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A White Woman's Photographic Travel Journal

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Fine Art Research

A thesis submitted in fulfilment for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Glasgow School of Art

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Abstract

Research Question

How might a photographic travelogue based upon personal first-hand experience and dialogic modes of self-representation actively embody and engage with the implications of whiteness as it impacts on racial hierarchies? And what ethical considerations should be taken into consideration when it is a white woman undertaking such research?

The research was constructed through a field trip that followed loosely in the footsteps of an African man (Tété-Michel Kpomassie) from West Africa to Greenland. While undertaking this research, I made a visual diary of self-portraiture, documentary and auteur-style snapshots and portraits that mirrored points of encounter through the subjective gaze of my photographic practice and my own white female body. The photographic travelogue and the dialogue with Kpomassie framed the circumstances of the research, thus implicating my complicity as a white subject in a system organized by racial tenets.

The methodology, which reflects my subjective as well as my categorical identity in different activities, such as middle-aged sex tourism, begs the question of what kinds of ethical factors and limitations need to be considered or transgressed when it is a white woman that is performing or conducting such research. These issues are examined in a discussion that juxtaposes the imagery with a selection of work around questions about racial/gendered and sexual identity, that has been carried out by other artists and academics in photographic, artistic and theoretical discourses, particularly Adrian Piper and Judith Butler.

The thesis is a joint portfolio/textual dissertation submission. The balance of the research material presented being 50% visual material presented in an exhibition and 50% dissertation. The exhibit consists of 43 c-prints organized into groups without regard to research chronology to emphasize a non-linearity whereas the textual documentation records the process and pays attention to the chronological as well as the practical and conceptual development.

Contribution to Knowledge

This research aims through a photographic engagement with the issues of whiteness to achieve ‘nothing less than [*to contribute to*] the eradication of the massive psycho-existential complex the juxtaposition of the white and black races has created’ (Fanon 1997 p. 11). While it examines whiteness as ‘part of a system of meanings about race, class, gender rather than something’ (Blaagaard 2011, p. 156) that is integral to its identity, it clearly documents and constructs racialized situations in its imagery. The photographs interrogate the power of whiteness’s position within different cultural productions and practices while simultaneously negotiating cross-categorical positions under signatures that are not only defined by the racial hierarchies. While the method acknowledges the analyses that define the power of whiteness as a racial construct, it recognizes the importance of not falling ‘into actual “generalised” essentialism’ (Hoofd 2002) by denying internal differences as well as intra-categorical similarities in or between any groups. As such, the research process expects to visualize the actuality of unequally organized structures without excluding the possibility of relationships that take place in a cross-racial, gendered or cultural social situation, which are not bound by structural hierarchies but negotiate the formation of alternative realities.

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Overview of Hypothesis, Question and Structure of Dissertation

This thesis argues that, because of its instability in time and space, photography provides an exceptional tool for narrowing the gap that often occurs between epistemological and ontological accounts in critical practice. Its hypothesis is that viewing the photographic act as a space where relationships can be formed across past and present will enable attention both to what is and, more importantly, to ways of imagining or making visions of what the relationships that are formed can lead to. In order to mine photography's ability to negotiate structural/epistemological conditions and experiential/ontological subjectivity as complex and significant relational negotiations, the research presents a case study, which in some respects tests the limits of conventional perceptions regarding what it is ethically possible to do with photography across categorical constructions.

As a point of departure, I asked the following question: How may a photographic travelogue based on first-hand experiences and dialogic modes of self-representation actively embody and engage with implications of whiteness as it impacts on structural hierarchies? And, what ethical considerations should be taken into account when it is a white woman undertaking such research?

To test the hypothesis I completed a photographic project during a number of field trips (between 2005 and 2008) following in the footsteps of a Togolese man, Tété-Michel Kpomassie on a journey from West Africa to Greenland. The photographic material is arranged in the form of a travelogue and consists of staged images, self-portraiture, auteur snapshots as well as images taken in a traditional documentary way. From an admittedly binary perspective the contextual framework problematizes whiteness, a circumstance I have taken care not to avoid, so as to not evade the problematic points at which my whiteness implicates my subjectivity. While it problematizes whiteness as a racial construction, the evidence will (as I demonstrate throughout the thesis) more importantly accentuate the need to reflect on the relation between methodology and social life, i.e. what it can perform, how it can interact with and what important developments it would like to contribute to in the social world. The thesis is presented in two parts: this textual dissertation and an exhibition.

The textual dissertation is structured as follows:

The rest of the Introduction is divided into six sections. 'Two Encounters: Crit and a Book' (1.1) will describe an underlying point of departure for the research. 'The Book, An African on Greenland' (1.2) is a short summary of Kpomassie's journey based on his autobiography. 'The Crit' (1.3) gives an overview of my initial encounter with critical theory during my years as an undergraduate, while (1.4) accounts for how my private life conflicted with the conclusions of that encounter. In 'Converging the Narratives' (1.5), I describe my deliberations regarding my quarrel with the critical discourse in question and how I came to decide that I wanted to use Kpomassie's story in this research. In the concluding part of the Introduction,

‘Touchstones of a White Woman’s Diary and Contribution to Knowledge’ (1.6), I state the overlaps in research focus on race with other identity categories, I justify my strategic choice to let the question of race take precedence, and I restate the research question and the contribution to knowledge.

Second two, ‘Contextual Overview’, is divided into three parts: ‘Rationale for Methodology’ (2.1) contextualizes the justifications for my choice of methodology; ‘Key Terms and Vocabulary’ (2.2) describes my interpretation and use of terminology; and ‘Brief Summary of Defining Moments in White scholarship and Debate’ (2.3) gives an overview of whiteness studies and clarifies that this thesis is not an argument for why to do whiteness studies but an examination of how methodologically to carry out one such study in a photographic practice.

Section Three, ‘Towards a Visual Methodology’ is divided into nine parts. ‘Three Voices: Adrian Piper, Judith Butler and Nina Bacos’ (3.1) is divided into subsections (3.1.1 Adrian Piper; 3.1.2 Judith Butler; and 3.1.3 Nina Bacos) and describes points in Piper’s and Butler’s positions that arguably overlap ethically in spite of the differences in their stated positions, which have been pivotal in developing this methodology. I also describe how, from a conversation with the tensions between their positions, I could start to make sense of how to come to terms with the tensions between expressions of the epistemological and ontological in my practice. ‘The Orientalist Journeys of Isabelle Eberhardt and Nina Bacos’ (3.2) gives an account of a trial field trip I made to Morocco with the intention of following in Isabelle Eberhardt’s footsteps to experience what it was like to use the story of someone else’s journey as a blueprint for a photographic research project and get an idea of

what problems it might cause. 'The White Girl's Lament' (3.3) discusses some of the issues that cropped up, in particular the tendency to avoid implicating my subjective whiteness, and the measures I took to manage them. 'Contextualizing the Practice in the Studio (Staging Exercises)' (3.4) offers a comparative reading of my own material with that of other artists (in particular Jo Spence and Terry Dennett but also, for example, Maxine Walker and Rotimi Fani-Kayode), which enabled me to understand what I needed to develop further in my methodology. 'Discursive Myths, Sexuality and Desire (Staging Exercise 2)' (3.5) is a more comprehensive demonstration of how I use the studio practice to make closer examinations of fantasies about relationships between white women and black men. 'Cruising White Women (Cruising Black Guys)' (3.6) accounts for how I detect a dimension of white female complicity in Adrian Piper's performance work *Cruising White Women* (Figure 63), which I had not previously noticed in these images, while in 'Colonial Remains' (3.7) I situate this complicity historically with regard to gender. 'The White Female Gaze' (3.8) demonstrates further visual examinations and connections between white female complicity and perceptions of the white woman as victim. The final part, 'Photography and the Victim Discourse' (3.9), discusses discursive approaches to photography's relation to the real using the example of a quarrel about victimization to make the connection between this research and a growing debate which argues that the photographic act is a collaboration rather than a fixed hierarchical relation between subject, photographer and viewer which places the subject at the bottom of that constellation.

Section Four, 'Travelling Light in the Footsteps of Kpomassie', discusses the findings of the three field trips I made to complete the journey in Kpomassie's

footsteps. 'Failing to Create Connections' (4.1) explains why it was difficult to create a meaningful conversation between my work and Kpomassie's story. It logs some obvious points at which my staging fails and draws further conclusions about the importance of including images taken under uncontrolled conditions in order to create a situation that makes it more possible for reciprocal narratives to enter into the work. 'Cruising Black Guys' (4.2) describes the circumstances under which one of the images in the *Cruising Black Guys* series came about. Testing the boundary between the documentary and the staged, it accounts for overlaps between race and gender in an informal collaboration to make a case for why fixing the photograph within one discourse limits our ability to rethink and re-engage in the social space with others. As the titles indicate, 'Conversing with Kpomassie' (4.3) and 'Greenland, Black Authorship and White Evasion' (4.4) try to return to the meaning of my imagined connection to his story and problematize my dilemma regarding his black authorship. In 'Representing Race' (4.5) I make a case study of some comments on Kara Walker's and William Pope.L's work and person, which indicates a pressure on black artists to perform their blackness with regard to certain standards, and explore Kobena Mercer's well-known revision of his own initial critique of Mapplethorpe's nudes. This section further consolidates (unsurprisingly) the inherent problem of methodology, which, while it states the instability of identity, acts as if categories are fixed. In 'Guess Who's Coming for Dinner and the (Unruly) Black Penis' (4.6), I continue to use Mercer, Pope.L and Walker to discuss how racial history makes itself present in experience as epistemology and ontology. This is to demonstrate a way to employ the documentary because it forms a counterpoint to the critical self-reflective I and situates it (the photographing I) in a time/space that is social and Universal and intimately connected to the stories of Others.

Section Five, 'The Return to the Journey (Concluding Summary and Contribution to Knowledge)', recaps the research progress and offers a closing line of argument based on the evidence. This demonstrates how I reached my conclusion, namely a methodology that is concerned with the social sphere has ethical responsibilities to test limits and to reflect seriously on how it interacts with life, where it wants to go and what it needs to do to go there, or else it will risk becoming self-serving at best and may be detrimental to political agency.

1.1 Two Encounters: A Book, A Crit

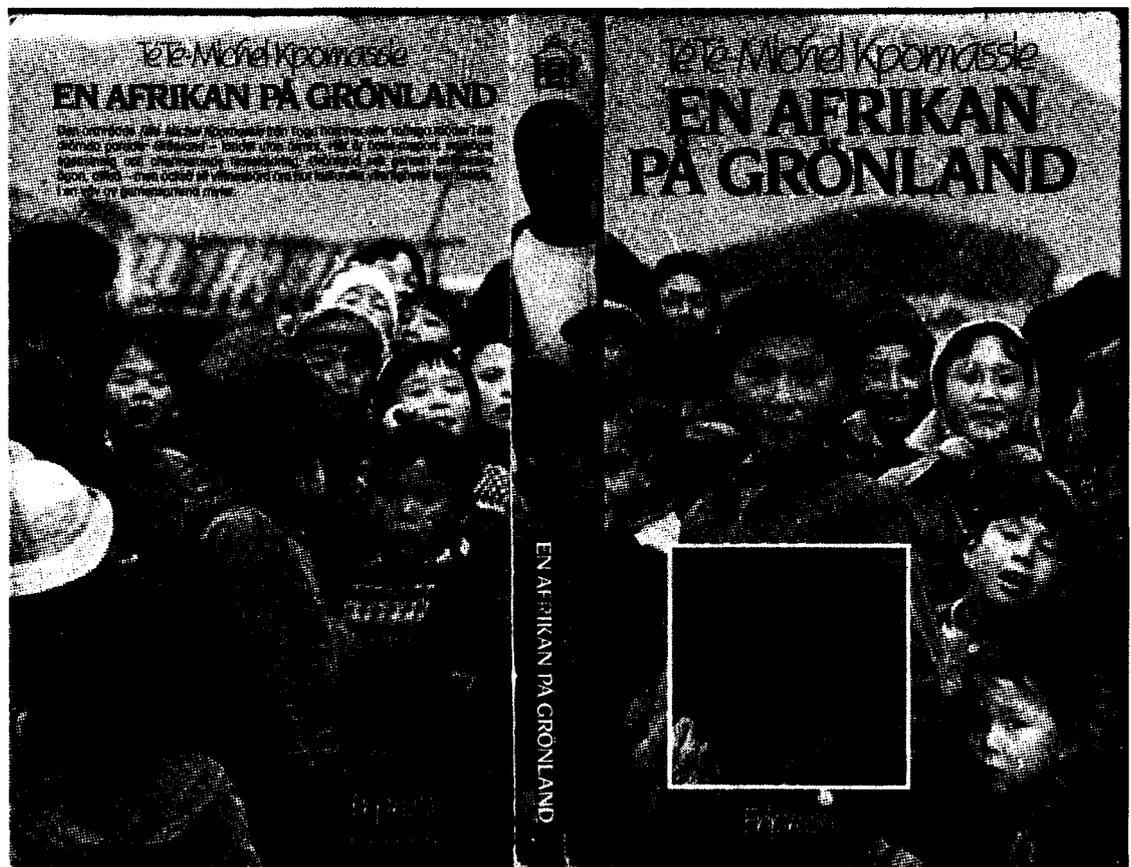


Figure 1. Book cover, *An African in Greenland* (Swedish Edition, 1984).

While working as a mess-man aboard a ship between my first and second year as an undergraduate photography student, I came across a book entitled *An African in Greenland* in the ship's library. Intrigued by the title, I borrowed the book. It was an old hardback, and on the cover was a small colour portrait of a black man superimposed on an older black and white grainy image of oriental-looking children gazing into the camera while flocking around a younger version of the same man. The short summary on the back of the book described it as the autobiography of Tété-Michel Kpomassie, who because of a snake phobia ran away from Togo to his imagined paradise of Greenland, a land without snakes. According to the author of the summary, the book was 'a headstrong report, a charming traveller's tale and a testimony of how cultural extremes can meet together in a weave of mutual myths and an account of Greenland seen through African eyes' (Kpomassie 1984; my translation).

1.2 The Book: *An African in Greenland*

Briefly, the book tells the story of how Tété-Michel Kpomassie ran away from home to go to Greenland after his father had decided against his wishes that he should join a group of voodoo practitioners that worship snakes after they had healed him of a curse received by watching a white man kill and skin a python. His escape was the beginning of a journey in which he not only broke with a profound patriarchal tradition by disregarding his father's wishes but also (during the eight years covered by the story) transgressed a number of expectations others (both Africans and Europeans) have of young Africans who leave Africa. During the course of his

travels, he made numerous conscious decisions not to take advantage of possibilities that might have lured him away from his goal of reaching Greenland. For this reason, he declined opportunities to go to university, ran away from a prospective marriage staged by an aunt and overcame a number of obstacles put in his way by overzealous and patronizing officials who tried to deter him from his journey. The book reveals an at times stubborn obstinacy to reach his goal, which after a while simply became a desire to see and experience Greenland.

1.3 The Crit

In the school I attended, the theoretical curriculum was mostly made up of critical paradigms based on the power/knowledge discourse. The discussions that took shape in the wake of classes on critical theory engaged predominantly with issues of photographic fictions, the politics of representation, subjugations, victimization and productions of ideology understood along categorical limitations of gendered, raced and classed identity. These theories called into question documentary's claim to truth (Wells 2003, p. 381). Discussing its parallel development with state-ordered photographic archives created to collect and control 'workers, vagrants, criminals, patients, the insane, the poor, the colonized races' (Tagg in Wells 2003, p. 260), the photograph came to be regarded as a 'structured and structuring space' (Burgin in Wells 2003, p. 137) and any attempt to discuss or work with images based in a social reality was regarded as a tendency to 're-legitimize codes and conventions of social documentary' which 'has its roots in projects of social surveillance and overt exoticism' (Bright 1998, p. 208). As I was interested in personal documentary and issues relating to the sociopolitical and the experiential/ontological, this introduction

to theory affected me in challenging and not always encouraging ways. The gist of this critique was that one needed to be aware that one's own condition/identity would always affect one's perception of experience. Contrary to the popular idea that the camera (the photograph) never lies, photography would never be able to give a complete account of all aspects of a situation. Its apparent transparency and one's limited understanding could in fact contribute to hiding underlying conditions and thus operate as an oppressive device.

This part of the critique did not conflict with my feelings or beliefs about the way photography operates. One of the reasons I had quit working as a freelance photographer and started studying in the first place was to engage with these issues, but I was deeply unsatisfied with what I saw as the conclusion of the critique, which 'consisted of arguing that all documentary photography contains an implicit will to power that would silence all other positions' (Edwards 1990, p. 74). I did not agree with the notion that photography like Nan Goldin's *Ballad Of Sexual Dependency* (1986) about her life in an abusive relationship, Anders Petersen's *No One has Seen it All* (1995) about a mental institution in Sweden made in collaboration with patients in a psychiatric ward, or Roger Ballen's *Plattenland* (1996) about poor whites in South Africa, which connected to social experience different from how white South Africans were usually portrayed during Apartheid, was immoral mining of others' misfortune.

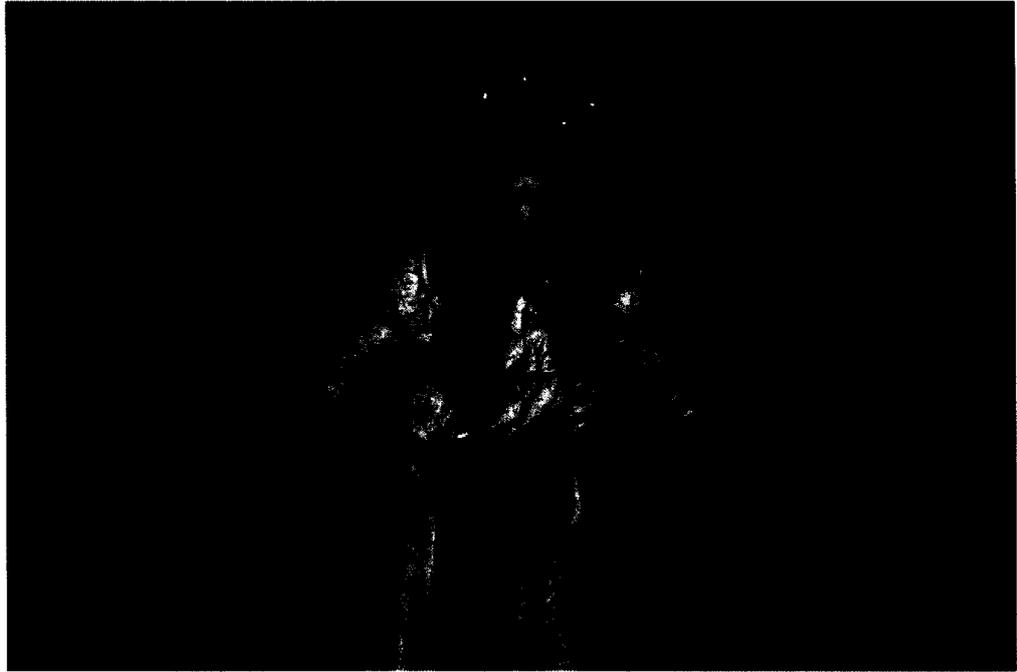


Figure 2. Anders Petersen, *Mental Hospital*. Silver gelatin print (1995).



Figure 3. Roger Ballen, *Hanging Pig* (2001).

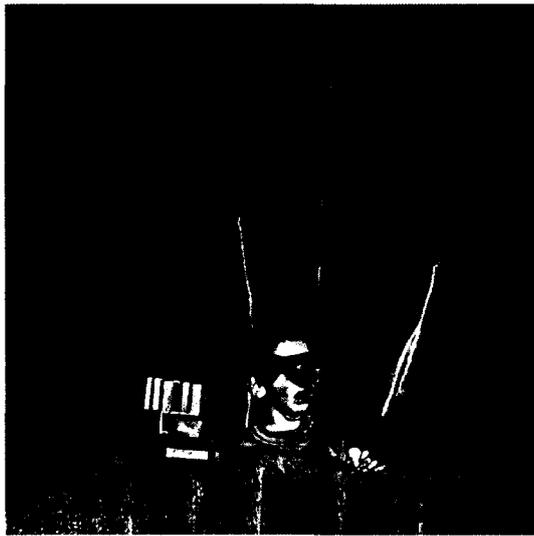


Figure 4. Roger Ballen, *Skew Mask* (2002).

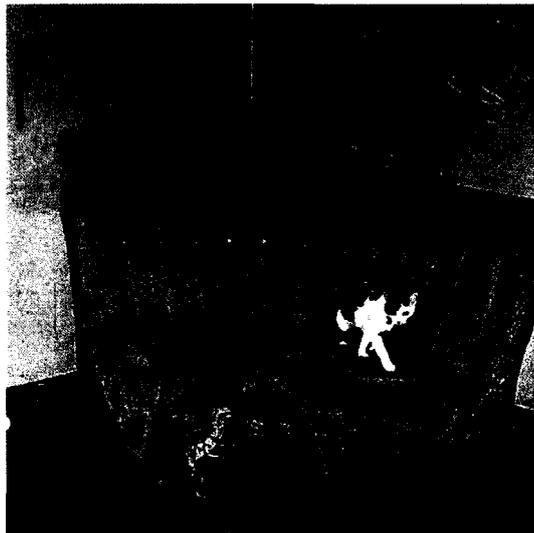


Figure 5. Roger Ballen, *Sittingroom* (2002).



Figure 6. Roy De-Carava, *Graduation* (1949).

