

[Introduction to the forthcoming book: *Women and Photography in Africa: Creative Practices and Feminist Challenges*, Darren Newbury, Lorena Rizzo and Kylie Thomas (eds). London: Routledge, 2020.]

New Lines of Sight: Perspectives on Women and Photography in Africa

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In December 1966, the Ghanaian edition of *Drum*, a popular illustrated magazine for urban African readers, published a short feature on the photographer Felicia Abban under the heading, ‘Look Out Men, Because Here Come the Girls’. As the title suggests, Abban was presented as an example of a modern Ghanaian woman ‘gate-crashing’, as the article put it, an arena that had formerly been dominated by men.¹ There can be no doubt that Abban was the equal of her male counterparts ‘in merit and purposefulness’, yet the urgency of the wake-up call to the magazine’s male readers seems somewhat ironic, if not entirely misplaced. Whilst Abban most likely appreciated the publicity value of her image appearing in *Drum*, she had in fact been running her own studio in Accra since 1953, after serving an apprenticeship in her father’s studio in Sekondi, where she had eventually run most aspects of the business (Bowles 2016: 50-51). And she not only worked in the studio, but also operated as a freelance photographer for Guinea Press Limited, a government press agency under President Kwame Nkrumah. This is not to dismiss the endeavour that underpinned Abban’s considerable success in the context of gendered familial and workplace relations, which in Ghana as elsewhere have often militated against women succeeding in artistic and commercial photography. Notably, she recalled an incident during her apprenticeship when, following a mistake on a rush job, her father slapped her across the face with a sheaf of wasted photographic prints. For Abban, this was one of a number of ‘hard lessons’ that fuelled her determination to succeed on her own (Bowles 2016: 50). However, the time lag between Abban establishing herself as a photographer and this public acknowledgement in *Drum* invites reflection on the visibility of women’s photographic practices, a theme that is central to this volume.

Despite the momentary celebration of her commercial success in the popular Ghanaian press in the 1960s, Felicia Abban was not among those photographers who garnered attention when, in the early 1990s, the international art world, and subsequently photographic scholarship, ‘discovered’ African photography.² In fact, as recently as 2019, curator Sandrine Colard was able to talk of Abban’s photography in terms of ‘discovery’, albeit she used the word tentatively (Lee 2019). Strikingly, however, this was despite the fact that in 1998 Abban had become chair of the Ghana Union of Professional Photographers, through which role she sought formal union recognition and membership for photographers (Yeboah 2019). As Colard recognised, discovery is very much a matter of perspective. Although Abban was a contemporary of Malick Sidibé, the artistic validation of her photography – first publicly exhibited in 2017, and included in the Ghana Pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 2019 – has had to wait almost a quarter of a century longer. Even then it is worth attending to the terms of visibility. The photographs displayed in Venice were self-portraits, a practice Abban developed to serve both aesthetic and commercial ends, exploring ‘a feminine identity that plays with the traditional and the contemporary in an artful hybridity that is urbane and transatlantic’, and providing her with ‘calling cards’ to promote the studio (Bowles 2016: 48). This places Abban as the seen photographic subject, as well as camera operator, engaged in a performative practice of self-fashioning. At the same time, it risks obscuring her identity as an advocate of working photographers’ rights. Patricia Hayes argues that ‘the act of “making visible” can silence women further’ (2005: 521); but, as the contributors to this book demonstrate, this is not an inevitable outcome. The relationship between women’s agency and visibility in and through photography is not settled in advance, and always remains open to contestation.

Following Linda Nochlin (1971), when she asked ‘Why have there been no great women artists?’, our intention here is not to accept the terms of the question or to take the absence of African women from the canon of twentieth century photography at face value. After all, male African photographers such as Malick Sidibé and Seydou Keita were only admitted in recent decades. It is true that, with very few exceptions, little is known about the lives and work of African women photographers, nor those of women photographers from elsewhere who have worked on the African continent. There is necessary

and important scholarly work to be done here to bring to light the work of women photographers; to acknowledge their technical skills, networks, commercial acumen and aesthetic sophistication. And the point applies equally to those who identify as non-binary. Yet, the argument of the volume is not simply that African women and non-binary photographers have been neglected or marginalised, nor that any remedy can or should follow the pattern that saw a small number of African male photographers come to prominence a few decades ago. If international acceptance of the artistic credentials of a certain African studio aesthetic facilitated the inclusion of Felicia Abban's portrait photographs in the Venice Biennale, it is nevertheless important to be mindful of the limits of such a framing, as well as to attend to the many ways her work and career is different to her male counterparts in West Africa. In contrast, here, we propose that a focus on women's photographic practices has the capacity to deepen understandings of the medium, by expanding notions of photographic production and curation and opening a dialogue with gendered photographic pasts.

From photographs of African women to women's photographic practices in Africa

Although the study of African photography was relatively late to develop, only really cohering as a field from the 1980s onwards, there is now a body of scholarship that we have been fortunate to be able to draw on in shaping the concerns of this volume. Perhaps unsurprisingly, reflecting both the predominant methodological paradigms of the period and the visual preoccupations of material available in colonial-era archives, an early strand of scholarship on women and photography in Africa focused on representations of the female body. In the 1980s, for example, Malek Alloula analysed early twentieth century postcards of Algerian women as a form of pictorial orientalism; as he described his project, 'to uncover the nature and the meaning of the colonialist gaze; then to subvert the stereotype that is so tenaciously attached to the bodies of women' (1986: 5). Significantly, Alloula conceived his project as a response to an absence, a critique presented on behalf of women who did not have access to cameras through which to document their own ways of seeing. In this vein, the sheer volume of images made on the continent and distributed across the globe during the golden age of the postcard, coinciding with the height of African colonialism, has provided a rich seam of enquiry, one that has the merit of accessibility. This has enabled the description of a gendered visual

repertoire of ethnographic or racial ‘types’, missionary conversion, as well as the pervasive exoticisation and eroticisation of African women (Geary 2008; Vokes 2010; Vicente 2017). It has also revealed instances where African women appear to have exercised a degree of agency over the ways in which they were depicted, commissioning photographs for their personal consumption (Geary 2002: 81-121; Vicente 2017: 18), even if some photographers would later exploit such images by turning them into commercial postcards and rendering their subjects as anonymous types.

