SANTU MOFOKENG, PHOTOGRAPHS.
‘THE VIOLENCE IS IN THE KNOWING’

Patricia Hayes

DRAFT. NOT FOR CIRCULATION

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

FIG 1. Concert, Sewefontein

Virilio raises an important issue when he speaks of the philosophical problem of the “splitting of viewpoint, the sharing of perception of the environment between the animate (the living subject) and the inanimate (the object, the seeing machine)”. Animate and inanimate are both the products of intense mediations; nor is this a simple question of a subjective-objective divide. But the hybrid, retentive and experimental effects of a fractured viewpoint, arising specifically in Africa, might offer some possibilities for thinking about photography. It is along such a nerve that I wish to wish travel, through the work and statements of South African photographer Santu Mofokeng. For the ghostliness of Mofokeng’s work, his pursuit of the spirit - of what people believe in - is like an ethereal after-image. For a variety of reasons, some socio-economic, he has sometimes used exhausted chemicals to achieve certain effects. The closer we get to the routines of a Mofokeng, the more the darkroom appears to be outside the abstract problematic of Debord, Virilio, Foucault and Baudrillard concerning the literalness of the lens and its pervasive reach. Their denigration of spectacle, of the gaze, and the critique of surveillance, seem to stem from the discipline of physics, not the transformatory effects of chemistry, though in analogue photography they come together in the chamber of the camera. The lens seems to be foregrounded in much visual theory, not the creative processes following its mapping on to the surfaces of retention, the ‘result of a delay, a detour into the chemical process of development and printing’.

We talk about the stuck temporalities induced by photographic images in history. What is also present is the extension and spinning out of temporality in the dark room, and its effect on the image and in history. The extemporizations of taking a photograph change into the temporizations of the dark room, that are not necessarily faithful to the ephemera of the atmosphere, but evocative beyond it. ‘If I bring in light I create, it’s not documentary’, says Mofokeng. ‘You can try your luck in the darkroom’.

The darkroom also influences how he takes further pictures. This creates an even bigger

---

temporal space, replete with many further mediations and ‘shared perceptions’, both freezing
time and expanding it.

When I talk about Mofokeng’s statements here, I am drawing on a variety of sources. There are
numerous exhibitions and photo-essays dating back to the 1980s, mediated in particular ways
at the time, and which are being repositioned in very deliberate ways in postapartheid time.
This short essay is based mainly on the recent 2007 exhibition, Invoice. Mofokeng is a highly
exhibited, published, and increasingly cosmopolitan photographer. The big shift in South
African photography has been the movement from the politicized spaces of the 1980s anti-
apartheid struggle, into the more abstracted space of the gallery in the 2000s. An oral history
research project with photographers that negotiates this divide, with Mofokeng among them,
lays much of the groundwork for this essay.  

Verbally, Mofokeng often circles around almost incessantly before arriving at a statement.
Photographically, he asked me what I thought of Invoice. I said, ‘bruising under the skin’.
During one public tour of the exhibit, he said, ‘the violence is in the knowing’. The violence is
not directly in seeing. It implies there are knowledges attached to seeing, and because of the
familiarity of South African photographs from the 1980s this is so for many other viewers as
well. Set against a bigger thematic corpus of work from the era of heightened political struggle
against apartheid, Mofokeng’s images can work against a more positivist and expository
backdrop, as a photographic estrangement that is increasingly legible over time.

Backdrop

What is this body of knowledge attached to seeing in South Africa? Within Africa, South Africa is
relatively industrialized and urbanized, and it has also been a highly photographic society. This
is not the place to go into a history of photography in South Africa, or in Africa more broadly,
but suffice it to say that ostensibly documentary work began to emerge by the 1940s among
white photographers such as Constant Stuart Larabee, Eli Weinberg and Leon Levson, on the
edges of their commercial projects. Drum magazine provided a crucial platform from the 1950s
for the emergence of black photographers, notably Ernest Cole who finally went into exile in
order to publish his famous indictment of apartheid, the banned work called House of Bondage.
Cole died a pauper in New York City in 1967, aesthetically frustrated, we believe. His fellow
Drum photographers Alf Khumalo and Peter Magubane were the black role models for the young
Santu Mofokeng growing up in Soweto, especially Magubane who photographed both Sharpeville
and later Soweto. In the 1980s, David Goldblatt became an important mentor.

