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Chapter Two
Studio Photography and Self-fashioning In The “Fabulous Decade”

I begin this chapter by comparing two images. The first is Ngilima’s formal studio portrait, dating from the early 1930s (figure 1.1). With its high ceiling and painted backdrop, it is a good example of white-owned studios found in segregated towns. A closer look at figure 1.1 reveals that Ronald’s hands and face had been dodged—touched-up in the darkroom in order to make his skin colour look white.\(^{232}\) The dodging was done with evident skill and precision, but Ronald’s darker ears, the regular white line on his hairline and the couple of bleached-out spots on the collar of his shirt nevertheless make the manipulation quite obvious. The dodging has also erased any details on his face, giving him a blank expression as he stares fixedly into the camera. Standing erect, the overall impression is one of contrived stiffness and formality. Compare this portrait now with this following image. It is a portrait that Ronald took of his son Thorence with one of his friends in his home studio, around 1954 (figure 2.1). In Ngilima’s portrait of these two young adolescents, what stands out is the predominance of the bodies over the background. The studio is stripped to a minimum—a curtain and a chair. In comparison, the trompe-l’œil technique of the painted background in Ronald’s portrait created a sense of extended volume, giving the impression that an additional room existed behind him. In contrast, the two silhouettes of the two boys fit in a tighter frame, where the sense of perspective is completely reduced to a unified flat but heavily patterned surface. The decoration being minimal, the viewer focuses on the performance of the two subjects. The vertical line of Ronald’s erect body contrasts strongly with the curved lines that the bodies of the two boys draws across the frame (for instance Thorence’s left arm). The natty suit is replaced with a very different dress code: a belt with the buckle off-centre, a woolly hat,

\(^{232}\) This darkroom technique, called dodging, consists in decreasing the exposure of certain zones on a photographic print, so as to make it lighter than the rest. The manipulator holds a card over the selected zone between the photographic print and the enlarger. In this case, an oval card was probably held up very close to the print. The disadvantage of this technique is the obvious cover-up lines that the masking card creates.
loosely rolled sleeves. Thorence's hat and bandana give him a distinct cowboy look, an effect enhanced by the tilt of his head and his side-ways glance. The slackness of their body language echo the “party pictures” that Thorence took a few years later. This exercise in comparison underlines not only a different style of portraiture but a completely different composure in front of the camera.

Figure 2.1: Thorence and a friend in Ronald Ngilima's studio. Wattville, early 1950s, NPC.

In chapter one, I described how the photographic economy changed substantially between the 1930s and the 1950s, resulting in a multiplication of photographers offering different types of portraits. I showed for instance how Thorence adopted some elements of photojournalism in his style of portraiture. In this chapter, the focus shifts from the photographers to the
photographic subjects. Here I dwell on the democratisation of the camera, enabled by these technological and economic changes described in the previous chapter, and their impact on Ronald’s subjects, in particular his younger subjects. The democratisation of the camera coincided with a particular moment in South African history, marked by economic boom and the beginning of a consumer society, including its black population. As second-generation black urbanites, born and raised in the townships, Thorence and young people of his generation were consuming a different set of images, in particular magazines, cinema and advertising. What effect did the expansion of the visual economy have on the way people related to the media—i.e. on their understanding of photography, both in terms of expectations (what a photograph is supposed to achieve) and in terms of practice? And how did this in turn inform and alter the type of images being locally produced?

In order to grasp more fully the difference between the two portraits mentioned above, I will proceed to a content analysis of the Ngilima images in two complementary ways. A formal reading of an image pays attention to elements such as body language, elements of the studio, how the subjects are positioned within the frame, the composition—i.e the strategies that photographer and subjects used to visually convey a particular message, or register. A second approach consists in focusing on how the subject mobilised certain cultural references—an image repertoire—in order to achieve a particular register. Ronald’s erect posture and the dodging followed a certain idea of body discipline and presentation of the self that was deemed necessary for a dignified photograph. Thorence and his friend were also pursuing an idealised self-image, but their ideal of the self was differently codified, according to new values and models of fantasy and imagination characteristic of the 1950s, the “fabulous decade”.

Considering that the opening portraits were both made in photographic studios, the space of the studio lies at the heart of my analysis. I approach the studio as a space used to construct social meanings through an evolving set of conventions and codes. That Ronald’s living room could be transformed into a studio is not self-evident. It presupposes that his clients accepted the fact that a dignified portrait did not necessarily need all the accoutrements of white-owned studios (high-ceilings, painted backdrops…). In other words, this spatial shift from white-owned studios to informal township studios implied a renegotiation of the basic terms of condition of the photographic contract—of what constitutes a photograph, what and whom it
is for, what makes a dignified portrait, what makes the magic of a studio. This evolution of
conventions suggests more than the emergence of a new aesthetic, it implies deeper change in
the “field of power around the camera”, i.e. the relationship between the photographer, the
client and the camera.\textsuperscript{233} By doing so, the very nature of photography is altered. The elaborate
frame traditionally hanging on people’s walls gave way to the snapshot, an informal, more
playful and cheaper version of a photographic print.

Christreaud Geary’s historical account of photographic practice in Funbum suggests that
vernacularization of photography happened in waves, through successive generations of
photographers.\textsuperscript{234} I also propose to approach this history of democratizing the camera in South
Africa in terms of different moments of appropriation, as a way of thinking about the
relationship between aesthetics and the “field of power around the camera”. Each moment
produced a specific photographic register, which was the product of a configuration between a
particular photographic economy, a style and an image-repertoire of that time. These different
moments were chronologically sequential to each other, but also concomitant, in that the
emergence of a new moment did not substitute the previous one. For the rest of this chapter, I
will focus on two moments of appropriation, represented by the two portraits mentioned
above. I begin with an analysis of Ronald’s formal studio portrait as archetypal of the register
of respectability; a register that Africans built on the traditional register of white-owned
studios, which dominated photographic production in South Africa, from the late 19\textsuperscript{th}
century to about the 1930s. I then move onto an analysis of Ngilima portraits featuring young
subjects, such as the portrait of Thorence and his friend. Inspired by a new repertoire of
images emerging out of a context of a booming economy, young people used the space of the
studio in order to fashion themselves as urban subjects, thus opening up new avenues for a
multiplication of photographic registers.

\textsuperscript{233} C. Pinney, \textit{Camera Indica: The Social Life of Indian Photographs} (Chicago: University of Chicago Press,
1997), 96.

\textsuperscript{234} Geary, "Roots and Routes of African Photographic Practices: From Modern to Vernacular Photography in
West and Central Africa (1850-1980)".
PART ONE. THE REGISTER OF RESPECTABILITY

*Early Black Portraiture*

When exactly black South Africans started entering the space of the studios as clients is difficult to determine precisely for lack of data on this subject. To the best of my knowledge, Santu Mofokeng's *Black Album* project, revolving around a collection of 35 found portraits, is among the little research done on the history of black photographic practices of the pre-war period. The *Black Album* suggests that it was essentially (but probably not exclusively) the missionary-educated Christian African elite who first began frequenting studios as commissioners, at least as early as the 1880’s. According to the information that Mofokeng was able to collect, among the photographed subjects were trained ministers, a formerly prosperous tenant farmer evicted under the 1914 Land Act, a domestic servant who originally came from a high-class family, a clerk. In some of the *Black Album* portraits, one can pick up certain elements that suggest a degree of class differentiation amongst these subjects. The 1918 portrait of Seidi Martha Motingoe, identified as a washerwoman, gives away clues of her belonging to the working-class, such as the corrugated iron background, her modest attire, the absence of props. Portraits like hers suggest that by the 1920s, a limited but existing number of working-class subjects were also visiting photographers (Figure 2.2).

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235 Mofokeng, *The Black Photo Album- Look at Me: 1890-1950*. Mofokeng did several years of research on this subject for the Institute for Advanced Social Research, at the University of Witwatersrand.
The stamps on many of these photographs, displaying names such as Clifton Studios, Lydenburg Studios, Scholtz Studio, H.F. Fine Studio, suggest that these were done in white-owned studios. However this does not exclude the possibility that some were taken by black assistants and apprentices. At least one photographer in this series has been identified as “A.M. Makhubu”, from a picture dating from 1927. Regardless of whether the author of the picture was white or black, all of the photographic subjects depicted in these photographs followed the same photographic tradition, inspired by late Victorian and Edwardian conventions of portraiture. This tradition was governed by the imperative of appearing respectable. Respectability is a set of values difficult to define precisely, but in the black locations in South Africa, it relied in the 1930s, 40s and 50s on an unshakable faith in the

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church, in education and in law and order. It also stresses orderliness, cleanliness and fidelity in sexual relations. As one of my interviewees stated, respectability in the township was a form of ideology that the black urban working class had appropriated and embraced, prevailing in all aspects of their lives. The drive for respectability was part of a much more global undertaking, one that had started transforming England’s society, before it anchored in Cape colonial society in the course of the 19th century. Because it was so successful to the point of being seen as “part of the natural order of things”, Robert Ross considers respectability as the “insidious, because totally informal, expression of cultural imperialism”. David Goodhew makes the points that respectability was not the prerogative of the petite bourgeoisie but was also a working-class phenomenon. The fact that those considered as middle-class and other black workers were living cheek-to-jowl in the same cramped location, and that the economic gap between the two was in fact minimal, additional stress was put on cultural aspects—notably religion and education, but also on conduct, behaviour and self-image. While respectability was “the outward manifestation of class ideology”, the divide between respectable and disreputable subjects was never clear-cut. Considering the dire economic situation that all black South Africans faced, it was understood that women resorting to ‘immoral’ activities for survival, such as beer brewing or prostitution, could still be fervent church-goers and be considered respectable.

