

**Matter, Metaphor and Meaning: The Precariousness of the Reality Value of
the Representational Status of Zwelethu Mthethwa's Photography**

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Declaration:

This work has not been previously submitted in whole or in part, for the award of any degree. It is my own work. Each significant contribution to, and quotation in this dissertation from the work, or works of other people has been attributed, and has been cited and referenced.

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An Overview

This study is divided into five sections. The introductory section briefly examines how South African black photography acquired its “history-telling” status and how the agitation against its rigidity came about and was achieved. The following chapter explores the norms and traditions that foreground the material elements and formal principles of Mthethwa’s photographs within art criticism. The third chapter considers Mthethwa’s betrayal of the viewer’s strong attachment to the objective recognition of the depicted in portraiture. The fourth chapter nudges the viewer to consider disembodiment as an alternative discourse of Mthethwa’s portraiture practice. The fifth chapter reflects on how the photographic abstractionism of the *Wall Paper*, 1995-2005 (Fig. 12) inverts the specificity of photography as a medium and promotes an aesthetic inclination rather than the viewer’s emotional attachment to it. The last chapter closely explores the reception and criticism of Mthethwa’s photography as “photography after the end of documentary realism” and the impact that it has (had) on the reception of his photographic practice and the hypothesis of this study (Enwezor 2010: 100).

The overarching motive of this study is to demonstrate the fact that, methodologically, it is the reception of Mthethwa’s practice as that which constitutes “photography after the end of documentary realism” that enables the viewer to look at his photographs as visual representations that subscribe to formalism and formal analysis: that dissolve the considerations of content to those of form. It is this viewing experience that, on one hand, encourages the viewer to locate Mthethwa’s photographs within art criticism: that enables the viewer to uphold their cultural worth or their status as aesthetic objects that draw the viewer’s sensory contemplation or appreciation to their beauty or sublimity. Also, it is this signification that, on the other hand, encourages the viewer to comprehend them as “sites of ambivalence” or as images that cannot be “read mimetically as the appearance of a reality”, but as artefacts that are capable of narrating a fiction. (Bhabha 1994: 51).

Chapter One

Introduction

This study argues that Zwelethu Mthethwa's photographs cannot be reduced wholly to the socio-historical conditions of their making. Such a reading is but one inescapably subjective way of looking at his photographs. There are other ways of looking at them, as objects or forms of expression whose interpretations and meanings can be imaginatively described and analysed. These divergent ways of looking at his photographs valorise the fact that "visuals have no roles, they are given orders to fulfil" (Mambety n.d: online).

A photograph is a contingent image; hence there are those who, first and foremost, see Mthethwa's photographs as visual representations that historicise a colonial experience or of "what happened once" (Hanson 1977: 58). For them, it is this consciousness or viewing experience that his photographs immediately evoke.

This consciousness is often justified by the historical circumstances and the pitiful conditions of the "shack life" of his black subjects, which readily evoke displacement. It is these circumstances that not only evoke tears of compassion and empathy from the viewer, but that most significantly, encourage the viewer to accept what is seen in them as a consequence of the effects of their subjugation to both colonialism and apartheid. It is this viewing experience that foregrounds the "history-telling" status of Mthethwa's photography and that underscores the realistic relationship between it and its spectator.

An example of the realist relationship between Mthethwa's photographs and its spectator is made evident by Okwui Enwezor's commentary on Mthethwa's *Sugar Cane* series (fig. 1). Enwezor writes:

This project cannily operates within an archaeological space, in order to excavate, and therefore probe, the social logic and economic dimension of colonial land practices and the apartheid policies that subtend them (Enwezor 2010: 109).

This extract underscores Enwezor's reading of the *Sugar Cane* series as visual representations that historicize the ethical and moral dimension of a colonial experience. This historical interpretation of Mthethwa's photographs is embedded indelibly in the South African black photographic history narrative. Its role in how we, today, consume and imagine South African black photography cannot be overemphasised. This is evinced by the fact that, to this day, "the specific ethical and political valences of documentary realism as a privileged oppositional genre to apartheid still hangs over the contemporary practices," writes Tamar Garb (Garb 2011: 12). Garb's assertion is central to the thesis of this study because on one hand, it alludes to the sustaining framework with which to think about South African black photography. On the other hand, it provides a historical context with which to locate the hypothesis of this study.

The valorisation of South African black photography's "ethical and moral dimension" also caught Susan Sontag by surprise in a seminar on Photography, Politics and Ethics in Johannesburg, 2004. Darren Newbury recalls:

Susan Sontag talked about being struck by the strong moral and ethical dimension within South African photography, and the attention given to the politics of photographic representation. By the power of photography as a means of documenting reality or showing the truth about society (Newbury 2009: 1).

Sontag's assertion reiterates the fact that a reading of South African black documentary photography as a "truthful document" cannot be wished away because it occupies a pride of place in the history of South African black photographic practice. Garb explains why: "the sobriety and gravitas associated with documentary photography made it a privileged pictorial means for revealing injustice through the representation of lived experience of black people under apartheid" (Garb 2011: 12).

The ethical and moral dimensions of South African documentary photography heralded a new pictorial turn that played a crucial role in mirroring the iniquities of both colonialism and apartheid. But most significantly, it led to a reversal of roles: of "who is looked, how and with what effect" (Whiteley 1999: 108). In other words, this pictorial turn betrayed the very ideology that photography was meant to serve. The recasting of South African black photography's role affirms Colin Richards' observation regarding visual representations' potential to "exceed the intentionality of the system that put them in place" (Richards in Garb 2011: 301). Contextually, Richards' remark foregrounds the fact that when photography was initially invented, it was thought of as an instrument to propagate Western civilisation. It was never thought of as a revolutionary medium that would mirror one of its most inhumane chapters.

The ethical and moral dimension of South African documentary photography and the realist relationship between it and its spectator was instigated mainly by the advent of apartheid. Apartheid interrupted the evolution of South African black documentary photography as a colourful and imaginative mode that documented black urban culture or the "self-modern awareness" of black people in South Africa. Here one refers to the "self-modern awareness" of black people as described in the documentary photographs of *Drum Magazine* (Firstenberg 2001: 179). As a result of this interruption, South African black documentary photography was reduced to being a mirror of what it meant to be black during apartheid. This is how it gained its status as a historical record.

Arguably, there is no other form of visual representation that had such a graphic and enduring impact in its depiction of the plight of black people in apartheid South Africa than struggle-and-social documentary photography.

Struggle-and-social documentary photography depicted the apartheid scars that run deep into the veins, blood and soul of the black body. Achille Mbembe vividly captures the graphic nature of the scars of apartheid on the black body. Mbembe writes:

In order to memorialise itself apartheid bears its signs on the naked flesh of the black body. It laboured it and laid it bare through various techniques: excision, incision, carving, scarifying and mutilation (Mbembe 2013: 69).

Due to their insistent reflection of the gravitas of these physical and emotional scars, the memory and meaning of apartheid still linger in the subconsciousness of black people who experienced apartheid as an existential reality. As a result, the consciousness of apartheid remains as well recorded and as vivid today as it was then.

It is this role of historicising colonial and apartheid experiences that, to many, South African black documentary photography memorises and immortalises. It is also this that has cemented its realistic relationship with its spectator. The realistic relationship between photography and its spectator is, to Allan Sekula, an inherent character of the discourse of photography. In his essay entitled *The Traffic In Photographs* (1981), Sekula argues that the discourse of photography is interrelated to socio-political ideological positions. And as such, Sekula “contests the reading of photographs that negate larger social and political issues that, for him, is the discourse of photography, above all else” (Sekula in Emerling 2012: 4). Sekula goes on to ask: “Can photography be anything else rather than being a representation of social and political activity” (Sekula in Emerling 2012: 4). Sekula’s positioning of photography as a “social and political activity” shares a strong kinship with the ideological positions of struggle – and – social documentary photography.

The Ethical and Political Valences of South African Black Documentary Photography

Struggle Photography

Conceptually, struggle photography was premised on a hunt for a single photograph that would lay bare the brutality and atrocities inflicted by apartheid on black people. As such, it was measured primarily by its ability to both condemn and raise the consciousness of national and international audiences against it (Eco 2009: 219). Most significantly, struggle photographers did not think or regard photography as merely a cultural practice; instead, they regarded it as a social and political obligation because “the competence to correlate race and culture was at the time a life function, a matter of survival” that was often inescapable (English 2007: 45).

To underscore its revolutionary consciousness, struggle photography exploited what Susan Sontag refers to as the “heroism of the vision”: photography’s moralised ideal of truth-telling” (Sontag 1973: 86). Sam Nzima’s photographs of the June 16, 1976 Soweto Youth Uprising as well as those of the 1960 Sharpeville Massacre (housed in the Bailey Archive) are examples of photographs that valorise the “heroism of vision”.

It is these photographs that “... abruptly revealed, without need for a lot of digressive speeches, something that has been circulating in a lot of talk, but that words alone could not make people accept” (Eco 2009: 219). Lone heroes emerged out of this, in a traumatic way, such as Mangaliso Sobukwe, Steve Biko, Hector Petersen and Nelson Mandela at a time when the “collective element of the revolutionary struggle was missing” (Eco 2003: 128). They became icons and “emblems of the idea of a revolution” because their selflessness and personal sacrifices were perceived as the embodiment of the cause of freedom (Rosler 2003: 128). In other words, the heroism of these photographs lay in the fact that they made people believe what words alone would not ordinarily make them believe.

To enhance its relevance and to keep its revolutionary rhetoric alive, struggle photography embedded itself in photojournalism. This afforded it a platform to disseminate political messages

and slogans as a means to sustain public consciousness against apartheid. Struggle photographs were also reproduced to conceptualise news items and revolutionary paraphernalia which included: flags, T-shirts, banners, book covers, posters and flyers. This revolutionary paraphernalia formed part of what Darren Newbury calls the “aesthetic of Flags and Fists of struggle photography” (Newbury 2009: 219). Due to its attachment to photojournalism, struggle photography was in the middle of the crosscurrents of widespread agitation against apartheid injustices.

Social Documentary Photography

Unlike struggle photography, social documentary photography was a photographic practice that was “designated upon the imaginative interpretation of reality” (Wells 2003: 252). Ernest Cole is one of South Africa’s black photographers who embraced this photographic form to represent the bondage of black people under apartheid.

An example of such a pictorial vision is made evident by the style and form of his photograph that graces the cover of Darren Newbury’s book, *Defiant Images: Photography and Apartheid South Africa* (2009). What is most outstanding about the composition of this photograph is that it enlivens his pictorial signature: his utilisation of a less definable style that intertwines creativity and reality with great artistic flair. The creativity-reality nexus of this photograph foregrounds;

The conventional aesthetic-historical moment, less definable in its boundaries, in which the viewer’s argumentativeness cedes to the organismic pleasure afforded by the aesthetic rightness or well-formedness of the image (Rosler 2003: 268).

It is the nuances of his “style-less style” that he utilised to depict the social life of black people in various settings – hospitals, servants quarters, mining compounds and public spaces that many critics admire and for which he is still remembered.

Cole denounced the high city life pictured in *Drum* in favour of a style that seeks to “provide a language to express an uncompromising vision of social dimension and life under duress” (Garb 2011: 41). The result is Cole’s seminal book, *House of Bondage* (1967). For Darren Newbury, it is his imaginative interpretation of reality that made it distinct from the photographic humanism which dominated *Drum* in this era. Newbury succinctly captures the undercurrents of this distinction, stating that “it is the phenomenological power, its photographic image and its analytical structure that made *House of Bondage* different from anything it was possible to publish in South Africa” (Newbury 2009: 174-5).

Newbury’s high regard for the narrative strength of this photographic book compels him to position it within the broader conceptual context of Frantz Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks* (1967). Newbury is of the view that *Black Skin, White Masks’* enduring meditation on the psychology and philosophy of race relations “offers a provocative context within which to situate the complex concepts of *House of Bondage*” (Newbury 2009: 175). For Newbury, the mutual discourses on race of *Black Skin, White Masks* and *House of Bondage* accentuated the universality of the political history of black art. Cole’s comment on his refuge in America reflects this yoke, as he notes: “You may escape the apartheid regime, but you carry your prison smell with you” (Newbury 2009: 174). This provocative comment underlies the psychology and philosophy of both the visual thought and the imaginative language embedded in Cole’s pictorial narrative.

Cole's comment is indicative of a distinct and insistent voice that belies his pictorial visions -- a voice that belies his concern with the social dimension of black peoples' lives under apartheid. This concern informed the premise of *House of Bondage* and underlies the subject matter of his photographic practice. It is this particularity that signifies not only his work, but also of the genre of his conviction. David Goldblatt, one of the leading proponents of documentary photography in South Africa, expands on the prescriptive and deterministic nature of social documentary photography. He declares:

Documentary photography concerned itself with the particular: the particularity of the particular. It's an attempt to be intensely engaged with the particular that propels me. I think it would be presumptuous to think that you are making a universal statement" (Barnes in Garb 2011: 9).

The particularity of the particular that Goldblatt alludes to is evinced by both struggle--and--social documentary photography's claims that what they show is nothing but the truth. It is this concrete singularity that has become the sustaining framework within which to think about South African black photography. And it has its own limitations.

The most glaring one is that it "offers little time or space for the contemplation of black photography's artistic merit, and an embrace of the photographer's cultural experience" (English 2007: 45). This lack entrenches the imaginative apathy and the lack of differentiation of mediums and practices in the reading of the works of many South African black photographers today (English 2007: 45).

Furthermore, this unidimensional visual proposition has not only entrenched the desire "to view black photographers and to understand black photographers' work in terms of their blackness" -- but it also implies that the historicisation of a colonial experience is the natural ambition of South African black photography and the source of its cultural imagination (English 2007: 55). The reading of South African black photography as that which, predominantly, concerns itself with the historicisation of a colonial experience, foregrounds the limits of both its representation and its critique.

Reality and Imaginary Reality:

The Primary and Secondary Reading of South African Black Photographic Representation

A reading of South African black photography as a visual practice that represents "reality" rather offers a way of looking and thinking about South African black photography as that which concerns itself, primarily, with "who" is pictured. In other words, it concerns itself with the identity of its subject as a source of its interpretation and meaning. Such a reading can be regarded as that which constitutes the primary reading of South African black photography.

The secondary reading of South African black photography offers less of a way of looking and thinking about *who* is pictured in it, and more about how its subject interfaces with its visual elements and how that facilitates the generation of meaning. Unlike photographic realism, the visual proposition of this photographic representation demands that the viewer inhabits it with all senses to ensure that interpretation is mediated by the visual properties of its elements and the principles

of its organisation. An understanding of the difference between reality and imaginary reality is critical because that is what constitutes the dialogic disposition of this study. The critics' failure to invoke a secondary reading of South African black photography is a failure to evoke its cultural worth or its imaginary reality.

The threshold between reality and imaginary reality in South African black photographic representation was, initially, concretised by Santu Mofokeng's declaration: "In addition to politics, the aesthetic is also in place" (Mokokeng in Garb 2011: 43). By this, Mofokeng, one of the most influential and prominent black photographers in South Africa, intended to evoke an imaginative reality that belies the South African black photographic practice. This disposition has been conveniently overlooked. Most significantly, Mofokeng's remark underscores the precariousness of the reality value of South African black photography. Fundamentally, it demonstrates that visuals have no fixated roles; they fulfil orders that are assigned to them.

Embedded in Mofokeng's comment is his contest of the fixed roles and orders entrenched in the visual language and vocabulary of South African black documentary photography. Conceptually, Mofokeng's observation seeks to ensure that documentary realism's "own formal languages are opened up to question so that the reality it constructs is beginning to be understood as partial, interested and particular" (Garb 2011: 12). Enwezor captures the primordial unity or fixity of the formal language of South African black documentary realism when he claims that "writing about South African art always seems like walking down a cul-de-sac. At the end of the one way street, what one finds is South Africa's anguish" (Enwezor 2010: 101). It is this linearity that has been the sustaining framework that characterised the reading and interpretation of South African black photography that, at best, Mofokeng interrogates and, at worst, finds to be problematic. He finds it problematic because this linear narrative flies in the face of the accepted position in relation to visual representation: the impossibility to fix the meaning of photographs. What Mofokeng's remark underscores are capabilities of South African black photography to make not singular, but universal statements. He, in a way, problematises the conformity and confinement of black photography to a particular consensus that precludes others. Hence, he finds solace in non-positionality to accommodate other forms of expressions that its linear narrative precludes.

The pitfalls of a consensus, and what Mofokeng is suspicious of are delineated by Kwame Appiah. Appiah argues that:

If you are a philosopher, consensus does not always make you happy. Nietzsche once made a remark to the effect that the *consensus sapientium* - the agreement of the wise - might be evidence of the untruth. The fact that everybody seems to agree about something *isn't* always proof that we are right, it may do us good to think about the principles, the values, and ideals that underlie our agreement, not just to make the consensus more intellectually secured, but also to explore consequences we have not noticed (Appiah 2001: 36).

Mofokeng's assertion, then, nudges the viewer to consider the principles that do not explore the consequences of this intellectually secured interpretation of South African black photography. In other words, his assertion advocates the elevation of the "history of disagreement" in the reading of South African black photography. The history of disagreement is a history that is not in favour of the stable or intellectually secured position, but rather of disruptions and discontinuities. According to Michel Foucault, history is generative and fruitful in evoking critical thoughts. Foucault writes:

For many years now historians have preferred to turn their attention to long periods, as if, beneath the shifts and changes of political events, they were trying to reveal the stable. The history of thought, of knowledge, of philosophy, of literature seems to be seeking, and discovering, more and more discontinuities, whereas history itself appears to be abandoning the irruption of events in favour of the stable (Foucault 1972: 3 and 6).

Mofokeng's observation can be looked at as his intent to uncover the discontinuities that lie beneath the supposedly stable -- as a means to unravel other photographic consequences and possibilities hidden beneath the cloak of the stable and the intellectually secured reading of South African black photography. Mofokeng explains his motive against the intellectually secured positioning of South Africa black photography, stating that:

Things have changed; it has become more difficult to legitimise my role as a documentary photographer in the traditional sense. As I get intimate with my subjects, I find I can't represent them in any meaningful way. I see my role becoming one of questioning rather than documenting (Mofokeng 2012: 10).

Mofokeng's new role of "questioning rather than documenting" can be seen as his desire to make universal statements, statements that will accommodate the contexts and concepts that inform contemporary notions of blackness in South Africa.

Such contexts and concepts allow him to explore new representational spaces and idioms that are not influenced by his historical experiences alone, but that are a manifestation of his creative imaginations too. His photographs of billboard advertisements evinced his embrace of new representational spaces and idioms. This pictorial vision was brought to a sharp, compelling focus by his giant Omo washing powder billboard advertisements that reduced the people of Soweto to miniature beings making ends meet on the periphery of the global economy.

This new body of work signalled the substitution of the yoke of apartheid in his work with the new psychological yoke of Western consumerist culture. This visual form can be construed as Mofokeng's way of questioning the subjection of black people to an economic slavery mediated by the advertising industry.

Mofokeng's scrutiny of the role of the advertising industry in the socio-economic life of the new South Africa concerns itself with the contemporary existence of South African black people as consumers of global culture. This body of work, in a way, serves to fulfil his role of inquiring rather than documenting. It also emphasises the overarching claim of this study that there is a way of depicting reality as that which cannot only be objectively secured, but imaginatively described and analysed.

Mofokeng's invocation of black photography as an object of imaginative attention seeks to ensure that black artists' culture and their identity are not conflated; instead, treated as two separate locales. These two locales are not necessarily intertwined, or always feeding off each other as is often portrayed. These are exceptions that are often overlooked in the analyses of black photography in South Africa.

What is most critical about Mofokeng's assertion is that it highlights how the autonomy of black photographic representation has been usurped. Prah makes the point:

The autonomy of the histories of black photography in South Africa has been usurped. And how new histories have been foisted on it that give credence to its periodisation as pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial. As merely an appendage and a historicisation of a colonial experience (Prah 2015: 2).

Ideologically, Mofokeng's assertion interrogates the periodisation of the South African black photography. This interrogation shares kinship with Homi Bhabha's notion of the "third space". Of this notion, Bhabha writes:

This new mutation replaces the established pattern with a mutual and mutable representation of cultural difference that is positioned in-between the narrative of the coloniser and the colonised. The indeterminate space in - between subject positions that are lauded as locale of the disruption and displacement of hegemonic colonial narratives of cultural structures and practices (Bhabha in Meredith 1998: 2).

Mofokeng's observation catapults South African black photography's ability to negate its reduction to a colonial experience. This serves to foreground the fact that its sources of interpretation cannot be attributed wholly to the socio-historical conditions of its making, but, rather, approached with a multitude of descriptions, perceptions and analyses.

Mofokeng's valorisation of the precariousness of the reality value of South African black photography seeks to underscore its capability to be:

A mode of articulation, a way of describing a productive, and not merely reflective, space that engenders new possibilities. It is an interruptive, interrogative, and enunciative space of new form of cultural meaning and production - blurring the limitations of existing boundaries and calling into question the established categorisation of culture and identity. A space in which cultural meaning and representation have no primordial unity or fixity (Meredith 1998: 3).

Mofokeng's assumption of his photography as a "productive, and not merely reflective space" is made evident in his portrait, *Eyes Wide Shut Motouleng Cave* (Fig. 5) (Bhabha in Meredith 1998: 2). Most fundamentally, its visual strategy blurs the objective and transparent representation of the sitter in portraiture. In other words, it is its metaphorical depiction of the sitter as an artefact brought to the fore by the conceptual premise of this portrait that surpasses the limitations of the existing boundaries of portraiture. It is this abstraction in Mofokeng's work that has been valorised by Patricia Hayes in her essay entitled *The Violence is the Knowing* (2009). Hayes writes: "There is a strong thematic throughout Mofokeng's work about things not being what they appear, achieved mostly through a lack of sharpness, blurring or of using exactitude to blur the very identity of things" (Hayes 2009: no page numbers)

The thematic that Hayes refers to is the one that underscores a dynamic entanglement in this portrait between seeing and imagining; between mindedness and absent-mindedness; between meditation and daydreaming. The viewer may have imagined the representation of the presence of absence, but not in the way Mofokeng (pre)figured it in this black - and - white photograph. The style and form of this portrait underscore the fact that portraiture can be represented as a productive medium that is manifest in the viewer's imaginations.