Mofokeng has written about his development as a photographer in the well-known essay
‘Trajectory of a Street Photographer’. There is a more substantial piece in The View from
Africa. Less well known is that he taught photography at the Mofolo Art Centre in Soweto, run
by his friend Cecil Manganyi, both members of the Medupi Cultural Group since 1977.
Frequently South African photography is classified in isolation from other artistic media, a
specialized category made credible by its political impact, but no less by the economic scale
that allowed it. At this stage, Mofokeng says he was motivated by black consciousness ideas on
culture and self-help. This was before joining the photographic collective Afrapix in the mid-

---

6 There are published essays where he has formulated his biography and thinking with
increasing sophistication and tightness; curatorial texts to accompany exhibitions, most
recently the 2007 exhibition Invoice; email correspondence; oral statements including
interviews, an extended postgraduate class address at the University of the Western Cape in
September 2006 before the launch of Invoice, and informal conversations.

7 Santu Mofokeng, ‘The Black Albums. South Africa rediscovers its history’ in The View from

8 Santu Mofokeng, email communication, 5 July 2007.
1980s. Afrapix brought together progressive photographers of all backgrounds who not only sought to document and support the struggle against apartheid, but who put their work at the service of trade unions, political and solidarity movements, youth organizations, and the mass democratic movement by the mid-1980s.

Numerous photographers from Afrapix speak of the way the camera acted as a passport, as a way of crossing boundaries in the 1980s, but Mofokeng’s passport story has a different trajectory. ‘Let me confess that envy is one of the motivations that steered me into the photography business. A few friends and peers at primary school had cameras. I noticed that they were very popular and had no problems approaching girls and chatting them up. They always had loose change jangling in their pockets.’ When he procured his first at age seventeen, he writes, ‘I cherished that camera. It helped me overcome my awkwardness around strangers. I got invited to parties. My social status was enhanced. Everywhere I went strangers would approach me to have their photograph made or simply to talk, all because I was lugging a camera… . Cameras carried a mystical fascination for a lot of people.’

Numerous photographers from Afrapix speak of the way the camera acted as a passport, as a way of crossing boundaries in the 1980s, but Mofokeng’s passport story has a different trajectory. ‘Let me confess that envy is one of the motivations that steered me into the photography business. A few friends and peers at primary school had cameras. I noticed that they were very popular and had no problems approaching girls and chatting them up. They always had loose change jangling in their pockets.’ When he procured his first at age seventeen, he writes, ‘I cherished that camera. It helped me overcome my awkwardness around strangers. I got invited to parties. My social status was enhanced. Everywhere I went strangers would approach me to have their photograph made or simply to talk, all because I was lugging a camera… . Cameras carried a mystical fascination for a lot of people.’

In the township of Soweto not many people had cameras. “This probably explains my artificial social elevation.”

Popularity notwithstanding, Mofokeng could not make a living as a street photographer, and took work in a pharmaceutical laboratory after matriculation. Top of his class, he mentions the impossibility of his desire to study philosophy at the University of the Witwatersrand, especially in those years of student political uprising against apartheid. After four years of boredom, he switched to donker-kamer-assistente, a darkroom assistant. This was ‘a dead-end position’ because the colour-bar policy was applied ‘to the letter’: only whites could be apprenticed to a photographer, and only whites and coloureds could be technicians. In every narrative of his life I have encountered, Mofokeng includes the remark he overheard in this lowly job from a famous photojournalist who was looking through his colour transparencies in the office: ‘There is nothing as beautiful as black skin and blood! It makes beautiful contrast. There’s nothing like it, China!’

When Mofokeng joined the Afrapix Collective in 1985 he says it gave him a home and the initial resources to become a photographer. ‘It provided me with money to buy a camera and film in order to document Soweto and the rising discontent in the townships. Their confidence in me was, in some ways, misplaced seeing that I was less interested in the unrest than in the ordinary life in the townships.’ He participated in Afrapix education programmes, and also became a staff photographer on the New Nation. In some accounts he highlights his narrow reprieve from being necklaced (burned alive with tyres and petrol) when coming to photograph a night vigil, after some comrades had been killed in Soweto; another story mentions how his Afrapix colleague Paul Weinberg saved him from scab workers by refusing to leave a strike scene without him.

