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TEXTUAL INSCRIPTION IN THE WORK OF SOUTH AFRICAN PHOTOGRAPHER

GEORGE HALLETT FROM THE 1960S TO 1980S

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Thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Department of History of Art

School of Arts

Birkbeck, University of London

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ABSTRACT

This research examines the relationship between text and image in the work of South African photographer George Hallett (1942-2020). It proceeds from the first presence of written signs on the walls of the Cape Town neighbourhood of District Six, in scenes photographed by Hallett in the 1960s at the beginning of his career. It then explores how his interaction with African literature informed image-making processes in his practice as he went in exile in London in 1970. Anchoring my research within discourses on iconography pertaining to the work of black artists and the field of black representation, such as those developed by art historian Kobena Mercer, I am proposing an in-depth examination of Hallett's pre- and exile work, both visually and through the cross-disciplinary interactions from which it emerged.

At the core of my interrogation is the issue of, how does one fill the gaps overlooked by dominant Eurocentric art histories. Especially as it relates to black or brown artists who have lived and worked in the West, in this instance, London. Equally, how does one fill the missing chapters in South African art history, in the case of artists who lived in exile during the years of apartheid and consequently are subject to a double form of erasure.

My thesis seeks to contribute to the production of new art historical knowledge by addressing the underrepresentation of Hallett's work in a context where it has a legitimate place. It also aims to make this research accessible to British and international audiences through a practical component consisting of an exhibition, a public programme, and an online resource.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This thesis has been a long time in the making. It started during my time as a research student at Birkbeck, University of London, but its seeds were planted well before I even knew I would, one day, develop an interest in South African art and exiled artists. These encounters, I owe to the people who introduced me to South African culture as a teenager and who have been with me in person and in spirit ever since. I am going back in time because it is this web of connections that have led me to Birkbeck for my PhD research. It is those people that I would like to thank, starting with my elder sister M. Madeleine Olong, who randomly approached South African activist and journalist Lorna de Smidt (1943-2022) for directions in Paris and got to strike a lifelong friendship with her and her husband Graham de Smidt. From Graham and Lorna, I gained knowledge of South African culture and the anti-apartheid struggle, I also inherited many books. It is also at Graham and Lorna's that my sister first met George Hallett who would become her husband from the mid 1980s to the late 1990s. During that time, he became my mentor and encouraged me to look at other art forms to understand photography, which led me to studying art history. The third very important connection Lorna made, was to recommend me to do my PhD with Professor Annie E. Coombes. I was convinced after reading *History After Apartheid*. A first attempt was made in 2006 with Professor Coombes thanks to whom I got a studentship grant from Birkbeck. But embarking on a PhD while raising and providing for small children proved quite a challenging experience. Eventually, it took the support of Professor Lubaina Himid CBE RA, for this research to get started as part of Making Histories Visible to which I was associated as Research Fellow at the University of Central Lancashire from 2012 to 2022. I am unreservedly grateful to Professor Himid for encouraging me to achieve something that seemed insurmountable at times, and even more so to Professor Coombes who, as my supervisor, kept me going and steered me in the right direction, especially when my emotions were all over the place. I would also like to thank Professor Joasia Krysa from Liverpool John Moores University, where I am now a lecturer, for allowing me time to complete my PhD.

Two years after I embarked on this PhD, George's health began deteriorating. I was able to see him one last time in Cape Town in 2018. He passed away in July 2020 at the peak of the Covid pandemic in South Africa, making it impossible to say our last goodbye in person. Writing this thesis has been part of my grieving process and I am thankful to family and friends who have been here along the way and have been of great emotional support: George's second daughter Maymoena Hallett with whom I have been exchanging a lot and who is endeavouring to preserve and raise awareness of George's work; my younger sister Nicole who always lifts me up, and my dearest friend Milena Buyum-Jackson who has always been there for me and my children. I would also like to thank my son Ruben, and my twins Aliyah and Samuel who patiently endured the invasion of books and research material in our living room. They have given me love and extra motivation to complete my PhD.

Finally, I would like to mention some of my peers whose interest in George's work, and in my research, have led to parallel conversations, essay commissions, and collaborations that have been intellectually stimulating: Kodwo Eshun and Anjalika Sagar (Otolith Group), Ntone Edjabe (*Chimurenga*), Dr Ugochukwu-Smooth Nzewi, Prof Dr Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung, as well as Professor Mark Sealy OBE and Renée Mussaï (Autograph ABP). George's friend, the artist and curator Gavin Jantjes, has been a great inspiration. My conversation with James Currey has also been most insightful.

This thesis is dedicated to George, and Lorna who left this world in May last year. I can hear George proudly saying, like he often did: 'She's doing a PhD on *me!*' And Lorna would remind me to keep being objective and critical. I do hope this thesis does justice to their teachings.

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INTRODUCTION

This thesis, on the work of South African photographer George Hallett, stems from a longstanding interest in twentieth century South African art. It follows from prior academic research undertaken in Paris in the late 1990s, on social realism in the work of Gerard Sekoto (1913-1993) in the period between the 1930s and 1960s. Sekoto is one of South Africa's and Africa's first modernist painters and my dissertation discussed how his art was one of the first to introduce dignified black figures in South African modern painting in a new approach characterised by a strong sense of agency and self-representation that was hardly ever afforded black South Africans in those days.¹ This was followed by a focus on the representation of the body in South African art from the 1960s to 1990s that explored various visual responses to the human experience and the aesthetic treatment of the body in a context of apartheid.² George Hallett was one of artists whose work was included in the latter. But it is only in the course of my practice as a curator and through independent research preceding the writing of articles and essays on his work between the 2000s and 2010s that I became aware that some aspects of his practice were still under-researched, had not been written about, or been exhibited. Three essays in particular led me to this observation: 'Gavin Jantjes, Freedom Hunters (1976): Subtexts and Intertwined Narratives'

¹ Marie-Christine Eyene, 'Gerard Sekoto : Du « réalisme social » au champ introspectif (1939-1966)' (Masters thesis, Université Paris 1, Panthéon-Sorbonne, 1998).

² Marie-Christine Eyene, 'Image et Corps : Réflexions sur la représentation de la figure humaine dans l'art sud-africain, des années 1960 à 1990' (Mphil thesis, Université Paris 1, Panthéon-Sorbonne, 1999).

(2010)³, ‘Yearning for art – Exile, aesthetics and cultural legacy’ (2011)⁴, and ‘George Hallett: the making of an archive’ (2015)⁵. Those essays opened up lines of inquiry, developed in this thesis, that I had never explored in my previous research. These required space and time for an in-depth consideration that, so far, my commissioned essays or curatorial practice had never allowed. The academic framework is therefore an adequate context for such endeavour.

A decisive event to mention is Hallett’s visit to the University of Central Lancashire in 2014 to deliver a guest lecture as part of UCLan’s Distinguished Visitor Programme. This invitation was instigated with guidance and support from the artist Lubaina Himid CBE RA, then Professor of Contemporary Art at UCLan, now Emeritus. Himid had set up Making Histories Visible (MHV), an interdisciplinary visual arts research project seeking to excavate, research, document, preserve and make accessible black creative practices from Britain that were still overlooked and marginalised by British cultural and academic institutions. Accompanying Hallett’s visit was a display of photographs, hand printed by himself, selected from a collection that I generically call the ‘George Hallett Research Collection’.

³ Christine Eyene, ‘Gavin Jantjes, *Freedom Hunters* (1976): Subtexts and Intertwined Narratives’, in *Conspiracy Dwellings: Surveillance in Contemporary Art*, ed. by Outi Remes and Pam Skelton (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010), pp 51-65.

⁴ Christine Eyene, ‘Yearning for art: Exile, aesthetics and cultural legacy’, in *Visual Century: South African Art in Context, Volume 2: 1945-1976* ed. by Lize van Robbroeck (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2011), pp. 96-119.

⁵ Christine Eyene, ‘George Hallett: the making of an archive’, in *New Spaces for Negotiating Art (and) Histories in Africa* ed. by Berit Fischer, Kerstin Pinther and Ugochukwu-Smooth Nzewi (Berlin: Lit Verlag, 2015), pp. 166-180.

If one were to retrace the origins of this collection, one could say that it began in the mid-1980s and grew organically over nearly thirty years. Some images were gifted by Hallett who became close to my elder sister from the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s. Often these consisted of our portraits taken during family gatherings, moments with friends, or even images from photographic sessions in informal settings or in studio. Others were given to me as presents when I developed an interest in photography and art history in the 1990s.

In the early 2000s, when I became an active art professional, Hallett would continue giving me some prints. Some were exhibition prints that would otherwise be discarded. Others were left in my care to exhibit or to sell should the opportunity arise. Declining his invitation to take on the role of his 'agent', as this is an altogether different profession, I proposed instead to raise awareness of his work through research, writing, and exhibitions. This proposition was also motivated by the fact that, despite the many developments that had occurred in the field of contemporary African photography, Hallett's work remained largely unknown. The research collection would also be a contribution to the Making Histories Visible to which I was associated as a Research Fellow in Contemporary Art.

It is in this context that Hallett was invited to UCLan and that a small exhibition was put together. The display consisted of 25 photographs giving an overview of Hallett's work created in exile, starting in 1970 until his return to South Africa to cover Nelson Mandela's presidential campaign during the country's first democratic elections. The presentation was organised in a linear approach that

was both chronological and thematic. It regrouped images linked to African literature, South African visual artists, dancers, musicians, and activists.



Fig. 1. George Hallett, and elated bookseller at UCLan's Atrium, holding African Writers Series books for which he created the cover photograph. Preston, 2014. Photo: Christine Eyene.

By pure coincidence, on the day Hallett arrived in Preston, Lubaina Himid was informed that a local book seller was getting rid of some of his stock. This included books from Heinemann's African Writers Series which covers featured photographs by Hallett. The striking presence of the photographs and the books, together at this MHV event, and Hallett's guest lecture, raised my interest in the relationship between his photographs as individual works, and their visual and conceptual meaning as book covers. This led to the undoing of a linear thinking in favour of a multitemporal, multi-layered, and multidisciplinary approach informing what became the topic of my research proposal.

Context and bibliographical considerations

Developing monographic research on an artist whose path one has crossed over many years raises numerous issues. The first one is the question of objectivity. In this respect, I have tended not to take the biographical information repeated in various printed or online source at face value, but to fact check everything. I am also indicating when I am unsure, have not found any information, or speculating. The second one is the appraisal of which biographical elements are relevant to the understanding of an artistic practice, and which are merely anecdotal. This, bearing in mind that certain pieces of information that may seem insignificant in the first phase of a reflection might become meaningful as the investigation progresses. Other points I have had to consider are the foregrounding and perspective: from general to specific, from collective to personal narrative; or conversely, using the personal as a point of entry to a wider experience. I am leaning towards the latter.

Born in Cape Town in 1942, George Hallett was classified ‘coloured’⁶ by the apartheid regime. He grew up in an oppressive political system devised to format, limit, and control the experience of those placed under its authority. ‘Racism’s

⁶ Although ‘coloured’ was a racial category developed by the apartheid regime, it has now become a cultural identity in its own right. During apartheid and in the immediate post-apartheid context, Hallett expressed, on numerous occasions, his discomfort with the term because of its discriminatory origins. However, there were many instances where he identified with the coloured community.

On the question of coloured identity, see Zimitri Erasmus, *Coloured by History, Shaped by Place: New perspectives on Coloured Identities in Cape Town* (Cape Town and Maroelana: Kwela Books and South African History Online, 2001).

Last Word’, as philosopher Michel Foucault once called it⁷, ‘one of the most repressive and detested political system ever devised’ as curator Okwui Enwezor described it⁸, apartheid was much more than ‘the traditional system of segregation that had been practiced for generations in South Africa, [...] in the colonial world and in the United States’, South African author and political journalist Allister Sparks writes. ‘This was the radical, programmatic restructuring of a country, of a socially intermixed society’ [...] divided ‘into separate living areas, separate towns, separate economies, separate “nations.”’⁹ This context and the forms of resistance it produced have inspired George Hallett to embrace, from very early on, the notion of shared experience. They have informed his interest in documenting society, from his first body of work onward and, in the process, led it to blend personal and collective histories.

Hallett started working as an independent street photographer in the 1960s, taking mostly portraiture, street scenes, and genre photography. His long-time friend, South African artist and curator Gavin Jantjes explains that: ‘the deterioration of South Africa’s political reality in the late sixties forced upon him the ironic and difficult choice of self-exile. Ever increasing restrictions on personal and intellectual freedom made life for artists, both black and white, as absurd as the Queen’s garden party in Alice’s Wonderland, where every creative act could be

⁷ Michel Foucault, ‘Racism’s Last Word’, in *Art contre/against Apartheid* (Paris: Artists of the World against Apartheid, 1983), pp. 11-35.

⁸ Okwui Enwezor, ‘Picturing apartheid: toward the exhibition of resistance’, in ‘Rise and Fall of Apartheid: Photography and the Bureaucracy of Everyday Life’ ed. by Okwui Enwezor and Rory Bestor (New York: Prestel, 2013), p. 18.

⁹ Allister Sparks, *The Mind of South Africa* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1991), pp. 149-150.

one of subversion'.¹⁰ Hallett left South Africa in 1970 and lived in England, France and Holland. He also spent brief periods of time in the United States and Zimbabwe, before returning to South Africa as the country held its first democratic elections in 1994.

His body of work could be divided into three periods:

- a) 1960-70: pre-exile, which includes photographs taken in Cape Town and the Cape Peninsula, including Hout Bay, District Six, the Cape Flats, and musicians.
- b) 1970-1994: exile, represented through portraits of South African activists, intellectuals, and artists; the design of Heinemann African Writers Series book covers (1970-80), portraits of African writers; photojournalism for newspapers and other publications.
- c) 1994-2010s: post-exile period marked by his portrayal of the new South Africa, beginning with the series on Nelson Mandela, commissioned by the African National Congress during his presidential campaign, a body of work that earned him a World Press Photo Award in 1995; and the documentation of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

His international career spans about five decades. Yet, his work has never been the subject of any major monographic publication. This does not mean that his

¹⁰ Gavin Jantjes, 'Stargazing', in 'Rhizomes of Memory: Three South African Photographers' ed. by Gavin Jantjes (Oslo: Henie Onstad Kunstsenter, 2000), p. 177.

practice was totally ignored or invisible. The work he produced before leaving South Africa was included in a couple of publications. But the reality is that it was, and to some extent still is, far less acknowledged than some of the biographical notes seem to imply, and certainly far less than some of his peers.¹¹

In 1968, his first photographic essay on jazz musicians was published in *Contrast* vol. 5, edited by South African authors Jack Cope and Richard Rive.¹² Two years later, his District Six series was featured in the same magazine as a visual essay entitled 'White Area'.¹³ The images documented the Cape Town area of District Six before its demolition and were a criticism of apartheid's Group Areas Act and forced removals.

The pre-exile work was also included in *Present Lives - Future Becoming* (1974) edited by Hallett and South African poet Cosmo Pieterse. This book captures 'the textures and realities of everyday life for the coloured community' in Cape Town through prose and poetry by Pieterse and photographs by Hallett, Wilfred Paulse,

¹¹ Other photographers from his generation whose work have gained very little international exposure are Omar Badsha and Rashid Lombard. One could also mention Peter McKenzie, who also happens to be from the coloured community. It could be argued that in redressing some of South Africa's art historical imbalances, photographers from that community have received less visibility than black photographers. This is notably a gap that South African curator Riason Naidoo has sought to address through such projects as 'The Indian in Drum in the 1950s' (South African touring exhibition in 2006 and MA dissertation, University of Witwatersrand 2007; published by Bell-Roberts in 2008) and 'Legends of the Kasbah', 12th Bamako Encounters – African Photography Biennale, Bamako, 2019.

¹² South Africa History Online, 'George Hallett', 17 February 2011
<<https://www.sahistory.org.za/people/george-hallett>> [accessed 2 April 2023].

¹³ George Hallett, 'White Area', *Contrast*, 23 (1970), 65-72.

Clarence Coulson, and Gavin Jantjes.¹⁴ In 1979, South African poet James Matthews published *Images*, the first book bringing together Hallett's pre and early exile work.¹⁵ It contains Hallett's short biography, photographs, and poetry by Matthews. In all those publications, none of Hallett's photographs are either dated, captioned, or interpreted. Which makes it difficult to fully place them within an art historical context.

The first two publications providing some interpretative keys on Hallett's work were authored by Gavin Jantjes. A first essay discussing Hallett's practice is written in the form of a letter to a 'Dear A. W....,' published in 'The Photographs of George Hallett', a twenty-page catalogue of a solo exhibition at Aschenbach Galerie (Amsterdam) in 1988. The second one is in 'Rhizomes of Memory: Three South African Photographers' (2000), an exhibition curated by Jantjes, then Artistic Director of Henie Onstad Kunstsenter (Oslo), featuring David Goldblatt, George Hallett, and Santu Mofokeng. The catalogue includes an essay introducing the work of each photographer, interspersed by non-chronological photographic plates, followed by thumbnails with captions, dates and, in the case of George Hallett, comments on how the photographs were taken. Jantjes's essay on Hallett's work provides useful information by inscribing his practice within the broader landscape of photography. However, it is through Hallett's own words, in the captions, that one can begin making sense of the story behind the images.

¹⁴ Back cover blurb, *Present Lives - Future Becoming* ed. by George Hallett and Cosmo Pieterse (London: Hickey Press Limited), 1974.

¹⁵ *Images* ed. by George Hallett and James Matthews (Cape Town: Blac Publishing House), 1979.

The same year, Hallett's work was included in *More Than Brothers: Peter Clarke & James Matthews at 70*.¹⁶ The photographs are dated and captioned. They are part of material comprising written contributions by South African scholars, and illustrations consisting of images and archive documenting the lives, friendship, and creative relationship between the South African painter and author Peter Clarke (1929-2014) and Matthews. Both were, as we shall see in the next chapters, George Hallett's mentors.

Portraits of African Writers (2006)¹⁷ edited by Hallett and introduced by South African poet and political activist Keorapetse Kgositsile is the first publication that explicitly structures Hallett's body of work along the line of exile and post-exile periods. The book also provides a rich dated and captioned study material of Hallett's portraiture of African writers. This link with African literature is further documented by British editor James Currey in *Africa Writes Back* (2008)¹⁸. In his book charting the history of Heinemann's African Writers Series (AWS), Currey – former editor of the series that contributed to popularise African literature in English – drew his visual material primarily from Hallett's portraits and the compositions he created for the AWS book covers.

Then and Now: Eight South African Photographers (2007)¹⁹, edited by South African photographer Paul Weinberg with an introduction by South African art

¹⁶ *More Than Brothers: Peter Clarke & James Matthews at 70* ed. by Hein Willemse (Cape Town: Kwela Books), 2000.

¹⁷ George Hallett, *Portraits of African Writers* (Johannesburg: Wits University Press), 2006.

¹⁸ James Currey, *Africa Writes Back: The African Writers Series & the Launch of African Literature* (Oxford: James Currey Publishing), 2008.

¹⁹ *Then and Now: Eight South African Photographers* ed. by Paul Weinberg (Johannesburg: Highveld Press), 2007.

historian Michael Godby, looks at the practice of a group of ‘veteran’ photographers before and after apartheid. The book itself does not add much information on Hallett’s practice other than the fact that, like *Portraits of African Writers*, it gives the viewers an idea of his work before and during his exile in the ‘then’ section and shows his new orientations in the post-apartheid ‘now’ section.²⁰

Finally, in 2007 Hallett and South African photographer Peter McKenzie edited *District Six Revisited*²¹, a ‘companion’ to the eponymous exhibition presented at the District Six Museum (Cape Town) ten years prior. In addition to Hallett’s work, the book features photographs by Clarence Coulson, Jackie Heyns, Gavin Jantjes and Wilfred Paulse. Like in earlier publications, the photographs are uncaptioned and undated, making the question of addressing these chronological and interpretative gaps an essential focus of my thesis.

Hallett’s practice between South African and Black British art histories

Hallett lived in six different countries, his work is therefore situated both within South African visual art history and that of the countries where he resided.

²⁰ Other photographic and editorial projects by Hallett from his post-exile period, including *Images of Change* (Johannesburg: Nolwazi Educational Publishers, 1995) – focusing on Nelson Mandela and members of South Africa new democratic parliament – are not relevant to this research.

²¹ *District Six Revisited* ed. by George Hallett and Peter McKenzie (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2007).

In this thesis, I am only considering his pre-exile period and the early years of his life in England.

Like many black and coloured visual practitioners from his generation, Hallett was mostly self-taught. The institutional discrimination in place before and during apartheid excluded non-white South Africans from artistic education. Despite this obstacle, a number of black and coloured aspiring artists defied the colour bar and engaged in various artistic disciplines against all odds. For a long time, these were ignored by mainstream South African art history. However, in the 1980s, these exclusions were increasingly addressed, producing conferences, exhibitions, and publications paving the way towards a fairer representation of the country's artistic landscape. Such initiatives include 'Tributaries: A view of Contemporary South African Art', Africana Museum, Johannesburg and touring (1985); 'The Neglected Tradition: Towards a New History of South African Art (1930-1988)', Johannesburg Art Gallery, Johannesburg, (1988); and 'Images of Man: Contemporary South African Black Artists', De Beers Centenary Art Gallery, University of Fort Hare, Alice (1992).²²

While the post-apartheid era has seen the emergence of a multi-ethnic art scene, the process of rewriting art history is still ongoing. Notable publications include

²² South African scholar Lize van Robbroeck made a critical appraisal of the writings, by white South African art historians and critics, underpinning those projects. She argues that, whether they emanate from 'the liberal humanist tradition of the English-language universities, or represent the more orthodox apartheid-speak from some of the Afrikaans and Black Homeland Universities', these reveal the 'discursive strategies and the invention of numerous taxonomies' to deny black artists 'proximity and coevalness and to re-establish spatial and temporal distance'. Lize van Robbroeck, 'Writing White on Black. Identity and Difference in South African Art Writing of the Twentieth Century', *Third Text*, 17.2, (2003) 171-172. See also van Robbroeck, 'Race and Art in Apartheid South Africa', in *Visual Century* ed. by van Robbroeck, pp. 78-95.

Revisions: Expanding the Narrative on South African Art (2006)²³ and *Visual Century: South African Art in Context* (2011)²⁴.

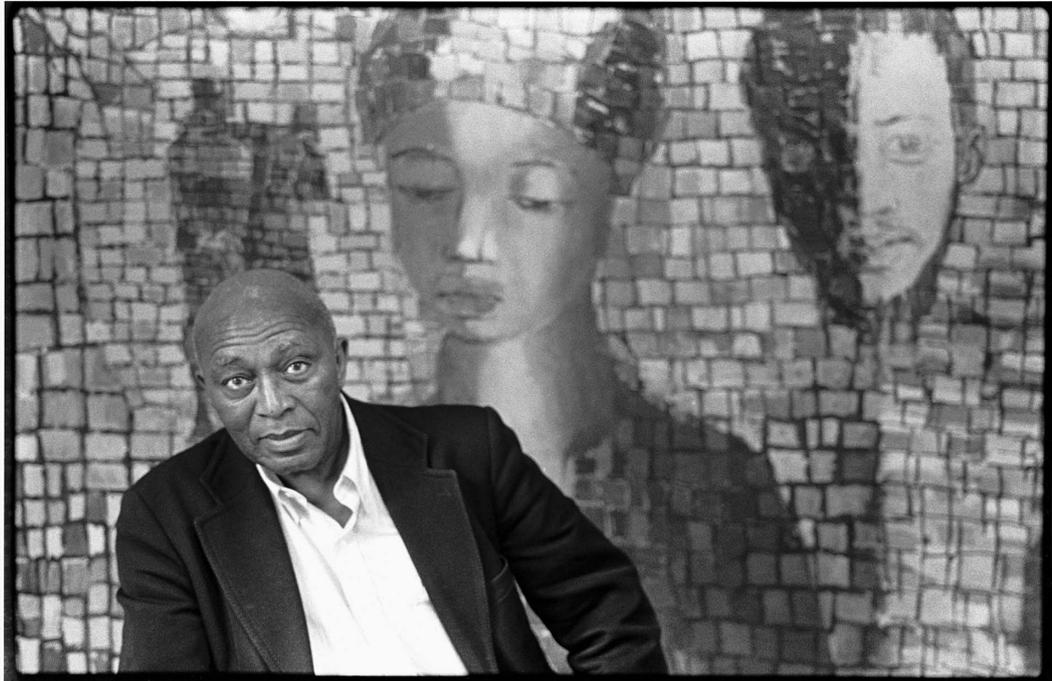


Fig. 2. Gerard Sekoto in front of his painting *Homage to Steve Biko* (1978). Nogent-sur-Marne, France, 1988. Photo: George Hallett.

The new inclusive approach has also been reflected in exhibitions revisiting the art of seminal black figures like Gerard Sekoto (1913-1993), Johannesburg Art Gallery in 1989 and Wits Art Museum (Johannesburg) in 2013; Ernest Mancoba (1904-2002) in 1994 and Dumile Feni (1942-1991) in 2007 both at the Johannesburg Art Gallery. Mancoba was also the focus of a solo exhibition at Musée National d'Art Moderne (Paris) in 2019. Albert Adams (1929-2006) and Peter Clarke both had retrospectives at Iziko South African National Gallery

²³ *Revisions: Expanding the Narrative on South African Art* ed. by Hayden Proud (Pretoria: Unisa Press, 2006).

²⁴ *Visual Century: South African Art in Context*, ed. by Gavin Jantjes and others (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2011).

(Cape Town) respectively in 2008 and in 2011. Clarke's exhibition toured to the Institute of International Visual Arts (London) in 2013, and in 2015 and 2020-21 Albert Adams has been the focus of a research project at the University of Salford in the UK. Revisions continue with research into the practice of underrepresented women artists, as shown by the exhibition 'When Rain Clouds Gather: Black South African Women Artists, 1940-2000' curated by Portia Malatjie and Nontobeko Ntombela at the Norval Foundation in 2022-2023.²⁵



Fig. 3. Albert Adams at his home in Camden Town, London 1971. Photo: George Hallett.

George Hallett's photographs have often been used as part of the archival material complementing the monographic exhibitions and catalogues of the artists with whom he interacted. But the creative dialogues he might have had with these artists, and the cross-pollinations that might have resulted from these, have never been considered in the interpretation of his work.

As a matter of fact, neither his participation to the three-person exhibition 'A Portrait of South Africa: George Hallett, Peter Clarke and Gerard Sekoto', Cité des Arts, Paris, 2013, nor his retrospective 'George Hallett: A Nomad's Harvest', Iziko South African National Gallery, 2014, have led to any form of digital or

²⁵ I am indebted to Professor Coombes for bringing this exhibition to my attention.

hard copy publication that could have reappraised the discourse on his work. The University of Cape Town has only recently developed some research around a small collection of Hallett's work exhibited under the title 'It is a gathering of the elders' (2022).²⁶

In England, the inclusion of Hallett's work in British, or even black British, visual art history is practically non-existent. He is neither mentioned in Paul Gilroy's *Black Britain: A Photographic History* (2007 and 2011)²⁷ nor was in Tate Britain's exhibition 'Another London: International Photographers Capture City Life 1930-1980' (2012). He is absent from Eddie Chambers's *Black Artists in British Art – A History Since the 1950s* (2014)²⁸ and Mark Sealy's *Decolonising the Camera: Photography in Racial Time* (2019).²⁹

Theoretical framework and methodology

The theme of this PhD emerged from being physically – by that I mean in a real context, not virtually, nor through reproductions – confronted by the visual juxtapositions between Hallett's photographs and book covers from the African Writers Series created during his exile. This partakes of the tangible art historical materialization to which Professor Salah M. Hassan and Olu Oguibe alluded when they wrote in their preface to *Authentic / Ex-centric: Conceptualism in*

²⁶ The project's co-curator Ingrid Masondo and I are in a dialogue in view of sharing our research and collaborating in the context of a George Hallett exhibition planned in 2024.

²⁷ (London: Saqi Books).

²⁸ (London: IB Tauris & Co.).

²⁹ (London: Lawrence and Wishart).

Contemporary African Art (2001) that: If You Don't Exhibit, You Do Not Exist!³⁰

The notion of 'textual inscription' referred in the title of my thesis is the result of an observation of the presence of the written signs or words in different forms and formats across some of Hallett's early urban work, more particularly his District Six series. Beyond the scenes represented, my focus centers on the background walls, their texture, and the words they contain; more particularly the tags that, strangely enough, have never been discussed in interpretations of Hallett's street photographs.

The arguments I develop are therefore close to the image, both at its surface and deep in its layers. My thinking is informed by discourses on Britain's Black Art movement, notably by the issues raised by the fact that, for a long time, approaches to the work of those artists was more concerned by its themes, emphasizing identity or sociopolitical content, than it was about the art itself, its aesthetics, technique, and process. This point is addressed by British art historian Kobena Mercer in his essay 'Iconography after Identity' in which he invites us to consider the 'quality of the discourse of criticism surrounding black artists' and calls for a return to 'the work of art itself', and a 'conceptual revision of art historical precepts' through the development of 'an iconology of the diaspora

³⁰ Salah Hassan and Olu Oguibe, 'Preface', in *Authentic / Ex-centric: Conceptualism in Contemporary African Art* ed. by Hassan and Oguibe (Ithaca, New York: Forum for African Arts - Prince Claus Fund Library, 2001), pp. 6-7.

artwork’.³¹ This imperative to develop forms of iconographical analyses was reiterated during the BLK Art Group Conference in Wolverhampton (2012)³² where, in his keynote speech, Mercer evoked the ‘place of absence’ from which analytical modes of interpretations of black art production have to be created within the field of art history, using the tools provided by the discipline, as well as black scholarship. In ‘Iconography after Identity’, Mercer refers to Heinrich Wölfflin (1864-1945) and Erwin Panofsky (1892-1968), the Swiss and German art historians who gave us the tools for formal analysis and iconology. But he does so without preaching any kind of dogmatism. In an age of decolonial thinking, perhaps a just approach to address ‘practices that depart from or fall into the interstices of nation-based mappings’, such as Hallett’s exilic body of work, one might, to borrow once again from Mercer, consider a ‘careful adjustment of the methodologies of [art] historical research’.³³ Based on these ideas, my approach to George Hallett’s work does not align with strict photography histories and genealogies in which he is predominantly placed as a documentary or press photographer. Rather it embraces a ‘contrapuntal’ approach evoked by Edward Said (a term he borrowed from music)³⁴ and adopted by British art

³¹ *Shades of Black: Assembling Black Arts in 1980s Britain* ed. by David A. Bailey, Ian Baucom and Sonia Boyce (Durham, London: Duke University Press, Institute of International Visual Arts and African and Asian Visual Artists Archive, 2005), pp. 52-55.

³² ‘Reframing the Moment – Legacies of 1982 BLK Art Group Conference’, 27 October 2012, University of Wolverhampton, convened by the BLK Art Group Research Project.

³³ Kobena Mercer, ‘Introduction’, in *Exiles, Diasporas & Strangers* ed. by Kobena Mercer (London, Cambridge, MA: Institute of International Visual Arts, MIT Press, 2008), p. 12.

³⁴ Edward Said, ‘Reflections on Exile’, in *Out There, Marginalization and Contemporary Culture* ed. by Russel Ferguson, Martha Gever, Trinh Minh-ha and Cornel West (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992) p. 358.

historian Amna Malik in her examination of the work of exiled artists.³⁵ Hallett's practice may then be considered through the lens of a cultural and disciplinary 'multiple perspective'. The primary concern of my thesis is to analyse and engage his work in terms of his creative and artistic practice as well as reinstate his place and relevance within an international history of art.

Chapter outline

This thesis is articulated around four chapters examining Hallett's work in two creative contexts, Cape Town and London.

Chapter one, entitled 'Before the Gaze: District Six and the impact of literature in Hallett's intellectual formation' retraces the cultural influences that predate, and informed, Hallett's interest in photography. It does so, more specifically, around the figure of his English literature teacher, the author Richard Rive (1930-1989), a native of District Six who broadened Hallett's cultural horizon and introduced him to black literature. District Six being Hallett's first photographic training ground, the chapter also focuses on this neighbourhood's history and culture.

Parallels between the Harlem Renaissance and black South African urban culture in District Six and Sophiatown (Johannesburg) are drawn through seminal figures such as South African writer Peter Abrahams (1919-2017), American photographer Roy DeCarava (1919-2009) and author Langston Hughes (1901-1967).

³⁵ Amna Malik, 'Conceptualising "Black" British Art Through the Lens of Exile', in *Exiles, Diasporas & Strangers*, p. 167.

Chapter two is concerned with the ‘Photographic Representations of District Six in the 1950s-60s and George Hallett’s Early Photography’. It proceeds from an investigation of visual material on District Six to identify the authors of these images, their themes, aesthetics, the intention behind documenting the district, the contexts in which these images were produced and shown, their audiences and reception. The photographers considered include Cloete Breytenbach (1933-2019), Jan Greshoff (-2006) and Janjse Wissema (1920-1975) who have each produced a large body of work in District Six. The sources I examine points to the differences in the way in which the district was photographed along what District Six Museum curator Tina Smith and South African historian Ciraj Rassool have identified as an ‘outsider/insider’ approach, placing Hallett, Coulson, Jantjes, and Paulse’s work in the ‘insider’ category.³⁶

My focus on Hallett leads to the emergence of his photographic practice and some of his images in which the background reveals a textured surface, abstract forms, and graffitied signs and words including gangs’ tags serving as an alternative mapping of District Six and introducing a narrative that is not immediately perceptible in the photographs.

Titled ‘Exile, Diasporas and New Creative Territories’, chapter three positions the route to exile in relation to the experience of black South African modern artists. My examination of the specific context of South African exile in London builds on British academic Mark Israel’s study of this phenomenon. This serves to

³⁶ Tina Smith and Ciraj Rassool, ‘History in photographs at the District Six Museum’, in *Recalling Community in Cape Town. Creating and Curating the District Six Museum* ed. by Ciraj Rassool and Sandra Prosalendis (Cape Town: District Six Museum, 2001), p. 137.

understand the racial fragmentations that both marked the experience of members of the Windrush generation and its descendants, and the replication of discriminatory measures between Commonwealth citizens in a hostile society. Against this background, culture offered more than a sense of agency. African and diasporic creative encounters such as the activities and energy around Heinemann's African Writers Series provided a sense of belonging. I approach the AWS through its first book, Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1962). Building on archival research and drawing predominantly on Nigerian art historian Chika Okeke-Agulu's close examination of Achebe's illustrations by Nigerian artist Uche Okeke (1933-2016)³⁷, my consideration of the relationship between writing and artwork (or text and image) leads me back to South African art with Albert Adams. In the process, my appraisal differs from that of scholar Camille Lizarribar Buxó³⁸ whose interpretation of the book covers does not take into account the fact that the work created is anchored within an artistic practice.

Finally, chapter four focuses on Hallett's collaboration with the AWS and the creative turn in his practice. Here, I discuss how London, as a new environment, brought new opportunities and broadened the scope of his images. I revisit his encounter with James Currey and go into a detailed examination of the types of source images he used, and the motifs or compositions he created for the AWS

³⁷ Chika Okeke-Agulu, 'The Politics of Form: Uche Okeke's Illustrations for Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*', in *Chinua Achebe's Things fall apart: 1958-2008* ed. by David Whittaker (Amsterdam, New York: Rodopi, 2011), pp. 67-86.

³⁸ Camille Lizarribar Buxó, 'Something Else Will Stand Beside It: The African Writers Series and the Development of African Literature' (Doctoral thesis, Harvard University, 1998).

book covers. I also address his adoption of a theatricality that did not exist in his pre-exile work.

This chapter goes into a more in-depth exploration of Heinemann's AWS archive held at the University of Reading Special Collections. It continues to align with Okeke-Agulu and to diverge from Lizarribar Buxó who sees Hallett's images as 'simplistic' and 'amateurish' without considering the multi-layered narratives at play and their importance in the context of South African exile, anti-apartheid activism, and pan-Africanism.

Artistically, Hallett's visual and technical experiments realised for the book covers represent a major shift in practice, from analogue photography to graphic design. This is best exemplified by his cover for Nigerian author Nkem Nwankwo's book *My Mercedes is Better than Yours* (1976) – an artwork that concludes my argument and opens the exhibition potential of Hallett's book covers.

CHAPTER ONE

BEFORE THE GAZE: DISTRICT SIX AND THE IMPACT OF LITERATURE IN HALLETT'S INTELLECTUAL FORMATION

The early stages of an artistic practice is not always easy to pinpoint. Often the intellectual development, the formation of one's thinking, the interest in a topic, a visual or aesthetic inclination, results from subconscious processes. Little does one know, at the time of its creation, the legacy of an image or object. Writing on George Hallett's early photography practice is no less easy. Gathering and dating his first images would require an examination of his personal archive. The latter being currently inaccessible, one can only rely on his printed photographs and reproductions from books, journals, and other published material, as well as written and oral accounts mentioning his work. George Hallett started practicing photography in the 1960s. A review of the early material featuring his photographs shows that, when reproduced, these were generally undated and uncaptioned. A listing of these images was therefore necessary to get a clear overview of his work before he left South Africa in 1970. Using the available material, and through cross-referencing sources, it appears that his main pre-exile corpus is composed of about ninety known (published or printed) photographs, of which fifty-four were taken in the District Six area of Cape Town.³⁹ Eleven of these images are dated 1968, two are dated 1969, four are

³⁹ It is understood that a photographic body of work implies the existence of a larger number of images in the form of negatives (or image files in digital photography) from which the photographer or picture editor selects the images that respond to either the photographer's visual or narrative intention, or the editor's vision. I also need to add that, as this research progresses,

dated late-1960s, and thirty-seven are undated. With more than half of his pre-exile images dealing with District Six, this series imposes itself as a main topic of Hallett's early practice. It also delineates a context within which to study it.

Most of Hallett's photographs of this area have been part of the District Six Museum's collection since the late 1990s.⁴⁰ As such they belong to the collective history of this community. They have *de facto* become images of historical value and have gained a status of national heritage. But neither their display at the museum, nor the book *District Six Revisited* published in 2007 after the eponymous exhibition curated by Hallett in 1997, featuring both his work and that of his peers, provide enough in-depth interpretative keys to his individual practice as a photographer. Very few of these images are captioned, to begin with. In looking at these photographs, it is therefore important to consider District Six as the fertile societal and creative terrain that led to this collection of images. There is also a need to reconstruct the scenes and narratives explored by Hallett and how his gaze is translated into an aesthetics of its own. Since the photographic eye is not neutral, but is rather informed by one's lived experience, memory, knowledge and thinking, I propose to first examine Hallett's intellectual

more images are resurfacing from various other sources, which means that, this first survey of Hallett's pre-exile corpus can potentially be updated.

⁴⁰ Hallett donated a collection of images in the context of the exhibition *District Six Revisited* that he curated at the museum. Most of the District Six Museum collections come from donations. For a history of the museum, see *Recalling Community in Cape Town. Creating and Curating the District Six Museum* ed. by Rassool and Prosalendis, and Annie E. Coombes, *History after Apartheid. Visual Culture and Public Memory in a Democratic South Africa* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2003), pp. 116-148.

formation, in an attempt to provide a better grasp of the thinking that preceded and informed his visual practice.

This chapter discusses the development of George Hallett's intellectual thinking before the emergence of his interest in photography. It also establishes the importance of District Six, as a location and cultural environment, in this early stage. The first section draws from Hallett's first visit to this neighbourhood as a child, and builds on his recollection of this experience as an entry point to the area's social history. The second part focuses on the influence of his teacher Richard Rive who introduced him to literature, particularly writers from District Six, Johannesburg, and the rest of Africa. Finally, I am considering the similarities between District Six and Sophiatown as fertile grounds from which emerged the narratives and tropes that defined the 1950s and 1960s black creativity that informed Hallett's mind and, in turn, led to the formation of his photographic eye.

I. District Six: a brief history and social portrait

It is often stated that George Hallett was born in District Six. He also makes this claim in an interview with John Edwin Mason – Associate Professor in African history and the history of photography at the University of Virginia – to whom he said:

I was born in District Six, strangely enough, although my parents didn't live there. But there was a place called St. Monica's, I think, a maternity home. So I was born in District Six and grew up with my grandparents in Hout Bay.⁴¹

Although he most certainly made this statement in good faith, sources indicate that Saint Monica Nursery Home is in Bo-Kaap.⁴² Which would therefore situate Hallett's place of birth in this neighbouring area rather than District Six.⁴³

It is more likely that George Hallett first visited District Six as a child, as he describes it in *District Six Revisited*: 'I was first taken to District Six by my grandmother when she visited an aunt who lived in Bloemhof flats'.⁴⁴ He also shares his first impressions as a six-year-old, mentioning the double-decker bus, the 'strange old buildings with ornate façades and pavement throbbing with the hustle and bustle of Saturday morning shoppers'. And he continues: 'We passed cafes and restaurants, spice shops, shoe shops and colourful dress shops; all seemingly owned by people from my community.'⁴⁵

⁴¹ John Edwin Mason, 'An interview with George Hallett', *Social Dynamics*, 40:1 (2014), 200.

⁴² In his book on medical missions in South Africa, medical practitioner Michael Gelfand gives a clear location of the nursery home. Saint Monica's first maternity hospital "lies in Lion Street on the boundary, just above the Malay Quarter". It expanded across several sites but all were located in the neighbourhood of Bo-Kaap. See Michael Gelfand, *Christian doctor and nurse. The history of medical missions in South Africa from 1799-1976* (Sandton: Aitken family and friends, 1984), p. 96. Saint Monica's home is also mentioned in Shamil Jeppie, 'Popular Culture and Carnival in Cape Town: the 1940s and 1950s' in *The Struggle for District Six: Past and Present* ed. by Shamil Jeppie and Crain Soudien (Cape Town: Buchu Books, 1990), p. 75.

⁴³ This information might seem anecdotal but, given the nature of District Six's history and its reliance on accounts from its former residents, in terms of analysis and interpretation, it is important to clarify the point from which Hallett related to, and engaged with, District Six.

⁴⁴ *District Six Revisited*, ed. by Hallett and McKenzie, p. 6.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

One could not say for certain what part of this account owed to Hallett's actual memory of that visit, and which one was informed by his experience of District Six as a late teenager or young adult. But these impressions do indeed capture an essence of the area.

District Six holds a particular place in the history of South Africa. It gained significant attention after it was marked for demolition in the 1960s. It also symbolises a legacy sustained by the collective drive to retrieve the history and memory of a place that was home to a long-established Capetonian community before it was torn by the apartheid regime.

Nestled between Cape Town's harbour and Devil's Peak mountain, this area was initially known as District Twelve or 'Kanaladorp', a name whose origins are uncertain. In an essay entitled 'The Early Years of 'District Six': District Twelve in the Eighteen-Forties', South African scholar Digby Warren mentions that the name might have come from a Malay word meaning 'to do a favour' or 'to help'. Others, he writes, have argued that 'it referred to the fact that the area lay across from the 'canal' or ditch called 'Capel Sloop''.⁴⁶ District Six got its name after the Municipal Act of 1867 restructured Cape Town into six districts.

In the early nineteenth century, the area only consisted of a few large wine farms that were then subdivided. And on these plots, Dutch-speaking white Capetonians

⁴⁶ Digby Warren, 'The Early years of "District Six": District Twelve in the Eighteen-Forties' in *CABO*, 3:4 (1985) 13. See also Bruce Franck, George Manuel, Denis Hatfield, *District Six* (Johannesburg: Longmans, 1967), p. 1.

began building their garden houses.⁴⁷ Then, followed the construction of houses for the officers stationed at the nearby Fort de Knokke⁴⁸ and, later on, ‘white residents and coloured artisans began to filter into the area.’⁴⁹ Between 1842 and 1854, the number of properties grew exponentially. The district also saw a vast increase in population. Warren attributes the area’s expansion to its proximity to a new town market⁵⁰ and to ‘the influx of non-whites into the city following the final emancipation of slaves in 1838’.⁵¹ Expanding on this point, he writes that:

Many freed apprentices migrated to Cape Town, often to settle in overcrowded, shabby quarters of the town. Some found employment as artisans, tradesmen or domestic servants or became fishermen – particularly the Malays – and other became vagrants, squatting on the Cape Flats⁵².

This information is also corroborated by historian Vivian Bickford-Smith in his essay ‘The Origins and Early History of District Six’, in which he lists the same professions⁵³ and adds that, owing to its location near the harbour, the docks were one of the main employers, along with other industries like the ‘railways, the building trade, fishing and food and clothing production.’⁵⁴ However, he remarks,

⁴⁷ Chris Schoeman, *District Six: The Spirit of Kanala* (Cape Town: Human & Rousseau, 1994), p. 1.

