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# BUMPER TO BUMPER

*Photographing Across the Class Divide  
in Post-Apartheid South Africa*

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***A Photographic Essay and Analysis***

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# 1. INTRODUCTION

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The eponymous collection of 64 photographs accompanying this text constitutes the creative research component of my M.A in Media Theory & Practice. I chose to photograph the men (and to a lesser but nonetheless significant degree women) that we see being transported in *bakkies*<sup>1</sup> and trucks on our roads on a daily basis, compiling a photographic essay engineered to provoke contemplation of current societal discrepancies. While informal public transport accounts for some of these instances, the vast majority of the people in my photographs are evidently being conveyed to and from sites of labour<sup>2</sup>, and thus are classifiable for the purposes of this essay as **'labourers' or 'workers'**. It therefore becomes apparent that a class discrepancy exists between the photographer<sup>er</sup> (me) and the photograph<sup>ed</sup> (workers on *bakkies*) that warrants investigation as it exemplifies many of the challenges faced more generally by photography's defining pursuit of truth. The laxity towards safe and legal transport practices exposed in these images also suggests that many of the people in these photographs are employed informally; their longevity of minimal concern to the company or lone employer.

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<sup>1</sup> A widely used South African term (derived from Afrikaans) used in this essay to describe the omnipresent passenger or utility vehicle designed for light delivery. It should be noted that these vehicles, though not unique to South Africa (Americans, for example, would call a *bakkie* a pick-up truck) are all local models specific to the Southern African market, and thus still factor into the national specificity of my project.

<sup>2</sup> Aside relying on common knowledge, I arrive at this assumption predominantly as a result of my photographic evidence (elaborated on p. 6)

The following essay aims to both contextualise my preconceptions, objectives, and methodology in the creation of this folio, and assess my results by holding them up to the lens of critical photographic theory and comparable precedents. In so doing – experientially and analytically – I hope to garner insight into some of the perennial quandaries suctioned upon documentary photography like remoras on a shark; in particular, matters of representation, objectification, gaze dynamics, truth and authenticity, and its ability (or the delusion thereof) to intervene in the plight and the suffering of the depicted; to show us the things that need to be corrected in our society<sup>3</sup>, and help right social right wrongs. Putting myself **‘in the field’ as it were, enabled me to** practically interrogate the merits and limitations of certain theoretic arguments pertaining to the portrayal of others and the reflection of reality.

My belief in the veracity of my work is crucial, and perhaps the only worthwhile **gauge of its classification as ‘documentary’; whether or not my** visual research constitutes such a practice is a moot point. The hallmark of documentary photography is the **notion that what it represents is ‘fact’** rather than an effect created through picturing<sup>4</sup>.

Emerging in an era of exploration intersected with a rising faith in positivist philosophy prioritising first-hand knowledge – enlightenment attained by **looking closely** at the world - the camera was instantaneously significant to our perception and our understanding of the world. It still is. Faith in and

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<sup>3</sup> Jacob Riis was an early proponent of humanist documentary who believed it was the photographer’s duty to “show the thing that had to be corrected.” In Wells (ed.), p 251.

<sup>4</sup> Jacques Ranciere distinguishes between documentary (which sides with the real) and fiction (or, invention), noting that documentary “treats [the real] as a fact to be understood.” In ‘Film Fables’ (2001, translated 2006), p.58

hunger for first-hand, unequivocal knowledge persists and has indeed flourished, if the phenomenal proliferation of the camera is considered a symptom. More detail, more contrast, higher definition, realistic skin tones, **red eye reduction, facial detection... the staggering technological evolution of** the camera is clearly geared at *more realism*. We crave an ever sharper and more powerful microscope with which to dissect and inspect and document our world.

The pursuit of truth is a paramount concern of many documentary photographers and photojournalists<sup>5</sup>. The situations I have photographed in this series are unequivocally true to life, and have not been staged or manipulated. Writing as a response to my final portfolio of images, this essay will also analyse the pictorial strategies I adopted to create these images, and whether or not they might be called truthful images. Consequently, insights into my own outlooks and preconceptions can be gleaned from these conscious and subconscious decisions. The success of my project – as both documentation and meditation – can then be evaluated accordingly.

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At the outset I think it is important to make a distinction between class and race. It will be obvious to any observer that virtually all of the figures in my photographs are either 'black' or so-called 'coloured'. **I have included a few** images of white individuals in the back of *bakkies* as a counterpoint to an

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<sup>5</sup> To list one example, Pieter Hugo's response to the question: What does being a documentary photographer mean for you? - "I see it as Werner Herzog sees it. It's about looking for new ways of conveying truth." Interview in Garb, (2011), p. 273.

otherwise racialised duality<sup>6</sup>, and to put forward the possibility that the phenomenon of riding in the cab of a vehicle despite its illegality (as I often did as a child) might say more about a general South African attitude towards traffic law than a **nefarious disregard for workers' rights**.

Acknowledging the persistence of a troubling correlation between race and class in South Africa, I would like to focus my discussion on class instead of race, since numerous signifiers associated with labour (and by extension the proletariat) unify this collection of photographs. These signifiers (*bakkies*, company names, overalls, ladders, cement bags etc.<sup>7</sup>) justify my inference that the people in my photographs are what I consistently refer to without prejudice as 'labourers' or 'workers', as **generic terms for** members of the proletariat. I hope to thereby draw attention to the correlation between class and the afforded standards of safety on South African roads.

**The numerous 'decisive moments'**<sup>8</sup> in which these images were made – those fleeting seconds wherein curiosity squares off against delight, disdain, curiosity, apprehension, bravado, mimicry, distrust – are laid bare for a semiotic autopsy, yet they are also worth considering as moments wherein an out-of-the-ordinary interaction across class lines occurs. This in turn amplifies the significance of the photographer-subject hierarchy and the impact it has on our reading of these photographs.

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<sup>6</sup> See plates 41 – 44

<sup>7</sup> See plates ...

<sup>8</sup> Henri Cartier-Bresson's conception of photography centred on this well-worn phrase, which was also the name of his 1952' book *Images à la Sauvette* (the English edition of which was titled *The Decisive Moment*).

Of course, the subject matter was chosen on the basis of this particular dynamic. Those curiously uncomfortable situations I have experienced many times – finding oneself (as the driver of a car) confronted by a *bakkie*-load of construction workers or window fitters or landscapers at a traffic light – have undoubtedly become a ubiquitous phenomenon; one of those South Africanisms to which many of us can relate, expressed more often than not through humour. Nowhere is this better exemplified than by Rico and **Dugmore’s wildly popular Madam & Eve comic series**, where the same sullen **trio of black labourers passively pester Madam with their unrelenting gaze** (“It never fails! For years, wherever I go in traffic I always end up behind the **same three guys** on the back of a *bakkie!*”) <sup>9</sup>.

At the same time, Madam (who is of course a parody of the middle-class white South African) wants to know more about these nameless, expressionless men who form part of her urban **landscape: “Who are they? Where are they going? What are they doing?” ... “This time I’m going to follow them – see where they live and what they do when they get home!!”**

Madam is captivated by the workers and wants to know more about their lives for the same reason fascination grips any of us – encountering difference. The three guys on the *bakkie* share a national identity with Madam, yet they are from a different race and class group; as curious and mysterious to her as a Polynesian pygmy would be. There is never any interaction between them, and while Madam vents her frustration and expresses her intrigue, the three men

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<sup>9</sup> See plate 70.

are always silent, statues who occasionally come to life for a punchline. Even at their home, on the stoep (in their natural environment as it were) they sit as they do in the *bakkie* – conjoined, barely distinguishable, gazing listlessly and wordlessly in the same direction<sup>10</sup>.

**Couched of course in a gag, Madam’s desire to** understand the lives of these “same three guys on the back of a *bakkie*” **points** both to the great power and the essential shortcoming of documentary photography: it stimulates our imagination but can only take us so far. It can show us corners of the world we might never have imagined, but it can not take us there. Similarly, we can look at and admire photographs of people very unlike ourselves, but we can never claim to *know* them or *understand* them based on mere amalgamations of silver crystals, ink on paper, illuminated pixels.

The stereotypical, static representation of workers on bakkies in these comic strips bears reference to my own work as I confront the anticipated claim of objectification, a devil-thorn in the heel of social documentary for many decades. Of course, as an art form that transmogrifies dynamic existence into a fixed object (the print), the accusation should perhaps always be anticipated. **Rico and Dugmore’s depictions, humorous and ‘on the mark’ as we might find** them, warrant a degree of criticism for their oversimplified portrayal of a vulnerable and culturally distinct group of South Africans, reduced to **‘the same three guys’ in every strip**. My images accordingly deserve the same scrutiny considering the recurring typology at the heart of my project, and the

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<sup>10</sup> See plate 70

**inclusion of so many aesthetically similar representations of ‘guys on the backs of bakkies’.**

Being a white, middle-class South African male with the wherewithal to drive **a motorcar (albeit a rusty ’83 Cortina) with a** decent camera in my lap, gazing curiously at workers huddled in a rusty Isuzu like Leni Riefenstahl ogling the mighty Nuba with her Hasselblad<sup>11</sup>, the political dimensions of my fieldwork cannot be ignored. My own identity is a context which is intricately wound up in the reading of the accompanying images.

**The title of my photo essay (‘Bumper to Bumper’) refers to the distance** between our the front end of my<sup>12</sup> sedan and the rear end of a *bakkie* or truck ferrying workers— mere metres in regular flowing traffic, yet it comes to **signify the gaping social chasm that points in some small way to South Africa’s** troubling rich-poor imbalance<sup>13</sup>. So close, yet worlds apart. It is during those moments when our vehicles are trickling through the gridlock, bumper to bumper, that we are quite literally forced to confront the reality of the class and racial divide that characterises our country.

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<sup>11</sup> Riefenstahl’s publications, **‘The Last of the Nuba’ (1974) and ‘The People of Kau’ (1976)** and were both international bestsellers. While heralded by many as outstanding colour photographs, they were harshly criticised by Susan Sontag, who claimed in a review **that they were further evidence of Riefenstahl’s ‘fascist aesthetics’.** (**Fascinating Fascism, 1975**)

<sup>12</sup> In this instance implying both myself and the middle-class perspective I aim to evoke in this collection of images.

<sup>13</sup> South Africa’s gini (“generalised inequality index”) coefficient, the canonical measure of income inequality, is 57.8%, according to the United Nations Development Programme. The theory is that a gini coefficient of one (or 100%) represents a situation in which one household earns all available income, while a gini coefficient of 0% means every household earns exactly the same.  
(<http://dailymaverick.co.za/opinionista/2011-01-25-ginidiocy>)

These trans-**cultural** ‘confrontations’ are an important aspect of my thesis, but this is not the only mode in which I photographed. Many of the images were made with my subjects unaware of my presence. In these situations I was simply an observer, a reporter – a fetishistic voyeur it might even be argued – and the project takes on a different shade, bringing into play matters of surveillance, objectification, and consent. In instances where the visages of my subjects are obscured or invisible, or when they are at some distance, their bodies may even become secondary, elements in the landscape that contribute to the reading of the scene in its entirety. The tightrope between the general and the specific in documentary photography is the topic of a later section.

Not forgetting that this project is a component of a post-graduate study in media practice, I will also discuss the appropriate media context for visual research of this nature, and point out how the impulse behind this project is indicative of a new wave of citizen-photojournalism located at an exciting intersection between technology, democracy, and heightened visual literacy. Daily observation can be easily mobilised as reportage in an age where the mobile phone has the potential to make the traditional news van redundant.

The potential for this work to be expanded upon in a more civic-minded orientation will be looked at, as will my decision to present these photographs as a curated selection of image-objects<sup>14</sup> as opposed to (for example) writing a newspaper article, or surrendering the negatives as forensic evidence of an

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<sup>14</sup> Referred to by Don Slater in his essay on ‘The Object of Photography’, in Evans, Jessica (ed.) *The Camerawork Essays*, p. 88

illegal and dehumanising practice<sup>15</sup>... **or making a calendar. Both are as** feasible as each other in an era where photography is part and parcel of a voracious consumer culture; where imagery is devoured, not owned<sup>16</sup>. In this regard I will also set out to crowbar open conventional definitions of photojournalism and documentary by assessing this project's place within a canon that is wide open to redefinition in an age of the ubiquitous lens.

During my research I found a handful of images online<sup>17</sup> that appeared to echo certain aspects of my intentions, my technique and my general modus operandi with curious similarity. A few of them accompanied a diffused complaint to a road safety website, or simply shared their alarm and amazement at this common scenario on South African roads with the blogosphere.

The existence of so many artefacts of civic surveillance of a comparable nature is heartening, as it affirms my assertion that this is something that, though more often than not overlooked, does concern many civilians. The accompanying text to (plate 82) makes it evident that the photographer of this image intended to bring the public's attention to a phenomenon that she feels is entirely exploitative and unacceptable:

*“...one of my pet hates is seeing these trucks that pack workers in like cattle...  
sometimes on the back of a bakkie there are so many guys squeezed in that*

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<sup>15</sup> See plate 85, a mock-up of the kind of civilian report that might employ the selfsame photographs I have taken as corroborating evidence.

<sup>16</sup> Camerawork essays

<sup>17</sup> See plates 79 – 84

*you cant believe some dont fall off... is this a legacy of apartheid where the rights of the labor force are so insignificant... where some peoples comfort are worth so much less then others.... lets never forget what this country is built on the sweat and hardship of many exploited men ... aluta continua.”<sup>18</sup>*

Evidence of aligned consciousness bolsters the hope that my photographs will resonate to some degree with those who page through them, and could perhaps be expanded upon or evolved into a civic-minded project aimed at curtailing this unsafe and dehumanising practice. In the final analysis my choice of composition does indeed emulate the photographic report a motorist might hastily capture with a cell-phone in a seizure of human compassion or civic-mindedness or amusement or disgust. However, the fairly extensive number of images (64) and the concerted duration of my specific study undoubtedly sets my work apart as documentary and not a knee-jerk report, which seemed to be the rationale behind most of the images I found.