Overall, however, Mofokeng explains that he was hampered by his marginal status, which typically meant that he could not get to the Afrapix dark room speedily enough for the press photos, or to the places where the front line pictures were being shot, unlike his white counterparts who could afford cars and motor bikes. It also entailed other physical attributes to his work, such as the effects of using exhausted chemicals to make his ghostly photographic prints. Ultimately in the 1980s Mofokeng landed a job as photographer for the Oral Documentation Project based at the Institute for African Studies at the University of the Witwatersrand, directed by social historian Charles van Onselen. The work involved

13 Mofokeng, Santu Mofokeng, p 29.
documenting the sharecroppers of the Transorangia, especially Kas Maine (subject of van Onselen’s prize-winning book *The Seed is Mine*), and the demise of this bleak but vivid rural world.

**FIG 2. Kas Maine**

This suited Mofokeng quite well, providing a more sympathetic work rhythm that enabled a photographic essay approach rather than being confined to episodic single shots. This tendency ties in with what some have called a refusal of the event. More than this, it relieved him of the necessity to photograph conflict. He hated and continues to hate violence, and claims that he would not go near it. ‘Bullets flying, I don’t function in those situations’.  

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

What was going on in this photographic economy? It seems that within the Afrapix group, whatever the racial, class or gender background, everybody was dealing with being on the inside and the outside at the same time, though obviously on radically different terms. It is striking from interviews with many Afrapix photographers of the 1980s generation that photography offered a way to cross boundaries, for white photographers to cross over into black townships in particular. The camera offered not only a passport, but a pretext and an alibi. Their outsidership might well be the reason they sought to reveal with crystal-sharp clarity the lives of black people under apartheid and political struggle in relation to police repression; for many it was a question of ‘exposure’. The most wanted photograph internationally was of white police beating black youths. The evidence of this ‘relationship’ produced certain effects (and economies) for the anti-apartheid struggle, especially outside the country. For black photographers there was the seduction of being in a tiny minority, especially if you were an insider from Soweto. The outsidership of a Santu Mofokeng however possibly meant that he was not drawn to this. He hated violence. He developed objections to the international appetite for struggle images, and went through a process of ethically questioning his own part in the visual economy that was spawned in the 1980s. And in fact, this is an unusual picture for him, of police (Fig 8).

**FIG 3. Police waiting**

It is telling that already in this photograph the violence is not happening, though it is waiting to happen. It is a photograph of suspense - violence because we know, through seeing, other violences. He is playing with temporality, showing a reluctance to be in the full ‘now’ of ‘struggle photography’. Instead we remain suspended, facing white police like black youths in

---

16 Interview with Santu Mofokeng by Patricia Hayes, Farzanah Badsha & Mdu Xakaza, Johannesburg, 24 July 2005.
the 1980s. Viewers might think and feel something different, compared with the third-party perspective of the white cop assaulting black youth.

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

The everyday

But Mofokeng was already turning away, it is likely that this comment simply clarified the matter. Whilst a newcomer at Afrapix, he had already embarked on everyday life, including the ‘Train Church’ series which developed over time into a much larger field of spirituality (see below). Mofokeng marks himself out from the rest of the 1980s photographers in the following ways.

In terms of the idiosyncracies of life in the eighties whereby we want to show that apartheid is bad, I’m making pictures of ordinary life. Football, shebeen, daily life ... . When the world becomes tired of seeing ... sjamboks or whatever, they come to you they start to ask what is daily life like?

He frames it as everyday life, that notoriously elusive concept that means nothing and everything. Several South African photographers have employed it, and it slipped in and out of debate in the 1980s. An interesting gesture can be found in the joint photo-essay called ‘Going Home’ by Paul Weinberg (a founder-member of the Collective) and Santu Mofokeng, in the short-lived Afrapix journal Full Frame. Here the worlds of the white boy from Pietermaritzburg and the black youth from Soweto were placed side by side, in the interests of ‘mutual understanding’ at the time. As Mofokeng put it, ‘This means that the worlds which lie beyond the routine of going home had to be looked at in an honest and exploring fashion.’ The deliberate juxtaposition is the obvious political move; the call to explore beyond routine is less so.