⁴⁸ Fort Knokke was a fortification established by the Dutch colonisers in 1744. It was demolished in 1926 to make way for Woodstock railway station.

⁴⁹ Digby Warren, p. 13.

⁵⁰ Ibid. and Schoeman, p. 1.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Warren, p. 14.

⁵³ Vivian Bickford-Smith, ‘The Origins and Early History of District Six’ in *The Struggle for District Six*, p. 36.

⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 38.

the predominantly seasonal nature of these activities, maintained the workers in precarious situations.

The growing presence of a poor coloured population was negatively perceived by those of a higher class. As a matter of fact, Bickford-Smith explains that although there existed a diversity of social classes, the arrival of the railway and tramway in the 1860s and 1870s encouraged the wealthier inhabitants to move to less dense areas.⁵⁵ District Six then became inhabited by a lower class composed of a community which cultural mix he describes as follows:

By 1900 the largest component was formed by people whom the Cape Government referred to variously as “Malay”, “Mixed and Other” or “Coloured” – i.e., those Capetonians of darkish pigmentation who were descendents of slaves and/or “mixed” marriages with or between Khoi, Africans who spoke Bantu languages (hereafter referred to simply as Africans) and Colonists from Europe or their descendents (hereafter referred to simply as Whites). The District also had large numbers of recent immigrants from Britain, several thousand Jews from Tsarist Russia and several more thousand Mfengu, Gcaleka and Gaika from the Eastern Cape. But a vast range of nationalities were represented [...] including considerable numbers of Indians, Chinese and Australians.⁵⁶

The characteristics of this population reflect Hallett’s observation on the shops owned by ‘people from my community’ as he himself was of mixed heritage and classified as coloured under apartheid’s racial terminology.

⁵⁵ Ibid., pp. 36-37.

⁵⁶ Ibid., pp. 37.

Among the sources used by Digby Warren to examine District Six's early history are letters written to the Cape Town municipality from which, he notes, 'emerges the picture of a vibrant community in the early days of its development.'⁵⁷ But the letters also document the residents' multiple complaints about the living conditions. Indeed, District Six might have been conveniently located near the harbour, in other words, near a dynamic economic centre, but living in the area had its challenges. Warren mentions crime and disorder among the concerns brought to the city council's attention: vagrants congregating in an abandoned building, the nuisance of prostitution or the absentee landlords leaving their properties in a state of disrepair.⁵⁸

District Six lacked proper housing and was characterised by overcrowded tenements. No provision was made by the public authorities for sanitation, proper water supply, or any of the amenities required in dense urban environments. This notably resulted in two waves of epidemics: the smallpox epidemic of 1882 and the Bubonic Plague that hit Cape Town in 1901.⁵⁹ The deprived conditions and lack of opportunities also sparked the "Hunger Riots" of 1906, an escalation of a demonstration that culminated into 'rioters attempting to steal food and clothing.'⁶⁰

Bickford-Smith argues that the poverty that affected the District Sixers is to be understood in relation to 'the political economy of wider Cape Town'.⁶¹ One

⁵⁷ Warren, p. 13.

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 14.

⁵⁹ Bickford-Smith, pp. 39-40.

⁶⁰ Ibid, p. 41.

⁶¹ Ibid, p. 42.

could also add that the ‘structural poverty’⁶² to which he refers was the result of a racially-based system designed by the European colonisers and their descendants to affect the entirety of ‘non-European’ South Africans well before the advent of the apartheid regime in 1948.⁶³ Like in other colonised African countries, this process of disenfranchisement operated through the appropriation of land and natural resources, the prevention of access to employment opportunities that would have alleviated this poverty, and a poor educational system that, not only banned local cultures and traditional forms of knowledge transmission, but also limited education to the needs of the colonial system rather than personal aspirations. In this respect, District Six bore a number of similarities with other ‘non-white’ or mixed urban concentrations born out of South Africa’s economic growth. An example of which is Sophiatown in Johannesburg, a neighbourhood that will be discussed in the third section of this chapter.

Along these unfavourable conditions, was the multifaceted social fabric developed by the Sixers. Numerous sources attest that, it is this social fabric that held the community together, notably in cases of financial hardship or illness, through family circles and friendships born out of neighbourhood proximity or collegial ties. This bond ran through reinvented communities that, not only

⁶² Ibid, p. 38.

⁶³ It would be fair to say that the history of racial segregation in South Africa began with the European invasion starting from the middle of the seventeenth century. For an understanding of the period that concerns us, and an overview of the discriminatory laws introduced by the white rulers before apartheid, see Leonard Thompson, ‘Chapter 5: The Segregation Era, 1910-1948’, in *A History of South Africa* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1990), pp. 154-186.

strived to preserve their cultures and religions of origin, but also shaped a new vernacular urban culture.

In an essay in which he advocates for a reliance on former residents' oral testimonies as legitimate sources serving the reconstitution of District Six's social history, South African historian Bill Nasson, paints a kaleidoscopic picture of a place in which the streets served as a stage for 'the great repertoire of other activities which the inhabitants of District Six imbued with their own meaning.'⁶⁴

Nasson suggests that, perhaps because of their trying existence and environment, 'working class people in District Six developed their own ways of moulding a living urban landscape to their requirements.'⁶⁵

To Hallett's description of buzzing Saturday shopping, can be added the image of '[a]rmies of poor children swarmed over pavements, turning streets into fiercely competitive arenas for playing at marbles or tops and string.'⁶⁶ Nasson also talks of well-known street characters, corner gamblers, hustlers of all sorts, and of the diversity of street entertainment consisting in 'pavement draughts and domino players, small male voice choirs, and buskers who sang and danced in front of cinema queues outside the Star, the Avalon, the British Bioscope or the National.'⁶⁷

⁶⁴ Bill Nasson, 'Oral History and the Reconstruction of District Six', in *The Struggle for District*, p. 49.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 57.

Another important form of reclaiming the streets, specific to District Six was the ‘Coon carnival’⁶⁸ which symbolism is encapsulated in the words of South African historian Shamil Jeppie:

The occupation of public space by the dispossessed the control of movement in this commercially hallowed space by the crowd, the shift of focus from the powerful onto the powerless, the motley garb and bright colours of troupers, the overt presence of the transvestite, known locally as “moffie”, at the head of nearly every ‘coon’ troupe, the uncontrolled mixing of the sexes, generations also colours, the near absence and powerlessness of the police, the thong of proletarian music and the happy but cynical lyrics of the carnival songs all bear testimony to the momentary anarchic character of the festival, to the symbolic inversion of the dominant social and moral order.⁶⁹

These are but some of the cultural manifestations that emerged from District Six. They formed part of the Sixers’ lives and, to quote Nasson, translated the ‘subjective’ aspects of their existence. They represented ‘the tissue of aspirations, wants, and frustrations’ that provided material to District Six ‘novelists like Alex

⁶⁸ The Coon Carnival dates back to the late nineteenth century. Performed by Cape Malays, or members of the coloured communities, the carnival is said to have emerged in Cape Town after the visit of an American minstrel band to South Africa. Minstrel shows started in the 1830s in America. They featured blackfaced white performers stereotyping and deriding black people. It was adopted by Cape slaves as a form of New Year celebration on 2nd January, which was the slaves’ day off. Minstrels and blackface continue to be considered offensive by black communities globally. In the context of South Africa, one could argue that the Coon Carnival is one of the markers of the different experiences between coloured and black communities both in terms of performative representations of the body, and in terms of occupation of the public space.

⁶⁹ Shamil Jeppie, ‘Popular culture and carnival in Cape Town: the 1940s and 1950s’, in *The Struggle for District Six: Past and Present*, p. 70.

la Guma and Richard Rive, or poets like Adam Small.⁷⁰ They were also reflected in the work of the visual artists and photographers who practiced in, or captured, District Six, like George Hallett did.

Of particular interest is Hallett's first introduction to literature through his English teacher, the author Richard Rive a pioneering figure of Cape Town's school of black authors that emerged during the apartheid era. Not only was Rive instrumental in opening Hallett's imaginary but, as we shall see in the coming chapters, he was also the first point of connection between Hallett and writers who would later become his friends, the subject of his portraiture, or whose novels would be the topic of his visual compositions. For this reason, it is worth delving into the literary world to which Rive belonged and in which the young Hallett quenched his thirst for knowledge, in a context where tertiary education was limited for South Africans of mixed and black ethnic backgrounds.

II. The influence of Richard Rive, District Six writers, and black literature

The impact of Richard Rive on Hallett's intellectual development cannot be underestimated. Rive's introduction of Hallett to the world of literature represents a major part of his thinking process, well before he set his mind on becoming a photographer.

Born in District Six, Richard Rive (1930-1989) was of mixed heritage. He grew up on 201 Caledon Street with his mother and never knew his father who passed

⁷⁰ Bill Nasson, p. 50.

away not long after he was born. In his autobiography *Writing Black*, he remembers growing up ‘in an atmosphere of shabbiness and depravation’.⁷¹ This is how he recalled the area:

In truth, the slum was damp, dirty and dank. As children we ran around barefooted in patched clothes, howling at drunks and shouting obscene encouragement at barechested street-fighters. [...] I endured a harrowing childhood in District Six, where drunkenness, debauchery and police raids were the order of the day.⁷²

The description of his living conditions does not differ from the many accounts by former residents or reports on District Six’s overcrowded tenements. The Rive household counted up to nine members in a one-bedroom accommodation⁷³, a number that reduced after one of Rive’s brother was found dead in Rondebosch⁷⁴, and another brother and sister both got married and ‘fled the District as soon as possible’.⁷⁵

After a difficult start at school – he ran away from his first three infant schools⁷⁶ – his primary education at St Mark’s and Trafalgar Junior schools became more settled. It is then that he began reading ‘avidly and indiscriminately anything [he] could lay [his] eyes on.’⁷⁷ He also writes: ‘By the time I was at Trafalgar High my

⁷¹ Richard Rive, *Writing Black* (Cape Town: David Philips, 1981), p. 10.

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 12.

⁷³ The information of one-bedroom dwelling is mentioned by Shaun Viljoen in his biography of Rive in which he cites Noor Ebrahim and Joe Schaffers, two former Sixers who knew the young Rive. *Richard Rive, a partial biography* (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2013), p. 5.

⁷⁴ Rondebosch is Southern suburb of Cape Town.

⁷⁵ Richard Rive, p. 13.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

reading was partially to escape from the realities of the depravation surrounding me.⁷⁸ He joined what he called ‘the rundown library at the Hyman Liberman Institute in Muir Street’⁷⁹ and it is there that emerged his critical thinking when he started noticing the racial bias of European and American literature with its ‘glorifying of the White image’.⁸⁰ Identifying with the ‘poor’, the ‘subdued savage Black tribesmen’, ‘the Indian rebels’⁸¹, he began reading African-American writers who were figures of the Harlem Renaissance⁸²: Richard Wright, Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, Jean Toomer and Cedric Dover⁸³, as well as South African author Peter Abrahams of whom he said:

Peter Abrahams described his life and mine in *Tell Freedom*. A new world with which I could identify opened up to me. I now knew that there were others who felt the way I did and, what was more, articulated it in a way I had never realised was possible. I was now able to assess my own situation through theirs; to

⁷⁸ Ibid. The role of literature as a medium for emotional or psychological relief is an important aspect to consider within contexts of social marginalisation.

⁷⁹ Ibid. p. 19. The Hyman Liberman Library is also mentioned by South African scholar and former resident Fakier Jessa in his self-published book *Echoes – Tales from District Six* in which he says: “The Hyman Liberman library was the big brother of literature for Sixers”, Cape Town: Fakier Jessa, pp. 33-34. See also Amelia Lewis, ‘Reflection on the Education in District Six’, ‘The Liberman Institute with its library, crèche, discussion groups, physical education and dancing classes was the nursery for much of the cultural activity which thrived in the area’, in Jeppie and Soudien, p. 190.

⁸⁰ Rive, p. 19.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Harlem Renaissance was a black cultural movement based in Harlem, New York that spanned the 1920s and 1930s in America. It has influenced numerous black intellectuals and artists in Africa and its Diasporas, including in Paris (France) where it inspired the Négritude movement in the 1930s.

⁸³ Ibid. See also Shaun Viljoen, p. 30.

rationalise my own feelings through theirs. I could break with my literary dependence on White Folks who only described the Ways of other White folks.⁸⁴

With these newly gained critical tools, Rive, now an educated member of the coloured middle class who could afford living on Walmer Estate⁸⁵, ‘became more aware of [his] position as an unfranchised, Black non-citizen’. It is from this position that he started writing, ‘producing [his] first, raw, angry prose, which was accepted for publication by left-wing magazines and those catering for an emerging Black readership.’⁸⁶

Rive earned his teacher’s degree in 1951 or 1952 from Hewat Training College in Athlone.⁸⁷ After teaching at Vasco High School for a year, he landed a position at South Peninsula High School in Diep River, a school ‘restricted by law to members of the ‘Coloured’ group’⁸⁸, where Hallett was a pupil. He also moved to Grassy Park, where Hallett’s parents lived, to be closer to the school. Of his kinship with his pupils he said:

I felt very close to my pupils and experienced with them the same hopes and despairs. They were no different from children anywhere else in the world except that because of the circumstances in which they found themselves they had built up an acute political awareness.⁸⁹

⁸⁴ Richard Rive, pp. 19-20.

⁸⁵ Walmer Estate was the upper-class section of District Six.

⁸⁶ Rive, p. 20.

⁸⁷ Viljoen, p. 34; Rive, p. 152.

⁸⁸ Rive, p. 172.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

This bond extended to Rive introducing some of his pupils to his own literary circles. In his interview with J. E. Mason, Hallett mentions how Rive, who was his teacher in English literature, encouraged him to read and, in the late 1950s, introduced him to writer James Matthews, artist and writer Peter Clarke, as well as Jan Rabie and Uys Krige, members from the Sestigers, a group of progressive white Afrikaans-speaking authors who were opposed to apartheid.⁹⁰ For Hallett, these introductions were life changing events. They gave him access to a world to which, legally speaking, he was not allowed, based on the terms of apartheid that enforced a colour bar on the social interactions between its citizens. Rive's literary circle was a nourishing intellectual environment for Hallett's young impressionable mind. It also provided a space for positive cross-cultural exchanges that gave him a view of society and the world that was more nuanced than the clear-cut ethnic divides and stereotypes the regime sought to impose with its propagandist message of white supremacy and black inferiority. Being part of this circle also meant being an agent of transgression of apartheid laws which, in essence, is also what defined and sealed the fate of District Six, an area that harboured cultural mixes.

To Hallett, not only did these encounters spark impactful creative conversations, they also resulted in lifelong friendships⁹¹ and, as mentioned earlier, became the source and subject of a large part of his body of work. For these reasons, it is worth investigating these literary links as they provide the context and background story to some of the photographs that are the focus of my research on Hallett.

⁹⁰ Mason, 201.

⁹¹ Shaun Viljoen writes that Rive made a lasting impression on many of his "more talented pupils" and "became a loyal comrade and friend". He also quotes two of his former pupils whose statements convey the same inspiration as the one found in Hallett's words, pp. 53-55.

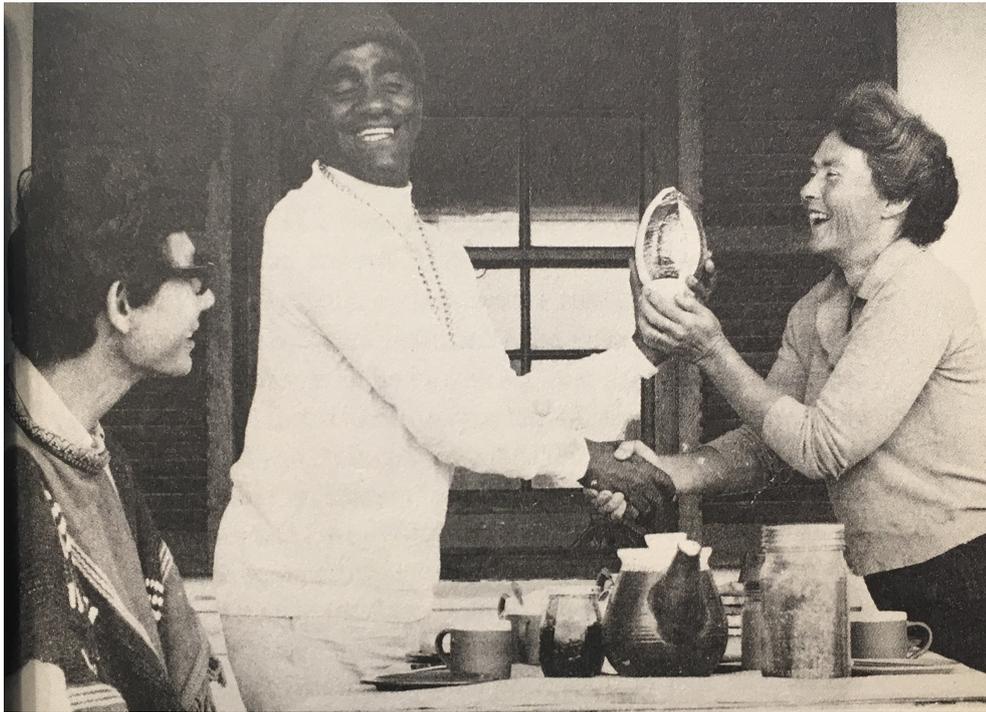


Fig. 4. Original caption: ‘An impish, delighted, camp Richard Rive, performing with Marjorie Wallace what seems to be a mock award ceremony, with George Hallett playing the audience (photographer: Jan Rabie using Hallett’s camera; courtesy George Hallett)’. Source: Shaun Viljoen.

Accounts of Rive’s ties to his South African peers are related in his autobiography *Writing Black*. Rive met Uys Krige and Jack Cope in 1955 after winning a short-story competition run by the local newspaper *New Age* with a piece entitled ‘Dagga Smoker’s Dream’.⁹² His stories ‘Black and Brown Song’⁹³ and ‘African Song’⁹⁴ were also published in *Drum* magazine where South African author Es’kia Mphahlele was fiction editor. A couple of years earlier, ‘The Bench’ (1953), won a *Drum* magazine prize and one of the judges was Langston

⁹² *New Age*, September 1955.

⁹³ *Drum*, May 1955.

⁹⁴ *Drum*, June 1956.

Hughes with whom Rive began a correspondence that lasted until the end of Hughes's life in 1967.⁹⁵

It is around that time that Rive found out about South African poet James Matthews and writer Alex La Guma, both former residents of District Six. Rive met Matthews in the early 1950s through *Golden City Post* Cape Town editor Barney Desai.⁹⁶ Matthews, then a telephone operator, wrote in his spare time. Rive had read some of his short stories in the *Weekend Argus*. He, La Guma, and Alf Wannenburg – whom Rive had met at the University of Cape Town while enrolling for a Bachelors of Arts Degree in English – were all part of a literary discussion group which Rive had created in the second half of the 1950s at a friend of his, the activist Jan Hoogendyk.⁹⁷ Their collection of short stories published under the title *Quartet* (1963) is the result of this literary association.

Rive also mentions being part of 'a small group of intense writers, painters and actors' while still undergraduate. The group met at Jan Rabie's home and included literary figures like Breyten Breytenbach and Ingrid Jonker.⁹⁸

⁹⁵ On Richard Rive's friendship with Langston Hughes, see Shaun Viljoen, 'Langston Hughes and Richard Rive: Notes Towards a Biography of Richard Rive' in *English studies in Africa*, 41:2 (1998), 55-63 and 'Proclamations and Silences: "Race", Self-Fashioning and Sexuality in the Trans-Atlantic Correspondence between Langston Hughes and Richard Rive' in *Social Dynamics*, 33:2 (2007), 105-122.

⁹⁶ Rive, p. 20.

⁹⁷ Rive, p. 30. This discussion group is also mentioned by Roger Field in *Alex la Guma: A literary and political biography* (Oxford: James Currey, 2010), p. 138. Hoogendyk was one of the accused of the Treason Trial in 1956.

⁹⁸ Rive, p. 101.



Fig. 5. James Matthews and Richard Rive at Rive's flat on Rosmead Ave, Kenilworth, Cape Town, late 1960s. Photo: George Hallett.

Another creative mind who made his mark on Rive and Matthews was the painter and writer Peter E. Clarke (1929-2014). Like Rive, Clarke, who also had stories published in *Drum* magazine in the mid-1950s (sometimes under the pseudonym Peter Kumalo)⁹⁹, had first known Matthews through his pieces in Cape Town newspapers.¹⁰⁰ In 1956, the trio collaborated on a short story called 'Willy-Boy!', published in *Drum* magazine.¹⁰¹ The cross-pollination at work in this creative experiment seems to have reached well beyond the trio as it has been suggested that Alex La Guma's character Willieboy in his novel *A Walk in the Night* (1962), set in District Six, 'draws heavily in style and content' from the piece published in *Drum*.¹⁰²

⁹⁹ Viljoen, p. 44.

¹⁰⁰ Willemse, p. 7.

¹⁰¹ *Drum*, April 1956, pp. 50-55.

¹⁰² Willemse, p. 21. This fact is also addressed by Roger Field, p. 115.

The year of their collaborative *Drum* piece, Clarke, who had worked for eleven years in Simon's Town dockyard in Cape Town, decided to quit his job and take a three-month vacation in the farm village of Tesselaarsdal¹⁰³ to focus on his art. Both Matthews and Rive visited him; visits that inspired their writing, as in the case of Rive's short story 'No Room at Solitaire' that was included in *Quartet*¹⁰⁴ and James Matthews's fictionalised autobiography *The Party is Over* (1987).¹⁰⁵ When Barney Desai moved to Johannesburg in 1955 to manage a cinema in Martindale near the neighbourhood of Sophiatown, he invited Rive to visit him. Rive took this opportunity to meet with some of the staff from *Drum* magazine. He knew *Drum* editor Sylvester Stein and the magazine's owner Jim Bailey. Stein introduced him to writer Casey Motsisi, Bloke Modisane, and Lewis Nkosi. He met Es'kia Mphahlele who took him to a social event at Nadine Gordimer's. He also met Todd Matshikiza and Jakes Modisapi.¹⁰⁶ Rive returned to Cape Town inspired by this trip.¹⁰⁷ One could say that he had met with his peers from Johannesburg. Indeed, it is often considered that what Rive, Matthews, Clarke and La Guma were expressing through their writing was the Cape Town counterpart, albeit in a much smaller scale, of the Johannesburg-based *Drum* writers.¹⁰⁸ As we will see in the next section, District Six and

¹⁰³ Tesselaarsdal is a province located 140 kilometers south east of Cape Town.

¹⁰⁴ Willemse, p 10.

¹⁰⁵ James Matthews, *The Party is Over* (Cape Town: Kwela Books, 1997), p. 159 and 168.

¹⁰⁶ Rive, pp. 23-24.

¹⁰⁷ Rive, p. 28.

¹⁰⁸ An observation made by South African scholar Hein Willemse, p. 17 and Professor Brian O'Connell former Vice-Chancellor at the University of Western Cape, in his foreword to *Quartet*'s 2008 edition, p.12.

Sophiatown shared some of the particularities that nurtured black creativity in the 1950s and 60s.

III. Sophiatown and District Six: bedrocks of 1950s-1960s black creativity

When discussing black urban culture in the 1950s-60s, among the first names that come to mind is *Drum* magazine. Much has already been written on this publication, notably about the photographers the magazine nurtured. While photography remains the central topic of this research, in this context and particularly in my attempt to map George Hallett's intellectual formation and the impression literature left on his young mind, it is relevant to consider the environment that saw the emergence of *Drum*'s school of writers in Johannesburg, in relation to Richard Rive and more generally District Six.

Drum was a monthly magazine that had a historical impact on black South African culture in the 1950s. It was created by former South African cricket player and sports journalist Robert Crisp who was its founding editor; owned by James Bailey (also known as Jim Bailey), son of gold millionaire Sir Abe Bailey; and co-directed with South African lawyer Robin Stratford. In his chapter on *Drum* entitled 'A Fine Thing': The African Drum', Darren Newbury, Professor of Photographic History at the University of Brighton, suggests that part of the rationale behind the creation of the magazine lied between an interest in

capitalising on the growing urbanisation and literacy of black South Africans, and an awareness of the ‘impact of an independent black press’.¹⁰⁹

The magazine started in Cape Town in 1951 under the name *The African Drum*. The first four issues of the magazine were unsuccessful. This is mostly attributed to the fact that the image of tribal Africans it conveyed, both visually and editorially, did not resonate in the mind of its intended readers, the urban Africans. As its second editor Anthony Sampson, commented in his book about the magazine, ‘the tribal *Drum* was part of a very general attitude of Europeans towards the African in his tribal state.’¹¹⁰

Sampson, then a recent Oxford graduate, was brought in by Jim Bailey to join the editorial office in 1951. The office was relocating to Johannesburg and the magazine renamed *Drum* from the October issue onward. Crisp left in November as differences in editorial vision between him and Bailey grew. The former was clinging onto ‘the romantic tribal *Drum*’ while the latter knew that the magazine had to change radically if it was to survive.¹¹¹ Newbury takes this point further: ‘the *Drum*, which began to take shape in Johannesburg in the second half of 1951 was visually and ideologically distinct from the *African Drum* launched by Crisp in Cape Town’¹¹². He explains:

Whereas Crisp turned to ‘art and literature and cultural development’ to lift black South Africans out of the squalor of modern urban existence [...], his successors

¹⁰⁹ Darren Newbury, *Defiant Images: Photography and Apartheid South Africa* (Pretoria: Unisa Press, 2009), p. 84.

¹¹⁰ Anthony Sampson, *Drum: An African Adventure – And Afterwards* (London, Sydney, Auckland, Toronto: Hodder and Stoughton, 1983 (1956)), p. 21.

¹¹¹ *Ibid*, p. 22.

¹¹² Newbury, p. 107.

turned instead to popular culture as a creative refuge from, and form of subversion of, the degradation and dehumanization apartheid forced upon the black population of South Africa.¹¹³

Editorially, *Drum* was close in genre to a lifestyle or cultural magazine. The sections included news topics sometimes in an investigative format, features on society, arts and sports, fiction stories, photo essays, editors and readers' letters, with a significant presence of advertisements targeted at black consumers. An important change made from the very early days of the new *Drum*, was the inclusion of a black editorial voice. An African editorial board was appointed to 'compensate' for the founders' whiteness, to quote Sampson.¹¹⁴ The first members included Job Rathebe, Henry Nxumalo who also brought in Todd Matshikiza. Building an African team was no easy task, Sampson remarked, as 'there were few precedents, and no one was qualified'.¹¹⁵ It seems that a lot of the editorial staff landed at *Drum* through networks of acquaintances since few, if any, black South Africans would have been trained in journalism owing to the limitations of the educational system during apartheid. But for some, it is their writing that led them directly to the magazine. Like Can Themba who was offered a position after winning a *Drum* short stories competition. Themba's writing was predominantly informed by his experience of living in Sophiatown, a township of Johannesburg to which he introduced the newly arrived editor.⁷⁸ In *Sof'town Blues: Images from the black '50s*, Sampson shared

¹¹³ Ibid., p. 108.

¹¹⁴ Sampson, p. 23.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., p. 47.

⁷⁸ Sampson shares his first visit and experience of Sophiatown, pp. 55-65.

his memories of joining *Drum* and talked with enthusiasm of the creative energy existing in ‘black Johannesburg’, adding that most of its creative activity was centered in Sophiatown:

In fact Sophiatown – a slum suburb 5 miles from Johannesburg’s city centre – teemed with criminals, drunks and prostitutes. It was filthy, overcrowded and it stank, and it had a very high murder rate. But it became the heartland of developing urban black culture – it vibrated with activity, talk and excitement.¹¹⁶

Further down he also mentions that ‘most of the writers, musicians and artists in black Johannesburg gravitated around Sophiatown’.¹¹⁷ Interestingly, these words echo the descriptions of District Six as a poor but creatively thriving environment. South African scholar Crain Soudien also notes the similarities between both neighbourhoods:

Two places which are emblematic of urban life for working-class South Africans during the fifties and the sixties are undoubtedly Sophiatown in Johannesburg and District Six in Cape Town. Of course, there were similar places elsewhere in the country, most notably Southend in Port Elizabeth and Marabastad in Pretoria. But District Six and Sophiatown were responsible, in their different ways, for holding up the rest of South Africa how working-class people might *manage* their oppression and, simultaneously, groom and cultivate their talents.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁶ Anthony Sampson, ‘Black Johannesburg in the 1950s’, in *Soft town Blues: Images from the black ‘50s* ed. by Jürgen Schadeberg and Klaus Humann (Pinegowrie: Jürgen Schadeberg, 1994), p. 12.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Crain Soudien, ‘Social conditions, cultural and political life in working-class Cape Town, 1950 to 1990’, in Willemsse, pp. 23-24.

The parallel is also evidenced in sources examining life in Sophiatown, like in David B. Coplan's *In Township Tonight! Three Centuries of South Africa Black City Music and Theatre* in which the South African social anthropologist says that 'the district was [...] multi-racial, and its white, Asian, and coloured residents and shop owners were generally accepted as members of the community'.¹¹⁹ He also positions Sophiatown as a major cultural hub:

Located not far from the heart of South Africa's industrial and financial capital, Sophiatown set the pace, giving urban African culture its pulse, rhythm, and style during the 1940s and 1950s. Noisy and dramatic, its untarred, potholed streets ran by the communal water taps and toilets and the rectangular jumble of yards walled in with brick, wood, and iron. A new synthesis of urban African culture sprang up here, shouting for recognition. Materially poor but intensely social; crime-ridden and violent but neighbourly and self-protective; proud, bursting with music and literature, swaggering with personality, simmering with intellectual and political militance, Sophiatown was a slum of dreams, a battleground of the heart in the war for the city and even the country's suppressed black soul.¹²⁰

The creativity springing from Sophiatown was such that it has even been called a 'Sophiatown Renaissance', similar to New York's Harlem Renaissance in the 1920s-30s. Black popular culture drew inspiration from multiple sources, notably cinema and community halls that hosted music performances. Youth culture was

¹¹⁹ David Copland, *In Township Tonight! Three Centuries of South Africa Black City Music and Theatre* (Auckland Park: Jacana, 2007), p. 172. (First published by Longman in 1985).

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 171-172. See also p. 183 third and fourth paragraphs.

particularly influenced by ‘the United States in general, and African-American achievements in particular.’¹²¹ Coplans continues:

The Chevrolet convertible, driven by elegant gangsters, became one of its dominant symbols and not inappropriately so, as gangsters exercised physical control over the streets and expressive control over fashion, performance, and other trends in popular culture. The leading gangs sported names such as the Americans, Green Arrows, Vultures, Spoilers, and Berliners taken from the American popular media. African men readily adopted ‘zoot suits’ and American slang, and English-speaking Sophiatown residents proudly referred to their community as ‘Little Harlem’.¹²²

The writings that emerged from Sophiatown and District Six were set within similar types of contexts and drew from similar inspirations. Just like in District Six, Sophiatown’s tumultuous life provided rich material to the writers and artists who navigated that scene. The writers were very much inspired by the Harlem Renaissance. Richard Rive’s biographer Shaun Viljoen specifies that, this inspiration occurred ‘through the work of the writer who most directly influenced the whole *Drum* school of writers, Peter Abrahams’¹²³:

Realism, a particular style of writing that represents place, time, people and things as they appear in everyday life, was attractive to black South African writers in the 1950s as the post war, anti-colonial movements gained momentum around the

¹²¹ Ibid., p. 176.

¹²² Copeland, p. 177. On the American influence on Sophiatown, see Rob Nixon, *Homelands, Harlem and Hollywood* (New York and London: Routledge, 1994), pp. 11-41.

¹²³ Viljoen, pp. 30-31.

world and defiance marked the anti-apartheid mood at home. Abraham's gritty realism, detailed depiction of local settings and autobiographically inspired content are narrative elements in the work of American Harlem Renaissance writers. In South Africa, Abrahams became a model for both black journalists and fiction writers of the 1950s.¹²⁴

A fact also confirmed by Es'kia Mphahlele, author and fiction editor at *Drum* from 1955 to 1957.¹²⁵

This literary lineage forms part of the wealth of knowledge Rive passed on to the young George Hallett who remembers those days in Mason's interview:

[...] during that period I was learning. I was with James and Peter and Richard Rive discussing the writers in New York and elsewhere, in a magical world that we created in Silvertown. We were inspired. We had an informal black studies group. We also studied literature from other parts of Africa. We were in isolation, but there was this little oasis in Silvertown where we could dip the cup of knowledge into the well of wisdom. People who loved language and literature – it was a great period.¹²⁶

Hallett's passion for literature is also attested by Vincent Kolbe who started his career as a librarian at District Six's Hyman Liberman Institute:

The library was a place where these young people met. They would recite poetry. I remember them as a Bohemian set, unlike those as the Liberman [Institute, in

¹²⁴ Ibid., p. 31.

¹²⁵ Es'kia Mphahlele, *Es'kia* (Cape Town: Kwela Books, 2003), p. 307.

¹²⁶ Mason, p. 203.

District Six] where the discourse was very political. The library was a cultural centre, and [...] I was their librarian, that's why they know me – George [Hallett] and Peter [Clarke]. They enjoyed life, went to the Athlone Hotel and saw there the parallels, the ingredients which they read about in the great books. Koestler, Jean-Paul Sartre, Camus. I had to get these things for them. Baldwin [...] The question for these people was how to [stay] creative. [...] The public library was the poor man's university. [...] People like James Matthews had lots of respect for working-class life. [...] They were intelligent people who themselves came from working-class families but who defended their right to be respected.¹²⁷

Literature forms an integral part of Hallett's creative philosophy. It is a narrative substance that informed his early photography practice and, as we shall see in the coming chapters, sustained large body of work spanning at least two decades. It is a territory allowing tropes, or motifs, to navigate across multiple disciplinary fields. What better way to illustrate this idea but through the photographer's own words:

Being around people who write – even if it's poetry – it's all visual stuff that they're putting into words. The word creates an image in your mind. That's why reading books is so incredible, or reading a poem. The kinds of images that you can evoke in people's minds is [sic] absolutely incredible.¹²⁸

¹²⁷ Vincent Kolbe quoted by Crain Soudien in Willemse, pp. 36-37.

¹²⁸ Mason, p. 204.

This statement translates the process whereby literature opened Hallett's imaginary and hints at how he would in turn use his images to create visual narratives encapsulating the African novels for which he designed book covers. It also introduces a form of relationship, or interaction, between word and image as a possible paradigm that may provide a new interpretation of his photography practice. It is through this notion of cross-medium (literary-visual) permeability, and possible permutation, that I am proposing to approach the theme of District Six in George Hallett's early work.

CHAPTER TWO

PHOTOGRAPHIC REPRESENTATIONS OF DISTRICT SIX IN THE 1950S-60S AND GEORGE HALLETT'S EARLY PHOTOGRAPHY

As I have shown in the previous chapter, the social and cultural, more particularly literary, environments of District Six have been fundamental in the development of George Hallett's intellectual thinking. The shaping of his photographic eye owes as much to this as it does to more direct visual influences. This chapter focuses on the visual representations of District Six within the framework of the emergence of studio and street photography in Cape Town. It also sets out to discuss the photographic essays produced by Janjse Wissema, Jan Greshoff, Cloete Breytenbach, Clarence Coulson and Wilfred Paulse who have contributed to provide a visual record of this neighbourhood. In considering their work, I ponder on the ways in which Hallett's documentation of the area, which marks the beginning of his photography practice, either relates to, or differs from the mentioned photographers, along the line of outsider/insider gaze. In other words, I question whether one can distinguish the photographic or artistic intention and visual or aesthetic traits of images taken by a photographer familiar, or intimately connected with District Six (insider), from a photographer who would not have ties with the area (outsider).

Through a detailed analysis of Hallett's images, I attempt to piece back together the scenes and narratives at play. I also speculate on the idea that, in addition to the photographer's initial intention of documenting District Six before its demolition, his images form part of an iconographic register that expands beyond his immediate grasp, particularly through the written signs, words, and names

appearing on the walls, in the background of some of the images or scenes he captured.

Building on the identification of some of those words as names of gangs active in the 1960s, I reflect on how these inscriptions serve as an alternative mapping of the neighbourhood and speak to a marginal existence expressed through ‘abstract’ yet very potent signs.

I. The emergence of photography in Cape Town and District Six

If the history of South African photography, from the 1950s onward, has predominantly been written from the perspective of the thriving Johannesburg cultural scene¹²⁹, encapsulated – in its more inclusive form – by the school of *Drum* photographers¹³⁰, chapters of the history of photography in Cape Town are still being written. Photography was introduced in Africa during European colonisation in the same year that saw the revolutionary invention of the daguerrotype in Paris in 1839.¹³¹ It arrived in South Africa in 1846, on the east coast, in Port Elizabeth, with French daguerrotypist Jules Léger. Soon after, Léger’s associate, William Rigg, settled in Cape Town with this new technology. Although the latter’s venture failed to take off, from 1851, three notable

¹²⁹ See for instance Darren Newbury, *Defiant Images*.

¹³⁰ Jürgen Schadeberg, *The Fifties People of South Africa – Black life: Politics – Jazz – Sports* (Johannesburg: J R A Bailey, 1987); Okwui Enwezor, ‘A Critical Presence: Drum Magazine in Context’, in *In/sight: African Photographers, 1940 to the Present* ed. by Bell and others (New York: Guggenheim Museum, 1996) pp. 179-191.

¹³¹ Nicolas Monti, *Africa Then: Photographs, 1840-1918* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1987), p. 6: ‘Photography reached Africa on November 6, 1839, with the first daguerrotypes on Egyptian antiquity by the orientalist painter Horace Vernet’.

daguerrotypists named Carel Sparmann, William Waller and John Paul successfully turned this innovation into a profitable activity.¹³² In the nineteenth century, photography expanded in the country and Cape Town counted two renowned studios, S.B. Barnard and F.A.Y. York, that received public commissions and a high-profile clientele.¹³³

As in other parts of Africa, photography was at the service of the Western, colonial, ethnographic, and oppressive gaze.¹³⁴ However that lens was also the terrain of negotiated forms of black agencies. As Professor Hayes from the University of the Western Cape reminds us, '[i]t was not simply the white elite who sought their portraits in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.'¹³⁵ Indeed, *The Black Photo Album / Look at Me: 1890-1950*, an archival research project led by South African photographer Santu Mofokeng (1956-2020) for the Institute for Advanced Social Research at the University of Witwatersrand (Johannesburg) from 1988 to 1998, is an example of black portraiture 'commissioned, requested or tacitly sanctioned' by 'urban black working- and middle-class families'.¹³⁶

¹³² For a history of early photography in Cape Town, see Marjorie Bull and Joseph Denfield, *Secure the Shadow. The Story of Cape Photography from its Beginnings to the End of 1870* (Cape Town: Terrence Mc Nally, 1970) and Patricia Hayes, 'Power, Secrecy, Proximity: A Short History of South African Photography', *Kronos*, 33 (November 2007), 139-162.

¹³³ Patricia Hayes, 139.

¹³⁴ The Western gaze on 'Other' bodies has been the subject of a vast scholarship of which can be mentioned Elizabeth Edwards, *Anthropology and Photography (1860-1920)*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992, and from an African perspective, Okwui Enwezor and Octavio Zaya, 'Colonial Imagery, Tropes of Disruption: History, Culture, and Representation in the Works of African Photographers', in Bell, pp. 17-47.

¹³⁵ Hayes, p. 143.

¹³⁶ 'Introduction' in Santu Mofokeng, *The Black Photo Album / Look at Me: 1890-1950* (Gottingen: Steidl, 2013), np. Among the listed studios are: Scholtz Studio, Lindley Orange River Colony; H.F. Fine Studio, Johannesburg; Clifton Studio, Braamfontein; Aliwal North Location

This was also the case in Cape Town where numerous photographic studios emerged. In her thesis on the Van Kalker Studio, established by Dutch photographer J. G. Van Kalker in Woodstock in 1937, Geraldine Frieslaar, Research Associate at the University of the Witwatersrand, states that the studio ‘appealed to the burgeoning working-class community of District Six, Salt River, Woodstock and other surrounding areas’¹³⁷. She quotes the *Woodstock Whisperer* in which it is said that, ‘[o]ver the years the studio found itself in demand for all special occasions - from various religious celebrations to graduations, birthdays and sporting events.’¹³⁸ These occasions, and all the preparations involved ahead of having one’s portrait taken, partake of a process of self-representation. Frieslaar also mentions the Bridge, Electric and Art Photo studios¹³⁹ of which it can be assumed that they photographed similar events. To these can also be added the name of Anne Fischer, a German photographer’s apprentice who migrated to South Africa in 1937 and established herself in Cape Town. A record from the University of Cape Town’s Libraries Digital Collections reads that Fischer built ‘a reputation as a fine portrait photographer and a master of lighting and ran a

School; Lydenburg Studios, Lynderburg; photographers of European origins; and a A. M. Makhubu, most probably a black South African, active in Ventersdorp in the 1920s.

¹³⁷ Geraldine Leanne Frieslaar, ‘*Looking Good, Clean and Fresh*’: *Visual Representations of the Self in the Van Kalker Studio, Cape Town, 1939-1978* (Masters thesis, University of the Western Cape, 2011), p. 14.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*

flourishing commercial business'.¹⁴⁰ Her studio was on Adderley Street in central Cape Town, but she also produced images outdoors, including in District Six.¹⁴¹

Another noteworthy studio is Movie Snaps, created by Lithuanian Jewish immigrant Abraham Hurwitz at the beginning of the Second World War. Movie Snaps consisted of a studio on Grand Parade, it also resorted to multi-racial street photographers to take portraits of passers-by to attract customers to the studio. Among those was Noor Ebrahim, a well-known former resident of District Six and co-founder of the District Six Museum where he is an education officer. Siona O'Connell from the University of Pretoria cites his interview in her short documentary *Movie Snaps* (2014), saying:

[...] these photographers were offered jobs despite having no training, and the experience afforded them the chance to hone their skills in the trade. Many of the photographers lived in nearby District Six and, by all accounts, they relished the opportunity to receive skills-training from “white” photographers, secure employment, and gain the minor local-celebrity status that came with being a Movie Snaps photographer. Referring to Hurwitz as “Mr Snaps”, Ebrahim says that he and three of his friends were simply handed cameras and put to work.¹⁴²

¹⁴⁰ UCT Libraries Digital Collections, 'Anne Fischer' <<https://digitalcollections.lib.uct.ac.za/anne-fischer>> [accessed 10 May 2021].

¹⁴¹ Kylie Thomas, 'Glimpses into the history of street photography in South Africa'. *The Conversation*, 8 October 2020. <www.theconversation.com/glimpses-into-the-history-of-street-photography-in-south-africa-146719> [accessed 10 May 2021].

¹⁴² Siona O'Connell, 'Snapshots of freedom: Street Photography in Cape Town from the 1930s to the 1980s'. *Image and Text*, 29 (2017), 225.

From Ebrahim's words and the scholarship previously mentioned, one gets a sense of the presence of the photographic medium both as a popular object of consumption, and as a creative form that existed in District Six. In the book *District Six Revisited* (2007), Hallett names two studios located in the district: Maxim's Electric Studios and Palm Tree Studios.¹⁴³

Another exceptional personal photographic collection that gained visibility in recent years is the Kewpie Photographic Collection centred around the figure of Kewpie, a hairdresser and drag queen who was born, and lived, in District Six, and whose portraits give a visual insight of queer life in the area. Discussing this collection, photography historian Michael Corrigall, and archivist and curator Jenny Marsden, highlight the fact that, while it 'contains a number of studio photographs, the bulk of the collection consists of photographs whose authorship is unknown'. They also state that those images are 'sometimes undervalued due to hierarchies of taste and 'professionalism' that are applied to the photographic field.' Although, they add, '[t]he District Six Museum has made exemplary use of personal photographic collections in both its exhibitions and permanent displays'.¹⁴⁴

These photographs, kept in family albums and personal records, form part of a collective repository that tells the story of a place and its people. They have entered the museum, or official archive, and gained a historical status, not only

¹⁴³ Hallett and McKenzie, pp. 6-8. So far there has not been any in-depth research on those studios similar to the ones about Van Kalker or Movie Snaps.

