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**Author:** Feyder, Sophie  
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Chapter Four

Domestic Interiors and ‘Lounge Photography’

Despite the monotony of the physical layouts, each house had its own individual sensibility, its own colour and textures, its own smell. Home was a corner of the world that families owned, even if they were perpetual renters.

Shamil Jeppie, ‘Interiors, District Six, c. 1950’. 423

Figure 4.1 is an official photograph (from the Museum Africa collection) depicting the construction of Wattville, the “New Township”. Taken at a certain height, the picture shows endless rows of nearly completed houses stretching all the way to the horizon. Piles of bricks and lone individuals, too small and far away to be recognised, haunt this solitary landscape. This kind of image came to characterize South Africa’s mass austerity housing: the drabness of sprawling townships, consisting of monotonous rows of identical houses on bare plots separated from each other by barbed wires. The production context of this image is unknown, but most likely it was commissioned to record the “spectacular” effort of Benoni Town Council to tackle the problem of acute housing shortage for its rapidly growing black community. The bird’s eye view demonstrates god-like surveillance power of the State, the camera floating above and gazing down upon its subjects. Aerial photographs such as this one focus on the endless rows of identical houses stretching out towards the horizon, reducing humans to tiny unidentifiable figures. The purpose of the image is to highlight the vastness of state intervention, in a context where the local government’s ability to deal with the migration problem had been criticised at length. 424


The series of Ngilima portraits taken inside people’s homes is an interesting counterpoint to this image. The bulk of Wattville being built between 1946 and 1955, Ronald’s portraits witness the township in its first years of existence, showing new sub-economic houses still in the process of being “broken into”. As mentioned in chapter one, Ronald Ngilima was amongst the first to own a flash and lighting equipment, which enabled him to initiate portraiture indoors. These portraits show individuals posing in interiors with various degrees of finishing and elegance. All of them show traces of different intervention that attempted the transition between a dreary, anonymous matchbox house to a personalised “home”. Portraits taken inside people’s homes bring our attention to the ashtray and (empty) fruit bowl displayed on the coffee table, the glass cabinet enclosing multiple porcelain-type of decorative figures, the fine tea cups hanging from the hooks lined up on the big cupboard, the table cloth and doilies spread out on the table or couch, the curtains, frames and calendars decorating the walls, the plaster covering the bricks, etc.

This chapter is about how these photographs taken indoors can be mobilised as historical sources to study the process of settling into a new home and of constructing social distinction through the making of domestic interiors. Many scholars have looked at the devastating impact of forced removals on the fabric of long-established communities. Fewer scholars have looked at situations where black families voluntarily opted to move into new townships and how black South Africans managed to make homes out of these rudimentary houses. Approaching housing from a user’s perspective, Rebekah Lee and Rebecca Ginsburg both
studied the process of investing in substantial renovations and improvements on the matchbox houses of Cape Town and Soweto in a context of limited or fragile tenure rights.425 Helen Meintjes looked at how people negotiated their image of themselves and of each other through material goods such as electric appliances. This turn to material culture in historical studies generally points to the importance of home and material goods consumed within domestic spaces in the “production of appropriated personhood”. 426

I argue that working with photographs of domestic interiors is another productive avenue to explore such themes. Indoor portraits have an incredible richness of details revealing the range of things black South Africans possessed in their homes by the mid-1950s and early 1960s. The “photographic excess” of the images helped me pinpoint the home-improvement procedure to the smallest details visible within the frame.427 Abstract questions such as “what makes a home? What is a proper living room?” become easier to talk about when it can be broken down to identifiable items present (or absent) in a picture.

Moreover, portraits taken indoors make us think about how this process of allocating meaning to interiors took place at a visual level, and how self-image and the meaning of spaces were mutually constitutive of each other through this representational medium. I maintain that the link between the emergence of indoor portraiture in the early 1950s and the accelerated development of townships like Wattville goes beyond a mere chronological coincidence. Spigel suggests that there was a connection between the rise of mass-produced suburbia and the rise of television in post-war United States, both spaces mutually reinforcing each other as social practices and cultural fantasies. ‘Media and suburbs are sites where meanings are produced and created; they are spaces (whether material and electronic) in which people make sense of their social relationships to each other, their communities, their nation and the world


427 Photographic excess is the fact that the lens does not discriminate in terms of what it records. A photographer rarely has absolute control on the content of his or her images; most often, details accidently get included in the picture. In Christopher Pinney’s terms, “however hard the photographer tries to exclude, the camera lens always includes. The photographer can never fully control the resulting photograph, and it is that lack of control and the resulting excess that permits recoding, “resurfacing”, and “looking past”.” C. Pinney, "Introduction: "How the Other Half...",” in Photography's Other Histories, ed. Christopher Pinney and Nicolas Peterson (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003).
In the case of the Ngilima indoor portraits, the experience of a new built environment (social housing) clearly had an impact on the local practice of photography (media). But unlike television, popular photography was a medium that Wattville inhabitants controlled and fashioned to their taste. Depending on whether one was posing in the sitting room (locally referred to as “the lounge”), the dining room or the kitchen, the photograph ended up enhancing different aspects of one’s personhood. Thinking about the visual dimension of home-making highlights the role of objects and activities in the definition of these interiors. What do these objects do for the photographic subject? How do they “work” within the frame of the image?

Posing in the lounge became a sub-genre of portraiture distinctive to Wattville houses. It typically depicts an individual in association with the couch, the doilies, the tea set, the coffee table, etc., which were some of the essential elements that anchored the subject in a modern lifestyle. The lounge, incarnating domestic modernity and elegance, came to replace the Old Location stoep as the prime photographic site to seek respectability and public display. I argue that the lounge portraits show how respectability became entangled with a particular material culture. Of particular interest are the series of photographs taken within the Ngilima’s own lounge, which was made available for shooting sessions. Clients could choose between posing against a plain curtain backdrop or using the space of Ngilima’s lounge. This trend of mainly middle-aged women being framed in a domestic set-up that is not theirs further complicates the notion of ‘home’. I look into how the lounge as a space worked differently than his studio backdrop, thus explaining how Ngilima was able to transfer the qualities of his lounge onto his clients. In reverse, the kitchen was only rarely chosen as a site for a photograph, despite being the most used space in the house. I contrast the celebratory pictures taken in the lounge and the dining room with Thorence’s unusual and intimate pictures of his family taken in the kitchen, in a genre that resembles that of social documentary. Interrogating the relationship between the various interior spaces and Ngilima’s


photography amounts to exploring Ngilima’s clients experience and representation of these spaces, and the values and notions associated with each room.

The development of what I have called “lounge portraiture” as a new photographic trend must be analysed within the context of social dynamics at play during the establishment of Wattville and its aftermath. Wattville’s “native sub-economic differed from houses in the Old Location in many ways: they offered modern infrastructure such as electricity and individual water taps, and new rooms such as a separate bathroom and the lounge. My chapter begins with a detailed description of how the creation of the “new location” came about amidst exacerbated class tensions within black communities. The new style of portraiture must be analysed within the social dynamics taking place in the area: the increasing conflict between site-holders and tenants in the Old Location, the scramble between urbanized Africans and newly arrived squatters to obtain a municipal house, the quest to transform sterile houses into personalised homes in Wattville, the economic boom of the 1950s and an emerging consumerist culture. Between the first and second part of this chapter, I include an interlude, a selection of short biographies of some of my interviewees that give a better sense of the diversity of these women’s trajectories and their experience of consumption. Lounge portraiture, as a specific sub-genre of portraiture that emerged in Wattville, is one of the ways by which social distinctions were visually expressed. In the second part of this chapter, I explain why Ngilima’s pictures help us understand the impact of the new township architecture on social dynamics and consciousness, making the link between a local practice of photography, respectability and architecture. I argue that lounge photography would not just be an expression of Wattville residents’ attempts to make sense of their new surroundings and to make it their own, but also part and parcel of this very process.

The lounge photograph is not without its ambiguities. These Wattville lounge portraits omit the racial dynamics of the apartheid era: the fact that black people were denied ownership and that as tenants they had few opportunities to make substantial changes to their houses. The harsh implications of apartheid’s policies in the domain of social housing, including the threat of eviction, are absent from these photographs. In the third part of this chapter, I describe how the Ngilima photographs enabled me during interviews to pinpoint the “hard work” behind the process of transforming these houses into personalised spaces. Such home-making practices helped Wattville residents, women in particular, to claim ownership over their
houses, regardless of municipal policies. I suggest that a key to understanding lounge photography’s popularity is the recognition of its capacity to reconfigure reality, to make tangible the unlikely ideal of becoming a homeowner.

**PART ONE. THE POLITICS OF SOCIAL HOUSING IN BENONI, 1940-1960.**

*Wattville’s Hesitant Birth*

The design and implementation of mass-housing for black communities in South Africa translated the core values of the apartheid project, but also its inherent contradictions.\(^{430}\) The apartheid economy, increasingly shifting towards manufacturing, required a stable semi-skilled or skilled labour force. On the other hand, the National Party (NP) had won national elections on the electoral promise of putting a stop to the “black peril”, the constant arrival of new African migrants coming into the urban areas. The positions underlining various housing policies oscillated between supporting a permanent African population and the notion that urban Africans were merely migrants in white cities. During the 1930s and 40s, the Benoni municipality, under the impetus of mayor Morris Nestad, actively pursued an industrializing policy to convert its declining mining economy to heavy manufacturing. But as Philip Bonner ironically points out, “the Council, however, did not display quite the same resourcefulness and vigour in coping with the social consequences of industrial growth”.\(^{431}\) Benoni’s Town Council instead seemed committed to inaction, despite the continuous wave of press articles and reports publically condemning the appalling living conditions of Benoni’s Asiatic Bazaar, embarrassingly revealing the municipality’s complete inefficiency. This “laissez-faire” attitude reflected the Council’s general hesitation in accepting the fact that there was a growing African urban population that was becoming permanent.


It was only under the pressure of Harry Mabuya’s successful squatting movement that the Council finally conceded to consolidate and expand Wattville (or the “New Location”, as it was labelled on several maps). The establishment of Wattville was done in waves, as the Council reluctantly gave in to various pressures and agreed to replace the tents from the Emergency Camp with sub-economic houses. Between 1945 and 1955 (with an acceleration in the early 1950s), the Council gradually expanded the township, reaching to a total of 2,422 houses by 1954.\(^{432}\) The presence of five different types of houses in the township is most likely the result of this hesitant expansion executed in waves\(^{433}\).

