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**Portraits of resilience : writing a socio-cultural history of a black South African location with the Ngilima photographic collection. Benoni, 1950s-1960s.**

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# General Introduction

## The Relevance of Ordinary Things: Of Photographs and the Writing of South African Social History

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### **PART ONE. FROM BOXES OF NEGATIVES TO AN EXHIBITION**

#### **1.1 Of Joyce, her mother, and the butcher's son**

Brakpan (Ekurhuleni), South Africa, 2011. As I parked my car and walked up to Joyce Mohamed's alleyway, I tried to imagine how she was going to respond to the photographs dating from the 1950s that I was carrying in the file tucked under my arm. The photographs had been taken by a long-deceased friend of hers, the neighbourhood's photographer Ronald Ngilima. On the phone, her high-pitched voice sounded frail yet welcoming. "Come anytime", she had said. "And please, call me Joyce". I started wondering how *I* would react if one day, at the age of seventy-something, a young student from a random country like Luxemburg ("*Rustenburg?*") would randomly knock on my door and show me pictures of myself as a young girl. It must be a surreal experience, bordering on creepiness ("*How did you get hold of these?!!*", many of my interviewees asked me). Joyce did not seem too surprised, but nor was she suspicious or on the defensive, as I think I would have been. Perhaps it was her recent conversion to Christianity, which, having coloured her life with renewed fervour and joy, made such unlikely scenarios easier to accept. Or perhaps, in her long years as an ANC activist in exile in East Africa, she had seen and experienced enough by

now to be used to the unexpected.<sup>1</sup> (Later, as she showed off her remarkable flexibility through yoga moves in the garden, I thought to myself that her own eccentric personality is also likely to have something to do with her openness towards the uncanny.)

Sitting on the floor by the couch with her feet tucked under her legs, she slowly went through the small stack of about twenty prints that I brought her, one by one, her attention fixed on the faces. “That’s my mother, this is Cynthia, my sister. And here is Mickey, Buddy, and Shanti. That’s Abbas in the corner. Who’s this now? Wait...”. As she scrutinized the ceiling in search of a name, I was startled again by the clear blue-grey shade of her eyes. Her features bore witness to her family’s incredible mix of ancestry, making it impossible to guess that she was, once upon a time, officially classified as “coloured”. She returned to the prints, and I had the impression she was plunged back there and then, at her twenty-first birthday in the Asiatic Bazaar of Benoni, in 1955. This was long before her years of exile, back when her world still revolved around Benoni, this small mining town at the far East end of the Rand, about thirty kilometres from Johannesburg.<sup>2</sup> Joyce and her family were living in the section reserved to the “non-whites” residents of Benoni, the Old Location and the adjacent Asiatic Bazaar. “My mother was very strict, she always had to have things the way *she* wanted. I was fighting her, even for this birthday. [I told her] we struggle to pay this and that and you still want to make this party! But she insisted, she insisted”.<sup>3</sup> The series of photographs, taken in the family house, depicts her surrounded by friends, dancing, posing with her dog, or posing with the birthday cake in the shape of the number twenty-one. Considering the dozens of pictures taken that day, I couldn’t help thinking that the photographs themselves were likely to have been an additional expense, on top of the cake, the drinks and the dress. As Joyce guessed, the party was most likely a crazy indulgence, one that they could hardly afford.

In Ronald Ngilima’s pictures, Mrs. Mohamed’s mother comes across as a strong and confident woman, her expression making it easy to believe the heroic stories that are still told about her. Looking at the family group picture, there is no doubt that Mrs. Moodley was the head of the household.

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<sup>1</sup> For a definition of ANC, see glossary.

<sup>2</sup> See maps 1 to 4. The area roughly between Johannesburg and Benoni was called the East Rand. In 2000, the towns comprising the East Rand (including Benoni and Brakpan) were amalgamated into a single metropolitan area called Ekurhuleni.

<sup>3</sup> Interview with Joyce Mohamed, 15.06.2011, Brakpan.



**Figure 0.1: Mary Moodley (sitting) and her family, including her daughter Joyce Mohamed (back row, fourth from left), and her husband Mr. Moodley (sitting, far right). Asiatic Bazaar, circa 1954, Ngilima Photographic Collection (henceforth NPC).**

She sits in the middle of the bench at the forefront of the picture, flanked by two men and numerous children. Her legs are crossed at the level of her ankles, her knees apart, claiming space between the two men, her dress modestly covering her knees. She gazes outward towards the horizon, past the photographer, and refuses to smile. Her body looks at once relaxed yet firm, in contrast to the raised shoulders of her thin husband (sitting far right). A former football star turned alcoholic, Mr. Moodley was an Indian man whom she married when her first husband passed away, in order to secure the right as a widow to remain in town with her two daughters, Joyce and Cynthia. It is said that Mrs Moodley would chase her drunk husband away; or, in a slightly different version of the story, that Mr Moodley would run away in fear of being beaten up by his wife. Mary Moodley was an ANC activist and an important voice in the community, known for her stubborn commitment to social justice and her unwary dedication to help those in need. She would for instance regularly call on her neighbours to collect money to help a destitute family buy a coffin. Mary Moodley took part in the famous 1956 women's march to Pretoria, and was imprisoned and banned so many

times the family lost count. The local clinic now carries her name, though the younger generations today hardly know why. In 2012, the ANC held a special ceremony on the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of her death, to give homage to this “Grand Old Lady” and to commemorate her important contribution to the struggle. Yet none of this was really discussed during my interview with Joyce. What came up in our long conversations were stories along the lines of the birthday party-- stories of everyday life. These stories were not devoid of drama, for instance the traumatising experience of being abused as a child by a family relative. But the stories resolutely belonged to the realm of the everyday, as they brought to the fore the kind of social and material problems—and joys— that most families faced in the location, from coping with the floods that frequently inundated the house to coping with a drunk step-father and with the task of feeding an entire family.

Joyce paused over the portrait of herself with a young Indian man in a suit and a tie. The young man is beaming at the camera, confidently holding a cigarette, slightly leaning towards Joyce. Joyce is standing perpendicular to the camera, her back to the young man. She is smiling what looks like a patient smile, as she gazes at a point away from the camera, away from the young man. The body language and tight smile suggest that she is complying to the exercise of posing for the camera, without being fully present. “That is Gaff Gabie”, Joyce said, “he was working at the butcher. And I would always get so angry. My mother would insist “You go”. I said “But why can’t you send others??”. She said “No, *you* go”, because she knew that he had an *eye* on me. And then when I would go then, it’s a little extra meat (*laughter*). Oooh, I was so angry, I was so angry at my mother”<sup>4</sup>. I could suddenly start imagining a possible scenario behind the photograph: the mother urging Joyce to take a photo with this undesirable suitor, Joyce complying reluctantly, not wanting to make a scene or ruin the festive atmosphere. This anecdote promptly cast a completely different light on Mary Moodley: here was a mother accepting to pragmatically make use of her daughter’s feminine charms, under the urgency of feeding her family. Yet it is the kind of story that did not fit with the ANC’s heroic portrayal of this female activist and had no space in the public 2012 ceremony.

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<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*



**Figure 0.2: Joyce Mohamed and the butcher's son. Asiatic Bazaar, 1955, NPC.**

Looked through the lens of private photographs, history takes on a different shape and colour. The story of Joyce, Mary and the butcher's son might appear marginal to the events that eventually became formative in the making of present-day South Africa, in particular when both Joyce and Mary had indeed actively taken part to these major political events. Yet this thesis tries to convince the reader of the relevance of apparently banal things like personal photographs, and of the ordinary stories they generate.

There are as many different kinds of personal photographs as there are ways of displaying them within the house: studio snapshots, I.D pictures, wedding pictures, amateur photography, airbrushed portraits, framed and hanging on the wall or put in photo albums, etc. Personal photographs are very distinct from photographs made for journalistic or official propaganda purposes: they were made with a different agenda, and they are mostly found within people's homes, as opposed to a public or semi-private archive. My thesis focuses on the corpus of photographs of one particular photographer called Ronald Ngilima and his son Thorence (more on them in the next section). The photographs that the Ngilima crafted were made for their sitters' personal usage, and they all take personal life (the self, one's personal relationships or events) as their central topic. Patricia Holland makes the important point that

the term 'private' or 'personal' is preferable to 'family photography', as private lives cover much more than simply family lives.<sup>5</sup> Such photographs also fall under the notion of "popular photography" or "vernacular photography", both of which underline the notion of photography as part of popular culture experienced by large numbers, including the working-class. It insists on the generic aspect of these photographs, on the fact that as a social practice, photography is regimented by conventions.<sup>6</sup> Here, I prefer the term personal photography, because it insists more on the fact that these photographs are anchored in the sphere of the domestic and the individual.

Intimate photographs slipped in between the pages of albums or found in a plastic bag under a mattress tell a different story than the one presented in history books on the area or in local museums. They tend to throw us, the viewers, into the realm of the intimate and the personal. They beckon us to step inside a particular world, a world tinted by the fashion and material culture of a particular age. By definition, the world represented in the photographs has already been and no longer is. Considering their ability to visualize a past world, what information do photographs offer about the past that other written sources cannot deliver in the same way? What does it mean to take personal photographs seriously as a source of history? What place do personal photographs have in the writing of South African histories?

A quick analysis of Joyce Mohamed's twenty-first birthday pictures begins to give elements of answers to these big questions. Photographs might be "ordinary", yet they are complex objects that can be approached and analysed in different ways. In this case, the group photo of Joyce, a coloured woman, together with Indian and coloured friends, being photographed by an African photographer, is relevant of the significant level of interracial cohabitation that had been developing exponentially in the Asiatic Bazaar since the 1930s (see map 4).<sup>7</sup> Joyce's

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<sup>5</sup> Considering how culturally loaded the term 'private' is, I myself prefer to use the term 'personal'. P. Holland, "Sweet It Is to Scan": Personal Photographs and Popular Photography," in *Photography: A Critical Introduction*, ed. Liz Wells (New York: Routledge, 1997), 116.

<sup>6</sup> "Vernacular photography", another term for popular photography, refers to all photographs taken by amateurs and professionals for personal usage (I.D photography, wedding photography, albums, studio photography, etc). Unlike "popular photography", the term "vernacular" insists on the fact that popular photographic practices are not homogenous throughout the world but are culturally defined. Elisabeth Edwards however finds this notion problematic, for it suggests that non-Western photographic practices are a departure from the Western canon, instead of representing the *majority* practice of photography. Elisabeth Edwards, presentation at the "Interpreting African Photographic Archives: Curatorial and Research Strategies" conference, Pitt Rivers Museum, Oxford, December 2011.

<sup>7</sup> The history of racial classification in South Africa is too complex to summarise in a footnote, as it continuously evolved through time. Under apartheid, people were classified as either White, African (also called Native or



stories associated with these photographs begin to sketch out a whole web of relationships suggesting the complexities of this social economy: a coloured woman married to an Indian man and living in the Asiatic Bazaar, an African photographer, a Basotho neighbour, an Indian butcher, a Jewish chemist... Another approach would consist in having a closer look at the curtains, the cupboards visible in the background and at the patterns on the floor. These details also provide clues in terms of what working-class families could afford, and what tactics they used to make a house look less shabby and more respectable—for instance the use of sand to dry floors after a flood generated by storms. Perhaps the main added value of working with these private photographs is that it shifts the spotlight from Mary Moodley, the famous activist, to Joyce, a young woman of twenty-one, and her coping with various challenges, including undesirable suitors, overwhelming mothers and abusive uncles. An oral historian working without these images would more likely have focused the interview on Mary and her political activities, and eventually on Joyce's own experience of underground activism and of exile. It is doubtful that the story of Joyce and the butcher would have emerged without this portrait calling out for this story to be told. And yet the butcher and the birthday anecdotes are relevant of an important aspect of Mary Moodley's history- her struggle to maintain the façade of a "normal" everyday life, in spite of the apartheid regime. This was perhaps less spectacular than her participation to the 1956 woman's march to Pretoria but no less important within the scale of her own life.

In other words, photographs focus on and validate elements of township life that were not explicitly oriented to resistance. I define resistance here in its narrow political sense: marches, strikes, boycotts, campaigns launched by political parties or unions, squatting movements...i.e. formal and informal collective movements fighting against the apartheid system at various levels of power. By contrast, private photographs are completely apolitical in their initial *raison d'être*. Individuals are depicted drinking at a party, playing golf or tennis, dressed up at a wedding procession, or simply ambling down the street with friends. Multiple signs of poverty do appear in many photographs (tattered shoes or being barefoot, ragged

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Bantu), coloured or Indian. Coloureds, Africans and Indians were considered as "Non-European" or black (but not the Chinese, who interestingly were in the 1950s classified as 'white'). The question of 'coloured identity' is particularly complicated. 'Coloured' refers to people of "mixed race", who predominantly speak Afrikaans. Historically, coloureds descend from the numerous (and probably forced) interracial sexual unions between white European males and Khoisan, Zulu or Xhosa women from the 17<sup>th</sup> century onwards. The system of racial categorisation has placed these people in a particular relation to one another and constituted them as a distinct "race". For my thesis, I have adopted the British spelling of 'coloured' wherever it applies to a group of people.

cloths, shabby furniture...). But many more photos reveal efforts to adjust one's appearance or the interior of one's house so as to suggest if not outright affluence, at least a comfortable middle-class urban lifestyle. Photography tends to privilege the "good times" in life, and Joyce's birthday photographs are no exception. They offer a radically different perspective on life under apartheid as a black South African— a daily life characterised by a striving for glamour and the struggle to maintain a sense of permanence in a context of duress.

## **1.2 The Ronald Ngilima Collection: an Introduction**

Joyce's birthday photographs belongs to a much larger collection of photographs, consisting of several thousands of negatives. Two photographers are behind this body of work, Ronald Majongwa Ngilima (1914-1960), and his son Thorence (1940-1998). No one really knows how Ronald Ngilima picked up photography, nor how he managed to piece together the capital to buy his first camera. What we do know is that Ronald acquired a darkroom in 1952, when he obtained a house from the municipality and installed it in the bathroom. Having access to his own dark room was the pre-condition that enabled Ronald to begin accumulating the negatives in his house, and marking the beginning of the collection as we know it today. Ronald Ngilima would cycle to various parts of Benoni municipality, mainly to "non-white" neighbourhoods— the mine compounds, the location, the Asiatic Bazaar and Wattville, the new township where the Ngilimas lived.<sup>8</sup> His negatives date from the early 1950s to 1960, representing roughly ten years in the life of the residents of Benoni's black neighbourhoods. The collection includes photographs of Africans, coloureds and Indians, who until the forced removals of the mid-1960s, were sharing the increasingly over-populated and rapidly shrinking space of the location. Luckily, Wattville was not subjected to removals, which means that the Ngilimas and the collection remained in the same house for the following thirty years. At Ronald Ngilima's death in 1960, his wife Sarah locked the boxes of negatives up in the bottom part of a wooden bookcase that was declared strictly off-limits. Meanwhile, Thorence, Ronald's eldest son, took over the photographic business for about five years, between 1960 and 1965. His body of work is difficult to identify precisely, as negatives of father and son got mixed up over time. However, oral and visual evidence suggest that most

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<sup>8</sup> For a definition of location, see glossary.

of the square formatted photographs, arguably the most innovative ones in the collection, were taken by Thorence.

The Ngilima collection would almost certainly have ended up in a trash bin or in ashes, had it not been for Ronald's grandson, Farrell Ngilima, and his pivotal intervention. Farrell partially grew up at his grandmother's house, and remembers the fetish he developed towards the forbidden bookcase. He had grown up hearing stories of his grandfather's activities as a photographer, and had seen several cameras lying about the house. But it wasn't until 1999 however, that he became fully aware of what had been kept in the bookcase. By then, Sarah Ngilima was eighty-one and losing her grip on the house filled with grandchildren and great-grandchildren. Farrell was living in Vosloorus (another township in Ekurhuleni, about 20 km south-west from Wattville) with his father, and was a student in visual arts and advertising at Wits Technicon. Just four years after the end of apartheid, Farrell was one of the first black students to be enrolled in such a program. One weekend, the whole family was gathered in Wattville for a big family event, when Farrell fell upon a few photographs at the bottom of a blue plastic drum full of rubbish. Curious, he picked them out of the drum and asked his grandmother and aunt Doreen whether there were more of the kind in the house. He asked them to put aside all negatives that they would come across and keep them till his next visit. His sensibility to art, combined with his curiosity vis-à-vis his family genealogy, meant that Farrell saw in his grandfather's collection a legacy worth preserving and sharing with a broader audience, in particular the present residents of Wattville. It was also a way for him to get closer to the grandfather he had never met, and to find out more about his family history. As his father's eldest son and one of the few male Ngilima family members left, he felt that the responsibility of preserving the family's history was bestowed on him.

