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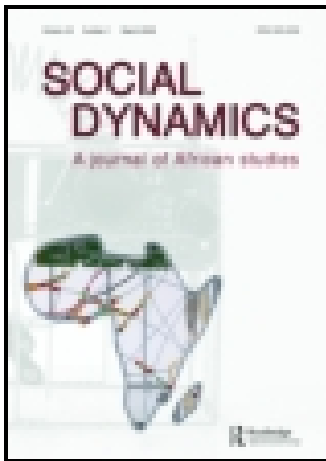
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Photographic portraits of migrants in South Africa: framed between identity photographs and (self-)presentation

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This essay explores how migration within the African continent is framed visually by passport photos as well as artistic documentary projects based in Johannesburg, South Africa. It offers examples of what type of photographic (self-)portraits are constructed, which photographs circulate and how African migrants' self-images as well as South African society's perception of them are affected by certain photographic images. The method employed is a close reading of some paradigmatic photographs. In addition, I will discuss different – and often gendered – ways in which African migrant subjects may become visible. In short, this essay asks, what photographic portraits construct the hegemonic view of the African migrant subject in the public sphere? Accordingly, the tension between visibility and invisibility of African migrants' lives emerges in the interstices of the inquiry. The paper first looks at the taking of identity photographs, since the passport photo exemplifies how the individual is made visible by the nation state. It can simultaneously serve as a poignant reminder of the ambivalent qualities of photography: on the one hand, documenting and codifying, and on the other hand, creatively representing. In this context, the essay explores the possibility of remaining invisible or “opaque,” but also the conceivably more empowering representational aspect of photography such as we see in participatory (art) projects, which may be connected to the visual politics of self-expression and reflection.

Keywords: photography; migration; identity photo; in/visibility; visual politics; participatory photo project; self-representation

This contribution focuses on the multiple roles of the photographic (self-)portraits taken in Johannesburg, South Africa, in the context of migration within the African continent. In part a response to the renewed interest in photographically portraying African migrants living in Johannesburg that has arisen since the so-called xenophobic attacks in 2008,¹ this essay examines how photographic (self-)portraits are used, which photographs circulate and how people are affected and perhaps afflicted by certain photographic practices. Inextricably linked to this are the discursive “framings” (Butler 2009) of these photographs – what is visible within certain frames and what is cropped out of the frame. It is often argued that African migrants inhabit a discursive space that is contradictorily marked by both invisibility and hyper-visibility (for example, Carter 2010; Gutberlet and Helff 2011). Their everyday lives are generally assumed to be invisible to mainstream society, whereas they become highly visible as deviant others, associated with crime or faced with dire

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circumstances like overcrowding, poverty, hunger, assault and rape.² Female African migrants are often framed by discourses of trafficking and sex work (Palmary 2010; Bahl, Hess, and Ginal 2010).³

The term “migrant” is very broad, and it could arguably be replaced with the terms non-South African nationals, foreign workers, (economic) refugees or asylum seekers. However, on the one hand, legal statuses and self-descriptions of African migrants may often change and overlap during their continued or intermittent stay in Johannesburg (for example, Kesting 2010), and, on the other hand, this paper is interested in their construction as “outsiders” in the symbolic visual realm of the South African public sphere.⁴

In addition to their “negative” visibility, migrants often lack full citizenship rights in their “host” country, and can, thus, be considered as a group of second-class citizens in the modern nation state, their assumed status as temporary dwellers in the city making them less eligible for assistance and services (Landau and Monson 2008). The goals of migrant organisations and NGOs are thus twofold; on the one hand, they fight for more political rights and recognition, and on the other hand, they also hope to lessen discrimination by pushing for “more” – meaning a more recognising – visibility. While visibility is, of course, an ambivalent quality (Phelan 1993) – especially in connection to political power and impact – this paper attempts to analyse a few examples of how these visual politics for a “just” visibility of migrants are pursued or baffled. Consequently, it explores the tension between normative and self-chosen visibility and invisibility by analysing different forms of (self-)documentation – at times as creative practice (for instance as part of participatory art projects), and at times as an attempt to defy representation altogether, for example, when living under the state’s radar as an illegalised migrant without papers.

I will be focusing here on photographic images that are seen by and engage with the majority of the South African population and the African migrants as the purported “others.” The photographs are drawn from the public sphere, exhibitions and participatory projects. As such, this is not an exhaustive study of different representations, but rather an attempt to offer a few glimpses and observations by close readings of paradigmatic images.

Framings of migrant life

As an entry to the subject, I want to look at a photograph (Figure 1) that was taken in the inner-city suburb of Hillbrow in Johannesburg, which is home to many African migrants.⁵ Often, the term “migrant community” is invoked when speaking about Hillbrow. This is, nonetheless, to borrow a phrase from Jacques Derrida, “a community without community” (Caputo 1997, 113), of those who don’t belong to any community, and thus a precarious community, without any common essence.⁶ At the same time, I want to point out that migrant inhabitants of Johannesburg, South Africa, often do share some common experiences: of repeatedly having to renew their legal permits, of being harassed by the police, or of facing difficulties in finding jobs and accommodation and other obstacles.

The photograph shows the boarded-up doorway of an apartment building on King George Street in Hillbrow. This photograph has several layers of meaning – both on its surface that includes another image and text, and as a metaphor. On the left-hand side of the photo, a sign for an anti-trafficking campaign, supported by



Figure 1. Boarded-up door with signs in Hillbrow (2011). Photographer: Marietta Kesting.

various local aid organisations, is visible. Also, one notices, the door has no handle and small pieces of wood have been nailed over to cover that area, to keep the door shut at all times; it has become an extension of the wall of the house. As the house was likely unoccupied at the time the photograph was taken, locking the door permanently was probably a measure against squatters. According to *Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF)*, “the inner-city slums of Johannesburg are the destination point for many survival migrants seeking opportunity, transit, or simply to hide among Jo’burg’s millions of inhabitants. But finding safe shelter here is extremely challenging” (Doctors Without Borders 2013). Recent arrivals to the city often need to share accommodation, which is frequently rented out at very high prices, shrewd landlords capitalising on the knowledge that many migrants do not have any other place to go and may not have legal papers.

To return to the photograph and one of its possible readings, certainly, this door no longer serves its original function of letting people pass through. The closed door can be seen as not only hindering people in Hillbrow from entering this house, but may also be analogous to the national politics of closing the borders and trying to control the influx of people. The semi-transparent glass bricks, visible on the right, are dusty and dark – one cannot actually see what is inside. The sign on the left reads “STOP HUMAN TRAFFICKING NOW!!” and includes a drawing of a stylised weeping white woman or girl, highlighting the common conflation of migrant women and children in the public imaginary (Yuval-Davis 1997). The image has a paedophilic tinge, leaving the viewer potentially uncomfortable. Her raised right hand may be seen either as the girl/woman wiping the tears from her eyes, or even as a raised fist of counter attack. She looks at the viewer from beneath her long fringe, her raised left shoulder a possible sign of her trying to protect herself, or as a display of fear and discomfort. Someone has used the white space to the right sign

to pin up a handwritten advertisement, offering “Special ID Photos” and giving his/her phone number. I still wonder what the “special” stands for. Maybe especially cheap or well made? It is certainly not a coincidence that the advert for identity photographs is written next to the “Stop Human Trafficking Now” sign. Indeed, the person offering the photo service might have assumed that its placement would give it extra attention, and maybe even that a person who might consider calling the number on the left could also be in need of some ID photos, as offered on the right.