**Class Differentiation**

The history of housing policy in South Africa is marked by the tendency to pursue housing policies that differentiated between different sections of black population, in order to secure control over them. Housing policies distinguished between “a migrant worker and or part of the stabilised proletariat, between the aspirant middle class and those beneath them, between domestic workers and other employees, and between different ethnic groups”.\(^{434}\) In various cities in South Africa, this trend translated in housing projects that targeted the more established, middle-class elements of black populations.\(^{435}\)

At its inception, Wattville was planned as one of those “model township”, considering the “high” quality and the extent of its infrastructure (“high” compared to that in the location, not in white suburbs). Before the harmonization of housing norms in 1951, various models of mass ‘Native’ housing co-existed. Later mass housing projects such as Daveyton were primordially concerned with limiting costs as much as possible. Yet Wattville was designed to be ‘the Jewel of Benoni’, the ‘most modern township’, ‘unequalled’, the ‘envy of the entire Reef’\(^{436}\). As school principal and ANC militant Mmule Mpakanyane asserted, “Wattville was known as the best township in the whole country”.\(^{437}\) Compared to the Old Location,

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\(^{432}\) De Coning, "Income and Expenditure Patterns of Urban Bantu Households: Benoni Survey," , 16.

\(^{433}\) The five different models are: semi-detached houses with two or three rooms, single houses with two, three or four rooms.

\(^{434}\) Maylam, “Explaining the Apartheid City”, 29.

\(^{435}\) Examples of these ‘superior’ housing schemes includes Langa in Cape Town, Lamontville in Durban and Dube in Soweto. See Maylam, “Explaining the Apartheid City”, 30.


\(^{437}\) Interview with Mmule Mpakanyane, 28.09.2011, Wattville.
Wattville had it all: roads that were progressively tarred, street lamps, trees planted along the main street, sport grounds (including a tennis court and football field with seating). There were a handful of good-quality brick houses in the Old Location (in particular on 21st street), yet Wattville houses were nonetheless a major improvement compared to the majority of rickety, self-built, iron-and-wood constructions that dominated in the location. Each house was endowed with a large yard in a neatly set out area, as well as ‘excellent facilities’ including a supplied coal stove, electricity and individual taps. One of my interviewees said that the fact that the houses in Wattville “came with numbers” made it all the more special.\footnote{438} Furthermore, each house had a modern room layout where every room had a specified function, including a separate ‘fully equipped’ bathroom and a lounge/living room.\footnote{439} In the Old Location, one had to share communal taps as well as the toilets that were still functioning under the disposable bucket system. Only the wealthiest households could afford to get electricity. Wattville houses were supposedly so sophisticated that many Wattville inhabitants think up to this day that they were initially meant for coloureds, not for Blacks.\footnote{440}

The string of conditions required for applying for the house—being married, having been employed in the same company for a certain number of years-- also clearly indicated a preference for the more established and “desirable” elements of the location.\footnote{441} In addition, the substantially higher rent combined with the new expense of monthly electricity bills automatically excluded the poorer families from the location.\footnote{442}

\footnote{438} Interview with Mpumi Mxoli, 23.04.2012, Wattville.
\footnote{440} But to be clear, these sub-economic houses, designed to cost as least as possible, were also far from the “top houses” that anthropologist Brandel-Syrier describes in her book \textit{Reeftown Elite}, which were built according to one’s own specifications and were apparently “similar to European houses in White areas”. M. Brandel-Syrier, \textit{Reeftown Elite}.
\footnote{441} More generally, one had also to prove that as a “Native”, one was “qualified” to reside legally in a white metropolitan area. According to the 1945 Natives (Urban Areas) Consolidation Act, to be granted permanent permit to reside in urban areas (known as “Section 10 rights”), a black South African had fulfil one of these three criteria: to be born in town and have lived there since birth, to have worked continuously for ten years for one white employer in one area, to be the spouse or child of someone who fulfils the above.
\footnote{442} Rent in Wattville was £2.10 a month for a four roomed sub-economic house in 1950, which was raised to £2.50 in 1954. In comparison, one would pay about £1.10 for a two-roomed house in the Old Location in 1954 and 2 sh 6d for a shared room in a hostel in 1948. According to a letter of complaint written by a certain W. Makatine on the 1st of March 1954, electricity bill cost them another 6 pence per month. Mr. Makatine was complaining against the new rule that sons over 21 years were to pay for their lodgers’ permit. “Today, we pay £3.6 when you have four sons. (…) But our wages are £1.19p a week”. National Archives (Pretoria), NTS 6336 125/313P.
However, the project of making Wattville a “model township” clashed with the political urgency to get the Asiatic Bazaar rid of its “illegal” African population. The Council’s priority was to reserve the new houses for those African families that were to be relocated from the Asiatic Bazaar. However, these families being essentially new migrants, many did not qualify to obtain a sub-economic house. At the same time, the Council had to deal with the hundreds of angry lodgers residing in the African Location, some of which had been on the waiting list for housing for over a decade. These long-term lodgers felt that they, rather than the freshly arrived upstarts from the country or the Asiatic Bazaar, should be given preference in the allocation of houses. This situation led to a stalemate, with many of the first new houses built in 1941 remaining unallocated for several years. The council’s general political incompetence led to a spiralling of tension between these two groups, which culminated in two different occasions (April 1945 and January 1946) to a scramble, families from both groups simply storming those units that were still unallocated, thereby promptly ruining the Council’s entire housing strategy.

As the events described above already suggest, 1950s Benoni’s African community was characterized by many internal divisions: between site-holders, home-owners and tenants, between long-term urbanized lodgers and rural or semi-urbanized new arrivals, between urban youth and the compound inmates, those living in houses and those in squatter camps.\(^{443}\) The acute shortage in housing had heightened the antagonism between site-holders, who were continuously pushing up the rent, and their vulnerable tenants. For most people applying for a house in Wattville, the allocation of one of its units represented a way out of the crushing poverty of the Old Location.

Generally, the difficult conditions for application and the additional costs mentioned above meant that Wattville was composed of a slightly higher proportion of an established working class, the long-established lodgers from the African Location, in particular married couples and families renting back rooms like the Ngilimas. But Wattville also included families who took part in the squatting movement or were residing on the municipal Tent Town, usually fresher arrivals from the countryside or peri-urban sites, gradually got their tent substituted by a house. Hence Wattville’s population was also characterized by a diverse combination of

households with various economic means and degrees of urbanization, though perhaps to a lesser extent than the Old Location. The short biographies in the box below give a sense of the various trajectories of the various women I interviewed in Wattville and Daveyton. These biographies focus on how interviewees arrived in Benoni and how they experienced the move to Wattville. The interviews demonstrate that Wattville was popularly perceived as better-off neighbourhood, if only for the novelty of having electricity and relative luxury of having one toilet per household.\footnote{444}

Other sources confirm that the economic profile of Wattville’s population was in many ways distinct from the Old Location’s. In 1958, a Benoni councillor compared the Old Location and Wattville in the following words:

The Old Location was poorly planned. It had no open space and many of the 1200 houses were in a state of disrepair, fit only for demolition. This area housed the poorest section of the Benoni Bantu population. Wattville on the other hand was an economic scheme and the Council had spent lots of money on the Township. It had tarred roads, sports grounds, schools, businesses, etc. and the elite of the Benoni Bantu were housed in that Township.\footnote{445}

Over time, this different class structure eventually translated in perceptible differences in local patterns of consumption. In 1962 the Bureau of Market Research\footnote{446} led a major economic survey on the Benoni townships. The report noted that Wattville was an older township than Pretoria or Daveyton with a more urbanised population, numbering 18,495 people. It also had a slightly different occupational structure. Wattville had a higher percentage of semi-skilled workers and a higher percentage of earners per household. Its percentage of people with teacher’s or similar diplomas was higher than that of the Pretoria

\footnote{444} Though, it might be underlined that the Council’s “generosity” did not go as far as designing water facilities--the tap and the toilet--inside Wattville houses, but outside, in the yard. One of the concerns underlining all housing policies in South Africa was finding a way of providing housing while maintaining the ideology of white supremacy. Thus housing could never be too lavish. Dr E.G. Jansen, Minister of Native Affairs in 1950, stated at the House of Assembly that it was a “wrong notion that the Native who has barely left his primitive conditions should be provided with a house which to him resembles a palace and with conveniences which he cannot appreciate and will not require for many years to come” (State Information Office, GP 1950-1; as quoted in Morris, A History of Black Housing in South Africa, 48). Another interesting point that comes out of the biographies is that not everyone welcomed the move to Wattville, several interviewees underlining the sense of loss they felt from leaving the location (more on this in chapter five).

\footnote{445} The Councillor here was trying to argue that Wattville was such a fine township that it was suitable for the Coloured community from the Cape Flats, at the time when the central government and the Benoni Town Council were working on the Group Area plan that eventually led to the removal of Africans and Coloureds from the Old Location. CAD, BEP 33, G6/23/2 (1) ‘Memorandum from H.S.J van Wyk (chairman of the Transvaal Committee) to the GAB, Re: Benoni’, November 1958, p.3.

\footnote{446} De Coning, Income and Expenditure Patterns.
townships. Furthermore, Wattville had a higher percentage of female household heads than other black townships on the Reef. Interestingly, 30% of female earners in Wattville were earning R30 or more, compared to only 16% in Pretoria. While the average income per earner was similar to Daveyton and Pretoria, the average income per household in Wattville was considerably higher. The report concluded that Wattville households had relatively more money at their disposal for ‘optional’ spending than those of other black urban areas. This explains why Wattvillers were able to spend comparatively more money on beer, as well as on recreation, amusement and sports or on luxury/semi-luxury items. For example, Wattville had the highest proportion of residents using coal stoves (94.6% instead of 72% in Pretoria) and owning a radio or a gramophone (38.9% compared to 20.2% in Johannesburg and 24.5% in Pretoria).  

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447 *Idem.* The exceptionally high percentage of households using coal stoves is however explained by the fact that most Wattville houses built after 1948 came with coal stoves already allocated.
A SELECTION OF WOMEN’S BIOGRAPHIES

Rebecca Mmope

Rebecca Mmope was born in 1921 at a farm called Old Fontein in the peri-urban area of Benoni. In 1933, her family moved to the Old Location, where they lived in a shack in a backyard. Altogether, they were 13 living in this small shack (parents and eleven children) and they used curtains to divide the space. As a way of bringing some money home, Mrs Mmope and her siblings would collect bones in the streets for an Indian man. She remembers her childhood as rather unhappy: “I was always down at my mother’s place, thinking ‘when are we going to get what other people get?’”. Growing up, she ardently desired a nice pair of leather shoes and dreamed of the day she could start working, to start saving for these things. She married in 1940, when she was 19 years old. In 1951, the couple were able to obtain a house in Wattville thanks to her husband’s boss, who intervened in their favour. She obtained a lot of furniture from one of her bosses, as he was heading back to England and giving away or selling his things. Later in the interview, she affirmed that “white men didn’t like you to own nice things”. She bought her Ellis de Luxe stove in the sixties, which she paid in instalment, at ZAR 6 a week. While every house in Wattville had the basic stove supplied by the municipality, not many had this expensive stove. In the recent years, her children have greatly expanded and renovated her house. “I never dreamed of such a house”, she said.

