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Santu Mofokeng's *The Black Photo Album / Look at Me: 1890–1950* (2013) and the Victorian Dispositive. Photographic Staging and Appropriation as Practices of Anticolonial Resistance

Abstract: This contribution discusses selected historical photographs of the research project, collection, and photobook *The Black Photo Album / Look at Me: 1890–1950* published in 2013 by Santu Mofokeng (1956–2020), both within the original context of their emergence as well as taking Mofokeng's intention in editing the photobook into account. Furthermore, the location of the image content and its aesthetics in the colonial context of South Africa 1890–1950 and within the Victorian photographic dispositive are in the focus. The analysis of the *The Black Photo Album / Look at Me: 1890–1950* considers the Victorian photographic discourse of the late 19th century as an influential frame. This discourse entails ongoing mechanisms of epistemic violence in the visual representation of the Black community. Furthermore, the paper perceives the photographs found by Mofokeng as a material testimony of practiced anticolonial resistance. This perspective contributes productively to the critical discussion of Mofokeng's question, if these images are "evidence of mental colonisation" or did they serve to challenge prevailing images of 'African people' in the 'West'.

Keywords: Santu Mofokeng; *The Black Photo Album*; visual counter-knowledge; studio photography in South Africa; dispositive; Victorian portrait photography: epistemic violence; colonial photography.

The Black Photo Album / Look at Me: 1890–1950. A Project Genealogy

As a member of the *Afrapix Collective* (1985–1992) and reporter for the *New Nation* magazine (1987–1988), Santu Mofokeng was actively involved in the institutionalized anti-apartheid resistance in South Africa.[1] From 1988 to 1998, he compiled a collection of photographs of Black working-class families in South Africa, taken between 1890 and 1950, as part of his field research at Witwatersrand University.

[1] Cf. Santu Mofokeng, "Trajectory of a Street Photographer," *Nka Journal of Contemporary African Art* 11, 12 (2000): 40–46.

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Based on this material, Mofokeng developed an exhibition project of private family photographs of workers in 1992. This led to the discovery of a large number of historical photographs in Soweto which, due to their image content and aesthetics, remained without comparable reference objects for Mofokeng and formed the basis for *The Black Photo Album/ Look at Me: 1890–1950*.[2]

The historical photographs were first exhibited as a slide projection at the 2nd Johannesburg Biennale *Trade Routes: History and Geography* in 1997 and at the German Pavilion of the 55th Venice Biennale *Universes in Universe* in 2013. The first publication of *The Black Photo Album / Look at Me: 1890–1950*, printed as a photobook with a black linen cover on black-coloured handmade paper, was launched in 2013.

On the cover of the *The Black Photo Album / Look at Me*: *1890–1950* is a photograph of three people, titled as "Unidentified Subjects, Albumen Print, Photographer: Unknown, c. 1900" from the personal possession of Moeketsi Msomi (image 1).[3] The reproduction is similar in format to a positive print and is mounted in a recess on the front cover of the photobook. The entire formal and aesthetic concept of the publication of The *Black Photo Album / Look at Me: 1890-1950* can be perceived as an allusion to a private photo album.

The collection of The *Black Photo Album / Look at Me: 1890–1950* consists of 80 selected photographs, about half of which are digitally processed scans of prints that Mofokeng had collected from ten South African families.[4] However, the book contains a selection of 35 technically processed and partly retouched photographs and seven copies of the original prints. The photobook can be described as a material testimony to the processes of archiving, musealisation as well as medial reproduction and dissemination of *The Black Photo Album / Look at Me: 1890–1950* from 1997 to 2013.

Publication Concept and Photographic Technique of the Original Prints

The reproductions in *The Black Photo Album / Look at Me: 1890–1950* are partially annotated with the biographical details of the photographed, in addition to the formal image details. On the back of the images are quotes from Mofokeng's interviews with the relatives of those portrayed. In addition, *The Black Photo Album / Look at Me: 1890–1950* contains text slides with Mofokeng's own comments. The authorship of the text is not marked, creating an impression of *talking images* commenting on themselves.

