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Negotiating Culture in Contemporary South Africa: Photographic self-representations from the Cape Flats

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Introduction

This paper presents insights from research into visual imaginations of culture on the Cape Flats, and more specifically in Langa and Gugulethu, two of Cape Town's older townships. The project in visual ethnography critically investigated the visibility of popular understandings of culture and the processes, discourses and practices of negotiating culture in post-apartheid South Africa. I analyse the insights of 'How We See Our Culture', as the project came to be known, against a broader effort of thinking about the politics of culture in contemporary South Africa.¹ The guiding question was, how do people negotiate the meanings of culture in a situation, in which culture has served for many years, and particularly so during the later apartheid years between c. 1960 and 1990, as a politically highly-charged discursive formation, which hierarchically ordered a racially and linguistically diverse population? The analysis revolves around the question how residents of the poorer urban areas in the Western Cape make sense of and negotiate public discourses of culture in contemporary South Africa, including those of the postcolonial state and elites, and the cultural dynamics of selected social settings and micro-contexts, in which the research collaborators² have been involved.

In a nutshell: this paper and the project on which it draws are interested in the role played by encounters with the visual and visual expressions in the see-saw of negotiating culture, linking discourses in the public sphere, where the state, media, and other political and societal agents employ cultural strategies, with those of a range of intermediate and micro social settings, and the aspirations of persons. Culture, if understood as process rather than as a 'thing', is always about negotiation, which has two related but discrete meanings. In the first, negotiations are taking place between individual actors interacting in specific micro contexts, such as friendships, families, workplaces, religious congregations, sports clubs, or a variety of peer groups. The second sense that negotiation has, and this is central to this project, is related to the relationship between publicly generated notions of culture and the way people refashion these ideas. It provides space to ask a set of questions about how demotic (literally: of the people)

¹ In recent papers emerging from my ongoing research into post-apartheid discourses of culture and identity I have made enquiries into the politics of multiculturalism in contemporary South Africa and have dealt with student discourses and politics of difference at the University of the Western Cape (UWC). (Becker 2008a; 2008b)

² In the context of this project I prefer the term 'research collaborators' above other more established and commonly used terms to refer to the people with whom we work in field work, such as 'informants', 'research participants', or 'research subjects', to indicate the collaborative nature of the research.

understandings of culture respond to dominant public discourses. How, and to what extent do people appropriate publicly generated ideas about culture? And which ones among a range of forms of public culture do they selectively respond to? Where and when do they follow the dominant discourses of public culture? Why do, why don't they? How does a powerful "structure of feeling" (Clifford 1988: 235) which sees culture as an enduring body with its own life, and strategic essentialism intersect in different situations? To what extent are popular understandings of culture situational? How are they being mediated? Do contestations of culture result in a schism between alternative public spheres of neighbourhoods and gender or generational peer groups, and a public arena dominated by national culture discourses?

The present paper engages these significant questions by drawing on the project in visual ethnography and its critical investigations of the visibility of the processes, discourses and practices of negotiating culture in post-apartheid South Africa. Fieldwork was carried out in 2005 and 2006; residents of townships on the Cape Flats (the common local dub for, and geographical location of most of Cape Town's townships) were asked to make use of inexpensive photographic technology to visually represent what they see as their culture. During the initial stage of the project, the auto-photography was complemented by studies of visual culture in post-apartheid townships and interviews with the research collaborators. The interviews explored their life histories, everyday practices, and their reflections on culture. Following this phase of the project, a selection of pictures taken by the research collaborators and their commentaries was presented in an exhibition, which has been on show in a township cultural centre and at local universities in Cape Town.

Culturalist discourses in contemporary South Africa

Without any doubt, the post-apartheid years – at least from the turn of the century onwards - have seen the resurgence of culturalist discourses in South Africa.³ Few scholars, surprisingly, appear

³ I refer to 'culturalist' discourses and politics where those invoke notions of culture as the *primary* category of difference. In such discursive contexts, 'culture' becomes 'ethnicity', and often indeed 'race' in two senses of meaning. In the first sense, it essentialises the idea of culture as the property of an ethnic group or 'race'. It thus reifies cultures as separate entities, as well as it overemphasises the internal homogeneity of cultures, with the danger of "potentially legitimiz[ing] repressive demands for communal conformity." (Turner 1993: 412) Second, this reductive conception of culture is compounded by a conception of race and ethnic identities being purportedly based on cultural difference; thus, as Paul Gilroy observed, "the terms culture and identity may function as surreptitious code words for 'race' ... [and] ... a belief in the absolute nature of ethnic categories." (Gilroy 1992, 50)

to have made the effort to comprehend usages that establish demotic discourses of cultural difference, identity, and multiculturalism in the post-apartheid society. Thus far analyses of the politics of culture in post-apartheid South Africa have focused mostly on the post-apartheid State and matters of (political) citizenship. Richard Wilson (2002), for one, describes culturalist discourses in post-apartheid South Africa as part of a fragmented elite strategy in the project of postcolonial nation-building, while the Comaroffs have identified the “pragmatics of (cultural) difference” as a defining feature of post-apartheid South Africa as a postcolonial political dispensation, where they make out an emerging form they refer to as *policulturalism*, which they understand to embrace the politicisation of cultural pluralism. Their argument is centred on the proposition that postcolonies in Africa were founded simultaneously on singularity and difference, not on a national culture based on “deep horizontal fraternity but on a social contract among persons who are at once right-bearing individuals and identity-bearing subjects.” (Comaroff & Comaroff 2004: 191; see also Comaroff & Comaroff 2005) Citizenship, thus, is conceived as at once transcending and tolerating diversity; between “Euromodernist” universalism and cultural relativism culture “has come to provide the language of difference.”(Comaroff & Comaroff 2005: 34; 2004: 188-9) They recognise that the discursive construction of diversity, which lies at the roots of postcolonial citizenship, may at once abide assertions of essentialised (ethnic) cultures and go beyond them toward new perspectives of “Afromodernity” in many spheres of contemporary African societies where culture is being contested and negotiated. (Comaroff & Comaroff 2004: 200)

They argue, further, that in contemporary postcolonies culture has become increasingly conceived of as an essentialised brand and a ‘naturally’ copyrighted collective possession of ethnic groups and ‘communities’. I maintain that beyond the instances of corporative ethnicity, which the Comaroffs (2004: 191) describe as ‘Ethnicity, Inc.’, in the workings of public discourses in contemporary South Africa reified culture is regularly presented as a ‘thing’ – an objectified entity beyond the realm of human agency, comprising ‘traditions’, folklore, shared beliefs, and a range of ‘custom’ – that people ‘have’ or ‘belong to’ in a way that distinguishes social groups. As Frederik Barth (1969) wrote almost four decades ago, culture popularly talked and written about as distinctive, stable, and timeless attributes emphasises boundaries. The question is, how people engage the dominant discourse of ‘this thing called culture’ in everyday

usages and practices. How do they absorb in their everyday lives the emphases on boundedness, on mutual distinctness, and internal conformity? And, how do they express them?

There are indeed indications of contestations and ruptures. In a study of HIV education in the Eastern Cape province of South Africa, Zolani Ngwane (2007) calls attention to the ostensible contradictions between the recurrent discursive invocations to culture as static, essentialised cultural norms, and cultural interactions and the shaping of identities in everyday practice. A number of publications on popular culture, often with a special emphasis on urban youth cultures, also have pointed out that contemporary shifts in cultural interaction, identity formation, production and consumption work along faultlines of difference, but that these are not necessarily based on ethnicity. Studies show that a sense of difference may equally draw upon notions of lifestyle, habitus or taste (in a Bourdieuan sense), class, gender, or regional origin. (c.f., Dolby 2001; Salo 2003; Badsha 2003; Nuttall 2004; Becker & Dastile 2006; 2008)

Continuities and discontinuities of culturalist discourses in South Africa

And yet, there can be no doubt that naturalising assertions of cultures as stable, bounded and coherent ‘possessions’ of social groups, to which individuals ‘belong’, are presented with a staggering certainty not only in public discourse. They also are a part of the every day in contemporary South Africa, and held even by those who, like the undergraduates who turn up in the University of the Western Cape (UWC) lecture halls, have come of age only after the end of apartheid. (Becker 2008b) Contemporary local ideas of culture appear to be starkly reminiscent of older public and popular convictions as described - twenty years ago – by John Sharp:

To many South Africans it is self-evident, a matter of common sense, that the society consists of different racial and ethnic groups, each of which forms a separate community with its own culture and traditions. It is believed that such groups actually exist objectively in the real world, and that there is nothing anybody can do to change this. (Sharp 1988: 1)

Sharp’s description of these beliefs which were commonly-held during the ‘bad old days’ of apartheid appears to be frighteningly accurate, too, in respect of the perceived self-evidence and inevitability of difference between bounded cultures, views which I find expressed in 2008

regularly by undergraduates who had barely started their primary education when Nelson Mandela was inaugurated as the first president of democratic South Africa in 1994. These are young men and women who – coming mostly from less privileged sections of the country’s populace – are ostensibly confidently at home in the global world of Nike’s, Nokia, and the internet. (Becker 2008b)

Which public discourses do my students, and others, respond to? In the following section, I sketch discourses of contemporary South African public culture, where multiculturalism is generally depicted as a desirable social and political dispensation. In later sections of the paper, I engage the role of the tourism industry in contemporary representations of urban African culture, and the influence of certain media productions and NGOs. As I shall show later on, different agencies of public culture send out ambivalent and often ostensibly contradictory messages.

