

“Picture Perfect”:
Hand-coloured photographic portraiture in South Africa in the
20th century; a study of the collection of the Aqua Portrait
Studio, Johannesburg.

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DECLARATION

I declare that this dissertation is my own work. It is submitted for the degree of Master of Arts at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, and has neither been submitted before to any other degree or examination at any other university, nor prepared under the aegis or with the assistance of any other body or organisation or person outside the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg.

Name

Date

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Although my aunt's airbrushed portraiture work had always just been there, my first moment of seriously *looking* at it and thinking about it, well over 20 years ago, was thanks to Karen Harber. A chance visit with Karen to Yettie's studio jolted me into seeing it anew with her extraordinary and unconventional vision. Together she and I travelled, researched, and co-curated our first exhibition on these pictures. Thanks are due too to John Pepper for reminding me, and getting me looking, again.

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ABSTRACT

This research was instigated by a collection of uncollected portraits (completed and incomplete), photographs, letters, papers, documents, passbooks, and other materials, left behind when an airbrush portraiture studio, The Aqua Portrait Studio, closed in about 1998 after fifty years of continuous business. The portraits were created by enlarging small original photos – sometimes from two separate sources – and then colouring them with an airbrush and other materials. Because of the nature of the airbrush technique, it was possible to change the original image completely: to clothe the sitters in completely imaginary attire, for example, and pose them together with someone they had possibly never been photographed with. This process gave rise to a genre in which people could re-imagine themselves, enact other personas. Because the fifty years of existence of this studio almost coincided with the years of apartheid (the studio was open from about 1950 to about 1998), it seemed that the collection of uncollected images and notes left behind could be a source of rich information about the people who were the studio's clients, the process of acquiring airbrushed portraits, and the social and historical context in which those involved lived.

I start with three fundamental questions: Since this portraiture form grew so exponentially in popularity, especially during the apartheid years, what specific significance and meaning had it taken on for the communities who were buying the portraits? What need was it meeting? What can we learn about these lives from this collection? The research takes two forms. First, it closely interrogates the material objects in the collection; and second, it tracks the routes of clients and salesmen to what were some of the former homelands of the northern part of South Africa. Both these investigations attempt to understand the possible roles and contribution of these pictures to the construction and reconstruction of self-identity under apartheid.

INTRODUCTION

The Aqua Portrait Studio



Images left behind after the Aqua Portrait Studio closed after fifty years of production.

In the late 1990s, my aunt Yettie Wasserman finally closed her business. For close on fifty years she had made a living by airbrushing and hand-colouring black-and-white photographic enlargements of the faces of people whom for the most part she never met. Over the years, she completed thousands of such portraits: in her busy times, she averaged forty portraits a week. They were portraits of people who lived wherever her regular travelling salesmen were able to reach; and they are found (to this day) over an area that extended from Johannesburg and the Witwatersrand to the furthestmost northern and north-eastern borders of the country, the northern and eastern Transvaal (as it was), the Orange Free State, east to Natal, and even beyond borders, into Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Lesotho, Botswana and Swaziland.

This technique of airbrushed photographic portraiture was not only practised by Yettie Wasserman: many dozens of studios flourished in South Africa between the 1930s and the late 1990s. This industry forms the background to this research.

The “portrait racket” – as it was known to many of those in the industry – was introduced to this country by an immigrant studio owner from Chicago. Since the mid 1800s, Chicago had been a busy centre for the hand-colouring of photographs, and was the main centre too of the development of the airbrush, then used primarily for this purpose. The practice of airbrushing colour onto black and white photographs had flourished there as a sizeable industry until the great Depression, which is when it was brought across to South Africa. An American entrepreneur, reportedly a Mr Popov, shipped across the technology, the material, the equipment, and even the artists, ready to set up a full-fledged studio on South African shores (Michel interview, 1996). He brought too – as I will discuss – the popular styles and conventions of a practice that had established itself in American society many years previously. It grew exponentially in popularity here. Soon there were studios, large and small, in the major towns of South Africa, with hundreds of salesmen fanning out and travelling back and forth throughout the land with “samples” under their arms.

What seemed radically new was that the technology of airbrushing allowed these images of peoples’ faces not only to have some colour, some tinting, added – as had been the practice for decades – but they could now be completely altered, enhanced, perfected, or “improved”. Sitters could be clothed, by the artist, in any attire at all. The possibilities it introduced must have seemed limitless.

Yettie Wasserman's business was called The Aqua Portrait Studio. It was in fact a very small one compared to some others – there were studios which employed dozens, even scores of artists, in their long, good years. She was its sole owner, artist, administrator, and framer, but she worked with a large group of freelance, self-employed people: travelling salesmen, itinerant and township photographers, printers and photographic enlargers, frame-makers, and occasionally “middlemen” (shop-owners or framing businesses), who brought work to her.

In order to get some insight into the practice in South Africa – because it was so widespread – it seems necessary to focus on one small unit of this activity. The Aqua Portrait Studio in Johannesburg appears to be an ideal case study. It provides an aperture just wide enough: its

consistent production over extended time and across a large geographic area enables me to see the way this industry took hold, and to understand its impact – yet is narrow enough to be a microcosm of the industry's very varied manifestations. It provides an opportunity to observe in different ways the process itself, how it worked, and why it succeeded or failed.

The Collection

When the Aqua Portrait Studio closed its doors for the last time, all the remaining uncollected portraits, source photographs, letters, instructions and other notes and ephemera that had accumulated over many years in the studio were rescued, just on the point of being thrown away. This hoard of uncollected or undelivered images and abandoned ephemera is currently in my possession.



A small sample of the ephemera in the collection.

The content of the collection comes from different periods across the fifty years of the studio's existence. The collection itself is key to the research, because it makes possible an unusually detailed study of the technical processes in the transformation of the image from original passbook pictures and 'snaps', to the highly-styled final portrait images requested by the clients. It also directly and indirectly reveals much about the times in which these images were produced; it allows some piecing together of details about the Aqua Portrait Studio, its owner, and its particular place and time, and about the people variously involved in its operation.

My dissertation arose from an examination of this collection. It is an enquiry into the portraits themselves, investigating the way in which this form gave scope for assuming or 'performing' personas and selves other than those imposed by social and political circumstance and the conditions of one's reality. The collection makes evident a series of decisions (taken by client, salesman, printer and artist) about what that physical transformation should look like.

My research further attempts to find in the collection an explanation of the enormous success of the industry, to understand who its clients were, and the nature of the political, social, and economic context in which they lived. I posit the thesis that this historical context contributed to the creation of a need which these portraits in some way met. So, in using this collection to comprehend something of the lived experience of this period, I try to understand how this period shaped or gave particular meaning, for its consumers, to this commodity.

Key Questions

The central questions of this enquiry are: What does the Aqua Portrait Studio reveal about the practice of airbrushed portraiture in the second half of the 20th century in South Africa, about the people who were portrayed, and about why they had these portraits made? What could the collection tell us about the meaning of these portrait photographs, and about the context which gave rise to them? And what can we find out about this from an examination of the physical objects themselves?

There are four main areas that I will focus on in exploring this question. The first, in chapter one, is largely descriptive and biographical, focusing on the nature of the studio itself and its

owner, and the system of its operation. I attempt to develop a picture of the workings of the studio, partly through the respective participants who made it work. This chapter surveys:

- The biographical background of Yettie Wasserman, an immigrant to South Africa – her family's history in similar or related work; her training as an artist; why and how she came to this kind of work, and opened her own studio in inner-city Johannesburg.
- The way the business was structured, and the systems of communication and movement of people between city and rural areas that enabled this practice to operate, i.e. the unofficial apartheid-era networks between urban and rural populations. This includes a survey of the physical and changing social environment – the studio's immediate location (Johannesburg inner city), and the distant location of the clients.
- How the transformation of images worked technically. What was done in order to turn small images of faces from an array of source photographs of very varied description into "painted portraits for posterity"?

The second area of enquiry, largely dealt with in Chapter Two, relates to the nature of the portraits themselves, and their purpose. Here I examine:

- What the Aqua Portrait Studio collection is, and how it came to be. I will describe examples of the physical components of this collection of materials, including airbrushed images, the original photographs (whether identity photos in passbooks, family 'snaps', formal studio photos or photocopied funeral eulogies); notes of instruction and payment; and other communications that were written between salesmen, clients, middlemen, photo-enlarger and artist, etc.
- Why these pictures were commissioned in such great numbers.
- What technical processes and materials were entailed in the making of the portraits, and how these affect the way we read them. The notion that alternate personas were created or "performed" in these pictures (by a number of players, and not only the sitter), in order to redefine the sitter's identity.
- Finally, I will try to follow this metamorphosis by looking closely at the material, physical objects and at the images. These include the original or source photographs that were sent by their owners to be transformed; the written instructions or notes from the client (via the salesmen) to the artist and printer; the photographic negatives

made by the printer/enlarger; and the enlargements and airbrushed finished portraits themselves.

Thirdly, despite the endless capacity of the airbrush to create any kind of image or characterization, a number of standard types and conventions arose within the genre that were almost inflexibly adhered to.

In Chapter Three, I investigate the sources of these, because it seemed to me that this practice has its own “archaeology” of sources and influences, and the underlying reasons for its tropes may reveal currents that sustained the practice and its consumers. Indeed, the answers to the questions below lead one into very different levels of historical and contemporary influence. In this chapter I consider:

- What were the standard tropes and conventions that arose? Where did these conventions originate, and why did they take hold in the form in which they did?
- How were these tropes adapted and overlaid with meaning and significance by the communities who bought and owned them, to suit their needs?

The fourth research area, in Chapter Six, relates to the historical context, i.e. the social, political and economic environment. Significantly, the lifetime of the studio coincided more-or-less with the period of apartheid.

- Apartheid imposed particular constraints for black people. Such a business as this, to function under apartheid, must have had to operate “between the cracks” of the various laws and regulations. My research will attempt to discover how this was achieved.
- The fifty or so years of the studio's practice, and almost parallel years of apartheid, were not fixed and unchanging. I will consider the impact of apartheid legislation and the conditions thereby created, on the portraiture practice.
- I will discuss how the political and social context affected the *meanings* of these portraits to those communities. Was the market driven by this political and social context? What needs did the portrait industry meet under this set of circumstances – what necessary role did it play?

- Importantly, I try to understand the role these portraits played in sustaining the resilience of people who were forced to reconstruct lives and identities under this regime.
- I also consider the special significance of the wedding portraits. Many of these represented weddings that had not in reality taken place (or not in this western “white wedding” form). Why were these imagined weddings requested, and why so often? What part do family, customary law and tradition, religion, or the state play in the making of these images? What role do gender and racial politics have in their functioning?

The Rationale

In South Africa during the 1950s, ‘60s and ‘70s – and even into the 1980s in some areas – the most prominent (or only) visual images on the walls of homes in rural areas and townships of this country were likely to be either calendars, popular religious pictures, or these framed airbrushed photographic portraits of family members. The significance of these visual images for families, then, calls for consideration. Although there exists some writing on airbrushed photographic portraiture in South Africa, the focus has tended to be relatively limited, and often illustrating a very specific point within the context of a different, larger argument. As far as I can tell, the existing literature does not yet address key aspects of understanding the complex and multiple usages and meanings of these images in families and communities, and in society as a whole.

Secondly, because the contents of this particular studio survive after accumulating for almost 50 years, they allow a uniquely detailed study of many aspects of this practice and its ramifications, over a long time – an “inside” view of the practice. These pictures provide an unexpectedly intimate and textured view of life as it was experienced then. As far as I can ascertain, there exists no in-depth research on the contents of any one studio, or of the studios at all.

Thirdly, the studio artists' perceptions of the industry, their work and its meaning, are thus far, I believe, completely undocumented. Few texts focus on the artists/producers. Their descriptions of the particularities of this often highly exploitative business are extremely

revealing of the industry and its attitudes. This research has entailed compiling detailed interviews with artists, but it needs to be written up further in future research papers. The artists, although working within the narrow confines of the form, each had a distinctly different “handwriting”.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, this is a vanishing art form: there is (as far as I know) no artist or studio currently practising it. The pictures themselves, though still numerous because there were once so very many, have been rapidly disappearing for many years. Some families continue to treasure them, but other younger family members have little interest in the pictures and discard them or sell the frames. Entire towns and villages, in which “every living room” once had some, have been stripped of them by roaming dealers and second-hand furniture sellers. There is a need to write up, record and document what remains as fully as possible.

Research Methods

I propose to start with an examination of the specific collection that comprises the abandoned contents of the Aqua Portrait Studio in Jeppe Street, Johannesburg, which closed down in 1998. These contents include many dozens of uncollected portraits; incomplete works; original photographs and passbooks; and ephemera encompassing letters of instruction, invoices, and numerous other notes and documents.

Careful consideration of the material evidence is central to this undertaking. The specific, physical nature of each photograph “has implications for the status and meaning of the image” (Tinkler, 2013: 23). In this research, therefore, I engage in “close looking”, i.e. careful and close visual analysis of the works and the originals. This has various objectives, including those of trying to understand the possibilities and limitations of the technical processes (in other words, the physical transformation), and of understanding how the transformation of identity was achieved, from original photograph to finished portrait. I scrutinise the images for what they reveal about the art form itself, as well as what they might reveal about the sitters or owners, the photographers, and the artist. In interrogating the “past lives” of the portraits (Kuhn, 1995: 8,9) – especially in this case where each portrait has “multiple selves”, as original photographs with their own contexts and as painted

enlargements – questions need to be asked of each layer, to achieve a more complex grasp of the meaning of the images.

The biographical component of this study is concerned with several personages: my aunt, some of the salesmen and others working with her, and to a much lesser extent at this stage, the subjects of the portraits. I have fragmentary materials to work with: very early travel documents and photographs relating to my aunt's childhood emigration from Latvia by ship with her mother and sister, along with shipping manifests from their voyage in 1933. I have her personal writings, her own paintings, drawings and art school exercises. I have interviews with people who knew her, and my own memories of her and of the studio, as I grew up from early childhood playing in that studio.

It is necessary to look at images *in situ*, to observe the way they took their place within families and in houses. I have therefore visited the homes of many families in Limpopo and some in Gauteng that have Yettie Wasserman's portraits on their walls. I have photographed many portraits in these homes, recording as far as possible their contexts. I am documenting how these interact with other objects, how their owners have displayed them (or not), and their relationship on walls to newer portraits made with more recent technologies.

Since the collection came from one small studio operating from the centre of Johannesburg and reaching customers mainly (though not only) in the northern parts of South Africa, it provides, as I have said, only a narrow window through which to view a widespread phenomenon. One should therefore guard against generalising about the practice or drawing conclusions about it that might not hold up in a wider survey, in other parts of the country and with a greater number of studios, clients, salesmen and artists. I have tried to ensure that my hypotheses and conclusions are applicable to this collection, these parts of the country, the period under review (approximately 1950 to 1998), and to these players and participants. It has still been possible to interview a few of the people who worked with Yettie Wasserman and her studio, along with many of the customers who were portrayed in her portraits.

In this study, I refer briefly to several different personal accounts. I have conducted interviews in Limpopo, the Northwest Province, Mpumalanga and other parts of the country where Yettie Wasserman's clients are found, and also with equivalent role players in other parts of the country who are still surviving – other artists, for example. The many interviews

will at a future time be the focus of a much more detailed analysis; here they serve to inform the investigation and to confirm or redirect my hypotheses. I have had extended discussions and travelled to various villages with Amos Letsoalo, the Director of the Polokwane Art Museum, who is very familiar with the practice in his community in Limpopo.

I have also had numerous interviews with airbrush artists Fred Michel, Graham Greaves, Colleen Michel, and Michael Tancrel (who worked in studios in different parts of this country, some earlier and some in the same period as Yettie) in order to understand the business, the relationships and structures within the studios, the processes and techniques. In addition, I have spoken to Giovanna Biallo, who made Yettie's photographic enlargements and prints for a time, and Ravi Lalla, who owned (and still owns) Popular Picture Framers in Jeppestown, which supplied frames and brought Yettie work and commissions over many years.

I have also interviewed two photographer/salesmen, Mr Teke in Northwest and Joseph Makhanya in Alexandra Township, along with Joseph's son Thami Makhanya, who worked with him doing collections and deliveries, and his wife, who ran his photographic studio. This interview took place shortly before her unexpected death; I had intended to interview her further.

Research Limits

There are important questions outside of the scope of this Masters dissertation that will certainly require further research in another place. One area of the enquiry that did not find space here would involve the owners of the portraits: the interview material that has been gathered from many dozens of conversations with the owners has not been fully explored or processed. Some interviews are with the sitters in the portraits themselves; others are with their children, grandchildren and families. Some interviews extended over days, while others have been briefer. I hope in future research to unravel more fully what role the portraits played and still play in perpetuating coherence and continuity within families.

I have asked interviewees about the subjects of the portraits, the circumstances of their lives, the circumstances of the making of the portraits, how they feel about living with the portraits still, what significance the airbrushed portraits play in the family narrative, and so on. I have

tried to find out what role the portraits have played in the family's past and present sense of who they are. These conversations turn on the portraits and how they contribute to the ways in which people perceive themselves and their histories – the workings of memory (Tinkler, 2013: 15; also Kuhn, 1995; Sandbye, 2014). Of significance in the pursuit of this future enquiry, will be the portraits' part in the fostering of shared or exchanged narratives across generations: unexpectedly revealing and often intimate discussions within families are elicited by attending to the portraits they own. These responses almost always (though without purposefully so intending) illustrate details of the ways in which people have attempted to find coping mechanisms for living under apartheid, or in which they created pathways for their own resilience.

As I have said, there seems to be very little, if any, detailed research on the airbrush *artists*. An area to look at in depth would be their memories – their store of knowledge of the technical processes, their perspectives, and their experiences in the many-sided business itself. A few are still living; I have completed very detailed interviews with a number of them (some died in the years subsequent to my interviews with them). The descriptions they provide shed light on the details of the studio processes, the economic hierarchies in the business, the participants and the structures. They also reveal the attitudes and perceptions of each group of players towards each other, a significant view on the way the industry worked.

There is also a need to understand and analyse the economic basis of this practice itself – the structure of this business, with its many players; its wider economic impact; who the drivers of the demand for pictures were (and how this varied from province to province); how income was divided (who got what) in the business more broadly; the employment created directly and indirectly by Yettie's skills (and other similar studios); profiles of kinds of people who did the work, and what they did after this source of work closed down.

Further, since this research stems primarily from objects and images that form an archive, a theoretical appraisal of the archival process is called for. Of importance for me would be to look at archival theory in relation to the way local, small, private or even accidental archives (as opposed to more formal archives that are housed in museums, state institutions or libraries) articulate, and are interpreted and mined for information. I would particularly need to identify ways of becoming rigorously and critically aware of the effects and impact of the

interaction of the curator/researcher (myself, in this case, but also co-curators and others I have worked with) with the collection.

Finally, there is a need to consider the contextualization of this practice in Africa, where related practices took different forms, and in the world at large. Aspects of this practice, for different purposes and with sometimes intriguingly different outcomes, took place in societies in Ghana, Nigeria, and elsewhere (Sprague, 1975; Haney, 2010; Pinney, 1997; Pinney & Petersen, 2003).

Chapter 1. THE AQUA PORTRAIT STUDIO AND ITS OWNER: A BRIEF BIOGRAPHY



Yettie Wasserman in her studio, c1961

“Photographs instigate, confirm, seal legends. Seen through photographs, people become icons of themselves.” (Sontag quoted by Bentel, 2017)

This enquiry is largely about the meanings and deeply emotional significance that the genre of airbrushed photographic portraiture was to acquire, over time, in South Africa, especially

during the era of apartheid. These portraits became more than portraits for their owners and subjects: they became often embodiments of desire and longing.

But in order to set the scenario, and more importantly to understand the way in which this transpired, I will begin with a very factual and biographical description of how these portraits came to be and what the *process* of their coming to be consisted of, on the ground. At some point in the 1930s, airbrushed photographic portraiture was introduced to South Africa by American entrepreneur Mr Popov, who arrived from Chicago by ship with all the equipment and artists he needed to set up a fully-fledged studio – and thereby launched an industry. This practice, in which ordinary photographs of people were enlarged, coloured and enhanced in whatever way their subjects desired, and then framed, became wildly popular in South Africa, growing into an industry that flourished at least until the late 1990s. Numerous studios arose in the major cities, producing thousands of these portraits each month.

This study will focus on one such studio, the Aqua Portrait Studio in Johannesburg. It was a small practice run by one woman, Yettie Wasserman, who besides being the owner, was also the artist and the framer. It operated from the early 1950s until the late 1990s, spanning most of the years of apartheid in South Africa. What makes it a uniquely useful case study is the collection of incomplete work and uncollected portraits, numerous documents, photographs, and papers that were left behind when the studio closed eventually closed, providing an opportunity to examine and to attempt to unravel this archive. This single studio will thus provide an entry into the meanings and ramifications of this practice in South African society as a whole.

The collection of photographs and other material that remained in the Aqua Portrait Studio in Johannesburg when Yettie Wasserman closed her doors, looked like a random pile of documents and images. It included pictures that had been handed to the salesmen by the customers – identity photographs, studio pictures, snapshots, wedding pictures, old damaged hand-coloured portraits that needed to be renewed, drivers' licences, travel documents, pass books and identity documents – along with letters, envelopes with scribbled instructions, obituaries, certificates... On closer examination, these began to reveal insights, potential views into lives during a significant era in our history, as experienced by ordinary people.

It became clear that this collection of images and ephemera could ‘speak’, and help to answer a range of questions, including questions about the lived reality of people in this harshest period of South African history.



Parts of the Aqua Portrait Studio collection in storage.

This chapter is largely descriptive, and in fact biographical, in nature. It sets out to describe what the Aqua Portrait Studio was, what it did, and how it worked. It describes who its owner/artist was, along with others who played major roles in the business; what her work involved; the structure of the studio’s workings as a business; and what it produced. I will very briefly outline the context in which the studio existed, both its physical background and the social and economic matrix of its time, although the meaning of this practice in its particular political, social and economic context will be expanded greatly in another chapter.

Yettie started the Aqua Portrait Studio together with business partner Rob Downing (a partnership that lasted only a few years) after both had left the large Germiston airbrush portrait studio that had employed and trained them. The Aqua Portrait Studio was located on

the third floor of Silbro House, Jeppe Street, in inner city Johannesburg, in a small office. Silbro House's floors each had long, silent passages with many closed doors, behind which first-generation immigrants (from Bulgaria, Portugal, England, Hungary, Eastern Europe) sold or manufactured small products. I recall a tobacconist, a small button shop, seamstresses, a clock-repairer, two small conjoined offices turned into a children's dress-making factory. The Aqua Portrait Studio itself (when I knew it) contained a large ancient mirror and a big wooden easel encrusted on each side with thousands of layers of paint – especially turquoise-blue – the result of the uncountable times paint was sprayed to test colours, measure the intensity of the spray, and empty and clean the passages of the airbrushes. The airbrushes themselves hung from large nails on the side of the easel. The studio also contained a compressor, and a sporadically noisy generator that powered it; many messy jars of paint; pots of coloured water on a table next to the easel; piles of stubby chalk pastels on the lip of the easel; a large Victorian wardrobe with four immense drawers stuffed with boxes of photographic paper, sheets of tissue paper, uncollected or semi-completed pictures; a pot of glue; a large roll of brown paper, both the backing material of the portrait, and for wrapping; and a small fridge. Every piece of furniture and the walls were dotted with sprays of colour. The large grubby window looked east onto an empty lot filled with tyres and junk, and onto the east end of the cityscape of Jeppe Street's buildings.

Yettie Wasserman – herself

Yettie Wasserman was born in Liepāja, Latvia, in 1929. Liepāja, (now known as Libau) was a beautiful seaside town, popular as a holiday resort with Latvians.¹ Yettie was the second of two daughters of Boris Elias Wasserman and Sonia Stein.

Boris was a watchmaker, and – unlike the rest of his siblings, and those of his wife – was apparently persistently unsuccessful in his career, and as a provider. His wife Sonia owned a small photographic studio in Liepāja, which like many others was furnished with luxurious-looking props and a painted backdrop, where she took portrait photographs of Liepāja society.

¹ Much of this renowned town was later horrifically destroyed, along with its entire Jewish population, by German soldiers in the Second World War. The particularly cruel murder of Jewish families, herded naked on the favourite Liepāja beach in the depths of the freezing winter of 1941, was – unusually – photographically documented by a German or Latvian soldier, and so has a vivid presence in Jewish collective memory.



Elias Boris Wasserman and Sonia Stein, Yettie Wasserman's parents, c1928.

During the long period between the late 1800s until between the two World Wars, Latvian and Lithuanian Jews (like other Jewish emigrant families heading to the West from Poland, Russia, Estonia and other east European countries), were emigrating to South Africa in their thousands to escape pogroms, long harsh army conscription for Jews, and the terrible economic strictures.

In order to keep contact with families left behind, a lively practice arose of sending small portrait photographs by sea-mail back across the oceans. These had become readily available in the new world, and the old world hastened to catch up. For Eastern Europe, writes Esther Jussim, quoting her father: “photography came in from the outside... the immigrants who had gone away were sending home their portraits.” The photographs arriving from family members abroad prompted a desire to reciprocate; this created an “avid market in the old country, for the production of photographic mementoes to be forwarded to the land of opportunity...” (Jussim, 1989: 168).

About immigrant Jews, still much scorned and lowly even in the new world, Jussim also surmises, significantly for this enquiry: “...[they] had lost [their] identity, and it may be that the studio photographic portrait was the one way to recapture it” (Jussim 1989: 165).

Photography studios appeared everywhere in Eastern Europe, with richly furnished and decorated backdrops for posed, formal studio photographs. These photographs were exchanged in huge numbers as the primary link between separated families, at least until World War II.

By decree, Jews in Russia and Eastern Europe were only permitted to do certain limited kinds of work. Photography was one of those professions they were allowed to enter, and by the early 1900s it was becoming a respectable and fashionable activity, soon overturning Judaism's religious objection to creating images of people (at least in secular families). (Making “graven images” is forbidden in the Talmud, and that had come to include *any* kind of image of a human being, including photographed images). It is thought that Jews first entered this profession by setting themselves up as itinerant photographers, travelling from village to village wherever there were no studios, equipped with cameras, lenses, developing chemicals, paper, drying frames and printing frames – “rather like the book peddlers often fictionalised in Yiddish nineteenth-century literature” (Schneer, 2011).

It is not surprising that Jews entered freely into this new field of art. There were no art schools, juries, state laws, or other forms of authority to admit or deny them entry. This newness allowed other marginalized groups who had been denied access to more traditional forms of art, such as women, also to enter freely into photography (see www.yivoencyclopedia.org).

Within the Pale of Settlement in which Jews were restricted to live and work, many medium-sized towns soon had several photographic studios, and interestingly (especially for this particular research subject), a number were owned and run by Jewish women (Schneer, 2011). Yettie's mother, Sonia Wasserman, was not unusual in this regard.



Sitter unknown; in a Leipaya photographic studio, thought to be from Sonia's studio.

The larger studios had hierarchies of skilled technicians who would have to have first done four year apprenticeships, including the very crucial retouchers: “positive retouchers”, who did spot-filling and other pencil work on prints, and “negative retouchers”, who would scratch away marks and blemishes on the negative. Occasionally, if the market warranted it, there would be colourists, adding watercolour and sometimes pastel. Many took their skills abroad when they left. “Most retouchers [in New York] in those days... were Russian Jews” (Jussim 1989: 166, quoting her grandfather).



Sonia Wasserman: tinted photograph, c1930.

Sonia, in her small Liepāja studio, is likely to have done her own retouching, and possibly tinting. How much significance there is in the fact that Yettie's mother had run a photographic studio before Yettie did, is hard to tell. As they were not surviving on Sonia and Boris's incomes, the family left Liepāja for the tiny southern Latvian village of Ezera (in a region populated predominantly by Germans) when Yettie was a very small child, to live with Sonia's wealthier sister's family, and Sonia did not work again before leaving for South Africa. But there was a very strong interest within the family in photography – Yettie was an avid photographer when young – and especially in photographs of family.

Her father, Boris, seeking a better life, left for South Africa in 1930. We know that he continued to struggle here: because as an immigrant in South Africa he had to carry a document – an identity book ironically very like the “dompas” given to Africans, which I describe below – whose many pages detail his search for employment and occasional periods of unemployment.

He did start his own watch repair business finally and must have managed to earn enough to send home the fare for his family. Either that, or helped by her wealthy sister, his wife Sonia and the two small daughters followed him in 1933.

They were required to travel first through Europe to Belgium, and then board a ship in Southampton England, to Cape Town. All of those countries required visas. The process must have been in those years exceedingly onerous and extended. The family lived not in the big capital but in tiny Ezera; each application would have involved a train journey to Riga. (Hennie Fisher, Sonia's niece, interview 2015, Israel).

[illegible]

On the shipping manifest (passenger list), Boris is listed as “watchmaker”. This would have put him in the top one percent of skills emigrating out of Eastern Europe, according to Roger Cohen, here describing the departure of Jews leaving through the Baltic port of Liepāja:

The ships departed twice a week with loads of three hundred to five hundred [Jewish] migrants crammed below deck.... A large number of them, 41.58 percent, listed no occupation on arrival. The next three largest occupations were tradesman or dealer (22.48 percent), tailor (6.23 percent), and boot maker (5.81 percent). The most skilled profession was watchmaker (1.06 percent). (Cohen, 2015: 55).



The Wassermans' passports, 1930 and 1933.

But in the interim between Boris's arrival and the planned arrival of his family, there were changes taking place in South Africa. There were, by 1933, extremely limited quotas of Jews being admitted. Dr Malan's notorious Immigration Quota Act of 1930 (described by Margot

Rubin, in *The Jewish Community of Johannesburg 1886 – 1939*; 2004), itself a reflection of the increasingly anti-Semitic climate in South Africa at the time, had been implemented:

Dr. Malan ‘rationally’ outlined the three governing principles of the Act, which were:

- (1) The desire of every nation to maintain its basic racial composition;
- (2) The doctrine of assimilability; and (3) South Africa's desire to maintain its own ‘type’ of civilisation, and the fact that the civilisation of Eastern or Southern Europe was, to a large extent, different from that of Western Europe. (Quoted in Elazar & Medding, 1983: 156).

Racial concerns were seen as completely and openly justifiable reasons for introducing the legislation. (Rubin, 2005: 131). Malan drew up a piece of legislation that foreshadows a Trumpian quality in its stunningly manipulative logic: Malan in 1930 sought to exclude Jews without mentioning the word “Jews”, by listing all the countries from which immigration was acceptable. The list excluded the entire group of eastern European countries from which it was *only* Jews who were desperately trying to get to South Africa. The Quota Act was put into practice on the 1st May 1930 and made it clear that:

. . . no person born in any country not specified in the Schedule . . . shall enter the Union, unless his entry has been approved in accordance with such regulations as may be prescribed . . . (Clause 1 [I]) [and] . . . not more than fifty persons born in any particular country not specified in the Schedule . . . shall in any calendar year be permitted to enter the Union for permanent residence therein” (Clause 1 [II]) (quoted by Rubin from Cohen, 1968: 19).

The “Schedule” of countries in the Act included those of the British Commonwealth, as well as Austria, Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Holland, Italy, Norway, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, and the USA and only immigrants from these countries were given unlimited immigration rights to South Africa (Elazar & Medding 1983).

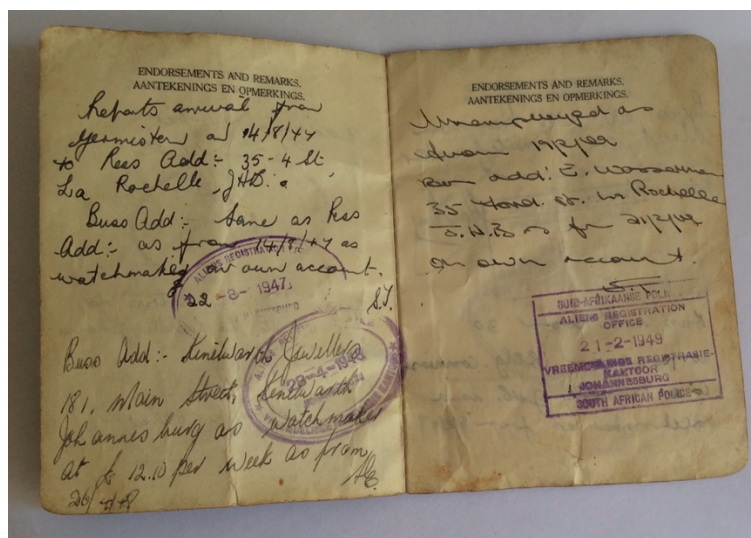
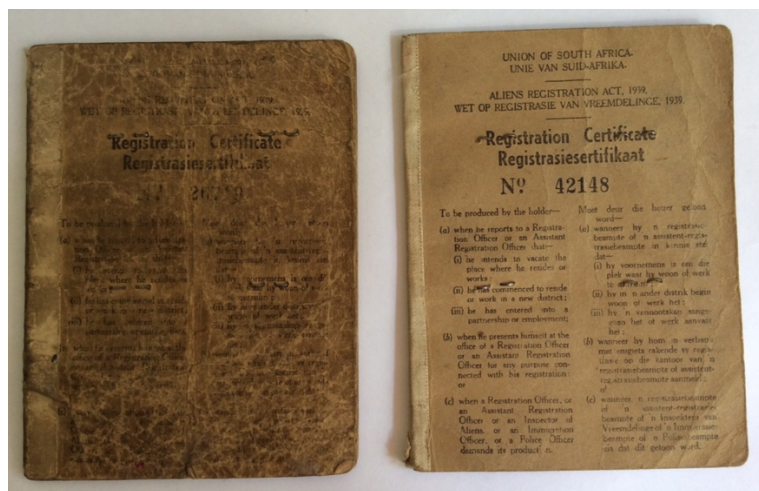


Yettie's immigrant quota permit, 1933.

