

CHAPTER 7

A HAPTIC AND HUMANISING READING OF THE SUBJECTS OF STUDIO PORTRAITS AND ASYLUM PHOTOGRAPHY IN COLONIAL SOUTH AFRICA

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1 Introduction

In this chapter I explore haptic and sensory interpretative strategies to underscore the humanness of black subjects who were photographed during colonialism. The first half of the chapter is dedicated to the photographic studio portraits that form part of Mofokeng's (1997) *The Black Photo Album / Look at Me: 1890-1950*. The photographs were commissioned by black subjects and depict genteel and gracious portraits of the sitters. A prominent feature of the haptic reading is how the embraces enacted by the sitters provide a horizon to interpret their humanness: The sitters are bonded to one another in care, camaraderie and love. The second half of the chapter turns to patient photographs of black subjects at the Orange Free State Asylum, circa 1900s. The asylum's photographs marked the status of each patient as a clinical case to be classified, described, and compared with other cases. As a means to counter the conceptualisation of the photographed subjects as dehumanised clinical cases, I develop an interpretative strategy for the photographs that provides an awareness of the humanity of the sitters, as well as establishes an embodied, empathetic and compassionate relation between the sitters and us.

2 *The Black Photo Album*

In a first-year Visual Culture Studies module at the University of Pretoria, I present a study unit dedicated to the history of photography in South Africa. In the large auditorium assigned to the module, I project a photograph that fills a cinema-sized screen. At first sight of the photograph, the students gasp in awe. They are mesmerised by the dignity of the sitters, they are enraptured by the sartorial splendour on display,

and the poise and posture of the sitters leave the students flabbergasted. The students have encountered one of the photographs that form part of Mofokeng's (1997) *The Black Photo Album / Look at Me: 1890-1950*. For the racially-diverse student body in the module, this encounter is momentous as it broadens their consciousness of art history: Instead of the customary canon of colonial photographs that depict stereotyped and stigmatised 'native tropes', the students have witnessed the existence of honorific citizen portraits of black subjects produced during colonialism.¹

Mofokeng's *The Black Photo Album* presents photographs of black working and middle-class families commissioned from 1890 to 1950. Mofokeng sourced the photographs from families located in the interior provinces of South Africa. In the homes of the families, the photos were displayed in various ways – some were part of a family's treasured photo albums, others were passed down from deceased relatives, and a fair share took centre stage on the walls of the family's homestead. The majority of the photos are characterised by Victorian photographic portrait conventions, evidenced in terms of the dress and posture of the sitters, the composition of the photograph, as well as the use of props and painted backdrops. While such photos are a 'creation of the artist insofar as the setting, the props, the clothing or pose are concerned',² the sitters of the photos are unique individuals, each of them with their own story to tell. The names of the sitters and the stories that their lives witnessed are integral to Mofokeng's work.³

The photos and the accompanying biographical research of the sitters presented in *The Black Photo Album* offers a potent means to redress the visual representation, as well as the history of black subjects during the colonial and apartheid eras.⁴ In terms of visual representation, black subjects have been dehumanised by being framed as exotic ethnographic

1 For further discussion of how tertiary students in South Africa respond to representations of race in photography, see P Hayes 'The uneven citizenry of photography: Reading the "political ontology" of photography from Southern Africa' (2015) 89 *Cultural Critique* 173.

2 S Mofokeng 'The black photo album/look at me: 1890-1900s' (1996) 4 *Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art* 54.

3 Mofokeng (n 2) 56.

4 D Newbury 'Photographic histories and practices in Southern Africa' in G Pasternak (ed) *The handbook of photographic studies* (2020) 412.

curiosities, debased as specimens of natural history, as well as portrayed as automatons for toilsome labour on the mines.⁵ To put it succinctly, black South Africans have had their ‘pasts visually shallowed out’ by the ruling powers that ‘officially pushed’ them into the above representational categories. Underpinning these racialised representational categories is the dissemination of an iniquitous portrait of black subjects to be enslaved and subjugated under imperial and apartheid rule. Mofokeng’s works serve as a ‘counterimage’⁶ to the aforementioned categories by presenting photographs that underscore a sitter’s acts of self-fashioning to be a declaration of their individuality and a poignant petition to claim their rights to full citizenship:

In commissioning portraits, these men and women were not merely creating mementos. They were staking claims to forms of identity and culture, to ways of being in the world, that the keepers of South Africa’s racial order sought to reserve for whites. In donning these clothes and holding these props, they were not only displaying bourgeois respectability, but also asserting urbanity, modernity, pride against a society that sought to consign them to a static past.⁷

In terms of redressing the history of black subjects in South Africa, Mofokeng’s *The Black Photo Album* is praised for offering the viewer a ‘sense of black complexity in racialised discourse’.⁸ Mofokeng’s research into the history of the sitters revealed how individuals and their family units had ‘challenged the hegemony of the government’s racist policies’.⁹ To this end, Mofokeng’s work contributes to commemorating the lives of citizens who engaged in acts of agency to resist racial discrimination. By documenting the sitters’ biographies, by seeing them as people ‘possessing a history, identity and desire’,¹⁰ the photos in Mofokeng’s works are a

5 A Butchart *The anatomy of power: European constructions of the African body* (1998).

6 TM Camp *Image matters: Archive, photography, and the African diaspora in Europe* (2012) 5.

7 S Mofokeng & JT Campbell *The black photo album/look at me: 1890-1950* (2013).

8 O Enwezor ‘Reframing the black subject ideology and fantasy in contemporary South African representation’ (1997) 11 *Third Text* 30.