Later studies have extended our understanding of how women were represented in the colonial visual archive in, among other places, Angola and Mozambique (Vicente 2017), Central Africa (Geary 2002, 2008), Uganda (Vokes 2010) and Namibia (Rizzo 2005). Lorena Rizzo shows how photographs made by Heinz Roth, a German settler, on an expedition to North-Western Namibia, exercised a ‘privileged control of the colonised body’ (2005: 694); as with the colonial relation to the land, so too African women were positioned ‘as objects of appropriation and control’ (690). And in a detailed analysis of the photographic archive of Henri Gaden, a French colonial officer in West Africa, Roy Dille explores the careful management of African women’s visibility by comparing the published images and private albums of French colonial officers (Dille 2019). There has been attention, too, to the continued circulation of colonial images of African women in the present. Vicente argues, for example, that these photographs perpetuate the colonial domination that shaped their initial production: a ‘male-dominated collecting market in the present reproduces the uses to which these images were subjected in the past’ (2017: 37). Yet, as Rizzo argues, returning photographs to their African subjects and making them the focus of oral narratives in the present holds out the prospect of revealing dimensions of agency largely concealed in the colonial photographic archive – ‘moments of refusal, of active resistance to the camera and the colonial gaze’ (2005: 706-7). This is a methodological point to which we shall return.

Important as work on representation has been, however, our intention here is to shift attention from the semiotic analysis and critique of dominant *images of African women*, and instead to shine a light on the multifaceted nature of *women’s photographic practices* in Africa. Women have long been

critical actors in collecting, preserving and curating photographs, even if their recognition as photographers has lagged behind actual practice. And attention to gender, we argue, is critical for a revised understanding of photography as an aesthetic and social practice. It is the rich field of women's engagements with photography in Africa that we wish to foreground in this volume, encouraging a growing awareness of the importance of women in the field of photography on the African continent, elucidating histories and contemporary forms of women's photographic practices in different localities and times, and highlighting the work of women in producing alternative historical imaginaries and envisioning other futures.

The representation of women in photographs and women's photographic practices are not unrelated of course, and there are contexts where this has been brought into sharp focus, for example, in Southern Africa during the 1980s. The critique of images of African women under colonialism presented by Alloula had its corollary in photographic practice; and in anti-colonial and anti-apartheid struggles there was often a concerted effort to produce alternative visual depictions of African women. For example, illustrated pamphlets, such as *Black Women in Zimbabwe* (Zimbabwe Women's Bureau 1980) and *You Have Struck a Rock* (IDAF 1980), circulated internationally through solidarity campaigns and offered a counter-narrative to stereotypical representations that had changed little from their colonial precursors. Significantly, women photographers and activists were central in the production of this work, which was informed by a feminist analysis and sought to represent African women's engagement in political struggle and the economy, as well as their broader experiences under colonialism and apartheid. This was the case, for example, with Lesley Lawson's *Working Women in South Africa* (1985), a project conceived as a resource for women's trade unionism, and which precipitated Lawson becoming a full-time freelance photographer.³

A longer history of the ways in which women have challenged dominant representations of Africa is only beginning to be told, but it promises to enrich our understanding of the medium's history on the continent. In a fascinating study, Leigh Raiford examines Eslanda Robeson's approach to photography during her 1936 tour of South Africa, Uganda and the Belgian Congo, and the

subsequent publication of her illustrated memoir *African Journey* (1945). Raiford outlines how as an African American woman Robeson was ashamed of the stereotyped image of ‘savage’ Africans held by most African Americans, and reinforced by some of the film roles played by her husband Paul Robeson. In response, although her photography began in an ‘ethnographic vein’, the resulting body of photographs can be interpreted as part of a political project that ‘refus[ed] exoticism and racial hierarchization’ (2017: 141), and which, following Azoulay, might be understood as the expression of a ‘diasporic civil contract’ (144). Robeson’s photographs ‘directly countered the visions of empire, which sought the primitive and the iconic, the authentic and the timeless’ (143). She chose to photograph everyday settings such as schools and weddings, and her subjects in a mix of local and Western dress, allowing them to ‘emerge as modern individuals, navigating both precolonial histories and colonial exigencies’ (143). Importantly, this was not only about the representational outcome, but bound up with the photographic practice she developed, which embodied ‘a modest gaze’ – ‘I never bring [my camera] out unless I am sure no one will mind’ (143-44). Around the same time Robeson was embarking on her tour of the continent, the social anthropologist Ellen Hellman was beginning to use the camera to document the everyday lives of urban African families in Johannesburg, producing photographs of African women which, Marijke du Toit (2005) argues, departed from the narrow range of stereotypes then circulating in South African visual culture. In Hellman’s case, photography was not intended ‘to establish or confirm a racial or ethnic typology nor to isolate cultural performance’, but rather to record ‘urban African cultural practice and economic survival’ (601-2). The photographs document female labour in the context of a crowded and dilapidated urban environment, rather than presenting African women as ‘idealised carriers of tribal identity’ or purveyors of immorality through sex work and beer brewing (604).