[2] Cf. Mofokeng, "Trajectory of a Street Photographer," 43, 46. Cf. Santu Mofokeng, *The Black Photo Album / Look at Me: 1890–1950* (New York, Göttingen: The Walther Collection, Steidl, 2013), n. n., 3, 120.

[3] Cf. Mofokeng, *The Black Photo Album*, n. n., 113.

[4] The families are: "[...] Dubula of White City Jabavu, Soweto-Gauteng; Khame of Naledi, Soweto-Gauteng; Mngomezulu of Ledig, Rustenburg-Northwest Province; Moatshe of Mohlakeng, Randfontein-Gauteng; Modibedi of Mapelta, Soweto-Gauteng; Motsoatsoe of Orlando East, Soweto-Gauteng; Msomi of Mofolo Central, Soweto-Gauteng; Smith of Rocklands, Bloemfontein-Orange Free State; Xorile of Orlando West, Soweto-Gauteng; and Ramela of Orlando East, Soweto-Gauteng". Mofokeng, *The Black Photo Album*, n. n., 3.

This observation is particularly valid for Mofokeng's first comment, "Look at me".[5] The appealing character of the sentence is directed at the viewers and suggests a statement emanating from the image or the photographed. Other comments scrutinise the looking subject and thus the power relationship between the seeing and being seen, the photographer and the photographed: "Who is gazing?"; questions the specific context in which the photograph has been taken: "What was the occasion?" asks about the individual biographies, experiences and perspectives: "Who is this man?"[6] Central to the historical contextualisation of *The Black Photo Album / Look at Me: 1890–1950* is the group of enquiries about the fates of the portrayed in the South African context: "Who were these people? What were their aspirations? What is going to happen to those aspirations at the end of twentieth century South Africa?".[7] Mofokeng also asks: "Are these images evidence of mental colonisation or did they serve to challenge prevailing images of 'the African' in the western world?".[8]

All the images in *The Black Photo Album / Look at Me: 1890–1950* belong to the genre of an individual or group portrait. One portrait shows P.G. Mdebuka in a three-piece suit with white shirt and tie (image 2). The caption provides information about the photographed and his professional status as a church music composer and minister of the Methodist Church. The reverse of the print copy indicates the function of the image as a gift: "A present from (and stamped P.G. Mdebuka – Location School, Aliwal North) to Jane Maloyi".[9]

Another single portrait is an arch-shaped original print with the photographed in a long skirt and a blouse with simple jewellery (image 3). The caption contains the person's name: "Seipati Martha Motingoe (neé Khalanyane)"; states the type of original print "silver gelatin print"; and informs about the place and time of origin: "New Market [Johannesburg] 1918".[10] Mofokeng's commentary indicates Seipati Martha Motingoe's professional background as a laundress.

A further photograph portrays two adults and four children (image 4). The clothing of the child on the right-hand side of the image is particularly striking. The young person is wearing a characteristic Scottish kilt, a velvet jacket, a sporran (a pouch bag) with a white hem, a scarf with a traditional pattern and a Highland cap.[11] This clothing indicates the use of props from the photographic studio around 1890.

The Black Photo Album / Look at Me: 1890–1950 contains a full-length portrait of Cleophas Moatshe, leader of the Anglican Church, and Martha Moatshe from Boshoek in the 1900s (image 5). The background of the image is formed by a painted backdrop wall.

[5] Ibid., 7.

[6] Ibid., 17, 23, 59.

[7] Ibid., 85.

[8] Ibid., 67.

[9] Ibid., 48; image notes, n. n., 112.

[10] Ibid., 78.

[11] Cf. James T. Campbell, "African Subjects," in: *The Black Photo Album / Look at Me: 1890–1950*, Santu Mofokeng (New York, Göttingen: The Walther Collection, Steidl, 2013), n. n., 136.

The portrait of Mmiletswa Sepobe with friends depicts a group of five people (image 6). Both sitting persons are dressed in the style of 1920s dandies.[12] The elaborate dress of the female portrayed on the right and the accessories are reminiscent of the so-called 'sailor style' in 'female' clothing of the 1920s.[13] To the right of the photographed group, a different photographic backdrop of the Lydenburg Studio in Lydenburg 1926, which does not belong to the staging of Mmiletswa Sepobe' portrait, is captured.

