The handle [http://hdl.handle.net/1887/39175](http://hdl.handle.net/1887/39175) holds various files of this Leiden University dissertation

**Author:** Feyder, Sophie  
**Title:** Portraits of resilience: writing a socio-cultural history of a black South African location with the Ngilima photographic collection. Benoni, 1950s-1960s  
**Issue Date:** 2016-05-03
Abstract

This thesis engages with the ongoing debate regarding how photographs can contribute to the writing of black South African history. In the field of South African visual history, a significant literature explores the “white gaze” that emanates from the administrative and missionary photographic archives of the colonial period. Comparatively fewer studies, however, have addressed how black South Africans pictured themselves, largely due to the presumption that black visual archives are scarce and difficult to access. The intrinsic bias of archival practices in apartheid South Africa has meant that, until recently, images made by and for black people were not included in the country’s institutional archives.

This thesis draws upon previously unexplored photographic evidence from the mid twentieth century in order to show that, well before the advent of black South African photojournalism in the 1960s and 1970s, black South Africans were taking upon themselves the task of representing their lives. I demonstrate that intimate photographs found in black homes constitute an alternative archive and original source of history, and highlight the relevance of such personal photographic archives for historical research. Such archives present a radically different perspective on black urban communities than that emanating from public photographic collections, including those authored by black photojournalists. Photographic portraiture translates how black South Africans wanted to be seen, according to their own conventions. To study everyday photographic practices is to reflect on the set of values, attitudes and ideas (including images) that influenced this exercise of self-representation. In exploring such material, this thesis employs a variety of methods and approaches—photo elicitation, identifying patterns in poses and conventions, scrutinizing background details, and locating photographs in today’s landscape—to help unravel the historical relevance of mundane images.

Scholars have identified music, writing and fashion as some of the realms of self-expression that enabled black South Africans to self-consciously assert a black urban identity by negotiating between various influences. A focus on the visual could substantially add to this already rich South African historiography. Considering that black urban populations were by large illiterate or semi-illiterate in the 1950s, personal photography is a crucial source through which to analyse how this black constituency nonetheless appropriated a particular register of modernity conveyed through various media, namely cinema, magazines, comic books, billboards and other advertising. By mediating ideas about urban living and modern identity, vernacular photographic practices linked a national and international visual culture to people’s own personal lives and bodies. Photography became hugely popular because it transformed subjects into icons—a flattering, improved version of themselves. This glamorous image could then be exchanged with friends, end up in someone’s album or be published in a magazine or an advert. Popular photography held the promise of enabling photographic subjects, including those who were economically marginalised, to take part in a predominantly white global visual economy. Identifying the different photographic registers
and conventions circulating in black working-class neighbourhoods reveals the various ways that “urban” made sense to subjects in terms of idealised body language and fashion, desired consumption patterns and imagined lifestyles.

The story of how Ronald Majongwa Ngilima, a factory worker who migrated from the rural areas to Benoni in the 1930’s, became a self-taught photographer, illustrates how access to photography democratized over the course of the 20th century. Between the early 1950s and the mid-1960s, Ronald Ngilima and his son Thorence worked during their free time as portrait photographers in the black neighbourhoods of Benoni, a city roughly 30 km east of Johannesburg. During their ten to fifteen years of photographic service, they produced over 5,600 negatives, which were subsequently preserved due to the intervention of family members. This dissertation strives to understand this body of work in relation to the specific historical conditions in which it was made. To what extent do these images in turn translate some of black urban working-class South Africans’ experiences? What do these images tell us about these depicted people that written or oral sources alone would not reveal?

This thesis is both a history of images and a history through images, in that it considers both patterns of representation and the material and social dimension of photography. The exercise of comparing images from different decades shows that young women in the 1950s, for example, represented themselves in bolder terms than women in the 1930s and 1940s. Oral sources made clear that the novelty also lay in how these women were making use of photographs. The act of possessing photographic prints, of being able to exchange them with friends and suitors or keep them hidden from their parents, opened up new possibilities of privacy, in a context where women increasingly postponed marriage for work and experienced romantic love. This combination of approaches, i.e. a study of representations and of photography as a cultural practice, enables one to grasp what photography meant for Ngilima’s sitters, and what it actually did for them. For instance, young people’s active appropriation of the studios that popped up in the location in the 1950s led to the emergence of a new photographic register. This informal register contrasted sharply with the imperative of looking “respectable”, a tradition dating from the 19th century that had dominated photographic practices up until then. Working-class subjects could attain the image of bourgeois respectability by endorsing a particular photographic register that included a rigid body language, lack of smile, and sober clothing. Young men and women in the 1950s began dramatically increasing the range of poses. Acts such as posing as “tsotsis” (local gangster figures) and cowboys in the studio, participated in the process of articulating a distinct self-referenced urban youth identity. By expanding the domain of what was considered “photographable”, young people ended up redefining photography as a casual leisure activity associated with urban youth culture.