Nor did I agree that documentary photography of the kind made by Walker Evans, Roy DeCarava, Diane Arbus or Robert Frank unavoidably comprised a form of eroticized victimizing and subjugating assault on the people portrayed, which naturalized rather than politicized poverty as Martha Rosler suggests in her seminal essay 'In, Around, and Afterthoughts (On Documentary photography)' (in Wells 2003). By overlooking the role photography played in, for example, anti-lynching, civil rights and black power activism 'to both unmake and remake black identity' (Raiford in Monaghan 2010), such as the photo text *Nothing Personal* (1964) by James Baldwin (1929–1987) and Richard Avedon (1923–2004), the discussions became monolithic. Because of this failure to pay attention to methods such as Baldwin and Avedon's poignantly powerful text/image juxtaposition, which oscillates 'between journalistic detachment and experimental intimacy' (Blair 2007, p. 180) to express the need for critique as well as for love, we students were left with a more limited palette of tools than would have been necessary.



Figure 7. Avedon, *William Casby*. Louisiana (1963).

nothing personal

photographs by Richard Avedon and text by James Baldwin

Figure 8. Avedon and Baldwin, Book cover (1963).



Figure 9. Avedon, *The Generals of the Daughters of the American Revolution* (1963).

Most importantly, rather than encouraging experimentations that tested the limits of photographic representation in the ontological present, this approach critically enforced ideas about the fixedness of identity classifications and the limitations of photography.

1.4 Personal Influences

At the time, I lacked the words to describe what I perceived as a categorical and limiting result of a critical theory that was deployed along binary terms of racial or classed identities and called into question representation (working across) demarcations within identity discourse. One reason for this was that the binary understanding of race in particular conflicted with my own life as I lived it (although I would also like to think that I would have reacted against it without this factor playing a role). My long-time partner was a migrant working-class black man. I loved, laughed, cried, compromised, fought, struggled and got on with life together with him. Race, or rather our different ethnicities, was sometimes consciously activated as an issue between us, either by things that came from the outside society in the form of racism or sometimes on an individual level. When it was individual, it was brought up by him (which I resisted and resented) and never by me because doing so inevitably forced me to acknowledge my whiteness, which felt like being racist. However, when the issue of race came as a racist attack from the outside (which we both resisted and resented) those incidents generally (but not always) brought us closer to each other. Sometimes what happened would be so overpowering that I would feel overwhelmingly guilty by association and my partner

overwhelmingly resentful of everything white. However unproductive or productive our actions were (they could be both), by being together we were actively engaged in making and negotiating a mutual history. When there were problems within the relationship, we both dealt with them actively. What was happening in my education became quite a different experience. The more I thought of, read and engaged in discussions regarding power, cultural difference and hierarchical structures, the less I felt that I could deal with them by using my own voice/work and the more I felt that silence, albeit not a particularly attractive idea, was at least a more sensible option.

At first, however, I defied the urge to remain silent and completed my assignments in a way that set race and gender into the orbit of the classrooms where our 'crits' took place. Implicitly and unconsciously, I demanded engagement from my classmates and my tutors to help me narrow the gap between the abstraction of critical analysis and the actuality of my life.



Figure 10. Nina Bacos, *Self-Portrait of a Relationship*. Silver gelatin print (1996).

Consciously, and maybe naively, I advocated mutual humanity by making images with (for example) my partner, our different kids, friends and myself to claim our mutually lived life as valid.

With the exception of one occasion, when our assignment was self-portraiture and I showed *Self-Portrait of a Relationship* (Figure 10), the discussions I hoped for did not occur. Instead the 'crits' remained firmly grounded in the ideas of photography as an inevitably structuring apparatus, and my work in particular was mostly discussed with a focus on victimization of women, class politics, the Other and exoticism. When I showed this image, however, silence settled across the room. And while silence is not a discussion, it was at least a change from the usual chorus. The raciality invoked by my (now ex-) partner's presence in the image (and solely by his presence, not mine) and the idea of the female victim accentuated by my white nakedness and the embarrassment of sexual rejection, counteracted the ordinary categorical interpretations. I instinctively understood that I had done something important, although I could not grasp what it was. It is clear to me today that despite the lengthy discussions about identity hierarchies and victimizing representation, my naked female whiteness and his clothed male blackness, posited against each other in this way, revealed that none of us (who were all white) in that classroom could grapple productively with the complexity of identity and implications in its representation when faced with it. None of us students – not I with my stubborn humanism, nor those who stubbornly denounced humanism as a false and oppressing diversion – could explicate anything about this complexity. More alarming perhaps was that none of the tutors could add anything to this either.

1.5 Converging the Narratives

It would be some years before I could articulate the incident. During my years at that school I continued trying to find a way into the dilemma that had presented itself so clearly when I made this assignment. However, I never came closer to a solution of how to narrow the gap between experience (ontology) and knowledge (epistemology) productively and how to engage with the complexity of identity in my work. Instead, the critical discourse closed in on me and for a while I only made projects that would not make me feel guilty about my own position. Giving in to the binary interpretation of the discourse and not seeing a way to be productively accountable for the work I made, I started to remove any recognizable presence of people who were not white from the image surface in order not to victimize (or be accused of victimizing) any Other. In other projects, I played with woman as a dominant figure of agency in relation to white maleness to visualize the construction of gender in order to explore the way the idea of the female as victim in some circumstances reiterated a victimizing discourse. It was all quite safe, but it provided me with a space in which I could let my thoughts brew while I looked, read and thought further.

This play regarding gendered positions slowly made me realize that there might also be a productive way to speak about race. There might be a way in which I, as a white person, could employ photography to examine racial structure without being naive, cynical or evasive about the function of race in the representation of white people's

life experience by working with issues of white complicity, accountability and responsibility across the delimitations of race. To do this, I chose to return to Kpomassie's book and travel in his footsteps to test different viewpoints through a visual examination of myself while I did so. Initially these tests were carried out from an admittedly categorical viewpoint. One may say that I appropriated his story for my own purposes, which I did, considering that I pulled his account of a cross-cultural experience entirely out of its original context to help me grapple with a problem that I had regarding the justification of representing cross-cultural experiences. However, appropriation is an imprecise term because it assumes only my own agency in relation to the various kinds of cultural expressions that I come into contact with. I kept returning to his story because it inspired me and I wanted to make such a journey myself. When a friend suggested that I should make a project out of it by following in his footsteps, I decided to do so. To assume that a choice like this is pure appropriation rather than a combination of appropriation and inspiration diminishes the agency of all those voices that are behind or entwined in any cultural expression or encounter. It is solipsistic in its character and in effect assumes a subject with total control over what influences its choices while often maintaining a kind of ironic or paradoxically benevolent distance. It simplifies categories into a stagnant dominance/subordinance discourse, and by so doing reduces contemporaneous Otherness [cultural expressions and peoples] and their 'simultaneous coexistence to a place in a historical queue' (Massey 2005, p. 5) from which those Others have to be emancipated before they can have full citizenship in contemporary culture. Having said that, however, for me to assume that I could somehow free myself from our mutual history – the very real cruel appropriation of Others' bodies, countries and cultures by white people in the past by which

contemporary whiteness still benefits economically and culturally – would be as naive as the previous attitude could be arrogantly unimaginative or unproductively ‘politically correct’ (see Section 2.2).

1.6 Touchstones of a White Woman’s Diary and Expected Contribution to Knowledge

Issues of gender and sexuality play a role in this work, but although they are similar to race in the way they reproduce themselves – and in reality constantly intersect with each other – I will concentrate on the context of race. Assuming, as this study does, that whiteness succeeds in maintaining its power by being an invisible and unconscious norm by insisting on perceiving visual qualities of the other as Other, I have chosen not to pay attention to what is Other in the white subject (gender/sex/class). In order to avoid a ‘dangerous if comprehensible temptation to imagine inclusiveness by imagining away’ (Williams 1997, pp. 5–6) the meaning racial difference keeps having, there will be an element of binaries in the way I address race, particularly in the textual part of the overall thesis. However, this binary point is made unstable in the photographic image if one allows oneself to view the work from the perspective of the multiple narrative functions it can have. Gender and sexuality are present (particularly through the suggestion of sex tourism in some of the images) but will for the most part be treated as implicit in the text. The use of different photographic strategies should not only be considered a materialistic practical and aesthetic strategy to create different narrative positions, but also a way to experiment with different positions for the self as a self-conscious as well as an

unselfconscious subject.

Against the background of these concerns, this research demonstrates the possibilities of using photography to suture the split between the epistemological (structural/categorical) analysis and ontological (personal/subjective) experience in critical discourse by asking the following questions: How may photography in the form of a travel diary that narrates first-hand experiences and dialogic modes of self-representation visualize an embodiment and engagement with whiteness as it impacts on racial hierarchies? What ethical considerations does such research require?

To enable this, the thesis engages with a number of issues about representation, which will converge around conditions of whiteness. Making a special note of photography's unstable relation to time/space, the evidence in this thesis narrows the distance between the analytical subject of whiteness and the complicit subject of whiteness by demonstrating photography as a site of examination where the structural and the personal visually overlap. The research lets the photographic act and the subjective experience in the ontological present take precedence over theoretical analytical activity when collecting the research material. This strategy was adopted to avoid the self-censoring activities described in Section 1.5 in order to facilitate a collection of evidence that is not censored by the fear of showing myself in an 'unflattering' light in which my whiteness gets implicated when other narratives (than those thought of when photographing) invade the image. The importance of this is not, as it may seem, to emphasize my honesty or chivalry as a researcher/photographer regarding my privileged position, but to strike a balance between attention to how 'The self at issue is clearly "formed" within a set of social

conventions that raise the question whether a good life can be conducted within a bad one, and whether we might 'imagine ways in which we can re-craft 'ourselves with and for another, [to] participate in the remaking of social conditions' (Butler 2005, p. 134). The underlying argument is based on the idea that while the self is structured by the social, the question of how my/one's life influences that of Others is an ethical deliberation that comes with responsibilities. It implores acts rather than answers. To understand the relativity of one's individual and structural identity may well constitute 'the condition for moral inquiry' (Butler 2005, p. 8) by bringing to attention one's own as well as Others' limitations, but to frame the act ethically one has to be 'willing to say that racism (or any inequality based on asymmetrically organized structural categories) is objectively wrong' (Piper in Berger 1999, p. 84).

The strategy developed in this thesis will demonstrate the need to pay attention to three conditions in the photographic act and how they come together to form the contribution to new knowledge. The three conditions are: attention to the individual, which narrates the subjective I and situates a personal ontological point of departure in the photographic event connecting it to a concrete situation; the structural picture plane where the personal narrative is invaded by the narratives of Others and the moral obligation to consider the consequences one's life has on Others that arises; and finally, as well as importantly, a living vision of the reason for initiating the narrative so as to remain open to the ambiguities introduced by the narratives of Others when they conflict with one's subjective individual understanding of oneself. Correctly attended to, these conditions will bring to the table the imperative for ethical consideration and provide an argument for reconnecting methodology to ontological incoherence if and when it becomes formalized, complaisant and

disconnected from how it interacts with life.

Contextual Overview

2.1 Rationale for Methodology

Besides looking at whiteness studies to contextualize the problem of whiteness as a racial construct and explicate my position in relation to that scholarship, I have made use of a number of practical methods and theoretical discourses from various fields and contexts to complete this PhD. Initially I looked away from artistic practice to formulate the methodology. In this phase (2005), I considered the links that the project has with *auto-ethnography* and *self-reflective participant observation*, through its focus on the subjective experience. Significantly these methods take shape as narratives; they are ‘a genre of writing and research that connects the personal to the cultural placing the self within a social context’ (Reed-Danahay 1997) and often resist having a hypothesis.

However, as my methodology took shape and I grew more aware of the need to look at whiteness, which constituted a kind of hypothesis, it seemed that my research question could be theoretically contextualized more productively through *intersectionality*. In her essay ‘The Complexity of Intersectionality’ (2005), Lesley McCall describes how different ways of employing the method of intersectionality have enabled feminists to visualize how people’s particular identities shift position depending on specific locations and/or cultural practices. The methodology of intersectionality is roughly divided into three major groupings with different procedural approaches. This research would be specified as using the ‘*Intra-Categorical Complexity*’ approach, which is carried out by narrating ‘an individual or an individual’s experience and extrapolat[ing]

illustratively to the broader social location embodied by the individual' (McCall 2005, p. 1774) to visualize how 'differences intersect within a particular person's identity or in a specific social practice or location' (Davis 2008, p. 75). The intra-categorical approach 'acknowledges the stable and even durable relationships that social categories represent at any given point in time, though it also maintains a critical stance toward categories' (McCall 2005, p. 1774). The rationale for this strategy is that it is assumed that a total departure from the concept of social categories makes examinations unmanageable. The prospect of connecting to a framework that had developed theories of the individual subject's experience as an analytical location to consider the ontology of categorical implications seemed to present a way of contextualizing the combined use of self-portraiture, staged and documentary images and the objective of examining whiteness within a political and social framework. As the research developed, I became increasingly aware of the obvious overlaps of this method and the practice of looking at, and visually narrating, one's own reflection to express in different ways how one is influenced by, or experiences, the environment (as well as how one relates to one's social surroundings), which has been common in photographic artistic practice for a long time.



Figure 11. Pierson, *The Countess of Castiglione* (c.1863/66).

There is, for example, the early work by the Countess of Castiglione (1837–99) who in the latter part of the nineteenth century commissioned some 700 self-portraits, which are alternately thought of as reproductive of a patriarchal structure gaze (Solomon-Godeau 1986) or a self-styled representation through a play with different identities (Smith 1999).



Figure 12. Claude Cahun, Untitled (undated).

There are also the self-portraits expressing gendered ambiguity by surrealist Claude Cahun (born 1894 -1954) whose writing and photography resemble auto-fictions (a kind of fictive autobiography).



Figure 13. Ana Mendieta, *Imagen de Yagul* (1973).

Ana Mendieta (1948–85) used her own body to stage rape scenes in response to such a crime on her university campus in the 1970s as well as to respond and connect to human relationships to nature and spirituality.



Figure 14. *Nan one month after being battered* (1984).

Nan Goldin's (born 1953) work *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency* from the beginning of the 1980s takes an auteur-style departure to narrate relationships within her social circles.



Figure 15. Cindy Sherman, *Untitled Film Still, no. 66* (1980).

•Cindy Sherman (born 1954) uses her own body to make the photographic series in which she plays with representations of identities but consistently argues that they have nothing to do with her own person (e.g. *Untitled Film Still, no. 66* (1980), Figure 15).

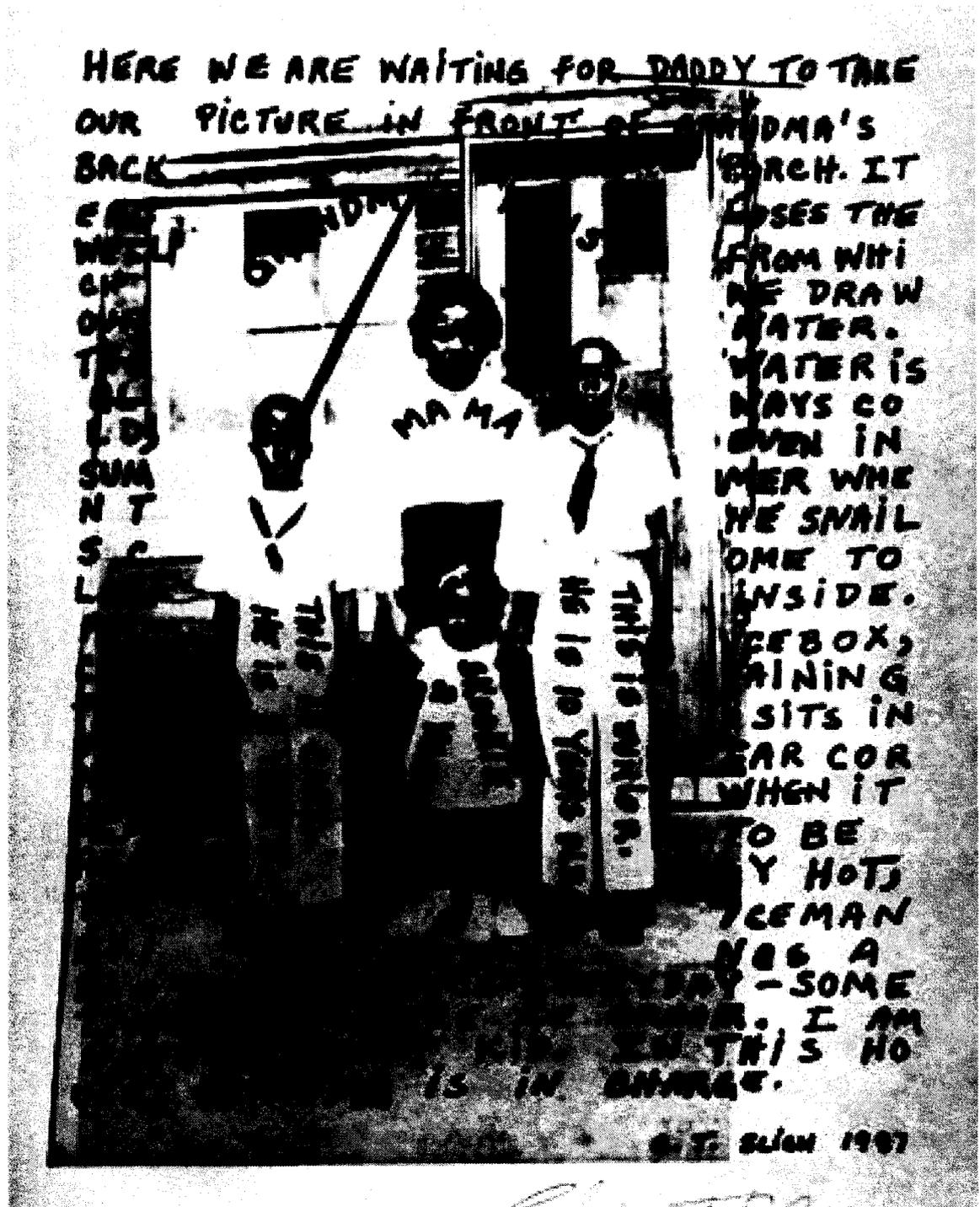


Figure 16. Clarissa Sligh, *Waiting for Daddy* (1987).

Clarissa Sligh (born 1940) combines an autobiographical documentary approach in found and shot material within a constructed studio practice in an 'insider and outsider' (Sligh 2010) perspective [as in Figure 16, *Waiting for Daddy*, 1987], in reinvestigation and re-evaluation of the family album.



**SHE SAW HIM DISAPPEAR BY THE RIVER,
THEY ASKED HER TO TELL WHAT HAPPENED,
ONLY TO DISCOUNT HER MEMORY.**

Figure 17. Lorna Simpson, *Water Bearer*. Silver gelatin print, vinyl lettering (1985).

Lastly, Lorna Simpson's (born 1960) image *Water Bearer* [Figure 17] is a self-explanatory record of white oppression.

These artists' use of their own bodies as means to explore and express existential as well as political limits and experiences of the world has obvious overlaps with my own, not least because they are women; but their methods differ from mine in significant ways. Cindy Sherman and Claude Cahun's masquerades parallel my explorations of different types, but they are set apart from mine through the consistency of using self-portraiture in a way that doesn't appear to have any links to their subjectivity (this is particularly true with regard to Cindy Sherman who explicitly says so) or their contemporary social ontological reality. While Lorna Simpson clearly operates along the same lines as I do by defining and challenging unjust racial delimitations in a social

space with a point of departure in the experience of being a woman (Figure 17), like Sherman she carefully sets her scene in a studio environment rather than in a social space shared with others. Ana Mendieta and Nan Goldin both explore relational and sexual violence against women, albeit using very different methods. Where Nan Goldin uses documentary or auteur-style photography much like I do, she does not involve staged imagery. While Mendieta's staging of violence to express the systematic nature of structural oppression can correlate to the way I stage my images, there is the important difference that I examine my structurally privileged position as a white woman defined by a supremacist culture. The analogies between my work and Clarissa Sligh's family album can be found in our attempt to use photography to describe, rewrite and understand a subjective social experience, but they differ in that my work consists of new material that I have photographed during my research rather than using and repositioning old material.



Figure 18. Lee Friedlander, *Madison Wisconsin*. Silver gelatin print (1966).

While studying these female artists closely was helpful in contextualizing my own work and defining its limitations as well as deciding on methodology, what enabled me to verbalize the return to photographic practice was instead the self-portrait work of Lee Friedlander.

One reason why Lee Friedlander's self-portraits provided this opening to return to a photographic context to formulate the methodology for this research is that his work often figures in seminal critiques of modernist documentary photography (e.g. in Rosler's 'In, Around, and Afterthoughts (On Documentary photography)', 2003 [1981]). Friedlander himself claimed that what began as straight portraits soon changed and that he 'found himself in the landscape of' his own photography. The work came about slowly and not with a plan but more as a discovery each time' (Friedlander 1970, np). Looking at Friedlander's self-portraits made me aware of how concepts relating to the shutter moment such as accident, the decisive moment and their perceived connection to truth and 'a notion of authenticity long ago debunked by critics such as Sekula and Rosler' (Davey 2008, p. 90) could possibly offer the best opportunities to explore how to visualize the unconsciousness of my whiteness because they could spur me towards allowing my intuition to guide my eye.

Friedlander's exploration of himself in his self-portraits is uncannily reflective of a generic white male's relation with the world as well as his place in it, but not as a particularly covert expression and not necessarily presented as being resolved either.



Figure 19. Friedlander, *New York* (1966).



Figure 20. Ana Mendieta, *Rape Scenes* (1973).