We want to caution against any simple gendered reading of the photographic gaze, however. As Patricia Hayes notes, in South Africa in the 1980s male photographers were typically associated with political struggle and public space and women photographers with interiors and the emotions (2011: 270-72). Yet, there are numerous counter examples, and it is necessary to complicate the gender norms that are in operation, recognising that they are ‘constantly reshaped and reinvented’ (270), not

least by practitioners themselves. Women who were part of the anti-apartheid photography collective Afrapix, for example, documented protests, violence, forced removals and funerals alongside their male colleagues, and their images appeared in many of the same publications. Equally, the critique of photography as a masculinist practice, which might be seen as implicit in the account of Eslanda Robeson above, and became explicit for later feminist photographic practices, must also be acknowledged. There is no doubt that important work has been done by women representing women's experiences that were often marginalised or invisible, 'pushing background into the foreground', as Hayes puts it (2011: 272). But such norms can also be constraining. The 'politics of respectability' (Raiford 2017: 143) underlying Robeson's depictions of women on her African tour was shaped by the expectations of her European and American audiences.⁴ Moreover, Robeson's position as a woman photographer of women was by no means straightforward either. Despite her wish to identify as a black woman in Africa, as a privileged foreign guest she often found herself in the company of men rather than 'relegated' to spaces occupied women (Raiford 2017: 143). And, of course, there is nothing inherently progressive about women's photography in the context of colonialism, as Inês Gomes (this volume) makes clear. And as Mark Sealy argues for Alice Seeley Harris' photographs of the Belgian atrocities in the Congo in the first decades of the twentieth century, important as this body of work was, its underlying ideology counter posed a supposedly 'good colonialism' to the 'bad colonialism' of Leopold's regime (Sealy 2019).

Recovering women's photographic histories in Africa

Women photographers, and black African women photographers in particular, are largely absent from early histories of the medium. Even in South Africa, which has attracted more attention than other parts of the continent, there are few women photographers from the early and mid-twentieth century who appear in the historical record, and even fewer whose work has been collected and received serious treatment. Constance Stuart Larrabee and Anne Fischer, who both worked in South Africa during the 1930s and 1940s, and Jansje Wissema, from the subsequent generation, are the only three whose names to have garnered any significant recognition, and until recently only the first of these had a significant presence in the photo-historical literature (Danilowitz 2016; Newbury 2009; Elliott

2018). In recent years, however, studies have been published on Fischer (Williams 2020, and this volume) and Wissema (Thomas 2014a, 2018a), as well as Minna Keene (Corrigall 2018), who worked at the Cape for a decade during the early part of the twentieth century. Any study of women and photography in Africa has to acknowledge the relationship between race and privilege that has shaped the medium's history. Keene, Stuart Larrabee, Fischer and Wissema were all white women who immigrated to South Africa. Keene inherited her first camera from her husband, as his interest in the medium dwindled, and began her career as an amateur. Stuart Larrabee and Fischer had both received photographic training in Germany; and Wissema was trained by Fischer. All had the mobility and access to resources to enable them to practice as photographers, albeit both Fischer and Wissema experienced periods of financial precarity.⁵ When the National Party came to power in 1948 and began to implement its policy of apartheid, both Stuart Larrabee and Fischer decided to leave the country, though the latter returned in 1950. This is not to dismiss the importance of their contribution, nor should it dissuade scholars from continuing to research their photographic careers. Keene's career, for example, demonstrates the complex interplay of race and gender in the context of transnational photographic networks. She began by specialising in flower photography, a genre regarded at the time as especially suitable for women (Corrigall 2018: 5), yet went on to run her own studio and became viewed as 'the leading light of South African pictorialism' (11). At the same time, part of her commercial success came through recognising the appetite for 'racial type' photographs amongst audiences in South Africa and Europe and applying her pictorial style to this genre (3). Ironically, from the perspective of African photographic history, despite the length of time she spent in South Africa and the significance of the work she produced there for her international recognition, this period in her career 'has largely been ignored or treated as entirely incidental' (4).

If the careers of white women photographers have often been marginal within photographic histories, those of black women photographers are almost entirely absent. Furthermore, the retrieval of their stories from the archive is often frustrated by the absence, loss or destruction of the photographs and records that their work generated. As an exception that proves the rule, Pam Warne notes that for our knowledge of Mabel Cetu (1910-1990), the first black woman to work as a freelance photographer in

South Africa and whose images appeared in *Zonk*, *Golden City Post* and *Drum*, we are largely dependent on the ‘affectionate recollections’ of fellow journalist Jimmy Matyu (Warne 2007: 60-1). Yet, the response to this dearth of official collections should not be to lament the lack, but rather to engage the challenge it presents. And, here, conceptual and methodological developments in photographic scholarship have proved beneficial. First, the way in which photography studies has expanded its remit over recent decades, going beyond an art historical emphasis and the colonial archive to embrace hitherto neglected photographic practices, has brought women’s work in photography to the fore. An earlier condescension towards the vast majority of everyday uses and popular practices of photography had served to marginalise women in photography. What it is to ‘do photography’, what kinds of photography are valued, and in what contexts, are therefore central questions for this volume, and have a significant bearing on any understanding of the role of women in the medium’s history in Africa. Second, in light of the vagaries of the conditions under which photographs have been archived in Africa, more inclusive photographic histories depend on a wider repertoire of methods and sources, beyond the analysis of the photographic print or negative. As Rizzo (2005) notes, for example, where women’s agency may be concealed by the photographs themselves, it may be recovered or reactivated through subsequent oral narratives. If women’s photographic practices have been confined to the interstices of established photographic histories, then such methods may be necessary to lever open these confined spaces.

In her study of photography in West Africa, Jennifer Bajorek (2020) provides a striking example. Having spent time with the family of Senegalese photographer Doudou Diop researching his collection of studio photographs, Diop’s wife, Ndèye Teinde Dieng, unexpectedly revealed that she, not her husband, had printed many of the images that Bajorek was examining and recording. Dieng would often work late into the night, making prints after the studio closed, and as a consequence developed a high level of technical knowledge and a sophisticated appreciation of printing techniques. As Bajorek goes on to discuss, the depth of Dieng’s involvement was seemingly unusual, yet also plausible; and the fact that it had remained hidden was perhaps unsurprising, reflecting as it did the cultural expectation that whilst women may have been instrumental to some aspects of a business,

they would have been highly unlikely to present its public face. The fact that Dieng was not initially forthcoming about her role likely reflected formal respect for her husband; her more recent revelation, Bajorek speculates, may have had something to do with encountering another woman sharing her technical knowledge and interest in the aesthetic qualities of photographic prints. Examples such as this, we suggest, can serve to open new avenues of enquiry into women's photographic work.

