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Chapter Three

A Space of One’s Own: Young African Women and their Photographic Practices

One of my interviewees, Judith Ngubane owns quite a large collection of photographs. Her collection, to my surprise, included prints that she took and developed herself. Her father, who was a photographer, had given her older sister a Kodak Brownie camera, so that she could earn some pocket money during her college years. Judith eventually borrowed the camera, which she used to photograph her own friends and boyfriend (future husband). Judith and her friends seem to have used her father’s darkroom, creating prints that showed subjects cut out in different polygonal shapes and juxtaposed against a dark background (figure 3.1). This radically new way of framing the subject, unlike anything I saw in the Ngilima collection, suggests a certain willingness to experiment with the medium.
Her photo collection includes a particularly stunning picture of her, taken in a studio in Johannesburg around the mid-1960s (figure 3.2). She is depicted wearing a strapless dress with a flower brooch pinned onto it, and earrings. Bust shots like these were more unusual, full-body length being the preferred option. Bust shots were usually used reserved for I.D pictures for administrative purposes. Yet this picture is clearly borrowing from a different register. Rather than a full frontal shot, her head is turned and tilted to the side. She appears to be slightly leaning in, as she gazes into the camera, positioned slightly above her eye level. Through a game of light and shadows, the spotlight accentuates her cheekbone and the roundness of her bare shoulders, bestowing an air of cinematographic glamour and drama to the portrait. The combination of the bare shoulders, the side-ways glance, her leaning-in, the plunging view on her bust, creates a tension between what is revealed and what is disclosed, between the bareness of her bust, and the impossibility of reading her expression. Is it sadness? Melancholy? For me, the portrait conveys at once a sense of vulnerability and of

315 In the interview, Judith Ngubane said the photo was taken in the mid-1950s, but then she was not yet working in Johannesburg, which is when the photo was taken. Interview with Judith Ngubane, 24.02.2012, Daveyton.
resolution at the same time. By then Judith was working in a garment factory in Hillbrow (Johannesburg), and was mother of two (or three) children. Her husband, a successful composer and saxophone player, was at the peak of his musical career, often away touring with his band or for the musical he was acting in, a period that Judith remembers as characterized by loneliness. She confessed with a laugh that the strapless dress was in fact an improvised garment made out of a curtain that she had found in a heap in a corner of the studio. When I asked her what the photographic event was and for whom the photograph was intended to, she responded: “Just for me. For nobody else but myself”.

![Image of Judith Ngubane](image_url)

**Figure 3.2:** Judith Ngubane in a studio in Johannesburg, improvising a glamorous evening gown with a curtain found at the studio. Circa 1960. Judith Ngubane’s private photo collection.

Judith’s stories were surprising to me on many levels: for one, it gave a very different sense of young women’s engagement with the medium of photography than I had had until then. My initial impression was that it was mainly young men who were most actively engaging with

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316 The exact date of the photograph was unknown, but was probably from around the early 1960s.
317 Interview with Judith Ngubane, 24.02.2012, Daveyton.
the studio. The previous chapter, with its focus on alternative models of masculinity, may possibly convey the sense that young men were being more innovative and creative as photographic subjects than their female counterpart. Judith and her sister are the only black female photographers from the 1950s that I have come across so far. I was also taken by the mystery that surrounded this photograph and by the contrast between the suggested glamour and the reality of the shabby curtain. Judith offered no particular narrative around this image. The mystery around this portrait enhanced its effect on me, as I began projecting introspection and loneliness in those melancholic dark eyes. The idea that one would have one’s portrait made for oneself fascinated me, because it disrupts what is expected from a photograph.

A photograph has the particularity of constantly navigating between the concept of the “individual” and the “social”. As art historian Luís Priamo wrote, the photographic portrait is an image of the self, for others. Though it is private and even intimate, it is fundamentally oriented towards the outside and therefore exposed to the weight of social judgement. For Priamo, the lens of the camera is inevitably the gaze of society. Posing for the camera implies an audience: photographic portraiture is an exercise of the display of the self, where posing for the camera is akin to being on stage facing an invisible audience. The model of airbrushed portraits in their oval wooden frame certainly falls within this description: such an object of memorabilia was designed to hang in the living room for the world to see and to admire. Judith’s particular photo was not made with the intention of being shared with friends or family. What is the raison d’être of a photograph, when kept hidden and/or made only for oneself? How would this exercise have impacted Judith’s perception of herself? What do photographs like these tell us about black feminine self-representations and their role in women’s lives?

While I am unable to assert exactly what this photograph might have meant emotionally or psychologically to Judith, I can try to relate it with other female interviewees’ similar accounts of their dealing with photographs. The main question structuring this chapter is thus: what did photography do for black female producers and consumers of photographs? What

318 “(...) las convenciones sociales que distinguen y caracterizan el retrato fotográfico como imagen de si para los otros, es decir, imagen privada o íntima volcada hacia el afuera y, por lo tanto, expuesto a lo social”. L. Priamo, "Fotografía Y Vida Privada, 1870-1930," in Historia De La Vida Privada En La Argentina, ed. Fernando Devoto and Marta Maderos (Taurus, 1999), 279-280.

319 Another line of interrogation is also: why am I able to see this photograph now? How and when did Judith decide it was all right to show it, and even accept to have a foreign researcher reproduce it?
did photographic portraits, as a practice of self-representation and as an object, enable in their lives?

**A Gendered Perspective of Photography:**

This chapter attempts to reflect more deeply on the significance of photographic portraiture in young women’s lives. I decided to address this topic in a separate chapter for several reasons. First, I suggest that detecting the significance of women’s engagement with the medium requires closer and more attentive reading of the photographs in relation to the female subjects’ lives. Unlike young men’s buoyant taking-over of the studio space, young women’s engagement with the camera manifested itself in more discreet and subtle ways. One needs to pay attention to the stories behind the making of the image, details that lie beyond the frame. Judith’s conversion of the curtain into a glamorous attire is one example of how young women put their imagination to work, resulting in a tangible object that beautified reality. In other words, this photograph represents a significant moment whereby Judith made herself the subject of an aesthetic experience. Yet it is an example that could easily have been overlooked, had Judith not provided the details of the story behind the making of this picture.

Second, I suggest that studio photographs are a key source to reconsider the role of women in the making of a black urban youth culture. While the previous chapter was focused on the visual analysis of a large set of images, chapter three is more deeply engaged with the question of how visual material can contribute to the historiography of black township culture, by adopting a gender perspective. Previous scholarship suggests that young women were reduced to the role of passive and subordinate objects within the parameters of “tsotsism”.320 *Tsotsis* captured the imagination of many black writers of the time, in particularly the journalists working for *Drum* magazine. Until now, cultural historiography of urban spaces in apartheid South Africa has tended to pay disproportionate attention to male identities, in its focus on “tsotsism” and *Drum* magazine, both of which can be said to

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320 In his gender analysis of “tsotsism”, Glaser concludes that the extension of traditional gender values in urban communities, which gave boys more independence and freedom than girls, ensured that young boys were the ones defining the parameters of the new urban youth culture. In this masculine subculture, girls were reduced to the role of passive trophies or “molls” over whom young men would fight, as a way to assert their status and their masculinity. See C. Glaser, "The Mask of Zorro: Sexuality and Gender Relations in the Tsotsi Subculture on the Witwatersrand," *African Studies* 51, no. 1 (1992).
represent an overtly male viewpoint. Personal photographic archives potentially counter this bias—studio photography being a medium through which young women were able to represent themselves.

Patricia Hayes warns against celebrating visibility too quickly, “for the act of ‘making visible’ can silence women further. Visibility does not necessarily mean ‘voice’, or empowerment”. Underlining the ambiguity of visibility in the archives, she writes: “The African woman visually fills the frame, unlike the way she subsists on the edges in the official report”. Yet the photographs I am analysing here are far from a case of African women “handing over their intimacy”, being pushed into becoming visible for administrative purposes. Rather young African women in South Africa, as instigators of their own image-production, used photography to symbolically assert their participation in youth culture. Not only did they control how they were being represented, they also critically controlled the extent to which these images were in circulation, choosing whether or not to reveal them, and to whom, according to their preference, thus creating new spaces of intimacy.

**Negotiating Intimacy**

Studio photographs from the 1950s are all the more interesting considering the number of social and economic changes women experienced at the time on the back of industrial expansion and “unprecedented” economic and political activity by African women. Women’s portraits allow us to grasp how they negotiated the social pressures they were experiencing at the time: negotiating love within the framework of traditional social conventions, of finding ways to develop intimacy amidst overcrowded living conditions and general surveillance, of making time for leisurely activities in a culture that tended to overburden them with domestic

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323 Luís Priamo makes a crucial distinction between photographs as documents of private lives and photographs as a symbolic object within the economy of private relationships. In Argentina in the late 19th century and early 20th century, these two types overlapped, but only for those who could afford to purchase their portrait, i.e. the elite. Economically disenfranchised subjects were occasionally depicted within the intimate space of their homes. But such pictures were taken by professionals who would then sell them as postcards or as illustrations for articles and reports describing them as “social problems”. “The poor classes- and in particular the marginalised groups, such as the indigenous, ‘handed over’ their intimacy to photography, without engaging with it”. Priamo, "Fotografía Y Vida Privada, 1870-1930," 276.
chores, of producing a positive self-representation in defiance of the critical discourse on their subject. For instance, by the time Judith had her portrait made in Johannesburg, she had like many other women of her generation gone through the painful experience of falling pregnant outside of wedlock. She was in her last year of her nursing studies; her pregnancy resulted in her being dismissed from nursing school and thrown out of her father’s house. \textsuperscript{324} Today, as a grandmother whose respectability is no longer questioned, Judith was able to describe her father’s furious reaction with a laugh, but admitted that at the time the event was “very sad” and had made her cry.