Multiculturalism entered South African public discourse in the mid-1990s, when former Anglican Archbishop and Chairperson of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), Desmond Tutu coined the metaphor of the *rainbow nation* for the *New South Africa*. In this usage, multiculturalism has come to replace “the beast of ethnicity”, of which some of the older ANC politicians continue to warn. (Asmal 2008) It stuck, not in the least because of its beauty and promise: after all, a rainbow comes about when the sun finally breaks through the rain. The image has become a core signifier of the post-apartheid society, used regularly in public culture to invoke the ideals of liberation and multiculturalism. The rainbow metaphor provokes strong feelings. However, it has its critics, too. Only recently, the Vice-Chancellor of UNISA⁴, Barney Pityana, a leading intellectual of the 1970s Black Consciousness generation, cautioned in an interview with the *Mail & Guardian* that “a rainbow is a number of parallel lines. We need to move beyond the parallel lines and get the lines to criss-cross.” (Mail & Guardian Online, 26.4.2008)

The South African rainbow, then, is not so much different from the ‘(cultural) mosaic’, the metaphor used officially in Canada, “suggestive of a wide range of ethnic cultures coexisting as

⁴ UNISA, the ‘University of South Africa’ is a Pretoria-based mega distance education institution with over 100,000 students from all over the African continent.

the nation.” (Yon 2000: 20) In South Africa, multiculturalism is not an officially legislated policy, although individual politicians and occasionally government documents, too, use the term. In the late 1990s, the then Minister of Arts, Culture, Science & Technology, Lionel Mtshali, when speaking about ‘transformation’ in the museum sector, pronounced that

The principle by which we have to operate is the principle of ‘pluralism’. We are a varied and multi-cultural society. Pluralism means that there should not be any kind of new ‘dominance’ except the dominance of variety and balance. If there is to be a new hegemony, it must be the hegemony of multi-culturalism and respect for difference. (quoted in Martin 1998)

Critics like Marilyn Martin, the Director of the South African National Gallery, disapprove of the language because it emphasises ‘pluralism’, which they reject due to its historical use by the architects of apartheid to emphasise difference and encourage fragmentation.⁵ They thus point out that the meanings of multiculturalism in South Africa need to be considered against the country’s history, where beyond – and preceding – the contemporary global identity politics based on culture as the language of difference, and specifically the reification and politicisation of culture in the public sphere⁶, in the recent past, culture as a discursive formation was *central* to state-driven policies and politics of exclusion. In the South African past, discourses of cultural difference were intrinsically linked to the experience of violence and deprivation. In the light of this history, one may indeed be forgiven to think that the historical experience of the “political use and abuse” of the culture concept (as the 1980s “South African Keywords” project had it; see, Boonzaier & Sharp 1988) would have cautioned post-apartheid society and politics against the extensive use of such a discredited concept in public and popular discourses.

Quite the contrary is the case, however: to the surprise, perhaps, of anthropologists like Sharp and his colleagues, who emphatically championed the single society theory against segregation and

⁵ Among the apartheid terminology, there was at one stage a Minister and Department of ‘Plural relations’ (replacing the earlier used terms ‘native’ and ‘bantu’ affairs).

⁶ As scholars have observed and theorised almost everywhere in the contemporary world. (Appadurai 2006; Byron & Kockel 2006; Kuper 2006) Globally, *culture*, generally imagined as a “billiard ball” (to invoke boundedness and coherence), and intimately linked with another buzzword: identity, “seems to explain everything at the moment ... culture has become a great public issue”. (Kuper 2006: 186)

apartheid, culturalist discourses have resurged in post-apartheid public and popular discourses. Richard Wilson's statement concisely sums up the culture politics of the post-apartheid state and indeed, it appears, wider sections of the post-apartheid society:

What is striking about the South African case is that the political use of culture has not gone away within state discourse, even after the ravages of apartheid social engineering. (Wilson 2002: 230)

Culture, more often than not understood as cultural difference, i.e., as racialized ethnicity incorporating the concept of a plurality of diverse cultures ('multiculturalism') and drawing on the image of the rainbow nation, remains a keyword of the New South Africa as much as it was under the country's apartheid dispensation.

The recurrent invocations of essentialised 'African' as well as specifically ethnic Zulu culture to mobilise popular support for former South African Deputy President Jacob Zuma during his rape trial in 2006 demonstrated just how much culturalist discourses have resurged in post-apartheid public and popular discourses. This is not only the case during moments of heightened political and cultural mobilisation. The political rhetorics of the state, NGOs, the media, and an ever-growing heritage and cultural tourism industry all make for a public culture which emphasises, albeit in a fragmented manner, the reconstruction of postcolonial identities around notions of African-ness and indigeneity in both its inclusive and ethnically fragmented guise. (Marschall 2005; Robins 2001; Sharp 2006; Becker 2006)

Culturalist discourses & the New World Order

The seesaw of public culture and personal identifications in contemporary South Africa presents pressing questions, which challenge us to revisit long-standing issues around cultural difference, identity politics, multiculturalism, traditionalist discourse, culture-as-resource, and hybridity in the everyday life of persons. They also challenge us to re-consider them in the 'global shadows' of post-apartheid South Africa in the neoliberal world order. (with reference to Ferguson 2006)

Following South Africa's reinsertion into global circuits after the end of apartheid, in addition to their role in legitimising the domestic and international diplomatic and economic politics of the South African postcolonial state, culturalist discourses and identity politics are undoubtedly owed, as Appadurai (1996: 32) has it, to the tensions of the cultural politics of globalisation. These are marked by the interactions between homogenising trends and reinforced cultural heterogeneity in this country, whose political liberation in the 1990s came along with the ruptures of neoliberalism and an ambiguous, headlong rush into socio-cultural hyper-modernity. In this context one may also argue that the discursive assertion of pre-existing cultures or even the call for African cultural revival, which my students often reference, and which arguably presents the core of the African Renaissance ideology, are aimed at "the promotion and empowerment of distinctly 'African' nodes of managing modernity and globalisation." (Coplan 2001: 117)

This may well be the case when one looks at the narrative production of (African) culture as a discursive formation, which the South African nation-state employs in its efforts of reshaping itself as a political entity both at home and in the larger regional and global playing fields. There can be no doubt that the visibility of (African) culture in local and national public spheres in post-apartheid South Africa owes to local and global, as well as national and regional moments.

In considering of how contemporary South Africans make sense of and relate to the culture discourses of the postcolonial state and elites, however, I maintain that it is not very helpful to confine the discussion of the politics of culture to analytical perspectives on culture as a resource – thus emphasising strategic essentialism –, which is, by and large, what critical scholars did, quite understandably, during the apartheid era (cf. Thornton 1988), and as I also understand Richard Wilson's (2002) argument. This is not to deny that Wilson's take on the uses of culture, and culturalist discourses as part of a fragmented elite strategy in post-apartheid South Africa, particularly in the project of nation-building, certainly makes a valid point. Something is missing in this analysis, however: It does not help us much to understand why culturalist ideas and the multiculturalist discourses of the parallel lines of the rainbow as the cherished ideal of the post-apartheid society remain deeply ingrained and seem to become ever more popular. We need to think beyond the overt politicization of culture if we wish to comprehend the appeal of culture to Jacob Zuma's women supporters during the rape trial in early 2006. The question is, why this

appeal appears so very real. Furthermore, why do the same ‘old’ notions of culture ostensibly accentuate the everyday discourses among 21st century university students who are concerned that they were ‘losing’ or ‘abandoning’ their (ethnic) culture(s); yet, these young women and men are equally adamant that without their cellphones they feel entirely lost in the world. (Becker 2008b)

There are routes beyond strident traditionalism and culture loss worries: In a discussion of African-language hip-hop in Cape Town, Nceba Dastile and I have shown that the search for local forms of African identity in the time of globalisation not necessarily means the confirmation of old boundaries or the construction of new boundaries. Instead of dismissing forms of global popular youth culture as a threat to presumably ‘authentic’ African culture, the protagonists of the *spaza* hip-hop culture coming out of Capetonian townships have creatively appropriated hip-hop in their quest for alternative, fluid, consciously ‘African’ identities in contemporary South Africa. (Becker & Dastile 2006; 2008)

The challenge to the ‘How We See Our Culture’ project thus has been: How can we even begin to conceptualise and conduct sustained ethnographic research on these varying observations of demotic discourses of culture and identity?