The Register of Respectability

How did one visually convey respectability? One of the main ingredients was to be framed within interior scenes that evoked a cultivated “European” milieu. In South African white-owned studios, this was typically achieved through a combination of “real” pieces of furniture (a side table, a little desk, a chair) and elements of imitation—a column made of papier maché, the first few steps of a staircase leading nowhere, and more commonly a painted

237 Goodhew, "Working Class Respectability: The Example of the Western Areas of Johannesburg, 1930-1955,"
238 Focus group discussion, quote by Nomathemba Ngilima, 16.05.2012, Wattville.
239 R. Ross, Status and Respectability in the Cape Colony 1750-1870: A Tragedy of Manners (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 5.
241 Ross, Status and Respectability, 5.
242 On a history of women’s engagement with beer-brewing as one of the few money-making activities accessible to them, see La Hausse, Brewers, Beerhalls and Boycotts: A History of Liquor in South Africa. For a historical study of Nairobi prostitutes and respectability, see L. White, “A Colonial State and an African Petit Bourgeoisie: Prostitution, Property and Class Struggle in Nairobi, 1936-40” in The Struggle for the City: Migrant Labour, Capital and the State in Urban Africa, ed. F. Cooper (Beverly Hills, 1983).
backdrop suggesting upper-class interiors. In the case of Ronald Ngilima’s formal studio made in Brakpan, the backdrop depicts a Roman column, long curtains that open onto another fictitious room with high ceilings and elaborate moldings. The pattern of the real carpet is in part reproduced on the painted backdrop, thus blurring the joining line between the two and reinforcing the illusion of perspective. Similarly the real bouquet of flowers resting on the wooden stand visually strengthens the one visible in the backdrop, resting on a Victorian style low table. Karen Strassler makes the point that late colonial backdrops often included floral arrangements—domesticated flora that signified European “culture”, implicitly contrasting with native (wild) nature. 243

In her book *Photographs on the Colour Line*, Shawn Michel Smith analyses how W.E.B DuBois challenged racial stereotypes of “Negroes”, by visualising them as respectable people (equal to whites) in his compilation of photographs for the American Negro Exhibit at the 1900 Paris Exposition. One of DuBois’s strategies was to overwhelmingly represent the “better classes” by showcasing predominantly portraits taken in spaces loaded with highly symbolic signs of economic prosperity (the piano, the furniture, the parlour-suit, the bookshelf, angles emphasizing the expanse of the property…). One particular photograph depicts a young woman at the piano with presumably her piano teacher in what seems to be a lavish interior. Yet upon a closer look, both subjects and piano were actually cut out and inserted in a painting, thus placing them against a different background made of elegant tapestries and large windows. “The actual location of the piano remains a mystery. Perhaps it stood in a simple drawing room, or a teacher’s practice room. One cannot be absolutely certain that it was not housed in a small cabin”. 244

The same could be said about the subject’s fine attire. Barring an interview with the subject, it is almost impossible to establish whether these clothes and props were his or hers, or whether these were loaned by the photographer. Yet there is no doubt that the clothes were equally important part of the bourgeois look. “Even more than housing, clothing, and other forms of body decoration, forms probably the most universal medium whereby people all over the world make statements to claim status”. 245 The female subjects in the *Black Photo Album* images are wearing hats and holding parasols and gloves, men are holding walking sticks and

245 Ross, *Status and Respectability*, 85.
wearing watch chains and waistcoats—all elements of Edwardian fashion. In one of these pictures, a little boy is even sporting an entire Scottish outfit, including the kilt, the sporran and the Glengarry bonnet. Photographers thus offered an umbrella of visual strategies—the collage technique, painted backdrops and loaning out outfits—thus potentially making the bourgeois look accessible even to lower-class families, even when they did not possess the means to match the image. The materiality of prints made in high-graded studios (elaborate sleeves, cardboard placeholders, stamp, silk sheet...) also contributed to this enterprise (see chapter one).

But Seidi Martha Motingoe (figure 2.2) managed to look respectable in her portrait, despite lacking the lavish interior and the fine clothes. What she lacked in props, she could compensate by performing a certain attitude through a particular body language. Thus working-class subjects who could not afford an expensive studio or refined clothing could still mobilise the register of respectability by banking on solemnity. It is usually argued that solemn and 'frozen' poses to technical imperatives, the camera needing a long exposure time and thus requiring absolute stillness to avoid any blurriness. Yet despite the acquisition of additional lighting equipment and the improved technology of the camera, the solemnity of poses persisted long after the need for long exposures was dismissed, because of this long-lasting association between respectability and photography. Solemnity limited the range for poses: standing erect, arms held close to the body (Nglima in figure 1.1) or sitting with legs crossed or legs close together. Only the position of the hands gave scope for variations: hands crossed over one knee, holding gloves, a book or an umbrella, or laid on someone's shoulder or on a table, etc. These poses underlined the individual's ability to successfully train his or her body into adopting “civilised” manners. They conveyed a sense of self-discipline, industriousness and of sexual abstinence that were central to Christian doctrine. A slouched or reclining body suggested indolence and sensuality. Victorian fashion, with its tight dresses, corsets, crinolines and bustles, already conveyed a similar association between stiffness and respectability. Civilised women’s bodies were to be contained and restricted in their movements as part of a greater project to control their sexuality. This notion is still somewhat alive in today’s moral economy in the townships. Restricting young girls’ movements is part of the necessary performance of respectability. Furthermore, the popular

246 Campbell, “African Subjects”.
expression “to go up and down” for instance, is a catch-all-phrase that is used to describe range of undesirable behaviour, including laziness, infidelity and alcoholism. It clearly associates mobility with sexual promiscuity and moral looseness. Rebeka Lee makes the point that mobility, as a vital economic strategy, nevertheless became an integral part of “urban style”, a point that is important for my next section. Photographically, it means that elderly township resident will still pose in a similar stiff style. In other words, the association between a particular body language and moral values has persisted up till today, surviving photography's technological evolutions.\(^\text{248}\) Ronald Ngilima's upgraded model of camera and his additional lighting equipment did not put an end to formal poses. His middle-aged or older subjects invariably stuck to this restricted range of poses, quietly standing or sitting down on a chair, looking very proper and dignified.

**On Race and Respectability**

W.E.B Du Bois was betting on conformity with middle-class standards of success to make a claim to equality. According to Mofokeng, the subjects in the *Black Photo Album* images were following a similar strategy of using class to lay claim to citizenship, in a context where social mobility for black South Africans was increasingly shrinking after a myriad of political reforms were passed in the early twentieth century, most notoriously the 1913 Land Act.\(^\text{249}\) But while Du Bois clearly sought to challenge and dismantle the racial hierarchies that governed American society around 1900, he also paradoxically reinforced them, as he disproportionately used portraits of young, light-skinned individuals with aquiline noses and long wavy hair to represent his vision of Afro-American elite.\(^\text{250}\)

How to interpret Ronald Ngilima's Brakpan studio picture? The dodging on Ronald’s face and hands intrigued me, as it was the first time I had come across such a manipulation during my fieldwork. I remembered Deborah Poole writing about similar cases of face whitening in portraits of bourgeois and petit bourgeois families made in Andean studio photography, dating from the late 19th century. When the female subjects did not apply cosmetics or flour

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\(^{248}\) While photographing Doreen Ngilima, Benjamin Ngilima, and Nomathemba Ngilima with my middle-format camera at a family function in 2012, the three adopted very similar way of upholding themselves.


on their face, photographers would attempt to “improve their race” by tampering with the emulsion, often creating awkward blotches on their face. Face whitening helped to constitute the family according to “the imaginary aesthetic of distinction and colour that constituted “race” in the cosmology of urban Cusco”. Poole argues that the photographic portrait played an important role in cementing the ideological construction of race, by translating a discourse into a material, concrete fact. The retouching of Ronald’s face clearly also needs to be interpreted within the context of South Africa’s institutionalised racial hierarchy. A hasty post-colonial reading might conclude that Ronald’s retouched face could be interpreted as a literal translation of Fanon’s "white mask". According to Fanon, the black subject tries to compensate for his inferiority complex, by acquiring status symbols and adopting certain manners.

It could be argued that photography anticipated the popularity of skin lighting creams in the 60s and 70s, offering black South Africans the possibility to physically change the colour of their skin, if not in real life then at least within the frame of a picture. However, I would be careful before equating Ronald’s whitened face and the Cusco portraits. Was Ronald Ngilima really trying to “improve” his race? Barring further information on this particular practice, it is difficult to establish whether the retouching was Ronald’s explicit request or simply the (presumably) white photographer’s executive decision. Another portrait made at the same Station Studio that I found in the Ngilima household depicts two of Sarah Ngilima’s relatives, possibly Sarah’s sister and her husband. Their faces and hands have also been retouched, though in a more subtle manner than in Ronald’s. The two Station Studio portraits together suggest that the dodging was perhaps the studio’s custom practice applied to all black customers, rather than sitters’ individual choice. What is certain is that Ronald and Sarah’s relatives were not in full control of the parameters of this studio space. Within the economic configuration as described in chapter one, the Station Studio situated in the town was most likely white-owned and therefore predefined as a white space. Black subjects could enter this space, but only after a procedure of adaptation and adjustment that required manipulation.