Besides Mofokeng, George Hallett is another South African black photographer that heralded black photography as an object of artistic attention during apartheid. This is made evident by his creative interpretation of the lifestyles and architectural landscape of District Six before it was demolished by apartheid.

Due to the racial strictures of apartheid, he could not sustain his desire to undertake art photography professionally and gainfully. He soon went to exile in the United Kingdom to pursue his photographic dream. When he arrived there he developed a series of photographs of African and South African black intelligentsia in the United Kingdom. These images were made possible by his network of writers, poets, musicians and visual artists, result of which is an oeuvre that provides a deep sense and sweep of their exiled existence in the United Kingdom.

It is Hallett's idea of merging literature and photography that brought him admiration, and that resulted in an impressive archive of portraits of African writers across Europe. His merging of literature and photography marked the advent of his unique photographic signature. It is the rarity of its conceptual premise that landed him a post as the artistic director of the Heinemann's African Writers Series' book covers. As director, Hallett was charged with the task of conceptualising the cover design of this series. This opportunity afforded him a creative space that he had not anticipated.

Hallett's first book cover commission was the conceptualisation of a novel by Dominic Mulaisho entitled *Tongue of Dumb*, in 1971. Under pressure to impress, he cut his photograph of a wooden sculpture into horizontal strips and rearranged them into a new, creative form and photographed them. The outcome was a worked artefact: a confluence of fine art photography and craft. James Currey, the editor of Heinemann's African Writers Series, was impressed by Hallett's offering. Many book covers followed and a creative relationship with Heinemann's African Writers Series ensued, lasting well over a decade (Eyene 2008: 62).

Hallett's network provided him with a tableau of "models" that became the subjects and objects of the concepts of many of this series' book covers. Pallo Jordan, the former South African Minister of Arts and Culture, had memorable cameo roles as a model. In hindsight, there are few viewers who would have imagined Jordan's eccentric sword pose in a double-exposed photograph that graced the cover of Chinua Achebe's seminal novel, *Things Fall Apart* (1968). Jordan's dance instincts were unveiled when he took a role as a dancer for the conception of a cover for John Munonye's book entitled *Dancer of Fortune* in 1974 (Eyene 2008: 62). In these photographs Hallett captures Jordan's creative instincts that would have otherwise remained unknown to many South African viewers.

For DM Zwelonke's *Robben Island* (1973) book cover, Hallett enlisted a coterie of exiled South Africans to depict the boredom of solitary confinement that many South African political leaders were subjected to on Robben Island. Most noticeable is Louis Moholo, the only surviving member of South African legendary and diasporic jazz band, The Blue Note.

There are other exiled South African artists that graced the book covers of this series. Gavin Jantjies and his wife had their turn when they graced Nuriddin Farah's book cover to represent the "tragic tale of life in his homeland" (Eyene 2008: 62). Jimi Mathews, a South African veteran literary figure, had one of the most unorthodox roles when he, "suffered the indignities of a prisoner of war, wearing only an old rag around his waist and bleeding from a head wound" (Eyene 2008: 62). What

emerged from this project was a new photographic consciousness of “self-image and projection, of desire and fantasy” (Eyene 2008: 62). Hallett’s merging of photography and literature negotiated new representational spaces and idioms.

What was unique about Hallett’s literary portraits is that they did not pretend to visualise these novels or to duplicate or mirror them. Instead, he provided the book covers with other layers of meanings that existed outside the text, but that were also in tandem with them. This generative synthesis between the two “gave his pictures a new, self-conscious alliance with language and, by extension, with literature” (Rabb 1995: I). Hallett’s merging of image and text as the visual language of photographic practice demystified the long-held assumption that “a photograph, after all, is just a photograph, words will determine its meaning and status” (Morris in Rabb 1995: xlvii).

In other words, Hallett’s miscegenation of photographs and literature dealt with one of the most contentious intellectual debates: of the primacy of words over images. Most interestingly, in Hallett’s literary portraits both image and text have their own distinct roles and there is no hierarchical order of value or signification. This visual representation demonstrates that the visual and text can have a reciprocal relationship with no “primordial unity or fixity” (Bhabha in Meredith 1998: 3).

Hallett’s tenure as the artistic director of this series afforded him an experimental, productive space that resulted in some of the most creative and artistic photographic outputs of his career. The artistic worth of this output was endorsed by its appearances alongside the posters and photomontages of Gavin Jantjies in various galleries in the United Kingdom. It is this collaboration that prompted Jantjies to declare that “to encounter Hallett’s work in an art gallery, is to witness how well it operates in the space of fine art... The gallery suits Hallett’s work because it... uncouples it from the genre of photographic documentary” (Jantjies in Eyene 2008: 60).

Mofokeng’s and Hallett’s photographic methodologies brought to the fore contexts and concepts that heralded new representational spaces and idioms that interrogated the widely held view that South African black photography is “stable and unchanging” (Bailey and Hall 2003: 382). Mofokeng’s and Hallett’s visual representations invoke hidden impulses that exposed other possibilities of looking and interpreting South African black photography, negating its intellectually secured interpretation that posits it as a representation of a colonial experience.

On another level, their alternative visual representations can also be seen as an interrogation of the stock of images that portrays the black body as an index of socio-political relations rather than as a site of imaginations. These are a stock of images that have unilaterally informed the viewer’s perception and reading of South African black photography as a political activity rather than as a cultural practice. On the whole, their respective photographic conceptions nudge the viewer to look at the South African photographic archive not as a site of wonder, but as a site that needs to be unravelled to reveal not merely what it contains, but also the very conditions that have made it possible; that invented it and that continue to sustain it.

This study’s examination of the visual representations of Mofokeng and Hallett serves as a context with which to locate the analysis of Mthethwa’s photographic practice. This serves to illustrate that Mthethwa’s photographic practice does not constitute an entirely new phenomenon, instead it builds on other influences and practices of other South African black photographers, whose work

contributed immensely to the elevation of the unpredictability of the reality value and representational status of South African black photography.

A Brief Profile of Zwelethu Mthethwa

It is well recorded that Mthethwa has always highlighted the precariousness of the reality value of his photographic practice. This is underscored by his now well-recorded insistence that: "I did not want to be a photojournalist. I wanted to be a fine art photographer" (Mthethwa 2011: 102). Mthethwa's proclamation has a striking similarity to that of Mofokeng. The only difference is the nuances of each. Although made at different times of their respective careers, they can be seen as reactions to "kinds of knowledge black photographers were permitted to reflect and generate" during apartheid (English 2007: 7). An example of this was made evident by Peter Mackenzie's statement: "No photographer can lay claim to any individual artistic merit in an oppressed society" (Mackenzie in Newbury 2009: 4).

Viewed as such, Mthethwa's claim can be construed as being in dialogue with MacKenzie's insistence. If not, at least, it distances his photographic practice from such a decree. Alternatively, it can be seen as his proclamation of the fact "he does not see himself as a representative of any community. He sees himself as a cultural activist that tries to make interventions into cultural spaces and those interventions may draw on one's own cultural rather than historical experiences" (English 2007: 43). Contrary to Mackenzie's resolve, Mthethwa's proclamation can also be seen as instigation for the imaginary in the reading of his work. Of the dialogic disposition of Mthethwa's photographs, Njami writes:

We must not be fooled: Mthethwa's images are not intended to invoke tears of compassion from us. The empathy he demonstrates towards his "models" is a long way from compassion, with its accompanying morality and hypocrisy. These images are not created in order to make us feel guilty and it is precisely from this apparent neutrality, from this factual side that they display, that they gain all their impact (Njami 2011: this essay has no page numbers)

It is this extract that accentuates the imaginary reality evident in Mthethwa's photographs. If not their ability to transform objective reality into a new and different kind of reality that is manifest in the viewer's imaginations is highlighted here.

Most significantly, Mthethwa's claim compels the viewer to begin to think and look at his photographs in a way that is distinct from the widely held view that South African black photographic practice is, in essence, a political activity. To think and look at his photographs as visual representations whose discourse cannot be separated from the themes, conventions, problems, tactics and strategies that inform the linguistic language and vocabularies of fine art and art history traditions. The claim that this study makes is that it is the fine art and art history background and traditions inherent in Mthethwa's pictorial and spatial formations that set his photographic practice apart from that of Mofokeng and Hallett.

Born in 1960 in Durban, KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, Mthethwa's visual art career started at Abangani Open School, in his hometown. In 1981, he enrolled at the Michaelis School of Fine Art, University of Cape Town, where he studied drawing and photography. In 1984, he obtained his

Bachelor of Fine Art degree. In 1989, while on a Fulbright Scholarship, he obtained his Master's qualification in Fine Art at the Rochester Institute of Technology, New York. Between 1994 and 1998, he returned to the Michaelis School of Fine Art to take up a post as a lecturer in photography and drawing. He later quit his teaching post to take up photography as a full-time career.

Unlike Mofokeng and Hallett, Mthethwa received a formal training in fine art and studied art history. This introduced him, early on, to "the problems of the visual arts. Of how shapes, forms and tonalities work together to create an image, of how the organisation of elements within the boundaries of the frame interact to create a space" (Rosenblum 1978: 33). The academic imprints of these traditions are evident in how he arranges the material elements of his compositions. Most significantly, it is all of the stories that he makes his photographs tell that make his photographic output worthy of a cultural study.

Mthethwa has become one of the key figures in the development of fine art photography in South Africa. His ability to "sense meanings in the wider culture and to contemplate the evolution and significance of those meanings" in depicting the ordinary as an object of aesthetic attention, garnered him critical acclaim both locally and internationally (Cooke 2004: 14).

Since the dawn of democracy in South Africa in 1994, Mthethwa's work has been a regular feature of major photographic exhibitions. Some of the major international exhibitions in which he participated include: *Venice Biennale Common Ground: Discovering Community in 150 years of Art* (2005), Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington DC., USA; *The Short Century: Independence and Liberation Movements in Africa 1945-1994* (2001), Museum Villa Stuck, Munich Germany; *Chicago Art Fair* (1996), Chicago, USA; *Basel Art Fair* (1996), Basel, Switzerland (1996).

Mthethwa's work has also featured in major international photographic book projects such as *The Short Century: Independence and Liberation Movements in Africa 1945-1994* (2001); *Snap Judgments: New Positions In Contemporary African Photography* (2006); as well as in self-titled monographic photography books: *Zwelethu Mthethwa* (2010); *Zwelethu Mthethwa: New Works* (2011), *Figures and Fictions: South African Contemporary Photography* (2011) and *Zwelethu Mthethwa: Photography a Contemporary Myth* (2011). The criticism of his work has also featured in prominent academic art journals such as *Nka Journal of Contemporary African Art* (2009), *African Arts Journal* (2004), *Wall Street Journal* (2010), *Art Journal* (2002), *New York College*.

Fuller recognition for Mthethwa's work came from the self-titled monographs that established his position as one of the most accomplished black photographers in post-apartheid South Africa. It is Mthethwa's appropriation of forms of representation, whose designation as, for example, "Untiled" that enhanced the artfulness of his photographs and the stature of his photographic practice in the art world.

To date, Mthethwa is recognised as one of the few black South African photographers who have relentlessly probed, pursued, scrutinised and embraced photography as an artistic practice. It is the gestural ambiguities of Mthethwa's compositions as temporal, narrative and fictional visions that foreground the fact that the real realm of his photographic practice is art criticism.

Most importantly, Mthethwa's photographic output is the subject of this study because it has raised the profile, standard, global appreciation and competitiveness of South African black photographic

practice. To date, Mthethwa has been bestowed with various accolades and his work forms part of permanent collections of respected private patrons and public fine art institutions, including the Deutsch Bank's prestigious fine art collection and the South African Embassy's collection in Washington DC, USA.

Chapter Two

Image-making: A Kinship with Painting

The overarching claim that this study makes is that Mthethwa's photographs, as pillars of this study, represent image-making: a meticulous process of picturing; of alignment and manipulation of colour, size, space and objects as visible forms of expression that share a kinship with painting. Michael Fried alludes to the manipulation of the visible forms of expression of photographs to depict "the photographic visions that have reused the painterly model and used photography, quite consciously and systematically, to produce works of art that stand alone and exist as photographic painting" (Fried 2008: 145).

Simon Njami shares this sentiment regarding Mthethwa's photographs. In his essay entitled *Zwelethu Mthethwa: Photography a Contemporary Myth* (2011) he writes: "Mthethwa's photographs are cleverly restrained, measured and they are kind of paintings that we have not seen produced for centuries" (Njami 2011: this essay has no page numbers). Njami's perspective on Mthethwa's photography valorises its capability to "dissolve the considerations of content into those of form" (Whiteley 1999: 18). What is most significant about this position is that it locates Mthethwa's photographic practice within art criticism: "The practice of evaluating art for its aesthetic and cultural worth, rather than using it to tell history" (D'Alleva 2010: 19). Art criticism as defined by Anne D'Alleva constitutes a methodological approach that this study will assume in its reading and description of the imaginative cachets of Mthethwa's photographs. Most importantly, the discrimination of practices and mediums underscored by art criticism in the reading of Mthethwa's photographs is a methodological approach that is often overlooked by commentaries that reduce the visual representations of Mthethwa's photographs wholly to a colonial experience.

Michael Godby's valorisation of the kinship between painting and the photographic output of Mthethwa's hinges, mainly, on Mthethwa's manipulation of colour. In fact, Godby is one of few art historians who have elucidated extensively the advent and prominence of colour in Mthethwa's pictorial visions. According to Godby, Mthethwa's exploitation of colour as both the mainstay of his pictorial grammar and an object of aesthetic attention was influenced by Mthethwa's affinity with the vivid colours of his pastel drawings. Godby writes: "Mthethwa's exploitation of colour in the medium of photography is fuelled by his experience of making pastel drawings that are characterised by extraordinarily vivid and resonant colour" (Godby 1999: this essay has no page numbers).

Mthethwa's application of colour in his photography as an object of artistic and aesthetic attention is most admirable. This visual effect is magnified by what Godby refers to as "the drama of colours": the harmonious interface of various values of colours in Mthethwa's pictorial compositions (Godby 1999: no page number). An example of "the drama of colours" in Mthethwa's work is evident in his "utilization of colourfully-printed posters, recycled wallpapers advertising soaps, chocolate bars, alcohol and other consumer products that create commercially-styled hyperreality of designs to aestheticise his images" (Godby 1999: no page number). It is Mthethwa's elevation of the

harmonious interface of various values of colour in his process of picturing his photographs that prompted Emily Speer Mears to declare: "It's the aesthetic posture of Mthethwa's images that makes them too beautiful to be effective social commentary" (Mears in Godby 2009: 75).

Mthethwa's embrace of colour has its own historical and dialogic positioning. Mthethwa was, for the first time in his photographic career, exposed to colour photography when he went to Rochester Institute of Technology in 1989 to further his studies. It is there that he experimented with this new palette because, at the time, the South African photographic palette was still confined to black and white. Ironically, Mthethwa sees his conversion to colour as a historical rather than a cultural transition. This is where the dialogic disposition of his discourse on colour in his photographic practice lies. As Enwezor writes:

In responding to what he perceived as undignified manner in which black-and-white imagery situated its subjects, Mthethwa was clearly reflecting on the relationship of photography and humanism, *ubuntu*. These articulations of humanism and concern for the other register powerfully in the struggle between black-and-white photography, as a medium that sets up its subjects as anthropological case studies, and colour, which allegedly contests the anthropological tendency of reportage and restores its subjects to their position as people with proper names and proper places - that is to say - as humans (Enwezor 2010: 102)

TS Elliot's claim that "no poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone" underscores my perception on Mthethwa's positioning of black-and-white photography in relation to colour photography (Elliot 1921: online). What can be said then is that Elliot's proposition is similar to the appropriation of the photographic medium: it is impossible to fix it to a primordial interpretation or meaning. If such disclaimer does not accompany Mthethwa's view, it is bound to raise many questions: can an interpretation of colour be fixed indelibly to one ideological practice? Or can one go as far as to state conclusively that colour is a visual or aesthetic element that represents an unalterable fact? What is certain, however, is that Mthethwa's interpretation of black-and-white photography overlooks the contemplation of other conceptions and visual strategies that foreground the cultural worth of black-and-white photography that highlight the precariousness of his claim. In other words, Mthethwa's comment offers little space at all for the contemplation of black-and-white photography as a visual form that can be responded to imaginatively.

For instance, the black-and-white photographs of both Mofokeng and Constance Larrabee contain visible forms of expression that cannot be objectively secured, but only imaginatively described and analysed. These are visible forms of expression that affirm that not all black-and-white photographs can be linked wholly to ethnographic tendencies. These are exceptions that are not taken on board by Mthethwa in his one-dimensional comment on black-and-white photography.

For instance, Larrabee produced many black-and-white photographs at the height of ethnographic photography in South Africa, between 1936 - 1949, that depict human interactions that are not ethnographic. According to Tamar Garb, the taxonomic representation of race which left black people "wriggling and reeling in the face of their exposure, was overtaken by time in the 40s", a new breed of photographers who offered an oppositional mode of photography emerged and assumed the photographic reigns (Garb 2011: 32). Larrabee was one of them. Garb supports this claim, she writes: "Larrabee did not restrict herself to poetic invocations of the tribal" (Garb 2011: 32). Garb's

assertion resonates with many of Larrabee's visual representations of the latter part of her photographic career.

Consider Larrabee's depiction of the young girls' innocent indulgence in their game of netball in her photograph, *Children on Playground with Policeman* (1936-1949) (Fig. 4). It is worth noting how their play bypasses, if only for a moment, their harsh realities and the sadness of living under apartheid. It is also worth considering how their own indulgence disarms the policeman into a submissive gesture. In my opinion, this photograph depicts the ordinary moments of everyday life, of everyday people, that did not historicise a colonial experience. But, rather, human moments that existed in-between the narrative of the coloniser and the colonised. It is such exceptional moments, as captured here by Larrabee, that are in dialogue with the much-vaunted claim that "apartheid penetrated even the most mundane aspects of life in South Africa" (Enwezor 2013: book blurb).

Larrabee began to depict black urban life more prominently in the late 1940s, as evident in her *Johannesburg Black Men* (1948) series. The visual mode of this series is underscored by, among others, her *Street Photographer Image* (Fig. 2) which depicts "a nattily dressed black street photographer poised to shoot a top-hatted young black man against the backdrop of a built-up city" (Garb 2011: 32). Contrary to her contemporaries who photographed black individuals in villages as fauna and flora of their natural habitat, her series comprised photographs that, visually, assumed the sprawling black urban culture, if not black modernity itself, as its subject.

But most importantly, the style and form of these photographs underscore Larrabee's appropriation of black-and-white photography as a visual representation tailored for purposes of artistic expression, if not formalism. Tamar Garb writes: "Constance Larrabee brought a modernist concern with medium specificity and pictorial design - seeking out shape, pattern and texture. Her main conviction was to contribute in developing black-and-white photography's own poetic language of composition" (Garb 2011: 32). Larrabee achieved this by not solely offering a way of looking at and thinking about photography as constituting who is pictured; instead, by placing more emphasis on the style and form of the abstract qualities of the shades and tones of black-and-white photographs to underscore the poetic power of her compositions.

The poetic power depicted in *Children on Playground with Policeman* is irresistible; it instantly catches one's imagination. Stylistically, it is the compositional arrangement of the graphic depiction of playing children and those who are watching, and a disarmed policeman reclining on the relics of a dilapidated playground that induce a silhouette of figures and architecture that valorise Larrabee's imaginative interpretation of reality in this photograph.

Santu Mofokeng's photographic oeuvre has, arguably, also promulgated black-and-white photography's ability to represent the ineffable. On why he still prefers black and white to colour when the reflective superiority of colour privileges the composition of an image and depicts the photograph's day and age in a distinct manner and with a transparency that black-and-white photography cannot even contemplate, he replies: "I prefer black and white because it gives me a distance. You don't have a focal point. For me, I like that because it allows... it does not tell you what. You have to put in yourself... You can even meditate on the image" (Mofokeng in Hayes 2009: this essay has no page numbers). These are the nuances of black-and-white photography that are not taken on board by the fixation of colour into a primordial meaning.

Larrabee and Mofokeng's utilisation of black-and-white photography liberates it from its stigma: as a visual element that serves to historicise a colonial experience perpetuated by ethnographic photography. How Larrabee and Mofokeng embrace black-and-white photography serves to show that colour is an alterable fact of photographic life. My claim is that the ambiguities of colour are similar to the gestural ambiguities of photography that are underscored by Pierre Taminiaux. Taminiaux writes: "Photography is a medium that is difficult to conclusively locate because it is a mode of expression that belongs simultaneously to the domain of history and aesthetics, without being strictly attached to any of them" (Taminiaux 2008: 5-6). My contention is that like photography, colour is an ambiguous medium that is difficult to conclusively locate within a singular cultural or ideological practice because it has the capability to slip its casing and therefore, it is impossible to fix its meaning. On the ambiguities of colour, Andreas Feininger writes: "The fact that colour is reproduced automatically in a colour photograph does not mean a photographer has to accept subject colour as one of the unalterable facts of photographic life" (Feininger 1973: 96). Hence Godby claims: "It's the colour of Mthethwa's images that distinguish his work from documentary projects of similar subject matter by other photographers" (Godby 2009: 76). Mthethwa's manipulation of colour as his work's viewpoint is what accentuates its own individuality and established him as one of the most outstanding colourists among contemporary South African photographers.

Mthethwa's manipulation of colour in his photographs serves to support this study's claim that the real realm of his photographic practice is art criticism: This is evinced by his manipulation of colour in his photographs as an object of artistic and aesthetic attention, rather than to exclusively tell history.