Only fifty Jews per year could enter this country, from all their countries of origin combined. How the small and completely powerless Wasserman family achieved these rare permits we do not know, but Yettie, aged four, her mother and sister, were issued with these 'quota cards' in March 1932, which they had to carry and present on arrival.²

Yettie's immigrant father and mother (with their extremely limited English) continued to be required to carry identity books – almost exactly similar in content and design to the *dompas* or passbook, with similar stipulations on every page inside, for receiving and recording permissions and authorisations for every move and change of address and workplace. The two of them carried these for the rest of their working lives.

² Perhaps the humiliation of being the unsuccessful brother-in-law ultimately saved the lives of Boris and his family, by prompting his embarking on the journey to South Africa to seek a better life. Within eight years many of the Liepāja family in Latvia had been killed by the Nazis, some sent to Siberia by Stalin's regime, and one, a brilliant young aunt, a professor at the Sorbonne University, vanished without trace, presumed sent to the death camps. The wealthy Ezera family, their eldest daughter having gone missing as the war broke out, fled into extreme poverty in Russia, where their father died very shortly of a heart attack.



Elias Boris and Sonia's immigrant SA identity books – carried at all times, and updated with all changes of workplace or domicile, circa early 1930's until the late 1960's.



Boris Wasserman's postcard-sized "business card", as a watchmaker in Johannesburg, c1945.



Yettie - as a child of approximately eleven years old, c1940; and at high school, c1944.

As she grew up, Yettie showed a very early talent for drawing and sculpture, and when she had completed her schooling at La Rochelle in the southern suburbs of Johannesburg, she enrolled at the Johannesburg Technical College Art School. Maurice van Essche lectured in painting, Douglas Portway (a former student there) taught drawing, Elizabeth Benson taught clay modelling (Van der Wat, interview 2016). It was a very important time in Yettie's artistic development. But it was also the time of her life in which she seemed to have suffered a first mental breakdown, manifesting later and throughout her life as severe social anxiety, causing her extreme shyness, depression, and a debilitating lack of self-confidence (except in her working life).

The notion of "commercial art" was not a new one; but after the Second World War, "commercial art" was beginning to open up as a career that women could enter. A specific programme (under that name) was offered at the Johannesburg Art School. A student in the fine art department some eight years before Yettie was there, recalls that the fine art students looked with extreme disdain upon the commercial art programme (Van der Wat interview 2016).



A cast of a clay head made by Yettie Wasserman as a student, c1947; and two later pencil self-portrait sketches, c1970.



Two of Yettie's South African identity documents. The green identity card on the left, issued in 1958, shows her status as Latvian. Yettie herself remained a Latvian citizen throughout her life.³

Although Yettie enrolled in the fine art department, and saw herself as a fine artist, she would obviously have had to very quickly start earning her own income. The growing production of airbrushed photographic enlargements created an ongoing need for skilled practitioners. Advertisements for “artists” appeared in the newspapers regularly (Greaves and Tancrel, interviews 2016). When applying for these jobs, applicants had to show their “credentials” as artists (i.e. training, qualifications from art schools or portfolios.) Graham Greaves describes a test, a kind of audition, which he had to undergo at the large studio to which he applied as a boy of seventeen. New artists would then be rigorously trained by the Head Artist in the larger studios –some of whom were “imported” from France or Chicago. Soon after

³ Latvia's own status changed several times in Yettie's lifetime, from being an independent country (whose last democratic elections took place around the time this family departed), to Stalinist Soviet occupation when World War 2 broke out, followed by Nazi German invasion and occupation, to incorporation as part of Soviet Russia; and, only in 1990, back to independence again - under extreme pressure even then, to rejoin the Soviet Union.

completing her Art School diploma, Yettie saw such an advertisement asking for artists to apply for work at an airbrush portrait studio in Germiston, and offering training. She must have been there for possibly five or six years, before resigning to form her own studio in partnership with Rob Downing.

Loss and Restoration

The link, if there is one, between Yettie's own Eastern European family history and her work is a matter for imaginative speculation, because she did not discuss it. Thousands of Jews coming to South Africa in that era had similar kinds of stories. In her own small family, the separation, losses, anxieties and terrors that accompanied their emigration when she was four years old, from a large and loving, extended family life to an unknown country and a very uncertain future, were recounted to me by her mother – my grandmother. Especially hard for Sonia was the rupture and permanent isolation from her sister and large family: my mother told me how Sonia would disappear into her bedroom for a whole day, or more, each time a letter or photograph would arrive from Latvia.

But how did this affect Yettie? And if at all, the direction her work took her in? She herself was a troubled and often solitary person. As it turned out (and as will be described in the following chapters) much of the work of her entire adult life involved piecing together other lives that were wrought by separation and loss – constructing togetherness, creating images of connectedness and unity for couples and families who were in reality forced apart. Was there any connection for her, or solace in this process, in her own mind?

The Aqua Portrait Studio in its Context: Johannesburg, Jeppe Street, and the Inner City

The particular location of this studio – 3rd floor, Silbro House, 225 Jeppe Street – in the inner city created access to certain kinds of clients and markets. These changed distinctly over the period under discussion, with the changes of the city.

Judging by the images in the collection left behind, in the earlier period of its existence – the 1950s and beginning of the 1960s – a number of the studio's clients were white people. It would appear from anecdotal evidence (which would need to be verified) that most of her

white clients were Afrikaans, and a few were Jewish. (Wasserman, interview 1995; Goldblatt, interview 2014).



Clients of the Aqua Portrait Studio c1955. Uncollected portraits.

In the decades of the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s – the earlier period of the studio’s history – the inner-city streets of Johannesburg were thronged with white middle class shoppers, office-workers and businesspeople. The medical fraternity had, from the late 1890s, set up their private practices in Jeppe Street. They remained there in high-rise buildings that drew the middle class and wealthy people from the suburbs to the fashionable doctors, dentists, and medical laboratories (as is still reflected to this day in some of the buildings’ names: Harley Chambers, Pasteur Chambers, Lister Building, Medical Arts Building, Medical Centre.) Those were not the only draw. A block from the Aqua Portrait Studio were the Totem-Meneghelli Gallery; nearby the Lidchi Gallery, Vanguard Bookshop, upmarket hotels, the Johannesburg Art Gallery, the elegant Joubert Park, genteel flats and apartments with good addresses for white people. Black people were a presence but as waiters, workers, street-sweepers and cleaners.



Airbrushed portrait, late 1940's.

Booms and lows cyclically determined Johannesburg's development from the beginning. The inner city of Johannesburg – perhaps even more so than the other big metropolises in this country – reflected (and still reflects) every nuance of the evolving socio-political history of South Africa in a very particular way, from the structure of the migrant labour system, which shaped a particular relationship between urban and rural, to the later loosening of restrictions that brought about an unrestrained influx of new inhabitants into the city.

After the South African War and in the 1920s there was a surge in building activity. This boom time of the 1930s saw Johannesburg being enthusiastically compared to both America and Europe. Their similarities were seen as an unquestionably good thing, as Lindsay Bremner reports in *Reinventing Johannesburg's Inner City*:

The depression of the 1930s, which saw the abandoning of the gold standard in 1932, resulted in foreign capital flooding into the country and transformed Johannesburg into a little New York, or if not New York, then at least Chicago or Saint Louis (De Kiewiet 1966, in Chipkin, 1993). By 1936, at the time of the British Empire Exhibition, Johannesburg was described as the “largest and most densely populated European city

in Africa” with “fascinating shops and smartly dressed shoppers” (Times Weekly Edition 1936; Chipkin, 1993: 10, quoted by Bremner, 2000: 186).

Until World War II the primary economic activities in South Africa were in mining and agriculture, and English-speaking capital financed and owned the mines. But from 1948, and especially after 1952, the newly elected nationalist government began to pour its support into developing a strong manufacturing industry. New buildings, strutting the brash nature of this money driven city, began to replace the old Victorian ones.

Carefully designed legislation continued to increase existing control of the allocation of skilled and better-paid jobs, limiting these to white Afrikaans-speaking people. It also continued to enable (white) business to have unlimited access to extremely cheap and, by now, forced African labour. The white elite, as a result, accumulated unprecedented amounts of disposable income. This led to a massive surge in the economy, visible in all kinds of development projects. Jeppe Street in Johannesburg was the site of a series of new building developments through the 1950s to the early 70s; but as Clive Chipkin writes in *Johannesburg Transition*: “...the city’s successive building booms sprang from, and then reinforced, this renowned exploitation of indigenous human and mineral wealth” (Chipkin, 2009: 121).

Changes Impact the Studio

A shift in the clientele of the Aqua Portrait Studio began to take place from the mid-1960s, and perhaps earlier.

It is likely that as cameras and colour film became easily available and very affordable to affluent people (mainly white people), they would have quickly lost interest in having their portraits hand-coloured. However, demand for the studio's services increased from different groups, from people without this technology at their fingertips: migrant workers in the area employed in the mines and industries and services, township people, and rural village and farm communities (or the agents and salespeople who were able to reach the latter).

Importantly the location of the building that housed the Aqua Portrait Studio, Silbro House, was close to the train station, the long-distance bus terminus, and the taxi ranks. Trains, taxis

and buses linked the city not only to Soweto and all the other townships on the Witwatersrand, but also to the towns and remote rural areas beyond. The train station – which would have been the disembarkation point for many of the salesmen coming into town and heading for Aqua Portrait Studio – had its “non-white” platform emerging in front of St Mary’s Cathedral (at that time an open street), close enough to Silbro House for easy access on foot.

By the mid 1970s and into the 1980s, the South African economic bubble had burst. In addition to the global increase in the price of oil, South Africa experienced a series of severe droughts knocking the agricultural industry. Worker resistance and strike action, starting in Natal, began to affect manufacturing and mining industries on a damaging scale, and the world became rapidly aware of the injustices of apartheid, especially after the student uprising in Soweto and the “unrest” that then swept across the country – despite the government’s attempts to shut down media access to townships. Countries began to apply economic (and other) sanctions to South Africa, which bit deeply – especially the loss of foreign investment, the withdrawal of foreign bank loans, and the radical reduction of foreign trade. The inevitable economic downturn that followed finally made the Nationalist party’s policies completely unsustainable (Dollery, 2003).

The impact of all this was always visible, for both good and bad, in Johannesburg’s inner-city. The late 1980s also brought increased crime and a deep anxiety about job security among white people, with both factors leading to a kind of exodus: significant (and damaging) numbers of highly skilled and professional white people left the country. The nature of the city was changing. Then, in the early 1990s, as access became everyone’s right, poorer people seeking work, opportunities and shelter arrived in vast numbers. Landlords and white-owned business fled the inner city, leaving spaces which filled with new residents (South Africans and Africans from all over the continent), new kinds of business, new products for selling and buying, and huge new pressures on the infrastructure of the city.

Even at a time when these parts of the city began to be considered “unsafe”, and fewer and fewer white people commuted into town – and even as she herself became considerably older – Yettie was apparently undeterred and unconcerned. She caught the same bus or minibus “black taxis” into work, then walked the considerable number of blocks from the bus stop to her studio, and back in the evenings, every day.

From the middle of the 1990s, gradually different kinds of wares were being sold or produced in Silbro House, alongside some of the older ones: clothes made in China and Myanmar, hair-braiders, a sewing co-operative, muti (indigenous medicine) shops, some in the foyer and therefore visible to passing trade, and some upstairs. And in the surrounding buildings, many signs and billboards began offering the services of traditional healers, traditional doctors, and prophets. (This seems appropriate in a part of town that had been always characterised, as I have said, by medical services of one sort or another.)

I have outlined very briefly large and sweeping changes taking place in the time and context of the Aqua Portrait Studio, because the basis of my exploration is the proposition that these (and other) social and economic changes form the matrix to the story of this portraiture industry. The meanings, the significance, of these portraits to the people for whom they were made, and the roles they played within family and community, were (whether consciously or not) to a great degree functions of the social conditions in which people lived. These complex relationships will be the subject of another chapter.

Chapter 2. THE BUSINESS OF AIRBRUSHED PHOTOGRAPHIC PORTRAITURE: HOW IT WORKED

In this chapter I outline the nitty-gritty of the business: how it worked in two respects – technically (the technical processes of making the images); and as a business (its structure, the participants and the role-players).

PART 1

Technical Processes: (a) Printing and Enlarging

Yettie had different printers at different times who carried out the photographic enlarging and printing processes. Orders with the original photographs would be sent on to the printer for enlargement.

The job of the printer/enlarger was to enlarge the originals and position the faces, now in black and white, on the final format. This process in itself was by no means automatic or unthinking; it involved a fair amount of judgement – enlarging faces from two originals (if there were two) which were usually at different scales, composing them in relation to each other and to the format as a whole, adjusting angles of heads if necessary. Space had to be allowed for the artist to create a sense of presence and stature, to convincingly create a sense of the subjects' physical occupation of space together, and to dress them. The same issues applied, though in a less complicated way, to single portraits. The process also involved lightening or darkening the print, and eliminating flaws in the original photo as much as possible.

In the last decade of the life of the Aqua Portrait Studio, some of the printing was carried out by Giovanna Biallo. In the early 1980s, Biallo, along with her husband Simon Stone, had opened “Giovanna’s Photo Studio” on the corner of Jeppe and Joubert Streets. Biallo was the printer commissioned by Ravi Lalla at Popular Picture Framers; Lalla took these prints for airbrushing to the Aqua Portrait Studio.

Biallo described the process to me, in two interviews in 2015 and 2016. She had a Hasselblad camera onto which was fitted a “converter”, which allowed for very close-up photography.

The small original photos would be pinned up on the wall, one by one, and a new photograph would be taken of the head only. This would be enlarged to fill the square-format negative. Both heads would be adjusted to be the same size. Biallo herself developed the negatives in a darkroom (that Stone had constructed out of Masonite) in the back of the shop. Before finally printing on the large photographic paper, she would usually print out a contact sheet, cut out the small versions of the heads on this sheet and make a series of little mock-ups, checking heights and distances between the two figures. A large format sheet of Kodak silver bromide paper (12"x16", 10"x12", or 8"x10" – depending on the client's order) would be placed under the enlarger. Biallo would cover half of this sheet with some cardboard to block it, and expose one of the negatives onto the other half by means of a light focussed downwards from the top through the negative, exposing the image. She would then block the exposed half (now printed with one image) with the cardboard, and expose the other half with the other negative.

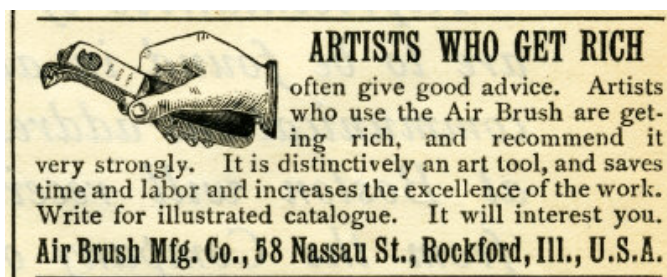
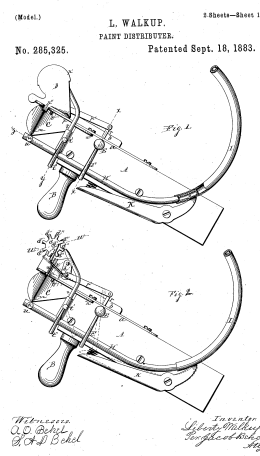
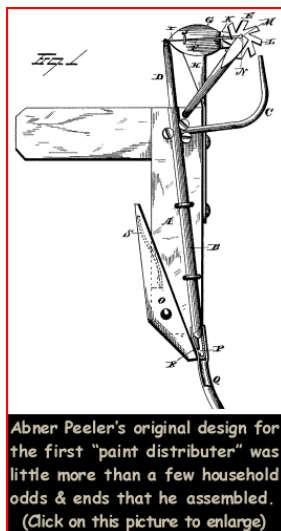
There were some absolutely unchanging conventions to the arrangement. For example, the man was *always* portrayed on the left (his right). This meant at times flipping the image so that the subjects looked more or less turned toward each other, if the head was not fully frontal; although sometimes one face would gaze outward, away from the partner. Even so, it often created somewhat strange or awkward relationships. Biallo would try to ensure the subjects looked "natural" together. She would determine their placing "by eye". She believes her training as an artist and as a portraitist helped her. She regarded this process as the work of an artist - she describes, for example, how she enjoyed the slightly softened "sfumato" effects created by such radical enlarging of the photographic image (Biallo, interview 2016).

In Natal and the Cape, pictures were lightened in the printing stage completely, leaving only a very faint guide over which the airbrush-colourist would fully develop the colour. In the Transvaal however, the clearer, more sharply focussed and more detailed an enlarged image was, the less additional colour would be applied to the face. This was regarded as a positive option in the Transvaal; but criticised quite scornfully as "glorified tinting" by one Natal artist whom I have interviewed (Greaves, interview 2015).

Technical Processes: (b) Airbrushing

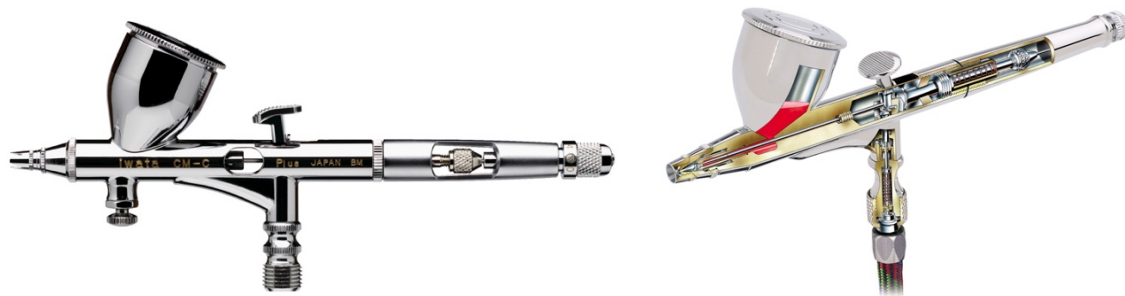
Techniques in colouring black-and-white photographs had existed long before the practice of airbrushing arose – possibly from the earliest advent of photography. Watercolour paints and other media were applied directly to the photograph, especially on faces. Studios (as we saw in chapter one) had been training and employing “touch-up artists” or “retouchers” or “colourists” since the 1800s.

But the special strengths of the airbrush, when it came onto the market in the early 1900s, were two-fold. First, it was possible to create extremely lifelike, realistic textures of all kinds, including skin, because of the extraordinary capacity of the airbrush to create very smooth and fine colour, and very smooth tonal gradation. Second, airbrush paint can cover the photograph in such a way that it can completely obscure what is beneath. The combination of these two factors meant that an accomplished airbrush artist could completely invent and reinvent parts of a photograph, and produce completely convincing photographic realism.



The earliest airbrushes, US. c1860s – 1870s. (From the website of The Airbrush Museum.)

Simply described, an airbrush works by forcing a continuous jet of fast-moving, compressed air through a “venturi”, which blows over a small container of paint called a reservoir, and causes small amounts of the paint to be sucked in. The speed of the jet of air atomizes the paint into extremely tiny droplets; and this spray of droplets is directed onto the paper. The artist controls the amount of paint by pressing a kind of trigger, which determines the size of the opening of a very narrow, tapered needle. The extremely fine degree of atomization this produces is what allows the artist to create such smooth blending effects, because two or more colours can be blended seamlessly.



Contemporary airbrushes. Their design has not fundamentally changed since the lifetime of the Aqua Portrait Studio, although they have become easier to use and their functioning more sophisticated.

Paints were water-based, i.e. imported watercolour or gouache, usually Windsor and Newton. Pastels, for details, would be applied with either a sharply folded chamois leather, or a stump – a tightly rolled paper with pointed ends. These came in different circumferences. Yettie used two airbrushes, one for fine work and one for large areas like the base colour backgrounds, etc. An eraser during the final finishing would bring out the highlights, or a blade used to scratch out colour in order to create lights in the eyes, for example.

The enlargements (unless very carefully done, which – other than in Biallo’s studio – was not normally the case) reproduced, and even exaggerated, damaged, marked or bent areas of the photographs, which had to be dealt with before the actual airbrushing could begin. If there were white spots, these had to be filled with pencil, and black marks had to be scratched out delicately with a razor blade. Most importantly the photographic paper worked on needed to have the depth and the texture of sketch-pad paper, to take the paint well. Good photographic paper for this purpose became almost impossible to find in later years; newer papers were smoother, and all the artists of the period bemoaned the problem.

Japanese or American airbrushes were mainly used, and replacing them was always a considerable expense.

These could be difficult tools to work with. Although the paint was water-based, airbrushes at the time would jam up regularly, and need cleaning out. Airbrushes would splutter unexpectedly, sometimes spitting paint droplets. Needles would get bent, and tubes would get blocked. The painted page would have to be washed clean and the artist would start again. Endless and valuable hours would be expended in trying to fix such problems. Yettie's earlier airbrushes were "single action", where the trigger only controlled the airflow, and the artist would have to stop and change the needle to change the volume of paint. Later, the trigger controlled both the airflow and the paint volume: pushing the trigger down caused air to pass through the airbrush, while pulling the trigger backwards allowed paint to flow. The further back the trigger was pulled the more paint flowed through, allowing for constantly varying densities as needed. Backgrounds and sometimes clothing, for example, would require complete coverage with denser, opaquer colour to eliminate all details from the original, whereas colour on faces was sometimes quite lightly applied and translucent. Also, by adjusting the tip, by turning or twisting it, the artist would be able achieve a very fine line, a soft blurred effect, a spatter, or the semi-transparent effect of a bridal veil, for example.

Airbrush artists all talk about how "connected" they felt to their tools after years of using them – "like an extension of one's own hand" (Tancrel interview 2015). Each had its own "feel". Artists working in a big studio would never dream of swapping instruments between them, and usually kept their own airbrush on leaving the position (Michel interview 2015).

Backgrounds were almost always applied first. Generally, the backgrounds were flat, usually blue or turquoise. Because the artists had to avoid getting this opaque blue onto the face (which would then have to be washed off, as the face was painted very translucently, and the blue would have remained visible), a blurred, fuzzy edge would remain around the outside of the face. Thereafter the face was filled in, and finally hair, hats or veils added, overlapping the blurred edge and part of the painted backdrop.

Each artist would make his or her own collection of cut out stencils and French curves, for contours and edges, cut from X-ray sheets. Their essential stencil set would vary slightly with changes in popular style: shapes for ties (narrowing or broadening according to fashion),

bow-ties, collars, or lapels; bridal flowers; children's hair-bows; the edges of hats; and also contours for the sides of the face, built up by constantly shifting the stencil. The details, like highlights in the eyes, the pearls, or parts of flowers were added by hand, painted on or in pastel or with a brush, and smoothed with chamois leather. A pointed paper stub was used to rub the shading in, using the side of the point.⁴ Yettie had, in addition to her handmade stencils, most importantly a large number of different pieces of lace, which she sprayed through for lacy wedding gowns and collars. These were clogged and congested with paint, but were always magically effective.

PART 2

Structure of the Business: Role Players

The business depended on numerous self-employed salesmen bringing in the work. Operating over a large area of the country, they were responsible for selling the concept, the idea, of having a kind of 'fantasy' portrait to clients, wherever they could. They had to persuade clients to place orders, and then bring these orders (together with the small original photographs), to the Aqua Portrait Studio.

Most commonly, the salesmen received payment from their clients, out of which they paid Yettie for her work. She in turn paid the printer/enlarger, and paid for the framing suppliers (including the mouldings, glass, cardboard, hardware, etc.). Nobody was in her employ.

Unpaid or incomplete instalments probably account for many of the works abandoned by the salesmen at Aqua Portrait Studio (T. Makhanye, interview 2017). This was a purely cash business, and based on promises. An extremely high level of trust and integrity – a kind of faith – must have underpinned this entire enterprise on all sides. Thami Makhanye, son of, and assistant to salesman Joseph Makhanye, emphasised the fact that his father's complete honesty was what made his work possible. His clients had to completely trust him, and he them, or it would have all fallen apart immediately. This honouring had to work in all

⁴ Some artists used "frisket" (I have no recollection of this in use in the Aqua Portrait Studio): frisket was a kind of waxed paper - waxy on one side, plain on the other. It could cling to the page one wanted to work on. One would cut out the shapes one wanted to spray, stick on before spraying, and it would mask the rest of the page in order to get the exact shape required.

directions: Yettie, too, took constant risks, and the pile of uncollected work is testament to this.

Joseph Makhanye, however, was a stable presence in a fairly fixed community. More impressive, perhaps, was the degree of honour and trust involved in the work of the salesmen who travelled very remotely, between farms, small villages, scattered rural townships, and the city. This includes (perhaps most heart-stopping of all) the entrusting by clients of their precious, rare, and personal photographs to the salesmen, to be taken far away and for months on end.

It was, as I have said, necessary to travel extremely long distances carrying precious photographs and passbooks, and then carrying back framed glass-fronted portraits. In the Cape, the salesmen – or agents as they were called there – were mainly white men and mainly Afrikaans, who drove “wide American cars” (Tancrel, interview 2016). But in the Transvaal, the salesmen were black men (I recall only one woman at one point), with substantially lower incomes and living under greater restrictions. Few black people in 1950s, ‘60s and even ‘70s drove their own cars. These salesmen mostly negotiated their daily lives of distance and constant movement by bicycle, public transport and simply on foot. Some of the salesmen lived in the communities to whom they sold pictures, but others covered many, many hundreds of kilometres of countryside.

The two salesmen I interview below are Joseph Makhanye (Alexander Township) and Mr Teke (Lesethleng Village, Northwest Province). Both happen also to have been photographers in their own right.

The Salesmen

The salesmen were self-employed businessmen from Alexandra Township, Soweto, the East Rand and Edenvale, Thembisa, Pietersburg (Polokwane), Vuwani, Thohoyandou, Rustenburg, and beyond, from scattered parts of the (then) Transvaal. Some of them were themselves photographers – either with small studios of their own, or itinerant – which enabled them to also produce the photographs that were to be enlarged.

Many names of salesmen appear on the remaining envelopes and notes, usually first names only. Of all the players in this industry whose perspectives and accounts I have been trying to discover, the salesmen have been the hardest to track down. But a few have been possible to interview: Mr Joseph Makhanye whom I interviewed in 1996, and after his death, his family, from Alexander Township; Mr Teke, photographer and salesman in Northwest Province; and Mr Magoba, Limpopo's "oldest living photographer".

The salesmen travelled back and forth, the majority between Johannesburg and the northern homelands, operating in the "cracks in the system" (Thami Makhanye, interview 2016). How did they negotiate the restrictive pass laws, over many years? It was relatively common for sympathetic white people to play the role of "employers" by signing the passbooks of black friends or associates, monthly or weekly, in order to enable them to be in a specific area at a given time. Did Yettie do this for any of these salesmen? She never mentioned such to me, nor did I witness this, but it would be a possible explanation of the salesmen's ability to live their lives in this way.

The salesman would arrive at a potential client (going door to door, or to church groups sometimes) with a sample portrait to show. If there was interest, they would enter into an agreement: the price, the instalment payment plan, and instructions about the portrait itself. The client would hand over an original small photograph (or two), which the salesman would put into an envelope; the stipulated clothing (for example, bridal costume, suit, church uniform) would be recorded by the salesman in often cryptic style on the envelope.⁵ The client would pay a small deposit to the salesman. After accumulating sufficient orders and deposits, the salesman would travel back to Johannesburg carrying cash, to deliver the work. A part of each deposit went to Yettie – the salesmen paying her for the work, but only in part.

To retrieve payment in full, multiple journeys were required. Many small instalments had to be collected from clients scattered over large areas. (The daughter of one salesman recalls travelling around with her father in the late 1950s and 1960s to collect "two shillings here, two shillings there" (Shulamit Rozowsky, interview 2015). There are frequent accounts of payment not being ready or forthcoming. Telephones were not common in black people's

5 In Durban's Chokwe Studio there was a printed form with questions, which the salesmen would carry and fill in. This described colour of hair and eyes, for example (locks of hair or samples of fabric might even be attached), and noted other kinds of small specific details mostly ignored by the salesmen of Aqua Portrait Studio.

households then, and there were no modes of communication of any kind other than personal arrival (or unreliable post). Collecting instalments not only involved travelling long distances but also lengthy gaps in time. Margins of profit were slim in the first place; often what appear to be tiny amounts were earned, for many hours of work or for long journeys.

Mr S Teke, Salesman and Photographer:



Mr Teke, photographer and portrait salesman, Lesethleng, Northwest Province, holding a portrait (from Aqua Portrait Studio) of himself, and a wedding portrait of himself with his wife.



Customers of Mr Teke, Lesethleng Village, Northwest Province, 2015.



Lesethleng Village, 2015.

Mr Teke lives in the village of Lesethleng in the Northwest Province. He had a photography studio in his house from the 1970s. He described how, till the mid 1990s, he would take the photographs of his customers and make regular trips to Johannesburg, to “the Jeppe Street studio”. On each trip he would collect completed framed portraits (if these were not ready he would have to wait, find somewhere to sleep, or come back), and return with them to his customers in the areas beyond the Pilanesberg and Rustenburg. Railway buses enabled him to commute between a point on the main road nearest his village and the Johannesburg Station terminus (about a six or seven-hour journey). To reach the distantly scattered clients, he would walk for hours, carrying the brown-paper-wrapped, bulky, framed pictures.

Joseph Makhanye, Salesman and Photographer:

Joseph Makhanye is another example of extraordinary perseverance and resilience in the face of conditions imposed by the apartheid system. Beginning as penniless and “illegal”, he slowly accumulated what small amounts he earned through plying his trade as a photographer and selling airbrushed portraits in township neighbourhoods. He eventually sent three sons and a daughter to university, at a time when extremely few black parents managed this.⁶

⁶ Joseph's eldest son Thami studied law and became an advocate when black advocates struggled to be given work. He eventually became an art-collector and esteemed judge, now overseeing the work of the IEC.



Joseph Makhanye, Photographer and portrait salesman, Alexander Township, c1956.

I first interviewed Joseph Makhanye when the Aqua Portrait Studio was still operating, in the mid 1990s. He took me on a journey to visit a number of his long-standing clients in Tembisa.



Customers of Joseph Makhanya, Tembisa, c1995. Photograph: Greg Marinovich.

At the time, I asked him why these airbrushed wedding portraits were popular:

Why are they attracted by the white wedding idea? Well, most of my customers are old people, and the old people were never exposed to modern marriage at the time. They had traditional marriages because there was perhaps no other choice. They had no opportunity to have these kinds of clothes. They never had that chance. Now this provides that chance. Some people say it is for their children. To create a memory. Also, this way they are together forever. It is a chance to be in one picture, which some of them didn't ever have. And to be dressed up in those clothes (J. Makhanye interview 1995).

A later chapter will engage fully with the (frequently repeated) idea of the wedding as a fantasy come true, at least in portrait form – of re-imagining one's own history in that sense; and secondly, of being “together” with one's partner despite not being able to be together enough in life. The significance of being in the specific kinds of clothes depicted, as opposed to one's own clothes, and also the notion of “creating a memory”, and the importance of posterity – linked in some interviews with ideas of ancestry – arose numerous times in interviews in Limpopo, and further discussions on this will form part of other chapters.

Recently I interviewed Joseph's eldest son, Thami Makhanye (who was at times in his youth an assistant to his father), and also Joseph Makhanye's wife, his *de facto* partner in the business.

As a very young man Joseph Makhanye came from the then Eastern Transvaal to find work in Johannesburg, in the mid 1940s. He bought himself a second-hand camera, and took photographs of people around him “as a hobby”. After being retrenched from his first job (in a bicycle shop), while desperately hunting for other work in Alexandra Township, a friend said to him, “You are carrying your job around your neck. Your camera is your job - can't you see?” He tried it, and found an instant market in the streets of Alex. As an itinerant photographer knocking on doors for custom, Makhanye became a familiar figure in the community, with his khaki pants and bicycle clips. “He was passionate, now this was all he did. He filled his spools of film in a day” (T. Makhanye 2016). He would deliver the full spools to Stern's Chemist, in 1st Avenue, Alexander Township (“the Jewish chemist owned by Mr Levine, a good friend”) to be sent away for development. On his rounds, Joseph also

peddled patent medicines and soft goods, facecloths, safety pins, and other small goods from Levine's shop.