The emergence of the tradition of airbrushed portraits is an interesting example of how black South Africans eventually expanded the register of respectability. Airbrushed portraiture was

251 Poole, Vison, Race and Modernity, 207-208.
253 On a history of skin lighteners, see L. M. Thomas, "Skin Lighteners, Black Consumers, and Jewish Entrepreneurs in South Africa," History Workshop Journal, no. 73 (2012).
a collage technique that was particularly popular for representing the married couple (figure 2.3). With rates of "illegitimate" children born outside of marriage shooting up, church weddings were one of the key social institutions that could save or confirm one's respectability. According to Natasha Erlank, spending large sums of money on weddings was a way through which “black families, especially the modernizing elite, experienced and established their own social status in white-dominated South Africa”. Hence families used up their meagre savings on venues, food and drinks, presents, rings, and above all, on the wedding dress. The wedding dress was a crucial element of church weddings: the choice of material conveyed the bride’s personal taste and her family’s economic means, while the colour of the dress also communicated the status of the bride as a virgin (or not).

In the absence of an official wedding certificate, a wedding portrait could retroactively be commissioned by the couple's offspring, even after the couple's death. The hand-tinted wedding portrait follows a very precise set of conventions: horizontal frame, bust cropped at mid-shoulder length, husband and wife sitting next to each other, with the husband to the left of the frame and the wife's figure juxtaposed over the husband's, both bearing serious expressions.

254 On the airbrush portraits, see Feyder, "Think Positive, Make Negatives: Black Popular Photography and Urban Identities in Johannesburg Townships, 1920-1960". See also John Peffer's more recent research on airbrush photography, for instance Peffer, "Colored Portraits and White Weddings’ - Vernacular Reception and Popular Photography in South Africa" (paper presented at the conference).

The airbrush technique enabled the airbrush artist to add the crucial accessories expected from a white wedding, such as a white dress and veil, decorated with lace and pearls, jewellery, a bouquet of flowers, the outline of a suit with a handkerchief tucked in the front pocket. Here again, working-class subjects could count on the magic of the dark room to compensate for lack of means and obtain an image of a "white wedding". It is quite possible that the couple depicted in figure 2.3 never had a white wedding, the airbrush artist Yeti Bosaman nevertheless succeeded not only in concealing the bride’s real age, but also in granting her the white dress she perhaps never got to wear. The “enframement” effect of the oval wooden frame, in combination with its placement in the house, well in view in the living room, conjure to confer the image an air of gravitas, making it the suitable register for commemoration.256 Interestingly, the conventions of the airbrushed wedding portrait can be found in eleven photographs in the Ngilima collection, which suggest that this became the

256 The notion of “enframement” points to the fact that material enclosure, such as the heavy wooden frame, includes “frames of references”, set of ideas or assumptions which inform the way we look at images and interpret them. Hence for instance expensive glass framing might make viewers more inclined to consider a photograph as “artwork”. Here, the ornate frame of the airbrushed portrait, I argue, encourages viewers to interpret airbrushed photography as serving a long-term commemorative purpose, to be distinguished from the casual snapshot. See P. Spyer and M. M. Steedly, Images That Move (Santa Fe: School for Advanced Research Press, 2013), 19.
conventional way of representing the married couple across photographic techniques (figure 2.4).

![Image](image_url)

*Figure 2.4: This photograph illustrates how Ronald Ngilima carried on with the airbrush conventions of depicting the married couple. Wattville, mid-1950s, NPC.*

The genre of airbrushed portraits represented a new repertoire of images in South Africa. It was partially inspired by the European bourgeois aesthetic but it also clearly departed from it. Christopher Pinney notes a similar moment in the history of popular photographic practices in India around the turn of the 20th century, when Indian-owned studios began to produce photographs that were heavily over-painted. At first glance, these painted photographs contrasted strongly with late 19th century *cartes-de-visite* depicting Indian subjects in a similar set-up as Ronald Ngilima’s early *Station Studio* portrait. Mimicking key colonial aesthetic forms, writes Pinney, these early portraits were virtually indistinguishable from the self-commissioned images that Europeans made of themselves. However, Pinney is critical of the culturally essentialist argument that considers the emergence of painted photography in India as the manifestation of a distinctive “Indian” aesthetic. He considers these new forms of visuality as the result of a “historical conjunction of different media”, a moment where “photography, theatre, chromolithography and film were all starting to work together, creating
a distinctive aesthetic which (...) opened up a new space within photography where powerful and extravagant visions could be conjured”.257 Pinney cautions against using binary categories such as “Western” vs. “Indian” images. After all, Indian-owned studios were capable of producing ethnological style portraits, classic European style cartes-de-visite and fantasy portraits drawing on ‘traditional’ Indian painting motifs. Similarly, while the genre of airbrushed portraits catered perhaps more specifically to the tastes of black South Africans, these were produced by white artists based in white-owned studios located in Johannesburg. In other words, the emergence of black photographers or black clients did not necessarily lead to a distinctive aesthetic (i.e. Ronald Ngilima’s Station Studio portrait mimicking colonial style), and nor did the emergence of a distinctive aesthetic necessarily depend on the emergence of black photographers (i.e. airbrushed photography produced by white airbrush artists). What distinguishes Ngilima’s portrait of Thorence and his friend (figure 2.1) as a distinct moment of appropriation is therefore not only the emergence of distinct aesthetic, but also of a more fundamental shift in the power relationships between photographer, client and the camera.

257 Pinney, Camera Indica: The Social Life of Indian Photographs, 95.
PART TWO. TOWARDS THE DEMOCRATIZATION OF THE CAMERA

In this second part, I move forward in time to focus on Ronald Ngilima’s studio pictures dating from the 1950s, of which figure 2.1, the portrait of Thorence and his friend, is a good example. In this section, I will try to show why the proliferation of black photographers, and in particular the emergence of black-owned studios located in black residential areas represents a particular moment in the on-going process of democratizing the camera in South Africa. I attempt to pinpoint the innovative aspects of this moment, compared to the earlier stage of black image-production. The shift between these two moments must be understood in relation to the broader context of “the fabulous decade”, a decade where the visual economy was drastically expanding and becoming more international. I first analyse more precisely how this new moment of appropriation changed people’s relationship to the camera, before I move on to analyze how this change translated in terms of image-production and aesthetic.

Studio Photography, a "Youth Thing"

As seen in chapter one, black-owned studios situated in the location, the “after-hour” studios, were relatively shabby and minimalistic compared to the white-owned studios in town. As mentioned in chapter one, it was impossible for Ronald, as a black photographer, to compete with white-owned studios, at least when it came to the material quality of his photographs. He did not have access to commercial space in a well-attended part of town; commercial spaces available to black entrepreneurs in the location were reserved for the narrow list of trades approved by the local government. There is however no doubt that location studios became very fashionable in the 1950s, in particular among young people in their early twenties. Mrs. Traifina Shobete, born in 1938 in the Old Location was a loyal client of Mawaya studio, on 3rd street. Her large collection of photographs includes dozens of black and white photographs of her husband (her boyfriend then) with his friends, of herself alone and with her friends. Among these accumulated studio snapshots, there are only two photographs of her family. When asked about a photograph with her mother and siblings, Mrs Shobete remembered the painstaking efforts it took to drag their mother to the studio for the first time: "Yah once, just once! we asked her, ' lets go to take snaps'. 'Oh no no', she said, 'it's not for me'! (In the end)
we did go, because it was not far from home".258 Similarly, I pointed out to Mrs. Thembi Matebula that the Ngilima collection includes many individual studio pictures of herself, several of her brother, but only one family snapshot of her family, despite the fact that the family lived just next to the Ngilimas' house:

TM: "Neh? Nooo...Ai! we blacks, ah-ah, no we don't do that [take family portraits] (laughter).
S.F: No? Why not?
TM: They [the parents] say, 'ooh, I'm too old, I don't want to take photos'.
Photography was the interest of young people. Only young people are interested in taking photos".259

A statistical analysis of the Ngilima studio snapshots confirms Matebula's statement: only nine out of the 47 studio shots depicting groups in the Ngilima collection correspond to the genre of the family portrait. Given that young people take up half of Ngilima's entire set of studio photographs (cutting across all categories, including "individual", "couple", "groups"), they arguably represented the bulk of the demand for his studio services. In comparison, older-looking subjects in their 40s and 50s seemed to prefer posing in their own house, in particular their living room, or in Ngilima's living room.

Studying contemporary photographic practices in Mombasa (Kenya), Heike Behrend was similarly struck by the fact that her young Kenyan interviewee possessed a massive photographic archive which focused entirely on his friends and himself and did not featured a single family relative.260 If young people's ease with new media and technology seem self-evident today, I would argue that this affinity between youth culture and photography was established at a particular point in time in South Africa, coinciding with the emergence of photographic studios in the 1950s. What attracted young people to studios in particular? What did "after-hours" studios add to already existing photographic practices such as Mhlanga's street stall?