Size and Space

Mthethwa's choice of life-size prints emulates the style and form that have until recently been regarded as a province of painting. The size can be looked at as a visual strategy meant to ensure that the viewer does not just glance at them, but rather engages with the specificities of their visual properties in order to "respond not just intellectually but punctually, in the moment of viewing, to the internal complexities of the life-size images as a whole, in particular to the carefully engineered structure of their gazes" (Fried 2008: 16).

In other words, the spatial envelope of Mthethwa's life-size prints serves to elevate the minute and lifelike details of his photographic compositions to enable the viewer to grasp the details and nuances of his photographic compositions. Otherwise, these nuances that are "crucial to their content would effectively be lost if the images were significantly reduced in size - which is what happens when they are illustrated in books or catalogues" (Fried 2008: 14). As such, size is a visual element of Mthethwa's photographs that "add a new level of depictive information and transparency" (Shore 2007: 18).

It is the spatial envelope of Mthethwa's photographs that compels Njami to claim that they "seem like they should adorn family homes" (Njami 2011: no page numbers). Njami's assertion implies that the size of Mthethwa's photographs are, like paintings, not related to hand-held objects, but have "their own integral spatial envelope that stands separate from, and in confrontation to, with the human body of the viewer" (Rissati 2007: 121). Alternatively, the life-size prints of these photographs signal their intent about how they must be viewed and with what effect. On the intent of life-size prints, Fried writes: "The image size declares its intent from the word go. And its intent is

embedded in its scale and volume which create an expectation that such photographs would be framed and hung on the wall, to be looked at like paintings rather than merely be examined up-close or even held by hand by viewer as has hitherto been the case” (Fried 2008: 14).

Njami’s observation makes reference to the fact that Mthethwa’s photographs are “to be framed and hung on a wall”: are made for gallery walls” (Fried 2008: 14). The gallery space also has its own conventions that dictate how photographs mounted on their walls ought to be encountered and is distinct from other representational spaces. Peter Wollen explains that one of the critical interventions of the gallery walls is that they underscore the significance of the moment and the manner of viewing photographs. Wollen writes:

The gallery walls afford the viewer an intimate space in which photographs are viewed, and ensure that the moment of looking is not interrupted and has no fixed duration. It can be extended and endlessly reiterated as long as fascination and curiosity last (Wollen 2003: 76).

In other words, the gallery space affords the viewer an active and sensitive engagement that enables him or her to inhabit Mthethwa’s photographs with his or her senses. This engagement is critical because it familiarises the viewer with a set of visual conventions: styles, techniques and traditions, which inform Mthethwa’s principles of organisation. This would, in turn, enable the viewer to understand “how *it is what it is*, even *that it is what it is*” (Sontag 1999: 119). Mthethwa’s elevation of size seeks to ensure that the viewer prioritises sight: it prioritises the visual properties of his visual representations, highlighting the art of critical looking. Nigel Whiteley elucidates the significance of the art of critical looking in visual representation, stating that:

The reading of visual representation is part of a visual language of forms. When that is overlooked, any specificities of the medium or the practice, any distinctive features relating to the class of object, will be ignored as the artwork is de-differentiated to become merely a sign which connotes meaning. As such, a visual representation would be reduced to a visual signifier in the way that a cartoon or a poster or a film still are visual signifiers that are levelled out as vehicles of meaning, texts which are to be read and interpreted rather than (also) aesthetically or visually experienced or responded to (Whiteley 1999: 108).

The claim to make is that if, for instance, one prioritises sight in the reading of the *Sugar Cane* (2003) series (Fig. 1), one would have an entirely different reading than the one advanced by Enwezor’s reading of this series earlier on. The point to make, at this juncture, is that the most striking thing about this series “is the degree to which it demands that the viewer looks” (Whiteley 1999: 114). A series is like a puzzle; it demands that the viewer looks and engages its structural and sequential arrangements in order to determine how each photograph relates to each other and how they can, as a collective, be visually experienced or responded to” (Whiteley 1999: 108).

For instance, the *Sugar Cane* (2003) series can be responded to visually as a set of pictures whose visual properties are held together by an identical, if not dialectical, sequence of place, space, poses, hues, textures and fabrics of its subjects’ clothes. The basis of such an intimation is made evident by the earthy models and the deep charcoal tonality of their fabrics that make them all appear crude and artful. The artfulness of this series is further evinced by the juxtaposition of these models against the diagonal lines of mountains, ground and sky that create cross-directional accents of long,

modulating and adulating topographies that seem to converge on a single vanishing point in the distance.

The link and visual relations of these visible forms of expression become apparent when the viewer looks at the photographs in this series sequentially and collectively in context, rather than looking at them in isolation. Michael Fried succinctly captures the effect of such a viewing experience. Fried writes:

By looking at the photographs of a series simultaneously and sequentially the viewer will store the knowledge of an ideal type. The viewer will see the aspects which remain the same, so the viewer will understand a little more about the function of a structure. As the work expands, these categories will become very crude (Fried 2008: 309).

The same can be said about the *Sugar Cane* series. A claim can also be made that there is a correlation of form and structure in this series that is similar to that of a music scale. A correlation of photography and music is not something unheard of. Of this kinship, Tina Campt writes:

While music may seem an unlikely aperture for understanding photography, music and images share a fundamental form of organisation as patterns that structure our perceptions of both the sonic and the visual” (Campt 2012: 136).

Although this kinship may not necessarily apply to any and every visual form, it certainly applies to photographic series. As such, there is a thematic, a formulaic form or arrangement of photographs, in this series that is similar to that of a music scale whose sonic register comes about only when its individual notes are played in unison, rather than individually. If not, it would result in a form of a discord.

Similarly, looking at the photographs of this series in isolation to one another may create a form of a discord because “the serial repetitions that this series enunciate attest to the fact that these images’ effects become complete when they are viewed as a collective. That is the case because as “formulaic images they register as a set of multiple that somehow no longer register as individual photographs. Instead, they are images that register as a group in relation to one another” (Campt 2012: 142).

On one hand, this study’s invocation of this series kinship with the modalities of the sonic underscores the complexities of signification in visual representation. On the other hand, it serves to highlight the limits of the critique of representation imposed by semiotics on the visual. Fred Moten makes the point:

Semiotics suppresses other ways of looking at photographs that are attentive to the whole sensory ensemble of what is looked at. And what is often suppressed by semiotics is the phonic substance of the photograph. Sonic currents are often suppressed by a forced universalism that is a larger problematic in the broader field of semiotics. It is a universalism that lies at the core of semiotics as a search for universal language and universal science of language which necessarily repress or excludes an engagement with other sensory modalities of the photograph - in particular, that of sound (Moten in Campt 2012: 134).

The invocation of this kinship between Mthethwa's series and the modalities of music in the interpretation of the *Sugar Cane* series takes on a set of significations that those who speak of Mthethwa's photography as a visual representation that can be reduced wholly to the historical conditions of its making, may not have anticipated in the reading of Mthethwa's work. This correlation is meant to illustrate that the interpretation and meaning of Mthethwa's photography cannot only be objectively secured, but can also be described and analysed in multiple ways.

It is these complex contexts and concepts of significations that are lost or suppressed when this series is read solely as a historicisation of a colonial experience. Such contexts and concepts demonstrate that Mthethwa's photographs have no intellectually secured roles; instead, they can fulfil any order given to them. As discussed above, "to speak of this series is to face the prospects of a multifaceted, speculative analysis which is considerate of many paths we can take" to underscore its complex processes of generating meaning (English 2007: 83). The most speculative path of the reading of this series is its comparison to the formulaic form of a music scale. This speculative interpretation of the *Sugar Cane* series serves to foreground the precariousness of the reality value and the representational status of Mthethwa's photography.

If there is something to be learnt from the visual effects induced by colour, size and space in Mthethwa's work, it is that the real realm of Mthethwa's photographic practice is art history. Diarmuid Costello's emphasis of the significance of locating photography within art history supports the hypothesis of this study. Costello writes:

The discourse of photography that has been generated within art history represents a particular intersection of visible and sayable form of content and forms of expression. And art history is still a primary context in which most people and students encounter the discourse of photography (Costello in Emerling 2012: 7).

My position is that if the reading of Mthethwa's work only valorises its function as a representation of a colonial experience, it, in a way, confines it to a "singular point of origin, a definitive meaning, a linear narrative" (Emerling 2012: 6). Such criticism foregrounds the limitations of reading photography outside the art history frame of reference.

Most significantly, this assertion underscores the limits of the critique of representation imposed by documentary realism's interpretation of black photographic activity as a reflective rather than a productive practice. This stagnation comes about when photography is read outside of the art history frame. Diarmuid Costello delineates the limitations of looking at photographs outside of the art history frame, noting "whenever we begin to talk about photography outside of the art history frame of reference, it is as if the conversation just dies" (Costello in Emerling 2012: 7).

It is this erasure that, in turn, hampers the cultivation of explanatory systems to ascertain the ineffable in Mthethwa's photographic practice or how his work can be responded to with the emphasis on the photographic or aesthetics thereof. This can be attributed mainly to the disregard of Mthethwa's visual skill and talent in the reading of his work. On the effect of skill and talent in the reading of a visual representation, Whiteley questions: "If skill and talent are factors in the artist's work, should not the critic take the level of talent into account and its relation to the expression of meaning?" (Whiteley 1999: 113).

The limits of critique that Mthethwa's photography is subjected to can be attributed to the reading of Mthethwa's work that do not take his formal education in fine art and art history into consideration. This, in turn, constitutes a disregard of the fact that Mthethwa's photography is a product of acquired pictorial and spatial vocabularies, whose interpretations and meaning are steeped in both formalism and formal analysis. Most significantly, it is a disregard of his claim to fine art photography that underpins his assumption of photography as a mode of representation tailored for the purposes of artistic expression.

A failure to recognise the influences and traditions that inform Mthethwa's photographic practice is a failure to comprehend the imaginative sources of his pictorial visions. The impact of which:

Skews the viewer's response to his work and shifts it towards general meaning, unmediated by the experience of his images which, as we know, can confound us and overturn the way the viewer thought would respond to them (Whiteley 1999: 118).

The emphasis here is that the readings of Mthethwa's work that are not mediated by the components of the visual elements of his photographs disregards that which magnifies both the imaginative and aesthetic cachets of his photographic practice. Or is a disregard of the interpretation and meaning that underline the contingent nature of the visual language of form embedded in his photographs. This is what constitutes an essentialist reading of Mthethwa's photographic output.

Charles Harrison offers a suggestion on why some critics resort to an essentialist reading of works of art. Harrison writes:

It remains true that the most interesting and most difficult thing about the best works of art is that they are so good and we don't know why or how - though we may know much else about them (Harrison 1999: 114).

The same can be said about Mthethwa's work. Some certainly know much about the "social and political activity" of his work, but many know little or nothing about how Mthethwa's photographs can be read as objects of artistic attention. To embrace Mthethwa's photographs as objects of artistic attention is to embrace the fact that its real realm is art criticism - that it is a practice that subscribes to the norms and traditions of visual art.

To locate Mthethwa's photography within the visual art realm is to embrace the fact that Mthethwa is not just involved in taking pictures; he is not reckoning with chance, he is, instead, involved in the painstaking process of image-making. The reference to image-making is a reference to visual vocabularies embedded in the synthesis of technique and the frames of imagination mirrored in the spatial and graphic formations of Mthethwa's visual compositions that set his photographs apart from that of other photographers.

It is this synthesis of technique and imagination that foregrounds the individuality of his visual compositions. Andreas Feininger writes:

Differences in composition are determined by the skill and talent of a photographer and provide the only difference among photographs taken by different photographers of the same subject at the same time (Feininger 1973: 12).

According to Feininger, besides the necessary skill and talent, composition involves the combination of technique and imagination. But imagination is more than just that, it is subjective and it involves the application of various sensory registers presented for purposes of artistic expression. As such, a well-composed image is one that utilises skill and talent imaginatively, and it tends to be more impressive than an ill-composed photograph. Feininger considers composition as the competitive advantage of a visually aware photographer:

Good composition could therefore be called the secret weapon of the visually aware photographer who, despite the fact that he photographs the same subjects using the same type of camera and film, exposure and mode of development as his colleague, consistently produces pictures that are superior in graphic and emotional impact” (Feininger1973: 12).

Composition can, therefore, be regarded as an expression of the individuality of a photographer. Mthethwa’s artistic achievement as a photographer is magnified by the imaginative depth and impact of his photographic compositions. It can now be claimed that it is Mthethwa’s compositional techniques that bring the sumtotal of all the ingredients of his pictures’ planes into an aesthetic whole.

To appreciate this is to appreciate the fact that Mthethwa’s photographic practice is “a contemplation to comprehend something or to bring an idea from a complex to a consummate composition” (Sander 2009: 30). My claim is that Mthethwa’s photographs that are discussed in this study represent image-making: visible forms of expression that valorise the formal, if not modernist, expression of Mthethwa’s photographic practice.

But it must also be said that it is not sufficient to describe Mthethwa’s photography as that which solely constitutes the photographic or as merely a representation of the pictorial and spatial medium. This study’s claim is that a more in-depth interpretation of Mthethwa’s photographs lies in a reading that signifies them as “situated in time, as telling a story and finally, as capable of narrating fiction” (Baetens 2007: 60). This interpretation constitutes the theoretical framework of this study.

Chapter Three

A Veiled Portrait: Making the Familiar Strange

Description

"Untitled" (1995-2005) (Fig. 6) depicts a frontally posed, barefooted, matured man, well beyond his 50s if not his 60s, seated on a chair and facing the camera. Most noticeable is the expressive restraint of his stiff, frontal pose and his face, which is veiled by a curtain of dangling beads. The beads veil his eyes completely, making it difficult for the viewer to gaze into the eyes of the sitter. Also evident on the sitter's face is a white cosmetic smear that borders the chin, cheeks and forehead and that also circles the circumference of the sitter's eyes. The nose and mouth of the sitter are the only parts left in their natural state. On the sitter's head sits an obliquely poised matter-cap made of animal skin that corresponds well with the frills that accessorise the sitter's joints: his neck, wrists and ankles.

The efficacy of this image rests with the sitter. The sitter is its foreground. The sitter is, to use Shore's phrase, "the frame's emphasis, the frame resonates off it and, in turn, draws the viewer's attention" (Shore 2007: 56). It is the sitter's posture: his armed arms, one held forth and the other stuck firmly on the ground and the shallow, lifeless smile that constitute this image's moment of exposure; an instance that, in Shore's words, "cuts across the grain of time, generating a new moment that depicts "a content at rest and whose time is still" (Shore 2007: 76). It is the imagined interplay of the sitter's casual and haphazard smile and the energy and intentionality of the sitter's armed arms that make it an intriguing proposition.

The duplicitous expression of the sitter is juxtaposed against an equally obscure *mise en scene*: a collage of graphic layers of newspaper clippings bearing logos, print adverts and news articles. The left-hand side of the image comprises a glimpse of a cluster of elements that are not quite visible. These elements constitute visual and physical aspects of the image that are, predominantly, graphic. On the right-hand side of the image, there is also a cluster of items: an obscured sideboard and a white Tupperware with red engravings.

Light and Colour

This image has "its own visual style that references and brings forth these elements to its reading", most of which are brought to bear by light and its sense of depiction (Shore 2007: 34). The light registers that which is visible and sayable in this image. Its distribution of light is meant to separate, graphically, the various parts of the image from one another. Light separates the subject from the background and the background from the foreground, by making the subject appear light and near to the viewer and the background dark and further away. This visual effect is foregrounded by the sitter's white traditional dress with peripheral black prints on its edges.

It is the light colour of the sitter's dress that creates a dimensional resolve that, in turn, forms an illusion of space and depth between the sitter and the material elements of this photograph. In

other words, it is light that “expresses the intentions of the photographer in spatial and graphic terms” (Feininger 1973: 65). For instance, the contents of the background that flank the sitter are depicted with the greatest economy and based on that one can assume that the background is part of the photograph to which the viewer is not consciously introduced.

This photograph’s impressionability is enunciated by its chiaroscuro, which constitutes the tension between the background and the foreground of this photograph. It is this tension that is fundamental to the pictorial enterprise of this image and that underscores the distinctiveness and indistinctiveness of its formal expression. It is this encounter that constitutes the “integrative tendency which amounts to outright disjunction, between representational fields that have been articulated expressively to the limit of visibility and regions of the picture that invite an altogether different mode of seeing” by virtue of its obscurity (Fried 1987: 74). It is this tension and disjuncture that evoke conflicting experiences when viewing this photograph.

Mthethwa uses colour in this image as an aesthetic cachet of its pictorial grammar. The tangential manipulation of colour as both the subjective and objective form of this photograph is made evident by the decorative symmetry of white and powder blue beaded necklaces dangling on the sitter’s neck and chest, a white printed dress, a white sleeve and two pairs of white animal frills on his wrists and ankles, which induce a harmonious tonal gradation with the accessorised brown arms, brown face and brown bare feet that turn the sitter into a decorative element of this photograph’s composition.

A Portraiture Premise

There is more of an imaginative, rather than a realist, portraiture premise in the conception of “*Untitled*” (1995-2005) (Fig 6). The distinction between these two visual propositions, as highlighted by Anne Hanson, is instructive. According to Hanson, a realist portrait is an objective representation of the sitter’s likeness or a portrait whose sitter represents “what happened once” (Hanson 1977: 58).

An imaginative portrait is a portrait that is not just about a way of looking at and thinking about who is pictured. Rather, it is about how the considerations of the sitter are collapsed into those of its form; into its material elements and formal principles and how they facilitate the generation of its interpretation and meaning. This visual strategy is foregrounded by the stripping of the sitter’s name and by Mthethwa’s appropriation of “*Untitled*” as the appellation of this portrait. Mthethwa makes the point: “*Untitled*” for us viewers sparks further inquiry in terms of *who* and *what* is pictured in the actual portrait. By calling my works ‘*Untitled*’ I was trying to offer the basic narrative and allow the viewers to embellish the story with their experiences” (Mthethwa 2010: 93).

The structural openness of this visual strategy seeks to foreground the sitter as a cultural object. In other words, it seeks to subdue the viewer’s emotional attachment to this portrait: that which constitutes the customary viewing experience of a portrait. It is the suspension of the viewer’s emotional attachment to this portrait that makes the familiar, strange; and that foregrounds the imaginative, rather than the realist, encounter between it and its spectator. That is what sparks the inquiry as to what does this portrait actually seek to foreground, and with what effect? It is this inquiry that underlies that which is seen and that which is imagined in this portrait.

Catherine Lutz and Jane Collins allude to this viewing experience in portraiture. They write:

What a certain viewer sees is not what each viewer gets. But what they imagine, what imagining a portrait provokes, and what they remember of it afterwards or of the story they make it tell or allow it to tell, is structured by the mental work of inference and imagination (Lutz and Collins 2003: 357).

It is this dynamic entanglement of inferences and imaginations that renders the meaning of this portrait a realm that is negotiated, rather than a given.

However, Mthethwa's practice of stripping the sitter's name in his portrait has been disquieting to others. As a result, it has often been criticised as a practice that shares kinship with ethnographic photography which equated black subjects to utilitarian objects rather than representing them as humans with individual names and identities.

We never ask or demand the sitters' names in paintings. We demand them in photography because there is an ingrained assumption that photography is a transparent translation of reality. It is this conventional and ingrained notion of photography that the avoidance of the sitter's name in this portrait seeks to suspend. The stripping of the sitter's name is, surprisingly, a *visual* strategy that seeks to show that although a portrait "deals with appearances, but nothing is what it appears to be" (Rexer 2009: 21). And, like paintings, photographic portraits are visual representations that "already and always disclose and withhold" (Rexer 2009: 17). The stripping of the sitter's name in this portrait is a testament to the abstract nature of photographic portraiture, if not its ability to "disorder the domicile vision of portraiture and to upset its furnisher of interpretation" (Rexer 2009: 21).

What those who critique this practice often long for is the domicile vision of portraiture underscored by prescriptive and deterministic acts of looking at a portrait. They long for the familiar: not only a named but also a biographical face so that they can have an authorised engagement with the sitter - so that they can impose their authorised spectatorial encounters with this portrait. Such a viewing experience has been deliberately deferred in this portrait. Its structural openness can be construed as Mthethwa's way of foregrounding the viewer's acquisitive relation, rather than its biographical detachment to the sitter of this portrait. It is a visual proposition that is meant to unravel not that which named portraits always and already disclose, but that which they generally withhold in our encounter with them.

What can be said is that the stripping of the sitter's name in this portrait is meant to afford the viewer an opportunity to look at it in broader rather than linear terms, often evoked by biographical descriptions of sitters in portraits. It serves to nudge the viewer to consider how the personal in this portrait relates to the impersonal that is presented and represented, and how all of the variables contribute to its meaning-making processes.

Alternatively, what this practice alludes to is that "it is vain to consider, in the appearance of things, only the intelligible signs that allow the various elements in a visual representation to be distinguished from each other. What strikes human eyes determines not only the knowledge of the relation between various subjects, but also an inexplicable state of mind" (Rexer 2009: 19). Mthethwa's claim that this practice seeks to afford the viewers an opportunity to embellish the

portrait's story with their own experiences is a reference to its visual representation, which evokes an incomprehensible state of mind that goes beyond the intelligible signs of named and titled portraits.

The structural openness brought to bear upon this portrait by the stripping of the sitter's name and "*Untitled*" as its appellation can be seen as Mthethwa's "invitation to the viewer to dream in its ideological space" (Lutz and Collins 2003: 357).

Liz Wells offers an elaborate example of how an "*Untitled*" -- portrait foregrounds an unauthorised interpretation that invites the viewer to dream in its ideological space:

Let us assume that a photograph of a homeless man, published in a 1930s magazine to advance some philanthropic cause, is shown, massively enlarged, on the walls of a gallery fifty years after it was made. Originally tied to the page with a caption and an explanatory text, it now stands alone as some kind of Art object. How are we to read such an image? As an example of a genre? As a work of Art? Or do we see it as merely a *photograph*, one among many and to be distinguished in terms of its formal, aesthetic qualities rather than its relationship to a world outside of itself (Wells 2003: 57-58).