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The minority of South Africans own motor vehicles, and our country has significant ground to make with regard to public transport. **Bakkies** and trucks therefore become a surrogate form of public transport; the have-nots relying on the haves to stake their claim in the economy. But to what extent is this an indigenous phenomenon? Perhaps it is merely a symptom of modernity – more people, fewer jobs, faster lifestyle, increasing competition for waning

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<sup>18</sup> <http://blogmodart.rebelmobile.de/blog/faith47blog/>

resources and a mechanised way of life that prioritises efficiency over humanity. The question we must then ask ourselves is: Are standards around labour transportation situation in South Africa really as atrocious as we sometimes make them out to be?

Faith47, the aforementioned outraged blogger, has every right to suspect that the exploitative attitude towards workers is indeed a *“legacy of apartheid ... where the rights of the labor force are so insignificant.”* It's also difficult to argue against her assertion that South African industry has been built upon *'the sweat and hardship of many exploited men.'* But couldn't the same be said of virtually every economy in the world? I certainly don't mean to downplay the systematic subjugation Apartheid induced in this country. The division between working and middle class is still predominantly along racial lines, but in all but the most advanced democracies, the safety and comfort of the proletariat are indulgences that are deprioritised in the face of **Capitalism's ruthless and insatiable appetite. This is simply modernity's** gamble, where progress is concomitant with compromise.

Having ridden the Japanese subway at rush hour, I can testify to the fact that a crowded *bakkie* ride is less demeaning and more comfortable (though sadly still more dangerous) than the cheek-to-cheek proximity Tokyoite commuters find themselves in every morning and evening. This in turn pales in comparison to the extent many rail commuters in third world countries like India, Sri Lanka and Indonsesia will jeopardise comfort and safety for

essential mobility, clinging on to every conceivable surface of lumbering cross-country locomotives like human barnacles<sup>19</sup>.

Though at times we've probably all seen comically overladen trucks and remarked about how unsafe the scenario appears, it was a British friend who first properly alerted me to how appalling our general acceptance of open-cab passengers is in South Africa, and how the traffic police in England would immediately pull over and fine any driver foolish enough to carry human beings on the back of a truck. *Don't we realise how unsafe that is? What if there's an accident?* The sentiment was echoed by an American acquaintance who was equally appalled by the prevalence of this unsafe practice. *Back home they'd get pulled over in five seconds!* It might also occur in other parts of the developing world, but that ought not be an excuse to tolerate a dangerous, illegal practice.

In due course I will discuss the legal aspects of my subject matter, and whether or not there appears to be any popular or governmental inclination to regulate the symbiotically sustained predicaments of 'men at the side of the road' and 'men on the back of bakkies'. The scope of my body of work suggests that the phenomenon is rife, in itself an indictment on government's willingness to adequately grapple with this two-headed monster that exposes shortcomings in both labour and traffic policy.

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<sup>19</sup> See plates 71 – 76

Finally, I hope to locate my efforts within a broader context of post-Apartheid South African photography by referring to work by some other South African photographers, especially those who were part of the recent ‘**Figures & Fictions**’ exhibition of contemporary South African photography held at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London last year. Including work by (amongst others) David Goldblatt, Pieter Hugo, Jodi Bieber, Zwelethu Mthethwe, Nontsikelelo Veleko, and curated by Tamar Garb, this exhibition can safely be regarded as a current and authoritative beacon of current conceptions and preoccupations around photography in post-apartheid South Africa<sup>20</sup>.

## 2. DOCUMENTARY PHOTOGRAPHY

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Though we often focus on the virtues of bravery, enlightenment and salvation that accompany the journalistic enterprise, the value of documentary photography as anything else than self-aggrandising tourism has rightly been under severe scrutiny in recent decades. Virtually since its inception it has evoked an increasing degree of suspicion towards its glaring class and power implications; its appeal as a bourgeoisie past-time, and the perpetual recurrence of the marginalised as subject matter<sup>21</sup>. Accordingly, the

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<sup>20</sup> Garb, Tamar - Figures & Fictions: Contemporary South African Photography (2011) – this book (including essays and interviews) accompanied the 2011 exhibition. I was fortunate enough to view the exhibition in June 2011, in London.

<sup>21</sup> Subject matter in the Figures & Fictions exhibition included suburban security guards (Subotzky), Ghanaian bee-keepers and Nigerian street performers (Hugo), practitioners of traditional African religion (Mofokeng), young Afrikaners (Van Wyk),

prevalence of this imbalanced dynamic and its bearing on my own field research, come under the microscope.

Whether this perceived mistrust is a symptom of increasing prevalence or an inherent flaw in the enterprise is the stuff of engrossing debate and something I will certainly be considering in this essay, particularly in light of the uncanny parallel between my shooting methodology and Sontag's recurring comparison between the car and the camera – both automated predatory weapons<sup>22</sup>.

To photograph is to confer importance, but what is important to the documentarian is to locate and immortalise subjects that substantiate his **investigation's aims: *important to the frame, important to the story***. Owing to the defining collusion of reality with creative interpretation, documentary photography often originates from the photographer's own inquisitiveness as opposed to any newsroom directive. This is significant since it forces us to question the motives of photographers compelled by their own sensibilities as opposed to the more objective dictate of newsworthiness.

Sontag has likened photography to sexual voyeurism that, at least tacitly, encourages whatever is going on to continue since to take a picture is to have an interest in things as they are – in the status quo remaining unchanged.

This notion aligns with the documentarians oft-repeated allegiance to **portraying 'the human condition'** – a stagnant concept that negates the

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immigrant park photographers (Kurgan), Zimbabwean refugees (Goldblatt), and black lesbian women (Muholi).

<sup>22</sup> Sontag, Susan, *On Photography*, (New York: Picador), 1977, p. 14

potential for change through revolution or enlightenment. Sontag goes on to claim that 'concerned' art has in recent decades done at least as much to deaden conscience as it has to to arouse it<sup>23</sup>. Martha Rosler provocatively asserts that our common acceptance of the idea that documentary 'precedes, supplants, transcends, or cures full, substantive social activism is an indicator that we do not yet have a real documentary.'<sup>24</sup>

So, does documentary ever make a difference? **It's an unanswerable question,** though one worth considering at this point. My natural reaction is to say **'Yes, of course it does,' but hard evidence is elusive. A photograph can definitely make somebody care about something, for a while at least... but so what? How does this affect the external reality? Quite simply, it doesn't.** The saturation of photographic imagery in our lives has surely dampened the psychological impact it once had in decades gone by. Having the Vietnam War beamed into the living room had a profound effect on consciousness in the sixties, but images of war are banal today. They can be accessed limitlessly with our mobile phones if we so desire.

As a person who follows photography blogs religiously, I look at photographic essays on an almost daily basis. Often these images depict aspects of war, poverty, disease, gangsterism – characters deserving of sympathy and, in the ideal world, help. Perhaps as a coping mechanism, I seem to filter this out for the most part and gauge my impression chiefly on the aesthetics, the story, the concept, the execution. Even when I see something that evokes an emotional

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<sup>23</sup> Sontag p.12, 21

<sup>24</sup> In Wells, Liz (ed.) The Photography Reader, p.251

response, it is fleeting and soon forgotten. Of course this tells us more about me as an individual internet user than about documentary photography as a discipline, but I do think my sentiment is a widely held one. More than 1 **billion people in the world use Facebook, 'fed' thumbnail images in a newsfeed** on a second-to-second basis – **and the old fashioned newsroom dictum, 'If it bleeds it leads', still rules.** Whether it's a YouTube sensation of some would-be Johnny Knoxville<sup>25</sup>, mock posters of unfortunate people, news clips of Gadaffi being lynched to death, or animal welfare appeals with graphic pictures of **mutilated dogs and rabbits... images of suffering abound in our daily lives,** often for our entertainment. How could we possibly *not* be hardened?

I would argue that **today's** prevailing attitude is one of cynicism, attributable perhaps to **Rosler's view that** documentary photographers, for the most part, tend to be from the middle and upper classes seeking images of the poor for reasons that include curiosity, philanthropy and sociology<sup>26</sup>. This is definitely not to say that we do not appreciate the art form or that we do not frequently experience empathy when viewing images depicting suffering, or at least of those less fortunate than ourselves. We all know that news and documentary images are capable of affecting us deeply, and many of us do get behind causes as a direct result of a photographic image or series that we have seen. Rhino poaching is a scourge on the increase that many of us are fiercely opposed to. Recently there has been a tangible mobilisation in the media, and I am certain

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<sup>25</sup> An MTV television series turned movie franchise, wherein the lead character (Johnny Knoxville) and his dimwitted friends perform ridiculous stunts that frequently involve large amounts of pain.

<sup>26</sup> Wells (ed.), p.252

that this is a result of grisly images of de-horned rhino's<sup>27</sup> that frequently appear in the newspapers; images that shock, disgust, and sadden thousands of South Africans to the point where the topic seems to be on everybody's lips and Facebook feeds at the moment.

Famous images – a skeletal African child stalked by a vulture, a screaming Vietnamese girl engulfed in fiery cyanide, or a sobbing teenager running away from the police with the lifeless body of Hector Pietersen in his arms – have all had an effect on global consciousness. There are dozens of images like these, known the world over and often compiled in books, that have bolstered and fundamentally altered our perceptions of casues like famine relief in Africa, the anti-war movement, or Apartheid, for example. The effect cannot be measured like a charity telethon. There may be an almost imperceptible shift in our world view that need not logically result in anti-government demonstrations or a vocation for relief work.

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**The title of an earlier draft of this essay ('Cattle') was chosen to highlight a prevailing perception, alluding to the fact that society affords informal labourers the same regard<sup>28</sup> as we do so many oxen or horses on a trailer. Later on in this essay I point out some of the laws governing the practice of transporting individuals in bakkies or trucks. Suffice to say, there is a glaring**

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<sup>27</sup> See plate

<sup>28</sup> In terms of transportational safety specifically, though the implication extends beyond this narrow aspect. Their physical vulnerability, made evident in my photographs, echoes a more significant socio-economic vulnerability

and worrisome disregard for the legislation put in place to keep these individuals safe in their constitutionally mandated pursuit of employment. Under the scrutiny of semiotic analysis, certain images bear out this damning analogy between labour and livestock. Compare, for example, (Plate 11) and (Plate 86). The framing and side-on perspective immediately sets up a visual parallel. In both of these images my subject matter is partially obfuscated by the metal bars of the trailer/truck, suggesting imprisonment – the antithesis of freedom. Furthermore, the farm workers in (Plate 11) are lumped haphazardly in the seatless cab, rudimentally designed for the transportation of objects (produce, machinery, rubble, sheep) and not fragile human bodies. By implication they are denied agency; forced to stand or sit in any available space, robbed of the human right to safety. Thus we see clear evidence that the imperative to transport as many able bodies as possible in the cheapest manner possible overrides safety concerns and effectively dehumanises the men and women who are.

The question then arises: Does the depiction of a dehumanising practice result in a dehumanised or a dehumanising image? Or, as Garb inquires in her **introduction to ‘Figures & Fictions: Contemporary South African Photography’**, does aestheticisation amount to dehumanisation, “depriving people of their histories and subsuming them into the idealising rhetorics of **exoticism or even the simplified taxonomies of racism?**”<sup>29</sup>

Early proponents of social documentary would almost certainly have balked at **the suggestion, convinced as they were of photography’s ability to illuminate**

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<sup>29</sup> Garb

injustice and suffering, and in so doing “**show the thing that had to be corrected**”<sup>30</sup>. Jacob Riis, for example, was a police reporter turned muckraking journalist who boldly ventured into the back alleys, brothels and gambling dens of New York City for his seminal 1890 publication 'How The Other Half Lives'. His halftone photographic images of bandits, orphans, immigrants and whores were a startling revelation to the city's upper classes, many of who had never had the misfortune of venturing outside of their velvet microcosms.

A few decades later during the Great Depression, Dorothea Lange and Walker Evans brought the plight of sharecroppers, displaced farming families, and migrant workers to public attention in a series of photographs commissioned by the Farm Security Administration. The pathos inherent in portraits exemplified by Lange's iconic 'Migrant Mother' (1936)<sup>31</sup> transcends the difficult lives of dustbowl farmers seven decades and speaks to what tends to be termed 'the human condition' – a tepid and all-too-easily-banded-about concept which negates change by struggle or revolution. Her timeless, troubled visage becomes an immediately recognisable icon of human suffering, doubt and perseverance – far more than the FSA likely expected from Lange's forensic report on economic hardship.

The responsibility of the photographer to the people portrayed remains a burning and unresolved issue<sup>32</sup>. Did the pictures Lange and many others took make any difference to the lives of those whose squalid lives they depicted?

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<sup>30</sup> **Photography Reader, Liz Wells (ed.) p.25**

<sup>31</sup> **Plate 89**

<sup>32</sup> **Garb, p. 27**

**“That's my picture hanging all over the world,” Florence Thompson** – the subject of 'Migrant Mother' – points out to an Associated Press journalist during an interview at her trailer home in Modesto, California some four decades later, **“...and I can't get a penny out of it. What good's it doing me?”** Florence rightly goes on to ask.<sup>33</sup>

Sontag maintains that often something will disturb us more in photographed form than it does when we actually experience it<sup>34</sup>, yet for her taking a photograph constitutes a violation enacted to appease middle class anxieties, **or even, as Rosler has extrapolated, assisting ‘the collective projection of Caucasian guilt...’**<sup>35</sup>

It seems fair to remove the burden of resultant social benefit from our list of responsibilities entrusted to the photojournalist or documentarian, though we must acknowledge that this ideal, however misguided it may turn out to be, is often a motivating factor. At the very least, engagement with society's value system seems a reasonable criterion to include, albeit 'armchair activism'.

### 3. COLLECTING THE WORLD

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33 The Photography Reader, Liz Wells (ed.) p. 267

34 Sontag

35 Wells p. 265

When Daguerre published his broadsheet advertising the invention of **photography**, he underscored that “people will form collections of all kinds.”<sup>36</sup> **In an age of the cameraphone, one suspects that photography’s founding** father could not have imagined the extent to which this premonition has actualised. As Susan Sontag repoints out in her opening paragraph of *On Photography*, “[t]he inventory started in 1839 and since then just about everything has been **photographed**.”<sup>37</sup> Russian sailors, Emperor penguins, Baptist churches, Mongolian wrestlers, Chinese taxis, diaspora communities, **discarded notes, matchbooks in bars... it’s all fair game for the observant** photographer. Conceptualising the world as a series of potential collections reassuringly suggested the state of things could be understood, and assuaged the intellectual and moral threat brought on by socio-economic upheaval in the post-industrial era<sup>38</sup>.