The core of this chapter is concerned with how photography as a practice, a material object and representational device was one of the creative ways by which young women could exercise a form of agency over their lives, if anything in the way they imagined themselves. And if, as Arjun Appadurai argued, the work of imagination is “a constitutive feature of modern subjectivities”, the impact of photography on young women’s imaging of themselves must then be considered not simply as belonging to the personal psyche but also as a “collective, social fact”. \textsuperscript{325} I argue that control over the representational economy participated in the development of new subjectivities and intimacies characteristic of the generation born and raised in the urban areas.

For this, I have considered photography both in terms of iconic representation and of collective practice. I begin by paying attention to the materiality of the photographs and the economics of it, which concurred to make photography a crucial element of romantic courtship. It is for instance the perception of the studio as a “safe” place for women to go, the small prints made cheaply suiting young women’s need to circulate them or to keep them as secret objects, the practice of keeping albums. The importance of these practices comes to light when contextualised within the history of a discourse that condemned and sought to control young women’s sexuality. I then focus on how the canons of visualizing black femininity evolved, as young women found other ways of “praising themselves” that gravitated around the notion of leisure. Young African women both recycled and departed from the representation of femininity in black magazines and from the doctrine of respectability that had dominated photographic practices until then. While chapter two

\textsuperscript{324} On the theme of nursing and the need to control women’s sexuality across the racial line, see S. Marks, \textit{Divided Sisterhood} (London: MacMillan Press, 1994).

focuses on Ngilima’s studio pictures, I have expanded my database of images for this chapter to include images originating from my interviewee’s own personal archive and the Ngilima photographs produced outside of the Ngilima studio.

South Africa was not the only country where photography became a tool for postcolonial subjects to fashion themselves. But considering the country’s particular trajectory, the history of the making of black modern subjectivity in South Africa is a politically charged one. How to understand photographic self-fashioning in relation to the longer colonial project of creating black bourgeois individuals, which included embracing capitalism and private property? To what extent were black South Africans really “free” to fashion themselves, considering the racist social structures that permeated their lives? A theoretical section therefore precedes my analysis of African women’s photographic practices, in which I attempt to unpack the notion of the “self”, in order to avoid making certain assumptions on the closely related yet distinct notions of privacy and individualism. Privacy being a cultural construct, black South Africans did not necessarily long for a more private form of living, akin to the model of reduced nucleus family that characterised white suburbs. Similarly, claiming one’s individuality through photography did not necessarily signify one’s embracing of capitalist values and the ideology of individualism.

Photography helps us think about how South Africans articulated individuality and intimacy with their practice of image-making in their own way. Keith Breckenridge has argued that the private sphere in South Africa paradoxical character, at once private and collaborative. Hence even when possessing basic literacy skills, migrant workers perceived courting by letter as a skill that called for a collective effort, relying on the assistance of Amanuenses (clerks) and friends. The public nature of reading and writing, Brekenridge argues, means that love letters were “about the individual self, but not about interiority”. Photographs are equally

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327 I do not feel qualified to comment on black South African’s perception of privacy-- whether they longed for it or not, whether it was perceived positively or not-- simply on the basis of their photographs. For instance, several female interviewees commented on how lonely it felt to move from the Old Location to the new house in Wattville and to find themselves in such a big house with so few people.

ambivalent, as they are intensely personal, at times even secret (for instance Judith’s studio picture), yet were also produced in collaboration with a photographer and in tune with a community of photographic clients. Through a local practice of photography, new forms of romantic intimacy developed despite the lack of privacy in these women’s lives. More broadly, this chapter looks at the relationship between photography, gender and the production of a private sphere in township culture.
PART ONE. OF PHOTOGRAPHY AND SELF-MAKING:
SOME THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Indexicality, Identification and Identity

To assert that photography enabled new subjectivities suggests that the medium introduced something new, something innovative into the equation. Yet scholars such as Tobias Wendel and Rowland Abiódún, have underlined the continuity between photography and former local strategies of self-presentation, such as painted portraiture and sculpture, thus questioning the notion that photography represented a rupture with prior traditions of portraiture.\footnote{See for instance T. Wendl, "Future Remembrance: Photography and Image Arts in Ghana," (Germany 1998). R. Abiódún, "Àkó-Graphy: Òwò Portraits," in \textit{Portraiture and Photography in Africa}, ed. John Peffer and Elisabeth L. Cameron (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013).} Photography did not so much displace local practices but it rather renewed prior forms of making meaning.\footnote{P. Meier, "At Home in the World: Portrait Photography and Swahili Mercantile Aesthetics" in \textit{A Companion to Modern African Art}, ed. G. Salami and Monica Blackmun Visonà (Oxford: John Wiley and Sons, 2013).}

It could be argued that indexicality, that is, the seemingly unique physical relationship between image and referent, constituted photography’s novelty. The mechanical capturing of someone’s trace in the form of light leads to an extremely realist mode of representation, which at first glance differs from more abstract form of evoking personal presence, such as sculptures or effigies. The genre of identity pictures for administrative purposes developed the idea that one’s unique identity could accurately be “fixed” on film, a claim that many artists in photography succeeded in contesting.\footnote{See for instance the work of artist Cindy Sherman, amongst others her series “Untitled Film Stills” (1977-80), in which she creates multiple self-portraits that frame her in many different situations and that present a persona that seems to be endlessly shifting and impossible to “fix”.} Questioning the relationship between photography, realism and identity has been at the core of recent investigation on African photography.\footnote{See for instance Behrend, "I Am Like a Movie Star in My Street: Photographic Self-Creation in Postcolonial Kenya," ; J. Borgatti, "Likeness or Not: Musings on Portraiture in Canonical African Art and Its Implications for African Portrait Photography," in \textit{Portraiture and Photography in Africa}, ed. John Peffer and Elisabeth L. Cameron (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013).} Jean Borgatti argues that the interpretation of a photographic portrait will differ from culture to culture, depending on factors such as the local concepts of personhood and individualism and the prevailing aesthetic.\footnote{Borgatti, “Likeness or Not”, 318.} What emerges from these studies is that...
realism was also far from being the dominant mode of understanding the medium of photography. Werner has characterised post-independence African studio photography, as a moment where Africans passed “from an authoritarian mimesis to a subverted one, as people no longer submit to the mimesis but rather mix fiction with reality and create personal worlds”. Hence while the colonial state anchored the relationship between photography, surveillance and identification, Africans have used photography more as a “theatre of the persona”, a site where one articulated a distinctive visual appearance that both constructed identity and symbolically transformed it for the better. What made photography so popular across the world was not its ability to accurately record reality but its promise to embellish it. Kobena Mercer, commenting on Malian photographer Seydou Keita, argued that the point of photography in this context was to “reveal a ‘self’ not as he or she actually is, but ‘just a little more than what we really are’”. For Behrend, indexicality was clearly not photography’s innovative characteristic. It lay instead in its mass-produced nature of its consumption and circulation. In other words, it was its status as a commodity that, like money, led towards creative discontinuities.

It is unfortunately beyond the scope of my research to identify the links between photography and “local media and image tradition”, which Tobias Wendl calls “entangled tradition”. A researcher with a good understanding of Zulu or one of the multiple other African languages spoken in Wattville would certainly have been in a better position to identify the concepts of personhood that informed the cultural codes and conventions of portraiture and that animated such practices. Future research could be done on local concepts of individuation, along the lines of studies on how African subjects translated notions of “personal singularity and social multiplicity” in their photographic practice. Notwithstanding this limitation, I maintain that photography did in fact introduce a new dimension in the process of making selves, for the simple reason that photography offered an experience of the self unlike any other medium. Because of its mirroring effect, photography is an exercise through which the subject feels

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336 Behrend, "I Am Like a Movie Star in My Street’ : Photographic Self-Creation in Postcolonial Kenya,”, 47.
s/he is becoming an object. As described above, Africans have dissociated indexicality from identification and interpreted it differently. But when looking at our portrait, we are given a glimpse into how others perceive us, seeing ourselves “as mediated by the gaze of another”. It would be fallacious to argue that photography in any way marked the beginning of consciousness of the selves. As Stephen Greenblatt eloquently writes, “after all, there were always selves—a sense of personal order, a characteristic mode of address to the world, a structure of bounded desires—and always some element of deliberate shaping in the formation and expression of identity”. Prior to widespread access to the camera, black South Africans were also not short of other modes of self-expression, for instance dance, songs, bead-work, pottery, painting, and for the elite, writing. But as a site for self-projection, photography offered a different experience of identity, one that is both aesthetic and playful, and which gave scope for experimentation. It also heightened the importance of one’s visual appearance in the complex operation of constructing imagined selves and in the act of communicating it to others. Photography prompted women to invest in their image and in themselves as image. To come back to Behrend’s conclusion on the real innovative dimension of photography, I hold that it was the new conditions of consuming and circulating photographs that opened new avenues for engaging with romantic love, “a central feature of modern subjectivity”.