The images of Seipati Martha Motingoe (image 3) and Mmiletswa Sepobe with friends (image 6) provide references to the original photographic techniques used: silver gelatine prints from 1918 and silver bromide prints from 1926. Both techniques correspond to the popular developments of the early phase of photography, which were also widely used in the studios in South Africa.

South Africa in 1890–1950 and the Victorian Photographic Dispositive

The analysis of The *Black Photo Album / Look at Me: 1890–1950* can be productively undertaken in the context of Victorian photographic discourse. This discourse is linked to ongoing mechanisms of epistemic violence in the representation of the Black community.[14]

Michel Foucault (1926–1984) introduced the concept of the dispositive, which describes a mechanism that first constructs certain phenomena or discourses in order to make power-political decisions on the basis of them. The dispositive refers to the totality of all mechanisms to stabilize power.[15]

The postcolonial concept of epistemic violence in connection with Edward Said's (1935–2003) study *Orientalism* forms a further theoretical basis for the discussion of the power relations within also visual discourses.[16] Said's central thesis reveals that both 'the Orient' and the subject in an 'Oriental' society are constructed and essentialised as *the other* only through the gaze of the 'Western' subject.[17] With Said, the critique of the process of *othering* emerges. Gayatri Spivak's study *Can the Subaltern Speak?* takes up the notion of epistemic violence and asks how the subaltern 'woman'

[12] Cf. Ingrid Loschek and Gundula Wolter, *Mode- und Kostümlexikon* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 2011), 67–86.

[13] Cf. ibid., 82–83.

[14] "We need to remember the scale of modern empire here and understand that the power structures created by colonialism are still active [...] albeit often camouflaged in a variety of social and cultural practices." Derrick Price, "Surveyors and surveyed: photography out and about" [2012], in *Photography: A Critical Introduction*, ed. Liz Wells (London, New York: Routledge, 2015), 104–105. On the photographic discourse of Victorianism cf. Peter Hamilton and Roger Hargreaves, *The Beautiful and the Damned: The Creation of Identity in Nineteenth Century Photography* (London: Lund Humphries, National Portrait Gallery, 2001).

[15] Cf. Michel Foucault, *L'ordre du discours* (Paris: Gallimard, 1971); *Dispositive der Macht. Über Sexualität, Wissen und Wahrheit* (Berlin: Merve, 1978).

[16] Cf. Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1978).

[17] Cf. ibid., 8.

can speak.[18] In the early works, Spivak assumed that the subaltern must be represented, while at present, Spivak's notion of "strategic essentialism", has been critically revised.[19]

One significant element of the Victorian power dispositive was the Victorian photographic discourse, which had strictly formalized conventions of representation. In the dominant discourse, however, the classic Victorian portrait was reserved exclusively for photographic representations of supposedly 'white' people. At the same time, eroticizing and marginalizing conventions of representation of people beyond 'Europe', thus also of the Black communities in South Africa, were constituted by Victorian colonial photography. It occurred particularly in anthropometric photographs, travel images as well as studio portraits made by 'white' predominantly 'male' photographers for the circulation at the 'European' market. A crucial meaning for the photographic process of *othering* is entailed by the commercially produced postcard. With the founding of numerous companies specialising in photographic postcard production, the postcard, which can be reproduced at low cost compared to the individual photographic print, found a strong worldwide market spread and thus actively contributed to the violent visual discourse of *othering*.[20]

In the South African context, Alfred M. Duggan-Cronin (1874–1954), who moved to South Africa from Ireland in the 1890s, is one of the central figures of Victorian colonial photography. From 1919 onwards, he undertook annual expeditions to remote regions of South Africa, producing approximately 7,000 photographs by the 1930s. His work constructs Black South Africans as *the other*, marginalizing them through a pseudo-scientific naturalizing discourse. Mofokeng critically examined Duggan-Cronin's photographs on several occasions.[21]

In particular, James T. Campbell, Patricia Hayes and Okwui Enwezor emphasize that *The Black Photo Album / Look at Me: 1890–1950* undermines the visual topos of *the other* depicted as ethicized, hypersexualized, 'uncivilized' and 'eroticized' expressed both in the images' content and staging.[22] The power relationship that dominated the discourse of colonial photography – the 'white' 'male' photographer as the acting subject of power and Black portrayed objectified in the act of photography – is radically deconstructed by the photographs in *The Black Photo Album / Look at Me: 1890–1950.* Based on the studio stamps, it can be traced that although the photo studios belonged to 'white' photographers, some of the photographs in *The Black*

[18] Cf. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern speak?" in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 271–316.