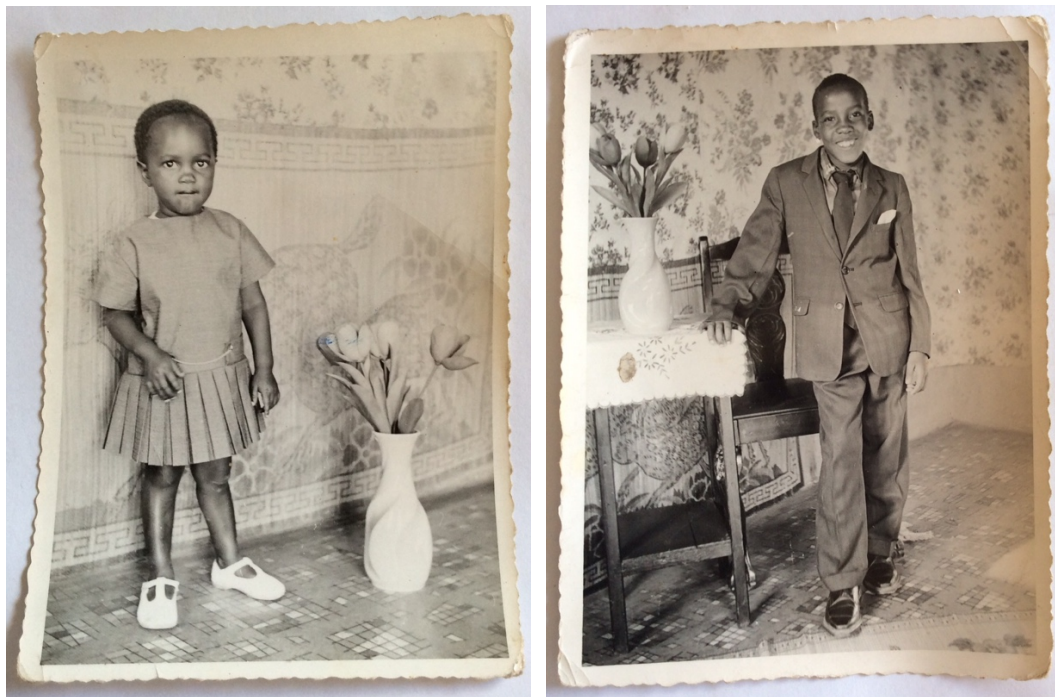
Schoolboys photographed by Makhanea in Alexandra Township, c1961.

In 1955, Joseph Makhanye moved his family to Edenvale's township of Dindele, near Tembisa; they lived "in the coloured section". But in 1958, during the forced removals, Dindele was razed to the ground, and the Makhanyes were relocated back to Alex. By then, however, all Joseph's contacts and clients were in Tembisa. Although his pass only allowed him to work in Alex, he continued to bicycle, illegally, to all his clients in Tembisa.

Tembisa was Joseph's "stronghold", as he called it; at least, certain sections of it, including the Modderfontein Hostels. The hostel dwellers were a constant and ready market, needing photographs to send home to families. Migrant workers would regularly order portraits of themselves and wives, as presents to be taken home (Peffer, 2013).

In the first few years of this work Makhanye would cycle from Alexander Township along Louis Botha Avenue, through Hillbrow and Joubert Park into town, even if – as was often the case at first – to deliver only one photograph to Aqua Portrait Studio. He would collect the portrait, cycling while carrying it under his arm, brown paper-wrapped and framed with glass. Only when more successful, and with many portraits to carry, did he use public transport.

In 1963, the laws changed. It was becoming increasingly untenable, in the eyes of the South African government, to allow itinerant or informal business activities by anyone black. *All* traders, of whatever kind, had to apply for licences, be taxed and pay levies, and pay rents collected by the municipality (from whom nearly all property in Alex was leased). Increasing pressure and threats from officials and police compelled Makhanye to find a fixed address for his business and run it from there. He found and rented a shop on a busy corner in Alex, 98 15th Avenue, with space for a studio as well. He and his wife created the “scene”: they put up a curtain for the backdrop, a carpet on the floor, added two or three mats, a table and chair, a telephone-prop and some vases of flowers.



Two children photographed in their Sunday best in the Makhanye studio, Alexandra township, c1962.

His wife began to work with him there, and he taught her to use the camera. According to her, she became much better at taking photographs than her husband was. “Mine were more beautiful. Everyone asked for me to do their picture rather than him” (Mrs Makhanye, interview 2016).



98 15th Avenue, the shop in Alex which once housed Makhanye's photographic studio, as it appears today. Although now a stall for a few groceries, with another proprietor, it still has its (now very faded) original sign.



Left: The Makhanye family on their stoep in Alexandra, c1971. Son Thami is seated front left. Right: Airbrushed portrait of Joseph Makhanye and his wife, held here by their son Thami Makhanye, on the same stoep, 2016.



Mrs Makhanye 2016.

Joseph Makhanye had never gone to school, but he began to attend some one-on-one classes in arithmetic with a friend, a teacher at the adult night school. He was a “born businessman” according to his son, and became highly skilled at keeping his accounts. His business required him to collect small but very frequent payments in instalments. Some customers paid weekly, some monthly; all paid him off in different, mostly minuscule amounts. Thami Makhanye remembers the notebook in which everything was minutely recorded.

Adding value to his photography business, Joseph began to offer framing. He would cycle with his pictures to a framing shop called H. Maroun & Son, “owned by Palestinians” in Simmonds Street. It may have been there that he came across the practice of airbrushing enlarged photographic portraits, although that was not something H. Maroun and Son did. For this Joseph approached another shop on Harrison Street, who had artists carry out that kind of work, and who also sold the oval and round “furniture frames”.

These airbrushed portraits ballooned into the most important part of his business. His wife, and sometimes his sons, helped to run the photographic studio in Alex, enabling him to travel to town and back, solicit clients, deliver pictures, and collect instalments. Some clients brought their own pictures for airbrushing, rather than being photographed in the studio. These included photos of deceased parents or children, or spouses.

Within a few years, he had moved all his work to the Aqua Portrait Studio. It is not known why he moved his business here: possibly Yettie charged lower prices, or was quicker or more proficient, or was more “respectful”. Thereafter he remained loyal to Aqua Portraits until Yettie retired. “There were never bad debts, they were both honest, Yettie always delivered on time, it was a very respectful partnership” (T. Makhanye, interview 2016). In fact, they were friends, with a keen interest in each other’s families and lives.

The Shop – “The Middle Man”

Mr Ravi Lalla is the owner of the shop “Popular Picture Framers” in Main Road, Jeppe area (close to Jeppe Street), Johannesburg. It is still there to this day, although on a reduced section of the premises. His shop is also very close to Jeppe Station, and therefore passed by a constant stream of commuters to and from the townships – a constant potential market. That area, not far from the part of town where Yettie was located, has a much longer history

of being predominantly “black”, in terms of its users, customers, commuters, and the kind of trade plied there. It was, furthermore, nearby to the Jeppe men’s hostels, with their many dozens of migrant workers. The railway line arriving at this station linked the mines to the city, and Jeppe was a commuter thoroughway for hundreds and hundreds of people each day – arriving from or leaving for the East Rand in the east, and Soweto in the west.

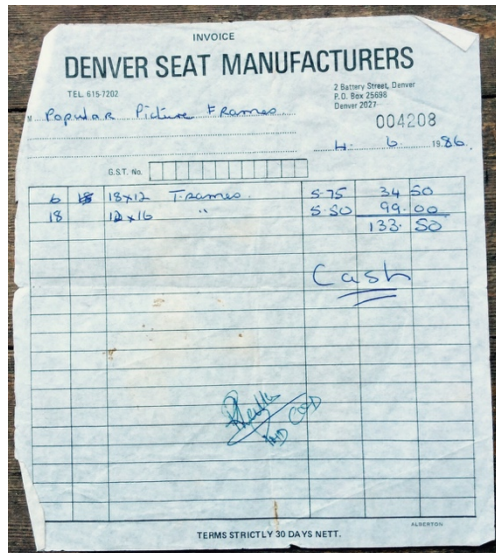
Popular Picture Framers opened as a general dealer in 1978. Soon thereafter someone put a framed airbrushed portrait on display in the shop, and Lalla was immediately inundated with interested clients, with requests for such portraits. He did the “research”, as he says, and “found the people who could do this”: a Mr Pretorius in Crosby, and the Aqua Portrait Studio (a few blocks away from his shop), could do the airbrush work. (Later Giovanna Biallo’s photo studio was enlisted to print and enlarge). Lalla would buy the frames direct from the supplier and do the framing himself. He received photographs directly from customers and the customers would collect from him; he would be paid by the client, and pay each of the others. (This was similar to the way in which Bobby Bobson’s in Durban, and Ginsburg in Cape Town operated.)

For a long period during the 1980s, both the photographic enlarger (Giovanna Biallo, interviewed below) and the airbrush artist (Yettie) were working on the same images, both operating in Jeppe Street a block or so apart, neither aware of the other’s existence. Recently Giovanna Biallo describes how she longed to know, in those days, who it was who turned her black and white enlargements into “beautiful blue and white wedding pictures –to me it was like magic”. She kept asking Lalla but he would avoid telling her.

Ravi Lalla sourced frames from a company called “Denver Seat”, a toilet-seat manufacturer in Denver, Johannesburg, which had adapted their toilet seat design to develop these oval frames – themselves based on wooden Victorian-style frames imported previously for this industry from Chicago. According to Lalla:

The oval type of frames were known as ‘furniture frames’ because they suited the dark, heavy-styled furniture of the old days. They blended in, the dark furniture, the radio in a wooden box, the shiny polished wood. The frames were made by a toilet-seat company called Denver Seats; somebody realized they could adapt their seat design – just make a groove all the way

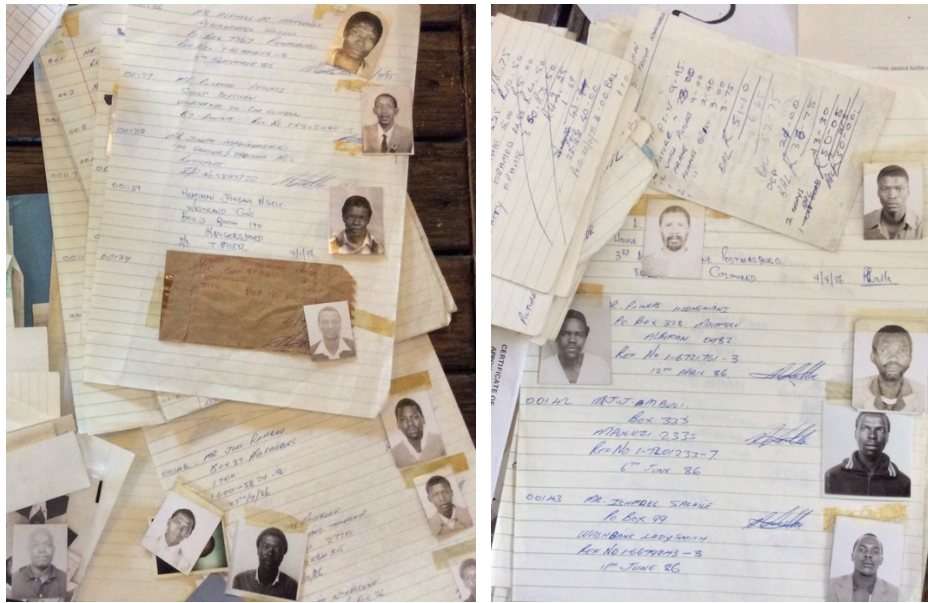
around – and be made to look ‘antique’, sprayed two-tone. I used to order them, then asked for a smaller size to be made, 8 x 10, then I needed a 10 x 12 – and as time went on we wanted larger. I would buy two dozen at a time per size of each frame (Lalla, interview 2015).



Invoice dated 4th June 1986, and some frames, from Denver Seat Manufacturers. At this point the frames cost from R5.50 each, depending on size.

Ravi Lalla had himself contracted dozens of salesmen (or “independent freelancers”, as he calls them), most of whom were selling other framed pictures for him around the country – square-framed prints of popular religious images. Some took on this more complex task as well, but it would appear that many of his customers came directly to his shop, having heard by word of mouth or seen samples in his or Giovanna Biallo’s window.

I used to go and sit next to Yettie in her studio and wait for my picture and make conversation, because we were all good friends, all of us in the business. Sometimes I would take time off and go and sit there an hour and a half, two hours. I was a curious fellow. I used to go into Yettie’s studio – I liked to see how it worked. I would watch her air-gun, the way it moved, left to right, left to right, the way the colours would appear, especially watching the colour in the face appear. She charged me R60 a picture and I doubled that for the customer [in the late 1980s and early 1990s]. The customers were happy to pay... (Lalla, interview 2015).



A few pages from the many hundreds in the files of Popular Picture Framers, recording the details of freelance salesmen who either brought portraits to be enlarged and airbrushed, or who sold framed religious pictures.

Lalla articulated something I had observed whenever present in the studio over several decades – a relationship seemingly of equals, between Yettie and all the various players in this business. This was not something that was simply to be expected then in working relationships in South Africa, between people of different races and very different cultural backgrounds.

There is a commonality and even communion that is found between recent immigrants (and even long-settled immigrants) and members of home-born oppressed classes within certain societies. These would appear to arise out of certain shared experiences – or the perception of sharing such experiences – which creates community across normal boundaries. Yettie found an easy camaraderie and empathy among the salesmen, middlemen, and customers of her business, that – more than the warmth of their personalities - seem to be based on a mutually grasped perspective on their lives (Wasserman, personal conversations; Makhanye, interviews 1995 and 2016.). Much has been written about relationships forged between members of immigrant groups *within* the groups themselves, and the contained nature of such groups in host countries. This is true for many obvious reasons, mutual survival (of different kinds) being one of them; maintaining a sense of cultural familiarity, ease and recognition, and sustaining traditions or practices such as diet, are others, and of course language is a crucial factor. But the interpersonal relationships that arise between immigrant *individuals* (rather than groups) and individuals within oppressed (black) groups, in apartheid South Africa, take

a singular form. Yettie, and also her father, seemed to have been embodiments of this. Isolated even from their “own” immigrant communities of Jews in Johannesburg – an isolation that may have been rooted in Latvia - they most certainly shared with black south Africans, an awareness of their own marginalisation, alienation and exclusion, and their daily struggles to make ends meet. This sense of being marginalised was not necessarily imposed from without - though the society at large, and the governments of Malan, and after, were to a large extent anti-Semitic. As we have seen, too, first generation immigrants, including Yettie’s parents, had to carry an “pass” very similar to those of black people (although they were by no means restricted to the same geographic degree, nor were they ever subjected to the same legal destruction of family and livelihood); immigrants from Eastern Europe faced a degree of ever-present petty humiliation in this country, documented in literature by such authors as Dan Jacobson and Roger Cohen, among others.

Chapter 3. STEP BY STEP: THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE IMAGES, AND THE CURRENCY OF THE PHOTOGRAPHIC PORTRAIT

In this chapter I attempt to understand the transformation that occurs from the original photographs to the final airbrushed portrait. I also seek to “mine” the photographs themselves, for any information that they might yield about the people who owned them. This involves a close-looking at the images, but also a careful consideration of the material object – the photographs and other documents as physical evidence. Finally, I consider what distinguishes these airbrushed portraits from other kinds of photographic portraiture (studio photographs, for example) in terms of their value, or prestige, within families.

In order to explore this transformation in a few examples, I chose ‘sets’ of these images to look at, which would demonstrate as far as possible the steps by which photographs of faces were taken from their original state to the finished portrait. These steps include a range of source images, including identity photographs, studio photos, and family snaps; the negatives made from re-photographing them; the salesmen’s instructions written on the envelopes; some of the unpainted or incomplete enlarged prints; and finally, some of the finished airbrushed portraits. Between them, the examples show the outcome of each stage in the technical process.

The choice had to be a little arbitrary. I was seeking out the most complete sets, although I also tried to select representative images that told different stories. The source photographs that happen to be included here do not necessarily reflect the variety of originals in the collection as a whole. A large proportion of originals, for example, are identity photos from different kinds of apartheid-era passbooks, yet here I have only discussed one (I will discuss others later). Moreover, in the collection there are very early studio photographs from the late 19th and early 20th centuries, which I have not here referred to (but will discuss later), and some “originals” are actually much earlier, damaged hand-coloured enlargements – among many other kinds. Also, many of these examples come from one area of Limpopo, although the images in the collection as a whole come from a much wider spread of the country.

PART 1

The Material Nature of the Research

I have engaged directly with the material objects, the source photographs and portraits themselves. Of great advantage to this process of interrogating the source images for information is the fact that these actual pictures are physically in hand, that in each case we are able to examine the object itself, under a (metaphorical) microscope.



Front and back of a source photograph: X marks the face to be enlarged. (All images in this chapter from Aqua Portrait Collection.)

“Sometimes photos can be appreciated fully only by engaging with their haptic dimension through touch,” writes Tinkler in *Using Photographs in Social and Historical Research*, in order to imaginatively sense the affective nature of the photos, to fully perceive and to *feel* “how photos have been used, viewed, and valued” (Tinkler, 2013). Gillian Rose, in her book *Visual Methodologies*, calls this aspect of working with photographs, “the materiality of seeing.”⁷

⁷ Rose discusses in detail the ethics of working with such private and possibly intimate material, which is a subject for deeper consideration in terms of this archive, in a future study.



Source images showing wear, age, or frequent handling, suggesting their significance in the lives of their owners.

For the researcher, as Elizabeth Edwards and Janice Hart write in *Photographs Objects Histories*,

photographs are both images and physical objects that exist in time and space and thus in social and cultural experience... it can be seen that it is not only the image *qua* image that is the site of meaning, but that its *material* and presentational forms and the uses to which they are put are central to the function of a photograph as a socially salient object (Edwards & Hart, 2004: 1, 3).

Edwards quotes D. Miller as arguing that it is “often when objects are assumed trivial and not to matter that they are most powerful and effective as social forces” (Edwards, 2002: 71). Miller writes further, in *Material Cultures*: “Through dwelling upon the more mundane sensual and material qualities of the object, we are able to unpack the subtle connotations with cultural lives and values that are objectified through these forms, in part because of the qualities they possess” (Miller, 1998: 9).

At least some “memory” of these interactions is evident in each object, can be apprehended through the senses, and is a valuable marker of its life-story, legible or not. This is true not only of the image itself printed on the front – invariably invested with more than its immediately intended meaning – but true also of the back of the object: any stamps or text, markings, dirt, stains, the edges of the photograph, the manner of its preservation, the way it has been folded, worn, torn, repaired, or attached to something else, can speak volumes. So, we experience them physically, not just through sight, but through touch and smell, feeling their texture, their fragility, “with subjective, embodied, and sensuous interactions” (Edwards & Hart, 2004: 2). The word “interactions” is a reminder, too, that interactions were not only between the photograph/object and its owner or subject, but that photographs set up relations *between people* – who exchange pictures of each other, send photos home, inherit family portraits, share images of celebratory moments, share (or contest) associated memories, contest ownership. People’s routine handling of photographs – passing them around, taking them out – is what imbues them with social and individual significance.

But for black people in South Africa, critically, repeated handling included the frequent forced taking out and putting away of the identity book photo, part of the *dompas*, and that

had to be carried always on one's person. This could happen at any time, at the behest of any policeman, potential employer, petty official or government bureaucrat. Some of the passbooks in this collection evoke this kind of handling especially strongly, the paging through, opening and closing. They are worn in those places; they also have a patina and a special smell, redolent of perspiration and anxiety.

We can assume from the fact that many of the original images in this collection seem to have been much used and handled, that they carried great importance of one kind or another for their owners. This would suggest that they were possibly the *only* photograph of the subject, or at least one of very few – otherwise they would not have been parted with. Apart from those necessary for daily bureaucratic survival, or kept close as frequently-looked-at pictures of loved ones, there were some that were clearly old at the time of commissioning the portrait, and must have been in those families for many years, perhaps a few generations.

So, we have to ask what pressing imperative drove their owners to risk parting with them under precarious circumstances, for the purposes of having these framed portraits made. What was the overriding importance and significance of the portraits that they were commissioning, that made the cost, the wait, and above all the risk of not seeing these photographs again, worthwhile?

This part of the chapter will involve descriptions of the material particularities and the “physical traces of usage and time” (Edwards, 2002) of a small number of specific objects in this collection, each together with some of the other stages in the process of their re-making into completed airbrushed portraits ready to hang on the wall.

I do this in order to lay the groundwork for exploring what we might learn from these objects: about their history as physical things; about what they tell us about their owners – and also about what they don't reveal. In this way, I believe that they (the objects themselves) may help us in understanding and answering the larger questions surrounding this study.

Among these questions will be how the transposition of an image of a photographed face from one reality and one specific material context, into another, changes its *reading*: visually, symbolically, and on the level of affect. Also, what underpins the choices made in this re-framing: of clothing, of style, of context, even of placement and juxtaposition (of people who

were not physically together, usually) – literally, the “re-grouping”, to use the term the practitioners in this industry used? A related but different question, for a later chapter, is raised concerning the portraits of weddings that were imaginary – those “weddings” that had not taken place in reality and equally those that had, but in a very different form from the one in the final portrait.

In addition, there is an interpretive aspect to this chapter, because aside from the technical processes, there are other kinds of changes: what are the psychological or emotional implications of having an image of oneself taken from one source, to be transformed or “transfigured” into a picture that instead embodies one’s most desired self-image?

And what is that desired self-image? One that approximates the way one sees one’s “real” or truer self, or affirms one’s place and dignity in the family, community, society? Gell, in *Art and Agency* (also quoted by Edwards) argued that objects themselves can be seen as “social actors, in that they construct and influence the field of social action in ways which would not have occurred if they did not exist or, in the case of photographs, if they did not exist in this specific format” (Gell, 1988).

So, in the context of the objects of my research, in the context of their history and the political and social world in which they were used and owned, perhaps instead of using words like ‘transformation’ or ‘transfiguration’, I should be rather speaking of an active *re-claiming* of one’s image, from those source photos.

But in order to be able to make this kind of assumption, I will examine some of the objects in this collection of examples, in order to excavate from them as much information as possible. Here I am approaching the photos as a series of texts: who were those people, the subjects of these pictures, and what were their circumstances? What can we know from their photographs that might extend our understanding of this portraiture and its meaning for them? Of necessity, this involves some speculation, but this speculation will be carefully grounded in the visual information embedded in the images, and is based wherever possible on the (sparse) words on the backs of the photos, the stamps, written instructions and other small textual clues on the accompanying envelopes. Occasionally there is a little more (one portrait of a couple was sourced from a photocopied obituary pamphlet kept after a funeral, for example, containing invaluable information); and of course all kinds of information is

deducible in permits, licences, or passbooks, information that goes far beyond the original official purpose of those documents.

Most of this therefore tries to be informed speculation, as far as possible. Sometimes, one has to examine the relationship between two apparently disparate source images in order to understand the final image that includes both, or to understand the impulse behind the commissioning of that final image. This kind of speculation is more tenuous, but still attempts to remain rooted in the actual evidence before us.



Source photographs and final portrait, from the Aqua Portrait Studio collection.

In Chapter 4, I will discuss the conventions that will start to be noticed here: that is, the fixed tropes and set practices and routines found in these portraits. Further in Chapter 4, I will group some other kinds of sets of images together, to look at their commonalities and differences, to see what this reveals about the process itself, and what it may tell us also about the kinds of imperatives driving the desire for these portraits.

PART 2

The Process of Transformation

Here I will examine several groups of images – each comprising a portrait, its source photos, the negatives, the instructions and whatever other ephemera have survived. In scrutinising these pictures, as I said above, I have tried to mine them for information. This has entailed looking and handling – not only deciphering the printed or painted images, and the words stamped or written on the backs, but the physical state and condition of each object. It is to this combination of factors that I was referring when talking of the materiality of the research. I have also at times followed directions suggested by clues in the available evidence, in trying to discover who these people were. But these paths have not been arbitrary: in all cases, the purpose has been an attempt at understanding (as far as such a thing is possible) the impulse behind each portrait commission, or about the lives that are hinted at in them, all of which were part of a larger social milieu. In each of the descriptions below – somewhat extended in many cases – these have been my motives.

Mr and Mrs Newani



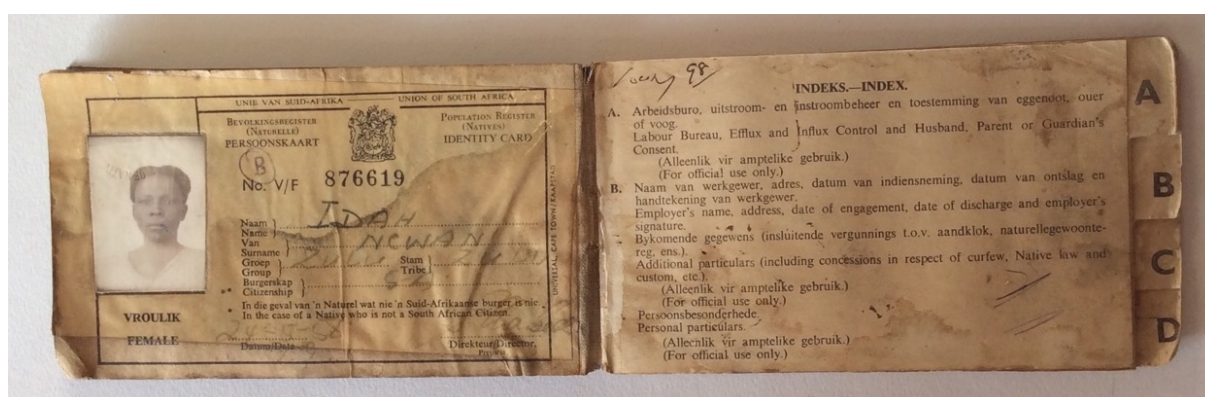
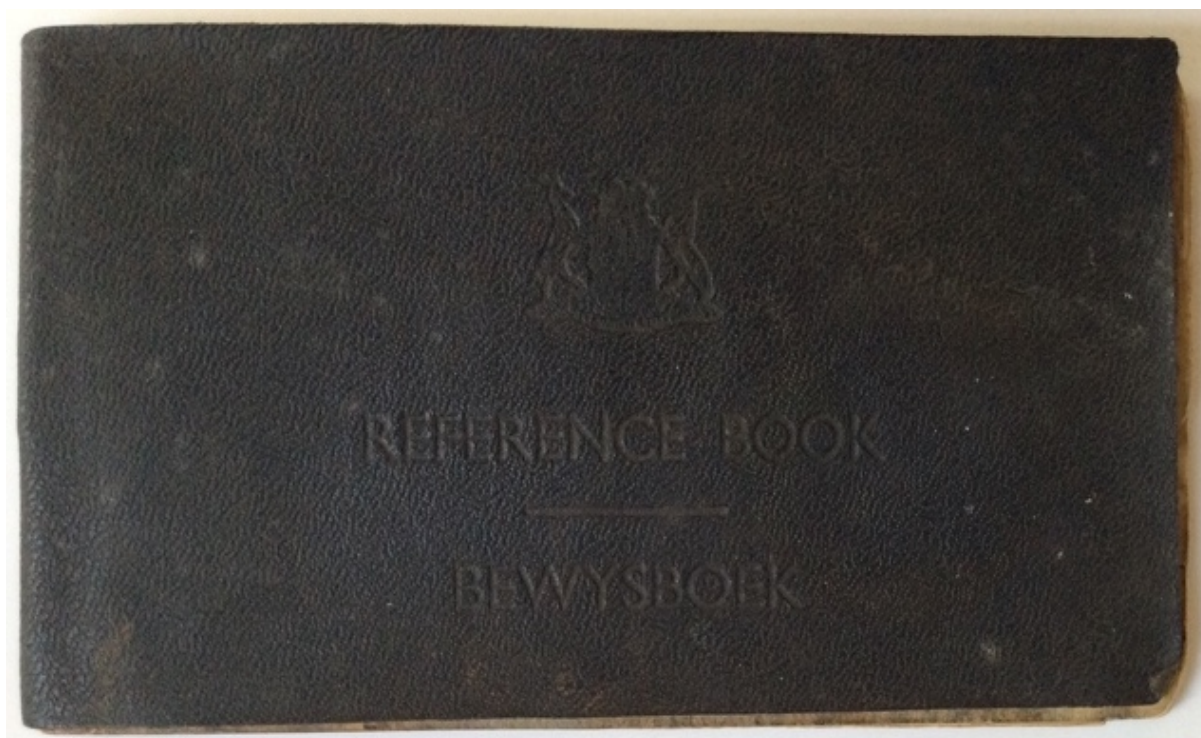
Mr Ncwani

This photograph may have been taken especially for the purpose of making the airbrushed portrait, though it shows wear from handling, and so may have been older. It was taken in some kind of studio: the sitter's upper body is seen against a pink/red curtain backdrop, and there is a bright light reflection on the face, from a camera flash. Judging by the film colour quality, this photograph was probably taken in the early 1970s: especially in Kodak Instamatic photos of that decade, the blue and green inks in the printing were fugitive, leaving behind images with a reddish-orange tinge.

The sitter (whose name as we will see in his wife's passbook is Mfense Ncwani) is a man probably in his late sixties. He is bald but with a small twirled dreadlock over his right ear. He has holes in his earlobes, for *isiqhaza* – traditional Zulu decorative earplugs. This indicates that he is from rural Natal; but, since not many salesmen who supplied pictures to the Aqua Portrait Studio came from Natal, he is likely to have been living in Johannesburg as a migrant labourer. In this case, he may have commissioned the portrait directly. Typically, at the time, migrant workers from that area on the Witwatersrand would be either working on the mines or as security workers or cleaners for blocks of flats.

On the back of the photograph is a capital letter B in a circle; the same B in a circle is found in the bride's passbook.

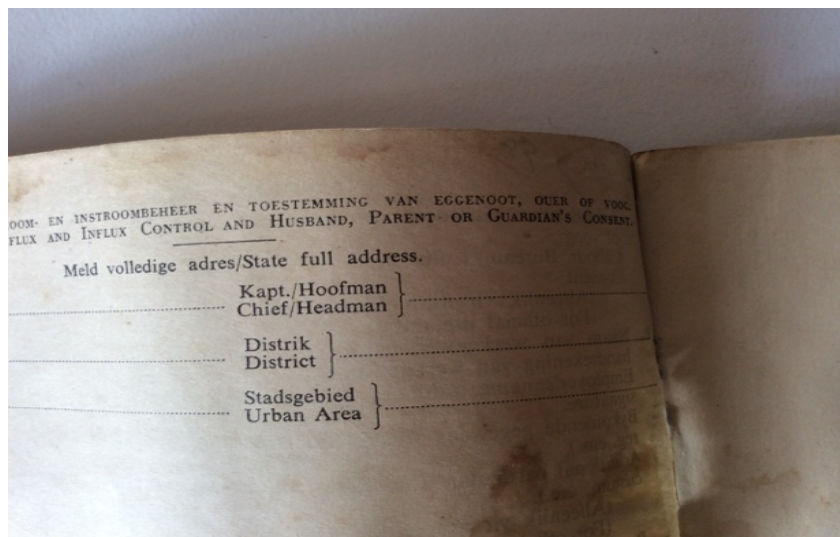
The second photograph is an identity photo in a passbook of the type issued in the late 1950s. The government had been threatening (and trying) to issue passbooks for women from January 1956, against widespread resistance. Only in 1958 were they finally forced upon women in substantial numbers: so, this one, issued on the 24th May 1958, must have been one of the earliest groups of passbooks issued, in a wide, horizontal format with black cover. On the front is embossed "Reference Book / Bewysboek".



Mrs Ncwani's passbook.

The identity photograph is on the inside front cover. This page is discoloured with age, and partly covered with self-adhesive plastic attached by the issuing official to prevent removal of the photograph. Under Verwoerd, in 1952 the committees responsible for the design on the passbooks ('bewysboeke') devoted much time to developing methods of preventing fraud. None of them were completely successful (Breckenridge, 2014). The page seems to have got wet at some point, and the writing filled in the lower half is faded and fairly indistinct. Filled in by an official on this page are the name "Idah Ncwani", "Zulu" under "Group", and "Zulu" under "Tribe". On this page, on top of the self-adhesive plastic and written by a different hand, is a capital letter B inside a circle – like that on the back of the photograph of her husband.

All the pages of the book are yellowed and brittle. Despite the lack of activity recorded in this passbook, it is relatively worn with use. Its corners are rounded and softened with wear, the covering coming slightly adrift from its cardboard front cover, and it generally has the appearance of having being frequently opened. Extremely little is recorded in this book (compared with most other passbooks in the collection). This passbook has mostly blank pages, empty spaces where one would expect all kinds of personal details, surveillance and monitoring information.



Mrs Ncwani's passbook.

The first section, A, provides eight pages for recording “consent” from “Labour Bureau, Efflux or Influx Control, or *Husband*, Parent or Guardian” (my italics), and is entirely empty of signatures or stamps. The third and fourth sections of 16 pages for “additional particulars”, have one page filled in: her marriage to Mfense Ncwani. His address is given as Ndela, a rural village not far from the town of Bizana. The marriage is recorded as having taken place in Bizana district in 1955. It is filled in as “N.C.” (for “*Native Custom*”). So – significantly – we know they did *not* have the “western” marriage of the kind portrayed in the final portrait.

Persoonsbesonderhede (veranderings moet op die hieropvolgende bladsye aangebring word).
Personal Particulars (changes to be reflected in subsequent pages).

Distrik van gewone verblyf
District in which ordinarily resident } *Bizana*

Huwelikstaat
Marital status } *n.c.*

Meld deur christelike/naturellegewoonte/saamwoon
State by Christian Rites/Native Custom/Living together } *Mhence Newani*

Naam van eggenoot, ouer of voog
Name of Husband, Parent or Guardian } *Idah*

Persoonsonommer van eggenoot, ouer of voog
National Identity Number of Husband, Parent or Guardian } *24-538*

Adres van eggenoot, ouer of voog
Residential address of Husband, Parent or Guardian } *24-538*

Datum/Date
7-9

STAMP: REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA
OFFICE OF THE NATIVE COMMISSIONER
BIZANA
24-538

Staboe
Direkteur/Director

Mrs Newani's passbook: particulars of her marriage.

The second section, B, records employment and monthly employer endorsements and signatures. Again, there are eight double pages for this with close-lined spaces for dates of engagement and discharge. At the top of the first of these pages there is a single entry for employment: Idah was engaged by the Saligna Forestry and Development Company on the 7th of March 1959. However, in the very next line, she was discharged from that employment and signed off by the same supervisor, on the 30th April 1959. She was employed for about seven weeks in all.