**Problematics of Self-Fashioning: Between Agency and Social Structures**

Abigail Solomon-Godeau presents the fascinating case of the Countess of Castiglione, who over the course of her adult lifetime in France during the 2nd Empire commissioned over 400 photographs of herself, most of which seemed to have been commissioned only for herself, similar to Judith’s photo studio. Unlike other female clients who followed the photographer’s directives, the countess seemed to have dictated many aspects of her photographs, including the mise-en-scène, the pose, props, costume, and accessories. Many of these photographs would have been considered shocking for transgressing the photographic conventions of the

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time, in particular the series where she lifts her dress high enough to reveal her bare legs. Though considering this collection as a remarkable and rare example of feminine representation, Solomon Godeau also highlights “the problematic and contradictory aspects of the countess’ attempt at photographic self-creation”. The countess, she argues, has absorbed and internalized the desire of others (in particular the male gaze) to such an extent that “there is no space, language, or means of representation for any desire that might be termed her own”.344

Solomon-Godeau’s analysis frames the problematic of self-fashioning in relation to power structures. To argue that black South Africans were simply free agents in the process of self-fashioning is problematic. On the one hand, it implies that the medium of photography was like a blank page, devoid of meanings and ideologies already encrypted and encoded in it from other previous or concomitant practices, such as the genre of I.D pictures. On the other hand, it also does not take into account the fact that black South Africans, in particular black South African women, were having to negotiate their agency against the limits that social structures— from the apartheid state and its system of racial hierarchy, to patriarchal family structures— imposed on them.345

Stephen Greenblatt was the first to coin the expression “self-fashioning”, to describe the development amongst the elite in 16th century Britain of “an increased self-consciousness about the fashioning of human identity as a manipulable, artful process”.346 Influenced by Foucault’s notion of “technology of the self”, Greenblatt however stressed the limits of this illusion of autonomy, underlining the power of institutions such as the family, the church and the state, in influencing the range and shape of this self-fashioning. Greenblatt reminds us that self-making does not take place in an ideological void. In Western Europe, the fashioning of modern subjectivities went hand in hand with a broader change of life-styles that culminated in the 19th century, a period described as the “golden age of private lives”, in which “privacy as an idea” was developed.347 Such changes included for instance the privatisation of love and sexual relationships, the rise of the nuclear family, who would retire to the “drawing room”.

345 E. R. Salo, "Respectable Mothers, Though Men and Good Daughters: Producing Persons in Manenberg Township South Africa" (PhD, Emory University, 2004), 22.
346 Greenblatt, Renaissance Self-Fashioning, 2.
while daily chores and such activities were happening increasingly behind closed doors. In other words, self-fashioning accompanied the rise of individualism in shaping a Western notion of the individual.

When applied to South African society, a discussion on self-making has to be framed within the context of colonial history, where the emergence of the private bourgeois individual was in large part the result of colonial history. As Jean and John Comaroff have shown, missionaries strove to develop elements of possessive individualism amongst their African congregation members. Their missionary project was about reshaping Tswana culture and subjectivities according to the colonizer’s image, creating discreet individuals through dress, styling, personal hygiene, private property (fencing of plots) and writing.  

It is hence important to specify that photographic self-fashioning in Wattville may have encouraged “watchfulness towards the self”, without necessarily implying that it entailed a more individualistic mode of life, or that it produced more “bourgeois” individuals. This said, there is no doubt that photography in Wattville was about the individual. As detailed in chapter one, depictions of single subjects by far outnumbers family portraits in the Ngilima collection, both within the studio and outside of it. In the previous section, I’ve described how young African men and women were able to inscribe new meanings to their own photographic practice by adopting other representational modes alternative to realism (see also chapter two). Here I argue further that the way young black women developed their own photographic practice (different both from the State’s genre of I.D pictures and their genre of formal portraiture of their parents’ generation) is also reflexive of how they created a sense of agency at the interstices of these social structures.

It is particularly in the field of romantic courting that photography enabled young men and women to construct a sense of intimacy, in a setting where privacy was not an option. Photographic prints and albums represented a symbolic space, a space of one’s own, straddling the public and private that resisted family pressure and the limitations of Apartheid. While photography helped constitute the private sphere— here defined as “a new individualized and affective domain”, it was not entirely private. The subject’s necessary collaboration with the photographer, the negotiation of new photographic conventions

amongst peers, ensured the collective nature of the work behind imagining new selves in the practice of ordinary life.\textsuperscript{350} The element of choice behind revealing or disclosing a photograph was as much constitutive of the subject’s agency as was the act of defining the content of his or her self-representation. The next section will strive to describe women’s photographic practices to support these arguments.

\textsuperscript{350} On the collective nature of imagination, see Appadurai Appadurai, \textit{Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization}, 5.
PART TWO. NEGOTIATING INTIMATE SPACES THROUGH PHOTOGRAPHY

The Studio: a “Safe Place” for Girls

When I asked Judith Ngubane where she would photograph, her answer mapped out the limits of where African female teenagers could and could not go in their free time. “Our high school made a terrible background. So we [Judith and her friends] used to go to Benoni town to take pictures. On Kimbolton Street, there were nice gardens and beautiful houses. That would make a nice background for the picture. But we would not go to the park. [You were] not allowed, unless you are pushing a pram [containing a white baby]. We didn’t know picnics.” Needless to say, Benoni’s famous lake, a major venue for white South Africans to go swim in their leisure time, barred Africans from the right of entry, unless their presence was justified by the function of caring for white children. African women were required to signal this function clearly through wearing their uniform. Yet it was not always necessary to go far to find a nice background. The Old Location also contained several beautiful houses that made adequate backgrounds for the pictures, in particular on 6th street. Judith’s collection of pictures included several pictures of herself at a slightly older age, posing in front of a Location house with her future husband Victor (figure 3.2). Dumi Dlamini recalls playing the game “pick-a-house”, which consisted in granting oneself the imagined ability to choose amongst the beautiful houses in the location and imagine living there. This game can be related to another anecdote she narrated at another point in the interview, relating to her wedding day. The wedding banquet took place at her father’s house. The house was partially a source of pride (her father built it himself) but also of embarrassment: the house did not have “real” windows but were simply boarded up. As a consequence, the guests at the wedding banquet were sitting in a dark room, sweating from the heat and the lack of breeze. Photography in this sense enabled Dumi and Judith to transcend the limitations of their economic reality and to visually enact their imagined scenario, converting it into a tangible object they could hold and show.

Photography, and in particular going to the “after-hours” studio, was one of the rare activities that female teenagers could do together, as a spontaneous collective outing, for instance on the way back from school. A photo studio was a place where young women could go unsupervised without raising their parents’ disapproval. The local bioscope, by comparison, was somewhat more controversial, due to its reputation as a “lovers’ hangout. In the Benoni location, the bioscopes were located at the heart of the location, still within reach of neighbours and family relatives’ eyes, making it more difficult for young women to go there anonymously. Going to the bioscope involved certain risks. Mpumi Mxoli recalls for instance how, on her way back from the bioscope, her cousin had to help her sneak back into the house without her mother’s knowledge. They had arranged a “special knock”, that would allow her cousin to recognize her and let her in. Why parents would consider the photo studio as a “safer” place to go, is not quite clear. Perhaps the found it more reassuring that women would go to the studio in small groups of friends and that they were not lingering in the dark. Or perhaps it was the photographer’s presence that gave parents the impression that their sons and daughters were not totally unsupervised. In reality, as the Ngilima photographs could attest to, an equally important amount of gender mixing was also taking place at the studio. Parents’ non-involvement in this activity meant that young people found enough freedom in it to fully appropriate it.

As detailed in chapter one, the smaller sizes of prints made in township studios made it easier for young women to keep their pictures private, out of sight of prying eyes. Young women would exchange their photos with their friends or offer one to their sweetheart. The phenomenon of circulating images was not new: migrant workers took the habit of sending their photograph made in town back to their home village along with letters and remittances as part of a broader strategy to cope and bridge long periods of absence. For the youth in the township, photography was not at all a question of family affairs but of peers. Collecting photographs from each other was, as many interviewees described it, “just for fun”, i.e. not be taken too seriously. This cumulative mode of consuming photographs is one of the aspects that most distinguished young people’s practice of photography from the previous generation’s. The generation of their parents would spend more money on a very restricted

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352 See glossary.
353 Interview with Mpumi Mxoli, 23.04.2012, Wattville.
354 See chapter one, “The pioneers” for a description of Alpheus Mhlanga’s photographs of mineworkers.
number of prints, but with higher production value. As mentioned earlier, the ornamental framed airbrushed portraits were usually found in the most public space of the house, the sitting room. They acted as commemorative objects, fulfilling a desire for posterity. But small-sized prints fulfilled a new demand among the youth, who were more interested in mobility and privacy—objects that were distinctively theirs to own, that could be easily passed around among the members of a peer group, but also kept away from parents (or prying siblings). This consumerist practice of photography—of accumulating pictures of oneself and of others through circulation—marked it as a leisure activity, a product of urban culture. In other words, it was not only through representation that one conveyed an urban identity. Regularly visiting photo studios was in itself a practice that defined what it meant for a young black woman to be urban, to be participating in the life of the city.355

The photographic album is the epitome of this new cumulative mode of consuming photography that emerged in the 1950s. Many of my interviewees claimed to have kept an album in their youth, though few of these albums have been preserved up to today. The popularity of photographic albums in 1950s is difficult to assess.356 In several Ngilima photographs, photographic albums are used as a prop, which suggests that albums were, if not a widespread practice, at the very least a familiar one by the late 1950s. The aim of an album is to store photographs in a format that organizes them according to a personal narrative.357 Yet the albums that I have come across in Wattville were actually quite sparse in terms of additional captions and embellishments, with photographs arranged in no particular sequence or chronology. Instead of some static final artwork, albums were constantly shifting over time, as photographs mysteriously disappeared, leaving blank holes or pages in the album, occasionally replaced with newer photographs.358 In this sense, albums seemed to have functioned mainly as a “changing place of accumulation”359 that facilitated the storage and

