

Santu Mofokeng, photographs: 'the violence is in the knowing'

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ABSTRACT

Born in 1956, Santu Mofokeng formed part of the Afrapix Collective that engaged in expose and documentary photography of anti-apartheid resistance and social conditions during the 1980s in South Africa. However, Mofokeng was an increasingly important internal critic of mainstream photojournalism, and of the ways black South Africans were represented in the bigger international picture economy during the political struggle. Eschewing scenes of violence and the third-party view of white-on-black brutality in particular, he began his profound explorations of the everyday and spiritual dimensions of African life, both in the city and in the countryside. His formal techniques favor "fictions" that contain smoke, mist, and other matters and techniques that occlude rather than expose. Using angularity and ambivalence, he also ruptures realist expectations and allows space for the uncanny and the supernatural. He works with the notion of *seriti* (a northern seSotho term encompassing aura, shadow, power, essence, and many other things). The essay follows strands in Mofokeng's writings and statements in relation to certain of his photographs, most recently repositioned in the substantial 2007 exhibition *Invoice*, to argue that he has pushed for a desecularization and Africanization of photography from the 1980s to the present. In more recent work the scourge of apartheid has been replaced by the HIV/AIDS virus, a mutation of nature, exacerbating the spiritual insecurities of many people in post-apartheid South Africa. The essay concludes that Mofokeng's work poses a critique of the parallel paradigms of Marxist-influenced social history and documentary photography in 1980s South Africa, both still highly influential, by attempting to reinsert aura (*seriti*) into photography and by highlighting what secular Marxism has concealed and proscribed.

Keywords: Africanization, apartheid, documentary, every day, secular, spirituality, struggle, violence

Born in 1956, South African photographer Santu Mofokeng talks about the limited number of images surrounding people when he was growing up in Soweto, compared to the present day in South Africa. In particular, he refers to "snowy television," the white fuzz on the black-and-white television when transmission broke down, that was somehow for him a memorable image. Fellow South African photographer David Goldblatt has described the photograph as a very attenuated thing.¹ I am interested in the way Mofokeng attenuates the photograph much further. Even in the 1980s, while his Afrapix colleagues were chasing police and protests and producing sharp realist images of unassailable clarity for local

¹ Video footage, *David Goldblatt Retrospective*, Johannesburg Art Gallery, August 17-October 31, 2005.



Figure 1. Concert, Sewefontein

and international consumption, Santu Mofokeng was, in his own phrase, chasing shadows. Paul Virilio raises an important issue when he speaks of the philosophical problem of the "*splitting of viewpoint*, the sharing of perception of the environment between the animate (the living subject) and the inanimate (the object, the seeing machine)."² Animate and inanimate are both the products of intense mediations; this is not a simple question of a subjective-objective divide.³ But the hybrid, retentive, and experimental effects of a fractured viewpoint, arising specifically in Africa, might offer some possibilities for thinking about photography. The assumptions underpinning a mode of disciplinary knowledge such as history, as well as the positivist norms of documentary photography in a particular South African context of late apartheid, warrant considerable unpacking. It is conceivable that the expressive and social subtleties of this modernist moment have been underestimated. Nor is it helpful to seal off the more empiricist disciplines from visual theory.

It is along such a nerve that I wish to wish travel, through the work and statements of Mofokeng. For the ghostliness of Mofokeng's work, his pursuit of the spirit—of what people believe in—is like an ethereal after-image. For a variety of reasons, some socioeconomic, he has sometimes used exhausted chemicals to achieve certain effects. The closer we get to the routines of Mofokeng, the more the darkroom appears to be outside the abstract problematic of Debord, Virilio, Foucault, and Baudrillard concerning the literalness of the lens and its pervasive reach.⁴ Their denigration of spectacle, of the gaze, and the critique of

² Paul Virilio, *The Vision Machine* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 59.

³ Daniel Miller, "Materiality: An Introduction," in *Materiality*, ed. Daniel Miller (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2005), 11.

⁴ See, among others, Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle* (New York: Zone Books, 1995); Virilio, *The Vision Machine*; Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Vintage, 1995); Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994).

surveillance, seem to stem from the discipline of physics, not the transformatory effects of chemistry, though in analogue photography they come together in the chamber of the camera. The lens seems to be foregrounded in much visual theory, not the creative processes following its mapping onto the surfaces of retention, the "result of a delay, a detour into the chemical process of development and printing."⁵ Critics talk about the stuck temporalities induced by photographic images in history. What is also present is the extension and spinning out of temporality in the darkroom and its effect on the image and on history. The extemporizations of taking a photograph change into the temporizations of the darkroom; the latter are not necessarily faithful to the ephemera of the atmosphere, but instead are evocative beyond it. "If I bring in light I create, it's not documentary," says Mofokeng.⁶ "You can try your luck in the darkroom."⁷ The darkroom also influences how he takes further pictures. This creates an even bigger temporal space, replete with many further mediations and "shared perceptions," both freezing time and expanding it.