There are hardly any public photo booths in Johannesburg’s inner city.⁷ Because of this, the informal ad for ID photos may actually be more “useful” to a migrant person in Hillbrow in trying to get papers than the well-intentioned sign on the left, since the NGOs working “against trafficking” usually assist the government in deporting migrants back to their countries of origin. The campaign illustration of a supposed victim on the left – even though it is fictional and asking for effects and affects – and the informal advert for ID photos on the right may reveal the ways in which migrant life is visually framed by NGOs and national laws imposing identification procedures. Both types of images – the assumed victimised migrant woman and the identity photograph as such – will be discussed in further details in the following sections.

Identity photos/passport photos

The passport photo needed for identification, as well as travel and legal documents, deserves further consideration, since it shows how one is made visible by and to the nation state. As indicated by the first image, photo services are in demand within the everyday life of the migrant community, since identification photos are necessary to register and obtain the legal permits that are often required in order to secure employment or legal status to remain. With a cellphone or other camera that people may have access to, it is very difficult to take photographs that are acceptable as official identity photos. Often, national institutions only accept photographs produced on their premises or by a specifically validated service, since these photos have to adhere to certain standards and rules: “The photograph should consist of a close up of your head and top of your shoulders so that your face takes up three quarters of the photo” (Passport Service 2010). Moreover, the face needs to be frontal with even lighting, sharply in focus, with enough contrast, and a uniform, neutral background. These standards are becoming ever more sophisticated in the age of terrorism and biometric passports. The photos are supposed to provide unequivocal recognisability of the person depicted, even though this is never entirely accomplished. Today, the identity documents often include a recorded electronic fingerprint as well (Figure 2).

The identity photograph is particularly relevant and can serve as a poignant example of the ambivalent qualities of the photographic self-portrait: on the one hand, documenting and codifying, and on the other hand, as a means of empowerment, self-expression and pleasure.

The passport photo reduces the subject and presses him/her into a certain category, thereby limiting people’s aptitude to produce their own images according to their own ideas, desires and standards. Another dimension to consider is the affective response to passport photos – the subject almost always *de-identifies* with his/her documentary portrait. Most passport photos are shown with the remark: “Don’t look at the picture, it makes me look bad. In reality I don’t look like that, it makes



Figure 2. Example of a correct South African passport photo.

me look like a criminal.” This is especially true nowadays with the new passport photo regulations where smiling is forbidden. Therefore, on an aesthetic level, the mandatory identification photos may turn every citizen into a criminal lookalike as on a “wanted” poster.

In addition, the legal papers with a valid identity photo that tie a person’s place of birth, country of citizenship and other information to their name through a passport with a name and nationality are often an integral part of preparing to deport him/her back to his/her country of origin. Therefore, another strategy to defy the nation-state system may include remaining invisible to state and legislative control altogether. This would mean staying illegally in a country without papers and under the state’s radar. Or becoming “someone else” by taking on a new identity, the legal option being to get married and taking on your spouse’s nationality and thus, for women usually, altering your surname, but there are also illegal options, for example, destroying your papers or forging an identity document. These tactics of invisibility will be discussed in more detail in a later section.

When considering this, one should never forget that identification photos are always already framed by historical discourses of borders, immigration policies and national security, all of which resonate with control and surveillance, especially in the South African post-apartheid and postcolonial context (Hayes 2007; Schröter 2010). Under apartheid and colonialism, the registration and domination of Africans by Europeans relied heavily on bureaucratic means of identifying, counting and granting or denying passports and entry permits. Some aspects in regards to in/visibility of black South Africans during apartheid may be comparable to the precarious visibility of African migrants in South Africa today.

During apartheid, all South Africans who were classified as “black” were foreigners in their own land. They only had limited citizenship rights in the ethnicised

“homelands.” Under various acts of the South African apartheid government following the doctrine of “separate development” of the different “races,” the homelands or “Bantustans” were created in order to control and exclude black South Africans in pseudo-independent territories. The Bantu Homelands Citizenship Act No. 26 of 1970 completed this process (South African History Online 2014a). Black South Africans, residing outside of their nominal “homeland” had to carry passbooks that soon included identity photographs, and work permits that at times included fingerprints, and their freedom of movement was largely restricted:

B had to register and be given a passbook – the tool by which the government effected laws that kept blacks out of the cities unless they were gainfully employed. ‘The old pass was just a piece of paper. It had no photo, so we could borrow someone else’s,’ B remembered, but the pass laws became more sophisticated and more difficult to evade. (Marinovich and Silva 2001, 81–82)

Especially in the South African cities – which were imagined as “white” areas by the apartheid government – the status of black South Africans was precarious. Black South Africans, thus, did not have the same rights as white South Africans, who had the status of “citizens.” Instead, their position might be described as what Ariella Azoulay (2012, 68) has called “flawed citizens.” She has explained “flawed citizenship” as a situation in which

[t]he state may be interested in the specific goods this population can provide or obtain, but is definitely not interested in their permanent assimilation into the rolls of the citizenry, and thus their status remains transient. [...] What the state wants is something that is in their possession – labor, power, bodies, sex, knowledge, and skill in certain areas – but this interest is not enough to alter their transient status. (Azoulay 2012, 68)

Black South Africans were subjected to a long history of exclusion in their own country. At the same time during apartheid in “white” South Africa, any black African, almost regardless of their nationality, was perceived as a foreigner or a trespasser. In addition, as Mbembe (2001, 190) has argued, the colonial epistemology denied colonised people self-representation and self-expression. They had “no freedom, no history, no individuality in any real sense,” rather “he/she simply ‘represented’ a sort of eternal presence.” The racist ideology of apartheid has often repeated and thus doubled the weight of the colonial heritage in South Africa. Yet there was a lot of resistance by the population classified as “African.”