As Allbeson and Oldfield note, for European and American contexts, a focus on the business side of photography can provide, a 'potent means of recovering the histories, participation, and viewpoints of marginalized groups', including 'evidence of female photographers' (Allbeson and Oldfield 2016: 101). It seems likely the same is true in Africa. An early history of photography in South Africa mentions one woman photographer, Maria Walter, who ran her husband's business, inheriting it after his death (Bull and Denfield 1970, cited in Martin 2001), and Felicia Abban, with whom we started this introduction, also ran her father's business before setting up her own (Bowles 2016). It is evident that, as wives and daughters, women often had critical, yet scarcely acknowledged, roles in photographic commerce. And it seems likely that inheritance and family responsibility has been of continuing importance to women's involvement in photography, as Rachel Engmann (this volume) highlights in her discussion of Kate Tamakloe-Vanderpuije's management of her father's photographic collection in the present. Nor should one ignore the role of women as photographic clients. Consider, for example, the effects of women's choices and preferences on commercial portrait photography, a context where the photographer-client relationship is absolutely central (Buggenhagen 2014: 86).

Women's engagement as photographic curators, in the original sense of that term as 'one who takes care of', is another key dimension of photographic work undertaken by women which it is important to highlight. Rizzo (this volume) demonstrates how the work of collecting, preserving, displaying and narrating photographs undertaken by women in Usakos represents a form of memory work, maintaining continuity in the face of dislocation and forced removal. Interestingly, women's 'curatorial' work with photographs, the careful practice of collecting and preserving photographs as

precious material objects, echoes in the work of contemporary photographic artists such as H la Ammar (see Rocca, this volume) and Joana Choumali, who have meticulously embroidered their images, emphasising both the photograph's materiality and time spent in its careful handling. There is the risk, of course, that in presenting women primarily as care-takers of photographs one simply reinforces a gendered division of familial and emotional labour extended into the domain of photography, but nevertheless the importance of this work needs to be acknowledged. No doubt women have played other roles in photography on the continent too, for example as educators. To take just one example, it was Bryan Heseltine's aunt, Irene Heseltine, who first fostered his enthusiasm for photography as he travelled with her on photographic outings from Cape Town (Newbury 2013: 15), even if it was his work that would eventually become more prominent.

Shadow archives: On photography, gender and African histories

We want to round out our consideration of women and gender in African photography with a few more explicit comments on photography and history. In recent debates, both within and beyond the academy, there have been careful reflections on photography's complicated relationship to the past, present and future. There is, of course, a substantial literature that has theorised the status of photographs as historical sources and explained how nineteenth century photographic realism continues to inform the historical expectations and desires that cluster around photographic images from the past (Edwards 2001: 9; Tucker 2009; Chaudhary 2012). Naturally, then, current scholarly repositioning of the photograph in African histories draws on important precursors, which we have mentioned earlier on, among them Alloula and Geary. As the contributions to this volume show, the conversation has long moved away from a treatment of historical photographs as unmediated renderings of reality or merely as documents of the past. The focus today is rather on asking what kind of past is inscribed in photographs, how they constitute and inscribe the past in the present, how photographs become meaningful historically, and what their agency is in the making of history. Yet, realism and the truth claims that come along with it remain problematic, especially in historical writing on Africa that relies on particular notions of photographs as historical sources and evidence (Burke 2001). Because of photography's complicity in perpetuating some of the most stereotypical,

and often racist representations of African pasts and presents, and those who inhabit them (Landau and Kaspin 2002), there is a persistent shadow archive that makes itself felt whenever we engage historical visual material from Africa. Doing so requires, therefore, a particular appreciation of the politics and ethics of representation – photographic and other – in academic knowledge production (Thomas 2012). This is why those of us interested in writing histories of Africa that privilege the visual over the written record have become increasingly mindful of how historical photographs challenge received understandings of what constitutes historical evidence and credibility, and shift the terrain on which we ground historical reconstruction and interpretation (Pinney 2004; Rizzo 2019; Bajorek 2020). Attending to the ways in which photographs are anchored in reality, how they seemingly transport the past into the present, in other words, how they intricately interlace multiple temporalities, has required us to recalibrate methodological practice and forms of historical narration (Enwezor 2008). Visual histories of nineteenth and twentieth century Africa continue to draw predominantly on colonial-era photographic collections. Critical examinations of the colonial photographic archive, and the knowledge regimes it engendered, have therefore become a prerequisite for writing histories that do not merely reproduce the colonial epistemological order, but use photography to describe African pasts in a way that helps understand the contours of its presents and opens up possibilities for reimagining its futures (Vokes and Newbury 2018). Questioning the archive has involved, more specifically, explaining the ways in which the archive mediates our encounter with photographs, how it imposes some readings while discouraging or foreclosing others and, finally, how it determines the ways in which we activate photographs in historical reconstruction (Morton and Newbury 2015: 7). In many instances, mining content and conceiving of historical photographs as signature images of particular disciplinary and institutional regimes, or as signifiers of social forces, power and ideology, has given way to understanding photographs as visual and material objects that traverse shifting social, cultural and institutional contexts over time, thereby continuously accumulating new qualities, meanings and histories (Edwards and Hart 2004).