The shadow cast across the portrait of the black woman (Figure 18) in the shop window and across the back of the woman he is following (Figure 19) can be read as an intuitive exploration, an accidental re-representation or a bad joke. However, even if we interpret it as a bad joke, there are indications that he is troubled by what he sees, and in one incident he admits himself to be both 'fascinated and disturbed' (Friedlander 1970) by his own presence. 'In some photos he visibly struggles with the notion of self-portraiture, desultorily shooting himself in household mirrors and other reflective surfaces. Soon, though, he begins to toy with the pictures, almost teasingly inserting his shadow into them to amusing and provocative effect – elongated and trailing a group of women seen only from the knees down' (MoMA's press release for the 2005 edition of the book). The act of pictorially beheading women and inserting his disembodied presence into the images may have restored the idea of himself as autonomous but it also signifies male uses of the female body to assert control. However, looking at the images from the perspective of them being an intuitive gauging of his relation to the world, the reference to humour does not exclude the possibility that the act questions gender violence through existential expression. If one imagines him as a perpetrator but in an involuntary or unconscious way, one can see an expression of existential confusion in the work, which may suggest that 'they are not portraits but act like sketches of tentative identities being tried out to see if they fit' (Szarkowski in Friedlander 2005).

Juxtaposing his image of his own shadow cast across the back of the woman with Ana Mendieta's Rape Scene (Figure 20), one can read Friedlander's images as demonstrating a budding awareness of being a privileged representative of a culture

built on excessive violence towards women (whether he consciously pursues this knowledge or not). Similarly, Figure 18, where his shadow is cast over the portrait of the black woman in the shop, indicates at least a subconscious awareness of the message Lorna Simpson is conveying in Figure 17. In this sense, it is surely one of this work's greater strengths that Friedlander didn't censor his self-presentation in that role.

His first book of self-portraits was published 1970s, while most of the images were photographed in the 1960s. Viewing it as indicative of ideas about gender that were slowly emerging into social consciousness, it reflects the same kind of questions of invisible and visible oppression regarding gender as feminist artwork as, for example, 'Cindy Sherman's exploration of identity' (Szarkowski in Friedlander 2005).

If we take as a point of departure the belief that a society that is not permeated by unjust gender (and race and class) relations is a better place for everyone to be but that changes may cause anxiety, it is quite possible that the budding questions of gendered inequality that were starting to make their way into the general consciousness during the 1960s made their way into Friedlander's self-portraits in the form of conflicting feelings about what was happening. Reaching this conclusion made it clear to me that, while situating the work within another principle like intersectionality or auto-ethnography was initially helpful, the questions about what photography can or cannot do, needed a more open approach to account for things I could not anticipate. I wanted to stay innocent, so to speak, with respect to discourse to avoid producing a discursive distance between the subject of whiteness and myself where my 'critical engagement' situated myself outside '[the corporeality of] that system' (Ware and Back 2002, p. 29).

Thus, this research is not intersectional, or auto-ethnographical, or snugly situated within any discourse or field. Instead it is interdisciplinary both in the way photography is interdisciplinary (not only in this project) through the ontological and epistemological connections it creates and displays as well as through my use of theories some of which do not spring directly from a photographic/art context. I use a vocabulary that is taken from a range of theories and discussions (in particular Judith Butler and Adrian Piper) to write about the ontological and epistemological connections visualized by photography. While the research tests a first-person narrative to explore the implications of whiteness, the photographic connections in such a narrative take place between and with subject(s), photographer(s) and viewer(s), unfold in relation to different historical, contemporary as well as future contexts, and can tell different stories in different times. In this view, the photographs are articulations of injury and privileges that offer a ‘chance to elaborate on an ethical perspective’(s) (Butler 2005, p. 101) ‘in the particular, personal and immediate transactions between ethnic or cultural others’ with a point of departure in my whiteness as it takes shape ‘in the indexical present’ (Piper 1996 Vol.1, p. 247) to which these photographs connect.

2.2 Key Terms and Different Vocabularies

The use of key terms here is consistent with the way these terms migrate and change depending on their context and may not always be pure or true to the original coiners’ concepts. An example of this is *deconstruction*, which I use to reference a ‘broader more popular’ use of the term than Derrida’s ‘more technical application’ (Balkin 1995–96, p. 1) to make claims about language and meaning through the use of

difference. While Derrida's understanding of difference is 'not restricted to language, but leaves its mark on everything – institutions, sexuality, the worldwide web, the body' (Caputo 1997, p. 104), the popular use emphasizes a literary understanding of the word. In this interpretation, the verb indicates that 'the deconstruction of master categories is understood as part and parcel of the deconstruction of inequality itself. Since symbolic violence and material inequalities are rooted in relationships that are defined by race, class, sexuality, and gender, the project of deconstructing the normative assumptions of these categories contributes to the possibility of positive social change' (McCall 2005, p. 1777).

When I use the phrase *categorical constructions*, I am referring to traditional classifications of race, gender, ethnicity and class as different categorical groups. I hold the view that these categories are constructed but that they are organized in more complex ways than 'traditional analytical' (McCall 2005, p. 1791) constructivist social theory takes into account. Thus, I argue that it may be helpful 'to use the system of classification' strategically at points of time as if the groups actually constitute delineated categories to 'document relationships of inequality among social groups and changing configurations of inequality along multiple and conflicting dimensions' (p. 1773) as well as changing relationships and perceptions between different groups due to the complexity of sexuality, gender, race, etc. Thus, while the black–white binary connoted by the term *blackness* (and *whiteness*) generally 'inhibits our comprehension to the variety of racism and racial identities' (Alcoff 2006, p. 247), and for this reason has often 'undercut the possibility of developing appropriate and effective legal and political solutions for the variable forms oppression can take' (p. 255), not using them (the black–white binary) in this project would make it difficult to facilitate an

examination of white privilege as racialized. Whiteness, contrary to blackness, which needs to be understood in its 'complexity and pluralities of racialized identities' (p. 249), needs here to be understood as something that signifies all white identity on a cross-cultural axis. It is important to view this practice as an employment of a strategic categorization to focus on my own racialized identity on a social axis, where it brings to surface conflicts between black and white identities in a way that emphasizes both overt and subtle white privilege, so that my *whiteness* doesn't get overshadowed by my gendered identity.

At one point in the text, I use the phrase *political correctness*, a term which from the beginning had a literary meaning to describe oppressive or violent forms of action and language. In contemporary practice, however, it is often used ironically in politically conservative or libertarian contexts to dismiss policies that are intended to level injustices based on class, race and sexual or gendered difference. There is, however, a development where a cross-categorical address can be perceived as a form of representational violence, which has led to a culture of not speaking for the Other. However, as Spivak expresses it, 'To refuse to represent a cultural Other is salving your conscience, and allowing you not to do any homework' (Spivak 1990, pp. 62-3). My use of the term 'politically correct' addresses situations like the one Spivak describes but from the angle that avoiding representing the Other is an issue of misguided political correctness. I use it because I think it needs to be reframed and driven apart from the neoconservatives' ironical definition of the term where it is put to use to deflate the agency of political strategies to even out an unequally organized society. Avoiding its use is not a helpful strategy because it is still a very powerful term and by abandoning it we have to a certain extent left critical dialogical evaluation of important

anti-racist and anti-sexist policy-making in the hands of people who are fundamentally against trying to be collectively accountable for systematic injustices. As such, the possibility for critical reflection about what works and what does not work in these policies is hampered because, as the research demonstrates, it cultivates a tendency to institutionalize inequality – in this case, making whiteness abstract and non-subjective to avoid the locations where oneself is implicated.

The word *Other* is used in a psychoanalytical as well as a sociological sense. It is used as that which is imperative for the imaginary ‘construction of subjectivity’ (Burgin 2003, p. 134) as well as in the meaning of Other as imperative for categorizations of class/gender/sexuality/race/ethnicity as the ‘external elements’ (Alcoff 2006, p. 83) that constitute identity. Since these two ways of interpreting the term can be deployed simultaneously, I capitalize the word *Other* when it is intended in one of the above senses and use lower case in all *other* circumstances.

The term *narrated* or *narrative* is used to distinguish between what is told through the different relationships and stories a photograph displays. That which is narrated does not have one person’s signature but includes encounters between different subjects and the possible narratives to which the images can give voice. It is used as a counterpoint to that which is thought of as *authored* (writing, photography or idea) and which claims a definite personal originator(s). I do not see these concepts as opposed. Within the postmodern context, it is commonly accepted that one’s *subjectivity* is opaque or unknowable, a condition by which ‘I cannot make myself fully accountable’ (Butler 2005, p. 40). From a narrative position, it is suggested that authorship entails believing that one has interpretative control. This may give rise to a sense of interpretative

omnipotence, which fails to foster a communicative exchange or dialogue. I think, however, that believing that one can take a totally un-subjective narrative position when describing the world or one's relation to it is a kind of hubris. This kind of relativistic interpretation may lead to focusing on the limit of what one can or cannot do for the Other rather than the ethical question of whether 'one can contemplate being the other' (Piper in Alcoff 2006, p. 83), which involves a kind of identification with the Other, albeit not necessarily based on sameness along categorical identity. Thus, I think that assuming a certain form of *authorship* may be necessary because it makes it possible to understand or accept ownership of the control that lies in what one chooses to say or not to say. Thus the viewpoint in this research is that in certain circumstances this concept can help in taking responsibility for what one says or does. An eclectic use of these two terms may be indispensable in order to install a kind of elasticity in how we employ ethical activity. I believe, with Badiou, 'that in reality, politics must always take a point of departure in the concrete situation' (2002, p. 104).

The concepts of the *universal* and the *particular* are used in the same sense as Judith Butler when she says that it is 'precisely at the same moment when we think that the Other has taken themselves out of the human community as we know it' (Butler 2006, p. 90) that the ethical commitment declared by the universal claim is tested by means of its ability to prepare space for the particular within its (universality's) ontological field.

Using the work of Isabelle Eberhardt and Tété-Michel Kpomassie inescapably stirs references to *Orientalism* and *appropriation* and begs an account of the approach taken in this research. Regarding Orientalism, I adopt Edward Said's definition of it as a 'created body of theory and practice in which, for many generations, there has been a

considerable material investment' (2003, p. 7) and thus references it as such: a European epistemology that has to a large extent been culturally supportive of colonialist/imperialist expansion and because of this has effectively contributed to creating racial hierarchies. The latter term, 'appropriation', needs to be explained because although my use of Eberhardt and Kpomassie's stories and lives as research material formally resembles appropriation – in particular, my use of the diaries about their experiences – it should not be confused with this. Artistic appropriation as it was defined in the 1980s was thought to 'upset the foundation stones (authorship, originality, subjectivity, expression) on which the integrity, value and supposed autonomy of the work of art are presumed to rest' (Solomon-Godeau 1991, p. 128). The strategy was based on the idea in the *power/knowledge* discourse that epistemology and language define everything we know and, in relation to photography, aesthetic sensibility is not excluded from its definition that 'cognition is a process of ordering the particular according to the universal categories of knowledge' (James 2007, p. 3). The aestheticization of knowledge in post-structuralism saw science and knowledge as disguised forms of power or masculine desire (Email, Edwards 2011). Thus, according to this discourse, the ability to know anything is permeated by the interests and intentions of the white patriarchal institution, which held those powers and felt those desires. Applying this way of thinking to photography through the use of semiotics, various critics have argued that 'the notion of the purely visual is nothing but an edenic fiction' (Burgin 2003, p. 131) and suggested that photography should be treated as a text object rather than as an aesthetic object. But by subordinating aesthetic responsiveness to intellectual awareness, the idea of appropriation as described above by Solomon-Godeau makes the mistake of thinking that language and images 'can be reduced to the other's terms: it is in vain that we say what we can see; what we see

never resides in what we say' (Foucault 1994, p. 9). Thus, after the initial strategies of artistic appropriation, the actual attack takes place against the heart of the artist's own aesthetic sensibility, by reducing the works and struggles to linguistic terms.

While many of my images connote appropriation as a method (and in many cases to my surprise can be directly linked to an image I have seen before, as in Figures 22–25), I would like to suggest seeing the relation to other work as re-enactments or even inspiration instead of appropriation. These concepts, together with the concept of repetition and remembering are all 'anchored in the past in the way we experience the intersections between past presence and future' (Hannula 2011, p. 103). My application of the concepts should be considered, together with history (remembering) and social practice (repetition), to make a conceptual return to the *ontological* (the place where the experience of life takes place), which considers (re-enacts) the *epistemological* (the organization of knowledge). It is a method of understanding how the ontological and the epistemological interact to form our understandings, but it does not assume that we are hermetically contained by this interaction. Thinking this way permits utilization of the tensions between the manifestations of the epistemological and the experiential ontological in the corporeal. The past and the present converge gazes through the different photographic methods (the staged and the documentary).



Figure 21. Nina Bacos, *Sheltering Sky*. Contact sheet (2006).

While a certain degree of staging always goes on in any images just by the way the photographer chooses to edit, crop and shoot the work, my use of the term *documentary tradition* implies images that are taken without being pre-constructed but through the fact that something caught my eye. *Staged* images are, as the word indicates, preconceived and then constructed through different means to visualize an initial idea. The similarities in Figures 22–25 below are accidents that become appropriations, which visually situate the influence of whiteness on my aesthetic and my *gaze* by referencing Sherman’s and Woodman’s work where gender has been thought to operate more or less alone in a male-dominated world without consideration of other categorical constructions or references.



Figure 22. Cindy Sherman, *Untitled Film Still #48*, c-print (1979). Figure 23. Nina Bacos, *Havive*. C-print (2006).



Figure 24. Francesca Woodman, *From Angel Series, Rome*. Silver gelatin print (1978).

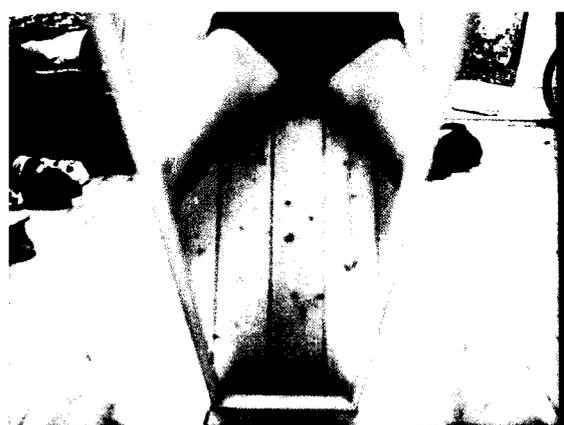


Figure 25. Nina Bacos, *Contact sheet*. C-print (2005).

While the images above can be considered meditations on a male *gaze* that victimizes and ‘reduces the female body to a spectacle’ (Chaudhuri 2006, p. 113), this research recognizes such an analysis of the *gaze* as only partially true. Instead it explores the *gaze* as an activity or pursuit that unfolds ‘the structuring force of (the colonial) narrative’ and white female complicity, by photographing myself *stalking* black men, thus reducing the male others’ bodies ‘to a spectacle’ or commodity for different desires. ‘In the field of vision’, however ‘no subject’s “gaze” is ever all powerful or transcendent’ (p. 112), and while these images touch upon the white woman’s complicity in the racial hierarchy and thus expand the field of the *gaze* to a certain extent, it remains structurally/culturally bound by how identity is popularly perceived. To break this bind ‘through which we are trained to see’ (p. 115), the images where I use *stalking* (*The Imperial Gaze*, *The Cultural Gaze* and so on) need to be read together with the series of images I call *Cruising Black Guys*, which reference Adrian Piper’s work *Cruising White Women* (1975). While the word ‘stalking’, which is what I do in the *Gaze* series suggests active predatory behaviour, signalling the brutal history of colonial remains in contemporary discourse, the aesthetics in *Cruising* re-initiates heteronormative gender orders. This is done to draw attention to the shifting conditions and relationships between different subjects’ identities depending on the surrounding environment. I have also allowed for the influence of my collaborators or fellow subjects in the images to stage any ideas they would have if they so desired. This should be understood as an invitation to make the narratives of many clear and visible so the photograph can be read both analytically as ‘part of the spectacle’ and performatively as a place where the subjects involved with the photograph (subject, photographer and viewer) might imagine relationships across categorical constructions that are not

restricted by the way we are trained through 'dominant fictions' to define those relations.

2.3 Brief Summary of Defining Moments of Whiteness Scholarship and Debate

Whiteness is considered an invisible racialized norm through which unequal asymmetrical relations between different racial identities are maintained. There is a growing body of work on this subject in which the issue is outlined and discussed in various ways within diverse fields. These include (but are not restricted to) Richard Dyer's work *White, Essays on Race and Culture* (1997), where he discusses racial imagery in film as central to the organization of racial hierarchies; Ruth Frankenberg's study *White Women, Race Matters, The Social Construction of Whiteness* (1993), which examines how race, sex and intimacy are played out in the maintenance of white racial privilege; Toni Morrison's *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (1992), where she traces how whiteness formed itself in canonical American literature through a racial subtext that relied on an Africanist presence; Vron Ware and Les Back's *Out of Whiteness: Color, Politics and Culture* (2002), in which the authors argue for politics that contest the normative racial mannerisms and privileges by looking at what happens on cross-cultural intersections; Shawn Michelle Smith's *American Archives: Gender, Race, and Class in Visual Culture* (1999) and Laura Wexler's *Tender Violence: Domestic Visions in an Age of U.S. Imperialism* (2000), which in different ways examine how photographic practices were implemented in the constructions of the white middle class and how the role of women was deployed to maintain whiteness; Tim Wise's *White Like Me: Reflections on Race from a Privileged Son* (2005), which narrates his work as an anti-racist activist while demonstrating how white privilege is

detrimental not only to blacks but also to whites (as well as offering practical examples of how a white person can counteract racism); and Maurice Berger's *White Whiteness And Race In Contemporary Art* (2004), a catalogue accompanying the first art exhibition devoted to the subject of examining 'the ever-present and unexamined state of mind and body, [of whiteness is] a powerful norm so pervasive that it is rarely acknowledged or even named'. In his introduction, Berger argues that 'By refusing to mark whiteness – to assign it meaning – we are also refusing to see a vital part of the interpersonal and social relations of race. In the end, any discussion of race that does not include an analysis of whiteness will be, at best, incomplete' (Berger in ICP 2004).

All these texts have in common the idea that society is structured by whiteness in a way that penetrates our culture on the most profound private and public levels. Most of the texts are written in an American context and although many of the issues are transferable to European contexts, I am specifically looking at Northern European whiteness, which, due to the different paths colonialism took, often left Europeans (particularly those from countries that did not have a successful history of colonialism) falsely feeling unconnected to the racial as well as the colonial discourse. This has caused 'Europeans to focus on the negative implications of the influx of immigrants from Africa and Asia' (Berger 2004, p. 7) rather than drawing conclusions about how European supremacist discourse contributes to the conditions that force people to leave their countries. Thus, they remain innocent of how, as Sven Lindquist argues in his book *Exterminate all the Brutes* (1992), the Holocaust was not truly unique in European history, but was rather the culmination of aggressive European colonial policies. To a greater or lesser extent, however, all the texts take as a point of departure the assumption that this phenomenon needs examination and dissemination if one is to

understand how whiteness reiterates and reinstates its power. Whiteness in these texts is examined sociologically, politically, historically, psychoanalytically and culturally. However, they vary in how they think the subject should be disseminated and what measures should be taken to dismantle the power of whiteness. For example, Kalpana Seshadri-Crooks believes that it cannot be done by raising 'race consciousness amongst so called "whites" as scholars in Whiteness studies suggest' (Seshadri-Crooks 2000, p. 36). Instead, she argues that troubling the security of all visual identity is key. Others like Tim Wise argue that white people's 'fear of alienating other white people' (Wise 2008, p. 90) blinds them to the obvious privileges they enjoy. Thus, making white people race conscious is an absolute necessity. Still others (such as Morrison 1992; Dyer 1997) look mainly at how popular cultural production/expression, as well as canonical literature, contributes to implicit racial hierarchies in order to provide arguments for analysing these productions from perspectives that take power structures such as racial hierarchies (but also gender and sexuality) into account. For example, Toni Morrison says that *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* is not primarily a critique of racism but a way of 'revealing how [canonical] white writers imagine black people, using the aesthetic of blacks as anarchy, as sexual license, as deviance' (in Lacour and Schappell 1993, p. 9) through which they create a completely racialized but invisible white discourse which functions as the 'powerful norm' that Maurice Berger mentions. Whatever the opinion, a shared feature in all these texts is the view that 'whiteness is a [invisible] visual regime' (Seshadri-Crooks 2000, p. 3), which reinvents its currency (power and privilege) through different frameworks and through racializing the other. In this way, race, 'even though racial difference does not exist in the scientific sense, continues to have numerous significations in a wide variety of contexts' (Lundahl 2005, p. 20; my translation).

I agree with the idea that whiteness is a condition that needs to be examined from various perspectives; my point of departure is this (in-)visible visual effect of whiteness and specifically how I embody this condition myself. The conditions under which I do this, which consist of photographic production and analysis, and trials from which I do not pull back when they implicate me in asymmetrically organized racial hierarchies, contribute implicitly to my contribution to knowledge. Since I accept the arguments for the need to look at whiteness, my work (visual and written) contains very few direct arguments for such a study. I will instead engage with how to make such a study through a photographic examination of whiteness using myself as a white female subject in a narrative that takes the form of diary notes (which do not follow a strict chronological order) to test the ethical valence of expressing my subjectivity across a cross-cultural axis. The arrangement of the exhibit is made to avoid suggesting that there is a stable linearity in the concepts the project investigates. In contrast to this, the diary notes documenting the research process are chronologically presented in the textual dissertation to make the research progression intelligible. I assume the position that, for a white person to understand her/his whiteness cognitively as an embodied function, she/he has to experience their whiteness consciously. This involves making conscious the effect of whiteness on others. In this research, this will be done by cross-referencing 'whiteness' with 'otherness' and as such the employment of others' narratives is essential.