Arguably, had the viewer known the intention behind this photograph, he or she would possibly not view it in terms of its "formal, aesthetic qualities" (Wells 2003: 57-58). He or she would possibly not, because the viewer would not be compelled to prioritise sight; to look and think beyond the original intention of this photograph, in an attempt to distinguish its "formal and aesthetic qualities" as an endeavour to see for oneself how the visual and material properties of this photograph have been put together and how they facilitate the generation of its meaning (Wells 2003: 57-58). In other words, if the original intent of this photograph was disclosed, its magic would have been lost and its spell would have been broken because, as Chinua Achebe puts it: "Knowing robs us of wonder" (Achebe 1998: 23). Achebe's assertion is instructive because it foregrounds the prescriptive and deterministic effects of captions in visual representation.

Roland Barthes explains how this comes about, he writes: "Text helps the viewer to choose the correct level of understanding, leading the viewer to attend to some signified in the image and avoid others" (Barthes in Kriebel 2003: 14). And, as such, captions and titles often privilege a certain meaning at the expense of others because they frame and compartmentalise the viewing experience of a portrait in accordance with their preferred interpretation and meaning. Viewed as such, captions ensure that the viewing experience of a photograph elicits a mediated interpretation. Therefore, they can determine "what is looked and with what effect" (Whiteley 1999: 108).

"*Born a slave*" (1963), the captioned portrait of William Casby, by Richard Avedon, is a typical example of Whiteley's statement. That is the case because this portrait induces an authorised spectatorial encounter that fixates this portrait with a predetermined interpretation and meaning. Of the authorised spectatorial encounter induced by this portrait's caption, Barthes writes: "Casby enters the realm of meaning as he comes to signify "slave" and ceases to register a singular face as someone who has lived his life as an autonomous subject" (Barthes in Smith 2009: 101). What Barthes implies is that slavery is an ideological frame that the viewer is compelled to impose to facilitate his or her spectatorial encounter with his portrait. As a result, Casby does not, in this

portrait, represent his own personality and the urgency thereof; instead, he signifies a collective experience of a particular race and a particular moment in its human history.

In other words, this caption authorises the viewer to compartmentalise Casby's portrait as a representation of "what happened once" (Hanson 1977: 58). Whatever is imagined of it will be informed primarily by this historical condition, above everything else. It is this singular point of origin and interpretation that suppresses its alternative viewing experiences. In other words, it is the historical condition of its making: slavery - deeply embedded in its explanatory text that influences the viewer's understanding and interpretation of it. That is what renders it an authorised representation, which is meant to evoke an authorised interpretation. Unlike Mthethwa's "*Untitled*" portrait, the magic of Avedon's portrait has been lost and its spell has been broken and, as a result, there is no way that the viewer can dream in its cultural space. That possibility has been deferred indelibly by its caption.

The analogy between "*Untitled*" and "*Born a Slave*" serves to demonstrate that there are competing variables that contribute to the meaning-making processes of portraiture -- some are metaphorical, and others realist. Mthethwa has chosen a metaphorical language to underscore the fact that the black body cannot only be objectively secured, but it can also be represented as "a pretext: not the ultimate goal or destination of the artist or of its representation" (Taminiaux 2008: 6). In other words, as a site of imagination.

What "*Untitled*" demonstrates is that the foregrounding of the biographical description of the sitter is but one way of conceiving portraits; there is a myriad of other ways of representing them that are impersonal that underscore the subjectivities of the sitter in a portrait. It is the subjectivities foregrounded by "*Untitled*" that widens its interpretation and meaning. This structural openness imposed upon this portrait by its title is explicated further by Godby. Godby writes: "Mthethwa's habitual appellation of untitling his work is a mute aesthetic form and an artistic label that demands that the sitter be considered in much broader terms" (Godby 2009: 74). Conceptually, Godby implies that Mthethwa's utilisation of this practice is meant to encourage the viewer to contemplate the sitter as both the subject and object of this portrait. As a representation that can be described and analysed in multiple ways.

The Objective and Subjective Forms of the Sitter in Portraiture

The gnawing question is when does a subject become an object, and an object the subject in portraiture? Of this duplicitous representation of the sitter in portraiture, John Erith writes:

There is, of course, the method of treating the sitter as part of the decorative composition of form and colour, and of subordinating everything to this subjective, so that the personality and character of the sitter are not allowed to obtrude (Erith 1948: 29).

Mthethwa's utilisation of an appellation rather than the sitter's name has brought the subjective and objective forms of the sitter in portraiture to the fore. The appropriation of the sitter as the object of this portrait is valorised by its representation as a "decorative composition of form and colour" of this portrait (Erith 1948: 29). In "*Untitled*" this idea is carried further by the design, the colour and the decorative effect of the sitter's accessories. This is particularly so, due to the obliquely poised

colour schemes of the light brown hue of the sitter's matter-cap that matches with the glimpses of dark brown hues of the sitter's face and the beige fur of the necklaces sprawling across the sitter's brown neck.

Also, this is carried further by the glimpses of a white cosmetic smeared on the sitter's cheeks and chin, across and around the sockets of his eyes and on his forehead, which correspond with the white beads that partially veil his face. It is this design and the decorative effect of the colour combinations of the sitter's accessories that, stylistically, serve to ensure that the sitter is not allowed to obtrude or be distinct from what is around him. This is what renders the sitter a worked artefact.

It is the abstract qualities of the sitter's face that are indicative of the fact that the sitter's face in this portrait is not meant to express the emotions of the sitter's mind. Instead, it is meant to serve a different function. Of the alternative functions of faces in portraiture, Elkins writes: "Faces may have other uses rather than just express the emotions of the mind; they can be used as canvasses for design and decoration" (Elkins 1996: 184). Mthethwa's blurring and obscuring of the sitter's face with smears and a beaded veil underscores his appropriation of the sitter's face as that which is tailored for artistic interpretation. This is an affirmation of this study's claim that there is a way of looking at Mthethwa's photographs as visual representations that accentuate their autonomy and transcend the historical conditions of their making.

Mthethwa's dissolution of the sitter's subjective content in this portrait into those of form and aesthetic is a demonstration of the fact that photography abstracts. Of this phenomenon, Emerling writes:

Photography never was a natural, straightforward representation void of artifice. A photograph abstracts. Even the most clear, well-focused, well-lit is an abstraction. It's separated from the concrete existence, it filches as it becomes impersonal and other (Emerling 2012: 7).

The representation of the sitter's face as an object of both artistic and aesthetic attention is the representation of the sitter in this portrait as the impersonal and the other.

Dress: A Semiotic Act

The treatment of the sitter as a language of form of this portrait's design and decoration is carried further by the sitter's dress. Like other properties of this portrait, the dress accentuates the dynamic entanglement between the real and the represented in this portrait. On one level, the dress signifies the sitter as a traditional healer. In this instance, the dress is looked at as a medium that mediates the sitter's cultural identity. It "implies a sort of masquerade that is in turn a semiotic act. It is this process that ensures that the self enters the social scene and becomes, through clothing, culturally visible" (Paulicelli and Clark 2009: 54-55).

But also, there is a way of looking at the sitter's dress as a representation of elegance. As that which "dissolves the very cultural identity of the sitter it initially captured and the narratives that hold together the complexities of its meaning" (Paulicelli and Clark 2009: 54). In this instance, the dress is utilised to fashion the unfashionable: the traditional healer. The aesthetisation of the traditional healer constitutes a visual register that comes about through the manipulation of the dress's

texture, fabric, design and cut that suppress its utilitarian function as that which makes the sitter culturally visible as a traditional healer. Instead, all of these visual registers conspire to elevate the “garment’s craftsmanship as the embodiment of elegance” (Paulicelli and Clark 2009: 54-55). In this instance, the dress is turned into “an object of beauty that participates in this aesthetic process with its texture, design, fabric and cut. And the sitter is embraced by the clothes he wears and caressed by them visually” (Paulicelli and Clark 2009: 55).

Mthethwa’s utilization of the dress to beautify the traditional healer is his demonstration of photography’s ability to introduce realism into glamour, if not its capability to aestheticise the ordinary. Susan Kismaric and Eva Respini explain how photography aestheticises the ordinary. They write: “The aestheticisation of the ordinary is achieved by combining the seductive powers of graphic photography with a deeply felt perception of the possibilities of how the ordinary can become exceptional when given the right amount of intelligence and imagination” (Kismaric and Respini 2004: 23).

It is this combination that creates a harmony and balance that validate the sitter’s dress as a representation of “an abstract zone of in-betweenness that underscores an aesthetic language that is austere but yet multifaceted in its nuances” (Paulicelli and Clark 2009: 57). It is this emersion of glamour into realism that constitutes “a particularly fruitful moment in the exchange between fine art and commercial photography” (Kismaric and Respini 2004: 12-13).

It is these significations underscored by the dress in this portrait that validate this study’s claim that Mthethwa’s photographs cannot be reduced wholly to a colonial experience, but can also be looked at as visual representations that validate both their formal and aesthetic qualities.

The Subjective: The Passion and Emotions of the Mind

The subjective in this portrait is underscored by the photograph’s language of emotions: the sitter’s gaze and his moment of exposure. It is the gestural ambiguities of the sitter’s partially veiled face and his shallow, lifeless smile that constitute the viewer’s first and real encounter with this portrait. It is the sitter’s duplicitous gaze, which is far from being articulated clearly both visually and photographically, that the viewer’s attention will be drawn to or fixated upon because it frames the viewer’s viewpoint. It is this ambiguous two-faced gesture that renders the familiar strange in this portrait

It is these visible forms of expression in the sitter’s gaze that flirt rather deceitfully with the viewer as if implying that what you see is not what you get and what you get is not what you see, that render the sitter’s gaze “a play between what is revealed and what is disguised” (Bright 2011: 13). As a result, there is a pervasive sense that the sitter and the observer in this portrait are in “silent meditation, or that the sitter’s gaze resembles a sealed-off consciousness and a repressive restraint that represent the sitter’s way of denying the viewer privileged access to the motions of its mind, if not a way of returning the gaze back to the viewer” (Elkins 1996: 184).

It is the sealed-off consciousness of the sitter that reflects the spectatorial encounter not only of the viewer, but also of the sitter. Mirianne Hirsch alludes to this peculiar viewing experience in portraiture, commenting that: “As the sitter poses, the sitter assumes masks; as we read photographs, we project particular masks, particular ideological frames onto the image” (Hirsch

1977: 86). The interpretation of the sitter's gaze in this portrait hinges on the viewer's ability to peel off the intractable layers of the gaze. One of the most intractable layers of this portrait is the veil that blurs the very identity of the sitter that it seeks to show or present to the viewer.

Elkins' conventional expectations of what and how a portrait ought to be, underscores that which makes this portrait strange.

Part of what I want to see from any portrait is a speaking face. I want a face to behave as a face: to be distinct from what is around it, to be clear enough to interpret (Elkins 1999: 4).

What Elkins wants to see in a portrait are emotions of the sitter's mind that constitute the viewer's realistic encounter with the sitter in a portrait. Here, it is the sitter's face's failure to give of itself freely a lot more: its tendency to withhold rather than disclose compels the viewer to "traffic in the unfamiliar" (English 2007: 21). The unfamiliar is brought to the fore mostly by a photographic face that is not photographic in that it is "not clear enough to interpret" (Elkins 1999: 4). The sitter's face fails to live up to the expectations of the conventional photographic face because its contingency foregrounds a duplicitous relationship between seeing and imagining. It is the confluence of these expressions that renders the sitter's face gestural rather than a face that reflects its objective depiction.

It is this photographic gaze that is not photographic, that is not clear enough to articulate without any ambiguity that constitutes a strategic decomposition of the customary ritual of a portrait: identification and recognition. Instead of affirming these assurances of portraiture, the sitter's gaze in this portrait fills the viewer with uncertainties. It is this face that is gestured, but never laboured that debunks the notion of photographic realism in portraiture and that attests to the fact that a portrait is capable of changing the narrative status of its subject from fact to allegory. This is what makes this portrait a fascinating proposition.

Mthethwa's representational strategy that occludes rather than exposes can be construed as his way of imagining the meaning and various ways of representing the black body that underscore the fact that its interpretation in portraiture cannot only be objectively secured. In other words, the black body cannot be reduced to its skin colour and to the ideological conditions of its making. Rather, it can also be construed as a realm mediated by a multitude of variables that can be imaginatively described and analysed.

The Moment of Exposure: The Idea of Illusionism in Portraiture

This portrait's moment of exposure is induced by the partially veiled face and shallow, lifeless smile of the sitter and the sitter's armed arms frozen in motion: one brandishes a knobkerrie and the other pins what looks like a spear firmly on the ground. Looking at the posture of the sitter's arms, we cannot doubt that their effect "invites the viewer to register the quality of the effort the sitter is making" (Fried 1987: 71). We also cannot doubt that Mthethwa intended the viewer to, on one hand, feel the tension of the grip enunciated by the veins of the arms, fingers and the feet, which heighten the intensity of this posture. On the other hand, Mthethwa also intended the viewer to feel the weight and energy of the weapons that the sitter brandishes.

When looking at both gestures collectively, there is a sense that the partially veiled face and shallow, lifeless smile of the sitter serves to undercut the seriousness of this physical engagement evidenced

by his armed arms. As a result, the lack of coherence between the two gestures complicates the intent and effect of this portrait's moment of exposure. This compels one to think that these two postures are representations that are "used to further the idea of illusionism in visual representation" because what the sitter reacts to or what propels him into an act of defence or offence is left entirely to the viewer's imagination (Savedoff 2000: 30). This thematic of the idea of illusionism demonstrates Mthethwa's ability to turn the real into an imagined reality.

The thematic of an imaginary reality is accentuated by the fact that in this portrait "we are looking at the sitter who appears not to be acting out his world only being in it. And he did not do anything he does not normally do" (Fried 2008: 38). This claim is supported by the fact that the sitter's gestures are a creation of a form that foregrounds the principles and values that characterise the fundamental demeanour of a healer. For instance, the sitter's smile represents the warmth and the humility with which he embraces his vocation. The armed arms symbolise the sitter's responsibility to guard and protect his patrons against ill. Read as such, Mthethwa can be commended for the right amount of photographic intelligence and imagination he applied to depict the ineffable.

The contingency of reality and imaginary reality in the conception of this portrait serve to draw the viewer's attention to the interchangeable nature of these gestures, which can be looked at either singularly or collectively. These are gestures that call for a wholly different mode of visualisation that is comparatively engaged and detached from each other. Gestures that demand different kinds of imaginative "activation" and that demand varying degrees of visual engagement on the part of the viewer (Fried 1987: 71). Yet, they can also be looked at collectively as that which informs the total effect of this portrait's moment of exposure. It is this thematic that underscores this portrait not simply as a representation of a realist scene, but as a worked artefact.

It is important for the viewer to respond to the visual registers of this portrait's moment of exposure, not just intellectually, but punctually too, in order to comprehend both the gaze and wonder embedded in its visual language. If the viewer fails to contemplate that, he or she would have failed to grasp one of the most imaginative investments of this portrait.

The Cocooned Layers of Meanings: Gestures and the Gender Agenda in Mthethwa's Visual Representations

The claim to make here is that the reading of Mthethwa's work as photographic realism often overlooks the language of emotions embedded in his photographs -- upon which the imaginative cachet of his photographic practice is often located. The significance of gestures in enunciating visual registers that are not always already evident to the naked eye is underscored by Anne Williams. Williams writes:

Gestures have their determinate significance and they can no more be misunderstood. We may express to an audience every passion of the heart by these, without words. There are peculiar gestures for every passion. And every part of the human frame contributes to express the passion and emotions of the mind, and where the language of the tongue is unknown, that of the hand is understood, being universal and common to all nations (Williams 1996: 472).

What can be said is that gestures have long afforded the viewer a passage to transverse even the most impenetrable layers of meanings of the emotions of the mind that even words find hard to comprehend. What can also be added is that gestures are not arbitrary, hence it is difficult to actualise them in photographic representation because “people or photographers think that they present their sitters in one way, but they cannot help but show something else” (Arbus 2008: 207). An example of this is made evident by Godby’s reading of gestures of gender in *Interiors* 2001 (Fig. 7). Godby writes:

Significantly, there is a major difference between the ways men and women respond to Mthethwa’s camera. Whereas women present themselves somewhat stiffly, apparently differential to the photographer as a man and a visitor, men generally engage with the photographer in a relaxed, self-confident manner (Godby 2008: 199).

This reading brings to the fore variables and nuances that do not often occasion the reading of Mthethwa’s photographs. More often than not, the black body in Mthethwa’s photographs is perceived as a representation of an index of power relations or as an axis of historical ideologies. The variables and nuances that Godby allude to become apparent when the reading of Mthethwa’s photographs prioritises sight.

Godby’s solicitation of the gestures of gender in his reading of Mthethwa’s photographs can also be construed as his elevation of a gender agenda that serves to undercut “a tale of narcissistic fantasy of masculine omnipotence” valorised by history (Whiteley 2012: 106). History commonly valorises masculine fantasies: heroism of men. Read as such, Godby’s invocation of the gestures of gender can serve to “ferment a feminist perspective” that is suppressed in the reading of Mthethwa’s photographs (Whiteley 2012: 106). Most critically, Godby’s observation enables the viewer to inhabit Mthethwa’s visual representations with all his or her senses in order to “learn to see the black body more, to hear it more and to feel it more” (Sontag in Whiteley 1999: 119).

Perceived as such, Godby’s enunciation of the gestures of gender in the reading of Mthethwa’s photographs brings to the fore other veiled notions of sexual orientations that relate to the expression of the black body’s feelings. These are gesticulations that the reading of Mthethwa’s photography as documentary realism is silent on. The silence on sexual orientations in the representation of the black body in photographic representation is a debate that David Bailey and Stuart Hall rekindle:

There is no one thing that is black. Black signifies a range of experiences of being a black male, a black heterosexual, a black gay, and a black middle class. So, the act of black representation becomes not just about decentring the subject but actually about exploring the kaleidoscopic conditions of blackness (Bailey and Hall 2003: 383).

What their assertion alludes to is the possibility of representing blackness not as that which has a “primordial unity or fixity” to its skin colour, but that which can be emancipated from the objective specificity of its skin colour. Bailey and Hall suggest that the black body and its experiences of being constitute “discursive gestures that one cannot start to speak of without considering the contemporary mutations of class, gender, culture and sexuality” (Bailey and Hall 2003: 383). Bailey and Hall’s assertions highlight a range of experiences that accentuate the fact that blackness is not only a factual but also an imaginative experience; it is not only a historical, but also a contemporary

phenomenon. These are receptions that discourage the reading of the black body as simply that which can be reduced to the historical conditions of its making. And it is such ways of looking at South African photography and its representation of the black body that bypass the established link between culture and identity in the reading of black photography.

Bailey and Hall's alternative representation of the black body foregrounds the possibility to represent it as an expression of its passion, emotions and pleasures of its mind, rather than the historical conditions of its making. Godby's unveiling of the cocooned layers of gestures in the reading of the black body in Mthethwa's visual representations is one of the most fruitful and generative ways of looking at Mthethwa's photographic output. It also brings to the fore alternative interpretations and hidden meanings of Mthethwa's pictorial visions that are often overtaken by the urgency of South African history.

The Optics of Studio and the Graphics of the Sitter's Domesticity

The space that this portrait occupies does not allow the sitter to obtrude or to be distinct enough from the other visual elements that are around it. Like other visual elements that occasion this portrait, the plane of this portrait also stands in for what the viewer is permitted to see and what it is only allowed to glimpse or imagine. This thematic is underscored by the graphic imprecision of the collage of illegible motifs of written and spoken representations and the silhouettes of healing accessories in the background. It is the blurring of the exactitude of these visual elements that create "a slippage between what is shown (or seen) and what is understood about what is seen" (Rexer 2009: 16). It is this ineluctable collision that frames the overall character of this portrait. It is a critical signifier because it is "a material structure that organises perception and that addresses our point-of-view" (Emerling 2012: 48). As such, it draws, if not almost dictates the parameters of the cultural spaces one can utilise to imagine this portrait.

Conceptually, this ineluctable collision is carried further by Mthethwa's appropriation of the sitter's domestic interactions as this portrait's plane. Mthethwa must be commended for appropriating a plane that presents him with scenarios that demand a higher level of imagination than the studio. The studio has an almost clinical setting that can be manipulated easily and its results are guaranteed because certain settings, as they relate to the desired effect of graphics and optics and colour, have been tried and tested and thus their outcomes can be predetermined.

Unlike the studio setting, the vagrancies of the sitter's objects and belongings are not fixed and cannot be manipulated with ease. The major challenge Mthethwa is faced with is to reconcile the intrigue of these vagrancies and appropriate each and every domestic interaction as a new visual challenge requiring a new resolution. He has to contemplate all of this to produce what he considers the best and most artistic representation of the sitter in his or her everyday role of his or her everyday life. Most of all, Mthethwa has demonstrated in this portrait how "aesthetically pleasing these incidents of quotidian life can be when underscored by the right amount of intelligence and imagination" (Kismaric and Respini 2004: 23).

Mthethwa's appropriation of the sitter's milieu to enact his portrait disrupts the long-held assumption that the photographer's or artist's studio is the cultural site for the enactment of portraiture. According to Kismaric and Respini, the return to the studio served a certain artistic impulse and had its own conceptual achievements. They write: "The retreat to the studio was part of an artistic impulse in the broader community that was based on the justified suspicion of photography as being a truth-teller, and on an intellectual investigation of photographs as purveyors of culture" (Kismaric and Respini 2004: 22). Mthethwa's infusion of the domestic interaction of the sitter into the conceptual premise of this portrait has brought new imports and insights to South African black portraiture.