Certainly, these critical revisions of the relationship between photography and history have not been an exclusive academic preoccupation, nor have they primarily come from the so-called ‘North’. The

last decade has seen the growth of historical studies of photography produced by scholars based *in* Africa (Hayes and Minkley 2019) and – beyond the academy – there are wide-ranging public contestations of dominant historical narratives that use photography and archives with the aim to produce histories of a different kind (Cadava 1997: xvii). Some of this work has taken place within practices of remembrance, memorialisation and heritage, or under the aegis of public history (De Jong and Rowlands 2007; Peterson, Gavua and Rassool 2015) and, importantly, it has taken our thinking about the work photographs do in relation to the past, present and future beyond the institutional archival domain (Coombes 2003; Hayes 2015). However, what these initiatives remind us of, at first, is to be wary of photography’s own implication in defining – both at the level of discourse and practice – what counts as history, and what is instead relegated to the domain of culture and heritage (Edwards 2012a). In Africa and elsewhere, these distinctions have often been marked by race and gender, whereby history was readily conceived as white, male, intellectual and modern, while culture tended to be thought of as black, female, affective and archaic (Hunt 2014; Du Toit 2001). As many have before us, we should therefore be careful not to perpetuate colonial theorems, but rather ask how history, photography and gender condition each other in different locations and times across Africa (Mitchell, Shibusawa and Miescher, 2015). With this in mind, we wish to reemphasise the need to highlight women’s diverse contemporary and past engagements with photography in Africa. We anticipate that doing so will help us understand how women’s photographic practices challenge the idea of African history as a circumscribed and privileged discursive domain to be set apart from clusters of cultural practices subsumed, hastily perhaps, under the heading of public culture, memory and heritage (Nora 1989).

In many instances, the desire to reimagine African pasts, presents and futures through photography has proceeded from opening up colonial archives as spaces of contested history and practice. One of the key concerns in this context has been to address the problematic tension between the heightened visibility of African women in the photographic record and their concurrent silencing in historical writing (Hayes 2005: 521). This tension possibly explains why numerous women academics, artists and activists continue to turn to the archive with the aim of dismantling an aesthetic order, which

notoriously put the black female body on display and fixed colonised Africans within essentialist gendered, racial and tribal categories (Willis and Williams 2002). Here, however, we wish to pay attention to a different manifestation of gendered archival revision, namely the reflective engagement of women photographers with their own photographic collections. Two chapters included in this volume (Partridge and Carpenter-Latiri) outline specific trajectories within what seems to be a broader preoccupation among photographers with rethinking their work in the context of changing forms of historical narration and more inclusive cultures of historical knowledge production in Africa (Goldblatt, Krog and Powell 2007; Mbembe 2016). While what triggers these projects of photographic retrospection and shapes the political and aesthetic frameworks within which they unfold varies, Dora Carpenter-Latiri's and Bidy Partridge's deliberations help us understand how women's multiple engagements complicate histories of photography that privilege the idea of an un-situated photographer *and* assign her a circumscribed role within the photographic domain (Solomon-Godeau 2017). Both likewise defy reductive territorial confinements within the arts, the academy or politics, and pursue a practice that unsettles institutional and disciplinary boundaries, as much as distinctions made between the domains of history, memory and autobiography (Nuttall and Coetzee 1998). Both finally provide important historical openings – a transgenerational one in Carpenter-Latiri's case, and a conversational one in Partridge's case – that take us beyond the bounds of their own photographic archive towards an associative and imaginative space, in which single photographs can become generative of multiple historical meanings.

Shaping new photographic futures in Africa

An analysis of the lives and work of the photographers highlighted in the chapters included here opens the way for investigating the social worlds in which they produced their work and for recognising the work of other women. In the 1980s, Bidy Partridge was one of nine women who formed part of the anti-apartheid photography collective Afrapix. Images taken by Partridge, Gille de Vlieg, Ellen Elmendorp, Lesley Lawson, Deseni Moodliar (Soobben), Wendy Schwegmann, Zubeida Vallie, Gisèle Wulfsohn and Anna Zieminski were included in the packages that Afrapix sent to anti-apartheid organisations outside of the country and were featured in popular publications the collective

produced and in books such as *Beyond the Barricades* (Badsha, Mendel and Weinberg 1989). Their work played a key role in drawing attention to the struggle for freedom in the country and in particular to the hardships faced by black women under apartheid. Besides Moodliar and Vallie who worked with Afrapix, there were very few black women photographers whose work during the 1980s has been recorded. Two exceptions are Mavis Mthandeki and Primrose Talakumeni, both of whom learned to take photographs through the Community Arts Project in Cape Town and went on to collaborate with Tracey Derrick to document the experiences of women during the first free and democratic elections in 1994. Other women photographers working in South Africa at this time and in the immediate post-apartheid period include Jenny Altschuler, Candice Breitz, Jean Brundrit, Jenny Gordon, Svea Josephy, Jo Ractliffe and Bernie Searle. London-based South African photographer Jillian Edelstein produced an important series focusing on the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which was published as a book, *Truth and Lies* (2002). A number of women and non-binary photographers studied at the Market Photo Workshop in Johannesburg and their work has subsequently been internationally acclaimed. Notable examples include: Jodi Bieber, who won the World Press Photo Award in 2011 for her portrait of Aisha Bibi, an Afghan woman who was brutally disfigured as a form of punishment for fleeing her husband's home; Ingrid Masondo, who has also worked as the photography and new media curator at the South African National Gallery; Lebohang Kganye, winner of the 2019 Camera Austria award, whose work forms a focus of two chapters in this volume (Kesting and Makhubu); and Zanele Muholi, who has won numerous awards for their work on race, gender and sexuality and LGBTQI+ advocacy, including the ICP Infinity Award for Documentary and Photojournalism, the Prince Claus Award and the *Chevalier de L'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres* (Lewin, this volume).

In the early 1990s, photography across the continent entered the global art market and the work of photographers who had worked primarily as photojournalists and activists was reframed and sold as art (Nimis 2012). A number of exhibitions and publications served to put African photography in the global spotlight, including the *Bamako Encounters* biennale, founded in Mali in 1994; *In/sight: African Photographers 1940 to the Present* curated by Okwui Enwezor, Clare Bell, Olu Oguibe,

Danielle Tilkin and Octavio Zaya at the Guggenheim museum in 1996; and *Snap Judgements: New Positions in Contemporary African Photography* curated by Enwezor at the International Center of Photography in New York in 2006. These exhibitions included the work of several African women photographers, among them South African photographer Nontsikelelo ‘Lolo’ Veleko, whose work has since been exhibited across the world. One important outcome of *Bamako Encounters* was the founding of Centre de Formation Audiovisuel Promo-femme (Promo-femme Centre of Audiovisual Education for Young Women), which Allison Moore argues ‘created opportunities for women to exercise agency as image-makers, thereby giving women the ability to shape local and international perceptions of gender through photography, and to revise gendered perceptions about photography, both as a medium and as a profession’ (2010: 172). One of Promo-femme’s most well-known graduates is Fatoumata Diabaté, currently President of l’Association des Femmes Photographes (Association of Female Photographers) founded in 2007 in Mali, whose work is the focus of Tina Barouti’s chapter in this book.