In his introduction to the 1979 Photography Annual, editor Arthur Goldsmith **makes mention of the public’s expectation and appreciation of “an extended exploration of a theme, a subject or style”**, noting in his experience as a magazine editor that the integrated portfolio had largely surpassed the single strong image. In Daguerre’s era, **the novelty of the technology coupled with a** rising faith in positivism spurred on the impulse to collate, whereas Sontag and Goldsmith were more than likely observing the symptoms of postmodernism. **If we momentarily substitute ‘image’ for ‘truth’ in his analysis, we neatly outline postmodernism’s central agenda: the abolition of the notion of a single truth. Marxist theory is generally dismissive of photography’s ability to offer**

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<sup>36</sup> Slater, Don – Camerawork Essays, p. 95

<sup>37</sup> Sontag

<sup>38</sup> Photography and its Critics, p. 125

us anything more than the most diluted whiff of truth, yet within the assertion that **“it is only by assembling the totality of determinations [forces, relations, history] that we can have an image of the Real”**<sup>39</sup>, we see that the potential to convey truth via photography does in fact exist, provided the investigation is extensive, multifaceted, and concerned with more than mere appearances.

The fact that I have already more than once referred to my series of images as a **‘collection’ or ‘my collection’ is also worth considering. It is of course a** normalised collective noun for artworks, but when referring to images of people (particularly as it becomes evident that the people in my photographs are frequently unwitting and unconsenting participants in my project) in the way one might make mention of baseball cards or pinned-down insects, bedevils my best intentions. The act of amassing exotic butterflies or playing-card-sized totems of Manchester United footballers arguably confers more individuality on the object of intrigue, as each specimen is labelled with its unique **Latin name, and each midfielder’s performance statistics, histories,** and other relevant attributes are listed. A potential shortcoming of my photo essay is the absolute anonymity of my subject matter though, as I touch on at a later point, this anonymity does equate to non-interventions and arguably presents a more objective truth for us to consider.

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<sup>39</sup> Slater in Evans (ed.) Camerawork Essays, p.93

## 4. OBJECTIFICATION

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You would have noticed that my **photographs are all labelled ‘untitled’**.

Documentary photographers frequently embed vital or additional information into the title of their images in order to provide some context for interpretation. **David Goldblatt’s captions contextualise his figures in the system of labour that controls their movement<sup>40</sup> (‘Going to Work: Standing room only now, on the Wolwekraal-Marabastad bus, which is licensed to carry 62 and 29 standing passengers’)**. Santu Mofokeng also embellishes most of **the images in his ‘Chasing Shadows’ collection with descriptive titles that add a dimension of time to the black and white prints, and take us a little deeper into the reality of the scene. As with Goldblatt, including the names (and by implication the specific ethnicity) of his subjects – locating their origins, destinations, faith, objectives – makes the images that much more personal, in line with the intimacy of his subject matter (‘Mthunzi and Meisie making supplications to the ancestors inside the Motouleng Sanctum – Free State, 2006’; ‘Ishmael after washing with holy ash at Motouleng Cave – Free State, 2004’)**. **Andrew Bush’s series of ‘Vector Portraits’, is another example. The titles in this series read more like transcripts from the photographer’s dictaphone (‘Woman taking her time rambling south at 63 mph on the Hollywood Freeway near the Vine Street exit in Los Angeles on a Saturday afternoon in 1991’)**<sup>41</sup>.

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<sup>40</sup> Garb, p. 45

<sup>41</sup> See plate 83.

The fleeting nature of my encounters with my subjects made it impossible to garner facts to illuminate my photographs beyond the pictorial surface.

I have included the name of the road, the area, and the month and year of each exposure, but any additional inference as to the precise nature of the moment I was depicting (origin, destination, nationality or ethnicity of the passengers and so forth) would have been pure speculation. The accusation of objectification is unavoidable, but the distance and anonymity I maintain in my approach is intended to comment on the transience of these interactions; it does not necessarily lead us to any greater understanding of the lives or the histories of the people depicted, but will hopefully induce reflection and invite the viewer to ask many of questions I am raising and addressing in this document.

Curating my final selection of images, I realised that to include the names (and perhaps a background vignette or two) of my subjects would have been practically impossible – almost all of the images were made with either myself or my subject matter, and more often than not both of us, in motion.

Ideologically, it would have fundamentally altered the nature of my essay. As I **have mentioned, the driver's point of view (which I have established by taking** all my photographs from behind the wheel) was a well-considered and significant perspective from the outset. The primary reason for this was to **establish a point of view that I regard to be indicative of the society's view of** these people. Their namelessness comes to define them in a sense, and our disinclination to involve ourselves in or know more about their experience – **their 'truth'** – is something I have attempted to convey. The size of the

collection is significant too. A final tally of 64 images is sizeable, more suited to the context of a book or a large exhibition than a photo essay that might appear over a few pages in a magazine, a newspaper, or online.

Lumped as they are in the cab and forced to maintain a fixed position for the duration of the commute – **“flora and fauna” in the motorway landscape**, docile and subservient<sup>42</sup> – the arrangement of bodies sometimes echoes the arrangement of natives in colonial taxonomies – placed facing the camera and instructed to stand or sit still while the light slowly activates the silver emulsion<sup>43</sup>.

In certain instances, whether through technical shortcomings or a creative instinct, the images are blurred. As I detail in the section describing my approach, maintaining an adequate shutter speed was challenging in a moving vehicle attempting to photograph other moving vehicles, usually with one hand. Yet despite being examples of imperfection, flouting the **documentarian’s allegiance to Truth and Realism**, I included some of them in the final portfolio<sup>44</sup>.

There are a few reasons for this. As Henry Bond maintains in defense of **creative pictorial strategies**, “a photo should be like a ‘mental image’, for these

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<sup>42</sup> Santu Mofokeng uses this expression ‘flora and fauna’ in specific reference to the subjects in Alfred Martin Duggan Cronin’s photographs, appearing “as part of nature, docile and subservient to the industrialization and modernization that surrounded them”. Duggan-Cronin was an Irish employee of De Beers who turned to photography, and is most well known for his compendium of idealised types, ‘The Bantu Tribes of South Africa’, published in four volumes with accompanying texts between 1928 and 1954. Garb, p. 21.

<sup>43</sup> Compare, for example plates 7 and 88.

<sup>44</sup> See plates 35, 47, 48, 51, 52, 54.

do not always come to us sharp-edged or in high-definition, but drift towards **us fractured, fragmented, hardly discernable.**<sup>45</sup> Walking the tightrope between the representation of society and the individual as documentary frequently does, these technically imperfect images constitute an idea as opposed to fact. Matters pertaining to consent, privacy and prosecution dissolve when identity is negated, and the images become impressions of a situation. There is enough detail to perceive reality, but the figures themselves are totemic representations of a type of people in a particular system, divorced entirely of their individual identities, their faces mere smudges. This too warrants accusations of objectification, but seeing as no-one's **identity is** jeopardised or exploited, the burden of accountability is eased. The figures become mere concept; an idea painted on to a canvas.

As a consciously deployed pictorial technique, I was also pleased with the way in which the motion blur evokes a sense of speed and dynamism in the images, connoting danger – **an aspect of the 'bakkie brigade' phenomenon I** foreground throughout this essay.

Finally, though I have thus far focused my attention predominantly on the people in my photographs (and it should be said that they are indeed the focal point of my essay) I find it hard to ignore the fact that **bakkies** or trucks appear in virtually every single frame of this compendium. It would therefore not be incorrect to refer to this series as a collection of objects: the **bakkies** and trucks used to transport labourers in South Africa. It is of course impossible to ignore the humanist orientation of my photographic essay. We

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<sup>45</sup> Bond, Henry. 2011, *The Gaze of the Lens*, (London) p. 71

might still say that the ever-present *bakkies and trucks serve as* “sets in which to situate subjects”<sup>46</sup> Many of the images are framed similarly – the *bakkie* or truck centred in the frame, captured directly from behind<sup>47</sup>. Fused on the pictorial surface in almost every instance, there are times when the *bakkies* and the people might be seen as a man-machine entity, almost sculptural in silhouette. *Mobile proletarian monuments.*

Photography invariably manifests tangibly in the form of a print, whether in a newspaper, a billboard, or the family album. Ultimately, this subjects all that the camera captures to objectification: A lover exists as a coin-sized cameo in a locket, a criminal as a mugshot in a file. For the phenomenologist, as Henry Bond has suggests in the introduction to ‘The Gaze of the Lens’, “every act of consciousness, every experience, is correlated with an object.”<sup>48</sup>

Objectification to some extent seems an inevitability of the photographic enterprise.

## 5. PORTRAIT / LANDSCAPE

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As a remarkably comparable precedent to my own project, I would like to refer again to Andrew Bush’s aforementioned series of ‘Vector Portraits’. Bush

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<sup>46</sup> Used in reference to Essop Garb, p. 27

<sup>47</sup> See plates .....

<sup>48</sup> Bond, p. 5

made these images with a large format view camera, mounted with a flash, on the passenger seat of his car. Individually, the photographs seem quite candid – snapshots by a bored passenger gazing out the window. Compiled, they offer a mesmerising cross-section of the American motorist. Taken over a period of more than two decades, these photographs are also imbued with a sense of nostalgia. Bush maintains a strict shooting formula that limits his composition to the head and shoulders of the driver, framed within the frontal section of the vehicle. Yet, despite the restricted viewpoint we are presented with, details like the car model, hairstyles and clothing gain significance as markers of a specific time and place. In other words, although they are **ostensibly portraits, they simultaneously describe the particular ‘human-automotive landscape’ of Northern America in the nineties.**

During a period of about 9 months I spent living in Yokohama, Japan, I developed a mild obsession for photographing parked bicycles<sup>49</sup>. The subject matter is hardly riveting on the surface of it, but as a foreigner from ten thousand miles away I found the omnipresence of these quaint forms intriguing. It seemed, to my limited knowledge, a typically Japanese phenomenon that reflected a prevailing lifestyle, as well as the societal values that made the characteristically South African phenomenon of opportunistic repossession an almost unimaginable eventuality. None of the images had any people in them – only bicycles – yet each bike's individuality seemed to radiate the character of its absent rider: the BMX covered in decals propped against a graffiti'd wall in grimy Shibuya; the sky-blue cruiser with surfboard mounts and a shopping basket in the laid-back seaside town of Enoshima;

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<sup>49</sup> See plate 85.

state-of-the-art Cannondale racer outside a health food shop in upmarket Ginza. I anthropomorphically regarded them as pet machines, waiting in silence for their respective masters to return.

After I had amassed a considerable collection of these bicycle photographs, it dawned on me that my attention to these geometric assemblages of rubber and steel belied a subconscious preoccupation with the backgrounds that collectively constituted a more tactile and descriptive vision of Japan than some imagined narrative with imaginary bicycle-riders. I suppose this is logical since the bike itself is far out-proportioned by the environment in terms of frame space. Bicycles are also for the most part standardised objects that don't vary all that much from country to country. The front porches and store fronts and vending machines and apartment blocks and park benches and alleyway walls upon which they happened to be resting – these shapes and forms and colours and textures informed my compositional decisions and contributed more to the nostalgic and artistic value of the images. The bike, it turned out, was a thematic nucleus that focalised my attention in an endlessly distracting landscape. The bicycle was of course an integral part of the composition. In many instances would be the eye's first port of call, and the most successful images to my mind were those where the colour and form of the bike either blended into the natural environment or existed as contrasting counterpoints.

A similar realisation evolved in the editing of this compendium. As an aggregation of vistas one starts to gain a sense of the South African motorway landscape, thematically anchored by trucks and bakkies with people aboard -

noble tableaux of man and machine hurtling relentlessly towards the horizon; part metaphor, part fact. Seen in this way, the images reflect an idiosyncratic patchwork of place, people, value systems, lifestyle and attitude. Beginning ostensibly as a street (or rather road) portraiture project, the emphasis tilted toward landscape as the collection grew. In certain images the figures are the focal point – the expressions on their faces, or their physical forms command our attention – whereas in others they are subsumed into the bigger picture.

The real magic of photography is that we can freeze an ephemeral, experiential moment, and re-inspect it in great detail at our own leisure. Perhaps this explains the fundamental re-evaluation of my work in some way: in the moment, in my car whizzing down the freeway with one eye momentarily pressed to my viewfinder, the people I was focusing on guided my compositional decisions. But, viewed after the fact (on a screen or as a print) and as a collection amongst many other similar images, other elements **in the frame jostled for my eye's attention as it wandered across the scene.**

With the indigenous *bakkie* as an anchor element, other signifiers within the frame speak to the South African landscape. These might be specific geographic markers (**Hottentot's Holland mountains**<sup>50</sup>, **the slopes of Lion's Head**<sup>51</sup>) or more ethereal descriptors, like the wheatfield-and-sky-blue scenery that typifies the farmlands of the Western Cape in summer<sup>52</sup>. In the urban settings, Capetonians would immediately recognise many of the buildings and intersections in my photographs. And even those unfamiliar with either Cape

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<sup>50</sup>See plate 02

<sup>51</sup> See plate 13

<sup>52</sup> See plates 29, 30

Town or South Africa would be able to infer the locale in many of the pictures by simply reading the road signs<sup>53</sup>. License plates – visible in a great many of my pictures – are additional textual signifiers that specify place. CA, CK, GP, CY, CJ, EC... **all codes that denote distinct regions in our country.**

Beyond the literal description of the environment, signifiers like cement bags<sup>54</sup>, scaffolding<sup>55</sup>, **‘men at work’ signs**<sup>56</sup>, ladders<sup>57</sup> speak to the specific theme of labour. Aside from locating my central focus on the proletariat, en masse they also amount to a sketch of the contemporary landscape of a **‘developing’ nation. Development is a visual motif in the aforementioned** images, and many others in the collection.