Social-history paradigms were dominant in South Africa at a time when progressive documentary photography became prevalent. To some extent they naturalized similar conventions, the one to end silence, and the other to end invisibility. With the one there was "history from below," while with the other there was photography of repression of its black victims and their resistance. Santu Mofokeng, however, with his manipulation of time and light, draws attention to something different. His photography opens up uncertainties and emphasizes different things. It is somewhat obvious to draw parallels between dominant genres of history and photography, but less so to speak of the effect of photography on history through its broader public impact. I shall attempt to come back to this in relation to Mofokeng's work. Did the media shape the political struggle, as some would claim? Is history made by visuals?⁸

When I cite Mofokeng's statements here, I am drawing on a variety of sources.⁹ Mofokeng's numerous exhibitions and photo-essays dating back to the 1980s, mediated in particular ways at the time and now repositioned in very deliberate ways in a post-apartheid time, are particularly important. But my essay is based mainly on the recent 2007 exhibition, *Invoice*, and is therefore highly selective. Mofokeng is a highly exhibited, published, and

5 Laura Mulvey, *Death 24x a Second: Stillness and the Moving Image* (London: Reaktion, 2003), 19.

6 Interview with Santu Mofokeng by Patricia Hayes, Farzanah Badsha, and Mdu Xakaza, Johannesburg, July 24, 2005.

7 Santu Mofokeng, *Santu Mofokeng*, Taxi Series 004 (Johannesburg: David Krut Publishers, 2001), 29.

8 The last question comes from Christopher Pinney, "*Photos of the Gods*": *The Printed Image and Political Struggle in India* (London: Reaktion, 2004), 8.

9 In particular: published essays in which Mofokeng has formulated his biography and thinking with increasing sophistication and tightness; curatorial texts to accompany exhibitions, most recently the 2007 exhibition *Invoice*; his email correspondence; oral statements by him, including interviews; an extended postgraduate class address at the University of the Western Cape in September 2006 before the launch of *Invoice*; and informal conversations. My research was conducted as part of the Project in Documentary Photography at the University of the Western Cape, supported by the University and the National Research Foundation of South Africa. I am deeply grateful to Santu Mofokeng for this dialogue, and permission to use photographs. I am also indebted to Farzanah Badsha, Mdu Xakaza, Ciraj Rassool, and colleagues at UWC, Adam Ashforth, David Campbell, Wendy Ewald, Susan Meiselas, Nancy Rose Hunt, Helmut Puff, Gary Minkley, Omar Badsha, Sujith Parayil, Tapati Guha-Thakurta, and audiences at seminars in Cape Town, Ann Arbor, Middletown, and Calcutta, for their criticisms and suggestions.

increasingly cosmopolitan photographer. The big shift in South African photography has been the movement from the politicized spaces of the 1980s anti-apartheid struggle into the more abstracted space of the gallery in the 2000s, and his photography, and his thinking about photography, have developed within this context.

Verbally, Mofokeng often circles around almost incessantly before arriving at a statement. During one public tour of *Invoice* he stated, "The violence is in the knowing." (Once he asked me what I thought of *Invoice*, I replied: "bruising under the skin."¹⁰) The violence is not directly in seeing. It derives from the fact that there are knowledges attached to seeing. Because of the familiarity of South African photographs from the 1980s, this knowledge is shared by many viewers. Set against a bigger thematic corpus of work from the era of heightened political struggle against apartheid, Mofokeng's images work against a more positivist and expository backdrop, as a photographic estrangement that is increasingly legible over time.

I. BACKDROP

What is this body of knowledge attached to seeing in South Africa? Within Africa, South Africa is relatively industrialized and urbanized, and it has also been a highly photographic society. This is not the place to go into a history of photography in South Africa, or in Africa more broadly, but suffice it to say that ostensibly documentary work began to emerge by the 1940s among white photographers such as Constant Stuart Larabee, Eli Weinberg, and Leon Levson, on the edges of their commercial projects. *Drum* magazine provided a crucial platform from the 1950s for the emergence of black photographers, notably Ernest Cole, who finally went into exile in order to publish his famous indictment of apartheid, the banned work called *House of Bondage*.¹¹ Cole died a pauper in New York City in 1967, aesthetically frustrated, it is believed. His fellow *Drum* photographers Alf Khumalo and Peter Magubane were the black role models for the young Santu Mofokeng growing up in Soweto, especially Magubane, who photographed both Sharpeville and later Soweto. In the 1980s, David Goldblatt became an important mentor. Mofokeng has written about his development as a photographer in the well-known essay "Trajectory of a Street Photographer."¹² Less well known is that he taught photography at the Mofolo Art Centre in Soweto, run by his friend Cecil Manganyi, both members of the Medupi Cultural Group since 1977. Frequently, South African photography is classified in isolation from other artistic media, a specialized category made credible by its political impact, but no less by the economic scale that allowed it. At this stage, Mofokeng says he was motivated by black

10 Email communication, Patricia Hayes to Santu Mofokeng, December 5, 2006.

11 Darren Newbury, *Defiant Images: Photography and Apartheid South Africa* (Pretoria: UNISA Press, 2009), especially chapters 3-5.

12 Santu Mofokeng, "The Black Albums: South Africa Rediscovered its History," in *The View from Africa* (*Granta* 92 [Winter 2005]), 215-232. This was originally published as "Trajectory of a Street Photographer" in *Nka. Journal of Contemporary African Art*, no. 11/12 (Fall/Winter 2000), 40-46.

consciousness ideas on culture and self-help.¹³ This was before he joined the photographic collective Afrapix in the mid-1980s. Afrapix brought together progressive photographers of all backgrounds who not only sought to document and support the struggle against apartheid, but who put their work at the service of trade unions, political and solidarity movements, youth organizations, and the mass democratic movements of the mid-1980s.¹⁴