In order to historicise these acts of defiance against identification and control, let us first take a look at the famous photograph of Nelson Mandela burning his passbook in 1960 by Eli Weinberg (EW14-4-1. UWC-Robben Island Mayibuye Archives - Figure 3). The black-and-white photograph shows Mandela crouched down in the yard of a township home. He is burning the pass in a tin pot. His gaze is fixed on his task, and at the same time, his eyes are half-closed from laughing. He seems at ease and very content with his action. All that remains visible of the pass are the dark rectangular cover pieces inside the pot, already engulfed in flames. There is no smoke, but the flames are visible, Mandela seems to be touching them with his left hand, as if he were urging them on. The burning of his passbook took place publicly during the ANC’s defiance campaigns in 1960. The abolition of the pass laws and the freedom of movement for all was one prime objective of the African National Congress. President Hendrik Verwoerd extended the pass laws in 1959 to include women, leading to nation-wide protest. In the same year at the annual conference of the ANC, its president Albert Luthuli had declared, “1960 will

be the year of the pass” (South African History Online 2014b). One of these anti-pass campaigns, organised in March 1960 and supported by the Pan-African Congress, led to the Sharpeville Massacre (Newbury 2009, 5).

The burning of passes as acts of defiance against an unjust government is echoed today by the act of some migrants of burning their papers before crossing a national border. The migrants know that they are breaking laws, but they also insist on their mobility. Therefore, they burn their passports in order to be un-identifiable and thus not to be deported. This practice occurs globally, as Papadopoulous and Tsianos (2007) have observed. Migrants waiting in Tangier to cross the street of Gibraltar are called “Herraguas,” the burners, people prepared to burn their documents when they reach the Spanish Schengen border in order to avoid being resent to their



Figure 3. Nelson Mandela burning his pass (1960). Photographer: Eli Weinberg. Source: EW14-4-1. UWC-Robben Island Mayibuye Archives.

country of origin.” This tactic might rather lead to an argument for a right to remain outside of visualisation, a “right to opacity,” not to be read, documented, included or excluded that Martiniquan writer Glissant ([2009] 2012, 73) once proposed: “Why must we evaluate people on the scale of the transparency of ideas proposed by the West? [...] As far as I’m concerned, a person has the right to be opaque.” While an imagined “right for opacity” is an important notion, it does, of course, not translate directly into any change of legal border policies at this point. African migrants who try to enter the Schengen area cannot claim this a “right for opacity,” as there is no larger national or international political organisation supporting such a right.

Becoming invisible

How do migrants oppose the control and identification procedures by the nation state in their everyday lives? As I am writing this text, I am also in the process of editing a short documentary film about photography and migration in Johannesburg with the working title “Drive-By Shooting” (Kesting [forthcoming](#)). Some scenes from the raw footage have got stuck in my mind and are replaying there again and again. One of them is an interview scene in which a migrant from Tanzania explains (Figure 4):

‘I am against the government, you see, and I have to be, life pushed me to be against the government, but I don’t want to be against the government each and every day for the rest of my life.’ He continues: ‘You know me by my name “Simon” but if you go to the streets now, there is nobody there who knows this name. I go by different names, you see? I have maybe five names, and each person I meet, I see which name I will give to them to call me with. Even these cops now that are looking for me they don’t know my name and they don’t know my face, either. So even if they find me, I can tell them, that is not me, that is somebody else.’ (Kesting [forthcoming](#))

This testimony is a provocation of the documentary photographic recording setting that is “still” trying to capture authenticity and “truth.” Instead this statement attests to the self-reflection of a minority position “against the government” and on the other hand, the conscious negation and refusal of a relatively banal knowledge like the real name of the interviewee. In addition, “Simon” deliberately *de-identifies* himself as a small act of resistance and as part of his acquired survival skills in inner-city Johannesburg. Tsianos and Papadopoulous have theorised *de-identification* critically, suggesting, that:

the strategy of de-identification is not primarily a question of shifting identitarian ascriptions; it is a material and an embodied way of being. The strategy of de-identification is a voluntary *de-humanization* in the sense that it breaks the relation between your name and your body. A body without a name is a non-human human being, an animal, which runs. It is non-human because it deliberately abandons the humanist regime of rights. (Papadopoulous and Tsianos 2007)

This process of de-identification does not imply an act of disappearance; instead, it is to become *imperceptible* by multiplication and, thus, becoming “more than one.” This signifies a never-finished state of *becoming*, which Tsianos and Papadopoulous have theorised by building upon Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of becoming that can impregnate and change an entire social field (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 279). As it is clearly spelt out in the quote above, it is important to stress that this process of de-identification should not be taken lightly or romanticised, since it is a very precarious position. Whoever inhabits it can no longer claim any of the formal

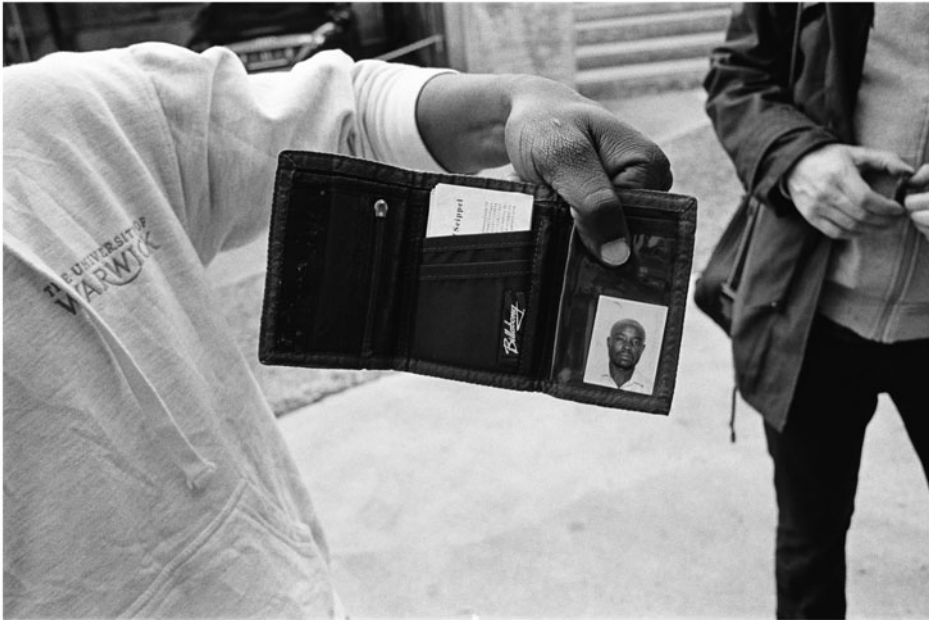


Figure 4. Simon's ID photo, (re-enactment). Photographer: Marietta Kesting.

rights from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees Refugee Convention or the like. In most countries, including South Africa, non-nationals applying for legal status and a right to stay, who lie in their applications, are – if found out – immediately expelled.

Yet even in this situation, there are sometimes still ways for individuals to negotiate, be it through connections to people working for the Department of Home Affairs or crossing a national border and re-entering. Many African migrants are defying national laws and actively promoting their presumed right to move freely. This strand of thought on de-identification can contribute to opening the visual discourse on migration beyond the simple equations of migrants as the eternal victim or the eternal criminal; instead thinking in terms of a politics of imperceptibility that includes positions of ambivalence. This positioning in-between may include at times a strategic identification and self-labelling, yet without fixing one's identity – to sometimes “pass” as a South African and in other circumstances to identify with one's home country. This may be compared with the process that South African writer and artist Sinethemba Twalo (2014) called “othering myself,” whereas Spivak defined this notion as “strategic essentialism” (Spivak 1990, 15).