In this regard it is important to point out that the overwhelming majority of the photographs were taken in 2009/10, a year or less prior to the 2010 FIFA World Cup, a phase of unprecedented infrastructural development in South Africa. Within this context, the omnipresence of labourer-laden vehicles to-ing and fro-ing through town and country assures us that the wheels of industry are revolving steadily, and these photographs memorialise this phase in the development of our country.

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<sup>53</sup> See plates 03, 33, 41

<sup>54</sup> Plate 36

<sup>55</sup> Plate 49

<sup>56</sup> Plate 32

<sup>57</sup> Plate 03

## 6. HISTORY IN THE MAKING

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There is, accordingly, an element of *zeitgeist* at work in these pictures. Plate **31, for example, would be a suited to a hypothetical Cape Times '25 Years After the Cup' photo special in mid-2035**. By that stage, the sight of men standing up on a truck to get to work may well be a thing of the past, and this photograph will gain even more nostalgic value than the crane landscape above the inchoate stadium already provides. *The way things were*. As a matter of fact, a few of the titles in my series referncing Eastern or Western Boulevard are in fact already dated just a couple of years later<sup>58</sup>. In the midst of a national agenda to redress the imbalances of the past, signifiers such as the names of freeways, airports, hospitals, and parks are in flux, bringing into focus the dynamic nature of history.

Photography is of course a nostalgic art; a twilight art. It can be assumed that some of the images I have captured for this project will gain greater significance as time marches on and the world changes<sup>59</sup>. Most photographs are created as a means of engaging with the ephemeral present, yet at a

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<sup>58</sup> These road names were changed to Nelson Mandela Boulevard and Helen Suzman Boulevard respectively in 2011.

<sup>59</sup> Billy Monk – a bouncer who wielded a camera as a hobby – took photographs of the young revelers in the clubs he worked at in the late 1960s, but gave it up shortly thereafter. He might never have imagined that his 'historical' collection of prints would be the subject of a posthumous exhibition at the prestigious Stevenson Gallery in Johannesburg in 2010 (<http://www.stevenson.com/exhibitions>). Perhaps this is why 'party photographers' are now an unavoidable fixture at nightclubs, convinced of their role as historical custodians of contemporary culture.

certain point they become historical documents. Some documentarians knowingly play the long game, accumulating material as a decade-long hobby for an imminent coffee table tome<sup>60</sup>.

As Cartier-Bresson has **remarked**: “We photographers deal in things which are continually vanishing, and when they have vanished, there is no contrivance on earth which can make them come back again.”<sup>61</sup> But perhaps this is being recklessly sentimental in my particular case. A general apathy towards an unjust situation is one thing, but using the camera's honorific capability to celebrate it is another. Despite the mass hysteria about crime and disease in South Africa, the single biggest cause of unnatural death and serious injury in this country is road crashes. Being transported in an open-backed vehicle without seats – never mind seatbelts – at speeds in excess of 100 km/h and frequently in circumstances that would kindly be described as 'overcrowded' is undeniably dangerous, and something that I do feel ought to be more thoroughly regulated by our Department of Transport. Who knows how many South African lives have been lost on account of our old iconic pal – the *bakkie* – an automobile designed, after all, to carry goats and bales and sacks, not people.

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<sup>60</sup> David Southwood's 'Milnerton Market' is a good example of this. What began as an observational impulse soon snowballed into a ongoing ritual; a project to which the photographer consistently kept on the go for almost ten years before compiling an exhibition and a book (<http://davesouthwood.com/tag/milnerton/>)

<sup>61</sup> cited in 'Creative Camera' magazine, April 1974, p. 112

## 7. APPROACH / TECHNIQUE

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As common a sight as it may be, the sight of a half-dozen men standing up on the back of a truck is nonetheless a visual aberration on the motorway landscape. For starters, the nature of road lanes and the design of the automobile dictates that people travelling in the same direction all face the same way; in ergonomic casing designed to focus our attention forwards. When passengers stand up they effectively elevate themselves above the street-level morass, isolating the individual(s) outside of the steel and glass sheaths that keep the majority of our fellow road users anonymous, or at least peripheral to us. The fact that the people I chose to photograph are more often than not fully exposed makes them doubly vulnerable to injury and of course inspection.

It therefore **wasn't all that difficult locating potential subjects** – just a matter of luck, and hitting the roads at the right times. Once I spotted a vehicle with human cargo I had a number of quick decisions to make, based on the situation I was in. If I was a bit further away or otherwise peripheral to the people I was photographing I would have some time to seek out a satisfactory composition; more observation than engagement. **Ideally I'd try and get** behind the vehicle at hand, conceal my camera until an opportune moment in which I could release one hand from the wheel to lift the camera, frame, focus (I used the autofocus function out of necessity), and shoot. If I could get close

enough and get the attention of the people in the **bakkie then I'd try** and shoot them quickly, capturing their reactions. I had neither the time nor the **inclination to 'swish the waters', and found it simpler to shoot and move on** quickly, knowing I had no chance to explain myself and my true intentions. Reciprocal intrigue across class lines is a central aspect of my investigation, and I was interested in documenting the responses to my spontaneous attention, discussed in the next section.

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I used a Nikon F100 SLR camera to make just about all of the photographs in this collection. My natural inclination was to use a standard 50mm fixed lens, since the field of vision on a standard lens roughly equates to the human field **of vision. But from the driver's seat I was uncomfortable with the inclusion of** the windscreen and the frame of the car in my pictures. The presence of my vehicle implicated my presence too abruptly, and the blurred corners of my car interior were distracting. I also wanted to get a bit closer up – to see the whites of their eyes, as the saying goes. As I have mentioned, there was an aspect of portraiture I wanted to explore, and this required being able to recognise the subtle distinctions in facial expressions from which the **machinations of an individual's inner world can** perhaps be inferred<sup>62</sup>. The environment was important to include, but the people on vehicles had to dominate the frame. So I opted for a fixed 85mm lens, enabling me to punch **in a bit closer than I would ordinarily see from the driver's seat. The lens was** also quite compact – I shot almost exclusively with one hand since I needed

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<sup>62</sup> Dorothea Lange's 'Migrant Mother' (plate 89) is a classic example of this.

the other one to keep my car on the road – which made it easier to wield and **lift at a moment's notice than a bulkier zoom lens would have been.** In

hindsight, as I have pointed out, I would have ideally liked to have been able to get in a bit closer in order to discern faces more distinctly. I do however feel that a good balance between focusing on individual and incorporating the equally descriptive environment has been achieved in many of the images as a result of this pragmatic compromise, to the benefit of the project.

**I tried to maintain a relatively high shutter speed since I couldn't keep the** camera very stable with one hand. Setting the aperture around 5.6 or 8 with 200 ISO film generally enabled this, and gave me sufficient depth of field for all the people on the *bakkie* to stay in focus, without the background distorting too much either. These preliminary calculations were my starting point, though obviously I had to make adjustments depending on the time of day or the speed I was travelling and so on.

**It wasn't always easy to take a picture** once I had been noticed. It felt impolite. Invasive. But that was what I needed to subject myself to in order to meaningfully engage with the topic at hand. All the critical theory made me so very aware of how exploitative I was being, and every moment I delayed made it all the harder. If I managed to get a photograph but then ended up stuck behind the same vehicle for some time, it was awkward trying to mime an explanation to a group of bewildered and suspicious men.

## 8. CONSENT, OR THE LACK THEREOF

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What right do I have to take a stranger's photograph in the first place, whether or not they happen to be looking at me at the time? Well, since these images are not intended for publication or exhibition in the public domain, I can find no legal reason to abstain from exercising my curiosity and snapping a frame or two for this personal project. But... what about putting some of the pictures on my personal blog? What about Facebook, or Twitter? Does that constitute publishing, and could I end up in hot water if somebody I photographed sees themselves, takes offense and decides to litigate. The possibility of this is remote enough to consider it unimaginable: the men and women in my **photographs more than likely don't have the financial capability to instigate** any form of legal counteraction to my drive-by invasion of privacy (should they feel this to be the case). This consideration is sinister, and speaks to the core of our distrust of documentary.

Pieter Hugo has referred to his work (more often than not located at the **intesection of portraiture and documentary**) as “**a recording of a collaborative event,**” where we “**... can't assume** that the subject of a photograph is passive **and has no agency.**”<sup>63</sup> Hugo spends time interacting with his subjects, and will ask them to move the angle of their head or their body position in order to create an exposure most suited to his aesthetic objectives. Despite his power to determine the final outcome (both whilst shooting and in the editing

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<sup>63</sup> Garb, p. 275

phase), his subjects are still engaged in the process of their representation. In my case however, I am fully aware that my subjects have no agency. In many instances they are incapable of even shifting their physical position in the overcrowded or speeding cabs, rendered unable to effect their representation in any way. I am using the imbalanced power dynamic to my advantage, empowered to shoot without worrying about the burden of accountability.

Chances are, I'm entirely forgotten before the truck arrives at its destination – written off as a loony tourist from the First World. Nevertheless, that's what consent forms are for; obtaining permission for the use and/or ownership of **one's personal image is entrenched** as standard practice in industries like fashion, film, and photography – where representations become commodities, and usage thereof has predetermined value.

The issue at hand hinges on privacy too, not just the right to financial compensation. In light of my intent to depict our collective nonchalance towards some of the most vulnerable members of society left all the more vulnerable on farm bakkies and construction vehicles hunkering on South Africa's notoriously death-inducing roads, it seems hypocritical and perhaps even malicious to further implicate my subject's vulnerability by sneaking photographs of them, concomitantly empowering me with the ability to disseminate their images at will, potentially for personal gain.

So, to answer my initial question, it seems I have every right and no right at all. On many occasions however, my ethical tensions were eased by a wave, a

broadened smile, a thumbs-up, a peace sign or an ensuing range of poses that suggested my fleeting attention was most welcome<sup>64</sup>.

I've always wondered why people, particularly in rural areas where cameras are far less prevalent, often instinctively ask to have their picture taken. The advent of digital cameras with instant preview has made the act of showing **one's subject their image immediately after taking it part and parcel of the** photographic ritual. Because I still shoot on film, I often detect a mild sense of disappointment when kids rush around to catch a glimpse of themselves in the non-existent little LCD screen. The instantaneous gratification of self-recognition offered in return for a pose has had a profound effect in allaying suspicions toward the photographer, who previously had exclusive access to the end result. Yet even when I walk through town with my camera I am frequently stopped and asked to take a photograph – a request I usually oblige despite the soaring costs of film and developing – after which the subject simply thanks me and keeps on walking. To refuse an act as simple as pointing a camera and pressing a button seems callous in the extreme. ***No thanks, you're not really worth the effort.***

**Conversely, directing one's lens at a specific individual amidst the infinite** points of view available to the photographer confers importance by suggesting there is something unique about that person; something worth remembering. Cartier-Bresson offers an ethereal yet plausible explanation for the desire to

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<sup>64</sup> See plates 18 - 20.

be photographed by a stranger, describing the impulse as hope, 'blended with a certain magical fear, to outlive themselves in this portrait.'<sup>65</sup>

Since it became pocket-sized in the middle of the previous century, the camera has evoked more suspicion than fascination. Permission to possess our image; to alter it, to reproduce it and even to circulate it is not something we readily concede. Photography's forensic application and great value to the state's system of documentation and surveillance (mug shots, passports, Farm Administration reports) has undoubtedly contributed towards this distrust.

On the road we are frequently under non-consensual surveillance: speed cameras<sup>66</sup>, toll cameras, CCTV traffic surveillance, GPS satellites, bored teenagers with Blackberries staring out the window in traffic. Modern cars even have built-in cameras to help us park better. J. G. Ballard playfully inverts this ominous perception by pondering: **“What provides togetherness? Traffic jams, airport escalators, CCTV. When you see a CCTV camera pointing at you, you know someone cares.”**<sup>67</sup>

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“In photographic interactions, **what do subjects consent to?**” is the question raised by Lisa Henderson in her essay on access and consent in public **photography**. “Is it to have their pictures taken or to have them used in some

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<sup>65</sup> Cartier-Bresson, p. 31

<sup>66</sup> See plate 90

<sup>67</sup> Ballard, J. G. 1973

way?”<sup>68</sup> Understanding this difference is crucial. I see nothing wrong with taking non-consensual photographs if the purpose is either purely academic, or to draw attention to social injustices that my field work might play some small part in rectifying. The moment I stand to gain money or acclaim from my efforts, or simply disseminate an unflattering or inaccurate image without permission, an obvious ethical problem arises. It would be almost impossible to track down the subjects in my photographs and, even if I were to manage this, how would I compensate them for their cameo role in my two-year long project? Five percent of sales? Fifty percent of royalties? An even hundred bucks? I can find no adequate answer to this question, and in fact I reject the idea that the subject of a photograph taken for non-commercial purposes is entitled to any compensation whatsoever, courtesy notwithstanding.

No group of people is categorically off-limits or of no interest to photographers,<sup>69</sup> but there is an undeniable corollary between prestige and our urge to observe. Entire magazines and television channels are founded upon the notion of celebrity. Thus, when the camera is trained on marginalised, unglamorous members of society, there is valid cause for suspicion.

A Zimbabwean immigrant working illegally on a piecemeal basis in Cape Town, hypothetically speaking, might rightly wish to avoid the singling out that being photographed entails. A permanent and irrefutable document that offers proof of a punishable transgression poses a real threat to this

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<sup>68</sup> Lisa Henderson, 'Access and Consent in Public Photography', in Wells (ed), p. 276

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid*, p.278

hypothetical person. This might explain the occasional look of anxiety or even resentment I encountered, though of course there is no way of knowing for sure. Had I deemed it important to report each and every one of the illegal scenarios in my collection to the relevant authorities, I could conceivably have brought unwanted attention to a system which, though far from ideal, maintains a mutually tolerable status quo.