Naam van werkgewer. Name of employer.	Adres van werkgewer. Address of employer.	Datum van indiensneming. Date of engagement.	Datum van ontslag. Date of discharge.	Handtekening van werkgewer. Signature of employer.
<i>Saligna Forestry & Dev Co</i>	<i>Box 93 Mphahlele</i>	<i>7/3/59</i>	<i>30/4/59</i>	<i>J.A. Hughes Mphahlele</i> <i>J.A. Hughes</i>

18

Mrs Newani's passbook, showing her employment history.

Keith Breckenridge describes in *Biometric State* (2014) one of the features of Verwoerd's new passbook concept implemented from 1952: it gave no scope at all for showing any detailed legal relationship between employer and employee, other than that the employment existed, which was entirely on the employer's terms. Prior to the apartheid passbook, proof of employment had comprised of legal *contracts* between employers and employees. A copy of such a contract in the form of a signed document would be kept by the employee to show to police, etc. These documents included terms and conditions, which the employer *and* the employee had to abide by, as in any contract. Employees (including black employees) could and sometimes did report or even lay charges against (white) employers who transgressed their contractual agreements. The new passbooks were specifically designed to replace all those multiple documents and messy papers. But, because of its minimal information, in the process it did away with that legal detail; and did away, in effect, with any binding obligations to the employee on the part of the employer (Breckenridge 2014).

An online search for information on the Saligna Forestry and Development Company suggests that the company has long ceased to exist. The two references that do appear turn out to be a research paper written by Helen Suzman in 1973 (whose title is *A Socio-Economic Survey into the Saligna Forestry & Development Company at Eston, Natal*), and a paper by Mark Dubois. Both were undertaken on behalf of the Wages Commission of the University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg, looking into working conditions and wages. The Saligna Forestry and Development Company – which was one of a number of government-owned Natal forestry companies – was found by the Wages Commission to be paying brutally low wages at that time.

Mark Dubois writes:

The Saligna Forestry and Development Company's Estates at Eston and the Government Timber Plantations in south-west Natal were the focus for subsequent research projects... it was found that the majority of workers received an average of R3,17 per week, while in some cases the wages were as low as R2,06 per week... In each case, low wages, lack of rations in some instances, poor housing... has resulted in widespread malnutrition and disease. Dr Barker maintains that 30% of all his patients have pellagra and 74% of all children who come to the hospital are below the 3rd percentile on the Boston Scale... Life-expectancy is severely lowered (Dubois, 1973).

The extent of how desperately low this wage was can be understood when one reads that the PDL (poverty datum line) for black families in South Africa for that very same year was R20 a week.

We would have to project backwards by a dozen or so years to imagine what Idah Ncwani would have been earning for those seven weeks in 1959. We do not know the reason for the brevity of her employment. It is possible that she left because the wages were unsustainable, or that this was very short-term seasonal work in which people were taken on and let go at the will of the company. But in Idah's passbook no other employment is ever recorded. Did she give up working in order to bring up children? Even to visit her husband or to go to a hospital, she would have required official endorsements and stamps. Dependent children were also recorded in these passbooks – and hers has no such record.

The reason for this line of enquiry is to understand the final portrait: to speculate about why the husband in this portrait seems to have been portrayed at so much later a point in his life than Idah. And judging by the evidence (or lack thereof) in her passbook, one might surmise that she died at an early age. Her husband would possibly have kept her passbook with him as a memento of her, which would explain its worn state. If this was the case, it would seem he commissioned a wedding-portrait for the two of them some time after her death, and used probably the only photograph of her together with a much later photo of himself: hence this marriage portrait of a youthful bride with an older man.

The final portrait of Mr and Mrs Ncwani is undated, like all the portraits in this archive. There are no notes or envelopes with instructions accompanying this one any longer (which many others have). I would estimate that it was made in the mid 1970s, i.e. about halfway through the fifty-year lifespan of the Aqua Portrait Studio.



Mr and Mrs Newani: final portrait.

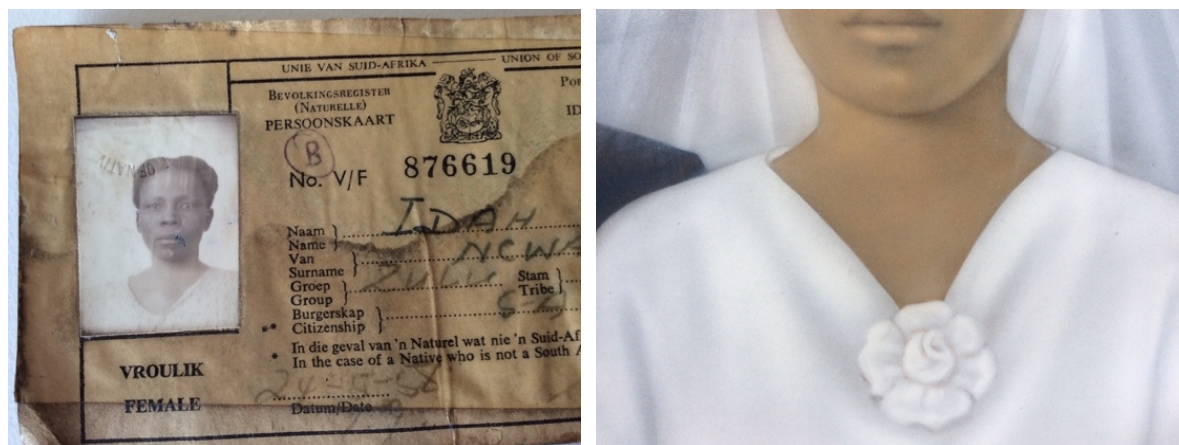
It is very carefully made. The airbrush work is skilled; the modelling of tone, depth of colour in the faces, and the detail and concern for texture show a high investment of time and care. The subtlety of colour, such as in the background and on the shirt and the almost painterly jacket, became much rarer in later years, as the scale and pressure of Yettie's business increased, and as portraits had to be turned out at increasing speed. This portrait displays a high degree of finish – the modelling of the flowers on the bride's headpiece and also on her dress (compared with the stencilled, very simple, flat and repeated flower of most of the later brides) – and in the carnation on the husband's jacket (compared with the mere blur of white paint commonly dabbed on later lapels).

The groom's face reveals the process of transformation that the airbrush technique made possible. The flashbulb glare, visible on his skin in the original photo, is changed to a smooth modulated skin: this modulation is one of the key strengths of airbrushing. The frown is smoothed out (somewhat), the contrasts in shadow and light reduced, the face generally made

more youthful to match his bride. (And, one notices, the ear holes for the *isiqhaza* are almost gone.)

The bride occupies implied space by virtue of her body being positioned as if in front of her husband's – as is the convention in these portraits – but with her veil falling behind him. The three-dimensional detail of the edge of her dress disappearing behind her back, is unusual too (in later brides, the clothes are sometimes almost flattened).

A comparison between the original identity photograph and the painted portrait shows that the artist's (imaginary) wedding dress design echoes the neckline of the original garment in the identity photo, and also the veil and floral headdress are fitted into the actual outline of Idah's hair.



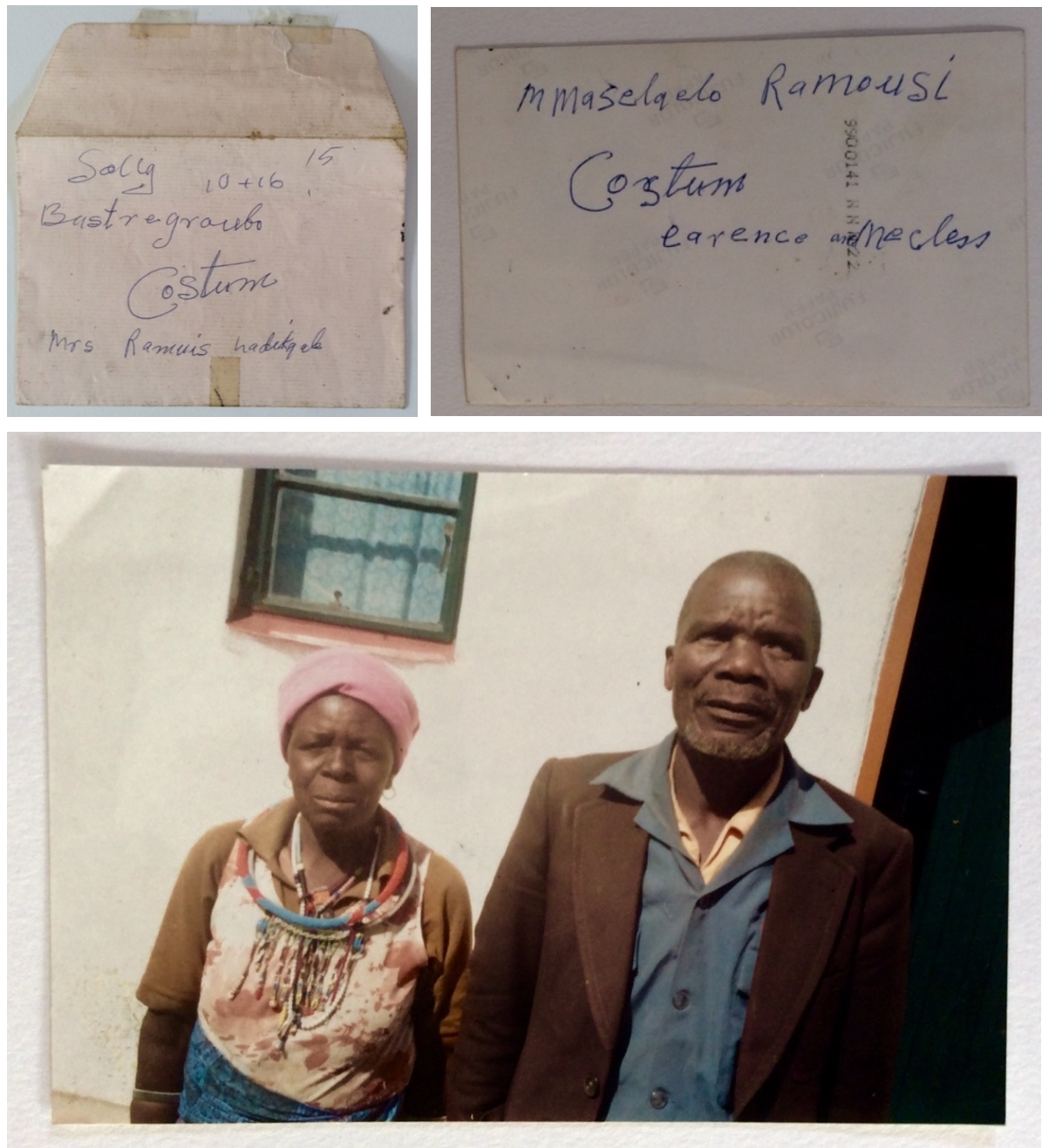
Mrs Newani: comparing the necklines in the source image and the final portrait.

Mr and Mrs Ramousi

The original is a snapshot taken of a husband and wife, in front of what is probably a house in a rural village in Limpopo. On the back of the photograph is written in the handwriting of the salesman (and possibly photographer) Solly: “Mmaselqelo Ramusi”, “Larence and Necless” (Lawrence or Clarence and Nicolas). The same handwriting appears on the envelope discussed below.

The photograph is in good condition, not worn, adding to the likelihood that either Solly or someone else took it specially for the purpose of having a portrait made. I would estimate

that the photograph was taken in the early to mid 1990s: the colour is unfaded, and the final work would accord with Yettie's portraiture style by that time.



Mr and Mrs Ramousi, source image. Above, the instructions, and the back of the source photograph.

In the photograph both the husband and wife stand formally and to attention. The image is tilted, causing both to appear to lean to the right. The husband is on the right of the picture, which, because of its tilt, causes him to seem to loom larger and to appear to dominate, though he has a gentle face, an anxious frown and a gaze that sidles out of the picture – seemingly unable to look directly back at the eye of the camera/viewer. The wife appears

much shorter and slightly behind him, but she fully engages the viewer with her gaze. In the photograph the window behind appears to rest on her head, unintentionally serving as an ironic visual metaphor, as literal (and metaphorical) burdens are carried on the heads of rural women.

She is dressed in a traditional manner, wearing a pink headscarf, a blue cloth tied around her waist, a bracelet, and layers of very beautiful colourful beadwork. This clothing becomes significant when we later compare this image with the completed portrait.

There is no direct indication of where the couple lived or where the photograph was taken. However, it is possible to estimate this, based on certain clues. According to my informant Maggie Masoeu, the beads that the woman is wearing would identify her as Tsonga/Shangaan, and the couple's surname, variously written here as Ramousi, Ramuis or Ramusi, would locate them as coming from a particular region of Limpopo, between Polokwane and Machado. As we will see when we study the envelope that contained this photograph, it was brought to Aqua Portrait Studios – and possibly photographed – by the salesman named Solly. (This name appears on many of these envelopes, and from other names and clues written on other envelopes, it would appear that he was a prolific salesman and travelled to a particular area of Limpopo, making it theoretically possible to attempt to trace these families in the future.)

The instructions are in the same handwriting as on the photograph:

“Solly” at the top, and the size ‘10 + 16’. (There were three standard size choices).
“Bust regroubo” (“Bust regroup”, which meant in this business a composite portrait, *regrouped* in this case to place the husband on the other side).
“Costum” (which meant they requested a woman's formal jacket and blouse);
and below, “Mrs Ramuis Nadikgale”.

The “15” is written by the printer and would have appeared also on the print.



Negatives of original, of their heads now separated, ready for re-group and printing.

The next stage in the process would have been to retake the photograph, with two separate photographs of the two heads only. This would allow the separate images of the two heads to be enlarged, then “re-grouped” - that is, in this case, swapped around so that the husband appears on the left (his right). They would also be adjusted to be much more equal in height. From these two separate negatives, one print would be made.



Mr and Mrs Ramousi: final portrait

The transformation from the original snapshot into the final portrait has created a different mood. The changing positioning of the two in relation to each other, the re-grouping, has

significantly changed the sense of the relationship. Now the wife (as in the convention) is placed as if in front of her husband, not behind, and is no longer physically lower than he is, as she is in the original photograph. The husband still looks to the right, but now into the picture and over his wife's head – still anxiously, looking as if he is anticipating something to be feared.

The deep shadows on both faces in the original photograph, caused by the bright sun which also causes them to narrow their frowning eyes, have now been modulated. But in doing so, or perhaps because of a poor print, also something of their character has been lost, and the artist has here tried to compensate for that with black pencil – in this late work a little crudely – delineating some of the features.

Both husband and wife are now dressed in smart, formal, “western” attire: the husband in a dark suit and simplified black tie, the wife almost similarly, in a black jacket, white blouse, and black turban-like hat. The only concession to any colour at all, apart from the turquoise-blue standard background, are her tiny gold earrings.

This feels, to a viewer like me, a sombre choice, given the colourful and expressively traditional – and to an urban eye, perhaps more beautiful – attire of Mrs Ramuisi in her original photo. But, for reasons I will discuss in the next chapter, the formal tailored woman's jacket worn over a blouse was a powerful symbol of modernity, and of respectability. Is this kind of choice a “selective appropriation of the icons of modernity”, as Rory Bester puts it in “City and Citizenship” (2001), in relation to the images re-photographed by Santu Mofokeng in *Black Photo Album*?

[I]deas of modernity effected a dichotomy between ‘modern’ urban space and ‘traditional’ rural space... Modernity and tradition were also used as ideological tools to force people to take on particular identities and experiences of belonging (Bester, 2001).

Whether, and how, these portraits were a painted and (literally and figuratively) reframed “rebuttal to the passbook” (Bester, 2001) is an important discussion, which I will take up in Chapters 6 and 7.

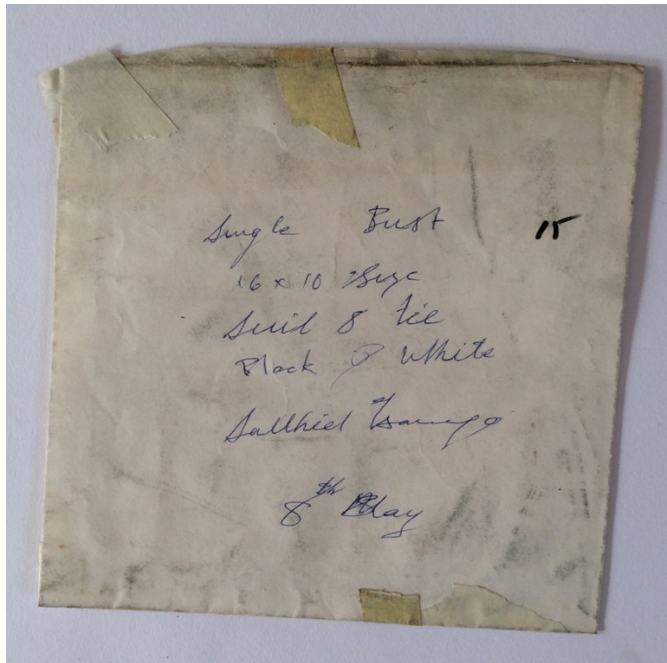
Mr Matjeding⁸



Mr S. Matjeding's employee access card.

This portrait is of Mr S. Matjeding, who was (at this stage) a worker at the Sappi paper mill factory in Springs, on the East Rand. The original image is an identity photo on an access card, enabling Mr Matjeding to enter the factory he worked in. The photograph was probably taken by a company photographer on the first day of his employment. It is in colour, taken with a flash. As a result, the face bears a startled expression, an expression of anxiety. There is a shine, a gleam of perspiration, on his skin. His head is thrown backwards somewhat, and this, together with the bright camera flash reflected on his skin, creates a sense (for this viewer) of his being cornered. This is a document for control of access. There are spaces for various numbers (including his National Identity number, a company number – “COY no.” – and a “Reg. No.”). A printed text makes it clear that this is a permit without which there is no admittance to his place of work. Usefully for us, it gives the date of issue of this card as February 1979.

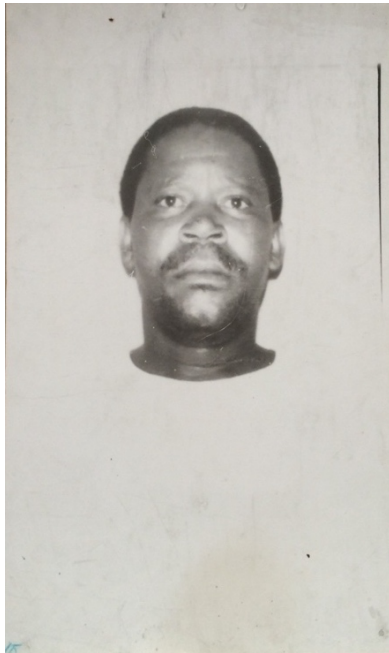
⁸ In the following three examples, the portraits were not completed: I have only the stages up to the printed but unpainted enlargement. But they remain instructive.



Instructions on the envelope.

The instructions are standard: “Single Bust, 16 x 10 size. Suit & tie, Black & white”.

The number 15, on this envelope and also scrawled at the bottom of the enlargement, was the enlarger/printer’s system of keeping a record of which image accompanied which instructions and originals.



Mr Matjeding.

Positioned on a vertical format, this enlargement is a demonstration of the part played by the printer/enlarger, who re-photographs the image, positions it on the format, but also adjusts the tonal qualities of the image. Comparing this image with the original identity photo, we see here how the printer's modulation of shadow and light completely alters the feeling of the face: the glisten of perspiration is gone from the skin, the high-contrast flashlight reduced completely, and the shadows of the frown almost eradicated. This entirely changes the emotional impact of the image: the tension in the expression has eased, the thrown back head now seems simply held high. The placement on the format matters too: on the long vertical format, there is room for his upper body, already implying stature and presence.

Sitters Unknown



Source photographs for unknown sitters.

There are no longer any instructions accompanying this portrait, and we have no names or places recorded relating to these sitters. The originals are two snapshots. On each photograph is a cross marked in ballpoint, to indicate to the artist (or the printer) which faces to enlarge and print for the final portrait. One is of the woman only, in Shangaan attire. She is posing in front of a car. The car is parked in front of rusted corrugated iron fences – it may be in a rural setting or township in Limpopo; there are no clear indications of its whereabouts. However, photos of subjects posing in front of cars form a kind of genre: like props in a photo studio, the car might not belong to the person posing (although we do not know this), but it seems to add a cachet – of modernity, success, urban life – and forms an interesting counter-statement to the traditional clothes.

The other photograph – taken from a low angle – shows both the man and the woman together, and was possibly taken in a studio in a city. Judging by the clothes this may have been taken in the 1980s. The man stands in an exaggerated *contrapposto* stance. He is very conscious of the way he looks and is projecting a very deliberate image, an air of confidence or pride, perhaps bravado. He wears a vivid belt and fashionable shirt. He has unbuttoned his shirt some way, and is presenting himself and his clothes to best advantage.

In his right hand, he holds out some money, on display. This, too, is a prop – though his own. His other arm is around his wife's (or girlfriend's) back, with a proprietorial air. His message seems to be: "I am successful; both the money and this woman are mine." Is this a photograph taken to send back home? Studio photographs such as this one were frequently taken for that purpose: to communicate new-found success and urban modernity to family left behind.

In this second photo the same woman is wearing very different, contemporary clothes. The face of the woman in this photograph has *not* been chosen for the final portrait – instead the picture of her face from the photo in traditional clothing is chosen. And yet the portrait to come will be in modern "city" clothes.

Why then the choice of the first image? We have no way of knowing, but in this second (urban) photo, she has a very different aspect from the other: she stands quite rigidly, almost awkwardly – in marked contrast to her male companion – with her arms straight down her sides. She is dressed in modern clothing, with her hat pushed back (perhaps at the request of the photographer, possibly to reveal her face more clearly). This greatly contrasts with her demeanour in the first picture, where she looks relatively at ease in her traditional dance clothes, pink headpiece worn with aplomb. Perhaps the choice was made for that reason; also, of course, we do not know whose decision it was, his or hers.

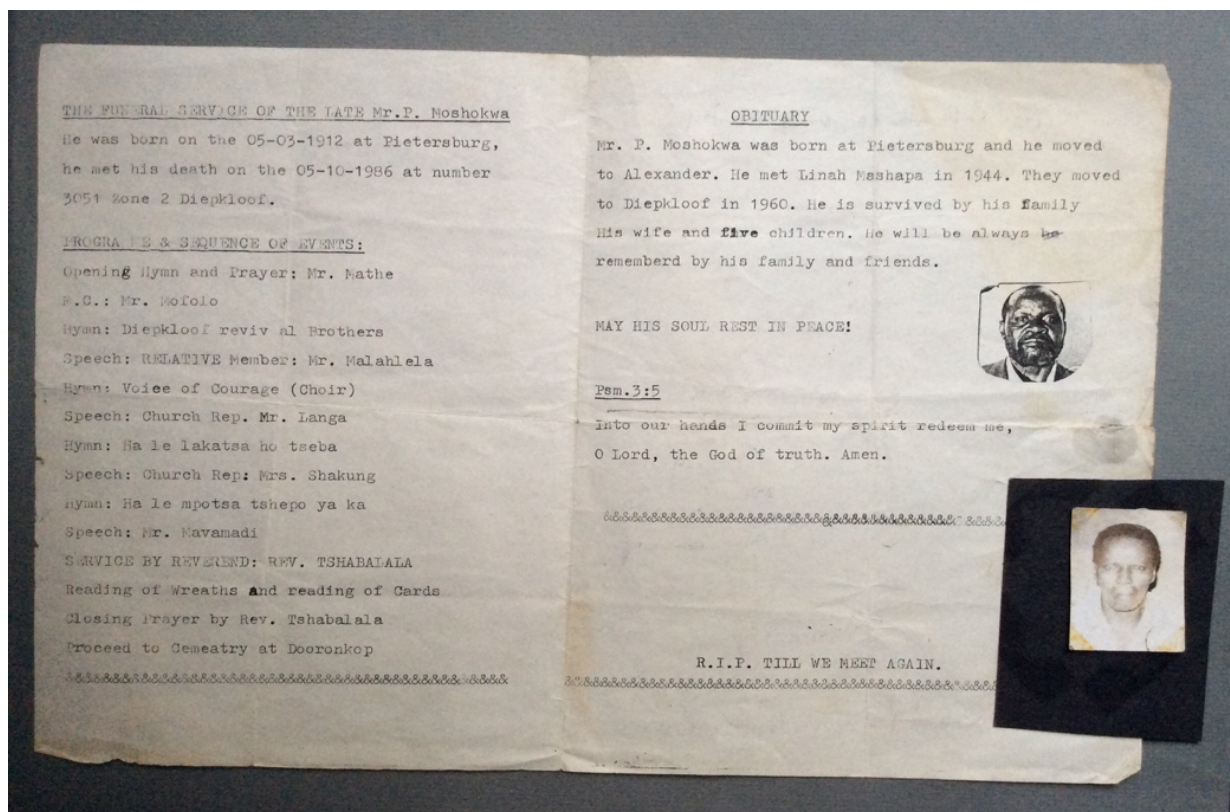


Print, with “re-grouped” heads, ready for airbrushing.

Colouring of the final portrait was never begun, so what we have is the enlargement ready for that last step. The man’s head, held at a strong angle in the original, has been straightened. His shoulders are now tilted, but they would have been airbrushed out, and he would have been given a straight-on, front-facing upper torso in a suit. The cross drawn above his head on the photograph is visible.

In this enlargement, the wife can still be seen to be wearing her traditional hat and her two Shangaan cloths knotted at the shoulders. These will all have disappeared under a painted white bridal veil and dress: a visible illustration, in this case, of the exchange of one – actual - expression of identity through dress, for another, imagined one. There are a number of images in this collection which show women dressed in traditional clothing, which are then airbrushed out for the smart city suit, or wedding dress. In Chapter Four this, too, will be discussed further.

Mr and Mrs Moshokwa



Mr and Mrs Moshokwa's source images: funeral service programme and passbook photo.

Here the original documents include a photocopied funeral service programme for the late Mr P Moshokwa. It tells us his date of death (5 October 1986), and the places where he lived: originally from Pietersburg, he “met his death” at “number 30511 Zone 2 Diepkloof”.⁹

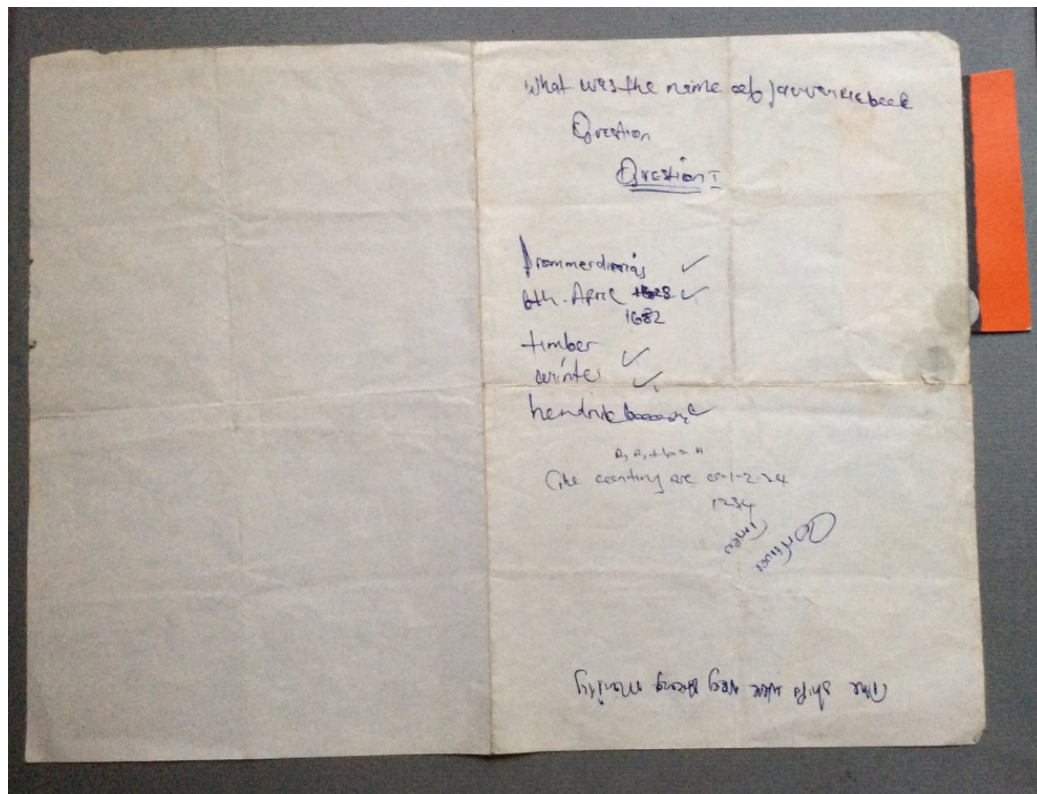
It is an A4 sheet folded to create two inside pages. The original was typed on a typewriter and the lettering has the slight inconsistencies, unevenness and corrections (few in this case), that typewriting entailed. On the right side of the right-hand page is a photocopied photograph of Mr Moshokwa. It is a copy of an identity photo possibly taken from his passbook, and it has clearly been cut at the bottom. The document itself is quite worn, and seems to have been very much handled, making it difficult to tell how soon after this funeral the airbrushed portrait was commissioned. It has damaged and worn edges and corners, is stained in one place, and has been folded and re-folded numerous times. It has a Prestik mark that suggests it was stuck to a wall, and it was used to write on: it was the copy that remained in the family.

Attached to the same page, below Mr Moshokwa’s face is a piece of card with his wife’s photograph stuck on it. This is an original photo but has been taken off the page of some kind of identity document as well – it has the remains of glue or Sellotape on the front of each of its corners.

This photograph, though an original, is less distinct than the photocopied one. It is overexposed or faded, and has a strangeness about her right eye.

On the back of the funeral service sheet is a child’s handwriting in blue ballpoint: a Soweto child doing his or her apartheid-era history homework. He or she has written out the following question and answers (and then ticked each answer):

⁹ As this research is evolving into a plan to try to find many of the families who originally commissioned some of these portraits, this kind of information is invaluable.



Back of funeral service programme.

“What was the name of Jan van Riebeeck

Question Question I

Dromedarius

6th April 1652

timber

winter

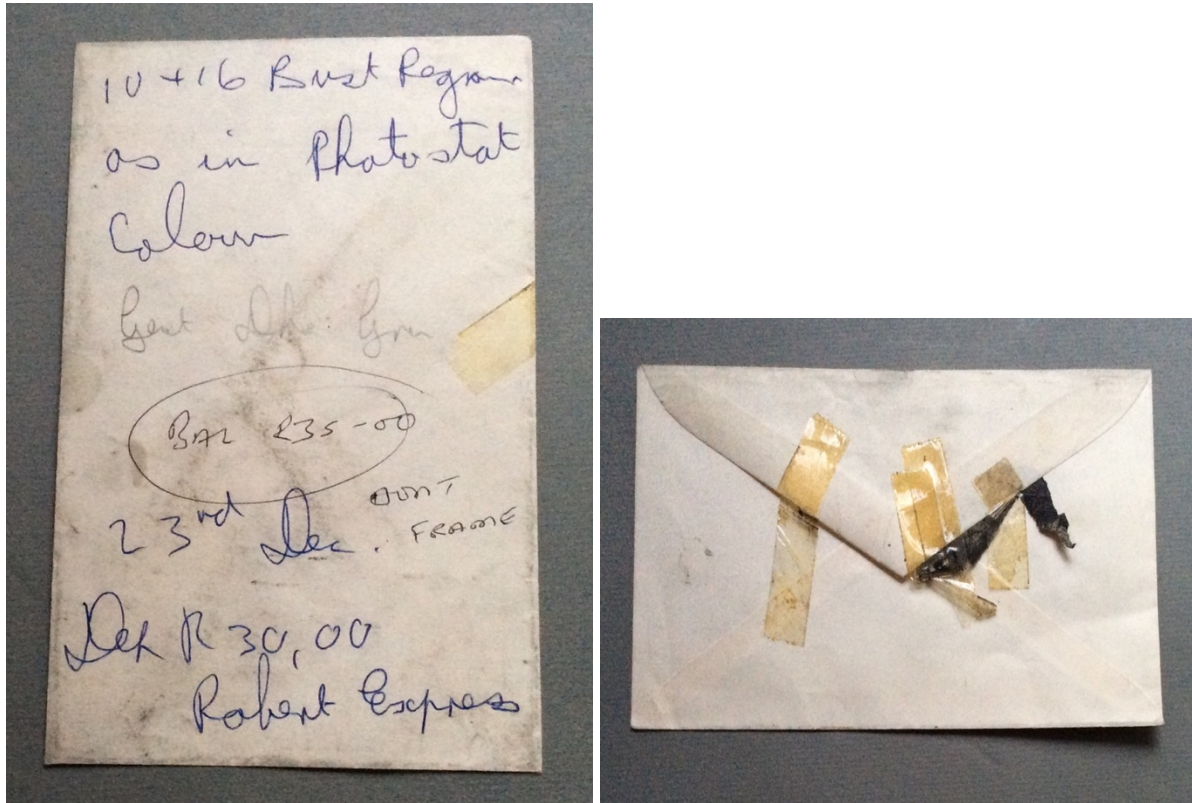
hendrikbees[some more numbers and letters]

[upside down:] The ships were very strong [.....]

The poignancy of such a subject for a black child’s school history study – the first arrival of the Europeans who were to colonise this part of the world – needs no emphasis.

The instructions for the portrait are written on a worn, grimed envelope. They are helpful to the researcher: more so than most because they include the deposit paid and the balance, revealing exactly what Yettie was earning for a portrait in the late 1980s.

There are two sets of handwriting on the envelope – mostly Yettie’s and presumably the salesman’s. The date written in ballpoint pen on it in Yettie’s handwriting is “23rd Dec.” We don’t know if it is the same year as Moshokwa’s death in late October. Some of the instructions seem to have been added later by her, in pencil: “Gent Dk Grey”.