356 Thomas suggests that photographic albums were a regular practice in African homes as early as the 1930s. Thomas Thomas, "The Modern Girl and Racial Respectability in 1930s South Africa," , 473.
358 A frequent complaint came up from my interviewees of pictures being “pinched”, stolen, by friends or relatives viewing the album. This seems to happen in particular during funerals, when large amounts of people pay visit to the mourning family and are typically the kind of moment where old pictures are looked at.
the viewing of photographs, rather than a distinct mode of narration. The accumulation of photographs served the purpose of visualizing the album owner’s popularity and his social connectedness, measurable in terms of how many photographs s/he received from his or her friends or how often s/he’d been to the studio with friends. While albums were seldom edited, they were nevertheless relevant and meaningful simply as an object of privacy, as something a young woman could own and control, in particular to whom she chose to show it to (one’s peers rather than one’s parents). Mrs. Matebula remembers for instance bringing her photo album to school to share with friends. “Parents shouldn’t know (that you have pictures). Pictures were something you kept to yourself, privately”, said Mrs. Matebula. These various photographic activities (going to the studio, exchanging photographs, keeping albums) thus crafted pockets of autonomy for young women.

The economics behind the photographs were another important element. Photographic prints were objects that young women could own because these they would pay for them themselves. Mrs. Matebula remembers her mother paying for the prints, which might explain why she only ever got a couple out of the fifteen photographs of her that I found scattered in the Ngilima collection. However most young women would either save up or use part of their own earnings from their salaries to pay for the prints. Their portraits, as something they would commission, therefore are a token of their budding autonomy linked to their entering the labour economy. While buying clothes was a rare occasion (usually reserved for Christmas time), photographs were cheap enough as a recreational treat that one could casually indulge in every now and then, similar to cinema (but comparatively a less risky outing, as we’ve just seen).

Framing the Urbanized African Woman

My analysis of these photographs needs to be framed against the background of young women’s social conditions of the time, and particularly in relation to the history of discourses on the subject of the city’s “corruptive effect” on the youth. To give a sense of this, the following quote is very significant. In a letter published in the Bantu World in 1936, Walter Nhlapo wrote: “Modern girls look alike. They all wear the latest, in photo[s] they captivate

360 Interview with Thembi Matebula, 18.02.2012, Soweto.
you to lose your head and heart”. Nhlapo’s statement is evidence of how photography was involved early on in the game of love but also of seduction. Photography’s prompting concern for one’s appearance potentially induced vanity, which conflicted with the Christian ideals of modesty and self-negation. Nhlapo seemed to suggest that vanity was the first step towards greater sin. It was as if the image, though belonging to the domain of the superficial, paradoxically was perceived to have the power to act as love medicine, tricking vulnerable men into falling in love.361 Portraits were thus perceived as “potentially corruptive”, as many other elements of the contemporary urban visual culture, including cinema.362 As early as the 1930s, parents, local elites and municipal authorities were repeatedly bemoaning the supposed corrupting influence of an urban upbringing on teenage girls (and boys). Articles appeared in 1930s in the Bantu World condemning the emergence of the “flapper girl”, who instead of devoting herself to domestic duties embraced explicit eroticism and leisurely lifestyle. The “modern girl”, characterized by her materialism and frivolity, was often educated, wore make-up and short skirts, smoked cigarettes and offered her affection in exchange for gifts.363

In 1958, journalist Can Themba wrote an ambiguous ode to the “Miss African Modern” in Drum magazine, giving a sense of how media representation of “the modern girl” had changed in thirty years: “she’s city-slick and sophisticated. She’s smart. She’s delicate and unself-conscious in the way she handles men, the home and life. (…) She now talks about those unheard things: divorce, abortion, feminine rights, mere males”.364 Themba and other Drum journalists developed a complex representation of the city woman, whose assertive power could be potentially threatening but was nevertheless judged positively overall. As a symbolic agent of modernity, writers used “the woman as a sign” to gauge the speed at which


362 The municipality attempted to censure and restrict “Natives” access to any films displaying a negative image of Western civilization, where white people were depicted displaying “uncivilised” behaviour, unworthy of their “race”, i.e. scenes conveying sensuality, jealousy, violence. The municipality’s censorship policies was essentially to ban any films that gave “Natives” a bad image of white civilisation and were not conducive to inspire moral self-improvement. These movies nevertheless found their way into black bioscopes. To get a sense of censorship policies, see Philips Philips, The Bantu in the City : A Study of Cultural Adjustment on the Witwatersrand , 303.


things changed in the city. ³⁶⁵ But while *Drum* strongly considered the figure of the city woman an important piece in its construction of black cosmopolitanism, its representation of women remained incomplete, emanating from an exclusively male viewpoint. ³⁶⁶ Run by a predominantly black yet all-male staff, short stories signed by female authors and even the “Dear Dolly” advice column (named after female jazz singer Dolly Rathebe) were misleadingly written by men. ³⁶⁷ As Dorothy Driver argued, the magazine’s textual representation of the urban women was limited to two possible scenarios of black urban femininities: the sensual and free-spirited jazz singer and the domestic housewife. “In between these two possibilities, black urban femininity is suspended”. ³⁶⁸

Few women actually occupied either of these roles with any degree of reality. The economic configuration of the apartheid system meant that few black women could actually afford the luxury of being a domestic housewife. The overwhelming majority was compelled to somehow earn an income to complete the household’s males’ income. Interestingly, labour was simultaneously the main avenue through which women could engage with the city. More and more young women started to find work in town, in a decade when new sectors of work were opening up for black women. Until then, black South African women’s options for earning a living were restricted to washing laundry, brewing beer and prostitution. An increasing number of girls who received schooling went on to study nursing or teaching. More importantly, the development of the manufacturing industry in the post-war years created a shortage of labour, which in turn generated a shuffle in terms of racial distribution of labour. Black men moved out of household work and into secondary industry, freeing up domestic work for black women. Similarly, white women sought better-paid positions in the service industry, and as a consequence clothing factories began recruiting cheaply paid black


³⁶⁷ “If it appears that the pen is wielded by a woman in this piece, this is an illusion, for it remains in the firm grip of the male writer, whose control of the pen – and the modernity it metonymically represents – becomes the technique through which the Modern Miss is manipulated”. Samuelson, “The Urban Palimpsest”, 68. See also Driver, “The Fabulous Fifties”, 398.

Many of the women I interviewed in Wattville worked in clothing or sweets factories in Doornfontein, Johannesburg. Young women were eager to work before getting married, in order to help support their parents. Young women rarely kept all of their meagre salary but would give it to their mothers. If they were lucky, their mother would allow them to keep part of the salary. As limited as this sum was, it nevertheless gave them some leeway to buy things for themselves, in particular items of luxury such as cosmetics, fabric for a dress, records, tickets to the bioscope and, as detailed in the previous section, photographs. Moreover, working in Johannesburg represented geographical and social mobility: it meant taking the train with other girlfriends every morning, escaping the sphere of domesticity, having the opportunity to shop in town after work, or simply do some “window-shopping” - in short, to take part in the excitement of city life.

According to AbduMaliq Simone, “cities came to be the means through which bodies [in Africa] were turned into individuals.” As well as experiencing increasing autonomy and mobility, young women were exposed to the “ideology of romantic love” in its modern form through movies and magazines, which inherently promoted notions of interiority and individual conscience. Such notions however often clashed with the reality of their social conditions, with its reminiscences of a patriarchal system. On the one hand, African women living in the urban areas began to marry later, between their 22 and 25th birthday, compared to her rural counterpart who would be married by her 18th birthday. The rising age of marriage thus extended the window of time where women were sexually mature yet “unattached”. Young women lived under the constant fear of pregnancy before marriage and becoming “socially disgraced”. Young women’s sexuality was the object of tight scrutiny from both family and the state. While young men were given more freedom and encouraged to stay outside in the streets, young women in contrast were tied down to the house, executing their domestic duties (taking care of the younger siblings, fetching water, starting the fire in

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370 Interview with Dumi Dhlamini, 13.04.2011, Wattville.


the stove for cooking, or running errands for supper). Local municipalities considered unregulated sexuality in the urban space as the main factor behind youth delinquency and general decay in the township’s social order. Unsurprisingly, the 1950s and 1960s housing policies required marriage as the pre-condition for obtaining social housing, in an attempt to control women’s sexuality and by extension the “native” population as a whole. In my own research, I found that premarital pregnancies were in fact fairly common. When establishing interviewees’ biography, many—if not most—had their “first born” before they actually got married. That pre-marital pregnancies eventually led to marriage confirms what Posel found out in her study of “house marriages”, that township communities eventually found ways to accommodate these increasingly “irregular” or “illegitimate” relationships.