As the case of Felicia Abban shows, the work of African women photographers is slowly but steadily moving out of the shadows of history and is increasingly being recognised. This has been in no small part due to a small number of photographers and curators who have worked to make African women’s photography visible. In 2010, Ethiopian photographer Aida Muluneh founded the first international photography festival in East Africa – Addis Foto Fest – which consistently includes and promotes the work of African women photographers. In 2019, Lagos Photo Festival, which launched in Nigeria in 2010, included two initiatives to support women photographers – a special project in association with UK-based Fast Forward Women in Photography, and Women Through the Lens, a mentorship programme in association with Culture at Work Africa. Projects like the Arab Documentary Photography Program have also created space to support and showcase the work of emerging photographers in North Africa, including women photographers such as Hadeer Mahmoud and Sara Sallam (both from Egypt). Exhibitions such as *The Way She Looks: A History of Female Gazes in African Portraiture*, curated by Sandrine Colard at the Ryerson Image Centre in Canada in 2019, drawing on the holdings of the Artur Walther collection, bring the work of contemporary African

photographers into conversation with archival representations to invite reflection not only on how African women have been seen but how they see. And, in 2019, Joana Choumali, a photographer from Ivory Coast, became the first African to win the Prix Pictet. These initiatives and successes reveal not only that there are large numbers of women photographers working across the continent, but also that the work they are making is among the most varied and exciting in contemporary photography and is beginning to find critical acclaim and attention.

Structure of this volume

This volume contributes to the growing conversation about women and photography in Africa – it attends to a significant gap in the literature on the history of photography and contributes to the still-emerging field of feminist visual studies. As noted above, the perspectives of black African women especially have been marginalised within the disciplines of art history and within the field of visual studies and photography. This collection begins to address this both through the inclusion of essays by black African women scholars and through detailed analyses of the work of black African women photographers and curators. The book also includes chapters that begin to map the longer history and critical role of women photographers, white and black, in establishing photography and photographic practices in Africa.

The individual case studies evidence photography's multiple iterations across the continent, in North Africa, West Africa and Southern Africa, including Anglophone, Francophone and Lusophone contexts; and they speak to the overall interest in refining an understanding of the historical and contemporary relationship between gender and photography. There is a strong focus on photography in Southern Africa in this volume, reflecting both the research specialisation of the editors, who all work primarily on photography in South Africa and Namibia, and South Africa's continuing importance for photographic theory and practice. Nevertheless, the absence of research on women photographers in East Africa is unfortunate and we hope that future studies will pay due attention to the variety of women's engagements with the medium there. Even if we can hardly provide an overall picture, the studies assembled here help to develop a portable concept of women's photography in

Africa, clarify how gender and photography become constitutive of each other, and argue why a focus on African women's photographic practices changes our sense of the work of photography more generally. The volume situates itself in the field of an emerging scholarship that has begun to cover and explore the domain of feminist African photography. Several of the contributors to this collection – Makhubu and Smith along with Partridge and Carpenter-Latiri – are artists, photographers and curators, in some cases as well as academics. This is no coincidence but rather an expression of how critical thinking and creative practice in the field of photography increasingly happens at points of intersections, where received distinctions between academic scholarship, art, culture, politics and activism are being challenged and collapsed. The essays account for their authors' complex positionalities and their multi-layered aesthetic and intellectual practice, but likewise the collection highlights that photography in Africa, and elsewhere, is historically and at present fundamentally shaped by questions of intersectionality. The volume hence proposes to refigure and reimagine gender, sexuality, class, race and locality through the lens of African women's photography, and to explain how interrogating these concepts through the visual might open up new paths of scholarly inquiry and aesthetic and activist practice.

The volume is organised in thematic sections that present historical research on the lives and work of significant yet overlooked women photographers, and women as collectors and curators of photographs, across the continent from the 1930s to the present. A number of the chapters focus on the work of contemporary African women photographers, offering critical reflections on the politics of knowledge production, the production of racialised and gendered identities, and alternative and subaltern subjectivities. We also explore how contemporary African women photographers, collectors and curators are engaging with colonial photographic archives to contest stereotypical forms of representation and produce powerful counter-histories. Several chapters take the form of photo-essays, where the photographic image takes an equal place alongside critical or historical analysis in the interrogation of the medium's history and present.

The opening section, 'Writing Women into Photographic Histories', begins with elucidating how the focus on women broadens our perspective on photography's multiple historical iterations across Africa. Jessica Williams' essay focuses on three women photographers – Anne Fischer, Else Hausmann and Etel Mittag-Fodor – who arrived in South Africa from Weimar Germany in the 1930s seeking refuge from the rise of Nazism. It reminds us, first, that the ways in which the Second World War affected photographic practices outside of Europe, and in Africa in particular, are only beginning to be retraced. The essay goes on to argue that particular gendered experiences of exile shaped the possibilities of these women's photographic practices in South Africa. Paying particular attention to Fischer's early career and her politicisation by the rise of fascism in Europe, rather than her better-known portrait photography, Williams reveals both the uniqueness and ambivalence of her position as simultaneously a white woman and a Jewish refugee photographing in the black township of Langa, a segregated location for black South Africans on the city's outskirts. Mediated through Cape Town's leftist milieu, she was able to begin her photographic work there in the late 1930s and document the living conditions of black working class families subjected to racial segregation. Unlike other Jewish exiled women photographers at the time, Fischer was committed to put her early documentary work into the service of oppositional politics and visual activism. Nevertheless, Williams argues, Fischer's career is an example of how cosmopolitan female photographers, who were exiled from Germany to South Africa in the inter-war period, were forced to transition from photographing in urban public spheres – a role often contingent on their privileged status as white women – into semi-invisible domesticity once the National Party came to power, imposed the politics of apartheid and contained alleged transgressions of white gender norms. In the end, Fischer's Langa photographs were never published, and while Williams weighs their potential for an 'alternative history from below', she submits that who this history was intended for remains uncertain.