Numerous photographers from Afrapix speak of the way the camera acted as a passport, as a way of crossing boundaries in the 1980s, but Mofokeng's passport story has a different trajectory. "Let me confess that envy is one of the motivations that steered me into the photography business. A few friends and peers at primary school had cameras. I noticed that they were very popular and had no problems approaching girls and chatting them up. They always had loose change jangling in their pockets." When he procured his first camera at age seventeen, he writes, "I cherished that camera. It helped me overcome my awkwardness around strangers. I got invited to parties. My social status was enhanced. Everywhere I went strangers would approach me to have their photograph made or simply to talk, all because I was lugging a camera. . . . Cameras carried a mystical fascination for a lot of people."¹⁵ In the township of Soweto not many people had cameras; "[t]his probably explains my artificial social elevation."¹⁶

Popularity notwithstanding, Mofokeng could not make a living as a street photographer, and took work in a pharmaceutical laboratory after matriculation. At the top of his class, he found it impossible to study philosophy at the University of the Witwatersrand as he wished, especially in those years of student political uprising against apartheid.¹⁷ After four years of boredom, he switched to *donker-kamer-assistente*, a darkroom assistant. This was "a dead-end position"¹⁸ because the color-bar policy was applied "to the letter": only whites could be apprenticed to a photographer, and only whites and coloreds (that is, those classified as of "mixed race" under apartheid) could be technicians. In every narrative of his life that I have encountered, Mofokeng includes the remark he overheard in this lowly job from a famous photojournalist who was looking through his color transparencies of a slain ANC cadre: "There is nothing as beautiful as black skin and blood! It makes beautiful contrast. There's nothing like it, China!"¹⁹

When Mofokeng joined the Afrapix Collective in 1985 he says it gave him a home and the initial resources to become a photographer. "It provided me with money to buy a camera and film in order to document Soweto and the rising discontent in the townships. Their

13 Santu Mofokeng, email communication, July 5, 2007.

14 Patricia Hayes, "Power, Secrecy, Proximity: A History of South African Photography," *Kronos Journal of Cape History* 33 (2007), 139-162, also published in *Reality Check: Contemporary South African Photography*, ed. Alexander Tolnay (Berlin: NBK, 2007), 10-31.

15 Mofokeng, "The Black Albums," 216.

16 *Ibid.*, 218.

17 Interview with Santu Mofokeng by Hayes, Badsha, and Xakaza.

18 Mofokeng, "The Black Albums," 219.

19 *Ibid.*, 220.

confidence in me was, in some ways, misplaced, seeing that I was less interested in the unrest than in the ordinary life in the townships."²⁰ He participated in Afrapix education programs and also became a staff photographer on the *New Nation*. In some accounts he highlights his narrow reprieve from being necklaced (burned alive with tires and petrol) when coming to photograph a night vigil, after some comrades had been killed in Soweto. Another story mentions how his Afrapix colleague Paul Weinberg saved him from scab workers by refusing to leave a strike scene without him.

Overall, however, Mofokeng explains that he was hampered by his marginal status. Typically this meant that he could not get to the Afrapix darkroom speedily enough for the press photos, or to the places where the front-line pictures were being shot, unlike his white counterparts who could afford cars and motorbikes. Mofokeng, in fact, still cannot drive. Economic stringency also entailed other physical attributes to his work, such as the effects of using exhausted chemicals to make his photographic prints.²¹ But finally in the 1980s Mofokeng landed a job as a photographer for the Oral Documentation Project based at the Institute for African Studies at the University of the Witwatersrand, directed by social historian Charles van Onselen. The work involved documenting the sharecroppers of the Transorangia, especially Kas Maine (subject of van Onselen's prize-winning book *The Seed is Mine*), and the demise of this bleak but vivid rural world.²² This suited Mofokeng quite well, providing a more sympathetic work rhythm that enabled a photographic-essay approach rather than being confined to episodic single shots. This tendency ties in with what some have called a "refusal of the event." More than this, it relieved him of the necessity to photograph conflict. He hated, and continues to hate, violence, and he claims that he would not go near it. "Bullets flying, I don't function in those situations."²³

I have argued elsewhere that Mofokeng is a key figure within the critique of 1980s documentary, from within.²⁴ The treatment of violence in fact is at the root of this, tied to the emerging photographic economy around the southern African anti-apartheid struggle, and its accompanying pressure to photograph certain issues. Mofokeng relates how he came to understand the problem: "If I show a picture of a policeman it's a good picture. If I show pictures of two policemen it's even better. . . . this is how I came to categorize the work I was doing at the time. . . . If I show three policemen then that's front page . . . it was bad white, good black. Not in so many words."²⁵

20 *Ibid.*

21 Mofokeng, *Santu Mofokeng*, 29.

22 Charles van Onselen, *The Seed is Mine: The Life of Kas Maine, a South African Sharecropper, 1894-1985* (Cape Town: David Philip, 1996).

23 Santu Mofokeng, *Invoice* exhibition walkabout, South Africa National Gallery, April 25, 2007.

24 See Hayes, "Power, Secrecy, Proximity"; *idem*, "Visual Emergency? Fusion and Fragmentation in South African Photography of the 1980s," *Camera Austria* 100 (2007), 18-22.