‘The everyday’ has had substantial treatment in South African writing and historiography, and resurfaced through critiques of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, whose focus on gross
human rights violations left out ‘the horror of the everyday’, those myriad, normalised daily indignities, ongoing in many senses, viewed as natural, ‘part of life’. As Felski and others have suggested, this is what normally sinks out of view.\textsuperscript{25} In recent interviews Mofokeng talks explicitly about ‘The invisible of the everyday’. He says, ‘There’s no real vocabulary for the non-photographed of apartheid’.\textsuperscript{26}

Mofokeng also uses the notion of the fictional or metaphorical biography to describe his work in Soweto during the 1980s. While in general we can follow Allan Sekula’s argument that photographs are ‘at once intensely private and ubiquitously social visual signs’,\textsuperscript{28} Mofokeng’s metaphorical biography is a highly subtle creature. It is meaningful to him, it bears or touches on his life, but it is not directly autobiographical, it is tangentially so. These ‘fictions’ contain smoke, mist, and other matters and techniques that occlude rather than expose.

While some critics have highlighted an obsession with movement,\textsuperscript{30} what I notice very strongly is the way his images break with the wider preoccupation with black-white relations and ‘straight’ social conditions. Rather, they are about people, sometimes in relation to each other, but more often in relation to objects, things, animals, spaces, and things unseen. Frequently they are landscapes, urbanscapes, to meditate upon. And increasingly in recent years, these are empty. When speaking of the sepulchral landscapes with graves, tombs and memorials he has photographed in recent years in Vietnam, Nagasaki, Auschwitz, he comments: ‘I am drawn to these places’.\textsuperscript{31}

\textsuperscript{26} Interview with Santu Mofokeng by Patricia Hayes, Farzanah Badsha & Mdu Xakaza, Johannesburg, 24 July 2005.
\textsuperscript{27} This is the caption in the photo-essay ‘Labour Tenants South Western Transvaal’, in \textit{Staffrider} Vol 9 No 3, 1991, p 51; in Mofokeng’s \textit{Santu Mofokeng} it reads ‘Afoor family bedroom, Vaalrand’, pp 48 and 95.
\textsuperscript{29} Interview with Santu Mofokeng by Patricia Hayes, Farzanah Badsha & Mdu Xakaza, Johannesburg, 24 July 2005.
\textsuperscript{30} Speech by Autograph Collective at opening of the \textit{Invoice} Exhibition, South Africa National Gallery, Cape Town, 2007.
Going back to the mid-1980s, arising literally from everyday urban life and combining movement with spirituality, Mofokeng started his ‘Train Church’ series. These commuting photographs form part of a series on prayer and church activities (*Chasing Shadows*) in commuter trains from Soweto to the city of Johannesburg.

Mofokeng had a long commute himself from Soweto to Johannesburg to Randburg at one point, and says he became irritated by their noise which prevented him from sleeping. His revenge was to photograph them and the series grew from there. Given the period of the photographs, such a subject matter at the height of political struggle was very unusual. But in Mofokeng’s later understanding, this was key, because people’s beliefs in spiritual forces helped them cope with apartheid.

So, unlike the majority of his counterparts in Afrapix, he used his camera to cross - not the social and racial divide - but into another world. It might be considered unreal because intangible, but Mofokeng has insisted that it constitutes something very real for many, many South Africans. As he says, many people spend their lives chasing shadows. Mofokeng works with the notion of *seriti* in seSotho, which is more complex than the usual English translation, shadow, which combines the possible meanings of *moriti* and *seriti*. In this translation, the notion of *Chasing Shadows* has quixotic connotations, not necessarily intended. According to Mofokeng, *seriti* can mean anything from ‘aura, presence, dignity, confidence, spirit, essence, status, wellbeing and power - power to attract good fortune and to ward off bad luck and disease.’ In indigenous languages it ‘represents the pursuit of something real, something capable of action, of causing effects - a chase perhaps joined in order to forestall a threat or danger’. These indefinable things cause harm.