¹⁴⁴ Malcolm Corrigall and Jenny Marsden, 'District Six Is Really My Gay Vicinity', *African Arts*, 53:2 (2020), 11.

because they are a record of the past, but also because they bear testimony to a place that no longer exists. Yet, it is also true that District Six Museum's explorations of the documentation of its neighbourhood, existing in the form of photographic essays, 'set in motion a more critical engagement with the visual language of different genres of photography'.¹⁴⁵ It is within that framework that I propose to examine the work of a selection of photographers who have produced visual essays focusing on District Six, and in relation to which Hallett's images can be appraised

II. Photographic essays of District Six – the outsider lens

In the mid-twentieth century, photographic images were a form of self-representation, consumer good, and creative practice that were part of everyday life in District Six. But there is one defining moment that shifted perceptions about this neighbourhood and changed the meaning of photographing it. In the previous chapter, I discussed the social make-up of District Six, its diversity, its sense of community and vernacular culture. I also addressed the hardship, insalubrity, and crime it experienced – issues linked to the structural poverty created by a system of racial discrimination that existed well before the advent of apartheid.

Apartheid was established after the National Party came into power as an outcome of South Africa's General Elections in 1948. While segregation already existed in the country, this regime raised it to the level of a legal apparatus

¹⁴⁵ Smith and Rassool, pp. 133-135.

engineered to serve an across-the-board institutional racism. Among the sets of laws designed to disempower non-white South Africans – laws which degrees of oppression varied according to ethnicity and pigmentation –, two were particularly detrimental to District Six: the Immorality Act of 1927 (amended in 1950) that criminalised ‘interracial’ intimacy, reinforced by the Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act of 1949, and the Group Areas Act of 1950 (amended in 1957 and 1966) that assigned areas of residence based on one’s racial group as defined by apartheid classifications. As a racially mixed area, not only did District Six contravene apartheid laws, the very existence of its community invalidated the racial foundations upon which rested the segregationist regime.

In *History After Apartheid*, Professor Annie E. Coombes cites Vincent Kolbe, who described the fate of this neighbourhood in these terms: ‘[District Six] represented non-racial cosmopolitan living, everything the apartheid regime feared—and it was a prime piece of land worth stealing.’¹⁴⁶ The government used the district’s transgressive status, ‘deviances’, insalubrity, and growing crime, as reasons to mark it for demolition and declare it a white-only area. The announcement came on 11 February 1966.

As Coombes remarked, many different constituencies considered this decision controversial, including ‘local government bureaucrats, councillors, and liberal intellectuals’¹⁴⁷. But diverging interests between District Six’s stakeholders, namely the land and property owners, businesses, and the tenants, did not help

¹⁴⁶ Coombes, p. 117.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

build cohesive actions to prevent the evictions and demolition of the district.¹⁴⁸

The forced removals began in 1968, the process lasted until the 1980s and affected a population of over 60,000.

From the moment the prospect of its erasure became a reality, District Six drew the attention of a number of photographers whose approach differed from prior documentations of the district. A new sense of heritage and history came into play. Among these photographers were Jansje Wissema (1920-1975) and Jan Greshoff (-2006) whose vast collections of images were donated to the District Six Museum.



Fig. 6. Jan Greshoff, *Hanover, Tennant and Godfrey Streets*. District Six, 1972. Copyright: Kathy Abbott Martin Adrian and Robert Greshoff.

With a corpus of respectively 700 and 500 images of District Six, Dutch-born photographer Wissema and South African architect Greshoff have produced

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., pp. 144-148. See also, Deborah M. Hart, 'Political Manipulation of Urban Space: The Razing of District Six, Cape Town' and Crain Soudien, 'District Six: From Protest to Protest', in Jeppie and Soudien, pp. 124-127 and 143-181.

substantial bodies of work on the area. While Wissema was commissioned by the Cape Provincial Institute of Architects ‘to record the people, street life and buildings in District Six’¹⁴⁹, Greshoff’s images were not a professional assignment but rather prompted by his own interest in capturing District Six on his free time.¹⁵⁰ Both Wissema and Greshoff were friends so, the fact that they photographed the area at the same period, the early 1970s, is probably not a coincidence. Unfortunately, there is not much information on Greshoff’s personal views as to how he envisaged his photographic exploration of the district in relation to the social condition, culture, and history of those who were affected by the forced removals and the area’s imminent demolition.¹⁵¹

In the catalogue to the exhibition of his work, ‘The Last Days of District Six’, the museum founding director Sandra Prosalendis writes that the architect declined to provide any biographical information and preferred ‘his photographs to speak for themselves’.¹⁵² Of note is his emphasis on the area’s architecture and urban features.¹⁵³ So much so that, nowhere in the images reproduced in the catalogue, does one find any interaction between the photographer and the Sixers who still lived in the area.

¹⁴⁹ Smith and Rassool, p. 135.

¹⁵⁰ Sandra Prosalendis, ‘The Last Days of District Six. Photographs by Jan Greshoff’. (Cape Town: District Six Museum, 1996), p. 2.

¹⁵¹ A new book on Greshoff’s photographs entitled, *District Six: Memories, Thoughts and Images*, edited by the architect’s nephew Martin Greshoff, published by The Attic Press (Cape Town) in April 2021 might provide more information on this body of work.

¹⁵² Prosalendis, p. 2.

¹⁵³ Smith and Rassool, p. 137.

In this respect, as far as this selection in the exhibition is concerned, his approach seems to differ from that of Wissema about whom it is said that she ‘built up close relationships with her subjects’ and that ‘[h]er series of interior photographs, in which she documented lives and social rituals, reflects her ability to cross the threshold and enter private spaces with softness and sensitivity.’¹⁵⁴

However, in Richard Rive’s opinion, ‘Jansje Wissema produced an excellent photographic record, though more of its buildings than its people.’¹⁵⁵



Figs. 7 - 8. Jansje Wissema, *A bicycle and a beetle parked on the roadside* and *Woman in the window of her home*. District Six, Cape Town, South Africa, 1970.

UCT Libraries Digital Collections.

Wissema’s District Six images were printed after her death and reproduced in 1986 in the book *District Six* alongside prose poetry by philosopher and activist Adam Small. South African scholar Kylie Thomas suggests that:

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., pp. 135-137.

¹⁵⁵ Richard Rive, ‘District Six: Facts and Fiction’, in Jeppie and Soudien, p. 112.

District Six sought to realize the radical potential implicit in Wissema's images of the area during the time of its destruction for political action in the present. In the 1980s, the Cape Flats were the site of ongoing battles between the state and anti-apartheid activists who were subject to the violence of the South African police force and the security police. The publication of *District Six* at that time served as a record of the history of violence and of struggle and also provided a visual projection of what people were struggling for—their right to occupy the spaces of the city and to claim their place as citizens of the country.¹⁵⁶

Prior to Wissema and Greshoff, Cloete Breytenbach (1933-2019) – brother of anti-apartheid writer Breyten Breytenbach – also took pictures of the area in the 1960s. These were reproduced in *The Spirit of District Six*, a book published in 1970.

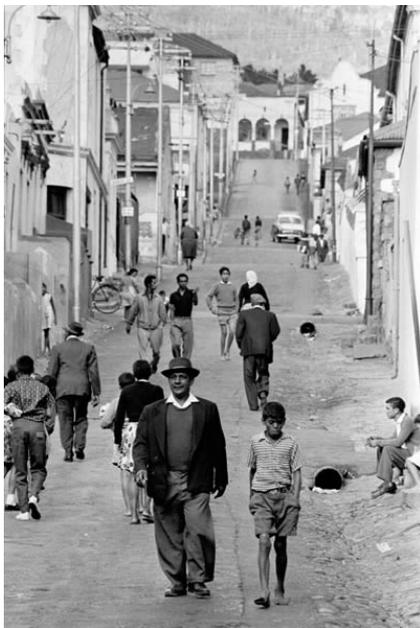


Fig. 9. Cloete Breytenbach, *Richmond Street*.
District Six, c 1965.

Breytenbach's photographs were exhibited at White Box, New York, in 2012, coinciding with late curator Okwui Enwezor's exhibition *Rise and Fall of Apartheid: Photography and the bureaucracy of everyday life* at the International Center for Photography.

¹⁵⁶ Kylie Thomas, 'Photography and the Future in Jansje Wissema's Images of District Six', *Safundi*, 15:2-3 (2014), 289.

While his work was mildly praised in the *New York Times* for its historical value¹⁵⁷, an interview with South African journalist Leila Dougan published in the *Daily Maverick* in 2018 portrays Breytenbach as an apolitical photographer.

As a matter of fact, the photographer, who started his career in 1951 working with *Die Burger* ‘a mouthpiece of the apartheid regime in those days’¹⁵⁸, viewed the struggle against apartheid as a form of terrorism.¹⁵⁹

Nevertheless, his images are an important contribution to the visual history of the district. They can be considered on the basis of the autonomy of images, for their historical value, disconnected from the author’s background or political views. As such, they serve the purpose of, what Kylie Thomas referred to as, ‘political action in the present’. However, the ‘radical potential’ evoked by Thomas, implying a possible alignment of Wissema’s images, and by extension those of

¹⁵⁷ Art critic Holland Cotter writes: ‘[t]he pictures, seen one by one, are not remarkable, but collectively and in the context of their history, they are.’ in Holland Cotter, ‘Cloete Breytenbach: “District Six”’, *New York Times*, 19 October 2012.

<<https://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/19/arts/design/cloete-breytenbach-district-six.html>> [accessed 11 April 2019].

¹⁵⁸ Leila Dougan, ‘Cloete Breytenbach, documenter of soldiers at war’, *Daily Maverick*, 1 Oct. 2018. <<https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2018-10-01-cloete-breytenbach-documenter-of-soldiers-at-war>> [accessed 11 April 2019].

¹⁵⁹ Ibid. This is how he bluntly summed up his siblings’ relation to the apartheid regime in the article: ‘Breyten was involved in furthering a terrorism organisation, putting bombs in places, that sort of thing. My brother Jan, killed them. I took their pictures. I didn’t spend any time in jail and I didn’t kill anybody, so I’m the clean one here.’ A year before publishing *The Spirit of District Six*, Breytenbach contributed images to the colonial propagandist book *The Terror Fighters: A Profile of Guerrilla Warfare in Southern Africa* in which South African war journalist and author Al J. Venter clearly described the Angolan War of Independence as ‘a savage war [...] between the Portuguese army and black guerrilla terrorists’. Venter also expressed his concern for ‘the survival of European civilizations in Africa’ including in Rhodesia and the Republic of South Africa. See Venter, *The Terror Fighters: A Profile of Guerrilla Warfare in Southern Africa* (Cape Town: Purnell and Son, 1969), p. 5.

Greshoff's and Breytenbach's, with the voices that opposed or were victims of the system that caused the demise of District Six, is a matter of interpretation.

The point I am trying to make is not dissimilar to the questions raised by Gary Minkley and Ciraj Rassool about the re-interpretation of works by Leon Levson (1883-1968), a pioneering figure of South African photojournalism. Levson's 'native studies', and the work he produced to promote South African mines in the 1950s, were subsequently appropriated into South African oppositional narratives 'through selection, archiving, distribution, captioning and recaptioning'. The South African historians also write:

[t]his appropriation has been confirmed in the regular appearance of Levson's images in exhibitions, posters and publications which seek to depict the social conditions of black people in South Africa. This transfer of genre and shifts in meaning from the paradigm of 'native studies' to that of African agency occurred in the ritualised and performative settings of resistance archives.¹⁶⁰

In considering the visual representations of District Six, in relation to George Hallett's work, I am particularly interested in inclusive histories and forms of African or black agency similar to the one that emerged from other creative fields, like in the case of literature discussed in the previous chapter. While the images created by the abovementioned photographers are undeniably invaluable historical records, their volume, particularly those of Wissema's and Greshoff's

¹⁶⁰ Gary Minkley and Ciraj Rassool, 'Photography with a difference: Leon Levson's camera studies and photographic exhibitions of native life in South Africa, 1947-1950', *Kronos*, 31 (2005), 213.

also begs the question of access and privilege. Who received public commissions to document District Six, who had the free time and disposable income that enabled the tools to photograph it? These are questions that cannot be ignored in the context of apartheid.

During the lengthy process of the forced removals, demolition, and oppositions to those, the district was a highly relevant topic. Although I do not have details of the critical reception of the first edition of Breytenbach's *The Spirit of District Six*, a review of the 1997 reprint by Shamil Jeppie points towards a similar issue of positioning. Jeppie writes of the accompanying text authored by South African journalist Brian Barrow:

The text is a small part of the work and is interspersed between the photographs. The text recreates certain 'types' such as the 'polony maker' and the 'tattoo artist.' Stories about these figures are told in an intimate and lively first person fashion. The author is empathetic with the characters he in fact created despite the factuality with which they are portrayed. Yet the complete 'otherness' of these characters and consequently the district itself remains an inherent part of the style and the narrative. The entire political context that permitted the area to suffer neglect and then get bulldozed, and the racism and class power in the city are all overlooked in the introduction.¹⁶¹

The text published in the 1997 edition is the original version. This means that even in the 1970s, closer to the time of the demolitions, questions could be raised

¹⁶¹ Shamil Jeppie, 'Reviewed Work(s): *The Spirit of District Six* by Cloete Breytenbach and Brian Barrow', *Kronos*, 25 (1998/1999), 294.

regarding the book's positioning.¹⁶² Images may well speak for themselves, but a critical appraisal needs to take into account the discourse invested by their authors. Here, it is absent, even for such a crucial issue.

District Six was also photographed by Bryan Heseltine (1923-2008) in the 1950s but, as British photography historian Amanda Hopkinson writes in her foreword to Darren Newbury's publication on the photographer, '[w]ithout written records, Heseltine's approach and attitude can only be surmised [...]'.¹⁶³ Newbury, who positions his interpretation of Heseltine's work as speculative, observes that Heseltine's pictures of the district 'are suggestive of the urban *flâneur* somewhat detached, observing the strange beauty of the city streets as he moves through them.'¹⁶⁴ He notes that 'Heseltine does not appear to have drawn a clear distinction between the Bo-Kaap and District Six' as his negatives of these areas 'were simply labelled "Malay Quarter"'.¹⁶⁵ He also adds that '[t]his inattention to the specificity of place suggests that the photographs of the Bo-Kaap and District

¹⁶² Jeppie expresses cynical views about this publication: 'Why another book of District Six pictures? The publishers obviously believe there is a market for memory and visual memory in particular. The value of the district in more than one sense, has grown markedly in the 1990s. There has been a fairly steady trade in District Six memories since the musicals of the 1980s and this repackaged set of photos is another commodity for that under-satiated market.' Ibid. It is difficult to say if the 1970 edition was motivated by commercial opportunism or advocacy for the people of District Six. Either way, as a visual record, this book is an important resource.

¹⁶³ Amanda Hopkinson, 'Foreword', in Darren Newbury, *People Apart: 1950s Cape Town Revisited. Photographs by Bryan Heseltine* (London: Black Dog Publishers, 2013), p. 8.

¹⁶⁴ Newbury, *People Apart*, p. 23.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.

Six should be understood as more personal and exploratory, the outcome of a practice of wandering the city streets [...]'.¹⁶⁶

In all those cases – Wissema, Greshoff, Breytenbach or Heseltine, who all happen to be white photographers with no, or very little, personal connection to District Six – one can only speculate as to their ‘radical’ approach or ‘humanistic’ take on the environment and subjects they photographed. Kylie Thomas positions Wissema’s images ‘alongside those of black South African photographers like George Hallett, Clarence Coulson, Gavin Jantjes, Wilfred Pause, Jackie Heyns and Peter McKenzie’¹⁶⁷. However, I would argue that, the way in which Hallett and his peers engaged with District Six partakes of an altogether different position and that it is largely informed by their close or personal ties with the district.

III. Hallett’s first contact with the photographic medium

In his interview with John E. Mason, George Hallett situates his awareness of the visual medium in his childhood. He mentions leafing through the *Reader’s Digest* and *National Geographic* magazines to which his uncle was a subscriber and of which he said that the black and white pictures of foreign lands must have

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 24. Here, Newbury is distinguishing between Heseltine’s images of those two districts and the larger body of work he has produced of the black population in Windermere, an informal settlement located in the North-East of Cape Town, 5 miles from the city centre. The area grew a large population in the 1950s which prompted the government to remove its inhabitants on account of ‘slum clearance’ policies.

¹⁶⁷ Thomas, ‘Photography and the Future in Jansje Wissema’s Images of District Six’, p. 289.

had an impact on him.¹⁶⁸ His eye also started developing when he began attending film screenings on weekends at his primary school in the fishing village of Hout Bay. This is how he remembered it:

In Hout Bay, our school was used as a cinema on weekends. On Friday nights and sometimes Saturday nights, we saw American movies – Alan Ladd, John Wayne, you name it – the black-and-white films of the forties, fifties. I became interested in the projector. A schoolmate of mine had the great honour of being taught how to loop these huge reels of film through the mechanism and down to the take-up spool on the bottom. Once I figured out how that worked and this powerful light being projected across this dark space onto the silver screen, I went to sit closer. I became the camera when I was sitting in that movie house. I didn't become the characters; I was the observer. [...] The other thing about being the camera, I also became aware that when the lighting changed, the mood changed, the music changed. [...] I think that had a huge influence on me.¹⁶⁹

Hallett also discussed his encounter with the cinematographic image in a lecture he gave at the University of Central Lancashire (UCLan) in 2014. In addition to the genres associated with the actors named in Mason's interview – western, film

¹⁶⁸ Mason, p. 200.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 201. I discussed the influence of American movies on black South African culture in chapter one. For a history of the development of cinema-going in South Africa, see David J. Gainer, *Hollywood, African Consolidated Films, and "bioskoopbeskawing," Or Bioscope Culture: Aspects of American Culture in Cape Town, 1945-1960* (Master thesis, University of Cape Town, 2000); James Burns, 'The African Bioscope – Movie House Culture in British Colonial Africa', *Afrique & histoire*, 5: 1 (2006), 65-80; and in District Six: Jacqueline Maingard, 'Cinemagoing in District Six, Cape Town, 1920s to 1960s: History, politics, memory', *Memory Studies*, 10:1 (2017), 17-34.

noir – he also cited scary movies and described getting, from this experience, ‘an instinct about light’.¹⁷⁰

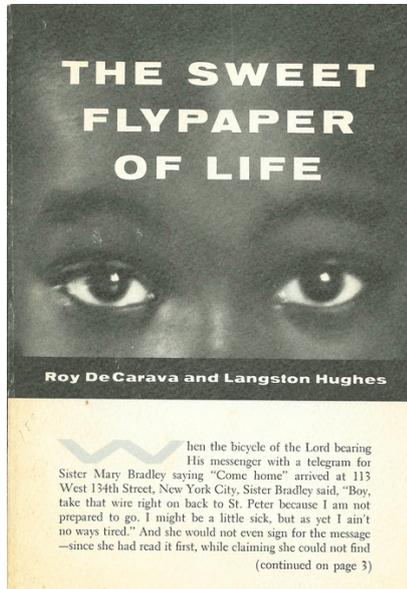


Fig. 10. Cover of *The Sweet Flypaper of Life* by Roy DeCarava and Langston Hughes.

In the previous chapter, we saw how Hallett’s exposure to literature, at the contact of Richard Rive, was a formative experience. It is then that he met Matthews, Clarke, Rabie, Krige and other Sestigers. In the early sixties, after completing matric¹⁷¹, Hallett moved in with his parents in Silvertown, Athlone (a Cape Town suburb). James Matthews’s home was nearby, and he attended numerous social events where he met the writer’s creative circle.

It was there that he was introduced to American jazz music and to the work of African American photographer Roy DeCarava.¹⁷² Matthews showed him a copy of *The Sweet Flypaper of Life* by DeCarava, in which the black and white photographs are accompanied with an essay by Langston Hughes.¹⁷³ The book

¹⁷⁰ ‘George Hallett: Photographer’, Distinguished Visitor Programme, Public Lecture Series, University of Central Lancashire (UCLan), 20 March 2014, video recording by the author. This recording was meant for personal research, but I have plans to edit it and make it a resource accessible to the public.

¹⁷¹ Matriculation is equivalent to A levels.

¹⁷² Mason, p. 202.

¹⁷³ Roy DeCarava and Langston Hughes, *The Sweet Flypaper of Life* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1955). A second edition came out in 1967, published in New York by Hill and Wang. It

depicts everyday life in Harlem and provides an insightful portrait of the black community in a light that differed from the imagery of segregation and oppression. By his own account, it was the first time he ever saw a book with only black people in it.¹⁷⁴

In a conversation with British artist and curator Marlene Smith, Gavin Jantjes also stressed the importance of this book for black artists from his generation. He said:

[Peter Clarke] was corresponding with Langston Hughes, who sent him a copy of his book *The Sweet Flypaper of Life* (1967). I tell you, this book was handed around in this little artist group of black writers, painters and photographers: you can have it for two days, then you have to hand it on to him, and please see that it gets back to Peter. We all read the poems – and the photographs by Roy DeCarava in the book, it was like wow!¹⁷⁵

It was a revelation for the young Hallett who was still hesitating between becoming a painter or a photographer.¹⁷⁶ Encountering this book may well have given him the impetus to consider photography.

His early steps into photography were rather informal. He could not afford further education, let alone pursue art studies. He first got hold of a camera upon

is not sure to which edition Hallett had access. The reprint of this book coincides with Hallett's early days as a photographer. News of this probably circulated in informed black artistic or intellectual circles in South Africa. See also footnote 46.

¹⁷⁴ Mason, p. 202.

¹⁷⁵ Black Artists and Modernism, 'Marlene Smith interviews Gavin Jantjes'.

<<http://www.blackartistsmodernism.co.uk/2016/06/23/marlene-smith-interviews-gavin-jantjes>> [accessed 10 May 2021].

¹⁷⁶ Mason, p. 202.

recommendation from Clarence Coulson, a high school friend who was a sports and social events photographer.¹⁷⁷ Hallett explains that when Coulson visited him on weekends and happened to share his photographs, he would always comment on the latter's angles, timing, and how he would have taken the pictures. One day Coulson replied by challenging Hallett to take his own photographs instead of commenting on his.¹⁷⁸

Clarence Coulson worked for a photographer called Kariem Halim, owner of Palm Tree Studios on Hanover Street in District Six. Since Hallett did not have the means to purchase a camera, Coulson recommended he visited Halim. Hallett introduced himself and Halim agreed to lend him a camera to take pictures of people in the street, then direct them back to the studio to collect their portrait when printed. Through this arrangement, Hallett earned a bit of money taking photographs and Halim would gain new customers.¹⁷⁹ Halim gave him some basic explanation regarding film exposure. He set the camera for him, but that was about it as far as training was concerned. This is quite similar to Noor Ebrahim's experience with Movie Snaps. Hallett mostly taught himself through trial and

¹⁷⁷ There is currently no scholarly research on Coulson but in *District Six Revisited*, he mentions his photographs were published in the *Sunday Times*; *Beeld*, *Die Burger* and *Rapport* for which he replaced Ted Doman; the *Weekend World* and *Cape Herald*. Hallett and McKenzie, p. 12.

¹⁷⁸ Mason, p. 203. See also Hallett and McKenzie, p. 6.

¹⁷⁹ Mason, p. 204. In the video recording of his UCLan lecture, Hallett added that Kariem Halim gave him 40 cents a portrait.

error.¹⁸⁰ He even said that Halim discouraged him from experimenting photographically not to waste film.¹⁸¹

It seems that, at the beginning, photography was only a weekend hobby. A roll of film was expensive, even black and white. And at that stage, this was not a sustainable activity for him. Hallett was working as a bookkeeping clerk and practiced with his camera on his free time:

During my lunch breaks I used to take photographs. Weekends I spent taking photographs. If there was light after work I would take my camera with me and photograph people on the platforms of the railway station and stuff like that. But it wasn't enough.¹⁸²

There is no clear indication of when exactly this foray into photography began. For that, we may rely on the biographical elements provided in the catalogue of *Rhizomes of Memory*, the exhibition curated by Gavin Jantjes in 2000. In it, it is said that Hallett started freelancing for *Drum* magazine with Jackie Heyns in 1964¹⁸³ and that 'his association with writers and artists made him give up his job

¹⁸⁰ Mason, pp. 203-204. Hallett and McKenzie, pp. 6-8. Although Hallett is generally described as a self-taught photographer, a number of online sources, including Wikipedia, mention he took 'a correspondence course in photography with the City and Guilds in London at the age of 20', < [www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/George_Hallett_\(photographer\)](http://www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/George_Hallett_(photographer))> [accessed 05 March 2019]. Hallett clarified in his UCLan lecture that he stopped the course after a couple of months because of the lengthy process of sending his homework to England and for the corrections to be sent back to South Africa.

¹⁸¹ George Hallett, UCLan lecture.

¹⁸² Mason, p. 205.

¹⁸³ Jantjes, p. 246. This information is corroborated by a type-written curriculum vitae Hallett gave me in the early 2000s. In the UCLan lecture, he indicated having started photography in the early 1960s.

as a clerk in 1966 and begin working as staff photographer for local newspapers.¹⁸⁴ However, there is still a level of unclarity as to which of his photographs were published in local newspapers. In his passage on Jackie Heyns, in *District Six Revisited*, he said the following:

The offices of *The Golden City Post* and *Drum* magazine were just a few doors away from Palm Tree Studios [...]. Shunned by the white press, this was our place to be seen, heard and maybe, if lucky, written about by the scribe of District Six, Jackie Heyns.

Aunt Sammy was possibly Jackie Heyns' most popular column. I went with him to visit Aunt Sammy's joint a couple of times. Never had the courage to take pictures; I was after all on Jackie's turf. All a novice from the Cape Flats could do was look and listen.¹⁸⁵

Discussing the motivations behind his departure from South Africa, the reasons he evoked include the fact that no newspaper wanted to accept him¹⁸⁶. Other sources also state that he could not find a job as a photographer in South Africa.¹⁸⁷ There could be several reasons for the lack of response from

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 242.

¹⁸⁵ Hallett and McKenzie, pp. 8-9. I researched the *Drum* issues that could have coincided with Hallett's early photographs but have not found any image credited to his name. However, in a private conversation I had on 30 November 2019, with South African art historian and curator Riason Naidoo, former director of the South African National Gallery, where a George Hallett retrospective was presented in 2014, it seemed plausible to him that Hallett might have had photographs published in *Drum* because, he said, 'the Cape Town editor would commission freelance photographers'. I am still pursuing other sources of investigation.

¹⁸⁶ Mason, p. 205.

¹⁸⁷ 'Having no success at finding a job as a photographer, he left for Europe in 1970', in Willemsse, p. 141.

newspapers to George Hallett's early photographs. On the one hand, it is never easy for any emerging or untrained photographer or artist to break through, regardless of the quality of their work, unless they have the right introductions. On the other hand, one cannot overlook the fact that Hallett's interest in photography emerged in a context of apartheid that predominantly reserved such professional, creative, or media opportunities to white South Africans.¹⁸⁸

Before leaving he held his first solo exhibition at the Artists Gallery on Adderley Street in Cape Town where his work included pictures of Hout Bay, District Six, the Cape Flats, and musicians.¹⁸⁹ My particular focus on District Six is motivated by the fact that, based on my initial inventory of his known, printed, exhibited, and published images – amounting to just over fifty images, although there are probably more – this neighbourhood forms the larger part of his pre-exile work. Hallett's proximity with the area provides a different kind of insight from what we have seen before, and is invested with a positioning that speaks to politics of black visual representation.

¹⁸⁸ In his UCLan lecture, Hallett mentioned approaching the *Cape Argus* with a portrait he had taken, and printed, of a young schoolboy of mixed ethnicity who had won a national art competition. He talked about how the staff giggled as his interlocutor referred to him as 'a "coloured boy" who thought he was a photographer', author's recording.

¹⁸⁹ Mason, p. 205. The Artists Gallery is also mentioned by Gavin Jantjes in his interview with Marlene Smith: 'It was a group of artists who came together and formed their own gallery because there wasn't a commercial gallery of any importance. There was one, but it supported European artists and a small number of South African artists. Other artists wanted to gain access to the major national institutions. So, they formed their own gallery of mostly white artists. They actually invited the first black artist I ever knew who became a dear friend, Peter Clarke'. Black Artists and Modernism, 'Marlene Smith interviews Gavin Jantjes'.

IV. Visual narratives from within – the insider lens

District Six was George Hallett's first training ground as a street photographer. A cross referencing of sources seems to indicate that his District Six series might combine images taken when he first ventured into street photography, and those he took for the specific purpose of documenting the neighbourhood after it was declared a white area. Aside from his prior connection with the district through 'an aunt who lived in Bloemhof flats'¹⁹⁰, Richard Rive, and working with Palm Tree Studios, Hallett's motivation to photograph the district was inspired by Peter Clarke, James Matthews, and a local tailor named Sakkie Misbach who encouraged him to document the area before its disappearance.¹⁹¹ His mentioning returning to District Six as a photographer 'three years later'¹⁹² could explain the 1969 dating of some of his photographs, although some of the sequences used as source material for this research are dated 1968.

Hallett donated a collection of these photographs to the District Six Museum, which is an essential resource for the study the area's visual representations and to appraise Hallett's work in relation to that of his contemporaries and peers.

¹⁹⁰ Hallett and McKenzie, p 6.

¹⁹¹ Hallett and McKenzie, p 6; Mason, p. 204; Jantjes, p. 236.

¹⁹² Mason, p. 204.



Figs. 11 - 12. District Six Museum, central gallery on the ground floor (left), and section with some of George Hallett's and other photographers' works (right). Cape Town, February 2018. Photo: Christine Eyene.

Reproductions found in books and catalogues complement this collection. These are of interest to my research not just for their historical or documentary value, but more so for the aesthetic, stylistic, iconographic, and conceptual reading to which they lend themselves. My monographic approach to Hallett's images seeks to highlight their distinct characteristics both in relation to the work of other photographers who have documented the area, and in relation to his own photography practice, of which they bear the preliminary signs.

If one were to consider all the images known of District Six, irrespective of the authors' ethnicity or political views, one could say that as a collective body of work they depict its architecture, urban setting, everyday life, street scenes, social events, and portraits with more or less closeness or familiarity with the place and its inhabitants. Yet, a distinction appears between those who photographed District Six as outsiders and those who created visual narratives from within. This is a point observed by Smith and Rassool who write:

The exhibition *District Six Revisited*, curated by George Hallett, with photographs by Hallett, Clarence Coulson, Wilfred Paulse, Gavin Jantjes and Jackie Heyns,

reflected more complex questions of representation. Here, as 'insiders', the photographers seemed to have a familiarity with the spaces they entered and the lives they encountered. Yet, the insider was also simultaneously the professional, who approached his subjects with a consciousness of light and form, and the aesthetic possibilities of the camera. [...] These photographers had ranged the District that was once their playground, entering its familiar spaces and networks, and, because of being accepted, were able to depict the nuances of social intimacy.¹⁹³

This insider view brought up by Smith and Rassool posits Hallett, Coulson, Paulse, Jantjes and Heyns's photographs on a different discursive field from that of Wissema, Greshoff, Breytenbach or Heseltine's. In their work, there is more than anonymous, general, or statistical facts to be given about the people or places photographed. There are personal stories. And, as far as Hallett's images are concerned, some of those stories were gleaned from informal conversations, collected from formal public presentations and lectures he gave, or deduced from comparisons between his and his peers' images. They have also been retrieved through poetry, novels, or biographies by, or about, authors who were part of his close environment.

¹⁹³ Smith and Rassool, p. 137.

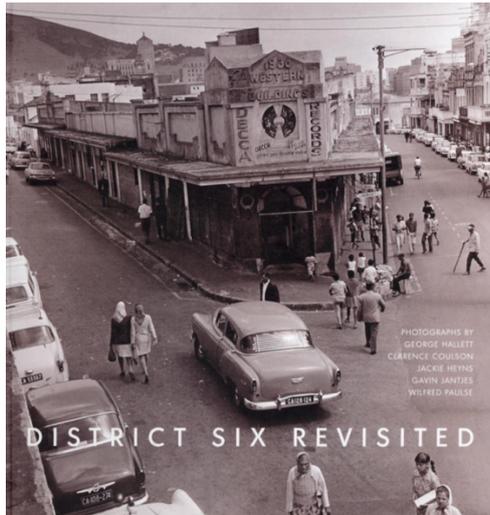


Fig. 13. Cover of *District Six Revisited*, edited by George Hallett and Peter McKenzie, 2007.

District Six Revisited, the book published ten years after the eponymous exhibition, is a key source in my attempt to piece together the stories behind Hallett's photographs. Often his images dialogue with that of his peers. They either complete each other or illustrate some of Hallett's own biographical information.

For instance, the first image to appear in the book is a picture of Mr Maxim of Maxim's Electric Studios taken by Hallett.¹⁹⁴



Fig. 14. George Hallett, *Mr Maxim ('Boeta Manie')* from *Maxim's Electric Studio*, undated (1960s).

¹⁹⁴ Hallett and McKenzie, p. 7.

Facing Maxim is a wall on which are pinned studio photographs among which one can make out what seems to be the bottom of a wedding picture, individual portraits, and a class photograph. There is also a leaflet showing a partial inscription ‘... Old or faded photographs’ that, one could imagine, refers to photographic retouching that might be on offer. Indeed, in this picture, Maxim is seen at work, immersed in retouching a picture on an easel.

This image is a *mise en abyme* in that it shows photographs within a photograph. It speaks to the visual culture that existed in District Six. It places the Sixers as agents of their own representation and conveys their wish to record important moments of their lives. It also reminds us of the importance of photographic documentation especially in cases of erased communities such as District Six. As a matter of fact, when it was written in 2007, Hallett’s accompanying text informs us that, there was no trace of Maxim’s vast collection of negatives after he was forced out of his studio.¹⁹⁵

The second image in the book is a portrait of Kariem Halim of Palm Tree Studios also taken by Hallett.¹⁹⁶ Halim, who gave Hallett his first chance at becoming a street photographer, is seen holding a single-lens reflex camera.



Fig. 15. George Hallett, *Kariem Halim* of Palm Street [sic] Studios, undated (1960s).

¹⁹⁵ Ibid., p. 8.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid.

We learn from Hallett that Palm Tree and Maxim's Electric Studios were situated close to one another. The fate of Halim's studio was quite tragic as Hallett recounts:

Mr Halim's studio was broken into shortly before he vacated. He arrived one morning to find his negatives all over Hanover Street, helped along by a fierce south easterly wind. He told me that he stood there and cried.¹⁹⁷



Fig. 16. Clarence Coulson, untitled, undated.

Maxim's Electric Studios was also photographed from the outside by Clarence Coulson.¹⁹⁸ The photograph is taken from the left angle and shows the studio sign on the wall and a window displaying a wide range of photographs from individual to group portraits, some of them could be a class, sports team and maybe a wedding.

Two women are looking at the window. They may have been costumers or simply passers-by admiring images from what could be considered a form of local photographic exhibition of portraits from the community. Although this image is

¹⁹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid., p. 45.

undated in the book, one could place it between 1965 and 1973, as Coulson writes in 2007:

George knew that I had been photographing the area since 1965. I had amassed a range of scenes and activities. Some of those pictures were used by the *Cape Herald* in December 1967. Now in 1973, poised on the Eastern Boulevard directly above Chapel Street, I was destined to continue my recording of District Six.¹⁹⁹

Coulson is referring to Hallett's request in 1973, for him to supply pictures of District Six to be included in a documentary by American filmmaker Bayley Silleck.²⁰⁰ Hallett said: '[t]his was our last attempt to mobilise world opinion to help stop the destruction of the heart of the city.'²⁰¹

To assist him photograph the area, Coulson enrolled his cousin Wilfred Paulse.²⁰² Among the images by Paulse is the sequence of a fight between two men right in front of Maxim's Electric Studios, taken from the higher floors of an opposite building.²⁰³ If one were to recreate the scene, the first photograph²⁰⁴ opens on a view that includes the studio's window (recognizable from Coulson's photograph), a frightened young woman passing by, rushing off not to be caught up in the violent scene, the balconies on the upper floor displaying household utensils, and the railings resting on the columns – one of them cracked along the

¹⁹⁹ Hallett and McKenzie, p. 12.

²⁰⁰ Ibid. Since 2014, I have tried many times, via different channels to get in contact with Mr Silleck, upon recommendation from George Hallett in order to get further information on the documentary entitled *District Six: The End Of A South African Community*, but unsuccessfully.

²⁰¹ Hallett and McKenzie, p. 10.

²⁰² Ibid., p. 12.

²⁰³ Ibid., pp. 60-63.

²⁰⁴ Ibid., p. 62.

near entirety of its length, signaling the structural hazard the building must have constituted. Interestingly, the columns also served as displays for newspapers to advertise their front page. One of them shows a *Post*'s news title reading: 'They're stealing District Six!'

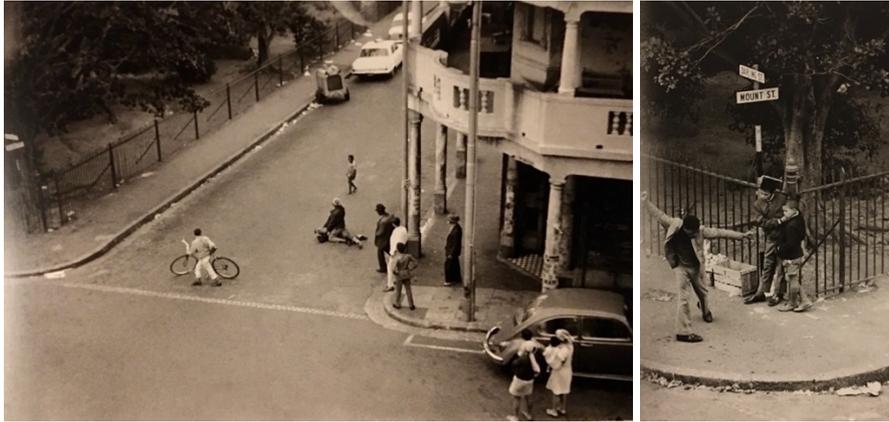


Figs. 17 -18. Wilfred Paulse, untitled, undated and detail.

Two further images complete this sequence with the two men now in the middle of the street, one locking the other on the ground, as a group of onlookers gets closer to the scene.²⁰⁵ Among them is a young boy wearing a suit. He is seen in the third picture describing the fight to two of his friends, gesturing the punch that probably hammered the subdued protagonist.²⁰⁶ The picture also shows the names of the streets where this incident happened, at the crossroad of Darling and Mount streets.

²⁰⁵ Ibid., p. 63.

²⁰⁶ Ibid., p. 60.



Figs. 19 - 20. Wilfred Paulse, untitled, undated.

This photograph is an example of the way in which the children from District Six were exposed to violence. Richard Rive mentions this experience in his biography.²⁰⁷

Documenting violence has never been part of Hallett aesthetics. His main concern throughout his entire career has always been to present positive images of black communities to counter the stereotyping of black people in white South African and, generally speaking, Western media. This can be seen in the way his street portraits give dignity to humble people. Three of these have been reproduced in several of his publications. One is entitled *Woman of District Six*, 1969. This is what Hallett said about it:

Walking along Hannover [sic] Street, this woman confronted me with ‘Take my picture’, a request I still find difficult to ignore. She arranged her body for the shot and having captured her image in a single frame I thanked her and we both moved on.²⁰⁸

²⁰⁷ See chapter one.

²⁰⁸ Jantjes, p. 236.



Figs. 21. George Hallett, *Woman of District Six*, 1968.

From her outfit, one guesses this woman lives a modest life. Yet she is displaying confidence through her eyes and hand on her hip posture. This picture appears in *Images*, the first monographic book of Hallett's photographs published by James Matthews.²⁰⁹

It is paired with a portrait of South African artist Dumile Feni and jazz drummer Louis Moholo taken a couple of years later in London. Both share a prose poetry caption by Matthews:

we shall quail them
with our stare
we are not subservient
to their demands²¹⁰

²⁰⁹ Hallett and Matthews, p. 52.

²¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

Here, it is obvious that the ‘we’ refers to black people and the ‘them/their’ to the apartheid oppressors. Matthews’s interpretation – if one may call it so, as it is more a conversational prose than an interpretation – highlights the political layer inscribed within Hallett’s work.



Fig. 22. George Hallett, *The Brother Says Hello*, 1968.

The Brother Says Hello (1968), a similar street portrait of a man wearing a suit, leaning against a window frame, translates the same kind of interaction between Hallett and the photographed person. The man waves at the photographer. Behind him, the window frame is an interesting pictorial feature echoing the symbolisms of the frame and window in history of art. This time, however, the window does not open onto an image of the world. The glass on the top part of the bay window is broken, while the bottom part was fixed with wood panels. There is no depth of field to visually plunge into. Somehow the state of disrepair serves to block the depth of the view, reminding us of the pending demolition and nothingness.

The last portrait I shall mention is the *Street Cleaner*, 1968. Of this picture Hallett said:

Being asked to take a photograph of a stranger is always an intriguing moment. A split second in which integrity, honesty and trust are evaluated. The subject has to

be confident not only of himself but of the photographer as well. It shows in the body language and the facial expression.²¹¹



Fig. 23. George Hallett, *The Street Cleaner*, 1968.

Behind the man, the street and building, with the latter's contrasted repetition of white or grey wall and brickwork, form interesting diagonals stretching as convergence lines. This full-length portrait is a strong composition revealing Hallett's visual signature. Interestingly, twenty-six years later he took a picture of an important man in a similar body posture.

The image shows a poised young man, with a broom in his hand placed diagonally behind him with a certain coolness. His smile and his gaze reflect Hallett's ability to connect with people and bring out one's personality.



Fig. 24. George Hallett, *Madiba on the phone*, 1994.

²¹¹ Jantjes, p. 240.

The photograph is part of the iconic images of Nelson Mandela's 1994 presidential campaign. Looking at both images now, one cannot but think of the resilience of a people to hang on to their dignity despite the injustice suffered. This reminds us of Vincent Kolbe's comment about Hallett, Clarke and Matthews as working-class people who defended their right to be respected. One of the underlying principles of apartheid was to deny black people their humanity. If Hallett's photography could be encapsulated in one idea, that would be his commitment to value and restore this humanity through the simple act of visually acknowledging each and everyone with respect. He did so using photography as a tool of counter-discourse to the apartheid narrative.

Saying that does not mean that Hallett avoided depicting the challenges of living in District Six. But for him these challenges never represented the full story. As he often said, during apartheid, there was also life. There were communities, as we have previously seen from the history of District Six. There was culture, love, weddings, and children being born. One might even suggest that, perhaps his numerous photographs of children was his way of injecting innocence and maybe a glimmer of hope in the rough environment that was District Six.



Figs. 25 - 26. George Hallett, *Vernon Terrace*, 1969.

This may well have been the case, as is suggested in a poem by James Matthews accompanying one of his photographs in *Images*. The text reads:

the ghetto our playground
where soon our innocence
will be corroded by
the grimness of reality²¹²

The photograph depicts children, one of them bare feet, playing in the dust at the bottom of steps in an alley. The same image was published in *District Six Revisited*²¹³ paired with another photograph shot at the top of those steps where the same two children are seen with more of their little friends. The place where it was taken would probably be easily recognizable to those familiar with the area. Hallett provides its date, 1969, and one of the rare District Six captions in Jantjes's catalogue:

Vernon Terrace was a large Victorian terraced block in District Six. It was demolished under the Group Area's Act in the late sixties along with South Africa's first music hall that had become [sic] known as the British Bioscope, and which was a block away on the same street.²¹⁴

²¹² Hallett and Matthews, p. 5.

²¹³ Hallett and McKenzie, pp. 54-55.

²¹⁴ Jantjes, p. 237. Two colour images of Vernon Terrace are also featured in Rassool and Prosalendis, pp. 20-21.

Other images of children blend innocence and play within the now vanished architecture of District Six. These include the front door of a corner shop on Cannon Street in which one can see a girl playing with a yoyo while an even younger boy is sitting on the ground outside, busy with something in his hands.²¹⁵ Another one shows a young boy sitting on the window frame of a fruit shop. To his left is a young girl whose dress seems to indicate that she comes from a modest family. Two adult passers-by are seen from behind as they are about to exit the pictorial field on the right hand-side.



Figs. 27 - 28. George Hallett, untitled, undated (1960s).