25 Interview with Santu Mofokeng by Hayes, Badsha, and Xakaza.

What was going on in the photographic economy at the time? It seems that within the Afrapix group, whatever their racial, class, or gender background, everybody was dealing with being on the inside and on the outside at the same time, though obviously on radically different terms. It is striking from interviews with many Afrapix photographers of that period that photography offered a way to cross boundaries—for white photographers to cross over into black townships, in particular. The camera offered not only a passport, but also a pretext and an alibi. Their outsider-ness might well be the reason they sought to reveal with crystal- sharp clarity the lives of black people under apartheid, and their political struggle against police repression; for many it was a question of "exposure." The most wanted photograph internationally was of white police beating black youths.²⁶ The evidence of this "relationship" produced certain effects (and economies) for the anti-apartheid struggle, especially outside the country. For black photographers there was the seduction of being in a tiny minority, especially if you were an insider from Soweto. The insider-ness of Santu Mofokeng, however, meant something different; indeed, he was not drawn to the scene in the way others typically were. He hated violence. He developed objections to the international appetite for struggle images, and went through a process of ethically questioning his own part in the visual economy that was spawned in the 1980s. Thus, the following picture of police is an unusual picture for him:



Figure 2. Police with sjamboks. Plein Street, Johannesburg, circa 1986

It is telling that already in this photograph the violence of the police is not occurring, though it is waiting to happen. It is a photograph of suspense—of violence about to happen because we know, through seeing other photographs, that such confrontations end in violence. Here Mofokeng is playing with temporality, showing a reluctance to be in the full "now" of "struggle photography." Instead we remain suspended, facing white police as black youths did in the 1980s.²⁷ Viewers might think and feel something different,

²⁶ Interview with Paddy Donnelly (formerly of the International Defence and Aid Fund), London, May 29, 2003.

²⁷ This was one photograph that was chosen for inclusion in the recent *Invoice* exhibition.

compared with the third-party perspective of the white-cop-assaulting-black-youth of more conventional anti-apartheid photography. Mofokeng displaces this normative subject-position. Moreover, if the viewer considers the positioning of the camera, it is ironic that the photographer is confronted directly by the police photographer, as if in some bizarre representational showdown, with implications for competing or multiple truth-claims. I shall return to this issue of displaced subjectivity and expectation later.

A turning point provided in many of his accounts is the critique Mofokeng found in the exhibition comment book, after putting up his first solo exhibition in Johannesburg in 1990. It read "Making money from blacks," and was signed "Vusi."²⁸ Mofokeng already had had qualms about how his work "got absorbed, interpreted and assimilated into the mainstream;" Vusi's comment reinforced this discomfort. It later propelled him "after much reflection" to attempt a very substantial historical project, a dialogue between his own photographs and those that people kept in their homes, the basis of a later work entitled *The Black Photo Album/Look at Me*.²⁹ This corpus is not the focus of this essay, but we shall pick up with one feature of the *Black Photo Albums* later. Mofokeng states that the "making money from blacks" comment made him realize he had simply become a professional photographer. "I was not paying enough attention to the narratives and aspirations of the people I was photographing. I had either forgotten, neglected or disregarded my early beginnings."³⁰

II. THE EVERYDAY

Vusi's comment clarified matters for Mofokeng. A newcomer at Afrapix, he had already embarked on photographing everyday life, including the "Church Train" series that developed over time into a much larger field of spirituality (see below). But now Mofokeng began to mark himself out from the rest of the 1980s photographers in distinct ways. "In terms of the idiosyncrasies of life in the eighties whereby we want to show that apartheid is bad, I'm making pictures of ordinary life. Football, shebeen, daily life. . . . When the world becomes tired of seeing . . . sjamboks or whatever, they come to you they start to ask what is daily life like?"³¹ Thus he framed his photographic excursions here as everyday life, that notoriously elusive concept that means nothing and everything. Several South African photographers have employed it,³² and it slipped in and out of debate in the 1980s. An interesting gesture can be found in the joint photo-essay called "Going Home" by Paul Weinberg (a founder-member of the Collective) and Mofokeng, in the short-lived Afrapix journal *Full Frame*. Here the worlds of the white boy from Pietermaritzburg and the black youth from Soweto were placed side by side, in the interests of "mutual understanding." As

28 Exhibition by Santu Mofokeng, *Like Shifting Sand*, Market Theatre, Johannesburg, 1990.

29 Mofokeng, *Santu Mofokeng*, 36; see also Mofokeng, "The Black Albums," 222.

30 Mofokeng, "The Black Albums," 222.

31 Interview with Santu Mofokeng by Hayes, Badsha, and Yakaza.

32 See Patricia Hayes, "Politics, Art and the Everyday: Omar Badsha and Social Documentary Photography in South Africa (1960s-1980s), in *Narratives, Rituals and Graven Images*, ed. Omar Badsha (Pretoria: SAHO, forthcoming).

Mofokeng put it then, "This means that the worlds which lie beyond the routine of going home had to be looked at in an honest and exploring fashion."³³ The deliberate juxtaposition of race is the obvious political move; the call to explore beyond routine is less so.

"The everyday" has had substantial treatment in South African writing and historiography;³⁴ it resurfaced through critiques of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, whose focus on gross human rights violations left out "the horror of the everyday," those myriad, normalized daily indignities, ongoing in many senses, that were viewed as natural, as "part of life." As Felski and others have suggested, this is what normally sinks out of view.³⁵ In recent interviews Mofokeng talks explicitly about "the invisible of the everyday." He says, "There's no real vocabulary for the non-photographed of apartheid."³⁶

Mofokeng also uses the notion of the fictional or metaphorical biography to describe his work in Soweto during the 1980s, and in relation to the *Black Photo Albums*. While in general we can follow Allan Sekula's argument that photographs are "at once intensely private and ubiquitously social visual signs,"³⁷ Mofokeng's metaphorical biography is a highly subtle creature. It is meaningful to him, it bears or touches on his life, but it is not directly autobiographical; it is only tangentially so. These "fictions" contain smoke, mist, and other matters and techniques that occlude rather than expose.