Another challenge was to initiate romantic relationships and develop intimacy in an environment where young women were constantly being surveyed. Though women were acquiring more autonomy through work, they were nevertheless forced to live with their parents until they got married, after which they would move in with their husband, or more likely with their husband’s family. Indeed, marriage rarely marked the beginning of intimacy between a couple. Given that it would often take a long time for newly wedded couple to obtain a house from the government, the young “makoti” (bride) typically lived with her in-laws for a year or two and was often assigned the hardest, most labour-intensive domestic chores. One of my interviewees remembers staying with her in-laws for two years. “My mother-in-law was alright. Now the problem is (pause) his brothers, you see? There were three or four brothers who used to sleep here in the kitchen, you know? (…) If I wake up, I couldn’t do anything in the kitchen because they’re still sleeping there. And then they complained, “this one is married now, he must move out with his wife”. An income survey from 1961 found that the average household in Wattville accommodated 7.7 people in a two bed-roomed house. It was not unusual to share a bedroom with four or five other siblings,

376 House marriages, also known as “The Hats”, were matches established between a man and a woman who did not know each other for the sake of acquiring a house. Idem, 71.
377 Interview with Constance Xotyni, 01.06.2012, Wattville.
378 De Coning, "Income and Expenditure Patterns of Urban Bantu Households: Benoni Survey," .
or sleep in the kitchen. Considering the general disapproval on sex before marriage, it was crucial to keep love relationships a secret. It was also the expected way to show respect towards one’s parents. As Mrs. Mxoli describes it, “mothers musn’t see you walk with a boy”. Whenever she would bump into her mother or a neighbour when in the company of her boyfriend, it was understood that they would immediately part ways and regroup later, a few blocks down, “to show your respect towards your mother”. However, keeping secrets under such circumstances was not an easy thing, which is where photography comes in.

Photography and Romance

The practice of exchanging photographs was particularly important in the domain of romance. This was not unique to urban culture or to the 1950s. In the 1930s, educated Africans as well as migrant workers enclosed photographs in love letters. By the 1960s photographs had become an integral part of Zulu marriage negotiations, whereby the photographs could substitute for the presence of the bride. Once the wedding was concluded, women would go to the studio photographer with their beadwork, on the occasion of coming to town to register the wedding with the registry office. But women were also using photography to advance their own agenda: if the husband would disappear without completing the bridal payment and without giving news, women from rural areas of Kwa-Zulu Natal would send a studio photograph of themselves with codified gestures. A photo of a woman with her hands spread out meant “where is the lobola?”, while holding up the phone receiver meant “I tried calling you”.

Among the permanently urbanized youth of the 1950s, photography was fully integrated into the process of courtship but in a more secretive and private mode. During the post-war years, the emergence of advice columns such as “Dear Dolly” in Drum magazine was evidence of

379 Interview with Mrs. Mxoli, 23.04.2012, Wattville.
381 Interview with Mr. Philip (veteran studio photographer on Bree Street), September 2009, Johannesburg.
382 Frank Jolles (art collector, Honorary Research Associate at the University of KwaZulu-Natal and Honorary Research Associate of the Natal Museum), in discussion with the author, March 2012, Johannesburg.
how courtship was becoming less a matter of the family and more a preoccupation of the youth.\textsuperscript{384} In the 1930s, writing and receiving love letters, and by extension the viewing of photographs, usually implied collective effort on both ends, relying on those educated Africans who knew how to read and write.\textsuperscript{385} In comparison, young lovers living in the township exchanged photographs directly with each other, this gesture informally marking a mutual interest in each other and potentially the beginning of the courtship. It was a gesture that established intimacy in the absence of possibilities to interact physically. As one interviewee stated: “Exchanging photos was very important, that was the main thing! It was the start of your courting days. We very seldom had the chance of meeting [girls] on their own, unless they came to Benoni town”.\textsuperscript{386} Figure 3.3 depicting Mrs. Matebula alone in the studio wearing her school uniform is a photograph that she considered most adequate as a courtship picture. The soft light illuminating her face, her dreamy expression and secretive smile, the pose bringing out the elegance of her hands and her silhouette all contributed to making her look glamorous despite the uniform. According to Mrs. Schabete, it was easier for a young woman to give her boyfriend her portrait, than for her to accept his portrait, as it entailed far greater a risk of getting caught and punished, if her parents would ever find it amongst her possessions:

Mrs. Matebula: The boyfriend [shouldn’t] give you the picture, \textit{you} give him the picture.
S.F: What if they find out that you have a picture of your boyfriend?
Mrs. Matebula: Oooh, it’s trouble for you with your parents!


\textsuperscript{385} Breckenridge, “Love Letters”, 338.

\textsuperscript{386} Interview with Maniboy Rahman, 01.06.2011, Actonville.
As Mrs. Matebula’s statement confirms, young women engaged in romantic affairs, often without their parents’ consent, despite being aware of the risks involved. When nevertheless exchanged between lovers, portraits stood for secret relationship and were kept hidden. In the absence of space where couples could be alone together, the exchange of symbolic objects, such as hand-written notes confessing one’s love, became very important as tokens of intimacy, as a mode of communication that enabled them to express affection, while remaining somewhat safely within the codes of respectability. Romance was thus a means through which young black women could assert a certain degree of agency over their own lives. Critical of certain gender-blind and feminist readings of pop love stories that have dismissed romance as political escapism, Samuelson interprets romantic love as a “central feature of modern subjectivity”, a domain in which “women represent and occupy a central and highly charged space in emerging modernities”.  

With time, controversial photographs can be negotiated into public viewing, reflecting the evolution in the relationship’s state of legitimacy. Mrs. Mxoli for instance had a photograph taken of her husband and herself. While taken around the time their second child was born (in 1952), it was still many years before their marriage:

S.F.: So this photo was at the very beginning, when you first met your husband?
Mrs. Mxoli: Yah, it was us (indistinct) boyfriend/girlfriend. I was not sure, sometimes you take me, sometimes you’re not my boyfriend (indistinct) so that you take me (Laughing).\(^\text{388}\)

This photograph remained hidden for many years. Mrs. Mxoli remembers the day she showed it to her daughter, who was by then already a full-aged adult: “After making this snap, after some time he married me now. (Laughing) (…). Only later I showed it to my child, I said ‘look at the time when I was young’”.\(^\text{389}\) Since then, her daughter got the small print enlarged and framed in an ornate wooden frame. It is now hanging on the wall between the sitting room and the dining area, well in view of all visitors walking in from the backdoor (figure 3.4). What was once a secret object has safely entered the public domain. The enlarged photo has slipped into the genre of the wedding picture, further granting legitimacy to a relationship that was sanctioned through marriage only a decade after the photograph was taken.

\(^\text{388}\) Interview with Mpumi Mxoli, 23.04.2012, Wattville.

\(^\text{389}\) Mpumi Mxoli, idem.
Visualising Affection

Mrx. Mxoli’s story confirms the fact that some couples were brave enough to be photographed together without in fact being married. If the 1950s represented the decade where photographic registers expanded and multiplied (see chapter two), this evolution also
applied to the domain of how couples were represented. Certainly under the influence of cinemas and pulp literature (cheap novellas, short stories in magazines), which made love the central feature of their stories, young people became interested in representing love by visualising affection through the display of physical touch. In contrast, the register of respectability was concerned solely with establishing the sociological state of being married. I described in the previous chapters how Thorence introduced a new dimension of romance in his wedding pictures, where couples can be seen smiling at each other, gazing deep into each other’s eyes, thus adopting the new visual code that signalled a state of being in love. Many pictures can be found in the Ngilima collection of couples manifesting affection outside of the context of a wedding, through the multiplication of signs of physical touch (first picture in the series in figure 2.14).390 One of my favourite pictures is figure 3.5, taken in Ngilima’s studio, depicting a couple standing close to one another, the man’s arms wrapped around the woman, both of their hands cupped, with their heads close together, both smiling sweetly at the camera. The woman wears no ring on her left hand, nor a doek over her hair, giving no indication that they were married.391 In picture figure 3.6, the young couple are standing in what looks like a corner shop (thus in public view), holding hands, the young man leaning forward, appearing to attempt to kiss the young woman, who modestly keeps her eyes cast down but smiles nevertheless. Through the reduction of spaces (between the two subjects), intimacy emerges as a photographic theme: “La sentimentalité, timidement, apparaît à travers la volonté manifeste d’immortaliser le contact physique, publicité d’un acte privé”.392 The large sample of photographs in the Ngilima collection in which intimacy is displayed confirms the fact that premarital romance had become casual enough a phenomenon that it could be performed in front of middle-aged respectable photographer such as Ronald Ngilima. Such relationships were certainly not approved of yet implicitly accepted, as long as the parents and the parents’ peers were not directly confronted with it. Such photographs had to remain secret, which also partially explains why such prints rarely survived, with the few exceptions as in Mrs. Mxoli’s case.

390 Jean-Bernard Ouedraogo found the same phenomenon in popular photography in Burkina Faso, describing it as “le rapprochement public des corps”, bodies publicly getting closer. The sheer fact that the couple is posing alone, without family or friends representing their community, is an indication that the young Burkinabés were tending towards the modern understanding of the notion. J.-B. Ouedraogo, "La Figuration Photographique Des Identités Sociales: Valeurs Et Apparences Au Burkina Faso," Cahiers D'Etudes Africaines 36, no. 141/142 (1996), 31.