In figure 27, there is eye contact between the children and the photographer, although the young boy's look is reserved, and the little girl seems intimidated. As for the place where the picture was taken, a very similar window shop is seen, in colour this time, in the book *Recalling Community in Cape Town*. From it we

²¹⁵ Hallett and McKenzie, p. 35.

can infer that it might be the Caledonian Fruit and Vegetable Market on Caledon Street.²¹⁶



Fig. 29. Unknown, *Caledon Street, District Six, 1966.*

Hallett photographed scenes of children in various places, including on waste grounds that became a more frequent sight as District Six was being abandoned²¹⁷, or courtyards²¹⁸ and front doors²¹⁹ which locations are not always identifiable. A particularity of examining District Six images is that they compel the viewer to remember (for those familiar to the place) or try and find clues (for those unfamiliar with this location), helping locate the places where they were taken.

²¹⁶ Rassool and Prosalendis, p. 71.

²¹⁷ Hallett and McKenzie, p. 106.

²¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 56.

²¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 61.



Figs. 30 - 31. George Hallett, untitled, undated (1960s).



Fig. 32. Jan Greschhoff, *Eaton Place, District Six*, date unknown.²²⁰

For instance, there is one photograph showing a group of children sitting on their stoop²²¹ which location is identified by cross referencing it with two other images: a wider angle by Hallett showing the full building²²² and a closer shot by Jan Greshoff of a man on horse cart in front of the same building. One can then read the street plate Eaton Place.²²³

²²⁰ Date unknown at the time of writing.

²²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 50.

²²² *Ibid.*, p. 105.

²²³ Rassool and Prosalendis, p. 103. Eaton Place was also known as ‘Buckingham Palace’, which is also the title of Richard Rive’s novel, published in 1986, on life in District Six before the forced removals.



Fig. 33. George Hallett, untitled, undated (1960s).

Likewise, the location of a picture of children round dancing, cropped in *Images*²²⁴, becomes identifiable by comparing it published in full frame in *District Six Revisited*²²⁵, with one of Greshoff's photograph of children playing in front of St Mark's School. The stonework and roof are similar. A colour picture of St Mark's Church in 1994, 'enveloped by the Cape Technikon', presents the same angle and the same architectural features.²²⁶ Once again James Matthews's words provides a reading to Hallett's image:

there is joy in the
hearts of children
whose play transport them
to a region of fantasy come true²²⁷

²²⁴ Hallett and Matthews, p. 8.

²²⁵ Hallett and McKenzie, p. 94.

²²⁶ Rassool and Prosalendis, pp. 18-19.

²²⁷ Hallett and Matthews, p. 9.

The ghetto as playground, the children being transported to a ‘region of fantasy’, are not just metaphors. They depict the few alternatives to the absence of outdoor playgrounds for children and young people. As such, the numerous pictures of children which, in Hallett’s case, could be interpreted as an easy subject for an emerging photographer, reflect the fact that children had no other choice but to play in the street for lack of better options. This brings us back to Bill Nasson’s statement on the ‘[a]rmies of poor children swarmed over pavements, turning streets into fiercely competitive arenas [...]’.²²⁸

It is also interesting to consider how experiences of the same streets could differ. For instance, Hallett’s picture of children in front of the British Cinema²²⁹ could be read along the recollections of a former resident named Boeta Braima saying: ‘[t]here were no playgrounds in District Six and the streets were our playgrounds... The streets were safe...’.²³⁰ But it could also be viewed through Vincent Kolbe’s account of meeting up with his friends on Hanover Street to go to the movies. ‘It was very rough’, he says, and adds: ‘British I avoided because the ou rookers were there, wasn’t our territory man. You can get mugged there...’.²³¹

The coexistence of these different lives is captured by Hallett. His photograph of the British Cinema was first published in 1970 as a photographic essay entitled ‘White Area’ in *Contrast*, a literary magazine edited by Richard Rive and Jack Cope. In the absence of access to the photographer’s negatives or contact sheets,

²²⁸ See chapter one.

²²⁹ Pieterse and Hallett, p. 57. Hallett, ‘White Area’, p. 66.

²³⁰ Jeppie and Soudien, p. 19.

²³¹ Ibid. p. 26. *Ou Rookers* is Afrikaans for ‘Old smokers’.

it has taken the examination of numerous sources to piece together the photographic sequence to which this image belongs. A recreation of this sequence could begin with the British Cinema photograph. The image shows a wide-angle view of the façade. At first, the eye is seized by the inscription of the cinema's name under which feature two sets of 'sock and buskin', the theatre masks symbolising tragedy and comedy. The metal gates and the padlock indicate that the cinema is closed. On the left hand-side, the ripped off posters seem to suggest the closure might be permanent as no movie is advertised.



Fig. 34. George Hallett, *British Cinema*, undated (1960s).

Children fill this image with their presence, from part to part of the pictorial field in a frontal linear composition. Panning the picture from left to right, the children are seen sitting on the ground, on the cinema's steps, or standing. Their activity is unclear. They are not playing any particular game. Rather they seem to be idling aimlessly.

Two men are also present. One, distinctly seen, sitting on the steps. The other, is on the left handside, slightly hidden by two children standing in front of him. In

the picture, both men's heads are turned to their left, as if their attention was drawn towards this direction at the same time. These two figures are also found in several other images, wearing the same clothes. Which may suggest that Hallett took this series on the same day. In one of them, the two seem engaged in a conversation. They are standing against a white wall that has faint writing on it. Although not entirely visible, one can guess that it says: 'Danger Keep Out'. The character, wearing a black beret and a jumper over a T-shirt and shirt with untied top buttons, is recognisable in another picture. This time he is with another two men and a young boy sitting on the steps of Lewis Bros House Furnishers. Hallett's source material does not say anything about him unlike his associate who is found in more images. Two of them are now iconic.



Figs. 35 - 36. George Hallett, untitled, undated (1960s).

One photograph shows him talking to a passenger that the viewer cannot see (fig. 37). The direction of his gaze seems to point towards that. One only sees a person whom we can assume might be the driver: an elegant man wearing sunglasses, whose seriousness indicates that he is not to be messed with. This image is known as *The Debt Collector* or *Pleading with the Debt Collector*, 1968.



Figs. 37. George Hallett, *The Debt Collector*, 1968.

While the latter is probably sitting at the back of the car, visually, the power dynamic at play is between the man and the car driver as they are the only two figures in the picture frame. One is dominant and his assurance transpires from his cold facial expression. The other is humbly negotiating his way out of this exchange. Pushing the interpretation further, one could imagine that the debt might be linked to some of the informal activities taking place in District Six at the time. And the fact that Hallett took the photograph from within the car shows that he had a level of close connection or at least the trust of whoever was in charge.

The same man is seen in yet another photograph (fig. 39). The vertical (or portrait format) picture, which background extends on the upper part of the image, situates the scene on the left hand-side of the British Cinema. Here, we see the man showing his friend what may well be a rock of a particular substance.



Fig. 38. George Hallett, untitled, undated (1960s). District Six Museum.



Fig. 39. George Hallett, untitled, undated (1960s).

Upon visiting District Six Museum in February 2018, as part of my research trip, I noted the presence of this character in one of the photographs displayed on one the walls of the museum's ground floor (fig. 38). The label accompanying it acknowledges George Hallett as its author and donor.

The caption states: 'A popular face in Hanover Street, this man expressively gesticulates while speaking to a friend'. I had heard on previous discussions with George Hallett that this person is poet James Matthews's brother. This is confirmed in the book *More Than Brothers*, where the photograph taken to the side of British Cinema is described as: 'Matthews's brother, Joey (right), and a

friend, known only as Manaka, in front of the British Cinema in District Six'.²³²

Knowing this fact, another piece of information re-emerged in my mind. In the part where he describes meeting James Matthews for the first time, Richard Rive writes:

So here was James Matthews, whose stories I had read in the *Weekend Argus*; the telephone operator who wrote fiction in his spare time. I knew from the articles I had read about him, that he came from a slum area above Bree Street, as beaten up as District Six [...]. I also heard that he was a member of a powerful gang.²³³

This gang connection leaves one to imagine the sort of activities in which his brother might have been involved. It also takes us back to Kolbe's comment about the British Cinema being part of a territory. But once again nowhere is there confrontation or violence in Hallett's photographs. In the shared space that was District Six, his visual representations blur the distinction between those who could have been viewed as marginal to society, and those who may have been deemed respectable. In a discriminatory society that disenfranchised everyone around him, all were given his empathetic photographic gaze. The example of James Matthews, described by Rive as member of a powerful gang, yet at the same time an engaged, sensitive poet and writer, shows that sometimes life during apartheid did not give any other choice but to tread on the fine line between legality and illegality. After all, the regime itself was a legitimisation of one the worst case of human rights violations.

²³² Willemse, p. 30.

²³³ Richard Rive, p. 21.

V. The gangs of District Six: signs and topography of a physical and abstract presence

One of the first images that Hallett took of a gang member does not seem to have ever been published but the circumstances in which it was taken has been told many times by the photographer, compelling us to imagine what it might look like. This is how the story goes: at the Athlone Hotel²³⁴, Hallett took his first photograph of a gangster who compellingly insisted on him taking his portrait. He said in Mason's interview that: 'this led to a series of images on that theme'.²³⁵ Which could mean that he took a series of portraits of gangsters. Indeed, recounting this event during his UCLan lecture in 2014, he explained that other gang members had requested he took their portrait.²³⁶

The documentation of gangs, or gang-related activities, in Hallett's photographs is very subtle. It is a presence that appears progressively in his work. Not that there would be any attempt, on his part, at downplaying the existence of crime in District Six. But more because, as mentioned before, his images are about capturing individuals for and through their humanity, as seen in a sequence reproduced in both *Images* and *District Six Revisited*.

The picture in question depicts a group of men and, to their left, a boy who seems to have jumped at the occasion of being photographed. Most men are smiling in this group portrait, showing a friendly interaction with Hallett. One man to the

²³⁴ Mentioned by Vincent Kolbe in chapter one.

²³⁵ Mason, p. 204.

²³⁶ George Hallett, UCLan lecture, 2014.

left, with an assured gaze, pauses squatting, cigarette to the left hand-side of his lips.



Fig. 40. George Hallett, untitled, undated (1960s).



Figs. 41 - 42. George Hallett, untitled (left) and *Hanging About* (right), undated (1960s). District Six Museum, Cape Town (right).

On the right hand-side, is a mix between serious or unhappy looks, and one person hidden by, or hiding behind, one of his friends. On first approach, one might view this photograph as a mere portrait of a sympathetic group of friends gathered in the street. But another shot from the same scene shows the men engaged in some activity on the pavement. It is difficult to say whether they are playing, if bets are involved, or if they are distributing something. Finally, a third

image that, to my knowledge, has never been published, is part of the District Six Museum's permanent display (fig. 42). Here the same group of men is seen in a vertical picture. While the length of the photograph's pictorial field reveals the littered ground, it is still difficult to make sense of what the men are up to. What can be imagined though, is that this image might precede the other two and that, maybe, stumbling upon this group, Hallett took another shot, this time landscape format, before asking the men to gather for a group portrait.

The label accompanying the photograph in the museum provides an interesting piece of information. It is a quote from a 1999 interview with artist and former District Six resident Lionel Davis, saying the following:

[The gangs] were brutal to each other. I used to witness fights between the Jesters and the Globe. They were vicious towards each other. I've seen terrible fights ... but it was not the gun shooting era ... often it used to be physical fighting ... with a panga or something like that.²³⁷

It is not clear whether Davis's statement directly referred to this photograph or if it was a curatorial choice to display this indirect comment underneath the image. If these were gang members, there is no information as to which gang they belonged to. What is certain, is that it reaffirms the ability of Hallett's images to encapsulate the district's multifaceted existence without a voyeuristic approach that would have consisted in seeking these violent moments for photo opportunities. In this respect, some of his seemingly trivial scenes are in fact much more multilayered than first meets the eye.

²³⁷ District Six Museum, label of photograph reference: Hal. 11/13.



Fig. 43. George Hallett, *Domino Players*, 1968.

This is evidenced in four pictures in particular. *Domino Players*, 1968 shows a group of five men in circular formation on the first floor of a building. The photograph is taken from the opposite pavement. As viewers, we cannot see the game and can only rely on the caption

provided by the photographer:

‘A group of young men were playing dominoes on an open balcony in Hannover [sic] Street in District Six. Men often gambled on balconies to avoid police raids at street level.’²³⁸ The picture is in portrait format. A truncated sign painted on the building’s façade indicates an occupancy by a tailor.

On the right window, lodged behind metal railings, is a sign saying: ‘We buy empty bottles’, a reminder that in a precarious environment every penny counted. To the left of the door, almost unnoticeable, is the inscription ‘Jester Kids’.



Fig. 44. Detail.

A second photograph shows a young girl sat on an makeshift swing made out of a rope and cardboard, hung to Godfrey Street sign post. Accompanying her is a

²³⁸ Jantjes, p. 238.

younger girl, maybe waiting for her turn. She is leaning against the wall of a building which surface is crumbling. The painted coat is cracking, the bricks exposed, while graffiti are invading the wall's bottom part. Among the legible inscriptions, one can read 'Stalag Kids'.



Fig. 45. George Hallett, *Godfrey Street*, 1968.



Fig. 46. Detail.

The third image is that of a young man walking down Seven Steps, an iconic feature of District Six's urban landscape. In a snapshot, Hallett captured the interesting diagonals created by the stairs and the pipe running along them and up the wall. Once again, the wall is the receptacle of society's marginal modes of expression. Here two tags catch our attention: to the left of the picture frame is 'The Forty Thieves' and to the right 'The Volunteers'.



Figs. 47-48-49. George Hallett, *Seven Steps*, and details 1968.

Street photography is very much about what French photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson called the ‘decisive moment’. A precept unknowingly adopted by Hallett very early on. Based on his practice, it can be imagined that Hallett snapped this moment with the intention to include the tags in the picture frame. Which is also the case in the fourth image in this set. A group of children is playing in the ruins of a building. Instead of being a frontal shot, the picture is taken in a diagonal angle and the pictorial field on both sides of the children show walls with crumbling coating, exposed bricks and once again markings including ‘Gossip Lane’ and ‘Holl Boys’ (fig. 50).²³⁹

²³⁹ This image is actually of Bo-Kaap but is often included in Hallett’s District Six series.



Fig. 50. George Hallett, *Holl Boys*, 1968.

These markings, or tags, have never been considered in written interpretations of Hallett's work yet they are important in many respects. Research on these words confirms that they represent names of the gangs active in District Six in the 1960s. From Hallett's images can be identified the Jesters Kids, Stalag Kids and Holl Boys, whose tags act as a form of abstract presence. Their existence is also confirmed by South African criminologist and author Don Pinnock in his book *The Brotherhood: street gangs and state control in Cape Town*. Pinnock dates the emergence of gang activity in District Six to the 1940s where it resulted from various factors including the informal sector towards which lack of opportunity, precarious living conditions, and the simple need to survive, led some members of society. But it was also part of District Six 'networks of social control'.²⁴⁰

Pinnock explains:

The powerful families 'ordered' the urban ghettos through their connections, inter-marriages, agreements, 'respect' and, ultimately, their force and access to violence.

²⁴⁰ Don Pinnock, *The Brotherhoods: Street gangs and state control in Cape Town* (Cape Town: David Philip, 1984), p. 23.

Because effective police protection was lacking, this control was beneficial, even essential, to life in the ghetto. It kept things 'safe'.²⁴¹

Pinnock goes on to discuss the rise of juvenal delinquency in the late 1920s - early 1930s which then manifested itself as isolated incidents from *skollies* (or thugs) rather than gang actions. He also quotes as a source a policeman who worked in District Six before the Second World War and observed that 'gangs started, and crimes escalated' after the war.²⁴² He continues:

It was then that such names as the Red Cats, the Jesters, the Goofies and the Kettang Gang found their way into the streets of District Six and the pages of newspapers. The time of the street gangs had arrived.²⁴³

The arrival of street gangs rose the concerns of the police who, in their effort to crack down on crime, indiscriminately arrested 'family' members and 'outsiders' alike, unjustly targeting non-European people.²⁴⁴ But action was also taken by the locals, notably 'old' families, often shopkeepers, skilled craftsmen and better-off hawkers. Pinnock writes that:

At night the sons of some of these shopkeepers used to congregate under a streetlight alongside the Globe Furnishing Company in Hanover Street opposite

²⁴¹ Ibid.

²⁴² Ibid., p. 24.

²⁴³ Ibid., pp. 24-25.

²⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 25.

the Star Bioscope [...]. Their first action as a group, in the early 1940s, seems to have been to smash an informal tax-racket at the cinema.²⁴⁵

The Globe, as they came to be known, began as a vigilante group. They were well respected and even viewed as ‘the most decent and well-bred gangsters ever’ by former District Six librarian Vincent Kolbe, whom Pinnock described ‘a close associate of the Globe’.²⁴⁶ Its leaders – amongst whom Mikey Ismail, a plasterer – were linked to a diversity of sectors tied to District Six community including construction, local transport, food distribution and the city council.²⁴⁷ They even had some form of agreement with the police.²⁴⁸ However by the 1950s things had changed. Pinnock explains:

... the Globe was controlling extortion, blackmail, illicit buying of every kind, smuggling, shebeens, gambling, and political movements in the District. Mikey’s image had gradually shifted from ‘keeper of the peace’ to that of Robin Hood, and gang members were taking in large weekly doses of American gangland experience at the cinemas in the District.²⁴⁹

As was mentioned in the first chapter when discussing black South African literature, the American influence was a phenomenon also experienced in Sophiatown, Johannesburg. It also inspired gangs’ names. An example of which

²⁴⁵ Ibid.

²⁴⁶ Don Pinnock, ‘To be a somebody. Probing the roots of community in District Six’. *SA Crime Quarterly*, 55, (2016), 11.

²⁴⁷ Pinnock, *The Brotherhoods*, p. 26.

²⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 27.

²⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 28.

is ‘The Forty Thieves’ from Hallett’s Seven Steps photograph which, apart from being taken from the well-known folk tale, was also the name of one of New York’s first known gangs, formed in the 1820s.

While the Globe’s name does not seem to appear in any of the recorded traces of District Six graffiti, probably owing to the image they sought to uphold, it is obvious that ‘their’ territory, was coveted by rival gangs. The tags on the walls of District Six create an alternative topography of the place that could be further explored. For instance, we understand from Pinnock that the Jesters were linked to Constitution Street.²⁵⁰



Fig. 51. Wilfred Paulse, untitled, undated.

‘Stalag Kids’ in Hallett’s photograph is located at the angle of Godfrey Street, and ‘Stalag 17’ is also found on the wall of a non-identified street in a photograph by Wilfred Paulse.

Seven Steps seems to have been a disputed territory. Other gangs can also be traced from a picture by Cloete Breytenbach, with a young boy pausing with his arms open.

²⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 26.



Fig. 52. Cloete Breytenbach, untitled, undated.



Fig. 53. Dr W. G., *A group of youngsters idling away time*, 1945.

The wall behind him is a palimpsest of this alternative form of street reclaiming. To his left are the names ‘Cossack’ and ‘Gestapo Kids’ with a swastika between the two words. Behind him appear letters and numbers, but the blocked view makes it difficult to say if they refer to gangs. One could speculate that the faded 17 might refer to a prior Stalag 17 tag. And the letters “lers” might be the ending of the Killers, the latter being also found in a 1945 photograph of ‘a group of youngsters idling away time’ taken by a Dr W. G. le Roux from Paarl.²⁵¹ Pinnock’s research indicates that on Saturday 19 December 1951, a gang war burst between the Globe and the Killer armies who confronted each other on Hanover Street with a combined force of 300 men.²⁵²

The gangs’ tags also feature on two photographs by Bryan Heseltine dated circa 1949-52 (fig. 54-55). One shows three groups of men playing street games. On the wall behind the furthest group can be seen ‘The Outspan Kids’. The scene is located near the intersection of Stone and McGregor streets. The background also

²⁵¹ Schoeman, pp. 46-47.

²⁵² Pinnock, *The Brotherhoods*, p. 27.

shows Eaton Place residential building.²⁵³ Another photograph by Heseltine taken in Bo-Kaap captures the inscription ‘Beware of the Skull Busters of 1937’. The accompanying caption by Darren Newbury indicates that the Skull Busters were a gang active both in Bo-Kaap and District Six. The wall also includes a faded ‘Lions Kids Vising’.



Figures 54 - 55. Bryan Heseltine, *Street Games* and detail, c. 1949-52.

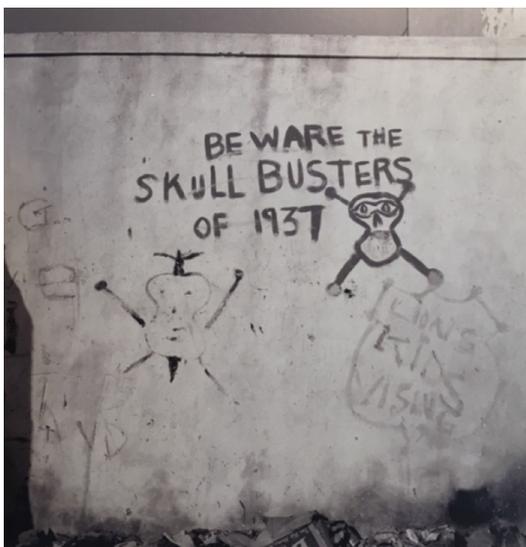


Figure 56. Bryan Heseltine, *Skull Busters*, c. 1949-52.

²⁵³ Newbury, *A people Apart*, p. 111.

Another District Six/Bo-Kaap overlap to mention, exemplified with the Holl Boys tag, is a picture taken by Estonian photographer Juhan Kuus (1953-2015), at the same spot as Hallett's, showing this time a gangster with a pistol.



Figure 57. Juhan Kuus, *Gangster, Malay Quarter, Cape Town, 1972*.

The photographer said:

I was on a rooftop photographing Coloured children when I suddenly heard someone shout, 'Whitey, take my photograph', and there was this man with a gun in the alley below. Terrified, I took one photograph. Satisfied, the man disappeared as quickly as he had arrived.²⁵⁴

In all those images, the walls become an important feature. Their texture is highlighted by the crumbling coating, cracked paint, and exposed bricks. The black and white contrast also give them a graphic quality. From an aesthetic viewpoint, there is a mirror function between the flat surface of the photographic

²⁵⁴ Juhan Kuus in Juhan Kuus and Trevor McDonald, *South Africa in Black and White* (London: Harrap, 1987), figure 145.

paper and the surface of the wall. While in most of the photographs discussed, Hallett's and others', the main focus is set on the people in those scenes, the tags may be considered as visual accidents or fortuitous encounters in that they did not represent the photographers' primary interest. Had that been the case, these would have certainly emerged as themes in their own practices. Like it did, for instance, in the work of New York photographer Aaron Siskind (1903-1991) who notably captured visual accidents on surfaces and translated them into pictorial subjects in their own right.

Here, the graffiti partake of both the demise of District Six and the aesthetics of ruin and decay. Generally considered an act of vandalism, an expression of marginalised communities, their status differs from that of any other written signs found within the visual representations of District Six. The gangs' names are potent elements, for all the reasons mentioned earlier. They convey the territorial wars and violence that came with the district's deterioration; arguments used by the apartheid government to seal its fate. But they are also pictorial signs. They are non-mimetic elements which presence on the picture plane may at times be discreet, they are nonetheless as important as the mimetic elements. By the latter I am referring to the people, streets, shops, buildings, or objects present in the photographs, considered for what they are, as three-dimensional entities in the space within which they were photographed. They represent the tangible reality, or nature, mechanically reproduced through the photographic medium. Whereas the written inscriptions belong to textured backgrounds that could be described as fields of abstract patterns of all sorts, from graffiti, scratches, ripped posters, to patches of various tones.

As non-representational forms, the tags could be interpreted along the thinking of French philosopher Roland Barthes in 'Elements of Semiology' (1964) – building on the work of semiotician Ferdinand de Saussure – whereby, the non-mimetic signs are *signifiers* which, in their cognitive nature, are identifiable as letters forming truncated or fully formed words.²⁵⁵ In turn, the *signified* information refers to the gangs' names and connotes the context of gangsterism discussed earlier. This also calls to mind Jacques Derrida's observation that the iconic potency of images lies in their ability to do without that which they are meant to represent, their referent.²⁵⁶ Derrida proposes the possibility of words functioning as images.²⁵⁷ Which gives us new avenues of exploring Hallett's practice both as a photographer and, as we shall see in the next chapter, as a graphic designer.

In this chapter, I have centred my analysis of Hallett's work on the theme of District Six as it forms the larger part of his practice and is his most important contribution to South African photography before his exile in 1970. I have also placed this body of work within the context of the emergence of studio and street photography in Cape Town and more particularly District Six. In doing so, I have critically engaged with the photo essays created by other photographers, notably Cloete Breytenbach, Jan Greshoff and Jansje Wissema, the last two having created vast collection of images of the district. In these photographs the predominance of views of public spaces and the limited interactions with the

²⁵⁵ Roland Barthes, 'Éléments de sémiologie', *Communication*, 64 (1964), 105-106.

²⁵⁶ Jacques Derrida, *Trace et Archive Image et Art* (Bry-sur-Marne: INA Éditions, 2014), p. 37.

²⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

Sixers, as Richard Rive or Shamil Jeppie observed, raise the issue of proximity or intimate knowledge of the place, and the question of discourse, or lack thereof, invested in those images.

The notion of outsider/insider approach noted by Rassool and Prosalendis, which in a way has defined the Western or white gaze on black or 'other' lives since the early days of photography, is a paradigm that distinguishes the practice of white and black photographers especially when documenting black or brown lives. In this respect, the particularity of Hallett's District Six series – which is substantially smaller in scale compared to those of Greshoff or Wissema's, was executed in a context of financial hardship, and benefiting from far less access to platforms of dissemination – lies in the depth of the personal interactions and narratives it conveys. This is not to say that one is better than the other, but rather that they speak from a different place and say something different.

This is all the more important in the context of apartheid during which this series was realised. While Hallett's photographic archive was imagined as a project dedicated to the community and collective memory, at the time of its making there was no certainty that it would ever find a South African publishing outlet or a place within an institution to be preserved and made accessible to the public. As a matter of fact, apart from the only exhibition he had before leaving South Africa and the publication in *Contrast* in 1970, it is during his exile and through the African Writers Series book covers that some of these images circulated before finding a home at the District Six Museum.

It is therefore noteworthy that Hallett's creative link with District Six begins with literature through Richard Rive, blurs the lines between literary world

and marginal life through the Matthews brothers, and that it unintentionally allows for the gangs' tags to mark the beginning of a relation between image and text in his work. This situates Hallett's series, and the imagery that will define his practice as he left Cape Town for London, beyond the sole field of documentation. It places it at the junction of figurative motives – notably portraiture, the genre that most defines his art – and the non-figurative, through the written sign. Bringing those signs to the fore, closer to the picture plane, on a par with the other visual elements, rather than considering them as secondary, or background elements pushed towards the depth of the wall, allows us to include the notion of text/texture in our appraisal of Hallett's first body of work. This points towards the literary/visual paradigm developed in the next chapters.

CHAPTER THREE

EXILE, DIASPORAS, AND NEW CREATIVE TERRITORIES

In 1969, George Hallett took part in his first group exhibition entitled ‘New Photography’ at the University of Cape Town.²⁵⁸ This was followed by his first solo exhibition at the Artists Gallery that featured his pictures of Hout Bay, District Six, the Cape Flats, and musicians. These exhibitions could have been considered solid first steps for an emerging photographer, however this is not how Hallett viewed his personal situation. As we have previously seen, he evoked the lack of opportunity that prevented him from finding a job as a photographer. On other occasions, he mentioned wanting to live in a place without racial prejudice or violence, and even said that a stabbing incident was the last straw that led him to leave South Africa.²⁵⁹

As much as his departure – voluntary or ‘self-imposed’ exile, as it is often referred to – was motivated by the country’s violence, it was also guided by a search for the freedom that could nurture his creativity. Hallett was inspired by the possibility of another world, of another place that he could imagine for his future self. In the 2014 lecture he gave at the University of Central Lancashire, he spoke passionately about the period in which he decided to leave South Africa. ‘It was *The Age of the Aquarius!*’ he said, to explain his mindset at the time. Hallett had mentioned it on several occasions in the past, during informal conversations. What seemed anecdotal then might, in fact, have been another example of how

²⁵⁸ George Hallett, ‘Curriculum Vitae’, private archive document.

²⁵⁹ Hallett, UCLan lecture, 2014.

aspects of popular culture filtered through his dreams as a young person in the 1960s.

The song *Aquarius*, that contributed to popularise this concept, spoke to the hippie²⁶⁰, anti-Vietnam war, and civil rights movements of the time.²⁶¹ Its message certainly appealed to anti-authoritarian ideals similar with those that sustained the struggle against apartheid. The previous chapters have shown how Hallett drew inspiration from literature and music. Some of the ideas conveyed in *Aquarius*, along with the intellectual stimulations he received at the contact of the writers and artists he encountered in the early days of his interest in photography, could certainly have contributed to heighten his yearning for social and creative freedom away from South Africa. In this, he followed in the footsteps of pioneering black artists who left the country before him to experience a true, Bohemian, artistic life which, up to then, had mainly been the preserve of white South African artists.

This chapter focuses on the cultural context preceding and informing Hallett's decision to leave South Africa, within the framework of the aspirations that existed in the predominantly black community of creatives with whom he interacted and identified, and in relation to the tradition of cultural explorations inherited from South African modern art.

Drawing from British academic Mark Israel's study of South African exile in Britain, this social condition is then approached as a complex multi-layered

²⁶⁰ Hallett embraced aspects of Hippy culture as exemplified by his decision to live on a farm in the Pyrenees in the mid 1970s.

²⁶¹ An example reflecting an attempt at racial integration was the diversity of the cast of *Hair: The American Tribal Love-Rock Musical* (1967) of which *Aquarius* is the opening song.

experience that encapsulates both racial fragmentations and cultural convergences. The latter is developed through Heinemann's African Writers Series as a site for African and Diasporic creative encounters. Taking as point of departure the first book in the series, Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1962), I consider the conversations and debates around the artist - artwork / author - writing double relationship. Doing so leads me to examine the works of some of the early African artists who have collaborated with the series, notably Uche Okeke and Albert Adams, and identify lines of enquiry useful to the study of Hallett's covers.

I. South African modern art and cultural explorations

Writing on the practice of George Hallett in the context of his exile in England is essentially attempting to address the double marginalisation of artists who have been overlooked both in Britain and in their home country due to their long absence. Although Hallett gained some form of acknowledgment in South Africa after he returned from exile, there are still aspects of his work that remain under-researched in both countries. His position is all the more complex as his creative years, and most of the themes he explored, are both connected with the social realism that emerged in black South African modernism²⁶² and the African

²⁶² I am basing this observation on prior research on South African painter Gerard Sekoto whose practice began in the late 1930s, and who lived in exile in Paris from 1947. Sekoto and Hallett might have met in 1972 in the context of a trio exhibition with Louis Maurice, in Amsterdam, Paris and Brussels. They both share the topic of black representation, notably portraiture, from their South African periods. See my introduction.

and diasporic representations inscribed within post-Independence literary and visual imagery.

There is an interesting lineage that precedes Hallett's departure from South Africa and demonstrates how some of the pioneering black artists inspired each other to take on new cultural journeys.²⁶³ This lineage also reflects the 'each one teach one' approach to the shared formative experiences that have marked the early practice of artists who could not access formal art education in South Africa. John Koenakeefe Mohl, Ernest Mancoba and Gerard Sekoto are particularly important to mention here, as their trajectory engages with some of the questions informing the decision to seek inspiration abroad, and whether the departure would be temporary or become permanent.

The travels of Mohl, Mancoba and Sekoto coincide with the emergence of new approaches in South African modern art in the 1930s and 40s. In those days, experiencing life and culture abroad was unheard of for black visual artists. Whereas, for white South African artists, these outward connections were linked to the European traditions upon which South African art education and modernism were established. This legacy had an influence on generations of artists who, as South African art historian Evelyn Cohen pointed out, looked to the British and French ateliers and art schools, 'went overseas for their tuition

²⁶³ South African art historian Elizabeth Rankin explains, that in the early twentieth century, 'While [black artists] were not excluded from South African art training by legislation, as was later to be the case under apartheid, they were barred by custom and the deeply embedded social separatism cemented under colonial rule'. Elizabeth Rankin, 'Lonely Road: Formative episodes in the development of black artists in early twentieth-century South Africa', in *Visual Century – South African Art in Context*, vol. 1 ed. by Jillian Carman, p. 93.

[...]’, and exhibited ‘the European experience in their work’.²⁶⁴ This phenomenon represented what Elizabeth Rankin called, ‘a typically colonial belief that the best art would be found in European art schools’, leading ‘ambitious South African artists [to] set their sights on Britain and Europe, where they hoped to find advanced training that would make up for the perceived or real deficiencies of local schools – even though these local institutions were invariably staffed by graduates from European art schools.’²⁶⁵ Although, as Rankin remarked, black artists ‘did not enjoy the questionable benefits of these schools’, a growing number of them ‘shared the same aspirations to study art both locally and abroad’.²⁶⁶

The first black South African visual artist known to have travelled out of South Africa to further his art training abroad is John Koenakeefe Mohl (1903-1985). Mohl was encouraged to paint by a missionary named Reverend Hale, from the London Missionary Society.²⁶⁷ The latter arranged for him to attend college, where he stayed for two years before being sent to an art school in South West Africa, now Namibia.²⁶⁸ There, he trained with a French art teacher²⁶⁹, and was then sent to Germany, with the support of the London Missionary Society

²⁶⁴ Evelyn Cohen, ‘Early Training and French Vision in South African Art Prior to 1920’, in ‘Paris and South African Artists 1850-1965’ ed. by Lucy Alexander, Emma Bedford, Evelyn Cohen (Cape Town: South African National Gallery, 1988), p. 10.

²⁶⁵ Rankin, p. 93.

²⁶⁶ Ibid.

²⁶⁷ Elza Miles, *Lands and Lives: A story of early black artists*. (Cape Town, Pretoria, Johannesburg: Human & Rousseau and Johannesburg Art Gallery, 1997), p. 58.

²⁶⁸ South West Africa was a German colony from 1884 to 1914 placed under South African administration after the First World War until 1990.

²⁶⁹ Rankin, p. 107.

and the Lutheran Church, to study at Dusseldorf's Art Academy for five years.

He returned to Cape Town in 1936 as he was strongly convinced that South Africa needed Black artists.²⁷⁰

Similarly educated in the school system introduced by European missionaries, Ernest Mancoba (1904-2002) was also encouraged to practice art by a member of the Church. After training to become a teacher, he settled in District Six in the mid-1930s. He was introduced to the sculptor Lippy Lipshitz (1903-1980), the painter Irma Stern (1894-1966) and, later on, to the sculptor Elza Dziomba (1902-1970).²⁷¹ Discussing Mancoba's life, South African art historian Elza Miles writes that the artist was 'inspired by the experiences of Lipshitz and Dziombia who had both studied in Paris.'²⁷² Irma Stern's training in Germany, where she interacted with German Expressionists, notably Max Pechtein (1881-1955), was certainly equally inspirational.²⁷³

In 1936, Mancoba decided to leave South Africa 'to continue his art studies in France'.²⁷⁴ His dream became a reality after he obtained a BA from the University of South Africa and received a grant and a loan from the Bantu Welfare Trust. He travelled to France via London where he stayed for a few weeks, visiting the

²⁷⁰ Miles, *Lands and Lives*, p. 57 and Tim Couzens, *The New African: A Study of the Life and Works of H. I. E. Dhlomo* (Johannesburg: Raven Press, 1985), p. 252. Elza Miles indicates that there is no trace of Mohl's registration at the academy because it was bombed and its archive destroyed during the Second World War, p. 58.

²⁷¹ Miles, p. 137.

²⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 138.

²⁷³ Esmé Berman, *Painting in South Africa* (Johannesburg: Southern Book Publishers, 1993), p. 74.

²⁷⁴ Miles, p. 138.

British Museum, attending conferences, and seeking to make contact with the Jamaican writer and philosopher C.L.R. James.²⁷⁵

Rankin suggests that Mancoba's decision to go to Paris might not have been motivated by 'the belief shared by many artists, that it was the hub of the art world'. She quotes his interview with Hans Ulrich Obrist in which he explained that, had he remained in South Africa, he 'would never be able to feel free enough, in my mind, to express myself as fully as I wished, but would always knock the head against the barriers which the colonial order had set up in my country...'.²⁷⁶ Since Mancoba was speaking so many years after the facts, it is difficult to know if, when he left South Africa, his intention was to never return. Indeed, his departure became permanent as the result of circumstances that dramatically changed his life after he arrived in France in 1938. These include his encounter with his future wife – the artist Sonja Ferlov, the outbreak of the Second World War, his imprisonment from 1940 to 1944 during the German occupation in France, and the birth of his and Ferlov's son in 1946. The interview he gave Hans Ulrich Obrist, with hindsight, after a long life in Europe – in France and Denmark and back to France in 1952 – does not rule out the question whether his intention was, from the outset, a definitive exile or if a return would have been envisaged, as turned out to be for many South African exiles at the end of apartheid.

²⁷⁵ Ibid., p. 139.

²⁷⁶ Rankin, p. 97 and Hans Ulrich Obrist, 'Ernest Mancoba: An interview with Hans Ulrich Obrist', *Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art*, 18, (2003), 14.

Perhaps the words of Richard Rive, who was awarded a fellowship to travel to Africa and Europe in the early 1960s, during which he connected with many South African exiles, can help us gauge the sort of questioning that might have come to mind as one contemplated traveling away from South Africa:

I wondered to what extent I should be able to sever my relationship with a country I loved and hated. Did I wish to stay permanently inside a system that based itself on constitutionalised discrimination? What if more favourable prospects presented themselves abroad? Would I be tempted? Was it worth returning to bigotry and prejudice? Then again, going abroad might give me the perspective I so badly needed in order to straighten out my distorted values.²⁷⁷

The idea to go and see, to take on this journey and open oneself to what would lie ahead was common to both Mancoba and his younger peer Gerard Sekoto (1913-1993) whom he met at Khaiso Secondary School in Pietersburg (now Polokwane) where they both taught in 1937. With a similar educational background, and a mutual interest in art, the pair became friends and Mancoba became a mentor to Sekoto. South African scholar Chabani Manganyi writes that: '[t]he two artists, one a novice, the other more mature, often talked about art and dreamt about going to Paris.'²⁷⁸ Contrary to Mancoba, Mohl attempted to dissuade Sekoto to leave South Africa and told him that he would lose himself, that 'South Africa needed painters to paint our people'.²⁷⁹ In that, his thinking foreshadowed what,

²⁷⁷ Richard Rive, p. 32.

²⁷⁸ Chabanyi Manganyi, *A Black Man Called Sekoto* (Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press, 1996), p. 21.

²⁷⁹ Miles, p. 57 and 80; Couzens, p. 252.

decades later, would become debates on exiles' identity in relation to the country left behind, and their role and impact in the struggle against apartheid.

Sekoto had already made up his mind about studying abroad. But before leaving South Africa, he wanted to travel across the country, experience its life and culture, and document it through his painting. In spending a bit more time in his country, he was able to gain some form of recognition as an artist. In 1940, one of his works was acquired by the Johannesburg Art Gallery – the first painting by a contemporary Black artist purchased by a public museum at the time. He was also included in an exhibition by the New Group²⁸⁰ in 1943. His profile drew such attention that, in September 1947, his departure to study art in France was featured in several newspapers.²⁸¹



Figures. 58-59-60. Press clippings of Sekoto's departure for France in the 19, 27 and 29 September 1947 editions of *Spotlight*, the *Argus*, and *Cape Times*.

²⁸⁰ The New Group was formed by young South African artists seeking to break away from the conservatism of the South African Society of Artists. It was founded in 1938 by Gregoire Boonzaier (1909-2005), Lippy Lipshitz (1903- 1980), Freida Lock (1906-1962) and Terence McCaw (1913-1978). They also co-opted 'two like-minded painters from the Transvaal, Walter Battiss (1906-82) and Alexis Preller (1911-75)'. Berman, p. 91.

²⁸¹ Including *Spotlight*, the *Cape Argus*, *Cape Times* and *Sunday Tribune*.

Interestingly, one of these articles caught the attention of Peter Clarke who later wrote: ‘I will never forget the effect this news had on me, an 18 year old dock worker at Simon’s Town. I remembered thinking “If he who is Black can be an artist, so can I”.’²⁸²

Peter Clarke – who, ten years later, would become one of Hallett’s mentors – was a school friend of Albert Adams and Richard Rive who all attended Livingston High School in District Six. Although Clarke left school at 15 in 1944, their connection remained. Clarke mentioned that shortly after Sekoto’s news of his departure, another noteworthy article was published in the *Cape Argus*. He wrote:

The article, dated Wednesday 8 October, was titled *Eager Students at Art Classes for Coloured*. Shortly afterwards, a note arrived from Albert telling me about these classes. These were run by an artist named John Coplans at St Phillip’s School in Chapel Street, District Six. It was open to anybody, and no qualifications were needed.²⁸³

A photograph accompanying this article showed Albert Adams as one of the students.²⁸⁴ Clarke and Adams are examples of the shift that started to happen in South African urban centres in terms of introduction to visual arts for black and coloured artists. This came less and less from Christian religious education and increasingly from within the arts, and from black role models.

²⁸² Peter Clarke, ‘Portrait of a Friendship – Words for Albert Adams’, in ‘Albert Adams: Journey on a Tightrope’ ed. by Marilyn Martin and Joe Dolby (Cape Town, Iziko South African National Gallery, 2008), p. 13.

²⁸³ Ibid.

²⁸⁴ Elza Miles, ‘Resurrected: The ‘Crucified Dark Man’, in Martin and Dolby, p. 25.

Another important change was to mark the end of the 1940s. Sekoto set out for France in 1947, the year before apartheid was voted in the General Election that took place in May 1948. The circumstances in which he, and Mancoba before him, left South Africa were different from that of the generation of artists that would follow. The latter faced a more hostile environment and, this time, politics was a decisive factor in the decision to depart.

However, exile was not a response generally adopted by black artists. As a matter of fact, South African art historian Steven Sack's statement that 'many of the most talented of the black artists have either died young and tragic deaths or have chosen to live in exile'²⁸⁵ could be nuanced by Mark Israel's statistical research showing that, in England – a key exile destination –, South African exiles were predominantly white.²⁸⁶ One could also note that the creatives whom Hallett cited as his mentors and inspiration, Richard Rive, Peter Clarke, James Matthews, – all of whom important figures in South African culture – remained in South Africa. The first two benefitted from residencies abroad but always returned home. Albert Adams who was accepted at Slade School of Fine Art in 1953 initially returned home after courses and study trips in Germany and Italy. He decided to leave the country for good after the Sharpeville Massacre in March 1960.

²⁸⁵ Steven Sack, 'From country to city: The development of an urban art', in 'Catalogue: 10 years of collecting (1979-1989): Standard Bank Foundation Collection of African Art, University Art Galleries' Collection of African Art and selected works from the University Ethnological Museum Collection' ed. by David Hammond-Tooke and Anitra Nettleton (Johannesburg: University of the Witwatersrand, 1989), p. 54.

²⁸⁶ Mark Israel, *South African Political Exile in the United Kingdom* (London: MacMillan Press; New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999), p. 2.



Figure 61. Travelling from Cape Town to Southampton on the Edinburgh Castle. From left to right: Caroline Nasileng, Amos Langdown, Peter Clarke, Z.R. Manare and Alice Nokorosi. Langdown and Clarke were on their way to the Rijksakademie in Amsterdam; the other three, all schoolteachers from the then Basutoland, were going to study in London. September 1962.²⁸⁷



Figure 62. Eddie Prins, James Matthews, George Hallett and Howard Lawrence photographed at Cape Town harbour in September 1962 seeing Peter Clarke off at his departure for Amsterdam.²⁸⁸

We have seen in this section that, in the first half of the 20th century, up to the aftermath of World War II, and before the introduction of apartheid, taking

²⁸⁷ Caption from Willemse, p. 52.

²⁸⁸ Ibid., p. 12.

the trip to Europe almost equated to the tradition of the Grand Tour. The stated intention was primarily artistic and manifested as art training or residency opportunities from which one would return. However, as repression progressed, self-imposed, political exile, or actual state banishment, gained ground. Notorious cases in the visual arts include artists Dumile Feni and Ernest Cole who left out of fear for their life. Exiles ranged from cultural figures to political activists, many of whom photographed by Hallett from 1970 onward.

The next section focuses on the multi-layered experience of exile in Britain, a key destination for Hallett and many South Africans.