Figure 3. Winter in Thembisa, 1989

These matters and techniques are deliberate; as he has said:

33 Santu Mofokeng and Paul Weinberg, "Going Home," *Full Frame* 1, no. 1 (June 1990), 27. *Going Home* was also an exhibition at the Canon Image Centre, Amsterdam, 1990.

34 See, for example, Njabulo S. Ndebele, *Rediscovery of the Ordinary* (Pietermaritzburg: University of Kwazulu-Natal Press, 2000), originally published by the Congress of South African Writers (COSAW) in 1991.

35 Rita Felski, "The Invention of Everyday Life," *New Formations* 39 (Winter 1999-2000), 15-31.

36 Interview with Santu Mofokeng by Hayes, Badsha, and Xakaza.

37 Allan Sekula, "A Portable National Archive for a Stateless People: Susan Meiselas and the Kurds," *Camera Austria* 95 (2006), 9.

I know aesthetics You know those rules and then when you break them you actually know what you are breaking. . . . It's not an accident. I learned technique not to rebel against it, but to try and do photography that was different.

I wanted control. And then I wanted to be different.³⁸

Mofokeng claims he is not a political animal, but many would dispute that. Everything is permeated by the political, but how one deals with it aesthetically depends on many things. Some critics have highlighted an obsession with movement,³⁹ but what I notice very strongly is the way his images break with the wider preoccupation with black-white relations and "straight" social conditions. Rather, they are about people, sometimes in relation to each other, but more often in relation to objects, things, animals, spaces, and things unseen. Frequently they are landscapes, urbanscapes, to meditate upon. Increasingly in recent years, these landscapes are empty. When speaking of the sepulchral landscapes with graves, tombs, and memorials that he has photographed in recent years in Vietnam, Nagasaki, and Auschwitz, he comments: "I am drawn to these places."⁴⁰

In the mid-1980s, Mofokeng's "Church Train" series arose literally from everyday urban life and combined movement with spirituality. These photographs form part of a series on prayer and church activities in commuter trains from Soweto to the city of Johannesburg. The distance and time to travel to work meant that people could not easily attend church in the normal way, and hence compartments were converted into sites of worship. Mofokeng had a long commute himself from Soweto to Johannesburg to Randburg, and unsentimental as ever, says he became irritated by the noise that prevented him from sleeping. His revenge was to photograph the passengers, and the series grew from there. Given the period of the photographs, such a subject matter at the height of political struggle was very unusual. But in Mofokeng's later understanding, this was key, because people's beliefs in spiritual forces helped them cope with apartheid.

So, unlike the majority of his counterparts in Afrapix, he used his camera to cross not the social and racial divide, but into another world. This world might be considered unreal because it is intangible, but Mofokeng has insisted that it constitutes something very real for many, many South Africans. As he says, many people spend their lives chasing shadows. Mofokeng employs the notion of *seriti* from the seSotho language, a term that is more multifold than its usual English translation, "shadow." ("Shadow" combines the meanings of *moriti* and *seriti* such that "chasing shadows" has quixotic connotations that are not necessarily intended by Mofokeng.) According to the curatorial statement for the exhibition *Invoice*, *seriti* can mean anything from "aura, presence, dignity, confidence, spirit, essence, status, wellbeing and power—power to attract good fortune and to ward off bad luck and

38 Santu Mofokeng, presentation to postgraduate Visual History class, University of the Western Cape, September 20, 2006.

39 Speech by Autograph Collective at opening of the *Invoice* Exhibition, South Africa National Gallery, Cape Town, December 2, 2006.

40 Santu Mofokeng, *Invoice* exhibition walkabout, South Africa National Gallery, April 25, 2007.

disease." In indigenous languages it "represents the pursuit of something real, something capable of action, of causing effects—a chase perhaps joined in order to forestall a threat or danger."⁴¹ The phenomena picked out by the term *seriti* explode the standard definition of what is real. In Mofokeng's understanding, there is not really a contiguity between the visible and the real; *seriti* presents another order of things altogether. The term "spiritual," as in describing a new genre of photography, does not convey the profundity of this move. Effectively, Mofokeng was almost single-handedly and increasingly pushing for new domains in representation from the 1980s: nothing less than an Africanization and desecularization of politics and photography.

Why choose the term "desecularization," rather than "spirituality" or "religion," to describe this new domain? It is because historically, through the dominant order in South Africa and the practices of representation that were mobilized to resist it, things have been made secular. Material existence under apartheid and the documentary photography developed to expose it had largely drained understandings of the spiritual and religious dimensions of African life over a very long time. Moreover, there are problems in trying to contain everything that encompasses African beliefs by means of the term "religion," which as Paul Landau pointed out long ago, is a strictly limited category rooted in European specificities, knowledges, and their disciplines.⁴²

This does not mean that Mofokeng necessarily empathizes or agrees with those engaged in practices involving *seriti*, nor are his portrayals naively positivist. He has been known to voice his own almost agnostic skepticism about what is claimed for religion and spirituality. With regard to some of his Soweto photographs concerning obligatory ritual practices, for example, he questions the degree to which people actually believe in what they are doing, and the efficacy of the *sangoma* (a healer). Often it is allegedly "more worry than spirit."⁴³ For him, material concerns often interfere with the spiritual. Desecularization is a process in which the secular remains in tension with everything else. Mofokeng's position calls to mind W. J. T. Mitchell's term "double consciousness," suggesting the ways in which people vacillate "between magical beliefs and skeptical doubts, naive animism and hardheaded materialism, mystical and critical attitudes."⁴⁴ When Mitchell argues that "the usual way of sorting out this double consciousness" is to attribute one side to someone else, "and to claim the hardheaded, critical, and skeptical position as one's own," he could be describing the secular drive in South African photography of the 1980s. The apartheid state was accused of "mystifying" the situation through its skewed or deliberately false representational practices, especially in relation to repression in South Africa and the war on the northern Namibian border. (This also applied more broadly in relation to the question of who was "modern.") But in pushing for

41 Curatorial statement, Santu Mofokeng, *Invoice*, Standard Bank Gallery, Johannesburg, 2007.

42 Paul Landau, *The Realm of the Word: Language, Gender, and Christianity in a Southern African Kingdom* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1995).