9 Mofokeng (n 2) 56.

10 Enwezor (n 8) 30.

memorialisation of the black proletariat who sought to reject the world view dictated by colonialism and apartheid and instead carve out a life lived with dignity and pride.

The Black Photo Album has received much scholarly attention, but it is only Camp't's research that has offered an in-depth engagement with the haptic dimensions of this body of work.¹¹ Seeking to build upon Camp't's engagement, and informed by Edwards's scholarship,¹² I offer a haptic and sensory approach to Mofokeng's *The Black Photo Album*. One of the focus areas I explore entails the way in which the family photos 'are tactile objects meant to be grasped, held, displayed, and circulated among loved ones'.¹³ In scouting for the photos of which his work is composed, Mofokeng narrates how some families regarded the photos as 'coveted ... treasures, displacing totems in discursive narratives about identity, lineage and personality'.¹⁴ As a valuable and cherished object of devotion, it is likely that the family members often touched the photos. The tactile encounter with the photo would possibly take place during celebrations, momentous occasions, and solemn times of mourning. The photos would be passed around to be held in the hands of an intimate 'interpreting community'.¹⁵ While interacting with the photo, one hand would be holding the photo; the other could be tracing the outline of the sitter's body and face as a tactile gesture to appreciate the uniqueness of the person.

Thus far, the encounter with the photo has been visual and tactile, but once family members start sharing stories of the sitters, they experience oral and affective registers. The verbalisations inspired by the photo are dynamic and each beholder enunciates shifts in story telling. In this way, the photos allow 'stories to emerge in socially interactive ways that would not have emerged in that particular figuration if the photograph had not existed'.¹⁶ The stories from each beholder bring into being different responses from the audience: The stories can be a

11 TM Camp't *Listening to images* (2017).

12 E Edwards 'Thinking photography beyond the visual?' in JJ Long, A Noble & E Welch (eds) *Photography: Theoretical snapshots* (2009) 31.

13 Camp't (n 6) 18.

14 Mofokeng (n 2) 54.

15 Edwards (n 12) 44.

16 Edwards (n 12) 42.

lament or a lullaby, a serenade or a sensational scandal, an ode or an odyssey, with each one rousing the listener to respond in a corresponding feeling, emotion and action.¹⁷ Therefore, in the intimate viewing circle of the photos, by listening to the ‘polyphonic’ stories tendered by loved ones,¹⁸ in caressing their countenance on the photo, the beholders become open to a wellspring of ‘sensate, embodied, and affective engagements’.¹⁹

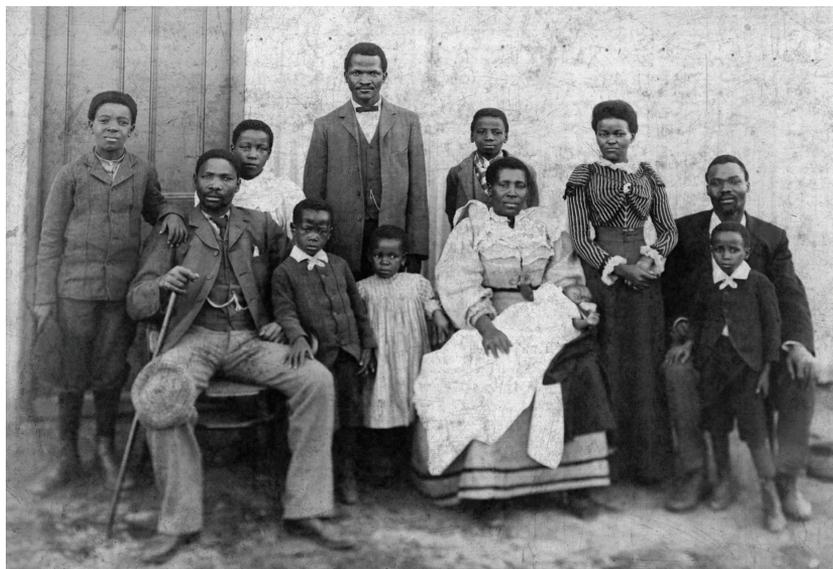


Figure 7.1: Santu Mofokeng’s (1997) *The Black Photo Album / Look at Me: 1890-1950*. © Santu Mofokeng Foundation. Courtesy of Lunetta Bartz, MAKER, Johannesburg

A second focus area I explore is the predominance of touch that features in the photos. In one of the photographs, I am enthralled by the encompassment of embraces (Figure 7.1). A father is seated, with his son standing nestled between his legs; the son returns the touch by placing his hand on his father’s knee. In the centre of the image is a mother seated with a baby on her lap. The mother’s pose and her solicitously soft touch

17 As above.

18 As above.

19 Campt (n 6) 44.

is reminiscent of the Renaissance genre of Madonna and child paintings. In this view, the mother's touch is venerated as altruistic and enshrines the life of the new-born child to be swaddled in sanctity. On the left, what appears to be three siblings and their father are united by a gentle and gracious touch. Thus, it is through the 'tactility of corporeal contact'²⁰ that the sitters in the photo are able to assert and revere their bonds of kinship.