Becoming visible

Nonetheless, there is also the opposite movement, fuelled by an equally strong desire among migrants to become visible and documented and to obtain legal status in South Africa. Only legal status affords assured access to certain jobs or education, housing and other services. The next photograph I would like to discuss shows Zimbabwean nationals waiting at the Home Affairs Office in Johannesburg in order

to register to get legal papers. Since at the exact moment the photograph was taken, they are without papers, they are not legal. Therefore, they did not want to be recognised in the image taken by a Zimbabwean photographer who was studying at the Market Photo Workshop in Johannesburg. It seems ironic that these people hiding from the photographer are waiting in line to have their official passport photo taken. Which modes of photographic imprint are legitimate and which delegitimise the subject becomes a matter of huge importance in these liminal moments (Figure 5).

The photograph was taken using a wide-angle lens, producing distortion, most visible in the warped lines of the stairs that the waiting people are seated upon. It looks almost like a stage set. The vanishing point shows a locked gate integrated into a green fence, leaving no room to escape, nowhere to go, adding a slightly Kafkaesque dimension to the scene. In the foreground, there is trash – a juice bottle, a soft-drink can and some plastic wrapping are visible on the first and second steps, maybe attesting to the long time period people have had to wait having to sustain themselves, however, meagrely. The steps have stains and crumbs on them, looking sticky and dirty. The person who chooses to sit down here and rest could only be someone with no other choice. The people waiting here, melding with the rubbish surrounding them, are a kind of human detritus, superfluous people, unseen and unnoticed by South African passersby who are rooted in their jobs, lives and everyday routines. The scene may also be reminiscent of Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. The standout of the scene, the “punctum” in the Barthesian sense (Barthes 1982, 43–62), is the woman on the far right of the picture, who chooses not to hide her face and instead seems to look on stoically. In this way, the photograph resists an all-too-easy reading or explanation, showing with her defiance that there are alternative actions available.

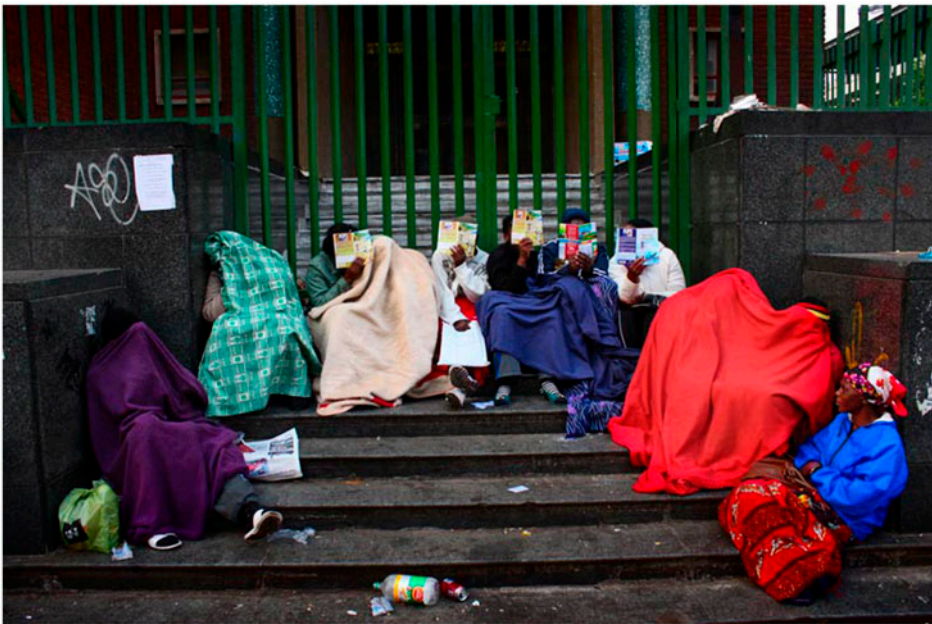


Figure 5. Zimbabwean nationals waiting at Home Affairs in Johannesburg (2011). Photographer: Believe Nyakadjara.

The nation state is the “author” or the power that requires every citizen and non-citizen to be identifiable and thereby controllable. The passport or identity document is usually the material object where photography and citizenship interface and assist the nation state to produce or construct the male or female citizen with a fixed nationality. A legal document requires identity images that one could argue are the most “documentary” images there are in the genre of documentary portraits, supposedly “true” and “factual,” where subjects are turned into objects in order to then be subjected to national and international laws. The *passport* photo together with a valid passport is literally the one allowing one to “pass,” to move, to enter, to make one’s way or not and it can also mean access to services and protection, usually reserved for citizens.

Documentary masks

After having discussed the passport photo in detail, I now want to look at an image that may at first look somewhat similar to a passport photo, but explicitly anonymises the person depicted in it. Figure 6 was used in the Southern African Anti-Trafficking Campaign in 2010 and shows a young black woman who cannot speak. Another image from the series shows the same woman unable to see, because her eyes have been blotted out with red. This creates a powerful image with violent connotations, which is also associated with illegalisation, as the hidden eyes, covered by a bar or pixelated, are often used when people are charged with a crime, but not yet convicted, to make it impossible to identify them.⁸



Figure 6. Campaign Against Trafficking (Southern African Anti-Human Trafficking Trust 2010).

The woman in Figure 6 looks at the viewer while looking away at the same time, it seems. Her gaze looks serious, and she has a scar on her right cheek. Her mouth is crossed out with red paint. The colour red signifies “blood,” “attention,” “life and death,” “danger,” but at the same time, it indicates “lust,” “emotion” and “anger” amongst others, and in this context, sensationalises the woman further. Yet the woman may also come across as very seductive. No trace of clothing can be seen, leaving the viewer to conclude that the woman seems to be naked, further pushing the idea of her as ready to be (sexually) consumed. This image and the way it is presented are rather more reminiscent of a slick advertising campaign than of the typical documentary photograph. Yet their monochromatic quality – except for the colour red – calls up black-and-white documentary photography. The images are highly stylised and were probably shot with a model only for the purpose of the campaign.

The intergovernmental organisation International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the regional public work Southern Africa Counter-Trafficking Program feature prominently on the poster. The IOM prides itself in advancing “humane and orderly” migration (International Organization for Migration 2013). This image of an assumed migrant black woman that imitates a documentary look, but is part of a stylised campaign, is a typical representation of the hegemonic idea of women as “silenced, blindfolded victims” in the context of sex work and – thus labelled illicit – sexuality (Palmary 2010).