Instructions, and back of envelope.

At the bottom of the envelope she has written “Deposit R30,00 Robert Express”. Above that the salesman (presumably Robert) has written “BAL R35-00” in a circle, and then “DONT FRAME”. So, from this rare instance, we are able to know that, in the late 1980s (or later – we do not know the exact date of this), Yettie was earning R65 per completed portrait, without frame. Out of this, she would have had to pay the person who did the re-photographing, enlarging and printing (who would also have been charging for their materials), and for her own materials and rent.

The enlargement was never painted but it provides an example of the kinds of unequal and sometimes strange juxtapositions set up because of the nature of this process. Because the originals of two faces destined for one portrait frequently came from very divergent sources, it was the job of the airbrush artist to address the resultant “strangenesses”, by bringing both

to the same level of finish and of presence; and to resolve the visual differences between the two by creating an equivalent sense of solidity and reality for both.



Mr and Mrs Moshokwa, "re-grouped" in print ready for airbrushing.

Zion Church Wedding

Many of the wedding portraits in this collection were of weddings that had either not actually taken place, or had taken place in a very different form. (There were many clients who did indeed have weddings wearing western-style white wedding dresses, but even in these cases the studio would nevertheless be expected to create entirely different, imagined, wedding clothes.) One of the aims of this study is to examine the reasons behind the fixed form of the airbrushed wedding portraits. Why, for example, would couples – despite having had a very specific kind of wedding, with a religious ceremony in the context of a specific church, and with its own special ritual attire and ceremonial accoutrements – nevertheless still opt to have their framed wedding portrait conform to the standard conventions of the white veil, lace wedding dress, flowers, carnation, suit and tie.

This is one of many examples in this collection of a wedding that *had* taken place: the original photograph is of the wedding ceremony itself. However, it is completely different from the image of the wedding in the final portrait.



Source photograph of ZCC wedding, c1950s.

This is a black and white photograph taken in what looks like a crowded corner of a room, seemingly inside a home. There are pictures and a calendar on the wall, a floral curtain with netting beneath it, over a narrow window. In this small part of the room there are two doorways. A number of people are confined in this corner, implying that the room is a small one (probably in a house in Alexander Township, as we know this is where the photographer came from).

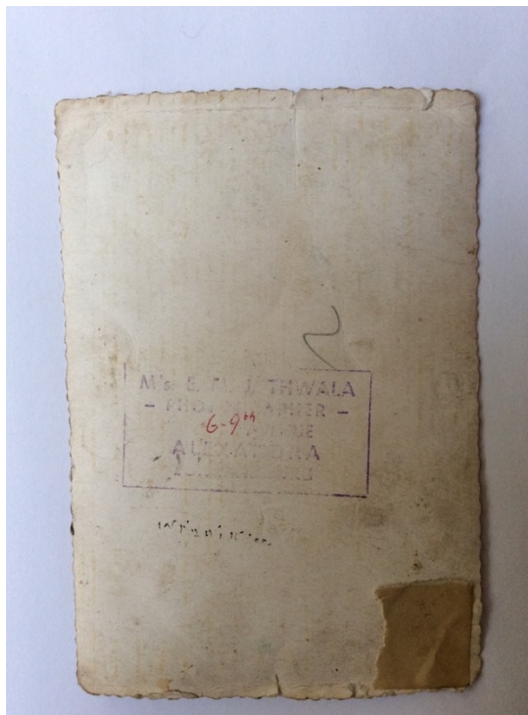
Judging by its wavy-cut edge, the photograph probably dates from the 1950s. At the top of the photograph on the white margin are two x's, showing which faces were to be enlarged for the portrait.

The original photograph shows both groom and bride at the point in their wedding when the groom is placing a ring on the bride's finger. They are members of the Apostolic Christian Church of Zion. Both are wearing the ceremonial garments of that Church: the groom wears a white robe, belted at the waist, with a sash over his left shoulder crossing to the right, and reaching to the bottom of his robe. Under his robe are a conventional jacket, white shirt and

tie, and light coloured (probably khaki) pants. On the sash is an insignia of the Church: a heart-shaped outline, crossed horizontally twice, with the letters “C.S.N.” at the top and “A.C.Z.” in the spaces below. On the left of the couple is the *uMfundisi*, the priest; he wears a more complex, coloured robe, with many pleats, wide shoulders and wide sleeves, edged everywhere with lace white trim.

On the right of the couple is the priest’s wife, *maMfundisi*, as we know by the simple but heavy white cloth over her clothes. She carries a special kind of stick, *ithusi*, used at prayer meetings (not only weddings). Behind the couple, we can see five other congregants, four men and one young woman, who are singing. The man behind the groom wears the same sash and insignia, and carries an *ithusi*. In front of the couple is a small table, with a bible and songbooks, and the now empty box that had just contained the ring.

The wear and tear of this photograph is evidence that it has been often handled, taken out and looked at. There is a narrow white border which is cracked and both sides are bent back, and the wavy edges of the photograph have softened and darkened. Part of an inky thumbprint remains on the left edge.



Back of source photograph.

The lower right corner was at one time torn off and then repaired with a piece of tape at the back. The back is grimy from handling. On the back is also the faint but legible photographer's stamp:

M/s E.M.J. THWALA -PHOTOGRAPHER-
6-9th AVENUE
ALEXANDRA
JOHANNESBURG

The final portrait is a fairly typical example of those coming from the Aqua Portrait Studio in the 1980s and possibly early 1990s (although the original photograph is, as we have seen, much older). The neckline of the dress, the collar, as in many cases, is inspired by that of the original photograph – perhaps for practical reasons, but also as a creative detail that distinguishes each bride in at least this tiny regard (there were always some distinguishing details, despite the fact that in general by this stage the dresses were largely similar). This particular one has a kind of satin-like tie or scarf in front as well. The sleeves of lace were made by spraying through pieces of actual lace, and the headpiece of tiny flowers holding the veil very delicately painted on by hand.

Comparing the positioning of the bride and groom in relation to each other in the original photo with that in the final portrait, we see that the “re-grouping” (by the printer/enlarger) has noticeably changed their aspect. They are, of course, brought much closer together. Her eyes are downcast: she is looking down at the ring in the original photo – but without the presence of the subject of her glance, one reads this instead as an expression of modesty and possibly submissiveness.

In the original, the bride tilts her head very slightly back; in the final “re-grouped” image, her head has been tilted the other way, towards him, almost like a slight bow. Because he is turned towards her, a space of intimacy is created between them.



ZCC couple: final portrait.

Mr and Mrs Mohale

This pair, like the first in this group, is interesting in that the wedding in the final image is “across time”. The two photographs are taken at very different points in the lives of this couple (and probably in different geographical locations.) The photograph of the husband is taken in a studio in the 1950s; his bride is photographed in the bedroom of a family home with her grandchildren, probably in the early 1980s.

The husband’s name appears written in the handwriting of the salesman in several different places, variously as “Billy Mohale”, “B. Mohale” or “Pili Mohale”. He is seen posing in a studio in this sepia-toned print. The photo is much-handled, its corners worn and rounded, the edges scuffed and darkened with use. The borders of the picture have yellowed. The image itself was printed at a slight angle.



Front and back of source photograph, taken in a photographic studio, of Billy Mohale.

Mr Mohale stands in front of a floral curtain backdrop; the backdrop consists of two different fabrics, which don't quite reach the floor. A folding metal chair stands next to him, on which his cloth cap lies upside-down. The kind of metal chair in the picture began to be manufactured only in the 1950s, and was possibly only available here in South Africa from the mid-50s.¹⁰ This photograph dates from no later than the mid 1950s, which means that, although a metal folding chair such as this would seem to our eyes a very informal piece of furniture for a studio portrait, at that time it was regarded as cutting edge, modern design. Billy Mohale stands slightly stiffly, left hand clenched in front of his jacket, wearing polished shoes, right foot slightly forward and under the chair. There is a pen in his pocket – often a deliberately placed object in photographs like this one. His checked cloth cap is upside-down on the chair, in what is – despite its casual air – quite a purposeful arrangement.

In Chapter Four, I will examine further the genre of studio photographs, common at that time – often made to send home to the rural family.

¹⁰ The first folding aluminium chair was manufactured in the USA by Frederic Arnold in 1947. A decade later, his factory was producing more than 14 000 per day.



Source photograph of Mrs Mohale.

The photograph of Mrs Mohale is a family snap; she is photographed in a bedroom, with small grandchildren. An electric indoor light or camera flash lights up their faces, with resulting strong light/shadow contrasts on the face. The children's clothing and the quality of the photograph and its colour, would suggest that it was taken in the late 1980s or early 1990s.

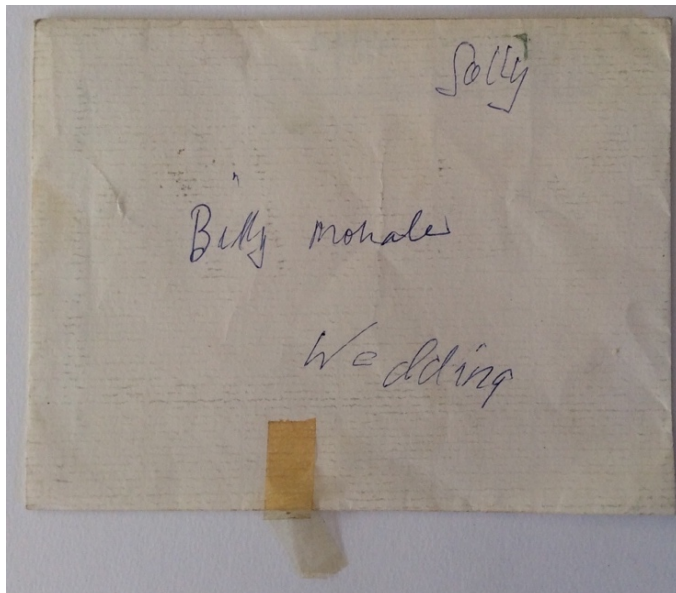
Mrs Mohale is posing – or being directed to pose, judging by the hand in the foreground – sitting on the floor in front of a bed covered with a floral bedspread. Possibly the floral bedspread and the bed-frill (coincidentally like the floral curtain fabric in the studio-photograph of her husband) are being used purposely as decorative backdrop.¹¹

The person whose left hand (and also a pointing finger of the right hand) enters into the picture is not the photographer but would seem to be supervising the picture-taking. The sitter, Mrs Mohale, is looking at this person, rather than at the camera: the expression on her face suggests one taking instructions. One of the children likewise looks at this person, the

¹¹ This possibility is suggested by an interview describing floral bed-sheets being hung as a decorative backdrop in a rural baptism ceremony (Olofssen, 2016).

other looks at the camera. There are two x's drawn onto the photo with a ballpoint pen to emphatically mark the face which is to be enlarged, Mrs Mohale's face.

On the envelope is the name of the salesman, Solly, and the husband Billy Mohale.¹² The instruction is simply, "Wedding".



Instructions and salesman's name on envelope.



Negatives made of heads, from the two source photographs.

In this pair, we see how both happened to be photographed against floral backgrounds – coincidentally, despite the extreme distance between them in time (the wife was photographed at least thirty years later), circumstances and place. Despite the serendipity of

¹² This might undermine my theory that this portrait was commissioned after Mr Mohale's presumed much earlier death. This is the envelope into which the originals were placed when the salesman took this order. The name written on this envelope would imply that Billy Mohale is his customer, not Mrs Mohale.

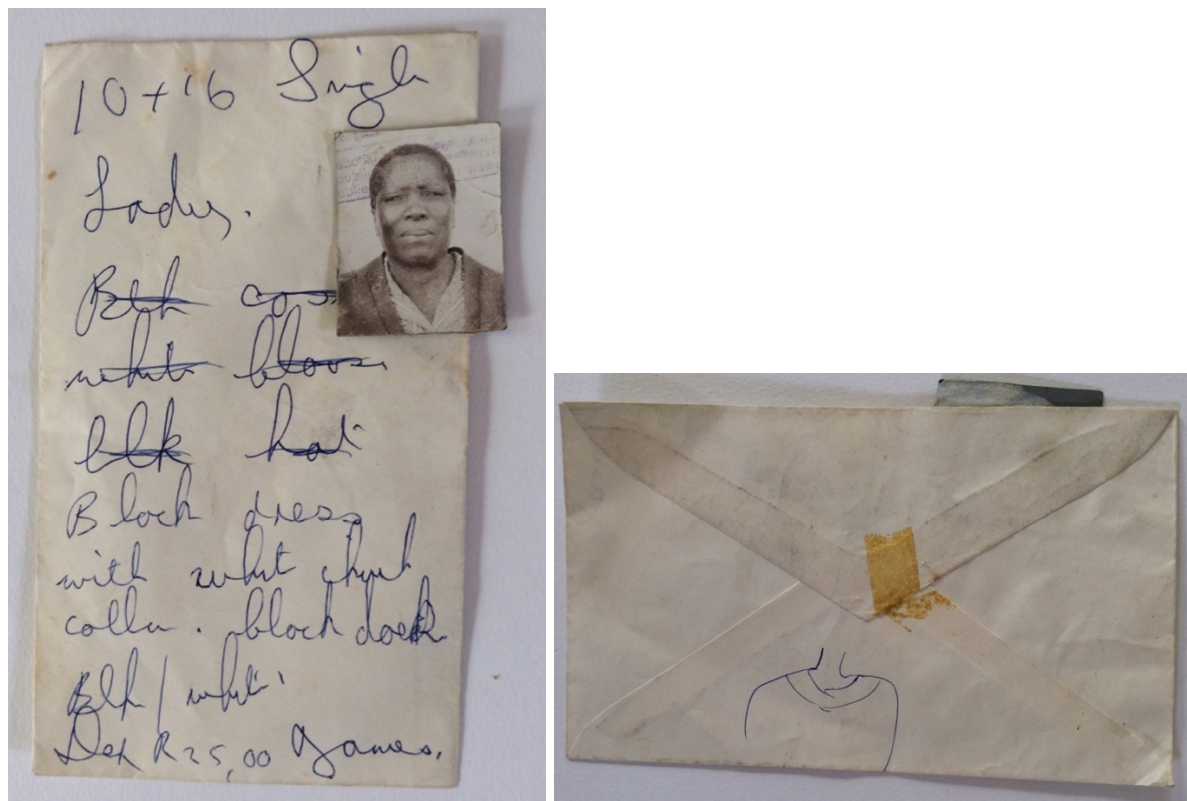
these backgrounds, the convention that prevailed without question in these kinds of portraits was that any existing background in the original would be obliterated completely, in favour of a blue, flat non-space.

For the final portrait, the artist has clearly attempted to bring them closer together in age by making the bride a little more youthful. Strong light-and-shadow contrast on her face is softened. Again, the mood is greatly altered, another example of the strangely transformative nature of this process, for better or worse. Her gaze is to our right, out of the picture – away from her husband. Where previously this read as compliant and listening to directions, it now communicates a sense of prayerful serenity. In this case, too, the shoulders of the bride were imperfectly placed, causing an odd dislocation of the head, visible especially at her right jaw. These instances are not uncommon, and are one of manifestations of the basic implausibility of this entire genre – the suspension of disbelief, or alternatively the acceptance and indeed wholehearted embrace of unreality, of make-believe, that is required of the sitters (and all other viewers) by these portraits. In some interviews, this is talked of as if the image has become a truth: the wedding is made by the image of it. In the final chapter, I will return to this idea in a different context.



Final airbrushed portrait of Mr and Mrs Mohale

Single Churchgoer



Front and back of the envelope: on the back is an explanatory sketch of a “church collar”.

The front of this envelope contains a series of changing instructions. These are in Yettie’s handwriting. Was the woman commissioning the portrait coming to her directly, and still trying to make up her mind? We know this was not the case, because the envelope has the name of the salesman “James” written on it. The back shows what seems to be someone’s (James’s?) explanatory sketch of the church collar finally decided upon, referred to on the envelope as “Black dress with whit church collar (sic)”. Normally the instructions would have come specifically from the client via the salesman, so this evidence of (presumably) the salesman’s confusion is a puzzle. However, it does provide for us a sense of the choices available (and these were not all) in what appears to be a rigidly confined set of conventions for clothes.

The importance of the clothes – despite the limited number of types and options on offer – is often overriding, for reasons which I explore in the following chapter.



Final portrait, with church clothing.

PART 3

Value and Status: The “Currency” of Different Kinds of Photographic Portraiture

How were these portraits seen and valued by the different people who played a part in their existence - by the subjects of the portraits, by the families who inherited them, and by the artists who made them?¹³

What emerges from interviews, in general, is the vast contrast presented by these portraits in terms of their value, for different people: the esteem accorded to them in the minds of the sitters or subjects and their families who owned them, compared to their status in the eyes of the artists who made them, for example.

Not one of the airbrush portrait artists in this industry whom I have interviewed (other than Yettie herself) has held onto even one example of their own work, and they have found my question – “have you kept any?” – absurd and amusing (Greaves, Tancrel, F. Michel, Schumer, and C. Michel interviews, between 1995 and 2017). Despite the fact that my interviewees from very different studios all recall the high degree of skill they were required to demonstrate, and the very high standards they had to maintain (failing which they could be fired peremptorily by the Head Artist), they are, without exception, disparaging of this activity as a whole. Though they clearly pride themselves on the high degree of expertise they had, none regard their pictures as ‘artworks’, or as imagery worthy of engaging with seriously for itself, or really as “art” at all.

Why this ambivalence? This is difficult to answer, but there is repeated testimony from the artists regarding the lowly place they themselves held in the eyes of the studio owners, and the very minimal pay on which they had to survive. To a large extent, they seemingly took on this regard of their status. What is telling is the fact that the artists referred (and still do to this day in interviews), to the practice as a whole as the “portrait racket”: a term that reflects this bitterness – the unending, sheer exploitation of the artists and of others (including clients) by

¹³An important topic for future research would be to investigate these images and their currency and meaning after their lifespan within the original families, is over: how are they seen and valued by collectors, dealers, and those who trade in objects of nostalgia?

the studio bosses, who became massively wealthy themselves. (Yettie, self-employed, was not subservient to any bosses, but she never became wealthy.)

In this work, did Yettie regard herself as an “artist”? She continued to draw privately, for herself, throughout her life. She was proud of her own personal drawings and paintings, and her house was full of her own images, framed. But she drew a sharp distinction between this, “real” art-making, and the airbrushed portraiture work that she did for a living – which she, like the others in her line of work, did not regard as worth talking about. Nevertheless, she must have taken pride in examples of airbrushed portraits from earlier in her career, because she retained some of them in her possession for decades. As I have indicated, this was extremely unusual.

But how do we understand the value this particular genre of portraiture held for their subjects, the sitters? Why would people have wanted the airbrushed portraits, when – in some cases, at least – they could have chosen to be actually photographed in a studio together, even dressed in formal attire (as many were)?

What was the special regard these portraits engendered, that differed from simply enlarged, framed photographs? In what way do these portraits manifest as profoundly *different* from photographic portraits? This question will be addressed from varied perspectives, in different chapters of this study.

It is a question that has been put to numerous interviewees (to whose important narratives, accounts and views, unfortunately, justice will not be done in this dissertation, for lack of space.) In many families, they are seen as heirlooms. In a few households, older parents express anxiety that the next generation will not take care of them. This was expressed in some interviews in Limpopo and also in Mamre, Western Cape. It is a legitimate anxiety. In some areas in the Western Cape almost all the portraits have been sold to antique dealers or second-hand furniture shops.

The portraits are almost always presented and positioned in their houses by their owners, as valued possessions in the family; as objectively valuable; as precious. This sense of these portraits being objectively, not just sentimentally, valuable objects may derive from the way in which the idea of these portraits was originally “sold” (in the sense of having used

persuasion) to clients by salesmen; but from the way they are finally seen and hung on walls, in central and important positions in houses, this high regard remains.

They are almost always in places of honour: very visible, usually in the main room or over the double bed, for example. All the trappings of value are present: in the way in which they were actually framed in large, expensive-looking shiny dark frames of many different degrees of ornateness depending on cost, often with expensive curved glass – ‘furniture frames’ as they were called; and in the way in which they were taken down for my closer perusal, reverentially treated and handled, carefully, as works of art. In most cases, this would be the first time they had been taken down from the wall since their arrival in the house.



Portrait hanging in home in Mangkweng Village, near Polokwane.



Above, portrait in a home in Maja, near Polokwane; below, portrait in front room in home in Tshakhuma Village near Makhado, c2015.

Certainly, the airbrushed photographic enlargements appear to be regarded by their owners as objects of a very different order from photographs (even photos from photographic studios, for which one could wear special clothes of one kind or another, and have a formal backdrop).

The fact that these are framed, large, in colour, or are hanging on the wall, does not distinguish them in all households. In many, they share space with more recent portraits, printed colour photographs that are also enlarged, framed (though generally less expensively), and hanging on the walls.



Mr and Mrs Neluvhalani, c1969. Left, Godfrey Neluvhalani, their grandson, holding portrait of grandparents, digitised; Tshakhuma, Limpopo, c2016. He keeps the new digitised version (with stock-image background of a lake) on his wall; the original is not displayed because it is broken. Nevertheless, older members of the family prefer the original “because it is unique” and is the only picture in existence of the couple made in their lifetime.



Portrait framed with added tinsel, Tshukhumah Village, 2017.

What *does* distinguish these, however, is how they are spoken about. They are referred to as old – ‘historical’, ‘antiques’, ‘treasures’ (for example, Maja interview 2015 and others). They

are seen now to represent a past era, and a past time in the life of the family itself. Whether thought of as a better time or a worse, these pasts are deeply embedded in most families' collective memories, and play a powerful role in the sense of the family's continuity and place.

For some, the categorisation of the portrait as a 'painting' is seen to rank it as an artwork, and confer upon it a very different order of esteem. Even though it might be understood that there is a photograph underneath, the perception of it as a painting is a common one (and of course these *are* paintings). Mr Sidwell Maja, who inherited a portrait of his parents, refers throughout to the portrait as a painting (although he knows that it is a painted enlargement of a photograph). He talks of its uniqueness: "It is one of a kind. It is the only one. I have to be its custodian; I have to take care of it for the future generations: it is a treasure." "The portrait is made by hand. It is made by an artist, one with skill, not a machine" (Maja, interview 2015).

But this identification of these images as unique, as hand-made, or as paintings, though frequent is not consistent among all their owners. Their status seems in doubt sometimes. Some refer to them as "photos". Some younger owners who have inherited them, seem unsure how they were made.

Another obvious reason for the greater value that these airbrushed portraits possibly hold for many families is that these portraits created an imagined reality, not deemed possible in normal photography, at least at the time these were current; not even in a photographic studio, where the set-up, backdrop, clothing and appearance could, to some extent, involve a pretence, a make-believe. The airbrushed portraits, on the other hand, involve a transformation, physical and visible. One does not know exactly what one will receive.



Wedding portrait, c1955, held by the bride. Maja Village, Limpopo. 2015.

Two of the interviewees spoke of the impact the portraits had when they were delivered or collected. Florah Mailulah described her joy when her portrait arrived in Matshedi Village (Limpopo) in the late 1960s. It was a gift from her husband who lived and worked all year round in Johannesburg. It is still the only object on the walls of her house. Thami Makhanya, who often accompanied his father on his deliveries, or delivered the portraits himself for his father, said:

“The excitement of people was unbelievable. They were just blown away. Because, you know, there would be *their* face just the same, but then there would be these flowers or these pearls...” (T. Makhanye, interview 2016).

They are of a different order from the straightforward photograph, of whatever kind: whether of the identity photograph, the graduate photo, or the self-determined, posed studio photograph – those are about a lived reality, to one degree or another. The airbrushed photographic portraits, on the other hand, reside much more in the world of emotions and of illusion.

And this, finally, suggests the last reason for their enhanced status and currency that I will deal with here, i.e. the element of *ritualization* that accompanies these portraits: first in the commissioning of them (the sending of the original photos in an era when there was uncertainty in such an act, at least a leap of faith, as I have discussed); the aspect of sacrifice, considerable for many in terms of money; the time it took to arrive; and then the receiving of the portrait, and the placing and hanging in the house. The physical place of the picture, its iconic centrality, visibility, height, the symmetry, its position in (or as) a place of honour, reflects the rituality of the whole endeavour. These are time-involving and deliberate acts.



Soweto, c1995. Photograph: Greg Marinovich.



Left: Mrs Eunice Netshidzivhani, Tshakhuma Village, near Makhado, 2015. Right: Mrs Florah Mailah, Makgofo, near Polokwane, 2015.



Some homes of owners of portraits, Limpopo.



Mrs Florah Mailulah, discussing the portraits with family and friends, 2015.



Portrait of the late Mr Netshidzivhani, in Tshakhuma Village near Makhado, Limpopo.

Chapter 4. THE ORIGINS OF THE GENRE – A PARTIAL HISTORY

This genre of images inherited, and developed, a set of conventions which came to be almost rigidly fixed. These conventions, I will argue, became imbued (by the users and subjects of the portraits) with layers of meaning and significance, through their sheer ubiquity. I suggest that these acquired meanings differed for different groups in this country, even for the same conventions and tropes. In order to grasp the nature of these images, and what this collection of signs and meanings consist in, I will here and in the next chapter, investigate these, and first of all, try to trace their origins. Some were inherited, as I try to show below. Others came about for a variety of complex reasons I will explore over the next three chapters.

The approaches to exploring their origins will differ. The first set of conventions is dealt with at the start, because it engages with the historical background to this genre in South Africa. This talks about the conventions of the backgrounds, in a different and quite literal sense: the actual *painted backgrounds* within the portraits, and also the picture formats (perhaps these are two features rather than one, but I will deal with them together). The second set of conventions deal with the pose, in both the singles (portraits of one individual) and doubles (couples). And thirdly, there are the conventions found in the imaginary attire, the painted-on clothes. The colour palette will form part of the discussion to some extent, both in relation to the background and in relation to clothes.

The Painted Backgrounds and the Oval Format: The Origins of the Genre

As a young artist starting in the business, Yettie Wasserman had known (and had at some point been trained by) Fred Michel. In the mid 1990s, Michel was already in his late eighties, and living in a single room in Bellville, Cape Town. I travelled to see him, at her suggestion, because it seemed he was the last “living link” back to the very beginning of this practice in South Africa. He had, as a very young man, been among the many dozens of local artists trained by Mr Popov, an entrepreneur who arrived in the years of the Great Depression years, the 1930s, from Chicago, USA. At that time, Mr Popov had brought across his own artists and salesmen by ship from America. He brought his head artist from Chicago, a man of 84 at the time, who had been known in Chicago as ‘the king of portraiture’. A photograph once existed, showing Popov’s studio of a hundred artists back in Chicago, and it has more than once been described to me by younger colleagues or apprentices of Fred Michel. What exact

set of circumstances led to Popov's choosing South Africa as a fertile new market we do not know; but once here, he set up a business in Johannesburg, called Progress Studios. Soon he became "a legend, a huge success, living in a mansion in Parktown" (Michel, interview 1995).

In tracing the roots of this man, Popov from Chicago, who was the source of the "portrait racket" in South Africa, it emerged that indeed Chicago had been a major centre of the hand-coloured photographic portraiture industry already in the mid 1800s (H.K. & B.A. Henisch, 1996). The practice of hand-colouring enlargements of photographic portraits had of course been in existence much earlier. But now, as the prices for photographic prints dropped in the latter part of the nineteenth century, and as hand-coloured tintypes became readily available in America, ordinary people – including many black Americans – could own them. The much older tradition of painted portraits in European and American aristocratic and upper class homes, gave rise to a widespread aspiration among working class people who wanted to own portraits like those. Painted portraits were "big" in the American colonies, among families with pretensions: "... the social image of the sitter was of prime importance to indicate social status." Wayne Craven in *Colonial American Portraiture* describes how most wealthy Americans of this era wanted to add "an aristocratic bearing" and lifestyle to their merchant or landowning affluence. In New York, a group of artists known as the 'patroon' painters flourished in this genre of "status painting". Portrait painters like Copley, Smibert, Sulley, Earl, Feake, Badger, Wollaston, Trumbull, West, and the three Peales, for example, as well as the realist portraitist Thomas Eakins (reputedly "unafraid of portraying the unflattering emotions of sorrow and melancholy"), were among the most well-known ones – there were hundreds of others (Craven, 1987).

And so, the idea that almost anybody could afford to have hanging on their wall a "painted" portrait of themselves, caught on extraordinarily rapidly.

Tintypes, also known as "ferrotypes", were invented in the 1850s in America. A very underexposed negative image was developed onto a thin iron plate. The plate was blackened by painting, lacquering or enamelling, and coated with a collodion photographic emulsion. After the negative was transposed onto the plate, the dark background gave the resulting image the appearance of a positive. Many "while-you-wait" itinerant photographers made use

of this form. Itinerant tintype-photographers, travelling to remote farms and communities, would cut pieces from a large sheet, making postcard-sized images; erratic edges often show how roughly they were cut.



American tintypes of the mid- to late-1800's. (Acknowledgements: Terry Castle, Stanford University.)



Above, tintype photograph of Andrew Chandler (left) and Silas Chandler (right, a slave), in the uniform of the Confederate army, 1861. (Acknowledgements: Frank Reeves, Block News Alliance).

Steven Kasher writes, in his summary of his book *America and the Tintype*:

Introduced in 1856 as a low-cost alternative to the daguerreotype and the albumen print, the tintype was widely marketed from the 1860s through the first decades of the twentieth century as the most popular photographic medium. The picture-making preference of the people, it was almost never used for celebrity portraiture: It was affordable, portable, unique and available almost everywhere.

Tintypes were frequently lightly hand-tinted. Interestingly Kasher continues:

Because of its ubiquity, the tintype studio became a kind of performance space in which sitters could act out their personal identities. Sitters brought to the tintype studio... the tools of their trade, costumes, toys, stuffed animals and other such props. Often they would enact stereotypes and fantasies that reflected or challenged conventional gender, race and class roles. (Kasher, 2008).

Clearly, the notion that a portrait studio can become a performance space in which to enact a fantasy version of oneself, carries over not only to the studio in which one poses with props, but also to the studio in which one's images are re-made. And for us in turn, these re-made images might provide insight into what lies behind aspirations and dreams of difference.

Originally, in these American studios, colour was added to photographs in one of two ways: "hand-tinting" referred to the technique of painting over an image in thin washes, which did not change the image content in any way; whereas "over-painting" referred to the use of more opaque paint, to the extent that the photographic origins of the image would sometimes be completely obscured.



Painted tintype, US, sitter unknown, c1870s.

Over-painting... often involved altering undesirable aspects of the original photograph. The cost of a painted photograph depended greatly on the amount of paint applied to the print... Having a hand-coloured photographic portrait itself became a status symbol, though most... people could only afford a rosy tint on the cheeks and gold paint on jewellery (Burns, 1995).



Tinted tintype, US, sitters unknown and date unknown.

Painted photographs grew in sophistication and popularity. Studios proliferated within even the smallest American towns, and itinerant photographers travelled everywhere in wagons and by train seeking business opportunities. They would deliver each photograph in an envelope to the enlarger/printer, who copied and enlarged them, and printed them on paper (deliberately faintly) as a guide for the artist who then painted them. The envelopes often included a lock of hair from the sitter, and sometimes a swatch of dress fabric, as guides to the artist, along with a detailed, filled-in form. A rare surviving example of such a form, from around 1895, exists in the collection of the Nova Scotia Museum (Robson, 1990).



These painted photographic portraits date from between the 1860s and the 1880s. The artists, photographers and sitters are unknown. These particular examples are housed in the archives of the Princeton University Library, Princeton, United States.

This sometimes-strange genre, which brought together the very different arts of painting and photography, did not always produce resounding successes. For example, because early photographs required the sitters to stay completely still for long periods, an unnatural

stiffness was not uncommon in the photographs; and as Geoffrey Batchen notes in *Forget Me Not: Photography and Remembrance*,

This stiffness is not softened by the addition of paint...which usually covered whatever idiosyncratic detail may have enlivened the photograph... [Thus they] often look strangely surreal, the contest for supremacy between photograph and paint producing striking distortions of perspective and expression (Batchen, 2008: 17).



Sitters unknown; USA, circa late 1800's. Princeton University Library archives.

Key to the development of the hand-coloured photographic portrait genre and its eventual arrival in South Africa, as we discussed in the previous chapter, was the invention of the airbrush. The airbrush, or “paint distributor” as it was first called, from its inception was associated with – if not invented for – colouring photos. In 1879, in Illinois, a man called Abner Peeler had “put together some odds and ends with a small vaned wheel (it resembles a tiny pinwheel) and the ‘paint distributor’ was born.” The first thing he did with it was to “dabble in a little retouch job on a photo of himself” (www. airbrushmuseum.com).

Various inventors tried to improve it. Liberty Walkup, married to a professional photographic retoucher, bought the patent and made fundamental changes, in the early 1880s. It was he who renamed it the “airbrush”. Walkup and his wife tirelessly promoted this device, travelling often to Chicago, where there was a thriving photo retouching industry.

...Colour photography was decades away and if you wanted a colour portrait, as everyone did, a black and white photograph had to be coloured by hand. It was a tedious, time consuming, and labour intensive art. It was done assembly line style, with.... a “spot knocker” specialising on a single portion of a photo (hair, ears, eyes, etc.), and with “drapery men” “hanging” the background (Burns, 1995).