In the 'touches of demonstrative affection'²¹ we are provided with a horizon to interpret the humanness of the sitters: Outside of the photo frame, the touch of the sitters may have entailed dimensions of care for one another, support for one another, as well as a commitment to one another's personal growth and well-being. In this perspective, the touch of each sitter is a testimony of their humanness, as well as an expression of love.²² It is paramount to acknowledge that the sitters' expressions of love occurred during a heinously inhumane time in which their very humanity was denounced by the ruling colonial and apartheid powers. For Oliver, love entails ethical and political dimensions: 'ethical in the sense of engendering obligations to each other, and political in the sense of engendering the possibility of working-through our histories of discrimination and oppression'.²³ In this formation, the love expressed by the sitters can be regarded as an act of agency. They chose to love in order to extend communion and caring to each other, as well as to cultivate camaraderie that is invested in their collective freedom from domination. By following this line of reasoning, I become engulfed with an acuity for the sitters as sensitive souls, sacred selves and appreciate that their lives were resolutely meaningful as they chose to love: 'The living body is a loving body, and the loving body is a speaking body. Without love we are nothing but walking corpses. Love is essential to the living body and it is essential in bringing the living body to life in language through the testimony of love.'²⁴

20 Campt (n 6) 40.

21 Campt (n 6) 100.

22 Instead of considering the depicted touches as simply indicative of Victorian posing conventions, I follow Margaret Olin's theorisation that photography entails adopting socio-cultural conventions and genres to perform or enact a relationship with others. M Olin *Touching photographs* (2012).

23 K Oliver 'The look of love' (2001) 16 *Hypatia* 75.

24 Oliver (n 23) 74.

In evoking and expressing love, the photographs are set apart from the photographic archive of South Africa where the focus, according to Jamal, has been on a 'perversely mutinous denial of love – a fascination with lovelessness ... Therefore, to state that South African photography remains overdetermined by the legacies of colonialism and apartheid is, frankly, an understatement.'²⁵ Echoing Jamal's conclusions is Newbury who pronounces that owing to colonialism and apartheid being the 'dominant framing narrative' in discourses of South African photography, the photographic archive of the country is assumed to be 'simply a repository of conflict and trauma'.²⁶ In this way, Mofokeng's work calls attention to the features in the photographic archive that are overlooked, namely, 'human identity, spirituality and responsibility'.²⁷ *The Black Photo Album* thus can be regarded as an invitation for us to explore the photographic archive of South Africa as a 'space of imaginative world making and creative renewal'.²⁸ I take up this invitation by investigating the photographs of the Orange Free State Asylum with the aim to engender an awareness of the humanity of the pictured subjects.

3 Interpreting photographs from the Orange Free State Asylum, c 1900

If the haptic analysis of the studio portraits of *The Black Photo Album* has underscored the humanness of the sitters, can a haptic and humanising interpretative strategy be developed to similarly interpret colonial photographs produced for the purpose of cataloguing and objectifying black subjects? For Camp, it is precisely such visual material that 'grapples with the recalcitrant and the disaffected, the unruly and the dispossessed'²⁹ to which we should turn our analytical attention. While photographs of black prisoners and mineworkers have received a substantial degree of academic attention,³⁰ there are a plethora of photographs from colonial

25 A Jamal 'Billy Monk: Love in a loveless time' (2013) 21 *Image & Text* 68.

26 Newbury (n 4).

27 Mofokeng & Campbell (n 7).

28 Newbury (n 4).

29 Camp (n 11) 3.

30 For example, see L Rizzo *Photography and history in colonial Southern Africa: Shades of empire* (2019).

institutions that depict objectified and dehumanised black subjects that have only recently received academic attention.³¹ One example is the network of lunatic asylums that operated in the country during the late nineteenth century. The photographic records of this asylum network presents an opportunity for scholars to offer a critical and creative approach to developing ‘an awareness of and appreciation for patients as individual subjects’.³²

The photographic records of the country’s asylum network were largely accepted to consist only of archived casebook photographs and photographs submitted to the colonial office. Thus, it is of immense interest that a collection of approximately 120 glass plate negatives of an asylum’s patients were donated to a private collector, Carol Hardijzer.³³ The name and location of the asylum remained a mystery, but after Hardijzer granted me access to the collection, I was able to establish that the photographs were taken at the Orange Free State Asylum (OFS Asylum) *circa* 1900s.³⁴ This finding is ground-breaking, as the collection constitutes the only visual record of the asylum’s patients.

Contextualising the photos and providing a detailed history of the OFS Asylum is riddled with pitfalls, as the country’s archives contain a meagre collection of documents that pertain primarily to its administration (the

31 For example, Michaela Clark has pioneered the analysis of clinical photography. M Clark ‘Patients, power and representation: Clinical photographs in focus’ (2019) 54 *de arte* 59.

32 R du Plessis ‘Beyond a clinical narrative: Casebook photographs from the Grahamstown Lunatic Asylum, c 1890s’ (2015) 29 *Critical Arts* 89.

33 C Hardijzer ‘Early 20th century asylum photography in South Africa’ 2017, <http://www.theheritageportal.co.za/article/early-20th-century-asylum-photography-south-africa> (accessed 20 February 2021).