Towards a Visual Methodology

3.1 Three Voices: Judith Butler, Adrian Piper and Nina Bacos

Kpomassie's story initially formed a geographical framework for the project. However, because of things I learnt while I was carrying out the research project, the influence of his story was mostly limited to some of the places I visited. I travelled and photographed in Togo, Ghana, Ivory Coast, France, Germany and Greenland, which were places he visited. Togo suffered a coup just a few months before I left for Africa. Thus Benin, which has a very similar culture and is a close neighbour to Togo, became my first port of call and was the place where I ended up making most of the work. On a second field trip to Africa, I also went to Nigeria.

To explore the possibility of deploying different modes of critical enquiry that were relevant to the research question, I took photographs while interpreting/experimenting with different photographic and theoretical strategies both in the studio and during the field trips. In particular, I deployed Adrian Piper's idea of an *individual methodology* (which assumes an authorial voice) and Judith Butler's examination of how to *make an account of oneself* (where she takes the point of departure that no authorial voice can exist). Oscillating between these two points of departure, I also explored aspects of some of the productions of the artists mentioned in the Introduction (in addition to others I discuss later, such as Kara Walker and Pope.L) and their methodologies to

develop the visual critical examination of the white self as a racialized individual embedded in a social context.

3.1.1 Adrian Piper

Butler's and Piper's positions can be seen as contradictory, which is reflected in their different views of the subject's formation. From this perspective, it is easy to draw the conclusion that their methods are incompatible. For me, however, their incompatibility offers a way to explore the method of using different critical strategies within one project. More importantly though, I think there are issues in these two positions that are not as irreconcilable as they appear. They are, importantly, both striving towards a platform where individual agency can be realized through an engagement with ethics.

Piper assumes a subject that can know itself. By treating herself as an art object, she 'become[s] increasingly reflective self-conscious' (Piper 1996 Vol. 2, p. 50) and creates events in which confrontation startles the viewer into a state of mind where s/he becomes aware of unconscious perspectives of their own relation to other beings. She calls the event *catalysis*, the body or object *catalytic agent* and the time/space in which it takes place the *indexical present*. She describes the term 'indexical present' as the here and now that is experienced by the subjects. The event may or may not involve a gallery space; often they are performances that take place outside the art scene as in the case of her piece *Calling [Card] No 1* (Figure 26).



Figure 26. Adrian Piper, *Calling [Card] No 1* (1986/1990).

This card is handed out in situations like the one described on the card to spark a catalytic reaction, which works on a tacit rather than an intellectual level and raises in the viewer a self-awareness of her/his implicit racism. Her method has a dual function: because her ability to understand the racist or sexist subject is dependent on her 'ability to confront' her own 'deep fears, fantasies and anger', the act of understanding it (the racist/sexist subject) also deepens her understanding of herself (Piper 1996 Vol. 2, p. 132). Self-knowledge/awareness sparked by the *catalysis* will ideally lead towards a permanent change in the viewer or confronted person and an eradication of xenophobia/racism in which the *me* and the *you* are together 'experiencing a recognition' that leads to 'understanding their pathology' (Piper 1996 Vol. 2, p. 133). Another less desirable goal (when the above is not achieved) is that the viewing subject will learn not to exercise its (often subconscious) bigotry as freely as it may have done before the experience and, because of this, at least no longer subject the object of racism to a racist practice. The fact that blackness is not always identifiable will, at any level on which this work is experienced, make its white viewer aware of the level of

instability of visible racial codes and biological assumptions, and, as such, destabilize the base it relies on.

3.1.2 Judith Butler

In contrast to Piper's view that the subject has self-awareness, Judith Butler speaks of the subject as opaque and inherently unknowable to itself because 'there is no "I" that can fully stand apart from the social conditions of its emergence' (Butler 2005, p. 7). Instead, a subject is the sum of a number of social relations. These relations are part of the 'I', but belong, so to speak, to the Other, which makes self-transcendence impossible because parts of oneself will always remain outside the immediate control of the 'I'. A prevailing interpretation of this condition is that any attempt by a subject to form ethics for moral action will fail because the normative powers of its formative social conditions will always inform its action. According to this, the subject cannot be held accountable or assume responsibility for how those relational conditions affect any other, even when one's own conditions have had a negative effect on the other. In *Giving an Account of Oneself* (2005) as well as in *Precarious Life, the Powers of Mourning and Violence* (2006), Butler tries to challenge and rethink the prevailing idea that this condition of 'un-know-ability' to oneself undoes the basis of political agency and moral accountability by arguing that becoming aware of this very condition is the necessary basis for forming 'a subjective ethics' (2005, p. 10). Her argument is that it is precisely when it seems impossible to understand, translate or accommodate something in the Other's particularity that universal ethics has a role to play. Only if Universality remains open to the Other's appropriation of its values can it be truly universal. It is crucial here that she uses the word 'appropriation' rather than 'assimilation' because it signals a plasticity of ethics in which the Universal is a negotiation rather than a static

set of values or a given timeless standard. Instead, the Universal should be understood as a concept in the making through a negotiation between the self and the Other. Butler suggests that one starting point for creating such a negotiation is to make an account of oneself. This account has to take place in an address to the Other and requires, among other things, an understanding 'that the self has a causal relation to the suffering of others' (2005 p. 12), which makes it possible for the Other's narrative to enter one's own. Making place for the narrative of the Other makes the account more complete (but never quite complete). The act renders, through the different narrations, the relational concrete; as such, it allows for a consideration of the ontological social (or indexical present) and it embodies a tangible situation in which negotiation becomes possible. It becomes mutual in its address, which is a necessary point of departure for negotiating between the universal and the particular without oppressing either of these two opposites.

3.1.3 Nina Bacos

As I see it, both Piper's and Butler's strategies are built on communication in forms that do not have to work against each other even though they take different philosophies as their points of departure. On this basis, I hypothesize that, in order for a critical visual analysis to go beyond an intellectual awareness-raising function (because epistemological awareness in itself does not constitute momentum for change in the experiential/ontological), any question one asks has to be asked from the perspective that one is living in relationship with the Other and that one's own position has effects on that Other's reality. In this case, aspects of examining this relationship have to take place in a way that implicates me as a white woman. To do this, I have had to generate

and photograph circumstances that visualize things that, due to my position at the racialized centre, I would not normally experience (or notice that I experienced).

I tried different methods, some of which involved elements that by method, choice of subject or titling can be seen as appropriation of other artists' work and/or the cultures in which I travelled, which functioned as a nod to art history as well as colonial/imperial history to contextualize a colonial aesthetic.



Figure 27. Guglielmo Plüschow (Unknown).



Figure 28. Nina Bacos, Untitled. Contact (2006).

The staged part of the project allowed for a certain authorial control in which I could gauge my effect by being able to choose the subject of my address partially through my choice of collaborators or as in the contacts below where I mined the possibilities offered by gender organization. Figures 29–31 were all shot in Benin in 2005 and 2006 to make the series *Cruising Black Guys*.



Figures 29, 30 and 31. Nina Bacos, *Cruising Black Guys*. Contact sheets, colour negatives (2005–08).

In many of my images, I chose to concentrate on the method of confrontation, which one can recognize from Piper's work. But in my work this was not played out in real time as it is in her performances. The confrontational was instead staged in the images in ways that jolt the viewer, as well as myself, into a conscious racialized viewing, for example, through emphasizing sexuality in racial hierarchies and practices as in the contact sheets Figures 32–34 below, which led to the image *The Intellectual Gaze*. (2006).



Figure 32, 33 and 34. Nina Bacos, *The Intellectual Gaze*. Contact sheets (2006).

In the second group of images, I offered myself to the gaze of the Other by giving up control of the camera and letting the Other photograph me as exemplified in the contacts below.



Figures 35, 36 and 37. Nina Bacos, Contact sheets being photographed (2005–08).

Finally, in the third group, I remained within a traditional photographic auteur role, shooting what came to my eye and presented me with visual pleasure.

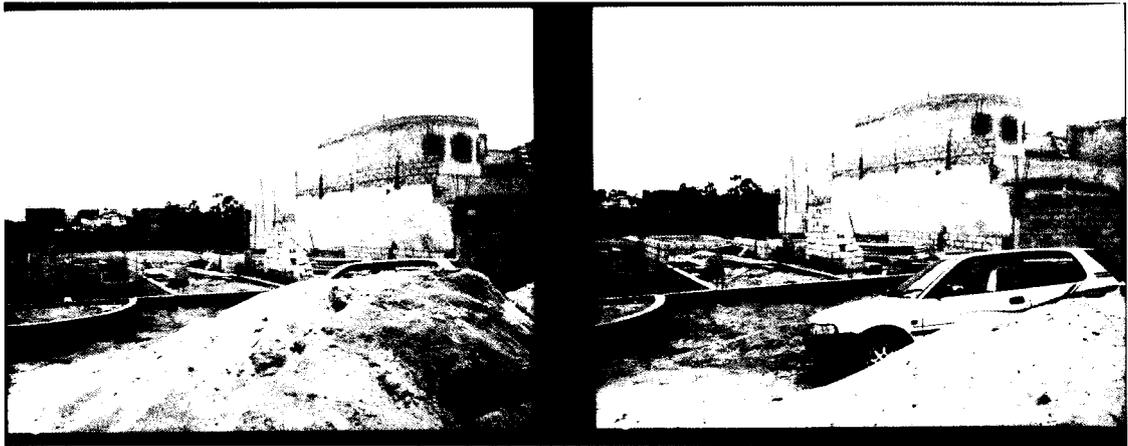


Figure 38. Nina Bacos, road trip Togo/Ghana/Ivory Coast. Contact sheets (2006).

The different groups were mixed together in the exhibition to create a narrative, where the different motives and causes for the images (the pleasure of looking, crossing the limits where I disregarded trying to resolve unwritten rules of representation across categorical constructions to test ethical limits and responsibility, offering myself to the camera, being looked at, etc.) came together in such a way that the research makes connections to an ontological experience.

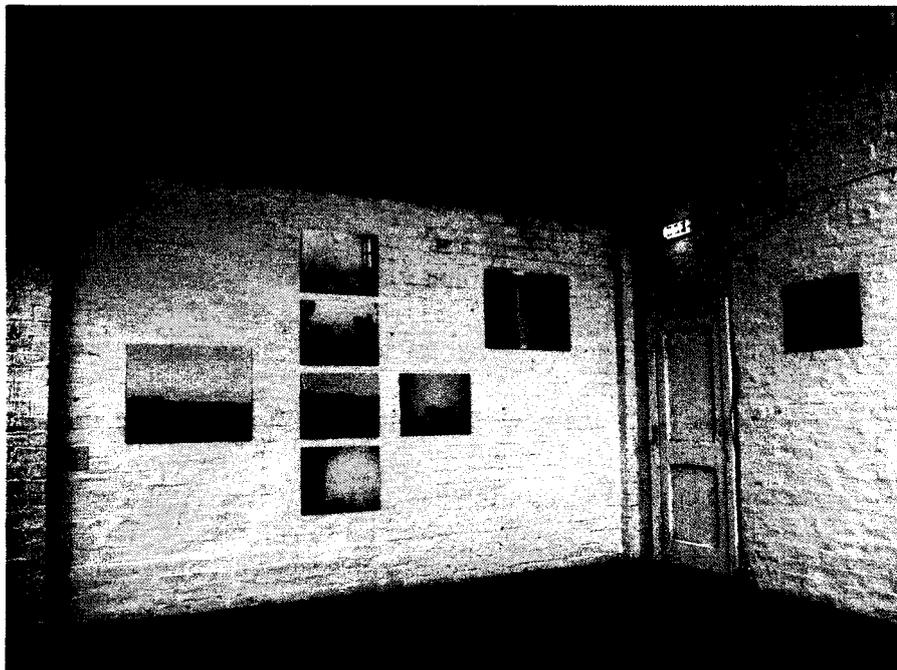


Figure 39. Nina Bacos, Installation view of PhD Material. Colour Negative (2011).

Finally, to position the work within a wider critical discourse as well as in the cultural social space in which the images are taken, their titles are derived from both the actual time/space in which they were shot and from films and books as well as key terms in visual studies to intersect the documentary and self-representative auteur narratives.

As previously stated, the images are intended to initiate narratives that bring on different forms of catalysis, which are both within and beyond my control, that bring my whiteness to attention. Of course, being white, the catalysis does not come into play in a cathartic way, at least not as a contingent status for the self, but it does allow for an engagement with the socialization of whiteness alongside that of other identity signifiers. It is in this moment that I find Butler's post-structuralist ethical examination of the Subject's account of itself as needing to be narrated rather than authored helpful. Granted, the strategy relieves me of complete accountability for every aspect (narrative) that the work puts into motion. However, understanding the nature of narrative as dialogical creates a place where I, together with the viewer as well as the other Subjects in my images, can create a space for negotiations around the issues that come into play to 'participate in the remaking of social conditions' (Butler 2005, p. 134). Accepting a certain opaqueness (incoherence) of oneself is the same as understanding that one does not and cannot understand or know everything about oneself or about others. More crucially, I accept Judith Butler's argument that opaqueness or the notion of not knowing oneself together with the willingness to be accountable is key to being able to have any kind of mutual communications. If '[one's] relations to others are the venue for one's ethical responsibility, then it may well follow that it is precisely by virtue of the subject's opacity to itself that it incurs and sustains some of its most important ethical bonds' (p. 20). Thus, it is through the relation to those others that one learns to

see and come to be oneself not only through understanding how one appears in the eyes of the other but through the relation with the other which takes place in a social space. This opens an opportunity for all involved in the relationship to have moments of self-reflective clarity. Aided by our reciprocal stories, gazes and consents, we can then together alternately author and narrate social changes.

3.2 The Orientalist Journeys of Isabelle Eberhardt and Nina Bacos

I made my first images on a trial journey to Morocco in June–July 2005. At this stage, I had not determined how to contextualize the subject of whiteness in relation to Kpomassie's story. As a first step, I decided to use the story *The Nomad: The Diaries of Isabelle Eberhardt* (Eberhardt 2003b) of a young Swiss-Russian woman who travelled in the Maghreb region in the early 1900s to experiment with how to work with someone else's story in relation to a photographic research project, where the visuals were intended to mobilize the narrative.

Eberhardt's life was unconventional, as was her death (she drowned in a freak flood in the desert, a little over four years after she first moved to Algeria). Her tale seemed as adventurous and certainly as enticing to me as Kpomassie's. Initially their works converged on three major points. Firstly, their journeys shared unconventional qualities: both travelled in places that were very different to where they came from and both transgressed the norms for their times. Secondly, her story presented the possibility of working with another literary blueprint than Kpomassie's, before embarking on working with his. Finally, Eberhardt's story seemed to have potential to problematize whiteness,

gender, colonialism and romanticism from a historical perspective before I tried to visualize the cross-cultural dialogue I planned to make with Kpomassie's story.

There are, however, as many differences as there are correlations in their stories. Kpomassie travelled as himself, and his reflections are calmer and more of a record of something that went on around and outside himself than Eberhardt's. His notes are like those of an ethnographer working from a participant observer perspective. Even when he is attacked by a man who calls him a rotten nigger, he analyses it from a distance saying when 'someone who uses such a name, it is always some embittered neurotic trying to work off frustrations that have nothing to do with the "nigger"' (Kpomassie 2001, p. 222). Hers are feverish, passionate and reveal an intoxication with the other and a need to be devoured by and to devour the culture and religion in which she immersed herself: 'God has sown some fertile seeds in my soul; my faith; an extreme disinterestedness towards the *things* of this world; and an infinite love and concern for everything that suffers' (Eberhardt 2003b, p. 134).

Although Kpomassie's text comments on how he feels and how he reacts from time to time, and also states that the journey changes him, he seems to remain grounded in his identity and keeps an analytical perspective on what he sees and experiences. On the contrary, Eberhardt not only dressed herself as an Algerian man and went under the name Mahmoud Essadi to get the freedom to travel as she wished, but she also seemed to want to lose herself in the landscape through which she travelled.

Her diaries bear witness to her concurrent inner soul-searching; she seems mostly but not always volatile and ungrounded and she seeks to transform herself spiritually. She

converted to Islam (not in itself an indication of volatility) and practised a Sufi version of this; she wrote reportage, smoked, drank, had an extensive sex life and was very contrary to her time. Her story is marked by her ecstatic lifestyle, and she often seemed to burn the candle at both ends. By contrast, Kpomassie does not give any sense of self-destructiveness at all but remains self-possessed/composed in his notes. He also enjoys the sexual freedom of Greenland but compares the attitude towards sex with the attitude he grew up with while his experiences do not seem to require he detach himself from his interpretation of his African identity.

After an attempt on Eberhardt's life in 1903 in which Abdallah Mohamed ben Lakhdar (a member of another Sufi sect) tried to kill her and during the French authorities' subsequent investigation, 'Isabelle realises that she is under surveillance' (Eberhardt 2003b, p. 100). She questions her attacker's guilt (claiming the man had only been an instrument for other powers). Soon after this, 'in view of the sensitive nature of her continued presence in North Africa' (p. 103), the French authorities found reason to expel her from North Africa. However, she had fallen in love with Silème, a young Algerian soldier in the French army. By marrying him, she became a French citizen and was able to return to Algeria. Although Kpomassie records run-ins with colonial authorities and writes about patronizing officials, he was welcome to stay in Greenland. He had love affairs, but he remained unattached, and his stated reason for leaving Greenland was a wish to educate other people and tell his story to them.

After the colonial degradation and the fight for independence, would not the most important mission for teachers be to open up the continent's eyes for the outside world? Should not I, also I, take part in this mission by bringing to the African youth my contribution to open its soul to the outside world. (Kpomassie 1984, p. 267; my translation)

Again, by contrast, Eberhardt was only interested in losing and/or finding herself in the desert; it seems that she believed that only in this way could she find peace.

Besides her diaries, which are expressions of her spiritual search as well as records of her journeys, Eberhardt was a writer, albeit one who published her work intermittently. Kpomassie wrote his (so far only) book in 1978, years after leaving Greenland. His descriptions of his own culture and that of the Inuit indicate a readership that is not familiar with either of them, which suggests that his audience is probably European. Eberhardt is better compared with writers (such as Loti, Gide and Vieuchange) whose work contextualizes her story with reference to whiteness, colonialism and Orientalism. Kpomassie's story, on the other hand, which is constructed from a mix of personal narratives, observations of ethnographic/anthropological character references to colonization and independence, is better compared and contextualized together with the social commentary of his era and a budding postcolonial discourse.

The differences in Eberhardt's story seemed to be useful for theoretical-historical contextualization, while the similarities of being a travel narrative made it a good choice for a practical exercise in how to work with literary stories as frameworks for making visuals.

In his book *Desert Divers* (2002), Lindquist travels through the Maghreb describing how Loti, Gide and similar authors carried out a certain amount of staging of their experience both physically and in imagination in order to lose themselves in this experience. In the process, he himself oscillates between personal description, critical

analysis and romanticism, doubling his own journey with the tales of those who travelled before him, who in their turn doubled theirs with those who travelled before them. He draws parallels between the Orientalists' methods and their romanticism, which gave birth to their desire to lose themselves in the mystique of the Orient. Their work is both the fruit of and a source for the European myth of Orientalism. It is created and maintained among and by them but was so engrained in their fantasy that these authors (and others) for the most part did not see how their romanticism created Orientalism. Further, they could not see how it served supremacist colonial expansion by producing an Other as a vehicle through which Europe could distinguish itself as enlightened and civilized while still having access to the mystic, the wild and the uncivilized.

The authors Lindquist is drawn to and writes about are all part of Orientalism, albeit with different degrees of delusion and complexity. For example, in the 1930s, Vieuchange dressed as a Berber woman (Figure 40) to travel to a ruin in the desert, which he had read about in Saint-Exupéry's novel *Southern Mail*. In his diary entries, he pretends that he is travelling with his brother, and he invents their joint arrival at the ruin without revealing that this is only a figment of his imagination.



Figure 40. Vieuchange as a Berber woman (Undated).



Figure 41. Loti as the god Osiris.

Pierre Loti (1850–1923) was a naval officer who created different versions of his own Orient at his childhood home, peopled these rooms with actors and himself dressed appropriately (Figure 41) to immerse himself in the context of whatever book he was currently writing.

Again and again, he writes the same novel. It is about a white man who has a romantic relationship with a woman of an alien race or culture . . . their love is estrangement, passion and departure. (Lindquist 2002, p. 50)

However, for Eberhardt, who like Vieuchange and ‘her master, Pierre Loti’ (Lindquist 2002, p. 90) took on a disguise, the disguise went deeper. In her diary entries, contradictory ‘disparate selves come into play’; she describes herself in masculine terms and may well end an entry ‘signing herself not Isabelle Eberhardt but Mahmoud Essadi her chosen Arab name’ (Eberhardt 2003b, p. 6). She identified with her adopted persona, but ‘put herself outside all categories’, and her existence challenged ‘the myth of the superiority of the white race’ (Lindquist 2002, p. 92). She understood her complicity in the colonial project. For example, she discussed her guilt when her husband took a job as a tax collector and she followed him on his journeys. In a diary entry, she contrasts the fact that his job gives them (for the time) relative financial security with her sense of guilt: ‘we became ashamed of what we were doing – he out of duty and I out of curiosity’ (cited in Soutine 2005, p. 6).



Figure 42. Isabelle as Saphi.

It would, however, be a mistake to conclude that Isabelle was a feminist or that she was free from racist thought; the workings of one's (hers and ours) context is much more complex than that. Both how we want to see her and how she wanted to see herself are of importance. The way she identified what was going on around her gives us cause to see her revolt against the norm as less unselfish or idealistic in terms of the critique of racial or male oppression than one would like to think. For example, full of admiration for the nomad, Isabelle describes as 'a vision of love and daring' (Eberhardt 2003a, p. 92) what could very well be a date rape during a rendezvous between a nomad man and a young village woman. She also used stereotypical derogatory language to describe sub-Saharan Africans. A young black slave who serves her is portrayed as too sharp for his own good and 'showing an incorrigible sloth and intricate animal cunning' (p. 66), and her colonial critique does not encompass oppression in the form of North African Desert dwellers keeping sub-Saharan slaves.