391 For a definition of doek, see glossary: Idem, 32.
Figure 3.5: Young couple at Ronald Ngilima’s studio. Wattville, mid-1950s, NPC.
Initially more astonishing for me were those pictures where the touching went as far as a man visibly cupping the woman’s breast. Figure 3.7 (left) for instance shows a couple kissing in a yard in the Old Location by a bare tree, locked in a close embrace. The young woman has her arms around his neck, and the man’s embrace has his hand clearly over her breast. In the next picture, both are clinging onto the tree, grinning at the camera. In yet another picture, they appear again with two more individuals, appearing to be celebrating together over a big bottle of home-brewed beer and perhaps a bottle of stronger liquor. I unfortunately cannot determine which of the three photographs came first, but regardless of the sequence, the existence of all three photographs suggest that the man’s gesture was something that happened in the open, along with drinking in public. The following picture, figure 3.8 confirms the sense that this particular gesture was not shameful, at least not within certain circles. Here both subjects are

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393 I cannot do so from Brussels, where I am writing, but it would be theoretically possible: it would simply require to go back to the archive in Johannesburg and examine the negatives, comparing the numbers written on the edge of the negative.
crouched, with a blanket at their feet. The woman is wearing a doek over her hair, an element of clothing usually worn by married women, an accoutrement of respectability. The man has one hand on the woman’s back and the other firmly on her breast. Both are gazing directly at the camera. This is calmly posed photograph, not taken in the spur of the moment. This gesture conveys more a sense of protection and care, perhaps also an element of patriarchal possession (“this is my woman”), but in no case does it suggest eroticism. But as we will see later in this chapter, most of my female interviews, today in their seventies and eighties, did not share my interpretation and resolutely disapproved of such practices.

![Figure 3.7: Couple kissing in backyard. Old Location, mid-1950s, NPC.](image)
Figure 3.8: Couple crouching. Location unknown, mid-1950s, NPC.
PART THREE. REPRESENTATIONS OF FEMININITY

Picturing Modern Girls

Modes of representing relationships between a man and a woman have clearly evolved over the years. What about representations of women? How have modes of representing femininity evolved in popular photography over the years? In the previous chapter, I looked at how young men found alternative models of self-worth as a source of inspiration for poses. How did evolving media representation of women have an impact on young women’s self-representation? And what do the Ngilima pictures and such photographs tell us about black South African’s articulation of black femininity in the 1950s?

By the 1930s, South African newspapers made for a white audience were organizing beauty contests and publishing corresponding photographs of scantily dressed women, “signalling a clear shift in white notions of acceptable female display”.\(^{394}\) It did not take long to find a resonance in black-oriented newspapers. In her analysis of nearly 50 entries of photographic portraits sent by young black women to the Bantu World in the 1930s, Thomas observes how the two winners of this beauty contest were those who most clearly rejected the till-then dominating conventions of “sombre countenance”. Rather than looking solemnly at the camera and wearing clothes expressing modesty, the winning girls displayed teeth-revealing smiles, low necklines and glamorous attires.\(^ {395}\)

With the emergence of the first illustrated magazines targeting a black audience, advertising using black female models started to appear. Realising the potential market amongst urban African women, advertising for cosmetics—in particular for face creams and soap—began using black models, while continuing to convey the notion that superior beauty was necessarily white.\(^{396}\) In an advert for Lux soap published in *Drum* in 1954, the glamorous picture of a white female, a film star, visually dominates the page (figure 3.9). The combination of make-up, jewellery and lighting make her eyes, lips, hair and ears shine, thus

\(^{394}\) Thomas, “The Modern Girl”, 471.

\(^{395}\) Idem, 472-77.

\(^{396}\) The word “white” was a dominant adjective in adverts. The text in this advert for instance describes Lux soap’s superiority as such: “it is whitest because it is the purest”. On the association between whiteness, cleanliness and economic prosperity, see A. Rauwerda, "Whitewashing Drum Magazine (1951-1959): Advertising Race and Gender," *Continuum: Journal of Media and Cultural Studies* 21, no. 3 (2007), 397-8.
highlighting the aura of celebrity. She looks far into the distance, creating the impression that she is unreachable. In comparison, the picture of a black woman holding up the soap to her face is much smaller. The black girl is looking straight at the camera and smiling. With the doek on her hair and wearing a modest blouse, she represents the pretty “girl next door”, the accessible realm of practicality in the real world. The pictures combined are meant to stimulate readers’ aspiration for beauty and whiteness (beauty as whiteness), while remaining anchored in a reality of household economics that African women could easily relate to. Perhaps under the influence of new market studies detailing the potential consumer power of a growing black middle-class, brands such as Pond eventually started using black female stars such as Dolly Rathebe, a jazz singer and actress, to advertise their products in black-oriented magazines. Drum’s practice of having a new “cover-girl” at every issue was pivotal in presenting African and coloured females as beautiful models, anchoring the visual language of pin-up girls (i.e. making them sexually attractive) in popular culture. 397 On the other hand, as Antje Rauwerda aptly reminds us, Drum continued to publish predominantly pro-white adverts, including for racist products such as skin lighteners. 398 Rauwerda reminds us once again how the racist social structures permeated the urban visual culture within which black South Africans were fashioning themselves.

397 For a historical explanation of the emergence of “pin-up girls” in popular culture, see footnote 404.
398 In Rauwerda’s words, “‘whitening’ advertisements are (...) surprisingly prevalent in this ‘by Africans, for Africans’ publication”. Rauwerda, “Whitewashing Drum”, 398. On an excellent analysis of how race, class and gender intersected in relation to soap and commodities, see Burke, Lifebuoy Men. Lux Women: Commodification, Consumption and Cleanliness in Modern Zimbabwe, in particular chapter six, “Bodies and Things: Toiletries and Commodity Culture in Postwar Zimbabwe”, p. 166-216.
However, it is also important to distinguish Drum’s message from the way its readership actually received it and gave it meaning within their own lives. The Ngilima photographs were clearly inspired by advertising and fashion imagery supporting white supremacy, yet this does not mean that the ideology of whiteness necessarily informed black people’s practice of

\[\text{Figure 3.9: Advert for Lux Toilet Soap, appearing in Drum magazine June 1964, p.56.}\]

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\[399\] Burke makes this important point of recognizing the power of local culture in determining the meaning and uses of commodities, relating various cases where products were used for different purposes than the one advertised (for instance Zimbabweans applying Colgate on cuts as a healing balm and disinfectant). Burke, “Lifebuoy Men, Lux Women”, 206.
For one, I did not come across any photographs produced in black studios that used the technique of dodging that was used in white studios (see chapter two), though black studios used the darkroom to create other visual effects.

While the photographs published in newspapers and magazines tended to be close-ups of faces, Ngilima’s subjects were usually photographed in full body-length, which gave more importance to the role of poses. As seen in the previous chapter, in the 1950s marks the period where the youth were greatly expanding the range of poses for the camera. These poses are indicative of the subject’s awareness as to how to use a certain body language to express femininity. The concept of femininity stresses the cultural dimension in the construction of a female identity. I argue that the elaborate construction of pose, gesture (and dress) constituted an important element in this construction. Tilted hips and the positioning of the feet attracted attention to the female curves of the body, the position of the arms suggested elegance and refinement. The reclining position combined with a horizontal frame was another popular pose mainly used by women, echoing the trope of the reclining woman, a dominant representation of femininity in the arts since the Renaissance (figure 3.10).

The topic of “wanting to be white” did not explicitly come up in my discussions with my interviewees on their photographic practices. Was my position as a white foreign researcher that made women hesitant to address such topics? They were in any case not shy to tell me about other instances of discrimination, for instance white shopkeepers attending white clients first, even refusing to serve them or let them try an item on. In any case, future research would have to dig deeper on to what extent aspiration for whiteness were intertwined with local notions of beauty, and to what extent it informed their self-representations.

See also Geary, "Portraiture, Authorship and the Inscription of History: Photographic Practice in the Bamum Kingdom, Cameroon (1902-1980)," , 155.

Solomon-Godeau, “The Legs of the Countess”, 84.

The Ngilima collection includes at least thirty snaps of women reclining on the sofa or on the floor (including outside on the lawn but also directly on the bare street). For another example of a studio photograph representing a young African woman reclining horizontally, see I. Brielmaier, "Mombasa on Display: Photography and the Formation of an Urban Public, from the 1940s Onward," in Portraiture and Photography in Africa, ed. John Peffer and Elisabeth L. Cameron (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014), 281; and Peffer, “Vernacular Recollections”, 121.
Figure 3.11 depicts a young woman walking down a street in Wattville. She is elegantly dressed, her tight dress showing off her thin silhouette, her beret matching the shade of her purse and shoes. Her left arm is bent; her purse hangs from the curve of her elbow, her dangling hand deliberately poised, yet casual. Several of my interviewees, upon studying this photograph, concluded that the subject of this photo probably worked in a factory in Johannesburg, as these ladies were known for being particularly fashionable. Commuting to Johannesburg on a daily basis, these ladies were the cultural link between the city and the township. What is interesting here is the construction of a femininity on the basis of codes signalling urban lifestyle: the urban infrastructure in the background (electric posts, modern houses, street…), her modern attire, but also the act of walking down the street, a visual metaphor for the idea that she was “going somewhere”. “Going somewhere” or “going places” were popular expressions I came across in Wattville and other townships, used to express admiration for someone’s upward mobility, both geographically-speaking (as in going to the city, going to nightclubs…) and in terms of social ascension, the former being a symptom of the latter. In the previous chapter, I argued that the register of respectability was
built on notions of establishment, visually translated in terms of rigid poses and clothing that prevented much movement. The ideology of respectability rejected geographical mobility, which was loaded with connotations of urban decay and moral looseness. Up till today, the expression “up and down” (for instance “this one goes up and down like nobody’s business”) is often used to describe a married man having an affair (hence roaming the streets as opposed to staying at home). Photographs such as figure 3.11 suggest that as geographical mobility was becoming de facto part of women’s lives, it was both a source of anxiety and a criteria for positive self-evaluation.