Culture & ethnography in South Africa

This paper aims at making a modest contribution to a re-conceptualisation of culture, which - I suggest – is a requisite of an insightful discussion of the ambivalent politics of culture in the post-apartheid society. I propose that we read the contemporary South African Everyday in connection with Adam Kuper’s argument that, in the contemporary world in the arenas of political struggle and academic analysis simultaneously, culture appears to have replaced other categories such as race, class, gender or destiny, which were central to these contested arenas in earlier periods (Kuper 2006: 186). Culture, as an analytical category may be problematic – to say the least – but its widespread usage in public and popular discourses still obliges scholars of culture and society to engage seriously with demotic understandings of culture.

In the context of the 'How We See Our Culture' project the term culture has been used accordingly not as an *analytical* category, used by social analysts, but as a category of *practice* (akin to the understanding of *folk* or *lay* category), following the distinction developed by Cooper and Brubaker (2005: 62). Culture, thus, became an object of analysis, i.e., I, and my student co-researchers, were interested in the meanings of culture, which have been, and are currently being developed by social actors, and in the expressions people give to their experience.

Mediation, globalisation, and the production of locality

One possible route is to think of different meanings of culture and multiple forms of negotiating culture as possibly tied to specific forms of mediation. Here I argue that if we want to develop a deeper understanding of the cultural politics of contemporary South Africa, we may need to move beyond the narrative construction of bounded culture/s by the post-apartheid state and the common evocations of authenticity and reified ethnic and racial cultures. William Mazzarella's propositions on culture, media and ethnography may prove helpful in the project of unravelling contemporary South African culture discourses. He suggests that we consider mediation as a constitutive process in social life, through which a social dispensation reproduces itself in, and through the use of particular reflexive and reifying technologies, i.e., media, which make society "imaginable and intelligible to itself in the form of external representations". (Mazzarella 2004: 346) He proposes an ethnographic focus on the technologies and spaces of mediation, which allows us to "confront culture" as social process. (Mazzarella 2004: 368)

It may, thus, be promising to investigate different forms of mediation when we attempt to understand everyday meanings of culture. Different media of popular expressions (oral and written verbal discourses, sound, visualisations, bodily practices, and others) provide different contexts in which people affirm ethnic and/or racial distinctiveness in some contexts but, in other contexts they engage in rethinking and debating their identities in more fluid and porous ways. In our work on *spaza* hip-hop (Becker & Dastile 2006; 2008), we were able to demonstrate the mediation of 'African culture & identity' through music, clothing and embodiment among young Xhosa-speaking hip-hop artists in a Cape Town township, which did not necessarily entail the confirmation of old, or the construction of new (ethnicised/racialised) boundaries. Instead they

appeared to resemble what Stuart Hall (1991; 1992) calls ‘new ethnicities’, which are produced in part through a productive tension between global and local influences.

The use of ethnographic research strategies on negotiations and contestations of culture in contemporary South Africa, which creatively explore reflexive and reifying technologies of reproducing ideas about culture, may take two distinct routes. Both these routes are promising. On the one hand, we may explore cultural products which, like the music and bodily practices of the township rappers that Dastile and I studied, pre-exist the ethnographic exploration. As we know, such pre-existing cultural products may also take on new meanings in the ethnographic encounter. Ethnographies of visual culture may investigate a range of practices and products, such as pictures, which may be stored conventionally in albums, or displayed in homes, or, among young people in urban South Africa, are increasingly now accumulated on digital media, such as cellphones, or – more rarely - laptops.⁷ In the project reported in this paper, however, the idea was to make use differently of selected forms of mediation in the process of producing ethnographic knowledge. Photographs, i.e., cultural artefacts, were produced – not merely looked at and commented upon – by the research collaborators during the process of fieldwork. Despite anthropology’s long-standing emphasis on participant observation, frequently the focus is on, usually oral, verbal narratives when demotic exploring concepts, such as people’s ideas about culture. This, the ‘How We See Our Culture’ project tried to trounce, by asking township residents to express themselves in a visual ‘language’.

Methodological notes: Visual self-representation & dialogical ethnography

Methodologically, the project emphasised collaborative methods where researchers and research collaborators were consciously working together to produce specific types of knowledge around visual images, with an emphasis on intersubjectivity, understood as the reciprocal relations between researchers, the ‘subjects’ of their research and the specific political-historical contexts, with the aim of reversing earlier claims to authoritative authorship and representation.⁸ Most of the fieldwork was carried out by four advanced undergraduate and postgraduate anthropology

⁷ Over the past few years, camera cellphones have become things of special significance in the South African Everyday, at least in urban contexts and among teenagers and young adults. Explorative research among UWC students has shown that many first acquired camera phones c. 2006; the constant availability of these visual devices has already dramatically altered their ways of (literally) ‘seeing’ the world around them.

⁸ Broadly, this understanding of intersubjectivity, builds upon my reading of Jackson (1998)

students at UWC. Three of the students were Xhosa-speaking young women in their early twenties, while the fourth, a man in his early thirties, is a Somali immigrant/refugee who has been resident in Cape Town now for several years. Hence, the photographers and the researchers in the field had much in common, which obviously has had considerable impact on the intersubjectivity of this project in collaborative visual ethnography. The project thus built on considerations of, and attempted to practise a new (reflexive, dialogical) visual ethnography in making use of visual, in this instance: photographic, self-representation, as a medium, drawing from Mazzarella's characterisation and considers photographs as visual objects through which people reference their experience and knowledge and invest meaning. (cf. Pink 2001)

Auto-photography has been a fairly commonly used method for some years now⁹ in social and cultural research, and frequently also beyond the arena of scholarship in non-academic school and 'community' projects. There are two significant gaps, however, with respect to relevant methodological considerations. First, only a few anthropologists have begun to theorise how visual self-representations through the appropriation of inexpensive visual media technology open new routes into a possible "reversal in the roles of who represents what". (Rhode 1998: 188)¹⁰ Second, in most instances, projects aimed at capturing their informants' *perceptual* orientations. Researchers have handed out cameras to informants with the aim, and have instructed them to gather a sense of unique phenomenological perceptions of their 'community' or their 'everyday life'. In contrast, asking people to produce photos to show their *conceptualisations* of 'philosophical' and rather abstract categories, such as culture, is still a fairly new venture.¹¹

In the 'How We See Our Culture' project, eighteen women and men, mostly residents of the townships Langa and Gugulethu in the Cape Town Metropolitan Area, deliberately including also a small number of transnational African migrants were provided during the South African winter

⁹ Early such projects in visual ethnography include, e.g., Blinn & Harrist 1991 and others that were reported in *Visual Anthropology* in the early 1990s.

¹⁰ Authors such as Rhode (1998) and Pink (2001) have elaborated on these questions, which are closely related to the project's methodological grounding.

¹¹ I am not aware of any attempts by others to make use of this technique to explore people's reflections, but have used it in a similar way in 2004 as part of another project in the Oshikango area of Northern Namibia to gain insight into local residents' notions of liberation war memory, and how they tag it to the rapidly transforming landscape on the border to Angola.

of 2005 with inexpensive, 35 mm film cameras and were asked to take photographs of whatever they see as representing their culture.

The age of the photographers ranged from 15 to 70 years at the time; although more than half of them fell into two distinct age brackets: one consisted of women and men in their early forties (born in the mid-1960s), while the other category comprised male and female youngsters, who were 18 or 19 years old in 2005. Roughly half of the collaborators were women and men respectively. The social backgrounds of the photographers varied widely, ranging from academically trained professionals, including a trained medical doctor, born in the Sudan, who as a refugee now makes a living with his art work aimed at the Cape Town tourist market, a graduate of the University of Cape Town's (UCT) drama school, a former ethnomusicology lecturer (also of a UCT background) who now earns his living as a musician and teacher of extramural classes in African music, and a secondary school teacher, through to young school leavers, high school students, hostel residents, and older self-employed women.

Langa (isiXhosa: 'sun') and Gugulethu ('our pride') are among the oldest 'African' townships in the Western Cape.¹² Langa is the oldest of the Cape Town townships, established in the 1920s to confine the city's African population to a 'location',¹³ while Gugulethu was established in the 1960s; many among Gugulethu's original residents had been forcibly removed from racially mixed areas in Cape Town where they had lived previously, such as Simonstown or District Six. The visual landscape of both areas is marked by a mix of apartheid-era 'matchbox' township houses, 'hostels' (dilapidated tenement buildings, originally built for migrant labourers), sections of more suburban style dwellings built for better-off residents, areas of shack settlement, and

¹² A note on the use of the racial categories 'African', 'black' and 'coloured' (in the following without quotation marks) is necessary: The persistence of the apartheid racial categorisation is ubiquitous in contemporary South African everyday usage, where they continue to be conceptualised, and even resurge as actually-existing groups. While I do not wish to support the apartheid-induced usage, I follow in this article the categories as they are commonly understood and used locally: 'African' and 'black' are used interchangeably by most residents of Cape Town to denominate people who speak an African language as their first language. 'Coloured' refers to people of mixed descent, who are being defined as a social group, or a 'community' in common parlance.