[19] Cf. Ulrike E. Auga, *An Epistemology of Religion and Gender: Biopolitics – Performativity – Agency* (London, New York: Routledge, 2020), 226–45.

[20] The London Stereoscopic Company sold 500,000 postcards and single prints worldwide in 1965. Cf. Price, "Surveyors and surveyed," 106.

[21] Cf. Mofokeng, *The Black Photo Album*, n. n., 120–1.

[22] Cf. Campbell "African Subjects", n. n., 136; Patricia Hayes, "Santu Mofokeng, Photographs: 'The Violence is in the Knowing,'" *History and Theory* 48 (December 2009): 34–51. Okwui Enwezor, "Reframing the Black Subject. Ideology and Fantasy in Contemporary South African Representation," *Third Text* 11, 40 (1997): 21–40.

Photo Album/ Look at Me: 1890–1950 were taken by Black apprentices. In addition, the portrayed are themselves the clients and – in contrast to the Black models of colonial photography – place themselves in front of the photographic lens by their own individual motivation. The prints contained in *The Black Photo Album/ Look at Me: 1890–1950* are intended neither for 'scientific' nor for museum exhibition purposes. They were made as a personal photographic souvenir (image 6), as part of the family photo album (image 4) or as a *carte de visit* and gift (image 2). Mofokeng's question, whether these images are "evidence of mental colonization" or did they serve to challenge prevailing images of 'the African' in the 'Western', discussed in the following, remains, however, not systematically analyzed in the theoretical research.

Photographic Staging and Appropriation as Practices of Anticolonial Resistance

1775 marks the beginning of Great Britain's colonial rule in the Cape region.[23] As early as 1799, after the arrival of the London Missionary Society, the first missionary centres were founded in Table Bay, which later spread to Central Africa. On the one hand, the importance of the mission stations for the process of the ethnogenesis in South Africa proved to be problematic.[24] However, the emergence of the Christian mission was accompanied by the setup of new life structures for the Black community: "Many converts found work within the missions themselves, serving as teachers, evangelists, and occasionally as ordained ministers. Others took positions in the colonial bureaucracy, working as clerks, postal workers, court interpreters and the like. A handful found their way to British universities, where they qualified as doctors and attorneys".[25] In addition to colonization, the new structures that emerged led to the formation of a new stratum of the population and to new opportunities for the Black inhabitants of the Cape region for gaining agency.[26] A break in the generation of knowledge and the enabling of life for the Black population occurred through a later emergence of racial ideologies.[27]

In relation to the analysis of the photographs in *The Black Photo Album / Look at Me: 1890–1950,* the research question of the relationship of the photographs to the

[23] Cf. Mahmood Mamdani, *Citizen and Subjects. Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 72.

[24] Cf. Bettina Schmidt, *Creating Order: Culture as Politics in 19th and 20th Century South Africa* (Nijmegen: Third World Centre, 1996). On the natiogenesis in the context of South Africa, cf. Ulrike Auga, *Intellektuelle – zwischen Dissidenz und Legitimierung – Eine kulturkritische Theorie im Kontext Südafrikas* (LIT: Berlin, 2007).

[25] Cf. Campbell, "African Subjects", n. n., 137.

[26] Cf. ibid., 135–7; David Campbell, "'Black Skin and Blood': Documentary Photography and Santu Mofokeng's Critique of the Vizualization of Apartheid South Africa," *History and Theory* 48 (December 2009): 52–58. On the concept of agency, cf. Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012).