A similar image could be found promoting an exhibit of *MSF* held at Constitution Hill, Johannesburg, albeit without the sexual overtones. This was also an exhibition dealing specifically with migration, entitled “Solidarity for Survival” (<http://www.solidarity4survival.org/>). The text banner of the exhibit silences the female face (Figure 7), which is – again – printed on a red background; only her left eye looks straight at the viewer. The woman depicted is wearing a headscarf. Although it is uncertain if this has a religious connotation, it seemingly marks her as a non-Western “other.” There are slanted red banners overlaid on the photograph, one over the woman’s forehead, the other covers her mouth. As if she is peeking through a fence, only a small rectangular frame of her face remains visible. It may remind one of the red cordons, marking sites of danger or construction on the street.

This silencing of the woman seems unintended, since the exhibit has the opposite aim of raising “solidarity for survival” (<http://www.solidarity4survival.org/>). It begs the question as to what kind of solidarity one can have with a character that has no voice? This can only mean that others – in this case *MSF*, or myself as the viewer of the poster – are empowered to *speak for* this silenced victim who cannot speak for herself. This creates an unequal partnership, where one partner has to care for the other and no real dialogue is possible (e.g. Spivak 1988; Ticktin 2011). The last two images are common examples of the highly selective ways in which migrant women are visualised by counter-trafficking and awareness-raising campaigns. They demonstrate why it is important to

draw on critiques about the focus on the sexuality of people from marginalized groups and the consequences thereof, but equally show how contested claims to represent ‘vulnerable’ groups have significant implications for how resources are distributed, how one makes claim to be or is labelled a victim or perpetrator, and the kind of migrant one can claim to be. (Palmary et al. 2010, 13)

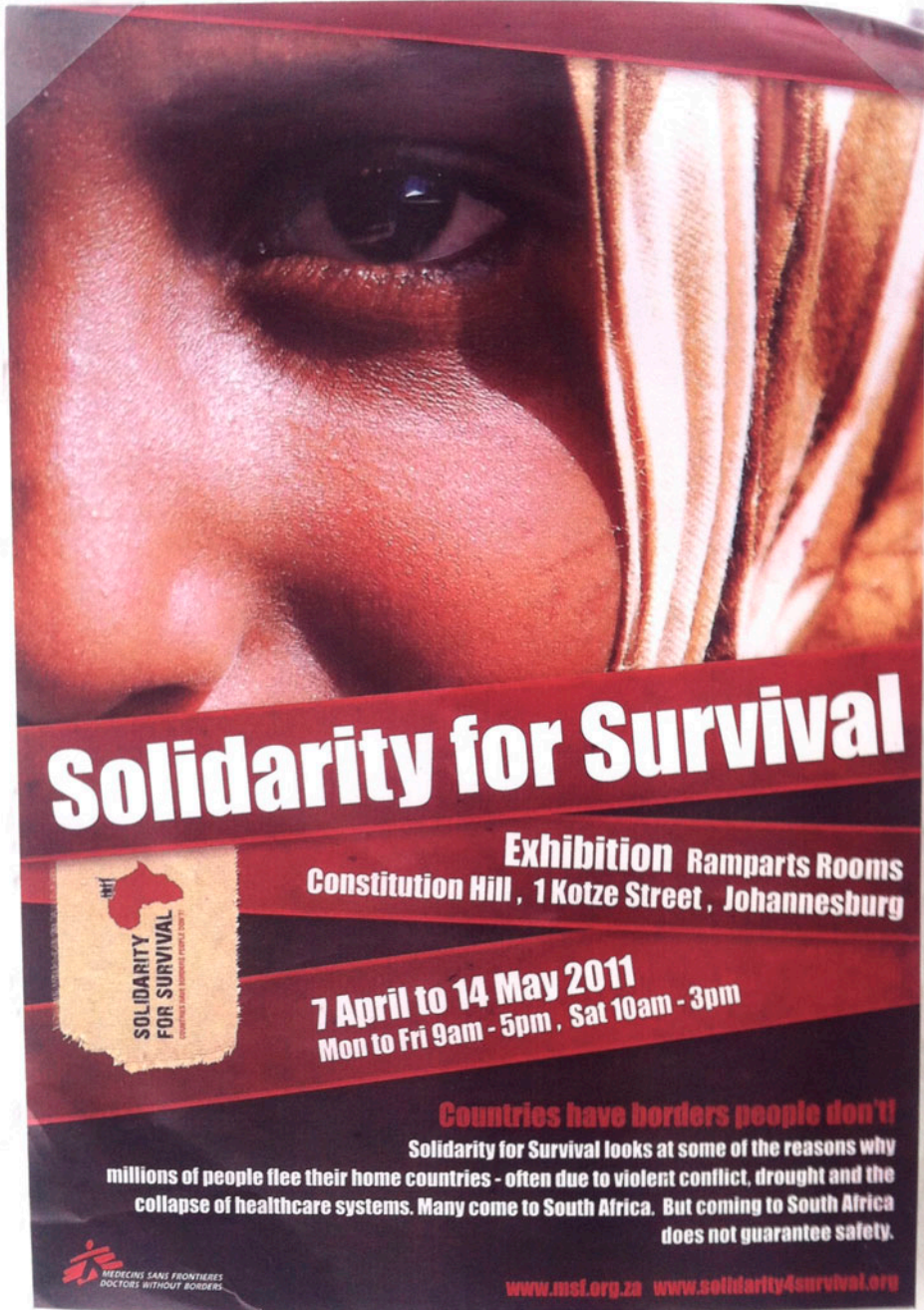


Figure 7. Poster for *Solidarity for Survival* exhibit by *Médecins Sans Frontières* (2011).

This means that migrants have only limited choices of how to portray and present themselves in the public sphere. Of course, presenting oneself as a “victim” is also a label that may be used strategically.

Interestingly enough, the *MSF* exhibit included the possibility for the spectators to get involved and take their own digital self-portrait as a *Kwerekwere* – a derogatory term for foreigner in South Africa.⁹ This action tried to promote the idea that “We are all foreigners, in most places.” I myself had my photograph taken, wearing the *Kwerekwere* campaign t-shirt (see Figure 8) (Médecins Sans Frontières 2013).¹⁰ The images were later uploaded to an online photo gallery, where one could see hundreds of smiling people wearing a “foreigner” t-shirt, many of the persons posing were white. Viewing the images had the effect of creating a slight disturbance between the self-assured look of people, representing themselves, feeling “normal” and part of society and the derogatory label *Kwerekwere*, which is usually only used for black foreigners in South Africa. The label did not seem to match, seemingly provoking the viewer to say, “What – these people are foreigners? They don’t look like them at all. Could I be a foreigner then, too?” It was designed to lead one to the recognition that the norm is usually invisible and that if one feels that one belongs to the norm, one can go about one’s life unlabelled. Then, it is not so subversive to “out” oneself as a foreigner. Whereas, a black foreigner could wear the t-shirt as an act of reappropriation, of “talking back”: “You call me a bad name? Well, look I am already calling myself that,” dampening the impact of the derogatory term. The *Kwerekwere* portraits were of course completely removed from the actual experience of navigating Johannesburg as a black foreigner from an African country, yet, they created a fruitful disturbance, and also showed how different (self-)portraits look when people have volunteered to have them taken.