34 The Orange Free State Asylum opened in Bloemfontein in 1884. It was later renamed the Bloemfontein Mental Hospital and thereafter the Oranje Hospital. It is still operational today and is now known as the Free State Psychiatric Complex. Two pieces of evidence provided a means to identify the asylum as well as establish the approximate time period that the photographs were taken. First, one of the photos bears the stamp of the ‘OFS ASYLUM’ thereby identifying the institution as the Orange Free State Asylum. Second, when text is depicted in the photographs it is in English rather than in Dutch – the official language of the former Boer Republic of the Orange Free State. This means that the photographs can be dated from 1900 when the British authorities took over control of the asylum during the Anglo-Boer War.

appointment and resignations of attendants, stock tacking, staff payments and repairs to buildings). Even more disconcerting, we are unable to provide biographical details of the photographed subjects – their age, occupation, marital status, next of kin – as the casebooks of the asylum are not archived. The absence of the asylum’s casebooks also means that we do not have access to additional information that was captured therein, namely, a basic outline of a patient’s life history, as well as a second-hand account of their experiences at the asylum. Although we have lost access to the biographical details and life stories of the subjects, we can explore the photographs to gain an awareness of the humanness of the sitters. To do so, I offer an interpretative strategy for the photos of black subjects that is primarily informed by Camp’s haptic reading of photography.³⁵ Camp calls for us to understand photographs by adopting a practice of listening to them. This entails ‘looking beyond what we see and attuning our senses to the other affective frequencies through which photographs register. It is a haptic encounter that foregrounds the frequencies of images and how they move, touch, and connect us to the *event* of the photo.’³⁶

The practice of listening to images thus invites us to dialogue with the photographs, to be open to the feelings produced by the photos, as well as to develop an embodied and empathetic connection between the sitter and us. It is imperative to highlight that the discussion of my affective attachment to the photographs necessitates ‘putting oneself in the narrative’.³⁷ I therefore detail the personal stories of how and why the photographs affected me,³⁸ as well as narrate how each interaction and encounter with the photos ‘produced points of critical reflection, insight, and interrogation’.³⁹

The adoption of Camp’s practice of listening to images also offers a novel approach to interpreting images that lack supporting documents

35 The asylum’s patient population consisted of a heterogeneous mix of individuals in terms of race, sex and class. The photographic collection reflects the diversity of the asylum’s patient body. For the purposes of this study, I have delimited the investigation to three photographs of black male subjects.

36 Camp (n 11) 9 (emphasis in original).

37 E Stańczyk ‘The rebelling orphan: Adopting the found photograph’ (2018) 18 *Feminist Media Studies* 1041.

38 Camp (n 11) 72.

39 Camp (n 6) 20.

and for which the biographical details of the sitters are missing. For these images, Campt calls for us to be open to how they reverberate in a ‘polyphony of quietly audible questions’ that resonate with other related bodies of photography.⁴⁰ In this way, the interpretation of a set of photos that lacks textual contextualisation can be aided by tracing the echoes that reverberate in other sets of photographs that are anchored by bodies of text. In pursuing Campt’s approach, my thoughts and contemplations of the OFS Asylum’s photographs are informed by my work on the country’s asylums – in particular, the Grahamstown Lunatic Asylum.⁴¹ Thus, while the negligible archived records of the asylum and the scarce scholarship of the asylum’s history offer only a basic contextualisation of the images,⁴² the photos of the OFS Asylum became readable and understandable to me by reflecting on the visual and textual discourses of the country’s asylums. To substantiate how the material from different asylums can be used to ‘probe a related set of queries’,⁴³ I provide a basic sketch on the connections shared between the OFS Asylum and the country’s asylums.

In the scant sources pertaining to the history of the OFS Asylum, it is glaringly apparent that the asylum segregated black patients from whites and offered black subjects inferior facilities and lower standards of care. For example, male black patients were issued with clothing that was found to be unsuitable and inadequate⁴⁴ and they were accommodated in wards that were built and fitted at a lower cost than the wards reserved for white patients.⁴⁵ Moreover, several reports indicate that the negligence and inattentiveness of the staff resulted in the accidental deaths of black patients.⁴⁶ Racial discrimination and segregation was not unique to the

40 Campt (n 11) 33.

41 R du Plessis *Pathways of patients at the Grahamstown Lunatic Asylum, 1890 to 1907* (2020). For a comprehensive overview of the country’s asylum network, as well as detailed case studies of specific institutions, see J Parle *States of mind: Searching for mental health in Natal and Zululand, 1868–1918* (2007); S Swartz *Homeless wanderers: Movement and mental illness in the Cape Colony in the nineteenth century* (2015).

42 As far as I could ascertain, the history of the asylum has only been investigated by M Minde ‘History of mental health services in South Africa. Part IV. The Orange Free State’ (1974) 48 *South African Medical Journal* 2327.

43 Campt (n 11) 33.

44 Free State Archives Repository (Bloemfontein), file CO 616_2235_1.

45 Minde (n 42).

46 National Archives Repository (Pretoria), file CS 996_20981_1.

OFS Asylum, but was a key feature of the country's asylum network. This feature was a product of the 'emergence of a racist colonial psychiatry, which characterised the black insane as more primitive, childish, and inaccessible to care than their white counterparts'.⁴⁷ To this end, the highest level of care, treatment and resources were earmarked for white patients. Black subjects were housed in under-resourced wards that operated like a workhouse in which the central thrust was daily drudgery with a reduced diet scale. The dispensation of minimal standards of care to black subjects resulted in a high number of injuries, accidents, deaths and infections. For example, at the Fort Beaufort Asylum - a facility reserved for black patients - the staff battled to keep the patients and the asylum clean and sanitary, leading to recurrent outbreaks of infectious diseases, as well as enteric fever, typhoid, and tuberculosis becoming endemic threats in the wards of the asylum. Moreover, the asylum's reduced diet scale resulted in scurvy being a disease that was common among the patients.⁴⁸