Conclusion

What differentiates Mthethwa's work from others is his appropriation of reality as that which is imaginary rather than that which valorises its realistic value. It is this metaphorical character that is a feature of his pictorial visions. This justifies the consideration of the reading and reception of his photographs as artworks that do not draw their meaning and interpretation wholly from a particular historical experience, but can also be perceived as pictorial visions that are made manifest by the viewer's imagination.

This assertion is central to the thesis of this study as it alludes to the need for the consideration of Mthethwa's photographs as representations that are autonomous and that have no iconographic or primordial fixity to reality. Mthethwa's appropriation of "*Untitled*" as an "artistic label and an aesthetic form" accentuates this premise.

This premise seeks to ensure that the viewer contemplates the interpretation and meaning of portraiture as that which encompasses not only what is always already before the viewer's eyes; but also that which resides outside of what a portrait depicts: what it withholds or obscures. That which this portrait withholds are the metaphorical stories and allegories that Mthethwa makes both the subjective and objective form this portrait tell. It is in these stories where the imaginative cachet of this portrait is embedded.

Surely, without the designation of "*Untitled*" or Mthethwa's practice of stripping the sitter's name in this portrait, the viewer's imagination would not have ventured and wondered far and wide in its quest to determine what is actually pictured and what it is meant to mean.

The conceptual premise of this portrait is a testimony to the fact that the failure to look at Mthethwa's photographs as visual representations that valorise their artfulness, is what often perpetuates the imaginative apathy and the lack of aesthetic discrimination that have become the hallmark of their criticism.

Chapter Four

The Emancipation of the Objective Specificity of the Black Body in Portraiture

Description

This photograph (Fig. 8) is clearly demarcated: there is a background, a plane, a lower section and a frame. The viewer's eye will be immediately drawn to the background, where various clothes hang. Placed on the upper left-hand side is a neatly displayed two-piece suit of low tonal value, next to it hangs a red shirt and a dark floral tie, next to them there is another tie with a dark floral design, two pairs of trousers of low and saturated hues.

This line of clothes is juxtaposed against a horizontally and vertically patterned wall that comprises various shapes and forms: the rectangular figure of the two-piece suit, the horizontal shapes of the two ties, and the triangular forms of the hangers on which the rectangular pairs of trousers hang. These various shapes of the clothing dominate the image's background, dislocating and disrupting its decorative pattern of vertical lines. As a result, the background of this photograph does not articulate one surface with one flat surface; instead, it consists of an uneven gradation of textures, tones and shapes.

Most noticeable in this image is a voluminous bed, with a wide and colourful bedspread that hosts a hodgepodge of equally colourful dolls and teddy bears. It is the sheer size of the bed that floods the plane of the image and that colonises other objects and belongings in this place and space. For instance, it is on the bed upon which a hodgepodge of soft and tender pink dolls and teddy bears are hosted. It is the bed that, in fact, actualises the depth and space of this image. And it is the bed and its accoutrements that afford this image its perspective of primary and secondary colours: yellow, orange, red, green, blue and purple that divide and aestheticise the image's plane.

The colours and shapes of the objects, which do not distribute their visual emphasis equally, enunciate the kaleidoscopic character of this photograph. Nothing seems to be in absolute command, be it the shape or colour of the fabric and furnishings of bright dolls and teddy bears, or the floral and plain pillows that compete with the low hues of prints and patterns of the bedspread, or the floral fabric of the couch. This photograph has a considerable inventory that compels the viewer's gaze to "move endlessly across the picture, from point to point, from colour to colour area, from textured facet to textured facet, in this photograph you savour a different depth each time your eyes alight on a feature" (D'Alleva 2010: 51). All of these cohabiting elements clamour for attention simultaneously; "bidding the viewer's eyes to roam the entire pictorial field", thus forbidding it from letting its gaze break its circle of looking (Reid 2010: 18).

On the fringe of the lower part of the frame, there is a couch. Its floral character contests what would be the nucleus of this image: the bed and its colourful elements. The couch and its adjacent elements are fragments that are a part and parcel of the essence of this image's composition. The asymmetric values and hues of the floral motifs of both the bed and the couch provide the image with an abiding beauty of design and decoration.

Light and Colour

The effect of light in this image is not as obvious as that of colour, but its influence is as emphatic. The natural light enters the image through the open window situated on the upper left side of the background, but it is abruptly stopped in its tracks by the sleeve of the jacket of the nearby two-piece suit, leaving the upper left corner of the background severely bleached.

The glow and shimmer of the natural light finds passage through a diagonal light ray that streams beneath the jacket. Its luminosity envelops the bed and illuminates the bright reflective velvety hues of its spread: the pink and white floral pillows, the highly saturated colours of dolls and teddy bears.

It is this natural light that mirrors the different hues and values of colours that underscore the mood if not the visual effect of this image. Although several hues are represented in multiple shades, highly saturated colours predominate. However, the saturated colours of the dolls and teddy bears are set off by the different shades of the secondary colours of the bedspread and the faded hues of the pillows. What underlines this photograph is the matrix of colour combinations if not their opposing registers, which give this image a painterly effect. This effect is carried further by the graphic hues of the patterns of the bedspread and the warm saturated hues of the teddy bears and dolls, which form an elegant aesthetic feel through a contrasting, yet harmonious tonal gradation.

Michael Fried explains that a photograph that has a painterly effect is a photograph that “reuses the painterly model and uses photography, quite consciously and systematically, to produce works of art that stand alone and exist as photographic painting” (Fried 2008: 145). The painterly model of this image is demonstrated by how Mthethwa uses the colour of these objects to depict their graphic and optic characters.

A Perceptual Ambiguity of a Portrait that Discloses and Withholds

My claim is that there is a portraiture premise in the conception of this photograph. This claim is based on that which the viewer imagines when looking at the objects and the belongings in this vacated place: the individual who owns these belongings, if not the inhabitant who inhabits this place. Mthethwa supports this claim, stating that “the bed and the room in this photograph remain unique and speak of an individual who resides there” (Mthethwa 2010: 93-94). What Mthethwa alludes to is that although the sitter’s status in this portrait is, seemingly, displaced by its absence, our reading of this portrait is still foregrounded by this inhabitant in its very absence. In other words, the individual who inhabits this place exists not in the real world, but in the theatre of the viewer’s mind.

The insistence on the presence of the absent sitter in this portrait relies heavily on Elkins’ theorisation of the presence of the body in visual art representation even when there is none. Elkins writes:

The desire to see the body in any visual art representation is a primal desire in humans to see a body when there is none. Even a splash of paint or a ruled grid can be a picture of a body -- or the denial of a body. Every picture is a picture of the body. Every work of visual art is a representation of the body. To say this is to say we see bodies, even where there are none, and that the creation of a form is to some degree also the creation of a body (Elkins 1999: 1).

With this in mind, a claim can now be made that the “the final source” of this non-figural photograph is the body (Elkins 1999: 18). But unlike other portraits, the referent of this portrait is enacted through *narration*, rather than through depiction.

Mthethwa’s dislocation of the sitter in this portrait subdues appearance as the furnisher of its depiction, upsetting the expectation that a portrait often induces. James Elkins explains:

Part of what I want to see from any portrait is a speaking face. In another sense, perhaps more fundamental or prior to the demand for a living face, I want a face to behave as a face: to be complete, to be unified and distinct from what is around it, to be there before me without any uncertainty, to be clear enough to interpret (Elkins 1999: 4).

What Elkins alludes to is the conventional act of looking at a portrait. This desire in the viewing of this portrait has been deferred indelibly in this portrait. As a result, there is no reciprocal response that exists in the way the viewer looks at it, a reciprocal response which constitutes what James Elkins refers to as “first seeing” (Elkins 1999: 5). Elkins writes:

“First seeing is when there is a body to see, and we focus on it with a particular relaxed concentration: there is a determined, sinuous, insistent gaze we reserve for bodies and faces. It affords me the luxury to rest my eye in the eyes of the person I see, and it slides and caresses the person’s skin as it moves from place to place. Even if the face I see is frightened or repulsive, a certain response exists in my way of looking (Elkins 1999: 5).

This photograph is devoid of such a viewing experience because the appearance of its sitter is gestured, rather than laboured.

The disappearance of the sitter’s appearance in this portrait can be construed as Mthethwa’s way of drawing the viewer’s attention to the fact that portraiture cannot always be objectively secured, but can also be represented as an imaginative encounter. This is made evident by his appropriation of this portrait as that which is “showing what it does not mirror or that which involves a slippage between what is shown (or seen) and what is understood about what is seen” (Rexer 2009: 16-17).

It is this gestural, rather than objective, representation of the sitter in this portrait that constitutes what Elkins refers to as “second seeing”. Elkins writes:

Second seeing begins when I fail to find bodies or body parts. Even the most narcotic objects -- a deep twilight, the sight of the freshly made bed, a well-designed garden-provoke something of this more restless seeing (Elkins 1999: 6).

The same can be said about the viewing experience evoked by the sight of the freshly made bed, and the decorative pillows, dolls and teddy bears, as well as the other various accoutrements in this place and space. It is the false consciousness of the presence of the sitter in its very absence evoked by these objects and belongings that compels the viewer’s eyes to roam the entire pictorial field in a virtual search for a virtual sitter. It is this unending circle of looking evoked by the viewer’s desire to see the body in its very absence that makes the viewing experience of this portrait to be as cerebral as it is visceral.

Mthethwa's representation of objects and belongings as frames within which to imagine the sitter's personality and character can be seen as his way of mounting a challenge to the mimetic concepts that have long been associated with the representation of the black sitter in portraiture. Such mimetic concepts often evoke the historical conditions of the black body as frames of its spectatorial encounters. Tamar Garb elucidates these entrenched spectatorial encounters of the black body in her book *Fictions and Figures: Contemporary South African Photography* (2011). Garb writes:

From its earliest inception, photography in South Africa has depicted people. And it has filtered their representation through three dominant categories of representation: ethnography, documentary and portraiture, each carrying with it institutional and cultural associations. Frequently referenced is the anthropological and ethnographical past that has provided the conceptual framework through which Africa's people have routinely and repeatedly been pictured (Garb 2011: 11-12).

Visually, this non-figural portraiture constitutes a visual strategy that marks a discontinuity with the conception of the black body in photographic portraiture. Significantly, Mthethwa's representation of the black body as that which is manifest in the viewer's imagination serves to demonstrate his ability to change the subject of the narrative of black portraiture from fact to metaphor. Most importantly, his conception of this portrait showcases his ability to transform what has always been considered a realist art into an imaginary representation.

This ambiguity in this portrait is elevated by its dismembering of the sitter. It is its dismembering of the sitter that ensures that the sitter is disremembered in realistic terms and remains that which is manifest in the viewer's imagination. The dismembering and disremembering of the sitter serves to ensure that the identity of the sitter of this non-figural portrait remains anonymous and thus there cannot be a unanimous recollection of who the sitter is, and how he or she looks. His or her identity will remain that which can only be imaginatively described and analysed. As a result, the identity of the sitter of this portrait will never be objectively secured, but will be regarded as a bodily metaphor. It is this duplicitous existence of the sitter as a bodily metaphor that foregrounds the perceptual ambiguity of this portrait.

On another level, the dismembering of the sitter in this portrait can be seen as Mthethwa's way of countering the obsession with the representation of the black body as an immutable body. A way of liberating the black body from the voyeuristic languages and vocabularies that stereotyped it as the body of the "other". The obsession with the body of the "other" is a notion that was sustained by what David Bailey and Stuart Hall call "the West's fascination with the bodies of black men and women and their social and cultural ethnicities" (Bailey and Hall 1992: 23). This fascination with the black body and its institutional and cultural associations was mostly perpetuated by ethnographic photography and its entrenchment of Western civilisation's interpretation of the classification of race.

Most notably, Mthethwa's conception of the black body as a metaphorical gesture highlights his "awareness of photography's history -- its genealogies, vocabularies and conventions -- that furnish South African photographers with a supreme self-consciousness about the languages and modes of picturing" (Garb 2011: 11). Through this non-figural representation, Mthethwa has unveiled new significations that afford the viewer the privilege of looking at the black body as that which is capable of "disappearing before the viewer's eyes and be restaged in the theatre of the viewer's

mind”, a feat that attests to the depth of imaginations embedded in the conceptualisation of this portrait (Rexer 2009: 71).

It is the perceptual ambiguity of the black body in this portrait that is mirrored but not shown that disrupts its customary representation in South African black portraiture, and that serves to underscore this study’s claim that the black body can be represented as an idea of illusionism.

Seeing a Ghost: A Disembodied Portrait

Conventionally, portraiture is the creation of a form of a context of the visible: of the sitter that is as “present as possible” (Fried 2008: 203). In contrast, this portrait’s criteria underscore the sitter that is as “absent as possible” (Fried 2008: 203). It is the figurative representation of the sitter’s presence that constitutes “a representation of false consciousness within the space of consciousness” (Harrison 2007: 80). It is this cunning consciousness that renders this portrait a visual representation that is tantamount to “seeing a ghost” (Njami 2011: no page numbers).

As a result, this portrait remains a haunted representation and there is a certain kind of haunting to which the viewer of this portrait is subjected. This haunting is foregrounded by “the precedent that this non-figural representation provides for a continued engagement in the context of the visible, with that which is contingently excluded from being seen” (Harrison 2007: 71). It is the viewer’s false consciousness of the sitter in this portrait that haunts the viewer whenever the viewer looks at it. It is this effect of a haunted place and space -- not by what can be seen, but by what is mirrored but not shown -- that renders the conceptual premise of this portrait that which is manifest in the viewer’s imagination.

This consciousness that surpasses the conventions of conventional portraiture is signified and made apparent by the act of imagining the sitter’s everyday-relationship with his or her objects and belongings. The evidence of this perceived relationship is evoked by the design and decoration of the freshly made bed; the decoration, design and arrangement of the pillows and the array of dolls and teddy bears; the iron that the absent sitter uses daily to iron out clothes; the comb he or she uses to comb his or her hair and the clothes that the absent sitter slips in and out of routinely.

Mthethwa’s appropriation of the objects and belongings to enunciate intimacy rather than a mere visual representation of the black body alludes to the fact that the black body cannot be reduced wholly to its skin colour; instead, there is a myriad of variables that informs its experience of being and its process of becoming, some of which cannot be reduced to the historical conditions of its making. Kara Walker makes the point, arguing that: “There are tons of ironies to be mined and waded through in the pursuit of representing the black body, some of which have no historical imprints-but are manifest in our imaginations” (Walker 2007: 83). The viewer’s utilisation of objects to do his or her bidding in metaphorising the black body lends credence to this claim.

The notion of “seeing a ghost” further illustrates Mthethwa’s ability to unearth hidden impulses and veiled interpretations of the black body that herald new modes of address that do not strive to satisfy old standards. They seek to bypass them in their quest to pull, push and stretch the representation of the black body in portraiture to an imaginative conclusion.

If one regards this non-figural image as tantamount to “seeing a ghost”, this may as well affirm Mthethwa’s ability to represent evidences of things unseen (Rexer 2009: 47). This could, in turn, be an

affirmation of the fact that what the viewer is presented with in this portrait is not merely a representation, but that which represents representation: that which is tantamount to “seeing a ghost”. Mthethwa’s invocation of the viewing experience of this portrait as that which is synonymous with “seeing a ghost” or that which echoes that which it does not show can be construed as a visual proposition that ushers in alternative ways of looking at the black body -- that deviate remarkably from its customary conception that often alludes to its existential reality.

By any means, the act of “seeing a ghost” is, in itself, a rare indulgence. It is Mthethwa’s ability to evoke this rare indulgence in this portrait that leads Njami to declare him a “contemporary mythologist” as are, according to Njami, all great portrait photographers (Njami 2011: no page numbers). Njami writes: “Great portrait photographers are great mythologists: Nadar, Sander, Avedon because they managed to make us “see the ghosts” in images” (Njami 2011: no page numbers). Njami goes on to declare that “the fact that Mthethwa is a great portrait photographer will, therefore, not cause anyone to be surprised that he belongs to that movement of great mythologists mentioned by Barthes. In his work we can indeed see the fabrication of contemporary mythology at work” (Njami 2011: no page numbers).

Njami’s statement may, to some, sound too far-fetched, but what is undeniable is that Mthethwa’s ability to compel the viewer to contemplate the presence of the sitter that is “contingently excluded from being seen” is, in itself, a testament to his unique ability to mirror the sitter in portraiture without showing him or her (Harrison 2007: 71). This is a feat that underscores one of the fundamental desires of representation that is often overlooked: “The desire of representation exists only insofar that it never be fulfilled, insofar as the original is always deferred. It is only in the absence of the original that representation may take place” (Godeau 2003: 154). Mthethwa’s ability to compel the viewer to contemplate the presence of the sitter in this portrait in its very absence showcases the malleability of its allegory and that is, in my opinion, what qualifies him as a mythologist.

Another Order of Being

Mthethwa’s appropriation of objects and belongings instead of appearances in this portrait can be seen as the creation of another order of being: “a variable being” (Fitzgerald 1992: 23). The representation of the sitter as “a variable being” in portraiture is underscored by Charles Baudelaire. Baudelaire writes: “Something real, which is nature, is always fixed and something individual, which is man, is infinitely variable” (Baudelaire in Fitzgerald 1992: 23). Baudelaire utilises the gestural ambiguities of self that never coincide with its image in his self-portrait to demonstrate the notion of “a variable being”. Baudelaire writes:

I want my image mobile, knocked about among a thousand changing photos, determined by various situations and periods of life -- to coincide with myself. But it is the contrary that must be said. It is myself who never coincide with my image; for it is the image that is heavy, immobile, stubborn-and myself that is light, divided, dispersed and, like an imp in a bottle, moves agitatedly from place to place (Baudelaire in Stamelman 1984:1).

Baudelaire’s description of his self-portrait alludes to the possible emancipation of the objective specificity of the sitter in portraiture (Stamelman 1984: 1). In this portrait, the emancipation of the sitter’s objective specificity is underscored mainly by the clothes: a jacket, a shirt, ties and pairs of

trousers that hang on the wall. My claim is that the representation of clothes in this portrait is to some degree the creation of a duplicitous sitter: a divided and a dispersed sitter. A divided and dispersed sitter that assumes various and varied personalities and characters determined by the style and taste of his or her clothes. This representation can be construed as Mthethwa's way of undercutting the compositional unity of the sitter (Fitzgerald 1992: 23).

The substantiation of the compositional unity of the sitter with clothes constitutes a metaphorical ambiguity that alludes to the fact that "each of us remains firmly enveloped in a specific body, but subject to its own idiosyncratic dynamics" (Ewing 1994: 238). The fabric, cut, texture, colour design and decoration of these clothes demonstrate the kaleidoscopic choices, tastes and styles that constitute the idiosyncratic dynamics of the sitter. These idiosyncratic dynamics attest to the sensory registers and multiple urgencies of the sitter that exist apart from the homogenous whole to which it belongs: its skin colour and the historical conditions of its making.

On another level, clothes can be construed as the creation of filters of figuration if not bodily metaphors. Viewed as such, these clothes can be looked at as that which constitutes "a shadow trap"; a term introduced to the South African photographic language by Mofokeng (Njami 2011: no page numbers). In this instance, the notion of a "shadow trap" alludes to the shadow of the invisible body evoked by the gestures of his or her clothes: the length and size that enunciation the shadow of the sitter that is trapped in his or her clothes. This visual conjecture is not something unthinkable; Barbara Savedoff alludes to the transformative capabilities of objects. She writes: "There is a long-standing fascination with the idea that objects are alive or can come alive" (Savedoff 2000: 9). Susan Sontag also attests to photography's capability to facilitate that. Sontag writes: "One of the perennial successes of photography has been its strategy of turning living beings into things and things into living beings" (Sontag in Savedoff 2009: 62).

Viewed as such, there is a sense that the decorative composition of the line of clothes on the wall is meant to enunciate the sitter's fashion taste and style. The viewer is, somehow, enticed to utilise them to fashion the shadow of the absent sitter. It is this imaginative process, instigated by the way these clothes are presented and represented, that compels the viewer to, imaginatively, "see the absent sitter being embraced by these clothes and caressed by them visually" (Paulicelli 2009: 55). Mthethwa's appropriation of clothes in this portrait has afforded him a cultural space to foreground that which is often submerged in South African black portraiture practice – fashion -- in favour of the face or body.

The fashioning of the absent sitter serves to underscore the fictional nature of portraiture. This visual conjecture shares a kinship with, among others works, Cindy Sherman's fictional fashion performances of her self-portraits in her *Untitled Film Stills* (1977-82) series. It can be claimed that both works appropriate clothes to showcase the notion of the multiple self, whose enunciation is determined not by the faithful rendering of the realistic depiction of the sitter's likeness: its personality and character, but by the contexts that clothes cast and recast the sitter in, at any given moment. Of the effect of Sherman's visual representation in portraiture, Susan Bright writes:

Sherman's work is not concerned with finding an essential core but with debunking it. Her work focuses on the post-modern belief that our identities are made up of multiple selves dished up and adopted in a series of performances and masquerades (Bright 2011: 20).

Mthethwa's utilisation of clothes to dismember the sitter seeks to foreground the sitter's multiple-self if not an enactment of the "other of itself": to embrace the conceptual ambiguities of clothes as the representation of the sitter's bodily metaphors rather than the historical conditions of its making.

Both Sherman's work and this portrait evoke the dynamic relationship between the literal and figurative; between the real and fictions of perceptions in portraiture. Mthethwa's ability to utilise clothes as masks; as spectatorial encounters that valorise the dynamic entanglement between seeing and imagining, is a remarkable photographic feat that has unearthed significations and cultural inscriptions that those who speak of his work may not have foreseen.

The greatest accomplishment that can be attributed to Mthethwa for conceiving and uncovering this non-figural portrait is that through it he brought to the viewer's attention a new representational space, new aesthetic impulses and idioms that will hopefully liberate the black body from the ethical and historical urgencies to which it has always been subjected.