Altogether, twenty-six Kodak boxes of negatives were retrieved, and Farrell together with his father Benjamin Ngilima (Ronald Ngilima's son) proceeded to painstakingly count them, one by one—5671 negatives in all. In his spare time, he initiated research on the photographs, spending hours showing the pictures to relatives and elderly street vendors in the hope of identifying a face. His attempt to meet identified subjects took him to different parts of Benoni and Boksburg (on foot!), including Reigerpark, the coloured township, and previously white suburbs. He also started consulting several artists for advice and reached out to various museums and academics, including Wits historian Philip Bonner, to see who would be

interested in such material. His vision for the future of the collection was less based on the prospect of economic gain than the hope to create a momentum that would transform the township through the development of cultural and artistic activities (in particular photography) for the youth in Wattville.

In 2008, Museum Africa's curator of collections, Diane Wall, introduced me to Ngilima's grandson Farrell. I was then starting my fieldwork for my master thesis, in which I tried more generally to identify the first black photographers in South Africa. In 2006, Museum Africa had put together an exhibition celebrating the 120<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Johannesburg, which included a selection of Ngilima photographs. When I approached the museum to enquire whether they had any photographs taken by black photographers in their large photo collection, collection manager Diane Wall remembered Farrell and gave me his details. Farrell and I met up a few days later in Newtown, he came with a small black plastic pouch containing about a few hundred negatives, apparently a "small" sample of the overall collection. I remember putting up the negatives against the light and trying to make out the positive, my heart racing. I could hardly allow myself to believe Farrell when he said there were twenty-six more boxes of the sort. I must admit I did not fully believe him until, two years later, I saw them with my own eyes at his house in Vosloorus. The occasion was a big one: I had come to pick the boxes up to fly them to Cape Town, at the Centre for Curating the Archive based at the University of Cape Town, where a young man called Zade Boniface took on the mission to digitalise the entire collection for us, using a good quality flatbed scanner to make high-resolution scans of the negatives. Zade and I had decided not to scan the collection at archival standard, which would have required far more expensive equipment, more lengthily procedures (such as cleaning each negative individually), and needless to say, a far greater budget.<sup>9</sup> The digitisation was completed within record time-- three months—allowing me to start my fieldwork immediately. This speedy bulk processing however resulted in that many of the negatives were scanned on the wrong side of the negative. As a consequence, many of the scans presented the images flipped over, something that I only came to realise later, when I started encountering numbers or letters that figured the wrong way around. In the absence of the latter, buttons work as fantastic indicators. Indeed, up until today, fashion

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<sup>9</sup> Many of the photographs in the collection were of such poor quality that they did not justify such expensive archival treatment. Our reasoning was to have a decent digitalization of the entire collection in order to find out what is in it, before making a selection that would then be properly scanned at the Centre. This archival-standard scanning is still to be organised and executed.

still abides by the rule that gender strictly determines whether buttons run along the right or the left side of a garment. The buttons on men or women's clothes thus indicate whether a negative is on the right-sided or reversed.

Digitizing the collection was the first thing that happened once the research project "Photographic Traditions in South African Popular Modernities", which my PhD was part of, was approved in 2010. Two years later, Farrell and his sister handed over the collection to an independent archive called Historical Papers, located at Wits University. The collection thus entered into the public domain, making itself accessible for general study and appreciation. This can be seen as a step towards "refiguring the archive", the urgent task of making South African archives reflect more closely the diversity of South African people, by including new kinds of material (previously considered not worthy of being preserved, such as anti-apartheid posters and personal photographs from black families) in archives' collection<sup>10</sup>. Historical Papers are now the guardians of the collection, but the copyrights of the negatives remain entirely in the hands of the Ngilima family. Farrell still intends to establish a trust for the collection, and to transform his grandmother's house into a small museum and workshop space, where young people from Wattville can learn about photography.

In 2012 and 2013, I spent in total about a year doing fieldwork in Wattville, continuing what Farrell had started in 1999: trying to identify, locate, and interview as many subjects in the photographs as I could. I asked interviewees about their memories of the photo shoot (if they could remember it), and more generally about their experience of photography. I also interviewed Wattville residents and ex-Old Location residents who were born roughly between 1930 and 1940, and who could relate to the Ngilima photographs or had large photo collections of their own. In 2012, Farrell and I set up an informal street exhibition in Actonville (the Indian Group Area that replaced the Old Location), which consisted in pasting some blown-up photos onto walls. In 2013, together with Tamsyn Adams, my colleague and fellow PhD student on the NWO research project "Photographic Traditions in South African Popular Modernities", I curated an exhibition entitled "Sidetracks: Working With Two Photographic Collections", which attempts to present the Ngilima and Tamsyn's own phenomenal family photographic collection together, rather than separately. For the opening of the show, we organized a bus to bring down people from Wattville to the gallery in

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<sup>10</sup> C. Hamilton et al., *Refiguring the Archive* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2002).

Johannesburg. Joyce Mohamed came, as did the Ngilima family and a few other interviewees. I was so moved to see them there, I was hardly intelligible when delivering my opening speech. Funnily enough, when I asked Farrell whether his family had enjoyed the show, he paused and said: “I think they did. For sure. But I think they are a little...uncertain—why all this fuss for these old photos?”. In the rest of this introduction, I hope to explain why the Ngilima collection—the work of Ronald and Thorence Ngilima, but also Sarah and Farrell’s efforts to preserve it— are worth the fuss.

## PART 2. HISTORIOGRAPHIES

### 2.1 A Historiography of Benoni: Urbanisation in South Africa, Social History, and the Cultural Turn

This thesis falls within a longer tradition of anthropologists and historians interested in arguably the most determining change that defined South Africa's 20<sup>th</sup> century: urbanisation. The discovery of diamonds in Kimberly in 1870 and gold in the Rand some fifteen years later profoundly altered the systems of production in the country, leading to the development of mining industry and capitalist farming. These economic forces had further reverberation on South African society as a whole, for one, through the implementation of a labour system that saw millions of men seeking work in the mines. The history of Benoni follows the same trajectory: gold was found in the east end of the long ridge of hills called Witwatersrand, about 40 km from Johannesburg, which led to the first mine camps, and eventually to the establishment of a municipality in 1906.

Anthropologists and sociologists such as Ray Edmund Philips (writing about the late 1930s), Ellen Hellman (about the 1940s-50s), the Mayers and Berthold Pauw (1960s), became fascinated with the changes that this mass migration to cities generated amongst Africans in terms of lifestyle, consumption patterns, value systems, social structures, as more and more men and eventually women decided to permanently settle in urban areas.<sup>11</sup> However, Bonner's ground-breaking article on the nature of African urbanisation convincingly argues that this process of urbanisation was far from linear and continuous, or even irreversible.<sup>12</sup> In Benoni, African urbanisation peaked between the 1930s and 1950s, as the local government began to invest heavily in transforming its mining industry into a manufacturing one. By the 1930s, most of the mines, faced with higher working costs and lower grades of ore, were starting to close down. With the pressure of the 1930 depression, the municipality launched a determined campaign to wean itself from its dependence on gold and attract secondary

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<sup>11</sup> R. Philips, *The Bantu in the City : A Study of Cultural Adjustment on the Witwatersrand* (Lovedale: Lovedale Press, 1938); E. Hellman, *Rooiyard: A Sociological Study of an Urban Slum Yard*, vol. No.13, Rhodes-Livingstone Papers (Oxford University Press, 1948); P. Mayer and I. Mayer, *Townsmen or Tribesmen: Conservatism and the Process of Urbanisation in a South African City*, vol. 2, Xhosa in Town (Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 1961); B. A. Pauw, *The Second Generation: A Study of the Family among Urbanised Bantu in East London*, vol. 3, Xhosa in Town: Studies of the Bantu-Speaking Population of East London, Cape Province (Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 1963).

<sup>12</sup> P. Bonner, "African Urbanisation on the Rand between the 1930s and 1960s : Its Social Character and Political Consequences," *Journal of Southern African Studies* 21, no. 1 (1995), 115-129.

industry to Benoni. Hence by 1935, Benoni experienced massive industrial growth, the dominant industries being iron, steel and brass foundries. The 2nd world war, with its military requirements and the increase in demand for consumer goods from the embattled allied countries, provided a crucial impetus for a rapid manufacturing development, to such an extent that by the mid-1940s, the East Rand was considered the “heartland of the country’s engineering industry”.<sup>13</sup> This boom in turn attracted further economic investment in Benoni, as new enterprises established themselves in Benoni, such General Electric, Amato Textiles and Dinglers Tobacco factory, where Ronald Ngilima found work in 1946. Such was the dramatic transformation of the town’s economy that by 1947, Benoni was widely recognized as a leading centre of heavy industry in the country.<sup>14</sup> Historians working on South Africa in the 1950s and 60s focused heavily on this transformation of the economy, absorbed by the “liberal-radical” history debate that revolved around analysing the nature of the relationship between the apartheid state and capitalism.<sup>15</sup> Was apartheid created by and in service of capitalist interests or was it rather the result of Afrikaaner racism? Published in 1968, the history book “*Benoni, Son of my Sorrow: The Social, Political and Economic History of a South African Mining Town*”, commissioned and published by the Benoni Town Council, celebrates the town’s economic success without dwelling on such ideological questions. As one of the first historical accounts of this town, it typically focused on the achievements of Benoni’s white population, and in particular of certain “great leaders” (typically men: politicians, mayors, etc).

### *The History Workshop and African urbanisation*

The inauguration of the History Workshop (henceforth HW) at Wits University in 1977, a year after the June 1976 Soweto uprising, marks the establishment of a progressive current in history writing in the country. Influenced by “humanist” Marxism, the civil rights movement in the USA, and the decolonisation movements taking off in various African countries, this generation of historians perceived the writing of history as a political act of “giving public

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<sup>13</sup> N. Nieftagodien, “The Implementation of Urban Apartheid on the East Rand, 1948-1973: The Role of Local Government and Local Resistance”, (PhD diss., University of Witwatersrand, 2001), 23.

<sup>14</sup> D. Humphriss and D. G. Thomas, *Benoni, Son of My Sorrow: The Social, Political and Economic History of a South African Gold Mining Town* (Benoni: Town Council, 1968).

<sup>15</sup> H. E. Stolten, "Introduction," in *History Making and Present Day Politics: The Meaning of Collective Memory in South Africa*, ed. Hans Erik Stolten (Uppsala: Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, 2006).



voice to the marginalised and down-trodden”, countering hegemonic views of history such as the one encapsulated in this Benoni Jubilee publication.<sup>16</sup> The HW, as well as various university departments in South Africa, began producing research that focused on how Africans not only coped with the oppressive machinery of white domination, but also sought to resist it. This academic project was set on retrieving evidence of black working-class agency, as opposed to portraying Africans as passive victims of looming structural economic forces. Inspired by “history from below” initiated by E.P. Thompson, South African historians were also deeply influenced by the insights of oral history as elaborated by Jan Vansina, leading to a multiplication of oral history projects up till today.<sup>17</sup> What both currents had in common was a research agenda focusing not on economics, but on the everyday lives of “ordinary people”. German historians from Alfred Lüdtké’s *Alltagsgeschichte* school similarly called for a closer study of people’s behaviour, self-perceptions and actions on the modest scale of everyday life. Beyond the realm of ‘small events’ and of daily routines, everyday life can be defined as ‘the domain in which people exercise a direct influence – through their behaviour – on their immediate circumstances’.

In the 1970s and 80s, the rift *within* the left, between social historians and Marxist structuralists, became greater than the one between liberals and radicals. Indeed, while liberals and radicals disagreed on the outcome of capitalism and its impact on societies, both had nevertheless in common an interest in and a focus on structural changes taking place at macro level (capitalism, nationalism, etc.). Some social historians started expressing their weariness with the all-encompassing and abstract notion of class, feeling the need to “expand (..) the abstract notions of class into the living categories of experience to embrace culture, consciousness and human agency”.<sup>18</sup> The culturalist and literary turn in the social sciences in the early 1990s pointed to some of the limitations of history from below. Despite its focus on everyday life, this school of historiography was criticised for perpetuating a preoccupation with class and power at the expense of “exploring the significance of symbolic and other

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<sup>16</sup> P. Bonner, "Keynote Address to the 'Life after Thirty' Colloquium," *African Studies* 69, no. 1 (2010), 13.

<sup>17</sup> E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York: Vintage, 1966). See also J. Vansina, *Oral Traditions: A Study in Historical Methodology* (Chicago: Aldine Transaction, 1965). On the legacy of oral history on South African historiography, see P. La Hausse, "Oral History and South African Historians," *Radical History Review* 46, no. 7 (1990).

<sup>18</sup> Bonner, "Keynote Address", 15.

cultural practices in the making of social meaning".<sup>19</sup> Cultural history in turn strove to integrate some of anthropology's insights, making subjective experiences, popular culture and locally produced systems of knowledge its central point of analysis. Some studies thus emerged that explored the forging of new black urban cultures from the perspective of popular culture, such as sports, the politics of liquor (beer), literature, gangsterism, theatre and music.<sup>20</sup> Yet while the Marxist legacy was being put in question, the HW remained resolutely anchored within an activist framework of fighting against apartheid, a legacy that was then put in question in the post-apartheid era.

### *A History of African Urbanisation: Benoni*

The process of urbanisation became a major focus of the HW's attention, producing an impressive body of research on the urban black communities living in the townships, locations and inner-city slumyards on the Witwatersrand.<sup>21</sup> The works of Philip Bonner and Julian Cohen are representative of this chapter in South African historiography, both authors focusing their research on Benoni's black location. Criticising the conventional historical materialist analysis of South African working class, Cohen chose to look at the regional specificity of Benoni's location in the 1930s, analysing how local patterns of control and

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<sup>19</sup> A. K. Mager and M. Mulaudzi, "Popular Responses to Apartheid: 1948-C.1975," in *The Cambridge History of South Africa: 1885-1994*, ed. Robert Ross, Anne Kelk Mager, and Bill Nasson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 369-70.

<sup>20</sup> See for instance D. Coplan, *In Township Tonight! South Africa's Black City Music and Theatre* (Johannesburg: University of Chicago Press, 1983); T. Couzens, "'Moralising Free Time': The Transatlantic Connection and Black Johannesburg, 1918- 1936," in *Industrialisation and Social Change in South Africa; African Class Formation, Culture, and Consciousness, 1870-1930* ed. S. Marks and R. Rathbone (1982); P. La Hausse, *Brewers, Beerhalls and Boycotts: A History of Liquor in South Africa* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1988).

<sup>21</sup> S. Marks and R. Rathbone, *Industrialisation and Social Change in South Africa; African Class Formation, Culture, and Consciousness, 1870-1930* (Harlow: Longman, 1982); C. Van Onselen, *Studies in the Social and Economic History of the Witwatersrand, 1886-1914* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1982); E. Koch, "'Without Visible Means of Subsistence': Slumyard Culture in Johannesburg 1918-1940," in *Town and Countryside in the Transvaal : Capitalist Penetration and Popular Resource*, ed. Belinda Bozzoli (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1983); — — —, "The Destruction of Marabi Culture: Urban Segregation in Johannesburg, 1923:1938," (University of Witwatersrand: History Workshop, 1984); P. La Hausse, "The Struggle for the City: Alcohol, the Ematsheni and Popular Culture in Durban, 1902 – 1936 " (M.A. diss., University of Cape Town, 1984); L. Callinicos, *A People's History of South Africa*, vol. 2: Working life 1886-1940: factories, townships and popular culture on the Rand (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1987); H. Sapire, "African Urbanisation and Struggles against Municipal Control in Brakpan, 1920-1958. " (PhD diss., University of Witwatersrand, 1989); P. Bonner, "The Russians on the Reef, 1947-1957: Urbanisation, Gang Warfare and Ethnic Mobilisation," in *Apartheid's Genesis. 1935-1962*, ed. Philip Bonner, Peter Delius, and Deborah Posel (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1993); — — —, "Eluding Capture: African Grass-Roots Struggles in 1940s Benoni," in *South Africa's 1940s: Worlds of Possibilities*, ed. Alan Jeeves and Saul Dubow (Cape Town: Double Storey Books, 2005).

resistance played a key role in shaping working-class culture.<sup>22</sup> Bonner's research is the sequel to Cohen's narrative, focusing on the large-scale squatter movement that emerged in Benoni in the 1940s, an unexpected response to the oppressive set of laws set up in the 1930s and the Town Council's inability to respond to the housing crisis.