43 Interview with Santu Mofokeng by Hayes, Badsha, and Xakaza.

44 W. J. T. Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 7.

alternative expository "truths," photography drove out the possibility of things that were beyond material reality—the supernatural, if you like.

The status of "development" in South Africa encouraged the normalization of a decidedly secular perception. As the most industrialized and "modernized" country in Africa, with a long and continuous history of a formal economy, and in contrast to postcolonial Africans everywhere else who have had to resort increasingly to so-called informal survival, South Africa poses the interesting possibility of a normative Western rationality undergirding a functioning economy in a continent in which these seem not to have a natural home. This possibility is seductive, and indeed it has become naturalized as the way of life for large numbers of South Africans. (This naturalization has been further encouraged by the relative abundance of material conditions of a significant enough proportion of its citizens.) This has been the case most evidently in urban settings in particular.

Within this rationalized capitalist development, industrialization, and urbanization, the perceived problematic is then one of exclusion and "contradiction": who is part of the process of development, who is not, and what effects will this have? Governmentally, the colonial racial segregation of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was a way of addressing this problematic, a segregation that was taken to extreme lengths under a modernizing, technocratic Afrikaner nationalism after 1948. For racially designated people, especially Africans, the degree of control over the body and mobility had huge effects on family and personal life, with the distortion (if not emasculation) of African patriarchal norms. Many people subsisted on insecure terms, on the edges, away from the heart of things, in various states of want, insecurity, and alienation. Mofokeng's father, with his "resident alien" status, comes to mind.⁴⁵ Over time these features were transmitted into the next generation and reproduced themselves. What Mofokeng calls the profound rupture with the land figures deeply in all this.

Within this context black Africans could find a ready explanation for the difficulty, poverty, marginalization, and suffering of their lives: *apartheid*. But this blaming of outside forces as entirely responsible for their condition exonerated people from introspection and self-examination. In his curatorial statement for the 2007 exhibition *Invoice*, a post-apartheid meditation that resituates much of his older work, Mofokeng dwells on the spaces people occupied between powerlessness and a kind of fatalism:

Many South Africans believed in apartheid . . . as they believed in everything which made it unnecessary for them to forge their own destiny; they loved their fear, it reconciled them with themselves, it suspended the faculties of the spirit like a sneeze. Apartheid was a roof. And under this roof life was difficult, many aspects of life were concealed, proscribed.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ Mofokeng, Santu Mofokeng, 26. Mofokeng himself was born in Newclare, but his mother entered her workplace as the place of birth on the birth certificate. Email communication, Santu Mofokeng, April 21, 2009.

⁴⁶ Curatorial text, Santu Mofokeng, *Invoice*, Standard Bank Gallery, Johannesburg, 2007.

He refers explicitly, elsewhere, to millenarian tendencies. "White people will get their come-uppance in the next life. . . . We will find justice. Maybe through the ancestors, maybe through Jesus."⁴⁷ This is not the bread and butter of more conventional Marxist or social historical approaches, in which vein I have discussed the work of Omar Badsha—trade unionist, activist, and one of the founder-members of Afrapix.⁴⁸ There are striking parallels between the paradigms of documentary photography and social history in South Africa. But in relation to the kinds of photographic situations and interpretations that Mofokeng brings forward, a more fitting postcolonial set of explorations is required.

Some of the most evocative writing on postcolonial Africa, for example, comes from the new urban studies that turn the trope of African failure, dysfunctionality, and irrationality upside down, and that generate an alternative level of description and interpretation. These touch directly on some of the qualities that seep out of Mofokeng's photographs.

It is a sense that there is much more taking place than meets the eye, and that everyday life is a force field of resurgent traces from some past, something not yet laid to rest. At the same time, this haunting is experienced as a kind of beckoning from some future that appears increasingly vague as residents have increasing difficulty getting a handle on the present—a difficulty they are in part responsible for.⁴⁹

As the author of this passage, AbdouMaliq Simone, puts it elsewhere, "a kind of haunting" permeates people's perspectives and meanings. But the source of this haunting, and the haunting itself, is all very real, and that is Mofokeng's point. *Seriti* overlaps with the word "shadow," but the absence of light is not all there is to *seriti*. The absence of light is not all there is to Mofokeng's photographs, either. Mofokeng is acutely aware of the multiplicity of meanings in photographs, their overflows, and he implicitly suggests photographers cannot control this: "You think your photograph stands for, this is what it means." This has pushed him toward a more austere way of looking, photographing, and printing. He likes this word "austere." "Why? To convey in a subtle way the atmosphere there."⁵⁰ He still favors black and white because it gives him "distance": You don't have a focal point. For me I like that because it allows . . . it doesn't tell you what.

You have to put in yourself.

You can even meditate on the image.

In this picture from Auschwitz (Figure 4), the eye seems to go to infinity.⁵¹

⁴⁷ Santu Mofokeng, Invoice exhibition walkabout, South Africa National Gallery, April 25, 2007.

⁴⁸ See Hayes, "Politics, Art and the Everyday."

