H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Darren Newbury. *Defiant Images: Photography and Apartheid South Africa.* Foreword by ALbie Sachs. Pretoria, South Africa: Unisa Press, 2009. xxiii + 345 pp. $37.00 (paper), ISBN 978-1-86888-523-7.

Reviewed by Pamela Allara
Published on H-AfrArts (September, 2012)
Commissioned by Jean M. Borgatti

Coding Iconic Images: Apartheid-Era Photography

In his forward to this survey text, juror Albie Sachs writes that "the bulk of the book in fact deals more with the defiant and innovative representation of the ordinary, than with the ordinary depiction of the heroic" (p. viii). This felicitous statement summarizes the author's approach rather neatly. The book's title suggests that the analysis will concentrate on struggle photography in particular and photography with a political agenda in general, but that is not the case. Rather it attempts to trace a history of photojournalism in South Africa. Newbury, a professor of photography at Birmingham City University, examines documentary images that addressed race relations from 1948 through 1994, with attention paid also to the use of those images to structure memory in the post-apartheid era. In addition, as a Western academic, he is interested in providing the international context for South African documentary images. As he writes: "I want to reconsider the documentary tradition in South Africa, not as an authentically African tradition, whatever that may mean, but rather as a complex set of photographic ideas and practices that were self-consciously both modern and international, and yet at the same time thoroughly South African" (p. 3). Although the phrase "thoroughly South African" may sound as meaningless as "authentically African," Newbury is diligent in sorting out the relationships between South African documentary photography and the Western practices in which it was often rooted. Thus the book provides a context absent from the now standard texts on this subject: *South Africa: the Cordoned Heart* (1986) and *Beyond the Barricades: Popular Resistance in South Africa* (1989). Although his goal is a book documenting "photography *against* apartheid" (by which I take to mean the visual depiction of the black experience in South African society), the author acknowledges that there are many other histories of this period that could be written (p. 8).

Given the book's title and stated goal, it is a bit disconcerting that the first photographer's work to be discussed in detail is that of Constance Stuart Larrabee. Criticized by South African historian Brenda Danilovitz and others for removing her photographs of tribal peoples from history and framing them as "beautiful objects," Larrabee consistently denied that her work carried any political meaning, and indeed fretted that her photographs might be interpreted as a criticism of the apartheid regime (as Newbury concedes).[1] His discussion of Larrabee's images of black urban life in the 1930s–"Johannesburg Black Man"–is indicative of the interpretative tightrope Newbury must walk in setting out the origins of South African documentary photography. This lesser known aspect of her work includes some of the earliest images of this important subject, but it excludes the darker problems of poverty and illness, and was guided by "an ideology of trusteeship" (p. 38). Larrabee was "trapped in a vision of a white universe and unable to conceptualize an alternative social structure to the existing reality" (p. 42). While providing a layered and complex analysis of Larrabee's urban work, Newburg concedes that it was a "false dawn for a critical documentary tradition" (p. 8).

Leon Levson, (d. 1968), the subject of the second half of this first chapter, occupies the same equivocal position. Although his work was collected by the London-based International Defence And Aid Fund for Southern Africa in the 1980s, when the fund was the repository for banned struggle images, the photographs' activist message was projected by the captions provided by his wife Freda, the politically engaged half of the couple.

In chapter 2, "'A Fine Thing': *The African Drum*," Newbury's text, like the images he discusses, is forced to equivocate. Founded in March, 1951, in Cape Town, *The African Drum* changed its name to *Drum* when it moved to Johannesburg four months later. In this and the following chapter, Newbury provides the first detailed his-

tory of the two phases of the magazine and argues that the Cape Town issues opened the way for the more radical publication to follow. In this, he wants to counter the argument presented in the influential 1996 Gugggenheim Museum exhibition "In/Sight: African Photographers 1940 to the Present," that because of the paternalism of the first issues, the Johannesburg *Drum* had to essentially start over from scratch. By providing examples of stories in each early issue, Newbury argues that the transition from the Cape Town publication to the Johannesburg *Drum* was a gradual one. Nonetheless, he undermines his own argument when he concludes that *Drum* was "visually and ideological distinct" from *The African Drum.* Because in 1951, there were few black South African photographers, "a new South African photography had literally to be created" from the first "faltering steps" of t*African Drum* (p. 109). That radical task is the subject of the following chapter.