While the passport photo and identity document are part of the measures to control national borders, populations and individuals, people taking their own photographic self-portraits can also experience this positively, even when wearing a certain label, as the *Kwerekwere* t-shirts attested. Photographic self-portraits are at



Figure 8. Example of the self-labelling as a foreigner; the author wearing the *Kwerekwere* campaign t-shirt (photo credit: Marietta Kesting).

times empowering, if the subjects can craft their own images freely and creatively according to their own wishes. Therefore, the final part of the paper will consider two participatory photo projects in Johannesburg that promote self-representation. One is artist and photographer Terry Kurgan's *Hotel Yeoville* and the other the Market Photo Workshops Collaboration with Migrant Women Sexworkers. These projects may be important tools in counteracting the representations of the colonial and apartheid past and creating photographic images of migration beyond victimhood narratives.

Self-portraits I: *Hotel Yeoville*

Terry Kurgan's participatory photography project *Hotel Yeoville* started in 2010 and mapped the inhabitants and visitors of Yeoville (audio-)visually – perhaps somewhat similar to a visual census. During 2010, the exhibition *Hotel Yeoville* was held inside the Yeoville public library. “The exhibition installation was comprised of a series of private booths in which visitors were invited to document themselves through a range of interactive digital interfaces and online social media applications, thereby bringing various forms of personal expression and intimate experience into public circulation” (Kurgan 2013).

The project thus had a physical presence, where content was produced and was exhibited on a website. In addition, Terry Kurgan archived all the images and included them in her own artistic body of work (P. Zvomuya, “An Outsider's Yeoville Insight: Social Responsibility Meets Mainstream Art in this Chronicle of Public, Private and Mundane Lives,” *Mail & Guardian*, March 8, 2013). The project's self-description claims that: “the exhibition's carefully considered surfaces and spaces not only functioned as invitations and prompts, for the users of the exhibition, but in fact relied on the traces and gestures – the engagement and participation of visitors – to produce both the website and the exhibition's content” (Kurgan 2013). All the images, texts and oral accounts created in the documentation and storytelling booths were uploaded to the website and mixed together with the resource content: migrant and refugee guides and advice, online discussion forums, classifieds and a business-listing directory.¹¹ The photo booth was, by far, the most popular space and used by many different people each day. Thousands of (self-)portraits were produced here in sets of two copies, accompanied by short texts. Participants were allowed to keep one copy of the photographs for themselves, the project team kept the other copy.

Terry Kurgan (2013) described the resulting images as existing “at the very threshold between private and public space, and these personal, utterly commonplace images have the power to resonate in much broader public and political spheres.” One example would be the self-portrait of a francophone African man by the name of Patience (Figure 9). He is looking straight at the camera, with little variation between the four frames, aside from the slight movement of him turning his head. He describes himself and advertises his ability to teach French to his “lovely Yeovillians fellows,” and he claims Yeoville to be his *home* – where he would “like to spend all my time really feeling at home.” But what could be the political and social role and lasting impact of very ordinary, everyday domestic snapshots? And how would they gain relevance in the larger arena of the public sphere? These are worthwhile questions to pinpoint – it is uncertain if these images had a political agency besides saying “I am here, and I am beautiful” and “I love you all,” which,



Figure 9. An example of self-portraits taken in the photo booth from *Hotel Yeoville*.

of course, is an important gesture, but also quickly forgotten unless it is accompanied by further research into the everyday discrimination faced by migrants. At the same time, the project was a successful intervention against othering processes, since it emphasised the common desires of all inhabitants of Yeoville regardless of their citizenship status. Yet, while the project was consciously set up as a space removed from everyday reality and day-to-day politics, the political was re-introduced in some of the images, remarkably, via the decisions people made about how to present themselves and what to share with the public. In one image (Figure 10), for example, two black women, explain that they are “proudly dykes” and describe themselves as “entrepreneurs[sic],” claiming a positive visibility for black lesbians who are often “othered,” excluded and marginalised similar to African migrants (Gunkel 2010).¹²

As Kurgan (2013) states: “In an attempt to create a poetic distance from politics, and also to free the work from a referential dependence upon the harshness of xenophobic violence, we very consciously made *Hotel Yeoville* a utopian or idealized space. The frame we produced was warm, pink and happy.” From my personal experience of visiting the *Hotel Yeoville* space in the public library of Yeoville, I can agree that the design of the photo booth, which was pink and called a “love booth,” definitely made one smile. It also seemed to equate the act of photographing with

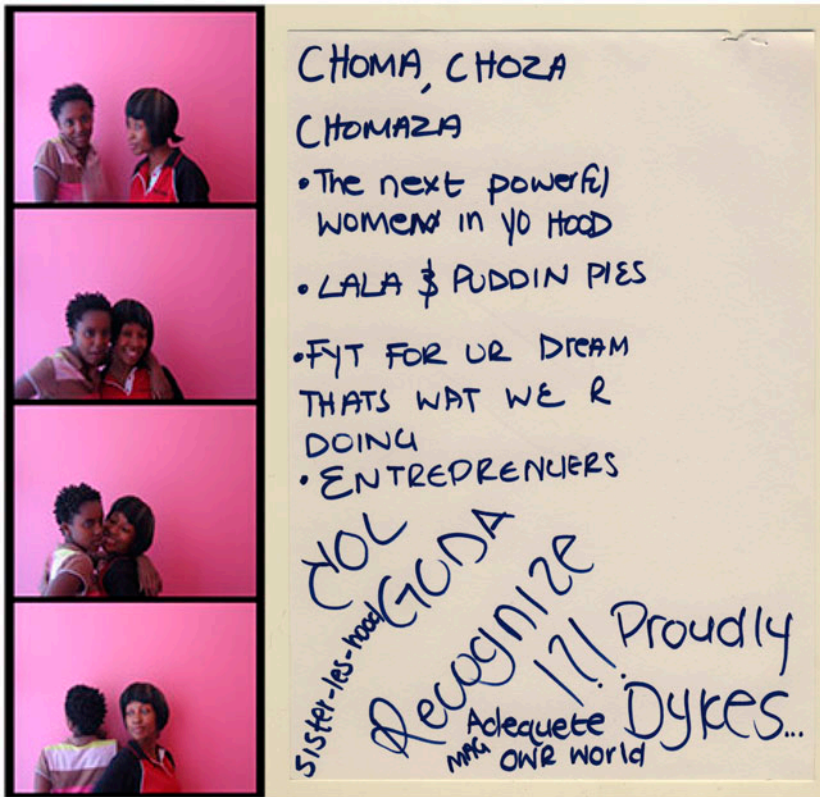


Figure 10. An example of self-portraits taken in the photo booth from *Hotel Yeoville*.

spreading love and friendship, and in fact many people took images together with their friends and family. This probably also significantly mitigated the reluctance to participate. While photographing in Johannesburg on the sidewalks in the inner city is not a welcome activity, here – at *Hotel Yeoville* – photographing oneself seemed safe and inviting. One question to be mused upon is whether the “feel-good” framing of the project also only produced mostly “feel-good” responses, leaving little space for criticism and contestation.