The Modern Awareness of the Black Sitter

Mthethwa's appropriation of the sitter as a non-figural representation, as that which is tantamount to "seeing a ghost" and as "a variable being", compels one to ask:

Why Mthethwa concerns himself with photographs that withhold at a time when photography inundates us with pictures that disclose so much, and when surely nothing is now left unseen or unknown? (Rexer 2009: 9).

This is a question that was posed during the advent of abstract photography -- a photographic practice that depreciated representation. It elicited various responses from various photographers who were immersed in this pictorial vision. Somehow, Laszlo Maholy-Nagy's response: "to have eyes outside our bodies", is the one that resonates with the thesis of this study because it can be said that Mthethwa's conception of this non-figural portrait is his attempt to nudge the viewer to look beyond the black body. (Maholy 2009: 9). Mthethwa aims to discover the "self" of the black body that does not coincide with its appearance.

It is Mthethwa's consideration of the forms of significations of the black body in this portrait: emotions, feelings and pleasures of its mind, rather than its solipsistic existence that valorise its "self-modern awareness" (Firstenberg 2011: 179). It can be claimed that Maholy-Nagy's call is a call for the embrace of humanity's self-modern awareness. This notion is what is missing in the reading and reception of Mthethwa's photographic output.

Mthethwa's abandonment of representation in this portrait and his embrace of new significations: the abstractly expressed design and decoration of floral and plant-inspired palettes of prints and patterns, textures, tones and shades of objects in this place as the referents of this non-figural portrait, serve to encourage the viewer to look at the sitter of this portrait not as a constitution of its ethical urgencies, but of sensory ensembles of its self-modern awareness that are structured by the mental work of inferences and imagination rather than depictive acts. Sensory ensembles that "all of us have not because one is black or white, but because one is human" (English 2007: 43).

Mthethwa's substitution of the sitter with objects and belongings is a way of elevating humanism that has no individual, but universal character. The colours, forms, shapes, spaces and material surface of this portrait have evoked the sitter's abstract character. Similarly, Maholy-Nagy's embrace of abstractionism is a quest to appropriate humanism as a subject of aesthetic attention. This is a notion that Maholy-Nagy dedicated so much of his career investigating, results of which is his displacement of appearances as the focal point of his photographic representation. Mthethwa's non-figural representation can be perceived as his embrace of this visual representation whose call was made generations before he himself became a renowned photographer. Like Maholy-Nagy, Mthethwa's substitution of the body with sensory ensembles of colour palettes and forms of visual elements serves to accentuate the fact that there is nothing real about the sitter -- except his or her thoughts and feelings.

The notion that there is nothing real except the thoughts and feelings of the black body is a notion that has long been put forward by Felrath Hines. It can be claimed that Hines is the one who first came with the notion of looking beyond the black body or image of the black body, to the self. His agitation underscored the abandonment of the skin colour as the index of blackness in visual representation. He made this call because he thought such a primordial fixity does not take into account the "modern -- self-awareness" of the black body (Firstenberg 2001: 179). Hence, he declared: "there is no Negro image in the twentieth century -- in the 1960s. There are only prevailing ideas that influence everyone all over the world, to which the Negro has been, and is, contributing" (Hines in English 2007: 61). What Hines alludes to is that the universality of the black body lies in the depreciation of its solipsistic representation which often confines its interpretation of being to a colonial experience rather than its humanism and its universalism.

In this portrait this is animated by the bed which represents the sitter's fantasies as well as the dolls and teddy bears that enunciate the pleasures of the sitter's mind: love, care and affection. These are sensory registers that define all of humanity and that "influence everyone all over the world, not because one is black or white but because one is human" (English 2007: 43). In other words, Hines's assertion alludes to the black body that no longer mean one thing, but many things simultaneously. It is to this proposition of the black body to which this portrait draws the viewer's attention.

Most recently, it is Laurie Firstenberg who, in her essay, *Postcoloniality, Performance and Photographic Portraiture* (2001), alluded to the modernist rather than historical gestures that underlie Mthethwa's representation of the black body in his portraiture output. Firstenberg makes the point:

Rather than seeing Mthethwa's work as an elaboration of a particular self-conscious, modern self-awareness, constructed and performed on the brink of decolonisation, scholars often continue to read his modernity as still operating under the modes and meaning of colonialism (Firstenberg 2001: 179).

It is the abstract representation of objects, colour, decoration and design as cues and clues of the absent sitter that casts Mthethwa as a painter of the modernity of the black body. This foregrounds a transcendent notion of the black body that cannot be objectively secured, but can also be imaginatively described and analysed. This serves to demonstrate the fact that the black body "has many voices and it can express itself through motions and ambiguous contours and forms" (Elkins 1999: 15). These are new significations that cannot be adequately understood through the received

wisdom of the narrative of those who “continue to read his practice as still operating under the modes and meaning of colonialism” (Firstenberg 2001: 179). Mthethwa’s resolve to appropriate the black body not as an embodiment of its skin colour seeks to illustrate the difference between an image and the self-influenced by prevailing ideals and ideas of modernity that influence humanity all over the world rather than by race and the historical conditions of its making (English 2007: 61).

Firstenberg’s claim can be construed as an admission of scholars’ failure to embrace the visual qualities of Mthethwa’s photographs that validate their contemporaneous approach in their depiction of the black body. This contemporaneous approach foregrounds the contingent nature of Mthethwa’s photographs as visual representations that can be variously described and analysed. Or is it her acceptance of the fact that there is more to Mthethwa’s work than what the viewer is made to see in it and to think about it? Firstenberg’s assertion underscores “the limits of representation and the limits of the critique of representation” that have fixated the reception, meaning and content of Mthethwa’s work to a singular narrative: as a representation of a historical record (Michaels 2008: 335).

Another critical South African photographic oeuvre that underscores an elaboration of a particular self-consciousness of the black body that does not coincide with the stereotypes and prejudices of its image is Santu Mofokeng’s *Black Photo Album* -- c.1890-1950. This multi-narrative photographic archive excavated in Soweto depicts immaculately dressed black middle class families whose self-imaging is oppositional to the “invocations of the tribal” as evinced by the picture economy of ethnographic photography (Garb 2011: 32). It is the modern palettes of its sitters’ fashionable clothes or dress codes that proclaim, in a dignified manner, “Look at Me”: look at our “self-conscious, modern awareness.” Beneath this proclamation, there is a latent breath that seemingly proclaims: do not believe how the ethnographic photography frames us, here is who we are and here is how we feel. And, in fact, there is nothing real about those represented except their feelings. How these subjects feel is animated by both their postures and the self-modern awareness foregrounded by the Victorian design and decorative form of the fabric, cut, styles and taste of their clothes. It is these sensibilities that are in dialogue with the picture economy of ethnographic photography and its representation of the black body at the time.

However, the emergence of this oeuvre has also raised other concerns that have subjected it to scrutiny. There is a view that its subjects represent their self-subjugation to a dominant order; if not a representation of their ingrained assimilation of the colonial sensibilities. Firstenberg also ponders this supposition:

How the colonised see themselves and what forms the patterns of identification. The manner of dress, the bearing and the paraphernalia that surround the subjects in their dignified, stately settings are clues yielded by the archive, confirming the quests for the archive to yield its historical import (Firstenberg 2001: 178).

In other words, to what extent does this archive constitute the reflection of black subjects that saw themselves through colonial spectacles? In the same breath, the question to be asked is to what extent they perceived these colonial sensibilities as the closest thing to the depiction of their humanity. Such interrogations elevate rather than diminish *Black Photo Album* as an enunciation of a counter-discourse to their colonial self. It is its representational idiom that foregrounds their claim to humanity. To me, that is the overarching claim enunciated by this oeuvre that cannot be overlooked

or wished away. Perceived as such, this archive can be construed as the re-negotiation of the humanity of these black subjects, if not a representation of their declaration: we are also worthy citizens of South Africa and we deserve to be treated as such. Firstenberg makes the point:

Mofokeng's *Black Photo Album* retrieves archival photographs of urban South African families between these years, signalling a reclaiming of the history, memory of the subjects of a particular social arena, and also a rewriting of the historical relationship between image, archive and citizenship (Firstenberg 2001: 178).

This restorative work has, in no doubt, brought its own historical import that has agitated against the singularities of ethnicities in black portraiture and an embrace of universal and modernist forms of identities that have no "primordial fixity" to the invocations of the black body as a representation of the tribal (Meredith 1998: 3). On the whole, this album serves to elevate the subjectivities of its subjects.

What this archive foregrounds is that contrary to ethnographic photography's narrative, the ethnographic black sitter occupied an ideological frame and space that did not represent the sensory ensembles and cognitive awareness of all black subjects at the time. Instead, the ethnographic subject represented sanctioned postures meant to legitimise the objectification of the black body as the body of the "abject other". In contrast, the self-imaging of the sitters of the *Black Photo Album* mediated their encounter with their spectators and that served to determine "how they are looked and with what effect" (Whiteley 199: 108). This becomes apparent when, for instance, one makes a comparative analysis of the visual representation of the visible forms of expression and the posture of the female sitters of the *Black Photo Album* and those captured in the picture economy of ethnographic photography. The postures of both imageries depict the conditions of their production. What differentiates the two is that one was conceived to depict the black body as a colonial construct, and the other as a subject of aesthetic attention.

Consider the temperament of the half-naked *Native Woman of Sofala* (1845) (Fig. 9) made evident by her empty but insistent stare directed at the camera. This gaze epitomises the confrontational attitude that embodies her anxiety, if not her submissive defiance towards the colonial voyeuristic scrutiny of ethnographic photography. This gesture is indicative of her unwillingness to partake in the making of this image. In other words, this image depicts an encounter that is not mediated by its subject, but the objectifying lens of a colonial camera. It is the structured gaze of its lenses that determines how its subject ought to be looked at and with what effect.

On the other hand, the Victorian sensibilities of the clothes of the female sitters of the *Black Photo Album* "silenced their black historical biographies and ethnicities and have elevated the articulation and aspiration of personal and social statements that express how as ordinary individuals envisioned their sense of self, their feelings and subjectivities, and their social status" (Camp 2012: 7). For instance, unlike the *Native Woman of Sofala*, the postures of the females in *Black Photo Album* are an embodiment of the fact that they participated in the mediation of their own encounters with the viewer and in the conceptualisation of the narrative of their gazes as both subjects and objects not of ethnographic, but rather aesthetic attention. It can, therefore, be claimed that the *Black Photo Album* is one of the photographic archives that mark the origins of the self-modern awareness and the self-conscious black photographic subject in South African photographic culture (Firstenberg 2011: 179).

In the early 1950s, it is the documentary photography of *Drum Magazine* that brought to view the self-modern awareness of black subjects, underscored, mainly, by the cross -- pollination of ideas and experiences, creating a transatlantic visual culture that transcended the barriers of space and time that acted as diasporic buffers. Newbury writes:

Photography was a significant channel through which these influences arrived in South Africa; directly in some cases, in the form of photographers and editors from Europe, but also indirectly as South African photographers absorbed the visual culture of Europe and the US (Newbury 2009: 6).

Some of the early *Drum* photographs that represented this sensibility are photographs of a young girl (Fig. 10) in a school uniform gazing at the globe attentively and the portrait of Miriam Makeba's photograph (Fig. 11) on stage, singing jazz. These photographs foreground Hines's assertion that the black body is a constitution not only of its skin colour, but also of "the prevailing ideas that influence everyone all over the world" (English 2007: 61).

Of the two photographs, it is the sensory ensembles of Makeba's visual register that nudges the viewer to look beyond her image, to contemplate the intimate sensibilities and emotions of the self that does not coincide with her likeness.

As a result, when one thinks of Makeba -- the legendary jazz singer that redefined South African jazz and later became its exponent across the globe -- one thinks first and foremost of her phonic register that contributed to the crystallisation of jazz, at least in South Africa, as an enunciation of black modernity. Her temperament cannot be divorced from jazz because it is that which "makes her feelings feel": that which underscores her humanity more than her skin colour could (Campt 2012 17). As such, jazz can be perceived as her own formulation of her cultural rather than racial identity. On jazz's capability to enunciate cultural identities, Derrida writes: "In appropriating and manipulating the significance of jazz, various black Atlantic communities have improvised both counter-hegemonic identities and parallel modernities" (Derridean in Titlestad 2004: xi). This assertion serves to demonstrate that jazz has always been a carrier not only of sensate registers, but also as an incubator and a vanguard of transatlantic influences of black modernity and its aesthetics: fashion styles, dress codes and social life.

To Makeba, jazz afforded her a terrain to embrace new strategies of self-hood if not new signs and forms of identities that transcended the notions of singularities of her race. These new significations were enunciated not in the production of original difference based on geography, race or ethnicities, but in the production of cultural difference that restated her role in humanity. The sensory registers enunciated by Makeba's photograph constitute the diasporic forms of self that:

Ceases to be a concise lineage inscribed in a particular territory, emerging rather as a rhizome assemblage of chains of signification, connected in all of its parts and proliferating future possibilities. This rhizome-self, based in the thought of that which relates, tells the tale of errantry that is simultaneously a poetics of the Other (Titlestad 2004: 16).

Makeba's embrace of jazz as her cultural identity foregrounds her "poetics of the Other" -- of a black female singer whose identity cannot be tied to the geographical location of its skin colour, but to the poetics of her intimate expression that underscore the "other" that is influenced and defined by the

universal language and vocabularies of jazz. This serves to show that jazz took root in the South African imaginary as the creation of not only a way of life, but “a broadening of the perspectival realm of aesthetic and spirituality that go beyond the territorial narrative of racial lineages (Rexer 2009: 12). Envisioned as such, Makeba’s embrace of jazz as her identity illustrates that the notion of identity is not necessarily an enunciation of a permanent existentiality, it can also be construed as a performative act that is temporal if not that which is manifest in one’s imagination.

The enunciation of jazz as the conceptual premise of Makeba’s cultural identity in this photograph brings to the fore Fred Moten’s critique of the limits brought to bear by semiotics upon visual representation. Moten writes: “Semiotics suppresses other ways of looking at photographs that are attentive to the whole sensory ensemble of what is looked at” (Moten in Campt 2012:134). According to Moten, what is often suppressed by semiotics is the “phonic substance of the photograph” (Moten in Campt 2012: 134). Of the phonic substance of the photograph, Campt writes:

Although this affect does not apply to every photograph, but its consideration is productive because it is one of the most generative and compelling scholarly contribution in enunciating the diverse, divergent registers of the photograph (Campt 2012: 194).

And through the senate registers of jazz the viewer “feel(s) a chafing of the history of photography at its limits, an impatience with mere visibility and a wish for some more intimate expression” (Rexer 2009: 12). The category of the imaginative expression enunciated by Makeba’s photograph foregrounds Moten’s critique of the limits of semiotics in the reading of the visual.

The sensory ensembles enunciated by the visual registers of both *Black Photo Album* and the self-modern awareness of the black subjects in *Drum*, serve to valorise Laura Wexler’s claim that “what we learn of the past by looking at a photographic document is not the way things were. What they show us of the past is instead a record of choices” (Wexler 2012: 6). Although Wexler’s assertion does not ring true to all photographic circumstances and contexts, it is nonetheless a productive way of thinking through and along these visual representations. Such representations reflect records of choices that underpin the intentions of black subjects who wanted to be seen in a manner that is contrary to the invocation of the tribal.

This study’s emphasis is that there is a correlation between the *Black Photo Album*, the self-modern awareness of the black subjects of the *Drum* era and “*Untitled*” (1995-2005) (Fig 8) because they depict photographic economies that subvert the received acts of seeing the black body as a product of the narrative of the coloniser and the colonised, as mirrored by the picture economy of much of the South African visual archive.

The invocation of these photographic outputs at this juncture serves to showcase not only the triumph of the subjectivities of the black body that the *Black Photo Album*, the documentary photography of *Drum* and the metaphoric gestures of this portrait articulate so astutely, but also how these photographic productions constitute an “aesthetic unrest” that demonstrates that the fixed values and closed racial politics of black photographic representation underscored by photographic realism can be “opened, decentred and reconfigured”(Bailey and Hall 2003: 282). Mthethwa’s non-figural representation is a testament to that.

This study's call for the consideration of the reading and reception of Mthethwa's work as work that is autonomous and that transcends the historical conditions of its making seeks to elevate the aesthetic unrest that belies Mthethwa's photographic practice. But what is tricky about this is that this unrest does not become apparent in the first reading of Mthethwa's work nor is it foregrounded by that which Mthethwa's work always and already discloses. It is embedded in that which his work withholds; that which becomes apparent only when the viewer prioritises sight in his or her reading of Mthethwa's work: when the viewer inhabits his photographs with all visual senses. It is this aesthetic unrest that Njami accentuates when he warns us: "We must not be fooled: Zwelethu Mthethwa's images are not intended to invoke tears of compassion from us" (Njami 2011: no page numbers). This aesthetic unrest demonstrates the ambiguities of Mthethwa's visual representation.

What Njami's caution seeks to achieve is to nudge the viewer not to resort to an essentialist reading of Mthethwa's work as a "truthful document"; not to legitimise what is already known of his photographs, instead he prods the viewer to look at them imaginatively. Njami's disclaimer can be construed as a criticism of the limits of the critique of representation in the current and popular reading of Mthethwa's work as a realistic practice. This becomes apparent when the viewer begins to look at Mthethwa's photographs not "intellectually, but punctually" (Fried 2008: 16). It is only then that the viewer would start to appreciate Mthethwa's visual practice not only as a realistic, but also an ambiguous art. This is where the aesthetic unrest or the dichotomy of Mthethwa's photographic practice is located.

Conclusion

Mthethwa's treatment of the sitter in this portrait as a gesture or that which represents representation rather than a laboured body has "diminished the viewer's capability to fully respond to this portrait" (Campt 2012: 7). In fact, it is this portrait's implicit conceptual premise that makes the desire to fully respond to it through received acts of seeing the black body an impossible undertaking.

Instead, it is its new visual idioms that depreciate appearance and that dismember the sitter of this portrait that set in motion a discourse that re-thinks and re-creates rather than confirms existing concepts and discourses of portraiture. Such concepts and discourses propel the viewer to unlearn conventional conventions of portraiture.

The gestural ambiguities and bodily metaphors embedded in this portrait and that constitute its visual strategy cast portraiture not necessarily as a realistic depiction of the sitter's likeness, but also as that which is capable of "showing what it does not mirror" (Rexer 2009: 21). This serves as proof that "a practice exists within a discourse and yet it can transform it" (Emerling 2012: 7). This photograph exists within the discourse of portraiture, but it has managed to subvert portraiture to unveil the "other of itself".

Chapter Five

Photographic Abstractionism

Description

The Wall Paper (1999) (Fig. 12) consists of an obscure and oblique representational miscegenation of text, words, logos, mastheads, print ads, graphic design, and print-making, all combined to form a landscape of mixed media that converges and diverges in various forms of disengaged and wavering grids and graphs. This produces a visual register that “sequesters the object, pressing data into data, and lines into lines” (Elkins 2008: 68). It is this congestion and seriality of spoken and written words, of disaggregated forms of visual representations that, visually, constitute the intertextuality that is “paced by the progression of difference and similarity within a seemingly repetitive framework” (English 2007: 211). This is what informs the conceptual premise of this photographic representation that foregrounds “novel seeing”; a vision of things that are not wholly manifest (Rexer 2009: 11).

The Disappearance of Appearances in Mthethwa’s Photography

Mthethwa’s representation of the “shack life” of black sitters in his photographs, which readily represents displacement or want, is what often justifies the reading and reception of his photographs as representations of the effects of colonial dislocation.

The claim to be made here is that this visual extract, which graces the inside covers of Mthethwa’s 1999 photographic book entitled *Zewlethu Mthethwa*, constitutes one of the visual elements that dislocates the desire to read and interpret Mthethwa’s photographs as a historicisation of a colonial experience. However, Mthethwa’s appropriation of its writing motifs as decoration and design of his interior portraits represents one of the modern photographic elements of his photographs. As such, there is nothing historical about it.

Most importantly, the impact of this visual element on the pictorial visions of Mthethwa’s interior portraits is worthy of study. It deserves consideration because it is a recurring theme that features prominently in Mthethwa’s interior portraits, and its effect in the design and decoration, if not the aesthetisation of the interior of his portraits is yet to be fully exploited. What can be said is that Mthethwa’s utilisation of this modern visual element rebukes, in a way, the tendency, by many, to impose the colonial cannon’s authority on his pictorial visions before he even gets to speak about them.

This study pays considerable time analysing these visual elements because they bring to the fore a new perspective on both the pictorial visions of Mthethwa’s interior portraits and on Mthethwa’s portraiture output. Michael Godby also alludes to the significance of this theme of the recurring miscegenation of logos, advertisements and prints in Mthethwa’s interior portraits. Godby has invariably referred to these writing motifs as that which infuses hyper-reality in Mthethwa’s portraits and that which is appropriated for the purpose of artistic and aesthetic attention (Godby 1999: no page numbers).

The more one looks at the form of this visual proposition, the more one starts to understand the function of its structure. As this visual element becomes ubiquitous in his portraits, it becomes more sophisticated and takes on other forms of interpretation and meaning. It is these forms of meaning and interpretation of this recurring background of the miscegenation of written and spoken words that are a constant feature of Mthethwa's interior portraits, to which the following section pays special attention.

What this visual element valorises is the need to read Mthethwa's photography against its formative backdrop of photographic realism as a means to quell the expectation to "want to understand his work only in terms of his blackness" (English 2007: book cover). There is much that underlies the desire to "view black artists and to understand black artists' work only in terms of their blackness" (English 2007: book cover). According to Stuart Hall, this desire is meant to "make us see and experience *ourselves* as other" (Hall in Mwangi 2009: 166). This alienating effect of the "other" seeks to stereotype black art as a peripheral rather than a mainstream activity that is at the centre of human development.