Similarly, Ronald Ngilima’s innovative use of the lounge as a photographic backdrop must be interpreted in conjunction with the social impact of Wattville’s new architecture, typical of modern townships. Lounge photography as a new photographic trend brings our attention to the importance of objects in the definition of a respectable home—a space deemed fit enough for receiving guests according to a particular etiquette. Moreover, objects constituted important decoration that helped break the dull grey homogeneity of “matchbox” houses, initially devoid of any personality or human touch. Ngilima offered his own lounge as a backdrop to sitters without a home or an adequate lounge, thus accommodating their desires for a lifestyle that was perhaps beyond their means. Writing about changes in the social function of photography hence leads to a series of broader social themes—shifting gender
roles, the making of a black youth culture oriented towards leisure and consumption, creating
a sense of home out of generic social housing, the making of personalised bearings in a
precarious urban space, and the visualisation of social distinction.

One important conclusion of this study is that the nature of this private material establishes a
new historical agenda. Compared with photojournalists’ iconic images of apartheid brutality,
personal photographic collections give a different impression of life under apartheid. By
bringing our attention to everyday social experiences such as leisure, consumption, and
desire, they validate elements of townships life that are not explicitly oriented towards
resistance. Including personal visual material in oral history thus prompts a fuller, more
complex understanding of the ambiguities of living under the apartheid regime, where the
impulse to oppose white supremacy often cohabited with the desire for manufactured goods
or for a certain standard of living that was associated with the white elite, their oppressors.

In other words, working with personal photographic collections allows historians to veer
away from the lure of the “struggle narrative”. Many studies on black urban communities
have tended to focus on the various ways that black South Africans collectively resisted
apartheid, and sought to regain control over their lives. Without denying the prominent
collective dimension of cultural practices, the Ngilima collection highlights the importance
of the individual in social processes—for instance, the construction of self-portraits, the
production of privacy and the visual manifestation of social distinctions in the space of the
township. With photography, attention is thus shifted from the more overt acts of resistance to
the more private and individual forms of affirming one’s self-worth. Popular photography
translates one’s desire to uphold a positive and dignified image of oneself. It manifests the
will for self-improvement, in a context where all areas of one’s life were subject to constant
curtailment, humiliation and deprivation.

Over time, people collected photographs of fashionable individuals, birthday parties, white
weddings, elegant lounges and tea parties, occasionally in an album, more often in a plastic
bag stored under the bed. This accumulation of photographs was a modest step towards the
construction of a private archive, which itself stood for regularity and stability, a privilege that
previously only the upper-classes in South Africa could lay claim to. Private photographic
archives certify that one’s life was not “deprived” but “normal”, and perhaps even punctuated
with happy moments. Archives such as the Ngilima collection shed light on the hard work of
creating permanence and stability in spite of black lives’ structural vulnerability. This thesis
sustains that popular photography is part of the larger project of resilience. Resilience,
understood as the efforts displayed to maintain dignity, to uphold ordinary life according to a
certain standard and the struggle to protect one’s aspirations, gives credit to these small
everyday acts that made life in the location liveable and rich, in spite of oppression.

A serious engagement with personal photographic material supports new trends in the writing
of South African history. One of these trends is the call to make the production of locality, a
notion emanating from the field of anthropology, the object of future historical studies. Many
of the Ngilima photographs were taken in Benoni Old Location, which was the subject of
forced removals in the 1960s and was subsequently turned into an Indian Group Area named
Actonville. When shown photographs depicting the Old Location, interviewees picked out
certain details from the background of the picture on the basis of which they formulated
assumptions as to where in Benoni the photograph was taken. These guesses based on details
were perhaps inaccurate, but reveal nonetheless how notions of class and race were visually
constructed, and how mental maps of a particular place were collectively erected. Producing difference was itself instrumental in transforming black spaces—spaces that the state qualified solely as problematic—into a significant place that residents would remember with fondness, despite its multiple shortcomings and prevailing poverty.

The Ngilima photographs are material traces of the social relationships that Ronald Ngilima, an African, had forged with the African, coloured and Indian residents of Benoni. The material and symbolic unity of the collection stands for the fact that the various communities, presently dispersed as a consequence of the 1950 Group Areas Act, were once entangled with one other. The Ngilima photographs thus provide a fruitful starting point for broader discussions on the history of interracial relationships and integration amongst the working-class in the Old Location, and also on the disputed legacy of this history in the present context. Local projects involving the Ngilima collection highlighted the difficulties of reconnecting a photo collection with its original “local community” and place, because of the discrepancies between this 1950s image world and the present day social reality of Actonville. Interviews with local Indian residents brought to the surface the lingering anxieties around themes of identity, race and rightful belonging that are characteristic of places having experienced the trauma of forced removals. While the portraits are not political in their initial raison d’être, the Ngilima collection acquires a political dimension as a reminder of state violence perpetrated against an entire community. The thesis concludes however that the relevance of the Ngilima collection lies above all in the fact that it stands for a different kind of memory than the one dominating present heritage policies in Benoni, engrossed in the celebration of ANC history. The richness of details characteristic of the photographic medium taps into memories anchored in the realm of the familiar and the intimate. Yet the Ngilima collection is more than simply a “family collection” representing personal history. As a collection of largely anonymous portraits, it hovers between genealogy and collective history, between the very personal and the political. The Ngilima collection prompts us to reconsider what is considered “worthy” of being remembered, to acknowledge the relevance of ordinary things, and to establish their value within a broader historical narrative.