To overlook diary entries like this and focus on the more subversive parts of the story – the cross-dressing, poetry, rebelliousness, her promiscuity or her sympathies with ‘her Algerian Muslim Brethren’ (Eberhardt 2003b, p. 186) against the colonial power – bears witness to the difficulty we have in reading the complexities in colonial discourse. But we need to see this in its complexity instead of consuming them in such a way that our romanticism reiterates the spiritual function the colonies had for Europe as ‘a safety vent – as, an escape, a place to misbehave’ (Lindquist 2002, p. 124) or through overdetermining the legacy of colonialism in her story by ignoring the subversive power it has. We need to read the different narratives alongside each other.

For Eberhardt (as for many other Europeans), the Orient was a place where she could conduct social experiments that were not acceptable in Europe. The large body of literature these adventures gave birth to offered the rest of Europe the adventure and the possibility of Europeans losing themselves in the Other from the safety of their own homes. Eberhardt was clearly able to make these transgressions because she was a white woman and thus (although they regarded her as troublesome) had the protection of the colonial government.

However, to ignore her confrontations with the French authorities (in both their patriarchal and their colonial shape) as the spoilt whims of a privileged white woman and without any political consequence, which possibly could (and still can) inspire resistance to different forms of oppression is an equally big mistake. To write/say this is easy, but how can one manage to remain in this unstable place (where these tropes of resistance and privilege inform each other equally) where one’s activity is to do two seemingly contrary things consecutively? How can one engage with the insight that the

truth-values in these concurrent readings of Eberhardt's life/work have equal importance for understanding the instability of life and social functions and connect it to one's own lived experience? How can one prevent the suppression of one – her complicity or her resistance – in favour of the other and avoid assuming a control that simply does not exist? Keeping this question relevant in regard to whiteness is crucial to finding a way (and being reminded of) maintaining a complexity that allows one to remain both intimately involved with the subject as well as being at a critical distance.

3.3 The White Girl's Lament



Figure 43. Nina Bacos, Morocco. C-print (2005).

My quest at this point then was how to make images give equal attention to the opposites that Eberhardt's story reveals; the occurrence of complicity in racist structures and the occurrence of cross-cultural encounters between human beings that are not dominated by those power structures.

The journey to Morocco was intended to engage with some of these problems. Looking at Eberhardt's story, I was hoping to find a way to visualize the different opposing narratives between her and the imperial power and to be able to contextualize these in relation to the contemporary situation of the white tourist/traveller in the post colony. However, when I arrived, it turned out to be too difficult (and, in fact, unnecessary) to travel in Eberhardt's footsteps, so I abandoned the plan. Most of the places she travelled

to are located in Algeria and the border between the countries was closed, so I could not go there legally. In addition, the prospect of dressing up as a man in order to try to get closer to her story was never an option as I travelled freely in Morocco and had no need for such disguises. This first practical difficulty of how to get close to her story raised my awareness that using any person's story as a major part of my narrative would deflect attention from my own subjective experience. While both Eberhardt's and Kpomassie's stories offered a kind of practical, geographical and contextual framework, which I could follow, they also potentially offered a disguise to hide behind. There would be an element of whiteness as performative in a contemporary setting, which risked getting lost or undermined if I focused my narrative on theirs.

For example, by dressing up in a man's clothes, I would have historicized my experience by relating it too tightly to Isabelle's and as such I would have turned the attention away from the contemporaneity of whiteness. While the actual dressing up would constitute a performative action that can be linked to whiteness because of the Orientalist traditions, it would remain focused on the act of dressing up rather than the contemporary act of making the images. Contrary to Lindquist, who can explicitly oscillate between a literary travel biography and a colonial critique as well postcolonial reality in his writing, I could not see how photographing this way (by dressing up) would make an explicit statement of my ontological present. In order to keep the attention on my reality as a white middle-class woman who can afford to travel and is free to do so without any elaborate protection, I decided not to reconstruct situations described in her tale, but instead to engage with the situations I myself encountered.

When I landed in Morocco, I had no explicit plan for how to go about the actual photographing. Since my first main focus during the preparations was to make a critique of whiteness, I automatically tried to do something different than other photographers had done before to problematize or make visible the Orientalist gaze.



Figure 44. Nina Bacos, Morocco. Colour negative (2005).

But wherever I turned my camera, everything was breathtakingly beautiful. Even as I looked for ways to avoid repeating the gaze that exoticizes the country as well as its people, it seemed that I couldn't help but do just that.

After a few days, a friend of my father invited me to his sister-in-law's wedding in the countryside. On arrival, I was invited to photograph and in doing so I became even

more acutely aware of the impossibility of not reproducing imagery that (in my context) connoted an Orientalist or white colonial gaze. My father's friend had a digital camera and when he saw me take some shots he took the same image (from the same position) so I could in a way see some of the frames even though I used only negative film. A portrait of the young bride (not included here), dressed up and beautifully painted with henna did not look very different from oriental postcards from the nineteenth or early twentieth century.



Figure 45. Moorish woman.

As such, the invitation presented a dilemma: if I was going to photograph for my hosts, how could I critically reveal and problematize my own gaze? What right did I have to impose my questions on this young woman's wedding even if I did not actively or directly impose them on her occasion? However, at this point, the only strategy for finding an answer to those questions would be to cross what my conscience perceived as an ethical boundary. The guilt was overwhelming. However, there was something

about this guilt that made me decide to continue to photograph even in situations where I felt strongly that I should not do so. My guilt signified a point of view that needed to be engaged and ‘constructed with never ceasing attention and felt for responsibility for the’ narrative ‘act of speaking from and speaking with’ (Hannula 2011, p. 13) the Other in order for me to be able to actively access and visually engage with perspectives of my privileged position as white.

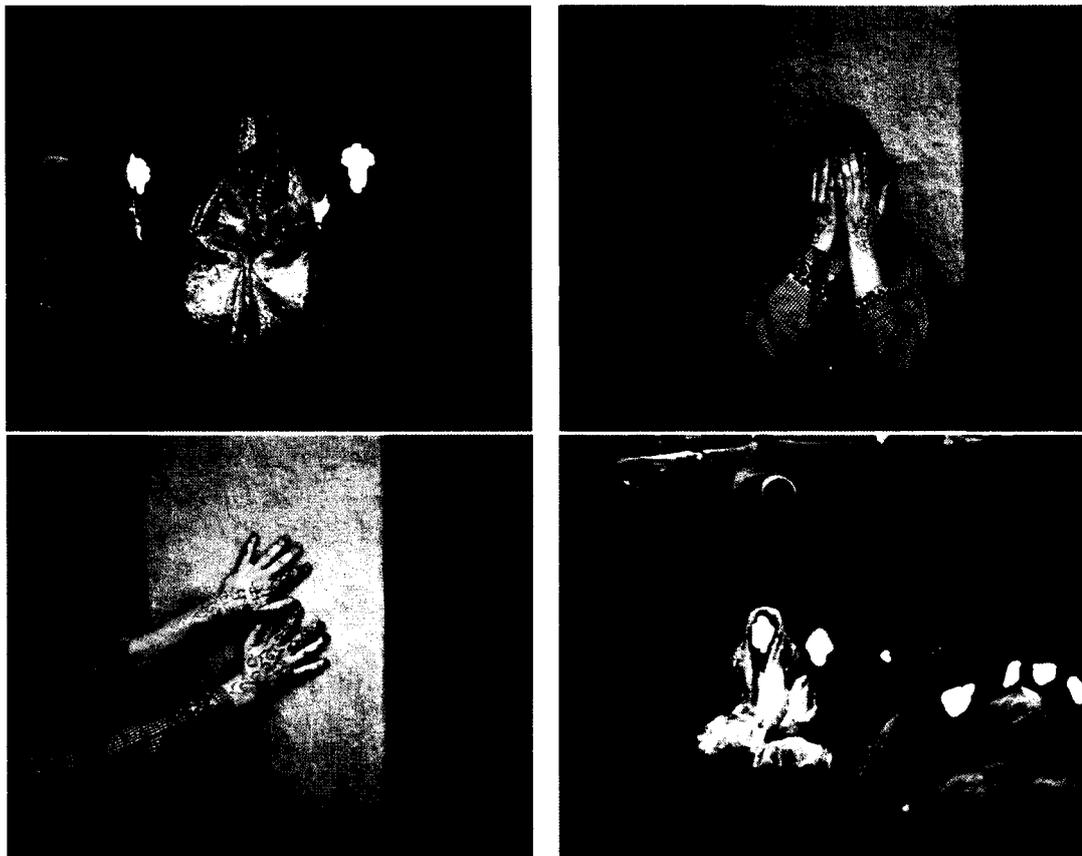


Figure 46. Nina Bacos, *The White Girl's Lament*. C-print (June 2005).

In the daytime, when the festivities were not taking place (the wedding lasted three days), I documented the surroundings and the house we lived in, and took some self-portraits. I tried to address my feelings – my guilt, my desire to avoid it and the impossibility of expressing it – without reproducing a common white liberal sentiment that Richard Dyer speaks of where the ‘display of our guilt is our calvary’ (1997, p. 11)

while yet revealing its (guilt's) central function. My desire was to be able to enjoy the situation of being at this wedding and feeling privileged not because I was white but because I was a guest and a welcome addition to the party. I wanted to feel comfortable with this and yet be in tune with my awareness. My guilt was that everything that brought me to this place had to do with my privileged situation as a white middle-class woman (and the effect this condition has had and continues to have on other people) no matter how aware I was of this. However, I had difficulty negotiating the complexities that were introduced by my encounters with other people. In particular, in the images, the interactions with my host took on a different meaning than they had when they were instigated. Although during the journey I normally and comfortably wore jeans and a T-shirt, my father's friend bought me a caftan to wear at the wedding because he felt my Western clothes would have created too much attention in the village where the wedding took place. A little girl had crudely painted my hands with henna. While from the perspective of a sophisticated postmodern viewer these images could connote an ironic cultural appropriation, their origin in two men's friendship, which extended to include their families, clashes with such readings. (Both are pictured in *The White Girl's Lament*, Figure 46.)

However, if this information is treated as one of many legitimate and possible (albeit personal) relations between the aesthetic, contextual and historical it may be possible to understand the images 'as being about relationships and how things are generated' (Hannula 2011, p. 12). In these circumstances, my dress in the images undoubtedly recalls the white people who travelled before me, and an explanation of the immediate contextual background could possibly be interpreted as an excuse and a way of diminishing my guilt. It also does look as if I am in disguise and am perpetuating the

myth of the Orient. It is as if I am losing myself in the Other just like Vieuchange, Loti or Gide, perhaps even trying to *be* the Other. In this vision, I join their escape from Europe and Civilization in the footsteps of Rousseau to meet and lose myself with the noble savage to reach a purer, truer state of self. My 'journey is projected in the philosophy and the literature as an existential trope, as a kind of compression of the longing and hopes about an idealised form of life harboured by humans' (Azar 2003, p. 20; my translation) *who are the Other that I make them.*

The fact that the underlying reason for my being there was a critical investigation of my own position as a privileged white person does not fundamentally change the process of the making of the Other. Like those who travelled before me, I also have longings that perhaps in a wider perspective are not that different. Eberhardt, no doubt, wanted to liberate herself from an oppressive Occidental power, and I want to liberate myself (and others with me) from the oppressive functions of whiteness. Like Richard Dyer, who raised this question when analysing white representation in imagery, I had to ask myself if I didn't reproduce 'the relegation of non-white people to the function of enabling me to understand myself?' (Dyer 1997, p. 13) My answer had to be that, no matter what our intentions were, both I and Eberhardt used the Other to be liberated from whatever it was/is that haunts us. For me, it was my guilt and my desire to rid myself of that, as well as my desire for a multi-culture in which I could feel at ease and at home; for her, I imagine it was her restlessness and spiritual hunger and the fragile transient home, the desert, her friends and life there seemed to provide for her.

The days in the village brought to my attention that, if I wanted to be critical and problematize whiteness, I needed, for a start, to situate myself more clearly as a subject

of examination. The cross-cultural meeting that I also wanted to be present in the work had to, in my mind, take the back seat, at least for a while. My reason for this decision was both because it was so easy to fall back on the pleasure that mutual meetings present, and also because thinking critically of those meetings seemed to impose yet another kind of Eurocentric view on the people I met and at that moment it impinged on my ability to photograph. For a start, I thought of things a white woman interested in other cultures (like myself) could be doing on a tourist journey in Morocco.



Figure 47. Nina Bacos, Belly dance. *Contacts* (2005).

The criterion was to find an intervening activity in a cultural practice that, from a Western perspective, would be considered very specific to that culture while at the same time being a living cultural activity that exists beyond its Orientalist connotations. The stereotypical choice of activity I thought of was belly dancing. However, in contrast to my initial expectations, there were no belly dancing classes as such for tourists. Instead, I finally found a gym where a combination of aerobics and belly dancing classes were given. The teacher, a Moroccan woman, agreed to take me on and give me a lesson in straight belly dancing in the break between two classes. After the first shoot, she asked

me to come back later that afternoon to work some more. In the afternoon, she brought some outfits for the shoot; some of them were of a stereotypical design like the one shown in Figure 47, but others were more reminiscent of cocktail eveningwear than of what Westerners normally associate with belly dancing.



Figure 48. Nina Bacos, Belly dance. Contacts (2005).

The dance session duplicated the feeling of an Orientalist costume party, which became fractured by the milieu of the gym as well as the change of dress. The red banner with oriental calligraphy in black indicating that the club also hosts a martial arts club, the gymnasium wood flooring and the mirror for dance and aerobic classes created a crack in the exotic vision that would normally follow the vision or fantasy of the harem-like dress and belly dancing. The dresses provided by the teacher are indicative of how the Orientalist visualizations of North Africa also have another life with different meanings and connotations. In contemporary Moroccan popular cultural production as well as in traditional life, belly dancing is practised in ways that are separate from European imperial and critical constructions as well as in ways that cater to them. The critical discourse about the cultural construction of the Orient as ‘a tradition of thought, imagery, and vocabulary that has given it reality and presence for the west’ (Said 2003, p. 5) that informed me seemed to consume something that was alive quite independently

of the tradition to which this discourse belongs. Although the European image of the Orient has written the Other as something that somehow exists for the benefit (but also because) of the West (and still often does so quite unabashedly as in the BBC advertisement below), there is something deeply disturbing and possibly dangerous about not looking for where alternate realities may spring to life while also speaking frankly and openly about the continuation of the colonial practices.

We are interwoven with what has come before us, and no matter how we try to take responsibility for this, some involvement will seem in part to re-create the historical act of consuming the Other's body and culture. However, while speaking of my experience of guilt or complicity involves a certain exposure, which 'cannot be narrated' (Butler 2005, p. 39) because the 'social conditions of my existence are never fully willed by me and there is no agency apart from such conditions and their unwilled effect' (Butler 2010, p. 171). Instead it is a case where my attempt gets invaded by other accounts, both those that will conform to mine and those that will disavow it. My complicity in the structure to which I belong informs every attempt to take responsibility. 'I cannot give an account of it, even though it structures any account I might give' (Butler 2005, p. 35). I can aim to place myself outside and make a critique, but such an assumption superficially stops the here and now. Through placing myself/the critic outside of the experiential, I distance my corporeality from the here and now instead of taking responsibility for the position I am in. Whereas belly dancing provided a visually obvious event to photograph, in order to capture the imaginary functions of Orientalism in the Western mind, and as such formed a way to work around the practice of exoticizing the Other's cultures, it did not solve the problem of how to address the subtleties in cross-cultural human encounters.



Figure 49. Nina Bacos, *Africa Lives on BBC*, Glasgow. Contacts, colour negative (2005).

The dance classes' very crude and obvious connotations would require a much finer approach to the documentary material if they were to succeed in making the oscillation between the interpersonal and the structural that I was aiming for in a way that was consistent with my aim to test the ethical limitations. After the belly dancing shots, I continued to photograph myself in different environments, as well as just photographing what was around me. None of these shots gave me a feeling that they would lead somewhere or that the images had a connection to each other and the project other than on a superficial level.

I also photographed myself together with different men I met. I had anticipated that opportunities to do this would arise because I was travelling alone and, as a single woman, I expected that different men would approach me. This was the only thing I was able to foresee happening with any certainty. As such, it was the only concrete plan for photographing that I had from the very beginning, and which I carried out to the very end of the research.



Figure 50. Nina Bacos, Morocco Prelude to *Cruising Black Guys*. Colour negative (June 2005).

That I had been able to foresee this later made me realize how acutely aware I am of and how I rely on my gender to negotiate my surroundings despite not thinking that I do so. The images also presented a way of engaging with ideas regarding white female fantasies about the Other. Through this it was possible to connect to the practice of white female sex tourism and romance holidays as a continuation of the colonial cultural practice that nourished ‘the sacred image, fashioned over centuries of time: this image of the unharried, unconcerned, glandulatory, simple, rhythmical amoral, dark, creature who was above all else a miracle of sensuality’ (Hansberry 2011 [1969], p. 209).

Most of the photographing experience during the Morocco field trip (except in the images where I just let my eyes’ enjoyment rule my choice and in the case of the belly

dancing classes) felt disappointing before I had even developed the photographs. The actual shooting lacked the lust-driven motivation that usually guides my making. Even when I gave in to enjoyment and was able to enjoy the moment of looking and deciding to shoot, my experience was somewhat guilt-ridden. It's a feeling that with increasing assurance I treated as key to the project, not because I necessarily thought it could be resolved, but because in most discussions about whiteness the relationship between whiteness and guilt seemed to remain unresolved.

Texts like Richard Dyer's *White* and Vron Ware and Les Back's *Out of Whiteness: Color, Politics and Culture*, among others, warn about the inherent risks of talking about whiteness because it may allow a discursive approach to the responsibility/complicity that may separate the speaking Subject from the spoken subject. For example, in an interview, Vron Ware describes a sinking feeling when she was asked about whiteness studies as a specific subject: 'I had always approached whiteness as a relational category, part of a system of meaning about race, class and gender rather than something to be studied on its own' (Blaagaard 2011, p. 156). For Ware, the project is to take political responsibility for what happens in one's name. She describes how *Out of Whiteness* (Ware and Back 2002) was an attempt to 'engage with the work on whiteness being done in the US, some of which took a very conservative turn in the mid 1990s' (Blaagaard 2011, p. 156). In turn, the concept of white complicity and guilt is being put to use to make arguments against policies to even out economic injustices. An aspect of the development they engage with is exemplified by Shelby Steele's book *White Guilt: How Blacks and Whites Together Destroyed the Promise of the Civil Rights Era* (2006), where Steele uses a very convincing rhetoric to argue that white liberal guilt is the main background for affirmative actions rather than

genuine will to politico/social change. The centrality of the problem of the white liberal and his/her resistance to assuming a position of accountability is not a new occurrence. In her diary for 17 May 1964, Lorraine Hansberry, the African American author of the play *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959), wrote the following about a meeting, *The Black Revolution and the White Backlash* (15 June 1964): 'It turned out to be explosive. Negroes are so angry and white people are so confused and sensitive to criticism, but aren't we all?' (Hansberry 2011 [1969], p. 245) The sensitivity she speaks of is the precursor to guilt. She is fully aware of the difficulty of assimilating into one's person a systematic guilt that goes beyond one's own control. She speaks of cross-racial identification as 'a merger on the basis of true and genuine equality. *And if we don't think that is going to be painful we are mistaken*' (p. 246).

During my field trip in Morocco it became clear that the confusion and sensitivity Hansberry spoke about in her diary in 1964 was in essence still true for me in 2005 more than 40 years later. It is a central figure, albeit that the contexts of Morocco and of the USA are different, the issue of white privilege crosses over and it seemed that it would not do to try to find strategies to avoid it. Nor would it be enough just to refer to it in an abstract way that is disguised as awareness, which allows discussion without really getting under the skin of this very central systemic function of liberal whiteness.

3.4 Contextualizing the Practice in the Studio (Staging Exercises)

One outcome of the field trip was that I started to realize the futility of reconstructing someone else's tale, and it confirmed my feeling that the query of whiteness seemed to impose a kind of cultural imperialism on the meetings between other people. However, as I developed the work I realized that, at this point, failing aesthetically (both with connections into my subject and with how the images looked) was actually a better strategy than succeeding.

In my previous practice (discussed briefly in the Introduction, p. 17), I edited away anything that was not aesthetically pleasing and any images that suggested that I replicated a position of power in relation to someone whose identity would be interpreted as hierarchically subordinate to my own because this felt like victimizing. This can be clearly seen in the following Figures 51 and 52, which belong to a series in which I followed fictive refugees' journeys through Europe.

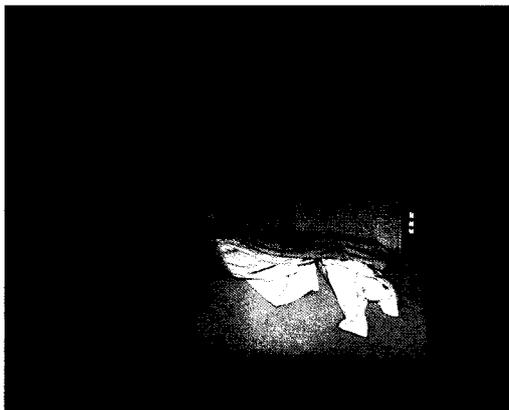


Figure 51. Nina Bacos, *In the Cracks of Migration* (2003)



Figure 52. Nina Bacos, *In the Cracks of Migration* (2002)

Understanding this strategy now as a reluctant awareness of complicity and a rationale for not troubling this complicity at intersections where it would be gauged as an activity, I started working backwards and tried to look at and work with that which was too beautiful, too ugly, too literal (Figure 46, *The White Girl's Lament*) or seemed irrelevant (as in Figure 54).