The stealth of my approach and the swift, startling kill shot perhaps leaves more authentic knowledge intact than had I, for instance, ridden alongside the passengers and photographed them from within the same vehicle. Thus the silent distance I maintained in my approach may, as I have explored, objectify my subjects – but it also upholds an agenda of non-intervention – presuming **documentary's** rigorous objectivity of distance<sup>70</sup>, that arguably makes for **images that can considered more 'truthful'**. If I am purporting to be documenting an unjust state of affairs, or simply painting a realistic sketch of the labour-brokering landscape in Cape Town, the awareness of my camera **instinctively extricates the subjects I am depicting from 'their natural environment' and locates them in a parallel dimension of camera** performance.

Sidestepping the nuanced complexities of human interaction by shooting certain subjects entirely surreptitiously was liberating (and easier) to a degree, yet at the same time I frequently felt burdened with an undeserved sense of entitlement that could never be challenged, making me all too aware of the power I yielded simply by virtue of possessing a fully-loaded camera.

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<sup>70</sup> Garb, p. 45

Sometimes I simply couldn't bring myself to lift my Nikon and shoot once I knew I was being observed. Occasionally I'd develop a fleeting rapport and be encouraged to snap a few more. Other times I made my exposure and sped off feeling like a criminal or a pervert.

**I didn't shoot every single example I encountered. Sometimes the light wasn't** right, sometimes I chickened out under the glare of my subject matter – unable to lift my camera and steal his portrait, for fear of being considered rude I suppose. It is of course inappropriate to point a camera at a stranger and take their photograph without some expression of permission – **it's one of** those unwritten rules still being forged legislatively; tolerated in certain situations (massive events, parties, protest marches...) and not in others (**sports club locker rooms, children's playgrounds, our own homes...**). From time to time a case ends up before a judge as the lens becomes ever more omnipresent in our daily lives, and our sense of suspicion – and at times annoyance – heightens proportionally.

One of the more intriguing cases to be tested in court was argued between the lawyers of artist Philip-Lorca diCorcia and Emo Nussenzeig. DiCorcia had set up strobe rigs in New York in 2006 and photographed people walking down the street. After exhibiting and selling the resultant images in a gallery, Nussenzeig – an Orthodox Jew who appeared in one of the photos – considered the sale both an invasion of his privacy and a breach of his religious rights. The court ruled that although ten copies of the images had sold for up to \$30,000 each, they were still considered works of art (i.e. were not commercial) and were therefore protected under the First Amendment.

Complicating the matter was the fact that Nussenzweig's **religion forbids such images, yet the judge's decision stood regardless.** As a precedent, the implication is that the right to freedom of expression trumps the right to privacy (in the public sphere at least) and – seen in the extreme – the right to freedom of religion. Of course, the fundamental issue in this particular case hinged on the matters of *presentation* rather than *representation* – the end result and not the process. In short, the non-commercial, *artistic* context of diCorcia's **work absolved him from prosecution.**<sup>71</sup>

Whether or not these actions can be ethically defended is another matter. DiCorcia may have emerged victorious in the eyes of the law, but we are still left to consider the troubling fact that the artist made hundreds of thousands of dollars photographing a man without permission, a man whose religious and personal code regards the act as invasive and unwelcome. In the execution of my photographic essay, all I can testify to is that I did not feel any guilt, largely owing to the fact that my intentions were benign – geared toward personal academic research and not publication. I am convinced that the photographs I have taken will almost certainly have no negative impact on the people in them, nor will the photographs enrich me by commodifying these representations in the absence of any agreement with the portrayed individuals. To my mind, the back of a person's **head, a blurred visage,** or a body in the distance constitutes no moral transgression and could in no way jeopardise the individual, and a smile at the camera is an implied contract of complicity.

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<sup>71</sup> [http://jmcolberg.com/weblog/2006/02/philiplorca\\_dicorcia\\_lawsuit\\_dismissed](http://jmcolberg.com/weblog/2006/02/philiplorca_dicorcia_lawsuit_dismissed)  
<http://blogs.photopreneur.com/5-nightmare-photography-court-cases>

But surely identity is at the nub of the matter when it comes to ethical considerations? If a person cannot be recognised – in other words if no **connection between the pictorial reality (or ‘trivial realism’ to which Brecht refers<sup>72</sup>) and the ‘truth’ of the image.** The grey areas tend to be those same moments where hesitation sets in; spotted by your would-be subject as the **frame comes into focus. There’s a moment of confusion mingled with suspicion, both triggered by the same question: “Why is he taking my photograph, *here* and *now*?”.**

Sontag frequently invokes the hunting metaphor when referring to photography, maintaining **that there is** “an aggression implicit in every use of the camera”<sup>73</sup>. **It’s** an accusation I find difficult to defend. Taking somebody's picture without their permission, from the safety of a mobile and enclosed vehicle, and then whizzing away to add the snapshot to a growing collection seems to confirm our worst suspicions about documentary photography: that it is nothing more than an invasive leisure pursuit for the middle- and upper-class, 'replacing the gun safari in East Africa.' I shudder to think of the times I **murmured “Gotcha!”** or something equally big-game-hunterly to myself after snapping a good one.

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<sup>72</sup> Slater, Don – Camerawork Essays, p. 95

<sup>73</sup> Sontag, p.7

In a park one might instinctively proffer some token gesture seeking permission when taking a snapshot of a passerby, but sealed in the vacuum of my automobile, rendered mute and unable to possibly convey my multi-faceted rationale for the random act, it seemed a different situation. Regardless, it was essential to capture these moments in order to communicate a sense of our persistent inability to meaningfully engage across class lines in post-apartheid South Africa.

The 'colonial gaze' has emerged in postcolonial discourse in relation to issues of exoticism and otherness, and is thought to implicate and reinforce privilege<sup>74</sup>. Divorced from its academic context however, 'gaze' is in fact the perfect word to describe what most of do when we're driving or stuck in traffic, reverting to a far more neutral term. **Gazing** out the passenger window at the passing pedestrians. **Gazing** from the back of a **bakkie** at businessmen in BMWs, students in Citi Golfs, soccer moms in station wagons, our field of vision framed by a windscreen proportioned similarly to a landscape photograph. When the camera is lifted and the proletariat become ensnared within my viewfinder, how quickly the dynamic shifts. How quickly the 'G' word takes on a menacing connotation.

But is observation always malicious? Can we not regard the camera as a butterfly net as opposed to a rifle? Surely Susan Sontag derails her provocative argument at times with broad and seemingly paranoid statements that, for example, liken the act of photography to a 'soft murder'<sup>75</sup>. **Murder?**

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<sup>74</sup> **The Photography Reader, Liz Wells (ed.) p. 325**

<sup>75</sup> **Sontag, p.15**

On occasions when I've asked strangers on the street if I can take their picture, I've countered the obvious question of "Why?" with assurances of harmlessness – *It's just a hobby of mine; I like the way your shirt matches with that wall; I'm photographing local residents* – and I'm pretty sure I was being honest most of the time. Clear, communicable objectives and a professional attitude generally tend to minimise suspicion.

Of course the alternative option is to simply snap and keep on walking as if taking a picture is the most natural thing in the world, engaging in what Goffman calls 'the overdetermination of normalcy'<sup>76</sup>. In a series of interviews with documentary photographers about their methodologies, Lisa Henderson notes that many of them 'considered their work and their photographs to be innocent and their subjects' suspicions unreasonable.'<sup>77</sup> It would be naïve of me to consider the wariness of my subjects 'unreasonable'. Even though photography has become "as common a practice as dancing or sex"<sup>78</sup>, this remains a rather bourgeois perception. Anyone being photographed in the act of doing something as mundane as riding in a car would rightly be suspicious of someone pointing a camera at them. Working class men and women however are not only less exposed to the gadgets we take for granted, but the attention conferred upon them for that moment is inconsistent with their lowly social status, making the presence of an observer all the more puzzling – if not threatening by virtue of lack of context. Nevertheless, on the road shooting workers on bakkies and trucks, I wasn't able to relay my benign intentions and had to settle for a smile or a wave or a thumbs-up or a nod –

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<sup>76</sup> in Wells (ed.) p. 282

<sup>77</sup> Ibid. p. 284

<sup>78</sup> Sontag, p.12

anything to assure my startled subjects that I was no foe. *I'm just a guy who likes to take pictures of daily life stuff. Thanks, bye...*

## 10. THE BAKKIE BRIGADE

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I like to think (and have no reason to doubt) that most of the people in my photographs are simply doing the best they can to earn whatever living they can within an imperfect capitalist system. It is perhaps unlikely they'll ever succumb to the fate concerned observers envision when tut-tutting at an overloaded *bakkie*. There is no evidence I could find that suggests death by *bakkie* is more prevalent than any other form of road carnage. A taxi ride is a far more perilous undertaking, statistically speaking. Ultimately, day's work isn't something many people are able to turn down on the basis of an uncomfortable or unsafe ride in to work. Piecemeal work is surely better than nothing for most people – but it is a poor substitute for contracted employment, and the socio-economic security it affords.

The topic of labour brokering is a kindle in the wake of COSATU's call for a blanket ban on the practice, as our Namibian neighbours have recently constitutionalised. Speaking at a branch meeting of the Sandton ANC Youth League in November 2009, Labour Department director-general Jimmy Manyi said the South **African government was** “serious about stopping the

practice of labour brokering, as it was in the ANC manifesto before the elections.”<sup>79</sup>

The dominant argument directed against the practice refers to the unequal bargaining power of the temporary employees and the allegedly exploitative nature of the practice of labour brokering. It is argued that the temporary employees generally lack the resources or stability in the workplace to unionise, thus compromising job security<sup>80</sup>. Though labour brokering is a common practice across the board of South African industry – employing around 500 000 individuals annually, from secretaries to strawberry pickers – the so-called '*bakkie* brigade'<sup>81</sup> is the face of this phenomenon. In an article published on the web by Business Report on November 22, 2009, Donwald Pressly notes that:

*'On my walk to Parliament each day, I pass a line of rather disconsolate work-seekers waiting outside the Roman Catholic cathedral, just opposite the entrance to President Jacob Zuma's Cape Town office, Tuynhuys. The church runs an outreach programme. Nearby in Strand Street every day dozens of young black men wait patiently for the opportunity to snatch a day's work from a passing bakkie. Their presence is a representation of the*

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<sup>79</sup> [http://www.fin24.com/articles/default/display\\_article.aspx?ArticleId=2562079](http://www.fin24.com/articles/default/display_article.aspx?ArticleId=2562079)

<sup>80</sup> <http://www.polity.org.za/article/labour-brokers-under-threat-2009-03-16>

<sup>81</sup> Not to be confused with an alternative definition, dating back a decade or two, that refers with an equal amount of cynicism to the wave of 'entrepreneurs' who bought themselves *bakkies* and started up building and plumbing companies overnight.

*failure of our democratic state to provide what ANC MPs like to call "decent work" ...'<sup>82</sup>*

The term '*bakkie* brigade' is generally used scathingly, referring to unscrupulous employers who pick up penniless people and transport them on their bakkies to sites where workers are needed, paying exploitative wages with no benefits and no guarantees of ongoing employment.

The flip side of the coin is more pragmatic in terms of South Africa's staggering unemployment rates. Advocates of labour brokering (or rather opponents of an outright prohibition) argue that we need to foster employment by any means possible rather than curtailing it. The situation may not be ideal, but it is perhaps a necessary evil in an economy where roughly a quarter of the population is jobless. If the men on the side of the road waiting patiently for any modicum of work were to desist their daily vigil and place their fates in the hands of bureaucrats to clear a shining path towards meaningful **employment, they'd quickly die of starvation.**

## 11. THE LAW

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According to the ArriveAlive website, the subject of the legality of human cargo is a perennial source of frustration: "It keeps turning up ... although it

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<sup>82</sup>[http://www.busrep.co.za/general/print\\_article.php?fArticleId=5256436&fSectionId=553&fSetId=662](http://www.busrep.co.za/general/print_article.php?fArticleId=5256436&fSectionId=553&fSetId=662)

always crops up after another fatal or serious accident, nothing ever gets done to stop this highly dangerous practice!”<sup>83</sup>

The figures in my photographs are all poised precariously in vehicles not designed for human transportation. In many of the real-life situations I have documented it seems miraculaous that passengers **aren't** falling out, and if we pause for a moment to imagine the consequences of an accident, the thought is spine-chilling<sup>84</sup>. Moreover, their physical exposure to danger echoes a more significant socio-economic vulnerability.

There are accidents aplenty on South Africa's roads, and each year the number of deaths and disabilities due to road accidents escalates. Strangely, this is most marked in Africa, where ownership of motor vehicles is among the lowest in the world. Twenty-four studies have shown that, after pedestrians, passengers are the second-most vulnerable group of road users in Africa (more than 30% of all road deaths) and drivers account for a far smaller share of fatalities (less than 10% in most countries, though exceeding 20% in only Botswana, South Africa and Zimbabwe)<sup>85</sup>. Aside from bakkies, taxis are infamous for cramming in impossible numbers of passengers at great risk to themselves and all road users. Thankfully there are guidelines for passenger numbers in taxis, and at least some degree of policing. The same cannot be said of overloaded bakkies.