3.1 First encounter

My first encounter with the collection was in March 2021 when I visited Hardijzer at his home in Johannesburg that holds his vast archive of South African photographs.⁴⁹ While seated at a table, Hardijzer carefully places the boxes of the glass plate negatives before me. He asks if I have handled glass plates before. I answer nervously, 'no'. He responds by instructing me on the proper handling of the plates and advises extreme care as they are very fragile and are at risk of cracking and breaking. I tremble in trepidation. The prospect of breaking one of the plates makes my heart palpitate, sending waves of molten lava dashing through my arteries. Hardijzer offers me a coffee and leaves me alone to view the delicate and infinitely precious objects. My gut instinct is to wait for him to return and ask him to handle the plates for me. Nevertheless, my curiosity gets the better of me and I lean forward to pick up the first plate.

47 S Swartz 'The black insane in the Cape, 1891-1920' (1995) 21 *Journal of Southern African Studies* 403.

48 Du Plessis (n 41).

49 Hardijzer holds one of the largest private photographic collections in South Africa. He has extensively investigated the photographs in his collection and the results thereof appear in over 60 articles he has authored for the Heritage Portal website.

Along the edges of the plate, I place my fingers to gently hold it to the light in order to see the figures depicted therein. Hence, before I can experience the image component of the plates, I experience the plates as ‘real physical objects’ that can be apprehended through sight as well as ‘through embodied relations of smell, taste, touch and hearing’.⁵⁰ The glass is cold to the touch and if I exert too much force, the plate will crack. From the stack of plates that are boxed before me, every time I pick one of them up, my ears are pierced by the sound of scratching glass. This is profoundly different from the sounds that usually accompany the viewing of images: Instead of the velcro-like sounds that emanate from turning the pages of a photo-album, the sound of the plates is filled with suspense that I may shatter it or unwittingly scratch away at the image. Thus, generated by the senses of touching and hearing, the experience of interacting with the plates is enmeshed with the frailty of the medium, fears of breaking the plates, as well as the embrace of handling practices that underscore treating each plate with care and respect.



Figure 7.2: Glass plate negative of patients at the OFS Asylum. Courtesy of Carol Hardijzer

50 E Edwards & J Hart ‘Introduction: Photographs as objects’ in E Edwards & J Hart (eds) *Photographs objects histories: On the materiality of images* (2004) 1.

To see the images contained on the plates requires finding the correct type of light. Some plates demand a bright light source and thus I hold them up to a window that is bathed in bright sunlight. A fair share of plates seek a softer light and necessitate that I move around the room until the images become perceptible. Like a divining rod, these plates guide me through the room to reveal the light source that makes seeing the image possible. One of the first plates I view has a crack that runs horizontally across the surface (Figure 7.2). I pause over the plate and begin ruminating if my touch will be the final one that results in the shattering of the plate and the eventual loss of the image. Cradling the plate between my two fingers, I hold it to the light. The image that comes into view depicts two subjects standing in front of a stark background. Both are shirtless but one does have a jacket on. Their names are etched into the surface of the plate. The etching of the subjects' names at the bottom of the plate pinpoints that the developed photos were used in the asylum's casebooks to identify the patients.

On the glass plate negatives, the faces of the subjects remain indecipherable. No matter how much I manipulate the plate, the faces remain elusive and enigmatic. Although I battle to clearly see the faces of the subjects, my fingers and hand are clearly visible behind the glass plate and my gaze is conspicuously reflected on the front side of the plate. Thus, in the process of viewing the plate, I become self-aware of my corporeality and gaze. In being confronted by my corporeal presence and gaze, I meditate on how the viewing of the plate positions me as a curator, in the sense of 'one who cares for'⁵¹ the plate as a physical object, as well as for the subjects imaged on the plate. The frailty of the plates requires me to adopt a gentle touch with fingers spanned as a safety net over the corners of the object. But, what about my gaze? What type of look can I adopt as a 'gesture of care'⁵² for the pictured subjects? At the very least, I can begin by recanting a clinical conception of the subjects as 'scientific and dehumanized specimens of the pathologizing gaze',⁵³ and turn instead to

51 D Newbury 'Going and coming back: Curating the post-apartheid archive' in C Morton & D Newbury (eds) *The African photographic archive: Research and curatorial strategies* (2015) 160.

52 L Stevenson 'Looking away' (2020) 35 *Cultural Anthropology* 8.

53 K Watson 'Precarious memory: Eudora Welty and the Mississippi State Lunatic Asylum (2020) 12 *Eudora Welty Review* 70.

a form of looking that seeks to witness the 'singularity of another being'.⁵⁴

3.2 Second encounter

On my second visit to Hardijzer we photographed the negatives and with the use of photo-editing software, we were able to convert the negatives into digital positives. Consequently, for the first time in many decades, the image component of the plates became visible. I became transfixed with the images and began documenting recurrent tropes. Throughout the collection, the subjects are arranged to face the camera and set against a plain background. These tropes are part of the mug shot genre of photography that was the genre of choice for the asylum's casebooks.⁵⁵ Nevertheless, there are many tropes in the photographs that do not conform to the mug shot genre. Unlike mug shots, which concentrate solely on the face of the subject, the photographs extend to the torso of the subjects and sometimes even the whole body. Additionally, the subjects were photographed in groups rather than each subject undergoing a solitary confrontation with the camera.