This already explodes the standard definition of what is real; in his understanding, there is not really a contiguity between the visible and the real. He presents another order of things. The term ‘spiritual’ does not get the profundity of this move. This is not about opening up a new genre in the midst of the struggle. Effectively Mofokeng was almost single-handedly and increasingly pushing for new domains in representation from the 1980s: nothing less than an africanisation and desecularisation of politics and photography.

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

It is not just a question of content. Mofokeng might portray people in the act of worshipping God, as part of a more generic trend towards representing the different religious practices in Africa. Even as such, he does not necessarily empathize, and this is not a naïve positivist portrayal. The train church series is located in material commuter conditions, and he has been known to voice his own almost agnostic skepticism about what is claimed for religion and

---

spirituality. These too come with their expectations and financial burdens. Of some of his Soweto photographs concerning obligatory ritual practices, for example, he questions the degree to which people actually believe in what they are doing, and the efficacy of the sangoma. Often it is allegedly ‘more worry than spirit’.34 For him, material concerns often interfere with the spiritual. Desecularization is a process, where the secular remains in tension with everything else.

Mofokeng’s position calls to mind Mitchell’s phrase, ‘critical idolatry’. While Mitchell is referring to people in relation to pictures, his notion of ‘double consciousness’ is very apt, where people vacillate ‘between magical beliefs and skeptical doubts, naïve animism and hardheaded materialism, mystical and critical attitudes’.35 When he argues that ‘the usual way of sorting out this double consciousness’ is to attribute one side to someone else, ‘and to claim the hardheaded, critical, and skeptical position as one’s own’, he could be describing the secular drive in South African photography of the 1980s. The apartheid state was accused of ‘mystifying’ the situation through its skewed or deliberately false representational practices, especially in relation to repression in South Africa and the war on the northern Namibian border. (This also applied more broadly in relation to who was ‘modern’.) But in pushing for alternative expository ‘truths’, photography drove out the possibility of things that were ‘Other’, beyond material reality. The supernatural, if you like.

The status of ‘development’ in South Africa perhaps allowed for the normalization of secular perception. As the most industrialized and ‘modernized’ country in Africa, with a long and continuous history of a formal economy when postcolonial Africans everywhere else had had to resort increasingly to so-called informal survival, it poses an interesting possibility of a normative western rationality and a functioning economy in Africa. This is seductive and has become naturalized as the way of life, the material conditions for a significant enough proportion of people having allowed it. This is probably the case in urban settings in particular. Within this capitalist development, industrialization and urbanization, the perceived problematic is then one of exclusion and ‘contradiction’. Governally, the colonial racial segregation of the late 19th and early 20th centuries was taken to extreme lengths under a modernising, technocratic Afrikaner nationalism after 1948. For racially designated people, especially Africans, the degree of control over the body and movement had huge effects on family and personal life, with the distortion (if not emasculation) of African patriarchal norms. Many people subsisted on insecure terms, on the edges, away from the heart of things, in various states of want, insecurity, alienation. Mofokeng’s father with his ‘resident alien’ status comes to mind.36 Over time these features are transmitted into the next generation and reproduce themselves. What Mofokeng calls the profound rupture with the land figures deeply in all this.

A ready explanation for the difficulty, poverty, marginalization and suffering, can be found in the comprehensive term apartheid. In fact, there is little need for introspection and self-examination, because outside forces can be blamed. In his curatorial statement for the 2007 exhibition Invoice, a postapartheid meditation that resituates much of his older work, Mofokeng dwells on the spaces people occupied between powerlessness and a kind of fatalism:

> Many South Africans believed in apartheid … as they believed in everything which made it unnecessary for them to forge their own destiny; they loved their fear, it reconciled them with themselves, it suspended the faculties of the spirit like a sneeze. Apartheid

34 Interview with Santu Mofokeng by Patricia Hayes, Farzanah Badsha & Mdu Xakaza, Johannesburg, 24 July 2005.
was a roof. And under this roof life was difficult, many aspects of life were concealed, proscribed.