The airbrush was a “game changer” to these companies, and photo retouching remained the primary use well into the first half of the twentieth century. The impact that this invention had on hand-colouring photographs was enormous. It was taken up by the numerous photo-colouring companies of Chicago, with lucrative results – until the crash of the Great Depression in the 1930s forced entrepreneurs like Popov to look further afield. What light does all this shed on the industry in South Africa, and on the evolution of our portrait conventions here? There are two notable points, two aspects (at least) of the nature of the business in this country that we seem to be able to trace to those American roots.



Left: American airbrushed photographic portrait, c1920. Right: Oval frame, c1935, with stamp showing its origin in Chicago on the back.

The first is that the entire business model (the structure of the studio with studio owner, low-level-employee production line artists, freelance travelling salesmen, outsourced framers) was transplanted from North America into South Africa, with very little change. And in terms of conventions, more important is the second point: if we look at these examples (a few

representing hundreds more in archives and museums), the imagery itself, its style and its mode of presentation – their visual conventions – look remarkably similar to ours.

Although these particular images were not airbrushed images (they were too early for that, and were painted with gouache and water colour on salted paper, albumen prints, or tintypes), it seems clear that the man from Chicago also brought with him a readymade *visual* form, requiring very little alteration to adapt to the South African locale. Features of this form included, firstly, their shape, designed for oval frames. Secondly, the painted-on clothes, at least some parts of which (the lace collars, for example) are probably imaginary or embellished.

And, finally, the same painting-out, *deletion*, of any pre-existing background or context, placing the sitter against a flattened non-space. This background (or absence of background) was painted mainly turquoise or grey-blue background: the colour that, increasingly brighter in hue, became the standard background colour in most South African airbrushed portraits.¹⁴ Why the blue – or blue-grey or bluish-turquoise – of the background? There does not seem to be an explanation, as far as I have found. One might speculate that this was a simplification of the tradition of painted skies on the backdrops of portrait studios, or in the backgrounds of many painted portraits. But the result is a negation of what was, or might have been, there. In that sense it implies displacement, removal, extraction from surroundings or context.

In Kamila Shamsie's article *The Missing Picture* (2013) she acknowledges the importance of the omission - that which is not in the photograph, but is implied in some way, and has the potential to propose a (powerful) alternate narrative. [Penny] Siopis' *Forgotten Family 1 [based on an airbrushed portrait of this genre]* implies a narrative about what is not (in the picture, in the lives of the family), rather than what is. It resonates with elements of displacement. It implies the other, the 'negative' space, where often the 'positive' is one most referred. It is about something that is elsewhere, and not where it should be, such as displacement (Bentel, 2017).

The similarity to the portraits produced in South Africa decades later, suggests that Popov simply continued to do what he had always done, or seen, in America. These conventions were not grown here – they pre-existed. Grafted onto conditions here, over time they were imbued with and developed their own localised meaning, as I will discuss in the next section. Even the oval frames at first were brought in from Chicago. An early example of a now empty frame used in the Cape, with its curved glass, appears to be evidence of that fact. The stamp, barely legible on the backing, says: “Gemaaken Gewaarborgd voor International Art 001 Chicago” (“Made, Guaranteed, for International Art 001, Chicago”, implying that it was made in Holland, and exported twice – to the United States, and then to South Africa).

Chapter 5. THE SOURCE IMAGES AND ORIGINALS: CONVENTIONS WITHIN CONVENTIONS

As was mentioned earlier, there are conventions within conventions – and even more so in the different source photographs themselves. I will talk about just two categories of them here – two of the most commonly found.

PART 1

The Photographic Studios

By the 1950s, photographic studios were becoming the most accessible way of having a picture of oneself made that was not the identity photo of the hated dompas.

Photographers within black communities, even if itinerant at first, were from the early 1960s compelled by law to have a fixed work address, and therefore a studio to which people could come and pose (T. Makhanye, interview 2016). Such studios were set up all over, including in small towns in some of the homelands. In the inner city of Johannesburg there were many by the 1960s.

They were very varied, as we see from the examples of studio pictures left behind in the Aqua Portrait Studio. Some had backdrops, some a few props, a few were more elaborate and painted; others had merely a bare wall, or piece of curtaining. The kinds of backdrops and props that most studios had, if any, would comprise of some or all of the following: either a piece of cloth or a curtain hanging behind, or a painted scene; a small table of some kind, possibly a chair or two; and a plant in a pot or a vase of flowers. Often, they were patently fake flowers. Most studios had a kind of mat or carpet on the floor. Interestingly, where there were painted backdrops they were not “African” in nature, but rather what was associated with “Englishness” in style: a bower, hints of a garden, a cloudy sky – no doubt a convention inherited from the formerly mainly “white” photographic studios that were still very current in the 1940s and 1950s in Johannesburg.



Source photographs from the Aqua Portrait Studio collection.

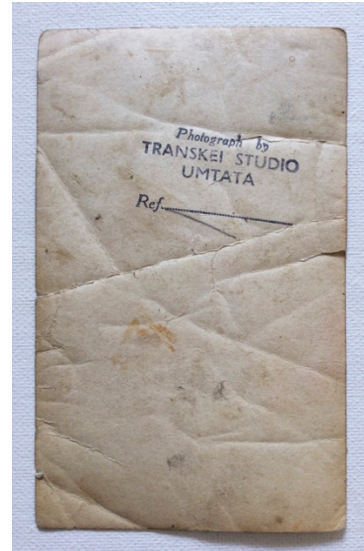


Source photographs from the Aqua Portrait Studio collection.



Left and right, sitters unknown, c1900. (Source photographs on these pages from Aqua Portrait Studio collection.)

Early studio pictures from Victorian and even pre-Victorian times, throughout Europe, had similar props: the imaginary painted garden, bower or balcony; the painted sky; the chair or balustrade – usually extremely luxurious and decorated – and the plant, or flowers in a pot, on a table or stand. Early (Victorian and early 20th century) South African studio pictures, like this one in the collection, captured it closely. It seems to me that the much later studios in the South African context largely took that idiom of studio furnishing (although probably unknowingly) and repeatedly recreated, or at least referenced it, even if in fragmentary, elusive, and metaphoric ways.



Sisters, c1910. Lesethleng Village, Northwest Province.

Many of the studio backdrops became very minimal: a mat, a curtain, a prop. But the photo of a woman, above, taken in a studio in Umtata, has a painted backdrop. She is posing in a “garden” on an upholstered stool with carved legs, with three-dimensional steps leading realistically into an illusionistically painted garden pathway, receding in perspective.



The image above, of a husband and his wife and baby, is telling, their “semiotic codes interacting” on numerous levels (Appadurai, 1997). The husband stands, feet apart,

somewhat awkwardly, perhaps ill at ease. His wife, holding the baby, sits with bare feet. He is impeccably dressed in a suit and tie and with pocket handkerchief; like an urban man, with details such as pocket handkerchief and tie-clip, presented as if he could be a successful businessman, a captain of industry – though we have no idea if he is such in real life. The woman, on the other hand, is not only barefoot (implying a rural way of life), but is wearing a “doek”, something completely associated with black women – never worn by white middle class women. She is slightly turned away from him, and has an air of deference; they are separated, distinctly, by the flower-pot stand.



Contact sheet from Bobby Bobson's studio, Durban, c1995: photos of the shop, studio, with curtain, bower and landscape backdrop. Photograph: Angie Buckland.



Photographic studio stamps, from the Aqua Portrait Studio collection.

Backdrops and props could play their part in the creating of identity. Appadurai speaks about A “rehearsal of roles”, according to Appadurai, can take place in these photographic studio settings:

Though backdrops may be described as props... they are not as passive as that designation may suggest... Backdrops remain a place where the meanings of modernity

can be contested and where experiments with the means of modernity can be conducted, even by those not well-placed in relation to class and state power... Photographic backdrops and props play an increasing role in the work of the imagination, in consumer-driven images of subjectivity and in socially mobile practices of self-representation and class-identification.

Their imaginary possibilities can act as “accessories for the subjectivity of the persons in photographs and the persons who view and circulate photographs” (Appadurai, 1997).



Subjects posing in front of cars: source photos from the Aqua Portrait Studio collection.

In the case of some of the source photographs of this collection, the idea of a fantasy backdrop seems to apply to a number of subjects posed in front of backgrounds that are *not* painted ones in studios, but are contrived from what exists in the outside world. Photographs of the subject posing in front of a car, for example, have been mentioned before: the car, obviously, a signifier of modernity, technology, the city, wealth, mobility, success, the future.

Appadurai says further that

the significance of the visible backdrop (actually represented in the photograph) cannot be assessed without reference to the invisible backdrop (the discourses and images that inform the eye of the photographer)... This second order consists of other photographs, visual texts and verbal discourses – ethnological, touristic, bureaucratic and missionary – which, in various combinations... shape the reading (Appadurai,1997).

Yet clearly, studios in South Africa provided a kind of democratic photographic space for individuals to “shape” their *own* “reading”, in a sphere that was dominated by the bureaucratic and coercive one.

PART 2

Passbook Photographs

The other main group of source photographs are those from passbooks: some still affixed in the passbooks, others taken out and sent as small detached images. Some are “travel documents”, as the homelands called them; others are driver's licences for work positions (a driver for a homeland hospital, for example).



Licence of hospital driver, working for Lebowa government, c1980's.



Passbook photographs as source images, from Aqua Portrait Studio collection.

Any sense of context or place is absent, and they are body-less – often not even shoulders remain to them. There is only the face, onto which the artist has to construct a bodily presence, and clothe it. Each one faces front-on and is more or less devoid of expression. Appadurai points out an irony of identity photos: “In such photographs, it is the ‘singularity’ of the individual that is the crucial goal, but it is accomplished ... through photographs that are like fingerprints”, in which everyone is reduced to a generic form (Appadurai, 1997).

Sometimes - especially in the images of the women - the eyes are involuntarily slightly downcast.

As if to emphasise the *boxed, stamped, controlled, and filed* quality of the human being, “imprisoned” in the dompas photo, in addition there are frequently markings, official signatures, stamps, perforations, embossed indents, holes, inked and franked official insignia – right across the small photographs: often across the face or hair. These are largely intended to avoid fraud, but the effect is a further sense of dehumanization. Appadurai characterizes this “incarcerating quality – even without the stamps and perforations:

The official forms and documents...function as the "backdrop" against which cropped head-shots take up a small space. ...All official photography (passports, mug-shots, driver's licenses, etc.) has this incarcerating quality in which the realism of the photograph is vastly overwhelmed... (Appadurai, 1997).

These markings and “incarcerations” form serious obstacles in the printed enlargement for the artist to attempt to hide or disguise. The disguise would sometimes succeed, often failed, but necessarily involved great ingenuity. The airbrush artist Mike Tancrel has described in interviews the many techniques for disguising or removing these marks from the print before painting it: scraping down, washing, removing chemically, covering with layers of pale paint-undercoats; or as a last resort, creating cleverly arranged hats, veils or hairstyles.

We will return to the passbook photograph in more detail in Chapter 7.

Chapter 6. TROPES AND CONVENTIONS

In this chapter, I consider how the factors that were explored in the last two chapters (and others, as I will discuss below) combine to create what became the highly-conventionalised form of the airbrushed portrait.

Subjectivity, in fact, is produced through signifiers, languages, and modes that pre-exist the individual... They were based on standardised forms of self-imagining and personal aesthetics... Poses, dress, and objects reflected an intricate game of meaning in which exterior appearances framed and fixed a fabricated public self. The subject being photographed, the photographer, and the viewer – all collaborated in a performative process driven by desire (Alu, 2014: 147).

Though the question might be simple, the answers are complex. There were a number of tropes and conventions that ruled this genre, to which most of the participants conformed. We see them in the portraits in this collection, and in others that came from this studio which are now in peoples' homes – and all these are similar to those produced by other airbrushed portraiture studios. (There were important variations from region to region across other parts of South Africa, but that is outside the scope of this study.) The first section of the chapter will talk about some of these conventions, and explore a range of possible reasons for them, in order to understand the surprising rigidity with which these conventions were adhered to. Some of these reasons are rooted in the history of the genre itself, others emerge from the social context, and there are some technical and practical ones.

What we mean by “convention” in this context is narrow. The Concise Oxford Dictionary defines “convention” as a “general (often tacit) consent” and a “practice based on this”; “depending on convention, not natural, not spontaneous; ...following traditions.” In this case, certain aspects of the mode of presentation in the final portraits – placing, pose, dress and use of colour (for example) – seem to conform to a pattern, repeated to an extent that demands examination. Many years ago, when Yettie Wasserman was still running a busy studio, I asked her why the portraits all had these very similar features, and her answer was, “Because that’s what people want.” This section tries to look beneath and beyond that to see, if we can, what determines – or even dictates – “what people want”.

So, within this practice and this context, I will try to unravel some of the conventions and canons and “culturally stylized components” that regulate the genre. This will not always succeed in leading to the ultimate answer as to WHY these take the form they take, but it may take us some of the way toward seeing how they got there.

One has to always bear in mind that the completed airbrushed portraits are a final form of visual convention that extracts and reassigns parts of images that were already embedded in *other* visual conventions. Each face that is portrayed comes from a particular photographic source governed by conventions of its own: the formal family portrait, the informal family snap, the subject standing against a car, the subject posing in the photographer’s studio, the identity portrait from the passbook or driver’s licence, and so on.

Obedience to implicit ‘rules’, all the way from the taking of a photograph to the assembling and constructing of a formal portrait, is indeed the norm. As Arjun Appadurai wrote in *The Colonial Backdrop*: “Body styles and postures, clothing and facial expression, positioning and eye-contact with the lens, all retain culturally stylised components” (Appadurai, 1997).

In the process of creating images of ourselves, we all (in our social groups) tend to conform to rules of this kind without questioning why, and in fact mostly without a conscious awareness that our conventions *are* conventions. Pierre Bourdieu expresses wonder that photography, despite its being so extraordinarily accessible – as a tool, as a technology, and as a skill, has not been “delivered over to individual anarchy”, but that instead “it appears that there is nothing more regulated and conventional than photographic practice... in the occasions which give rise to photography... or the very composition of the pictures, everything seems to obey implicit canons” (Bourdieu, 1965: 21, 23).

I will return to Bourdieu’s theories, although so much has changed in the nature of social photography that perhaps these ideas hardly now apply. But the whole photographic milieu that we are discussing here in this study – all the practices and processes regarding it, the activities around it, and the usages thereof – date from around the time that Bourdieu made his arguments. And so, they are a useful frame for the forms and structures of these practices, and – despite the different cultural context he wrote in (with its very different class structures) – seem to resonate with the social context in which those arguments evolved.

Again, Bourdieu is writing, of course, about straightforward photography, whereas I am applying his ideas to manipulated and altered photographs: in fact, composed *parts* of photographs, combined, enlarged, isolated from context, and painted. But even so, his theories in this context seem not incongruous, so similar are the kinds of apparent societal rules and strictures that hold. The mechanisms used in reaching the final image are quite different, of course: instead of posing the subjects (whether a group or an individual or a couple) in front of a camera, the pre-photographed subjects are ‘posed’ by enlargers, photographic printers, and airbrush artists.

PART 1

The Pose



From Aqua Portrait Studio collection, c1970.

Earlier airbrushed images followed the source photograph to a greater extent, for example allowing the sitter to sit at an angle, such as in a three-quarter position. By the 1960s, however, the pose was strictly frontal: even where the source image may have had figures at all kinds of angles, the final portraits had their shoulders facing forward. Why these strict conventions of pose?

This is not unique, or even unusual. In a range of cases involving conditions of displacement, exile, or Diaspora, it seems the studio photos and family snaps which are taken to send home or to each other, reveal similar traits to the photographic portraits of this study. One finds examples in other societies and countries, of photographic images of groups of people living under social or economic oppression and/or dislocation, disruption, or groups who find themselves remote from home due to economic pressures – migrant labourers, people fleeing conflict or poverty, or by forced removal – which are comparable to those in apartheid South Africa.

This fixedness of pose is found too, for example, in the photographs of themselves sent home by Italian migrant workers, whose existence in the “host country” was one of exclusion, marginalisation and exploitation. Georgia Alu writes in her essay *The Peripatetic Portrait*: “Subject to racial, cultural, ethnic and linguistic barriers...many Italian migrants saw the studio as a place where they could assert control over their own visibility and its fabrication.” (Alu, 2014: 139). Gazing directly into the camera, upright, sitters were assuming a stance that would both impress those at home and perhaps shield themselves from their own anxiety and longing. So they pose “as they wished to appear to their relatives and friends... distinguished and victorious” (Alu, 2014: 133).

The parallels to a performance of an identity of self-respect, honour and dignity, in the portraits of this study – portraits made in apartheid-era South Africa – are borne out in interviews repeatedly. The subjects of our portraits – especially black people in South Africa in the time period we are discussing – were, though living in their own country, experiencing intense dislocation, where lives had undergone traumatic and irrevocable changes wrought by apartheid. For some, this was a literal dislocation – migrant workers far from home in the mines or in industrial or urban areas, by force of political/economic circumstances. For others, it was the experience of alienation and disaffection in townships that never could replicate the rural conditions of home. This was a country of ongoing psychological exile.

Some writers surmise that these predictable images provide a kind of reassurance: conformity in something over which such individuals and communities seemingly had some control, yet about which they ironically do not make individually different choices.

Tina Campt, for example, in *Image Matters* writes about photographs of black people in the Diaspora, looking at two archives of family photographs belonging to black families in Europe in the first half of the 20th century:

The photographs examined here are images that conform to familiar and in some cases quite rigid formats – formats that repeat the conventions of their respective genres through the use of recognisable visual compositions. As I will argue, it is the familiarity and serial reproduction of these compositions that in large part make them register so widely and so evocatively. These are images whose most striking feature is that they are *not* singular or exceptional; rather it is in... the prevalence of these images and practices...that their import can be found... [T]he widespread circulation of such images demonstrates the enormous cultural work they perform in creating a sense of self, community, and belonging for their subjects (Campt, 2012: 14).

Pierre Bourdieu, as I have mentioned, addresses this issue too in *Photography as a Middle-brow Art*, in his analysis of the fixed rituals of portrait photography. “Honour demands that one pose for the photograph as one would stand before a man who one respects and from whom one expects respect, face on, one’s forehead held high and one’s head straight.” (Bourdieu 1965). “The man of honour” is one who shows his face, who looks into the face of his counterpart while uncovering his own. Christian Behnke paraphrases Bourdieu:

This is the reason for the rigid, soldierly pose, intended to provide a clearly readable image in every respect, as though a misunderstanding or confusion were to be expected if this extreme conventionality were to be neglected. Bourdieu speaks of a “reciprocal reverence” that photos emphasising frontally in this way are intended to effect. (Behnke, 2007).

Bourdieu writes that “in a society in which one is constantly and inescapably exposed to the gazes of others”, the pose is an especially essential aspect of a controlled representation of oneself, depicting one’s status being of worthiness and of self-worth (Bourdieu, 1965: 7, 21-25).

In the case of South Africa, where photographic images of one’s face were largely being made for purposes of state control, this argument seems particularly pertinent, where the photographed image has to literally be remade in order to depict one’s status as one of worthiness.

PART 2

The “Re-group”

What seems to distinguish the practice of airbrush photography in South Africa from its American counterparts of an earlier time, is the “re-group”. This is the term used by its practitioners to refer to a compilation image, in which faces are taken from different source photos and printed on one page, and later airbrushed to seem as if they were actually occupying the same space. Often these were couples, but sometimes they were children or siblings, brought together in an image that was constructed out of multiple source images.





Siblings, sitters unknown, dates unknown.

The pose itself – the position of the subject in relation to the viewer, and in the format – is a “construct” created by the printer and especially by the airbrush artist. They had to work with a combination of factors, for each individual sitter portrayed. Firstly, there would be the original position of the head and the body in the source photograph, and then the original direction of the glance from the eyes. The original photograph might be taken of the subject in a very different position – receiving a certificate, kneeling on the grass, sometimes caught in a moment when not deliberately posing at all.





All photographs in this chapter are from the Aqua Portrait Studio collection.

If the portrait was of two people from different source photos, the printer and artist had to address the fact that the faces in the originals were not actually reacting to each other's presence, nor to the same photographer, or even to a similar context. The printer and artist could not radically alter the heads, but the printer could tilt or flip a photograph from left-to-right. Frequently this created an awkwardness to the final pictorial relationship.



"Flipped groom"



Even where the source (above) had the husband on the right, he would be “re-grouped” to the left in the final portrait.

What *was* under the control of the artist was the pose. The pose was always fully frontal. The subjects invariably face directly forward. The printer straightened the head but the artist painted in the neck and shoulders, and re-directed the body.

In portraits of couples, a husband and wife or bridegroom and bride, there seem to have been



strict protocols adhered to. The man is always on our left, his right (no matter what arrangement existed in the source photo, even if already photographed together). This holds true with only the very rarest exceptions (over many years I have seen only one). The man is always slightly behind the woman: that is, their shoulders overlap in the image, with hers in front. This allows for their heads to be closer together, therefore making better use of the space on the format, and allowing the figures to be at a larger scale than they would otherwise have to be. So, especially from the late 1960s, even where there is uniqueness and difference in stance and attitude between different people in photographs, it is removed as much as it can be, to achieve as far as possible a near-uniformity. Certainly, no cognizance is taken of difference in terms of cultural practice (especially in terms of marriage) or socio-economic circumstances.

Ironically, the pose favoured in these portraits became a convention on which live, posed photographs were sometimes modelled. According to Sophie Feyder in *Lounge Photography and the Politics of Township Interiors*, included among the Ngilima collection's "large diversity of outcomes and clear patterns in the photographer's work" were photographs of married couples "often photographed sitting side by side, hugged by a horizontal frame, *following the conventions of the traditional airbrushed portraits*" (my italics). (Feyder, 2012).

PART 3

The Clothes

One of the features that would distinguish South African examples from most others of this genre is the nature of the painted-on clothes: usually imaginary, or at least enhanced, the clothes painted onto the subjects by the artists form a study in themselves.

Earlier images show their sitters' actual clothing with colour skilfully added (as in these examples from the Aqua Portrait Studio, below, which date from the early 1950s). In this first decade of the studio's history, there is a loving attention to fine particularity of detail – of texture, colour, fabric, cut, style – closely based on the original image and what the subject was actually wearing. There is greater variation and subtlety in the colour and pattern, in, for example, the men's ties; occasionally a handkerchief or pen in the jacket pocket, a jersey under the jacket.



Above, portraits made in the early 1950s, sitters unknown.



Chief Edward and Boikubela Maja, Maja Village, Limpopo. Dates unknown. These portraits are owned by their son, the current Chief of Maja district.



Above left, sitter unknown, date unknown. Right, Leah Letsoalo, born 1927 in Sophiatown. Portrait now owned by her granddaughter, also Leah. Date of portrait unknown. Limpopo.



Detail of clothing, Northwest Province, c1950.

But by the 1960s, Aqua Portrait Studio, like most of the studios in this part of the country, began to provide a shortened list of optional clothing types, as I described. This could not have been for any practical or technical reason: the airbrush, depending on the skill of the artist, could do literally anything. It was not a rule that came from any outside source at all. Perhaps it may have been a factor of the increasing pressure of numbers of commissions and the remoteness of the clients from the studios.

In Yettie's work there were always unique variations in the painted-on clothes (which we will come back to later), and indeed no two were exactly alike. But as time went on, and the client base in the north broadened, grew in numbers, and changed (it was becoming definitely a poorer client base, yet quickly growing in numbers – yet, at the Aqua Portrait Studio, for example, Yettie remained the only artist), the consequences showed.

By the late 1960s, the finished portraits largely eliminate any actual, identifying clothes, whether of the individual or of their group. By that time personal idiosyncrasies and tastes or even (in the case of weddings as the source photos) their actual, real-life wedding gowns or suits are airbrushed out.

Over time, the few optional clothing types which had evolved became firmly-held conventions, those supposedly “desired” by the clients. Their choice would be written in a

kind of mutually understood linguistic code by the salesmen, on envelopes brought back to the studio (the same envelopes which contained the source photos).



Instructions from salesmen regarding clothing choices, and also regarding altering the image itself. .

The Weddings



From the Aqua Portrait Studio collection. Sitters unknown.

The social significance of the wedding portraits is very ingrained – this fact itself expressed in their sheer numbers in proportion to the other kinds of portraits. As I will argue later, they carried a particularly compelling meaning and potentially life-changing function in the socio-political context in which they existed.

In terms of dress, wedding portraits were, appropriately, of all the categories the most extravagant. We know that many of these weddings had not taken place in any form, or had taken place in very different forms: traditional or customary marriages, or Zion church marriages, for example, involving very different dress. But all these unions are re-framed here in terms of “white weddings”: western-style white lace, satin, pearls, veils, and flowers.

But notably even where the original photograph *was*, itself, of a bride in her own western-style bridal clothes, her final airbrushed portrait will have replaced these with imaginary ones. This is intriguing: why would a bride, who has her own unique bride-dress in real life, accept an airbrushed, invented version? (See images below). (A contrast to this is the practice

in the Western Cape, for example, where the actual bridal dresses were carefully augmented but not altered by the airbrush studios.)



Source photographs showing actual “white weddings”, but which were nevertheless sent to be transformed into standard airbrushed grooms and brides.

In wedding portraits, the airbrush would create delicate textures of netting, lace, and satin – typically in a combination of lace sleeves and shiny satin bodice, with transparent veil; crowns, sometimes of small flowers; and at the neck a string of (hand-painted) pearls. Brides usually hold a bouquet of flowers, constructed of a combination of stencilled airbrushed petals and hand-painted leaves and stamen details.



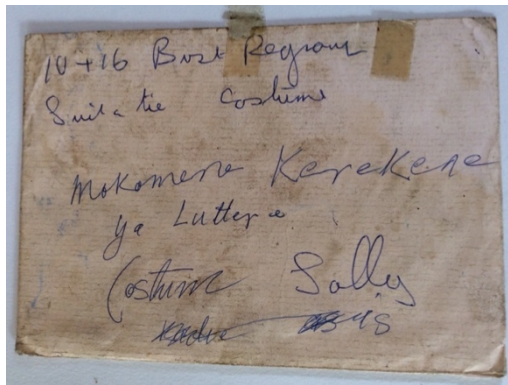
Details of brides' clothing.





Here the groom's original bow-tie and shirt-front, and the bride's ear-rings, are the inspiration for their airbrushed attire.

The “Costume”



Finally, we find, equally prevalent to the wedding, is the category of “Costume”. Men’s clothes in a “costume” portrait differed very little from the bridegroom’s suit, other than the carnation in the bridegroom’s lapel. But what was known as the “costume” would – for women – comprise a formal, tailored, usually grey or black (and sometimes to our eyes quite severe-looking) jacket over a white blouse. The blouse might be very plain, or lacy or satin-like, with occasionally puffed sleeves, and different kinds of collar. There would sometimes be a little string of pearls around the neck. The headwear would be a scarf or formal woman’s hat: white or black.



Women’s “costume”: variations on tailored jacket over white blouse.

To what extent did this painted clothing reflect or follow the fashion of the day? Although there were constant small shifts to accommodate the sort of changes just mentioned, the basic style of clothing design seems to have established itself in the mid to late 1950s. The actual period of the very late 1940s and throughout the 1950s – the decade or so following the Second World War – was dominated, in terms of fashion, by a relatively conservative formality, at least for middle-class and ‘smart’ urban men and women. It was an era when men, young and old, wore dark or grey jackets, buttoned-up shirts, and ties on a daily basis and in more contexts than would now be regarded as necessary.

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LEFT: Shady Island — In Altman, St. Pauling, with a matched jacket. Jacket length, slightly past knee. Skirt, knee-length, simple, very "costly" and graceful. \$29.95 to \$39.95.

MIDDLE: Chester — In Wanamaker, Halle Bros., with a matching jacket. Jacket length, slightly past knee. Skirt, knee-length, simple, very "costly" and graceful. \$29.95 to \$39.95.

RIGHT: Elizabeth — In Lefkowitz, with long hair bands. In Halle Bros., a patterned, belted waist to the knees. Skirt, knee-length, simple, very "costly" and graceful. \$29.95 to \$39.95.

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In the 1950s, suits for women were almost always referred to as *costume suits*, or *costumes*. (Thomas, 2014). This use of the word “costume” has largely fallen away now. But this use of it was part of everyday conversational currency at that time; in the same way the words “suit” (for men) was and is.

What is the significance of urban/western dress in the airbrushed portraits?

The style of (painted on) clothing which became the standard style of the Aqua Portrait Studio would have therefore been fashionable, formal and appropriately conservative, at least during the mid 1950s. Fashions in the real world, of course, changed in the course of the studio’s life (which extended for another forty years or so), but the style that had by then been established changed little. It was a style that continued to be seen by clients as respectable, admired, and worthy. The Aqua Portrait Studio’s customers were mostly *not* of the upper middle class, but they seem to have aspired to this.

An interviewee in Limpopo spoke of how clothing felt “ennobling”: “The point about these paintings was that they allowed people to feel *ennobled* and elevated by clothes that they didn’t have in real life” (Letsoalo, interview: 1996).

But if their choices reflected a need to affirm a sense of innate dignity, this seems aligned to their perception of the appearance of middle class or upper middle class conventionality. Men requested to be portrayed wearing suits, crisp white shirts, elegant ties, sometimes hats. Women’s (imaginary) costumes, as we have seen, were tailored, with blouses in white silk or lace, and pearls – or white wedding veil and wedding dress. What does it mean that these kinds of clothing are being painted onto the portraits of people who, in their daily lives, may actually have worn some kind of rural traditional dress, or the work clothes of farm-workers, miners, domestic workers, builders, or industrial labourers?

Western vs. Traditional Dress

If one compares the original source photographs of men with those of the women, in many cases, the men will almost always be in western clothes - suits, or clothes that reflect their poverty sometimes, or work clothes. However, many of the women are in traditional attire,

reflecting traditions from different areas and cultures. They may wear Shangaan cloths, Ndebele necklaces, Venda tshiluvhelo or nwenda, or the dress of a traditional healer, perhaps.

Why this lack of equivalence?

The homeland system of sending the men away to the mines or industries, while the women stayed at home at try to keep the family alive, meant that women tended to become “subsistence cultivators” of land; but also, they “became the prime bearers of a cultural identity that fixed the place of their people among other peoples...” Women, especially if not exposed to the westernising influence of the various Evangelists, maintained strong traditional practices, in healing activities perhaps most strongly, and in carrying out the special markers of family life (the growing up of daughters, fertility and marriages of daughters, initiation rites of sons, obeisance to parents-in-law and seeing to ancestral requirements). However, their clothing also “betray[s] the hyphenated condition of the peasant proletarian”, and this is evident in some of their photographs, as opposed to the absorbed, “neutral” westernised garb of their husbands and sons. (J.L & J. Comaroff, 1997: 259). All of them however become westernized and middle class in their airbrushed portraits.



Above and next page: these examples all show women wearing traditional dress in their original photographs, to be “re-clothed” in modern suits and blouses in their final portraits.



Living under apartheid, the people portrayed in these portraits were, for the most part, from marginalised, excluded, and economically exploited parts of the population – to whom in reality access to everything desirable about urban and “western” life was impossibly difficult to attain or was denied by law; and for whom *nowhere* was there a sense of legal ownership, security, belonging, or acceptance. So the more obvious kinds of answer to the question about why western/urban dress became the convention, would seem to be about aspiration and longing, and a need to be included, at least imaginatively, in a world where success is possible, i.e. in the structures of the dominant class.

But it does appear to be more complicated than that.

Clothing and Respectability

In her paper on the Ngilima collection of photographs taken in Wattville township during the 1950s and 60s, Sophie Feyder describes a photo of people living in similar times and under similar social conditions to those in my own research. She writes: “Their clothing indicates a certain level of prosperity... the woman is wearing a two-piece suit... The *doek* covering her hair and her left hand resting on her husband's shoulder suggest that she is a married woman... The combination of clothing and material environment hence gives the impression that this is a well-established, *law-abiding and respectable* urban family” (my italics) (Feyder, 2012).

Being seen by others, and seeing oneself as ‘respectable’, is not a simple notion in the context of apartheid South Africa. It is fraught with questions of aspiration and desire, exclusion and inclusion, lack of control over one’s own life, surviving within the law (as Feyder’s description suggests), ever-possible humiliation. What determines respectability? Ideas of respectability – so we might assume – are associated with a perception of the values, opinions, and material trappings of the dominant class. Respectability would therefore seem to be about approximating those aspects of that class as far as possible. Thus Jane Taylor writes about Santu Mofokeng’s images in *The Black Photo Album/Look at Me*, that they are “performances of bourgeois identity that would facilitate their integration into the hegemonic world of white affluent power” (Taylor, 2002: 278).

But my interviews with the families who own the airbrushed portraits – of a subsequent generation to *The Black Photo Album* – would strongly suggest otherwise. There is a need, it would seem, to construct a sense of dignity in its own right, a sense of self-worth for its own sake. As Rebecca Ginsburg shows clearly in another context (writing about people in black townships in the 1960s), township dwellers’ efforts at making their homes feel dignified and look “respectable”, were for reasons that were directed *inward*, toward creating a sense of wellbeing for the occupant *herself* (and at most for her neighbours), and showed no evidence of trying to mimic, nor integrate with, the dominant class (Ginsburg, 1997).

But we need to go back further, to understand *why* western/urban clothes were equated with “respectability”.



Sitters and date unknown. From the Aqua Portrait Studio collection.

Clothing and the Church: “The outer sign of inner grace”



Limpopo, Matshedi Church, near Polokwane.

Did the idea of wanting – or wanting to seem to have had – a “Christian” wedding influence the choice of attire? In my very many interviews with owners of portraits, none have offered this as a direct motive, nor have any voluntarily mentioned wanting to appear more “Christian” (or the desire to have had a Christian, as opposed to a customary, wedding) as a reason for commissioning these airbrushed wedding portraits. However, it has been suggested as likely to be a factor as most portrait owners, in the Limpopo region at least, are Christians.