The question of 'alternative photographic histories' re-emerges in Lorena Rizzo's essay, albeit under different auspices. Rizzo explores private photographic collections preserved and curated by African women in a central Namibian town called Usakos since the 1920s. Her interest is in images taken up to the early 1960s, when the South African administration in Namibia began to forcibly remove black

residents out of their neighbourhoods into segregated townships. It is against the backdrop of this traumatic experience, the repercussions of which continue to be felt among the town's residents, that the women activate photographs in remembrance and memory work and insert them into historical narration and imaginaries of the future. While Rizzo's main preoccupation is with a concept of photographic practice that transcends narrow notions of authorship and pays attention to women's multiple engagements with the photographic image and medium, she refrains from understanding the curatorial and custodian work women do here within the registers of the private, familial and affective alone. Rather, the essay explores how private photographic archives from Namibia invite us to rethink the ways in which institutionalised violence and racial segregation shaped photographic encounters and entrenched gendered divisions of labour in the domain of photography. The female photographic landscapes described for Namibia between the 1920s and 1960s differ greatly from those explored in Angola and Mozambique in the same period in Inês Gomes' contribution. Here we enter the world of a group of very privileged white women photographers whose activities were confined to two constitutive domains of the colonial visual encounter: ethnography and travel or tourism. While Gomes' concern is recuperative, given that there is still little knowledge of women's photographic practices in Portugal's African colonies in the early twentieth century, she acknowledges the role of the colonial archive in constituting the (in)visibility of women as agents in Angola's and Mozambique's photographic records. Gomes' study of a female member of French and Portuguese Royalty, Hélène of Orleans, elucidates both photography's function as 'complementary tool' in European elite travel, and the circulation of photographs in the context of transnational preoccupations with 'recording the races' of empire. Similar considerations drove Mary Pocock's photography, who accompanied Dorothea Bleek on her travels to Angola, where the women documented 'Bushmen', who by then were considered to represent a vanishing way of life. And finally, Gomes's analysis moves into the 1950s and to Helena Corrêa de Barros, for whom she traces an idiosyncratic entanglement of gender, mobility and photography within Portuguese colonial propaganda that explicitly promoted tourism as a form of empire. Altogether, the case studies discussed in this essay add to the rich literature on gender and empire and specify white women's contribution to racial stereotyping across the boundaries of colonial cultures in Southern Africa at the

time. However, Gomes reads against the archival grain (Stoler 2002), and her specific interest in how the three women negotiated their encounter with African photographic subjects refines our understanding of the complexities of photographic occasions that remained, even under tightening colonial control, moments and sites of contestation.

The second section, entitled ‘Photographic Dialogues with the Past’, offers three variations of a reflective motif in contemporary female photographic practice in Africa that attends to the archive’s resonances in the present, and imagines ways of reworking the perennial return of images from the past. We have mentioned before how in this volume the critical revision of the archive, in relation to both public and private archives, is constituted as an explicitly dialogical one. Bidy Partridge frames the concern with her own photographic legacy, which resulted from her decade-long work as an artist and activist in South Africa and Zimbabwe, in terms of both a haunting – of the photographer and her images – and an opening for collaborative inquiries and a dialogical, trans-generational form of historical knowledge production. Her essay is an intimate and nuanced account of how her photographs facilitated an aesthetic, political and ethical conversation with Breeze Yoko, a multimedia artist, and Ntsiki Anderson, a play therapist and researcher. Similarly, Dora Carpenter-Latiri’s essay delineates a series of dialogues about representations of women in historical photographs from Tunisia, but here the interlocutors are Carpenter-Latiri’s late father and the stories and imaginaries that cluster around his archive. We are introduced to photographic intimacies within families and across generations of photographers, which are in turn placed in tension with the disturbing legacy of orientalist visual traditions in North Africa. Partridge’s and Carpenter-Latiri’s essays are preceded by a kindred initiative in Accra, Ghana, discussed by Rachel Engmann. Engmann evaluates her conversations with Kate Tamakloe-Vanderpuije, who manages and curates the archival collection of two Ghanaian photographers, her grandfather James Koblah Bruce-Vanderpuije, and her father Isaac Hudson-Bruce-Vanderpuije. Here, the conversational is first used as a form of academic writing that displaces conventional understandings of academic expertise and authoritative knowledge production on photography. The essay introduces us to an important theme that remains widely uncovered, namely African women’s knowhow in relation to collection management and digitisation,

and concurrently their role in publicising and commercialising photographic archives on the continent. Kate Tamakloe-Vanderpuije's work is especially intriguing in how it reflects on the role of historical photographs in shifting notions of the past, present and future in contemporary Ghana. Finally, while at first sight her role as custodian of her grandfather's and father's legacy might seem to reproduce conventional gendered labour divisions in the domain of photography, Engmann's discussion of Tamakloe-Vanderpuije's archival project helps us understand the specific temporalities and epistemologies that shape men and women's changing photographic practices in a particular West African location.