¹³ Location (*lokasie* in Afrikaans) refers to the older term for dormitory residential areas (which later became known as 'townships'), where urban black populations were forced to live during the 20th century eras of segregation and apartheid. A first, rather shortlived, African location in Cape Town was Ndabeni in the current Maitland area. Wilson & Mafeje (1963) provide a comprehensive history of Langa up to c. 1960, which gives excellent insights into life and popular culture in the township in the late 1950s, based on Archie Mafeje's early urban anthropological research.

finally new blocks of flats built most recently to accommodate the large-scale influx of new arrivals from the Eastern Cape and to ‘eradicate’ the shack settlements, as expressly intended by the ANC-government. The overwhelming majority of the residents of Cape Town’s black townships speak isiXhosa as a first language, which serves as the lingua franca in these areas.

Except for three immigrants who hailed from the Sudan, Somalia and Kenya respectively, the photographers were Xhosa-speaking South Africans. Or so we thought. It was only during the later stages of the research in the winter of 2006 when we discussed with the research collaborators their life histories that we realised how diverse, in fact, the ethnic backgrounds of several of these presumed *amaXhosa* were. One man, born in the mid-1960s, could not speak a word of *isiXhosa* when his family was forced to move to Langa in the early 1970s. Until then he had grown up in Athlone as the son of a Shona-speaking Zimbabwean father; at home his family had spoken only Afrikaans, which was the common language in this coloured township. One young man, who was still in his late teens in 2005, was a son of a long-established Langa family; yet, he vaguely remembered that his grandfather had come to Cape Town from the former Ciskei in the Eastern Cape as a young man, where he had married a coloured woman (the collaborator’s grandmother). After an initial period of residence in Athlone, the young man’s grandparents had moved to Langa, apparently out of their own free will. Two other young women, who were cousins to each other and in both cases had been sent to Cape Town for schooling from Mdantsane in East London, listed coloured South Africans as well as Mozambican ‘Shangaans’ among their parents’ and their grandparents’ generations. Lastly, our oldest collaborator, 70 year-old seamstress and matriarch ‘Nomsa’ Mamusa Sheila Hlalele turned out to have been born to Sotho-speaking parents in Brakpan near Johannesburg, but still regarded the coloured Cape Town area of Athlone as home, where she had lived for the first 12 years of her life.¹⁴ Although five

¹⁴ During the life history interview with her, conducted by Thokozani Norushe, *Makhulu* (grandmother) ‘Nomsa’ explained:

Nomsa: [My name is] Sheila Mamusa, Mamusa is Nomsa in Sotho. In Zulu, it’s Nomsa that is one name. In Xhosa, I am Nomsa, which means ‘morning star’.

Thoko: What languages can you speak?

Nomsa: I’m Bi-lingual, I can speak everything: Sotho, Xhosa, and Afrikaans because I stayed with Coloureds in Crawford before the Apartheid system removed us. I can speak everything.

Thoko: Where were you born?

Nomsa: I was born in Kromboom Road in Crawford.

Thoko: In Crawford? Where in Crawford?

cases out of fourteen collaborators who were initially thought of as ‘pure Xhosa’ do not present any statistically relevant figure, these were rather surprising findings, which increased our sceptical awareness of the processes of making all-too-certain perceptions of ‘pure ethnicities’.

All our research collaborators were involved, in one way or another, in various forms of consuming, and some were also producing visuals. TV sets are ubiquitous on the Cape Flats – there is one in almost every house and also in many shacks; those who can afford them aspire to multiple tvs in their homes. The public broadcaster’s Channel 1, which during the first post-1994 decade screened a large number of programmes in the Nguni languages (*isiXhosa* and *isiZulu*), was particularly popular during the time of our fieldwork.¹⁵ Numerous photo studios on the Cape Flats offer formal portrait photography, while roving photographers (known as ‘street photographers’) take less formal photographs at weddings, birthdays, or graduation parties. A fair number of our project photographers had prior experience with photography, and a few owned, or had previously owned cameras. In 2005-2006 camera cellphones had just begun to spread to the poorer sections of South African society; only one of the youngest project photographers had already incorporated cellphone photography into his everyday practices at the time of the fieldwork.

After the project photographers returned their cameras to the field researchers, two sets were printed of each negative. One set of prints of his or her film were given to each photographer (filed in a mini-album in the order in which the pictures had been taken) and the other set filed in albums which allowed for the addition of extended captions/commentaries. Some time later, in an intensive dialogue between the photographers and the field researchers (of whom two also participated as photographers), the readings of the images in relation to culture were explored, debated and eventually condensed into extended captions, mostly ranging between one and three

Nomsa: I’m not from Cape Town. I was born in Brakpan, but I don’t know where. My parents came here when we were very young. So it’s Kromboom Road, Crawford because in everything of mine including the deeps of *fulakeni* (Athlone) I’m still from Kromboom Road, Crawford.

¹⁵ Since the end of fieldwork for this project, SABC 1 – which was previously known as *Simunye* (‘we are one’) was re-branded and now is geared particularly at a younger, predominantly black audience; it has been re-designed to appeal across ethnic lines. In 2008 SABC 1 broadcasts under the slogan ‘*Mzansi fo sho*’ (Mzansi stands for South Africa) thus using an emerging cross-cutting slang to emphasise its ‘South African-ness’.

sentences for each picture. Shortly afterwards, more intensive audio-recorded interviews were conducted with the photographers about their ideas of culture.

The initial phase of the project was concluded in December 2005.

Pictures and spaces of an exhibition

From the early stages of the project, it was envisaged to exhibit a selection of the pictures and accompanying captions. The initial idea was, “to take the process further and involve more residents”, a portable exhibition of selected photographs would be taken back to the original research sites “to take further the dialogue between the UWC-based research team and the local communities”. (Quotes from an earlier paper; Becker 2006)

From hindsight, this appears to have been a somewhat naïve notion of the social life of images. Following recent extensive debates in visual Anthropology and visual culture studies, the meanings of images change as they travel through time and geographical, cultural and social spaces. It is commonly accepted now that every viewer brings her or his form of visual literacy to the reading of pictures, which includes aesthetic conventions developed in specific forms of visual culture, as much as expectations to the photographic genre. Of equal importance is the knowledge and expectation a viewer has of the subject of photographic images.

In the context of the ‘How We See Our Culture’ project it was of special interest that we read images differently depending on the context of their presentation: We ‘see’ the same picture in different ways depending on whether it is stored in our own or a friend’s private photo album (or on our own or someone else’s cellphone or laptop), or whether it is published in an academic or popular book; seeing the same image on the internet may again touch the viewer differently. These are no stable locations in many instances. Many anthropologists would sympathise with Sarah Pink’s (2001) vivid description of how many of the photographs she had taken during field work repeatedly shifted between her personal and her ethnographic archive. Visual scholars have become crucially aware of how different knowledges may be produced around the same image in different contexts.

Images have social lives as Christopher Pinney (1997), among others, has shown. So have exhibitions, as Corinne Kratz (2002) has related in fascinating detail. Kratz discusses the different ways in which viewers in Kenya and the United States understood an exhibition of photographs which she had taken during her long-term field work among the Okiek people of Kenya. As she, following Karp (1992), has pointed out, “the expectations, understandings, and interests that an exhibition inspires are embedded in specific histories and shaped through a number of cultural conventions and institutions.” (Kratz 2002: 2) She emphasises that there are at least three layers of notions, wishes and expectations towards an exhibition and its presentation: those of the people who visit it, those of the people who produce it, and those of the people who are represented in it. (ibid.)

Hence, the space where an exhibition is put on show matters a great deal in any instance, more so in a case like ‘How We See Our Culture’ where the boundaries between the producers (research collaborator-photographers) and the subjects of cultural (and ethnographic) knowledge were blurred. Except for a few, the photographers had no prior experience of visiting an exhibition; the world of Cape Town’s city and suburban galleries and museums is a far shot away from their own social worlds. We, thus, had to carefully consider Rick Rhode’s (1998: 190) apt description of the “chaotic mix of Namibian social and cultural worlds”, which was generated on the occasion of the opening night of an exhibition of photographic self-representations from rural ‘Damaraland’ in Northwestern Namibia, which he solicited and curated during field work in the mid-1990s. The opening night at the (Namibian) National Art Gallery in Windhoek impressed on him

... the surprise and excitement on the faces of the photographers as they confronted the images and narratives of their personal lives in this distanced, genteel and sterile context – the safe mediated world of the urban art gallery. Issues of race, ethnicity, aesthetics, poverty, power and their representations were both implicit to the occasion and explicitly reflected in the photographs themselves. (ibid.)

While such encounters undoubtedly generate further reflective and discursive energies, in the ‘How We See Our Culture’ project, we opted for a different context for the photographers to

confront their images; with the Guga S'thebe Arts & Culture Centre in Langa we consciously chose a setting, which we imagined to be closer to their immediate worlds.