Industrialization, generating a need for a more stable workforce to fill the growing number of semi-skilled jobs, created the conditions for a more permanent African urban population, who sought shelter outside of mine or municipal compounds, for instance in locations. Established in 1911, Benoni's location was situated about two km away from the main town, with the industrial zone acting as a buffer zone between white and black residents. The location was further divided up into three sections—an Asiatic Bazaar, a coloured section and a 'Native' section—though there were no visible lines of demarcation. It is in this location, in all three sectors, that a significant portion of the photographs in the Ngilima collection were taken.<sup>23</sup>

From 1935 onwards, a steady stream of Africans fled the congested African section to find shelter in the Asiatic Bazaar. Overcrowding was generalized throughout the location, but it was in the Asiatic Bazaar that the social and economic privations reached a new peak. By 1950, 5003 Africans, 892 Indians and 211 coloureds crammed onto the tiny strip of land squashed between the African location and the railway tracks.<sup>24</sup> The terrible living conditions had already provoked a media scandal in the mid-1930s, following the visit of a delegation from India who expressed their horror at what they had seen.

### *Creating and Destroying Black Urban Communities*

Following the media uproar, the municipality thereafter decided to focus their strategy on "cleaning up" the Asiatic Bazaar, the priority being to get rid of Africans squatting the Asiatic Bazaar. Their efforts were however thwarted on the one hand by Indian landlords reluctant to abandon this lucrative source of income, and by shrewd businessman Harry Mabuya, who

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<sup>22</sup> J. Cohen, "Twatwa: The Working Class of Benoni During the 1930s," *African Perspectives* 20 (1982).

<sup>23</sup> In this thesis, I use the words "Benoni location" to refer to the location as a whole, including the three sections. 'Old Location' was the name given to the African section, Asiatic Bazaar the Indian section and Cape Stands (or Cape Flats) the coloured section. While the administration stressed the distinction between these sections, oral evidence suggest that "Old Location" was popularly used to refer to the entire neighbourhood, for instance by Indians when speaking about the Asiatic Bazaar. For a discussion on the politics of naming places, see chapter six.

<sup>24</sup> P. Bonner, "Eluding Capture", 174.

was to lead the largest squatting movement in the area, which included the autonomously run and self-sufficient Tent Town which housed hundreds of families.<sup>25</sup> Facing such pressures, the municipality decided to accelerate the construction of Wattville, which was officially declared a township in 1948. The Ngilima family obtained a house on Tladi street in 1952, at which point Ronald was able to set up a dark room in the bathroom and develop his own negatives. Wattville was designed to be ‘the Jewel of Benoni’, the ‘most modern township’, ‘unequaled’, the ‘envy of the entire Reef’, for the ‘excellent facilities’ provided in each brick house and in the township more generally (tarred roads, large yards, a supplied coal stove, a bathroom with a cement bathtub, electricity and individual taps).<sup>26</sup>

While Wattville was progressively being expanded, new plans were being made for a much larger township about 10 km north-east of Wattville, called Daveyton, which was conceived as a long-term solution for the ongoing Old Location problem. 1948 coincides with the coming to power of the National Party, who won the elections by bolstering fears amongst white South Africans of “the black peril”, the fear of more and more Africans invading ‘white’ towns. Within four years of being in power, the architects of the apartheid state passed the Group Areas Act, designed to profoundly reform the urban areas so as to create racially pure residential areas. Noor Nieftagodien, a student and member of the History Workshop, focused his doctoral research on the implementation of this Act at the level of Benoni, looking at how the various levels of power interacted. The United Party-led local government and National Party-led national government put ideological differences aside, rallying around the cause of preserving white privilege and suppressing oppositional elements. The agenda was nothing less than to ‘racially’ restructure the entire East Rand, a plan which crystallised around the creation of Daveyton, where the principle of ethnic division was tried out for the first time. One of the main leaders of this plan and an advocate for ethnic division was the Native Commissioner appointed to the Old Location in 1949, James E. Mathewson. Interestingly, Mathewson was also one of the editors of the 1968 *Son of my sorrow* publication, which perhaps explains why the book includes a surprisingly critical chapter on the municipality’s pathetic management of the Old Location’s growth in the 1930s and 40s. The authors’ critical standpoint essentially serves the purpose of erecting Mathewson as a

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<sup>25</sup> P. Bonner, "Family, Crime and Political Consciousness on the East Rand, 1939-1955," *Journal of Southern African Studies* 14, no. 3 (April) (1988).

<sup>26</sup> Benoni City News, “Wattville, A Jewel of Benoni”, 21 January 1949.

saviour figure, whose “forceful and effective methods” led to “a major breakthrough”, “a transformation in Benoni’s Non-White affairs that was little short of miraculous”.<sup>27</sup> This radical “transformation” involved the forced removal of Africans and coloureds from the Old Location starting in 1965, resettling Africans in Daveyton and the coloureds in Reigerpark (Brakpan). The location was declared an Indian Group Area, where Indians from other Asiatic Bazaars in the East Rand were relocated, and re-baptised Actonville. Based on extensive oral research, Nieftagodien researched the range of reactions within the location, from acquiescence to the emergence of a resistance movement, which to a certain extent crossed racial and class divides. He also shows to what extent Old Location residents deeply resented the ethnic division in Daveyton, which went completely against the urban cosmopolitan culture that had developed in the location. Unfortunately, the anti-removal campaign did not succeed and the last of the location residents were removed by 1968. The mid-1960s also mark the end of the Ngilima collection, as Thorence became more dedicated to his activism with the ANC and quit commercial photography.

### *History Making in the Post-Apartheid Era*

The release of Nelson Mandela and the 1994 elections generated a new impetus to redefine the nation’s past within the framework of national unification and nation-building. The changed political context had important consequences for the production of history, especially public history. Historians felt compelled to make history relevant for the transformation of South African society and to seek solutions to some of the urgent contemporary challenges the country was then facing. One of these challenges was the struggle to renegotiate public representations of the past, which up until then focused on aspects of history predominantly relating to the white ruling class, such as the Vortrekker monument in Pretoria.<sup>28</sup> The vast expansion of the “heritage” sector—whether as the object of a month-long celebration and an official holiday, a state discourse, a political tool, a tourist industry—made heritage the new buzzword in the post-apartheid era. This development raised several criticisms, not least for the ambivalent question of whether oral history became “enslaved” to the ANC’s nationalist

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<sup>27</sup> Humphriss and Thomas, *Benoni, Son of My Sorrow: The Social, Political and Economic History of a South African Gold Mining Town*, 117.

<sup>28</sup> A. E. Coombes, *History after Apartheid: Visual Culture and Public Memory in a Democratic South Africa* (Duke University Press, 2003).

project, after decades of being in opposition to centres of power. As the heritage industry became closely involved with the reconciliation process, the political will to showcase a common history tended to smooth over past conflicts and tensions.

One ongoing criticism was, in Deborah Posel's terms, that "the research agenda was largely captive of the trope of struggle", leading to the favouring of certain topics over others.<sup>29</sup> According to Nieftagodien, much of public history has had a disproportionate emphasis on national liberation movements, and in particular national political organisations in exile (ANC, and to a much lesser extent the SACP and the PAC) and its (predominantly male) leaders, to the detriment of the experiences and contributions from internal movements (based in townships, factories or schools).<sup>30</sup> "Hence, post-apartheid public history has been responsible for the creation of grand narratives of resistance or teleologies of liberation".<sup>31</sup> For Rassool and Minkley, this trend is not a post-apartheid phenomenon, but an essential flaw in oral history and its unproblematic use in South Africa. In their view, oral history has tended to collapse individual accounts into a simplified, pre-fixed historical narrative of collective experiences, heavily based on the domination/resistance model. In this "totalizing history", the social diversity of black communities, with its internal distinctions, tensions and hierarchies, is blanked out in favour of the romanticised notion of "collective memory" or "the memory of a people". It is thus important to underline that apartheid did not always produce resistance, and nor was resistance always occasioned by apartheid.<sup>32</sup>

A striking and troubling indicator of recent developments in the field of public history is the fact that the number of biographies on national leaders published since 1994 has far surpassed those dealing with unknown people. At the root of this trend is the increasing commodification of the heritage industry. The struggle against apartheid has become the most attractive lens through which to view the past, notably to attract tourists.<sup>33</sup> This in large part explains Ekurhuleni's obsession with ex-ANC president Oliver Tambo, who happened to

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<sup>29</sup> D. Posel, "Social History and the Wits History Workshop," *African Studies* 69, no. 1 (2010), 33.

<sup>30</sup> N. Nieftagodien, "The Place of 'the Local' in History Workshop's Local History," *African Studies* 69, no. 1 (2010). For a definition of SACP and PAC, see glossary.

<sup>31</sup> A. Lissoni, N. Nieftagodien, and S. Ally, "Introduction: 'Life after Thirty'- a Critical Celebration," *African Studies* 69, no. 1 (2010), 4.

<sup>32</sup> G. Minkley and C. Rassool, "Orality, Memory and Social History in South Africa," in *Negotiating the Past: The Making of Memory in South Africa*, ed. Sarah Nuttall and Carli Coetzee (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

<sup>33</sup> S. Nuttall and C. Coetzee, *Negotiating the Past: The Making of Memory in South Africa* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 10.

live in Wattville for six or seven years, before going into exile in 1960. Upon his return to South Africa in the early 90s, he settled in the northern suburbs of Johannesburg. Tambo passed away in 1993 and ended up being buried in Wattville. Hence for the past ten years, Ekurhuleni has multiplied public events and heritage projects to celebrate and lay claim to “their” struggle leader, which culminated recently in the erection of the brand new “O.R. Tambo Narrative Centre”. In the epilogue of this thesis, I explore the significance of the Ronald Ngilima collection within this present landscape of heritage politics. As an archive, the collection does exactly the opposite of the museum and the biographies dedicated to national heroes. It casts the spotlight instead on a group of mostly anonymous people, in a very normal, non-sensational setting.

In 2009, the History Workshop organised a conference to assess its thirty years of legacy but also to find strategies to go beyond the stalemates identified above and identify “the possibility of an emancipatory project in the post-apartheid period”.<sup>34</sup> For Nieftagodien, the renewed importance of local history provides a possible counter-point to the nationalist project. Yet, he adds, historians have tended to take for granted “the local” in local history. How is this local produced? How is it imagined? Certain scholars have started raising questions on the meanings of the local and of place, notably the social production of space.<sup>35</sup> Philip Bonner offers another possible solution: a “shift away from public and social lives and towards the inner private self. What some call subjectivity”.<sup>36</sup> Taking on these cues, this thesis proposes to analyse people’s individual experience of urban space and the way they creatively re-appropriated and translated their experience of urbanisation through the medium of photography, a form of popular culture that is both collective (regulated by public conventions) and highly individual (revolving around the self).

### *Rediscovery of the Ordinary*

History was not the only discipline that seems to have fallen for the alluring struggle narrative. This effect was also felt in the arts, including literature and art photography. David

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<sup>34</sup> Lissoni, Nieftagodien and Ally, “Life After Thirty”, 4.

<sup>35</sup> See for instance D. Massey, *For Space* (London: Sage, 2005).

<sup>36</sup> Bonner, “Keynote Address”, 26. “UNPCcking” the inner private self, notably through studies focusing on religion, was a research agenda that Robert Ross already called for in 1988. R. Ross, “Culture in the Historiography of Modern South Africa,” *Leidschrift* 4, no. 3 (1988).

Goldblatt, the most internationally acclaimed South African photographer, writes about the difficulties he had in the 1980s and 90s to justify vis-à-vis his peers his own photographic agenda, which was more interested in capturing mundane scenes of life in Afrikaner suburbs (in particular Brakpan, right next to Benoni) than the bloody repression of demonstrations or the violence of forced removals. Similarly, writer and literary critic Njabulo Ndebele formulated, as early as 1984, a virulent criticism of “protest literature” in a now famous essay called “Rediscovery of the Ordinary”. Ndebele argues that black South African literature has been exclusively concerned with the realistic exposition of the brutal oppression and overwhelming injustice inherent to the apartheid system.<sup>37</sup> Stories are written on the premise that “everything must make a spectacular political statement”, with little attention to nuances and details. The main problem for Ndebele is the underlying assumption that certain aspects of life are more relevant than others, namely those that offer an obvious political insight. Ndebele thus called for broadening the scope of literature, recognising that “in the making of culture, even those elements of life that are seen not to be *explicitly* oriented to resistance, are valid”. Literature relating to the ordinary, here defined as the opposite of the spectacular, end up revealing a much larger and richer “context of resistance”:

We must contend with the fact that even under the most oppressive of conditions, people are always trying and struggling to maintain a semblance of normal social order. (...) They apply systems of values that they know. Often those values will undergo changes under certain pressing conditions. The transformation of those values constitutes the essential drama in the lives of ordinary people.<sup>38</sup>

I argue that the Ngilima collection speaks directly to Ndebele’s passionate manifesto. Rather than showing spectacular forms of opposition, the Ngilima collection represents the core substance of people’s *resilience* under apartheid. I define resilience in this context as the struggle to uphold one’s sense of dignity and one’s aspiration to self-improvement—in short, the efforts displayed to sustain ordinary daily life according to a certain standard. If imagination is indeed a “constitutive feature of modern imagination”<sup>39</sup>, the work of imagining

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<sup>37</sup> See also Ross, “Culture in the Historiography”, 14.

<sup>38</sup> N. S. Ndebele, *Rediscovery of the Ordinary: Essays on South African Literature and Culture* (Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2006), 48-49.

<sup>39</sup> A. Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 2-3.



oneself and of translating this imagination into a self-image becomes an important part of this work of resilience.

Jacob Dlamini, also a native of the East Rand (Katlehong), touches on very similar themes in his recent book *Native Nostalgia*. His plea in favour of “taking nostalgia seriously” is partially to counter what he calls the “ANC’s anti-politics machine”, the homogenising effect of government planning, which, like the master narrative of black dispossession, tends to erase variations in local history and iron out the differences among black South Africans, reducing them to a series of “problems”. Like Ndebele, Dlamini calls upon scholars to look beyond the drab uniformity of township houses and look for the subtle marks of social distinctions and the making of internal landmarks; details that made each township unique for its inhabitants, as a lively place to live in and to cherish in memory.<sup>40</sup> To recognise these variations is to acknowledge that “apartheid did not shape black life in its totality”. Dlamini’s text thus also prompts readers to think of resistance in another (non-spectacular) way, and to expand the notion beyond the political sphere: black citizens’ resilience also came from a moral system and social capital that formed the very fabric of their daily life.<sup>41</sup>

## 2.2. Historiography of South African Photography

Several parallels can be made between the historiography on Benoni and the historiography of South African photography, the first being a similar privileging of the political over the ordinary. My initial motivation for this research was to contest the “formatted narrative” on South African photography, one that is based on a very limited range of iconic images. “The conventional narrative of South African photography can be summarised in a few words: colonialism, *Drum*, the struggle, and liberated art”.<sup>42</sup> It starts with first photographic studios in Cape Town and the ethnographic genre of photography dating from the mid and late 19<sup>th</sup> century. The spread of photography inland went hand in hand with the expansion of Afrikaner

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<sup>40</sup> Owen Crankshaw makes a similar observation that in most studies on urban African life in the pre-apartheid period have tended to downplay the social differences between Africans of different classes, under the argument that these divisions were less important than the racial oppression that they all shared. O. Crankshaw, "Class, Race and Residence in Black Johannesburg, 1923-1970," *Journal of Historical Sociology* 18, no. 4 (2005), 354.

<sup>41</sup> J. Dlamini, *Native Nostalgia* (Johannesburg: Jacana Media, 2009), 13.