The identification of the tropes that stray from the mug shot genre allow us to comprehend that the photograph printed from the glass plate negative was extensively modified before it was pasted in the casebooks. To reduce expenditure on photography, a common practice in the country's asylums was to take a photograph of a group of patients.⁵⁶ Consequently, to photograph a group of patients within the dimensions of the plate necessitated the inclusion of their bodies. Once the photographs were developed, it is likely that a staff member was tasked to create mug shots for each patient by cutting the photograph to amputate the subject's head from their body. In sum, the image depicted on the plates offers an expansive view that is not visible in the casebooks: While the casebook mug shots are tightly concentrated on isolated profiles of the patients, the plates represent the subject to have a body.

In the discussion that follows I offer a twofold investigation of the depiction of the subject's body on the plates. First, we have the means

54 Stevenson (n 52) 8.

55 Du Plessis (n 32).

56 See also KDB Rawling 'Visualising mental illness: Gender, medicine and visual media, c 1850-1910' PhD thesis, Royal Holloway, University of London, 2011.

to examine and interpret the ‘embodied experiences of being a patient’ at the asylum.⁵⁷ Second, the inclusion of a subject’s body allows us to explore whether the subject engaged in body language and self-fashioning as a means to refuse being framed as clinical objects for identification, inspection and categorisation. This interest draws upon Camp’s call for us to engage in the ‘paradoxical capacity of identity photos to rupture the sovereign gaze of the regimes that created them by refusing the very terms of photographic subjection they were engineered to produce’.⁵⁸ Along these lines, while it is evident that a photographer captured the patients before a plain background, insisted on a frontal positioning, and likely instructed them to look into the camera, we must also consider how the patients may have attempted to ‘exploit extremely limited possibilities for self-expression’⁵⁹ – for example, their dress, posture, pose and facial expressions – in an effort to ‘enunciate quiet but resonant claims to personhood’.⁶⁰ Thus, in engaging with images, we are implored to interpret how the subjects may have refused their status as clinical objects and instead attempted to ‘reconfigure their status as subjects’.⁶¹



Figure 7.3: Patients of the OFS Asylum. Courtesy of Carol Hardijzer

57 KDB Rawling “‘The annexed photos were taken today’: Photographing patients in the late-nineteenth-century asylum’ (2021) 34 *Social History of Medicine* 261.

58 Camp (n 11) 5.

59 Camp (n 11) 59.

60 Camp (n 11) 65.

61 Camp (n 11) 60.

A common feature in the photos of black subjects is that they wear clothes that are oversized, that are shabby, tattered and torn, and that are soiled, filthy and grubby. Even more alarming is the fact that some patients are photographed naked while others are only partly clothed: bare-chested or draped in a blanket that covers their bodies. This alarming fact is restricted to photographs of black men. Stated differently, across the race and gender spectrum of the photographed patients of the OFS Asylum, it is only black men that are captured naked or in various states of undress. In Figure 7.3 (the digital positive of Figure 7.2) both men are shirtless. The subject on the left wears a jacket that is dreadfully defiled and darkened in dirt and appallingly grungy with missing buttons. The subject on the right wears a frayed pair of pants that do not fit him. Eastoe proposes that photographs can provide a glimpse of the 'care practices'⁶² offered by an asylum to its patient body. Following this line of argument, the rotten and rancid dress worn by the black subjects, as well as the instances of undress, can be seen as a product of the asylum's limited interest in their care and attention. The dress worn by the black subjects activates an affective response in me. I consider how the patients must have felt wearing dirty clothing. I ponder how their skin may have recoiled in abjection by dressing in clothes that were soiled in stains and reeking in odours. To feel the gelatinous grime of a dress rubbing off onto one's skin, to feel one's skin chafe on the parts of fabric that are congealed with dirt, transforms the daily ritual of dressing to be an encounter that exposes the subjects to mortifications of their self-image and was marred in tactile feelings of revulsion and repugnance.

In Figure 7.3 the subject on the right captivates me. The subject is posed with his hands behind his back while gazing directly at the camera. Although this pose and gaze could denote an act of submission to the photographic encounter, I regard it to constitute an act of refusal. Standing bare chested before the camera, the subject is not able to assert his character via dress but rather by pose. The subject asserts a dignified character by folding his arms behind his body. In this pose, the subject is set apart from stereotypes of insanity that depict sufferers to be animalistic, violent and engaged in depravities.⁶³ In this reading, the subject refuses to be captured

62 S Eastoe *Idiocy, imbecility and insanity in Victorian society: Caterham Asylum, 1867–1911* (2020).

63 R du Plessis 'Photographs from the Grahamstown Lunatic Asylum, South Africa, 1890-1907' (2014) 40 *Social Dynamics* 12.

by the photographer as an unclothed and ignominious individual. Through the act of refusal, an alternative account of the subject becomes visible,⁶⁴ an account that focuses our attention on the subject declaring a dignified self-image.

While writing this chapter, I have been in the Free State during one of its arctic-like winters. I experience gale force winds that pound my body and frosty nights that make my flesh shiver. On most evenings I am awoken by the cold and seek to cocoon myself in ever more blankets to keep the painful polar chills at bay. When I experience the harsh sting of the cold, I wonder about the black subjects depicted in the photos. With limited articles of clothing and items of dress that are unravelling and falling apart, how did they withstand the hardships of winter nights that make the body ache in pain and coil up like a contortionist? These questions haunt me and have a bearing on my thought pattern: When I encounter the tortures of sub-zero temperatures that seize the nights like a plague, I express empathy and compassion for the photographed subjects, who endured the cold in an institution that did not prioritise their care and comfort.