The exhibition space

The *Guga S'thebe Arts & Culture Centre* is located on one of the main streets in the heart of Langa, close to the civic hall, police and clinic, and next to the *Langa Museum*, which is housed in the re-built apartheid-era Pass office in the township. The Centre was opened in September 2000, and is (poorly) funded by the city of Cape Town and the Western Cape provincial government's Department of Arts. The – somewhat eclectic – building was designed by a Capetonian architect specifically for the purpose of providing a space for the promotion of the arts within the space of a township. It includes an outside amphitheatre as well as the 'Round Room', as this spacious venue is known, which is rented out for workshops and private functions. The Round Room provides an excellent exhibition space, complete with picture rails all round, for exhibitions such as the inaugural run of 'How We See Our Culture: Photographic Self-representations from the Cape Flats', as our exhibition came to be known.



Entrance to Guga S'thebe Arts & Culture Centre in Langa

Langa-resident artists were involved in the artistic creations on the colourful walls and in the court yard of Guga S'thebe. The Centre has for some years housed a ceramic workshop, a welding workshop, and a tailoring group, whose products are sold on the premises. The darkroom

for photographic work, unfortunately, has not been operational for several years as some of the donated equipment cannot be repaired locally at reasonable cost. Individual artists also produce and sell a variety of art and craft on the premises. During the 18 months of fieldwork in 2005 and 2006, we witnessed the addition of an internet café and a coffee shop to the Centre's attractions. *Cape Town Tourism* occupies a large ground-floor room, where the official Capetonian tourism agency aims at co-ordinating tourism in the area. The upstairs offices are occupied by the Director of a theatre company (well-known Langa-born playwright Fatima Dike), a German-supported project aimed at children traumatised by violence, and photographer and artist Anele Ngoko, another one of the many creative people in the visual and performing arts, who have been produced by Cape Town's culturally vibrant oldest black township. After we approached him in mid-2006, Anele became instrumental to the project as the enthusiastic and capable artistic and technical collaborator; without him the exhibition would not have been possible.

The exhibition hall at Guga S'thebe appeared to be a particularly suitable space for the inaugural exhibition of 'How We See Our Culture'. It was thought to allow a closer engagement of the photographers involved in the project and other township residents with the images and narratives close to their own geographical, social and cultural worlds as it is located in the geographical space of Langa, where about forty percent of the pictures were taken and where a fair number of the photographers live. Moreover, two of the project photographers were already attached to the Centre through their daily activities; some of the pictures which were produced in the context of the project were actually taken at Guga S'thebe and showed some of the everyday practices at 'Guga' and indicated reflections on culture which have been nurtured at the Centre.

Dialogical Editing

The editing of over 350 images and narratives for the exhibition required an ongoing dialogue between all parties to the project. Initially we aimed at selecting 30 photographs and accompanying narratives; after the consultative process between myself as the curator, Anele as the artistic director, and the photographers we ended up with 37 pictures. In a first step Anele and I pre-selected ten of the originally eighteen photographers for inclusion in the exhibition, This was done based on a mix of criteria, which involved the technical and aesthetic quality of the photographs as much as the strength of the stories told through the images and accompanying

narratives. A secondary, though not unimportant, consideration was an attempt at demographic 'representativity'. We made an effort to include about even numbers of male and female photographers in the exhibition (in the end, the work of 6 men and 4 women was exhibited); other criteria included the photographers' age range, a variety of their social and educational backgrounds, their geographical area of origin, which we considered significant, in line with, perhaps, not quite justifiable ideas about rural/urban divides; three of the photographers whose work was on shown had been born in Cape Town (they are 'Cape borners' in the local social terminology), while four had arrived in Cape Town as children (mostly from the urban or the rural Eastern Cape); one woman was a fairly recent arrival in the city who had moved from the rural Eastern Cape in her mid-20s. We also took care to include about even numbers of Langa and Guguletu residents, as we had become aware of an at times jocular, at times fierce rivalry between those residing in these two neighbouring areas on the Cape Flats. Finally, we took care to include two transnational migrants (from the Sudan and Somalia) among those whose images and narratives were exhibited.

Included in the first step was a pre-selection of between six and nine images of each of the ten selected participants. Individual consultations were then arranged with of them to discuss which ones among their pre-selected images they wanted to see included in the exhibition. During the consultations we also checked with the research collaborators in their dual capacity of photographer and narrator whether they considered the extended captions appropriate, as they has been recorded during the initial research of 2005. In most cases the consultations involved the photographer, the research assistant who had worked with him or her over the past year, and myself. Anele also joined in on a few of these extended meetings. Agreement on the final selection was reached smoothly in most cases; the research collaborator-photographers and the researchers easily shared ideas which images and narratives they wanted to see in the exhibition. In a few instances, the consultations also incorporated compromises to accommodate both the photographer's and the researcher's preferred images.

I had not quite expected the dialogical editing to reach such easy agreements on which 'stories' should be told in the exhibition and, interestingly, in which visual language they should be told. While I hesitate to draw a, possibly premature, conclusion, I tend to surmise, as I discuss further

elsewhere in this paper, that the significance of the local and global visual media in confluence with ideas flowing from the aesthetics of the urban cultural tourism, may have resulted in a rapprochement of a visual language to depict contemporary culture.

Responses

The opening night in November 2006 turned into a spirited engagement of the photographers represented in the exhibition, other research collaborators, and a small, but enthusiastic audience, which included a number of township-based artists and social and cultural activists. It, thus, confirmed the assumption that the exhibition space within the social and cultural world of the photographers allowed for a different engagement than could have been achieved within the “safe mediated world of the urban art gallery”, as Rhode (1998: 190) fittingly described the space of the National Art Gallery in Windhoek.

After the scheduled speeches by UWC’s Vice Rector and one of the youngest photographers (Luvuyo Matyesini, whose creativity and reflective stance will be further discussed elsewhere in the paper), several other project photographers and local artists took the opportunity to speak about their perspectives on the project. The passionate discussion continued for some time after the end of the official function and later turned to the deplorable situation of the arts in the township environment.

Unfortunately, the spirited engagement of the opening night could not be sustained during the two weeks of the exhibition at Guga S’thebe. Only very few township residents, even those from the neighbouring areas of Langa ever visit the Centre unless they are immediately involved in its activities or attend a social function, such as wedding receptions, which are regularly held in the ‘Round Room’. Unfortunately, of the workshops with local residents, which had been planned to encourage more engagement with the images and narratives on show, only one afternoon session materialised, which was held with a group of 12-14 year-old boys, who were participants in an extra-mural arts class in a township school.¹⁶

¹⁶ Anele Ngoko has been teaching extramural art classes in Nyanga township since 2004, funded by the Amy Biehl-Foundation.



Visitors viewing 'How We See Our Culture' at Guga S'thebe

Most of the visitors who saw the exhibition in Langa, instead were tourists on a township tour, who were rushed by their guides through the Centre and the exhibition hall. Over the past few years, Guga S'thebe has become a regular stop on the routes of many township tour operators whose tourist groups fill the central part of the building almost constantly during the late mornings and early afternoons. Most tourists had little time to spare for more than a superficial appraisal. Some visitors expressed sympathy with the plight of the photographers, whose biographical statements in some instances noted poverty and disrupted biographies, but only a few showed a deeper interest in the exhibited images and narratives. Judging from observations and informal interviews conducted during the run of the exhibition, the tourists tended to be drawn more specifically to those images that ostensibly responded to their ideas of 'typical township life'. Photographs which challenged commonly-held ideas about gendered and racialised 'types' and interpersonal relations seemed to attract far less interest on the part of most visitors.

Visual representations of culture

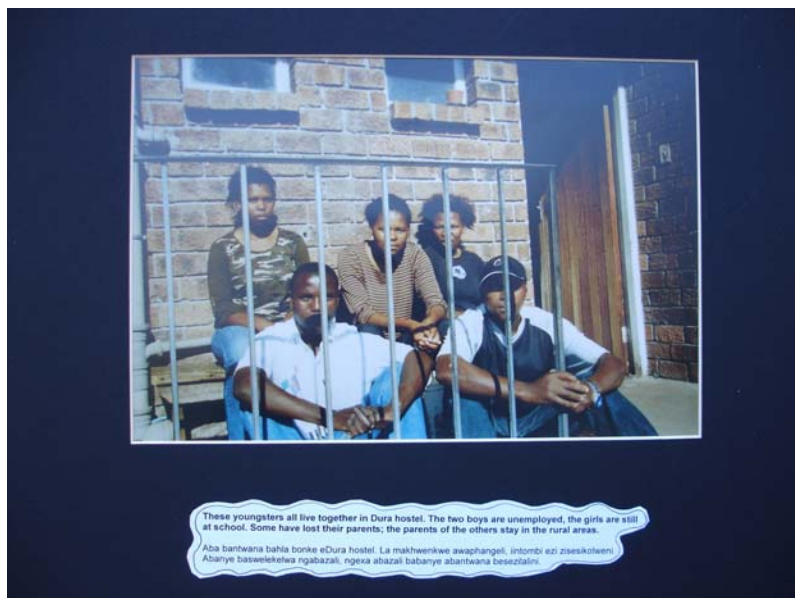
What about the photographers themselves, then? Incorporating the study of how residents define and redefine township spaces in the post-apartheid context, two central questions have guided the analysis of the about 350 pictures taken and commented upon by the photographers. First, what and who is present, and what and who is absent in the photographs? In other words, absences

were regarded as significant as those people, social situations and objects of material culture that were pictured. The second guiding question is, are there contestations and even apparent contradictions between the images and the verbal narratives of what the photographers represented as their culture?