<sup>42</sup> J. Pepper, "Réflexions Sur La Photographie Sud-Africaine Et L'extra-Photographique," *Africultures* 88 (2012). Translation by the author.

settlements and British colonial rule over the course of the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>43</sup> The narrative then typically jumps straight to *Drum* magazine from the mid-1950s and 60s.<sup>44</sup> *Drum* gave birth to the first publically acclaimed generation of photojournalists such as Bob Gosani, Ernest Cole, and Peter Magubane. *Drum* has recently been the object of a certain “hype”, catching the imagination of many writers and scholars alike, for its romantic and glamorous portrayal of a black cosmopolitan culture emerging in Johannesburg and the mythical black township Sophiatown. Through numerous exhibitions, publications and clever marketing (including posters, postcards, frames for restaurants), the *Drum* images have become the dominant representation of black township life in the 1960s. The focus on *Drum* photographers has perhaps drawn attention away from the existence of earlier black popular photographers. Considering that African photographers have been running their own studios in West Africa as early as the 1850s, it is indeed difficult to believe that Africans in South African would only take hold of the medium an entire century later. Erin Haney makes a short mention of “a small number of black-owned photography studios (and those probably owned by Indian and coloured photographers as well)”, which were more the exception to the white-dominated practice of photography than the rule. Haney does not name any examples of black-owned studios, explaining that the forced removal evidently played a role in deleting any records of them.<sup>45</sup> Nor does Tamara Garb in her introductory essay to the exhibition catalogue “Fact and Fiction”, a retrospective on South African photography. Like Haney, Garb simply asserts that by the late 19<sup>th</sup> century an urban black elite used the space of the studio to appropriate for themselves the poses and postures of Victorian respectability, using Mofokeng’s “Black Album” images as evidence.<sup>46</sup> The exact history of that critical phase, between the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and the 1930s, remains very vague. Yet the lack of evidence does not mean these did not exist, only that insufficient research has been done on this topic,

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<sup>43</sup> P. Hayes, "Power, Secrecy, Proximity: A Short History of South African History," *Kronos* 33 (2007). On early colonial photography in Southern Africa, see also K. Schoeman, *The Face of the Country : A South African Family Album 1860-1910* (Cape Town: Human & Rousseau., 1996); W. Hartmann, J. Silvester, and P. Hayes, *The Colonizing Camera: Photographs in the Making of Namibian History* (Cape Town: University of Cape Town Press, 1999); P. Metelerkamp, "Considering Coloniality in South African Photography," in <http://www.metelerkamp.com/writing/coloniality-and-south-african-photography/> (2002).

<sup>44</sup> This narrative can be found to various degrees in O. Enwezor, O. Zaya, and O. Oguibe, *In/Sight: African Photographers, 1940 to the Present* (New York: Guggenheim Museum, 1996); Metelerkamp, "Considering Coloniality in South African Photography," (unpublished essay, 2002); A.-M. Bouttiaux et al., *L' Afrique Par Elle-Même: Un Siècle De Photographie Africaine* (Paris: Revue Noire, 2003); D. Newbury, *Defiant Images: Photography and Apartheid South Africa* (Pretoria: Unisa Press, 2009).

<sup>45</sup> E. Haney, *Photography and Africa* (London: Reaktion Books, 2010), 104.

<sup>46</sup> T. Garb, *Figures and Fictions: Contemporary South African Photography* (Göttingen: Steidl and V&A Publishing, 2001), 64.

in particular when compared to research done on early West African photographers.<sup>47</sup> Ronald Ngilima, who started photographing in the late 1930s, is most likely already the second-generation of black photographers, using more sophisticated cameras. In the next chapter, I discuss why early African photographers in South Africa were likely to be self-taught and operating on the streets, rather than in studios.

The subsequent generation of “struggle photographers” from the 1970s onwards produced many images that circulated world-wide and eventually became iconic, the most famous one being without a doubt Samuel Nzima’s photograph of young Hector Pieterse shot dead during the 1976 student riots in Soweto, being carried by a young student, with his sister screaming next to them.

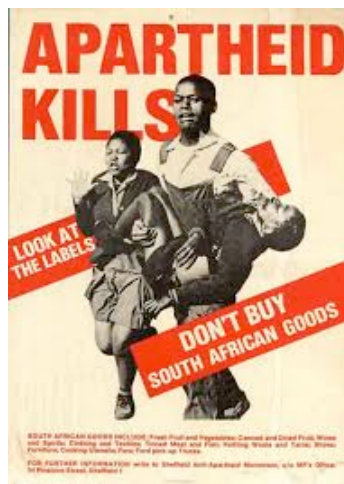


Figure 0.3: Anti-apartheid poster by a British group dating from the 1980s, featuring Samuel Nzima’s iconic photograph of Hector Pieterse.

<sup>47</sup> The works of Christraud Geary, Erin Haney, Erika Nimis, and Jürg Scheider are some examples of recent scholarship on this topic. See for instance C. M. Geary, *In and out of Focus: Images from Central Africa, 1885-1960* (London: Philip Wilson, 2002) and — — —, "Roots and Routes of African Photographic Practices: From Modern to Vernacular Photography in West and Central Africa (1850-1980)," in *A Companion to Modern African Art*, ed. Gitti Salami and Monica Blackmun Visonà (Oxford: John Wiley and Sons, 2013); E. Haney, "If These Walls Could Talk I: Photographs, Photographer and Their Patrons in Accra and Cape Coast, Ghana 1840-1940" (University of London 2004); E. Nimis, "Yoruba Studio Photographers in Francophone West Africa," in *Portraiture and Photography in Africa*, ed. John Peffer and Elisabeth L. Cameron (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013); J. Schneider, "The Topography of the Early History of African Photography," *History of Photography* 34, no. 2 (2010). One lead for this kind of research in the South Africa context could be the archives of Mariannhill mission station in Kwa-Zulu Natal, where my fellow PhD student on this project Christoph Rippe found mention of an African photographer, the son of a Zulu chief, in a document pre-dating the 1<sup>st</sup> WW (personal communication with Christoph Rippe, Leiden, 2015). Robert Ross suggested another lead: to check the national census of 1911 and 1936 to see whether any Africans declared photography as their profession.

Such dramatic images are usually those that are considered as most significantly and accurately representing South African history. Their “iconization” is tied to the rise of the heritage industry, as the same sample of images began circulating abundantly in museum displays, exhibitions, history publications and newspaper articles. The international exhibition “The Rise and Fall of Apartheid: Photography and the Bureaucracy of Everyday Life” presented at the International Centre of Photography (New York) in 2012 is perhaps the latest example of this ongoing trend.<sup>48</sup> This big budget exhibition is perhaps the most expansive and thorough attempt to gather the richness of the photo-documentary tradition in South Africa. Yet despite claiming to be interested in bureaucracy and “everyday life”, the exhibition does not include a single example of photography as used by black South Africans themselves, for their own usage. As critic Taco Bakker wrote in his review of the exhibition, “one category shining by absence is family photography by means of snapshots or private photo albums from the apartheid era—a category par excellence to reveal the effects of apartheid’s bureaucratic order on everyday life”.<sup>49</sup> According to this view of South African visual history, mundane pictures of picnics and weddings seem marginal to the major events that shook the entire country. This perhaps explains why research on South African photography has tended to focus on the tradition of social documentary and photojournalism during the high years of apartheid and after 1994.<sup>50</sup> Scholars working on West and East Africa have been comparatively much more willing to make studio photography and identity pictures the object of their research project.<sup>51</sup>

That this formatted narrative excludes vernacular photography is by no means specific to South Africa.<sup>52</sup> Vernacular practices, whether from Western or non-Western countries, have traditionally been excluded from early accounts of photography’s history.<sup>53</sup> This “repression”

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<sup>48</sup> <http://www.icp.org/exhibitions/rise-and-fall-of-apartheid>

<sup>49</sup> Taco Bakker, “Rise and Fall of Apartheid: Photography and the Bureaucracy of Everyday Life (A Review)”, *Camera Austria International* No. 120, Dec. 2012, p. 70.

<sup>50</sup> Peffer, “Réflexions sur la Photographie”.

<sup>51</sup> See for instance H. Behrend and T. Wendl, *Snap Me One! Studiofotografen in Afrika* (München: Prestel Verlag, 1998); H. Behrend and J.-F. Werner, "Special Issue: Photographies and Modernities in Africa," *Visual Anthropology* 13, no. 3 (2001); J.-F. Werner, "Photography and Individualization in Contemporary Africa: An Ivorian Case-Study," *Visual Anthropology* 14, no. 3 (2001); E. Haney, "Film, Charcoal, Time: Contemporaneities in Gold Coast Photographs," *History of Photography* 34, no. 2 (2010); Schneider, "The Topography of the Early History of African Photography," ; D. Zeitlyn, "Photographic Props/ the Photographer as Prop: The Many Faces of Jacques Tousselle " *History and Anthropology* 21, no. 4 (2010).

<sup>52</sup> For a definition of vernacular photography, see footnote 6.

<sup>53</sup> A classic example of a traditionalist, Eurocentric account is for instance B. Newhall, *History of Photography: From 1839 to Present* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1982).

of vernacular history is due to the fact that vernacular photographs do not fit with the art historians' classic categories, such as authorship and innovation. As Geoffrey Batchen points out, vernacular photographs are mass-produced, often by anonymous photographers, cheap, readily available, often of poor aesthetic quality, very conventional and repetitive in terms of composition and subject matter, making them very banal, unspectacular and thus invisible to art historians.<sup>54</sup>

Photographer Santu Mofokeng's "*Black Album: Look at me*" project was the first step towards adding important nuances to this simplistic narrative. His initial art installation consisted of a slide show presenting a series of found portraits dating from 1890 to 1950 (the majority of captions displaying the date "c. 1900" or "c. 1910"). The portraits, for the most part found amongst the possessions of black families, suggest that the depicted black subjects had actively commissioned their portrait, in contrast to the earlier ethnographic portraits taken by white men. For Mofokeng, these photographs are evidence of black subjects trying to portray themselves as respectable and dignified people, in the midst of a political series of reforms (such as the 1913 Land Act) that were threatening to dismantle the African upper class' claim to citizenship.<sup>55</sup> Yet these photographs also raise certain uncomfortable questions. Given South Africa's distinct experience of imperialism, it is not surprising that early portraits commissioned by black subjects were deeply imbued with the style and conventions of respectability, borrowed from a Western tradition of photographic portraiture. "Are they evidence of mental colonisation?", asks Mofokeng. In other words, how the camera was appropriated in South Africa is a history that is inevitably entangled with the major questions that many scholars working on South Africa have been confronted with, namely black South African's ability to negotiate their relationship to modernity and respond to the "European forces of civilization". To what extent were black South Africans able to appropriate new cultural practices such as photography to articulate for themselves their experience of urbanisation?<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> G. Batchen, "Seeing and Saying: A Response to « Incongruous Images », " *History and Theory* 48, no. 4 (2009): 30. See also — — —, *Each Wild Idea: Writing, Photography, History* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002), in particular the third chapter called 'Vernacular Photographies', 56-81.

<sup>55</sup> S. Mofokeng, *The Black Photo Album- Look at Me: 1890-1950* (Göttingen: Steidl, 2013).

<sup>56</sup> On this question, see for instance J. L. Comaroff and J. Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution: The Dialectics of Modernity on a South African Frontier* vol. 2 (The University of Chicago Press, 1997).

Since Mofokeng's innovative project, Darren Newbury identified other elements that constitute in his view a "new photographic history of South Africa", one that shifts attention "from photographs of apartheid to photography within apartheid".<sup>57</sup> The Van Kalker collection hosted by the District Six Museum, containing 200.000 portraits of Cape Town's coloured community, has started to pique researchers' interest.<sup>58</sup> The Daniel Morolong collection stored at the University of Fort Hare contains fascinating portraits of East London's African urban community, very similar to Ngilima's work.<sup>59</sup> John Peffer has recently shifted his focus to the air-brushed portraits, in particular wedding portraits, found in the townships.<sup>60</sup> Many of these exciting innovative research leads were presented at the workshop our Leiden research group organized in Johannesburg in 2013, called *Beyond the Iconic Image: A Workshop in Microhistory and Photography*. More recently, photographer Paul Weinberg curated a travelling exhibition in 2014 called "The Other Camera", which he describes as "a celebration of vernacular photography in South Africa over the last 60 years".<sup>61</sup> This shift to everyday practices of photography results in "a much richer description of the photographic ecology under apartheid".<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> D. Newbury, "Sizwe Bansi and the Strong Room of Dreams: Photographic Histories after Apartheid," in *The Rise and Fall of Apartheid: Photography and the Bureaucracy of Everyday Life*, ed. Rory Bester and Okwui Enwezor (New York: International Centre of Photography, 2013).

<sup>58</sup> N. J. Nwafor, "Re-Presenting Self: Reading Some Van Kalker Studio Photographs," *OGIRISI: A New Journal of African Studies* 7 (2010); G. Frieslar, "Keeper of the Walls: On Silences and Reverie" - Van Kalker Photographs within the Domestic Interior of the Home" (paper presented at the conference *Beyond the Iconic Image: A workshop on Microhistory and Photography*, Wits University, 2013).

<sup>59</sup> Patricia Hayes makes a brief reference to the Morolong collection in P. Hayes, "Introduction: Visual Genders," *Gender & History* 17, no. 3 (2005); Frieslar, "Keeper of the Walls: On Silences and Reverie" - Van Kalker Photographs within the Domestic Interior of the Home" (paper presented at the conference).

<sup>60</sup> J. Peffer, "Colored Portraits and White Weddings" - Vernacular Reception and Popular Photography in South Africa" (paper presented at the conference *Beyond the Iconic Image: A Workshop on Microhistory and Photography*, Wits University, 2013).

<sup>61</sup> <http://www.theothercamera.se/>

<sup>62</sup> Newbury, "Sizwe Bansi", 231.

### PART 3. DEFINING MY RESEARCH PROJECT

My research on the Ngilima collection finds itself at the crossroads between these various academic traditions and calls for new research agendas: combining the field of social history with visual theory and anthropological concerns, approaches and methods, I use personal photography to explore black South Africans' experience of urban living at a local scale, and the translation of this urban experience in terms of shaping one's self-image. Moving beyond the domain of political parties, trade unions, and such organisations, I look out the political within the more mundane and less spectacular aspects of daily life. Without denying the importance of macro power structures and its influence on black people's lives (and their ability to answer back), my thesis anchors itself within the realm of resilience— the various strategies people adopted to cope with oppression on a daily basis and move on with their lives. Resilience, in comparison to resistance, is not set on directly *opposing* an external force but can be defined as the ability to *absorb* impact, quickly recovering or springing back into shape. It describes more accurately the ambiguities of living within an apartheid situation, where the desire to oppose white supremacy often coexisted with for instance the desire for manufactured goods or for a certain standard of living. Second, it shifts the attention away from collective forms of resistance to more private and individual forms of managing and affirming or sustaining one's self-worth, in a context where all areas of one's life were subject to constant restrictions, humiliation and deprivation. It therefore allows me to embrace a particular interest for themes such as the self-image, the production of privacy and the visual manifestation of social distinctions in the space of the township. 'Resisting apartheid' was not the reason that pushed people into photographic studios; to record a special moment (Joyce's 21<sup>st</sup> birthday) or a fantasy, to have fun, these were some of motivations behind getting photographed. But when defining resilience as the upholding of daily life in a context of duress, popular photography can be said to be part of this greater project. Furthermore, the Ngilimas created a record of thousands of people's lives, whose trace collectively conjure up a complex portrayal of what 'black' is, thus resisting the simplification project of apartheid. Hence while politics was not at the inception of the photographic portrait, the interpretation that one makes of the photograph today, as a record read against the other elements in the archive, is indeed inherently political.

In this following section, I will define the main research lines of this thesis, trying to situate myself in regard to the existing literature. The over-arching question that reoccurs constantly is: what difference does it make to approach these debates (black urban culture, the private self, the local, history of everyday life..) through photography as opposed to exclusively through written or oral text? What does the visual add to the debate? Or does it possibly even change it?

### **3.1. Popular Photography and Self-Fashioning of the Body**

I propose to look at the photographic expression of a black urban culture in the making, from the 1950s to mid-1960s, in its various manifestations. To be “urban” is a concept deceptively easy to grasp in contrast to “the rural”, but difficult to substantiate in a tangible way. What does it mean, concretely speaking, to be “urban”? To say that the rural/urban binary is essentially a social construct does not explain how it came to have such a hold on social imaginings. Approaching urban identity through popular photography allows me to unpack this loaded notion into three interrelated dimensions: the body, objects and place. Beyond a matter of geographical location and population density, the adjective “urban” refers to a certain material reality, namely the access to certain goods and services that characterised a certain lifestyle. This material aspect aside, the body also became an important site in the making of black modern selves in 1950s South Africa.<sup>63</sup> Photographic portraiture mobilises all three dimensions: it is a performance of the body, which often deploys objects as props, and makes use of space as particular background. It registered and codified, but also helped to define, the preferred styles of urban life, both in terms of the adorned human body and the built environment.