This theme's anti-iconographic strategy marks "the most visible signs of a shift in which the reading of Mthethwa's photography as a representation of documentary realism has become a historical problem in need of consideration" (English 2007: 28). It nudges the viewer to consider how Mthethwa dissolves the considerations of content to those of form. To me, this is the function of criticism of visual representation. Firstenberg also alludes to this historical problem underscored by the desire to read the modernity of Mthethwa's photographs as a historicisation of a colonial experience. There is no photograph that better highlights the political inscrutability of Mthethwa's visual representations and that accentuates the need for the consideration of the reading and reception of his photography as a modernist practice than this visual element.

This visual element is a testament to the fact that "an aesthetic experience exists apart, without purpose, all but beyond history" (Emerling 2012: 36). The artfulness of this visual element affirms the fact that Mthethwa's photographic practice is a product of pictorial influences and traditions that are informed by the discourse of visual art.

The new representational spaces and idioms that inform the conceptual premise of this visual proposition underscore the fact that Mthethwa's photographic practice is not a homogenous practice with a homogenous interpretation and meaning, instead, it is a practice that consists of multiple sensory registers that are capable of invoking alternative viewing experiences that demystify a one-dimensional reading of his work. It is these alternative viewing experiences that draw the viewer's attention to the fact that Mthethwa's photographic practice can be variously described and analysed.

An Ocular Premise

There is an ocular premise in this visual element that compels the viewer to discern nothing beyond the surface layers of shapes, texts, words, grammar, language and syntaxes. This premise renders it the creation of nothing more than a pictorial and spatial formation of forms of graphs and grids. It is this viewing experience that valorises this pictorial vision's ocular premise. The ocular premise of this visual element constitutes what Roland Barthes refers to as the "Edenic state" of a photograph. For Barthes, this is a state in which "a photograph is cleared, in a utopian fashion, of all connotations,

becoming a non-coded iconic message; it is innocent, by virtue of what he declares is its absolutely analogical nature” (Barthes in Kriebel 2003: 14 and 15). This is a state in which the reading of a photograph does not burden it with one meaning or culture; it is a reading in which the associations often induced by the formal analysis of a photograph are not yet evoked. In this instance, a photograph is looked at purely in relation to the analogical plenitude of its pictorial and spatial formations that validate its formal qualities. That is how Mthethwa wants the viewer to view this photograph at first.

The intent of such representation is to nudge the viewer to recognise the fact that “no matter what, a photograph emphasises its own existence, its own qualities which cannot be reduced or referred wholly to things or situations outside the frame” (Rexer 2009: 17). It can be claimed that the underlying intent of valorising the visual qualities of this visual element is to prioritise sight, to ensure that the viewer looks and pays attention to the visible forms of expression that underpin its principles of organisation. The principles of organisation are critical to underscoring the viewer’s point of view; or it is upon which the viewer’s gaze lingers. These are visual particularities that are often overlooked in the reading and reception of Mthethwa’s photography as a representation of “what happened once” (Hanson 1977: 58).

My intention here is to illustrate how the interpretation of Mthethwa’s work as a representation of a colonial experience suppresses the prioritisation of sight, how it impoverishes the analysis of the style and form of Mthethwa’s photographs and how that process subdues what I consider to be the function of criticism. On the function of criticism, Susan Sontag writes:

The function of criticism should be to show *how it is what it is*, even *that is what it is*, rather than to show what it means. This is a view with which I sympathise, so long as the word only is inserted after ‘show’ because in place of the hermeneutics we need an erotics of art (Sontag in Whiteley 1999: 119).

What Sontag advocates is the viewer’s recognition of the significance of the particularities of the visual in its reading. In relation to this, the artfulness of Mthethwa’s visual representations lies in the contemplation and comprehension of their principles of organisation.

What is needed, first, is more attention to form of art. If excessive stress on content provokes the arrogance of interpretation, more extended and more thorough descriptions of form would silence that. What is needed is a vocabulary... for forms. The best criticism, and it is uncommon, is the one that dissolves the considerations of content into those of form... Equally valuable would be acts of criticism which would supply a really accurate, sharp, loving description of the appearance of a work of art. This is harder to do than formal analysis (Sontag 1999: 119).

To comprehend the conceptual premise of this photograph, one needs to understand how its artfulness emanates from its visual properties: how they work and are put together to create a space; and how they facilitate the generation of meaning. This competency does not come naturally; it is acquired and it should be constantly cultivated. Whiteley makes the point: “To practice imaginative and aesthetic discrimination requires sensitively developed skills and abilities: it cannot be achieved readily by a tourist from another word-based discipline” (Whiteley 1999: 117).

It can be claimed that this visual representation serves as an example of a pictorial vision that seeks to entrench the culture of the art of critical looking, so that the viewer can determine not only what it is, but also what the object of its gaze is.

An Impossible Testimony

There is also a way of looking at this photograph that foregrounds it as an impossible testimony. A way of looking that, in one instance, makes meaning possible and then in another, empties it out. A way of looking at its different modes of temporalisation, spacing and repetition as a constitution of a “slippage between what is shown and withheld, and what is understood about what is seen” (Rexer 2009: 16-17). The abstract in this photograph is evoked by the indeterminate and complex miscegenation of written and spoken representations. Their cocooned layers of meaning seemingly suggest that this photograph is not made to mean anything in particular. Even that which it discloses, momentarily, is instantly recalled and withheld, if not nullified, to betray the very idea of making this visual element mean(ingful). It is its fluid and unauthorised form that abstracts and that creates a visual effect of a photograph that discloses and withholds simultaneously. Of such a photograph, Rexer writes:

Our tendency is to make something of a photograph, to try to say immediately what it means and how it works and why it was made. But images are more disjunctive than that, and often frustrate our impulses. Other kinds of art, which of course always solicit us on many levels, never make so insistent a claim and often deliberately fight against it, resorting to the language of emotion and direct experience. We are exhorted not to think or interpret but to react and feel (Rexer 2009: 17).

When looking at this photograph there is certainly a sense that it exhorts the viewer from thinking about what it means. It is this unique proposition that renders it a photograph that “hands the viewer what it was not seeking and may have preferred to avoid” (Tagg in Emerling 2012: 39). I am invoking John Tagg’s analysis of Walker Evans’ photograph entitled *Man Standing Next to the Wooden Shack* (1936) not because the two photographs share similar pictorial visions, but because, somehow, Tagg’s account of Evans’ photograph alludes to what constitutes, in my opinion, the viewing experience of this photograph. In his succinct account of *Man Standing Next to the Wooden Shack*, Tagg writes:

This is a photograph Evans gives us: less than what we want and more than we desire, never adequate to our questions or to our demands, it hands us what we were not seeking and may have preferred to avoid. Inadequate and overwhelming thing, poor compensation, impossible testimony (Tagg in Emerling 2012:39).

The miscegenation of spoken and written representations: print adverts, logos, printmaking and graphic design, which mix impulses, is overwhelming and there is a sense that it indeed is “more than what the viewer desires” (Tagg in Emerling 2012: 39). It is more than what the viewer desires because its representation of referents that are considered to be mutually exclusive as its subjects is unorthodox and “does not privilege the subject of the photograph’s formal composition. In the face of photography’s concrete particularity, it emphasises the medium generality, an ambiguous specificity” (Rexer 2009: 11). The medium generality of this photograph, which is devoid of an internal constituency and which lacks wholeness and a resolution, can be seen as a strategic

decomposition that renders this photograph a visual proposition that is beyond comprehension, inverting what the viewer thinks photography to be.

It is these perplexing formulations and contingent propositions that shift and change, and of a visual proposition that is never wholly manifest that makes it impossible to confer meaning to its “state of matter that is beyond comprehension, outside concepts, or inaccessible to intuition” (Elkins 2008: 53). This photograph’s inconclusive patterns, undisclosed ideas and thoughts that render its surface complex and intricate make it difficult to determine whether it is the creation of forms of graphs or grids because even the thought of its geometric grid of graphs disappears before it is fully comprehended in the viewer’s mind. It is these contradictions inherent in this photograph that make it difficult to get a clear hold of its duplicitous plane that discloses and withholds simultaneously. It is these dichotomies that demonstrate the fact that meaning in Mthethwa’s photographs is a realm that is contested, negotiated and mediated; it is never a given.

Those who continue to speak of Mthethwa’s photography in a one-dimensional manner, as simply a representation of a colonial experience, may need to adopt new imaginative interpretation and aesthetic discrimination in order to comprehend the principles of organisation that are at play in this photograph. As these principles foreground abstract and figurative images that “purchase heavily on what cannot be seen” (English 2007: 217). This is what makes this photograph a visual proposition that is beyond what some expect Mthethwa’s photography to be: a representation of a historical record.

Ultimately, this photograph epitomises Mthethwa’s photographic practice as that which is “open to unauthorised engagements and impossible to seal” (English 2007: 123). Such a visual conjecture can be construed as a strategic decomposition of an idealised notion of documentary photography in the reading and reception of Mthethwa’s photographs

The impossibility to seal this photograph’s meaning can be attributed to the competing layers of its visual representations. As the viewer peels one layer off, is confronted by others and as he or she wants to make one layer mean, other layer empties that meaning out. Comparatively, the multiple layers of this photograph resemble an onion and the peeling off of each layer infects the viewer with a sense of temporary blindness, rendering the very act of peeling off its layers a dynamic entanglement between seeing and imagining. It is this inherent mental blindness that lingers in the subconsciousness of the viewer, long after the viewer has engaged this photograph or this photograph has engaged the viewer.

This dynamic entanglement between seeing and imagining inverts what the viewer expects Mthethwa’s photography to be. In other words, this visual element liberates Mthethwa’s photography from its formative reading as a realist art and is set to modify the viewer’s relationship with Mthethwa’s photographic practice.

The Inversion of Photography’s Medium Specificity

Ironically, this visual element introduces the sitter to a visual representation that is made up of sentences, but that is not sententious that is, instead, the creation of a form of “picturehood” (English 2007: 222). It is this visual proposition of written and spoken words that “graduate into “picturehood” that renders the experience of looking and reading a single act that is contingent to

each other and that not only makes it difficult to tell the two apart, but that also creates a confusion as “to which one needs to be prioritised and which one must play a surrogate role” (English 2007: 208).

It is this visual binary of written and spoken words as an image that is not meant to be read but to be looked at that constitutes an inversion of what we know photography to be. Because on the face of it, it looks legible, yet a close inspection of its principles of organisation makes it apparent that it is a visual element that conflates the pleasures of both looking and reading. It is this “border-breaching” dichotomy of a text that does not conform to the convention of reading and that has no principle of structural closure or completion that makes this photograph not only difficult to decipher, but that visually and photographically renders it an unlikely proposition (English 2007: 235).

This visual element can also be considered as a poetic image. Leen DeBolle elucidates the characteristic of poetic images:

Like a poem, which is made up of lines that resemble sentences but exceed the normal way we read sentences, a photographic image might be made up of representations that resemble the state of things in reality, but exceed the way representations are read (DeBolle 2012: 2).

It is its appropriation of other visual impulses from other visual practices that were considered to be mutually exclusive as its subject, if not referents that exceed the way visual representation and the reading thereof have been compartmentalised.

It is all the dichotomies and stories that this *Wall Paper* enunciates that constitute a “historical reversal”. The notion of a “historical reversal” is underscored by the fact that the words, in this visual representation, “do not illustrate the photograph; instead, it is the words that which, structurally, inform its form”: its idea or type (Barthes 1997: 25). In other words, the words play a dual role in this visual element: they inform both what we see and what is sayable about it. The graduation of words into “picturehood” in this photograph showcases photography’s duplicity: its ability to reflect the other of its self.

Conceptually, the merging of words into “picturehood” is not something new, it is legendary. It is a visual proposition that has informed the pictorial constructs of artworks as far back as the 1800s. An example of this is made evident by, for instance, Eakins’ visual representation of *Between Rounds*. In *Between Rounds* (1899), not only is the press box full of men writing and covering a boxing match, this photograph also depicts brightly lettered posters and smaller signs indicating the press box and the rounds (Fried 1987: 27). In *Between Rounds* the miscegenation of writing motifs and the notion of a newspaper is gestured, whereas in this photograph such intertextuality is laboured.

Mthethwa’s photograph and *Between Rounds* appropriate written and spoken words as the creation of a form of image, conflating reading and looking. This conflation is also evident in Valentine Malangatana’s painting entitled *The Farewell* (1961). However, the genealogy of the abstract functioning of written and spoken words can be traced back to Ernest Mancoba’s work, *V 5* (1990) (Stevenson 2008: 139).

The supposedly dialogic disposition of image and text in visual representation is also valorised in Constance Larrabee’s *Tailors at Work* (1936-1949) (Fig.3), and in George Hallett’s literary book

covers. Similarly, these photographic representations foreground the intertextual play of words and images that render them abstract representations whose meanings cannot be objectively secured, but rather imaginatively described and analysed. Their kinship foregrounds the cognitive relationship between words and images, which is as visceral as it is cerebral. This kinship serves to foreground that the two feed off each other -- that looking is a product of reading, as is reading a product of looking.

It must be said that the utilisation of words purely for purposes of visual representation constitutes its own form of discontinuity. It is this apparent disruption of norms; of words presented to the viewer to be deciphered like the viewer deciphers paintings, that makes this image an iconoclastic image whose realms of visuality preclude the old ways of looking at a visual element that showcases slippages between what is represented and that which represents representation.

The inherent contradiction between what is represented and that which represents representation is further enhanced by the fact that this visual element is made up of multiple voices of multiple creators and authors. Mthethwa cannot claim to be the sole creator or author of this photograph because "the voice that we hear is not that of him alone, but also of others who are contingently represented in this photograph" (English 2007: 212). The multiple voices of the creators that constitute this photograph render it, what DeBolle calls, the "art of quotation" (DeBolle 2012: 10). Of this visual conjecture, DeBolle writes:

Art of quotation refers explicitly to images from other visual representations. Images that consist of borrowed parts or fragments. And its fragmentary character consists of juxtaposition of quotations of fragments that establish a new constellation (DeBolle 2012: 10-11).

The "art of quotation" that DeBolle refers to is what Susan Sontag alternatively refers to as the "cannibalistic nature of photographs" (Sontag 2003: 60). Of this, Sontag writes:

In some way I will argue that photography is an art which devours other art. It cannibalises and very concretely reproduces other forms of art. There is also a sense that photography takes the whole world as its subject, cannibalises all art forms, and converts them into images. Images which would not exist if we did not have a camera (Sontag 2003: 60).

This photographic medium's ability to appropriate a variety of visual representations as its objects or subjects represents Mthethwa's photographic practice's ability to "accentuate the camera's own data-gathering capabilities to frame unfamiliar views of recognisable subjects", or to render the familiar strange (Sontag 2003: 60-61). It is this photograph's ability to render the familiar strange that changes the viewer's field of vision, intellectual response as well as his or her cultural interpretation. This photograph changes the viewer's perception of photography because it offers formulations whose pictorial visions offer new possibilities, new meanings and visual strategies that are often overlooked in the reading of Mthethwa's photographs.

Mthethwa's conception of this visual element, which mixes up visual representations that belong to different visual representations, constitutes a pictorial vision whose discourse is not sourced from the South African black photographic archive. Neither do these photographs constitute visual significations that subscribe to the pre-existing acts of seeing that this archive embodies.

Mthethwa's conception of this visual proposition can be seen as his own way of reinventing, if not rewriting, the history of the South African black photographic archive. Or it could be viewed as his own way of proposing another archive; one of discontinuities, disruptions and eruptions. An eccentric archive premised upon disorders, apparent distortions and contradictory visual impulses. Viewed as such, the contemporaneousness of this photograph serves not only to extend the boundaries of photographic representation but, most importantly, it is set to redefine the very terms and conditions that inform the criticism of the pictorial and spatial characters of Mthethwa's photographs.

Chapter Six

Photography After the End of Documentary Realism: A Leap Into an Imaginative Criticism

Photography After the End of Documentary Realism is the title of Okwui Enwezor's essay on Mthethwa's photography; it frames the concluding remarks of this study because it underscores a significant shift in the reception of Mthethwa's photographs (Enwezor 2010: 100). This shift is central to the thesis of this study. Enwezor's proposition that we read Mthethwa's photography as a visual representation that constitutes "photography after the end of documentary realism" implies that the reading of Mthethwa's photography as documentary realism is no longer tenable.

Viewed as such, *Photography After The End of Documentary Realism* marks:

The most visible signs of a shift in which the reading of Mthethwa's photography as a representation of documentary realism has become a historical problem in need of consideration (English 2007: 28).

The reading of Mthethwa's photography as documentary realism is a historical problem because its precarious proposition does not represent the visual thought and theory that foreground the urgency of Mthethwa's work. Mthethwa has long proclaimed the visual culture that has and continues to be a source of his photographic practice. This proclamation is made apparent by his well-recorded claim: "I did not want to be a photojournalist. I wanted to be a fine art photographer" (Mthethwa 2010: 102). This claim, which has been constantly overlooked, proposes a need for the consideration of the artfulness of his work. The artfulness of his work is a reference to the visual language of his photography whose motives, norms and traditions are steeped in the discourse of visual art that distinguishes his practice from the visual culture of photojournalism or documentary realism.

Enwezor elucidates this distinction, he writes:

Photojournalism is a kind of photography which is produced solely as a social commentary, in which subjects and situations become mere specimens and an illustration of a given moral code, a code to be transformed into advocacy for victims in need of sympathy (Enwezor 2010: 102).

In contrast, art photography marks a shift in the discourse of Mthethwa's work which highlights Mthethwa's contemporaneous approaches that valorise the status of his photographs as visual representations that "operate within the rarefied vision of art as a context with no responsibility towards social commentary or moral empathy", writes Enwezor (Enwezor 2010: 102). Enwezor's differentiation between the medium and practice of Mthethwa's photography and documentary realism broadens the interpretation and the aesthetic experience of its discourse. This differentiation is indicative of a major shift, if not a revisionist moment, in the criticism of Mthethwa's photographic practice.

Enwezor explains the historical moment that triggered the modification of the criticism of Mthethwa's work:

The tension between social documentary and fine art photography was fundamental to Mthethwa's decision to finally devote himself to photography in 1996. At that point, the political crisis of the 1980s has passed, and contemporary South African art has acquired a level of conceptual and formal complexity that permitted a return to representations that specifically utilised the camera in different ways from those of the era of resistance politics and art (Enwezor 2010: 107).

The differentiation of Mthethwa's practice struck me as necessary and this necessity is at its greatest when "a particular reception is gathering momentum over a period of time and becomes a predominant mode of perception even when conditions justifying its existence have passed" (Ndebele 2006: 59).

Enwezor's justification of the revision of the criticism of Mthethwa's practice is an admission that photographic realism is a mode of articulation and a way of describing Mthethwa's photography that has its own inherent limitations. Photographic realism has a tendency of not "engaging the particularities of the visual to show how strategies, techniques and representations achieve their aim or meaning" while art photography underscores the contemporaneous styles and forms that prioritise sight and that "demand that the viewer looks" not only at who, but mainly at what is actually pictured in Mthethwa's photographs (English 2007: 6). The telling difference between the reading of Mthethwa's photographs as representations of documentary realism and their treatment as imaginative objects is that documentary realism does not, pictorially:

Raise any sort of issue unbeknown to the viewer that can enlighten its visual knowledge about Mthethwa's photographs, instead the viewer is often presented with a generalised interpretation that is authoritatively given. Most of the time, documentary realism valuations are projected as a given and often are "neither discussed nor explained" visually or photographically (Whiteley 1999: 100-101).

As demonstrated by this study, the shortcomings of the critique of documentary realism is that it tends to disregard the objective and subjective forms of Mthethwa's photographs and how they interface to inform their reception, meaning and content. In other words, documentary realism disregards many other stories that Mthethwa's photographs are capable of telling, if not invoking, when the viewer engages critically with the conceptual acuity of his pictorial visions.

In fact, Enwezor's articulation of the visual culture of *Photography After the End of Documentary Realism* further labours Firstenberg's assertion of a self-modern awareness in Mthethwa's work; a disposition that Mthethwa has continuously insisted upon. Enwezor writes:

It relates to a rarefied vision of art that affords Mthethwa an opportunity to clear the ground, if not necessarily in service of fine art photography, then at least towards a kind of photography after the end of documentary photography (Enwezor 2010: 113).

This assertion bolsters the hypothesis of this study that Mthethwa's photographs cannot be regarded solely as a representation of a colonial experience; instead, it can be given alternative orders to fulfil. If anything, the conceptual premise of *Photography After the End of Documentary Realism* can be seen as a means to mirror the significations that invoke abstract approaches and practices thriving within contemporary photography that share kinship with painting, and

performance art, where the manipulation of process is underscored. These are alternative viewing experiences that draw the viewer's attention to a new categorisation of their artistic and aesthetic expressions.

The conceptual and formal complexities of representational spaces and idioms that foreground the notions of a shadow trap in (Fig. 6) demonstrate the fact that Mthethwa's photographic practice can invoke other ways of looking that exceed or upset the furnisher of interpretation that reduces it to "what happened once" (Hanson 1977: 58). What this criticism proposes is that Mthethwa's photographic practice should be looked at as a practice that proffers interpretation and meaning that can draw the viewer's attention to the impulses that foreground it as a productive or an enunciative, rather than a reflective, activity.

The blurring and systematic disappearance of appearances in the photographs upon which the consideration of the artfulness of Mthethwa's work is based, constitute the generative rather than the reflective interpretation of Mthethwa's photography. These are nuances that serve to pacify, if not to counter, the prioritisation of the sociological content at the expense of form in the reading and reception of Mthethwa's photography. It is these nuances that nudge the viewer to "see what is there and how it is put together" or rather, what is the "artfulness" of Mthethwa's practice (Whiteley 1999: 107). The artfulness of Mthethwa's work is that which seeks to signify the visual encounter or experience that has been conveniently overlooked, if not suppressed, by the reduction of Mthethwa's work as a reflection of a society and its history. This limitation of the critique of Mthethwa's work is what drives the motives and concerns of this study.