II. South African exile in Britain: a racial socio-political climate

Exile as a lived experience and in its theoretical framework does not hold a strict unique definition. In its general meaning, exile is understood primarily as a ‘penal expulsion from one’s native country’, and secondarily as an ‘expatriation or prolonged absence from one’s homeland under either the compulsion of circumstance or the rigors of some high purpose.’²⁸⁹

Among the thinkers and scholars who have pondered on its definitions, and on the nuances of this form of displacement, Palestinian-American scholar Edward Said wrote in his essay ‘Reflections on Exile’:

Although it is true that anyone prevented from returning home is an exile, some distinctions can be made between exiles, refugees, expatriates and émigrés. Exile originated in the old-age practice of banishment. Once banished, the exile lives an

²⁸⁹ Wikipedia, ‘Exile’, <<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Exile>> [accessed 25 December 2022].

anomalous and miserable life, with the stigma of being an outsider. Refugees on the other hand, are a creation of the twentieth-century state. The word “refugee” has become a political one, suggesting large herds of innocent and bewildered people requiring urgent international assistance, whereas “exile” carries with it, I think, a touch of solitude and spirituality.

Expatriates voluntarily live in an alien country, usually for personal or social reasons. [...] Expatriates may share in the solitude and estrangement of exile, but they do not suffer under its rigid proscriptions. Émigrés enjoy an ambiguous status. Technically, an émigré is anyone who emigrates to a new country. Choice in the matter is certainly a possibility [...].²⁹⁰

British scholar Mark Israel, who has studied South African exile in Britain, cites Professor Shu-Yun Ma’s analysis of Chinese exile – informed by the theories developed by German economist and author Albert Hirschman in *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty* (1970) – which she articulates around the notions of ‘forced exit, dissenting voice and struggle to return’. Israel views Ma’s framing as ‘an unproblematized idealization of exile’ and argues that:

While there is considerable agreement that no two exiles are the same and no two exile groups are the same, the terms ‘forced’, ‘committed’ and ‘intent on return’, despite their repetitive use by bureaucracy and scholars of exile as seemingly objective measures, are all subjective states. These terms are not used dispassionately. Rather they may be deployed to suit particular goals.²⁹¹

²⁹⁰ Edward Said, p. 132 and pp. 362-363.

²⁹¹ Israel, p. 7.

These critical approaches to defining or intellectually framing exile, regardless of the context, attest to the fact that there are many ways of examining this experience within South African history. In discussing the rationale behind his analysis of South African exile, a study he began in the early 1990s (at the eve of the country's liberation) and published towards the end of that decade, Israel stated that: '(d)espite the size and significance to both Britain and South Africa of South African migration to the United Kingdom, it has received almost no academic attention.'²⁹²

In the past twenty years, more literature on South African exile has emerged, but this has predominantly been from the perspective of the country's political situation. As far as the arts are concerned, music and literature seem to have raised more interest from researchers than the visual arts. This is a fact observed in an article published by the University of Cape Town entitled 'Research, exhibit exiled artists' work lest they become "intellectual refugees"' in which, discussing the case of George Hallett, South African author and community activist Aubrey Mogase is quoted voicing the concern that 'South African artists who went into exile during the apartheid years risk becoming "intellectual refugees" if institutions such as universities don't step up to ensure their work is archived and researched – and this knowledge made easily accessible.'²⁹³

²⁹² Ibid., p. 3.

²⁹³ Helen Swingler, 'Research, exhibit exiled artists' work lest they become 'intellectual refugees''. University of Cape Town, 22 February 2022, <<https://www.news.uct.ac.za/article/-2022-02-22-research-exhibit-exiled-artists-work-lest-they-become-intellectual-refugees>> [accessed 26 December 2022].

The reasons for the scarcity of research on exiled South African visual artists, particularly black artists, could be linked to several factors. During apartheid, mainstream South African art history has tended to exclude black visual artists. It is only in the mid to late 1980s that the discipline began addressing these imbalances. An important step towards filling those gaps was to re-introduce the work of black artists in the narrative.²⁹⁴ This led to an initial focus on the black artists based in South Africa before the attention could be turned on artists who had left the country decades earlier.

Another factor to account for, is the lack of access to the works produced by visual artists in exile, as opposed to music or literature which, to a certain degree, are easier to disseminate. Furthermore, while black artists were known within their communities, the impact of apartheid was such that those who could have made these stories known much earlier were not in a position to do so.²⁹⁵ Finally, one could add that, upon settling in their new country – permanently or temporarily, as would be the case for some – exiles were either absorbed in the artistic scene of the place to which they migrated or, more likely for black artists, became as marginalised as their local peers. This marginalisation reflects an experience also highlighted by Israel who observed that:

²⁹⁴ I discuss this point in my introduction.

²⁹⁵ The case of Gerard Sekoto comes to mind. Indeed, while it is Professor Chabani Manganyi who, in 1985, raised awareness of painter Gerard Sekoto's absence from South African art history it took the resources and connections of Barbara Lindop to document his work and publish the artist's first official monograph. Barbara Lindop, *Gerard Sekoto* (Randburg: Dictum Publishing, 1988), n.p. Similarly, a chance encounter with the work of Ernest Mancoba in the mid-1980s 'sparked off', in Elza Miles' own words, her fascination with his art. Elza Miles, *Lifeline out of Africa: The Art of Ernest Mancoba* (Cape Town, Johannesburg: Human & Rousseau, 1994), p. 7.

As members of the Empire and then the Commonwealth, South Africans faced no restriction on their entry until 1962. After that, the majority of white South Africans were given preferential treatment, first as ‘kith and kin’ of the British, and then more formally as patrials and later as citizens of other countries of the European Union.²⁹⁶

He also adds that: ‘(d)espite formal equality, immigration was racialized’.

Institutional racism became embodied in a series of ‘devious’ administrative devices to restrict the entry of those termed coloured Commonwealth citizens.²⁹⁷

For those who made it to Britain, apart from the support of networks of South African exiles, they were subject to the same forms of discrimination that affected the Windrush generation concerning employment, housing, education, and other public provisions.²⁹⁸

In his book *Staying Power: The History of Black People in Britain*, writer and journalist Peter Fryer explained how between 1958 and 1968 British law surrendered to racism and politicians from both leading parties ‘progressively accommodated themselves to racism’. He writes: ‘Step by step, racism was institutionalized, legitimized, and nationalized. That which was unthinkable in 1958 was by 1968 the law of the land.’²⁹⁹ With the 1962 Commonwealth

²⁹⁶ Israel, p. 5

²⁹⁷ Ibid., p. 94.

²⁹⁸ Ibid., pp. 113-114, 118-124.

²⁹⁹ Peter Fryer, *Staying Power: The History of Black People in Britain* (London: Pluto Press, 1984), p. 381.

Immigrations Act³⁰⁰, '[b]lackness was officially equated with second-class citizenship, with the status of undesirable immigrant'.³⁰¹

The 1962 act was consolidated by the Commonwealth Immigration Act in 1968 that contained a special clause giving 'ex-colonials with white skins the continued right for free entry'.³⁰² Further restrictions came about with the 1971 Immigration Act – reflecting the agitation created by Enoch Powell's racist and anti-immigration rhetoric – which only allowed entry for black people who, under a contract labour system, came to do a specific job for a limited period.³⁰³

There is a corollary between the privileges that white South Africans benefited, and the disadvantages affecting black and coloured citizens back home, with their experience of exile in England. On this matter, Israel writes:

In general, white and black South Africans had very different experiences in finding work in the United Kingdom. In part, this was due to racism, and in part it was the result of the varying intellectual and financial resources that they brought with them from South Africa. White exiles were more likely to have arrived with degrees and professional qualifications. They were more likely to have money in South Africa which they might be able to move out either when they left or after they were settled in Britain.³⁰⁴

³⁰⁰ Officially, this law only permitted entry to migrants with work permits, generally issued to high-skilled workers.

³⁰¹ Fryer, p. 382.

³⁰² *Ibid.*, p. 384.

³⁰³ *Ibid.*, p. 385.

³⁰⁴ Israel, p. 124.

It goes without saying that these privileges resulted directly from colonisation and apartheid. White South Africans were better able to blend in with the white British population. South African writer Lewis Nkosi who lived in exile in the United States and London remarked that, this difference also translated into the topics addressed in writing:

It is quite significant, for example, that most Black South African writers who live in exile continue to address themselves to the social problems of their own country rather than tackle those of their adopted society. In contrast to their white compatriots, who after long stays abroad metamorphose into 'international' writers, Black South African poets and novelists continue to write about their country from whatever materials memory can still provide. The reasons for this difference between Black and White writers living abroad are many, some very complex. Except for the left-wing writers who continue to identify themselves by choice with the struggle for South African liberation, white writers are more acceptable as participants in the cultural life of the countries in which they are forced to live than Black Writers, who continue to exist on the margins of American or European life.³⁰⁵

Literature was indeed an outlet for non-white South African authors (and their allies) to delve into the social issues that existed both in their country of origin and in their country of adoption. In England, much like in other places that saw the presence of black diasporas in the 1960s and 1970s, literature continued

³⁰⁵ Lewis Nkosi, 'Art Contra Apartheid: South African Writers in exile', in *Home and Exile* (Harlow, New York: Longman, 1983 (1965)), pp. 94-95.

to serve as a vehicle for cultural expression. It was a platform for a diverse black experience and for pan-African intellectual explorations, in spaces where blackness was stigmatised in the media and society and was excluded from mainstream cultural platforms. Publishing ventures like Heinemann's African Writers series had a particular place in this endeavour. Not only did it bring together African and diasporic literary voices, it also engaged with the visual language developed by African artists to represent, or rather encapsulate, the essence of African literary pieces. George Hallett was credited for creating some of the most iconic covers for the series. But, as we shall see in the final part of this chapter, prior to Hallett's arrival in England in 1970, the series had a history of collaborating with African visual artists who are still known today as leading figures of 20th and 21st century African art.

III. African Writers Series: a platform for pan-African creative collaborations

The African Writers Series is a collection of books produced by British publisher Heinemann Educational Books (HEB), from 1962 to 2003. The series was established after Alan Hill from Heinemann's educational department, who was sent to South Africa and West African countries in 1959, identified a gap in the market. During his tour, he observed that:

British publishers operating within West Africa sold mainly textbooks and regarded the territory as a place where you sold books rather than a source for new writers. Moreover, the books sold were almost all written by British authors and

produced in Britain. They were taking profits out of West Africa and putting nothing back in the way of investment in local publishing and encouragement of local authors.³⁰⁶

British publishing had benefitted from a monopoly granted by the colonial educational system, protected by the 1842 and 1911 Copyright Acts, and the 1947 British Commonwealth Market Agreement that prevented American publications to enter the market. Africa's independence, sustained by nationalist and pan-African ideologies, brought about a push for the introduction of African literature in the educational curriculum. For Heinemann, this provided a new commercial avenue. For the African writers the series had the potential to launch one's career.

The series started off with Nigerian author Chinua Achebe's novel *Things Fall Apart* initially published by William Heinemann Ltd in 1958 and sub-contracted to Heinemann Educational Books for a publication in 1962. During his 1959 trip, Hill noted that 'Achebe and his novel were only known to a limited audience'.³⁰⁷ This convinced him of the importance to promote this book. Furthermore, after having received several manuscripts from other 'would-be' authors, the idea came from Evan McKay Milne (also known as Van Milne), the Overseas Director at Heinemann Educational Books, to create the African Writers Series. A team was set up around this project, with editorial offices in Africa, and Achebe was appointed editorial advisor. Over the years, editorial office managers included

³⁰⁶ Alan Hill, *In Pursuit of Publishing* (London: John Murray, 1988), p. 122.

³⁰⁷ Alan Hill, 'The African Writers Series', *Research in African Literatures*, 1:1 (1971), 18.

Keith Sambrook (London), Bob Markham (Nairobi), Aig Higo and Akin Thomas (Nigeria), James Currey (London), Henry Chakava (Nairobi).³⁰⁸

In England, the archives of Heinemann Educational Books – African Writers Series are located at two universities. The manuscripts archive is held at the Centre of African Studies, School of African and Oriental Studies, University of London, while the administrative archive, which includes information on the book covers production, is kept at the Museums and Special Collections of the University of Reading. The latter covers the years 1949-1999. The physical extent of the collection is 859 files organised in 41 boxes, each generally focusing on the production of one or more single or multiple-author book. The boxes include information ranging from book proposals from authors or recommendations from the AWS networks of advisors; correspondence between authors, editorial offices, and peers; editorial board and readers feedbacks; artwork commissions; marketing-related information, press clippings, material related to promotional events; purchase orders and invoices. The file numbering, from box HEB 01 to HEB 41, is not always chronological, although the content within each file tends to be. A listing of the AWS collection has helped me determine which boxes contained information on the books with Hallett's cover photographs. However, to get a sense of the chronological evolution of the commissioning and creative processes, it was important to review all the folders from the beginning, up until James Currey's departure from Heinemann in 1984, which also marked the end of Hallett's collaboration with the publishing house. I consulted the content of HEB

³⁰⁸ Currey, pp. xiii - xviii, 1-5.

01 to HEB 30 and 39. Out of these 31 boxes, 59 files from boxes HEB 01 to HEB 39 provided information connected to my research.

There are fascinating stories about the African Writers Series, as it intertwines with the biographies of its editors, as well as the life and writings of the authors it published. This has resulted in various publications by the parties involved, including James Currey's *Africa Writes Back – The African Writers Series & The Launch of African Literature* (2008). Additionally, several studies have critically engaged with the issues raised by African literature published in English, its editorial approaches, themes and formats, translation, market, and readership. Notable scholarship includes Camille Lizarribar Buxó's doctoral thesis entitled *Something Else Will Stand Beside It: The African Writers Series and the Development of African Literature* (1998) and Nourdin Bejjit's *The Publishing of African literature: Chinua Achebe, Ngugi wa Thiong'o and the African Writers Series, 1962-1988* (2009)³⁰⁹.

Less has been written on the AWS book covers and their design as a commercial imperative that, incidentally, provided artists with a space for creativity and visual experimentation. While Lizarribar Buxó discusses the covers, her appraisal is rather negative, and her views are challenged by Bejjit. Chika Okeke-Agulu's essay 'The Politics of Form: Uche Okeke's Illustrations for Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*'³¹⁰ is an essential reading that opens interpretative keys, from

³⁰⁹ Nourdin Bejjit, 'The Publishing of African literature: Chinua Achebe, Ngugi wa Thiong'o and the African Writers Series, 1962-1988' (PhD thesis, The Open University, 2009).

³¹⁰ Chika Okeke-Agulu, 'The Politics of Form: Uche Okeke's Illustrations for Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*', in *Chinua Achebe's Things fall apart: 1958-2008* ed. by David Whittaker (Amsterdam, New York: Rodopi, 2011), pp. 67-86.

an art historical perspective, and provides useful tools for the visual reading of other AWS covers.

1) **Things Fall Apart: a literary and visual template**

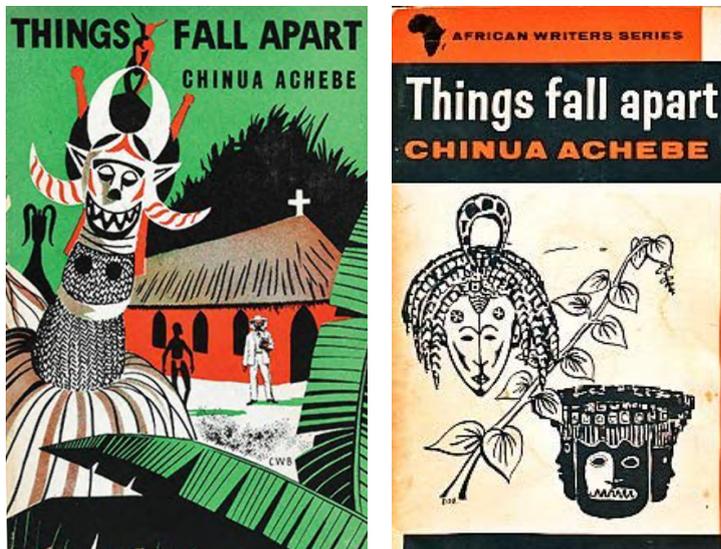
As mentioned earlier, the African Writers Series debuted with *Things Fall Apart*. Regarded as an archetype of African modern novel, this book established Chinua Achebe as the ‘father of African modern literature’ and the African Writers Series as the platform that ‘launched African literature’. Achebe’s story is set in the fictional Igbo community of Umuofia, and follows a main protagonist, Okonkwo, a respected figure who, by his forceful authority and his actions, ends up being exiled from his village. Upon his return, he is confronted by, and compelled to resist, the European presence notably marked by the introduction of Christianity. A series of events then lead to his demise.

Literary critics have lauded Achebe’s ability to marry the European genre with Igbo folktales, blending English and Nigerian syntax, and making it a blueprint for subsequent African writers. But the novel also provided another form of template, visual this time, through the design of what came to be known as the ‘orange series’. In ‘Cover Story’, an article by South African art writer Sean O’Toole published in 2013 in the Cape Town-based magazine *Chimurenga*, the author discusses the different covers of the novel’s various editions. He writes:

When Heinemann, the publishing house founded by William Heinemann in 1890, first offered to publish Achebe’s book, it commissioned graphic artist C.W. Bacon

to design the hardcover dust jacket. Bacon was well known for his crime fiction covers, having previously designed the Hamish Hamilton editions for Raymond Chandler's novels *The Little Sister* (1949) and *The Simple Art of Murder* (1950). His design focused on rendering the spiritual and religious conflicts at the heart of *Things Fall Apart*, tensions that culminate near the end of the novel with Enoch, a fanatical Christian convert, unmasking a spiritual guide or egwugwu during a festival marking the earth deity. Bacon's tart green cover features cartoonish men in masks in the foreground – they stand behind two banana fronds – with a church shown in the background.³¹¹

Discussing the reprint of Achebe's novel in the African Writers Series, O'Toole adds that 'the cover design was stoically British and featured drawings of a mask, piece of leafy flora and carved drum surrounded by pseudo-modernist bands of colour'.³¹²



Figures. 63-64. Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*, 1958 and 1962 Heinemann and AWS editions.

³¹¹ Sean O'Toole, 'Cover Story', *Chimurenga*, 16 (2011) <<https://chimurengachronic.co.za/cover-story>>, [accessed, 28 January 2019].

³¹² Ibid.

The artwork was integrated in the series design template which Brooklyn-based designer and archivist Josh McPhee described in expert terms:

The initial design template was rolled out on the first eleven titles, published between 1962 and 1964. [...] Rather than a series logo, or colophon, there is a masthead similar to what one would see on a newspaper or journal, with a cutout of the African continent that sits on the left, the series name in the center, and the series number on the right. All is in sans-serif, and while the author's name is set in a squat, broad font denoting seriousness, the titles are in a taller, almost comic font, with flared ends that give it a 1950s Beat feel. Overall it is shockingly similar to the designs Penguin used in 1962 on a series of African anthropology books by Laurens van der Post, here reimagined as a marker for a self-assured African literary project.³¹³

The deliberate similarity between the AWS's design and Penguin's is something acknowledged by James Currey who said: 'The colour orange for novels was shamelessly copied from Penguin.'³¹⁴ So was the rest of the AWS colour coding which included blue for non-fiction (biography and politics), green for plays, and brown for poetry. These colours formed the front and back covers and the upper five centimetres of the spine.

The artwork on the cover of Achebe's AWS novel is signed with the initials DGD., which is Dennis Duerden (1927-2006), who created works for the covers

³¹³ Josh MacPhee, 'Judged by Its Covers', *Lapham's Quarterly*, (2018), <<https://www.laphamsquarterly.org/roundtable/judged-its-covers>> [accessed, 28 January 2019].

³¹⁴ Currey, *Africa Writes Back*, p. 1.

and illustrated other books from the series. Duerden's name appears on several occasions in the Reading archive in his role as director of the Transcription Centre. An obituary penned by educator and cultural historian Derrick Price, published in *The Guardian* in 2007 gives more information about him. Duerden, it says, was an education officer in the Nigerian colonial service. It also mentioned:

In 1956 Duerden became assistant curator at the Jos museum, in central Nigeria, learning first hand from writers and artists about the culture, arts and crafts of the area. Back in Britain, he became director of the Hausa service of the BBC World Service and, in the 1960s, established the transcription centre, where he built up a tape archive of interviews with African writers.³¹⁵

Duerden authored several books on African culture including.³¹⁶ It is probably because of his interactions with art and literature in Nigeria that he was

³¹⁵ Derrick Price, 'Obituary: Dennis Duerden', *The Guardian*, 30 January 2007 <<https://www.theguardian.com/news/2007/jan/30/obituaries.readersobituaries>> [accessed 24 May 2022]. Based in London, the Transcription Centre (1962-1977) created cultural programmes on tape for African radio stations. The Centre was founded and managed by the Paris-based Congress for Cultural Freedom which was an entity of the Central Intelligence Agency. See, Gerald Moore 'The Transcription Centre in the Sixties: Navigating in Narrow Seas', *Research in African Literatures*, 33:3 (2002), 167-181; and Asha Rogers, 'The Transcription Centre and the Coproduction of African Literary Culture in the 1960s', in *The Bloomsbury Handbook to Cold War Literary Cultures*, ed. by Greg Barnhisel (London, New York, Dublin: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022), pp. 207-224.

³¹⁶ Books by Duerden include *African Art* (London: Hamlyn, 1968 and 1985); *African Writers Talking* co-edited with Cosmo Pieterse (London: Heinemann, 1972); *African Art: an introduction* (London: Hamlyn, 1974); *African Art and Literature: The Invisible Present* (New York: Harper and Row, 1975; London: Heinemann, 1977). In the latter, Duerden proposes an interconnected reading of modern African literature and an understanding of 'traditional' arts, but does not consider visual art practices contemporary to the writings discussed.

approached for Achebe's cover. The author discussed the novel's covers with American scholars David Chioni Moore and Analee Heath. The interview reveals that Achebe was not consulted on the 1958 cover. He said: 'I saw the proof of the text in its final stages, but the cover was entirely their idea.' Adding that: 'I'm not sure I have ever influenced any cover of any of my books. Publishers have their own sense of what and how they want to sell.'³¹⁷

Achebe's words confirm a point that stood out from studying the archive. Most of the time, the literary piece and the book cover, or illustrations, were two different conversations. Usually these did not involve a direct dialogue between author and artist. The gap between the moment a book or manuscript proposal made it to editorial meetings, received readers' reports, and corrections were sent back and forth between London and the African countries, right to the actual book production, was quite lengthy. The archive shows that, often, conversations about the book covers came after all editing issues were resolved and as production was in planning. However, there were instances when the authors already had an idea on the kind of image they wanted for the book cover or illustrations, or the artist they had in mind for the job.

Indeed, a particularity of the early books in the series is that, in addition to the cover, they contained some illustrations in the books. The first AWS edition of Achebe's novel contained four drawings by Scottish illustrator Dennis Carabine, while the reissue featured drawings by Nigerian artist Uche Okeke. A comparative analysis of the two sets of drawings has been the subject of two noteworthy analyses by Chika Okeke-Agulu, then assistant professor in the

³¹⁷ David Chioni Moore and Analee Heath, 'A Conversation with Chinua Achebe', *Transition*, 100 (2008), 13.

Department of Art and Archaeology and Center for African American Studies, Princeton University, in 2011; and in 2016, by Emily Hyde³¹⁸, then assistant professor of English at Rowan University who, when she studied at Princeton, attended a year-long seminar on art history and race led by Okeke-Agulu.³¹⁹ The main critical points pertaining to the aesthetic and conceptual differences between Denis Carabine's and Chika Okeke's illustrations were first articulated in Okeke-Agulu's essay, while Hyde adds a literary emphasis to her analysis.

Examining the first collaboration between Achebe and Okeke, the Nigerian art historian anchors his reflexion on the author's response to the artist's illustrations, as recalled by the latter, during a public conversation between the two pioneers, moderated by American art historian Christa Clarke, at Newark University in 2006. Okeke recalled:

Chinua came, I think from Lagos, with the galley proof of *Things Fall Apart* and said that I was the person that should do this. So I took the book, read it upside down, looked at it. I said, that was it, we have our book. By the time he came back, I had finished the drawing about the hero Okonkwo [used for the book cover] and the rest of it.³²⁰

And he continued:

³¹⁸ Emily Hyde, 'Flat Style: *Things Fall Apart* and Its Illustrations', *PMLA*, 131: 1 (2016), 20-37.

³¹⁹ Emily Hyde, 'A Way of Seeing: Modernism, Illustration, and Postcolonial Literature' (PhD Dissertation, Princeton University, 2013), p. iv.

³²⁰ Christa Clarke, 'Uche Okeke and Chinua Achebe: Artist and Author in Conversation', *Critical Interventions: Journal of African Art History and Visual Culture*, 1 (2007), 154.

He came, and I showed him the drawings. He looked at the drawings and the only thing he said was – I quote him – “That is how it should be,” and left. That was it. “That is how it should be.” So what do I say to that? That is why when somebody asks me how many times I sat with Chinua and we discussed whatever, I tell them we didn’t meet. We already knew what we wanted. It is as simple as that.³²¹

Okeke-Agulu’s essay is an in-depth examination of Achebe’s ‘That is how it should be’ comment which points out a convergence of ideas between the author and the artist, echoing the new forms of agency manifested in the socio-political and cultural affirmations prevalent at the dawn of Nigeria’s independence. In Achebe’s first novel, this translated into the exploration of a topical subject-matter – the encounter between an African (in this instance Igbo) imaginary community and European colonisation. This was achieved through the development of a ‘new’ English or ‘domesticated’ colonial language conveying the weight of the African experience.

The same applies to Okeke whose art – alongside that of his peers from the Zaria Art Society – challenged the European artistic canons and academic conventions brought by the British. Looking for a contemporary, locally grounded, idiom Okeke invented a new vocabulary based on what he called the Natural Synthesis – a convergence of diverse culture types, a blending of ‘the old and the new’, a fusion of ‘functional art and art for its own sake’ as he explains in this 1960 manifesto.³²² For Okeke-Agulu, this declaration translated a ‘rejection of the neotraditionalism championed by Kenneth Murray and other progressive colonial educators’, and of

³²¹ Ibid.

³²² Okeke-Agulu, pp. 71-73.

‘European academism and modernist art’³²³, in favour of systematic appropriation of elements from specific Nigerian cultures as well as European art forms and technical procedures’. In other words, to quote the art historian, once more: ‘Natural Synthesis was an argument for recognition of the values of indigenous and Western sources in the making of a postcolonial visual language’.³²⁴

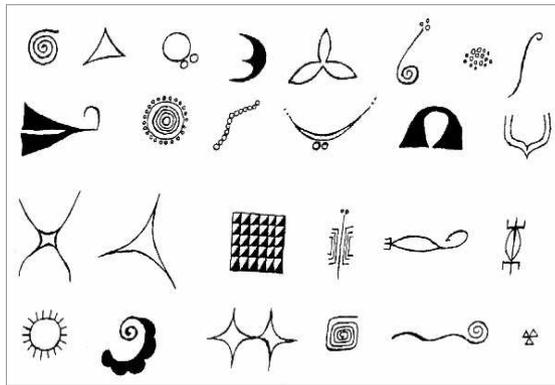


Figure 65. Uli motifs. Illustration by Chika Okeke-Agulu in *Post-colonial Modernism Art and Decolonization*, 2015.³²⁵

To this effect Okeke developed research on Igbo Uli folktales and symbols which led to the creation of ‘a new visual language that had the formal rigour and cultural specificity his modernist and postcolonial sensibility demanded’.³²⁶

This manifested through ‘abstract compositions in which the drawn motifs and the negative spaces around them received equal attention’.³²⁷ This observation is key in the distinction between Carabine’s and Okeke’s illustrations in *Things Fall Apart*.

³²³ Ibid., p. 74.

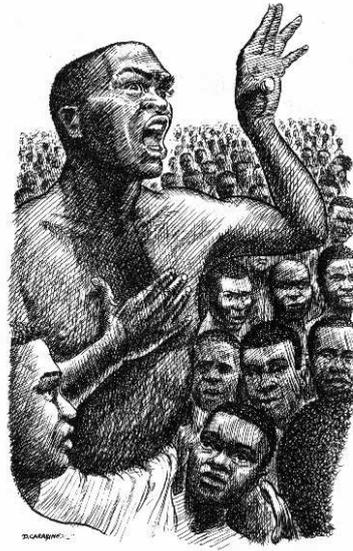
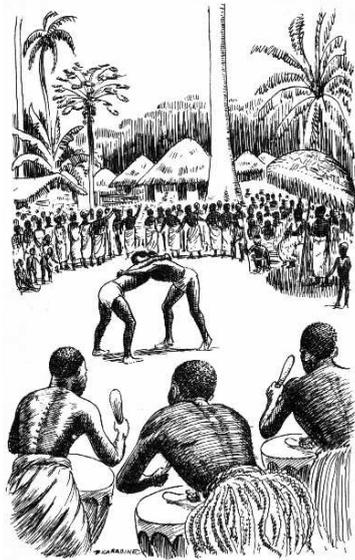
³²⁴ Ibid., pp. 73-74.

³²⁵ Okeke-Agulu, *Post-colonial Modernism: Art and Decolonization* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), p. 187.

³²⁶ Okeke-Agulu, ‘The Politics of Form’, p. 74.

³²⁷ Ibid.

Okeke-Agulu and Hyde expand on this matter by demonstrating how the former's naturalism translates a 'realistic', even ethnographic, reading of Achebe's novel, while the latter's abstract representations allow room for subjectivity.



Figures. 66-67. Illustrations by Dennis Carabine in *Things Fall Apart's* first AWS edition 1962.



Figures 68-69. Illustrations by Uche Okeke in *Things Fall Apart's* AWS re-editions.

Okeke's drawings convey the essence of moments calling for a perceptive approach informed by cultural affinity and unspoken understanding, that of 'a co-

traveller, a kindred spirit' who shared Achebe's objective of literary and artistic reinvention at the dawn of Nigeria's independence.³²⁸

From these comparisons and interpretations, one can draw two key ideas on the link between text and image as it transpires in the African Writers Series. The first one is common to any thinking on how to approach this relation: either conceived as a pure illustration of the words with, in some instances, didactic implications, or as a symbolic interpretation. The second point is specific to African literature, particularly the AWS, in the early days of independence. Like literature, visual representation was a means for conveying a new African or pan-African identity created from within. It reflected an African mind, sensitivity, subjectivity, with an affirmative sense of self. It also translated the deep understanding of the importance of challenging previous visual stereotypes through content and aesthetics that offered African cultures and imaginaries new representational possibilities.

2) African Writers Series' collaborations with African artists

Although Achebe claimed that he never influenced any of the covers of his books, he still had an influence on the artists who were to be involved in the African Writers Series. The archive contains a letter to Van Milne dated 6 February 1962 in which Achebe mentions having written to Bruce Onobrakpeya of the Department of Fine Art, Zaria, and expected to hear from him soon after. The artist, he said, 'should be able to produce excellent illustrations'.³²⁹

³²⁸ Ibid., p. 68.

³²⁹ Reading, University of Reading, Special Collections (URSC), HEB 05/01.

Onobrakpeya was one of Okeke's peers. He too was part of the Zaria Arts Society (also known as the Zaria Rebels) who sought to decolonise Nigerian arts from British art education. Like Okeke, he drew inspiration from local folklore which he explored through paintings and lino cut prints. These are known to form part of his 'Mythical Realism' (1957-1962), a genre similar to his illustrations for Achebe's second AWS novel, the third in the series, *No Longer at Ease* (1963) which story is a 'part two', or 'sequel', to his first novel. Like in the reprint of his first book, the cover was designed by a British illustrator, Peter Edwards who was commissioned by then editor Hamish Mc Gibbon³³⁰, whereas the illustrations in the books were by an African artist.

From the Reading archive, it seems that Onobrakpeya was the first African artist recommended by Achebe. As Okeke recalled in his conversation with the author that the latter approached him after he had returned from Germany where he travelled on a German Federal Grant for almost a year from late 1962.³³¹ This would have been some time in 1963.

The fact that, in the early editions, the cover – the primary visual identity of a book – would be designed by an English person, and the inner illustrations, encountered in second place, in the progression of the reading, were by African artists is noteworthy. Since the African Writers Series' marketing department had a say in the validation of the book covers, as they were part of the promotional material, one could argue that, at the time, the publishing house might not have considered the two group of artists on an equal footing.

³³⁰ Ibid.

³³¹ Christa Clarke, p. 158.

This is a plausible hypothesis on two grounds. Firstly, although the African continent had seen an emergence of modern pioneers from the 1930s onward, in early 1960s Britain, their work wasn't yet established enough for individual names to be identified by those who were not familiar with of these developments. This, in spite of the fact that, the first half of the twentieth century has provided many examples of interactions between African or black writers and visual artists. These include the Harlem Renaissance (1920s-30s), the Négritude movement (1930s-60s), the *Drum* circle in Johannesburg and the creatives from District Six discussed in previous chapters, and, of course, the worldwide black cultural affirmations of the 1960s from Africa's Independence and Black Consciousness in South Africa to the Black Power movement in the United States. All these made for a diversity of creatives who had yet to gain exposure in England and internationally.

Secondly, the difference in the appreciation between European and African artists becomes clear when reading Keith Sambrook (who replaced Van Milne in 1963), in a letter dated 31 May of that year, addressed to Ruth Yudelowitz, an artist and illustrator of the East African Literature Bureau in Nairobi. Yudelowitz who is credited for illustrating the South African author Peter Abrahams's *Mine Boy* (AWS 6, 1963) might have expressed an interest in being involved in more book covers, to which Sambrook replied:

I am sure that your idea for travelling via South, West and North Africa is a good one. Neither Nigeria nor Ghana is inundated with artists. There are some good local people but very few with experience of book work. [...]

We have various plans for books for Nigeria, etc. and, if you are going to be available for free-lance work after you arrive in London, I think we ought to have a talk.

In the meantime, if you can do some sketch work en route, this will never be wasted.³³²

Sambrook's words confirm what he viewed as a lack of expertise in Africa. It is also noteworthy that he is employing the term 'good local people' without referring to any specific kind of creative discipline. His initial move would therefore be to approach British-based illustrators, as was the case for Cyprian Ekwensi's *People of the City* (1963), for which he directly contacted Dennis Duerden who had informed Van Milne (before his departure) of his interest in designing the cover for Ekwensi's book.

First published in 1954, four years before *Things Fall Apart*, *People of the City* follows Amusa Sango, a crime journalist and music band leader thriving in the big city, presumably Lagos. He's got everything going for him, including female attention, until misfortune hits him. The main protagonist, a woman, and the city are the three elements central to Duerden's cover. His exchange with Sambrook is one example of feedback between an AWS editor and a commissioned illustrator.

³³² URSC, HEB 10/05.

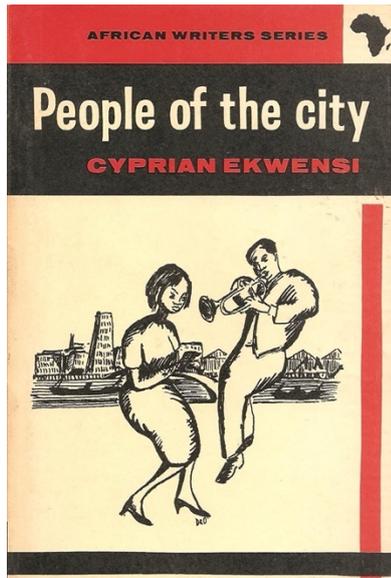


Figure 70. Dennis Duerden's cover for Cyprien Ekwensi, *People of the City*, 1963.

In a letter dated 3 May 1963, Sambrook writes: 'As I said on the telephone, I think the woman's figure is too static, and more movement generally in the figure would help to give something of a big city excitement which Ekwensi gets into his novel.' He then gave Duerden a week to finish the cover drawing and frontispiece.³³³

Generally, the turnaround to have the final artwork ready for print was quite short.

Dealing with a British or British-based illustrator was therefore convenient for the AWS editors both timewise and financially.

Sambrook's comment about the lack of expertise in Africa, his decision to approach a British designer from the outset, without consulting the author, seems to confirm what postcolonial literature scholar Professor Graham Huggan called the 'symptoms of a controlling imperial gaze.'³³⁴ But the archive shows that overtime, the involvement of African artists became a more common practice. Achebe recommended once again Okeke for the cover of Amadi Olechi's *The Concubine* (AWS 25, 1966). Sambrook also directly approached the Nigerian

³³³ Ibid.

³³⁴ Graham Huggan, *Interdisciplinary measures: Literature and the future of postcolonial studies* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2008), p. 24.

artist for the cover of John Munonye's *The Only Son* (AWS 61, 1966); Albert Adams for the re-edition of *Quartet* (AWS 14, 1963) edited by Richard Rive; and consulted Ekwensi for the cover of *Lokotown and Other Stories* (AWS 19, 1966). There was room for the writers to propose artists of their choice. As far as African artists are concerned, the archive and published books include works by Agbo Folarin, Ibrahim El Salahi, Ato Alex Boghossian, Ato Gebre Krestos Desta, Kiure Francis Msangi, Ayo Ajayi, Eli Kyeyune and Dumile Feni in addition to the names already cited, representing Nigeria, Ethiopia, Tanzania, Uganda and South Africa.

Professor Nourdin Bejjit, author of a doctoral thesis entitled *Chinua Achebe, Ngugi Wa Thiongo and the African Writers Series* (2008) argues that the contribution of these African artists contradicts Huggan's claim that the covers conformed to 'Euro-American preconceptions of 'simplicity', 'primitivism' and 'authenticity'.³³⁵ Bejjit notes, Huggan draws from former doctoral student, Lizarribar Buxó, whose thesis in Comparative Literature focused on African literature and the African Writers Series. In her research Lizarribar Buxó dedicates a chapter to the AWS book covers of which she identifies the two distinct types of artworks: the drawings or sketches 'which depict what could be termed as traditional objects or scenes', and the photographs that 'mostly show human figures'.³³⁶

Summarizing their aesthetics she writes:

³³⁵ Bejjit, p. 7 and Huggan, p. 119.

³³⁶ Lizarribar Buxó, p. 146.

The designs and photographs used portray a primitive, emerging literature, one that at best presents what could be described as traditional images of Africa, and at worst reinforces negative stereotypes which have defined the ‘dark continent’ and its people to the Western world.³³⁷

The issue with Lizarribar Buxó and Huggan’s statements is that they deny the artists, notably the African artists, their subjectivity and creative agency. Because the two scholars are solely founding their visual appreciation on the covers, they fail to consider these artworks in relation to the artists’ own practice.

Consequently, whereas Okeke-Agulu reads in Okeke’s illustrations for *Things Fall Apart* the fruit of a meticulous research on Igbo folktales, a study of Uli symbols, and a genuine reflection on a new visual language in the articulation of the relationship between literature and visual arts in Nigeria at the dawn of the country’s independence, this is Lizarribar Buxó’s interpretation of the same work:

Both of these editions include illustrations by Uche Okeke, which consist of monochromatic drawings that depict scenes from tribal life. The illustrations show mostly crowds and can be vaguely traced to the actual plot, while their style is what could be termed naive. In fact, they have a children’s book quality to them, and the human figures are sketched as mere outlines.³³⁸

One could, of course, ascribe this difference of interpretation to their disciplinary fields. One, an art historian, the other, a literary scholar. But one cannot ignore the cultural filter at play. Just like the illustrator and artist, Carabine and Okeke,

³³⁷ Ibid. p. 154.

³³⁸ Ibid., pp. 153-154.

had a different interpretation of Achebe's novel, Okeke-Agulu and Bejjit who are both African have a different take on Okeke's work than Lizarribar Buxó and Huggan.

3) **A special South African connection**

The African Writers Series was certainly on the radar of South African authors at home and in exile. In *Africa Writes Back*, James Currey highlights the contribution of 'South African writers, journalists and academics' to the series, as advisors on 'manuscripts and edited scripts from across the whole of Africa'.³³⁹ He cites Randolph Vigne (1928-2016), Cosmo Pieterse, Doris Lessing (1919-2013) and Mary Benson (1919-2000), to name but some of the British-based collaborators. Although this South African connection spans a timeframe that precedes Currey's involvement with the AWS, it is worth mentioning that his parents, who were also involved in literature – his father was a poet, his mother a writer – were both born in South Africa. His critical interest in 'the realities of the regime in South Africa' led him to Cape Town in 1959 where he worked for Oxford University Press.³⁴⁰ In 1962, he co-founded and co-edited *The New African: The Radical Review* with Vigne and Neville Rubin. The magazine's content attracted the Special Branch, leading him and Vigne to escape from South Africa in 1964.³⁴¹ This experience introduced him to numerous South African

³³⁹ Currey, p. xx.

³⁴⁰ Ibid., p. xvii.

³⁴¹ The Special Branch was the apartheid regime's security police. It was active from 1947 to 1991. Currey and Vigne relate this story in *The New African: The Radical Review* (London: Merlin Press, 2014).

writers and, as the co-editors, write: '[o]nce we had opened the door, many [writers] came crowding in, white and black.'³⁴² This included Mary Benson, Mazisi Kunene, James Matthews, Richard Rive, and many more.³⁴³

In *Writing Black*, Richard Rive recounts visiting Paris in 1963 where he celebrated the release of his collection of short stories *African Songs* by German publisher Seven Seas. He mentions being in the company of author and editor Ezekiel Mphahlele, then exiled in Paris; 'Paul Kosten, the bookshop owner from Goodge Street, London (formerly from Cape Town)'; Breyten Breytenbach, Peter Clarke, and Gerard Sekoto.³⁴⁴ Clarke, who was then studying at the Rijksakademie in Amsterdam, had planned a trip to London. Richard Rive, whose scholarship enabled him to travel across Europe, decided to join him on this trip.³⁴⁵

In London, the pair was hosted by former *Drum* editor Sylvester Stein. Thereafter, he rented a room with a South African family where former *Drum* writer and composer Todd Matshikiza also lived with his family.

Rive took the opportunity of this trip to visit the Transcription Centre of which he said:

[The Transcription Centre] consisted of studios where visiting African writers, actors and artists were interviewed on tape. In addition it was a meeting-place for

³⁴² Ibid., pp. 10-11.

³⁴³ I am listing here writers who have also been photographed by Hallett.

³⁴⁴ Rive, pp., 102-103.

³⁴⁵ Rive, p. 104.

creative artists [...]. I was able to meet more writers there than in the whole of Africa itself.³⁴⁶

He continues:

At the Transcription Centre, I met the best-known Nigerian writers, John Pepper Clark, Christopher Okigbo, Chinua Achebe and, for a brief moment this time, Wole Soyinka. Short as these meetings were, they gave me an insight into the persons who were having a profound effect on shaping West African and indeed African writing.³⁴⁷

Rive's account of his first trips to Paris and London reveals a sense of connection between South African exiles that was not just about responding to essential needs or socialising based on a shared nationality. It was very much part of intellectual and creative affinities linked to personal interests and field of practice. This is also what motivated Rive's interest in meeting other African writers. In his autobiography, the author mentions having been approached by Keith Sambrook to discuss 'the fledgling African Writers Series which had started a few years before and was still in experimental stage'.³⁴⁸ Sambrook was interested in Rive 'doing a prose selection for them, the first major one by an African'.³⁴⁹ This would indeed place Rive as the first black author in charge of an edited volume for the series. He writes that:

³⁴⁶ Rive, pp. 108-109.

³⁴⁷ Rive, p. 110.

³⁴⁸ Rive, p. 111.

³⁴⁹ Ibid.

Soon after, *Modern African Prose* appeared, containing contributions from established writers such as Chinua Achebe, Amos Tutuola and Cyprian Ekwensi, and relatively unknown ones who would later achieve international acclaim such as Luis Bernardo Honwana of Mozambique, James Ngugi of Kenya, Efuia Sutherland of Ghana.³⁵⁰

Modern African Prose was illustrated by South African artist Albert Adams. This choice was probably Rive's, as the two knew each other from Cape Town for having been students at Hewat Training College in the 1950s.³⁵¹ Rive also mentions visiting Adams on his first trip to London in 1963 at the time of his conversation with Sambrook.³⁵²

Adams, who had studied in London, Germany, Austria and Italy in the 1950s, had settled in London in 1960 after the Sharpeville Massacre. His biography indicates that '[h]e taught at various secondary schools in the East End of London and thoroughly enjoyed teaching'.³⁵³ One could imagine that his immersion into education made him a perfect artist for a literary series geared towards an African educational readership.