The diversity within the black urban population in the Witwatersrand was such that one could hardly speak of a single unified black urban culture but of a plethora of urban experiences defined by a number of factors— class, regional or ethnic background, gender, whether

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<sup>63</sup> In his historical study of consumption in Zimbabwe, Timothy Burke observed that advertising succeeded in establishing a link between bodies and objects in the production of identities, as “the pleasures of consumption (became) increasingly and explicitly tied to the satisfaction of the body and its hungers”. Burke warned however that pursuing a history of the body too avidly ran the risk of separating bodies from selves. T. Burke, *Lifebuy Men, Lux Women: Commodification, Consumption and Cleanliness in Modern Zimbabwe* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 1996), 33.



urban-born or recent arrival. The anthropologists mentioned earlier in this chapter were interested in the impact of urban living on the social fabric: changes within the family, shifts in gender relations, in patterns of socialisation. These questions have had a particular resonance in South Africa, given the spectacular speed of the industrial transformation of its economy and consequently the pace of African urbanisation.

Popular culture is one potentially rich point of entry into analysing how Africans navigated among various cultural influences. Musicologist and anthropologist David Coplan's excellent research on jazz and other genres of music provides various examples of creative syncretism that led to the development of different genres of music in Johannesburg, for instance *maraba* and *kwela*. "The hybridities of jazz reconciled the cultural contradictions of the post-war period: it was home-grown but cosmopolitan; indigenous but not ethnically divisive; black but urban and not impoverished or parochial; rooted in American English but infected by vernacular rhythm and slang".<sup>64</sup> What was at stake for an African living on the Rand in the 1950s, was to create platforms of expression through which he or she could assert an urban, yet African, identity, in a context whereby the white rule government continuously contested his or her right to remain in town. This thesis considers photography studios as one of these creative platforms.

Beyond the jazz scene, the 1950s has more generally been identified as a key period for the assertion of a black, self-consciously urban culture in Johannesburg. The decade, once famously described as the "fabulous decade," was characterized by a "remarkable atmosphere of romantic self-construction," which found its expression in a panoply of cultural productions: short stories written by black writers, the blossoming of jazz music, and dance parties in shebeens, the first productions of films with an all-black-cast and multiracial musicals.<sup>65</sup> Magazines such as *Zonk!* and *Drum*, the first magazines to specifically target a black audience and to have a multiracial staff, provided a platform for the emergence of talented black writers and photographers. These individuals played a key role in producing commentary on Johannesburg's cultural scene, transmitting a dynamic and glamorous self-image that conveyed to black communities a positive sense of achievement, which the post-war economic boom also succeeded in bolstering. Darren Newbury, in his analysis of *Drum*

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<sup>64</sup> D. Coplan, "Sophtown and South African Jazz: Re-Appropriating a Cultural Identity," *Africultures* (2006): second page.

<sup>65</sup> For a definition of shebeen, see glossary.

photographers' legacy, describes photography as a "literal and symbolic means of expressing (an urban) confidence and the ability to move around the city". Stephen David similarly argues that the *Drum* photographs are an important visual record of black culture in a context where up until then such a record hardly existed. "*Drum* magazine gains importance in the cultural history of black South Africans because it is the first extensive record of the cultural details of urban black South Africans in the 20<sup>th</sup> century"<sup>66</sup>. Yet such a record *does* exist outside of *Drum*: photographic collections such as the Daniel Morolong<sup>67</sup> or Ngilima collection, as well as people's own collections stored at home, not only record a similar phenomenon but they do so in terms different than *Drum*'s, using a different set of aesthetics. Popular photography is another rich and yet relatively untapped channel through which to look at how Africans visually translated and performed their own ideas on what it meant to be urban and to live an urban lifestyle.

Particularly interesting to me is the notion that vernacular photographic practices in the townships linked a national and international visual culture circulating images of urban lifestyle (notably advertising) to people's own personal lives and selves. Rosalind Morris points out that a successful appropriation requires finding an indigenous echo: "Vernacularization is not merely a vectoral transfer, it is the mode within which foreignness (in this case capitalist modernity and the consumerism it demands) is materialised locally"<sup>68</sup>. To study popular photography is to seek to understand how ordinary people succeeded in appropriating a particular visual register of urban modernity and in applying it to themselves, to their own bodies, thus substantiating for themselves the notion of a black urban culture. Photographic practices help mediate ideas about urban living and modern identity as part of daily life and of the realm of the personal. In Strassler's terms, popular photographic practices "graft (..) personal sentiments and memories onto public iconographies."<sup>69</sup> Certain key popular figures, such as the *tsotsi* (gangster) played an important role in the vernacularization process of connecting media and popular photographic practices. Born out of the harsh streets of

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<sup>66</sup> S. David, "Popular Culture in South Africa: The Limits of Black Identity in Drum Magazine" (PhD, University of Illinois, 2001).

<sup>67</sup> Daniel Morolong was an African photographer based in East London, who worked for various newspapers and ran his own studio in the 70s and 80s. See the online catalogue of Weinberg's "The Other Camera" exhibition, <http://www.theothercamera.se/>, 33.

<sup>68</sup> R. C. Morris, "Style, Tsotsi-Style, and Tsotsitaal: The Histories, Aesthetics, and Politics of a South African Figure," *Social Text* 28, no. 2 103 (2010), 88.

<sup>69</sup> K. Strassler, *Refracted Visions: Popular Photography and National Modernity in Java* (Duke University Press, 2010), 28.

Johannesburg, the *tsotsi* was represented as being ruthless and “clever” in magazines and radio shows. This media treatment of the *tsotsi* contributed in erecting him as a mythical figure of masculinity, which in turn inspired young men when posing in the space of studio.

The 1950s was the decade whereby the process of democratising the camera in South Africa widened, reaching out to a black population at a much larger-scale.<sup>70</sup> As the equipment became cheaper to buy and easier to use, black photographers started offering their services in the locations and townships, thus challenging white city centres’ monopoly over this trade by extending photography to black residential areas. Informal studios suddenly multiplied in the black South African townships and enabled photography to reach a much wider segment of township society, in particular its youth. David raises an important point, when considering what the effect of photography might have been on a black constituency that was then by largely illiterate, semi-literate or poorly literate.<sup>71</sup> On the one hand, the ubiquitous display of pictures (billboards, cinema, posters, magazines....) “connected blacks to a larger world in a way never achieved before”<sup>72</sup>. But more importantly, the democratization of the camera thanks to the emergence of black ambulant photographers has meant that “the representation of identity no longer remained in the control of those that mastered or controlled the production and reproduction of words alone”<sup>73</sup>. Photography has a particular capacity to edit reality, hiding certain elements and enhancing others, resulting in a flattering image. Photographic studios enabled potentially anyone— the working-class, the illiterate, the ‘unfamous’ — to become the star of their own “movie snap”.<sup>74</sup> This thesis seeks to grasp the cultural significance of these multiplying photographic practices in the Benoni Old Location and Wattville, by analysing one particular collection.

Meg Samuelson has identified fashion and film as two central technologies of self-stylization in South Africa, both during the “fabulous fifties” and today.<sup>75</sup> I add that photographic self-creation was an equally important channel in the process of fashioning modern urban

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<sup>70</sup> In Europe, this process would have happened earlier, starting with Kodak’s introduction of the Brownie camera in 1888.

<sup>71</sup> According to David, less than 10% of the black population was literate in the 1950s. David, “Popular Culture in South Africa”, 67.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>74</sup> Movie snap was the widely used name of a particular genre of street photography. See S. Feyder, "Think Positive, Make Negatives: Black Popular Photography and Urban Identities in Johannesburg Townships, 1920-1960" (Mphil, University of Leiden, 2008), p.78.

<sup>75</sup> M. Samuelson, "The Urban Palimpsest: Re-Presenting Sophiatown," *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 44, no. 1 (2008): 71.

individuals. Photographic portraiture is an intense performance of the self. It underlines the constructed nature of our self-image. It involves a process of choosing, often together with the photographer, amongst a range of props, poses, clothes, and background, all of which have the function to convey and lay claims to certain social aspirations and lifestyles. The photographic studio is a site where the body is called to project one's view of oneself, to oneself and to others, through the embodied language of taste, style and fashion.

Any practice of photography is governed by a set of values and attitudes relating to the presentation of the self. These conventions are not fixed but evolve over time, as new photographic agendas start to emerge. While images possess their own internal dynamic, the evolution in conventions is to a certain extent the result of the transformation of social dynamics and values in the process of urbanisation. In chapter three for instance, I explore how the private space of the studio and the potential circulation of small sized prints amongst one's peers reflect to some extent the relative degree of social and geographical mobility that young women were starting to acquire through their work in factories in Benoni and Johannesburg. As this example suggests, one major aspect of urbanisation's social impact is thus the dimension of generational change. By the 1950s, the first generation of Africans born and raised in the urban areas was coming of age. This generation embraced urban forms of leisure, including photography and jazz, and looked out towards "America" for inspiration. It is also a generation that grew up with a very different visual culture from their parents: watching American westerns at local "bioscopes", reading British detective stories, and looking at the abundance of illustrated adverts in magazines.<sup>76</sup> How young people, in particular young women, appropriated the medium, translating these broadcasted images of urban glamour to the scale of their own private lives, is one of the key points of focus of this research.

The youth's investment in photographic studios transformed the practice of photography into a leisure activity associated with urban youth culture, paving the way towards a consumerist practice of photography. As Terence Ranger observed about Zimbabwean township photography from the same era, "youth and style replaced age and rank as the justification for representation".<sup>77</sup> The range of photographic agendas greatly broadened. From the comparatively small sample of photographs remaining from the turn of the century (for

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<sup>76</sup> For a definition of bioscope, see glossary.

<sup>77</sup> T. Ranger, "Colonialism, Consciousness and the Camera," *Past and Present* 171, no. 1 (2001), 213.

instance the photographs featuring in Mofokeng's "Black Album" installation), I would venture to suggest that the first Africans to commission photographs in South Africa were for the most part subjects who were products of missionary education, in particular church ministers.<sup>78</sup> My analysis of these early portraits in chapter two concludes that in its early stage, the practice of black portraiture was initially regulated by an imperative to seek respectability. This imperative eventually gave way to a number of other visual registers, tending towards humour and fantasy. This multiplication of photographic registers is evidence of the fact that the African elite, with its controlling concepts of cultural respectability, no longer had the monopoly over what constituted a positive self-image. Many of Ngilima's young male sitters attempted to approximate the style of the dandy, street-wise gangster, who combined fancy clothing with the rejection of propriety.<sup>79</sup> As photography became genuinely "popular", previously marginalised elements of black urban society—proletarians, young women, unemployed young men—used this medium to manifest their identification with urban culture. Patricia Holland found a similar pattern in the history of photography amongst the working-class in England and in the U.S. Initially, working-class families would prefer to visit the studio, its beautiful and exotic backdrops removing them from their shabby homes in the inner-city tenements. Travelling photographers, often of working-class background themselves, made it possible for working-class people to "present themselves to each other, creating a confident working-class identity".<sup>80</sup> The diversity of photographic agendas and registers stand for the fact that some of the "unique amalgam of urban experiences"<sup>81</sup> that constituted location and township life were able to find expression in local photographic practices.

### **3.2. Visualising Aspirations: Photography and the Economy of Desire**

A striking characteristic of the Ngilima collection is indeed its remarkable diversity of photographic subjects in terms of age, class and race. The diverse demographic of Ngilima's clients reflects to a large extent the complexities of the black urban community he was

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<sup>78</sup> See Mofokeng's original field report, in Mofokeng, *The Black Photo Album*.

<sup>79</sup> Morris, "Style, Tsotsi-Style and Tsotsitaal".

<sup>80</sup> Holland, "'Sweet It Is to Scan': Personal Photographs and Popular Photography," 35.

<sup>81</sup> N. Nieftagodien, "The Implementation of Urban Apartheid on the East Rand, 1948-1973: The Role of Local Government and Local Resistance" (PhD, University of Witwatersrand, 2001).

photographing. It is noteworthy to specify that a classification of black South African communities in terms of class is a risky venture. The huge disparity of incomes in South Africa meant that the African middle-class could not be compared to the white middle-class of South Africa or that of any Western country. The difference in income within the African community was negligible in comparison to the disparity of income between black and white populations. However, class distinctions within African urban populations mattered a great deal to Africans themselves. Africans occupying semi-skilled, managerial or professional positions were clearly the elite in relation to the overwhelming majority of Africans working in unskilled jobs. Obtaining a higher skilled job was usually conditioned upon having access to higher education, another important factor of class distinction. Yet education did not always equate with higher income; African teachers for instance were notoriously badly paid. Considering the limited income disparity, factors other than occupation and income became important in establishing the individuals' social class and social status. Higher education meant that teachers enjoyed a certain prestige status within their community, despite not being economically rich.<sup>82</sup> Another important distinction was one's legal status, and notably the distinction between "exempted" and "non-exempted" Africans-- between those who were deemed to have reached a certain "scale of civilisation and education" to become exempt from the regulations concerning residential segregation and pass laws, and the rest.<sup>83</sup> In the absence of substantial wealth, one's consumption patterns participated in determining whether one had "adapted" to white standards and reached this level of "civilisation". It is therefore not surprising that within this racial hierarchy, consumption and in particular one's housing situation came to play an important role as a marker of social distinction.

Squalor, disease and high death rates characterised life of the working-class living in Benoni location. The few brick houses belonging to the petty bourgeoisie stood out from the sea of rickety shelters made of zinc, constituting punctual oasis of relative prosperity amidst the abject poverty. Representing 2.3% of the location's population, this class included entrepreneurs (traders, storekeepers) and people employed in professional and clerical occupations (teachers, clerks, priests, lawyers...)<sup>84</sup> The location was thus characterized by a

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<sup>82</sup> This probably explains why striving for higher education was not a 'petit bourgeois' characteristic but a widely shared concern, including amongst the black working-class. D. Goodhew, "Working Class Respectability: The Example of the Western Areas of Johannesburg, 1930-1955," *Journal of African History* 41, no. 2 (2000).

<sup>83</sup> Crankshaw, "Class, Race and Residence in Black Johannesburg", 366-367.

<sup>84</sup> Cohen, "Twatwa", 80.

combination of migrant workers, first-generation immigrants (or “semi-urban”) and established urbanites. As Nieftagodien accurately describes, life at the location was very different, depending on whether one was an urban youth or a compound inmate, a homeowner or a lodger, living in a house and in a squatter camp, part of the educated elite or an ordinary resident.<sup>85</sup> Wattville, the adjacent township established in 1948, was in comparison mainly constituted by established urbanites from the Old Location.<sup>86</sup> Obtaining a Wattville house came with a series of conditions, including being legally registered in Benoni and having been employed in the same company for several years without interruption.

A 1962 income survey of Wattville indicated that the township had a greater proportion of traders/managers, skilled workers, and high-earning women amongst its residents, compared with Daveyton, the Old Location and townships in Pretoria.<sup>87</sup> Yet if Wattville was significantly better off than the Location, the bulk of its residents did not quite fit with the description of “African elite” that Brandel-Myrier offers in her 1971 study “Reeftown Elite”.<sup>88</sup> Most of the Wattvillers I interviewed did not receive missionary education, let alone finish high school, and had worked at a factory. The proportion of high-income earners in Wattville corresponding to her description of the elite might have been higher than other townships, but it still only concerned 10% of the population.<sup>89</sup> More significant for our case is the incontestably higher percentage of semi-skilled workers in Wattville.<sup>90</sup> As a result, its residents could spend comparatively more on food, recreation, amusement (including visiting photographic studios) and sport than Africans living townships in Pretoria.<sup>91</sup> As a pre-

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<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 275.

<sup>86</sup> Bonner, “Eluding Capture”.

<sup>87</sup> In Wattville, the top four earning income (professional, proprietor/managerial, skilled labour, semi-skilled labour) amounted to 33.7% of the population, compared to 22.2% in Daveyton, 25% in the Old Location, and 23.7% in Pretoria townships. See C. De Coning, “Income and Expenditure Patterns of Urban Bantu Households: Benoni Survey,” (Pretoria: Bureau of Market Research, University of South Africa, 1962), table IX.

<sup>88</sup> M. Brandel-Syrier, *Reeftown Elite*. “Reeftown” was the fictional name that Brandel-Syrier gave to the official township on the Rand where she did her fieldwork. Coincidentally, this place would in reality be Katlehong, the East Rand township where the author Jacob Dlamini is originally from and where many of the anecdotes from his book *Native Nostalgia* take place.