⁴⁹ AbdouMaliq Simone, *For the City Yet to Come: Changing African Life in Four Cities* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 92.

⁵⁰ Interview with Santu Mofokeng by Hayes, Badsha, and Xakaza.

⁵¹ I am grateful to Mzuzile Mdu Xakaza for interpretation and discussion about this and other of Mofokeng's photographs.

Here there is nowhere to go that is well-defined, there is nothing obvious for the eye to do. Things that other photographers of his generation have made empathetic or humanist, centrally located within the composition in the secular documentary mode, are frequently distanced. Mofokeng might be drawn to human difficulty and pain, but it is remote, removed, sometimes one-dimensional or silhouetted. We might say Mofokeng stretches form, plays with composition, and shrinks expectations about content. The senses are heightened because detail is often obscured (though not always by darkness), sharpening the mind, allowing for an intensified attunement. The photograph of the Omo sign in Thembisa is a case in point (Figure 3), with its "highly ambiguous sense of place."⁵² This photographic sensibility is not corporeal or "embodied" in a banal way, as the cliché about Africa (and other non-European places with "problematic" modernities) would have it. It does not seek catharsis. It is, perhaps, both alienating and releasing of the imagination at the same time.

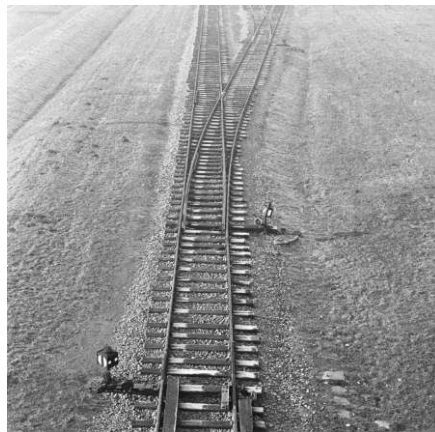


Figure 4. Auschwitz

III. MOTOULENG: MAGIC AND DISEASE

In the 1990s Mofokeng made numerous visits to Motouleng, where a famous woman healer called Mantsoupa from King Moshoeshoe's time in the troubled nineteenth century is believed to be buried.⁵³ There is a cohesion to the thematic of spirituality there, "outside the bounds of the officially recognized religions, in caves and open spaces. . . ."⁵⁴ The rocks present another world, another domain, a site of initiation. Motouleng is far from the city, and the series marks an extended section of Mofokeng's post-apartheid work. It continues his preoccupation with spiritual beliefs together with his growing obsession with landscape,

⁵² The quotation relates to African cities more generally, and is from Simone, *For the City Yet to Come*, 2.

⁵³ Motouleng is near Clarens in the Orange Free State. Mantsoupa is famous for predicting that Moshoeshoe's army would defeat Boer forces at the battle of Viervoet in 1851. Email communication, Santu Mofokeng, April 21, 2009.

⁵⁴ Sam Raditlhalo, "Communities of Interpretation" in Mofokeng, *Santu Mofokeng*, 67.

something he thinks black South Africans do not think about much because of their ruptured relationship with the land.

Mofokeng reiterates that he likes to leave things ambiguous, for example, what a priest silhouetted against the rocks might be—possibly not human, maybe even a devil. But then, in 2004, Mofokeng learned that his brother Ishmael, who had become a *sangoma*, had developed AIDS and had a few months to live. He accompanied Ishmael to the caves to try another form of healing. Mofokeng articulated the problem of this pandemic in the curatorial text for his exhibition *Invoice*: "Today this consciousness of spiritual forces, which helped people cope with the burden of apartheid, is being undermined by mutations in nature. If apartheid was a scourge, the new threat is a virus, invisible perils both." Ishmael's portrait is called *Eyes Wide Shut*, because of its reference to sexuality. Ishmael's family—wife, young children—all died. In his photographic portrait at Motouleng there is already a film coming over his eyes.

Ishmael's narrative intervenes in the series on the caves; in the exhibition *Invoice*, Mofokeng adds another enigmatic photograph to this cluster, of something that might not be what it seems. It was taken at the Buddhist Retreat outside Pietermaritzburg, of a horse grazing in a forest. It has become an integral part of the series called *Magic & Disease*.



Figure 5. Ishmael. *Eyes Wide Shut*

Mofokeng has a string of eerie photographs of things that may not be what they seem: the priest at Motouleng who might be a devil; the grazing horse with no head; the sacral goats on top of one another.

This is beyond conjuring otherness from the ordinary. There is a strong thematic throughout Mofokeng's work about things not being what they appear, achieved mostly through a lack of sharpness, blurring, or the highlighting of extraneous detail or objects in a scene. But in these three cases he is using exactitude to blur the very identity of things. They are photographed as he finds them in space and time, but to be misread into something much more sinister and inhuman, un-animal, or Other. Perhaps they are "mutations of nature." These photographs are not reassuring; this is not humanist photography. Their spiritualized context creates a break in expectation, and opens up the mind to other worlds, not the material, secular one, and not even a normative spiritual one. This work ruptures realism, and there is doubt in the very heart of the alternative realm.



Figure 6. Buddhist Retreat, near Pietermaritzburg, 2003

IV. CONCLUSION

If I think about the anatomy of this "insider," and the photographic trajectories he has articulated over about twenty years, some very complicated factors come together. In many ways like his photographs, in his writing Mofokeng tends to avoid events, violence, and drama, though they are somehow always at one remove. When his widowed mother is finally given a house, for instance, he notes: "We were later to learn the reason why our new home had been vacant: there had been a murder in the house. A son had killed his own father in that house."⁵⁵ He pulls back from the obvious and rather opens up spaces of anxiety, remembering, escape.