³⁵⁰ Ibid. The archive actually indicates that it is Richard Rive who first approached the African Writers Series with the intention of proposing the publication of *Quartet* which manuscript he brought with him. Letter dated 9 May 1963, URSC, HEB 02/06.

³⁵¹ Rive, p. 20, Elza Miles, 'Resurrected: The 'Crucified Dark Man' and 'A Brief Biography' in Martin and Dolby, p. 26 and 102.

³⁵² Rive, p. 111.

³⁵³ Martin and Dolby, p. 102.

The artwork created for the cover is somewhat abstract. Presented in a square format, it resembles intertwined tubular forms with thick black lines. Although the shapes are multidirectional, two-dimensional, and without Albertian perspective, there is a concentric accentuation towards the top left side of the drawing, circling a small concave lozenge in its centre, framing an asterisk-like shape.

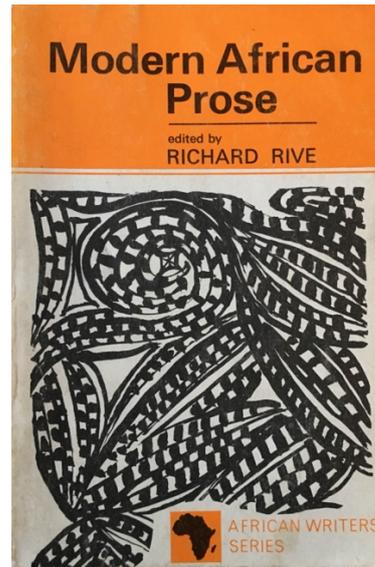


Figure 71. Cover artwork by Albert Adams for Richard Rive (ed.), *Modern African Prose*, 1964.

In the absence of documentation about the work, attempting to provide an interpretation would be pure conjecture. However, in its abstraction, the shape has a certain hybridity to it, suggesting an undetermined organic form or maybe belonging to a symbolic register. Might the latter be an attempt at proposing an abstract, yet evocative, design that could be associated with a certain African aesthetics? That could be the case. One could speculate that, faced with the brief of having to create an artwork for the cover of a book evoking Africaness and modernity, Adams might have chosen to explore visual forms resonating with the experiments then being developed in Africa. In this instance, a resemblance to Uli motifs comes to mind. Especially the concentric or coiled shape that could, or not,

refer to a scene depicting the presence of a snake in one of the book's stories.³⁵⁴

The concave triangle and lozenge are also part of Uli symbols.

Once again, one wouldn't want to ascribe to Adams work a meaning it does not contain. Yet, conversely, one cannot exclude the possibility that Adams might have looked at what previous artists had created for the series. Although they were young and emerging artists at the time, Okeke and Onobrakpeya were at the forefront of some the visual experiments taking place on the continent. One must also bear in mind that, before coming to Europe, Adams had been exposed to German expressionism through his mentor and patron, the artist Irma Stern who, as previously mentioned, had ties with German Expressionist Max Pechstein. He had also seen works by artists such as George Grosz and Käthe Kollwitz via Rudi Von Freiling and Siegbert Eick, two German refugees who had fled Nazi Germany and became some of his collectors, friends, and benefactors.

Reminiscing on some of his conversations with the artist in the catalogue of the retrospective *Albert Adams: Journey on a Tightrope*, Colin Cina, former head of Chelsea College of Art and Design, reaffirms this fact and adds that Adams was also exposed to the philosophies supporting the Expressionist genre.³⁵⁵ Among them can be mentioned the non-naturalist approach and accentuation of lines that have been acknowledged as some of the visual contributions from non-Western arts, including classic African art, to European Modernism. Therefore, a possible intention, on the part of Adams, to create a visual for the cover of *Modern African Prose*, conveying the idea of an African visual language is plausible.

³⁵⁴ Luis Bernardo Honwana, 'Papa, the Snake and I', pp. 101-116.

³⁵⁵ Colin Cina, 'Welcome to London, Mr Adams', in Martin and Dolby, p. 20.

Unlike the cover, the works inside the book are illustrative and even accompanied with a caption referencing the text. The book contains ten illustrations. Their style is consistent with Adams's draughtsmanship and printmaking practice: some with a predominant use of lines to delineate the characters or scenes depicted, others with an accentuation of stripes to give those outlines volume.

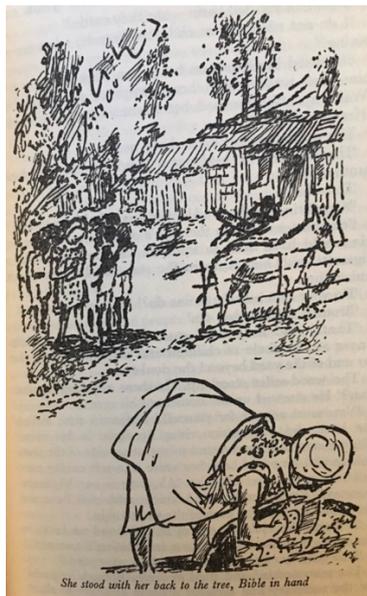


Figure 72. Illustration by Albert Adams in *Modern African Prose*, p. 121.

Three of these drawings are particularly interesting for their visual resonance. The first one, illustrating an excerpt of South African author Jack Cope's *The Tame Ox* (1960), depicts a scene in a shanty town. In the foreground, a woman presumably washes the laundry in a basin. In the background are a group of children and a donkey, the strapped to a fence.

Further back is a reclining figure, a row of shacks and what can be imagined as trees here and there. This image is typical of the township scenes by black South African painters like Sekoto.



Figure 73. Gerard Sekoto, *Street Scene*, 1939. Oil on board, 30.50x40.50 cm. Iziko South African Art Gallery, Cape Town.

An example can be seen in Sekoto's street scenes from his Sophiatown period in the late 1930s - early 1940s. The woman bent over – typical of the image of the African woman at work, washing, or sweeping the floor with a straw broom without handle, etc... – and the shacks with their corrugated roof, are both in Adams' and Sekoto's works.

Another echo is found in a second sketch illustrating a passage from Nigerian author Amos Tutuola's *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* (1954). Here, the pattern of a dress worn by the female protagonist is reminiscent of one of Sekoto's early paintings entitled *The Store* (1940-1942).



Figure 74. Illustration by Albert Adams in *Modern African Prose*, p. 143.



Figure 75. Gerard Sekoto, *The county store* Eastwood, c. 1940-42. Oil on board, 11.50x13.50 cm. Private collection.

This is not to say that Adams was directly inspired by Sekoto but more that, he probably drew from the same visual references and memory of scenes experienced in South Africa. Although, it needs to be reminded that Adams was mentored by Irma Stein and that before him, she had also impacted Ernest

Mancoba who, in turn, was Sekoto's mentor. It is very likely that Sekoto's work might have been mentioned during Stern and Adams exchanges. Furthermore, if Peter Clarke, who was a dock worker at the time, spotted the articles on Sekoto's departure from South Africa to study art in France, it is very likely that Adams, who had shown an interest in arts from a very young age, did too. In other words, there is a chance that Adams was aware of Sekoto's work which, before his departure, was known and praised for its focus on black life in the townships of Sophiatown, District Six and Eastwood. Rive might also have mentioned him since he had seen him in Paris before coming to London.

The two scenes discussed above are undeniably anchored in a thematic and visual lineage that can be traced back to a genre established by black South African painters. But Adams's sketches also contain characteristics that are specific to his own style. I am referring to his treatment of the face in the Tutuola illustration and in Nigerian writer's Onuora Nzekwu's *Blade Among the Boys* (1962).

In the former, the face presents mask-like features that are reminiscent of his 1960 *Crucifixion* works which both conjure up Picasso's treatment of the face in *Les Femmes d'Alger* (1907) and their preparatory sketches.



Figure 76. Albert Adams, *Crucifixion (head, upper torso)*, c. 1960. Ink on paper, 76.50x56 cm Private collection.

The vast scholarship generated by these and Picasso's peers brought to the fore the contributions of African and non-Western arts to Modernism, including Dan (Ivory Coast), Fang (Cameroon, Gabon) and Mbuya or Mbangu (Congo) masks.

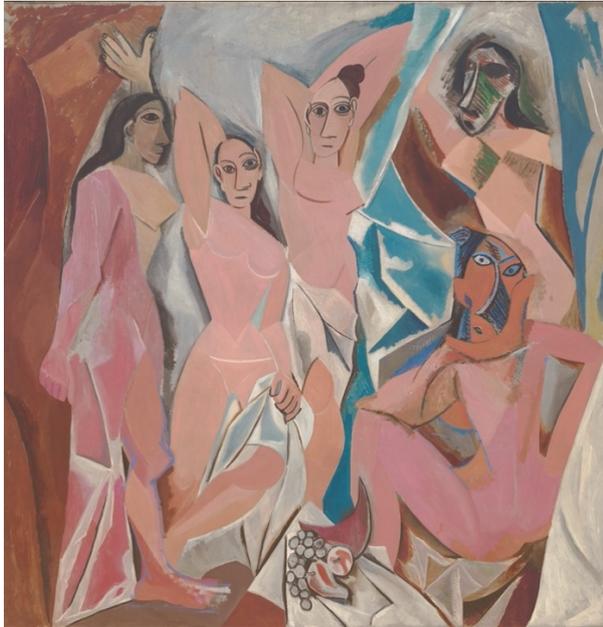


Figure 77. Pablo Picasso, *Les Femmes d'Alger*, 1907. Oil on canvas, 243.9 × 233.7 cm. Museum of Modern Art, New York.



Figure 78. Mbangu Mask (Congo).



Figure 79. Dan Mask (Ivory Coast).

One could make the same observation of the portrait Adams created for the AWS edition of *Quartet* (1964). The face bears mask-like features and is rather similar with those of a series of aquatint self-portraits realised by the artist four years earlier.

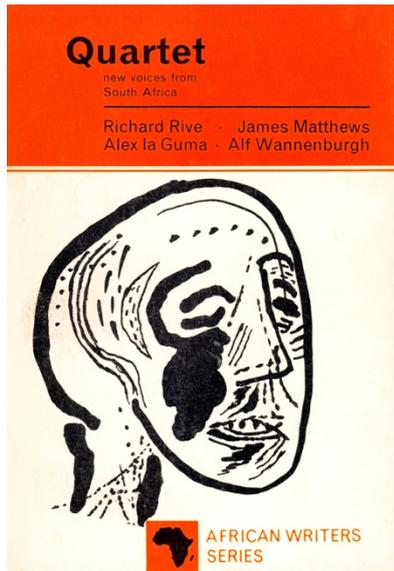


Figure 80. Cover artwork by Albert Adams for Richard Rive (ed.), *Quartet*, 1964.



Figures 81-82. Albert Adams, *Self portrait*, 1960. Etching, aquatint, 74x53.40 cm. University of Salford (left).

The work for Nzekwu's excerpt depicting the despair of a Nigerian mother at the loss of her son (and her lineage as social status) to Catholic priesthood, is closer to a German Expressionist style. The aesthetics in this work recalls one of Otto Dix's prints, *Wounded Man Fleeing (Battle of the Somme 1916)*, 1924, which encapsulates the same tension in the lines and 'deconstructed' features. This was a style adopted by Adams for many self-portraits especially from 1956 onward. This demonstrates that, the creativity Adams put in his drawings, for *Modern African Prose* or *Quartet*, is no less important than the one found in his other works. As South African curator Joe Dolby remarked in the first line of his essay on 'Adams as a printmaker', '[d]rawings and graphics form the major part of Albert Adams' output. He drew incessantly'.³⁵⁶ This indicates that his work perfectly lent itself to this kind of medium and format.

³⁵⁶ Joe Dolby, 'Beloved comforter. Albert Adams as printmaker – an appreciation' in Martin and Dolby, p. 33.



Figure 83. Otto Dix's prints, *Wounded Man Fleeing (Battle of the Somme 1916)*, 1924. Museum of Modern Art, New York.



Figure 84. Illustration by Albert Adams in *Modern African Prose*, p. 200.

Albert Adams's oeuvre has only recently caught the attention of British scholars.³⁵⁷ There is certainly more to unpack here. But the little we have seen in recontextualising a few of his sketches within a global art history is enough to challenge Lizarribar Buxó and Huggan's generalising and reducing claims that the design of the AWS covers are 'simplistic'³⁵⁸ and 'exoticist'³⁵⁹.

I have looked at how between the 1930s and 1970s, travels and exile undertaken by South Africa artists were as motivated by artistic aspirations as they were by the social and creative restrictions caused by apartheid. I have also discussed the paradoxical experience of exile in England as a place of safety,

³⁵⁷ University of Salford, Special Collection: Albert Adams, <<https://artcollection.salford.ac.uk/albert-adams-in-context/>> [accessed 9 March 2022].

³⁵⁸ Lizarribar Buxó, p. 131.

³⁵⁹ Graham Huggan, p. 119.

freedom, and comfort for some, and a place of precariousness and marginalisation for others. In this new context, Afro-centred artistic and cultural platforms offered a space for creative expression and agency. Literature and the African Writer Series provided such an outlet to both writers and visual artists in and out of Africa. Examining the collaborations that took place between the three entities (writers, publisher, visual artists), and the works created by the African artists for the covers, allowed me to position my argument in relation to existing scholarship – more particularly Lizarribar Buxó and Okeke-Agulu – leaning towards the latter and his appraisal of Okeke’s drawings for Achebe’s first novel. As I expand this thinking to the example of Albert Adams and the works he produced for AWS, I am similarly led to conclude that the drawings he created are part of an existing art practice. Therefore, the art works of the book covers need to be appraised both in relation to the books, and in relation to the artists’ own body of work, themes, style, and context of creation. It is with the same principle that I am choosing to approach George Hallett’s work in the next chapter.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE AFRICAN WRITERS SERIES BOOK COVERS: THE CREATIVE TURN IN GEORGE HALLETT'S WORK

This final chapter focuses on Hallett's arrival in London and addresses how his new environment brought new opportunities and broadened the scope of his images and practice. In the first part, Hallett's account of his encounter with James Currey is revisited and complemented with additional facts. His trial for the creation of an artwork for his first cover is also discussed. Parts two and three examine the types of source images and motifs he developed across the covers, as well as the theatricality and staging of scenes translating both a literal interpretation and subjective approach. The multiple narratives embodied by Hallett's models are explored through the stories they illustrate and their own existence as South African cultural actors in a context of exile. In the latter, the figure of artist Dumile Feni is an interesting case to expand, as it connects exile, the African Writers Series, and the interaction that existed between South African creatives of diverse disciplines, which Hallett also photographed. Finally, Hallett's visual and technical experiments overlap from part two to four, demonstrating a shift in practice from pure analogue photography to graphic design.

I. Seeing a new world with fresh eyes

After a fourteen-day journey on the MS Achille Lauro, George Hallett arrived in England and disembarked in Southampton. He recounted his arrival in his interview with John E. Mason:

Amazingly, at the docks I met another South African exile, the activist and poet, Cosmo Pieterse, who was there to welcome a relative from Cape Town. I was blessed to share the train with fellow South Africans who shared the same values of humanity. At Victoria Station in London my friend Carol Tralawney was there as promised. I was instantly made to feel at home.³⁶⁰

He continues:

When I arrived in London, in 1970, I must have had about £100 in my pocket, which was enough to keep me going, I suppose, for about a month. I started taking my portfolio around to the Times, to the Telegraph, the Observer. I had about 20 pictures from my exhibition in Cape Town, mounted on board. They all said, “We’ll let you know.” Then I went to the Times Higher Education Supplement, and they said, “We like your stuff. We’ll give you a call.”³⁶¹

A week later, the *Times Educational Supplement* then edited by Diane Spencer called him for his first assignment. We know for a fact that Hallett collaborated

³⁶⁰ Mason, p. 205. I could not find any information on Carol Tralawney but found the surname Trelawney who was an editor and involved in the arts.

³⁶¹ Ibid.

with the newspapers for at least a couple of years because two of the stories he covered in Handsworth in 1971 and 72 were part of an exhibition at Soho House, Birmingham, organised by Birmingham City Archives in 2002.

It is very likely that Hallett approached his new surroundings in the same way he did in Cape Town. As a matter of fact, he went to Handsworth with an awareness of Enoch Powell's 1968 'Rivers of Blood' anti-immigration speech pronounced in Birmingham three years earlier. His experience as a South African of mix heritage, who came from a then institutionally racist country, gave him the tools to engage with the locals with the same sense of kinship that had marked his District Six images.

His personal photographic practice, assignments from newspapers, and other forms of collaborations expanded the range of his subject matter and resulted in a vast body of work on British society which he called 'the English work'. I have had the opportunity of viewing the 18x24 cm photographs he printed for a project that couldn't be realised before his passing. These images are not included in my thesis, nor are the *TES* works as Hallett indicated that he had to hand the negatives. These could form another research project of its own. In this chapter, I am specifically concerned with the photographs that were used for the covers the African Writers Series.

After settling in this new environment, Hallett contacted Isaiah Stein, a South African exile who had been a boxer and was forcibly removed from District Six to Athlone, an area designated for the coloured community during apartheid. Stein relocated to London in 1968 due to the oppression he

experienced as an anti-apartheid activist.³⁶² He was a friend of James Matthews (who also lives in Athlone) and Peter Clarke. Hallett had first met him back in Cape Town when Stein was under house arrest.³⁶³ Upon visiting him at Heinemann's office, where he worked for the postage service, Hallett was invited to join him for lunch with the publishing house's directors. He described this moment in 2007 for James Currey's book *Africa Writes Back*:

Shortly after my arrival in London in 1970 I was introduced to James Currey by an old friend, Isaiah Stein, a South African exile then working for the publishers Heinemann in Mayfair. We met in a beautiful traditional pub with ornate mirrors and dark wooden interiors. Some of the other directors from Heinemann were also around enjoying a tankard of bitter. In this pleasant convivial atmosphere James Currey spoke animatedly about the African Writers Series. He wanted to change the look of the covers from a rather academic look using drawings, to a more contemporary style using photographs. Turning his gaze towards me, he asked me if I ever had done any covers in South Africa. I replied positively, adding that I did not have any examples to show him. However, if he gave me an opportunity, I would love to show him what I could do.³⁶⁴

I am quoting the photographer at length to give him a voice and to unpack his statement. In the interview he gave Mason, Hallett admitted that his response to Currey's enquiry as to whether he had done any covers in South Africa was embellishing the truth. Indeed, nowhere in my research on his South African

³⁶² South African History Online, 'Isaiah Stein', 03 May 2011

<<https://www.sahistory.org.za/people/isaiah-stein>> [accessed, 6 September 2022].

³⁶³ Mason, p. 206.

³⁶⁴ George Hallett quoted in Currey, *Africa Writes Back*, p. xxviii.

period have I found trace of any book cover either featuring his images, or designed by him. However, that does not mean he was entirely clueless in the matter as he might have had an understanding of the relationship between visual arts and book covers through Peter Clarke. In *More than Brothers*, Hein Willemse explains that painting did not provide Clarke with a sustainable income, so he complemented his earnings with his crafts and book illustrations.³⁶⁵ This was the case for many artists who collaborated with the AWS, as some of the correspondence in Heinemann's archive reveals. That income made a difference when times were lean.

Willemse cites Clarke's illustrations for Freda Linde, *Snoet-allen* (1964), a book that won the C.P. Hoogenhout Award. He also mentions his cover designs for Davison Don Tengo Jabavu's *Izidungulwana* (1958), Alan Paton's *Aber das Word sagte Ich nicht (Too late for the Phalarope)* (1960), Ezekiel Mphahlele's *The Living and the Dead and Other Stories* (1961), and James Matthews's *Azikwelwa* (1962).³⁶⁶

All this happened during Hallett's intellectual formation, in the years that he was immersed in conversations about literature, black writers, and arts in the company of Rive, Clarke and Matthews.³⁶⁷ An awareness of such authors as D.D.T. Jabavu (1885-1959) is all the more important as the author and activist was the son of John Tengo Jabavu (1859-1921), also activist and founder of *Imvo Zabantsundu (Black Opinion)* one of South Africa's first newspapers in Xhosa.³⁶⁸

³⁶⁵ Willemse, pp. 10-11.

³⁶⁶ Ibid.

³⁶⁷ I discuss this period in the first two chapters.

³⁶⁸ The newspaper was a mouthpiece for the New African Movement. I evoke it in an essay on Gerard Sekoto and Negritude, in which I also discuss Ernest Mancoba's mentoring, and his

Hallett may have acquired what could be called an implicit or tacit knowledge, that is to say, a form of knowledge gained without even being aware of it. This is also partly how the ‘each one teach one’ learning process occurs, when transmission happens through proximity, as is the case for communities whose cultures are not part of the mainstream, or official, educational systems but exist in societal margins.

Hallett came from a racially segregated country where he had been denied professional opportunities and even been humiliated by newspaper staff. In that surreal moment, in the company of the white directors of a publishing house, this potential job offer was an unexpected and much-needed opportunity that could allow him to prove his creativity. This is probably why he jumped at the occasion and implied that he had done book covers before.

Currey invited him to his office and presented him with the manuscript of *The Tongue of the Dumb* (AWS 98, 1971) by Dominic Mulaisho on which he started working immediately. He said:

On my way home on the underground, I started reading the manuscript. By midnight I was thinking about images to put on the cover. I had taken a photograph of a wooden sculpture by Frank Brown, a relative of Peter Clarke. By cutting the picture into strips and, rearranging them, I created a new image of the work.³⁶⁹

awareness of issues related to literature and African languages in South Africa. See Christine Eyene, ‘Sekoto and Négritude: The Ante-room of French Culture’. *Third Text*, 24:4 (2010), 425-427.

³⁶⁹ Hallett in Currey, pp. xxviii-xxix.

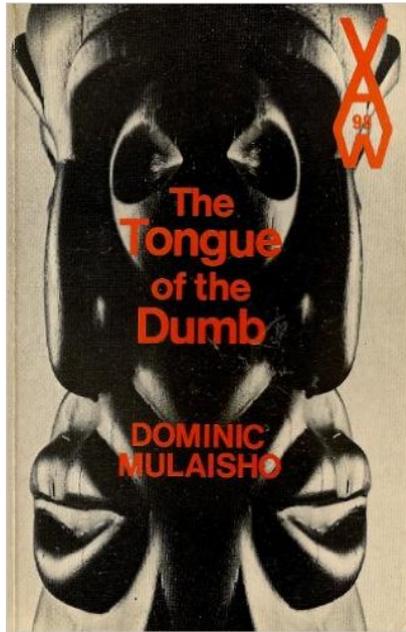


Figure 85. George Hallett's cover artwork for Dominic Mulaisho, *The Tongue of the Dumb*, 1971.

This account marks the first instance of Hallett's intervention on any of his images. In Cape Town, he had experimented with low exposure when he photographed a gangster at the Athlone Hotel and South African jazz musician Robert Sithole.

But this time, the intervention took place after the picture had been taken, on the physical print, through cutting and creating a new composition.

The result was a double-sided elongated sculpted face described by American designer Josh MacPhee's as a Rorschach montage, or mirrored image, of an African sculpture.

Multiple-face masks are also part of the African sculptural canon. It is not sure whether Hallett had seen any of these either in South Africa or in London.



Figure 86. Senoufo Kpeliye mask, Ivory Coast. Source: Héritage Galerie.³⁷⁰

³⁷⁰ Héritage Galerie, Senoufo Kpeliye mask, Ivory Coast, <<https://art-africain-traditionnel.com/en/masks/939-senufo-kpelye-mask.html>>, accessed 18 April 2023.

It might be possible since he mentioned the British Museum in relation to other covers and, after he had left London, he would come back and photograph 'African artworks in a gallery in Bond Street who specialised in selling African artefacts'.³⁷¹



Figure 87. Skin-covered three-faced helmet mask, West Africa. Pitt Rivers Museum. 1942.4.9 B.

Therefore, the image for that book can be considered both as a composition stemming from the photographer's imagination and as the possible recreation of a previously seen African form. This might illustrate Hallett's intention to present a visual form emblematic of Africa, as was the case for the cover of *Things Fall Apart* by Dennis Duerden. As a matter of fact, Duerden's cover also features a multiple face mask which he could have drawn from the pantheon of Nigerian deities or ceremonial figures. Currey would certainly have shown Hallett examples of book covers, including the first in the series. Interestingly, both *Things Fall Apart* and *The Tongue of the Dumb* evoke the demise of an African chiefly figure against the background of conflicted feelings between the religion and education imposed by the colonisers, and the retention of traditional beliefs and customs. In any case, as we shall see later, one cannot exclude the possibility that Hallett's images for the book covers, this one and others, might indeed have

³⁷¹ Mason, p. 209.

been inspired or informed by some earlier works by other illustrators and visual artists.

James Currey discussed his collaboration with George Hallett during a personal interview. He mentioned that the cover had to be presented to an in-house weekly committee which gave its approval.³⁷² After a conclusive trial, Hallett was commissioned more covers and ‘a creative relationship was established with HEB that lasted well over a decade’.³⁷³

Based on my counting, Hallett’s collaboration with the African Writers Series took place from 1970 to 1983 and likely ended with Paul Scanlon (ed.), *Stories from central and southern Africa* (AWS 254). Out of 192 books published in that timeframe, Hallett’s images feature on at least 66 covers across all of the AWS colour coded literary genres.³⁷⁴ This places his work on nearly 35 per cent of the series new releases and re-prints in that time period, which is quite a substantial number for one artist.

It would be beyond the scope of this thesis to go over all of them individually. As rich and varied as they might be thematically and in terms of iconography. My study is specifically focused on the most emblematic ones: those most visually striking and departing from the photographic genres that defined his South

³⁷² Interview with James Currey, 29 January 2019.

³⁷³ Currey, p. 19.

³⁷⁴ A slight variation is possible as Hallett’s images were sometimes used for reprints of editions first published before his collaboration with AWS. In other cases, books that were first edited with his photograph on the cover are out of print and the reissue has a different design. It needs to be remembered here that the African Writers Series archive does not always mention the author of cover artwork. Therefore, to be sure, one needs to check each edition of each book, which I have done for the books discussed in my thesis.

African period. I also pay particular attention to those in which the presence of the photographed ‘subjects’, or models as George called them, adds a narrative that can only come to light through contextualising the source image.

II. Three types of source images

The source images used by Hallett for the African Writers Series book covers can be divided into three types:

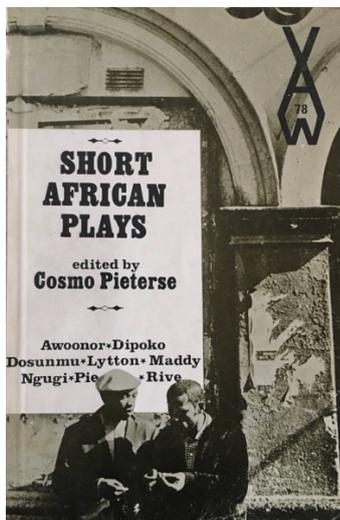
- 1) Pre-existing images taken in South Africa (1960s)
- 2) Personal (or non-assignment) images taken in England and France (1970s-1980s)
- 3) Images specifically created for the book covers (1970s-1980s)

1) Pre-existing images taken in South Africa (1960s)

This group of images is clearly identified and counts some of Hallett’s photographs taken in Hout Bay, Langa and District Six. They are part of the work that was included in the two exhibitions he mentions before his departure from South Africa and include the District Six series discussed in chapter two. Among them, the Hout Bay images have been used for Bernard Dadié’s *Climbié* (1956, AWS 87, 1971) and Rebeka Njau’s *Ripples in the Pool* (1975, AWS 203, 1978).

One photograph from Langa’s jazz festival is used on Modikwe Dikobe’s *The Marabi Dance* (AWS 124, 1973).

Often the image refers to the title or themes of the books. This works particularly well for narratives set in South Africa, such as *The Marabi Dance* which deals with the challenges of life in Johannesburg between estrangement from traditional African life and ‘the chaos of the Marabi parties and city gangs’.³⁷⁵ The Langa photograph speaks to a similar context. Likewise for the images of District Six. *The British Cinema* (1968) makes the cover of Cosmo Pieterse (ed.), *Short African Plays* (AWS 78, 1972) and *The Brother Says Hello* (1968) is used for Nadine Gordimer’s book *Some Monday For Sure* (1952, AWS 177, 1976) for which she expressed her satisfaction with the cover.³⁷⁶



Figures 88-89. George Hallett’s photograph *British Cinema* (1968) used for the cover of *Short African Plays* (1972) edited by Cosmo Pieterse.

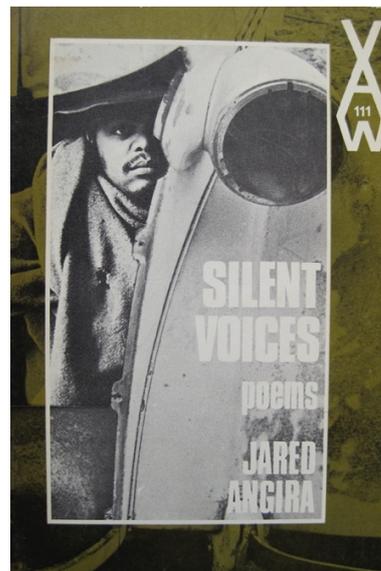
³⁷⁵ Back cover blurb.

³⁷⁶ HEB 17/03.

2) Personal (or non-assignment) photographs taken in England
(1970s)

As indicated by this section's title, these book covers use non-commissioned photographs taken in England and France where Hallett moved in the mid-1970s. If we consider the English selection only, an interesting example is an image from the 100 Club in London used by Hallett for Bessie Head's short stories *The Collector of Treasures* (AWS 182, 1977). The image of a performing black woman is used to represent the female characters that are central figures in the stories. Hallett also photographed women of mixed heritage, reflecting the author's own identity, for two of her books: *Maru* (AWS 101, 1972), and *A Question of Power* (AWS 149, 1974). Both have autobiographical connections, from a protagonist having a white mother, to immersion in mental health in the latter.

Another image from Hallett's London work emerges in Jared Angira's collection of poems *Silent Voices* (AWS 111, 1972). The cover shows a man whose face appears in high contrast. His chest is wrapped in a blanket and his bust is inserted over what looks like a car bonnet.



Figures 90. Cover of Jared Angira, *Silent Voices* (1972).

It is difficult to make up the rest of the image which looks like soil or some indistinct texture.

The original photograph used for the cover is part of Hallett's exile series. It was published in Hallett and Matthews book's *Images* (1979). It is also in *Rhizomes of Memory*, the three-person exhibition curated by Gavin Jantjes in 2000. The caption produced in the catalogue reads:

Feni Dumile (sic) and Louis Moholo, 1971, London

To inform their families that they were doing well in exile in London, the sculptor Dumile (left) and jazz musician Moholo asked me to take their portrait.³⁷⁷



Figure 91. George Hallett, *Dumile Feni and Louis Moholo*, 1971, London.

The photographic print from the 'George Hallett Research Collection' bears a handwritten caption saying: 'A photograph for the family back home'.

Considering that Dumile Feni is a major South African visual artist, one cannot but wonder how he ended up on one of the AWS covers. Was it simply the case

³⁷⁷ Hallett in Jantjes, p. 236.

of a connection between the artist and photographer, or could there be more linking them to the African Writers Series? Elements of answer can be found in the artist's life story and, more precisely, in his exile in London between 1968 and 1976.

Dumile Feni came to England to flee the apartheid authorities that targeted him after his art had gained exposure for its innovative style and also came on the officials' radar for criticising the inhumanity of life under the oppressive regime. His entry into the UK was an invitation from American collector Eric Estorick (1913-1993) to exhibit at the Grosvenor Gallery in London.³⁷⁸

In a profile of the artist, South African actor and filmmaker Lionel Ngakane (1928-2003) discussed his life in London and his love of jazz. He mentions Dumile's large collection of jazz records, how he spent his meagre income on jazz concerts, and quotes him saying how listening to jazz inspired him creatively.³⁷⁹



Figure 92. Dumile Feni, Untitled, undated.

³⁷⁸ Bruce Smith, 'Dumile: Artist in Exile' (Johannesburg: Bruce Smith and Art on Paper, 2004), p. 16.

³⁷⁹ Lionel Ngakane, 'Dumile: A Profile'. *African Arts*, 3:2, (1970), 13. See also Bruce Smith, p. 30.

Ngakane's words add to the interpretation of two photographs by Hallett: one showing the artist with jazz drummer Louis Moholo, the other with saxophonist Dudu Pukwana. They also help explain the introduction of references to jazz music in his art after he arrived in London.

By the same token, the fact that at some point Dumile shared accommodation with South African author, journalist, and former *Drum* contributor William Modisane (1923-1986) also known as Bloke Modisane, might explain an increased presence of words in his art. A comparison of Dumile's work before and after exile shows that written signs take up more space on the picture plane than they did before he came to England.

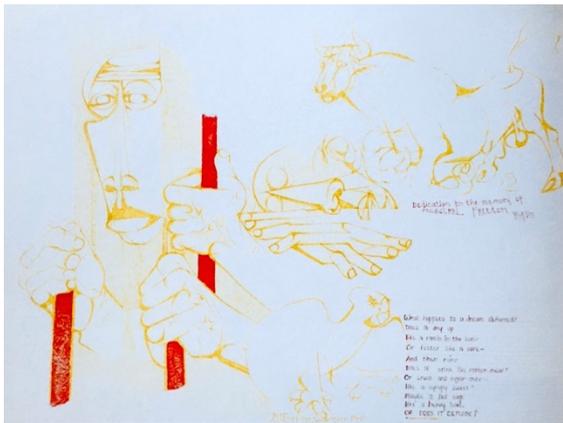


Figure 93. Dumile Feni, *Dedication to the Memory of Ancestral Freedom*, 1977.

His inclusion of a paragraph from *A Dream Deferred* by Langston Hughes (1951) in *Dedication to the Memory of Ancestral Freedom* (1977), executed ten years after the author's death, suggests that he drew from literary inspirations.

The African Writers Series archive confirms this point. On 10 December 1969, James Currey contacted Dumile to create a cover for *Seven South African Poets* (AWS 64, 1971) edited by Cosmo Pieterse. That year, Dumile had started making a name for himself in London after having a solo exhibition at Grosvenor Gallery

in August and participating in two group exhibitions at Camden Arts Centre in August-September, and again at Grosvenor in September-October.³⁸⁰

He created works for the cover and illustrations in the book for which he was paid £25.00, as a payment order dated 3 April 1970 indicates.³⁸¹ Like in Albert Adams's case (discussed in the previous chapter) the work created on the cover and an example found in the archive, are typical of Dumile's style of contorted bodies and accentuated lines.

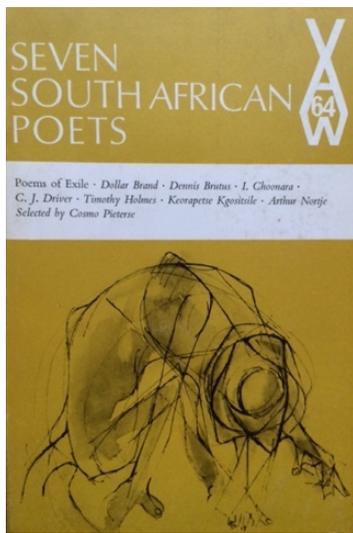


Figure 94. Dumile Feni's cover artwork for *Seven South African Poets* edited by Cosmo Pieterse (1971).

The archive also reveals that, ahead of the book release, a poetry reading entitled 'Voices from Africa' was planned by the International Defence and Aid Fund (IDAF) at the University of London Union, on Malet Street, on Saturday 12 December 1970.³⁸²

The line-up included Dennis Brutus, Masizi Kunene and Cosmo Pieterse, poets whose works were published in the AWS book, and who have all been photographed by Hallett – some of them also ending on covers as is the case for

³⁸⁰ Chabani Manganyi, *The Beauty of the Line. Life and Times of Dumile Feni* (Johannesburg: KMM Review Publishing Company, 2012), pp. 18-19. At Camden Arts Centre, Dumile took part in 'Contemporary African Art', a landmark African art exhibition in England.

³⁸¹ URSC, HEB 03/05.

³⁸² *Ibid.*

Pieterse on *Five African Plays* edited by himself (AWS 114, 1972) and Stanlake Samkange, *Year of the Uprising* (AWS 190, 1978).

Another related event recorded by the archive is the planning, by Heinemann, of a poetry reading at the Africa Centre on Monday 19 April 1971.³⁸³ These, and other documents, show that engaging with literature and collaborating with the African Writers Series was not limited to the written word.

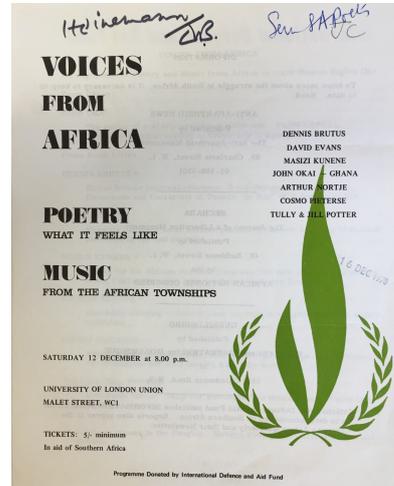


Figure 95, International Defence and Aid Fund, 'Voices from Africa', programme, 1970.

It was also about the incarnation of those words and performativity. Hallett brings this out in the 'theatrical' compositions he created for the covers.

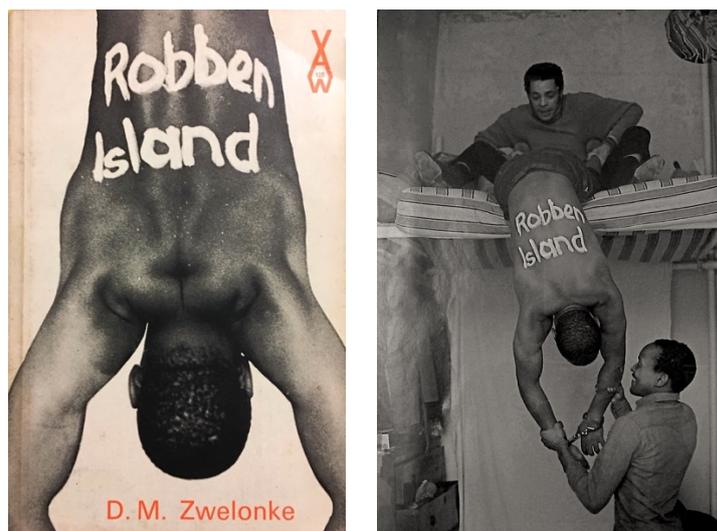
3) Images created for the book covers (1970s-1980s)

In 1971, James Currey was in dialogue with former political prisoner Daniel Zwelonke Mdludi for the publication of 'Bekimpi in Robben Island'. In this novel, the author narrates the story in the first person, placing him as both subject and witness of the harrowing experience of imprisonment on the island. The story focuses on Bekimpi, also known as Zweli, a Poqo³⁸⁴ leader (the armed wing of the Pan-Africanist Congress), imprisoned on Robben Island. The carceral

³⁸³ Ibid.

³⁸⁴ Created in 1961, Poqo (pure in Xhosa) was the armed wing of the Pan Africanist Congress, a liberation movement that broke away from the African National Congress (ANC) in 1959.

island is, of course, known for holding political prisoners since the end of the 17th century, including the Xhosa leader Makana Nxele (c.1780-1819/20) and many active opponents to the apartheid regime from 1961 to the early 1990s. Kept in a long period of solitary confinement and tortured for information, Bekimpi is hung by the feet until his ultimate death. The image created by Hallett focuses on this moment. The cover presents the naked back of a black man, seen upside down, with the words Robben Island painted on it. A source image for this work entitled *The Creation of a Book Cover* (1972) reveals how far Hallett would go for his models to re-enact scenes from the books.



Figures 96-97. George Hallett, cover image for D. M. Zwelonke, *Robben Island* (1973), and *The Making of a Book Cover* (1972).

Here, two men are assisting in holding the man in a perilous position. One of them perched on a mattress set hazardously high on an unsecured horizontal structure. The main protagonist is seen in handcuffs, a portion of image that does not appear on the cover. Further explanation by Hallett allows to identify the central figure as Louis Moholo. The jazz drummer, who had been photographed

with Dumile, was one of Hallett's many South African friends, exiles or visitors, who posed for the book covers.

In this example, the archive reveals how an editorial decision influenced the words forming part of Hallett's composition. The book proposed by Mdludi was initially entitled 'Bekimpi in Robben Island'. But in a letter to the author dated 28 September 1972, the editor writes:

There was much discussion about your title and it was felt that in the end the simple title, ROBBEN ISLAND, would be better. What do you think? I am very much in favour of it and hope you will agree. For people outside South Africa the name Bekimpi is rather strange and not memorable. Many people know of ROBBEN ISLAND.³⁸⁵

This book is the only one in the series, out of the covers using photographs in the 1970s, for which the title is part of the original photograph. The letters function on multiple levels. Individually, painted on Moholo's back, they are non-mimetic forms, or 'signs-vehicles' lending themselves to semiotic considerations. They might be approached along the notion of words as images, beyond their discursive property, as evoked by Derrida.³⁸⁶ But, invested with contextual knowledge, they refer to the carceral island, symbolise the brutality of apartheid and, in doing so, impart Hallett's image with a clear and direct political message. Those words are the outcome of an unseen editorial process only revealed by the archive and materialised on a double surface: Moholo's skin and the book cover.

³⁸⁵ URSC, HEB 10/10.

³⁸⁶ Derrida, p. 40.

As such, not only are they elements of the three-dimensional space of the pictorial field, they also belong to the two-dimensional surface of the book as object, on the same plane as the components of the AWS design template. As elements of a photographed scene, with its own tangible reality, the words function in the same way as the writings in Hallett's District Six (and Bo-Kaap) works. One could, for instance, imagine how 'Westminster Restaurant' or 'Holl Boys' could also similarly function on a double plane.

III. The image, 'to the letter': props, theatricality, and symbolism

Over time, Hallett's compositions developed a very distinct style and visual register. Props and symbolism complemented a confident theatricality. Many of the photographed figures were friends of his, which facilitated the process of re-enacting a scene until the right image appeared. Hallett named some of the friends who participated in this new body of work:

Friends from the extensive South African exiled community in London and further afield became my models and accomplices in the creation of new covers. Pallo Jordan danced for *A Dancer of Fortune*. Louis Moholo was hung upside down with handcuffs for *Robben Island*. Lorna de Smit (sic) became a corpse with a silver coin over one eye while a Gabon viper kept vigil nearby. Gavin Jantjes and his wife were transformed into characters for Nuruddin Farah's tragic tale of life in his homeland. Jimi Matthews, while studying photography with me in the French

Pyrenees, suffered the indignities of a prisoner of war, wearing only an old rag around his waist and bleeding from a head wound.”³⁸⁷

It is probable that, having seen previous book covers featuring South African models, and with AWS being an important internationally distributed series, his friends wanted to be part of this experience. Their motives could have either been for entertainment; for their own sense of self; for what those images meant in terms of black representation, especially for black South African exiles whose nation of birth had robbed them of this form of agency; or simply for their own interest in African literature, with an understanding of what it meant both in terms of black subjectivity, and in the assertion of a political voice. Hallett said that his friends ‘weren’t interested in the money. It was the joy of doing it, the honour of doing it’.³⁸⁸

1) **Props as new visual elements**

A number of props began appearing in Hallett’s images. The example mentioning Jimi Matthews, son of poet James Matthews, which is the cover of Williams Sassine’s *Wirriyamu* (1976, AWS 199, 1980), contains a rifle. Such accessories are found in other scenes created in London, notably those representing conflicts or war-torn contexts. The photographer provided further information about his access to accessories and how they enabled him to stage some of his compositions:

³⁸⁷ Hallett in Currey, p. xxix.

³⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 206.

I soon discovered a massive warehouse in Camden Town that had the most incredible collection of props, historical costumes and guns of every description for the film and television industry. This was my Hamley's toy shop! I even found a South African policeman's uniform from the apartheid era to illustrate Alex La Guma's novels set in District Six. Nigerian soldier's uniform from the Biafra war? No problem. Our little team of exiles created quite a stir one night in a quiet North London street; I had three guys dressed up as soldiers with automatic weapons at a road block somewhere in Nigeria. Lighting was from the overhead street lights [...] with a red Volkswagen beetle contrasting with the green camouflage uniforms. The British Museum kept me supplied with Gabon vipers and stuffed exotica from the African forests. African masks I found in galleries in Bond Street [...].³⁸⁹

The scene staged in North London refers to Cyprian Ekwensi's *Surviving the Peace* (AWS 185, 1976). In a letter to James Currey, dated 6 September 1976, the author indicated his satisfaction with Hallett's 'excellent cover'.³⁹⁰

Weapons as props became a motif forming part of a new iconography Hallett developed across his covers. It was unusual for him to represent violence. This has always distinguished his images from that of the well-known South African struggle photographers. Scenes of this nature mostly draw from the imagination sparked by the manuscripts, even if those might have been informed by real and sometimes autobiographical events. He might also have looked to memories of

³⁸⁹ Hallett in Currey, p. xxix.