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<sup>83</sup> <http://www.arrivealive.co.za/pages.aspx?i=439>

<sup>84</sup> See plates 07, 14, 21, 30, 40

<sup>85</sup> [http://www.hsrb.ac.za/HSRC\\_Review\\_Article-131.phtml](http://www.hsrb.ac.za/HSRC_Review_Article-131.phtml)

News articles about workers or children killed in grisly *bakkie*-related incidents made me acutely aware of the potential for grievous harm when people are relegated from passengers to loads. Bland media snippets – in which only the location and death toll fluctuate around a recurring narrative – remind us that what we regard as yet another one of our quaint idiosyncrasies is in fact a life-and-death gamble. These two reports appeared around the time I was still in the field shooting. Eerily, it seemed as though some of the photographs I had taken might have served as supplemental visuals for these news stories. The faceless ghosts of those whose lives had ended so hellishly seemed embodied in the people I saw in my pictures:

### **Workers Hurt in Bakkie Crash**

2010-01-05 / 11:25

*Cape Town - Four construction workers were seriously injured when their bakkie lost control in Milnerton, Cape Town on Tuesday, paramedics said. The four men were sitting in the back of the bakkie when the driver lost control and smashed into a barrier at around 08:50, said ER24 spokesperson Werner Vermaak. It was understood the occupants were on their way to a construction site. The injured were taken to various hospitals for treatment while the driver of the bakkie and a passenger were not injured. (SAPA)<sup>86</sup>*

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<sup>86</sup>

[http://www.news24.com/Content/SouthAfrica/News/1059/c61254d8ec99406eb9f5c7f109225f2f/05-01-2010-11-25/Workers\\_hurt\\_in\\_bakkie\\_crash](http://www.news24.com/Content/SouthAfrica/News/1059/c61254d8ec99406eb9f5c7f109225f2f/05-01-2010-11-25/Workers_hurt_in_bakkie_crash)

## **Six Kids Die in W Cape Crash**

2009-12-19 / 21:53

*Cape Town - A 40-year-old woman and six children were killed when their vehicle collided with another on the N1 North near De Doorns on Saturday morning, Western Cape police said.*

*A delivery truck from Gauteng and an Isuzu bakkie from De Doorns were driving in the same direction on the N1, said Inspector November Filander. The bakkie was transporting 13 people from the Naudésig Farm in De Doorns to a nearby daycare centre, while the truck was carrying grapes, he said. "The driver of the truck tried to overtake another vehicle, but collided into the right front side of the white bakkie," Filander said.*

*The bakkie was preparing to take the Sandhills turn-off from the highway. Its passengers were thrown from the vehicle by the force of the impact. Five people were declared dead on the scene, Filander said. They were Anneline Beukes, 40, Quin Beukes, 8, Ruben Beukes, 3, Nicole Mentoer, 2, and Zinaidin Sonders, 5. Eight others were seriously injured and rushed to a nearby hospital where a further two died, Filander said. They were Leanna Jogens, 12, and Beuline van Wyk, 5.*

*"Both drivers escaped with minor injuries," Filander said. He said a case of culpable homicide had been registered. (SAPA)<sup>87</sup>*

\* \* \*

What does the law of our land say about the transportation of passengers in so-called 'bakkies' or other similar vehicles? It's a Frequently Asked Question that is succinctly answered by the Kwa-Zulu Natal Department of Transport's website. It's heartening to see that the issue is raised often enough to attain FAQ status. The South African on the street is apparently more socially conscious than I imagined. Hopefully it's the nation's farmers and foremen who are ringing the phones off the hook to double-check that they're complying with the rules. Anyway, this is the Department's plain-stated response:

*Regulation 247 of the National Road Traffic Act clearly stipulates that the portion of the said vehicle in which persons are being conveyed must be enclosed to a height of at least 350mm above the surface upon which such person is seated (seated passengers) and at least 900mm above the surface on which such person is standing (standing passengers). If that portion of the vehicle complies with the above and is made with a material of sufficient strength to prevent passengers from falling from such vehicle when it is in motion, it is perfectly legal.*

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[http://www.news24.com/Content/SouthAfrica/News/1059/662f4788ef3c440aaf8cc68152e385ab/19-12-2009-09-53/Six\\_kids\\_die\\_in\\_W\\_Cape\\_crash](http://www.news24.com/Content/SouthAfrica/News/1059/662f4788ef3c440aaf8cc68152e385ab/19-12-2009-09-53/Six_kids_die_in_W_Cape_crash)

*Although provision is made in the National Road Traffic Act that you may not carry persons in the goods compartment for reward, this regulation unfortunately only pertains to passenger carrying vehicles and not goods vehicles (Regulation 250 of the National Road Traffic Act).<sup>88</sup>*

Regulation 250, prohibiting 'any person, adults as well as children [from being] carried in the goods section of a goods vehicle for reward', is a curious regulation indeed that, to my mind, sets out to target bounty hunters and human traffickers more than unscrupulous construction bosses. Nonetheless, there you have it. It is against the law to pile workers into bakkies without adhering to specific guidelines. Interestingly, while there are limitations on the number of passengers in cars, there are no such stipulations for bakkies – only very specific guidelines for the dimensions of the cab. Similarly, there is a glaring discrepancy between the detailed legislation within the Road Traffic Act pertaining to the use of seat belts in motorcars and minibuses, and a complete lack of any reference to similar safety mechanisms in goods vehicles that convey passengers.

Recent reports suggest that our Minister of Transport is committed to tackling this woeful status quo:

### **Traffic Officers to Crackdown on Bakkies**

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<sup>88</sup> <http://www.kzntransport.gov.za/faq/index.htm>

2009-12-19

*Traffic law enforcement officials need to take a firmer stance on bakkies found transporting passengers, Transport Minister S'bu Ndebele has urged. He was speaking after visiting the scene of an accident near Nyoni on the north coast in which seven people were killed and eight others injured yesterday. It is believed that the driver of the bakkie lost control of the vehicle while travelling on the N2 towards Durban.*

*The accident comes after 12 people were killed - including nine children - in a crash on Monday night near Umbumbulu. In both accidents, the passengers were seated on wooden seats in the load area of the vehicles. Ndebele described yesterday's accident as gruesome, saying bakkies "were never primarily designed for the conveyance of passengers... This is yet again an unnecessary loss of lives."*

*The head of the Road Traffic Inspectorate in KwaZulu-Natal, John Schnell, said the National Traffic Act contained two regulations on the transportation of people by goods vehicles or bakkies. Regulation 250 of the act prohibits the transportation of people in the goods section of a vehicle for reward or for business purposes. However, Regulation 247 places limits on the transportation of people even for private use. The regulation states: "No person shall operate on a public road a goods vehicle conveying persons unless that portion of the vehicle in which such persons are being conveyed is enclosed to a height of at least 350mm above the surface upon which such person is seated."*

*Schnell said that this would mean that all passengers would have to be seated flat on the floor of the bakkie as the height was measured from the load floor of the vehicle. That effectively prohibited the transportation of people sitting on benches or those seated on the wheel arches of such vehicles. Schnell said that the transportation of passengers in bakkies was extensively done in agriculture and the building sector, mainly because bakkies were cheaper than other kinds of vehicles and these could also be used to transport goods at the same time.*

*In Monday's accident, members of the Shange, Ngcongo and Ngcobo families were killed after their Nissan bakkie collided with a truck as they were returning to their Malukazi home. Mzwakhe Ngcongo and his 10-year-old relative, Mkhelele Ngcongo, both survived the accident but are still in a critical condition.*

*[This article by BHEKI MBANJWA and DASEN THATHIAH was originally published on page 3 of The Daily News on December 18, 2009]<sup>89</sup>*

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So, here I sit with evidence of crime. I have license plates, company names, phone numbers, times of day, and precise locations. There are hotlines in place for civilians to report deviant road behaviour and encourage 'active

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<sup>89</sup> <http://www.arrivealive.co.za/News.aspx?s=3&i=696>

stakeholder participation'<sup>90</sup>. As the KZN Department of Transport reminds us, **'it is every road user's responsibility (24/7/365) to help stop the carnage on our roads'**, and one could argue that my failure to submit this evidence to the relevant authorities is tantamount to shirking this civic obligation.

But personal responsibility surely has to be factored into the situation. In the two previous images the vehicles do seem to comply with stipulated standards for the conveyance of human cargo. Moreover, there is plenty of space for the two respective men to comply with regulations by sitting on the floor of the *bakkie*. The decision they have made to jeopardise their safety is entirely their own; it is a reflection of personal liberty rather than the deprivation thereof. On the one hand it seems illogical for a person to sit in such a precarious way, but then again – as our own Minister of Transport insists - 'bakkies were never primarily designed for the conveyance of passengers'.

The onus on ensuring safety lies with the driver, according to the law.

Regulation 213 of the National Road Traffic Act stipulates:

***'(11) The driver of a motor vehicle shall ensure that all persons travelling in such motor vehicle shall wear a seatbelt as contemplated in this regulation.'***

Initially the driver was responsible for children up to the age of fourteen, and adults were charged on their own. However, passengers are not obliged to carry identification, which made it difficult to charge. A provision was then

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<sup>90</sup> <http://www.kzntransport.gov.za/faq/index.htm>

added to make the driver responsible for all passengers<sup>91</sup>. This doesn't have any bearing on passengers in the cargo section of a truck or *bakkie* since they are not obliged to buckle up – or rather, it is impossible to do so in the absence of safety belts. It does point to another shortcoming of the Traffic Act though. Regulation 213 makes it quite clear that the driver has a duty to safeguard persons being transported in his vehicle, yet this responsibility dissolves in the case of bakkies and trucks, where passengers are at a far greater risk of personal injury in the event of a road accident.

In defense of the legislative discrepancy between bakkies and motorcars, employees usually have to be transported on goods vehicles in the course of their work. Bakkies and trucks are designed to transport equipment, produce, parts, building materials and so forth. They are needed at construction sites and on farms anyway, so it makes economic sense to pile on workers in the available space. Cost-cutting aside, South Africa's major cities are already under the strain of escalating gridlock as more and more cars are on the road. Add carbon-emission guilt to the equation and one could argue that a truck filled with wheelbarrows and bricks and cement mixers *and* the workers who put this to use is a more logical, efficient and comparably eco-friendly means of doing business than doubling the number of vehicles in daily use in order to transport people separately. But even if one does accept that the transportation of legally employed workers in the course of their employ is a necessary evil that might warrant an exception, there is no valid reason why prohibition ought not apply to people in general.

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<sup>91</sup> <http://roadsafety.co.za/2009/11/11/who-carries-what-responsibility-for-the-wearing-of-seatbelts-in-a-motor-vehicle/>

## 12. CONCLUSION

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I believe that the phenomenon I have investigated is relevant to post-Apartheid South Africa. It deserves our attention for a number of reasons. Firstly, these images verify specific challenges facing our country – namely, road safety and employment. Secondly, owing to a consistent pictorial strategy intended to position the viewer as outsider, we are urged to reassess our position within a class hierarchy, and reflect upon the metaphorical distance **between ‘us’ and ‘them’**. No solutions are provided to any of these conundrums, but it is hoped that the folio in its entirety will engage the viewer and invite them to consider these realities. The best documentary images can hope to do is heighten consciousness. Anything beyond that is a matter of the **individual’s conviction and value system**.

Many of the friends or acquaintances I have spoken to about this project during the last two years **have come back to me saying things like: “You know what? Thanks to you I notice those guys on the back of bakkies every time I’m driving,” in a tone that** suggests they might have been better off oblivious. I would like to think it constitutes awareness nonetheless. Some friends even **showed me photos of their own they’d taken** of guys on bakkies in traffic – perhaps as an act of solidarity, or simply because the idea intrigued them, and

with a camera-phone ever at hand the ability to document is something we **are all capable of. Amateur photographers (and who isn't an amateur** photographer these days?) are, after all, the documentarians of real life<sup>92</sup>.

It affirmed **John Pavlik's introduction to** 'Journalism and New Media', in which he proposes (already back in 2001) that developments in new media are giving rise to the development of new storytelling techniques that engage the audience in more contextualized and navigable news reporting.<sup>93</sup> In other words, establishing new systems of truth-telling that operate in a more human-oriented, experiential mode than traditional media does.

My photos on their own might not do much to change legislation or raise awareness on a significant scale, but perhaps I am thinking in a far too traditional paradigm. What if my project were to be elaborated into an online creative campaign, where any driver or passenger or pedestrian in South Africa can take their own photos of dubious activity on our roads, then upload the image and its GPS co-ordinates onto a central server that logs the data and cross-references it on a Google Earth map of our national roads network. Every single transgression would be visible as a red dot on the map, and as a corroborative photograph. It goes without saying that updates to the collection would be linked to your Facebook page via an RSS feed. It is all quite **feasible; nothing an iPhone or a Blackberry or a new model Nokia can't do** today. A hypothetical website like this could conceivably have more impact in

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<sup>92</sup> The opinion of Andrew Nemeth – an Australian photographer and amateur solicitor specializing in the rights of photographers (<http://photorights.4020.net>)

<sup>93</sup> Pavlik, John V.2001, *Journalism and New Media*, New York: Columbia University Press: (2001)

raising public awareness and ushering a serious re-evaluation of the grey areas in our National Traffic Act than any one photo essay in a magazine or a book or a gallery could. The medium, the approach, and the intention to instigate **some degree of improvement to the world we live in all qualify this kind of ‘new media’ concept as a valid expression of** documentary photography. Moreover, it seems conceivable that as surveillance, observation, and storytelling are normalised in our camera-saturated society, matters of representation become less gummed up with the residue of an era where the photograph was a rarefied event, and the missionary and the photographer were often one and the same. In theory, in a world where everybody owns and operates a camera the photographer / subject hierarchy is moot.

But as technology makes a new frontier for civic photojournalism and the freedom of expression possible, we also need to be aware of other **fundamental rights that might be infringed upon in our zeal to ‘collect the world’ and/or ‘show the thing that has to be corrected’**. Roger Clarke, **chairman of the Australian Privacy Foundation, warns that “technology has exploded much much faster than the law has kept up with.”**<sup>94</sup> Longstanding regulations pertaining to privacy and consent, and personal expression will face a robust challenge in the coming years and undoubtedly need to evolve as a result.

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<sup>94</sup> Cited by Geesche Jacobsen in the article ‘Phone images capture a moral minefield’ ([www.smh.com.au/national/phone-images-capture-a-moral-minefield-2012127-1qlgk.html](http://www.smh.com.au/national/phone-images-capture-a-moral-minefield-2012127-1qlgk.html))

For the time being, it looks as though the phenomenon of human beings being carted about like cattle on our roads is too deeply entrenched a social reality for a collection of snapshots to wake us from our apathetic slumber.