<sup>89</sup> De Coning, “Income and Expenditure Patterns”, table XV. Professional occupations combined with proprietors/managerial occupations come to represent 9.9% of households in Wattville. Daveyton in comparison had 5.8%, the Old Location 6.8% and Pretoria 4.9%.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.* Semi-skilled labour amounted to 21.8% in Wattville, compared to 14.9% in Daveyton, 16.5% in the Old Location and 17.8% in Pretoria townships.

<sup>91</sup> De Coning, “Income and Expenditure Patterns of Urban Bantu Households: Benoni Survey,” table XX.

apartheid township, Wattville hence represents one of the earliest examples of an established, African urban working-class community on the Rand.<sup>92</sup>

Despite not being part of the “elite”, this established, slightly more comfortable African working-class was nonetheless (or perhaps all the more) aspiring to a middle-class lifestyle. Consumption patterns of the black working-class have received relatively little attention within South African historiography, perhaps because the Marxist influence dominant in the 1960s and 70s interpreted consumption as a factor of alienation, rather than a social and cultural practice that Africans wanted to engage in.<sup>93</sup> Many income studies dating from the 1940s and 1950s were keen on proving how inadequate average salaries were to cover even the minimal basic needs of a whole family, thus supporting the call for raising minimum wages.<sup>94</sup> Yet the 1950s was the decade in which a whole new range of consumer goods (cosmetics, cleaning products in particular washing powder, electrical appliances, clothes, accessories...) was entering the townships, including the *spaza* shops.<sup>95</sup> With the post-war economic boom, black urban South Africans were for the first time considered as potential consumers, and marketing campaigns then emerged targeting a specifically black market. For any issue of *Drum*, almost half of the magazine consists of advertisements for kitchen appliances, smart clothes, furniture suites, gramophones, cosmetics, etc.<sup>96</sup> Though the disposable income of most Africans was negligible, many Africans shared the post-war optimism and believed that the prosperity derived from industrialization would eventually benefit them too.<sup>97</sup> The building of new townships such as Wattville, with pre-designed lounges and dining rooms, also led to a boom in furniture sale (“kitchen suites” and “lounge suites” in particular).<sup>98</sup> A product of mass consumption, photography progressively became a standard possession within black family households by the 1950s.

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<sup>92</sup> For a more extensive engagement with the concept of class and its applicability in the South African context, see O. Crankshaw, *Race, Class, and the Changing Division of Labour under Apartheid* (London: Routledge, 1997).

<sup>93</sup> Exception being Timothy Burke’s excellent study of soap consumption in Rhodesia. Burke, *Lifebuoy Men, Lux Women*.

<sup>94</sup> On the political agenda behind income surveys in South Africa, see R. Ross, "The Politics of African Household Budget Studies in South Africa," (forthcoming).

<sup>95</sup> For a definition of spaza shop, see glossary.

<sup>96</sup> Newbury, *Defiant Images: Photography and Apartheid South Africa*, 116.

<sup>97</sup> L. J. Bank, *Home Spaces, Street Styles: Contesting Power and Identity in a South African City* (London: Pluto Press, 2011), 171.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, chapter four, “Re-Modelling the house: Gender and the Politics of Domestic Desire”.



As sociologist Leo Kuper wrote in 1965, “a common subjection has not stifled class differentiation within the African community, nor has the low ceiling placed on their achievements prevented Africans from drawing distinctions among themselves. (...) Since the range of differentiation is narrow, the distinctions drawn are more fine, sometimes appearing to the outside observer as distinctions without difference.”<sup>99</sup> In locations, where the different classes lived for the most part side-by-side, it was crucial to be able to distinguish oneself from the “less desirable” elements of the township.<sup>100</sup> In Wattville, there was an urgency to break the drab monotony of the endless rows of council houses, which all looked exactly the same, and to create a sense of home. Photographs are valuable sources to research how people produced social distinctions, within the limited means at their disposal. This often happened at the smallest scale: “It could be as small as the type of lawn one had in one’s yard, the type of furniture in each bedroom, or the kind of fencing one had around the yard”.<sup>101</sup> Photographic collections also contain “an archive within an archive”<sup>102</sup> so to speak, in that the images provide a wealth of details in the background of the picture. These details are evidence of material culture, of domestic acquisition and consumption: the ice chest in a corner, the car, newspaper used as wallpaper, the radio...

The Ngilima portraits taken inside people’s homes thus give us an idea of what a black South African living in a township could afford in the 1950s and to what extent they could engage with this new wave of consumerism. Of course, barring an interview with the depicted person, it is difficult to verify whether the objects really belonged to him or her, or whether they were simply borrowed for the picture. One of my interviewees remembers for instance randomly choosing a nice house, either in town or in a fancier part of the location, for the sake of having a nice backdrop for her portrait. Nevertheless, the Ngilima photographs document what people aspired to, what they considered desirable. These images convey a certain economy of desire, revealing the process by which particular objects became heightened cultural signifiers. Having interviewees comment on a selection of photographs helped identifying what were the important elements in achieving an urban middle-class lifestyle: the length of

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<sup>99</sup> L. Kuper, *An African Bourgeoisie: Race, Class and Politics in South Africa* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1965), 7.

<sup>100</sup> According to David Goodhew, the “lack of geography of class” is one of the factors that inhibited or slowed down the full-fledged articulation of a middle-class. Goodhew, “Working Class Respectability: The Example of the Western Areas of Johannesburg, 1930-1955,” 253-254.

<sup>101</sup> Dlamini, *Native Nostalgia*, 18.

<sup>102</sup> Patricia Spyer, at the conference “Beyond the Iconic Image”, June 2013.

the curtain, brick as prestigious building material, etc. As an interviewing tool, the photographs thus enabled me to pinpoint how my interviewees ascribed meaning to changes in material culture. The photos also bring one's attention to seemingly unimportant objects such as calendars, frames, carpets, vase...as potential markers of aspiration and status. They underline the importance of the domestic space in terms of decoration and public presentation, as a setting for the enactment of the (urban) self.

### **3.3. The Local: the Social Production of Space**

From domestic interiors, I move on to exterior spaces. Most of the photographs in the Ngilima collection were in fact taken outside, with bits and pieces of the township and location visible in the background of the picture. As Ronald Ngilima moved about on his bicycle, he would wander through the streets of his neighbourhood, encouraging people to have their portrait taken. By focusing on the background in the photographs, I attempt to develop a view of the Old Location from the perspective of a local resident. Interviewees' ability to "place" the photographs within their mental map of the location brought my attention to the distinctions made within the space of the location: important landmarks such as taverns and cinemas, nicknames allocated to various neighbourhoods. The theme of social distinction emerged again, as interviewees often took to evaluating the depicted subject's social class on the basis of certain details in the background of the picture, barely visible for the untrained eye— the construction material used for the house, the presence or absence of electric cables... Race was another recurring theme in the interviews: race was both a factor of division (identifying the three sectors in the Old Location), a border, but one that people happily and frequently crossed, both physically (coloureds and Africans living in the Asiatic Bazaar) and metaphorically (intermarriage, cohabitation, cross-racial solidarity).

This exercise in discerning the production of difference within the space of the location is important for several reasons. First, it suggests some of the ways the residents of the location were able to qualify their home as being distinctively "urban", thus substantiating their claim to being urban citizens. Considering the Town Council's serious lack of investment in basic amenities, it is somewhat astonishing how residents managed to make the location an animated place, the kind of place that most people look back on with fondness. The location

was set up to be merely a satellite of Benoni, tucked away behind the industrial zone and concentrating most of its black population. Yet ex-residents speaking about the Location underline the fact that the place had its own sense of gravity, independently of Benoni town. Its lively music scene was particularly important in producing a sense of “being connected” with bigger hubs such as Johannesburg or even an international city like Chicago. The production of difference, visualised in the photographs, was the key process behind the transformation of the location and Wattville from a site to a place, with all its distinct potencies that made the place unique for local residents.<sup>103</sup> While citizens’ claims that Benoni was the “Mecca of jazz” in the East Rand might be exaggerated, it speaks to the fact that social imaginations play a big role in the process of qualifying a place as “urban”.

The Ngilima collection is thus the kind of archive that acknowledges the richness and complexity of black life in the location. Multiple, at times contradictory, interpretations of the same pictures suggest the many mental maps of the place as ex-residents remember it. This range of interpretations offers a different sense of place than what one gets from official documents relating to the Location, presently stored at the National Archives in Pretoria. These textual documents, representing the point of view of the municipality, the Native Administrator, the Provincial government and the local police, provide a very different narrative of the place. It focuses on the problems: the health issues, the overcrowded nature of the place, its unruliness and lawlessness for lack of proper control over its inhabitants. While these texts do convey an underlying sense of protest and frustration, which Bonner, Cohen and Nieftagodien were able to pick up “between the lines”, the tone is always distant, apathetic, technical. The administration’s narrative can be compared to a bird’s eye view of the location, similar to the photograph published in the 1956 Jubilee publication, showing Daveyton in the process of being built. Taken from a certain height, the photograph depicts the endless rows of houses, in perfect alignment, black silhouettes appearing tiny in the rough terrain of a future front yard. In comparison, the Ngilima pictures, together with the memories they evoke, allow us to walk through this location block by block, as if accompanying Ronald Ngilima on his endless ambulation.

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<sup>103</sup> E. Casey, *Remembering: A Phenomenological Study* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), as quoted in Dlamini, *Native Nostalgia*, 154.

## PART 4. PHOTOGRAPHS AS HISTORICAL SOURCES

What are private collections of photographs a history of, exactly? As the expanding field of visual studies—particularly in relation to African photography— has shown, there are many different ways of approaching photography: from a history of medium to a history of discourse, a history of a community to a history of a particular individual, a history of practice to a history of aesthetics.

### 4.1 Following a Collection of Photographs

The content of my thesis to a large extent is contingent on the contours of the Ngilima collection, embracing the possibilities this material creates, but also its limits. For one, I am not doing a systematic study of photographic practices within the community of Wattville. Karen Strassler for instance does a masterful ethnography of photographic practices in Java, from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century to late 1990s, analysing how different genres of photography refract new ways of seeing and being seen, of “positioning oneself” within the ideological landscape of national modernity in postcolonial Indonesia. I instead follow a single body of work, a collection made by two different photographers, representing first and second generation of black urban South Africans. There were many genres that I came across in people’s homes but did not engage with substantially, other than as contextual information for the Ngilima collection—I.D photography, formal church group photographs, framed airbrush portraits, holiday snapshots, school class photographs, white wedding photography...This said, I have also collected additional visual material from the same time-frame or earlier, made by other photographers, material from interviewees’ own personal collections or that I found in magazines. This additional material allowed me to situate Ronald and Thorence Ngilima within the broader “visual economy” in which they were participating.<sup>104</sup> But my research mainly “followed” the Ngilima collection, both in terms of where it led me, the people I got to meet through it, and in how it defined my research interests. My aim was not

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<sup>104</sup> Deborah Poole defines visual economy as the comprehensive organization of people, ideas and objects that structures the production, circulation and consumption of images across boundaries. Here I use it more specifically to refer to the industry that developed locally around the demand and supply of photographs – all the various photographers that black residents of Benoni had access to, as well as the various sources of images (such as magazines and advertising) that they were exposed to in the 1950s and 60s. D. Poole, *Vision, Race, and Modernity: A Visual Economy of the Andean Image World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 8.

writing a complete history of vision or of “visualities”,<sup>105</sup> but to understand a body of work in relation to the specific historical conditions in which they were made. And vice-versa: I was curious to probe how a body of images translated some of black urban working-class South Africans’ experiences of urbanisation. My main purpose was to try out to what extent the Ngilima collection, as an original and rich historical source, could be mobilised for the writing of a cultural history of a particular population: the residents of the Old Location and of Wattville.

## **4.2 A History of Images: Photography as a Representation**

This thesis is partially a history *of* images, in that I approach photographs as two-dimensional representations codified through a particular visual language. Studying an entire collection of photographs presents the advantage of being able to analyze closely the image-making of two photographers over time. Patterns in terms of composition, themes, choice of props and poses, begin to jump out at the viewer who is patient enough to flick through hundreds (and thousands) of pictures at a time. These patterns enable one to reconstruct some of the conventions and rules that regulated this local practice of photography. The discipline of art history provides useful methods of analysis for identifying these patterns, understanding images in terms of composition, visual effects (perspective, contrasts, repertoires...) and genre.<sup>106</sup> It helped me to track down certain recurrent poses and to recognise the role of props and backdrops as highly contrived signifiers.

Tracking patterns helped me realise that the Ngilima collection is far from being homogenous but that the image production of Ronald and Thorence is marked by different genres, styles and registers. Photographic genres are “sets of social practices, aesthetic conventions, and ‘semiotic ideologies’ that condition how people make and make sense of photographic images”.<sup>107</sup> Formal airbrushed portraiture, studio portraiture, the formal institutional group picture, the informal snapshot, and identity photographs are the dominant genres that I came

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<sup>105</sup> For an extensive explanation of the word ‘visuality’, see Strassler, *Refracted Visions*, 307 (footnote 33 of the introduction).

<sup>106</sup> See for instance chapter four “‘The Good Eye’: Looking at Pictures Using Compositional Interpretation”, in G. Rose, *Visual Methodologies: An Introduction to Researching with Visual Materials* (London: Sage, 2012), 51-80.

<sup>107</sup> Strassler, *Refracted Visions*, 18. On Webb Keane’s notion of “semiotic ideologies”, see W. Keane, “Semiotics and the Social Analysis of Material Things,” *Language and Communication* 23, no. 3-4 (1997).

across in Wattville, each of these being a “photographic project”, whose aesthetic and materiality is moulded by a particular set of expectations and codes.<sup>108</sup> Most of the Ngilima photographs fall under the genre of studio portraiture and the informal snapshot.<sup>109</sup> These photos were thus made within the configuration of a commissioned portrait— an encounter between a photographer and his client, the imperative for the photographer to please his or her customer, the final print being for the client’s personal use. Within the genre of studio portraiture and the snapshot, the collection offers a wide variety of styles and registers, influenced by multiple visual repertoires. Style can be defined as “a system of forms with a quality and a meaningful expression through which the personality of the artist and the broad outlook of a group are visible”.<sup>110</sup> In chapter two, I argue that Thorence had to a certain extent adopted a different photographic style than his father, as he seemed more willing to experiment with the medium. For instance, the particular composition and arrangement of the subjects in some of Thorence’s photographs translate a sense of dynamism that contrasts with the stillness of his father’s portraits. Young sitters were also generally eager to experiment with poses, tapping into a different register than their elders. The notion of register refers to the tone used in written and spoken language. A formal register will be adopted in particular social settings or for official communications. Applied to images, register similarly determines whether a portrait is ceremonial, formal or rather informal. Register is one of the parameters that define the different genres of portraiture.

The variations in styles and registers made me realise that there were new photographic agendas that emerged in the 1950s, informed by the social changes black South Africans were experiencing at the time. Deborah Poole’s notion of visual economy, which conceptualises the circulation of images while retaining the notion of hierarchy, is useful here to think about the influence of visual repertoires broadcast through mass media on popular photography. By repertoire, I refer to the set of images that people were exposed to and could mobilise as a source of inspiration, for instance to find new poses. Popular photography is an interesting channel to observe how black South Africans positioned themselves within national and international flows of images, by choosing amongst the “available set of models of

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<sup>108</sup> Strassler, *Refracted Visions*, 18.

<sup>109</sup> One of the exceptions being a picture of the Benoni town hall, which is, quite suitably, completely devoid of human presence. In chapter four, I discuss one of these significant exceptions, Thorence’s portrayal of his own family in their kitchen, in a mode that is far closer to personal documentary than to commissioned portraiture.

<sup>110</sup> M. Schapiro, "Style " in *Theory and Philosophy of Art: Style, Artist and Society* (New York: Braziller 1994).

appearance”.<sup>111</sup> But rather than a single one-way traffic, which would have citizens simply mimic poses seen at the movies, I would suggest there was to a certain extent a “go-between”. *Bona* magazine for instance had two full-page columns called “Town and Country” dedicated to personal photos sent by their readers. Similarly, companies would organise photo competitions and invite people to send picture of themselves posing with their product, with the promise that the winning photo would also be published in a magazine. Photography was exciting because it promised to transform the individual into a sublimed or idealised version of him or herself. By becoming an icon, one could potentially enter the realm of celebrities and models, for instance by having one’s picture printed in a magazine.<sup>112</sup> Equally relevant are the photographs published in *Drum* and *Zonk!* that use the register of personal portraiture: photos taken in shebeens, in prominent people’s living rooms, in boxing gyms...<sup>113</sup> This is not surprising, considering that many of South Africa’s acclaimed black photographers started their career in the townships, doing commissioned portraiture.<sup>114</sup> This back-and-forth between mass media and popular practices of photography helped to make black South Africans’ claim to a modern, urban, cosmopolitan identity more credible and tangible. They were actively taking part in shaping this visual code of urban modernity, which they themselves incorporated at every studio shoot.