Figure 53. Nina Bacos, *Contacts Morocco*, colour negative (2005).

Awareness that the tendency to an ironic or blasé aesthetic provided a distancing effect between the subjective 'I' and research; the strategy provided evidence as to why avoiding a consequently ironical aesthetic was essential. This ruled out the possibility of

working with my body as raw material producing images unrelated to my own lived experience like Cindy Sherman (to mention one example of an artist who successfully has used such a distancing aesthetic methodology) (Figure 55). Further it emphasized the important conclusion that I should work with the aesthetically pleasing (and let visual pleasure guide my choices) to create identification in the visualizing experience, where the encounters needed to be treated as events, where trajectories were crossed, and individual positions could be seen as shifting through negotiations rather than static representations of a condition.



Figure 54. Nina Bacos, *Contacts Morocco*, colour negative (2005).

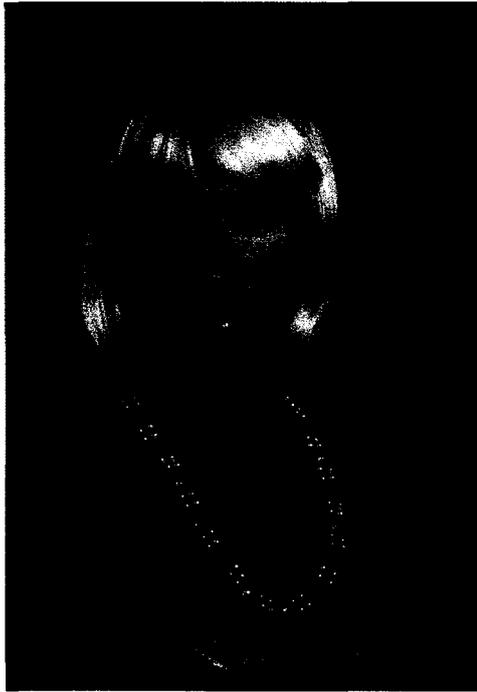


Figure 55. Cindy Sherman, *Untitled 402, 403* (2002).



Figure 56. Nina Bacos, *White Girl's Lament* detail, Morocco. C-print (2005).

The only work I manipulated after shooting were the images that are part of the collage *The White Girl's Lament*. Erasing the faces of the women at the wedding party was a way of reproducing an act of violence that made the Other replaceable, in order literally to feel how it felt to do so in a situation where I could pay very close attention to what I was doing.

It was a way of trying to physically experience making representational violence and to place it together with the guilt or the avoidance of guilt (through shamefully covering my eyes) in order to visualize the fractured conflicting feelings. After the initial act of making *The White Girl's Lament*, I realized that this way of working would be too constructed and too controlled. As a result, even as I erased the faces of the women at the party, I managed to author myself in a benevolent light.

On a couple of levels, this method is similar to how Jo Spence and Terry Dennett made the images *Colonization* (Figure 57) in their essay 'Remodelling of Photographic History' (1995). Their work focuses on the links between colonial/working-class oppression by imperialist capitalism and the oppression of women, in particular working-class women, and the women are mostly represented as (or in place of an other) victim in a rather overt structural manner. My research does not emphasize the links of oppression from the perspective of victimhood but rather through the links of participation in this system. As such, while the subject matter has overlaps (looking at the colonialist legacy and trying to engage with its meaning), the theoretical backgrounds differ. The *Colonization* images allude to historical anthropology and thus call into question a scientific and materialistic framework, whereas *The White Girl's Lament* alludes to Orientalism, an art/literature reference. Spence and Dennett's use of

costume brings in and aims to obliterate the mythic construction of the Other through staging the genres of photographic history and cross-referencing between the different genres. By visualizing the lack of clear delimitations between different photographic genres, they elucidate the aim of the ideological and temporal formations imbued in anthropological representation.

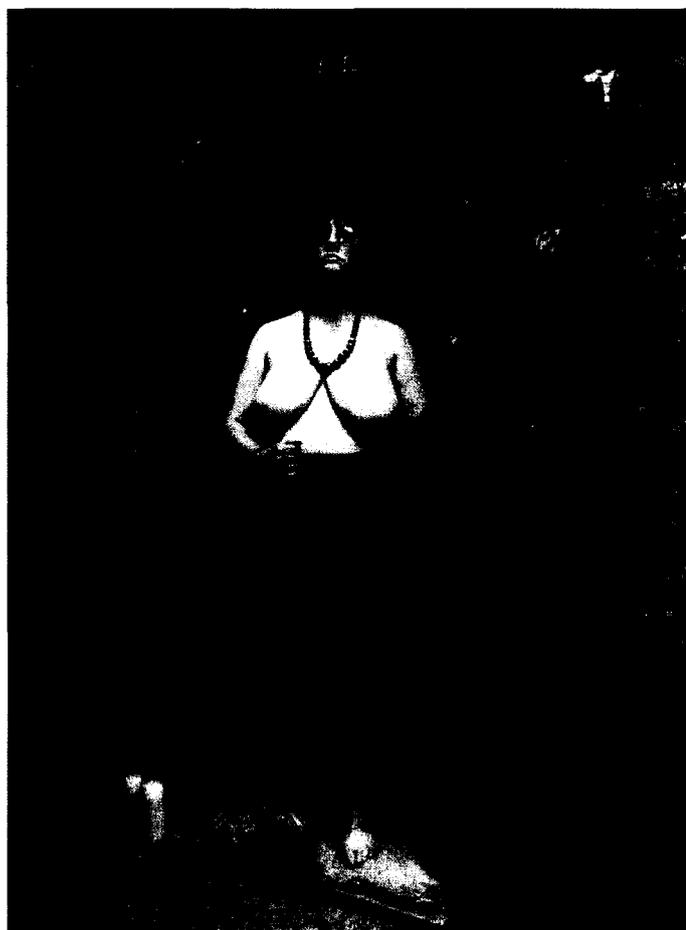


Figure 57. Spence and Dennett, *Colonization* (1982).

The props point out the halting of time in 'authentic' anthropological imagery, which uncovers colonial anthropology's practice of dislocating its subject from the present. The intention is to portray the violence of the colonization processes through Spence's white body by forcing us to think about the condition of the portrayal of the other female as exotic and alluring without subjugating that female other again 'without

recourse to the literal depiction of the body of a black or third world woman . . . by using the white woman's body to address issues around racial displays Spence and Dennett also acknowledge their own complicity with the racist structures they are attempting to critique' (Wilson 2005, p. 249).

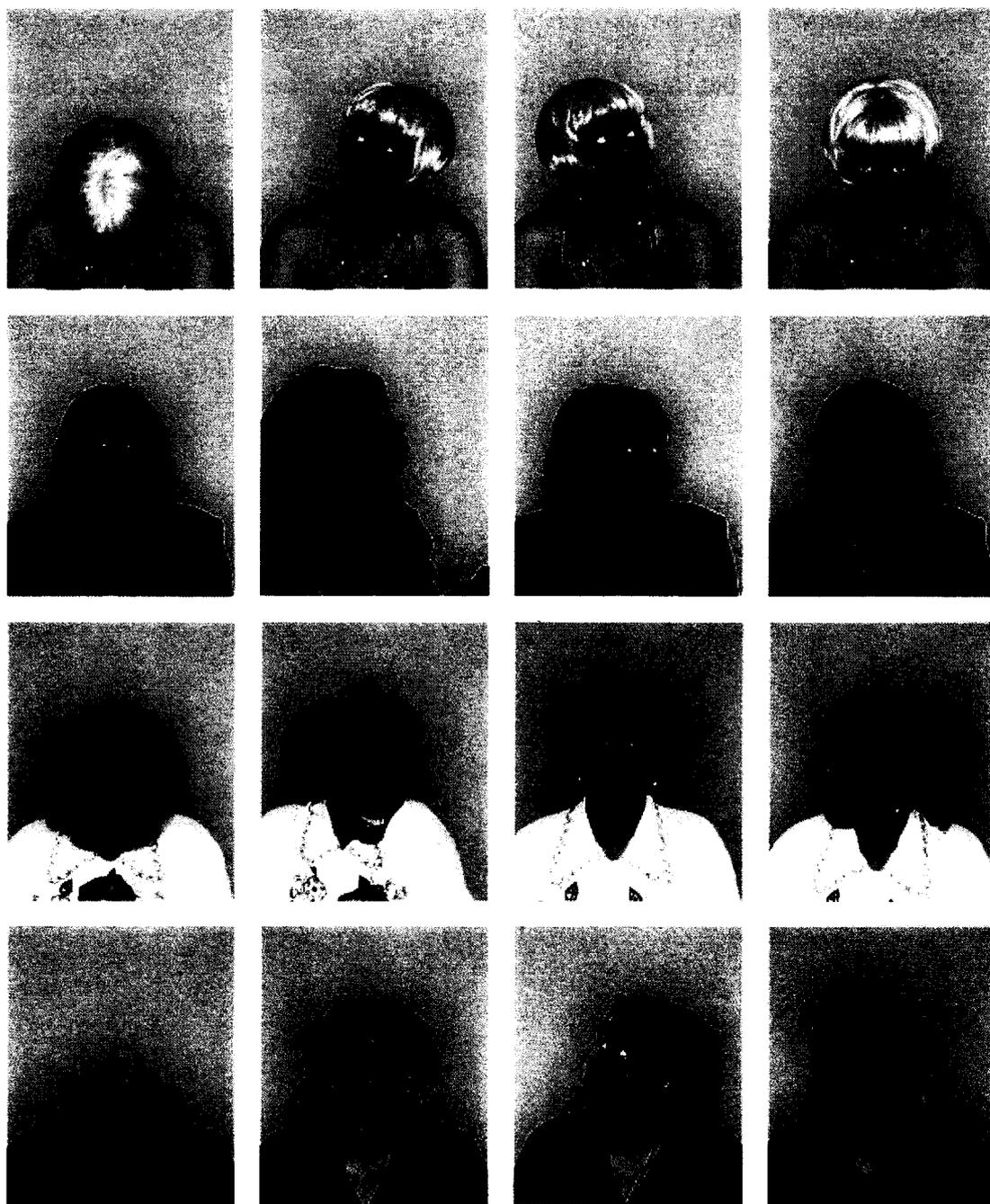


Figure 58. Maxine Walker, 1995 C-print.

However, while their work overlaps with mine in some ways, *The White Girl's Lament* has more in common with the contemporary use of self-portraiture, particularly by investigating identities through using costume and role-playing with various references to race/gender, sexuality and colonialism to destabilize the idea of identity constructions in late 1980s and 1990s black British photography. *The White Girl's Lament* is posited between Spence and Dennett and the works reproduced here by Maxine Walker in which she playfully examines femininity through racial and gendered discourse to challenge stereotypes.



Figure 59. Fani-Kayode, *Golden Phallus*. C-print (1987–88).

By reproducing guilt (with Spence and Dennett) and through a formal connection to the structural (with Walker), *The White Girl's Lament* is unsuccessful in 'creating space within a context dominated by' (English 2007, p. 32) certain forms of racialized identification like the image by Rotimi Fani-Kayode (Figure 59) succeeds in doing, by not quite reaching beyond the gestures of staging or beyond the staging exercise of white guilt.

Spence and Dennett's legacy is full of references against racist oppression, and Spence makes their awareness most explicit in her text *The Cultural Sniper*: 'Of course I am outraged as I have learned my history . . . I am outraged at what dominant culture (which produced me) has done in colonizing and destroying other cultures, other economies' (Spence 1986, p. 161). Within its contemporary context, this work was revolutionary, important and above all an inspirational attempt to find a way to engage with and take responsibility for photographic practice. However, I do not agree with Wilson that their acknowledgement of complicity is explicit in this image. The structure of their address is photographic history's complicity in institutional formations (i.e. the role of anthropological and medical photography in the development of colonialism/capitalism). The *Colonization* image reproduced here is clearly constructed on the idea that re-representation implicitly re-victimizes the Other. In this sense, the image is more articulate of what it set out to do (looking at the mechanics of the institutional use of photography) and of its contemporary critical discourse, which formed ways of photographing that were intended to question, for example, documentary traditions. 'When photographs or the work of particular photographers are characterized as "partisan", "subversive", or "critical", the assumption is that the photograph shows something that is already over and done, foreclosing the option to

watch photographs as a space of political relations' (Azoulay 2008, p. 20). In other words, the critical viewer's position permeates the subject of the image abandoning the possibility of seeing the subject carrying out an act of communication. If one looks at the *Colonization* image from Wilson's perspective, I think she lets herself be informed more by what she knows about Spence and Dennett's work as well as of their context than what the image says about whiteness. In light of this, their photographic strategy is more expressive of the guilt I address in *The White Girl's Lament*, where I try to speak about my inability to speak 'because I cannot find myself as the author of these actions and I cannot explain myself to those my actions may have hurt' (Butler 2005, p. 75).

Spence and Dennett's work was made at a time when photographic representation was being questioned in a number of ways through the framework of the power/knowledge discourse. It was a time when questions were being asked about the value of intentions by pointing out the failure of humanism and Enlightenment theories to deliver their promise of freedom, brotherhood and equality. Through this discourse, the relevance of the position of those who spoke was highlighted and the truth-value as well as the political benefit of the intention in documentary or realist photography was problematized in a series of canonical texts.

In her essay, 'Who Is Speaking Thus? Some Questions about Documentary Photography' (in Solomon-Godeau 1991), Abigail Solomon-Godeau argues that traditional documentary 'photography distinguishes between the worthy and the unworthy poor, while obscuring the larger economic order that contributed to their misery' (p. 179). In 'In, Around, and Afterthoughts (On Documentary Photography)', Martha Rosler makes similar claims that 'Documentary photography has always been

much more comfortable in the company of moralism than wedded to a rhetoric or program of revolutionary politics' (2003 [1981], p. 262). And, in 'Looking at Photographs' (2003) Victor Burgin discusses the structure of representation and how subjectivities and significant systems of meaning interact in images to reproduce ideology.

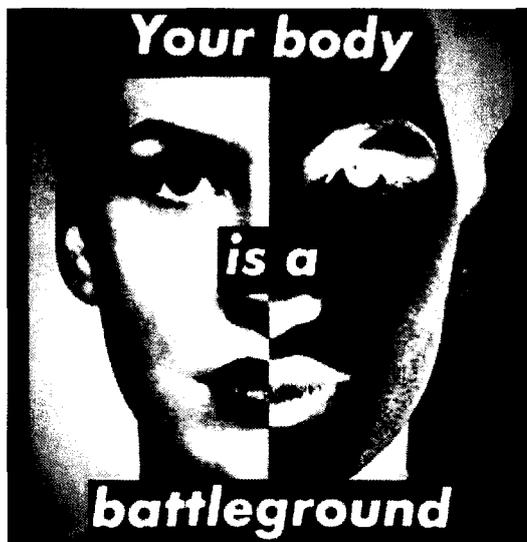


Figure 60. Barbara Kruger, *Your body is a battleground* (1989).

Spence and Dennett's work is part of this intellectual development, which resulted in many artists (e.g. Barbara Kruger, Figure 60) moving into the studio in order to reappraise and examine how their relation to the world as well as how the world itself was constructed. The many practices that were developed then have 'allowed us to comprehend the part played by photography in the workings of social power; the way it has pressed down upon the bodies of the exploited and the oppressed' (Edwards 1990, p. 63). However, while laying bare the fact that photographs are representations and 'not unmediated documents of pre-existing realities', it also 'at times led to the problematic assumptions that documentary realism was inherently non-reflexive' (Fusco 2003, p. 40).

The very obviously staged qualities of *Colonization* and *The White Girl's Lament* make our – Spence and Dennett's and my own – position seem less problematic than it is. In their case, it is a matter of examining a new theoretical and practical conception of photography. Thus their method of constructing the images – which can be perceived as a lack of connection to the unstable real that we inhabit – is an exploration of how the mechanics of power influences the ontological, the experiential or the indexical present – which has to be contextualized to their contemporaneity as Edwards (1990) does. In my own case, however, that staged quality to a certain extent disconnects me from the interconnected social space where power bears down on relations (by narcissistically staying in the lamenting sphere of guilt) and does not let the other narratives come into play on their own conditions.

Val Williams suggests that, due to a preoccupation with proving the 'constructedness' of realist discourse, the theories that followed the postmodern photographic/theoretical development disconnected from realist photography. Critics stopped developing theories about this kind of photography because it was assumed that the often large constructed colour images that became popular in the 1980s and 1990s 'were better equipped to overturn the ideologies by institutionally subverting the fictions the images produced' (Williams 2009, p. 56).

As a critical point of departure, *The White Girl's Lament*, although it tries to constitute a photographic event connected to a social space and narrate an experience, remains embroiled in the debate about the 'relation between what is in front of the camera and the culture that composed the photographed situation which has been at the heart of much Western photography theory the last 30 years' (Mbembe 2011). The staged nature

and the avoidance of dealing with what was in front of the camera, made obvious through the act of interference by erasing the other women's faces from the image's surface, shows but does not engage with the epistemic violence beyond the gesture of guilt and reveals 'a deep anxiety as to the constitutive elements of the Real' (Mbembe 2011). In this vein, the re-enactment of the guilt in *The White Girl's Lament* suffers from 'archival and academic actualizations that look too much to what was and too little at what is perhaps becoming' (Hannula 2011, p. 109).

As a result of these findings, I concluded that I should continue developing the way I had been working with staging shoots in Morocco but without manipulating them afterwards. I decided that the different ways of shooting (auteur, documentary and staged) would introduce enough instability to visualize intimate and structural experiences not as mutually exclusive but as complex relational negotiations. The censoring I had practised or wanted to practise in some situations in Morocco raised my awareness of trying not to let any feelings of guilt stop me from photographing whatever caught my eye. The Moroccan experience and the subsequent studio work suggested that it was the event of photographing (whether staged or un-staged) that would be crucial to the project. I decided to explore the idea that photography would provide a possibility for 'an encounter with the present' in the hope that images would then document 'an event of life' (Mbembe 2011). Hypothetically, this method would provide space for an analysis of the social/ontological/indexical present taking into consideration the epistemological/structural (not at the cost of it) by creating an account of the research with a reasonable balance between the individual and the structural. More importantly, the idea that the image can document an event of life implicitly

connects the act of photographing to the ontology of life where it intersects with Others in order to test the ethical valence of the method.

Ware's warning that whiteness studies may create a theoretical context in which white people through their critical engagement can 'situate themselves outside [the corporeality of] that system' (Ware and Back 2002, p. 29) reveals that the words one speaks can provide a safe space where one's person can be protected. As such, the discourse may produce strategies that avoid the delicate and painful spot that constitutes one's own personal involvement.

My hypothesis was that images could circumvent this problem because their dubious, complicated quality opened up for readings that exposed my own 'benevolent (or descriptive) as well as my ideologically' charged whiteness. My first theory was that working aimlessly would be more productive because I would subconsciously photograph in ways that would give evidence of how unconscious whiteness worked through me in order to address the tendency of white people not to think that race or racism concerns or affects them. While this did not mean that the staging practice would lose its value, as it provided a good space to process self-reflections and difficulties, it did indicate that ethically a step out of the constructed image is crucial if the aim is to examine the social space.

3.5 Discursive Myths, Sexuality and Desire (Staging Exercise 2)

The first and most obvious staging I did after the initial trip to Morocco was looking at white females' instrumentality in supremacist control of the black body. I was trying to find ways in which I could represent or visualize white women's curiosity, or outspoken and particularized desire for black men, based on the stereotypical black man created by this discourse. My point of departure was an observation of how, 'while one might think that desire for an interracial sexual contact represents a sign of acceptance of the other person's race' (Owens and Beistle 2004, p. 203), supremacists' discourse has travelled into contemporary popular culture and created a figure of romantic and sexual fantasies about the dark stranger. These tropes are not only found in white supremacist discourse, but are embedded and reproduced in whites' objectification of black sexuality. In the study, 'Race, Sexual Attractiveness and Internet Personal Advertisement', Erica Owens (2004) examined personal advertisements for heterosexual relationships in three groups: (1) whites looking for whites only; (2) whites looking for non-whites only; and (3) whites who did not specify any racial preference. She found that both the first and the second group implemented sexualized racial tropes with equal frequency in their wished-for partner. Furthermore, the tropes were (in different ways) always projected on the black body. In the white supremacist ads this was revealed, for example, through the portrayal of the white woman as in need of protection from the dangers of blackness (violent sexuality) in order to preserve her purity. In the ads of whites looking for non-white partners, similar assumptions regarding racially determined personality characteristics were revealed. These revolved around black hyper-sexuality, exoticism,

but also desire for the appropriation of the desired partner's culture. In contrast to both of these groups, in the ads where racial belonging in the desired partner was not specified, sexuality was not a prominent feature and the persons advertising tended to be more descriptive of their own characteristics rather than what they wished for in a partner.

Owens's examination indicates the tendency to look at the black body as a stable and unchangeable entity on which whites can project their fantasies and through which an investment in supremacist ideology can be traced where the person pursuing it would describe themselves as non-racist (as in the case of those whites looking for a black partner). To engage with this, I embarked on making images wherein I stalked a black man in order to try to visualize how the connection between the supremacist discourse and the desire for the Other's body can be played out. While looking at these examinations in the public sphere, I gauged them against Ruth Frankenberg's *White Women, Race Matters* (1993) where she interviews white women to explore their racial thinking. Describing how certain 'narratives articulated the idea that white woman signalled either inadequacy or perversion through interracial relationships' (Frankenberg 1993, p. 88), her work, read together with Owens's, marks out an invasive discursive corporeality of race that mirrors 'racist discourse' (Owens and Beistle 2004, p. 203) in both public and private life. Trying to trace the way the female sex gets to mean everything and yet nothing, in the sense that I had experienced it, I brought the work closer to my own body and started making images in which, using a mirror, I photographed the space between my legs in different positions.