Jane Phondo Makhubu

Mrs Makhubu was born in 1926 in the Asiatic Bazaar. Her father was working as a clerk in the mines, while her mother worked as a domestic worker. They were seven in the family, sharing a two-roomed house, for which they would pay £1.10 a month. The children would sleep under the kitchen table. One traumatising story was that one of her siblings became deaf, after hot water accidentally trickled into his ear while he was still sleeping and her mother was making tea for her father. Her parents were relatively comfortable. After all, they could afford to send Mrs. Makhubu to boarding school in Newcastle, at the Mariannhill St Anne’s school till standard six. But Mrs. Makhubu remembers being very happy when they got a four-roomed house in Rooicamp (the predecessor to Wattville, so to speak) in 1942, because they no longer had to share a toilet with other people (12 people were living in the backyard of their location house). She could do the washing in the house, without having to wake up early enough to queue for using the communal tap. Mrs. Makhubu started working in 1948, at a dress factory in Doornfontein (Johannesburg). After getting married in 1949, the couple moved into their own house in Wattville. She worked hard to afford the essential furniture for the house and invest in some house-improvement projects. She remembers for instance buying a fancy dining set in 1960, from a shop in Johannesburg, which she paid in instalment over a period of six months.
Charlotte Moroesele

Charlotte Moroesele was born in Sophiatown in 1925 and arrived in Wattville in 1966. She was recruited from Pretoria to work in the location clinic as a community health nurse. Through her paternal grandfather and other relatives, Mrs. Moroesele had inherited a staunch faith in upward mobility through education. Converted to Anglicanism, her grandfather was a successful Sotho farmer based in KwaZulu-Natal, who not only owned land but also cattle and mills for grinding corn. Himself illiterate, he made sure all his children went to school, including his daughters. Mrs. Moroesele’s father worked as an interpreter, first for the Native Affairs in Cape Town, then for the one in Pretoria. Her mother worked as a domestic worker and did washing for white families to put her seven children through school. Mrs Moroesele herself attended high school at the Mariannhill St Francis school and studied nursing at the Lovedale Missionary Institute in the Eastern Cape. She arrived in Wattville as a divorced, autonomous woman, with her children at boarding school. As nurses had a higher salary, she was amongst the first to have a fridge in the neighbourhood, which she looks back on as a wonderful change. “The whole section around my house—you found only doctors, teachers and nurses”. She started a women’s club called “Ikageng” (“build yourself”), which was a saving scheme to help each other for certain expenses, such as burials, entertainment and school fees. She was also part of the Benoni Association of Retired Professionals, which met once a month in their uniforms.

Figure 4.2: Charlotte Moroesele as a young nurse. Photographer unknown, circa 1950s. Charlotte Moroesele’s private collection.
Linda Jangu

Mrs Jangu was born in Sophiatown in 1942. Her parents were both teachers and members of the ANC. They moved to the Old Location to a house on 7th street, when her mother got transferred to a school in Brakpan. In 1950, they bought a large, brand new ten-roomed house on 21st street, which was considered the neighbourhood of the “bourgeois” and the “tycoons”. The pictures Thorrence took of her engagement ceremony around 1964 show a beautiful brick house with a little wall running in front, and fancy iron work on the windows. They were one of the few families to have electricity and even a phone. Mrs Jangu enjoyed living in the Old Location, “it was living like a democracy” in the sense that it was really mixed. In the mid-1960s, her parents were relocated to a four-roomed house in Daveyton. Meanwhile, Mrs Jangu got married in 1969 and moved in with her husband in Wattville. Mrs Jangu did not enjoy moving to Wattville, for it was simply not as big.

Figure 4.3: Original print, Linda Jangu private collection. Photo taken by Thurence Ngilima, circa 1964. The original negative of this picture is still found in the Ngilima collection.
Mrs Sesanga Manyama

Mrs Manyama was born in 1934 in a farm in Bapsfontein, about 25 km north-east of Benoni. Her parents had come from Durban, where her grandfather had a farm. From Bapsfontein, her parents moved to Springs, to another plot belonging to a white family. They were allowed to stay there without paying rent, as her mother worked in the house as a domestic worker. They only started paying rent when they moved to the Old Location. In 1950, they moved to a shack in Apex squatter camp, where rent was cheaper and they could build a larger shack. Three years later, the family of seven obtained a brick house in Wattville. Their obtaining a house was probably facilitated by the fact that her father was by then employed by the municipality as a construction worker. Mrs Manyama met her husband in Apex and they got married in 1955, two years after her first child was born. Until her husband could pay for lobola, she continued living with her parents in Apex, then in Wattville, with her child. This was probably the time the Ngilima photos of her were taken. The picture here below depicts her at her parents’ place, with her parents in the background and her two-year old son on her father’s knees. Mrs Manyama was eventually able to obtain her own house in Wattville when one of her aunts died, without any children. It was difficult to formalise this transfer with the Council, as they had no money for bribing council employees. But they nonetheless continued improving the house, long before obtaining the official title deed for the house in 1989.

Figure 4.4: Sesanga Manyama with her parents and her child. Wattville, mid-1950s, NPC.

For a definition of lobola, see glossary.
Norah Mapila Dhlamini

Mrs Dhlamini was born in 1927 in a village called Marapyane, in Mpumalanga (about 200 km away from Benoni). Her father was from that village, while her mother was from Middleburg. The way Mrs Dhlamini describes it, “there were no trains that side. Only donkey carts”. Her parents, as land owners, survived “from hand to mouth”, from subsistence farming and a little cattle. They lived in a thatched roof house, with bricks made from mud. She first went to Benoni Old Location to visit some relatives when she was about seventeen and decided to stay there and start working. In her own words, “Benoni made me wise”, as in “clever”, or street-wise—in other words, being accustomed to technology and more generally to city ways of doing things, such as going to the bioscope, or having her first boyfriend. She started working at a factory in Doornfontein (Johannesburg), and would send half of her salary back home to her parents, so they could buy tea and sugar. Mrs Dhlamini stayed with a cousin from Marapyane in a house on 12th street. She would go once a month back to Marapyane to visit them. In 1951, her first child was born but died in infancy. By then, she was living with her future husband’s parents in Wattville on Tulela Avenue, in a backroom, though they were only to get married in 1954. As a ‘makoti’ (a young daughter-in-law), she was put to work “like a slave”. After a short time (date unspecified), they were able to get their own house in Wattville. The photo taken by Ronald Ngilima shows her and her husband in their new kitchen, by the small stove provided by the council. She was proud to have her own house, despite the rough walls and the tiny stove. They now had three-roomed house, with a dining room, a kitchen and a bathroom. Improvements included painting the walls, putting in tappet, buying furniture. She used to cut out newspaper to line the cupboards where the pots were kept. They waited until 1986 before converting one of the bedrooms into a sitting-room, after most of their children left their house.
Figure 4.5: Nora Dlamini and her husband in their new house. Original print, photograph taken by Ronald Nglima circa 1955. Nora Dlamini’s private collection. The negative of this picture is still part of the collection.
PART TWO. PORTRAITS OF INTERIORS.

Choosing a Room for One’s Picture

As described in chapter one, Ronald Ngilima was among the first black photographers in the township to offer taking portraits of people within the comfort of their own homes. Until then, indoor photography was confined to posh white-owned professional studios in town. Mahlanga’s generation of ambulant photographers using the “while-you-wait” cameras was dependent on natural light and were thus restricted to photographing outside. With Ronald’s acquisition of artificial lighting, his clients were offered the possibility of being photographed in the familiar environment of their own homes. At one point in his photographic career, Ronald started offering his own living room as an alternative backdrop to his studio curtain. Sitters could opt between the regular studio set up (curtain, flower basket) and posing in his lounge as some kind of extended, ‘three-dimensional’ studio. In order to maintain the lounge’s appeal and to give it an air of novelty, the Ngilimas were constantly changing the curtains, wallpaper and carpet, and the orientation of the furniture (see figure 4.6).

Figure 4.6: Two examples of clients posing in the Ngilimas’ lounge, with different curtains, floor patterns and furniture disposition. Wattville, 1950, NPC.
In Appadurai’s words, the backdrop contains important clues that help us ‘place’ the photograph in its geographical and historical context. Most of Ronald’s clients chose their background quite consciously, selecting one that would show them off in the most positive way. I suggest that indoor portraiture gave Ngilima an advantage over his colleagues, enabling him to construct a niche market of clients who, by commissioning him expressed a desire to be photographed at home, whether to show off their interior or to record a family event taking place at home. Whether a spontaneous decision taken on the spot as Ngilima was passing, or whether consciously taken in advance for a specific event, calling on Ngilima’s services expressed the general consensus that the environment of the township had become ‘photographable’, an acceptable background for a good, dignified portrait. Township homes perhaps did not evoke the luxurious bourgeois lifestyle as the town studios’ backdrops did, but they were deemed sufficient to generate a good impression. However, not all parts of the house were equally suitable for the picture; some rooms were considered more dignified as a background than others.

As I went through the thousands of images in the collection, I categorised the images on the basis of the objects visible within the frame: the presence of a couch, and/or armchair and a coffee table would qualify as a lounge photo, whereas a large table, chairs and a ‘dining suite’ (cupboard storing dishes and cutlery) would qualify as a dining room. Following this rudimentary classification system, I found 173 photographs taken in a sitting room in Wattville, and but only 6 photographs taken in Old Location that could be qualified as “sitting rooms”. On the other hand, I came across 51 photographs taken in the dining room in Wattville, and 39 in dining rooms in the Old Location. The number of pictures I found taken in bedrooms is equally divided between Wattville and Old Location (18 and 17 respectively). Very few pictures were taken in the kitchen (about 26, including 14 taken in the Ngilimas’ kitchen). Another element that is interesting to highlight is the existence of a large number of pictures that simply resisted my simple clear-cut categorization in terms of space division.

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451 Such photographs depicting “in-between spaces” are important reminders suggesting that Africans did not necessarily stick to the original layout elaborated by urban planners. As mentioned before, the Ngilima family simply washed by the stove in the kitchen, and used the bathroom as a darkroom instead. Similarly, many families decided to remove the cement bathtub in the bathroom and install it outside for doing the laundry.
something I will come back to later in this chapter. For instance, one picture depicts a woman 
with a chubby baby on her lap, sitting in what could be a lounge (armchair, couch, coffee 
table, doilies, decorations). The large bed and the two pillows to her right nevertheless make it 
clear that this lounge was also a bedroom.

What becomes clear from these numbers is that there was a specific relationship between 
Wattville and lounge photographs. The overwhelming majority of the pictures depicting a 
lounge were taken in Wattville township, whereas photos taken in dining rooms and 
bedrooms are more equally divided between both places. How to interpret this difference in 
choice of background between these two groups of residents? Why are there so few pictures 
taken in the kitchen? What do these choices tell us about the way people differentiated 
interior spaces and allocated meaning to them?