258 Traifina Shobete, 01.06.2012, Wattville.
259 Thembi Matebula, 18.02.2012, Soweto.
The Space of the Studio: A 'Strong-room of Dreams'

There are several possible explanations as to why studios became so popular with younger clients, the first being that photography by the 1950s had become geographically more widespread throughout the country. Studios located in locations themselves made it easier for people to access them. Moreover, photography had become affordable for a much larger section of the population, thanks to a combination of photographs becoming cheaper and people earning slightly higher wages. I suggest that photography’s affordability significantly altered people’s relationship to photography. As a general rule, the cheaper the photographic production, the more lax photographers tend to be in terms of how many picture they take. When photographers were still using glass-plates, every shot counted, and photographers had to be extra-careful to make sure that everything was in place before pressing the shutter release. They knew that the number of glass-plates was extremely limited and that there was therefore no margin for mistakes. The shift from glass-plates to negatives meant that the cost of making an additional picture had become less consequential. (Today, digital photography has pushed this to another level, as photographers are able to take endless amounts of photographs with almost no additional costs involved). Lower cost of production translated to lower prices for customers, making it possible for clients to indulge in additional shots. Photography’s economic affordability was key to transforming it from being an expensive affair reserved for special occasions to a more relaxed leisure activity. The following series of five shots depicting the same three young men in the Ngilima studio, holding a different pose at every shot is indicative of this trend (figure 2.5). Ngilima’s young clients often took numerous shots at every session, changing outfits and adopting a new pose at every shot. Going to the studio photographer with friends became an outing, an activity that young people did to have fun together. It is probably not a coincidence that one of the popular studios was called "Good Friend". The print was not the only outcome: young men and women sought the experience of going to the studio- the anticipation of going for a shoot together, preparing for it, dressing up, working out the various positions and poses for each frame, anticipating the results. In other words, one did not have to wait for a special event to see a photographer: going to the studio as a group of friends or with one's sweetheart had become itself the
In other African countries, photographic studios were even compared to hairdressing salons, a popular meeting point for daytime socializing.  

Karen Strassler has made a similar observation on the role of the camera in birthday parties in contemporary Indonesia: “it often seemed that rather than the event being photographed, the event was the photographing”. Strassler, Refracted Visions: Popular Photography and National Modernity in Java , 197.

Steven Dubin also compared Kitty’s studio in Pietermaritzburg to Africa-American barbershops: a place to relax, drink tea, discuss politics, to the point where the studio became a hub for anti-apartheid opposition. See S. Dubin, "Impersonations and Revelations: Mysteries of a South African Photography Studio," African Arts 47, no. 4 (2014), 28.
A "strong-room of dreams" is how South African play writer Athol Fugard described the studio, in his 1972 play figuring a studio photographer as the main protagonist.263 Another one of the Location studios' innovative aspects included the adoption of attributes characterizing a modern urban trade, in particular a fixed venue and an identifiable name and address. Adopting a name differentiated a studio from local competitors and associated the studio with attractive features. The name "Studio Novella" for instance underlined the exciting quality of being new and suggested the promise of presenting oneself as the star of a novella.264 The sedentarization of photography (the shift from street roaming to a fixed indoor space), also had significant impact on how people, especially young people, related to the medium. Considering how crowded the location was and to what extent neighbours kept an eye on the streets, the studio offered a clearly delimited, enclosed and hence private space, where subjects could be photographed without being subject to the gaze of people passing by. Fugard's expression "strong-room of dreams" underlines the spatial dimension of a studio, as well as that of protection, offering shelter to one's dreams. Shielded from society, young couples could be photographed inconspicuously; more generally clients could loosen some of their inhibitions. The absence of references to the outside world (street signs, pavement, etc) enhanced the experience of being disconnected and detached from the constraints of the 'real world'. The studio became a neutral space ready to support anyone's fantasy scenario. While Ngilima's adult subjects were interested in recording (and expanding on) their social and material achievements, young people were more interested in adopting new roles for themselves within the imaginary space of the studio, by experimenting with props and poses.265 Photography was used as a "technique of the self, as a means to objectify and at the same time to subjec

263 A. Fugard, "Sizwe Bansi Is Dead," in The Township Plays ed. Dennis Walder (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972). Similarly, Christopher Pinney referred to the contemporary studio in India as "a chamber of dreams" while Behrend described the Kenian studio as a "wish-fulfilling machine". Pinney, Camera Indica: The Social Life of Indian Photographs, chapter three; Behrend, "I Am Like a Movie Star in My Street': Photographic Self-Creation in Postcolonial Kenya".

264 "Novella" could be derived from novellus, which means new, or fresh, in Latin. But it also likely came from novella, a short story or a tale.


266 Behrend, "I am a Movie Star in My Street", 44.
on posters and postcards, in magazines and newspapers. Photography’s power to convince lay in the fact that it was both a fantasy and a record, in its ability to “exploit photography’s indexicality to serve imaginative ends, working to expand the horizons of the actual”. A photographic portrait is nothing less than a "choice that praises", a positive affirmation of one's existence.

Renegotiating the Essence of a Studio

That people would accept Ronald Ngilima’s dining room as a studio was however not self-evident. At least one of my interviewees decided that informal studios compromised too much on quality to visit them. Lack of space, associated with limited capital, and other such restrictions black entrepreneurs were facing, explained why Ngilima's studio was relatively minimal, with studio furniture stripped to a minimum. Given these circumstances, the issue then becomes: how to guarantee a successful conversion from dining room to photo studio? How did Ronald succeed in making the studio “work” for the 400 clients who came to pose in his living room? What is the minimum required for a studio? Or in other words, what constitutes the essence of a studio?

When Ronald Ngilima decided to open a studio in his own living room, he was faced with several challenges, the first being the room’s size. The "matchbox houses" provided by the government were of limited size and the dining room was a small and narrow room (less than 15 m2), in which Ngilima nevertheless had to fit the large wooden dining table, the chairs and a wooden cupboard with a big mirror. Within the confines of this room, it was hard to create the minimal distance between the photographer and subject required to take full-length body portraits. As a consequence, the borders of the improvised studio often appear at the margins of photographs: the edge of the curtain, the crack between the two curtains, the curve of the flood lamp, the dangling electric cable for the lamp, a blurry table corner or a chair...(figure 2.6). Ngilima's studio was a space he had to share with his family life. The limited space available possibly explains why he took his subjects at an oblique angle instead of a frontal shot: placing his subjects diagonally from where his camera stood was the best chance of

267 Strassler, Refracted Visions, 79.
expanding the depth of field as much as possible. This in turn might explain why the horizon line is slanted on most of his studio portraits.

Ronald's studio furniture consisted of a chair and a decorative side-table, high but with a narrow surface, supporting a straw basket with a hoop usually containing a bouquet of flowers. This set-up can be seen in other photographs taken in studios from South Africa at various epochs (portraits made at the Marianhill station’s photographic studio in the early 1920s, Ronald Ngilima's Station Studio portrait from the 1940s; portraits taken in Kitty's Durban-based studio from the 1970s) \(^{269}\), but also in studios outside of South Africa. \(^{270}\) Beyond its aesthetic function, I suggest that this repetitive set-up played an important role in formalizing the conversion from dining room to studio. Photographic conventions establish themselves through the endless repetition of certain elements (reproduction of props, poses

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\(^{269}\) Steven Dubin comments that the wooden stand supporting a basket with flowers was “a commonplace in photography studios in Africa and beyond”. S. Dubin, “Developing Characters: Contending Cultures & Creative Commerce in a South African Photography Studio,” (Johannesburg: NIROXprojects, 2013).

\(^{270}\) I’ve seen the same combination in portraits of Afro-Americans dating from the 1940s and portraits of Indians dating from the 1950s.
and backdrops), which echo familiar portraiture techniques used since the 19th century.\textsuperscript{271} Ronald hence borrowed certain elements of white-owned studios, translating them within the means at his reach. This legitimizing function would explain why the basket is always included in the frame, including when it is completely empty (see figure 2.6 and figure 2.7), or bearing very wilted flowers. In seven of his photographs, a framed photograph taken in a white-owned studio depicting two men can be seen in the lower shelf of the decorative table (figure 2.8). Too small to recognize the people in the frame, the frame worked instead as a \textit{mise-en-abîme} that referenced the tradition of professional studios in which Ngilima wished to anchor himself.\textsuperscript{272}

![Studio picture of unidentified women posing with empty flower basket. Wattville, mid-1950s, NPC.](image_url)

\textsuperscript{271} Campt, \textit{Image Matters}, 142-145.
\textsuperscript{272} A \textit{mise-en-abîme}, or the mirror effect, is when an artwork is inserted within the artwork, most famously the example of Velasquez inserting himself painting Las Meninas within this painting itself. In literature, the \textit{mise-en-abîme} is the insertion of a narrative within a narrative or of a theatre scene within a theatre scene.
Figure 2.8: Photo of unidentified man posing with basket of flowers, decorative table, lace, and framed picture. Wattville, mid-1950s, NPC.

Figure 2.9: Three photos of three different women posing with the same coat and pouch. The different flower combination in the middle photo suggests that these were taken in at least two different sessions. Wattville, mid-1950s, NPC.
Within the repetition of these elements, there was room for variation.\textsuperscript{273} There were at least six different types of lace doilies set on the table; the bouquets varied in terms of types of flowers and their various stages of freshness and fullness. The range of props available at the Ngilima studio was limited to vinyl discs and magazines, and occasionally umbrellas, clocks and items of clothing (figure 2.9). The position of the flower basket also varied: creative sitters would have it on the floor next to their reclining figure, or hold it by the hoop, like a handbag.