In parts of this thesis, I attempt to distinguish Ronald and Thorence’s body of images from each other (when possible), as evidence of how generation affected and altered the local image production. However, the authorial approach generally cherished in art history can only go so far here. The commission setting meant that the photographs were not so much Ronald and Thorence’s subjective interpretation of the world as much as the result of a close collaboration with their clients. When discussing the works of internationally renowned photographers Malian Seydou Keïta and Malik Sidibe, art critics such as Olu Oguibe have been prompt to analyse vernacular photography as a form of discourse resisting the

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<sup>111</sup> Strassler, *Refracted Visions*, 29.

<sup>112</sup> Patrizia di Bello describes how 19<sup>th</sup> century bourgeois women in England would mix celebrity cards with photos of their family and friends, or even themselves, in their photo album. “This changed subtly the connotation of being photographed, as it is now implied at least potentially, participation in a public sphere of celebrities and beauties”. P. Di Bello, *Women's Albums and Photography in Victorian England* (Hampshire: Ashgate, 2007), 109.

<sup>113</sup> Newbury, *Defiant Images*, 124.

<sup>114</sup> Most notably: Peter Magubane, Ernest Cole, Alf Khumalo, Santu Mofokeng, Juda Ngwenya, and William Matlala. See Paul Weinberg’s electronic catalogue of his exhibition “The Other Camera”, p.10. <http://www.theothercamera.se/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/The-Other-Camera-e-Book.pdf>

anthropometric images of ‘natives’ generated under colonialism.<sup>115</sup> Kobena Mercer reviews critically Olu Oguibe’s argument that Seydou Keita’s authorial intention was to counteract the ‘untruth’ of colonial photography. “Such a reading not only tends to underplay the self-understanding of vernacular practitioners as entrepreneurs rather than artists, it also assumes a person-centred model of artistic agency at odds with the inter-subjective collaboration between sitter and photographer in the studio setting”.<sup>116</sup> Adopting a purely authorial approach runs the risk of minimizing the importance of the collaboration between the photographer and the depicted subjects in the making of the picture. The sitters remain invariably anonymous, insinuating that sitters’ experience of the photographic encounter is not where meaning is located.<sup>117</sup> Yet analysing photographs without considering the sitter’s perspective presents the risk of using photography’s apparent objectivity to support one’s own subjective interpretation of the images. Hence, while I dedicate a chapter to the biography of our two photographers, my research is mostly concerned with the subjects depicted in the collection and what these images might have meant to them.

Given the influence of the Ngilimas’ clients over the process of image-making, these portraits are in effect records of how these people wanted to be seen, according to their own terms. Studio portraits are images that hover between fantasy and a latent reality, between individual authorship and collective representations. Occasionally, I would come across a photograph, in which the depicted person’s terms fell completely outside of the usual social conventions. For instance, amongst the series of portraits of a particular young woman is a picture where she chose to depict herself wearing only her underclothes and a see-through nightie with a ribbon on the front. She has a hand on her hip and the other hand in a gesture of mock scolding. Her head is slightly tilted, and she is smiling showing her teeth, aware of her boldness. Such photographs invites us to consider photography as an “act of self contemplation”, “a medium through which individuals confirm and explore their identity”.<sup>118</sup> Patricia Holland argues that the rise of private photography in Europe and in the US accompanied certain major shifts in Western culture: the increasing emphasis on individuality, the emergence of a consumer-led

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<sup>115</sup> See in particular Oguibe’s essay: O. Oguibe, "Photography and the Substance of the Image," in *In/Sight: African Photographers, 1940 to the Present*, ed. Okwui Enwezor, Octavio Zaya, and Olu Oguibe (New York: Guggenheim Museum, 2001).

<sup>116</sup> K. Mercer, "Photography and the Global Conditions of Cross-Cultural Modernity," in *Unfixed: Photography and Postcolonial Perspectives in Contemporary Art*, ed. Sara Blokland and Asmara Pelupessy (Heijningen: Jap Sam Books, 2012), 77.

<sup>117</sup> E. Bigham, "Issues of Authorship in the Portrait Photographs of Seydou Keita," *African Arts* 32, no. 1 (1999).

<sup>118</sup> Holland, "Sweet It is to Scan", 119.



economy encouraging people to identify themselves with the pleasures of their purchases, the advent of Freud's psycho-analysis and its call for inwardness and self-scrutiny.<sup>119</sup> It is interesting here to mention that the Ngilima collection— especially the studio section— is dominated by portraits of single individuals, which by far outnumber family group portraits. This is a very different outcome from Bourdieu's own conclusion that popular photographic practices in 1960's France was essentially about legitimising and reinforcing the family unity, revolving for the most part around family rituals such as weddings, and children.<sup>120</sup> Family photography also happened in Wattville, but to a far less extent. For black South Africans, photography was above all a technology for presenting the self.

### **4.3 A History *Through* Images: Photographic Practices and Beyond**

In an essay discussing the methods of art history, Carlo Ginzberg demonstrates that art historians attempting to make the link between a work of art and the attitudes of the day, or the "zeitgeist" of a particular society, often fall in the trap of "circularity of interpretation". "The historian reads into them *what he already learned* by other means, or what he believes to know, and wants to 'demonstrate'".<sup>121</sup> Ginzberg points out that it is erroneous to assume a straightforward correlation between artworks and the feelings and mentalities of the society that produced these artworks. Iconographic materials are not mirrors of states of mind from the past. This said, Ginzberg continues to encourage historians to search for links between the realm of art and the other facets of historical reality- political life, social life, cultural life...as the pursuit of these connections is what for him constitutes the very object of history. It is then a question of acknowledging that iconographic evidence always requires interpretations that are always inherently ambiguous and slippery. Ginzberg ends his essay by proposing a possible way to avoid the trap of circular interpretation: to think about artworks not merely in terms of aesthetics but also in terms of "function". Changes in aesthetic styles (for instance

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<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>120</sup> "La pratique photographique n'existe et ne subsiste la plupart du temps que par sa fonction familiale, à savoir de solemniser et d'éterniser les grands moments de la vie familiale". P. Bourdieu, *Un Art Moyen: Essai Sur Les Usages Sociaux De La Photographie* (Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 1965), 39. Bourdieu does however distinguish between family photography and amateur photography as practiced in photo-clubs. Members of photo-clubs were generally keen to cultivate distinctions with popular family photography in order to make their own practice more sophisticated.

<sup>121</sup> C. Ginzberg, "'From Aby Warburg to E.H. Gombrich: A Problem of Method'," in *Clues, Myths and the Historical Method* (John Hopkins University Press, 1989), 35.

the discovery of linear perspective during the Renaissance period) are thus not so much the result of changes in mentality than of the transformations in the social function or the “requirements” of art within a given society. What function did photography have in people’s lives in Wattville? Ginzberg’s caution to art historians has strengthened my conviction of the need to adopt anthropology’s set of concerns regarding photography. Approaching photography as a cultural practice orients the researcher towards questions of social usages, of the economic particularities of the trade, of images’ materiality, etc.

Meaning resides not only on the surface of the image but also in the process of its making and in its social life thereafter. The particular history of “handling, making and reception—that is, the popular uses of photographs” is, according to John Peffer, an “integral aspect of the interpretation of the surface image”.<sup>122</sup> My analysis of the Ngilima images necessarily extended to a study of photographic practices, which included, in the anthropological tradition, “tracking the thing”<sup>123</sup>—locating the social and physical spaces in which these practices took place (the Ngilima studio, the lounge, the street corner, the factory’s glass entrance...), but also tracking what people actually did with the photographs, how they shared them within their private circles (for instance, lovers exchanging their portraits during courtship). Matters of viewing rituals and circulation bring to the fore the fact that beyond their representational dimension, photographs also possess a certain materiality or “thinginess”.<sup>124</sup> Understanding local photographic practices also presupposed a basic grasp of the technological developments that made it possible for photography to become a leisure activity accessible to and affordable for the working-class.

This thesis is also a history *through* images. The Ngilima portraits are cultural objects whose shape and meaning were defined by a specific historical period. They are emblematic of and participated in deeper social changes, resulting from a structural transformation of the economy. By writing about changes in the function of photography within a particular population, we touch upon a series of broader themes of society— shifting gender roles, the development of working-class private sphere, the making of a black youth culture oriented

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<sup>122</sup> J. Peffer, "Introduction: The Study of Photographic Portraiture in Africa," in *Portraiture and Photography in Africa*, ed. John Peffer and Elisabeth L. Cameron (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), 4.

<sup>123</sup> G. Marcus, "Ethnography in/of the World System: The Emergence of Multi-Sited Ethnography," *Annual Reviews Anthropology* 24 (1995).

<sup>124</sup> For a theoretical engagement with the notion of materiality of photographs, see E. Edwards and J. Hart, *Photographs, Objects, Histories: On the Materiality of Images* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

towards leisure and consumption, creating a sense of home out of generic social housing, the making of personalised bearings in a precarious urban space, the visualisation of social distinction. In other words, we move away from the purely photographic to grasp aspects of black working-class men and women's cultural experiences of urban South Africa in the 1950s and 60s. The Ngilima photographs have tended to lead to discussions on very personal matters—memories of childhood, stories of first boyfriends, unplanned pregnancies and embarrassing weddings. Personal photographs put the emphasis on how social changes and events were experienced on a very human scale. They make black subjectivity a possible field of study. By subjectivity, I refer to the cluster of experiences, emotions, desires, and expectations, on basis of which people made sense of their present situation and acted upon it. The photos urge us to acknowledge the importance of imagination in many aspects of people's daily lives.

#### 4.4 Iconographic Fictions

The Ngilima portraits are ambivalent documents of social imaginations. They depict how people wanted to see themselves, rather than how their lives “really were”. N’Goné Fall describes Congolese studio photographs from the 1950s as “fragile description of a re-invented everyday life that made it possible to immortalise an ideal self-image”.<sup>125</sup> Peter Burke argues further: “what portraits record is not social reality so much as social illusions, not ordinary life but special performances. But for this reason, they offer priceless evidence to anyone interested in the history of changing hope, values or mentalities”.<sup>126</sup> There were many aspects of daily life that actually never made it into photographs, for they were deemed to be outside of the realm of the “photographable”<sup>127</sup>: daily chores, especially those relating to the kitchen and child-rearing, labour, material shortages and deprivations, conflict, disease, and death.<sup>128</sup> These absences and distortions are themselves significant of the social role people

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<sup>125</sup> N. G. Fall, "Le Maître Du Studio," in *Photographies Kinshasa*, ed. N’Goné Fall. (Paris: Revue Noire, 2001), 34.

<sup>126</sup> P. Burke, *Eyewitnessing: The Uses of Images as Historical Evidence* (Cornell University Press, 2006).

<sup>127</sup> Bourdieu, *Un Art Moyen*, 24.

<sup>128</sup> Death portraits were popular in other parts of Africa such as Benin (see for instance T. Seeling, "Introduction: Studio Africa," in *Life and after-Life in Benin*, ed. Alex van Gelder and Okwui Enwezor (London: Phaidon Press, 2005), but certainly not in Wattville. Farrell recalls his grandmother telling him the story of an Ngilima picture she once saw of a dead woman in a coffin, surrounded by her Indian relatives. She found the photograph profoundly disturbing, because it was “contrary to their tradition” (Interview with Farrell Ngilima, 2008). There

attributed to photography. These photographic taboos were not specific to South Africans. As Holland writes about the working-class in the UK: “The poorer the community, the less directly are their daily activities reflected in the pictures they keep. Those who live in the inner city tenements remained anxious to record the formality and dignity of their life, not its more distressing moments”.<sup>129</sup> Bourdieu equally interprets this refusal to be photographed in ordinary clothes, doing ordinary things as a similar expression of self-worth: “Prendre la pose, c’est se respecter et demander le respect”.<sup>130</sup> Yet the everyday and popular photography have many things in common. Both are associated with similar connotations: informal, non-political, private, enmeshed with popular culture.

“What is missing from the picture?”, asks Sandra Courtman, in regard to Dyche’s studio portraits of England’s newly arrived migrants (the “Windrush generation”) dating from the 1950s, predominantly Afro-Caribbeans and Indians. She discusses the difficulties in using such “portraits of desires” as historical evidence, given the fact that these images were created in “fictional settings” that completely do away with the economic difficulties and humiliations that this generation experienced upon arrival to the UK. “What is missing are any of the social reference points, the subject’s homes and work places, street scenes, freezing weather, (..) any clues as to the material reality they inhabited”. The anonymity of the sitters makes it all the more challenging to retrieve some of the factual data needed to interpret the subtext to the story and to decode this ‘raw material’.<sup>131</sup> However, Courtman considers the Dyche images as being nonetheless “important non-literary evidence of a desire for a strong identity and self-expression” and of identities in flux.<sup>132</sup>

Courtman’s conclusion rings true for the Ngilima collection, with two important nuances. The first is that the Ngilima images, due to their diversity in terms of depicted geographical location—including streets and domestic interiors— are actually brimming with “social reference points” and “clues” on the subjects’ material reality. Lingering in the background are also minute details that inadvertently survived the gaze of the photographer: a piece of tattered corrugated iron, unpolished shoes, bare walls, bottles of Castle beer. Such details

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is only one other reference to death in the entire collection, a photograph depicting a woman kneeling by a tomb, conveying an attitude of mourning.

<sup>129</sup> Holland, “Sweet It Is to Scan”, 143.

<sup>130</sup> Bourdieu, *Un Art Moyen*, 117.

<sup>131</sup> S. Courtman, “What Is Missing from the Picture?,” *Wasafiri* 14, no. 29 (1999): 9-10.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

anchor the portraits in the socio-economic world in which Ronald, Thorence and their clients were formulating their aspirations. The second nuance is, I would argue, that the Ngilima collection does more than record a desire for an affirmative urban identity. It also records a desire for normalcy in a context of duress. The photographs are clearly not direct translations of everyday life, or in Sekula's terms, an unmediated copy of the real world.<sup>133</sup> Yet they successfully convey a sense that photography had become an ordinary, standard element of everyday life. In employing an international visual repertoire of modern rituals (birthday parties, white weddings, elegant lounges, tea-parties...), Ngilima's clients were symbolically confirming that they belonged (or aspired to belong) to a middle-class, and that their lives were "normal", as opposed to "deprived". There is therefore an interesting tension in the collection, between the expression of change that one picks up in the images, and the claim to a stable ordinary life resilient to change.<sup>134</sup> As the Ngilimas were called back, time and again, to the families in their neighbourhoods, their growing archive stood for regularity and stability, a privilege that generally only the upper-classes in South Africa could lay claim to. In the face of prevailing instabilities and insecurities, daily life was, to borrow Appadurai's words on the production of locality, "hard work". I argue that photography was part of a larger set of strategies of resilience, aimed at maintaining self-worth and protecting one's aspirations, including the aspiration to a stable 'ordinary' life, in a political and economic context that was constantly undermining these. As Michael Godby eloquently stated, the Ngilima archive "represents nothing less than the triumph of ordinary individual experience over the dehumanizing machinery of apartheid".<sup>135</sup>

The Ngilima photographs are in many ways 'unintentional' documents. The portraits were not taken with the purpose of objectively documenting a social and material reality, as in the tradition of photo-journalism. The Ngilima collection acquired the value of historical source through the weight of time passing and by gradually (re)-entering the public sphere of university archives. As with other historical sources, the historian contextualises the images according to their conditions of production and consumption. Similar to the exercise of

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<sup>133</sup> A. Sekula and V. Burgin, "Thinking Photography," *Thinking Photography* (1982): 86.

<sup>134</sup> I owe this particular point to David William Cohen, who was once my respondent to a seminar I gave at UWC in 2012. I am very grateful to him for bringing this point to my attention.

<sup>135</sup> M. Godby, "'Native Studies'," in *The Rise and Fall of Apartheid: Photography and Bureaucracy of Everyday Life*, ed. Okwui Enwezor and Rory Bester (New York: International Centre of Photography, 2013): 62.

writing a micro-history, historically reading a photograph requires ‘a reconstructive linking together of the individual elements in a network of interrelations’.<sup>136</sup>

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<sup>136</sup> A. Lüdtke, *The History of Everyday Life: Reconstructing Historical Experiences and Ways of Life* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 14.