Old Location vs. Modern Townships

The significance of the choice in backdrops emerges when considering the meanings 
attributed to various sites, meanings that are the product of a history of architecture, of people 
appropriating their living spaces, and of local housing politics. In the Old Location, for 
instance, most of the houses were privately built.452 Having a stoep suggested one had the 
economic means to invest in this additional structure, giving the impression of being a site 
holder. The division between site holders and tenants was one of the strongest factors of 
social distinction within the black community of Etwatwa, where differences in revenue were 
generally minimal.453 Figure 4.7 depicts three subjects, probably parents and their child, 
standing next to the column of their stoep. Their clothing indicates a certain level of 
prosperity: the little girl is wearing her ‘Sunday best’, a matching beret and shoes; the woman 
is wearing a two-piece suit and accessories such as a watch and some jewellery. The doek 
covering her hair, together with her left hand resting on her husband’s shoulder, suggests that 
she is a respectable married woman. Aside from their bodies, the choice of background here is

452 According to Philip Bonner, 979 out of 1179 houses were privately built in 1944. Philip Bonner, ‘Eluding 
Capture: African Grass-Root Struggles in 1940s Benoni’ in Saul Dubow and Alan Jeeves, eds., South Africa’s 
1940s: Worlds of Possibilities (Cape Town: Double Storey Books), 176.

Society, 18, 4 (2005), 353-393.
equally as important a site for conveying prosperity. The column implies long-term investment and stability, as well as a certain economic well-being. The address number appearing above the door also indicates that they are properly registered with the local authorities and have the appropriate permits to live in the urban area. The combination of clothing and material environment hence gives the impression that this is a well-established, law-abiding and respectable urban family. Unfortunately, this family has not yet been identified and it is impossible to state whether they really stayed there and whether they were owners or simply tenants. But in any case, they certainly were able to use the medium of photography and pin down the visual codes to produce a flattering image of themselves as occupying a certain social position. Several interviewees asserted that people would often choose a particularly beautiful house with a nice stoep or a beautiful front gate simply to have a pleasing background for their picture. Through the services of a photographer and the magic of framing, subjects could potentially transcend the site holder/tenant divide.

Figure 4.7: Family posing in front of a stoep. Old Location, date unknown (circa early 1950s), NPC.
In Wattville, people had to find alternative ways to express social distinction. In the Old Location, differences in wealth translated in an array of various housing conditions. This is clearly shown in the evaluation of property value of houses in the location, a document produced in the run-up of the forced removals in view of offering compensations to house owners. The bulk of the properties were estimated valuing less than R.500 (68% of the properties). Numbers of property estimated at more than R.500 rapidly diminish, but there were still 145 houses valued between R.1000-R.5000 (11%). Significant for my point is the fact that the scale of value stretches on till reaching R 11,000, R 13,000 and even R 15,000 (1 property each).454 By contrast, the progressive expansion of Wattville produced rows and rows of identical houses. As the municipality initially refused to sell the council houses, all the inhabitants were reduced to the status of temporary tenants. As highlighted above, Wattville’s population was also mixed, composed of recently arrived migrants and illegal squatters, set together with an emerging black middle-class and a comparatively larger elite made of black professionals. In Crankshaw’s terms, ‘housing provision by the State had produced a homogenized urban landscape where workers and the middle class lived in identical houses’.455

Getting a council house came with a long set of rules and regulations, one of them stating that tenants were not allowed to alter the original foundations of the house, nor to make any extensions. The original layout of the house was to be respected and regular rounds of inspections made sure this rule was obeyed. Only marginal improvements could be made, for instance putting down a layer of cement on one side of the house or building steps leading towards the front door. For the sake of saving on building costs, state architects had not included a stoep in their plans for Wattville houses. Building a fancy entrance wall or an elaborate stoep was not allowed, though applying red polish to the windowsills was. As a consequence, members of the household could only really make domestic improvements or alterations to the garden and the inside of the house. The new lounge thus became the site where they concentrated their efforts to personalize their house and make it stand out.

The lounge called for an entirely new range of furniture and objects, in particular couches and armchairs, explicitly conceived for the sitting area. As Leslie J. Bank writes of the domestic

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interiors of the black township Duncan Village, built near East London in the 1940s, ‘The dark-wood dressers, tables and cabinets that had been popular in the old location were cleared out to make way for a flood of new products now on the market that were specifically designed for small houses.’\textsuperscript{456} According to Mia Brandel-Syrer, writing about the emergent black middle class in Johannesburg townships of the 1960s, this accumulation of objects stemmed from the rapid expansion of new housing estates. ‘Houses needed curtains and carpets, dining-room suites and kitchen schemes; new tea sets required doilies and display cabinets required “objects d’art”; house-proud hostesses needed tea and polishes; generous hosts needed cigarettes, and children’s birthday parties needed sweets and cold drinks.’\textsuperscript{457}

Few Old Location households, the back room tenants in particular, could afford the luxury of having a whole room solely dedicated to receiving guests.\textsuperscript{458} Most of my interviewees who lived in the Old Location stated that they lived in shacks or at best a two-room house. Typically the parents would occupy the bedroom and the children would sleep in the kitchen. The Old Location’s dense population and the general lack of space meant that the rooms were necessarily multi-purpose: eating meals, taking baths, studying, children sleeping, etc. all had to take place in the same room. This explains why there are so few pictures of Old Location lounges. In the absence of possessing a separate lounge, Old Location residents had themselves photographed in dining rooms (with couches perceptible in the frame evoking “loungeness”), or on the stoep.

For some of my interviewees looking back on the Ngilima photographs, the shots depicting stoeps and front doors triggered nostalgic responses, as these pictures evoked for them the type of street life that characterised places like the Old Location. According to Leslie Bank’s study of an East London location in the 1950s, the stoep was an intermediate space between the private and the public that enabled women to complete their domestic chores while keeping an eye on the children and on the street life.\textsuperscript{459} It was a way of asserting one’s

\textsuperscript{456} Bank, \textit{Home Spaces, Street Styles: Contesting Power and Identity in a South African City}, 84.

\textsuperscript{457} Brandel-Syrriel, 14.

\textsuperscript{458} Shamil Jeppie describes District Six interiors in the 1950s as follows: ‘Apartments were too small to set spaces aside for special occasions, such as a hall to receive visitors or a lounge for entertaining them, and apart from the kitchen and toilet every room was usually occupied. Although the amount of space obviously depended on the size of the family, rooms served multiple purposes - lounges, for instance, would be transformed into bedrooms at bedtime.’ Jeppie, ‘Interiors, District Six, C.1950,’ 390.

\textsuperscript{459} Bank, \textit{Home Spaces, Street Styles}, 51-53.
presence in the public domain, with the possibility of calling out to each other and catching up on the gossip. It would also be the space where music bands could rehearse, or where the young ones could dance to the gramophone.\textsuperscript{460} In short, the *stoep* played a central role in organising social interaction within the vibrant location. In choosing for *stoeps* as a background, Old Location residents were probably not necessarily searching to emphasise this particular aspect of their lives.

The comparison between portraits taken in both places is useful to pinpoint some of the important changes in social dynamics that the new kind of house-design of modern townships implied. This in turn helps explain the aura of the lounge as an idea, a symbol of a different lifestyle. While the design of Wattville houses did not include a *stoep*, the state architects provided each house with an individual tap, bathroom and lounge. This new division of space and individualisation of services meant that women could stay indoors to do their chores. Another rule in Wattville was that inhabitants were not allowed to construct shacks in their backyard. Hence the kind of communal life that took place in the courtyards of the location evolved towards a household economy based on the model of the nuclear family.\textsuperscript{461} The modern townships clearly led to a much more private form of life, oriented towards the inside (house interiors) as opposed to the outside (streets). The vision behind the new architecture of the modern township was to develop ‘new Non-European men’ and to generate a more individualistic way of life that would eventually substitute the tribal unit with the family as the basic cultural unit.\textsuperscript{462} The following extract from Bloke Modisane’s autobiography entitled *Blame me on History*, gives a sense of how a neat division of space in the house was something that Modisane, and many others undoubtedly, ardently desired and aspired to, as a lifestyle associated with material advancement and social class:

To be a doctor like Dr Xuma would be to be respected, to live in a big house with separate bedrooms, a room for sitting, another for eating, and a room to be alone, for reading or thinking, to shut out South Africa and not be black;

\textsuperscript{460} Interview with Khubi Thabo, 17.06. 2011, Daveyton; Joyce Mohamed, 15.06.2011, Brakpan.

\textsuperscript{461} Hellman, *Rooiyard: A Sociological Study of an Urban Slum Yard*.

a house in which children would not be sent out if someone wanted to take a bath, we would not have to undress in the dark or under the blankets.\textsuperscript{463}

\textit{The Lounge: Incarnating a Modern Lifestyle}

The photographed lounge seems to sum up the social changes that accompanied the introduction of social housing and to embody this drive for an individualistic lifestyle. It is interesting to observe that the vast majority of Wattville’s lounge portraits figure only one or two people. The lounge was clearly preferred for single-person portraits, while the dining room was more often chosen for large family or friend gatherings, in particular birthdays. Most of the dining room photos depict people sitting at a table full of glasses and bottles or standing huddled around a birthday cake (figure 4.8). Given that the lounge and the dining room were equal in size, the preference for the dining room for depicting groups cannot be attributed to a question of space. I would suggest that the explanation lies in the powerful symbolic associations with individualism that the lounge’s material culture came to represent.

\textsuperscript{463} B. Modisane, \textit{Blame Me on History} (Cape Town: AD. Donker Publisher, 1986), 34. As quoted in David, "Popular Culture in South Africa: The Limits of Black Identity in Drum Magazine", 199.
Figure 4.8: Examples of group portraits typically taken in the dining room of houses in the Old Location. Old Location, early 1960s, NPC.
The enthusiasm to furnish the sitting area coincided with the post-war economic boom, in which black households were suddenly flooded with a range of new products and commodities, in particular beauty creams and cosmetics. A contemporary advertising for furniture appearing in the *Bantu World* urged black South Africans to “Be a Man of Possessions!” Becoming a modest consumer of these national or international brands contributed to the feeling that whilst the suburban dream was still reserved for a white elite, black people could also get a share of the profits of the economic boom. In figure 4.9, for instance, a man and a woman are depicted sitting comfortably on either side of the gramophone and radio set that occupies the central part of the portrait. The woman sits in an armchair, holding a record and smiling at the camera. The man is holding a pouch in one arm and putting on a record with the other hand. But the eye of the viewer is somewhat distracted, dragged towards the accumulation of objects surrounding them, in particular towards the coffee table on which one sees: teacups, saucers, spoons, a sugar bowl, a tray, glasses, open bottles of alcohol, a plant in an improvised vase on a saucer, doilies and ashtrays. On the top of the gramophone are more doilies, another empty glass vase and more ashtrays.

![Image](image.jpg)

**Figure 4.9:** The lounge as embodying Western lifestyle. Wattville, late 1959s-early 1960s, NPC.

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464 Burke, *Lifebuoy Men, Lux Women: Commodification, Consumption and Cleanliness in Modern Zimbabwe*. See also Thomas, “Skin Lighteners, Black Consumers, and Jewish Entrepreneurs in South Africa.”

According to Appadurai, the studio backdrop, no matter how realistic it strives to be, is necessarily nevertheless a representation of an actual site. Because the backdrop is fragmentary, it is inevitably metaphoric, alluding not to a particular location but to a type of location, loaded with cultural references and icons.\footnote{Appadurai, "The Colonial Backdrop."} Though the lounges in the Ngilima photographs are ‘real’ insofar that they refer to actual existing locations, I also read them as the expression of the desire to engage with modernity and embrace this ‘new age’ of mass consumption. The lounge contained a plethora of domestic items that were meant to define the essence of urban lifestyle, in particular tokens of modern technology. The radio, the gramophone, the radiogram and the vinyl record were amongst the most popular props to pose with for both young and old. Cables and plugs were often included in Ngilima’s pictures, instead of being hidden away (figure 4.10).