Looking back at the project, Kurgan (2013) elaborates on her evaluation further: “If we accept the claim that all photographs bear the trace of the encounter between the photographer and the photographed, then some of the traces that these images carry is that utopian desire – a world in which power (us) and citizens (our participants) existed on a plane of co-dependence and equal exchange.” I would argue instead that it remains an open question as to whether the participants in the *Hotel Yeoville* project – largely consisting of the African migrant population of Johannesburg – actually had equal citizenship status (both in reality and symbolically) as the conveners of the project. If they were treated as citizens in the project, this does not necessarily extend to their daily life experiences in South Africa, in which they may often be treated as non-citizens or “flawed” citizens. Nevertheless, the project, of course, cannot and never set out to document the *reality* of discrimination, and in itself, it was generally a positive and an affirmative experience for its participants.

The project also succeeded in building a counter-archive of photographic portraits of the everyday life of African migrants living in Johannesburg and, thereby, worked against the assumed invisibility of their lives, producing photographic images that were both meaningful for the participants and to some extent resonated in the public sphere.

(Self-)portraits II: a participatory project with migrant women sex workers


Before looking at my final example of (self-)portraits of migrant women, it is important briefly to locate and contextualise the Market Photo Workshop, which initiated the project, historically in South Africa.¹³ Photographer David Goldblatt founded the Workshop in the late 1980s in order to provide training and education to African photographers, who were excluded from other tertiary institutions by apartheid policies. Therefore, it was never *only* a school of photography but also a space of political protest and defiance, a social, political, as well as educational and aesthetic project. While during apartheid there was a clear mission for the school and clear “enemies,” the post-apartheid situation is complex and confusing – full of hope, but also facing corruption – having to negotiate post-Fordist neoliberal work settings, as well as many other problems (Goldblatt 2007, 14). The Market Photo Workshop educators and students are at the forefront of the discussions on the shortcomings of post-apartheid society, about representing marginalised people, and trying to integrate this critical awareness into their own practice. Among other remarkable projects, the Market Photo Workshop succeeded in doing a collaborative project with migrant women sex workers, a social group that usually either remains invisible or receives negative visibility, framed as victims, as we have seen in some of the previous examples.


Working the City was a collaborative project involving the Market Photo Workshop, the African Centre for Migration and Society (ACMS) at the University of the Witwatersrand, and the Sisonke Sex Worker Movement.¹⁴ “*Working the City* sought to bring to light the experiences of migrant women involved in sex work within inner-city Johannesburg through a visual medium” (Market Photo Workshop 2010). The project brought together students of the Market Photo Workshop and migrant women both from within South Africa as well as from neighbouring African countries. The method of the project was to conduct a part-time workshop, during which the students first recorded the stories of how the 11 participating women had arrived in Johannesburg. For example, a woman named Sbu explains: “I moved from Kabuli Natal to Johannesburg in 1995 to look for a job. I could not get employment, so I started selling fruits and vegetables on the streets” (Market Photo Workshop 2010).

The next step involved the students sharing some rudimentary parts of their photographic knowledge and thereby assisting the women in taking photographs. Then, the women were asked to take images to illustrate their own lives in the inner city of Johannesburg (see Figure 11 as one example). Afterwards, the participants worked with students to edit their images and write captions and texts. The oral account of each woman was set in white letters in the lower middle part of the posters. The photographs were printed in different sizes and arranged in sequences on a black background to produce one poster for every participant.

A portrait photograph of each woman was included – usually in the lower left corner of a poster. These (self-)portraits are highly significant for my specific focus, since, here, again one can see different strategies of becoming visible or staying

IMPRISONMENT





MIMI

My first time in Hillbrow was bad because I was robbed at gunpoint and they took all my belongings. I was having a Blackberry phone, a laptop, my academic and professional certificates, clothes, R500 and my passport. My life was ruined as I was left with no form of identification and as a result could not get a job.

I went to Soweto where I stayed with a friend, whom I had met in Hillbrow. She welcomed me on a temporary basis. I spent almost two weeks indoors as a result of the traumatic experience. It was like imprisonment because I could not move around without my passport until I got my asylum papers.

As for now am working hard so that I get a bursary and further my studies.

Johannesburg is a good place to live but its being ruined by criminal activities especially drug dealings and sex business. There is a high risk to teenagers who may get involved in early sexual activities which could ruin their lives. Basic foodstuffs are affordable, which attracts foreigners because of the country's currency stability compared to others in the Southern Africa region.

My aim is to help young girls from neighboring countries not to fall into the same trap as most of us did. My passion is to get involved in Women Support community based work.

CAPTIONS CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT

- An old lady selling her wares along Bantek street in Hillbrow with stickers on the wall of people searching for accommodation. There is accommodation shortage in the area.
- It is unhealthy to find condoms on the street because kids might pick them up and use them as balloons. However, this also shows that people are using condoms as a way of protection against sexual diseases.
- A young lady enjoys her cigarette in front of her work place. Smoking is hazardous to health, not to her alone but to the customers as well.
- A busy street in Hillbrow; she runs a station and is also a Zimbabwean. I took this picture to show that besides going into sex business as a foreigners you can own something in a foreign land.
- A street vendor chats with friends. There are allegations that some people pose as street vendors whilst selling drugs in Hillbrow.
- A homeless man goes through his goods in a poorly managed and unhealthy space; homeless people in such areas can get sick from waterborne diseases in unhealthy spaces.
- A pool of dirty water in one of the streets of Hillbrow reflects a nice building; the water is a health hazard to residents especially young children.

This poster is a result of a participatory photography project with migrant women involved in sex work in inner-city Johannesburg in August 2010, as part of the health and migration research initiative of the Forced Migration Studies Programme at Wits University in collaboration with the Market Photo Workshop.

Figure 11. *Working the City*, poster presentation of Mimi (detail).

invisible. In the poster (Figure 11), the personal story of Mimi is told, which starts with her being robbed, losing all her belongings, including her passport, on first arriving in Hillbrow. In her words: “My life was ruined as I was left with no form of identification and as a result could not get a job.” Here, the loss of an identity

document is immediately linked with the loss of employment opportunities, forcing this woman, as she tells the story, to take up sex work. While the portraits of friends and acquaintances in the upper right corner of the poster show one woman smiling and another looking serious, as well as some men who work as street vendors, the woman called Mimi herself did not want to show her face and is hiding behind her hair and her hand. This may be because she did not consider her current living situation as “good” and, therefore, presentable, or maybe she was ashamed of being a sex worker or feared retribution, since sex work is still criminalised in South Africa under the Sexual Offences Act 23 of 1957 (Department of Justice & Constitutional Development 2011). Yet her gesture is also one of defiance, refusing to be fully interpellated into the exposure implied by portrait photography.