'Gender and Sexuality in Photographic Practice', the third section, begins with an essay by Tina Barouti on the Malian photographer Fatoumata Diabaté, and specifically her series *Sutigi - À nous la nuit* (2004-13) photographing youth culture and fashion in Mali, Senegal, South Africa and the Republic of the Congo. Diabaté provides a case study of the impact of initiatives, such as the Centre de Formation Audiovisuel Promo-femme (founded in 1996), which launched Diabaté's career, that have enabled a generation of Malian women to contest the ways photography had hitherto been gendered as a profession. Moreover, Barouti sets Diabaté's photography in context through comparison with Malick Sidibé, a member of the earlier generation of male West African studio photographers 'discovered' by the art world in the 1990s. The essay explores both the formal similarities in their photographic styles – Diabaté explicitly pays homage to her male predecessors – as well as the gender and generational differences that shaped their photographic careers. The next chapter underscores the importance of complicating our analyses of gendered photographic practices and histories. Tina Smith and Jenny Marsden write about a collection of photographs that provides an intimate view of an LGBTQ+ community in South Africa from the 1950s to the early 1980s, and insights into how queer people of colour forged communities in the face of the brutality of apartheid. Their chapter shows how photography opens a space for the expression of identity, friendship and love, even during times of extreme oppression. Their work also makes an important contribution to charting queer photographic histories in Africa, which for the most part remain unseen and unwritten, and provides a way to trace the visual 'ancestors' of contemporary LGBTQ+ African photographers.

They lay the grounds for Tessa Lewin's chapter on the work of Zanele Muholi and queer visual activism in contemporary South Africa. Lewin makes an argument for looking beyond the image in order to understand the significance of photography in the making of queer communities. She argues that Muholi's strategy of using the fine art market as a tool to advocate for the rights of black queer people is exemplary of how visual activists in South Africa navigate the complexities of working within a system that privileges individual gain and challenges ideas about who and what art is for. Both of these chapters serve as reminder of the importance of moving beyond heteronormative gender binaries if we are to understand the ways in which gender, sexuality and race have structured photographic practices and histories.

The final section, 'Feminist and Postcolonial Practices', explores the ways in which female artists in Africa creatively engage photography as part of a complex multi-media landscape and in relation to non-visual forms of sensing and making sense of African pasts, presents and futures. Marietta Kesting's essay looks at the work of South African artists Thenjiwe Niki Nkosi and Lebohang Kganye, who in their artistic practice unmake, rework and refigure private and public photographic archives and insert them into multi-media installations and performances. Kesting tells us that both artists share a critical curiosity for historical photographs and their recuperative potential, especially in projects that wish to trace 'subaltern' histories of black South Africans and explore forms of 'alternative' historical narration. On the other hand, Nkosi's and Kganye's orientation is decisively towards the future and ways of imagining futures that ground themselves not primarily in the archive, but on ethical and aesthetic principles established in African storytelling and the affective worlds of family and community. Art photography's importance in reshaping social imaginaries and reformulating identities in post-apartheid South Africa remains the focus in Nomusa Makhubu's contribution, which looks at post-gendered narratives in the performative work of Tracey Rose, Athi Patra Ruga, Kudzanai Chiurai, Thania Petersen and Lebohang Kganye. In order to understand these artists' performative photographic work in the volatile political transition of contemporary South Africa, Makhubu deploys the idea of visual currency and the conceptual language of recurrence, repetition, circulation and exchange and describes the ways in which they turn 'demeaning historical

images' into politically oppositional ones. While the transformative work of the artists discussed here is fully acknowledged, Makhubu closes her essay with important words of caution reminding us that even in the work of artists in South Africa today, it remains at times difficult to escape the circulation of apartheid images and prevent the ongoing implication of viewers in the consumption, displacement and violation of the black (female) body. What is at stake in a feminist politics and ethics of photography is at the heart of H la Ammar's artistic and activist work in Tunisia, discussed in Anna Rocca's essay. Since the Tunisian revolution in 2011, Ammar's photography and performance has mainly addressed civil rights violations and physical and psychological abuses in Tunisia's penal system. Rocca's essay focuses on Ammar's installation *Tarz* produced in 2014, in which the artist reflected on the role art, the archive and memory in the post-revolutionary period. Here, Ammar chose a particular cultural technique – embroidery – and its photographic and cinematic representation in order to reflect on how Tunisian women processed a violent political transition by securing spaces of reflective, artistic and affective expression. In addition, embroidery serves the artist to spin an imaginary thread that enables her to creatively assemble historical photographs with her own images and propose alternative temporalities, ways of knowing and caring for Tunisia's troubled past and present. Embroidery, in short, becomes a gendered way of refiguring the photographic archive.

As we have argued consistently, historians and writers on photography in Africa need to take account of women's multiple engagements with the medium, as curators, archivists, business managers, clients and subjects, as well as photographers, and attend to the complex ways in which women's agency is enfolded and exercised in these roles. Taken together, the chapters in this volume begin to build a picture of women's photographic practices on the continent that enriches our understanding of the medium's African trajectories. Moreover, it is our contention that these studies do not simply contribute to photographic scholarship in a cumulative manner, but also open up new lines of enquiry and new modes of revealing African photographic histories, locating the medium at the complex intersections of gender, class, race and sexuality across multiple times and spaces. In this way, we hope too that the volume provides an opening for new ways of writing and thinking about African photographs.

¹ Image description for a portrait of Abban held in the Bailey's African History Archive (Filename: BHA0049_017). Available online at <<https://www.baha.co.za>> (accessed 06.02.20).

² One might read the *Drum* piece as an expression of male anxiety and an operation in containment, as much as it is a celebration of Abban.

³ For a short biography of Lesley Lawson, see South African History Online (SAHO). Available online at <<https://www.sahistory.org.za/people/lesley-lawson>> (accessed 11 February 2020). Lawson's memoir, *Quiet Moments in the Struggle* was published in 2019 and can be accessed online: <<https://www.lesleylawson.co.uk/quiet-moments>> (accessed 24 March 2020).

Women's political activism has not been the exclusive domain of women photographers of course. The former *Drum* photographer Peter Magubane was also known for his photography of women's role in the political struggle in South Africa, dating from his coverage of the 1956 march against the introduction of passes for black women. See Magubane 1993.

⁴ For a later exploration of this theme, Beth Buggenhagen provides an insight into how Muslim women in present-day Dakar 'use photography to create a space of respectability' (2014: 82-4).

⁵ Conversely, Felicia Abban lamented not being able to travel to Hanoi as part of Nkrumah's entourage due to her pregnancy (Yeboah 2019).