## **PART 5. METHODOLOGY AND CHAPTER OUTLINE**

### **5.1 Methodology: Working with a Collection**

As mentioned earlier in this introduction, the first task was to digitalise the collection and find a new permanent home for the negatives. In September 2010, Farrell and I flew down to Cape Town, to bring the 26 boxes of negatives to the Centre for Curating the Archive, at the University of Cape Town, where they were scanned box by box. Each scan was numbered and allocated a letter corresponding to the box in which it was originally found (for instance RN045A, RN3387N, RN5671Y). Certain rudimentary modes of classification thus came to light (box of children's photos, box of photos from a particular mine compound).<sup>137</sup> The negatives were brought back to Johannesburg and found their permanent place at the Historical Papers.

The next step was to constitute a working catalogue, so as to allow me to easily navigate through the mass of images during my interviews. Given the high number of photos on my computer, I had to be able to rapidly choose a sample of images that was most likely to be relevant to the person I was interviewing. I hence started creating obvious categories according to geographical location (Ngilima studio, Wattville, Old Location, etc.), social activity (sport, church, family gathering, wedding, birthday) and, more problematically, "ethnicity" (coloured, African, Indian). I used these categories as imperfect working tools, a starting point meant to increase my chance of identifying people depicted in the photos. My "ethnicity" category increasingly made me uncomfortable, as I felt as if I was reproducing apartheid methods of classifying people according to appearance. Needless to say, my pile of "Not Sure" pictures quickly grew longer and longer. This said, my samples worked quite well within the coloured and Indian population, as both groups constituted fairly tight-knitted minorities in the location, members of which were more likely to know each other. My catalogue continued to grow over time, as I gathered more information that allowed me to identify new patterns. I started for instance to recognise unknown individuals who kept emerging in various photos scattered throughout the collection. I also had a system of keywords, to annotate the names of identified people, or to pinpoint certain recurrent poses

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<sup>137</sup> However, it is likely that the order in which the negatives were found no longer corresponds to whatever Ronald's filing system was in 1960, given that photographs were likely to have been shuffled around since then, particularly in the years preceding Farrell's intervention, in 1999.

and formal characteristics of the images (horizontal framing, the reclining pose, flood lamp showing in a corner, etc). The catalogue expanded as my research interests became more detailed: my “domestic interiors” for instance was further divided in terms of room spaces. The catalogue produced interesting statistics (how many photos were taken in Wattville compared with the Dingers factory? How many in the lounge compared with the kitchen? How many people chose vinyl as a prop, as opposed to clocks or magazines?), which I mainly use as rough guidelines, given the evolving nature of my on-going filing.

Photographs remain “incomplete objects” without the people who “animate them with sentiment and story”.<sup>138</sup> Such is the Photograph: “it cannot *say* what it lets us see”, wrote Roland Barthes.<sup>139</sup> In order to understand the ‘subtext’ to these photographs, I gathered over eighty interviews over the course of a year-long fieldwork in Wattville, which took place in two different periods (2011 and 2012, six months each). My starting point was the Ngilima household, in particular Doreen Ngilima, Ronald Ngilima’s second daughter. She played a crucial role in selecting for me a first group of interviewees, people whom she either recognised in the photos and were still alive or whose children were still alive, or elderly people from Wattville whom she thought could recognise faces amongst the pictures. Retired but still active in her Anglican church group, she was both connected to the elderly population of Wattville and was often available to walk me to the households of potential interviewees. Bahij Ibrahim, a government employee whom I met by chance at the local library, played a similarly crucial role in introducing me into Indian households in Actonville. I also used some of the connections that Farrell had initiated during his own research, in the early 2000s. I eventually met Edward Hank, a doctor and passionate genealogist, who patiently helped me identify about 80% of photographs relating to the coloured minority.

Interviews varied in length, structure and focus, though all were open-ended, held in English, and used the method of photo-elicitation<sup>140</sup>. If the interviewee was the subject of an Ngilima photograph, I would ask about his or her memory of that photographic event, of Ronald or Thorence Ngilima, and more generally about his or her photographic practice. I would also make note of the place of photos in their home (presence or absence of images, their location in the room...), and ask to see their own personal collection of photographs, if they had one.

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<sup>138</sup> Strassler, *Refracted Visions*, 28.

<sup>139</sup> R. Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflexions on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 100.

<sup>140</sup> D. Harper, "Talking About Pictures: A Case for Photo Elicitation," *Visual studies* 17, no. 1 (2002).



Only in a few occasions did I find original Ngilima prints amongst people's own photographic archives, which seems to suggest that his photographs were not meant for keeping for posterity, unlike other genres (formal airbrush portraits).

The most intense emotional responses were typically the situation where an interviewee discovered a photograph of a lost but dear family member for the first time. Laughter Skosana, for instance, was moved to tears when I gave her a copy of an Ngilima studio portrait of her mother. Up to that point, she had not owned any pictures of her mother and consequently had not seen her image since her death many years ago. Hendrieka Billings was also ecstatic when I presented her with a large series of pictures depicting her parents, in which she appears as a young toddler. The photographs depict her parents as a happy couple and young parents, years before they split up and her father remarried. Mrs Billing's stepmother then allegedly burnt all the family pictures from this epoch, that were contained in a suitcase. This detail in her biography adds an interesting dimension to her emotional response to the photographs, a mixture of disbelief regarding this resuscitation and, undoubtedly, the feeling of revenge.

Yet interviews with people unrelated to the pictures proved to be very productive as well. Seeing photographs "brought in from the outside" for the first time had a clear confrontational effect, which possibly prompted more palpable and spontaneous reactions.<sup>141</sup> Not being related to the depicted subject in certain cases actually enriched interviewees' reading of the photographs. In the absence of a familiar face, interviewees spent more time looking at the details surrounding the face: the clothes, the furniture, the elements in the background. Furthermore, as one interviewee suggested, the absence of family ties meant that interviewees did not need to abstain from making negative judgements on what they saw and could comment as much and as freely as they liked. They were thrust in a productive middle ground, photographs between being familiar but not tied to the family, viewers hovering between the status of detached observers and that of insiders to the community. In chapter five, I argue that this impression of anonymous familiarity stems from photography's ability to convey a sense of place.

At one stage however, I realised that it was probably overwhelming to sit in front of a screen and watch an endless number of photographs. Most interviewees would begin the viewing

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<sup>141</sup> Freund and Thomson 2012: 14.

session eagerly, hoping to recognize a face; but their enthusiasm would fade after a while, as I scrolled through hundreds of photos of what ultimately were random people to them. I thus decided to change my method of showing pictures to interviewees. I started by preparing short series of prints, focusing on a particular theme (portraits of women, of men, of couples, of interiors). We would then discuss them together; I would ask them to choose their favourite photograph and to explain their choice. Working with a very limited sample made it easier to keep focused. Using physical prints enabled us to lay photos out next to each other, helping the interviewee to compare pictures.

I then compiled two longer series of pictures based on geographical location (Wattville and Old Location) in the format of an A4 album, which clearly influenced people's responses to the photographs. Unlike my laptop, a bounded album was a familiar and reassuring medium, like a family album or a magazine. It was something interviewees could appropriate more easily. Interviewees would flick through the volumes at their own pace; they lingered on photographs that particularly called them and skipped through those that had no particular interest to them, only commenting on those that provoked a reaction. They could pick up the album and bring it closer to have a better look, look up to tell a related story, write a name down, fold a page or crumple the corner of the page. I found this mode of working with photographs more productive than asking my interviewees precise questions on specific photographs, whether their own or Ngilima photographs in which they figured. The flicking through the albums, similar to flicking through magazines, created a relaxed conversational atmosphere in which women in particular felt comfortable to comment on photographs they did not know. It worked particularly well when the interviewee was not alone and not feeling the pressure of being "in the spot light". In particular one session taking place at Constance Xotyini's house, five related women but of different generations, were gathered around the dining table with the volumes, the conversation punctuated with peals of laughter. My experience with the bounded volumes resonates with Martha Langford's own conclusion that the album as a medium is fundamentally oral, most evocatively read 'through conversations' or dialogue.<sup>142</sup>

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<sup>142</sup> M. Langford, "Speaking the Album: An Application of the Oral-Photographic Framework," in *Locating Memories: Photographic Acts*, ed. Annette Kuhn and Kirsten McAllister (New York & Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2006).

The advantages in using photographs in interviews are many. Photographs are good “bridge builders”, establishing a common ground between my interviewees and myself. In one particular case, a rather unsuccessful interview changed its tone radically as the interviewee recognised himself in one of the pictures. He was so uplifted by the discovery that he became much more communicative after that. “Following the collection” means that my sample of interviewees is genuinely mixed (as opposed to concentrating on prominent local figures with better English facilities). The photograph provided me with a great excuse to enter people’s homes and ask them about their lives. Viewing photographs together, in particular in the form of prints or albums, was part of an already familiar ritual, thus breaking the formality and strangeness of the interview structure. The photographs enabled me to approach personal topics, by rekindling certain memories relating to childhood and teenage years.<sup>143</sup> Even photographs of anonymous subjects had sometimes an emotional effect on certain interviewees, the details in the images recreating the highly recognisable visual world of their childhood home. Moreover, communicating over images facilitated a discussion on complex and abstract sociological ideas, such as the notion of respectability or what “proper” means in the expression “a proper house”. In Burke’s words, “an image is necessarily explicit on issues that may be evaded more easily in texts. Images can bear witness to what is not put in words”.<sup>144</sup> We thus approached the images on different levels, alternating between an affective reading of the subjects on the foreground and a more sociological reading of the details in the background. Aside from working with images, we would do a more traditional oral history account of their life (either in the first part or second part of the interview), which provided equally valuable background information about their situation around the time the pictures were made.

There were of course moments where photo-elicitation did not work: people did not always feel comfortable to talk about images, either because they are not used to it and do not have the vocabulary to do so or because they felt they had nothing special to say about these pictures.<sup>145</sup> As Douglas Harper noted, “it is difficult to put in words a complicated but utterly ordinary reality”.<sup>146</sup> My own difficulty to remember my first studio experience made me

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<sup>143</sup> In one or two occasions, photographs created the opposite effect, abrupt rejection and refusal to acknowledge themselves on the picture. I suspect it was because the photograph triggered unpleasant or embarrassing memories better left alone.

<sup>144</sup> Burke, “Eyewitnessing”, 31.

<sup>145</sup> P. Tinkler, *Using Photographs in Social and Historical Research* (Los Angeles: Sage, 2012), 181.

<sup>146</sup> D. Harper, “The Visual Ethnographic Narrative,” *Visual Anthropology* 1, no. 1 (1987), 118.

realise how impossible it is for certain people to remember theirs. Photography was something fun, something of the moment. Details of a particular photographic experience are not always remembered very clearly, simply because it was not necessarily a memorable event. The second set of problem, which is also true for oral history, is the fact that interviews do not necessarily reflect “truthfully” what the interviewee was feeling and thinking at the time, but rather what he or she feels today, as an elderly person looking back on their youth. It was impossible for instance to find interviewees who would admit to posing in a swimsuit or in underclothes, let alone interviewees who approved of the pose. Yet the Ngilima photographs provide evidence for the fact such bold acts of posing were taking place, including amongst young women.

I also visited several archives, mainly the national archives in Pretoria, where most of the official correspondence on “native affairs” between the Benoni Town Council and the government at the level of Transvaal is stored. To my regret, I found out that the political changes that transformed the East Rand into the new metropolitan Erkuhuleni since the early 2000’s negatively impacted the local archive of the Benoni Town Council. In their attempt to centralise all archives of the region, Benoni’s is now stored in limbo, nobody knows exactly where. Luckily, the Benoni library has all the 1950s and 60s copies of the Benoni City Times (unlike the BCT themselves) and the Rand Daily Mail. Historical Papers, from Wits University, had interesting photographs of Benoni in its early years, as well as some early portraiture of members of the black petite bourgeoisie, such as Dr. Xuma and his family.

## **5.2 Chapter Outline**

My dissertation is at once a history of photography and a cultural history through photography. On the one hand, it looks at the evolutions of a photographic practice, in terms of conventions, technology and the trade’s economics. Ronald Ngilima represented a new generation of photographers who used lightweight portable medium-sized cameras and flash, as opposed to the static “while-you-wait” camera, which enabled him to be more mobile and

to photograph indoors and at night.<sup>147</sup> These technological innovations generated new genres of portraiture, for instance lounge portraits and party pictures. My first chapter pieces together Ronald and Thorence's biographies and the trajectory of their body of work. It retraces the history of popular photography within the African community and establishes the various other photographers active locally, situating Ronald Ngilima and his son within the South African photography trade of the 1950s.

On a second level, I try to analyze what photography actually meant to Benoni's black population, and in particular to its young population. My second chapter looks at young men and women's vivid engagement with studios and their appropriation of the medium. I argue that in the 1950s, with the emergence of informal studios in the location, young men and women played a key role in changing local photographic practices, transforming them into a casual leisure activity. A new moment of appropriation of the medium happened when black South Africans began renegotiating the range of the "photographable"—leading to a multiplication of photographic agendas and visual registers. In return, what was it about photography, as a device that immortalised an ideal self-image, that spoke to Benoni's young men and women? How has the democratization of the camera impacted on the making of a black urban youth culture? How did international and national popular culture inform local productions of photographic portraits?

My third chapter follows up on the second, but resolutely takes a gender perspective. What did photography "do" for young women? I argue for instance that as photography became part of the courtship process, Ngilima's small prints constituted subtle and limited—but significant nonetheless—zones of privacy for young women who were increasingly postponing marriage for work and experiencing romantic love, occasionally putting their respectability at risk.

Respectability is the major theme of the fourth chapter, which looks at the series of portraits taken in Ngilima's or his clients' living room. It looks at how clients used photography to visualize social distinctions and perform a certain idea of urban lifestyle within the lounge, a sensual space full of certain type of objects and site for hosting activities. The striving to distinguish oneself through consumption must be understood within South Africa's racialized hierarchy of values, which equated "civilisation" to particular consumption habits and the

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<sup>147</sup> "While-you-wait" was the popular name for a rudimentary kind of camera, which was very easy to use and to repair, but which also limited the photographer's options to outdoors and full daylight. For more details on this kind of camera, see Feyder, "Think Positive, Make Negatives", 46.

rejection of other modes of consumption. Creating social distinctions was also important for the sake of breaking the deadly homogeneity of the generic social housing that the local municipality started building in Wattville in the early 1950s. Details in the background of the photographs (curtains, window frills made of recycled newspaper, plastered walls...) revealed various tactics to upgrade and personalize the endless rows of bare and dull social houses. Interviewees brought my attention to these elements, as they evaluated and ranked the various lounges I presented to them. They based their judgment of what makes a “good lounge” on the basis of details that they picked out in the background of the image.

The fifth chapter aims at reconstituting a resident’s view of the location prior to its demolition, putting the emphasis on how people experienced and defined their place of residency as an urban space. Here too I look at the production of difference, but this time in relation to class and race. Interviewees again mobilized minute details in the photographs (including for instance the shape of the ventilation grid) to geographically and socially situate a particular photograph, according to their mental mapping of the township. In other words, the photographs help pinpoint the visual elements that people used to produce differentiated spaces within the township, elements that are tightly linked to notions of race and class. Interviews based on these photographs led to broader discussions on interracial relationships in the Asiatic Bazaar and to what extent social and spatial borders were and were not crossed.

What possible meanings the Ngilima collection takes on in South Africa’s post-apartheid panorama is the topic of the last chapter and the epilogue. What does the collection stand for today? My initial proposal was to consider the Ngilima collection as a site of memory common to all people who once lived in the location. Not all my interviewees shared the same commemoration agenda. Chapter six focuses on my experience with the Indian community of Benoni, in the making of an informal street exhibition in Actonville in October 2011. Their interpretation of the collection as the “golden age of the Actonville community”, focusing on an exclusively Indian past, was very distinct from my own interest in researching a history of interracial integration amongst the working class. This chapter hence dwells on the challenges of reconnecting a photo collection with its original “local community” and place, because of the discrepancies between this 1950s image world and the present day social reality of Actonville. Finally, in an epilogue I speculate on the uncertain future of the collection. While the negatives are presently safely preserved in a public archive in Johannesburg and thus in

principle accessible to all, what future does it have in Benoni itself, considering the present dominant heritage politics favouring ANC? My epilogue is a final plea to convince my readers (and hopefully future heritage practitioners) of the relevance of these humble portraits, these ordinary things.