Figure 61. Nina Bacos, *Meditations* Contact colour negative, Glasgow (2005).

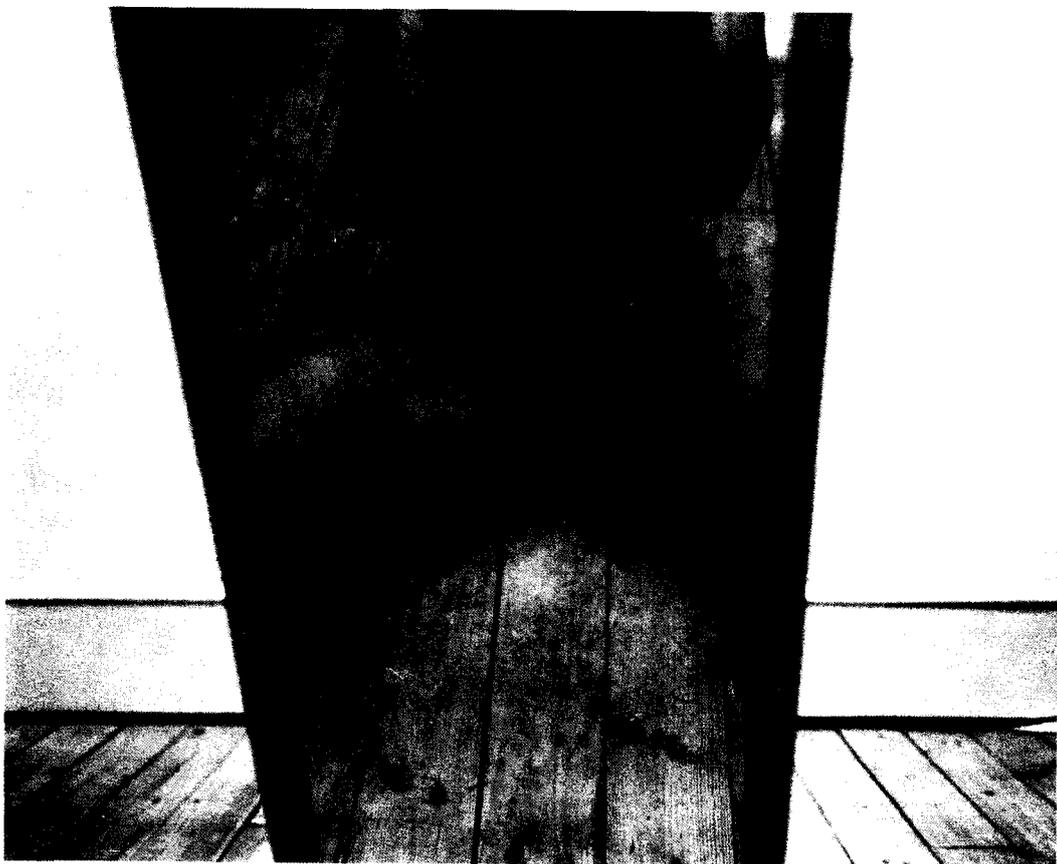


Figure 62. Nina Bacos, *Meditations*. C-print (2005).

The image accounts for white female interracial desire as inscribed with 'the myth of the larger black penis' and implicitly references 'male preoccupation with penile size as a mark of virility and power', which 'complicates and disrupts this myth, yielding conflicting discourses concerning power, race, and sexuality' (Lester and Goggin 2005, p. 141). The final image, *Meditations* (2005) is a meditation on how a return to the body/self may be helpful to 'discursive negotiation and struggle between authority and power on one side and individual resistance and participation on the other' (p. 131).

The pornographic connotations enforce both the act as an act for the self and the invasion of other sexual discourse, but it must be so. The body is never totally free from that socialized space and only by refusing to take responsibility for what the act may entail for others does it become a powerful and liberating act. The act of 'looking at sexuality' in this private reflection and then deciding to bring it out in the public space by way of a photograph 'disrupts the political agenda of social control' (Sigel 2002, p. 250). The act of making this public takes narrative control of how my body has been socialized in supremacist and sexist discourse and forms a starting point for a re-evaluation of social limits in the ethical space.



Figure 63. Adrian Piper, *Cruising White Women*, b/w photodocumentation of a street performance, Cambridge MA (1975).

Simultaneously with the making of *Meditations*, I started shooting a series of images called the *Gaze* series in which I stalked black men. One of the first images in the *Gaze* series, a street shot (Figure 72) is reminiscent of Adrian Piper's *Cruising White Women* (while other images, which were made later in the research, have more in common with the aesthetics of performance artists like Hanna Wilke and with self-confessional lifestyle photographers like Wolfgang Tillman and Nan Goldin).

The simple matter-of-fact difference between what goes on in Piper's *Cruising White Women* and what goes on in the *Gaze* series is that a woman generally does not have to actively cruise in order to flirt or pick up a man, and this fact makes a completely analogous comparison with Piper's work seem forced. However, a comparative examination as well as an account of how I engaged with her methodologies was imperative in developing a textual documentation of the *Gaze* series by alerting me to the circumstances in the social space around the images and the way the work has been received or thought of.



Figure 64. Nina Bacos, *The Imperial Gaze*, Germany. Contact sheet, (2005).

3.6 Cruising White Women (Cruising Black Guys)

In her *Cruising White Women* (1975) performance, Adrian Piper used a persona called the Mythic Being, which she worked with in various locations exploring different aspects of race and gender (Figure 63). The Being was performed and animated on public levels through advertisements in the *Village Voice*, at an interpersonal level on the streets of different cityscapes (New York etc.) and privately in the studio. The different versions or ways of using the Mythic Being provided a vertical research base for further output in writing as well as photographic and collage production in which Piper examined her own experience of enacting the persona as well as others' reactions to the Being. *Cruising White Women* is a photo documentation of a performance she made when she was a student of philosophy at Harvard. By immersing herself dressed in drag in Cambridge, Massachusetts, she gave herself a research platform to 'invoke perceptions of an altered state of being' to explore and express her sense of alienation to the environment 'in a way she rarely experienced in a day to day life there' (Piper 1996 Vol. 1, p. 147).

The *Cruising White Women* series itself is often mentioned in conjunction with the other Mythic Being work but never really exhaustively spoken about on its own. In Laura Cottingham's essay which accompanies *Adrian Piper: A Retrospective* (Berger, Piper and Fisher 1999, p. 66), the work is mentioned as one of many examples of how the Mythic Being drew on the fear provoked by the political demands for change by black male leaders in the late 1960s. Frazer Ward describes in an article in *Frieze* how 'The "Being" is clearly a racially charged figure, a fact made explicit in The Mythic Being *Cruising White Women*, (1975), and The Mythic Being *Getting Back*' (Ward 1999)

without further discussion of how the racial charge functions. I do not oppose these descriptions of the images as racially charged or dealing with a fear of blackness. However, it seems to me that the *Cruising White Women* series has not been properly mined for its gendered or raced meanings, beyond the intentions that Piper has expressed about exploring otherness, alienation and 'self transcendence' (Vol. 1 p. 142) to overcome limitations. Looking at the gendered and racial dynamic that is put into play in the *Cruising* series together with my own work, the *Gaze* series (Figure 64), which I performed in a similar way to and for the some of the same reasons as Piper (to examine altered states of being), helps to explore nuances of racialization that are pertinent to experiencing whiteness from within which one may normally do not pay attention to. By following a dramaturgical development in the *Cruising* series, it is possible to examine discourses where white femininity is put into play as a central but passive agent in racialization to build a case for exploring suppression and expressions of interracial desire. I will start with a description of what I see in the *Cruising* series and then move on to discuss the development of the *Gaze* series.

References to the *Cruising* series in a number of texts, it seems, have rested upon an accepted knowledge/assumption that the depiction of the 'black man' involved in the activity described by the title gives us unmediated transparent access to that which connotes the racialization and gendered-ness of the images.

The black man and the white woman as raced and gendered are central to the images. I would like to add to the readings of these images by trying to look at what it is beyond the physical visual signs that ordinarily read as race, which come to surface in these images.

The general setting for the three images that make up *Cruising White Women* is the Mythic Being hanging out on some steps in a cityscape and checking out the scene on the street in front of 'him'. A man, possibly a friend, sits beside 'him' casually dressed in shorts and sandals. It's impossible to tell how close they are sitting as the Being's body obscures the other man's, and we can only see parts of him. There is, however, something in their body language and similar casual dress that makes me imagine that they are friends out together and that the other man assists in the performance. In these images, everybody but the Mythic Being seems to me to be white. Both the Mythic Being and the man sitting beside 'him' are wearing sunglasses, so we cannot say for sure where they are looking; instead, we have to read their facial directions as indicators of where they direct their gaze.



Figure 65. Adrian Piper, *Cruising White Women*, Detail 1 (1975).

In the first image, a woman is walking in towards the centre of the image. Her body is placed on a diagonal to the Mythic Being. The Mythic Being, who seems occupied with 'his' own thoughts staring straight in front of 'himself', is not paying attention to her, and the white man's gaze is hidden by his hand.

In the second image, the Mythic Being directs 'his' gaze towards another woman walking into the picture who seems unaware of 'him' looking; and in the third, 'he' looks at a white male/female couple. In images two and three, the gaze of the Being's friend seems directed past the Mythic Being's face into the recording camera and thus onto us, the viewers. Perhaps it is coincidental, maybe he is checking that the timer on the camera is working; but, if we read it as active, his gaze makes us aware that someone sees us looking at the scene.



Figure 66. Adrian Piper, *Cruising White Women*, Detail 2 (1975).



Figure 67. Adrian Piper, *Cruising White Women*, Detail 3 (1975).

At first glance, the woman in the third image also seems oblivious to the Mythic Being's gaze but the man clearly is not, because he looks diagonally past the woman across the picture plane directly towards the Mythic Being. However, the unawareness of being gazed upon that the women in the images seem to express may not be all it seems; it may, in fact, be a strategy for avoiding unwanted attention. Ransacking my own experiences of being looked at by men, at least when walking alone, I recognize that a pretended unawareness is often the best method to ensure that I am left alone. Piper arrived at a similar conclusion in another of her performances when using *My Calling Card # 2* (Figure 68), which was directed towards unwelcome flirtations in bars.

Dear Friend,

I am not here to pick anyone up, or to be picked up. I am here alone because I want to be here, ALONE.

This card is not intended as part of an extended flirtation.

Thank you for respecting my privacy.

Figure 68. Piper, *My Calling Card* 1986–1990.

Instead of deferring the person she handed it to when they tried to come on to her, it 'would elicit further jokes, put downs' and 'attempts at flirtations' (Piper 1996 Vol. 2, p. 221). On these grounds, the images – particularly the second image – may be seen as dominated by the male precursor rather than a racial precursor. I write 'dominated' not because it's not void of racial dynamic, particularly as we know that, among other things, it narrates Piper's exploration of racial alienation. However, I propose that for a moment it may be helpful to stay with the gendered analysis and treat the (possibly strategic) female passivity as indicative of how gender and race can play into and support each other and interplay with the racial dynamic in ways that are more complex than previously mentioned readings have permitted.

While the first image sets the scene and the second caters to the gendered analysis, looking more closely at the third (Figure 69), which portrays the couple, reveals an added complexity to the dynamic of the series.



Figure 69. Piper, *Cruising White Women*, Close Detail 1 (1975).

In this image the white man's facial expression is difficult to make out, but his body language demonstrates unconscious (or conscious?) aggressive desire to dominate and take control of the woman by his side. The couple hold hands, but the man has placed his body slightly in front of the woman, as if he is trying to cover her body with his own by pulling her in behind himself. The angle of his body is such that he leans slightly across the picture plane towards the Mythic Being in a way that suggests that he has just moved into this position. His body, however, manages only to cover the arm and shoulder of the woman. The woman's head is pulled slightly backwards as if to give room for the man's head to turn towards the Mythic Being.



Figure 70. Adrian Piper, *Cruising White Women*, Close Detail 2 (1975).

Looking more closely at the whole series again, another gendered complexity appears. While we are busy looking at the Mythic Being gazing at the woman in front of 'him' in Figure 70, it is easy to miss the fact that the couple portrayed in the third image are

walking into the background. In this image, the woman's body is hidden behind the head of the Mythic Being's friend, and one can only make out her legs. The couple are walking side by side, but there is a space between them so we cannot be sure if they are holding hands. If they are holding hands in this image, their hands are joined in a way that allows them a certain freedom of movement. What happens when they pass the Mythic Being and the couple's bodies are positioned in the restricted way described above? What are we seeing? Are we seeing a man protecting his woman from the gaze of a strange man, any strange man? No, I see an apparently white man protecting his apparently white woman from an apparently black man's gaze. The woman seems active only through her passivity, or is she playing along, maybe even initiating the event? Is she perhaps leaning into the man holding her hand to lend some authenticity to her man's impulse to protect her from the black man's gaze through an act of imitated fear? Is she helping him to confirm that there is something she needs protection from?

The man would have been successful in covering his partner's body and face from the Mythic Being's gaze if he had been on her other side in last image of the series, but as it is now he can't succeed in this endeavour. I imagine it frustrates him and makes him feebly try anyway, hence the rather awkward positions of their bodies. Would he have reacted this way if the 'man' looking at his partner had been white? Would he have felt the need to step in, protect and stare back in what I perceive as an aggressive manner? I can't, of course, know the answer to these questions, but historically the white woman's body has had a precarious position in supremacist discourse. As 'her racial identity was essentialized at the top of biological hierarchy' her 'sexuality was posed as a force that threatened to destabilize not only her own social position but also the racial hierarchy she was supposed to reproduce' (Smith 1999, p. 148). The system that evolved from the

imagined need to safeguard the white race spawned ways of justifying the protection of the white woman's body (most violently in the white cultural practice of lynching) by creating images of black sexuality as specifically dangerous, animalistic and unfettered and in need of control.

I do not know if the couple in the image knew Piper and were instructed to walk past and perform in the way they did. I suspect not, since it seems to be her practice to give credit to her collaborators. Importantly, however, it does not really matter for the content of the image whether or not Piper was directing the couple. The white man in the image is for me convincingly responding to the conventional white idea of heterosexual black male sexuality as something from which he has to protect himself. He does this because, according to the racial logic described above, it threatens him with annihilation. It is the white woman's sexuality that sets the drama of the narrative in motion, but the drama, which in this case maintains the impression that white women need protection, takes place by her doing nothing. The racial play in these images, then, does not stem from the apparently black man, but from a drama set up in supremacist discourse, which too often goes unnoticed even when one is looking hard for it.

This analysis so far confirms the woman as a spectacle by which the male protagonists can drive events forward through the discursive effects of her 'to-be-looked-at-ness' (Mulvey 1989, p. 19). The structure of this kind of argument may not on its own guarantee the equilibrium for gendered (as well as sexually and racially structured) discourse. By precluding any activity on the part of the white woman towards the black man, the analysis here follows in supremacist discourse's tradition of silencing such encounters through both violent and discursive suppression. Simultaneously with this,

the acceptance of the passivity as a non-action also performs a gender-specific suppression of female sexuality, which reiterates the role of female white sexuality in racialization and imperial politics. While these analyses help us to see how gender and race have been played, the generality of the analyses excludes other histories of consensual interracial activity and the perspective of the white woman's desire for black man not only as undertows created through supremacist discourse but also as a resistance to it.

3.7 Other(s') Ways of the Gaze (Colonial Remnants)

During the colonial period, European travel writers contributed to the construction of female sexuality by establishing what Donette Francis has called 'a sexual grammar' (2010, p. 17). These writings cast black women as untamed, white Creole women as ravenous, white women as chaste and so on. Casting the white woman as chaste was integral to suppressing knowledge of consensual interracial desire between black men and white women. The same notion functioned as an implicit explanation for white men's desire for black women: in order to keep the white woman chaste he had to relieve himself in the arms of the black woman.

The notion is replayed in imaginations about interracial relationships, as in the following quote from Spike Lee's film *Jungle Fever*. In this scene, the main black character is having dinner with his new white girlfriend at his parents' house, and it is his father, Doctor Purify, who is speaking.

You think I don't know about the white woman committing black adultery, but I do. You see there were a lot of lynchings in Willicoochee Georgia from where I come when I was a boy. . . . Whiteman say to his woman, 'baby you are the flower of white southern womanhood too holy and pure to be touched by any man including me. I'm gonna put you up on a pedestal, so the whole world can fall down and worship you. And if any Nigger, so much as look at you, I'll lynch his ass.' She believed him, thought she really was holy and pure, like the Virgin Mary. She let him put her upon that pedestal. Meanwhile, the husband, no sooner than the sun went down . . . down to the slave quarters grabbin' up every piece of black pootang he could lay his hands on and running to the gin mill to brag about it. That's how our blood got diluted, mulattos, quadroons, octoroons. I am sure that most of those high and mighty ladies felt abandoned. But they were so proud to be white, and therefore superior, they kept their mouths shut and their legs locked tight. But in the midnight hour, then alone on the hot bed of lust I'm sure they must have thought about what it would be like to have one of them big black bucks their husbands were so desperately afraid of. I feel sorry for you, here it is the nineties and you are still trying to make up for what you missed out on, but I don't blame you. As for the black man, like my own son Flipper who odd to know better, had a loving wife and daughter, still got to fish in the white man's cesspool. (Lee 1991)

According to Francis, this differentiation serves not only to protect the racially grounded practice of trying to keep the whiteness pure, but also as a tool 'which is yoked to create difference between women and then harnessed to justify to denying' women 'rights to sexual citizenship' (2010, p. 17). The condition of white chasteness was passivity. To take part in sexual activity, the white woman depended on being seduced by a man of the correct colour, and when she didn't conform to this norm by having relationships with black men evidence of the event was destroyed. Napoleon Bonaparte ordered his generals to return to France all white women who had 'prostituted themselves to negroes' (p. 1). When the Haitian revolutionary slave leader Toussaint Louverture was captured, he had among his possessions a double-bottomed box, which hid love notes and locks of hair in all colours. The box was destroyed to erase the shameful memory to which the items bore witness. Francis's point in telling this story is to underscore not only the level of 'white masculinist desire to preserve the

white woman's honour' (p. 1), which made the generals disobey their orders and destroy the evidence that white women could desire black men, but more importantly the significance of the 'intimate sphere as a cornerstone of imperialists' and nationalists' projects' (p. 1).

Francis's assault on normative readings of gendered and raced hierarchies makes me turn the camera towards my own gaze. While I look at my gaze to find a language in which to speak about it, I return once more to how texts in which the *Cruising White Women* series is mentioned emphasize gendered as well as racial discourse, but how race remains remote and activated by the Mythic Being's body. The lack of involvement with the question of how race is aligned with narratives of gender, class and sexuality in the images reiterates the fact that the visualization/image becomes racial by the presence and performance of the Mythic Being. Likewise the image becomes gendered by the presence of the women. Thus it marks blackness not whiteness, and as such the texts pick up on the 'struggles of representation' instead of 'the politics of representation' (Hall 1997, p. 444). The result of this is that, although whiteness as structural is implicitly acknowledged in the texts, it remains invisible and distanced from the white beings' ontology in the image, whereas because whiteness is not marked, blackness becomes that which is raced. Whether in a colonial setting, where the relationship between a black man and a white woman could only be pictured as rape or white female prostitution to serve the idea of white purity, or in a more contemporary setting, as in the quote from Spike Lee's *Jungle Fever*, the union between a black man and a white woman continues to be presented with a sense of perverseness in the imaginations of both black and white people.

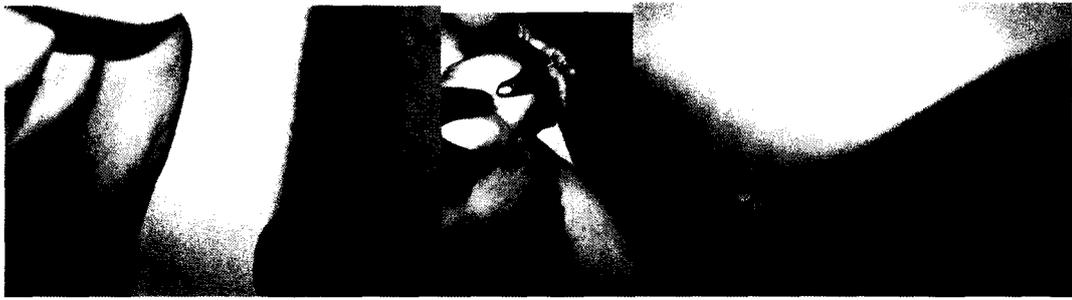


Figure 71. Nina Bacos, 'Our women are at the mercy of the negroes. God knows how they make love, it must be terrifying' (Fanon 2007p. 157), Benin. C-print (2007).