Below and on next page: Christian attire varied, although mainly took the form of ZCC clothing.



Images from the Aqua Portrait Studio collection.

I travelled to Tshakhuma Village to consult Dr T. Rabothatha on the significance of Christianity in this portraiture practice.

There has always been, and especially throughout the period under discussion, a deep Christian influence in most of the areas in which the portraits were commissioned. There are hundreds of church groups (of which some are mentioned in addresses or correspondence between the studio and the salesmen or customers). Many subjects of the source photographs are seen wearing or request to be ‘dressed’ in various Church uniforms, signifying their membership or pastorship of particular churches, or insignia from different branches of the Zion Christian movement.

Many traditional and customary practices persist, including customary weddings, circumcisions, and medicinal and healing practices. But these continue to be practised alongside deeply held Christian beliefs, by the same individuals. In fact, the Zion Christian church itself was founded on the basis of the combining of elements of African traditional religion with Christianity. “...Many millions of Africans are followers of more than one religion, even if they may register or be counted in census as adherents of only one

religion...” (Mbiti, 1975). During apartheid, African traditions continued to be widely practiced, along with Christianity. But there was always also a perceived tension, for some, deriving from the fact that missionaries and church-school teachers, “whether they were Congregational, Methodist, Anglican and Lutheran or Catholic, were aggressively opposed to traditional African practices that they considered barbaric and based on superstition” (Denis 2006). As I discuss below, in early mission schools and mission churches, not only were congregants required to dress in western clothes, they were also not allowed, for example, to play music in any other idiom than in specifically Christian style. In the mid-twentieth century, the general perception among black people was that African religion and its traditional practices were still not well thought of by white people in South Africa (Mbiti, 1975).

According to Dr Rabothata (a linguist and retired headmistress who has herself made a study of the music and song cultures of the region of Limpopo between Makhado and Thohoyandou), in the more remote areas of the northern provinces, the airbrushed photographic portraits are invariably associated with churchgoing people. In assisting me by tracking down families who have these portraits in the villages of Tshakhuma and Mashau, she went to the oldest Christian families first. These areas are dominated by Lutheran churches, with a long history of intense German missionary activity (from about 1878, and for a continuous period until this day).

There seems therefore a powerful set of reasons for which western clothing may have become the attire of choice in these portraits – probably not reasons of which the subjects are or were even consciously aware. Because Christianity and the influence of the missions and the mission schools runs so very deep, there has been for several generations an entrenched sense of propriety specifically around clothing and outward appearance. Jean and John Comaroff describe in their book *Of Revelation and Revolution* (1997) that from the very beginning missionaries treated Western clothing as “the outer sign of inner grace”.

Schoolchildren attending the early mission schools (and the later ones too) were compelled to wear “civilised” western clothes in order to be admitted. Even adult women were “discouraged by the missionaries from wearing their beautiful traditional attire; it would be taken away from them, and they would be given in exchange clothes sent to the Lutheran mission from Germany” (Rabothatha, interview 2017). Dr Rabothatha – despite being a lay

preacher and a leader in the Women's League of the Church herself – is highly critical of the early missionary approach.

They targeted the women because the women would control the family. They imposed their own new things in every way, denying local African ways, especially clothing. Even names: the children were given new German names, which was easy for them to do because they baptized our children. Some old men in the area still have those German first names. And songs: they forbade our songs, and taught us to sing only German songs though with our Venda words. They saw nothing good in our ways at all. This caused our people not to like themselves (Rabothatha, interview 2017).

In fact, Rabothatha remembers that women in sewing circles in Germany were still sending parcels of hand-stitched underwear and outerwear to her village until the 1970s. (One can just imagine the reception these got from modern young women at that time, even in the most rural areas of South Africa).

Jean and John Comaroff's chapters on the impact of the missionaries on clothing in some regions of Southern Africa, bear out Rabothatha's perspective. Although they write primarily about Tswana groups, the missionaries there too were German Lutherans. A number of parallels arise in their respective descriptions.

The missionaries' insistence on European dress and things of "taste", refinement, decorum and civility, were primarily to change behaviour. "The evangelists... believed strongly in the capacity of *proper dress to work profound changes* in their sentiments and conduct" (Comaroffs, 1997: 223).

But the missionary project was, as we know, always at some level also aligned to manufacturing and selling, the encouragement of a desire to consume, to own, and to acquire: "conquest by consumption." (Comaroffs, 1997: 219). The idea was that the "market" of trade and goods, brings about its own good social order: the hardworking rise to the top, can have what they deserve to have, and the lazy and inept are punished by their own lack of success. *Things*, objects, becomes targets of desire, they become their own incentives and rewards, regulating behaviour.

The evangelists succeeded in engendering a longing for these objects – particularly so in relation to western clothing. The Comaroffs quote the anthropologist Isaac Schapera as saying that the desire to purchase clothes, especially, became a strong motivation to go to the cities (Comaroffs, 1997: 250).

One further reason that Rabothatha cites for the association of these portraits and Christianity, is education. The converted families were educated in the mission schools: “They had to school our people first of all so that we could read the Bible”. In her mind, the acquisition of the portraits has a strong link to this fact, for several reasons: firstly, she says, because the educated (i.e. Christian) families were employable in better jobs and tended to have more money. And secondly, they also had acquired a sense of wanting to preserve and pass on to their children certain kinds of things: books, photographs, portraits, heirlooms, and family histories (Rabothatha, interview 2017).



Dr Thanda Rabothatha, Tshakhuma Village, Limpopo. Centre, portrait of Emmanuel and Selina Mutshekwane, (now late) Pastor of the Lutheran Mission Church and his wife. Right, portrait of Emmanuel's mother, who was the wife of the first local pastor in Tshakhuma.

The link with appearances and decency are, of course, strong in these portraits. Firstly, the converted families may simply have embraced western objects of desire, of consumption more easily (framed portraits becoming one of those), given the missionary influences Rabothatha describes. But secondly, couched as the portraits are with all the visual signs and symbols of acceptability, appearance and decorum, it is fitting that they became almost icon-like in some homes – in some homes indeed an icon, and the very image of respectability.

The portraits, of course, only made their appearance in the second or third generation of the church's presence in those areas. But these values of proper dress and decorum would have

been absorbed very deeply over a few generations, and by then would have become almost indistinguishable from ideas of respect and dignity.

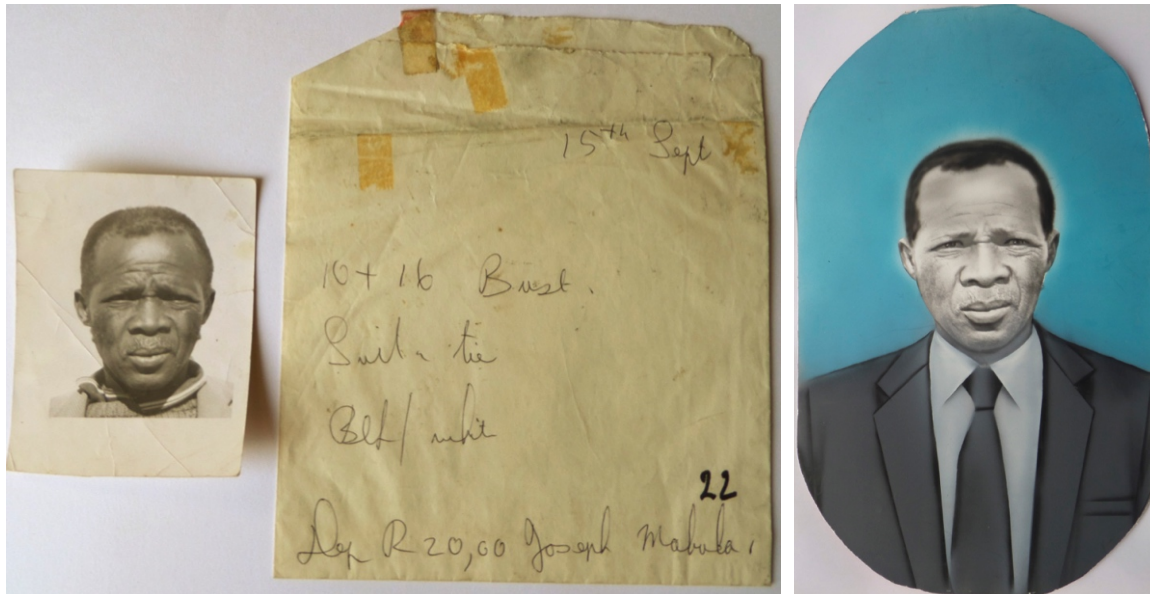
The Ancestors

On the other hand, there is another narrative, discussed in detail by another informant in Limpopo, Amos Letsoalo. Now the director of the Polokwane Museum, he grew up in the surrounding area. He took me to Dikhulong Village and Molepo Village, among other villages, and introduced me to families who were *not* part of the church congregation, nor steeped in Christianity.

Some people around here still regard the ancestors as their main source of guidance and spiritual advice. The ancestors are very present in their lives, people speak to them. Ancestors may, of course, include quite recent ancestors, their late parents or grandparents, perhaps a great-uncle who has passed on. They are not very distant in the past. It is still very much the practice to communicate with those ancestors. What is important used to be (and still is often) to visit their graves – their graves are where this communication would usually happen. But in years since these portraits are here, in so many homes, this has changed in many cases. Because these were portraits of those ancestors. So instead of going to the grave, they were “visiting” instead the pictures in their own house, the portraits on the wall. Their ancestors are there in the portraits. And I know this from seeing it myself (Letsoalo, interview: 1995)

Clothing and Work: Defiance, Dignity or Pride

The clothing depicted in these airbrushed portraits was not just *any* western clothing. There are, for example, none – at least that I have ever seen – depicting a sitter in work clothes. Yet work clothes are often seen in the original source images, as are traditional clothes, even if photographed in a studio.



Source and final portrait from the Aqua Portrait Studio collection. Sitter and date unknown.

It would seem that many black people in employment saw the work clothes they were compelled to wear as demeaning (Aris, 2007). Work clothes would have been associated with the degrading positions into which so many people were forced. The colonial-servant-style short pants and apron, for example, demanded by white employers as a kind of uniform for male domestic workers (flat-cleaners and “houseboys”) caused intense resentment. Traditionally, in the cultures from which these men came, short pants were only worn by young boys, and to wear them as grown men was therefore belittling and humiliating. Aprons, customarily for Africans, were worn by women. Men compelled to wear them would feel “at once feminised and infantilized”, and would be likely to experience deepest shame (Comaroffs, 1997: 249).

Instead, as we have mentioned above, the airbrushed clothes of the portraits are always smart, fashionable, western and upper middle class. In colonial and apartheid South Africa, dress formed a nexus – one among many, but a particularly nuanced one because it was “simultaneously political, cultural, moral, and aesthetic” (Aris, 2007: 18) – between white people and black people, that allowed for an outward and visible, vivid but also silent, expression of defiance and pride.

Africans ... were not passive consumers of European commodities, especially clothing.... Thus, dress was deeply and directly connected to agency, the ability to maintain a sense of independence.... It made available an expansive, expressive,

experimental language with which new social identities could be conjured, a language with which to speak back to the whites (Aris, 2007: 3).

This act of appropriating the dress, pose, and even style of photography disrupts the colonial vision of the African person's proper place, and so it is a political one. A mirroring of dress and other aspects of the lifestyle of the dominant class can be an act of subversion. Taking on and meeting the oppressor class not only in its attire, but in its very *best* attire – the top-of-the-range, top quality, most cutting edge, most stylish, most expensive version – is to outdo the oppressors on their own turf, to better them on their own terms, which is the subtlest and most disarming challenge there could be. (Hence the extraordinarily transgressive, yet conservative, phenomena of the Swenkers of Johannesburg and the Sapeurs of Kinshasa.)

The impulse toward defiance and resistance had to be expressed in subtle ways. “Modernity and tradition were... used as ideological tools to force people to take on particular identities and experiences of belonging”, as Rory Bester writes in his discussion of the images of black Victorian era families re-photographed by Santu Mofokeng in *The Black Photo Album*, 2013 (Bester, 2001: 219). By taking on the garb, then, of the colonising powers, the oppressed person can posit a different self, become a different being, from who he or she is *in the mind of the coloniser* – and can thus ‘stand in the face of’ colonial racism.

The images of my research, while made in a different time and by very different means, have some parallels with the Mofokeng photos: posed portraits are constructed; urban/western/“white people’s” attire is donned (or painted on), for the purposes of creating portraits that are modelled on a form itself deriving from European tradition. Both are a reaction to the imposition of an identity by others. The purpose of both is complex and enmeshed: it certainly encompasses an aspirational aspect and the taking on of a re-imagined self that can assume an imagined place. But my sense is that the purpose of the airbrushed portraits, at least, is still more private than political, at least in any activist sense: I have suggested that they embody a personal “truth” about their subjects that is felt to be truer than the imposed day-to-day reality of their lives. These images act as confirmation of *who those subjects feel they are*, and this confirmation forms an emotional bulwark, a psychological buffer against apartheid and all its detailed manifestations that helps make psychological survival possible. (I will return to this argument in Chapter 7).

This, I think, rings close to Santu Mofokeng's own perspective on the subjects of his re-photographed images. Rather than seeing them as being primarily 'integrationist' – if that means trying to somehow infiltrate or integrate with white society, as Taylor's interpretation of his words seems to suggest (Taylor, 2002: 278) – he seems to accept them as having been constructed on their own terms, for their own sakes:

When we look at them we believe them, for they tell us a little about how these people imagined themselves. We see these images in the terms determined by the subjects themselves, for the subjects have made these images their own (Mofokeng, 2013: 57).

Chapter 7. THE PORTRAITS IN THEIR PLACE: CONTEXT AND MEANING

This chapter considers the wider political and socio-economic context in which this industry flourished, and asks what formative impact that context may have had on the nature and scale of the portraiture industry.

In this chapter I look at key apartheid policies, because – as I will argue – these policies and laws shaped the conditions that gave this genre of portraiture its particular significance for the people most affected by these laws. I will consider how the social conditions and the (apartheid-engineered) structures of people's lives and everyday reality gave rise to a society that imbued this genre with particular meanings, such that communities found their own resonances in it. Of course, the commodity itself – the airbrushed portrait – was an existing form that happened to have arrived in this place by that time. But it found itself in a social and political context in which, significantly, it seemed to be able to articulate a profound desire and to answer a specific need.

Apartheid lived up to its name: literally, it created a lived reality of *apartness*, in which individuals endured almost lifelong absences of spouses, children and parents. Millions of lives were characterised by separation, brokenness of family, and destruction of community.

I will consider how, in these conditions of separation and most importantly of loss of familial structure, the airbrushed portrait genre came to make visible a dream of togetherness, of spousal and family coherence, and, as I argue, of dignity.

I examine a number of facets of apartheid policy in this chapter. These are the pillars of apartheid policy, and each impacts intimately on the portrait industry under discussion in ways that are intertwined. I start with a survey of the homelands policy; then look at the pass laws and passbooks; third, the laws applying to marriage and succession; and last, housing and urbanisation. In each of these sections of the chapter I will attempt to understand the ways in which this genre of portraiture provided some kind of answer to the needs engendered in society by the apartheid project.

Interviewees in repeated instances speak of living apart from spouses, and therefore needing to show their children and their children's children that their parents and grandparents were a

“proper husband and wife”, to show them together and as belonging together. The poignancy of the portraits that showed husband and wife, taken from different source photos, “together in the frame”, becomes sharper. The portrait was a staged image, therefore, that represented a “truth” that was not physically evident – that was in fact forcibly taken away – but that was a more profound truth nevertheless. They belonged together, and the portrait showed that, and made it true.

In earlier chapters I have referred to photographs exchanged between migrants or emigrant families and home. Photographs can come to stand in for absent people – they are able to evoke the presence of the person, a sense of closeness. Photographs summon up the existence of the photographed subject: their image conjuring the person, whose “felt” presence is thereby brought into the space which the photograph occupies. Interviews with portrait-owners suggest that the portrait image in the house is a powerful one, and is in itself a presence to interact with. In Limpopo, for example, during a discussion regarding having a portrait repaired, and thinking we were going to remove the picture, one interviewee said: “Don’t take my mother away.” As I described in the previous chapter, it has been reported to me that there is a practice, in at least certain households, of consulting portraits as one would consult or speak to the ancestors.

For Roland Barthes, the photograph is capable of “bridging a distance, temporal or otherwise, between viewer and person viewed, between likeness and subject” – that which “transcend[s] mere resemblance” and “conjure[s] a ‘subject’, a presence that lingers...” (Barthes, 1997: 80-81, paraphrased in Edwards & Hart, 2004: 2).

So, if we acknowledge what takes place with any portrait photograph, especially if it is of someone we know – the evoking of the absent one – then a relationship exists, between ourselves and the image. “Although what the photograph [depicts] is no longer present... its having-been-there now forms part of the referential structure of our relationship to the photograph” (Kroes, 2007).

I argue in this chapter, then, that for these and other reasons, these portraits met a need created by the system and policies of apartheid. I write at some length here about the context that shaped the lives of the majority of the customers of the Aqua Portrait Studio, because it frames my argument for why this genre of portraiture took such a hold in this part of the

country. The reasons for this widespread popularity are not single-fold, they are layered and complicated, but I believe this political reality underpins a considerable proportion of it.

PART 1

***“In this honourable way”*: The Homelands, Migration – and the Portraits**

From the fragmented and incomplete information contained in the archive, from the addresses on letters, envelopes, stamps or the passbooks themselves (or “travel documents”, as they were called in at least one of the Bantustans), we can see that the clients of the Aqua Portrait Studio lived across a large swathe of homelands territories. The portrait salesmen and their customers were to be found in all the scattered pieces of the northern homelands – Lebowa, Gazankulu, Venda, Bophuthatswana, and KwaNdebele, and some in KwaZulu.

It is the norm, in my interviews in these regions, that when older women and men describe their lives, they describe a life of separation of spouses and absence of fathers. The interviewees are mainly women, since women have outlived their husbands in most cases; and talking to such families brings home the harsh reality – and all-encompassing effectiveness – of the system.

Apartheid’s fundamental policy of the separation of the races required (in terms of its own logic) the mass clearing out of black people; the forced physical relocation of huge numbers of people, the overwhelming majority in this country, into what were known as the “African reserves”, the “Bantustans”, or the “homelands” (that last name is cruel in its irony, as so many millions had to be removed from their homes to be dumped there).

The splitting up and breaking apart of black families did not start with apartheid. The “displacement and herding around of black people” (as A. Baldwin writes in *Mass Removals and Separate Development*, 1975) had been the practice of governments in South Africa long before the coming of the apartheid government. The 1913 Land Act, the 1923 Stallard Commission, and the 1936 Land Act (which set limits on what was to constitute the reserves) caused removals of people, hugely destructive to their lives in all kinds of ways, into areas mostly barren and hitherto unknown to them. But with apartheid, after 1948, the process

became more systematic and far-reaching. After the Nationalist government took power, legislation piled up year after year: dozens of new laws were passed between the Group Areas Acts of 1950 and the Designated Areas Development Act of 1979.



Forced removals, Magopa. Photograph: Paul Weinberg.

According to Baldwin, what is “staggering” “is the theoretical proposition that over half the black population should be removed into these reserves” (Baldwin 1975: 219). The policy of dumping millions of African people into disparate, scattered and fragmented pieces of ground that in total were less than 13% of the land of South Africa, had multiple aims: to purify and create a “white” South Africa, to deprive black people of their rights and citizenship; to create massive pools of cheap available labour for white-owned and state-owned mines and industries; and, vitally, to create “disorganization (fragmentation) of the dominated classes of South Africa” (Mare, 1981: 49).

It was also to “dispose” of so-called unproductive or “surplus” people: the physically handicapped, old, ill, or young were “to be removed from their houses” (Morris, 1981: 74, 75):

They were not needed in white cities, towns and farming areas... Whoever was not seen as useful to the “European labour market” – the aged, the unfit, widows, women with dependent children... and even educated professionals who were “not essential”... were discarded (Aitchison, 2005: 2).

Even as early as 1981, it was estimated that 7 million black people had been affected by removal (Mare, 1981). It was a continuing, huge and sweeping act of disruption and cruelty, destroying individual and communal livelihoods, social structures, family structures, and established ways of life. The majority of the black population, before being forcibly removed to the reserves, had been able to support themselves, whether by farming land that they had collectively or singly owned as peasant farming communities, or by seasonal employment on white farms, in ‘piece jobs’, in various kinds of domestic service, and so on. But when they were transported and literally dumped on arid, empty land, with no tools or resources, they starved. Not only were economic assets stripped from them, but also social assets, causing a loss of capacity to mobilise or resist in any way.

...to be uprooted, bundled on a truck, and deposited in a new environment of which they have no experience, precipitates extreme stress; which is reflected in a reduced ability of resettled people... to cope with their new and often hostile environment (Rogerson & Letsoalo, 1985).

There were extremely few jobs in these areas, no provision made for farming, and the only hope for sustaining life was that the men in the families would get work far away on mines or in industry and be able to transmit some funds home. The resettlement camps created a desperate pool of cheap labour, one of the policy’s prime objectives. Fathers, husbands, and sons became absentees.



Images of Northwest and Limpopo Provinces, which included the former homelands of Venda, Gazankulu, KaNgwane, KwaNdebele, Lebowa, Bophutotswana.



As late as 1978, Connie Mulder felt he still could address the House of Assembly in these confident terms:

If our policy is taken to its logical conclusion... there will not be one black man with South African citizenship... Every black man will be accommodated in some independent state in this honourable way and there will no longer be an obligation on this Parliament to accommodate these people politically (Zille, 1984: 41).

In the northern region of the country, four ethnic homelands were created to accommodate the North Sotho, Venda, Tsonga and Ndebele people. To try to gauge the quality of lives in the homelands, let us look at one in more detail: Lebowa.

As with the other homelands, the portrait salesmen found many hundreds of clients there. It was designated by the government for a mix of Pedi and North Sotho people, and was a series of twelve separate pieces of land, many of them very small, in the far northeast of the country. It became “autonomous” in 1972. Prior to this, these groups of people had lived together in a mix that entailed endless unravelling, leading to “volumes of resettlement”. Areas of ground continued to be re-designated ‘white’ at different times, other lands were re-allocated back and forth between the homelands themselves – each time resulting in further disruption, aggressive uprooting of renewed attempts to survive where they were, and sudden relocation. For example, the redefining of the Matoks area as “white” caused the removal of 3,400 families, most until then supported by breadwinners working in the white town, trucked to a place of no work at all; another case was the fluid, ill-defined border between Lebowa and Gazankulu, causing repeated moves for more than 130,000 Lebowans (Rogerson & Letsoalo, 1985: 181-186).

The region is manifestly unable to generate sufficient job opportunities... Indeed two-thirds of the homeland’s estimated gross income derives from payments to migrant workers in ‘white’ South Africa... Agriculture is on a subsistence level (Rogerson & Letsoalo, 1985: 188, 189).

Despite these dire conditions, Lebowa continued to be the receptacle of mass population resettlement over many decades. The people being trucked into Lebowa came through

different kinds of removal processes: abolition of labour tenancies, “homelands consolidation programmes”, relocations from urban townships and urban areas and a growing stream of the so-called “unproductive blacks” forced out of the urban areas – the “surplus people” mentioned above.

But especially, they came through “black spots” eradication. Most “black spots” were areas of fertile and arable land that had been farmed continuously by black peasant farmers, often prosperously, from the mid 19th century. These lands were areas of longstanding African freehold occupation, and many had been farmed for many generations by the same families.

The clearance of these “black spots” is one of the prime causes for mass population removals into the Bantustans.... Only large landowners, i.e. those owning more than 17.3 ha of land, are entitled to compensatory land within the homeland. Lebowa has been affected by the clearance of several “black spot” lands throughout the northern and eastern Transvaal since the period of the early 1950s. In virtually all cases the uprooted populations are descendants of families that have owned and farmed the former “black Spot” for at least a century (Rogerson & Letsoalo, 1985: 181).

Forced off good land, people were offloaded from trucks onto impossibly small plots of poor soil that were “unfit for human habitation”, as the Rand Daily Mail described one of these – Bothashoek, an arid dumping ground for a formally prosperous and stable peasant community (RDM 29/6/1974, quoted in Rogerson & Letsoalo, 1985: 188). Families went, overnight, from being completely self-reliant in terms of home grown food, to finding themselves on arid empty plots, needing to buy food for survival. This forced an almost complete reliance on money remittances sent by migrant-labour family members – if there were such family members.

The occasional jobs were scarce. A few people with qualifications received work from the local Lebowa government as teachers, nurses, or government office workers. Nearby white-owned farms sometimes offered low-paid part-time or seasonal work. Some made a little from traditional beer-brewing or selling a few vegetables. Pensioners could (though did not always) receive a small pension from the homeland government, which might have to support a whole household. The average diet was poor, extremely limited, and monotonous, and housing was poor. The median income in the early 1980s was R40 – R45 a month, at a time

when the conservative poverty datum line for black families was set at R170 (Rogerson & Letsoalo, 1985).

Yet, as Helen Zille wrote in a conference paper in 1984, the Nationalist government continued to receive its reports and “information” from officials and “experts”, like Dr Flip Smit, Vice President of the HSRC and the government's adviser on urbanization policy, who stated that the migrant labourers actually *preferred* the homeland system: [The men] see that the city costs money and that the family will struggle if they come there. They do not wish to expose the family to the evils of the city. And he wants to get away from his screaming children and the women that are around him every day. Alone in the city he can enjoy a time with dressed women and he has some money to spend on them (quoted by Zille, 1984: 28-30).

Smit denied that people were starving in rural areas, with these words:

I do not have much experience of the Eastern Cape. But in Natal and the bushveld areas, Mother Nature is wonderful. It is now nearly the Marula season and even in a drought year nature looks after its children at this time. Then there are other types of fruit like the Marog, a type of bean and then there are Mopani worms. The bushveld is rich from a nutritional point of view... every time there is a fire this source of food diminishes but it is surprising how much they still get from the veld (quoted by Zille, 1984: 28-30).

I have here tried to establish, in very broad strokes, the architecture of the system which governed millions of lives: involving as it did the severing of families, the disuniting of couples, the separation of fathers from children, the break-up of communities, and the forced alienation and foreignness of the workplace, in relation to home. I have attempted to establish this background as a way toward understanding at least one of the roles which the airbrushed photographic portraits came to play in the environment which constituted life in South Africa at this time. Because, as we have seen, these portraits had the capacity – in imaginary but visible form – to bring together, to reunite, to normalise, to “marry” together, those who were apart.

PART 2

The ‘Dompas’ and Passbook Photographs



The kind of “rural ghettoism” described above was only made possible through the passbook system. According to Keith Breckenridge in *Biometric State*,

It was the dompas that allowed [Verwoerd] to do this. It provided him with a blunt instrument to lock the majority of African men and women into the deteriorating subsistence economies of the patchwork of so-called independent and self-governing states (Breckenridge, 2014: 268).

In the vision of all-powerfulness that the apartheid government espoused, passbooks were indeed the key that would make the separation of the races possible, by providing the state with a “panoptic vision” that could supposedly watch the movement of every black person. These small books obsessively documented – or were intended to document – each individual’s movements: places of residence, places of employment, dismissals or changes of employment, arrests, evictions by officials, periods of unemployment, trips to seek work in towns, hospital visits or medical inspections; all these activities were signed off by a wide

variety of apartheid bureaucrats, including any policeman on the street at his will.

The issuing of passes long preceded apartheid, of course. They had been used in this country to control or coerce black people, keep them out of sight, disempower and exploit them, ever since the 1700s. Slaves were issued with passes by the British in the 1780s, passes were imposed on local black populations by the trekboers after the Great Trek, and passes were used extensively during and after the South Africa War (the Anglo-Boer war) – for example (Saint, 2012).



The Bophuthatswana “travel document” that authorises the holder to travel to South Africa and its other homelands – plus Swaziland – only.

The recently installed Nationalist government wasted little time. Under apartheid, the pass laws were key to the maintaining of racial separation and subjugation, key to the whole homelands system. Again, legislation heaped upon legislation was required to make this work. The Population Registration Act no.30 of 1950 paved the way for the pass laws that followed. Verwoerd's notorious Natives (Abolition of Passes and Co-ordination of Documents) Act of 1952 forced black South Africans to carry a "Reference Book" that enabled the government to monitor and restrict their movements ("from registration until death"); but what is not often noted is that it took the place of *eleven* existing pass laws. The Natives (Prohibition of Interdicts) Act of 1956 removed all legal recourse for objecting to the removal of black people from certain residential areas. The Native Urban Areas Consolidation Acts, and its various Amendments of 1954, 1955, 1956 (from which point women were required to carry passes as well), 1957 and 1964, limited black people in increasing ways to a maximum of 72 hours to seek work in an urban area if they did not have permission from a specific municipal officeholder.

It was not until over three decades later that the gigantic failure of this project had started to become pressingly apparent even to its perpetrators. The Abolition of Influx Control Act No 68 of 1986 was passed, in order to begin to dismantle pass laws. Even then, this reversal was only to a very partial extent: "This dispensation applies only to blacks who already have urban rights and so are entitled to remain in white urban areas despite the citizenship-stripping statuses of the 1970s" (Dyzenhaus, 1991: 47, note 37).

"A few minutes of humiliation": The passbook photograph

At the start of the process, in 1952, the system of identification and monitoring was originally going to be based more importantly on fingerprints than on the photographs (Breckenridge 2014: 267-282). Mobile teams travelled throughout the country to reach the estimated 2.5 million black men needing to be registered, photographed, and fingerprinted. For three years (in a process that was meant to take under nine months) – with the co-operation of white employers, the mines, rural administrations, etc. – they carried out this process. Forms were filled in with names, places of residence, languages, tribal groups, tax status, rights to work, etc, and this information was forwarded to a single central office in Pretoria to be processed into "bewysboeke". Inevitably, the sheer numbers and the sheer insanity of the task, taking many years longer than anticipated, quickly overwhelmed the central office. Especially in

terms of fingerprints: this system of identification and tracing required well-trained personnel, and such people were simply not available in the numbers required. According to Breckenridge, at one point there were many millions of individual fingerprints collected awaiting processing, of which more than ten percent were thought to be duplicates taken in error (Breckenridge, 2005: 274). And so, “the state’s failure to cope with the administrative demands of fingerprinting all subjects meant that the passbook number and *photograph* became the standard way to monitor identity instead” (Saint 2012: 118).

This was a significant development, in our terms: it was such photographs that comprised the majority of source images for the airbrushed portrait industry.

The need for an identity photo in every passbook to monitor every individual, necessitated a massive programme, throughout the country, of photographing every black adult person (men only at first; later women). One of the technical problems apparently encountered immediately was how to photograph dark-skinned faces, since most available film was only sensitive to the light reflected off light-skinned faces. Christopher Bonanos (2013) has documented the story of an American company, Polaroid, which had already developed film for the US forces in the Second World War, to enable surveillance cameras to “see” and take photographs in darkness. According to the records of the Polaroid Workers Revolutionary Movement¹⁵, Polaroid, at the behest of the South African government, then developed, or adapted, special film for the purpose of photographing black people – specifically for identity photos to go into their passbooks. Polaroid’s collusion with the South Africa government in such a politically tainted and inhuman process, and the fact that they put their technology at the service of the S.A. state to this purpose, caused an outcry and a protest campaign amongst some of their American employees, which spread. Despite claiming as a company to espouse humane and liberal ideals themselves, Polaroid fired the staff member who discovered and revealed the project (Bonanos, 2013; Broomberg & Chanarin, 2013).

Under pressure (and aghast at the implications, now publicly revealed by employees), Polaroid sent a couple of “emissaries” to investigate what people in South Africa felt about it. The process was degrading, and its coercive purpose was not a question. But, although the emissaries reported back that the system was clearly hated and was deeply unjust, they were

¹⁵ These records are housed in the archives of Michigan State University, USA.

also quoted in newspaper reports as saying that “some Africans” encourage the keeping of Polaroids because the process was at least quick. One of these emissaries said to a reporter: “One intellectual in Dube Village told me the [Polaroid] ‘pass camera’ was good because it only took *a few minutes of humiliation to get the picture done*” (my italics) (quoted in *Post* newspaper, 13 December 1970). The same emissary, speaking to another reporter on returning to America, was quoted as saying: “Black South Africans felt that if nothing could be done to stop the system, Polaroid film could be an asset. They wouldn’t have to stand in the sun so long” (*Boston Globe*, 12 January 1971)

The idea of having a portrait photograph of oneself, for a vast number of people, was new: most Africans in the 1940s and 50s would have had little or no opportunity to have photos of themselves made. People without financial resources did not own cameras. Because of the almost universal poverty and lack of access to cities of black people, the small passbook photo which every black adult was compelled to receive was, for most, the *only* photographic image of themselves that they had. In the cities and townships there were some studios and a few black itinerant photographers for those who could afford this (J. Makhanya interview 1995).¹⁶ But for most people in the 1950s, although the passbook photo was a tool of subjugation and control, it might also be the only portrait of oneself, and therefore an ambivalent object: an affirmation of a kind, at least a visual record, of one’s physical identity. “*Now I could see myself*” (J. Makhanya, interview, quoting old people 1995).