![Jazz band posed as if listening to the radio together. The cables are very visible in the background. Wattville, early 1960s, NPC.](image)

It was sign that the house had electricity, something Wattville residents were very proud of, despite the additional charges that it added to their monthly bills. As one interviewee put it,
at night Wattville was shining while the Old Location remained plunged in the dark. Long before South Africans were able to afford electric appliances or before the availability of television sets, having electricity in the 1950s for domestic lights and for the radio was already a physical and symbolic expression of one’s connection to the national net, of one’s inclusion in the general wave of modernization and of being in sync with the world at large.

Visualising one’s enthusiasm for such objects and fashion ‘from overseas’ affirmed one’s dedication to cosmopolitanism, a claim the National Party government and many white South Africans were reluctant to acknowledge. In their eyes, Africans’ exposure to city life and the consequential distancing from traditional values were responsible for their moral collapse and fall into criminality (alcoholism, prostitution, gambling, gangsterism). The first issues of The African Drum, reporting on ‘African’ tribal life and ‘African’ traditional customs, are representative of a larger enterprise by a patronising white class to retribalise African identities. To deny the emergence of black urban culture was to underline the temporary nature of the African presence in urban space and their inevitable return to the homelands. The State’s discourse translated on the ground to local gossip vis-à-vis migrant workers and the rural arrivals’ mode of living. Traifina Shobete reported, not without some disgust, that the Basotho women staying in the Asiatic Bazaar lived in houses entirely devoid of furniture:

Their house was always empty. They only had blankets, folded and put it there aside. (…) You’re afraid even to come in, uuu! This empty house, yoyoyo…they just come here, after that they go back home to Basotho. That there must be just blanket only, because they can carry the blankets and go home. They don’t want to buy anything!

Basotho women had a very bad reputation amongst the urban African community for “embracing” tavern and prostitution activities as their main mode of survival. “My mother did not want to see them”, recalls Mrs. Shobete. A section of rural migrants, such as the “Reds”

467 Interview with Dumi Dlamini, 28.04.2011, Wattville.

468 Initially launched in 1951, The African Drum was the predecessor to Drum magazine. The African Drum failed within a few months for lack of readership, presumably because the topic of a mythologized tribal past and traditional culture did not appeal to too many people. James Bailey eventually took over the magazine and gave it a new direction and style, resulting in the much celebrated, cutting-edge Drum.


470 Interview with Traifina Shobete, 01.06.2012, Wattville.
from Eastern Cape, were reluctant to invest anything more than the bare minimum in their urban dwelling, preferring to save as much of their little income as possible for their real homes, back in the village. This refusal to give into “urban ways” was a way to articulate their dedication to a rural mode of life, to which they were determined to eventually return. From Mrs. Shobete’s statement, it seems that urban Africans regarded a disreputable mode of life and lack of furniture as going hand in hand. In reverse, investing in one’s house in the township and in furniture was expressing one’s dedication to respectable urban living and one’s intention on staying. While rejecting this imposed association with tribalism and rural identity, black South Africans’ engagements with modernity were constructed not just in opposition to tradition, but also in their own positive terms, in their embracing of consumption and a new material culture, in this disposition to be ‘enchanted by the production and circulation of novelty, innovation and new fashions’ and in their ‘enjoyment of and attachment to new things’. Eventually, women going back to rural areas after long periods spent in Johannesburg would also bring with them new elements of furniture. The furniture would come with specific domestic instructions on how to display it and use it, inspired by their years of working as a domestic worker in a white household. Rather than sheer mimicking, women usually discriminated in their adaptation of white standards of décor (for instance, no live plants in the house nor dogs). Yet it is undeniable that white suburban material culture exerted a general attraction across the African population. This attraction must be however understood within South Africa’s racialized hierarchy of values, which gave status appeal to “European things” and “white ways of doing things”. Consumption was one way for black South Africans to establish their dignity and equality with white people. As one interviewee stated: “White men did not like you to own nice things”.

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471 The “Reds” was a nickname that the Mayers introduced in their 1961 study of Xhosa migrants in East London. The nickname refers to the red clay that Xhosas would smear on their face. The Mayers contrasted the traditionalist “Reds” with the modernist “Schools”, Xhosas who were a product of missionary schools and ended up adopting a Western lifestyle. Mayer and Mayer, Townsmen or Tribesmen: Conservatism and the Process of Urbanisation in a South African City.


473 Ginsburg, ”Now I Stay in a House: Renovating the Matchbox in Apartheid-Era Soweto”, 177.

474 Interview with Rebecca Mmope, May 2011, Wattville.
“Loungeness” as a Transferrable Disposition

According to a typical Western division of space, the lounge is the only room in the house exclusively reserved for non-economic activities, such as listening to music or receiving special guests. Yet many Wattville households were admittedly so full that they had to use the lounge as a second bedroom. In the morning, the children would store away their bedding and the room would recover the aura of the lounge again, ‘reserved’ for special occasions. In his analysis of ‘parlour photography’ in Gambia, Buckley argues that the concept of the parlour is not fixed to a single room. The parlour (the Gambian term for sitting-room) has a ‘transferrable disposition’ that can be applied to other rooms in the house, including the bedroom, so long as they display a similarly luxurious use of the space. The ‘transferring disposition’ of the lounge also comes across in those portraits taken in hybrid spaces. Earlier in the chapter, I quoted an example of a lounge corner set up in a woman’s bedroom. Individual subjects tended to pick out a corner of the dining room or kitchen that blurred the function of the room but focused instead on particular objects or pieces of furniture: the gramophone, and especially the glass cabinet. The glass cabinet had no immediate practical function; like the lounge, its sole purpose was to appeal to potential visitors, to convey elegance by putting on display the household’s best china, photo prints, vases and trinkets for all to see (figure 4.11). With careful composition, it was possible to block out obtrusive elements that could potentially spoil the lounge effect (for instance a dining table or a bed). The narrowness of the rooms meant that the photographer could not always succeed in this. More often than not, a corner of the dining table appearing at the margins of the photograph, giving the subject away (figure 4.12). Those photographs taken in hybrid spaces translate people’s strategy to work around the shortage of space: if one cannot have an entire room dedicated to hosting, then at least one could create a mini-version of a lounge in the corner of a room.

The transferable disposition of the lounge also helps to understand the series of pictures of customers appropriating the Ngilima’s lounge. The three pictures of figure 4.13 depict Constance Xotyeni, the Ngilima’s next-door neighbour, pretending to be coming back ‘home’ from work, and relaxing to some music by ‘her’ gramophone in ‘her’ house. They belong to the same uncut roll of negatives shot by Thorence Ngilima. It is likely that they were never enlarged. Through the magic of photography, the aura of the lounge holds even without the photographic subject owning that space. In other words, the lounge-studio is just as ‘fake’ as a...
painted backdrop, yet it has more of an effect on the viewer. What makes the idea of the lounge so visually convincing?

Figure 4.11: Two examples of women posing by the glass case exhibiting teacups, trinkets and such objects. Wattville, late 1950s-early 1960s, NPC.
Figure 4.12: Note the dining table visible on the left edge of the photographs. Old Location, late 1950s-early 1960s, NPC.

Figure 4.13: Constance Xotyeni coming back from work, entering 'her house' (the Ngilima’s house). Photograph by Torrance Ngilima. Wattville, early 1960s, NPC.
Lounge as a Sensual Space

In his text on popular photography, Appadurai considers only the iconic qualities of the flat surface behind the subject that function as backdrop. But the Ngilimas’ lounge-studio worked differently from his curtain-backdrop and attracted different kind of clients (mostly middle-aged women). I maintain that the persuasive effect of the lounge lay in the representation of a three-dimensional, all-enclosing space – as opposed to a flat surface.\textsuperscript{475} The effectiveness of the idea of the lounge partly stems from the person’s ability to inhabit this space and invest meaning in it through a set of practices. For some of Ngilimas’ subjects it was not enough to simply pose with objects of modernity. Many of them also wanted to demonstrate their familiarity with such technology by actually interacting with these objects, for instance by twisting the radio’s knob, pretending to put on a record, or to read a magazine.\textsuperscript{476} For Buckley the parlour is best understood ‘as a sensual space, where persons participate in specific sensory relations with the material environment’. The experience of being photographed in the parlour ‘made the link between the visual and the other sensory registers, including the embodied emotion of elegance’.\textsuperscript{477}

The sensory experience of the lounge had a particular resonance amongst women as it fused with the practice of hosting and the notion of respectability. Respectability can be defined in many ways: an unconditional respect towards law and order, being very religious and heavily involved in church life, being economically successful, or being highly educated.\textsuperscript{478} But respectability for many women was also about the art of receiving visitors, the art of making one’s house look presentable, clean and orderly, about conforming to certain etiquette of hospitality. The importance of this etiquette comes across beautifully in a scene of Njabulo Ndebele’s novel \textit{The Cry of Winnie Mandela}, in which his four female characters gather for their weekly sisterhood meeting. One of the characters, Delisiwe, describes the training her mother gave her to learn the science of tea etiquette. Ndebele informs his readers that

\textsuperscript{475} I wish to thank Patricia Hayes for raising this point about the difference between a backdrop and ‘a portrait of a space’.

\textsuperscript{476} Gihanean photographer Philip Kwame Apagya has become internationally renowned for his studio portraits taken against colourful painted backdrops depicting for instance a fully equipped modern kitchen or an airplane. His subjects would often pose “in action”, pretending to be opening the fridge or mounting the steps to the plane.\textsuperscript{477} Buckley, “Photography, Elegance and the Aesthetics of Citizenship,” . 189.

\textsuperscript{478} Goodhew, "Working Class Respectability: The Example of the Western Areas of Johannesburg, 1930-1955," .
Delisiwe’s parents were both graduates of missionary school, and that her father was a priest. A description of a photograph of her parents dating from the 1920s, an early studio portrait with “Roman pillars” in the background, successfully frames the parents as the generation that “brought modernity into their homes”. This scene in the novel clearly links a particular genre of photography and a style of self-representation (see chapter two) to the fervent adoption of European lifestyle, including the elaborate tea-ritual. The details of the ritual are worthwhile to transcribe here in full:

“In my days, zintombi, proper training and serving of tea to visitors”, she said to them, “was the ultimate proof of refinement”. (…) She proceeded to enunciate the process:

1. Prepare the dough for the scones an hour before the visitors arrive.

2. Retrieve your most valuable tea set from where you keep it safely on top of your bedroom wardrobe, or underneath it.

3. Lay out the occasional table in the middle of the room: well-starched tablecloth and starched matching serviettes, table mats, cups and saucers, side plates for scones; bowls in the middle of the table (sugar, apricot jam, and butter); knives for spreading the butter and the peach or apricot jam. Everything arranged according to some plan to reveal care and the desire to please.