He refers explicitly, elsewhere, to millenarian tendencies. ‘White people will get their come-uppance in the next life…. We will find justice. Maybe through the ancestors, maybe through Jesus.’

This is not the bread and butter of more conventional Marxist or social history approaches, in which vein I have discussed the work of Omar Badsha, trade unionist, activist, and one of the founder-members of Afrapix. There are striking parallels between the paradigms of documentary photography and social history in South Africa. But in relation to the kinds of photographic situations and interpretations that Mofokeng brings forward, a more fitting postcolonial set of explorations comes to mind.

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

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

As the author of this passage AbdouMaliq Simone puts it, ‘a kind of haunting’ permeates people’s perspectives and meanings. But it is all very real, and that is Mofokeng’s point. Seriti overlaps with the word shadow, but the absence of light is not all there is to seriti. The absence of light is not all there is to Mofokeng’s photographs, either. Taking this notion of desecularization, I have often asked myself whether the secular goes with a visual language or epistemology, in the formal sense. Mofokeng is acutely aware of the multiplicity of meanings in photographs, their overflows, and implicitly suggests photographers cannot control this. ‘You think your photograph stands for, this is what it means’. This has pushed him towards a more austere way of looking, photographing, and printing. He likes this word ‘austere’. ‘Why? To convey in a subtle way the atmosphere there’. He still favours black and white because it gives him distance.

You don’t have a focal point. For me I like that because it allows ... it doesn’t tell you what.

You have to put in yourself.

You can even meditate on the image.

And with this one from Auschwitz, the eye seems to go to infinity.

---

38 See Hayes, ‘Politics, art and the everyday.’
40 Interview with Santu Mofokeng by Patricia Hayes, Farzanah Badsha & Mdu Xakaza, Johannesburg, 24 July 2005.
41 I am grateful to Mzuzile Mdu Xakaaza for interpretation and discussion on this and other of Mofokeng’s photographs.
There is nowhere to go that is well-defined, there is nothing obvious thing for the eye to do. Things that other photographers of his generation have made empathetic, or humanist, centrally located within the composition in the secular documentary mode, are frequently distantiated. He might be drawn to human difficulty and pain, but it is remote, removed, sometimes one-dimensional or silhouetted. We might say Mofokeng stretches form, plays with composition, and shrinks expectations about content. The senses are heightened because detail is often obscured (though not always by darkness), sharpening the mind, allowing for an intensified attunement. The photograph of the Omo sign in Thembisa is a case in point (Fig 4). This photographic sensibility is not corporeal or ‘embodied’ in a banal way, as the cliché about Africa (and other non-European places with ‘problematic’ modernities) would have it. It does not seek catharsis. It is, perhaps, both alienating and releasing of the imagination at the same time.

Motouleng: magic and disease

In the 1990s Mofokeng made numerous visits to Motouleng, the place which was believed to have been the home of a famous woman healer from Moshoeshoe’s time in the troubled 19th century. The rocks present another world, another domain, a site of initiation. There is a cohesion to the thematic of spirituality here, ‘outside the bounds of the officially recognized religions, in caves and open spaces … ’. Motouleng is far from the city, and the series marks an extended section of Mofokeng’s postapartheid work. It continues his preoccupation with spiritual beliefs together with his growing obsession with landscape, something he thinks black South Africans do not think about much because of their ruptured relationship with the land.

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

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

---

42 I use the official spelling of the site here. According to Mofokeng it should be Motauleng.
43 Sam Raditlhalo, ‘Communities of Interpretation’ in Mofokeng, Santu Mofokeng, p 67.
Mofokeng has a string of eerie photographs of things that may not be what they seem. The priest at Motouleng who might be a devil; the grazing horse with no head; the sacral goats one atop another.