To be mindful of the embodied experiences of the patients, I consider the sounds that bodies make. How did their breathing sound during the cold nights they endured? Did glacial gusts of wind contribute to breathing that was shallow and laboured, to exhales that were a caterwauling hissing accompanied by turbulent shivers? Initially, at the beginning of 2021, I did not consider the sound of an ill body when I pondered this image. By mid-2021 a change in my temporality influenced my engagement with the image.⁶⁵ My partner and I tested positive for COVID-19 on 11 June 2021. A few days later my partner was rushed to the hospital as he was battling to breathe. The days preceding my partner's hospitalisation entailed witnessing the fast pace at which his body was seized by the virus and how his breathing had become distressingly shallow – it was as if he was slowly being asphyxiated. Sitting at the bedside, I monitored his health by listening to his breathing. Every inhale and exhale was taxing on his body and produced a corporeal lament in the lungs: Muffled and shallow inhales were met by exhales that sounded like tumultuous choking. Once we

64 Campt (n 11) 5.

65 Campt (n 6) 34.

recovered, I returned to this study by viewing Figure 7.3. On this occasion I was confronted by thoughts about ill bodies and their care at the OFS Asylum. The casebooks of the Grahamstown Lunatic Asylum guided these thoughts where we observe that the doctors focused their attention on the sound of the patient's body: The beat of the heart was examined at regular intervals; breathing sounds indexed the health of the lungs; and the pulse was monitored for thuds that were neither elevated nor excessive. To return to the image under investigation, I am conscious of the bodies of the subjects. I now recognise that the health of a subject's body matters just as much as the health of the subject's mind. I now comprehend and appreciate the subjects to have bodies that 'sound the alarm' when they are ill, suffering, or at the crossroads of demise. Moreover, I contemplate how patients may have complained to the staff about their somatic stories of suffering, as well as communicated corporeal stories of restored health. My ponderings thus provide me with a richer appreciation for how a 'patient's personal experience of their body – its illnesses, its accidents, its unexpected and often distressing defects'⁶⁶ is an essential aspect in considering their lives at the asylum.

In Figure 7.4 the subject is dressed in civilian clothing rather than wearing the standard clothing issued by the asylum to the patients. The subject may have elected to wear a shirt and waistcoat as an act of refusing to present his self-image as that of a patient. Instead of wearing a uniform that brands him as an inmate of the asylum, the subject wears clothing that brings into view a self-identity that is civil and genteel. Thus, despite his clothing being tattered and torn, it still serves as an example of the 'limited and often compromised resources' by which the 'dispossessed reconfigure their status as subjects'.⁶⁷ Stated differently, he may have had a limited wardrobe of civilian clothing that bore the scars of frequent use, but this did not deter him from devoutly committing to attempts to secure a status of a subject who is worthy of reverence.

66 J Wallis *Investigating the body in the Victorian Asylum: Doctors, patients, and practices* (2017) 14.

67 Campt (n 11) 60.



Figure 7.4: Patient of the OFS Asylum. Courtesy of Carol Hardijzer

The subject's raised hand could be a gesture to the people behind the camera to cease their operations, to wait, or to signal his refusal of the photographic encounter. Viewing this gesture presents an opportunity to explore how it may have been accompanied by the subject's voice.

In the moment before or after the photo was captured, the subject may have voiced his refusal, pleaded with the photographer, or attempted to negotiate the terms of the photographic encounter. Once we concede that this photograph exists 'within sound', we must take into account 'the sound of voices, spoken or sung, in rising and falling rhythms, tones and volumes'.⁶⁸ I wonder if the subject turned to his native tongue – maybe Sotho – to articulate his discontent with the photographic encounter. Did he stand up to the photographer by voicing himself in a stern yet respectable manner? The sound embedded in this image affects me. In voicing his objection to the photographer, I am struck by the subject's steadfast strength of character. The courage it took him to look into the lens of the camera and, with conviction, to raise his voice and hand to convey his discontent, is an act that fills me with feelings of admiration. However, concurrent to these feelings, I am also gripped in fear. I realise that the subject's act of resistance posed several risks to him. In particular, the asylum staff would perceive his act of resistance to constitute misconduct and improper behaviour. To correct his behaviour, the asylum staff would submit him to a regime of discipline and punishment. In attuning myself to the possible utterances voiced by the subject, I am thus filled with tears of tribute and fears of penance.

In Figure 7.5, owing to an error in the development of the glass plate negative, two images are visible on the plate: first, a relatively clear image of black subjects; second, a blurry negative of white subjects. The superimposed images are a product of a technical fault, but this accident proves to be immensely valuable to a researcher, as it visualises the overwhelming juxtaposition between the black and white subjects of the asylum. While the white subjects are neatly dressed in fine clothing and handsomely groomed, the black subjects are dressed in clothing issued by the asylum. Unlike the distinguished dress and gentlemanly appearance of the white subjects, three of the black subjects are demeaned and debased by being issued with clothing that are in varying degrees of ruin and shamble.