4. Cover everything with a net. It can be white, or pink, or green, or blue.

5. Then wait.

6. When the first visitors arrive, welcome them. That is the signal to put the pan in the oven. Then while the scones bake, spend a few moments with your visitors exchanging pleasantries. Keep talking about the weather, about the ever-rising cost of food, about fashion and its pressures on children, adding to the difficulties of bringing them up today, about anything that does not get you into a really serious discussion. Skillfully spot a moment to go and boil the water.

7. Meanwhile, warm the cups with boiling water.

8. Put tea-leaves in your hot teapot and pour in boiling water. Cover the teapot with the tea-cosy.
9. While the tea treks or loes-s as Basotho say, warm the milk.

10. With teapot, milk jug, warm cups on a tray, return to the guests and serve the tea. ⁴⁷⁹

As the most public room of the house, the lounge is in its essence geared towards the reception of guests. The accumulation of furniture, decorative and technological objects in the lounge, is part of the process of making the room appealing to an external audience. As Dalisiwe’s description suggests, the operation of properly serving tea and scones requires nothing less than: teacups and saucers, a teapot, a sugar and jam bowl, a milk jar, a separate plate for the scones, a tray, doilies for the tray, as well as storage devices for all these objects. ⁴⁸⁰ The visit of special friends or relatives coming from far away was a popular opportunity for calling a photographer to record this event. The elegant surroundings and the posing for the camera generated in turn ‘the experience of comportment and the sense of being well composed’. ⁴⁸¹ Hence many of these lounge portraits are a *mise-en-scène* of hosting rituals: female subjects pretending to pour a cup of tea, holding a tray of glasses, or sipping on a cup while holding the saucer with the other hand (figure 4.14).

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⁴⁸⁰ My own experience of Wattville can confirm this fact. When conducting my interviews with Wattville residents, I was treated to endless cups of teas. I even started my own series of pictures of elaborate tea trays that would be presented to me.

Such hosting etiquette and rituals are not specific to Wattville and have certainly been practiced for many generations in the Old Location. There was a sense, however, that living in a formal brick (or in this case, cement) house, with its larger volumes and clear room divisions, required “proper” things and “proper space usage”, adequate for “proper living” (for instance cooking on a coal stove as opposed to a mbaugha). The symbolic qualities inherent to the structural forms (more space, less hot in the summer, less cold in the winter, own tap, etc) lead to further expectations and pressure on how to occupy this space and what objects it should have. Inhabitants felt compelled to “enact formally built homes”. 482 In other words, the new council houses anchored respectability and hosting in a specific material culture that revolved around the lounge. Ronald’s shooting sessions created a sensual experience that participated in the configuration of the lounge as the main site for visualising respectability. The new tradition of lounge photography magnified the public quality of the lounge by bringing it under the scrutiny of the camera’s ruthless gaze. To be ‘photographable’ or ‘showable’ was a mark of approval. It was evidence that the room had reached the aesthetic standards of presentation to become a photographic backdrop. These photographs would then be used to decorate the glass cabinet, or albums that would be taken out and shown to visitors. ‘As an arena for display, the parlour serves as both a room to show photographs and a room in which to pose for photographs.’ 483 This combined acts of producing and consuming images in the same site, enhancing the notion that the lounge was a stage where people could play out their aspirations of a modern lifestyle.

Besides the practices and sensorial experiences that configured the lounge as a sensual space of elegance, the aura of the lounge as a powerful backdrop also stemmed from the fact that lounge photography resonated closely with representations of domesticity circulating in popular culture, for one in mainstream magazines. For instance, Drum articles reporting on rich and prominent black people in South Africa would typically be accompanied by a portrait of the person in question situated in richly decorated and furnished living rooms. Every issue was full of advertisements for furniture shops and kitchen sets, floor polish and gramophones.


483 Ibid., 191.
The Kitchen: an Unfit Backdrop

At the polar opposite of the lounge is the kitchen. Pictures taken in the kitchen represent a tiny sliver of the sample, less than 5%. This initially surprised me, considering how much time I knew Wattville families usually spent in the kitchen, until I realised that there were probably few pictures taken in the kitchen in my own family’s album. What is it about kitchens that make them so unfit as a backdrop?

The theory that kitchens were deemed too private to be revealed in a photograph can immediately be dismissed. Kitchens in township homes can hardly be considered exclusively private. Up till today, the kitchen, situated at the back of the house, is usually the main entrance point into the house, for family member, neighbours and strangers alike. It is considered the polite thing to do, to “come round” and knock at the kitchen door to introduce oneself. A neighbour or a close friend or relative will probably be invited to drink tea in the kitchen, whereas more exceptional or special visits (relatives coming from far away, pastors, lady friends from one’s prayer group, etc…) would rather take place in the lounge.

Comparing the lounge portraits with the series of photographs of the Ngilima family in the kitchen put us on a better track to answer this question. This series of 14 pictures fall under a completely different genre of portraiture. Their informality and the lack of restraint in terms of filtering out certain “unglamorous” elements indicates that these were taken with a different agenda. In the most likely scenario, Ronald Ngilima would step into the kitchen from his studio and take pictures of his family then and there, simply to finish a roll of film. Figure 4.15 seems to have been taken spontaneously, without much warning. Only Mavies is looking at the camera, as well as Thorence, huddled in a corner. The women are all absorbed in their activity, sewing and cooking, to look up from their work for the snapshot. The spontaneity of the snapshot effectively documents the busy nature of the space of the kitchen, give the viewer a sense of a rawness or unusual closeness to “real life”.

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484 The front door is never used, it is often even permanently closed, a couch propped in front of it. 285
Other Ngilima photos taken in the kitchen were clearly taken after Ronald’s death\textsuperscript{485}, which suggests that Thorence took after Ronald in continuing this tradition, also in a spontaneous manner: his images present lopsided angles of the frame, depict a room crowded with subjects

\textsuperscript{485} In one of them one can make out a young Sipho aged about one, making it a post-1960 picture. Another clue is the fact that Benjamin appears visibly older, with a shadow of a moustache and wearing a suit. Finally, in one picture, the 1963 calendar is visible in the background.
caught with their mouth half-open in the action of speaking, singing or eating, babies being lifted up... These photographs plunge the viewer into the private life of the family carrying out its daily routine, without disrupting it, in a way that recalls social documentary. The predominant ambiance of lively activity and chaos further creates a strong contrast with the calm, manicured atmosphere of the lounge. Because these photographs taken only “to finish the film”, our photographers took more liberties with these that with their commissioned work. In figure 4.15 for instance, Sarah Ngilima appears wearing an apron, with a lopsided doek that looks as if it was about to fall off, revealing her whitening hair. Her slouched body conveys a sense of tiredness. Instead of electric appliances and objects of leisure, she is surrounded by various elements constituting domestic chores (the clothes iron, the spool of string, the laid-out notebook with a list scribbled on it, the cooking pots), giving the viewer the sense that she is taking a break from a never-ending chain of housework. These photographs thus depict the kitchen as a clearly gendered space, a space dominated by mothers and elder sisters dressed in aprons and peignoirs, fretting over babies and bare-feet toddlers, and most of all working: cooking and dishing out food, serving tea, washing (plates, clothes and bodies), ironing, mending. In Marxist terms, the kitchen was the space dedicated to domestic reproduction.

The kitchen photos potentially remind the viewer of some of the aspects of a harsh reality, that by definition do not fit with what is expected of photography. Symbolically, the kitchen stood for the limits to black South Africans’ aspirations, the struggle to properly feed an entire family at least twice a day. During her fieldwork in Soweto, Helen Meintje encountered several Sowetans for whom the priority in the process of upgrading their matchbox houses was to build a wall to make the kitchen into a separate and enclosed room. The reason for the urgency of this particular operation was that the wall was supposed to conceal the exact nature of some meals (like goggas or morojos, using respectively insects and wild spinach), which was distinctly associated with poverty. Meintjes’ interviewees also feared that people would notice the lack of food in the cupboards. The kitchen and the lounge thus related to each other in a similar way as the main stage related to the backstage in a theatre. The backstage needs to be kept out of view, least the magic of the performance be ruined by disclosing what laid behind its making-of.

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Meintjes, ‘Washing Machines Make Lazy Women”, 70.
This said, there was a minority of clients who seemed to have explicitly requested to be photographed in the kitchen. The kitchen could become a source of pride instead of a potentially embarrassing place to conceal, under certain conditions. Norah Dhlamini’s photograph (see biographies section) depicts her and her husband showing off their new and improved coal stove, visibly superior to the one provided for by the council. The photograph echoes the sense of happiness that Dhlamini described to me for finally having a place of their own, after having stayed for several years at her husband’s parents’ house. Figure 4.16 gives an example of how it was possible to be photographed in the kitchen in a dignified way.

Figure 4.16: An example of ‘dignified kitchen’. Wattville, mid-1950s, NPC.
Unlike the kitchen in the Ngilima’s photos, this one stands out for being very neatly organized. The pots and matching storing food jars on the top shelf are arranged in terms of decreasing sizes, while the storage jars’ labels (indicating its contents-sugar, tea, coffee) are all neatly facing the viewer. The cans of condensed Nestle milk are also arranged so as to easily read the name of the brand. On the shelf below, gleams another row of matching glass jars that appear to be empty. A long straight strip of plasticized material with a decorative pattern on it, garnishes the ledge and brightens the blackened wall behind the stove. Behind the man sitting, one can see a cloth curtain hiding the contents of the cupboard, its pattern matching the tablecloth. Instead of the jumble of elements seen in the Ngilima kitchen photos, the surface of this table is completely cleared except for the sugar bowl and saucer. All three are drinking from teacups and saucers that appear to belong to the same tea set. The woman sitting down is holding her teacup with her pinkie lifted. As mentioned in the lounge portraits, partaking in tea hosting etiquette also imparts respectable civility onto the photographic subjects. The young woman standing is pouring herself a cup, while looking directly at the camera. Her frank acknowledgement of the camera suggests that posing in the kitchen was a conscious choice, manifesting a desire to show-off not so much her stove but her efforts to decorate the kitchen. These tactics of decoration and meticulous arrangement and display of objects transformed the crude municipal construction into a “proper” kitchen. The absence of food or reference to cooking in the image allows the viewer to focus solely on the tea ritual: the pouring, the lifted pinkie, the key ingredients for tea/coffee on the top shelf. It is this attention to etiquette and the “proper way” of doing things that redeemed the kitchen from its closeness to poverty-related issues and shifted it into the zone of the photographable.