It appears that, overall, the images and commentaries provide a multivocal discourse about how people in some of the older townships in the Western Cape visually choose to represent their culture. Working through the hundreds of photographs, the most striking impression, however, is the near-total absence of visual representations of ‘authenticity’ in the sense of purportedly distinctly African culture, and even less of bounded ethnic cultures. Most of the photographs display scenes from contemporary township life instead of representations of, what culturalist discourses may call, distinctive ethnic-racial African culture/s. However, these representations also indicate the ruptures and ambiguities of the processes of negotiating culture in contemporary South Africa, as I demonstrate in the following analysis of three major themes. First, I show how the research collaborators represented post-apartheid township spaces; second, I explain the ways in which some of the photographers make use of their picturing of and commenting on ‘African’ artwork & performance, in order to place themselves within shifting transnational networks and urban locations across the city. Lastly, I discuss how some of the youngest research collaborators visually imagine a new culture of social relations within shifting grids of gender and race.

Representations of the post-apartheid township

The Guga S’thebe Centre visitors’ responses to the depiction of ‘typical township’, which I presented above, raise further questions on the wider public sphere in Cape Town, and how this invokes notions of contemporary urban culture and its visualisation in post-apartheid South Africa, which already became evident in a fairly large proportion of the images and commentaries produced by the research collaborators.

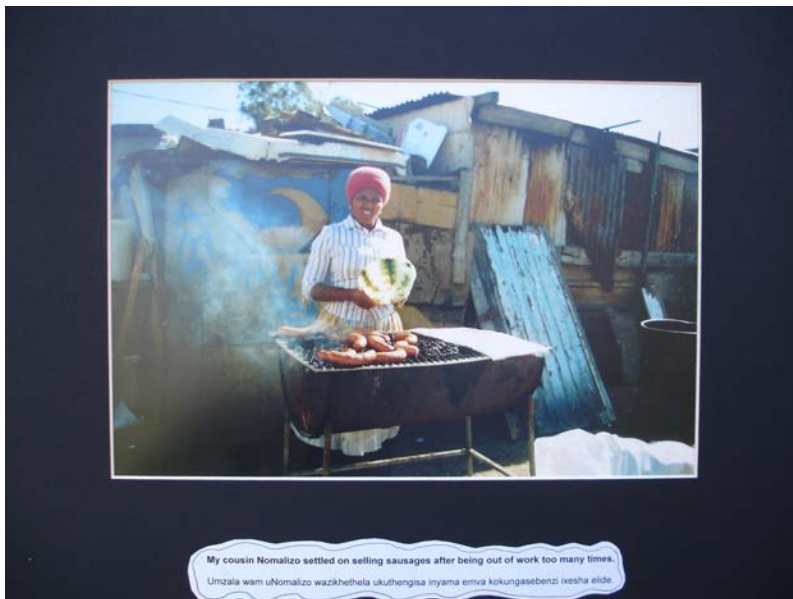


The youngsters all live together. The boys are unemployed. The girls are still at school. Some have lost their parents. The parents of the others stay in the rural areas.

Photograph & Commentary: Thobeka Dlali

Many pictures taken by the project photographers display scenes from contemporary township life, which range from depictions of abject poverty, and youth who are – quite literally – barred from escaping a bleak life, through to poverty-induced urban environmental hazards. These were complemented by visual celebrations of agency; more particularly, photographers portrayed small-scale township entrepreneurs and their businesses, which provide a range of durable or perishable goods. Pictured were, among others, a welding workshop, a shoemaker, women dressmakers, and Rastafarian fruit and vegetable sellers (who thus save township residents trips to the supermarkets ‘in town’¹⁷ or the new shopping malls, which have in recent years sprung up across the Cape Flats.

¹⁷ ‘Town’ is the common South African dub for the formerly white parts of the city, including commercial and administrative centres as well as residential suburbs.



My cousin Nomalizo settled on selling sausages after being out of work too many times.

Photograph & Commentary: Thobeka Dlali

A fair number of the pictures taken by the project photographers, however, appear to reference a particular genre of picturing township life and culture, which has been widely circulated in the public sphere in recent years. This is obvious in many of the scenes the photographers chose in their visual representations, where they pictured informal *spaza* shops, *shebeens* (informal taverns), barber shops, and road-side stalls where meat is barbecued. The lighting and composition of some such photographs suggest that these township-resident photographers were familiar with the distinctive representations of ‘typical township’ scenes, which play a pivotal role in the burgeoning cultural tourism industry in Cape Town and have been published in colourful books and as picture postcards on sale in curio and bookshops at Cape Town’s major tourist spots and in up-market shopping malls.¹⁸ Several of the photographers through their association with established stop-overs on the township tourism routes, such as the Guga S’thebe Arts & Culture Centre in Langa, engage with a constant stream of tourists and tour guides on a daily basis. But even those who were not immediately connected to the township tourism industry were highly aware of it, and generally appreciated that - mostly international, white - tourists visit because, as we heard time and again during interviews, township residents expected

¹⁸ Examples of this photographic genre include Telschow (2003) and Fraser (2002). Representations of ‘typical township’ culture also feature in the less-commercialised work of photographers of life and culture in the Cape Town townships (see, e.g., Ledochowski 2003 and Lurie 2006).

‘development’ to follow in the wake of such visits, which introduced wealthy visitors to the vibrancy of the townships.

However, beyond asking critically how realistic these commonly expressed hopes are, one needs to consider the culturalist ramifications of the ways in which tour operators – with a few remarkable exceptions¹⁹ – represent the townships. In a fascinating paper, Steven Robins (2000) discusses the connections between the ways in which tour operators and guides present the ‘ethnic’ and ‘exotic’ of township life, and purportedly culturally sensitive urban planning in Cape Town, which emphasises cultural difference in a rather primordialist perspective.

Indeed, the townships appear to have taken on the role of a new ‘traditional African way’; some tour companies advertise their forays into Capetonian townships in exactly such wording. Leslie Witz makes a strong point that, in the tourist brochures,

a visit to a township is described as a movement across the (colonial) frontier to ‘the other side of the colour line’, enabling the postapartheid adventurer to enter areas ‘previously inaccessible to whites.’ The tourist theming of South African society is mapped for international tourists as a sequence of routes from tribe to tribe and in rural and urban settings. (Witz 2006: 114)

As Witz argues further, it is indeed cultural diversity that post-apartheid South Africa holds up as its primary marker of difference, which was summed up in the marketing slogan, ‘Explore South Africa: Culture’, which was coined by SATOUR in 1996.(ibid.)

The photographers’ responses to this wider public discourse of cultural difference vary; mostly however, they incorporate contradictory visual and verbal statements and generally display a sense of ambivalence. Take the visual narrative of a ‘traditional’ ritual, serialised in more than ten shots by a Rastafarian artist of handicrafts in Langa. In several of his photographs and

¹⁹ Robins (2000) singles out an NGO formed by former ANC MK guerillas, which has taken visitors to the Cape Flats on ‘journeys of memory’ since the late 1990s. This organization was initially known as *Western Cape Action Tours*, and has been reconstituted more recently as the *Direct Action Centre for Peace and Memory*. (www.dapcm.org)

accompanying comments Monwabisi Sobitshi emphasised inherent ruptures – women sitting on chairs and sofas (instead of ‘traditionally’ squatting on the floor, as he comments), during the ritual a participant steps out of the circle to make an urgent call on his cellphone; participants drink cool drinks and bottled beer instead of ‘African beer’. Equally ambiguous, if not ambivalent, appears the portrayals of one traditional healer in Gugulethu and her dispensary. She was pictured by three photographers, of whom one was one of the field researchers (at the time a Masters student in Anthropology); the other two were another woman in her mid-twenties with a tertiary education and an 18 year-old matriculant.



It is very rare to see people who are so committed to their roots that they have become an inspiration to the youth.

Photograph & Commentary: Zola Jamela

Eighteen year-old Zola Jamela also presented a photograph of a site where Xhosa male initiation was going on at the time. She took this picture from a distance and commented that as a “girl” she was not admitted closer. This image contrasts her other pictures, many of which were close-up shots of environmental concerns within the township environment.