Figure 3.11: Unidentified woman walking down a street in Wattville. Photo by Thurence Ngilima. Wattville, early 1960s, NPC.
“Revealing” Pictures: Posing in Bathing Suits and Underclothes

Potentially more controversial are the sixteen photographs depicting a female subject wearing only underclothes. By the 1950s, images exhibiting the female body had become frequent but acceptable only within certain parameters. Photographs taken at the beach in a swimming costume became a genre within popular photography, the beach providing the justification to be lightly dressed. In Benoni, the lake and swimming pools (then called “baths”) were equally a site where young white women were encouraged to exhibit their bodies in bathing suits. Published in the Benoni City Times of 1949, figure 3.12 depicts “two beauties of the baths” in their bathing suits adopting poses that are clearly inspired by the genre of pin-up girls.404 Barthes argued that photography used in advertisement has the capacity to code certain connections as natural and obvious, such as cow’s milk and cheese.405 Here, the connection between the bathing suit and the swimming baths were also made natural, despite the fact that both pictures were clearly taken in a studio. The caption notes that the heat of summer did not bother these women, who “sought coolness in the water”, but as did many other people: “The other day the baths were so packed that there was standing room only”. Needless to say, the article does not specify that such sites of leisure and recreation were barred to black people.

404 Nude and erotic photography has existed since the creation of photography in the mid-19th century, but these photographs would be sold “under the counter” (initially for the elite) and were generally banned from public viewing. The emergence of picture postcards in the 1870s enabled a greater circulation of nude photography but remained a risky affair, often banned from delivery. Though emerging in the 1930s, the WWII was the impetus for the mass development of the “pin-up girl” as a genre: photographs and illustrations of young women smiling full teeth smiles and holding suggestive poses showing off their long limbs and shapely forms, designed to be mass-produced and “pinned-up” on the wall. This material— which included postcards, playing cards, posters, calendars and vignette cards— was explicitly patriotic, made for uplifting the moral of the soldiers, as a reminder of the “girls worth fighting for” waiting back home. The “pin-up girl” marked a turning point in the introduction of the sexualized female body into advertisement and ultimately into popular culture. Calendars and advertising posters depicting pin-up girls can be seen in many backgrounds of Ngilima’s photographs taken inside people’s homes, a good indication that such imagery also ended up on black people’s walls.

Nevertheless, such images found their way to the townships, initially through elite black families coming back from their holiday at the beach in Durban (figure 3.13), and simply through magazines and free calendars (figure 3.14). Shot in 1952 (but only published in
1957, Jürgen Schadeberg’s famous photograph of a radiant Dolly Rathebe, a popular singer and actress, in a bikini standing on a mine dump is a good example of how beach photographs were translated into a Johannesburg setting (figure 3.15). Schadeberg had wanted a “beach scene” for his next cover of Drum and chosen a mine dump near Soweto for the shoot. Surrounding Johannesburg, the mine dumps function as a famous landmark of the city’s skyline, and as a metonymy representing the city, whose origins were so tightly intertwined with mining activities. The humour of the image lies in the fact that the yellow dusty quality of the mine dump was equated with a beach. The former landscape evokes a history of economic exploitation of black labour, of conflict and dispossession; the latter whiteness and leisure. The whiteness of the landscape and Rathebe’s attire (bikini and a sun hat) ensure a successful transition from one landscape to the other. In all three shots, Schadeberg chose to include some of the far-away townships into the frame, making the mine dump recognisable and thus giving the photograph a distinctively urban edge.

Figure 3.13: Unknown woman at the beach. Date and location unknown. Photo found within the Ngilima collection, probably the original print that was handed to get a copy or make an enlargement out of it. I found 16 photos in total in the Ngilima collection, that were brought in to be reproduced.

406 The photographs ended up being published only in 1957, five years after the shoot, probably because the court case that ensued. Rathebe and Schadeberg were followed by policemen and consequently arrested, charged for contravening the Immorality Act, which forbade interracial sexual relationships.
Figure 3.14: Examples of images of women in revealing outfits, as seen in mass-produced media. Pictures on the right are enlargements of details found in the Ngilima pictures (left).
DOLLY

Dolly Rathnau, pin-up that "Drum" photographers discovered.

NEXT MONTH

Next month, Cee Thams introduces Dolly Rathnau who is the pin-up that "Drum" photographers discovered.
Figure 3.15: Left, extract of Drum magazine, February 1957, p.51. Note the caption, featuring the word “pin-up”. Below, Dolly Rathebe photographed at the mine-dumps, during the same shoot. Both photographs by Jürgen Schadeberg.

Figure 3.16: Photograph of woman in bathing suit, reclining on the floor, accompanied by a fully-dressed woman. Location unknown, mid-1950s, NPC.
The photograph suggests in any case that by the late 1950s, black women posing in bathing suits had become a current and accepted representation in the media. In the Ngilima photographs, this trend was represented by a handful of women posing in their swimming suits and such approximations, the house interior substituting for the beach. In figure 3.16 for instance, the subject is half reclining on the floor, on which a fabric or a towel was laid out. Her sun hat, clearly distinguishable from hats used by people working under the sun, reinforces the reference to the beach and to leisure. The fully-dressed women sitting behind her and the cracked walls visible in the background however make an odd contrast with the swimming suit, reminding the viewer of the domestic context in which the image was made and thus breaking the “beach effect”. The presence of other (fully-dressed) people in these pictures, interior details that make out the sitting room, are indices that suggest that the swimming photos were deemed innocent and acceptable enough to be done well in view of the subject’s family and in the house’s most public space. Perhaps Ronald Ngilima was himself a guarantor of the innocence of these images, his social status and reputation ultimately determining the moral limits of the photographable. Considering that he was a fervent “church-goer” and a respectable father of a large family (and a man), is it conceivable that Ronald would have accepted to take “immoral” photographs?

But then there are these few puzzling photographs in which women are posing in their underclothes. One could argue that a woman posing in her underclothes had a different connotation that the bathing suit, perhaps leaning towards the erotic. Unlike the beach pictures, here there is no “justification” for being so lightly dressed. In Benin however, women posing in their underclothes were interested in showing their bras as consumption items of modernity, similar to the radio or a watch, without necessarily having an erotic connotation. This is also how I would interpret figure 3.17 depicting a women in underclothes lying on the couch and holding a vinyl. Here the underclothes reinforce the effect of the couch and the vinyl in evoking a modern urban lifestyle. Another possible explanation for the lingerie pictures is that the photograph was taken for a beauty or advertising contest. I would also suggest that women wore lingerie instead of swimming suits, simply because they could hardly afford to buy something that they would anyway

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408 An emerging marketing strategy was for companies to organize photo contest inviting consumers to send photos of themselves posing with their product. The Ngilima collection includes a couple of pictures of women and their toddlers posing with products (Quaker Oats and Klim tins of milk).
never or so seldom wear, considering the legal and economic constraints to black women’s access to beaches, lakes or even swimming pools.

![Unidentified woman reclining on couch, holding a vinyl. Wattville, mid-1950s, NPC.](image)

Finally, figure 3.18 presents another scenario. Here, the female subject is posing in a bra and underwear, underneath a short see-through blouse. Her left hand is closed in a fist and resting on her hip, the other is held up in a gesture of mock scolding, as if teasing the viewer for looking at this picture. This image contains none of the “redeeming” codes of beach photography. It is straightforward sensual and suggestive, because profoundly ambiguous. Not having been able to identify nor interview any of these reclining women, it is impossible to state what exactly was the occasion behind the making of this picture, the subject’s intention nor what women did with these photographs. Were they kept hidden, as Judith’s studio photograph? Were they shown freely and if so, to whom were they shown?

I asked several of my female interviewees (now in their seventies and eighties) whether they could tell me more about this practice. Interestingly, this series of photos received all-round disapproval from them, despite the fact that they were contemporaries to these photographs’
subjects. “This is wrong”, they would say, shaking their heads and tut-tutting. But were these photographs really considered as provocative and indecent in the 1950s? The female subject in figure 3.18 appears in at least seven other pictures in the collection, four of which were clearly taken on the same festive occasion (indicated by the flower decoration pinned on her dress and the traditional zulu beer pot). The see-through blouse picture was therefore made alongside a family group picture and a bust shot of wearing an elegant evening dress and jewellery. Comparing these four photographs and paying attention to the curtain and wallpaper, one can establish that the see-through shot was taken inside the enclosed space of a bedroom, while the others were taken in the hallway and living room. Placing this photograph alongside the other three gives a sense that, similarly to figure 3.16, such pictures were taken in the private setting of the bedroom, but within the context of a family event, with potentially many people hanging around in the house.

Figure 3.18: Unidentified woman posing in see-through blouse. Wattville, mid-1950s, NPC.