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# PLATES

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# **ADDITIONAL IMAGES**

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Plate 01  
(untitled) on the R27 near Milnerton, December 2009  
From the series 'Bumper to Bumper' (2012)



Plate 02  
(untitled) on the N2 near Citrusdal, August 2009  
From the series 'Bumper to Bumper'



Plate 03  
(untitled) on Liesbeek Parkway, Rosebank, August 2009  
From the series 'Bumper to Bumper'



Plate 04  
(untitled) on High Level Rd., Sea Point, May 2009  
From the series 'Bumper to Bumper'



Plate 05  
(untitled) on the road between Blantyre and Lilongwe (Malawi), June 2009  
From the series 'Bumper to Bumper'



Plate 06  
(untitled) on the road between Blantyre and Lilongwe (Malawi), June 2009  
From the series 'Bumper to Bumper'



Plate 07  
(untitled) on the road between Blantyre and Lilongwe (Malawi), June 2009  
From the series 'Bumper to Bumper'



Plate 08  
(untitled) on the road between Blantyre and Lilongwe (Malawi), June 2009  
From the series 'Bumper to Bumper'



Plate 09  
(untitled) on Main Rd., Woodstock, January 2010  
From the series 'Bumper to Bumper'



Plate 10  
(untitled) on the N7, near Malmesbury, May 2009  
From the series 'Bumper to Bumper'



Plate 11  
(untitled) on the N7, near Malmesbury, May 2009  
From the series 'Bumper to Bumper'



Plate 12  
(untitled) on Lower Main Rd., Observatory, September 2009  
From the series 'Bumper to Bumper'



Plate 13  
(untitled) on Victoria Rd., Bakovwn, August 2009  
From the series 'Bumper to Bumper'



Plate 14  
(untitled) on Albert Rd., Salt River, February 2009  
From the series 'Bumper to Bumper'



Plate 15  
(untitled) at the Total garage, Piet Retief, June 2009  
From the series 'Bumper to Bumper'



Plate 16  
(untitled) in Atlantis, May 2009  
From the series 'Bumper to Bumper'



Plate 17  
(untitled) on the N1 towards Paarl, September 2009  
From the series 'Bumper to Bumper'



Plate 18  
(untitled) on the N7, near Philadelphia, October 2009  
From the series 'Bumper to Bumper'



Plate 19  
(untitled) on Lower Kloof Nek Rd., Tamboerskloof (August 2009)  
From the series 'Bumper to Bumper'



Plate 20  
(untitled) on Lower Kloof Nek Rd., Tamboerskloof (August 2009)  
From the series 'Bumper to Bumper'



Plate 21  
(untitled) at the intesection of Adderley & Strand St., Cape Town, May 2009  
From the series 'Bumper to Bumper'



Plate 22  
(untitled) on Strand St., Cape Town, May 2009  
From the series 'Bumper to Bumper'



Plate 23  
(untitled) on Strand St., Cape Town, May 2009  
From the series 'Bumper to Bumper'



Plate 24  
(untitled) on Strand St., Cape Town, May 2009  
From the series 'Bumper to Bumper'



Plate 21  
(untitled) on Buitengracht St., Cape Town, October 2009  
From the series 'Bumper to Bumper'



Plate 22  
(untitled) on Main Rd., Observatory, September 2009  
From the series 'Bumper to Bumper'



Plate 23  
(untitled) Paarden Eiland, August 2009  
From the series 'Bumper to Bumper'



Plate 24  
(untitled) on Strand St., Cape Town, January 2010  
From the series 'Bumper to Bumper'



Plate 25  
(untitled) on Buitengracht St., Cape Town, November 2009  
From the series 'Bumper to Bumper'



Plate 26  
(untitled) in Citrusdal, August 2009  
From the series 'Bumper to Bumper'



Plate 27  
(untitled) on Lower Kloof Nek Rd., Tamboerskloof, August 2009  
From the series 'Bumper to Bumper'



Plate 28  
(untitled) on Commissioner St., Johannesburg, November 2009  
From the series 'Bumper to Bumper'



Plate 29  
(untitled) on the N7 near Malmesbury, July 2009  
From the series 'Bumper to Bumper'



Plate 30  
(untitled) near Citrusdal, July 2009  
From the series 'Bumper to Bumper'



Plate 31  
(untitled) on Beach Rd., Three Anchor Bay, January 2010  
From the series 'Bumper to Bumper'



Plate 32  
(untitled) on the Eastern Boulevard, Upper Woodstock, September 2009  
From the series 'Bumper to Bumper'



Plate 33  
(untitled) on Buitengracht St, Cape Town, October 2009  
From the series 'Bumper to Bumper'



Plate 34  
(untitled) Buitengracht St, Cape Town, August 2009  
From the series 'Bumper to Bumper'



Plate 35  
(untitled) on the M1, near Edenvale, August 2009  
From the series 'Bumper to Bumper' (2012)



Plate 36  
(untitled) on Strand St, Cape Town, October 2009  
From the series 'Bumper to Bumper'



Plate 37  
(untitled) Strand St. pick-up, Cape Town, October 2009  
From the series 'Bumper to Bumper'



Plate 38  
(untitled) Strand St. pick-up, Cape Town, October 2009  
From the series 'Bumper to Bumper'



Plate 39  
(untitled) Strand St., Cape Town, August 2009  
From the series 'Bumper to Bumper'



Plate 40  
(untitled) on Buitengracht St., Cape Town, May 2009  
From the series 'Bumper to Bumper'



Plate 41  
(untitled) on Victoria Rd., Hout Bay, March 2009  
From the series 'Bumper to Bumper'



Plate 42  
(untitled) on the N7 towards Durbanville, December 2009  
From the series 'Bumper to Bumper'



Plate 43  
(untitled) Back road, near Citrusdal, August 2009  
From the series 'Bumper to Bumper'



Plate 44  
(untitled) Back road, near Citrusdal, August 2009  
From the series 'Bumper to Bumper'



Plate 45  
(untitled) on Ave Disandt, Fresnaye, August 2009  
From the series 'Bumper to Bumper'



Plate 46  
(untitled) on the N1 near Woodstock, June 2009  
From the series 'Bumper to Bumper'

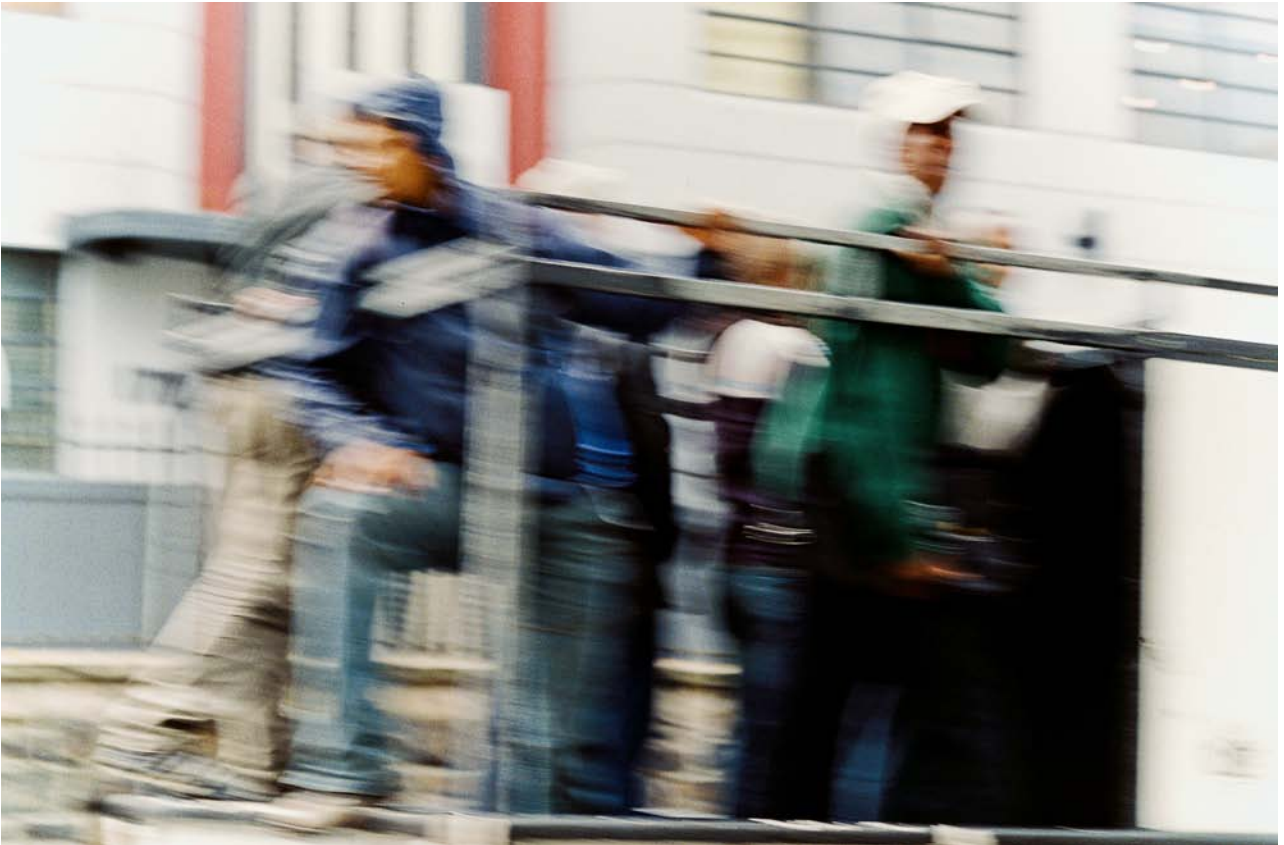


Plate 47  
(untitled) on Strand St., Cape Town, March 2009.  
From the series 'Bumper to Bumper'



Plate 48  
(untitled) Regent Rd., Sea Point, September 2009  
From the series 'Bumper to Bumper' (2012)



Plate 49  
(untitled) on Buitengracht St., Cape Town, May 2009  
From the series 'Bumper to Bumper'



Plate 50  
(untitled) Strand St., Cape Town, December 2008  
From the series 'Bumper to Bumper'



Plate 51  
(untitled) on Lower Kloof Nek Rd., Tamboerskloof, August 2009  
From the series 'Bumper to Bumper'



Plate 52  
(untitled 01) N2, past Athlone, February 2009  
From the series 'Bumper to Bumper'



Plate 53  
(untitled) on Sir Lowry Rd., Woodstock, February 2009  
From the series 'Bumper to Bumper'



Plate 54  
(untitled) on the N7 near Philadelphia, August 2009  
From the series 'Bumper to Bumper'



Plate 55  
(untitled) on the R27 near Milnernton, May 2009  
From the series 'Bumper to Bumper'



Plate 56  
(untitled) at the Salt River circle, Salt River, April 2009  
From the series 'Bumper to Bumper'



Plate 57  
(untitled) on the N7 near Atlantis, May 2009  
From the series 'Bumper to Bumper'



Plate 58  
(untitled) on Grayston Drive, Johannesburg, August 2009  
From the series 'Bumper to Bumper'



Plate 59  
(untitled) turning onto Eastern Boulevard, Upper Woodstock, December 2009  
From the series 'Bumper to Bumper'



Plate 60  
(untitled) on Roodebloem Rd, Woodstock, February 2009  
From the series 'Bumper to Bumper'



Plate 61  
(untitled) Main Rd, Observatory, December 2008  
From the series 'Bumper to Bumper' (2012)



Plate 62  
(untitled) on Koeberg Rd., near Milnerton, December 2009  
From the series 'Bumper to Bumper' (2012)

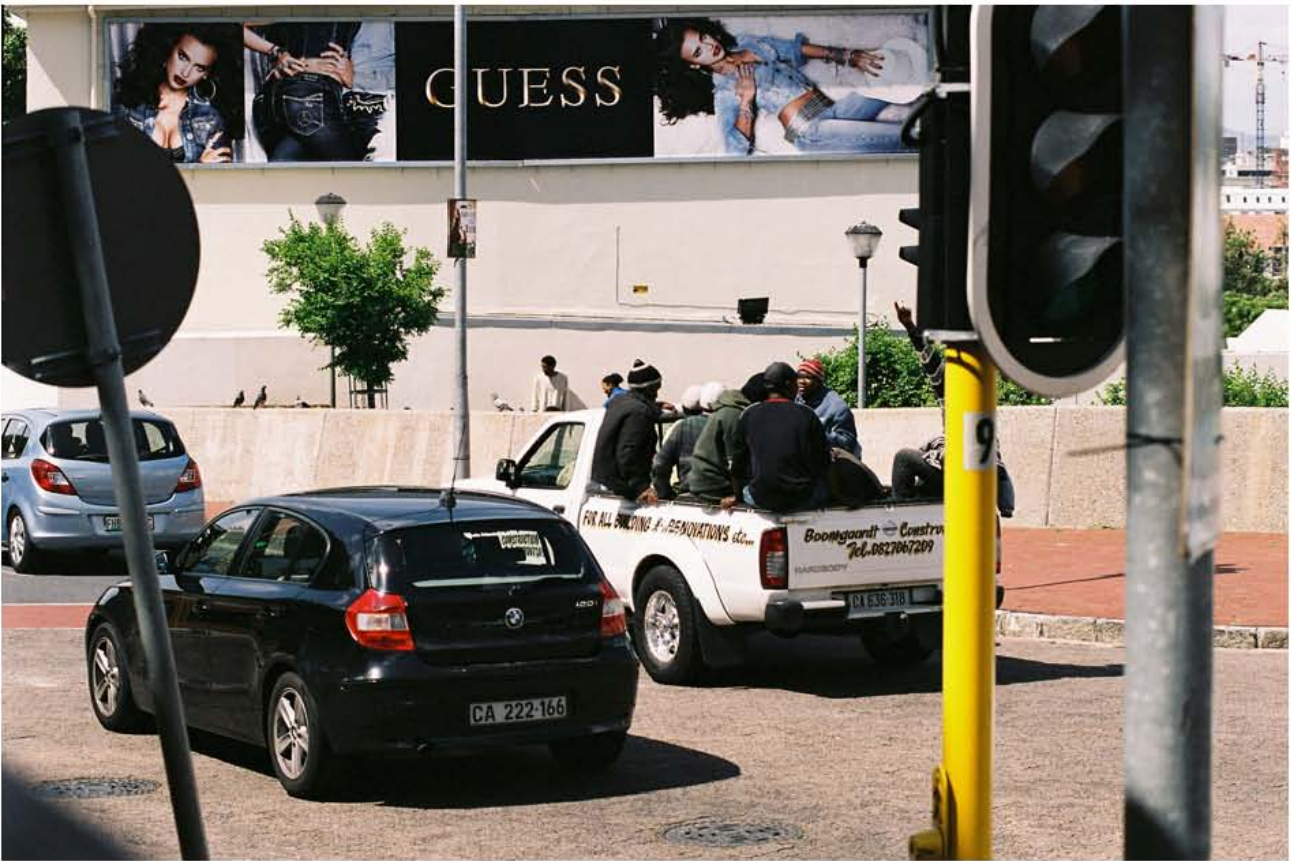


Plate 63  
(untitled) on Lower Kloof Nek Rd., Tamboerskloof, August 2009  
From the series 'Bumper to Bumper'



Plate 64  
(untitled) at a Petrol station in Maseru (Lesotho), July 2009  
From the series 'Bumper to Bumper'



Plate 65



Plate 66



Plate 67

Plates 65 - 67

'Three guys on the back of a bakkie' make frequent cameo appearances in the Madam & Eve comic strip by Rico & Dugmore.