Compared to the kitchen, to what extent was the lounge a feminised space? I detected that more men than women seemed to have favoured the front door and the front gate as a

\[487\] When analysing this photograph, it suddenly occurred to me that the consumption of food was quite generally absent from the Ngilima photos, in particular in comparison to the predominance of references to the consumption of alcohol (beer bottles, liquor bottles, home-brewed beer…) and sodas (‘cool drinks’). It is only in some of Thorence’s party pictures where one will find references to eating, for instance a young girl demonstratively gnawing a chicken leg, possibly also part of the code demarcating young people from their parents. The centrality of food in the major rituals in the townships (weddings, funerals…) did not translate in the photographs. One possible answer is that eating was part of the realm of survival, whereas drinking alcohol and sodas, as non-essential products for survival, were more readily associated with leisure. Moreover, drinks were highly marketable products, with breweries and liquor producers already launching aggressive advertising to convince people that drinking certain brands of beer or liquor could be a status symbol. The branding of food through the emergence of fast-food industry would come much later in the country, mainly in the post-apartheid era.
backdrop for their portrait. This is perhaps an attempt to portray oneself as the male provider, the guardian of the house, or to distinguish themselves from the space of domestic interiors, loaded with notions of femininity. This said, there were almost as many men as women posing in lounges. I did, however, notice that it was only women who posed in Ronald’s lounge-studio, while young men generally preferred to pose against the backdrop curtain (see chapter two). Improving the lounge was not exclusively a feminine activity. Most Wattville women expected their husbands to purchase the larger pieces of furniture. But if the husband would buy the glass cabinet, the wife would use her salary to buy smaller things like trinkets and tea sets, objects that further personalised the room and actually made use of the glass cabinet. Often the husband gave his salary to his wife for savings, in which case the wife would partake in the decision-making process. The lounge was not exclusively feminine. It was, nevertheless, a space for which women would make plans, save, imagine and slowly work towards the completion of these plans.
PART THREE. TACTICS OF HOME-MAKING

Domesticity as Hard Work

Dorothy Driver writes critically about the images of domesticity as mediated in magazines. *Drum*, she maintains, publicised domestic commodities with the aim of constructing consumer desires and forging an ideology of domesticity through an aggressive demarcation of separate gender spheres. Driver goes on to argue that the ideal of the housewife that *Drum* projected was in complete denial of the economic conditions of apartheid that drove most women to work. Indeed, out of the twenty-five women I have interviewed in Wattville, only two of them had never worked outside of the house. As stated previously, Wattville seemed to have had a particularly high proportion of working women, including a high proportion of women earning relatively high salaries (R30 per month in the 1950s). Most of my female interviewees had worked at some stage in the textile factories in Doornfontein, Johannesburg. A fifth of my female interviewees have been teachers or nurses.

Though Driver’s critical analysis of *Drum* magazine is very perceptive, she fails to take into consideration how women actually received these *Drum* images and experienced domesticity in their own lives. From Driver’s feminist perspective, it would perhaps seem paradoxical that economically active women would focus much of their aspirations on domestic interiors, that is, that they would conform to this patriarchal ideology aimed at ‘keeping women in their place’, i.e. at home. Other sources however call for a different outlook on domesticity, as a way for women to creatively construct their self-image in relation to the interior space of their home. It is worth going back to Belinda Bozzoli and Mmantho Nkotsoe’s *Women of Phokeng*, a thorough historical study based on extensive interviews with twenty-two women, who represented the first generation of Tswana women to migrate to the city for work. The extent to which the purchase of furniture played a role in their decision to work in the city is striking. According to one of the interviewees, Naomi Setshedhi,

There was a sense of freedom about staying on your own in Johannesburg and things like furniture we had seen others bring as fruits of their work in

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488 Driver, "Drum Magazine (1951-9) & the Spatial Configurations of Gender,"

the towns urged us to follow suit … It was the in thing in those days, and when you perhaps visited a friend in the village who had worked in the towns, you’d find her room stocked with all the furniture and that was all the incentive you needed as encouragement to find a job.490

‘Posting’ some furniture home (back to Phokeng) was a source of pride and evidence of their agency as hard workers. The twenty-five female elders that I interviewed in Wattville represent a slightly younger generation, for the most part born and bred in an urban setting. Many were born in the Old Location, to parents who could already afford some furniture, at least the kitchen set and the dining table. They then moved to Wattville, either following their parents, or as young brides setting up their own homes. In both cases, there was quite some excitement about moving into houses with such modern facilities. According to Bank, black women from East London townships in the 1960s had been ‘nourished on images of the modern housewife in the media for more than a decade’.491 The new council houses provided the opportunity to create modern interiors that matched the glamorous images from magazines such as Drum and Zonk!. Yet the process of settling into these new houses and ‘making a home’ was far from being as easy as advertisements suggested.

Details of this process came out clearly from the interviews I conducted in Wattville. Part of the discussion was structured around a series of twenty lounge portraits, focusing on the question of what made a nice lounge. When discussing a selection of photographs (including figure 4.17), Rose Mhlanga brought my attention to elements which made her negatively evaluate a depicted lounge: unplastered walls, mid-length curtains (only covering the window instead of falling to the floor), curtains that were simply hanging on a string instead of having a proper pelmet.492 Through such detailed remarks, I came to realise quite the extent to which these lounges were the result of personal investment with appropriate attention given to the smallest of details.

490 Ibid., 91
491 Bank, Home Spaces, Street Styles, 179
492 Interview with Rose Sebetloane, 30.03.2011, Wattville.
Their domestic enterprise is all the more remarkable when considering the initial state the houses were in. All of my interviewees underlined the bareness of Wattville houses when they first moved in. In an attempt to keep construction costs as low as possible, the construction company left all finishing touches to the future tenants. These included putting in a ceiling, cementing the floors, putting doors in the rooms, plastering the bare walls, etc. Such improvements were too costly to be done in one go and were addressed piecemeal. According to a government official, it cost £65 to put in a ceiling and paint one model house, representing about four 1/2 months of income for an average black South African household.493 Doors were equally expensive. As stated earlier on in this chapter, portraits

493 Meeting of the Advisory Board with the Non-European Affairs Development Committee, 26.06.1956. According to the 1954 S.A. Institute of Race Relations’ report, “The Cost of Living for Africans”, the monthly average wage (including costs-of-living allowances) was £11.8. Including the wife and children’s revenue, the average income for a household was therefore £15 s.18 d.11 per month. See Gibson, The Cost of Living for
taken in the hallway witness this stage when hung curtains were used as a temporary substitute. Some decorations could be done cheaply, for instance by cutting out newspapers in various shapes and patterns so as to decorate the ledge figuring above the hallway. Old newspapers were also used to make Christmas garlands or as a cheaper substitute for wallpaper. Bare brick walls would be partly covered by free picture calendars bearing the name of local shops. Advertisements displaying pin-up girls and framed religious pictures were another popular form of decoration. Framed photographs decorated the bare walls of the lounge, firmly anchoring the impersonal house within the personal narrative of family history. Wedding pictures in particular added an aura of formality and stability to the room, as if to resist the inherent instability that characterised the lives of so many black families. Displaying photographs was so important that Ronald would go around on his trade tours with some of his own frames, offering them to those clients who did not own any (Figure 4.18).

Figure 4.18: Newspaper decorations for the ledge family portrait as a prop, belonging to Ronald. Note also the prominence of the radio, set at the very front. Wattville households, 1950s, NPC.

_Africans: The Results of an Inquiry into the Cost of Living for Africans in the Locations and African Township in Johannesburg and Alexandra_, table II and III. In 1962, the average wage for an unskilled labour in Benoni was ZAR 31.20 per month (about £15). See De Coning, "Income and Expenditure Patterns of Urban Bantu Households: Benoni Survey".
De Certeau’s notion of ‘tactics’ is useful to understand the importance of these domestic activities. Institutions such as the municipality have the power and the resources to execute certain strategies that have a big impact on people’s lives (for instance the removal of ‘black spots’). The ‘weak’ resort to cunning tricks carried out in everyday life in order to navigate the best they can the systems that they infiltrate. De Certeau compares ordinary consumers to snowy waves of the sea that ‘drift over an imposed terrain, … slipping in among the rocks and defiles of an established order’.494 In this light, consumption ceases to be a passive activity. The consumer is an ‘unrecognised producer’, operating within the space organised by the colonizer/occupier but in an autonomous way. Women in Wattville were perhaps unable to challenge or disobey the numerous regulations regarding the municipal houses. State architects designed the sub-economic house so as to include a sitting room. Many women complied with the design but with convictions and objectives that were foreign to the architects’ intentions. Small manoeuvres such as decorating, furniture shopping and general homemaking enabled them to assert their own personalities and sense of self-worth. The insertion of their own goals and desires into this imposed situation is what De Certeau calls ‘an art of manipulating and enjoying’.

Figure 4.19 is a rather sexy portrait of Doreen Ngilima, Ronald’s second daughter. This portrait was taken after he died and she had started working to sustain the rest of the family. The couch on which she is lying was bought with the first salary of her first job and is still in the house up to this day. Rather than projecting submissiveness or obedience, this portrait oozes with the self-assertion and pride of a woman not just able to maintain herself but also to improve the family house.

Creating Permanence

These strategies of home improvement are all the more important to acknowledge, given that they took place long before Wattville families got extended leases and title deeds for their properties. The Benoni municipality initially refused to grant ownership over council houses, as another way of reminding Blacks that their presence in town was temporary and conditional on their ability to find work. In 1954 the Non-European Affairs Committee of Benoni approved the introduction of such a scheme only after an official report proved that ‘granting temporary leasehold rights to blacks did not provide any permanent form of tenure and was thus not contradictory to the policy of separate development’. In other words, thirty-year lease plans did not alter the fact that families could easily be evicted, for being late on payment or for losing one’s job and hence losing the right to reside in an urban area.

495 Morris, A History of Black Housing, 49.

496 Minutes of Advisory Board, 22 May 1954. Quote from Morris, A History of Black Housing, 50.
Women were particularly vulnerable to evictions in cases where their husbands had died and had left them as widows without any sons. As Nomathemba Ngilima stressed,

> Those days were terrible. If you didn’t pay rent on time, within a week they were coming to kick you out. Every month, we saw families being publicly humiliated with their belongings piled in the street. We lived in fear of eviction. 497

Mr. Damane, member of the Advisory Board, similarly declared during a meeting with the town council in 1957: “Residents live very nervously these days, for fear of being arrested for failure to pay rents, and some had actually been ejected from their homes on the grounds of failing to pay rent”. 498 The regular publication “Benoni Bantu Bulletin”, prepared by the local Non-European Affairs office, promptly reported in November 1954 that “four Wattville residents were sentenced for failing to pay their rent and that they were ejected from the houses by the Magistrates’ Court”. No doubt to further intimidate residents on the consequences of not paying rent, the bulletin went on: “In terms of the regulations, these people may also be ejected from the Benoni Township and their property may be sold to pay off delay in rent”. 499

While the municipality had initially agreed to sell the model houses to residents, the plan was never implemented. The Native Affairs assistant manager suggested raising the rent from sub-economic to economic before embarking on a selling scheme. Opposed to this suggestion, residents also considered the fixed selling price too high and, considering the dubious quality construction, expressed doubts about the durability of these model houses. 500 Apart from the overvalued selling price, the biggest obstacle was the down payment of £20 that the municipality requested as a condition to engage in such a selling scheme, inaccessible for most households. As a consequence, it was only in the mid-1980s that families were given 99-

497 Group workshop at the old-age centre called Luncheon Club, 16.05.2012, Wattville.


500 A member of the Advisory Board, Mr. Myataza, tried to convince the Development Committee to let newcomers skip the first month of rent, during which they could then focus on the finishing touches. The houses, he argued, were far from the “model houses”, as they had mounds on the floors and holes in the walls. The Depute Director responded that the model houses had a different finish precisely to show other residents what they could achieve if they were prepared to improve their house. But he added that they would simply have to save for it. Meeting of the Advisory Board with the Non-European Affairs Development Committee, 26.06.1956.
year leases and only after 1994 did they become full owners of their houses. The lounge photographs thus seem to completely omit the racist dimension of living in apartheid South Africa in the 1950s. As the first black township built in Benoni, Wattville was under the tight surveillance and control of the local municipality. Inspectors would come around to make sure residents would maintain their houses ‘properly’ and not build any extensions.