So how to interpret my interviewee’s strong aversion to the bathing suit pictures (above all the one in the see-through blouse) and to photographs displaying physical intimacy? They
preferred the photographs of mature women using the register of the “sombre countenance” associated with respectability, most notably photo figure 3.19, depicting a middle-aged woman sitting on a chair with her hands clasped together, wearing a doek, long dress and long-sleeved blouse closed up to the throat. Their preferred photographs corresponded more closely to the social status that they were aspiring to today, as seventy or eighty-something year-old grandmothers. Their reaction confirms the fact that photography registers had become generationally coded. If such poses and experimentations were tolerated for young women, older women were supposed to disapprove of them, because that was part of their role as a respectable aged woman. One of my interviewees even refused to acknowledge herself in a photograph, despite having been identified by at least two women on separate occasions. For what she saw in the picture clearly displeased her: a young man standing between another young woman and herself, his arm around their shoulders and his hands casually resting on their breasts. Her embarrassment vis-à-vis the picture, informed by her present situation and social needs, denies how accepted this pose was in the ’50s.

The sample of pictures showing women in swimming suits and displays of affection represents a small percentage of the entire collection. They are nevertheless important evidence of how social conventions were starting to change in the townships. They function as a barometer for what was increasingly deemed acceptable to keep a visual trace of, even if as a trace to be kept only for oneself, as with Judith’s photograph (Figure 3.2). These Ngilima photographs are evidence that expressions of romance and even sensuality had started to enter the domain of the ‘photographable’. Translating the vocabulary relating to the study of music structures to images, Tina Campt’s notion of dissonance is useful to help us think how the ‘deviant’ photographs might work with the rest of the collection, or how peculiarities work in relation to the serial. “Dissonance is part and parcel of the patterns of both the visual and the musical and is a central component that links the structure of each”.

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409 This reiterates my point in chapter 2, that the register of informality did not substitute the register of respectability but that both co-existed and worked as a marker for generational difference.


Perhaps the best example to illustrate this point is the woman in figure 3.20, one of the rare examples I’ve come across of a young woman with her child. In the first shot, she appears as a young mother, sitting upright with her toddler on her lap, wearing an ordinary dress and smiling modestly. In the second picture, the toddler is no longer in view. The young woman depicts herself wearing a bathing suit and holding a magazine. Unlike in the first picture, she sits on the armrest of the chair, leaning back, with one leg coyly tucked under the other. Her smile broadens, showing teeth. The combination of bathing suit (symbolising sexuality and leisure), the magazine (symbolising popular urban culture), and her body language (slack, reminiscent of pin-up girls) frames her in a completely different way, emphasizing female sensuality and youth rather than motherhood. Campt proposes to analyse the multitude of

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412 Both pictures belong to the same uncut roll of negatives, which means that they were taken in the same “shooting session”.

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performances in a single photographic archive as an ensemble, in which different manifestations of femininity harmonize with rather than against each other. Unlike Drum’s reductive and incompatible binary (sensual jazz singer vs. domestic housewife), the Ngilima photographs suggest that “black femininity was sexual and maternal; wage-earning and religious; autonomous and deeply invested in the family, all at the same time”.

Laying Claim to Leisure

But considering how many African women were having their first child born in their early twenties, it is remarkable how few photographs there are in the collection that depict young women with children. Within the set of pictures taken in the Ngilima studio, I have come across two studio pictures corresponding to the “mother with child” theme, which is very few compared with the considerably larger section of photographs of children alone. Was it that

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413 In Campt’s words: “gender registers through forms of femininity in which sexuality harmonizes with rather than against respectable or maternal motherhood”. Image Matters, 176

414 idem, 177.

415 In total, I have catalogued about fifty-seven pictures with the theme “mother and child”, most of which depict women that are more mature in age, surrounded by several children, taken within the space of their home. In comparison, there are 600 pictures of babies and toddlers, 36 of which were taken in the studio.
young women were somewhat ashamed (if outside of wedlock) or simply uninterested in being portrayed as mothers? The answer probably lies elsewhere. Many of my interviewees indicated that they stopped going to the studio photographer after they got married (which tended to happen after the birth of one or more children). The reason why their photographic activities dried up after marriage is not very clear, but perhaps it was because marriage ushered women into a new realm of responsibilities that became incompatible with playful photography. Perhaps their new status as a married woman required a different register of representation, evolving towards the image of the ‘gogo’, the grandmother, that my interviewees favoured. Or perhaps it was simply that, no longer being single, photography was not needed anymore for romantic purposes.

This brings me to my last point, on young women’s use of photography to lay claim to leisure. As described in chapter one, black studios were nicknamed “after-hours”. The nickname “after-hours”, referring to the hours of free time after work, is indicative of how photography entered the sphere of urban leisure, defined according to a modern division of time. Though studies on leisure in African communities have flourished in the past ten years, not many of these have seriously considered photography as a leisure activity. Martin’s excellent study of leisure in colonial Brazzaville for instance only mentions photography in relation to Europeans’ habit of being photographed by the Congo rapids. Conceptualizing photography as leisure is crucial for understanding the significance of women’s engagement with photography and more broadly with urban culture. As Glaser has rightly pointed out, the perpetuation of traditional gender values in urban communities meant that domestic responsibilities were mainly allocated to teenage girls, no doubt limiting their opportunity to enjoy leisure. Martin and others pointed out that in several African countries, leisure was conceptualized as a masculine category: women who indulged in recreational activities were

416 Again, this is an interesting contrast to what Bourdieu’s conclusion that marriage and above all children were the driving force behind popular photography in France the 1950s and 1960s.


418 Martin, Leisure and Society, 173.

considered lazy, idle or worse, prostitutes.420 Yet the Ngilima collection includes images of women quietly withstanding such notions. Many photographs in the Ngilima collection show women portraying themselves engaging in various leisurely activities that defined the parameters of urban culture: reclining on the couch, reading a magazine, playing sports (tennis, netball but also sports considered to be more “masculine”, such as golf and softball—figure 3.21), smoking and drinking while listening to records. Figure 3.10 contains multiple elements that visually signified leisure: a woman elegantly reclining on the rug of a living room, by the chimney, in front of a board game, gazing afar and smiling pensively. Of course, such poses did not mirror the amount of leisure these women actually had in their lives. But it is nevertheless meaningful of how women imagined themselves as modern girls engaging with urban culture. The series of reclining women posing in their bathing suits or underclothes could be interpreted as a symbolic claim over the idea of the beach, as a space traditionally defined both in terms of race (as a space reserved for white people) and of gender (leisure being a masculine privilege).421


421 On the notion of beach as a liminal space, see G. Thompson, "California Dreaming: Surfing Culture, the Sixties and the Displacement of Identity in South Africa" (paper presented at the conference The 23rd Biennial Conference of the Southern African Historical Society, Durban, 2011).
Figure 3.21: Photograph depicting women playing softball, wearing trousers and sports gear. It was still unusual for women to wear trousers in the 1950s. Photograph taken in Daveyton (the new township where the African residents of the Old Location were forcefully relocated in the 1960s), circa late 1950s/early 1960s, NPC.
CONCLUSION

To conclude, studio photographs give us a glimpse into a particular window in black South African women’s lives, between the age of puberty and marriage, in a context where gender roles were shifting substantially, as more and more women entered the labour market and postponed the age of marriage. While older generations voiced their disapproval on “modern girls” in newspaper columns, young women found in photography a way to construct a modern yet positive model of femininity, revolving around new ideas on love, sexuality and leisure. This alternative model was not built in opposition to the dominant ideology of respectability but as a dissonant tone working within the constraints of this ideology.\(^\text{422}\)

Photographic prints being an object that they could possess and hide, young women could for instance engage in romantic relationships while maintaining an appearance of respectability. Meanwhile, in the studios, considered a “safe place” for young women, many were negotiating the boundaries of the “photographable”, venturing into grey zones to express for instance intimacy (holding hands) and even sensuality (posing in bathing suit/body suit). In other words, studio photography became popular among young South African women as a medium that they could to some extent control (choosing a pose, an outfit, choosing whether to show or disclose the prints, whom to show it to…) and through which they could symbolically exercise agency over their lives—as the story of Judith’s glamorous portrait made “only for herself” beautifully illustrates.

Above all, it was about depicting oneself as young and urban, even in situations when reality did not match the projected ideal (the impossibility of going to the beach, having no time for leisure). Here is it important to underline the importance of photography not just as a platform for self-representation but as a cultural practice. Consequently not only did women portray themselves as having fun (when in reality they were probably burdened with chores), the act itself of going to the studio, of having an album, of exchanging photographs etc… was itself a form of urban leisure that made them agents of urban culture. The circulation of photographs, the mass consumption and accumulation of prints, the act of purchasing prints with the savings of their first income, the possibility of representing themselves as being in love, are all dimensions that solidly anchored photography within an urban culture at large.

\(^\text{422}\) Campt, Images Matter, 172-179.
Through their practice of photography, women contributed to anchoring photography in the sphere of consumption and leisure. In other words, they were actively taking part in crafting the parameters of a new practice of photography. Furthermore, young women’s use of photography, visualizing multiple scenarios for the urbanized woman, insists on multiplicity of subjecthood rather than uniqueness. While being inspired by Drum magazine, young women were thus also able to depart from its limited representation of urban femininity. In short, popular photography is not simply the mirror of an urban culture in the making but its very means of production. Judith Ngubane becoming a female photographer in her school years was certainly exceptional for her time yet is nevertheless a powerful counter-example of how some young women engaged with technology and took control over the process of self-representation. These fragile images are not as boisterous or as rebellious as the elements of “tsotsi” subculture, yet are meaningful nonetheless, as intimate objects representing a particular phase of negotiated freedom in these women’s lives. Considering the political system based on white supremacy, considering a time when more and more African women were using skin-lighteners, it is all the more remarkable that young African women found ways of praising themselves visually in their photographs, in terms that brought them closer to their ideal of black urban femininity.