<http://www.madamandeve.co.za/archive.php>



Plate 68



Plate 69



Plate 70

Plates 68 - 70

'Three guys on the back of a bakkie' make frequent cameo appearances in the Madam & Eve comic strip by Rico & Dugmore.

<http://www.madmandeve.co.za/archive.php>



Plate 71



Plate 72



Plate 73



Plate 74



Plate 75



Plate 76

### Plates 71 - 76

Unsafe, uncomfortable, or illegal transport conditions are not unique to South Africa - and not even the developing world



Plate 77



Plate 78



Plate 79



Plate 80



Plate 81



Plate 82

### Plates 77 - 82

Amateur photographic responses by civilians in their cars to unsafe and/or illegal transport conditions on our roads suggest the impulse for civic journalism is easily manifested in the camera-phone era. Of course, the hypocrisy cannot be ignored: as with my own project, a transgression committed in order to document a transgression (i.e taking a photograph whilst driving, as the driver's seat point of view implies).



Plate 83  
Selections from Andrew Bush's series of 'Vector Portraits'  
<http://www.andrewbush.net/vector%20A.html>

2009 - 11 - 23

To: Whom it may concern  
Western Cape Traffic Department

REPORT OF TRAFFIC VIOLATION

Dear Sir / Madam,

I wish to bring to your attention a blatant traffic violation I observed on September 23 2009, on the N2 highway between Riviersonderend and Plettenberg Bay, roughly 3 km before the R310 turnoff. As you can clearly see, the vehicle in question (license plate NPN 31084) is carrying at least ten unrestrained passengers, in clear violation of Regulation 247 of the National Traffic Act.

It is high time  
unethical pract  
owing to a lac  
like the one  
in the disci  
this danger  
the future

about this illegal and  
most unnecessarily  
transgressions  
graph assists  
that  
ed in

Yours s

Dylan Cu  
Sea Point

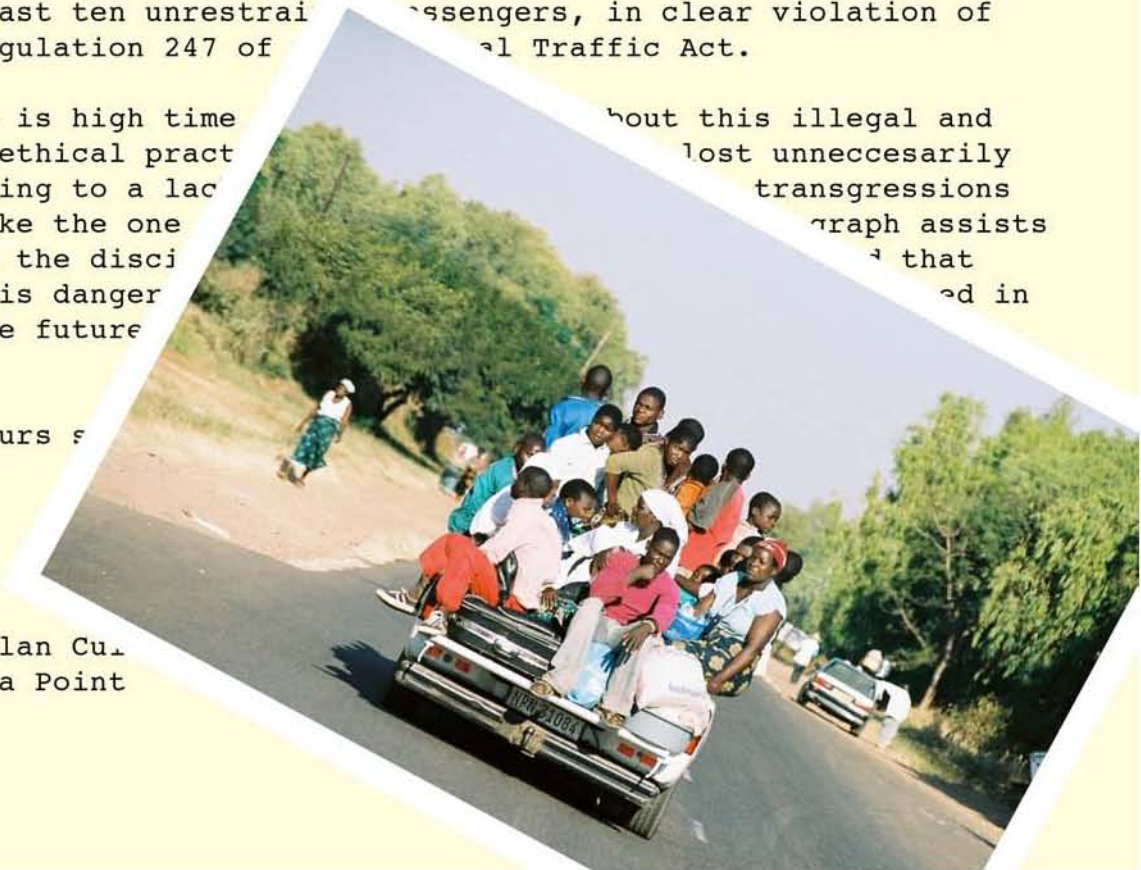


Plate 84

Another potential application for the photographs in this series: corroborating evidence in civic reports of unsafe or illegal road usage.

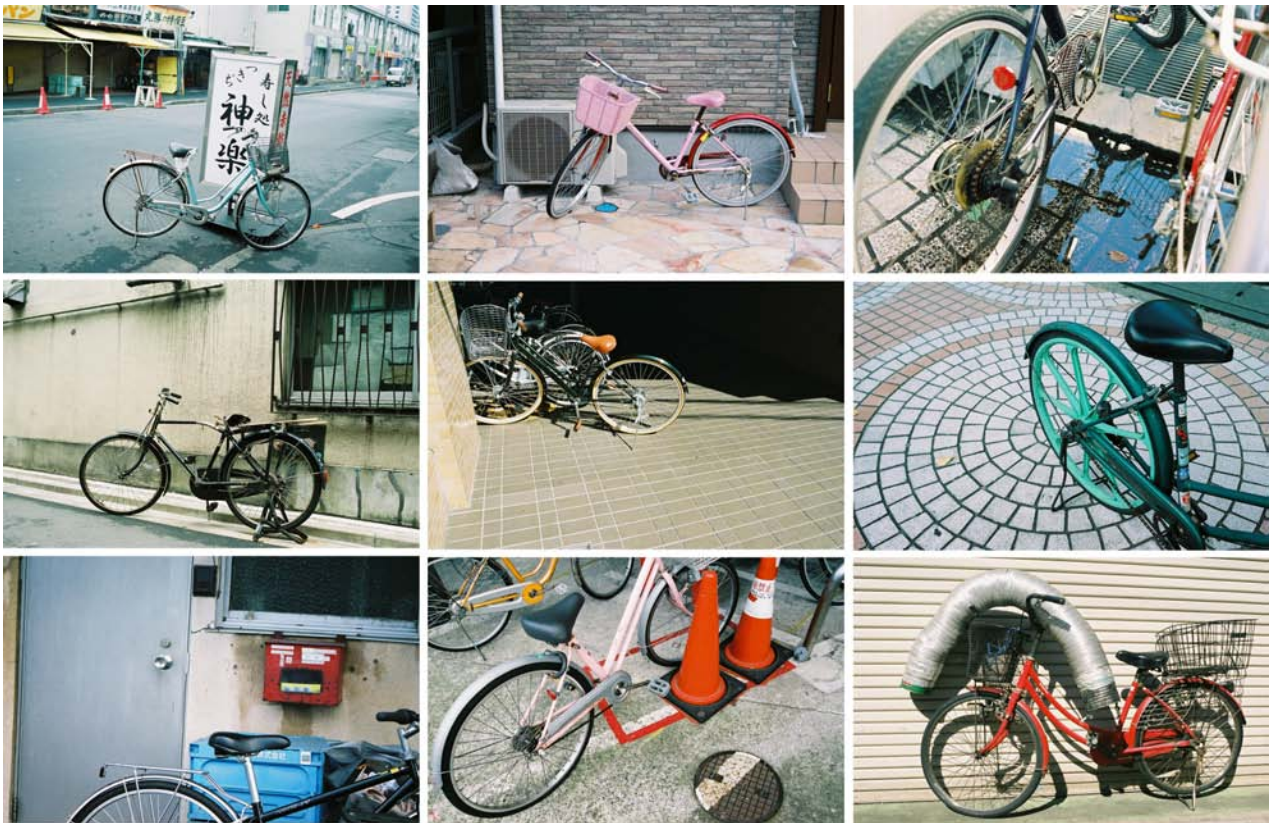


Plate 85

A selection of Japanese Bicycles from a much greater folio of images for a 2007 photographic essay.



Plate 86

Horses being transported in a trailer on the N7 near Darling



Plate 87

Lewis Hine took this photograph of refugees being transported atop box cars through Macedonia in 1918, one of many group portraits of the disenfranchised from his travels throughout Europe.



Plate 88

Photographer unknown, railroad workers in Senegal (approx. 1890)

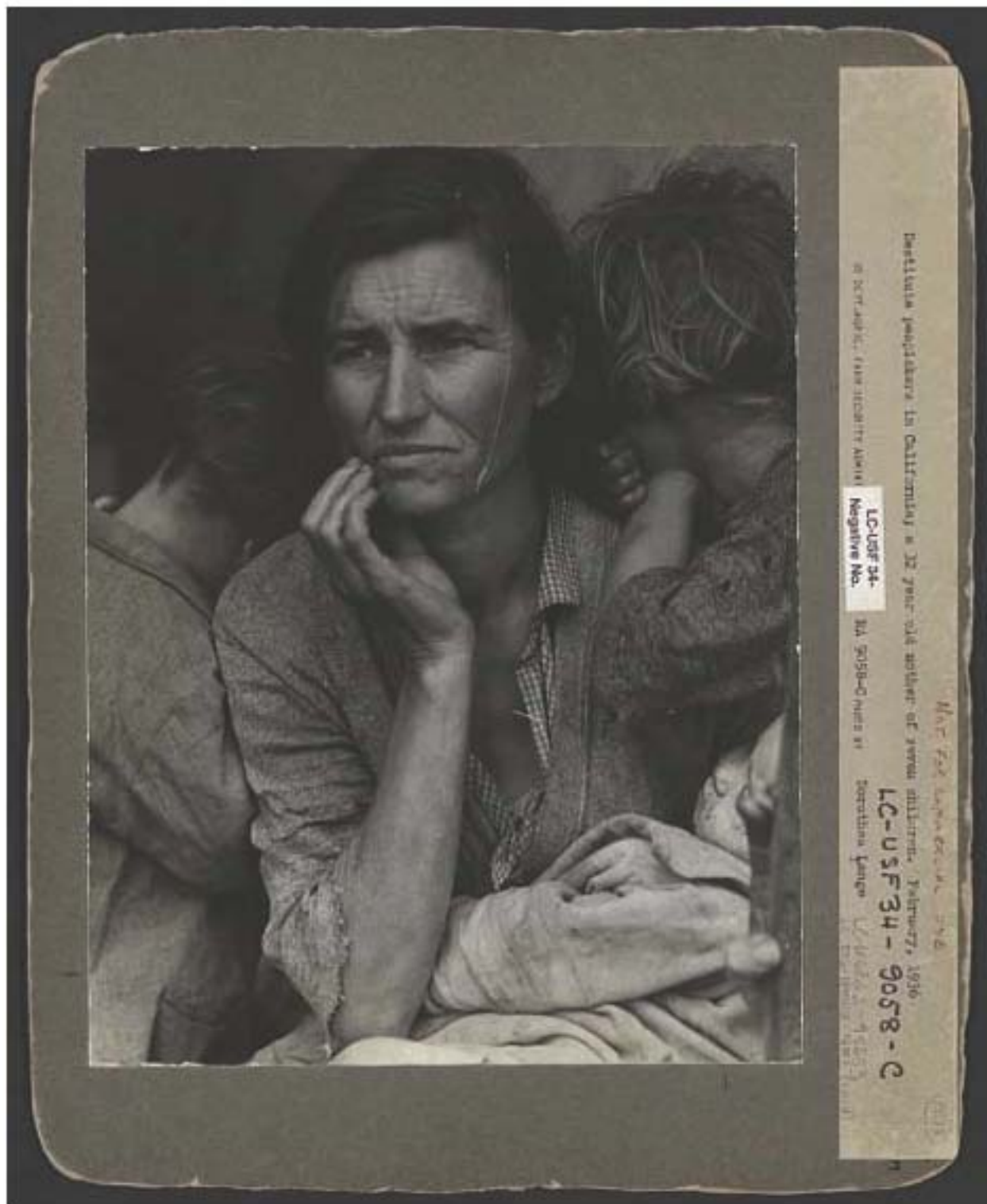


Plate 89

'Migrant Mother' (1936), Dorothea Lange's iconic portrait of this '32 year-old mother of seven' commissioned by the Farm Security Administration is simultaneously a representation of the depression era in rural America.



Plate 90

I couldn't resist snapping this image of a traffic 'speed cop' on Beach Rd., Sea Point. His purposeful surveillance and photography of motor vehicles - seeking out those transgressing the laws of the road - mirrored the approach to my own research.



Plate 91:

Images like these have undoubtedly affected public opinion and mobilised support around the rhino poaching dilemma (<http://bushwarriors.org/tag/rhino-poachers/>)