[27] The passing of the Natives Land Act in 1913 laid a legal foundation for racial segregation, which manifested in apartheid with the election of the African National Congress (ANC) party.

thesis of the "colonization of consciousness" has been formulated.[28] Campbell makes the following statement in the context of analyzing the staging intentions of the photographed: "The photographs may or may not be evidence of 'mental colonization', but they are evidence of assertion, of struggle. In commissioning portraits, these men and women were not merely creating mementos. [...] In donning these clothes and holding these props, they were not only displaying bourgeois respectability, but also asserting urbanity, modernity, pride against a society that sought to consign them to a static past".[29] The quote underlines the ambivalent attitude towards photographic staging in *The Black Photo Album / Look at Me: 1890–1950*. While Campbell, in the consideration of the studio props as well as the clothing, tends towards an assessment of the staging as a testimony to 'intellectual colonization', the overall context of the photographs is evaluated as resistant.

Campbell's thesis of an appropriation of the supposedly 'European' photographic technique in the South African studios can be contradicted.[30] As explained with the examples of the silver gelatin print and the silver bromide print, the applied technical processes belonged to the popular developments of the early phase of photography, which were also widely used in the studios in South Africa. Despite the origin of the photographic processes in England, they found a worldwide spread. For this reason, the designation as a 'European' technique carries a risk of universalization. In addition, the dry gelatin process was without an alternative the latest technique in the 1890s and beyond, and therefore its use testifies to an interest in innovations in the field of studio photography and an equipment with the necessary devices.

Thus, the staging elements of the portraits are interpreted here as components of a subversive appropriation of the colonial Victorian portrait and therefore as a discursive practice of anticolonial resistance. This appropriation refers to the resistance of the photographed against the marginalizing, violent mechanisms of colonialism and colonial photography. The positioning in front of the camera, the posture as well as the way of looking into the camera lens and the choice of clothing cannot be regarded as features of analogously appropriated Victorian portrait staging and thus as 'evidence' of the "colonization of consciousness" of the Black community in South Africa. In particular, the use of dandy and *sailor style* clothing and the choice of Scottish dress are perceived as a subversive, performative strategy of appropriation, which contributed to the production of visual counter-knowledge, to subject formation and individual agencies within the Black community. The gaining of agency occurs through a staging with the help of contemporary fashion accessories as well as a decorative backdrop that represent an aspired fulfilled living environment. Furthermore, the staging cannot be described as a masquerade, as the individual elements were not identically adopted from Victorian portrait photography. On the contrary, new

[28] Cf. Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff, "The Colonisation of Consciousness in South Africa," *Economy and Society* 18, 3 (1989): 267–96.

[29] Campbell, "African Subjects", n. n., 140.

[30] Cf. ibid., 134.

knowledge about Black subjects in South Africa between 1890 and 1950 was rather produced as the radical photographic counter statements captured in *The Black Photo Album / Look at Me: 1890–1950* and reached by the use of staging props constructed as 'Western-colonial' in the knowledge order of the marginalization of Black life in South Africa.

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Image Source and Credits:

Mofokeng, Santu, *The Black Photo Album / Look at Me: 1890–1950*, The Walther Collection / Steidl: New York / Göttingen 2013 ® The Walther Collection

Image 1: n. n., book cover image.

Image 2: n. n., 47.

Image 3: n. n., 79.

Image 4: n. n., 111.

Image 5: n. n., 63.

Image 6: n. n., 51.

Image 7: n. n., 126.