In this sense it was, at least for some, seen as a document that could afford a degree of pride or attachment. We know the anguish associated with passbooks was extreme (and the Sharpeville massacre marked a culmination of the expression of that anguish). But some peoples’ feelings about the passbooks were complex. “Passes... held ambivalent qualities, being at once the totem that could enable passage to a more privileged world, while simultaneously also limiting the available options” (Saint 2012: 120). Lily Saint discusses a photograph by David Goldblatt that articulates this ambivalence. Goldblatt describes how one of two young men with a “dompas” that he photographed in 1972, struck up a pose for Goldblatt, displaying his passbook: “a very interesting gesture. It’s partly defiance... But he’s also posing in the way that Africans, particularly in those times, loved to pose with something that was precious to them” (Goldblatt, quoted by Saint, 2012: 121). This commentary strikes

¹⁶ Later, in the 1960s, the number of these small photography studios increased in the burgeoning townships, about which we will speak later in this chapter; and in small homeland towns, too, photographic studios found ready clients.

one now as perhaps paternalistic, and it is of course entirely possible that this pose was intentionally ironic, an irony that the white photographer, Goldblatt the “outsider”, completely missed.

The fact was that every African adult eventually had such a photograph, which provided them with an image that could be enlarged and painted. Many of these, some still affixed in their passbooks, remain in the archive of uncollected portraits and source photos of the Aqua Portrait Studio – a large enough number of them to suggest that passbook photos were a major proportion of the images sent in for this process. This raises a question: how was it possible that people could afford to part with this vital document, for the length of time it was going to take to have the portrait made and the passbook returned? Some may have been of people by then deceased; some may have by that time been replaced by newer passbooks. But, certainly, some appear to have been current. This leads to two conclusions: First, it is evidence of how extremely important the possession of that final framed portrait was to them, in that that they were prepared to risk the despatch of their passbook for possibly weeks or months, and over great distances (with none of the mechanisms for following its progress, and none of the “guarantees” we expect today). And second, it confirms the very scarcity of photographic images, or any images, that people had of themselves. They had no others from which to choose.

The point for this research is a very important, though complex and nuanced one. At a time when photographs of the people under discussion were scarce, or otherwise non-existent, the pass photo became the image from which something else could be made. The airbrush portrait industry offered this exact opportunity. And so, an image that was made *not* at the instigation of the sitter, or even in the interests of the sitter, *not* in the form which he or she might have chosen, *not* for the purposes for which most photographs are taken voluntarily (such as to celebrate, commemorate, share) – but for purposes of diminution, subjugation, and oppression: this same image is remade to represent, or to become, the portrait of conjugal commitment or love, or of highest pride (one’s wedding day or graduation), or of patriarchal or matriarchal presence and dignity, or of a familial bond, or as an image of continuity, as a narrative of an enduring family line. It is transformed into its opposite.

PART 3

Wedding Portraits: Civil and Traditional Marriage Laws, and Inheritance

Earlier in this chapter I spoke of the wedding portraits and the double portraits of husbands and wives that were ordered, commissioned, and made. Each portrait was an expression of a conjugal relationship, a visible manifestation of a partnership.

All wedding portraits are of course expressions of conjugal relationships; but the poignancy of these portraits in particular lies in the context of both their production and their display. Firstly – as I have said – many of those marriages had never taken place in this western, white-veiled form (though some had). Secondly, most of these marriages in real life were quickly wrenched apart by the political system they lived under: time actually spent together was irregular or non-existent for eleven and a half months of every year. And third, that these wedding portraits were in fact constructed of separate photos; that they might be photos taken for a very different purpose, at different times from each other, and often in different geographical places. The portraits were, in most cases, created long after the fact, to symbolise a togetherness that in reality had to survive physical absence.



Wedding portrait and source images, Northwest Province.

During interviews with the owners of wedding portraits, especially in Northwest Province and Limpopo, but also in townships around Johannesburg, I asked each owner of a wedding portrait why it was made. Many of the responses were similar: the portrait “is so we can see our closeness to each other”; “shows us being joined in life”; “being a truly married couple”; “being seen *together* forever”.

“My husband, he is late now, worked all year long in the hospital in Johannesburg. He made this picture and it made us as *one*” (Mrs Viya Matshediso interview 2014).

Very frequently the children or grandchildren were invoked: “It is showing them we were a proper, dignified couple”; “showing the future generations who their parents really were”; “we wanted our children to know we were a proper couple, respectable”.

“My grand-grand-grandchildren must know about us, know where they come from” (Margaret, daughter, interpreting for Leah Tinyane, interview 2015).

Marriage and Inheritance

But a number of times, in interviews, I was told of another aspect underlying the need for the wedding portrait. This came up frequently enough to bear further enquiry. This was the conviction that the wedding portrait would “show” or “prove” that the couple had been married under civil law – i.e. not only by customary or traditional law.¹⁷ The wedding *portrait* itself – of a western-style bride in white lace, and a western-style groom – was seen to have an evidentiary weight that a “white wedding” took place – *even*, or indeed especially, when a wedding of that kind may never have happened. It would declare to outsiders (or in-laws, as we shall see) that the couple had had a “white” (therefore civil) wedding. There it is, documented.

There was a “life-and-death” reason for this. If this image was recognised, in the eyes of the extended family or the immediate community, as a proof or testament of a civil marriage, it

¹⁷ It was striking that the subjects of the portraits, in cases where they were still alive – the brides in the pictures – never spoke to me directly of this: this information was always volunteered by a daughter, sister or granddaughter, or some other family member.

had the potential to protect the inheritance of the wife and her children from her husband's family after his death. This was because if the couple had had a civil or state wedding – as with white or any other citizens – the South African law of inheritance would determine that should the husband die intestate, the wife or children would inherit his estate. But if they had been married by customary law or had a common-law marriage, then they fell under “traditional law” at that time, which decreed that the deceased husband's home would at once revert to one of *his male relatives*. The widow would be evicted by the husband's family, often immediately, and even their children could, and often were, thrown out and excluded from inheritance.

The question is, of course, would the family not be aware of what kind of marriage had taken place? And more interestingly, how could these portraits – created by anonymous photographic printers and airbrush artists, dealing in turn with unknown subjects – have such powerful and solemn status within the family, that they carried the weight of a marriage document? Especially when there was so much at stake?

It becomes a more likely possibility on reading the Black Administration Act. This Act was first passed in 1927, and it remained in place (with amendments) throughout the apartheid period, and even long after. It was in fact only repealed relatively recently.¹⁸ Here is the Act under question – worth reading in order to underline the very real part the wedding portraits were seen to play.

I reproduce this section of the Act in full:

In Section 23(10)(a), (c) and (e) of the Black Administration Act, Section 23 of the Act provides as follows:

*“(1) All movable property belonging to a Black and allotted by him or accruing under Black law or custom to any woman with whom he lived in a customary union, or to any house, shall upon his death devolve and be administered under Black law and custom.
(2) All land in a tribal settlement held in individual tenure upon quitrent conditions by*

¹⁸ Astonishingly, this Act had not been repealed and was still being applied and upheld by Magistrates and Courts as late as 2004. Only in that year, in the Bhe Case, did the Cape High Court overturn an instance of this application of “Black Law and Custom”, because it clashed with the post-1994 Constitution. In this case, a common-law wife was losing her house to the father of her recently-deceased partner. In this case, the High Court concluded “that the legislative provisions that had been challenged, and on which the father of the deceased relied, were inconsistent with the Constitution and were therefore invalid”.

*a Black shall devolve upon his death **upon one male person**, to be determined in accordance with tables of succession to be prescribed under subsection (10).*

Regulation 2 provides as follows:

“2. If a Black dies leaving no valid will, so much of his property, including immovable property, as does not fall within the purview of subsection (1) or subsection (2) of section 23 of the Act shall be distributed in the manner following:

(a) . . .

(b) If the deceased was at the time of his death the holder of a letter of exemption issued under the provisions of section 31 of the Act, exempting him from the operation of the Code of Zulu Law, the property shall devolve as if he had been a European.

(c) If the deceased, at the time of his death was:

(i) a partner in a marriage in community of property or under antenuptual contract; or

(ii) a widower, widow or divorcee, as the case may be, of a marriage in community of property or under antenuptual contract and was not survived by a partner to a customary union entered into subsequent to the dissolution of such marriage, the property shall devolve as if the deceased had been a European.

(d) When any deceased Black is survived by any partner:

(i) with whom he had contracted a marriage which, in terms of subsection (6) of section 22 of the Act, had not produced the legal consequences of a marriage in community of property; or

(ii) with whom he had entered into a customary union; or

(iii) who was at the time of his death living with him as his putative spouse;

*or by any issue of himself and any such partner, and the circumstances are such as in the opinion of the Minister to render the application of Black law and custom to the devolution of the whole, or some part, of his property inequitable or inappropriate, **the Minister may direct** that the said property or the said part thereof, as the case may be, shall devolve as if the said Black and the said partner had been lawfully married out of community of property, whether or not such was in fact the case, and as if the said Black had been a European.*

*(e) If the deceased does not fall into any of the classes described in paragraphs (b), (c) and (d), the property shall be distributed **according to Black law and custom.**”*

In reading this Act in full, one might see that the possibility feasibly existed that a *portrait* of a wedding – despite its being a depiction of an imaginary event – could act as “proof” of this

having been a western marriage. The second part of Section 23 of the Act gives “the Minister” (or presumably his representatives) some discretion in determining whether a couple’s estate should be regarded as having to be dealt with according to “Black law” or “European law”. In this context one might certainly imagine that a portrait such as this could be seen as sufficient evidence of a long-term union.

These customary laws, or as the Act called them, “Black laws”, were enforced because they were written into the law of the land; if the couple were deemed married under “Black law” – and therefore subject to the corresponding inheritance practice – there was no other recourse for the widow. Even the later granting of temporary leasehold rights to black people in townships did not provide any permanent form of security for widows:

... thirty-year-lease plans did not alter the fact that families could easily be evicted, for being late on payment or for losing one’s job and hence losing the right to reside in an urban area. Women continued to be particularly vulnerable to evictions in cases where their husbands had died and had left them as widows without any sons (Feyder, 2012).

The meanings in these wedding images are thus cumulative and layered. As I will discuss later in this chapter, the notion that one could create a “fait accompli” after the fact, so to speak (in this case, a *de facto* civil marriage based on an artist’s construction of a portrait) was not unique to this situation; it was applied in other acts of negotiation and survival too.

“Signs and codes are generated by myths and in turn serve to maintain them,” as Barthes said in another context. “We reach here the very principle of myth: it transforms history into nature... Things appear to mean something by themselves” (Barthes 1957). Barthes’ myth was that created by the colonizers through ‘naturalizing’ their imposed and dominant values – causing colonial impositions and cultural behaviours to appear self-evidentially ‘true’ and ‘normal’, unquestioned. What we see here is a different but related use of myth: where, in order for an oppressed group (or individuals) to survive, “evidence” is manufactured that posits a “truth”, a myth, that makes it possible to negotiate or endure within certain conditions about which one has few choices.

PART 4

The 1960s – Urbanisation and Township Housing

To deny the emergence of black urban culture was to underline the temporary nature of the African presence in urban space and their inevitable return to the homelands... [But] black South Africans' engagements with modernity were constructed not just in opposition to tradition, but also in their own positive terms, in their embracing of consumption and a new material culture (Feyder, 2012).

In the 1960s, the demand for these airbrushed images continued to grow, and indeed accelerated. The clients of the Aqua Portrait Studio were now increasingly black people, with interest from white customers declining sharply. This decline was due to a number of factors, but easily the biggest was the growing access to easy-to-operate cameras and colour film, available to those who could afford them – and those who could afford them were generally white people.

There were also factors that contributed to the growing demand among the black clients. One was township housing – now legally available (for some) close to white towns and cities. Under duress, in the beginning of the 1960s, the government was compelled to start permitting the acceleration of mass-built “matchbox” housing as ostensibly temporary urban accommodation. As Owen Crankshaw writes in *Class, Race and Residence in Black Johannesburg*, the pressure, entirely economic, came from business:

...there were at least two important policies that restricted manufacturing growth in Johannesburg. These were the industrial decentralisation policy and education policy, both of which aimed to curb African urbanisation. The former policy forced manufacturers either to cut back on African labour or to relocate to remote decentralisation districts. Education policy was supposed to limit African urbanisation by restricting the provision of secondary education in Johannesburg. This obviously had the effect of exacerbating an already chronic shortage of skills (Crankshaw, 2005).

But during the 1960s and 1970s, the Witwatersrand experienced a sustained and rapid growth in jobs. This led to a chronic shortage of labour in the manual trades, which had been the strict preserve of skilled white artisans. Employers responded to this crisis by introducing semi-skilled components to these trades, i.e. tasks that with training could be carried out by black workers.

There was, predictably, resistance from white trade unions and the government, but the imperatives of business and finance were strong.

During the late 1960s and early 1970s, a set of compromises... were struck. The essence of these agreements... was that Africans could be advanced into semi-skilled, supervisory, and white-collar jobs on the condition that it did not adversely affect the employment conditions of white workers (Crankshaw, 1997).

Government was pressured to reform both its employment and educational policy towards urban Africans. In fact, these schemes were only introduced after an official report proved that “granting temporary leasehold rights to blacks did not provide any permanent form of tenure and was thus not contradictory to the policy of separate development”. (Crankshaw, 1997). In other words, thirty-year lease plans did not alter the fact that families could easily be evicted, for being late on payment, for example, or for losing one's job and hence losing the right to reside in an urban area. It was not at all unknown for people to be thrown out of their house and sent to the homelands.



Typical house in Soweto built circa 1960, with an asbestos cement roof.

Acquiring a house came a whole set of imperatives, some a result of outside peer pressure, but mostly from within – that is, the imperative to make one’s house a “proper home”: a desirable place to be in, and a welcoming place to come home to, a personal refuge and also a place of self-affirmation – particularly in a context where the lived reality *outside* of the home, in the city and in the workplace, was of likely humiliation, fear, subjugation and anxiety.

The most important questions I raise in this part of the discussion concern the connections between oppression, the construction of “home” as a projection of self, and the notion of dignity.

Most of all occupants of these houses testified in interviews to a fierce compulsion to establish a sense of it being “permanent”, which flew in the face of its officially temporary and highly precarious status. “The municipal authorities made it clear: ... ‘you don’t own the place’ ... yet many Sowetans chose to respond by declaring themselves permanent residents of Soweto” (Ginsburg, 2005: 130). Improvement schemes in township houses in the 1960s and 1970s were a way for black families to collectively create this sense of permanence, even if illusory: “Housing activity served to reinforce one’s claim to urban residence where other forces conspired to deny it” (Ginsburg, 1996).

Rebecca Ginsburg argues that, given the indignities and insults that black people regularly experienced, the upgraded home was simultaneously a literal and metaphorical refuge from the harshness of the apartheid environment, where residents could reconstruct a sense of worth and dignity through investing their energies and making long-term plans. Remaking and redefining these spaces were activities that defied the strictly temporary terms of their existence, and also enabled a kind of redefining of themselves: the emotional and financial investment of fixing, plastering walls, installing floors and ceilings, etc, established a sense, even a conviction, of perpetuity; and this *performance* of stability made possible a capacity for mental wellbeing, necessary to the survival of the human spirit under apartheid.

The reason I have engaged with this process is that there are at least two issues that seem to me common to both the question of creating a “respectable” home, and the phenomenon of

the airbrushed photographic portraits. One is the creation of de facto “evidence” – changing one’s circumstances by creating *evidence* of new circumstances. The other is the issue of establishing a persona of dignity and self-respect in the context of an oppressive state.

In Soweto (as Ginsburg shows) and in Wattville (as described by Feyder), and in many other similar examples in the 1960s, township residents “did not need a deed in their hand before they will improve their housing. *Evidence that they [would] not be removed [would] suffice*” (Ginsburg, 1996: 131). But this “evidence” was completely self-manufactured. It was the work they themselves put into their houses.

For Sowetans at the time, such “proof” may have come in part through their reading of the apartheid laws. According to influx control laws, one was eligible to live in an urban area if [one was] born there, resident there for ten years, worked there for fifteen years, or married to or the dependent child of someone who had such rights (Ginsburg, 1996: 133).

The evidence was the same kind of “evidence” that the wedding portraits provided in rural areas and in townships, that is, as “proof” of a civil marriage, therefore of one with inheritance rights for the (future) widow. Self-manufactured evidence becomes “truth”: the home becomes permanent, the civil marriage real.

This posits a survival strategy in which it is possible to redefine circumstances by presenting a physical alternative – as a *fait accompli*, as the terms of a given existence, as the de facto condition.

“People who like themselves...”

One suspects that as apartheid became ever more repressive and as one’s self-respect was increasingly assaulted and one’s pride undermined, housing transformation became a... way for Africans to assert their stature (Ginsburg 1996: 137).

The second set of issues that seem common to the creation of a decent home on the one hand and to the portraits on the other, is that of respect – self-respect, respectability, and dignity.

The respectability that could be derived... sustained people at least somewhat in their encounters with the outside world. Those domestic workers whose employers handed them tea in empty jam-jars... or who fed them dinner in the dog's dish... could at least pick up alternative constructions of self-worth in their own homes... [Quoting from an interview]: "It shows that *people* are staying in this place, *people who like themselves*" (my italics), (Ginsburg, 2005: 138).

Not only the renovation of the house but also the placing of objects (like furniture and framed portraits) in it, were key steps of the process of creating an appearance of a settled, stable, and enduring life in the township. The physical form this process took, the objects themselves, the styles, and the details, were often chosen to match those of neighbours and friends.

"Whatever we did... was to copy somebody. We copied because we liked the things that other people did" (Ginsburg, 2005: 135). (I have heard similar comments in my interviews in Limpopo, about the airbrushed portraits.) The portraits too became part of the necessary completion of the home. This was an era that had not long before left behind the heavy and dark wood furniture of the 1940s, and part of that aesthetic persisted, including the picture frames in dark and gleaming curved wood (or imitations of this). The airbrushed portrait was one of those things, it seemed, that everyone wanted to "copy". The invariable oval frames around the airbrushed portraits were actually known as "furniture frames" (Lala, 2016). Easily accessible now, for people living much nearer town, their popularity soared. "That portrait was often the first thing, maybe for a time the *only* piece of furniture they would have in the house" (T. Makhanye, interview 2016).

Indeed, in photographs taken in township houses of that period, we frequently see these portraits in the background, hanging on the walls. I will just mention two examples both from Sophie Feyder's paper on the photography of Ngilima. These photographs were taken in living rooms of houses in Wattville in the 1950s and '60s. One is actually a trio of images, taken in Ngilima's own house (which he would use as a setting or backdrop for clients if they so chose). It shows a number of elements that speak of conscious "affluence", and is carefully intended to show this: the floral wallpaper, different kinds of curtains, the plant-holder with plant, and (given much attention) the modern-looking record player, with bowl and cloth on top. But – equally part of this show – a framed airbrushed portrait hangs on the wall just

above the record player. This portrait completes the carefully selected and placed furnishing: as with every object here, its visible presence is not accidental.



Figure 5 a-c: These three pictures belong to the same uncut roll of negatives shot by Torrance Ngilima. It is likely that they were never enlarged. They show Constance Xotyeni coming back 'home' from work, first entering 'her house' through the front door, then posing inside next to the gramophone with her coat on. My interview with Xotyeni revealed that at the time these pictures were taken, she was a 'homeless' young bride, in limbo between her parents' house and her sister's house. The late Ronald Ngilima's house on Tladi Street, Wattville, early 1960s. Torrance Ngilima.

(Feyder 2012)



Figure 8: On the far right corner, one can see the newspaper cutting decorating the ledge. The framed portrait on the left corner apparently belonged to Ronald, who would offer it to clients as a prop. It is also interesting to note the prominent position of the radio in the picture, set at the very front of the group portrait. Wattville, 1950s. Ronald Ngilima.

(Feyder 2012)

In the second (and earlier) example, a family is posed in front of a wall, unplastered, unpainted and of course without wallpaper. This house is poorer than the other, and as Feyder points out, even the curtain frill at the top right is cut out of newspaper.

Nevertheless, very prominently on the wall behind the group hangs one of the airbrushed portraits. Along with the radio on the table in front, this is clearly a deliberate and iconic object within this context. What is striking is that this framed portrait on the wall – according to Feyder – is a prop. It was offered by the photographer as a feature to be included in photographs of families that bore no relationship to the person in that portrait.

This speaks volumes about the status and prestige of such portraits. Like the radio, it suggests one has “arrived”: to own a portrait, one must have a wall to hang it on, one has a home. The woman portrayed in the picture to some extent resembles the seated, matriarchal-looking

woman in the family group. To this extent the portrait confirms and underlines the solemn presence of the family, extends it, adds a “layer” of meaning, time and history to it. Such a portrait in this way implies a continuity, an added dignity and stature.

These ideas do not suggest the family was being deceptive about their relationship to the person in the picture (if indeed it is only a prop). Just as later, people might (and frequently did), for example, have themselves photographed in front of a smart car: it would be clear that the car was not theirs, but its associations and meanings, and aspirational values, are a part of their cachet: quite openly enacting a role and colluding to contrive an “image”, an impression, a persona, for popular public perception.

Notions of Selfhood

In her paper, speaking of “photography's role in the construction of space and of self-representations in relation to space”, Feyder asks a key question: “How did vernacular photography help to articulate abstract notions of selfhood (such as respectability or modernity) within historically specific circumstances?” Although she is discussing posed photographs, this question becomes even more pertinent when applied to the airbrushed portraits of this study. These were, of course, constructions of self-representations in the literal sense; fictions about their owners. But they were images made on their subjects’ own terms. Created (to the extent that they could make certain choices about them) by the subjects themselves, they were able to construct a persona closer to a “truth” about the self than that imposed by the distorting and dehumanizing reality of apartheid.

The emergence of new photographic conventions and an evolving local aesthetic is further evidence of people's agency in a quickly changing environment, of their ability to respond to these changes through a medium of cultural expression that is *directly under their control* (Feyder, 2012).

In the case of the airbrushed portrait, I have considered in an earlier chapter to what extent the image was really “directly under their control”. As we have said, there were very specific conventions that were available to choose from, but certainly these conventions seem to have reflected strongly the aspirational ideals of the subjects at that time. How much the clients’

choices would have differed had the menu of options been wider or different, is a matter of conjecture.

But how people took control of the way they were seen (or saw themselves), the visual form in which they chose to be represented, and how they literally remade their image, resonates with the way in which they approached their houses: which was, given a dehumanising set of impositions, to *redefine* what was given. This process has multiple intertwined motives – practical (in the case of the house renovations, real considerations were to be comfortable, to be able to maintain cleanliness, to insulate from cold and noise), political (to remain in place, to assert permanence), and psychological (to feel like “a person”, to have dignity and respect).

Although, in the context of apartheid, as I suggested in the section on clothing in Chapter Six, the political cannot be clearly divorced from everything else, it is the last – the psychological – which is of most interest in relation to the portraits. A private sense of dignity, given visible expression in the portraits, was, I have tried to show, what made it possible to maintain resilience in the face of daily experience. This was only in part about maintaining a level of visible outer order and social conformity, retaining the good opinion of neighbours and community. To an even greater extent, it was a manifestation of self-preservation – the preservation of a sense of innate value, and an identity which is acknowledged, which are essential to one’s continuing existence as a functioning human being; without which anxiety and depressive disorders, crises of identity and loss of purpose, psychological illness, social alienation, and impairments in social functioning would become overwhelming when exposed to crisis events. And apartheid was an ongoing crisis event.

Death, labour, domestic chores, conflict, material deprivation were very much part of daily life... yet one would not think so by looking at the pictures. These absences are themselves significant of the social role people attributed to photography (Feyder, 2012).

In their complete deletion of any possible background details from the original photos, any sense of place and context, and of any attire that may have revealed poverty or a traditional way of dress, they become “ambivalent documents of social imaginations” (Feyder, 2012). In the portraits there is no bleak environment: instead, faces surrounded by uninterrupted blue, a

clean slate, unlimited possibility. The portrait had no role in recording lived reality. Its purpose was to postulate a different one.

The aesthetic of the airbrushed images – with their sharpness and clarity, perfectly-defined edges, the smooth tonal gradations, the flattening and simplifying of the background, and the elimination of all content other than the figure itself in its non-space – was one of carefully crafted illusion. These absences made it possible for these images to become the tabula rasa of their subjects' projections and fantasies.

CONCLUSION

PART 1

The Scope

In contemplating the collection of printed and airbrushed portraits, and all the source images and ephemera that accompanied these that remained after the Aqua Portrait Studio closed its doors for the last time in about 1998, I set out to answer – in many parts – certain questions about it: What does the Aqua Portrait Studio collection tell us about the practice of airbrushed portraiture in the second half of the 20th century in South Africa? What does it reveal about the people who were portrayed, and about the context they existed in? What understanding could be reached from the collection about the meaning of these portrait photographs, and about why these clients had these portraits made? What specifically can we find out about this from an examination of the physical objects themselves, and an exploration of where that leads?

The structure of this research arose out of these questions. Because of the focus on one specific business as a case study, a number of different approaches seemed appropriate. First, in order to understand the nature of the business, a biographical approach was taken regarding the owner of the studio, and at least one of the other participants in this business (as an example – a salesman). The cultural and personal narratives that emerged are revealing of the complex social milieu and political environment in which this project as a whole was operating. Secondly, I investigated the technological *modus operandi* of the practice, attempting to understand what technical or physical processes are necessary, and how they are carried out, in order to understand the constraints and possibilities. Thirdly, the study focused on the material objects in the collection itself to see what they might disclose both about the clients and about the technical processes in the transformation of their photographs. This required a process of visual analysis: I chose a small selection of the original photographs for a close reading, in order to “mine” them for possible information about the context in which they were produced, and to gain a sense of who the clients were. I then looked at the final portraits themselves, to understand how they came to look the way they do, and how this specific form came to be accepted by its market. Fifth, I asked *why* these

portraits came to look the way they do, trying to identify the sources of its conventions and tropes. This involved a combination of tracking historical narratives and documents, and interrogating the assumptions of some of these. Finally, I examined the historical and social environment: the political, economic and social conditions which governed the lives of most of these clients, to grasp how these conditions in combination created a ready market for these images; and to consider how this genre was imbued with particular meaning and significance by the communities who commissioned and owned them, to suit their needs. Perhaps most important for this enquiry was to consider the social and political conditions of the time: it was a period of time almost contiguous with the era of apartheid. The practice flourished in the face of the constraints, privations and deprivations imposed on lives, the physical upheavals to communities and individuals, and the lifestyles this brought. Why was this the case? I argued that the homelands policy and the uprooting and breaking up of families, migrant labour and the separating of spouses, the pass laws which provided an identity photo of every black adult, and both customary and civil laws governing traditional and customary marriage and civil marriage in black societies, all had a part to play in the assignation of meanings in, and roles played by, this genre of portraiture.

Because this discussion has confined itself largely to the work of one airbrushed portrait studio, in one locality, it has drawn its conclusions mainly from the collection of images that remained there, and from some of its known clients or participants in its operation. For that reason, I have not tried, nor would I have been able within this scope, to determine how representative it is (or not) of such studios in South Africa as a whole: that would involve a different study. I also have not followed up on every community from whom commissions came at different points in the studio's history: such as, in its earlier period the white and mainly Afrikaans community, for example. My focus was on the meaning and significance of these portraits to those who formed by far the *majority* of the clients, who were from black communities spread across the northern homelands and the townships within reach of Johannesburg.

PART 2

What I Have Learnt from the Enquiry

- A wide variety of source (or original) photographs exist in the collection – a variety greater in scope than expected. Many of the source photographs were from passbooks, and these passbooks themselves comprised a rich font of information on individuals, and of life led under apartheid. But there were also many photographer's studio photos, and photographs from itinerant photographers, dating from the 1950s and even earlier; most with the stamps of the photographer on the back – alerting me to the wide spread of these in townships, small homeland towns and even villages.
- Some source photographs also show that actual “white weddings” were not a great rarity, even in rural 1950s, 60s, and 70s South Africa. Nevertheless, when these photos were sent to be transformed into wedding portraits, inevitably the head shots were taken from different originals, and the final airbrushed wedding attire was not the real attire, but taken from the repertoire of garments in the imagination of the artist.
- What my examination of the archive seemed to show me was that the original photos could offer information of all kinds; however limited though it may be for the most part, they are often unexpectedly rich in unintended content. They provided evidence of the *kinds* of photos of themselves that people owned and *how* some of those photos may have been used. Also, they often showed where some of the people lived or came from; how they looked and dressed in daily life; what they did as a living; and the kinds of activities they were engaged in when the photographs were taken, among other things.
- By comparing the originals with the various stages of their transformation, it was possible to understand the technical scope and the particularities and peculiarities of the airbrush, and of the other hand-colouring techniques used. In addition, it made it

possible to observe changes in the artist's style and quality of work over time, and changes in style demanded by fashion and the market.

- I explored the kinds of enactments, the persona and constructed identities of the sitters that were represented in the portraits. In looking at how often rural or working class people were presented as “urban” and middle class, the research made clearer to me also exactly what comprised individual choice and what comprised long-held conventions; and also, where these conventions arose from, and why. But importantly, although the scope for individual choice may have been limited, nevertheless there were choices.
- Some of the individuals (not necessarily all) were attached to churches. The ZCC especially seemed a strong presence, which added to the perception mentioned in some interviews that there was a sense of propriety and piety in being represented as dressed (in the portraits) in a “Christian” way, stemming from earlier mission school education.
- I traced the conventions that prevailed in this form of portraiture over a very extended time, with very slight variations in studios throughout the country. I found that the roots of a number of the conventions reach back to the origins of this specific genre, in America from the late 19th century to the Depression years of the 1930s. These sources seemed to me important to find, because they determined the look of a genre that became the definitive aspirational image for so many South Africans.
- But other conventions such as the “re-group” seem to have taken on a particular purpose in South Africa. There are forms among the Yoruba people in Nigeria, where double printings of sitters in one image were used in a practice linked to the *ibejì* tradition, to represent a deceased twin (Sprague, 1975); and a version of the ‘re-group’ is also found in India (Pinney, 1997), but for different purposes. The South African adaptation of this genre allowed for the creation of wedding portraits, for example, and “doubles” (portraits of couples from separate source images). The reasons for which these arose, even if this was not fully consciously articulated by the various players, are deeply entwined with the racial policies in this country and with South

Africa's marriage traditions and customs, combined with its racially defined civil marriage laws. These portraits played complex and multi-layered roles, including in decisions determining succession and inheritance in relation to widows and children (as I outlined in Chapters 7 and 8).

- By examining ephemera – the notes, handwritten instructions, and envelopes in which the source photographs were carried to the city and delivered – I was able to pinpoint the various regions in which the clients lived. These were many and some far-flung, but (according to the remaining archive) mainly in the Witwatersrand, the northern and eastern Transvaal (as it was), and especially the homelands of Lebowa, Gazankulu, Bophuthatswana, and Venda, and also of KwaZulu-Natal. This led me to understand more fully the impact on daily lives of the homelands policies, and especially of migrant labour and the consequent absence of spouses and break-up of family life.

These are only a few of the fundamental issues surrounding this practice. Many questions remain to be explored; these explorations will be the subject of future enquiries.

INTERVIEWEES

Biallo, Giovanna: photographer/printer/enlarger; owner of photography studio in Jeppe Street 1980s. (2016)

Goldblatt, Lily: owner of airbrushed portraits of grandparents. (2015)

Greaves, Graham: airbrush artist, Durban. (2015, 2016)

Lalla, Ravi: proprietor of Popular Picture Frames, Jeppestown, Johannesburg. (2015, 2016)

Letsoalo, Amos: Director of Polokwane Museum, Limpopo. (1995, 2015)

Mailulah, Mrs Florah: portrait owner, Limpopo. (2014)

Maja, Sidwell: portrait owner, Limpopo. (2015)

Makhanye, Joseph: salesman, Alexandra and Tembisa. (1996)

Makhanye, Thami: son of and assistant to salesman Joseph Makhanya. (2016)

Michel, Colleen: airbrush artist, email correspondence, Cape Town (now in London). (2015)

Michel, Fred: airbrush artist, Head Artist of Peninsula Studios, Cape Town (1995)

Moseou, Maggie: ZCC church member, Johannesburg. (2016)

Mrs Makhanye: co-owner, photography studio in Alexandra Township, Johannesburg. (2016)

Olofssen, Malin: agricultural researcher, Limpopo (personal conversation). (2016)

Rabothatha, Dr T.T.: school principal, Tshakhuma Village, Limpopo. (2016, 2017)

Rozowsky, Shulamit: daughter of I. Ginsberg, portrait agent/middleman, Cape Town. (2014)

Tancrel, Mike: airbrush artist, Cape Town. (2015)

Teke, S.: photographer/salesman, Lesethleng, Northwest Province. (2015)

Wasserman, Yettie: artist/owner of the Aqua Portrait Studio, Johannesburg. (1990s)

Further interviewees from Tembisa, Alex Township, Soweto, and Limpopo Province, are referred to, or have provided images or background information, though not all directly quoted in this dissertation, including: Elizabeth Mabizela, Ephraim Mabizela, Anne Nkomo, Frans Mothapa, Thoko Martha Mayaba, Motjatji Alletta Molepo, Siphon Ephraim Ndlovu, Mackson and Rosina Maboho, Susan Murathi, Florah Mailula (and Tsatsi Mailula), Viya Matseditso, Richard Mahlatji, Sanna Mahlatji, William Mahlatji, Talakgale Malesela, Rosina Modikwa, Leah Tinyane, Sidwell Maja, Chief Maja and his wife Joyce Ramasela, Ruth Mutshekwane, Monica M. Tshinondiwa, Alice Netshidzivhani, Eunice Netshidzivhani, Emily Tshimangadzo Luthodo, Julia Mutshekwane, Nangwanu Patrick Luthodo, Reineth Nyawaisedza, Francina

Matamela, Martha Neluvhalani, Godfrey Matodzi, Mrs Nzumbululo, and others whom I may have omitted in error. (1995 – 2016)

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