I suggest that for Ronald's sitters, the essence of a studio was not determined by a certain standard of quality (for instance the quality of the amenities offered by the studio or the quality of the final print). A studio was above all defined by its ability to offer a stage—a space removed from daily reality where people could perform their idealised projection of themselves. Perhaps another key element in the transformation of the dining room into a studio was the long curtain. The curtain covered the bare wall and added an element of décor, thus signalling a distinction between the studio and mundane ‘real life’. This said, the curtain functioned differently from the lavish backdrops that could be found in other parts of Africa and the world.\textsuperscript{274} According to Lucy Lippard, photographic backdrops usually operate a “spatial dislocation into a magical elsewhere”, lifting the photographic subject from his or her economic reality into a different space, time, or class. Backdrops typically depict idealised landscapes or architecture (exterior and interior) that emphasize opulence and elegance or exotic fantasy. “The backdrop setting presents a place in which the photographs’ subjects occupy new, often inappropriate, ‘realities’”. In Ngilima’s \textit{Station Studio} portrait, the backdrop conspired with Ngilima’s pose and clothing to offer an altered self-image of himself associated with an upper-class environment. The curtain in Ngilima’s studio was more neutral, lacking evocative visual symbols that referenced a different elsewhere or a certain status. Echoing the magic of theatre, it emphasized performance without defining an alternative economic ‘reality’. Ngilima’s choice of curtain instead of a painted backdrop was

\textsuperscript{273} Tina Campt uses the metaphor of jazz music to read creativity within repetition of forms. Within the structure of jazz, it is possible of find freedom to improvise even within a fixed structure. Campt, \textit{Image Matters}, 168.

\textsuperscript{274} Though more contemporary, the intricate and colourful studio backdrops in Ghanaian photographer Appayiah’s work are a good example of such backdrops. For more examples of lavish backdrops, see \textit{AfterImage}’s special issue on backdrops “From the Background to the Foreground: The Photo Backdrop and Cultural Expression”, vol.24, no 5, March/April 1997. On African photographic backdrops more specifically, see Behrend and Wendl, \textit{Snap Me One! Studiofotografen in Afrika}. 

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probably guided by practical factors: a painted backdrop was probably more expensive to produce and more difficult to store away than a curtain.\textsuperscript{275}

The emergence of black-owned studios in the location therefore implied more than a simple geographical relocation. It implied the redefinition of the photographic contract: What does it take to make a dignified portrait? As it turns out, not much: a curtain, a basket, a wooden stand. A combination of factors meant that the local photographic economy now allowed for a younger clientele to practice photography as a leisure activity. Their images, which is the object of the next section, translates the deeper changes in power relationships around the camera.

\textsuperscript{275} More generally, painted backdrops did not seem to be part of South African photographic tradition. Most photographs that I came across dating from the 1950s and 60s, whether made in studios in the Old Location, in Johannesburg and in other South African cities, seemed to prefer the plain curtain over painted backdrops or a backdrop made of patterned fabric (as it was popular in West Africa, for instance in Malian Seydou Keïta’s photographs).
PART THREE. THE MULTIPLICATION OF PHOTOGRAPHIC REGISTERS

What impact did the multiplication of black actors on either side of the camera have in terms of local image-production? What were young people doing in the space of the studio? In what way did their images differ from earlier traditions of portraiture? I argue that young people succeeded in developing new photographic registers, as their repertoire of images greatly expanded through their exposure to a new range of images. The ubiquitous display of advertising on billboards, posters, magazines, free calendars, but most importantly cinema opened up new avenues of representation.\(^{276}\)

A Different Way of Praising

If portraiture was "a choice that praised", young people were making different choices than their parents as to how to praise the self. One very noticeable difference is that young African urban subjects displayed a greater visual awareness of their body, as well as a greater understanding of the effectiveness of body language, resulting in a dramatic expansion in the range of poses. The placement of hands for instance became a matter of meticulous attention: hands pointing towards the sky, stretching out sideways, defiantly beckoning towards the viewer, coquettishly curled around the hips, palms held upwards in a motion of prayer, fingers fashionably holding a cigarette, pinkies lifted (series figure 2.10 and 2.11). Facial expressions soften compared to the previous sombre countenance, with male and female subjects smiling, shy smiles for the most part but also several broad teeth-showing smiles.\(^{277}\)


\(^{277}\) According to Lynn Thomas, the emergence of the “teeth-showing smile” in photographic portraits can be dated to the early 1930s amongst progressive intellectual circles in South Africa, probably from the influence of advertisements for toothpaste and other toiletries. Glamorous attire and drop neckline were other signs of women beginning to break-away from the “somber countenance” that defined photographic traditions up until then. L. M. Thomas, "The Modern Girl and Racial Respectability in 1930s South Africa," \textit{Journal of African History} 47, no. 3 (2006), 172-76.
Figure 2.10: Series of unidentified men posing in Ngilima’s studio. Notice the importance of the hands in each pose, the slanted line of horizon. Note also the two-toned shoes and the watch in the middle picture in top row. Wattville, mid-1950s, NPC.
Figure 2.11: series of Ronald’s studio pictures featuring (unidentified) young women. These photographs highlight the gendered dimension of posing, including the position of the feet and type of gestures. Wattville, mid-1950s, NPC.
Figure 2.12: Young men sitting with legs wide apart. Wattville, mid-1950s, NPC.

Figure 2.13: Dynamic poses suggesting a suspended movement that translates the nature of city life. Wattville, mid-1950s, NPC.
Interestingly, poses acquired a more articulated gendered dimension. Men for instance would stand with their legs wide apart and their arms crossed or with their hands in their pockets. Alternatively they would often tilt their bodies forward and step forward, possibly echoing traditional Zulu warrior dances (picture on the left in figure 2.10). When sitting, some young men would keep their wide legs apart, at times exaggerating the split sideways (figure 2.12). Women held poses that rather showed off the curves of their silhouette, suggesting a subtle form of sensuality: slightly bending a knee, tilting their hips sideways, their hands held close to their face or along their hips, feet placed "like clock hands at twelve and two" (figure 2.11). Through this series of minute adjustments of the body (alignment of hips, knees and feet, tilting of the head, inclination of the torso, positioning of the hands, etc), poses become more dynamic and expressive. The paradoxical name "movie snap", which suggests the flow of narrative combined with the frozen image of a snapshot, accurately captures the gist of some of these poses, which often come across as a suspended movement (figure 2.13). As mentioned earlier, dynamism and mobility are two qualities that came to symbolise city-life.

Drum writer Lewis Nkosi characterised the pace in the city as following:

Johannesburg, unlike Durban, was also dense, rhythmic: it was swaggering and wasteful, totally without an inner life. People loved quickly, they lived fitfully; so profligate were they with emotion, so wasteful with their vitality, that it was very often difficult for them to pause and reflect on the passing scene.

The dynamic dimension of these poses is quite a contrast to the frozen air of the register of respectability, suggesting that a different set of values were now informing local photographic conventions. Aside from their dynamism, new poses were characterised by a distinct slackness, in particular among men. A slack body language, also contrasting strongly with the erect, stiff body that constituted the recognisable trademark of the register of respectability, featured as a component of the “urban swagger”. For some, physical slackness was associated with moral slackness, which was perceived as the unfortunate yet unavoidable consequence of

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278 Campt, Image Matters, 158. There are a few exceptions amongst Ngilima’s set of studio portraits of women putting on men's items of clothing such as men's hats, trousers or a man's jacket (5441Y, 4178U, 5246Y). In none of these examples did wearing men’s clothing translate into a ‘masculine’ way of posing. Posing in men's clothes appears to be more of a form of joke than an act of defiance of norms. In reverse, as far as I can tell I have come across no examples of men wearing items of female clothing in the entire collection, except for perhaps photo RN1169C (the subject to the left is wearing female clothes but has the shadow of a moustache and is rather flat-chested). For an interesting analysis of a studio photograph as an act of transgression of gender identities, see Dubin, "Impersonations and Revelations: Mysteries of a South African Photography Studio," .

growing up in the urban space. Parents would complain about their children disobeying, of becoming "cheeky" and no longer respecting the authority of the elders. Within the space of the studio, it translated into a multiplication of reclining or semi-reclining positions: leaning against the decorative table or against a friend's shoulder, sitting at the edge of the chair and leaning back (as opposed to sitting straight in a chair), leaning across two chairs... As a result, many of Ngimila photographs of young subjects are marked by curved lines outlining swaying bodies (series 2.14, in particular the last picture). These diagonal lines and curves effectively capture the eye of the viewer, in a quasi-visual manifestation of the subject's desire to bend conventions. Furthermore, young subjects were creative in their way of using the few props available in Ngilima’s studio to place their bodies innovatively within the conventional space of the studio: sitting on the chair set backwards, sprawling on the floor, reclining diagonally over two joint chairs, standing with a foot resting on the chair or on the lower rings of the decorative table, propping a leg on the back of a chair (figure 2.15).