Figure 7.5: Patients of the OFS Asylum. Courtesy of Carol Hardijzer

The differences in dress was only one part of the story of racial discrimination at the asylum. As already indicated, in the racially-segregated OFS Asylum, black patients received a regimen that was marked by inequity and prejudice: Less food, care and attention was provided to them. Owing to the racial segregation implemented at the asylum, it is likely that there was very little contact between black and white patients, as well as almost no access for the black subjects to experience the spaces and regimen of the asylum that were reserved for white patients. While Figure 7.5 visualises the contrasts between the black and white subjects, by adopting a haptic reading it is also possible to argue that the image brings into view a conception that the figures touch one another. Although the black subjects of the asylum were barred from contact with white subjects, as well as excluded from the regimen and resources allocated to whites, the image allows us to conjure a different world: a world in which both race groups received equitable care, as well as bonded with one another. The image thus makes it possible to consider what it would have been like if black subjects received ‘care of the highest quality’ in order to

‘live a joyful and dignified life’.⁶⁹ This envisaged world is a catalyst for levelling an acerbic critique against the actual world that the black patients encountered, where they received an inferior standard of care compared to white subjects. In doing so, the asylum denigrated the humanity of the black subjects: Their lives and well-being were of less value than those of their white counterparts.

For Kittay, it is through acknowledging and bestowing care that ‘we respond to the intrinsic value of each individual’.⁷⁰ In bestowing care, Kittay encourages us to understand that care is a

multifaceted term. It is a labor, an attitude, and a virtue. As labor, it is the work of maintaining ourselves and others when we are in a condition of need. It is most noticed in its absence, most needed when it can be least reciprocated. As an attitude, caring denotes a positive, affective bond and investment in another’s well-being. The labor can be done without the appropriate attitude. Yet without the attitude of care, the open responsiveness to another that is so essential to understanding what another requires is not possible. That is, the labor unaccompanied by the attitude of care cannot be good care.⁷¹

I reflect on Kittay’s thoughts and comprehend that my criticism no longer is based solely on the fact that black subjects received a substandard ‘labour of care’⁷² that disrespected their right to equitable healthcare provision. Added to this, we must also consider that this diminished labour was likely undertaken without an apt ‘attitude of care’.⁷³ The black subjects must have palpably felt the absence of this attitude. They likely observed the staff’s disinterest in their hostile body language, castigatory tone of voice, and in their unkind touch. Some black subjects may have responded by flinching at the tone of the staff’s commands and winced at the staff’s

69 EF Kittay ‘The ethics of care, dependence, and disability’ (2011) 24 *Ratio Juris* 52.

70 EF Kittay ‘Equality, dignity and disability’ in MA Lyons & F Waldron (eds) *Perspectives on equality: The second Seamus Heaney lectures* (2005) 113.

71 EF Kittay ‘When caring is just and justice is caring: Justice and mental retardation’ (2001) 13 *Public Culture* 560.

72 As above.

73 As above.

unsympathetic touch. This is palpably visible in one of the photographs where a staff member's hand is placed on the back of a black male subject to keep him standing motionless before the camera's shutter. The black subject responds to the hand of the staff by retracting his head into his shoulders and neck, as well as wrapping his body in a blanket so that it is only his one arm and face that is seized before the camera. Thus, the photograph allows us to witness some of the ways in which black subjects responded in a corporeal manner to the staff's touch and commands. Although the content matter of this photograph is 'painful' to witness, we are called to recognise that 'painfulness' marked the reality that many black subjects endured during their institutionalisation.⁷⁴ While no written record offers a first-hand account of the abuses suffered by black subjects, the photographs are a 'truth-telling'⁷⁵ of the anguish expressed by the subjects.

4 Conclusion

This chapter sought to affirm the humanity of the OFS Asylum's patients by developing an interpretative strategy for the photographs. One of the key characteristics of the interpretative strategy was the adoption of a haptic reading of the photos that brought to the fore an exploration of the embodied experiences encountered by the subjects. This exploration entailed drawing upon my own personal history and affective responses to the images as a way to establish an empathetic and compassionate relation to the subjects. Thus, in spite of the lack of direct testimony authored by the black subjects of the asylum, the chapter's adoption of the haptic reading offered a means by which we can attain a form or degree of 'recognition, understanding, and even empathy between historical patients and contemporary readers'.⁷⁶ Although the deep historical injustices suffered by the asylum's black subjects cannot be undone, the chapter's interpretative strategy does offer a means for us to recognise that

74 E Edwards *Raw histories: Photographs, anthropology and museums* (2001) 6.

75 As above.

76 K Rawling 'Patient photographs, patient voices: Recovering patient experience in the nineteenth-century asylum' in R Ellis, S Kendal & SJ Taylor (eds) *Voices in the history of madness: Personal and professional perspectives on mental health and illness* (2021) 238.

the ‘sufferer exists’ not as a ‘specimen from the social category labelled “unfortunate”, but as a [hu]man, exactly like we are, who was one day stamped with a special mark of affliction’.⁷⁷ To this end, the interpretative strategy can be framed as a ‘gesture of care’⁷⁸ to the black subjects as it aids in appreciating them as sacrosanct human subjects, as well as restores the sanctity of their lives and avows that they are deserving of dignity and respect.

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77 S Weil, cited in J Berger ‘Jean-Louis-André-Théodore Géricault (1791-1824)’ in T Overton (ed) *Portraits: John Berger on artists* (2015) 212.

78 Stevenson (n 52) 11.

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