³⁹⁰ HEB 17/05.

indignities witnessed in South Africa or mass media images to which he could have been exposed.

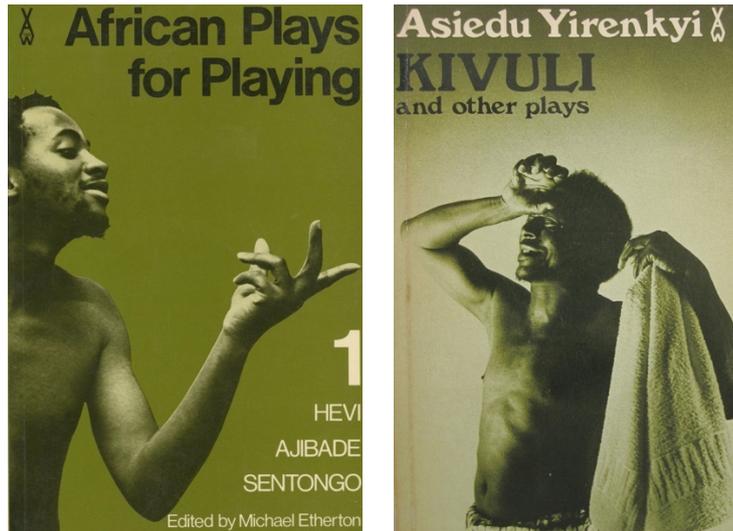
While the realism of his covers owes to the nature of the photographic medium, they are not photojournalism. This is what Camille Lizarribar Buxó observes when she writes that the cover photographs ‘waver between a journalistic, ‘on the scene’ quality or that of a blatantly contrived scene’.³⁹¹ These are staged images, mediated by Hallett’s own imaginative interpretation, in a process echoing his comment that ‘the words create images in your mind’.³⁹²

2) **Playfulness and theatricality**

Imagination is something that the photographer also managed to bring out from his models. Many of them were creatives, extrovert enough, or natural performers. This made it easier for him to capture unscripted moments, or playful photographic sessions that could be instigated at any time when he had an idea in mind. This is the case for the cover of *African Plays for Playing* (AWS 165, 1975) edited by Michael Etherton, with a gestural Pallo Jordan, or a performing Peter Clarke in Asiedu Yirenkyi’s *Kivuli and other plays* (AWS 216, 1980).

³⁹¹ Lizarribar Buxó, pp. 134-135.

³⁹² Hallett in Mason, p. 104,



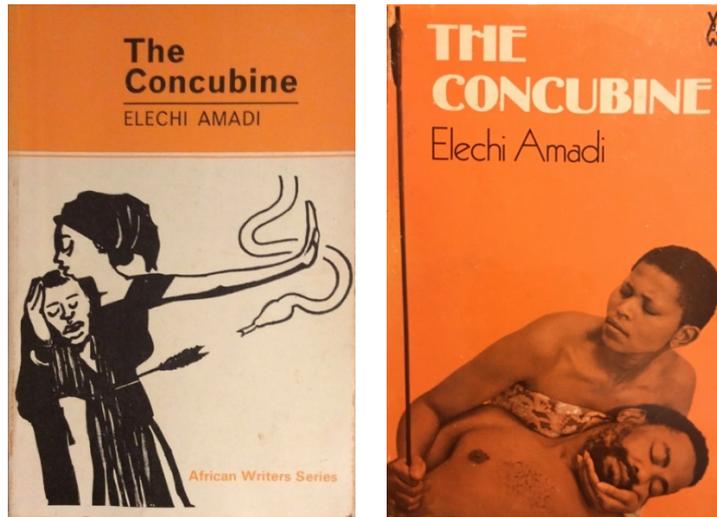
Figures 98-99. George Hallett cover photographs for *African Plays for Playing* (1975), edited by Michael Etherton and *Kivuli and other plays* (1980) by Asiedu Yirenyi.

Peter Clarke was photographed in the South of France in a context described by Hallett that might also apply to his London photo sessions:

I took portraits of Peter Clarke there – an amazing portrait, the one with a cowbell. James Matthews in the water. That’s there. They came to visit me there. We played with each other. I photographed Peter in a Basotho hat, I photographed him stripped to the waist, doing all kinds of things. It was great. A lot of people came to visit me there, and most of those people I photographed.³⁹³

Another form of scene re-enactment or, as I call it, ‘embodied narrative’, is found in Elechi Amadi’s *The Concubine*. Hallett’s cover, for the 1970s-80s reprints of the book, stages a scene from the novel with the main protagonist, Ihuoma, holding her lifeless lover Ekwueme, ‘played’ by Louis Moholo, with an arrow in his chest.

³⁹³ Hallett in Mason, p. 209.



Figures 100-101. Covers of Elechi Amadi's *The Concubine* by Shyam Varma (1966) and Hallett (1970s-83 editions).

This is yet another example of how Hallett might also have been inspired by previous covers. Here the placing of the figures is similar to the drawing created by Shyam Varma in 1966. Which also demonstrates the cross-disciplinary resonances (from literature to drawing, etching, etc.), within Hallett's photography practice.

3) Symbolism and abstract elements

The final characteristic I wish to discuss is the symbolic elements, 'abstract', or decontextualised fragments appearing on the covers. We have seen earlier how the classical mask was used by several artists as a symbol for Africa. Several of Hallett's covers play with symbols, sometimes in a repetitive manner that is not redundant but rather acts as the consolidation of an iconographic register.

I.N.C. Aniebo's *Of Wives, Talismans and the Dead* (AWS 253, 1983), is one of Hallett's most striking covers with the model, Lorna de Smidt, laying wrapped in a shroud, her eyes closed, a coin on her eyelid and a viper coiled above her head. This cover is loaded with symbols and encapsulates the general theme of the short stories dealing with changes in Igbo traditional beliefs and practices. The snake could symbolise the Igbo Eke (snake or python) deity, and the coin, a divinatory compensation.

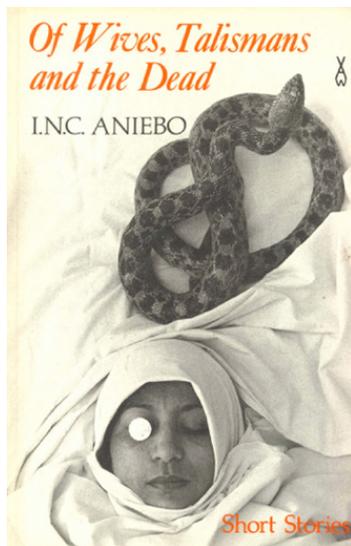


Figure 102. George Hallett's cover for I.N.C. Aniebo's *Of Wives, Talismans and the Dead* (1983).

Contrary to the playfulness that transpires from other covers, or from Hallett's words, de Smidt indicated that modelling for this cover had been an unpleasant experience and that Hallett had bullied her into doing it because his model had not turned up.³⁹⁴

This is quite telling considering that de Smidt, a South African exile, a dedicated anti-apartheid activist, had an assertive personality.

³⁹⁴ Lorna de Smidt in University of Cape Town, 'It is a Gathering of Elders', Conversation series #1: Eugene Skeef and Lefifi Tladi with Valmont Layne, 3 February 2022, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3tJM3W4jW4Q&t=3883s>>, 58m.49s to 1h.04m, [accessed 2 November 2022].

There is certainly a parallel history to be written in relation to the power relations at play between female sitter and male photographer. Especially because the African Writers Series published far less women than they did male authors.³⁹⁵ This also means that, in terms of visual representation, there was more of a male bias and less of female visual subjectivity and agency.



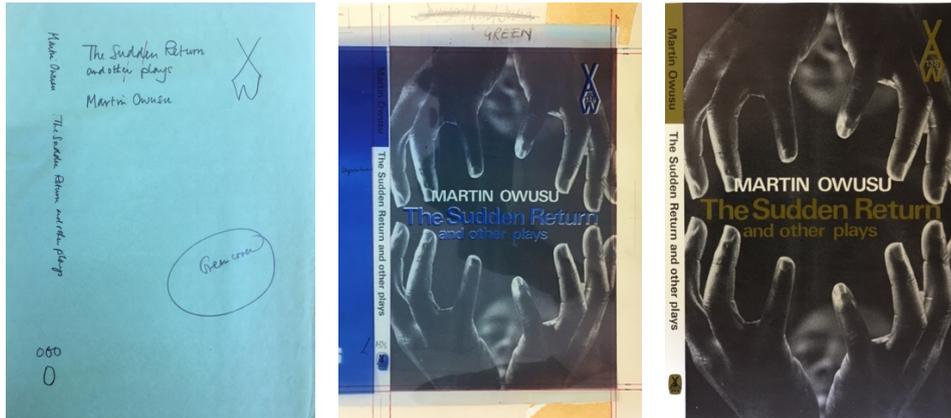
Figure. 103. Display of photocopied book covers by Hallett featuring hands as main motif. ‘George Hallett: Word . Text . Image’, BIC Project Space, Casablanca, 2020, curated by Christine Eyene.

Several images feature hands converging towards each other. One also finds hands holding a knife or religious symbols and raised arms in various positions. In some of these cases, the archive contains interesting documents enabling us to understand the different stages an image went through before the final product. The file for Martin Owusu’s *The Sudden Return and other plays* (AWS 38, 1973), contains a light blue sheet of paper with hand-written markings placing the different elements of design. Another document is a kind of vellum-type paper presenting the cover prototype in blue tones. The file also holds a near final version with green tones, the colour code for plays.³⁹⁶ These intermediaries, or

³⁹⁵ New doctoral research is undertaken by Kadija Koroma at Leicester University on women in postcolonial nations, particularly on how African women are represented through the narratives of the African Writers Series.

³⁹⁶ URSC, HEB 18/10.

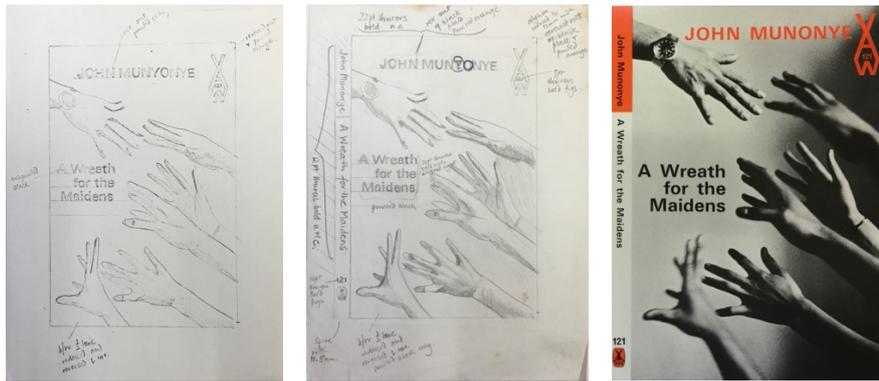
visual ‘by-products’, invite us to conceive of Hallett’s compositions as images in ‘suspense’, or images which visual aspect and meaning are neither unresolved nor completely closed. The changing tones allow for ‘Warholian-type’ visual permutations which are not unlike the sepia experimentations Hallett would develop in the mid-1980s.³⁹⁷



Figures. 104-105-106. Development of the book cover for Martin Owusu’s *The Sudden Return and other plays* (1973).

Another example is the cover of John Munonye’s *A Wreath of the Maidens* (AWS 121, 1973) which shows a group of hands rising from the bottom right towards a hand coming from above. The composition might refer to a political rally taking place in the story, set at a time where Nigeria looked towards the promise of Independence before the Biafran war. It could also evoke the relationship between leaders and idolising followers, as the novel addresses issues of political ideals and allegiances.

³⁹⁷ These works are not discussed in my thesis. They are part of my private collection, and some prints, or tests, must also probably be part of Hallett’s archive in South Africa. I am mentioning them because they reveal that in the same way Hallett’s images for the covers underwent different tones, this is also a visual effect he explored. I had the chance seeing such prints fresh out of his darkroom in Amsterdam in the mid-1980s.



Figures 107-108-109. Development of the book cover for John Munonye's *A Wreath of the Maidens* (1973).

The archive contains a prototype of the cover with two annotated sketches. Interestingly, while sketches are usually studies preceding an artwork, in this instance the sketches proceed from, and around, Hallett's photograph. One could even conceive of these 'intermediary' images as a 'material' or 'image-matter', reduced to lines having the same graphic value as the AWS logo, the title, and other elements of the cover design.

Here, Hallett's photographs, in their in-between status, are not meant to exist as autonomous images. Yet, one cannot deny their existence, albeit transitional, as photographic matter.

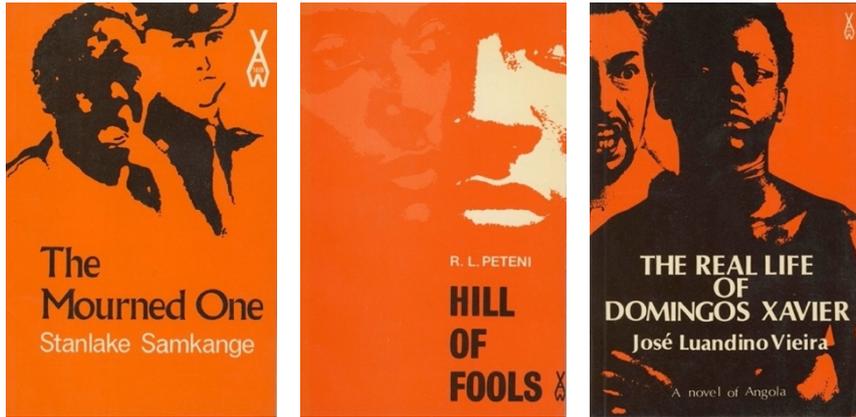
IV. The cover 'design' in question

The consensus on George Hallett's collaboration with the African Writers Series, and the way it has been generally described in short biographies or articles, is that he designed book covers for the series. What becomes clear, in reviewing the story of those covers, is that an existing design template was

already in place when the photographer first became involved with the publishing house, and that, for the most part, his images were inserted within that template. However, this is not as clear cut as one would think. Indeed, the image credit on the back covers either mentions ‘cover photograph by’ or ‘cover design by’. One implying that the photographer is the author of an image inserted within the template, the other suggesting a visual intervention beyond the photographic image and, possibly, a creative decision on other elements of the cover, such as the placing of the author’s name, the title, the fonts and tones of the motifs and background elements within the AWS graphic charter.

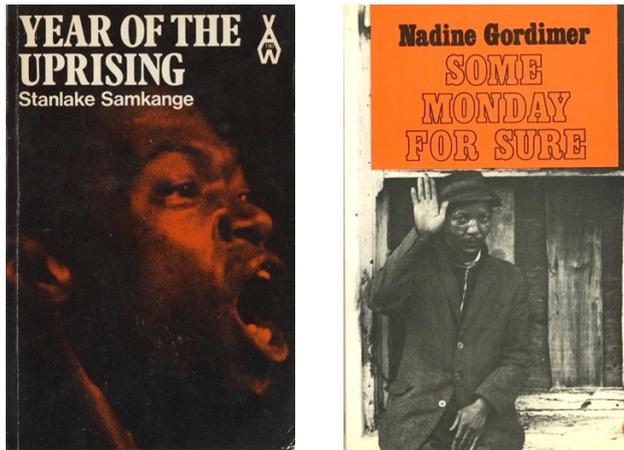
During our conversation, James Currey indicated that on the whole Hallett took his own pictures but sometimes he would work from images by other photographers.³⁹⁸ He mentioned, as an example, Stanlake Samkange’s *The Mourned One* (AWS 169, 1975) in which Hallett used the bleaching out technique. Bleaching is done using potassium ferricyanide or alternatively household bleach. The process dissolves the layers of imprinted colours and, depending on how long the print is left in the solution, it can result in red, yellow, or orange tones, the latter blending with the colour code of AWS novels.

³⁹⁸ Interview with James Currey.



Figures 110-111-112. Covers of Samkange's *The Mourned One* (1975), Peteni's *Hill of Fools* (1976) and Vieira's *The Real Life of Domingos Xavier* (1978) using the bleaching out technique.

A similar technique seems to have been used for R. L. Peteni's *Hill of Fools* (AWS 178, 1976) and José Luandino Vieira's *The Real Life of Domingos Xavier* (AWS 202, 1978). However, Hallett is credited as designer for the former and photographer for the latter. The designations 'cover design' or 'cover photograph' do not seem to have strictly defined Hallett's interventions. He is also credited as cover designer for Gordimer's *Some Monday for Sure* and Samkange's *Year of the Uprising* (AWS 190, 1978), with visuals of a cropped District Six shot, and close-up of a photograph of Cosmo Pieterse performing a protest poem with the Brotherhood of Breath in London in the early 1970s.



Figures. 113-114. Covers of Samkange's *Year of the Uprising* (1978) and Gordimer's *Some Monday for Sure for* (1976 AWS edition).

Hallett's intervention might have involved image cropping and placing of the lettering. This is a possibility. Currey confirmed that the photographer used Letraset, the rub off dry transfer, but he was not always sure which books in particular. The editor was certainly involved in the process. As a matter of fact, as he explained during our conversation, he actually was one of the African Writers Series designers. But that is not something he could say, as it was not considered proper for him, as the series editor, with his own department, to do the 'humble work of design'.³⁹⁹ This shows that he was not a detached commissioner but had a creative eye which informed his collaboration with the photographer.

Hallett's design work is most prominent in covers containing images resulting from darkroom experimentations and the transformation of his photographs from analogue to graphic forms that give them a different materiality. These processes are discussed in his text for Currey's book:

³⁹⁹ Ibid.

High contrast film became a favoured way of creating stark graphic images. Overlaying multiple negatives when printing in the darkroom was a new way of developing designs. Double exposures in the camera was another way of creating images for covers. This was long before computer-generated images became possible.⁴⁰⁰

One of the most conclusive examples distancing his work from pure photography and marking his orientation towards graphic design is Nkem Nwankwo's *My Mercedes Is Bigger Than Yours* (AWS 173, 1975). Nwankwo's story is that of Onuma, a young man returning to his native village after a 'many years' sojourn in Lagos⁴⁰¹, where he studied at university and then secured a position as public relations promoter. The return of the prodigal son is most impactful as he arrives in a 'golden coloured Jaguar'.⁴⁰² The author depicts, through the protagonist's thoughts, the importance of the social status bestowed upon whoever owns a car; especially 'the luxury cars, the Mercedes Benzes, Cadillacs' in which girls would want to be picked up.⁴⁰³ After a drinking related accident, Onuma lands his car on the edge of a precipice. Reduced to taking the bus, he becomes envious of 'a young snob [...] acquaintance' who drives a Mercedes.⁴⁰⁴ In a tragic series of circumstances involving political rivalry and betrayal, Onuma shoots his cousin who came to visit him in a Mercedes and drives off with the car. From beginning to end, Onuma associates luxury cars with the idea of women. This is not just

⁴⁰⁰ Hallett in Currey, p. xxix.

⁴⁰¹ Nkem Nwankwo, *My Mercedes Is Bigger Than Yours* (London: Heinemann, 1975), p. 3.

⁴⁰² *Ibid.*, p. 12.

⁴⁰³ *Ibid.*, p. 66.

⁴⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 77.

about the intimate moments taking place in the back seat. Driving his Jaguar, or the stolen Mercedes, provokes in him erotic thoughts.

The cover created by Hallett presents, from top to bottom, a centred Mercedes orange logo, next to a regular sized AWS white logo. This is followed by the author's name and the title in white, and at the bottom, a mirroring portrait of a woman at an oblique angle. Her face is printed in high contrast rendered in orange on a black background.

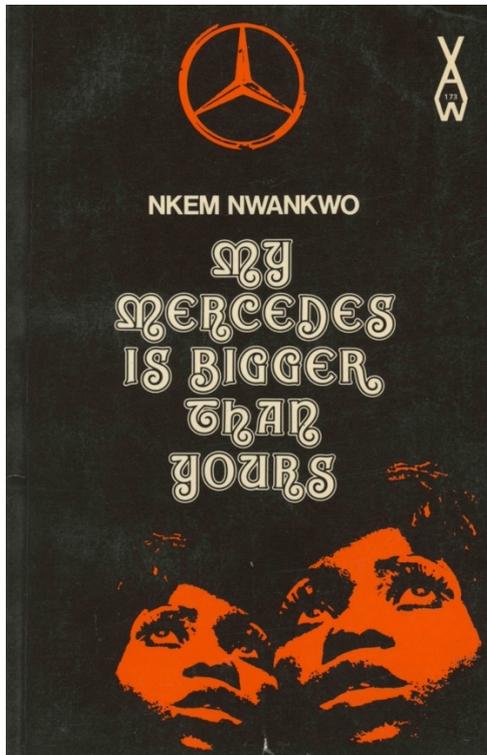


Figure 115. Cover of Nkem Nwankwo's *My Mercedes Is Bigger Than Yours* (1975).

Hallett created this cover in France.

A test print shows what might have been an intermediary stage.

A letter by Elisabeth Ledermann from Heinemann to the photographer, dated 15 September 1975, presumably after he sent a first proposal, informed him of the committee's feedback:

Everyone is keen on the girl's face looking up aquisitionely [sic], but they find the rest a little fussy.

Keith couldn't even quite work out if they were male heads or something more abstract, even obscene!! What do you think of keeping the girl, roughly as she is, but have her looking up at the symbol of the Mercedes car – presumably you can find one there?



Figure 116. George Hallett, test print, 1975.

Do come back to us if you don't think that will work. The type could fit between her face and the symbol at the top.⁴⁰⁵

According to Currey this was one example where George designed most of the cover. He did it in black and white and the orange was added in the production process.⁴⁰⁶

In this instance, it was not just about one of his photographs being inserted in a template. The 'type' mentioned by Ledermann is most interesting. Indeed, the

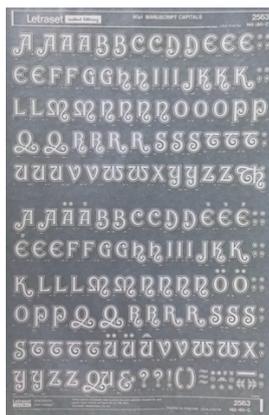


Figure 117. Example of Letraset, 'Manuscript Capitals'.

font used for the title is quite unique in the series. It comes from Letraset's 'Manuscript Caps' created by British graphic and type designer Robert Newman in 1972.

⁴⁰⁵ URSC, HEB 03/03.

⁴⁰⁶ Interview with James Currey.

Its aesthetics, with the swash accentuating some of the letters, resonates with the fonts used in Blaxploitation posters such as *Super Fly* (1972), *The Mac* (1973), and *Foxy Brown* (1974) respectively designed by Tom Jung and Fred Pfeiffer for the first two.⁴⁰⁷



Figure 118-119-120. Posters of *Super Fly* (1972), *The Mac* (1973), and *Foxy Brown* (1974) respectively designed by Tom Jung, Fred Pfeiffer, and unknown.

The colophon and the AWS production sheet indicate that the book was simultaneously published by André Deutsch Limited for a US distribution. It might be that Hallett, who was well informed of African American culture, wanted to create a cover that replicated a similar feel. Blaxploitation posters convey ideas of coolness, action and sex. These elements are also present in Nwankwo’s story that mostly plays out in the urban context of Lagos, contains numerous sexual scenes, thuggery, guns and even a car chase. Interestingly, further research into the history of Letraset indicates that this type of lettering was the go-to technique for underground, marginal, avant-garde, and political

⁴⁰⁷ The designer of *Foxy Brown*’s poster seems to be unknown.

movements such as the Black Panthers which most prominent printed material was designed by artist Emory Douglas. This is not to imply that there is a direct link between Douglas's work and the covers. However, they belong to the realm of black visual representation.

In the display presented at Birkbeck's Peltz Gallery in 2023 as part of the practice component of this thesis, the design Hallett created for Nwankwo's book becomes a central feature. The image is enlarged from a 18.5x12 cm paperback book to a 90x58 cm digital print. This curatorial intervention is a statement on the visual potential of this and other covers by Hallett, beyond the limits of the paperback size. Exhibiting those covers is an attempt at giving visibility to these overlooked artworks on a larger scale.

These bear testimony to the breadth of the practice of a self-taught photographer to which London, as a new creative environment, gave the opportunity of experimenting with graphic design. More so, this was done within the context of African and Diasporic literature, a cultural form at the origin of Hallett's creative interest well before he embarked in a photography career.

Building on an iconographical approach, I have established the lineage of images created by George Hallett for Heinemann's African Writers Series book covers.

This genealogy is traced back to both Hallett's own photography and through its dialogue with the work of other artists, including classical African arts. In the process, three types of source images authored by the photographer have been identified: pre-exile existing images, personal/non-assignment images created in London in the 1970s, and images created for the book covers in the 1970s-early

1980s. Within them has emerged compositional and formal typologies comprising: ‘theatrical’ re-enactment of scenes from the books, gesture, and symbolic motifs. I also distinguish when one might consider Hallett’s work as graphic design and when his contribution rather consists in the insertion of his photographs within an existing template.

Although Hallett moved to France quite abruptly – he mentioned being called by Scotland Yard after having come on the radar of South Africa’s Special Branch⁴⁰⁸ – he continued collaborating with James Currey on the book covers and a portfolio of African writers portraits. In 1983, the Thomas Tilling Group, the conglomerate owning Heinemann, was taken over by BTR Ltd. James Currey stepped down after the new management informed him that, from then on, he would only be able to produce one or two new publication a year by established writers.⁴⁰⁹ He was replaced by Tanzanian-born British editor Vicky Unwin of whom he said:

Vicky Unwin did her best to relaunch the Series in the British market with a new ‘B’ format and full-colour art covers by British artists. [...] South Africa and the other countries of southern Africa accounted for over 70 per cent of the sales of the African Writers Series to Africa from Britain in 1987 and so that was the market where Vicky Unwin directed her very considerable energies.⁴¹⁰

⁴⁰⁸ Hallett in Mason, pp. 208-209.

⁴⁰⁹ Currey, p. 297.

⁴¹⁰ Currey, p. 299.

Currey indicated to me that Unwin felt Hallett's work was too old fashioned.⁴¹¹ She went in a different direction. The books produced under her editorial direction completely changed the series visual identity. However, the covers of the new African Writers Series never managed to regain the distinct style of those created in the previous decades.

In that, the artworks and designs created by Hallett, and many of the Series collaborators, straddling drawing, ink on paper, etching, photography, and graphic design, form a unique body of work that has a legitimate place in the history of African and diasporic visual art histories.

⁴¹¹ Interview with James Currey.

CONCLUSION

This research, on fragments of the work of George Hallett, proceeds from a speculative, almost intuitive approach. It started from the observation of the existence of another body of work, another kind of approach to Hallett's practice that differed from the photojournalistic or portraiture genre to which his work was usually associated. My personal connection to this work has been established from the outset. But I had never properly looked at them, not in-depth, and certainly even less imagined the art historical facts, narratives, ideas, creative processes, traces, and archive material I would uncover as my research progressed.

I structured my thesis along two main parts corresponding to the first two contexts in which Hallett created his work: South Africa and England or, more precisely, Cape Town and London. Each part then contains two chapters: one setting the contextual socio-cultural framework, the other gearing towards, or focusing more particularly on Hallett's work. Those two main contexts are about the emergence of a practice: from a self-taught experience in the familiar environment of Cape Town, to being a foreigner, an exile, in London, a place that not only stimulated his eye, but also opened him to graphic design as a new creative field.

Writing on the practice of George Hallett is a monographic exercise. It is a deliberate act, and my response to the lack of monographs when it comes to twentieth century and contemporary African artists. It is also a critical stance on

an art scene that produces exhibitions, books, and catalogues surveying African and black artists collectively, from different various angles, while rarely affording curators with a research-based practice, or art historians, the space and time to really dive into an artist's practice. As time passes, and immediate contemporary African art history continues to be written, many artists fall through the cracks, especially from Hallett's generation and more so those who lived in exile.

This monographic thesis, however, has always meant to be articulated dialogically. That is to say, in dialogue with social contexts, histories, other disciplines, or other practitioners with which Hallett and his work interacted. In this respect, it is not written in the perspective of photography history strictly speaking, but adopts a much broader art historical scope, inclusive of cross-disciplinary themes, inspirations, thinking and creative processes that manifest itself through and beyond photography.

Chapter one placed an emphasis on District Six as a social context from which emerged a vernacular creativity, notably one that, as in Sophiatown, was inspired by African American culture, sharing the same black urban experience of racially based socioeconomic marginalisation. The figure of Richard Rive is quite prominent because of his importance to Hallett as a youth, of the impact of black literature to which he introduced him, as well as his circle, particularly James Matthews and Peter Clarke who became his lifelong friends.

It is them who encouraged him to photograph District Six, discussed in chapter two. From then on, the thesis shifts from elements of a local black literary history as a defining factor in Hallett's intellectual formation, to the emergence of

photography in Cape Town. To this date, District Six stands out as, not only the place where he started photography, but also as the most prominent theme in his early practice.

Examining his District Six work placed him in relation with other photographers who have documented this neighbourhood before, during, and after it was demolished. Here, the District Six Museum is an essential source in matters of interpretation. Through its documented exhibitions and other publications emerged the notion of ‘outsider’ and ‘insider’ photographic eye, identified by museum curator Tina Smith and South African historian Ciraj Rassool. This is clearly defined along the colour line with the white photographers, Cloete Breytenbach, Jan Greshoff and Jansje Wissema having an outside gaze – although the latter is said to have had a more intimate connection with the place than the former two –, and the coloured photographers, Coulson, Hallett, Heyns, Jantjes and Paulse, having an inside approach.

The photographers’ predominantly uncaptioned works led me to a quasi-forensic examination of these images that illustrate aspects of the history of District Six discussed in chapter one. It also helped me identify places that do not exist anymore, and even to reconstruct some of the visual narratives by piecing together photographic sequences, in the case of Paulse and Hallett.

In the process, I have paid attention to seemingly insignificant details in some of Hallett’s works, particularly the words on the background walls in some of his District Six scenes. These revealed to be tags of active gangs which presence inscribed on the walls create an alternative mapping or topography of the district. This interpretation is sustained by the writings of South African criminologist

Don Pinnock confirming the relationship between gang activity and territorialisation within District Six and the neighbouring area of Bo-Kaap.

Discussing those written signs served to connect some of Hallett's images with those of Dr W. G. le Roux, Breytenbach, Paulse, Juhan Kuus and Bryan Heseltine beyond the colour line. They also introduced the presence of writings as a visual form within his images.

Chapter three aimed to foreground the thinking behind the decision of exile by black and coloured visual artists. It located this phenomenon within the history of South African Modern art, its pre-existing links with Europe, and the common practice of furthering one's studies abroad, or go see and experience life in Paris or London, then considered the centres of Modern art, as well as Germany. Black South African artists followed down that road. Either returning back home, like in the case of John K. Mohl or Peter Clarke, or seizing this newly found freedom, like Ernest Mancoba and Gerard Sekoto who settled in continental Europe, or Albert Adams, Dumile Feni and George Hallett for whom London was the first port of call.

Hallett arrived in London two years after Enoch Powell's 'Rivers of Blood' speech in a country then becoming more and more hostile towards non-white immigrants. Peter Fryer's writing on the black presence in Britain and Mark Israel's study of South African exile in London both painted the racial fragmentations between white and black lives, and revealed how this, somehow, replicated aspects of the institutional segregation experienced in South Africa.

In that context, culture became the locus of reclaimed forms of agency. The thesis more particularly focuses on the relationship between African literature and visual arts through Heinemann's African Writers Series. The third section of chapter three used the first novel in the series, Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1962), as an analytical anchorage predominantly echoing Nigerian art historian Chika Okeke-Agulu's analysis of its covers and illustrations by Dennis Carabine and Uche Okeke. Building on the art historian's writings, my interpretation of further AWS covers incorporated elements of Heinemann's archive that contains a wealth of material on the publishing house's collaborations with African visual artists.

The African Writers Series' strong relationship with South Africa is marked by the return of Richard Rive in the picture, with his first commission to edit a collection of prose writing from Africa in 1963. The cover and illustrations created by Albert Adams opened a new iconographical appraisal and pointed towards genealogies embedded within South African art history.

This was further explored in chapter four where I examined the covers that James Currey, then AWS editor, commissioned Hallett. Within these I identified three categories of source photographs: pre-existing images, non-assignments (or personal) images, and new compositions. These, in turn, developed prominent themes and new aesthetics running across his covers and departing from his pre-exile or photojournalistic work: the props as new visual elements, theatricality, and symbolism. The chapter concluded with Hallett's experimentations in his photographic laboratory and introduced graphic design in his practice.

Conceptually, in my speculation on the relationship between, on the one hand, words, text, African literature and, on the other hand, image or image-making processes, I was interested in the possibility of permutation of the written signs from the background walls (in District Six) to the foreground (book covers). I initially started this research reading many of the African Writers Series books hoping to always find the exact visual references and correlations between the stories, or paroxysmal moments in a piece of writing, and the images created by Hallett. This was not always the case, as Lizarribar Buxó also observed when she said that Hallett's images reflect his own imaginative interpretation. Buxó and others – sometimes even the authors, as I found out from the archive – were of the opinion that, not all of Hallett's covers were successful because either they did not adequately illustrate what the author would have visually imagined, or sometimes the props did not represent exact objects specific to the cultures evoked in the books.

What this actually means, is that Hallett managed to express a form of creative agency and compose visual narratives *de facto* associated with the books, while intertwining the pan-African experience of South African exile. In that he operated what Edward Said, quoted by Kobena Mercer and Anna Malik, called 'a "multi-perspectival outlook":

Seeing 'the entire world as a foreign land' makes possible an originality of vision.

Most people are principally aware of one culture, one setting, one home; exiles are aware of at least two, and this plurality of vision gives rise to an awareness of

simultaneous dimensions, an awareness that – to borrow a phrase from music – is contrapuntal.⁴¹²

This is how Hallett's book covers should be interpreted. They are not necessarily meant to be linear or illustrative. They carry with them the vast tapestry of images, be they literary, visual, or even musical, that have sustained him from the early days of his photographic career in District Six, all through his life in exile and back to South Africa.

The 'textual inscription', forming the object of this thesis, is but one of the many chapters of South African, African, Black British, Diasporic and British art and photography histories still being written. It is my hope that this research opens new paths of inquiries into Hallett's art practice, and that it equally encourages current and future peers in the field to continue challenging those art historical gaps.

⁴¹² Edward Said, p. 366. Kobena Mercer, 'Introduction' and Amna Malik, 'Conceptualising "Black" British Art Through the Lens of Exile', in *Exiles, Diasporas & Strangers* ed. by Kobena Mercer. (London, Cambridge, MA: Institute of International Visual Arts, MIT Press, 2008), p. 9, 167.

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PRACTICE COMPONENT

EMBEDDED TEXT – EMBODIED NARRATIVES

A reading of George Hallett's early photography



Detail of Nkem Nwankwo, *My Mercedes is Bigger than Yours* (1975).

Cover designed by George Hallett

2022/2023

Peltz Gallery

Birkbeck, University of London

I. EXHIBITION PROPOSAL

EXHIBITION CONCEPT

‘Embedded Text – Embodied Narratives: a reading of George Hallett’s early photography’, proposes to examine the relationship between text and image in the work of South African photographer George Hallett (1942-2020). Retracing Hallett’s early practice, the exhibition will explore the literary encounters that have informed his creativity and inspired him to venture in the field of photography in Cape Town in the 1960s. It will also show how African literature became a major theme of his when he moved to London in 1970.

Born in Cape Town in 1942, Hallett was a student of South African author Richard Rive (1930-1989) at South Peninsula High School in Diep River (a Cape Town suburb). Hallett’s cultural horizon expanded beyond the social and intellectual limitations imposed by the apartheid regime when Rive introduced him to his literary circle. Hallett got acquainted with black South African artist and writer Peter E. Clarke (1929-2014), writer James Matthews, as well as Jan Rabie, Uys Krige and other members of the Sestigers, a group of white Afrikaans-writers who were against apartheid.

These fruitful encounters had a lasting impact on Hallett who remained friends with Clarke and Matthews. At Matthews’, he was introduced to American jazz music and also discovered the work of pioneering African American photographer Roy DeCarava (1919-2009) in *The Sweet Flypaper of Life* (1955) which featured an essay by Langston Hughes (1901-1967) who also happened to be an acquaintance

of Rive's. This photographic portrait of the black community in Harlem resonated with him at a time where he was still hesitating between painting and photography. Hallett first got a camera through former high school friend Clarence Coulson, a sports and events photographer, who introduced him to a photography studio owner in District Six, a culturally mixed area of Cape Town. Kariem Halim, from Palm Tree Studio, lent him a camera to take street portraits and attract customers to the studio. District Six then became Hallett's first training ground.

In 1966, the apartheid government declared District Six a white-only area, in accordance with the Group Areas Act (1950) that assigned racial groups to separate residential areas. Two years later, before the forced removals and demolition began, Clarke, Matthews, and a local tailor named Sakki Misbash, encouraged Hallett to document District Six before its disappearance.

This series forms Hallett's largest known body of work before his exile from South Africa. His images captured some of the district's landmarks, its urban environment, everyday life, street scenes, social events and portraits. One also finds numerous photographs of children playing. Often, these scenes take place in the middle of crumbling walls and derelict buildings as the area was slowly being demolished. In these images, the walls become a textured and textual surface combining abstract patterns composed of various patches and shades of grey, as well as graffitied signs, words, and names of some of the gangs active in the area. These photographs, marking the first appearance of text in Hallett's imagery, situate his work at the junction of figurative motifs and written signs.

Embedded Text – Embodied Narratives will focus on some of Hallett's photographs in which the tags of District Six gangs are potent markers of a social history and narrative embedded within the image.

Taking the gangs' name tags as point of departure, the exhibition will show how written signs went from being background elements in the District Six work, to becoming foreground visual elements on the covers of Heinemann's African Writers Series books that British editor James Currey commissioned him to design in the 1970s-1980s.

The exhibition will present a selection of books from this collection, along with some of the original hand-printed photographs used for the covers, often featuring London-based South African exiles who were anti-apartheid activists, musicians, writers and visual artists. It will also look at the creative processes behind the photographic and graphic design experiments he developed to create those covers. Drawing on the idea that the covers represent pictorial fields in which South African exile and African literature intertwine, the exhibition will show how the images both reference their own tangible reality and embody the imaginary world of literary narratives, while creating a whole new iconographic register. The covers will also be appraised as 'visual citations' whereby the compositions, and the scenes staged or performed for Hallett's camera, function as allusions, or quotations, conveying the meaning, symbolic, or paroxysmal moment of a literary piece.

The first ever solo exhibition in the UK to articulate new interpretations and aesthetic readings of George Hallett's work through the prism of text and African literature, *Embedded Text – Embodied Narratives* will unearth the multidisciplinary creative dialogues that were foundational to his early practice and informed the rest of his photographic career

CURATORIAL ARGUMENT

Throughout his career, George Hallett has created a photographic body of work spanning the late 1960s to the early 2000s. He documented black lives and particularly South African exile in England, France, the Netherlands and the United States and beyond. He photographed South African activists, artists and musicians who have influenced contemporary culture on a global scale. In 1994, he was one of the photographers commissioned by the African National Congress to cover the presidential campaign of Nelson Mandela (1918-2013). He was also one of the official photographers of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (1996-2003).

In England, his photographs have been the covers of Heinemann's African Writers Series, that contributed to launch African literature in English. He was also a photographer for the *Times Educational Supplement* and produced an important (but never exhibited except one) photographic series on British society.

Yet his work remains largely unknown to most British audiences and overlooked (either for lack of knowledge or by choice) by visual art historians, curators, and institutions. Consequently, his work has been absent from practically all major British or Black British-themed 1970s photography publications, exhibitions, or acquisitions, in which it could have had a legitimate place.

The exhibition will complete a threefold approach (research, writing, curating) and expand the diverse forms and formats whereby Hallett's work might be encountered and appraised by wider audiences.

A key point of my curatorial argument engages with Salah Hassan and Olu Oguibe's observation in their preface to *Authentic / Ex-centric: Conceptualism in Contemporary African Art* (2001) that: 'If You Don't Exhibit, You Do Not Exist! Exhibitions remain exemplar of how art history is produced. They are building blocks of art history and therefore crucial in moving art from the private to the public domain'. (pp. 6-7).

Presenting what is, in fact, a selection from a private collection, the 'George Hallett Research Collection' is my attempt at sharing a body of work containing important knowledge and practice related to art history, photography, graphic design, literature, language, performance, postcolonial thinking and decolonial practice.

Exhibiting is also about engaging with politics of space and interrogating institutions on questions such as: which artists are shown or excluded, where, with what financial means, at which period of the year, etc. It touches on visibility and invisibility. It speaks to notions of materiality or physical encounter. For instance, what does it mean to present black artists or black figures in the white cube and to a white audience? Conversely how does it contribute to broaden audiences and create, for BAME audiences, a sense of identification and shared belonging within society and collective, histories and cultures.

Last but not least, from a curatorial standpoint, format and scale are of crucial importance. The book covers created by Hallett for the African Writers Series (AWS) are a key focus of my research. As James Currey remarked, most of the physical life of a book, including the AWS is spent on a bookshelf. The

predominant visual relationship one has with a book is through its pages. What is left of it once it is placed on a shelf is its spine.

Although the book cover aims to be visually appealing for commercial reason and, with this objective, allows space for creativity and originality, it returns to a status of invisibility once placed back on a shelf.

The covers are proxy, and temporary, exhibition surfaces. Placing Hallett's images in a three-dimensional space gives them a more sustained and visually impactful presence. Furthermore the 18.5x12 cm image of an AWS paperback has certainly less impact than the possibilities of enlarging the artwork and presenting it alongside the vintage source photographs.

These are testimonies to the artistic and technical qualities of Hallett's composition. Scale also informs the viewer's visual experience. Shifting the format from a book to that of a poster-size opens up avenues of dialogue with poster art or with the aesthetics of black cinema posters, including in the 'blaxploitation' genre. This can only be experimented through the physicality of an art work.

Likewise, physical exhibitions remain unique immersive spaces where dialogues between art works occur and where curation can trigger sensory experiences in ways that can draw visitors inside the works.

In this respect, an initial proposal was to add a public programme that would bring out the cross-disciplinary resonances that exist within Hallett's work, through literary, performative, and sonic conversations.

PROPOSED EXHIBITION CONTENT

Embedded Text – Embodied Narratives will be articulated around three thematic sections: District Six, South African exile in London, the making of book covers. These sections will consist in curated displays of vintage silver-print photographs handprinted by George Hallett, digital material (images, video, music), books and archives.

District Six (1968-69)



Westminster Restaurant, 1968, handprinted silver print, 38.7x50.5 cm, unframed.



The Brother Says Hello, 1968, handprinted silver print, dimensions tbc, unframed. *The Street Cleaner*, 1969, digital display. *Woman of District Six*, 1969, handprinted silver print, 39.5 x 27.5 cm, unframed.



Seven Steps and Godfrey Street, 1968. Handprinted silver prints, Dimensions tbc.



Bo-Kaap, 1968, handprinted silver prints, dimensions tbc.

South African artists exiled in London (1970s)



Mervyn Africa on the piano, performing at 100 Club. Digital file.



Chris McGregor, rehearsal at BBC Studios, date, tbc. Handprinted silver print, 38.7x50.5 cm, unframed.



Johnny Dyani at Dudu Pukwana's home, 1970s. Handprinted silver print, dimension tbc, unframed.



Dumile Feni and Louis Moholo, 1971. Handprinted silver print, 38.7x50.5 cm, framed.

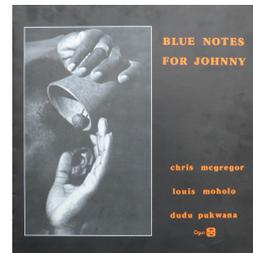
Digital display



Cosmo Pieterse performing with the Brotherhood of Breath.