Many young people came very carefully dressed, sometimes specifically to show off particular items of newly acquired (or borrowed) items of clothing. In one picture (middle picture of series 2.10), the young man shows off his "two-tone shoes" (that are clearly too big for him), while his hand gesture brings the viewer's attention to his watch. Interestingly, many others also came with worn-out clothes, in particular shabby "tekkies". "Tekkies" were worn by young women and men alike, probably favoured for their cheap price (figure 2.16). Young women easily combined pretty dresses and fashionable berets with “tekkies” without shoelaces. Young men would wear them together with a trendy trench coat or a snazzy hat. It is not clear whether this particular combination was a fashion statement or not, but it is in any case indicative that young people felt confident enough to forego the preceding duty to appear in one's "Sunday best". The photographs also suggest that by the 1950s, young people raised in the townships began to develop and assert a distinct youth clothing style, one that most likely clashed with their parents' notion of "Sunday Best", which was the very embodiment of aspirations to middle-class respectability. Young subjects were finding alternative ways of defining self-worth-- not only through middle-class respectability but through the flaunting of a certain urban style. And while wearing "two-toned" shoes definitely helped, pulling off this style was foremost a question of attitude and bodily performance, of demonstrating a certain

280 Campt, Image Matters, 173.
281 For a definition of “tekkies”, see glossary.
282 Campt, Image Matters, 163.
assertiveness. Photography thus underlined the performative dimension of taste— that it was not only a question of access and resources to key items such as clothes, it was also and foremost a question of how one wore them.\(^{283}\)

Figure 2.14: Series of studio photos marked by incurved lines outlining swaying bodies. The bottom two photographs show young men approximating the cowboy style. Wattville, mid-1950s, NPC.

\(^{283}\) What photographs do not let us perceive is of course the auditory dimension of this style, namely the ability to story-tell and talk tsotsitaal or urban jargon. See for instance David, "Popular Culture in South Africa: The Limits of Black Identity in Drum Magazine", 69; and R. Morris, “Style, Tsotsi-Style, and Tsotsitaal".
Figure 2.15: Series of photos of young men using the chair in an original way. Wattville, mid-1950s, NPC.
Tapping Into a New Image-Repertoire

Photographic performance went as far as adopting a theatrical dimension that was clearly inspired from cinema, which introduced a new element of drama into popular photography. White-owned studios in town had based their authority on the perpetuation of a particular tradition dating back from nineteenth century European portraiture. In contrast, location studios were spaces where young black people could bring in a more contemporary cultural baggage, including film noir and romantic comedies. Cinema’s main impact was to introduce the principle of narration and suspense into portraiture. Many of Ronald Ngilima’s portraits of young people, and in particular Thorence’s pictures, manifest a clear desire for story-telling: photographic subjects would mimic a hold-up scene, or a fighting scene (figure 2.05), in the middle of the action. Certain facial expressions translated mock surprise or shock, making viewers wonder what had just happened and perhaps prompting them to imagine a story that exceeded the frame of the photograph. Figure 2.17 for instance depicts a young woman sitting on the couch between two men, who seem to be fighting over her. Both men are facing each other and pointing at each other in a gesture of warning, while the young woman, facing the camera, holds a hand up to her head, looking confused. In another picture,

284 On the influence of film noir in South Africa, see Morris, "Style, Tsotsi-Style, and Tsotsitaal: The Histories, Aesthetics, and Politics of a South African Figure,".
the couple perform a touching scene of departure: the man in a suit and holding a briefcase is walking towards the camera but looking longingly back at his sweetheart, waving good-bye. She in turn smiles back at him, her eyes cast down and laying a hand on her heart. In yet another picture, the couple is sitting at the kitchen table, grinning at each other as they gaze into each other's eyes. Thorence’s wedding pictures, discussed in chapter one, also tapped into a similar register: in one photo, the bride sits on the lawn, with the dress spread out, holding a bouquet of flowers. The groom stands next to her, holding her hand as they beam at each other. Their gaze is locked into each other’s eyes, as if oblivious of the rest of the world (Figure 1.12). Such representation of the couple, heavily loaded with notions of romantic love, contrasts strongly with the above-mentioned tradition of airbrushed portraits depicting the respectable married couple. Both are products of fantasy (the fake veil spray-painted onto the female bride who may or may not have had a white wedding), but of very different inspiration. The reference to the Western notion of romance is also most likely the result of cinema's influence over people's imagination. The impact of cinema can also be found in the choice of certain names for studios and genres, for instance “Studio Novella”, or the “movie snap”, both of which suggest the notion of narration.285

Figure 2.17: A *mise-en-scène* portraying two men fighting over a troubled woman stuck in the middle. Wattville, mid-1950s, NPC.

Figure 2.18: Three examples of couples pretending to read. Wattville, mid-1950s, NPC.
These micro *mise-en-scènes* were not always extremely dramatic: most studio snapshots simply involve two or three individuals pretending not to acknowledge the camera's gaze and reading a magazine together, or pointing at something that they are holding (Figure 2.18). Several photos are framed as a face-off between two men checking each other out (Figure 2.19). Without matching the drama of some of the fighting scenes, such photographs are nevertheless evidence of how interaction amongst subjects or role-playing for the sake of narration became a major part of the photographic experience. This dimension of performance presupposes a very different rapport between the photographer and his subjects, where subjects are able to dictate to a much larger extent the “terms and conditions” for a portrait. According to an interviewee, Ronald Ngilima would, when requested, offer suggestions to help the sitter find his or her pose. But he was equally willing to let his subjects determine the outcome of their pictures. His younger subjects seemed to have a very clear idea of how they wanted to present themselves, in a style that often contrasted quite strongly with many of their parents' photographic conventions. One might think that a pious churchman and ex-preacher such as Ronald Ngilima would not approve of his male subjects performing mock crimes and

*Figure 2.19: Mise-en scène of young men in a mock “face-off”. Wattville, mid-1950s, NPC.*
smoking cigarettes, or female subjects posing in bathing suits. Perhaps he did not approve but simply accepted it as part of the adjustments required to remain in demand as a photographer. Another explanation is that these performances were tolerated because it was understood that it was simply make-believe, disconnected from "real life". Young black South Africans, and Ronald, had understood that the medium's appeal no longer lay in the idea of immortalising one's image, but in the potential of using it to escape assigned behaviours and to tell a story, potentially a dramatic one.

**Alternative (Masculine) Models of Self-Worth**

Cinema’s influence over photographic practices goes beyond simply introducing narration and dramatization into image-making. Cinema, but also crucially magazines and perhaps comic books, offered young people new role models that stimulated their imagination. *Drum* writer Lewis Nkosi commented that his generation of black writers entered the decade of the fifties with no literary heroes:

“We had to improvise because there were no models who could serve as moral examples for us in our private and public preoccupations. (...) In the moral chaos through which we were living we longed to find a work of literature, a drama or film, home-grown and about us, which would contain a significant amount of our experience and in which we could find our own attitudes and feelings.”

The Ngilima portraits suggest that young people turned to cinema and magazines to find alternative models of inspiration. As Stephen David reminds us, the primacy of pictures in magazines, billboards, cinema posters, advertisings was particularly significant as a "communicative structure", considering that less than 10% of the black population in South Africa was literate in the 1950s.

The magazine was by far the most popular choice of prop in the studio. The cheap price and accessibility of magazines made it a handy, ready-to-use prop that partially explains this popularity. African women would also frequently bring home older copies from their workplace, in particular those working as domestic servants for white families. The Ngilima collection includes portraits of women posing with magazines other than those targeting a

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black audience (mainly Zonk!, Bona and Drum), including Yours, Woman’s Journal, Look, and Life, featuring white women on the cover. Yet flicking through magazines and looking at the pictures of movie stars, cover girls, beauty queen competitions, and advert models was the main source of inspiration for women wanting to expand their range of poses. Figure 2.20 shows two portraits of Ronald Ngilima’s niece, Nombuyiselo Ndaba, taken a few years apart. Mrs Ndaba was born in 1941 at Modder Bee. Her father, Ronald’s brother, had died in her early years and she was consequently a frequent visitor to the Ngilima’s household in Wattville. In the first picture, Nombuyiselo is sitting with her arms and legs crossed, as she looks rather uncomfortably into the camera. Her plain dress with the high round neckline enhances the impression of pre-adolescent insecurity. Her whole posture conveys a certain hesitation and perhaps even reluctance towards the exercise. Mrs Ndaba remembers that she used to dislike photographs when she was "small", because she was too shy for the camera.288 The second portrait however shows her standing, holding a copy of Zonk! rolled up in her right hand. She is wearing a more fashionable print dress that shows off her feminine features, notably the belt hugging her slim figure and the generous neckline. Her free arm hangs loose alongside her body, while her right knee is slightly bent, adopting what was becoming the new norm for female posing. With a shy smile on her lips, she looks much more relaxed and open to the idea of being photographed. These two portraits point to the “work” behind adopting poses. Holding a pose does not come naturally; it required practice and observation, both of media images and of one's own body. Posing for the camera was a work of translation: it enabled young people to put into practice and thus embody the urban identity that they were claiming for themselves. Studio photography was the mode within which this new cosmopolitan image-repertoire was locally materialized. The performative element is what makes photographic portraiture such a key mode of vernacularization. For through the exercise of enactment, young people were “producing the very forms of subjectivity that the camera appeared to record”.289

288 Interview with Nombuyiselo Ndaba, 26.07.2012, Daveyton.
289 Campt, Image Matters, 162.
More specifically, magazines, cinema and the music scene (via album covers for instance) mediated multiple figures of masculinity. There was for instance the figure of the cowboy, the police detective, the jazz musician, the boxing champion, and above all, the tsotsi. All of these figures represented new forms of masculinity, based on notions of power, mobility, freedom and success. Though inspired by American cowboy and gangster movies, the figure of the tsotsi is perhaps the most distinctively South African. The term emerged in the late 1940s, probably an appropriation of the word zoot suit, the "ultimate in clothing", a term which Cab Calloway, the star black American actor and performer of Stormy Weather, popularised in his dictionary of jive terms. The zoot suit in the United States was a “subcultural gesture”,