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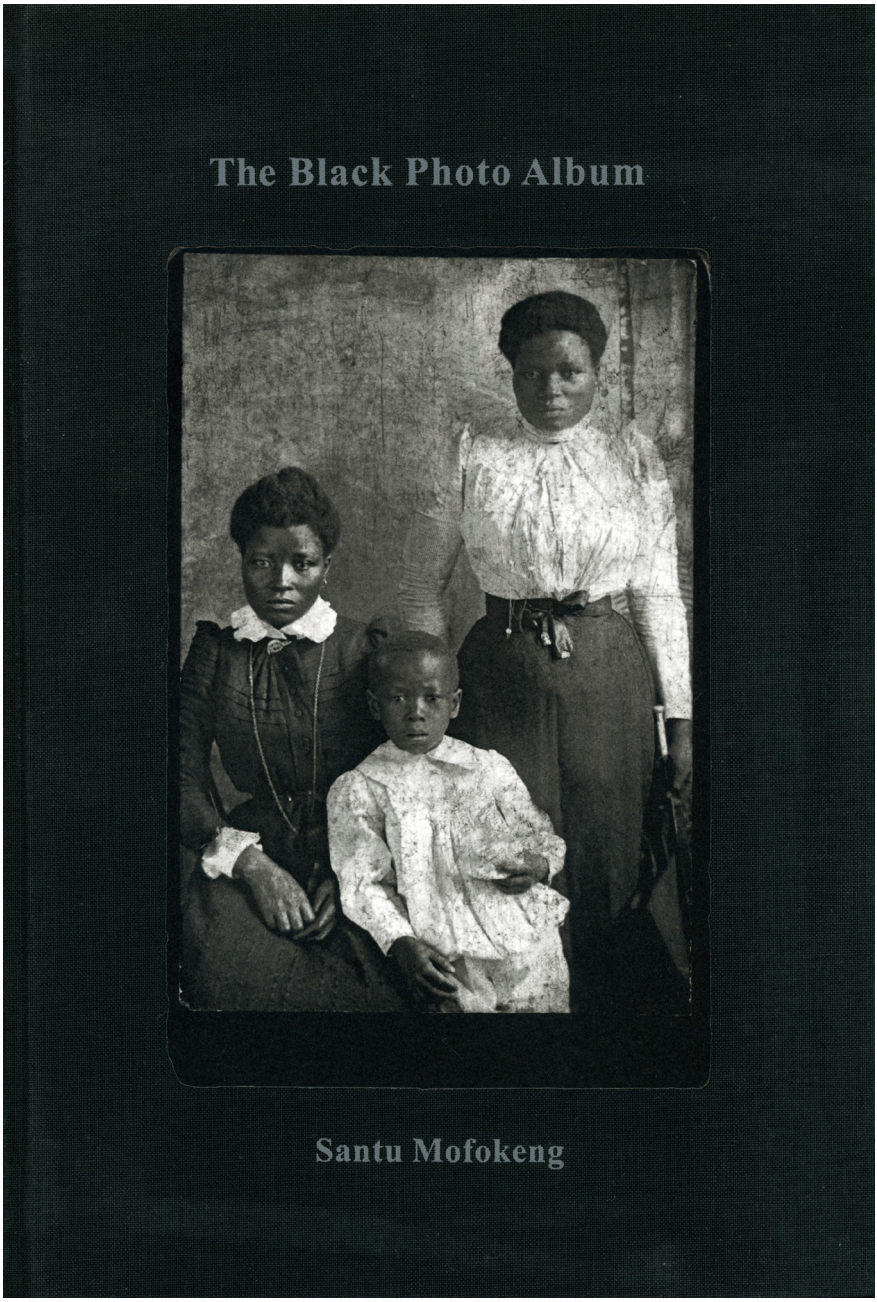

Image 1: Book cover image of Mofokeng, Santu. *The Black Photo Album / Look at Me: 1890–1950*. New York/ Göttingen: The Walther Collection/ Steidl, 2013.
Cover: black linen binding; 19 x 27 cm. Cover image: Unidentified subjects. Albumen print, 11,5 x 17,5 cm. Photographer: Unknown, c. 1900.

Image 2: P. G. Mdebuka. Albumen print, 14 x 16 cm. Photographer: Aliwal North Location School, c. 1900s.

Image 3: Seipati Martha Motingoe. Silver gelatin print, 13 x 20 cm. Photographer: Unknown, New Market, 1918.

Image 4: Unidentified subjects. Albumen print, 14,5 x 11,5 cm. Photographer: Unknown, c. 1890.

Image 5: Cleophas and Martha Moatshe. Albumen print, 14,5 x 20,5 cm. Photographer: Unknown, Boshoek, c. 1900s.

Image 6: Mmiletswa Sepobe (standing left) with friends. Silver bromide print, 14 x 19,5 cm. Photographer: Lydenburg Studios, Lydenburg, 1926.