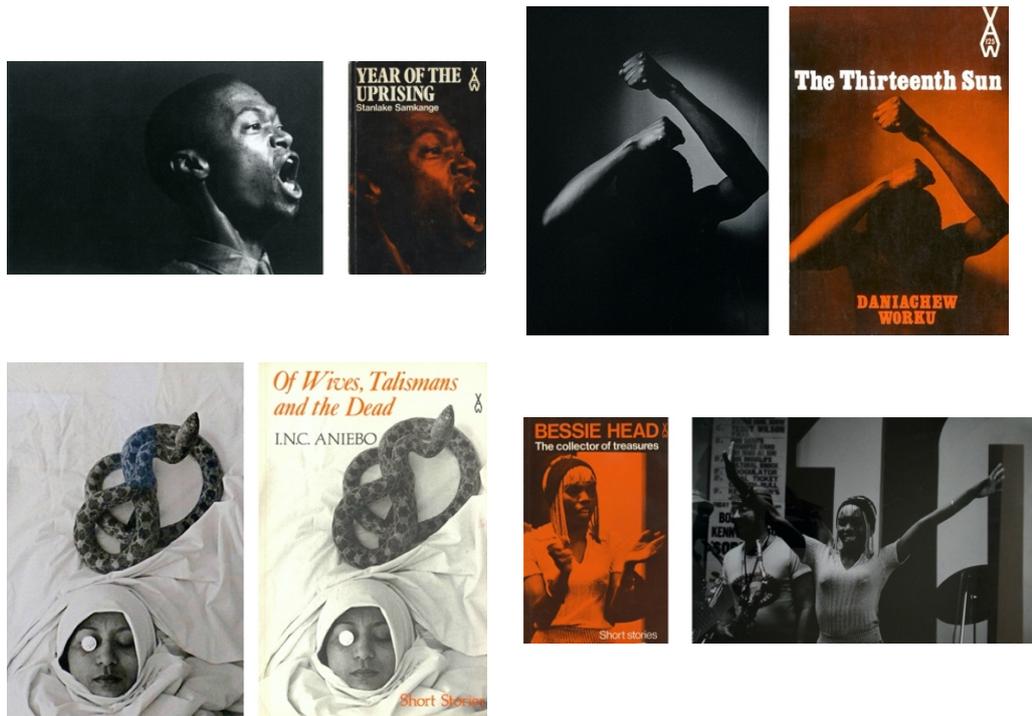


Chris MacGregor (1936-1990) right: Ronnie Beer, Dudu Pukwana at BBC Studios, 1970s.

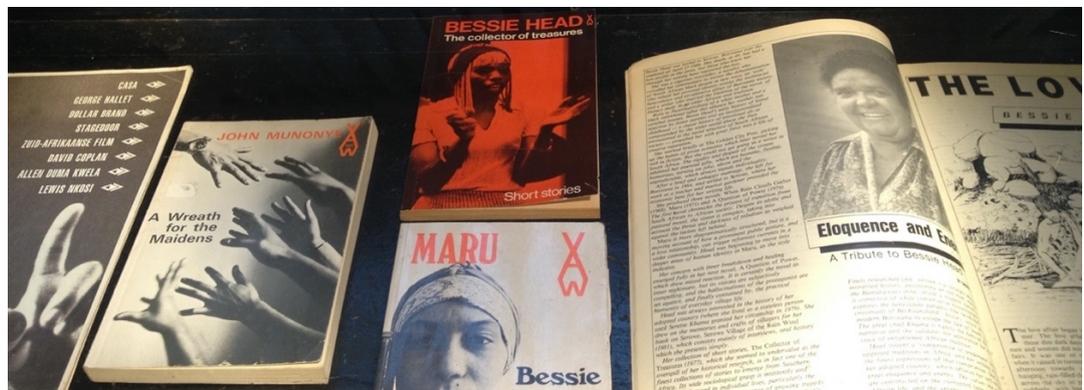


Record sleeve designed for Ogun Records.

Books and related photographs



Examples of vitrine displays



Presentation Making Histories Visible, UCLan, 2014.



Presentation BIC Project Space, Casablanca, 2020.

Examples of enlarged book covers display



Above and below: Presentation BIC Project Space, Casablanca, 2020.



AUDIENCE ENGAGEMENT

These are examples of proposed public programme events:

- Participatory opening performance by South African musician, poet, and educator Eugene Skeef, featuring pianist Narotam Horn.

- Curator talk and/or a lecture involving scholars or art practitioners who collaborated with George Hallett or knowledgeable in the field to discuss the themes of South African exile in London, African literature, South African jazz in London, South African/African/Diasporic photography (eg. Gavin Jantjes, Mark Sealy, Kodwo Eshun).

- Engagement with Hallett's book covers and the literary pieces through readings or performances.

- Screening of the District Six film that includes photographs by Hallett, produced by ITV, or other relevant films such as Imruh Bakari, *Blue Notes and Exiled Voices* (1991).

BUDGET

Expenditure	Project Cost
Framing	4000
Equipment Hire	1500
Transport and packaging	1500
Events	4500
Contingency	1500
Marketing	1500
Printed material	1000
Education and engagement	1500
Sound artist commission	1500
Installation costs (technicians)	750
Interpretation text and vinyl	750
Preparing gallery walls	500
Total	£20500

In addition to Birkbeck's in-kind support I secured funding for this project.

ESTIMATED TIMELINE

This is the estimated timeline planned in the development of the exhibition project. The exhibition was delivered from **12 January to 8 February 2023**.

Timeline: June 2021 - June 2022

June 2021

- Listing of photographs and material to be included in the exhibition
- Confirmation of works and identification of lenders
- Validation of exhibition approximate dates
- Provisional booking of conference room
- Development of exhibition design based on Peltz Gallery's floor plan
- Liaison with Peltz/Birkbeck technical team for facility report / technical listing
- Identification of possible funders / partners

July 2021

- Loan requests, digital files and copyright clearance
- Budgeting of production costs including:
 - . Printing
 - . Mounting
 - . Framing
 - . Art transport
 - . Digitising
 - . Film renting
 - . Copyright clearance
 - . Artist commission (text or sound-based performance)
 - . Conference costs (speakers fee, transport, hospitality, technician/s, printing)
 - . Digital presentation
 - . Documentation
- Writing of funding applications (6-month timeline)
- Partnership requests

September 2021

- Follow-up on loan requests
- Follow-up on fundraising / partnerships
- Contact conference speakers
- Research artists to be commissioned a performance around Hallett's work
- Research photographer / videographer for documentation

October - November 2021

- Follow-up on loan requests
- Follow-up on fundraising / partnerships
- Contact artists for commission
- Contact photographer / videographer for documentation
- Development of online display concept

December 2021

- Funding / partnerships outcomes
- Budget adjustment
- Confirmation of artwork loans
- Confirmation of conference speakers, performance artists and photo/videographer

January 2022

- First draft of production and installation planning
- Gallery liaison on technical matters
- Artist commissions follow-up
- Development of online display
- Media listing and planning

February 2022

- Digitising of images
- Gathering of other media files (film, video, sound, slideshow)
- Development of online display
- Media listing and planning

March 2022

- Book photography printing/framing job
- Artist commissions follow-up
- Development of online display
- Partial launch of online display
- Drafting of exhibition and event announcement
- Exhibition announcement and mailing
- Social media teasers

April 2022

- Artist commissions follow-up
- Development of online display
- Printing/framing to begin
- Liaison with Peltz/Birkbeck technical team
- Review of installation planning
- Confirmation of conference content and requirements
- Exhibition/events reminder and mailing
- Social media teasers

May 2022

- Liaising with Peltz/Birkbeck technical team
- Review of installation planning and technical requirements
- Finalisation of artist/s commission/s and performance plans
- Printing/framing to be finalised
- Development of online display
- Preparations for conference

- Exhibition/events reminder and mailing
- Social media teasers

Exhibition opening date 12 January 2023

- Exhibition installation
- Exhibition launch
- Delivery of public programme (performances / conference / screenings)
- Launch of website/webpage full content
- Exhibition/events reminder and mailing
- Social media teasers
- Admin and finance when applicable

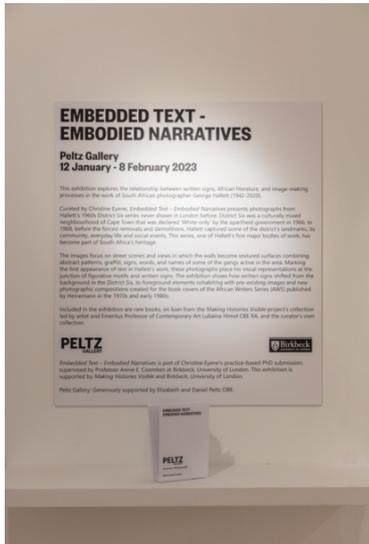
Closing date 8 February 2023

- Exhibition de-installation
- Return of photography work
- Gallery clean-up
- Archiving
- Evaluation and reports

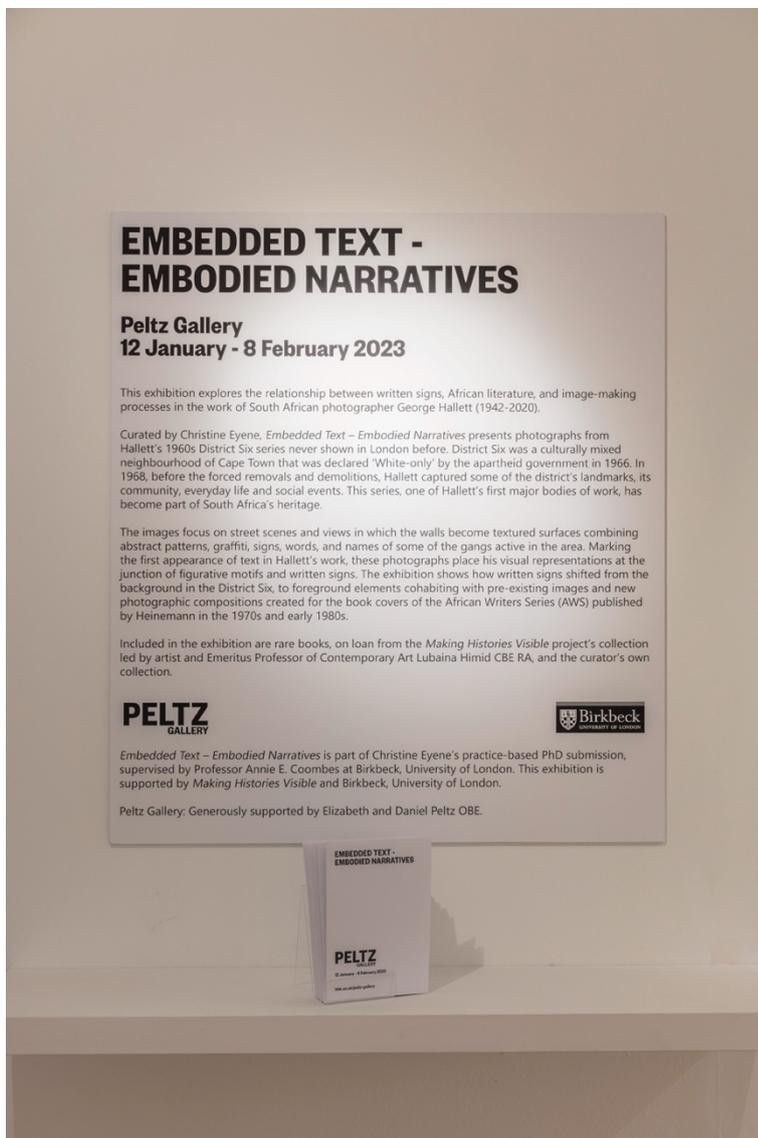
II. REALISED EXHIBITION

Embedded Text – Embodied Narratives

12 January - 8 February 2023



Peltz Gallery during 'Embedded Text - Embodied Narratives' exhibition, outside and inside general views. Photo: Lucy Dawkins.



Peltz Gallery during 'Embedded Text – Embodied Narratives' exhibition, general views. Above, wall text and brochure. Photo: Lucy Dawkins.



Wall featuring District Six works. Labels located outside the frame to the right. Photo: Lucy Dawkins.



Wall presenting images linking South African exiles and African literature through Hallett's photographic compositions and experiments for the African Writers Series book covers. Labels located outside the frame to the left. Photo: Lucy Dawkins.



Second part of wall with enlarged (A4) reproductions of book covers from the Making Histories Visible and the curator's collections and African writers portraits used on AWS back covers. Label located to the left and right of the frame. Photo: Lucy Dawkins.



Jazz in Exile, slideshow created by George Hallett in 2014 for his Distinguished Visitor Lecture at UCLan. Images show the cover of South African musician Chris McGregor (1936-1990) album *In His Good Time* (Ogun, 1979) and two men dancing at Langa Jazz Festival (1960s). Label placed at the bottom right of the screen after this picture was taken. Photo: Lucy Dawkins.



Above and below, vitrine with AWS and District Six books, test prints, contact sheets and course programme. Label placed in the vitrine after display change. Photo: Lucy Dawkins.



First visitors at the exhibition opening and Eugene Skeef performance.
Photo: Christopher Christie



INVITATION & BROCHURE

INVITATION

You are cordially invited to

George Hallett Embedded Text - Embodied Narratives



An exhibition curated by
Christine Eyene

OPENING

Wednesday 18 January 2023
18.00 - 21.00

Poetry and music performance by **Eugene Skeef**
with **Narotam Horn** on piano

Exhibition continues to 8 February 2023

Peltz Gallery
43 Gordon Square
London WC1H 0PD
www.birkbeck.ac.uk

Book your free ticket [here](#)



Making Histories Visible

EMBEDDED TEXT - EMBODIED NARRATIVES

PELTZ
GALLERY

12 January - 8 February 2023

bbk.ac.uk/peltz-gallery

Embedded Text - Embodied Narratives is supported by Making Histories Visible and Birkbeck, University of London.

PELTZ
GALLERY



Peltz Gallery Director Louise Owen

Events & Exhibitions Producer Adam Castle

With thanks to Birkbeck staff including: Arts Space Steering Committee; Customer Service Coordinators; School of Arts; External Relations, Estates and Facilities; College Secretariat and IT Services.

Peltz Gallery: Generously supported by Elizabeth and Daniel Peltz OBE

BROCHURE TEXT

Embedded Text – Embodied Narratives

Embedded Text – Embodied Narratives explores the relationship between written signs, African literature, and image-making processes in the work of South African photographer George Hallett (1942-2020).

Curated by Christine Eyene, the exhibition presents – on the two large walls of the Peltz Gallery – a two-part display showing photographs of the Cape Town area of District Six, and images relating to Hallett’s collaboration with the African Writers Series (AWS) produced by British publisher Heinemann Educational Books. The vitrine contains, among other material, a selection of books from the AWS which cover features a photograph by Hallett included in the exhibition. Finally, a slideshow created by Hallett, as part of a guest lecture he gave at the University of Central Lancashire in 2014, expands the field of his creative interactions, from African literature to South African jazz music.

District Six and the emergence of words in Hallett’s images

The exhibition opens with photographs taken in the late 1960s in District Six, representing Hallett’s early practice. District Six was a culturally mixed neighbourhood of Cape Town in South Africa, that was declared ‘White-only’ by the government in 1966. Encouraged by South African poet and author James Matthews, writer and painter Peter E. Clarke (1929-2014) – who were both Hallett’s mentors – and a local tailor named Sakkie Misbach, Hallett decided to document the area in 1968, before its demolition.

Although Hallett was still a very novice photographer, he was part of a group of practitioners who captured this neighbourhood with an early sense of urgency and memorialisation. Among his peers were Clarence Coulson, Jackie Heyns, Wilfried Paulse and Gavin Jantjes whose images were included in an exhibition entitled *District Six Revisited* at the District Six Museum (Cape Town), in 1997 – three years after South Africa’s first democratic elections.

A particularity of Hallett’s images is that they represented Black and Brown Sixers (the inhabitants of District Six) with a sense of direct engagement, identification, and belonging. This is particularly important in the context of South Africa, at a time of racial divide. Having been classified ‘Coloured’ by the Apartheid regime, Hallett’s images also convey notions of self-representation and agency. For instance, in the image *The Brother Says Hello* (1968) (fig.1), there is an interaction between the photographer and the man greeting him. His series and that of his peers have been said to provide an insider gaze of District Six that was specific to photographers who, like him, had close ties with this community.



Fig. 1. George Hallett, *The Brother Says Hello*, District Six, Cape Town, 1968. Silver print, hand printed by the artist, 52 X 42 cm. Private collection.

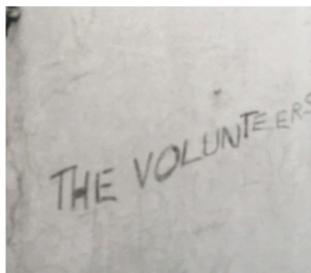


Fig. 2. George Hallett, *Seven Steps*, District Six, Cape Town, 1968, and details. Silver print, hand printed by the artist, 56 X 43 cm. Private collection.

The photographs presented here are part of a private research collection but earlier prints from this series were donated by Hallett to the District Six Museum in the 1990s. This work is therefore known in South Africa for its historical value and as part of the country's national heritage.

Among the visual elements hardly ever discussed in Hallett's *District Six* series are the background walls of specific images. Seemingly unimportant at first, on closer look, the walls reveal a variety of textures, abstract patterns, graffiti, signs, and words. Research have indicated that some of those words are in fact, the names of local gangs like the Jesters, The Forty Thievs and The Volunteers (both fig. 2), the Holl Boys (in Bo-Kaap, an adjoining neighbourhood) and the Stalag Kids which can be seen in the photographs. Gang names also appear in images taken by photographers such as Dr W. G. le Roux, Cloete Breytenbach (1933-2019), Bryan Heseltine and Juhan Kuus (1953-2015).

The gangs were active in territorialised parts of the district. As such, their names suggest an invisible presence, an alternative world, that also acts as a form of mapping of the territory, beyond the nostalgic memory to which it might be associated. In Hallett's work, these images add another layer of interpretation. They mark the appearance of written signs inscribed within figurative motifs, cohabiting in the same picture plane. This word/image relationship gained ground after Hallett's departure from South Africa in 1970.

African literature as a space for photographic subjectivity, experiment, and performativity

In the late 1950s, when George Hallett was in high school, his English teacher – the author Richard Rive (1939-1981) – introduced him to South African writers who, like Rive, were born or lived in District Six. Hallett kept these connections, notably around the social circle of James Matthews in Silvertown, another neighbourhood of Cape Town. The photographer recalled these moments:

[...] during that period I was learning. I was with James and Peter and Richard Rive discussing the writers in New York and elsewhere, in a magical world that we created in Silvertown. We were inspired. We had an informal black studies group. We also studied literature from other parts of Africa. We were in isolation, but there was this little oasis in Silvertown where we could dip the cup of knowledge into the well of wisdom. People who loved language and literature – it was a great period.*

* George Hallett in John Edwin Mason (2014), 'An interview with George Hallett', *Social Dynamics*, 40:1, 203.

This interest in literature remained central to his practice as he moved to London, his first point of exile. Hallett travelled on the MS Achille Lauro aboard which he shared a cabin with an imam whose portrait is included in the exhibition. In London, he encountered networks of South African exiles who were writers, artists, musicians, and activists. It is in this context that he got acquainted with James Currey, editor the African Writers Series. This series, founded in 1962, contributed to disseminate African literature in English. In search of a new appealing look for the series, Currey commissioned Hallett to create photographs for the book covers.

Creating images for the series led Hallett to experiment visually and technically, pushing his practice beyond the genre of documentary or ‘naturalist’ portrait photography that had characterized his District Six and other South African works.

The following images show two new approaches to Hallett’s image-making processes. In the first group (fig. 3), the two photographs on the left and right are clearly staged for a book cover. On the left, a man is held upside down by two people. On his back is written ‘Robben Island’, the notorious jail that held political prisoners during Apartheid. Although one clearly gets a sense of the playfulness between the protagonists during the staging of the scene, the black body hung upside down is set to convey the notion of torture.



Fig. 3. From left to right: George Hallett, *The creation of a book cover*, London, 1972. Silver print, hand printed by the artist. 53 X 42.50 cm.

Performer at the 100 Club, London, 1970s. Silver print, hand printed by the artist. 51.50 X 61.00 cm.

A photograph for the family back home. (Dumile Feni and Louis Moholo), London, 1971. Silver print, hand printed by the artist, 42.5 X 52.50 cm.

Lorna de Smidt posing for the cover of I.N.C. Aniebo’s *Of Wives, Talismans and the Dead*. Published by Heinemann in 1983. Silver print, hand printed by the artist, 52.50 X 42.50 cm. All Private collection.

To the right, the photograph features a woman wrapped in a white sheet. She appears like a body laid to rest, her eyes closed, with a coin on her right eyelid, and a snake curled above her head.

Often for those compositions, Hallett focused on a symbolic aspect of the book. These photographs were created for the cover of D.M. Zwelonke, *Robben Island* (1973), and I.N.C. Aniebo, *Of Wives, Talismans and the Dead* (1983), copies of these books are in the vitrine. The former is an account of the author's experience of the infamous prison island, the latter deals with changes in Igbo traditional beliefs and practices. As such, the snake could symbolise the Igbo Eke (snake or python) deity, and the coin, a divinatory compensation.

The two images, one above the other, were taken respectively during a music performance at the 100 Club where Hallett took many photographs of South African jazz musicians, notably the Brotherhood of Breath (Chris MacGregor, Louis Moholo, Harry Miller, Mongezi Feza, Dudu Pukwana and Johnny Dyani); and below it, the portrait of Louis Moholo and South African artist Dumile Feni (1942-1991) was to send back home to their families.

These photographs were also used for AWS book covers: Bessie Head, *The Collector of Treasures* (1977) (which cover is reproduced on the central wall) and Jared Angira, *Silent Voices* (1972), in the vitrine. In both cases, the pre-existence of the image weaves the photographed figures' own presence into the book as an object and in the symbolism of the narratives.

There is, for instance, a resonance between Dumile's exile in London due to the persecution he experienced, the discontent expressed in his work and the vocal political tone of Angira's poetry.

Many more examples are found in the covers using Hallett's images. Recounting creating the photographs Hallett wrote:

"Friends from the extensive South African exile community in London, and further afield, became my models and accomplices in the creation of new covers.

Pallo Jordan danced for John Munonye's *Dancer of Fortune* (1974), Louis Moholo was hung upside down with handcuffs for DM Zwelonke's *Robben Island* (1973), Lorna de Smidt became a corpse with a silver coin over one eye while a Gaboon viper kept vigil nearby."**

** George Hallett in an email interview dated 13 August 2007, quoted in Christine Eyene (2008), 'The Human Face of History', *Art South Africa*, 6:3, 62.



Fig. 4. From left to right: George Hallett, *The Imam* (photographic experiment). Picture taken at sea, aboard the MS Achille Lauro, 1970. Silver print, hand printed by the artist. 52.50 X 42.00 cm.

Untitled, London, 1970s. C-type print, digital reproduction of handprinted silver print, 55.7 X 40 cm.

Untitled, undated, view of enlarged contact sheet. Part of Hallett's photographic tests for the African Writers Series book covers. Silver print, hand printed by the artist. 34.50 X 27.50 cm.

Book cover enlargement of Nkem Nwankwo's *My Mercedes is Bigger than Yours*. London: Heinemann, African Writers Series, 1975. C-type print, 90 X 58.4 cm. All Private collection.

The images presented above (fig. 4) are examples of Hallett's experimentations with the photographic medium in his darkroom, during the printing process, to create a variety of tones and compositions. Never exhibited before, an 'overexposed' print of the Imam (either left in the developer bath, or under the light of Hallett's enlarger for a longer time) reveals Hallett's exploration of dark tones. The face of the Imam comes up when the print is exposed to light. Another image of Imam with the balanced tones for which this image is known is included in the book cover reproductions (fig. 6, bottom half in the middle) and the book is also included in the vitrine.

Similarly, the untitled image of a man with raised fists is a digital reprint of a hand-printed photograph that Hallett has published in both light and dark tones. Here the image produces an interesting chiaroscuro. Its symbolism is quite ambiguous because the raised fist symbolises resistance, a gesture that has notably been associated with the Black Power movement in the US in the 1960s, in the anti-Apartheid struggle, and to this day, to the Black Lives Matter movements. But the man's body posture with two raised fists, forming a disjointed triangle above his head also feels like a performed aesthetic pose. This might translate Hallett's attempt at representing the notions of symbolism, mysticism, and tragedy addressed by the novel. A smaller test print and a reproduction of the cover of Daniachew Worku's *The Thirteenth Sun* (1975), featuring this image, are presented in the vitrine.

The visual conversation between a test print and an enlarged book cover (Nkem Nwankwo, *My Mercedes is Bigger than Yours*, 1975), shows Hallett's experiments of cutting, double exposure, and bilateral symmetry which he also

used for the first AWS cover image he realised, for Dominic Mulaisho, *The Tongue of the Dumb* (1973), (fig. 5 and presented in the vitrine).

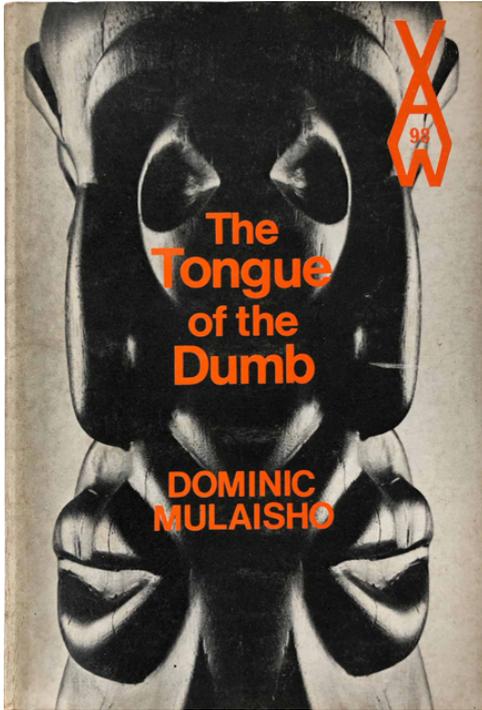


Fig. 5. Dominic Mulaisho, *The Tongue of the Dumb* (1973)

Nwankwo's enlarged book cover – a curatorial intervention on the notion of scale through which Hallett's images could be considered – offers an impactful visual possibility and, in this particular case, the aesthetics and the unusual font (in comparison to other AWS books) recall the visual devices used in Blaxploitation posters such as *Superfly* (1972), *The Mac* (1973), and *Foxy Brown* (1974).

The African Writers Series front and back covers by Hallett

Launched in 1962, the African Writers Series thrived under the editorship of James Currey who was at its helm from 1967 to 1984. The publishing house collaborated with many artists, European and African, like Uche Okeke, Bruce Onobrakpeya, Albert Adams, Dumile Feni, Ibrahim El Salahi, to name but a few. But Hallett's book covers form a unique body of work. Out of the 270 books published by 1984, more than 50 covers feature an image by Hallett as first prints or reprints.



Fig. 6. Enlarged AWS book covers selected from Making Histories Visible and the curator's book collections.

The selected covers displayed here are visually interesting both for the colour coding adopted by Heinemann (orange: fiction – ‘borrowed’ from Penguin; blue: non-fiction; green: plays and brown: poetry), and for the fact that Hallett developed recurring motifs, such as the portraits, dramatic or theatrical poses, hands, the presence of a weapon, etc. based on the themes of the books.

In addition to the front covers, a selection of some of the authors portraits are an example of the image featured at the back of the books with their biography and the synopsis or blurb.

Among them is Chinua Achebe (1930-2013), whose first novel *Things Fall Apart* (originally published by Heinemann in 1958) was the first in the African Writers Series. Achebe was also one of the series editorial advisors.

Documentation: vitrine and slideshow

In the vitrine are presented some African Writers Series books which cover features a photograph by George Hallett also included in the exhibition. The book *District Six Revisited* (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2007) was edited by Hallett and South African photographer Peter McKenzie (1955-2017) ten years after the eponymous exhibition that took place at the District Six Museum (Cape Town) in the aftermath of Apartheid. The postcard, an artefact from District Six Museum, features a photograph of District Six also used in Nadine Gordimer's book *Some Monday for Sure* (1976).

Other documents include Hallett's 'Artist in Residence' course (undated), showing his approach to teaching photography and his interaction with African writers and South African jazz musicians. This reflects Hallett's understanding of photography as a medium that could be informed by other art forms.

The contact sheets with writers Buchi Emecheta and Bessie Head's portraits indicate the editorial act operated by the photographer which is usually a decision to which final viewers do not have access.

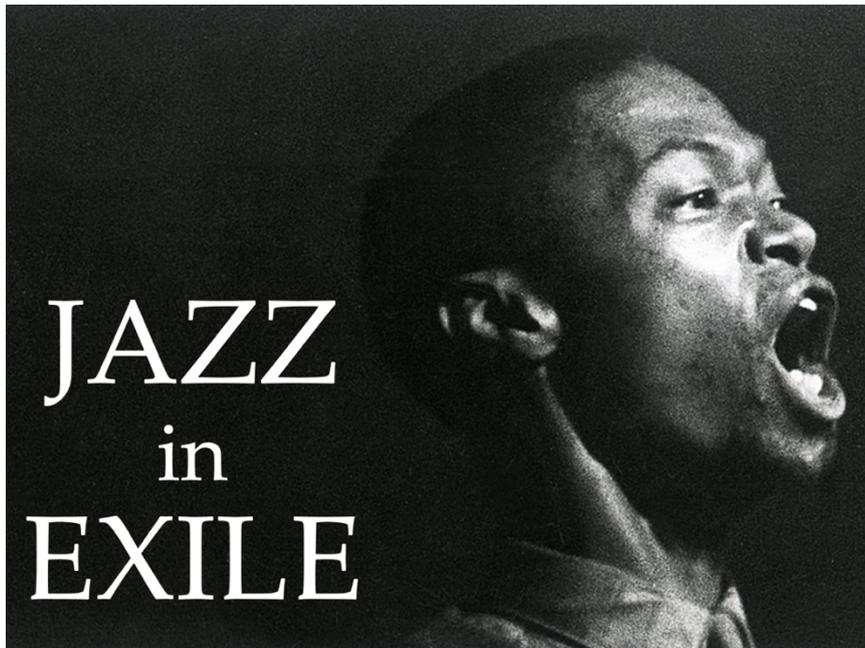


Fig. 7. *Jazz in Exile*, slideshow created by George Hallett in 2014 featuring an image of Cosmo Pieterse, London, early 1970s.

Focusing on South African jazz music, *Jazz in Exile* (fig. 7) is a digital addition that expands the reach of the work produced by Hallett when he lived in London in the 1970s. The opening slide features a photograph of South African writer Cosmo Pieterse performing a poem against oppression, with the Brotherhood of Breath. This image is also the cover of Stanlake Samkange, *Year of the Uprising*, 1978 (fig. 6, top left).

This slideshow was created by Hallett, for his Distinguished Visitor Lecture at the University of Central Lancashire (Preston) in 2014 where he was invited as part of the Making Histories Visible (MHV) project then led by Pr. Lubaina Himid and Christine Eyene.

Upon Hallett's visit to Preston, MHV acquired a collection of African Writers Series books many of them with a cover by Hallett.

It is this visit that prompted research into the link between African literature and image-making processes in the work of George Hallett, resulting in *Embedded Text – Embodied Narratives*.

For this presentation, the soundtrack, is an excerpt of *Blue Notes in Concert* (Ron Barron, prod. London: Ogun, 1978). However, this document is part of further

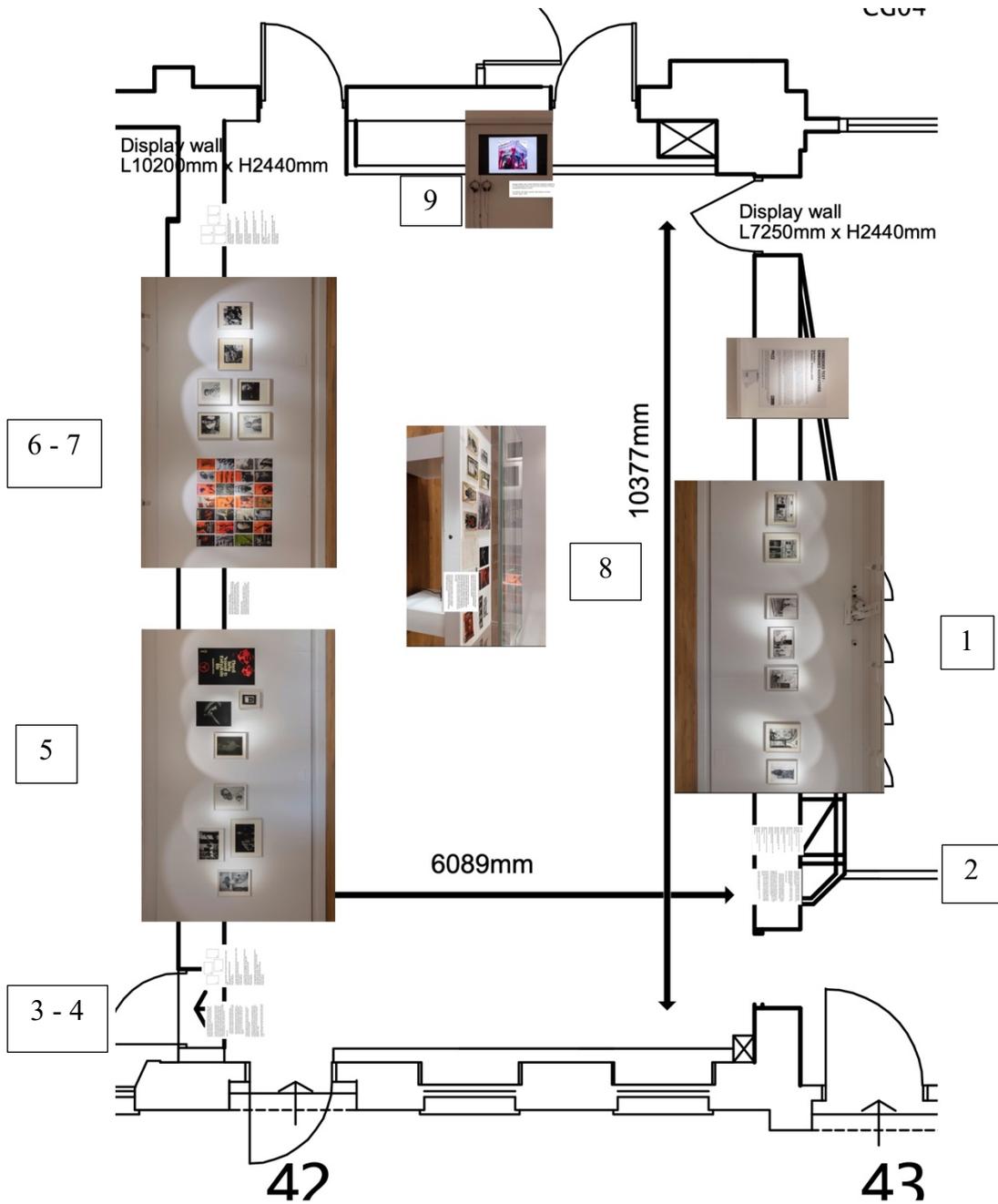
planned curation of research material, including the recording of Hallett's lecture, to be made accessible to the wider audience.

George Hallett (1942-2020) was a photographer born in Cape Town (South Africa). He began his career as a street photographer in the 1960s. In 1968, he documented the area of District Six before its rezoning and demolition by the Apartheid regime. In 1970, he went in exile and first lived in London where he created a vast body of work featuring South African visual artists, writers, musicians, and political activists. He continued documenting exile, the Black diaspora, and local stories in France, Holland, and the United States. In 1994, he returned to South Africa to document Nelson Mandela's presidential campaign. This was to mark his return to his home country where he photographed the new democracy.

Christine Eyene is an art historian and curator. Since April 2022, she is Lecturer in Contemporary Art at Liverpool John Moores University and Research Curator at Tate Liverpool. From 2012 to March 2022, she was a Research Fellow in Contemporary Art at the University of Central Lancashire where she worked on Making Histories Visible, a multidisciplinary visual arts research project led by Lubaina Himid. She is currently a PhD candidate at Birkbeck, University of London, and is completing a thesis on George Hallett under the supervision of Professor Annie E. Coombes. As a curator, Eyene has organised exhibitions internationally.

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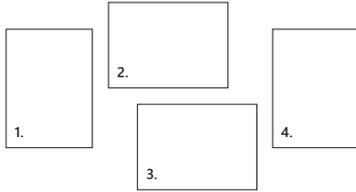
FLOOR PLAN AND LABELS



The labels were placed at the beginning or the end of sections of images to allow for a focus on the visual. This was done bearing in mind that most of them were captioned by the hand of the photographer on the white margin of the photographs.

Clockwise visit:

<p>Left to right</p> <p>George Hallett, <i>Westminster Restaurant</i>, District Six, Cape Town, 1968 Silver print, hand printed by the artist, 2000 50 X 61 cm Private collection</p> <p>George Hallett, <i>The Card Players</i>, District Six, Cape Town, 1968 Silver print, hand printed by the artist, 2000 50 X 61 cm Private collection</p> <p>George Hallett, <i>Seven Steps</i>, District Six, Cape Town, 1968 Silver print, hand printed by the artist 56 X 43 cm Private collection</p> <p>George Hallett, <i>Bo Kaap Children</i>, Cape Town, 1968 Silver print, hand printed by the artist 43 X 55.5 cm Private collection</p> <p>George Hallett, <i>Godfrey Street</i>, District Six, Cape Town, 1968 Silver print, hand printed by the artist 43 X 55.5 cm Private collection</p> <p>George Hallett, <i>The British Cinema</i>, District Six, Cape Town, 1968 Silver print, hand printed by the artist 61 X 50 cm Private collection</p> <p>George Hallett, <i>The Brother says hello</i>, District Six, Cape Town, 1968 Silver print, hand printed by the artist 52 X 42 cm Private collection</p> <p style="text-align: right;">1</p>	<p>In the late 1950s, when George Hallett was in high school, his English teacher – the author Richard Rive (1939-1981) – introduced him to South African writers who, like Rive, were born or lived in District Six.</p> <p>Hallett kept these connections, notably around the social circle of poet James Matthews in Silvertown, another neighbourhood of Cape Town.</p> <p>Of this period he said:</p> <p style="padding-left: 2em;">"I was with James and Peter and Richard Rive discussing the writers in New York and elsewhere [...]. We were inspired. We had an informal black studies group. We also studied literature from other parts of Africa."⁴</p> <p>In 1966, District Six was rezoned a 'White Only' area, foreshadowing the eviction of over 60,000 inhabitants. Encouraged by James Matthews, author and painter Peter E. Clarke (1929-2014), and a local tailor named Sakkie Misbach, Hallett documented the area before its demolition.</p> <p>On the background walls of some of these images, among the written signs, are names of local gangs like the Jesters, The Forty Thieves, The Volunteers, the Holl Boys and Stalag Kids. These map the territory of a place that does not exist anymore.</p> <p>⁴George Hallett in John Edwin Mason (2014), 'An interview with George Hallett', <i>Social Dynamics</i>, 40:1, 203.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">2</p>
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1. George Hallett, *The creation of a book cover*, London, 1972
Silver print, hand printed by the artist
53 X 42.50 cm
Private collection
2. George Hallett, *Performer at the 100 Club*, London, 1970s
Silver print, hand printed by the artist
51.50 X 61.00 cm
Private collection
3. George Hallett, *A photograph for the family back home (Dumile Feni and Louis Moholo)*, London, 1971
Silver print, hand printed by the artist
42.5 X 52.50 cm
Private collection
4. George Hallett, *Lorna de Smidt posing for the cover of I.N.C. Aniebo's Of Wives, Talismans and the Dead*
Published by Heinemann in 1983
Silver print, hand printed by the artist
52.50 X 42.50 cm
Private collection

3

In 1970, George Hallett left South Africa and began a 24-year exile. He travelled on the MS Achille Lauro aboard which he shared a cabin with an imam whose portrait is included in the exhibition.

In London, he encountered a community of South African exiles who were writers, artists, musicians, and activists. It is in this context that he got acquainted to James Currey, editor of Heinemann's African Writers Series (AWS). This series, founded in 1962 contributed to disseminate African literature published in English. Currey commissioned Hallett to create photographs for the AWS book covers.

Hallett said:

"Friends from the extensive South African exile community in London, and further afield, became my models and accomplices in the creation of new covers.

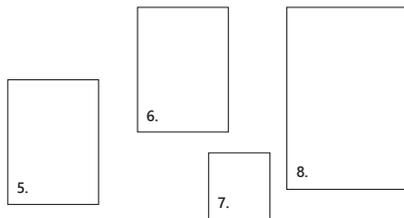
Pallo Jordan danced for John Munonye's *Dancer of Fortune* (1974), Louis Moholo was hung upside down with handcuffs for DM Zwelonke's *Robben Island* (1973), Lorna de Smidt became a corpse with a silver coin over one eye while a Gaboon viper kept vigil nearby."

Creating images for the series led Hallett to experiment visually and technically, pushing his practice beyond documentary photography.

In addition to the reproductions of enlarged book covers are included portraits of African writers, including Chinua Achebe (1930-2013), AWS founding editor and first author published in the series with *Things Fall Apart* (originally published in 1958).

*George Hallett in an email interview dated 13 August 2007, quoted in Christine Eyene (2008), 'The Human Face of History', *Art South Africa*, 6.3, 62.

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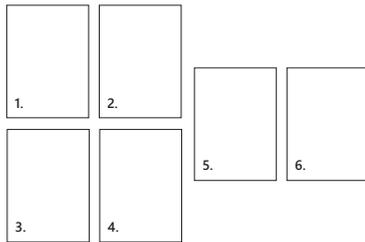
5. George Hallett, *The Imam* (photographic experiment)
Picture taken at sea, aboard the MS Achille Lauro, 1970
Silver print, hand printed by the artist
52.50 X 42.00 cm
Private collection
6. George Hallett, *Untitled*, London, 1970s.
C-type print, digital reproduction of handprinted silver print
55.7 X 40 cm
Private collection
7. George Hallett, *Untitled*, undated, view of enlarged contact sheet
Part of Hallett's photographic tests for the African Writers Series book covers
Silver print, hand printed by the artist
34.50 X 27.50 cm
Private collection
8. Book cover enlargement of Nkeme Nwankwo's *My Mercedes is Bigger than Yours*,
London: Heinemann, African Writers Series, 1975
C-type print
90 X 58.4 cm

5

Enlargements of Heinemann's African Writers Series book covers featuring photographs and visual compositions created by George Hallett. These books are part of collections gathered by George Hallett, Making Histories Visible, and the curator.

Launched in 1962, the African Writers Series thrived under the editorship of James Currey who was at its helm from 1967 to 1984. The publishing house collaborated with many artists, but Hallett's book covers form a unique body of work. Out of the 270 books published by 1984, over 50 covers featured an image by Hallett.

6



1. George Hallett, Buchi Emecheta, London, 1979.
Silver prints, hand printed by the artist
52.50 X 42.00 cm
Private collection

2. George Hallett, Bessie Head, Berlin, 1979
Silver prints, hand printed by the artist
52.50 X 42.00 cm
Private collection

3. George Hallett, Nadine Gordimer, Gaborone, 1982
Silver prints, hand printed by the artist
52.50 X 42.00 cm
Private collection

4. George Hallett, Dzambuzo Marechera, Berlin, 1979
Silver prints, hand printed by the artist
52.50 X 42.00 cm
Private collection

5. George Hallett, Chinua Achebe, undated (late 1970s -
early 1980s)
Silver print, hand printed by the artist
51 X 51 cm
Private collection

6. George Hallett, Mariama Bâ, Frankfurt, 1980
Silver print, hand printed by the artist
52.50 X 42.00 cm
Private collection

7

In this vitrine are presented some African Writers Series books which cover features a photograph by George Hallett also included in the exhibition.

The book *District Six Revisited* (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2007) was edited by Hallett and South African photographer Peter McKenzie (1955-2017) ten years after the eponymous exhibition that took place at the District Six Museum (Cape Town) in the aftermath of Apartheid. The postcard features a photograph of District Six also used in Nadine Gordimer's book *Some Monday for Sure* (1976).

Other documents include Hallett's 'Artist in Residence' course (undated), showing his approach to teaching photography; as well as contact sheets of Buchi Emecheta and Bessie Head's portraits.

8

George Hallett, *Jazz in Exile*, slideshow created by Hallett for his Distinguished Visitor Lecture at the University of Central Lancashire (Preston) in 2014.

Soundtrack, Ron Barron (prod.), *Blue Notes in Concert*. London: Ogun, 1978.

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