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290 Stormy Weather (1943) is one of the earliest and most popular Hollywood musicals featuring a largely black cast. It was shown in South African black theatres between 1945 and 1950 (Morris, “Style, Tsotsi-Style, and Tsotsitaal”, 88). Many of my African male interviewees have quoted this film as being hugely influential when growing up.

popular within the underground jazz scene, that signalled a refusal to conform to manners of subservience. Worn in an extravagant style, the *zoot suit* became an emblem of ethnic identity for Afro-American and Mexican youth, in particular after the 1943 *zoot suit* riots in Los Angeles, when white servicemen transiting in the city attacked hundreds of young men dressed in this attire.\(^{292}\) Rosalind Morris makes the point that the term *zoot suit* could not have been imported to South Africa successfully, had it not had local linguistic and cultural resonances to build on.\(^{293}\) Hence the word *zoot suit* is also close to the Sepedi word *ho tsotsa*, which means "to sharpen", possibly referring to the peculiar shape of the trousers, wide-legged and tight-cuffed around the ankles, which was the *zoot suit*’s distinctive look. The *tsotsi* was a street-smart figure who earned a livelihood through criminal activities and gambling. *Tsotsism* rejected hard-work discipline, parental authority and "the mythic structures of authority in bourgeois society".\(^{294}\) It offered young men who were by large facing mass unemployment an attractive alternative for survival, without submitting to a white boss. "The *tsotsi* was emphatically associated with masculine violence, personal autonomy and unfettered mobility--everything apartheid withheld from black subjects".\(^{295}\) The romanticisation of this figure in *Drum* magazine coincided with the *tsotsi* phenomenon reaching a peak in Benoni Old Location and Wattville in the 1950s. A wave of inter-gang violence became a major topic of concern both for municipal powers and parents.\(^{296}\) Gang fights were mainly about establishing territorial rights over neighbourhoods, in particular over cinemas.\(^{297}\)


\(^{293}\) Morris, “Style, Tsotsi-Style, and Tsotsitaal”, 88.


\(^{295}\) Morris, “Style, Tsotsi-Style, and Tsotsitaal”, 88-89.


\(^{297}\) According to an interviewee, every boy was forced to be somewhat involved into gangs, by his sheer belonging to a particular neighbourhood. Falling in love with a girl from a territory belonging to a rival gang would often be the source of much drama and tensions. It became such a widespread phenomenon that certain neighbourhoods are still referred to by the gang name, long after the gangs have been dismantled. Interviews with Khubi Thabo and Petrus Mofokeng, 13.06.2012, Wattville.
Figure 2.21: Two examples of very elegantly dressed men, showing off their clothes. Whether inspired by the figure of the tsotsi or rather by the jazzman, both figures have in common a passion for fashion. Wattville, mid-1950s, NPC.
In its incarnation of rebellion and freedom, the tsotsi joined the solitary figure of Western cowboy, escaping the law and the authority of the State. The figure of the cowboy was the object of juvenile cult in various countries throughout the African continent, including the Congo and Tanzania. Both the tsotsi and the figure of the police detective dwell and flourish in the underground scene of the city and obtain their power from the streets, while obviously being on opposite sides of the law. The jazzman was free to move around, including at night, performing in townships and white concert halls alike. The jazz musician was generally popular, especially with women, and was usually incredibly stylish. As Benjamin Ngilima stated, jazz and fashion were two passions that went hand-in-hand.

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299 The pass laws made it difficult for Africans to circulate at night, unless they were granted special permission for work purposes, which needed to be clearly indicated in their passbook.
300 Interview with Benjamin Ngilima, 31.03.12, Wattville.
Similarly, the figure of the *tsotsi* also revolved around fashion, at a point where “criminality was endorsing the dimension of style” (figure 2.21). The *tsotsi* and the boxer shared an interest in physical demonstrations of power, though the *tsotsi* used knives and guns whereas the boxer relied solely on his body.

There are quite a few photos in the Ngilima collection specifically referencing boxing and bodybuilding (respectively 26 and 34 pictures each). Though most of these were taken outside of the studio, they deserve to be mentioned briefly, for they suggest a different visual tactic than those described above. Here, the male body is almost entirely stripped of clothing, in particular the bodies of bodybuilders. (Boxers wore boxing gear: boxing shorts, boxing shoes and boxing gloves; bodybuilders wore only briefs and were either barefoot or kept their normal street shoes and socks). All of the viewer's attention therefore converges on the body, purged of almost all accessories. The body stripped of all accessories becomes the site for conveying power, through the highly codified display of muscles and technique. The pose includes the highly recognisable boxing pose: arms close to the ribcage, closed fists held close to the face, ready to strike, one leg in front, back foot half raised (figure 2.22). Bodybuilders took on poses dictated by the bodybuilding discipline, as illustrated in the instruction posters visible in the background of the picture (figure 2.22).

While there were important nuances between these different male figures, such distinctions were often blurred in the studio. The genre of the informal snapshot enabled a certain fluidity between these cultural references. Ronald's subjects attempting to approximate the ideal of urban style with whatever they had at hand. A fedora, or better yet a Stetson, combined with a loosely tied cravat (in style of a bandana) and a slack physicality conveyed the more defiant attitude of the cowboy (see last two pictures of series 2.14). However the same fedora combined with a properly tied cravat, polished leather shoes and a jacket, achieved the sophisticated dandy look, in particular when combined with a watch or a proper belt. The pose completed the outfit, for instance the way one held a cigarette or held out one's jacket. The trench coat was part of the dandy's wardrobe, popularised by the film noir aesthetic and cartoon characters such as the police detective Dick Tracy. Ideally combined with a fedora or cap, it presented the advantage that it could hide one's shabby clothes and perhaps steer

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301 Morris, “Style, Tsotsi-Style, and Tsotsitaal”, 89.
attention away from the grubby *tekkies*\(^{302}\) (figure 2.22, right picture). The trench coat was powerful enough a prop, that even when combined with the wrong accessories (a bob hat and *tekkies*), the subject could possibly get away with it. Often, young men accumulated different symbols: in figure 2.24, the young man is wearing a fedora and cravat tied the cowboy way, and in addition is holding a vinyl, an explicit reference to jazz.

![Figure 2.23: The fedora hat and a cravat loosely tied around the neck refer to the cowboy style (left), while the trench coat evokes rather the figure of the detective in *film noir* (right). Wattville, mid-1950s, NPC.](image)

\(^{302}\) The popularity of this look anticipated the huge popularity of photo-comic character Lance Spearman (aka "The Spear"), created by Drum Publications in the 1960s. Spearman was loved for being sophisticated, clever, brave, and above all, African.
“Street-smart” as the New Ethos

Together, these various male figures, in particular that of the tsotsi, constituted cultural material that Ngilima’s young male sitters mobilised to display an alternative set of values than that of respectability. The series of five negatives (figure 2.05) depicting three men pretending to fight each other is perhaps one of the best examples of how young people were redefining the photographic conventions of the snapshot. With each shot, these young men are portrayed taking turns in playing the role of the "bad guy", holding up the knife to the "victim" of this imaginary aggression. Yet the five shots do not convey aggressiveness, frustration or hatred; violence is here mobilized in an attempt to create a spectacular or exuberant scene. The series of a dozen mock fighting scenes scattered throughout the collection, involving hatchets, guns and knives, were not as much a glorification of violence than a theatrical rendition of it, in a quasi burlesque way. In one of these pictures, a young man is holding up a brick, as if he was about to smash it down on his friend who is sprawled at his feet, pretending to be already dead or passed out. Yet the “aggressor” is smiling shyly as he gazes calmly at the camera, his sheepish facial expression annulling any potentially menacing effect. Showing the series of fighting scenes to various male interviewees, I
collected mainly chuckles, head shakes and amused looks in response. "These are just small boys", said Christopher Mateta with a dismissive gesture. Khubi Thabo also laughed at the above-mentioned photograph of the two men, stating that they were clearly country bumpkins. Thabo pointed out that they were holding the knife "totally wrong", as one would never succeed in stabbing someone holding a knife that way. Thabo agreed with Mateta, concluding that the two subjects were “just playing”.

I suggest that these subjects from this short series were making a symbolic reference to violence as part of a broader attempt to look “street-wise”. Being “street-wise” or “clever” was a quality that was highly valued amongst young urban males, as an essential requirement for surviving the city but also to gain respect amongst one’s peers. Appearing “street-wise” constituted an alternative to bourgeois respectability in the quest for self-value and self-assertion. The reference to fighting, or any kind of violence, is usually associated with being “rough” or “street-wise”, which is the antithesis of respectability. Returning to the three men from figure 2.05, their performance of violence expressed their rejection of law and order, while the shabbiness of their clothes possibly expressed their lack of concern vis-à-vis the imperative to appear respectable.