While handing over the camera can be to a certain extent an empowering – or maybe simply just amusing – experience for the participants, there are obviously still power relations involved and the project supervisor has in fact the final control of the edit of the materials. The project initiator is also usually the person with a higher social status and education, as was also the case with the students and the migrant sex workers. Therefore, it is tremendously insightful to include photographs that show a participant defying the act of being portrayed and thereby adding a meta-reflective layer to the final poster.

The *Working the City* posters were presented as a travelling exhibit and shown in different locations – including art galleries in Johannesburg. The first aim of the exhibition was to raise awareness, since the criminalisation of sex work leads to difficult and often violent and unhealthy working conditions. Secondly, this project attempted to humanise the migrant women involved in sex work, who are often perceived as people involved in “dirty work” by the mainstream media. Instead, it wanted to show who these women are, why they do the work that they do and what their fears, hopes and everyday lives are. Certain other themes, however, also surfaced repeatedly in the personal narratives:

Additionally, tales are told of very difficult lives, and harrowing experiences. It is important to note that a high level of xenophobia is expressed in many of the stories, a fact that reflects some of the difficulties and harsh realities of these women’s lives but also an issue that is extremely problematic particularly in a country of unacceptable levels of xenophobia and tendency toward xenophobic violence. (Market Photo Workshop 2010)

Here, intersections of race, class, immigration status, and occupation all influence individuals’ life situations and may aggravate each other. Moreover, the organisers of the project connected the subjective experiences of these migrant women to the larger picture of South African post-apartheid society and which problems are present here. Participatory projects thus can act as seismographs of societal constellations or as a means of social mapping that can be a starting point for political interventions. As Grant Kester has remarked: “While each practitioner comes to collaborative work with a unique perspective, these individual creative choices, taken in the aggregate, reveal much about both the current political moment and the broader history of modern art” (Kester 2011, 1). Even as it is problematic to assume that the site of political transformation is always in the discriminated other (to refer to Foster’s 1996 critique), nevertheless, non-stereotypical images can render the perception of minority groups in the public sphere more complex and less schematic. Photographic portraits are consequently reconfiguring the sphere of representation and are ways of “world-making.”

In conclusion, while the normative passport photograph only frames the African migrant in an attempt to identify and control him or her, I want to argue for the need to complicate the frames and framings of African migrant subjectivities in photography. The intentional hybridisation of the documentary photographic genre including re-enactments and fictionalisations can accomplish this, and thus give the former “objects” of the camera’s gaze an active part in the photographic image production. There also needs to be the choice, however, to remain “opaque” or imperceptible, since migrant subjects are often already framed by normative discourses of victimhood or deviance that they cannot directly influence. As Judith Butler (1997, 20) states: “Bound to seek recognition of its own existence in categories, terms, and names that are not of its own making, the subject seeks the sign of its own existence outside itself in a discourse that is at once dominant and indifferent.” The act of taking self-portraits can intervene in this outside discourse and may initiate an introspective meta-reflection on one’s own situation, thus the photographic self-portraits of migrants frame subjectivities in different states of becoming and oscillate between self-expression within normative frames or the choice to stay invisible. Photographic interventions of participatory projects are meaningful tools in our current world to complicate and multiply the frames already available, since photographic portraits circulate in private and public arenas. As Cuban–American interdisciplinary artist and theorist Coco Fusco observes: “We grow increasingly reliant on photographs for information about histories and realities that we do not experience directly. But we also create and use photography to see ourselves” (Fusco 2003, 13).

Notes

1. The “xenophobic attacks” took place in the peripheries of almost all urban centres of South Africa in May 2008, when mobs attacked alleged foreigners. Sixty-two people were killed (a third of whom were South Africans), dozens raped, hundreds injured and thousands displaced. Many African migrants returned or were forced to return to their countries of origin after the attacks (see Landau 2011).
2. There is already a distinct genre in literature and photography on the “invisible migrant”; see for a recent example *Writing Invisibility: Conversations on the Hidden City* (The individual writers, Mail & Guardian, and AMCS 2013). However, there are also more publications focusing specifically on “migrants and images” – see, for example, Gutberlet and Snyman (2012).
3. For a different and less “catastrophic” perspective of female migrants’ everyday lives in Johannesburg, where participating migrant women took their own photographs, see Kihato (2013).
4. I will thus use the broad category of “African migrant” throughout this discussion, differentiating only when it is deemed necessary.
5. I took this photograph when I was on a “photo walk” through Hillbrow that was part of the *Wide Angle: Photography as Public Practice* conference that took place on March 23–26, 2011 at Wits University. The photo walks were organised by the Johannesburg-based artist Dorothee Kreutzfeldt.
6. Georges Bataille used this expression originally but Derrida discussed the concept further (Morin 2006).
7. Yet there are many photographers, offering their services in Joubert Park in Johannesburg, some of which also take ID photos. Many of these photographers are African migrants, as Terry Kurgan found in her Joubert Park Photo Project (see Kurgan and Bethlehem 2013).
8. At the same time, it can also be valuable to hide someone’s identity, and there are many different ways to do it while at the same time maintaining that person’s dignity. One

- example would be Tine Leisch's (2008) *Gangster Girls*, where female inmates wear theatrical makeup that obscures their faces, but their eyes are shown.
9. Black South Africans from the metropolitan areas or townships referred to non-South African blacks from other African countries as *Kwerekwere*. Their various languages, which they did not understand, all seemed to sound the same to them, like *kwere-kwere*. White foreigners in South Africa were usually not called *Kwerekwere*.
 10. The other gallery mentioned above, of visitor portraits, was unfortunately not online anymore in 2013. Also, the ACMS distributed the same type of t-shirt in 2013, with its website address printed on the back of the t-shirt: www.migration.org.za.
 11. Terry Kurgan is a Johannesburg-based artist, who has explored the idea of (self-)portraiture widely both in the medium of drawing and photography in several other bodies of her work. This paper cannot address the whole project and only looks at a few paradigmatic self-portraits that were produced there.
 12. South African photographer Zanele Muholi's work is one of the few examples that has started to create a visual counter-archive (Muholi 2006).
 13. Market Photo Workshop is a school of photography, gallery and project space located in Newtown, Johannesburg (<http://www.marketphotoworkshop.co.za>); the other organisations involved were the Sisonke Sex Worker Movement – an organisation in Hillbrow, South Africa which is a sex worker-led movement that was launched in 2003, aiming to unite sex workers, improve living and working conditions, and advocates for equal rights for sex workers, and the African Center for Migration and Society that is based at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, South Africa (www.migration.org.za).
 14. The project *Working the City* was presented at the *Wide Angle: Photography as Public Practice* conference, Wits University, Johannesburg, March 23–26, 2011, and several papers have been published on it (see, for example, Veary et al. 2011). This paper will only look at one specific poster of one participating woman in the context of photographic self-portraiture.

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