It is this study's admission that the artfulness of Mthethwa's work is a notion that no singular study can fully comprehend, due to its elusive nature. Although the quest for the artfulness of Mthethwa's photographs remains an elusive endeavour, this study's attempt will, hopefully, assist in nudging the viewer to scrutinise Mthethwa's work to ensure that its reading "moves beyond this understandable and necessary historical stage to a reorientation that will foster a return in criticism to the particularities of the visual as material structures that have their own experiential and existential presence" (Whiteley 1999: 120). The most critical aspect of the material elements of Mthethwa's photographs is that they foreground the visibility and particularity of Mthethwa's photographs as individual objects, whose individual characters and urgencies cannot be generalised or read in unison. They are, by virtue of the arrangement of their design and decoration, of their colour, form and style, distinct from each other and elucidate distinct responses and interpretations.

As this study has demonstrated, it is insufficient to consider Mthethwa's photographs as just "photographic" or as constitutions of pictorial and spatial mediums. Such a consideration does not necessarily constitute the diminishing of their formalism or that which constitutes the visual in them: colour, form, scale, mass and their surface material. As made evident by this study, the enunciations that go beyond that which constitutes their formal character or formalism lies not in them being merely visuals, but in their narrative forms that solicit the viewer with an invitation, a permission to dream; to make inferences: to enrich their process of distillation -- one of which is formal analysis. It is their subjection to formal analysis that enriches their meaning and that enables the viewer to discover, on his or her own, how it can dissolve the consideration of forms of Mthethwa's photographs into those of content.

The dissolution of the considerations of form into that of content in the reading of Mthethwa's photographs is sustained through narrative. This is what renders Mthethwa's photographs narrative photographs. I consider them as such because they draw the viewer's mental focus to their narrative space. Stephen Shore explains a narrative photograph as a photograph that "shows that which it does not mirror" (Shore 2007: 97). "*Untitled*" (1995-2005) (Fig. 8) is a case in point. Alternatively, narrative images are described by Susan Bright as "elaborately conceived and that owe much to the language" (Bright 2011: 78). The linguistic language and vocabulary that occasion this study's reading of Mthethwa's photographs attests to this.

But beyond language, there is a need for an incremental acquaintance with them. Bright underscores this sentiment, she writes: "Narrative photography demands time from the viewer in order to peel off layers of visual registers to get to the next instalment which might fill in the blanks" (Bright 2011: 78). For instance, the filling of the blanks constitutes the peeling off of the metaphorical meanings of the objects and the subjective that occasion these photographs.

For instance, "*Untitled*" (1995-2005) (Fig. 6) involves the peeling off of entangled and impenetrable layers of the sitter's gaze that is not allowed to obtrude the visual elements that surround it. This study utilises narration to make this photograph mean(ingful): to fill in the void of its sitter's gaze that cannot be objectively secured, but rather imaginatively described and analysed. Without a figure of speech, this would be impossible to achieve.

The assumption of these photographs as metaphorical representations demonstrates Mthethwa's ability to project the photographic as an allegory. This implies that Mthethwa's photographs "can be like a figure of speech, composed of familiar words but containing an ambiguity between literal and figurative interpretations" (Garb 2011: 9). The reading of Mthethwa's photographs as representations of allegories presupposes their interpretation not as realistic, but as ambiguous representations, and that attests to their contingent status: the impossibility to fix their meaning. This is the case because Mthethwa's photographs, upon which this study is based, reflect a duplicitous moment: an entanglement that, like a figure of speech, simultaneously foregrounds that which is seen and imagined.

One of the major breakthroughs in the representation of Mthethwa's photographs as narrative photographs is their enunciation not as the meaning of the "thing and its formal parameters, but as a meaning produced by a spectator, who tends to project on the image his or her own stories, which may well be fictions or phantasms" (Baetens 2007: 61).

The dialogic disposition of this postulation serves to showcase the elasticity of the imaginative framework embodied, typically, by the cunning ability of Fig. 8. This ability urges the viewer to utilise the conglomeration of accoutrements of the domesticity of the sitter as clues and cues to enunciate the temporal character and personality of the sitter in its very absence.

The utilisation of objects to enact the profile of the absent sitter in Mthethwa's non-figural portrait is an act that attests to the fact that when objects are read as metaphors they can invoke something outside of what they actually show and can overturn the way viewers encounter and entrust them with meaning, especially within the context of portraiture. This serves to demonstrate that "the very act of photographing something makes it special, its significance and our understanding of it can change dramatically once it is turned into subject" (Bright 2011: 107). This is made evident by the

reading of clothes in this photograph as objects that represent filters of figuration and fictions of perception: of an absent body whose shadow is, metaphorically, trapped in its clothes, if not also in its place and space.

The visual registers of Mthethwa's photographs upon which this study is based represent the depreciation of photographic realism or the lack of transparent representation of reality in Mthethwa's photographic output. This is a visual conjecture to which "photography after documentary realism" alludes. This depreciation is heightened by all the metaphorical stories that Mthethwa makes these photographs tell, that in turn foreground the fact that meaning in Mthethwa's visual representations is a realm that is underscored by various variables that cannot be objectively secured, but imaginatively described and analysed. The duplicity of these photographs underscores Benn Michaels's claim that "it is in photography rather than in painting ... hat the most fundamental question about the limits of representation and the limits of the critique of representation have been raised" (Michaels 2008: 335). Most fundamentally, the limits of representation and the critique of representation in the reading of Mthethwa's photographs are heightened by a disregard for their artfulness, or by the representation of his photographic practice as a realistic rather than an ambiguous art.

Njami explains the dialogic disposition of reality and imaginary reality in Mthethwa's pictorial visions. Of this fine, yet significant divide, he writes: "We must not be fooled: the empathy that Mthethwa's photographs demonstrate towards his models is a long way from compassion, with its accompanying morality" (Njami 2011: no page numbers). Sontag takes the dialogic disposition created by the miscegenation of reality and imaginary reality in photography even further. Sontag writes: "Instead of just recording reality, photographs have changed the very idea of reality and of realism because photography's realism creates confusion about the real" (Sontag 2012: 23).

Both Sontag and Njami's assertions discourage the viewer from having an intellectually secured relation with pictorial visions, or from treating them as empirical evidence that is beyond reproach. Instead, they encourage the viewer to look beyond that which photographs always and readily disclose; to look for that which constitutes a wealth of viewing experiences that only come about through critical looking.

Envisioned as such, the greatest shift in the reading of Mthethwa's photographs in this study is that it dislocates the structured act of seeing Mthethwa's work as prescriptive and deterministic. Most significantly, it "disengages the viewer from habitual modes of reception, turning its attention away from the image and back on itself or, more precisely, on its relationship with the image" as someone with no secured role (English 2007: 216). The ability of Mthethwa's photographs to reposition the viewer's position in relation to them illustrates the fact that a possibility exists that these photographs could also be looked at as photographs capable of imagining their own audiences. Barthes alludes to this possibility when he writes: "The signified, whether aesthetic or ideological, refers to a certain culture of the society receiving the message" (Barthes 1997: 17). In other words, the audience that these photographs seek to address from their very conception understands how, for instance, photographs harness light and colour as well as the manipulation of the processes of picturing which foreground the metaphorical and abstract meanings embedded in their visual languages.

The form of analysis utilised by this study to examine Mthethwa's photography seeks to ensure that it affords the viewer a means to "visually scrutinise them; to study them closely so that the viewer no longer just notes or glances at them, but sees what is there and how it is put together and carry on to make his photographs mean on its own" (Whiteley1999: 107). What this study has also sought to achieve is to nurture a critical spectator that comes about through the practice of critical looking. Hopefully, upon comprehending this study's interpretative strategies it utilised to enunciate meaning in Mthethwa's photographs, the viewer will continue to invest them with his or her own interpretations and meanings. It would even be more appreciated if the viewer could, in a way, begin to respond to them critically, both visually and photographically. Whiteley captures my interpretation of this practice of looking:

Critical looking demands an intelligent and sensitive engagement which makes one sees the artwork, rather than just glancing at it, in the way most visitors to a gallery look at artworks. It may involve standing in front of the artwork for some considerable time, and it underlines the difference between seeing the work in the flesh, so to speak, and seeing it merely reproduced as an illustration in a catalogue but as a practice that makes images; that makes photographs that are open to various interpretations (Whiteley 1999: 118).

It is through critical looking that the viewer will begin to comprehend how the subjection of Mthethwa's photographic practice to documentary realism limits the scope of both its representation and its critique. Through critical looking, the viewer will begin to understand how the contradictory modes, the disintegrating and disengaging representations of Mthethwa's visual representations and all the metaphorical stories that he makes them tell demonstrate his endeavour to rethink, recreate, reinterpret and to redefine black photography's representational capabilities.

Ultimately, what this study seeks to illustrate is that the progressive value of the history of Mthethwa's photographic practice can be realised only if one regards it not as static experiences, but as that which constitutes the changing states of its being. On the progressive value of history, Daniel Herwitz writes:

Only if we make a leap of faith into a new historical form, a new consciousness of utopia, a new setup for human life to play itself out in a particular kind of game (Greek, Roman, Medieval, Renaissance, Enlightenment) only then could the limits of each be known, and something better be imagined out of the details and ruins of the old (Herwitz 2008: 82).

Enwezor's revision of the criticism of Mthethwa's photographic practice as "*photography after the end of documentary realism*" foregrounds the progressive value of its history, out of which emerged the promise of something new, unique and innovative.

And if the reading of Mthethwa's work does not comprehend its "leap into a new historical form" that is steeped in art history and fine art, its criticism will, sadly, be alienated from the very artistic and scholarly traditions that gave birth to it. This alienation will, in turn, suppress the critical aesthetic impulse of Mthethwa's work that casts him as a painter of modern photographic representations.

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Images

Fig.1. Mthethwa, Zwelethu. *"Untitled"* (from *Sugar Cane* series), 2003. Chromogenic print 81.3 x 104 cm. Private collection, Courtesy of Shainman Gallery, New York.

Fig.2. Larrabee, Constance. *Street Photographer, Johannesburg, South Africa*, 1948. Constance Larrabee Collection, Eliot Elisofon Photographic Archives, National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Fig.3. Larrabee, Constance. *Tailors, Johannesburg, South Africa*. 1936-1949. Constance Larrabee Collection, Eliot Elisofon Photographic Archives, National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Fig.4. Larrabee, Constance. *Children on playground with policeman, Johannesburg, South Africa*. 1936-1949. Constance Larrabee Collection, Eliot Elisofon Photographic Archives, National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Fig.5. Mofokeng, Santu *Eyes Wide Shut, Motouleng Cave, Clarens* (from series 'Chasing Shadows'). 2004.

Fig.6. Mthethwa, Zwelethu *"Untitled"* (from the 'Interiors' series). 1995-2005. Chromogenic print 179 x 241 cm. Private collection, Courtesy of Shainman Gallery, New York.

Fig.7. Mthethwa, Zwelethu. *"Untitled"* (from the 'Interiors' series) 1995-2005. Chromogenic print 179 x 241 cm. Private collection, Courtesy of Shainman Gallery, New York.

Fig.8. Mthethwa, Zwelethu. *"Untitled"* (from the 'Interiors' series). 2001. Chromogenic print 179 x 241 cm. Private collection, Courtesy of Shainman Gallery, New York.

Fig.9. Thiesson, E. *Native Woman of Sofala* (Mozambique), 30 years with white hair. 1845.daguerrotype. 15.3 x 13 cm. George Eastman House, Rochester, New York.

Fig.10. *The African Drum*, June 1951. Bailey African History Archives.

Fig.11. Gosani, Bob. *Miriam Makeba singing on stage*, August 1956. Bailey African History Archives.

Fig.12. Mthethwa, Zwelethu *"Wall Paper"* (from the 'interior' series) 1999.

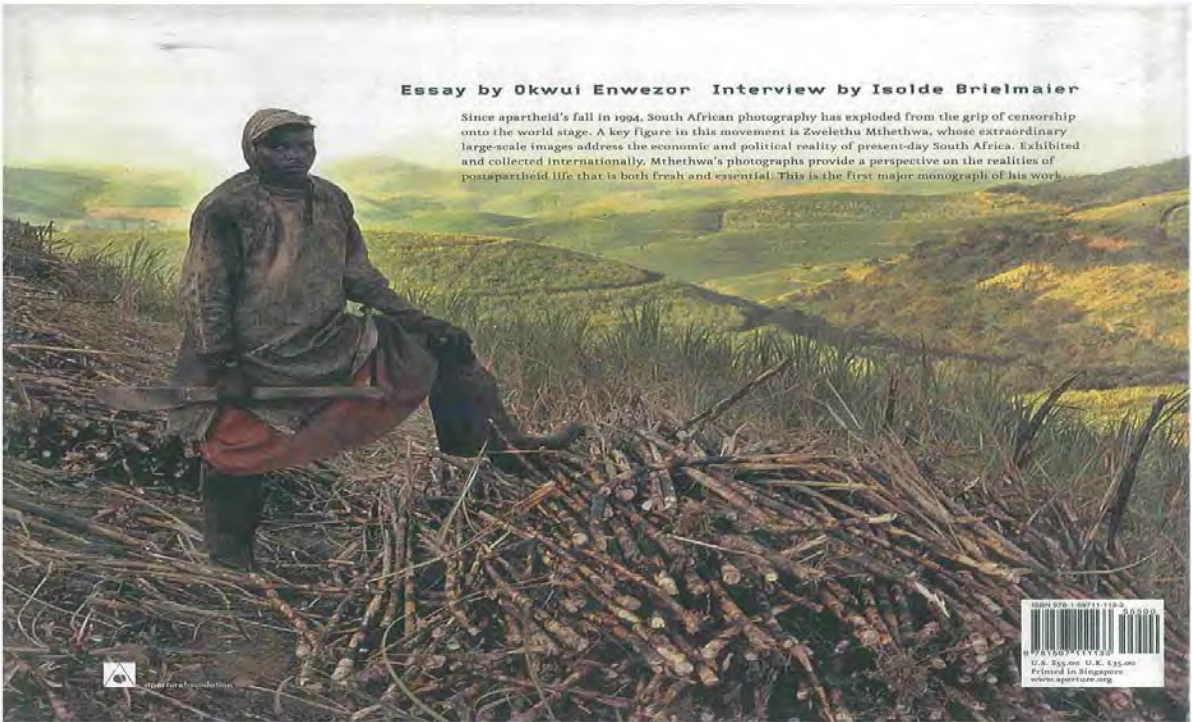


Fig.1 & Fig.2.



Fig. 3.

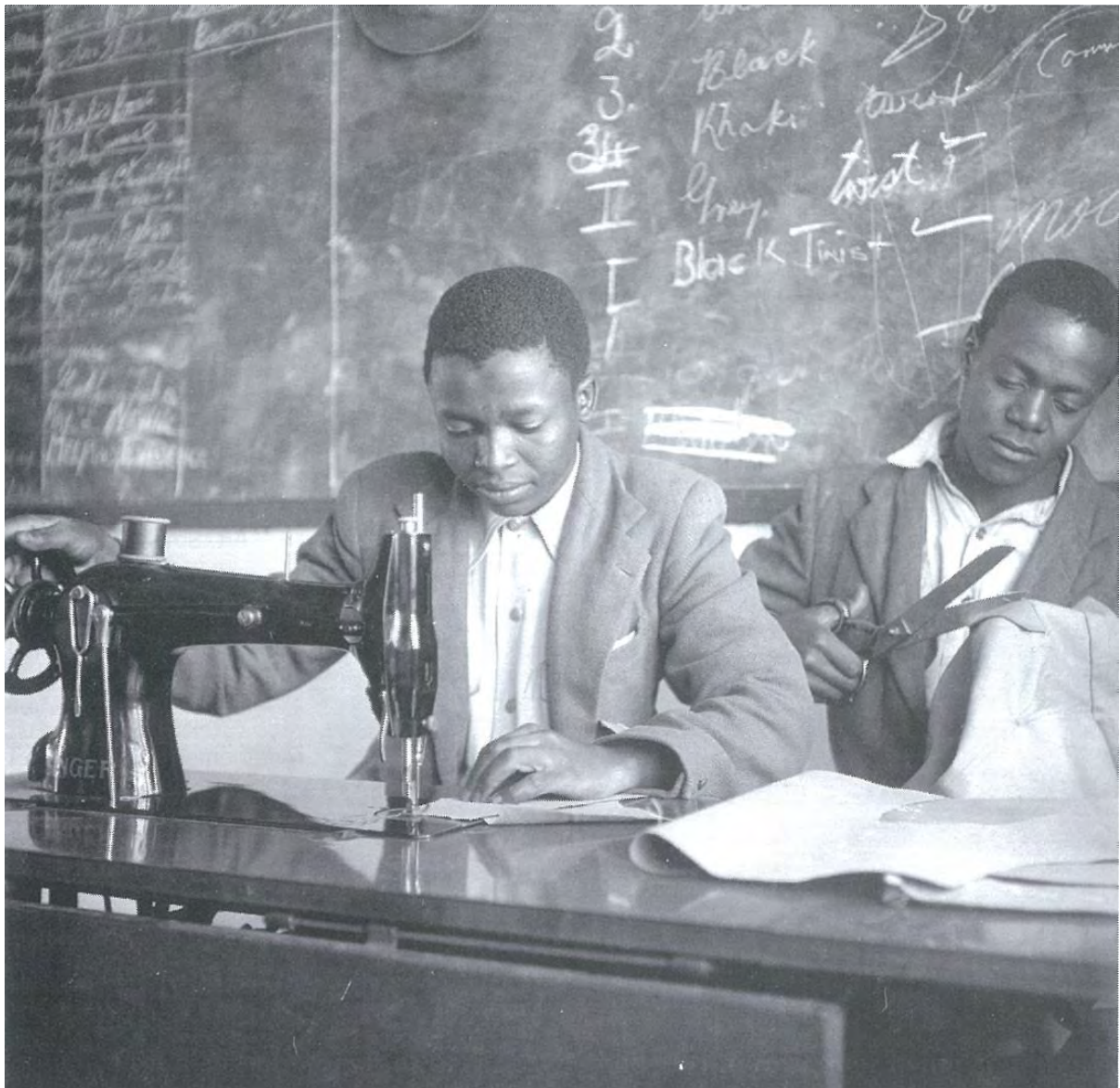




Fig.4.



Santu Mofokeng
Eyes Wide Shut, Motouleng Cave, Clarens,
from the series 'Chasing Shadows', 2004

Fig.5.



Fig.6.



Fig.7.



Fig.8.



10

Fig.9.

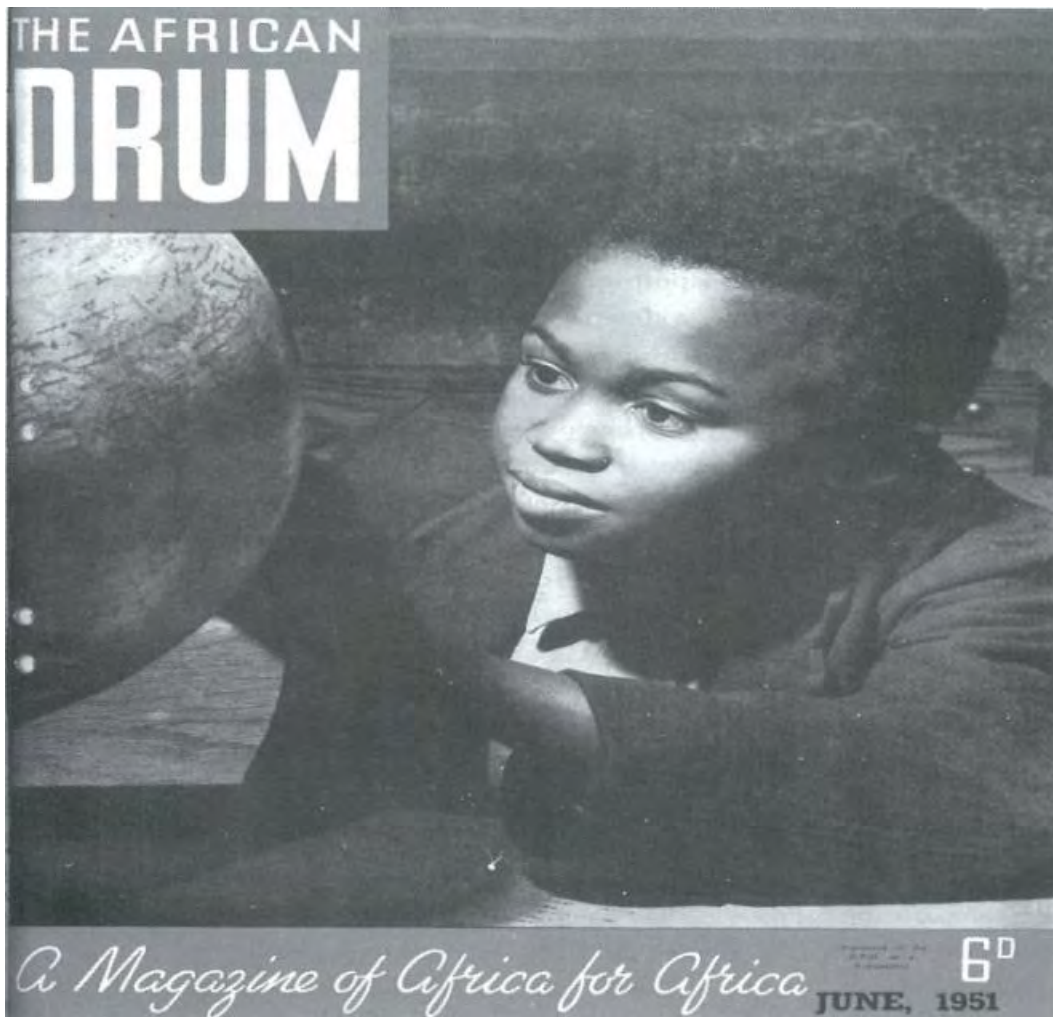


Fig.10.



Fig.11.



Fig.12.