In the 1930s, a younger generation of radical black activists rose to prominence in the 1930s in the Western Cape. They rejected the older and more conservative generation of leaders’ strategy of betting on the making of a bourgeois self, revolving around a certain “cult of respectability”. Instead, they “demonstrated an oppositional ethos in their ‘uncivilised’ behaviour”: they were loud, irreverent and ill-mannered and poked fun at middle-class seriousness and pretence through mockery, laughter and wit. Many of the new elements that young black men introduced into black studio photography would also suggest an oppositional ethos. Their pictures were extravagant and flamboyant, light, even silly. They seemed to glorify violence and gangsterism over law and order, physical strength and style over civilised behaviour and education, shabbiness and performance over Sunday clothing. However, an important distinction between the Western Cape radicals and Ronald’s sitters is

303 The distinction between "small boys" and grown-up men has less to do with age than with certain social achievements, such as marriage or getting a stable job. Interview with Christopher Mateta, 18.04.2011, Wattville.
304 Informal conversation with Khubi Thabo, June 2011, Daveyton.
305 Goodman, Respectability and Resistance, xviii.
that these photographs were punctual performances taking place within the safe enclosed space of the studio. These portraits tell us about these young men’s fantasies of idealized urban identities, but not whether they were consistent with this attitude in their daily life. To a certain extent, the genre of the snapshot legitimised the performance of ‘uncivilised behaviour’ and of rebellion. The “street-wise” performance did not by any means preclude the performance of respectability. In one case, a young man identified as “Maghasela boy” is found in several pictures, included in snapshots taken in Ngilima’s studio with his friends and in a family portrait with his parents (figure 2.25). In the family portrait, he is wearing a spotless white shirt buttoned up to the top, sitting behind his stern-looking father. In the studio shots, he takes on stylised poses and wears a cravat tied loosely around his neck. His sample of images suggests that young men were able to conform to both genres, and simply adapted to the demands of the photographic occasion.
What these young men from Wattville had in common with the radical black activists from the Western Cape was that both grew up in the much tougher socio-political environment of pre-war years, where the chances of social mobility were becoming slimmer, in particularly after the implementation of the Bantu education in the post-1948 period. It had become clear for many young black men growing up in the township that the pursuit of the bourgeois civilised self as a way to claim equality with whites was a strategy that had had limited success and that was in any case out of their reach. Lewis Nkosi commented on how young people of his generation despised the literary character Stephen Kumalo, the hero of Alan Paton’s 1948 novel *Cry, the Beloved Country*. In the book, the Reverend Stephen Kumalo makes the journey from his village in Natal to Johannesburg to search for his lost son and to help his sister.

We, the young, also despised Stephen Kumalo, of course, for his failure to come to terms with the city. (...) I suppose, in a sense, the war between us and Stephen Kumalo was therefore a war between two generations—the
older generation which looked forward to fruitful change under the Smuts Government and the young who saw themselves beginning their adult life under a more brutal apartheid regime.\textsuperscript{307}

What the Ngilima portraits simply tell us is that youth culture succeeded in finding in studio photography a platform of expression through which they could articulate a social world of their own, based on their generation’s experience of the urban space and of the visual economy of the 1950’s, a visual economy that provided them with new heroes resonating more closely with their preoccupations.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has hopefully made clear how the proliferation of black actors in the field of photography resulted in a multiplication of photographic registers. Until black photographers started bringing photography closer to the township, photographic conventions were defined almost exclusively according to a white European tradition of portraiture. The register of respectability was initially developed within the white-owned studios, where painted backdrops suggesting European interiors accounted for the subject’s civilised status. While white-owned studios remained a key site for generating this kind of photography, black working-class sitters found nevertheless ways to perform this register without the elegant backdrop but within their own living environment, by adopting the right body language and restrained attitude.

The emergence of black-owned studios in the location in the 1950s altered profoundly the relationship between the photographer, the subject and the camera. The technological simplification of the camera made photography accessible and affordable to a much broader range of people, including young people, who were pioneers in establishing the carefree tone of the snapshot. As photography became a leisure activity, young people expanded the range

\textsuperscript{307} Nkosi, \textit{Home and Exile}, 7-8.
of the "photographable" — that is, to renegotiate what is expected from a photographic portrait and what it is it meant to consist of. This shift translates linguistically in the difference people make between a portrait and a “snap”. A portrait was something more elaborate and special, to be hung in the lounge; the “snap” was more ephemeral, to be kept in a wallet, something one did for oneself, “just for fun”. No longer interested in immortalising a respectable image of oneself, young people used photography to embody and project fantasies of urban sophistication. Beyond clothing, urban styles were defined by one’s ability to make references to popular culture, whether in the way of posing or of story-telling (the micro mise-en-scènes). As a result, portraiture coming out of location studios in the 1950s is characterised by informality, both in terms of its material dimension (small cheap prints, minimal studios) and in terms of people's playful relation to the camera and the photographic event. Appropriation of a medium is therefore not simply a question of visual content (aesthetics and style), but in the act of renegotiating the collective agreement and understanding of what a photographic portrait consists of and what it is for.

This evolution in photographic registers, from the register of respectability to the one of informality, is by no means specific to the townships, nor to South Africa. Elsewhere in the world — for instance in the Netherlands — the emergence of ambulant street-photographers in the 1920’s and 30’s in public spaces such as at the beachfront played a big role in inducing a more informal way of practising photography and in establishing an association between photography and recreation. Writing about the tintype era in America from 1860 to 1890, Geoffrey Batchen identified the tintype's cheapness and accessibility as the two fundamental conditions that enabled a shift towards a more informal and playful practice of photography in America. "By being both inexpensive and familiar, this type of photograph encouraged the expression of humour and play on the part of the subjects, turning the act of being photographed into a kind of theatrical game". There are remarkable similarities between the mid-19th century tintypes and the Ngilima collection in terms of challenging some of the dominant social codes. In tintypes, subjects also brandished props, acted out roles, posed in an exaggerate manner, and pretended to mug each other. "The tintype, when one could afford it

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repeatedly, was a great promoter of multiple identities and a sense of liberation from the prison of the proscribed role.\textsuperscript{311} An interesting difference is that the Ngilima collection, unlike tintypes, present no cases of subjects pulling funny faces, cross-dressing,\textsuperscript{312} or engaging in self-deprecating humour. Photography for black South African youth remained a "choice that praises": while young people did indeed explore new roles for themselves, it was never at the expense of reaffirming a positive sense of self-worth, a sort of "upgraded" version of oneself.\textsuperscript{313} More self-confident of their taste shaped by urban living, young subjects did not hesitate in innovating in terms of poses, giving them an unprecedented dynamic and physical quality. Within a rudimentary studio, the body, rather than decor, became the most important site for projecting identities. Young people, in particular men, found alternative ways of affirming self-worth, through the performance of an urban style. This style included an important sartorial dimension (for those who could afford it or have access to it) but was above all a question of body language and attitude. Finding inspiration from various sources of media, young people used the space of the studio to translate this new image-repertoire within the means at their disposal. How young men adapted, mixed up and combined references to various figures from popular culture is further evidence for the fact that urban identity was, in fact, multiple. Studio photography was about experimenting with different looks and different roles (figure 2.25). One register did not substitute the other, rather both coexisted side-by-side and could be equally mobilised depending on one’s photographic needs, which evolve with age. The register of respectability therefore became a marker of generational difference. I have myself experienced this while photographing my interviewees: while they owned informal studio snapshots of themselves dating from the 1950s, they presently preferred being photographed according to the register of respectability, as it is considered more suitable for depicting seniors. Similarly, my interviewees tended to approve of the Ngilima photographs that I showed them depicting senior subjects and disapprove of what their own peers were doing some fifty years ago.

\textsuperscript{311} S. Kasher, America and the Tintype (New York; Göttingen: International Center of Photography: Steidl, 2006), 96.
\textsuperscript{312} On the absence of cross-dressing in the Ngilima collection, see footnote 278.
\textsuperscript{313} John Peffer relates the example of a studio in Soweto, which used a stamp that included the following motto: “izithombo ezixolisayo”. Peffer translates it as “‘likenesses that forgive’—that make amends for your faults. It also means ‘pictures which make you beautiful’”. Peffer, "Vernacular Recollections and Popular Photography in South Africa ", 122
One thing is clear: that a young urban culture did not simply "leak" from the media into the townships. Photography was one way through which individuals could adopt an urban style and a particular self-image. Yet as a "youth activity", it also played a big role in legitimising the concept of an autonomous youth culture—the notion that young people formed a distinct age group with their own cultural interests and taste-- by producing and reproducing references to itself. Carlo Ginzberg quotes the work of linguist Benjamin Lee Whorf, who emphasized that “language does not give names to pre-existing things or concepts so much as it articulates the world of our experience”.314 Similarly, photography as an embodied practice enabled young people to articulate the idea of a youth culture. In figure 2.26, one can see examples of young people gazing at albums containing photographs of youth people taken in the studio. Both pictures depict a group of young people crowded around the dining table. One of them holds a photographic album open at a page where various "after-hours" studio prints are discernible, with the caption "Teenagers" in block letters appearing in the middle of the album page. The album participates in an ensemble of signs, which includes the bottle of Castle beer, the large smiles, the active gestures, and in the foreground a young man leaning backward holding up a glass. Together, these signs frame these young people as "youth": carefree, having fun and self-conscious of the process of self-fashioning.

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314 Ginzberg, “From Aby Warburg to E.H. Gombrich”, 52.
Figure 2.26: Two of Thorence’s pictures of a party. The bottom picture is an enlargement of a detail from the top right picture, showing the open album of studio pictures with the word “TEENAGERS” as caption. Wattville, early 1960s, NPC.