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CONCLUSION: THE NGILIMA COLLECTION AS AN ALTERNATIVE ARCHIVE

Roland Barthes has beautifully translated the fascinating, bizarre aspect about the medium of photography: the “vertigo of Time”, the “superimposition of reality and the past”; the fact that “on the one hand ‘it is not there’, on the other ‘but it has indeed been’”. Barthes defines *punctum* as the “pricking effect” of a photograph, triggered by a detail in the picture. He also describes a second kind of *punctum* provoked by the intensity of tension between past and present, between presence and absence. It is for instance the effect of looking at a photograph of one’s mother as a young child, after she passed away. The Ngilima photographs of the Location have a particularly jarring effect of showing a place on the brink of its demolition, and which today no longer is. Photographs enhance the sense of time passing by enabling a direct comparison between then and now, or in other words, by visualizing change. Yet the dramatic and sudden rupture in time and place introduced by the forced removals, the violent erasing of almost all traces of this vibrant community and its replacement with a completely different infrastructure, conjure to add a painful dimension of loss to melancholia and nostalgia, for most of my interviewees’ who experienced displacement. Barthes wrote: “Photography has something to do with resurrection”. Knowing the irreversibility of an entire neighbourhood’s eradication makes this unexpected resurrection all the more poignant.

Despite the moving nature of these photographs, it so far failed to interest heritage officials. It became clear to me that a collection of “banal” snapshots, representing a random selection of unknown local residents, had no place within the OR Tambo Centre, a space solely dedicated to the biography of a heroic political leader. If the Ngilima collection would ever become an established archive in Benoni one day, it would be a very different kind of memory site than the Tambo centre, functioning on a completely different register. Gary Minkley and Ciraj Rassool’s criticism regarding the tendency in oral history in South Africa to collapse into a simplified, pre-fixed historical narrative heavily based on the domination/resistance model could easily be extended to the practice of heritage projects in celebrating township history in


663 Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 82.
The Ngilima collection presents the advantage of not being attached to the narrow realm of politics and the struggle narrative, while retaining a certain political significance as a reminder of state violence against an entire community. While the Ngilima family initiated its production and conservation, the thousands of negatives escape the narrow label of “family collection”, being relevant to an audience much larger than Ngilima family members. As a collection of anonymous portraits, it hovers between genealogy and collective history, between the very intimate and the political. It addresses viewers on an emotional and personal level rather than an ideological one; it has the potential to touch people by conveying something profoundly familiar, tapping into a past imagery of their childhood and youth with the help of small, seemingly trivial details. It does not single out one particular individual, one heroic leader, but puts forth individuals and families, many of whom are still unknown, but which have the potential of being identified and claimed by members of the local community. It celebrates not heroic resistance against apartheid, but black people’s determination to seek and find pleasurable moments that they thought worthy of being recorded in the form of a photograph, in living conditions otherwise overwhelmingly characterized by duress and lack of resources. In Annie Coombes’s words, it is about acknowledging the quotidian as being an integral part of the grand narrative. My initial desire to interpret the collection as a commemoration site for the Location presents the danger of mythologizing it for its “uniqueness” or venerating it for its state of destruction and “goneness”. But from my fieldwork experience, I conclude that the Ngilima collection is nevertheless a good starting point to simply acknowledge the fact that this place meant something to certain people — that the Location was more than an amalgam of logistical problems for the State to solve. That the people living there succeeded in producing memories worthy of being upheld. That these memories, and the local history to which the collection is inextricably tied, deserve to be acknowledged, independently of its meagre connection to a famous national hero. Annie Coombes has argued that romanticization was to some extent necessary to undermine the bureaucratic language of the State and emphasise the human aspects of this existence.

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664 Minkley and Rassool, “Orality, Memory and Social History in South Africa,”.
665 Coombes, History after Apartheid: Visual Culture and Public Memory in a Democratic South Africa, 139.
667 Coombes, History After Apartheid, 124.
When taking into account the following lines from “Benoni, Son of my Sorrow”, the importance of upholding the memory of Benoni’s Location cannot be underestimated: “With the disappearance of the Old Location will vanish the last reminder of the earlier degradation of Benoni’s Bantu people. “Twatwa” will be no more.”

If the Ngilima collection were to become a site of memory, it would be anti-monumental in nature. Not only for its subject-matter (“ordinary” people, though many were clearly flaunting it), but also for its inherent fragility. Unlike a gravesite or a commemorative statue, this collection of negatives cannot seek eternity: the negatives have a clearly limited expiration date (many have already started to decay). Furthermore, the collection’s meaning and relevance to the people of Actonville, Wattville, Daveyton and Reigerpark are not prefixed but awaiting people’s memories and interpretations. While official heritage sites tend to emphasize national unity, the future Ngilima archive would potentially give room to acknowledge the fractured and diverse nature of the local community. As the street exhibition has shown, events organized around the Ngilima photographs create interesting opportunities to make the various points of views and perspectives on this controversial episode of local history emerge, reminding us that history is far from being resolved. At the same time, its material and symbolic unity as a visual archive also calls for a history of entanglement of the various communities revolving around Benoni’s Location. After more than thirty years of urban living according to racially defined Group Areas, these communities are presently more geographically dispersed and fractured than ever before. The legacies of apartheid, still deeply affecting many aspects of people’s daily life, are hard to dismantle. Yet establishing a formal space for the Ngilima collection would be a first step towards a more complex understanding of the past, one that would consider the expression of commonalities, as well as the expression of difference.

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