Another reality that many women experienced was waiting for long stretches of time before they were able to acquire a house of their own, due to the general shortage of housing. Couples starting their lives together were typically on waiting lists for several years before they were allocated a house, unless they could obtain it through other means. As the short biographies included above convey, most women went through a phase of living with their parents or husband’s parents, with their first and even second-born child. It was a recurrent and totally acceptable practice in the townships, in line with the tradition of makotis living with their in-laws for a couple of years to prove their worthiness as a wife. These young women were nevertheless eager to have a space of their own. In this regard, Mrs. Constance Xotyeni’s (figure 4.13) biography is very telling. Mrs Xotyeni was born in Apex (squatter camp) in 1940 and had lived in the Old Location before her family moved to Wattville, right next to the Ngilima’s house, in 1950. Around the time these pictures were taken in the early 1960s, she was working as a receptionist for a hospital in Johannesburg, where she met the man she eventually married in 1965. She remembers being excited about marrying, as it represented a new life for her. Yet as it turned out, her early years of her marriage were spent in acute limbo between her inlaw’s house, her own parents’ house and two of her sisters’ house. In chapter three, I included one of her quotes, in which she described how difficult it was for her to live with her in-laws in Orlando West (Soweto), because of lack of space. They continued to shift continuously from one relative to another until her parents passed away and they took over the house, despite the fact that her husband did not get along with one of her brothers. Interestingly, Mrs Xotyeni did not make any improvements to the house until 1995,

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501 The National Party’s coming into power coincided with the year Wattville was officially promulgated as a township: 1948.

502 From my interviews it emerged that deals were often made between families leaving Wattville and families looking to move in. In one case, two families agreed to make a swap between the allocated house in Wattville and one in Daveyton. If one was lucky, a family relative would die without children or a close friend would leave Wattville, making his or her house available. It is not clear how these under-the-table deals were then legalized. In one instance, a widow resolved to marry her uncle in order to secure the deceased grand-parent’s house for herself and her children. Offering bribes to municipal employees to legalize the deal or to be put on top of the waiting list was of course the quickest and surest way.
after her brother passed away and she obtained the official title deed to the house. Knowing how her story unfolds makes Thorence’s photographs of herself in the midst of appropriating the Ngilima’s living room all the more poignant: as a fiancée looking forward to her new married life, she could not yet predict how long it would take before she could finally fulfil her dreams of having her own place. Mrs. Xotyni did not have copies of these particular pictures, but her personal photography archive, including her elaborate wedding album and one of Ngilima’s pictures, followed her wherever she went, constituting a continuous line of narrative in spite of all the moving about.\textsuperscript{503}

There thus is an interesting gap between what these photographs seem to suggest and the political and social background against which these photographs were made. As stated before, the Ngilimas’ lounge photographs resonated with the images found in lifestyle magazines. These magazines were themselves influenced by North American visual culture, which in the post-war context of the suburbia explosion were generating images idealising the identity of the middle-class homeowner.\textsuperscript{504} The Ngilima lounge portraits are a local re-appropriation of this homeowner ideology in defiance of the prevailing racist housing laws and the constant threat of eviction. Being photographed in Ngilima’s own lounge produced an image of a home-owner, even when one did not have a place of one’s own. When asked how the regulations made her feel about her house, Lili Mkhulisi replied with a wave of her hand and a big smile: ‘Ah never mind [the rules], it was still my house!’\textsuperscript{505} I would argue that the impulse to upgrade the house was perhaps an essential way to cope with this constant threat of eviction, and create a sense of permanence. Similarly, Ginsburg interpreted the improvement schemes in Sowetan houses in the 1960s and 1970s as a way for black families to collectively create a sense of permanence. ‘Housing activity served to reinforce one’s claim to urban residence where other forces conspired to deny it.’\textsuperscript{506} Given the indignities and insults that black people regularly experienced, adds Ginsburg, the upgraded home was like a shelter from the harshness of the apartheid environment, where residents could reconstruct a sense of self-worth and dignity through these long-term investment plans.

\textsuperscript{503} Interview with Constance Xotyni, 06.05.11, 19.04.2012, 01.06.2012, Wattville.
\textsuperscript{504} Spigel, \textit{Welcome to the Dreamhouse}.
\textsuperscript{505} Interview with Lili Mkhulisi, 17.05.2012, Wattville.
\textsuperscript{506} Ginsburg, ‘‘Now I stay in a house’’, 135.
CONCLUSION

As a space entirely devoted to sociality, with no other functioning purposes than leisure, it is not surprising that the lounge was a prime choice for a photograph. Examples of photographs taken in lounges can be found in many other countries, including outside of the African continent. Joeri Januarius for instance has reached similar conclusions about the desirability of the dining room in his study of private photographs from the Limburg immigrant mining community (Belgium) from the 1950s.\textsuperscript{507} The strong similarities between the Ngilima lounge portraits and the Limburg dining room snapshots are evidence that the adoption of interior photography was part of a 1950s global trend, as more and more people of working-class had access to a camera or to photographic services at home.\textsuperscript{508} Within this global trend, the local context of production generated subtle photographic variations. Photography’s interaction with the local social, political and cultural context inevitably creates different expectations of how an image should function and what role the camera should play. The Limburg dining room photographs, for instance, put an emphasis on projecting strong family values, clearly illustrating the roles of each family member (the housewife, the male breadwinner). Photographs taken in the dining room also tended to represent family events, in particular birthdays, though the large number of people huddled together around a table made it more difficult to guess the family roles assigned to each one. Another difference between the Limburg and the Ngilima dining photos is that the Ngilima subjects would acknowledge and openly perform for the camera, whereas the Limburg families tried to mimic dining scenes and pretend the camera was not around. In contrast to the dining photographs, the Ngilima lounge portraits focused more on individuals. Lounge photographs were not so much an ode to domesticity or even the institution of the family, as it was an assertion of one’s respectability through one’s association with of a certain way of living and of doing things. Such subtle differences underline the importance of interpreting interior photographs within the specific context of local history.

Read within the socio-historical context of their production, the Ngilima photographs enable us to explore some of the more subtle and complex aspects of a particular community at a

\textsuperscript{508} The present day popularity of parlour photography in Gambia indicates that this trend has continued in other parts of Africa up till this date. See Buckley, “Photography, Elegance and the Aesthetics of Citizenship”.

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particular time. Ultimately, the Ngilima portraits record the transition people went through when moving from the Old Location to the New Location. The new urban architecture, with its different setting and house disposition, impacted certain social dynamics and one’s relation to house interiors. For many women who experienced both the Old Location and Wattville, the move to the modern township in the early 1950s was brimming with the promise of a modern lifestyle, opportunities to become an urban consumer. As an escape from overcrowded houses in the location, the “model township” also fostered a desire to conform towards the ideal of nuclear family.

More generally, the Ngilima photographs say something about the “hard work” of conforming.509 First, it speaks to the work behind creating a collective understanding of respectability through a photographic practice that organised the connection between the value of elegance and the sensual environment of the lounge. As Goodhew stated, respectability, like class, was essentially about defining oneself against other people. Here Wattville’s emerging middle-class was struggling to distinguish themselves both from newly rural and poorer elements of Wattville and the Asiatic Bazaar. Dlamini pleads against the contemporary ‘master narrative of black dispossession that which masks deep class, ethnic and gendered fissures within black communities’. Reading subtle signs of social distinction is for him a vital part of challenging the image of townships as dreary, dull and uniform. Wattville as the “model township” was to remain distinguishable from the Old Location. Though home-upgrading was an essentially private affair, taking place behind closed doors, photography enabled these achievements to circulate beyond the limits of the house and constitute a collective framework of what respectability looks like. Photography prompts us to think about the mechanisms behind the construction of abstract and delicate concepts such as ‘respectability’ or ‘modern lifestyle’, and to explore how they are visually rendered in historically specific circumstances.

Second, these portraits of spaces help us grasp the work it took to actually meet these expectations and desires that the new township generated. Multiple socio-economic elements prevented Wattville residents from fulfilling these aspirations. For one, the shortage of houses and the long waiting lists made it difficult to conform to the model of the nuclear family.

Married couples and their children often had to rely on their parents to accommodate them until they were themselves able to get a house. More ambiguously, accepting the comforts of urban living was also to accept becoming a tenant, to be subjected to increasing surveillance by the State, with the permanent threat of eviction and the loss of landlord status.

And this is where photography comes in: while reinforcing an ideology of social distinction, photography also provided opportunities for transcending them. The magic of photography lies in its ability to ‘edit’ real life and conceal some of its limitations. With the right composition, bedrooms and dining rooms could become lounges. With the right display of tasteful arrangements, kitchens could be redeemed. And just as the lounge disposition could be transported to another room, it could also be transferred to a person, its idiom of elegance rubbing off through the visual juxtaposition of a body in relation to objects and space. Lounge portraits celebrated the modern individual, disaffected by the general over-crowded living conditions in the townships. In this sense, thinking about the relationship between interiors and a photographic practice helps us understand the essence of both things—what is the idea of the lounge, what is the idea of a photograph—as they mutually reinforce each other in the effort to idealize reality.

Finally, the banality of the Ngilima snapshots should not divert us from the fact that creating a sense of permanence, a sense of normalcy, was in fact also ‘hard work’, in a context of economic and political oppression. To interpret the portraits of women in the lounge only as evidence of a patriarchal ideology of domesticity would fail to grasp the years of economic and personal investments behind the making of a ‘home’. Given the rich array of details visible in the backgrounds of the portraits, one can consider the Ngilima photographs taken in the early years of Wattville’s official establishment as visual records of the various tactics that women used to transform sterile, bare, identical houses into personalised homes. If the Ngilima pictures come across as ‘ordinary’, it is a sign that the Ngilimas succeeded in framing their subjects within a mainstream middle-class urban culture to which they were laying claim. For the many families who experienced multiple moves in the quest of better housing accommodation, photographic archives often served as a visual device for articulating stability and continuity in times of change.

Ultimately, the Ngilima photographs (combined with the memories that are potentially inscribed in them) are the expression of people’s effort to fill a homogeneous site with
memories and social landmarks. The lounge portraits point to the remarkable ability of township dwellers to re-imagine their reality and project more positive self-images, even when their actual situation often failed to fulfil these aspirations.