Chapter 3, "'Johannesburg Lunch Hour': Photographic Humanism and the Social Vision of *Drum*," traces the beginnings of a black vision for black experience as rooted in the emerging practice of South African photojournalism. Although the magazine was aimed at the de-tribalized African, *Drum's* editorship remained white, but sufficiently enlightened that the German expatriate photographer Jürgen Schadeberg could insist on mentoring the first generation of black photojournalists, among them Bob Gosani and Peter Magubane. The new urban focus highlighted political figures (all 156 people accused in the Treason Trial of 1957 were pictured), while also providing more sensationalized stories of crime. Perhaps the most well known of the stories against apartheid is Gosani's "Mr. Drum Goes to Jail" (March, 1954), which, despite its stunning depiction of the degrading *tausa* dance, argued in its tepid text only for a more thoroughgoing inspection of the prison system. By 1956, under the fourth editor, Tom Hopkinson from Britain, the sequenced photo-essay became more prominent, establishing a three-way relationship with the photographic humanism characteristic of Western news magazines such as *Picture Post* and *Life*: "an articulation of photographic realism, the notion of the 'ordinary' African and a liberal reformist politics" (p. 151). (Sachs's introductory comment on the defiant representation of the ordinary is echoed here.) The chapter concludes with the jarring juxtaposition of Edward Steichen's "Family of Man" exhibition in South Africa (1958) with the *Drum*'s images of the Sharpeville Massacre of 1960. Countering the well-known criticism by Roland Barthes that the humanism of the "Family of Man" exhibition was really a matter of colonialism, Newbury argues that in the South African context, humanist photography (as influenced by Western photojournalism in the 1940s and1950s), was the "servant of black African cultural expression" because it depicted "images of urban Africans as irrepressibly human, as actors on their own account for both good and evil" (pp. 158-159). Because the concept of photographic humanism is so central to his argument, I wish that the author had taken the time to provide a more extended discussion of the term than appears in the text. The concluding discussion of Ian Barry's and Peter Magubane's photographs of the Sharpeville Massacre concentrates on the editor's responses and the fact that with the imposition of a state of emergency, South African documentary photography would have to be published abroad from that point forward.

With chapter 4, "An 'Unalterable Blackness': Ernest Cole's *House of Bondage,"* we arrive at the heart of the book. If the text to this point has dealt with ordinary black experience as seen through the lens of white photographers, or in the example of *Drum*, through the editing by whites of photography by blacks, *House of Bondage* is a book devoted to the vision of one black photographer. However, even here the question of mediation on the part of whites in a position of authority cannot be avoided. Newbury makes the following claim for *House of Bondage*, assembled from photographs smuggled out in 1966 when Cole moved to New York, and published in Canada in 1967: "I have argued earlier that the photographic humanism that took root in South Africa in the 1950s, and which provided the initial context for Cole's photography, was influenced heavily by ideas and practices imported from Europe and the US. *House of Bondage* moved in the opposite direction, representing therefore the refraction of these ideas through the lens of apartheid South Africa, and their return to the West. Read in this way, *House of Bondage* is an antidote to Steichen's *Family of Man*" (p. 175).

Unfortunately, Newbury struggles to support this argument. Because of the lack of archival documentation on Cole, Newbury must speculate about how much influence the four *New York Times* essays Cole published with journalist Joseph Lelyveld and the introduction to *House of Bondage* by *Life* editor Thomas Flaherty may have had on the book, especially as it was directed ultimately to a Western audience. Fortunately, the power of the images that are reproduced serve to support his argument that the book represents "an authentic black South African voice" (p. 174).

Chapter 5, "An Aesthetic of Fists and Flags: Struggle Photography," again takes the reader down an un-

expected path. Some of the familiar players are barely mentioned (Paul Weinberg, Santu Mofokeng), as Newbury chooses instead to trace the roots of activist photography in the work of a forerunner, Eli Weinberg. Although a contemporary of Levson, Weinberg was a true activist, and his book *Portrait of the People: A Personal Photographic Record of the South African Liberation Struggle*, published by the IDAF in 1981, the year before the Culture and Resistance conference in Gabarone, became the foundation of "the international anti-apartheid movement's visual archive" (p. 220). Because the greater part of the chapter is devoted to Weinberg's lesser known images of defiance, the discussion of the photographs assembled in *South Africa: The Cordoned Heart* (1986) and *Beyond the Barricades* (1989) is necessarily truncated. Nonetheless, Newbury provides a solid analysis of the importance of each of these iconic texts.