Besides this proximity to violence, Mofokeng's biography is immersed in the insecurities and intimacies of impoverishment in a South African township, where any sense of security makes you unsafe, the target of ill will. There is a sense of the utter invasiveness of the apartheid state and its aftershocks: the control over the body and over where people lived; its ongoing ability to make people turn on each other. It is no wonder that many sought (and still seek) to escape into the spiritual realm for protection and healing. There is perhaps alienation if not despair around human relationships, tied into deep spiritual insecurities.⁵⁶ In all this Mofokeng conveys a heightened awareness of something else going on, something that is outside the narrative convictions of the emergent politics of the 1980s, convictions that have continued as a thick cultural (and nationalist) field in post-apartheid South Africa, especially in the Mbeki era. But with Mofokeng there is a

⁵⁵ Mofokeng, *Santu Mofokeng*, 29.

⁵⁶ See Adam Ashforth, *Witchcraft, Violence, and Democracy in South Africa* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

freedom of the imagination, and a tangibility to the atmosphere of a space. There is also, strangely, the aliveness of objects, things, even detritus.⁵⁷ Ironically, the proximities of black urban life in South Africa seem to liberate these tendencies.

There are two ways in which Mofokeng's photographs and his writing about them raise questions for that "philosophical problem of the splitting of viewpoint," and for South African historiography itself. First, in his expanded definition of *seriti*—"anything from aura, presence, dignity, confidence, spirit, essence, status, wellbeing and power"—there is a jarring suggestion of what photography can do, read against Walter Benjamin.⁵⁸ For if Benjamin was alert to the dangers of the mechanization of culture, of technology destroying the uniqueness of created artworks through repetition, reproduction, and distribution, with potentially fascist ramifications, then what does it mean to re-inject post-apartheid popular culture with a diffusion of enigmatic and oblique illuminations? Is this somehow an Africanizing move? In its way, his work poses a problem for secular Marxism and its cultural formulations.

The answer does not lie in reducing Mofokeng to the simple, unitary identity as an African, still less as an "African photographer." He has close and long ties with the international photographic community and economy. He is in many ways cosmopolitan, acknowledging multiple influences. Plus, as a chemical and darkroom technician, then photographer, and also a product of Soweto, he is caught between Western science and "African science" (the popular term for knowledge of witchcraft and healing).⁵⁹ These are dualisms that mark him very deeply. Some of the answer may lie in the uses to which his photographs have (or have not) been put. Unlike the near-sacred status of some of the portraits from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in the *Black Photo Albums*, Mofokeng's photographs do not seem to play a similar role in people's lives in Soweto, for example. But they do feature in galleries, collections, and particular public spheres (and in print) from where Mofokeng's desecularization of the daily life of the majority of South African citizens must make its impact. This is not easy.

Mofokeng's *oeuvre* poses a second implicit critique of Marxism and of the social-history paradigms that took hold in South Africa especially in the 1980s. In all the histories of workers, histories of resistance, and histories "from below," nothing prepared Mofokeng (by his own admission) for the petty bourgeois aspirations of the ancestors that he found in old photographs for the *Black Photo Album* series.⁶⁰ If apartheid concealed and proscribed many aspects of life, then so too have these well-established historiographies and intellectual paradigms concealed and proscribed certain ways of looking.

⁵⁷ See Mofokeng's extraordinary essay entitled "Lampposts" in Mofokeng, *Santu Mofokeng*, 25-40.

⁵⁸ Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" in *idem*, *Illuminations* (London: Fontana, 1973), 211-244.

⁵⁹ Ashforth, *Witchcraft*, 146-148.

⁶⁰ Mofokeng, "The Black Photo Albums," 222.

For many of his 1980s colleagues, famous South African photographers from Afrapix and later the Bang Bang Club, the violence must be seen.⁶¹ That is why the "truth" genre of photojournalism and documentary became so prevalent. Through its expository, sharp, hyper-positivist structures, it had a direct impact on the eye. But then it became extended to the point of saturation, even fracture, and in this way was exhausted. Visually, the very act of exposure drains things of their alteri- ties. Techniques of cloaking and masking, however, re-evoke these alterities and, by implication, the supernatural world. There is no need for vulgar visibility.

I end with a Mofokeng story, which suggests the multiple manifestations of the splitting of viewpoint, the fracturing of visual sensibility, the displacement of the subject, and the creativity that follows survival. He writes that in 1986, before the angry young comrades were going to necklace him at a night vigil in Soweto, "Everything began to seem unreal. My voice did not feel like my own. . . . The light seemed to change." It made him remember the eclipse he saw in Soweto as a child: "I remembered a particular moment as a child coming home from school. There was an eclipse of the sun. The grass was yellow of winter, the ground was unreal. The day wasn't as bright as it normally is. I have tried to capture this feeling on black and white film, with little success."⁶²

Then, into that murderous gathering, "an angel came."



Figure 7. Windmill, Vaalrand Farm

University of the Western Cape, South Africa

⁶¹ See South Africa: The Cordoned Heart, ed. Omar Badsha (Cape Town: Gallery Press, 1986); Beyond the Barricades: popular resistance in South Africa, ed. Iris Tillman Hill and Alex Harris (New York: Aperture, 1989); and Greg Marinovich and João Silva, The Bang Bang Club: Snapshots from a Hidden War (New York: Basic Books, 2000).

⁶² Mofokeng, *Santu Mofokeng*, 29.