With these few exceptions, there are no apparent depictions of distinctly ethnic or racialised African culture within the township environment, which would claim immediacy or authenticity. In a striking contrast to the responses to merely verbal investigations of demotic notions of

culture, which I, and others, have attempted in post-apartheid contexts, the emphasis on ‘the traditional’ as defining bounded cultural entities appears to have largely melted into air where the research collaborators had the photographic medium at their disposal.

Picturing ‘African’ artwork, performance, and transnational locations

A fair number of images represent what many would denominate distinctly African artefacts and performances of markedly African dance and music as well as of colourful paintings of scenes of purportedly African daily life. Yet, all of these involve a distinct sense of self-distancing when we read the images and the photographers’ commentaries together. The photographers make it quite clear that these are representations of objectified manifestations of African culture, which are primarily directed at foreign tourists, or South African elites, who have the wish (and the disposable income) to indulge in displays of ethno-chic in their homes and attire. These include images of locally made artefacts crafted from recycled beer and soft drink cans, which are often seen as modern-urban African styles of handicrafts, pictures of more conventional beadwork, displays of the common lore of ‘Malawi art’, as the cheap typified woodcarving and metal jewelry produced for the tourist market are locally known, and finally colourful paintings sold in the streets of central Cape Town. Colourful dresses, denominated ‘Xhosa’ tradition, which recently have become fashionable among female members of the South African elites and expatriates, are commented upon as ‘modern’ attire, quite in contrast to the marketing strategies for these, supposedly ‘traditional’ garments. A practising dance-group in a Langa gym hall was said to practise for tourist performances and to have combined Xhosa and Zulu dance styles.



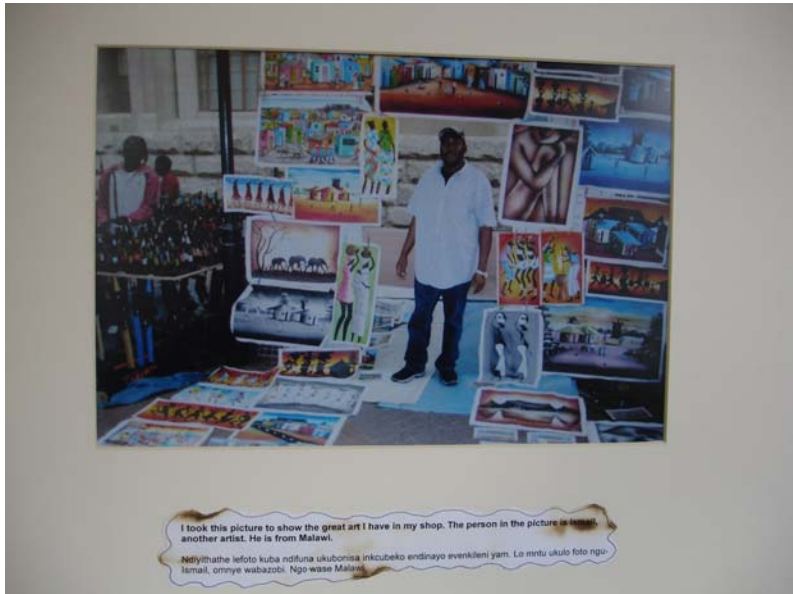
This white guy is my friend. He is from Ireland. He is also an ethnic musician. We are having a workshop in Afro-Irish music because we were mixing African and Irish music.

Photograph & Commentary: Henry Jeane

In a slightly different perspective, certain images represent the insertion of African forms of performance in transnational cultural networks, in which Henry Jeane and Monwabisi Sobitshi place themselves through their direct or indirect engagement with popular, ‘traditional’ music as a performer (Henry Jeane) or as an observant cultural activist (as Monwabisi Sobitshi described himself). Both photographers pictured Afro-Irish jam sessions with visiting musicians from Ireland, which took place at the Guga S’thebe Centre in Langa at the time of the initial research in 2005.

Mohamed Omar’s depictions present a good example of the globalisation and commodification of African art in contemporary Cape Town. In many of his pictures, this refugee from the Sudan, a trained medical doctor who has thus turned to making a living from painting colourful, stylised, ‘naïve’ scenes from rural and township life, which he sells, mostly to European tourists, in downtown Cape Town, depicts his pride in his artwork and downtown stall, which allows him to survive and which he *therefore* sees as “part of my culture”. He also uses his photographs to represent the links that his display of paintings facilitate for him with European tourists, as well as with South African employees of nearby businesses in the Cape Town Commercial Business District, and with fellow African immigrants. The friends he pictured, in addition to his Sudanese

compatriots (and South Africans) originated from Senegal, Malawi, Tunisia, Somalia, and the Congo.



I took this picture to show the great art in my shop. The person in the picture is Ismail, another artist. He is from Malawi.

Photograph & Commentary: Mohamed Omar

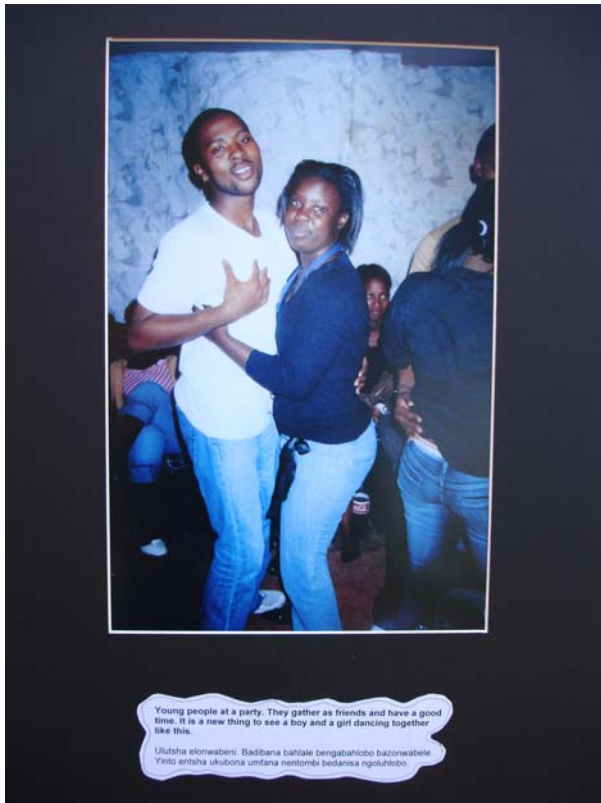
Mohamed Omar's pictures and commentaries are at the intersection of social processes and biographical experience that, on the one hand, have brought him to an artistic mediation of, largely imaginary, African culture for survival's sake. In his photography, on the other hand, he represents his artwork as the central node of his multinational network of social relations in Cape Town, between his fellow transnational African migrant friends and (white) South African employees of downtown coffee shops whom he has befriended, and, lastly, his coloured Capetonian wife and members of her family, whom he depicted in his living room where he also pointed out a painting, which he did of a Stellenbosch landscape in a conventionally 'Western' style.

Some of the other photographers also used the visual self-representations as an opportunity to show their connections with Cape Town's urban spaces and residents beyond the realm of the townships. This is evident, for instance, from the photographs taken by Henry Jeane of his all-

white pupils practising African music (drumming, and the like) at a private school in Claremont, in the heart of Cape Town's affluent southern suburbs.

Imagi(ni)ng a new culture of social relations

The depictions, which I have discussed thus far, ambiguously reference public discourses of essentialised African and in some instances specifically ethnic cultures, which originate in political and commercial efforts of re-casting Cape Town as the 'gateway to Africa'. The images and narratives of some of the youngest photographers, women and men in their late teens, respond to altogether different segments of contemporary South African public culture. They mediate the claims of young township residents to a glocal culture. In the words of Elaine Salo who has carried out long-term research on gender and youth on the Cape Flats, the post-apartheid years have seen the emergence of "an imagined cosmopolitan South African youth culture" (Salo 2003: 358). First, similar to what Salo found in her research in the coloured township of Manenberg, young people in the black townships of Langa and Gugulethu demonstrate that they have appropriated global commodities. Pictured were, among others, a pair of Nike trainers as representing 'our culture'.



Young people at a party. They gather as friends and have a good time. It is a new thing to see a boy and a girl dancing together like this.

Photograph & Commentary: Simphiwe Mhlanyana

The young photographers also depicted ostensibly ‘new’ cultural forms, represented, for instance, in 18 year-old Langa-born Simphiwe Mhlanyana’s photograph of “a boy and a girl dancing together” as a couple at a party, which he described as “a new thing”. Most significantly, however, these young men and women emphasise social processes of re-inventing interpersonal relationships in their everyday lives through redefining the meanings of ‘race’ and gender after the end of apartheid.