Chapter 6, "'Lest We Forget': Photography and the Presentation of History in the Post-apartheid Museum," examines the complexities of the memory boom in South Africa today. In discussing the central place of the photograph in the Apartheid Museum, the Hector Pieterson Museum, the District Six Museum, and Constitution Hill, Newbury worries with some justification that there is a danger that the photographs may "come to be seen as demonstration of the achievement of social justice rather than part of a wider, and as yet incomplete, process of transformation" (p. 274). In addition, he notes that the presentation and interpretation of documentary images at the Apartheid Museum are directed primarily at a tourist audience, and therefore do not generate needed dialogue. These and other issues raised in this final chapter are among the most important contributions of the book.

*Defiant Images*is meticulously researched and provides the reader with a historical overview of South African documentary photography that argues for a consistent humanistic core that over time permitted a South African voice to emerge, while a foreign audience was made aware of the multiple, daily oppressions of the apartheid regime. The undeniable influence of documentary traditions in the West as well as that of white editors and photographers who were not South African complicates the picture of the nature of the South African voice. More than any text that I know of, Newbury brings the internationalism of photojournalism to the fore and investigates its ramifications for images rooted in the South African experience. Of course, his own perspective is that of a white, British photographic historian, but Newbury manages to maintain a balanced approach that quietly insists that photography can never be fully transparent, but is always mediated.

A second important reason for bringing this history up to the present as he does in the final chapter is that although the literature has tended to posit a complete break from the political work of the 1980s to the personal explorations of the post-apartheid era, the documentary impulse remains strong. "The veracity of the photographic images continues to be invoked to give a sense of urgency and moral obligation to the depiction of social inequalities; and the link between representation and responsibility, between seeing and acting, forged in the struggle years, is still a significant dimension of documentary practice in South Africa" (p. 319). In this he is part of a shift in interpretation that began after the first decade of democracy. When Paul Weinberg's edited anthology, *Then & Now: Eight South African Photographers,* was first published in 2007, the broad aim was to highlight the new directions taken by the struggle photographers post-1990. However, in anticipation of Newbury's text, art historian Michael Godby noted that "The same drive for a better society that fuelled the earlier work is apparent in many of the [photo] essays.... And the same need in Struggle times to present their subjects as rounded human beings rather than victims or ciphers still inspires these photographers still inspires these photographers to engage with the humanity of their subjects."[2]

It appears that this humanistic approach to the photography of the ordinary will be presented in the forthcoming exhibition, "The Rise and Fall of Apartheid Photography and the Bureaucracy of Everyday Life," which will open at New York's International Center of Photography in mid-September. According to the press release, "This photographic exhibit examines the legacy of the apartheid system and how it penetrated even the most mundane aspects of social existence in South Africa."[3] Newbury's chapters on *Drum* and *House of Bondage* should provide a useful background for the ongoing legacy of apartheid as interpreted by curators Okwui Enwezor and Rory Bester. However, it will be interesting to see how much weight, if any, they give to a fraught theme of *Defiant Images*: that of the central role played by white editors and photographers, many of whom were not South African, in the development of documentary photography from 1948 to 1990.

Notes

[1]. Brenda Danilovitz, "Constance Stuart Larrabee's Photographs of the Ndzundza Ndebele: Performance and History beyond the Modernist Frame," in *Between Union and Liberation: Women Artists in South Africa 1910-1994*,

ed. Marion Arnold and Brenda Schmahmann (London: Ashgate, 2005).

[2]. Paul Weinberg, ed.,*Then & Now: Eight South African Photographers,* intro. Michael Godby, 2nd ed. (Johannesburg: The Highveld Press, 2008), 13.

[3]."This Week's News: Rise and Fall of Apartheid at ICP New York." *Art South Africa Weekly,* http://www.artsouthafrica.com/?-news=638&utm_source=GraphicMail&utm_medium=email&utm_term=N

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:
http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl.

Citation: Pamela Allara. Review of Newbury, Darren, *Defiant Images: Photography and Apartheid South Africa.* H-AfrArts, H-Net Reviews. September, 2012.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=36395

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.