This is beyond conjuring otherness from the ordinary. There is a strong thematic throughout Mofokeng’s work about things not being what they appear, mostly through means of lack of sharpness, blurring, or the highlighting of extraneous detail or objects in a scene. But in these three cases he is using exactitude to blur the very identity of things. They are photographed as he finds them in space and time, but to be misread into something much more sinister and inhuman, un-animal, or other. Perhaps they are ‘mutations of nature’. It is not reassuring, this is not humanist photography. The spiritualised context facilitates the use of positivism to misread. It creates a break in expectation, and opens up the mind to other worlds, not this material, secular one, nor even a normative spiritual one. It ruptures realism, and there is doubt in the very heart of the alternative realm.

Conclusion

If I think about the anatomy of this ‘insider’, and the photographic trajectories he has articulated over about 20 years, some very complicated factors come together. In many ways like his photographs, in his writing Mofokeng tends to avoid events, violence, and drama, though they are somehow always at one remove. When his widowed mother is finally given a house, for instance, he notes: ‘We were later to learn the reason why our new home had been vacant: there had been a murder in the house. A son had killed his own father in that house’. He pulls back from the obvious and rather opens up spaces of anxiety, remembering, escape.

Besides this proximity to violence, Mofokeng’s biography is immersed in the insecurities and intimacies of impoverishment in a South African township, where in fact security makes you unsafe, the target of ill-will. There is a sense of the utter invasiveness of the apartheid state and its aftershocks: the control over the body, and where people lived; its ongoing ability to make people turn on each other. It is no wonder that many sought (and still seek) to escape into the spiritual realm. There is perhaps alienation if not despair around human relationships. In all this Mofokeng conveys a heightened awareness of something else going on, that is outside the narrative convictions of the emergent politics of the 1980s, convictions that have continued as a thick cultural (and nationalist) field in postapartheid South Africa. But with Mofokeng there is a freedom of the imagination, and a tangibility to the atmosphere of a space. There is also, strangely, the aliveness of objects, things, even detritus. Ironically, the proximities of black urban life in South Africa seem to liberate these tendencies.

There are two ways in which these photographic issues raise questions for that ‘philosophical problem of the splitting of viewpoint’, and for South African historiography itself. In his expanded definition of seriti - ‘anything from aura, presence, dignity, confidence, spirit, essence, status, wellbeing and power’ - there is a jarring suggestion of what photography can do, read against Walter Benjamin. For if Benjamin was alert to the dangers of the mechanization of culture, of technology destroying the uniqueness of created artworks through repetition, reproduction and distribution, with potentially fascist ramifications, then what does it mean to reinject postapartheid popular culture with a diffusion of enigmatic and oblique illuminations? Is this somehow an Africanising move? In its way, it poses a problem for secular Marxism and its cultural formulations.

44 Mofokeng, Santu Mofokeng, p 29.
There is a second implicit critique of Marxism, and the social history paradigms that took hold in South Africa especially in the 1980s. In all the histories of workers, histories of resistance, and histories ‘from below’, nothing prepared Mofokeng (by his own admission) for the petty bourgeois aspirations of the ancestors that he found in old photographs for the Black Photo Album series. If apartheid concealed and proscribed many aspects of life, then so too have these well-established historiographies and intellectual paradigms concealed and proscribed certain ways of looking.

For many of his 1980s colleagues, Paul Weinberg and other famous South African photographers, the violence must be seen. That is why that ‘truth’ genre of photojournalism and documentary became to some extent exhausted. Through its expository, sharp, hyper-positivist structures, it had a direct impact on the eye, to the point of saturation, even fracture. Visually, the very act of exposure drains things of their alterities. Techniques of cloaking and masking however re-evoked the supernatural world. There is no need for vulgar visibility.

I end with a Mofokeng story, which suggests the multiple manifestations of the splitting of viewpoint and the fracturing of visual sensibility. In 1986, before the comrades were going to necklace him at a night vigil in Soweto, he writes: ‘Everything began to seem unreal. My voice did not feel like my own…. The light seemed to change.’ It made him remember the eclipse he saw in Soweto as a child:

I remembered a particular moment as a child coming home from school. There was an eclipse of the sun. The grass was yellow of winter, the ground was unreal. The day wasn’t as bright as it normally is. I have tried to capture this feeling on black and white film, with little success.46

Then, into that murderous gathering, ‘an angel came.’

FIG 15. Windmill, Vaalrand Farm

46 Mofokeng, Santu Mofokeng, p 29.