Nineteen year-old Luvuyo Matyesini’s representations revolved entirely around the LoveLife youth centre in Langa where he was an intern (‘groundbreaker’) in 2005. LoveLife is an organisation, which is most commonly known in South Africa for its controversial billboard campaigns and aspires to innovative forms of addressing the need for behavioural changes among young people, caused by HIV/AIDS. Launched in 1999, according to its Chief Executive David Harrison, LoveLife consciously positions itself as a ‘brand’ to work for young people who are

'brand-sussed' and aspire to glamorous and 'cool' lifestyles throughout the urban and rural locations of post-apartheid South Africa. (Mail & Guardian, 3 December 2003)

The past decade has seen the eruption of a new politics of sexuality in South Africa. Heated controversies have been attached to sexuality-related issues, particularly HIV/AIDS and sexual violence. The South African post-apartheid politicisation of sexuality and its organisation in public argument and debate locates public sexuality discourses in the postcolonial space and, particularly, in the nationalist project of the ANC government. Central to this endeavour has been until most recently the HIV/AIDS controversy, discursively largely driven by former President Thabo Mbeki's and other prominent ANC politicians' ambiguous statements and the South African government's incoherent policies. At the same time, numerous, often proactive responses to the government-driven discourse have become increasingly visible and audible in public and popular culture. Organizations like the Treatment Action Campaign (TAC) combine campaigns for the de-stigmatisation of HIV and AIDS with assertive public action, drawing on older forms of political activism.²⁰

Controversial and often provocative, high-profile, largely donor sponsored multimedia campaigns (prominent examples include, among others, LoveLife, and the popular television drama series 'soul city' and 'Yizo Yizo') promote lifestyle changes, primarily among young South Africans. These initiatives openly celebrate a newfound visibility of public images of free sexualities (including increasingly open same-sex sexuality) in post-apartheid South Africa, which present a stark contrast to the puritan prohibitions and moral policing of the apartheid years. Explicit, colourful billboard adverts, magazines geared at the stylish post-apartheid generations, and prime-time tv soap operas targeting different age brackets, to name but a few, promote 'sex dialogues' and a 'positive lifestyle'. These images and discourses embrace responsible decision-making and condom use along with a notion of young people's entitlement to 'having fun' and with, as an integral component, the assertive appropriation of a heavily sexualised consumption of sexy designer gear, fashionable cellphones, flashy cars, and other

²⁰ The TAC-led civil disobedience campaign in April 2003, for instance, consciously called on memories of the anti-apartheid struggle, particularly the ANC's 1950s defiance campaign.

commodities that symbolize the cultural repertoire of a local youth, which ostensibly draws on images of hip Black American culture as a global model.²¹

The hyper-‘cool’ images of a cosmopolitan post-apartheid youth dialectically also suggest vigorous attempts at re-inventing a (post-)modernist African-ness, deeply embedded in the generalities of global cultural modes. Stylish-clad R&B lover Simphiwe told us about his culinary preference for “pasta and pizza” over African dishes of local provenance. Yet, this 18 year-old cosmopolitan from Langa was equally keen to demonstrate in one of his impressive images that it was now acceptable to eat *smiley* (boiled goat’s head) anywhere, “even in the office”. In this stylish, youthful image, being African appears to be defined through a web of imagined global black culture, adorned with a range of fashionable, ethnic paraphernalia, ranging from beads to dreadlocks, worn alongside the baggy clothes of hip-hoppers and rappers. These images have begun to cut across the racial divides; they are also embraced by increasing numbers of young, white and coloured South Africans who sport dreadlocks and beads, distinctly black fashion gear, discretely black tastes in music (hip-hop and particularly *kwaito*; a contemporary South African music style heavily influenced by rap), and, in some cases, have begun to adopt speech patterns, which are said to be peculiar to black usages of local English. The contemporary South African public discourse on responsible yet open and frank sexuality, epitomised in LoveLife, thus, appears to be an integral part of a new-style image of African-ness, which at least a section of young South Africans embrace as a fashionable, hip variant of (and answer to) global youth cultures.

LoveLife has repeatedly come under critique for its self-positioning as a brand of popular youth culture (instead of as a conventional public health campaign); its effectiveness in HIV-prevention has been questioned (see, e.g., Leclerc-Madlala 2006). Yet, its role as a medium of new forms of youth culture is strongly suggested by Luvuyo’s representations. He pictured the Langa LoveLife Youth Centre’s book club (“to break away from the stereotype that black people don’t read”),

²¹ There are interesting parallels to contemporary youth cultures in the UK, where high school teachers have observed that increasing numbers of white teenagers now speak of and embody their desire to be black. (personal communication, Gill Stally, May 2003, Sowerby Bridge, West Yorkshire); also see Back 1996.

youngsters engaged in a game of chess, practising computer skills, or exchanging views in discussion groups and through the Centre's radio station.



A Rastafarian and a white woman. I saw Claire and Andile when I took the picture. I'm only realising now that I'm looking at it that it's actually a white woman and a black man.

Photograph & Commentary: Luvuyo Matyesini

Luvuyo's images and commentaries represent multiple ways of how he sees the social relations of gender and 'race' currently being re-defined within a public discourse, which is being driven by organisations like LoveLife and certain media productions, including the acclaimed South African soapie *Isidingo* (screened every weekday on the public broadcaster's SABC 3 tv channel between 6.30 and 7 p.m.), which regularly engages contemporary issues, including shifting patterns of 'tradition', generation, gender, and sexuality.²² In this context, Luvuyo pictured a coloured woman out in a black township's street and commented that, "before, no coloured would have done this; now we are free". He also took a photograph of young men and women gathered together in the Centre's kitchen, to show that, "it's not only women anymore that enter a kitchen". In what is perhaps his most astounding picture, he documented relationships between black and white young people of different sex; when discussing this picture he reflected that it

²² To name just one example: Just a few days after South Africa became only the fifth country worldwide that made legal provision for same-sex marriages as from 1 December 2006, *Isidingo* broadcast a gay wedding into millions of South African homes at prime soapie-time.

was initially just taken to show two of his friends, “I saw Claire and Andile” and that he only realised later that, “it is actually a white woman and a black man.” With his images and verbal narratives of what he termed “a new culture of positive things”, Luvuyo thus indicates a set of social processes in which post-apartheid South Africa not merely re-appropriates but *creates* new global nodes, precisely because of the country’s past.

Conclusion

The insights from the recent research into visual mediations of culture on the Cape Flats raise a number of interesting issues around the processes, discourses and practices of negotiating culture in contemporary South Africa, and particularly the relationship between publicly generated notions of culture and the way people refashion these ideas.

Firstly, I demonstrated the significance of mediation, following Mazzarella’s propositions. Luvuyo’s images and verbal commentaries were remarkably consistent. However, several of the other photographers emphasised during the interviews conducted during the later stages of the project that culture was “our heritage, how our people used to live [in the past]”²³ or that “culture is not something that you see everyday”²⁴, which provided a striking contrast to the near absence of such notions of culture as tradition and heritage in their visual representations, where they made use of photography as a reflexive technology of mediation. In an act of self-distancing behind the camera, the photographers were able to see their world differently and, thus, reference (and translate) experience in new ways. The apparent contradictions between visual and verbal discourses, thus, appear to confirm the significance of different technologies of mediation in the processes of negotiating culture in contemporary South Africa.

Secondly, I showed that different photographers’ came up with varying visual representations and narratives of culture. Images and narratives reflected their different social conditions, as much as their individual biographies and aspirations, in other words, their positionality, to borrow a term from the realm of reflective ethnography. Although this was far from determinant, people who were differently-positioned in respect of age, gender, and life experience also tended to prefer to respond and reference different public discourses on culture. Their visual representations pointed

²³ Interview with Thobeka Dlali, Gugulethu, July 2006

²⁴ Interview with Zola Jamela, Gugulethu, July 2006

out that while constructions of difference are indeed significant for how people respond to the notions circulating in the different South African publics, contemporary faultlines of difference are not necessarily based on ethnicity, but may include also other notions, such as lifestyle, taste, class or gender.

Thirdly, there are indications, which suggest that people negotiate culture differently in particular contexts where they are engaging in a variety of strategies with the fragmented cultural discourses and practices of the South African nation-state, and the wider public sphere, which tend to hibernate between culturalist invocations and leaps to the vanguard of cross-cutting 'postmodernist' global processes, such as in the case of 'gay rights'. The photographers' interpretations of these ostensibly contradictory processes and their agency in negotiating culture vary equally widely between more unsurprising responses to a range of expressions of public culture and the imagination of radically shifting boundaries.

The contesting notions expressed verbally, and particularly the visualisations of culture done by the research collaborators, indicate that contemporary South Africans are engaged in a range of different ways in re-imagining their identities and concepts of culture, linking varying responses to a range of discourses originating in the public sphere, specific social settings and micro-contexts, as well as personal aspirations. While I suggest that this may, partly, be owed to different forms of mediation, these further translate into situational differences of demotic conceptualisations of culture, drawing on the contemporarily available, rapidly shifting range of visual expressions in the African urban sphere. Visual encounters in the urban sphere thus embrace notions of culture emanating from the public sphere, while in turn popular visual expressions refashion these very same ideas.

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