Piper addresses the issue of miscegenation from the perspective of white people in the video work *Cornered* (1988) by juxtaposing her own visually ambivalent racial heritage and 'white' connotations such as her way of speaking and dressing against her testimony to be black. In a video-filmed conversation, she introduces the work by articulating how white people often resent when light-skinned blacks (able to pass for whites like herself) identify with being black and discusses the racism imbued in this resentment from various perspectives. By addressing whiteness's supposed superiority and how this implicitly lessens the value of black culture (and the absurdity of this cultural division in a country where the determination of blackness is that 'one drop' of black blood makes you black), she didactically leads the viewer through a number of white presuppositions about blackness and whiteness. With a simple turn of focus, she forces people who assume themselves to be white to acknowledge that their racial classification is not only an illusion but an integral part of a 'system based on sick values' (Piper 1988). Her examination of race in *Cornered* shows how deep-rooted the problem of racializing is. The sense of perverseness arises from the idea of racial purity, which itself takes a point of departure in the idea of white racial purity, which arguably reproduces supremacist logic. Thus Doctor Purify's comment is not reversed racism, which is often the white verdict on black dislike of or revulsion at interracial relationships. It gives expression to the same twisted ideas about race and impure blood, and it puts sexuality and gender into play to uphold racial ideas in much the same way and with the same conclusions as major supremacist discourse. As Piper so

clearly states, the one who analyses race must be willing to say that racism is objectively wrong. 'It is not just wrong for me. It is not just wrong for you. It is objectively wrong.' (Berger 1999, p. 84) While the narrative relativity of the 'self implicated (in) a social temporality that exceeds its own conditions of its emergence', she also argues that the self cannot have a story of its own but only one that is constructed of the story 'of a set of relations – to a set of norms' (Butler 2005, p. 8). These norms demand deliberation on the set of relations through which one comes to be, which implicitly includes providing space for the Other to appropriate those norms and come into being. While Piper's objectivity makes the issue of racism crystal clear, Butler's deliberation on norms and the relation to the Other helps negotiate the socialization what happens when that Other rejects the self, as Doctor Purify rejects the white woman.

3.8 The White Female Gaze



Figure 72. Nina Bacos, *The Scopophilic/Xenophilic Gaze*, Berlin. C-print (2005).

Addressing white female desire for black men as an activity that forms a baseline in all supremacist discourse, I made the *Gaze* series. Using a methodology similar to Adrian Piper's *Cruising* series, I staged performances in public places to form a platform from which I could then go further in explicating different functions of how whiteness is played through sexuality. However, unlike Piper, I did not prepare for the work with writing (cf. 'Preparatory notes for the Mythic Being' in Piper 1996 Vol. 1, pp. 92–139). I made this choice because writing, it seemed to me, demanded critical engagement on a conclusive level, which would lead me to repeating what others had said (more accurately than I could) before me. The work was intended to address a sexualized and

a dreamy romantic perspective of exoticized as well as bluntly racial looking. I felt that in writing about what I did at the point I was shooting I risked censoring myself instead of letting my body/self and gaze act out racial positions in order to be able to look at the evidence. There was (and is) also the issue of actually not having the words for what I wanted to say. In all the *Gaze* images (except one), I did this by staging events in which I photographed myself stalking different black men. The embodiment and visualization of the experience of racial white female desire was intended to initiate a productive discussion with the critical discourse regarding race without being directed by this discourse.

My gaze through the window in Figure 72, *The/Scopophilic/Xenophilic Gaze*, where I look over my shoulder at the two men sitting in the café, is the look of Doctor Purify's white woman. But my gaze is not only hers 'who in the midnight hour, alone on the hot bed of lust thought about what it would be like to have one of them big black bucks their husbands were so desperately afraid of' (Lee 1991). My gaze is also something else; it is, in fact, many other things alongside each other. It is an interactive element in the maintenance of power relations. According to this logic, my gaze is directed at any black man; one is interchangeable with another, because black men can only be types, not individuals with individual personalities. It needs, however, to be perfectly reasonable to account for the possibility of de-racing my gaze by saying that the look could be cast because one (or both) of the men were handsome, looked like someone famous or like someone I knew, or that one of them or someone else did something that provoked my gaze. It is important not to disavow this possibility in this image because if one takes a stance against racism, whatever form that stance takes, its *raison d'être* must be that an un-racialized gaze is possible. Piper

suggests that racism ‘requires developing the very familiarity and intimacy’ (Piper 1996 Vol. 2, p. 247) that sexism is dependent on to form an ‘identification process, to eliminate the practice of “othering” people who do not look or act like ourselves’ (p. 249). Butler, on the other hand, does not look for or speak about unity in that way, but for ‘establishing living relations’ (to norms and ways of contextualizing morality within its social condition) (Butler 2005, p. 9).



Figure 73. Annika von Hausswolff, *Back to Nature*. C-print (1993).

Thus, even as I set out to speak about whiteness as a dominant racial signifier and as something that has to be made visible, it is also necessary to account for the possibility that an interaction between so-called races can be *un-raced* or *non-raced*, because if this option does not exist, we not only remain in the realm of race but we help build and support its unequally structured framework.

As the (post-)colonial white woman, however, I am in popular consciousness primarily still a victim; a fantasy is bestowed on me by another's acting, which gives me a place to hide; I don't have to see my activity because I can see my victimhood. Any activity involving white femininity can be directed by the role of victim, either as a performance of resistance against being victimized or as an establishing utterance of victimization and female oppression. This situation is, of course, more problematic due to the fact that women (including white women) often *are* victims of real violence, but for argument's sake this position needs to be foregrounded just now.

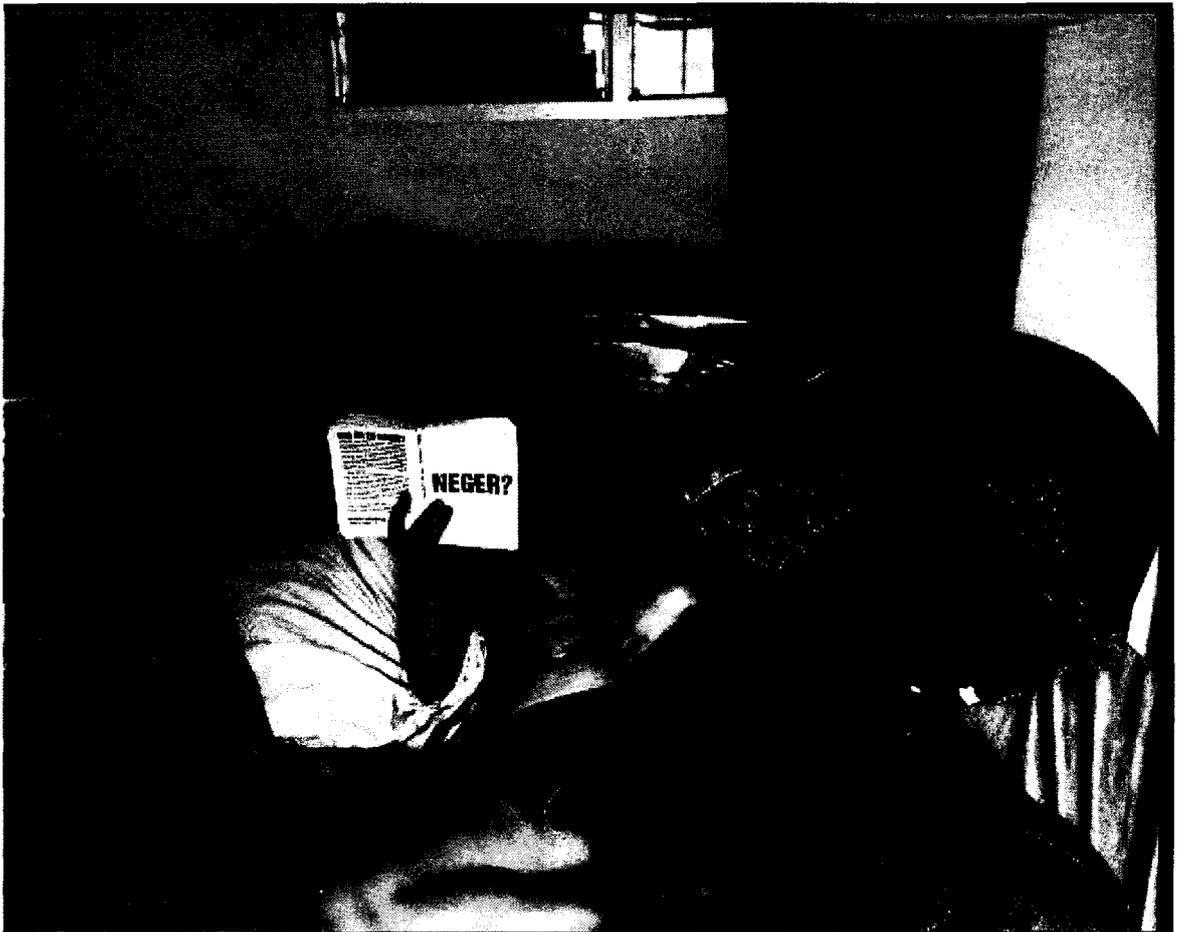


Figure 74. Nina Bacos, *The Intellectual Gaze*. Contact sheet, colour negative (2006).

The *Gaze* series, which was staged in both Europe and the field trips in Africa, visualizes this female persona in a 'contemporaneity' and let her morph into various different versions of a modern woman who does not seem so incapacitated. She remains in essence oblivious to the significance her whiteness has for the maintenance of racial hierarchies and casts her gaze in different ways that involve the fantasy of the other, the desire for the other, to show the cultural construction of the Other as being made Other in part by those practices.

To emphasize the various perspectives of seeing, the title of each image has a prefix, which connotes an individual strand or engagement in the intellectual genealogy of the postcolonial power/knowledge discourse as well as with popular culture. In *The Intellectual Gaze* (Figure 74), in particular, I seek to implicate my own intellectual practice: the post-structural cultural critic who sets out to define and analyse the injustices that have taken place in the name of her own culture, but whose commitment to a discursive reading renders an ironic touch to the *mise en scène* or repeats the racilizing gesture. This work was reaching a point where it started to make sense, where I felt I was on my way somewhere with it. By inserting myself in a position where the account of myself placed me not as a victim of the situation but as a perpetrator, I was able to deal with the narcissistic self-critique in *The White Girl's Lament*, which emphasized me as a victim. However, in order not to give way to the temptation to leave these images in a constructed and slightly ironically conceptualized realm, the next moment required thinking more creatively about the images in the research that are not staged.

3.9 Between Subordination and Dominance in and out of Photographic Representation



Figure 75. Detail Vanessa Beecroft, *Navy Seal*. Digital chromogenic print, San Diego (1999).

Examinations of structural power have mostly been carried out from the perspective of the subordinate towards the dominant in different ways, as in the rape images of

Hausswolff (Figure 73) and Mendieta (Figure 20). The examination of whiteness is no exception, and visual examinations are in particular mostly done in terms of a systematic patriarchal critique and sometimes, as in Vanessa Beecroft's image of her *US Navy Seals Performance* (Figure 75), with an ironic distancing effect produced through staging techniques.

Historian Sarah James suggests that today's 'critical approaches to photography are still heavily dependent upon those that emerged in the late 70s and 80s, [and as a result] we are incapable of even getting close to penetrating most contemporary photographic work' (James 2007, p. 312). The important issues of who, why and how photography does something (if, indeed, anything) and what photography says, or does not say, as well as for what ends photographic representation takes place, were essential to these questions. However, somewhere along the line, the questions slipped into a rhetoric that was obsessed with the methodology of the critique, which resulted in stating photography's incapacity, rather than exploring the limits of where its possibilities lie. Posited between Benjamin's condemnation of direct experience (Hannula 2011, p. 105) and the way 'Baudelaire, Barthes and others [were] preoccupied with the question of stabilizing, restoring, and re-entering the Real' (Mbembe 2011), the dominant questions about pictures in recent literature about visual culture and art theory have been rhetorical and interpretative (Mitchell 1995, p. 28).

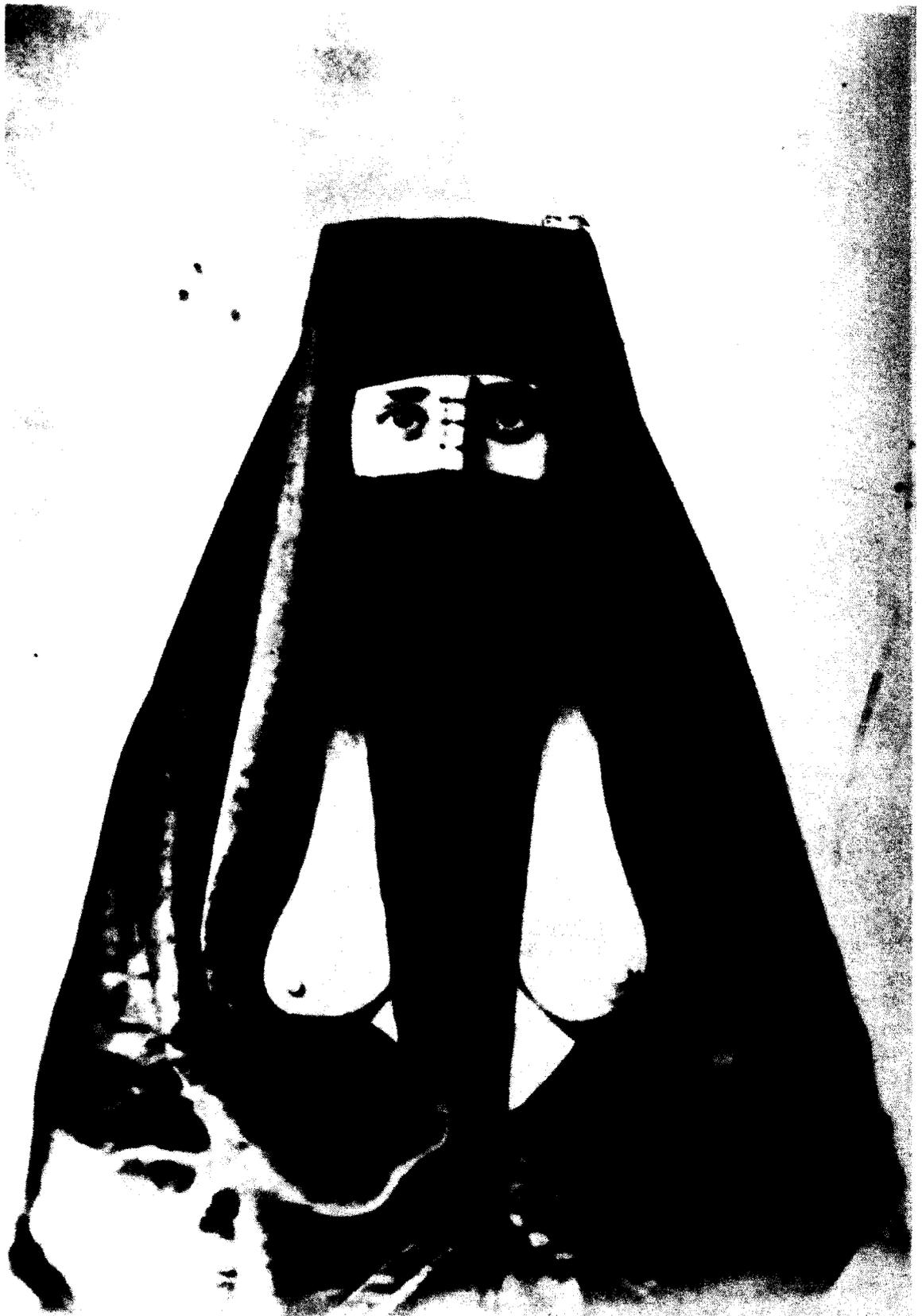
In these readings, photography is both structured by the institutional contexts within which it is produced as well as being complicit in the formation of the institution. This condition makes any project of trying to work from the point of view of exploring alternative realities through photographic realism in a social context impossible because

one cannot help but repeat the role of one's social determinism. Though the discussions have not completely lost relevance (regarding one's own position is crucial to any relationship, not only a photographic one), reiterations of the methodologies have complicated the approach to practice. Working with photography is often filtered through a preconceived knowledge about what can and cannot be done – or should or should not be done – with the medium in a way that can limit experimentation with expressions and experience. Discussing the documentary filmmaker John Grierson's (1898–1972) statement that documentary is a creative treatment of reality, Mika Hannula asks the question 'Why has the theoretical discourse not enjoyed that deliberately open and emerging call for participation? Why have so many enthusiasts searched for an all-over categorization?' (2011, p. 49) The questions become particularly problematic to approach when they involve cross-cultural or categorical encounters or alternative ways to use or represent an experience of such encounters. However, 'If we approach photography as a cultural product . . . [and,] acknowledge the historically conditioned nature of theory' (James 2007, p. 312) (which is polemic in its nature), it may be possible to review some of the earlier conclusions about photographic practices in realist or documentary photography. Viewing them as signs of unresolved issues, as I suggested when writing about Friedlander's image, is one example of developing a flexible critical practice that does not rely on the security provided by frozen categories (Hannula 2011, p. 50). At the beginning of her book *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, Toni Morrison states that she is 'interested in how agendas of criticism have disguised themselves, and in so doing, impoverished the literature studies. Criticism as a form of knowledge is capable of robbing literature not only of its own implicit and explicit ideology, but of its ideas as well' (1992, p. 8). This thought illuminates the fact that our relationships within the hierarchical structures are

also historically conditioned and that a critique that relies on obliterating former powers runs the risk of reinstating them as hegemonic holders. Instead of restricting the readings to a structural institutional critique by trying to master the narratives that it is possible to discern, it would be productive, as Ariella Azoulay suggests, to read documentary photography as a 'civil contract' (2008, p. 17) in which a collaboration between subject, photographer and viewer takes place instead of it being a result of a fixed subordinate contra dominant relationship between subject and photographer/viewer.

The discussion above contextualizes and questions the habit of not paying attention to the different meanings or narratives that can come into play in one image. These voices may be more distinct in some images and less in others, and their effect or volume will shift depending on the context and the viewer, but they are there to speak to the one who listens. This part of the thesis is in dialogue with the large body of critique that collectively targets traditional documentary as 'victim photography' (Rosler 2003 [1981], p. 263). The common consensus of this discourse is that 'to look and record the world unmediated, is to run a high risk of victimizing second time those already victimized by social injustice' (Davey 2008, p. 91). Dovetailing with the development of this critique are a number of new ways of using photography which address social and historical politics like the work of Jo Spence and Terry Dennett cited earlier, Martha Rosler herself and Allan Sekula. Whether produced with explicitly sociopolitical intent or with a fine art context in mind 'much of the staged or patently constructed work of the 80s and after, whether of critical nature or not, is underpinned by Rosler's critique' (p. 91).

These questions or critiques regarding re-victimization through different ways of representation reach far beyond direct photographic practices, and there is a cross-fertilization or contamination between critique documentary photography and cross-categorical representation. The critiques have a tendency to involve a categorical interpretation of identity as well as a categorical interpretation of photography as something that is owned only by the viewer, the photographer and the place where it was published or showed where endless repetition of victimization takes place. In her essay 'Postcard from the Edge', Mieke Bal (1997) discusses Malek Alloula's *The Colonial Harem* (1986), which examines the practice of colonial postcards from a critical postcolonial perspective (Figure 76). Her argument is that, despite its contrary intention, Alloula reproduces such a victimization through a 'beautiful discourse', which is more reminiscent of someone's 'refined judgement of female beauty than of a postcolonial critic analysing the intricate issues of relationships between race, gender and class that he claims to be doing' (Bal 1997, p. 216). As such, instead of turning the gaze from the women in the photographs, Alloula's *The Colonial Harem* reproduces 'a homo-social discourse where women are exchanged between men in order to define and assert masculinity' (p. 218). In contradiction to Bal, the visual cultural critic W.J.T. Mitchell (who is also implicated in Bal's text) describes viewing the images that Alloula has chosen and feeling 'exiled from what I want to know, to understand and to be acknowledged by' (Mitchell 1995, p. 311). Perhaps it is this impossibility to be acknowledged, to understand, 'to be forever redeemed' as well as the inability to change and react 'properly' that so strongly spurns the desire to shut down images with worrying content.



162. - SCENES et TYPES. — Femme Arabe avec le Yachmak.
SCENES and TYPES — Arabian woman with the Yachmak.

Figure 76. Post Card Postcolonial harem.

From this perspective, the impulse to question critically the re-representation may be a desire to proclaim an acknowledgement of the violence of the images, without having to engage with the process of the initial offence and its links to the present. We can't change history, but we can refuse to look at images of it. If this is the case, the strategy may not be based in 'any superior moral vision, but precisely in a prophylactic to the obscenity of the human ruin' (Enwezor 2009, p. 93).

There are points at which the logic of the argument opens up in ways that go beyond the mechanics of this kind of critique, but for the moment we have to concentrate on how its internal logic fails. While Bal's argument has relevance from feminist perspectives, its subordination of the colonial perspective to the gendered fails because Alloula does not speak of himself as a man when he defines his narrative place in the introduction to the book, but as an Algerian. Her analysis fails to acknowledge that an Algerian woman perhaps identifies more closely with an Algerian man and Algerian history than with Western feminist history and practice. Implicitly Bal's strategy may be equally guilty of fixing the Algerian women portrayed in the postcards as the victims (something she also accuses Alloula of doing). W.J.T. Mitchell expresses a liberal white male's feeling of impotence, and complicity, with regard to crimes he can never undo and a worrying 'personal reaction which stems from a not altogether pleasant failure to react "properly" to the pornographic image' (Mitchell 1995, p. 311, n. 24). As uncomfortable or unsympathetic as this last comment is, it positions him inside the discursive space in which he acts. He tries to engage with the facts of his place with regard to the photographs without narrowing this down to one meaning. What he says 'seems a guilty narcissistic preoccupation with what one can do as a first world intellectual and so fails again to attend to the suffering of others' (Butler 2010, p. 99) while it also expresses the

complications that are involved in speaking about as well as with the Other. This position indicates that the structural critique by which the victim discourse is constructed is becoming limiting and is no longer as helpful as it might have been at one point in the struggle to engage with and understand the functions of unjust systems. However, it seems clear that there is a need to acknowledge the importance that its descriptions of power structures have had for the understanding of the relationships that exist between different subjects.

The rethinking regarding the theories of the victim discourse within photography has been clearly discernible in the work of Butler and Azoulay as well as in that of previous champions of it such as Abigail Solomon-Godeau and the late Susan Sontag. Their concern focuses on what it means to control images about different kinds of oppression, both news photography in war and archives as well as privately intended images of unspeakable crimes (like the torture pictures from Abu Ghraib). After the torture at Abu Ghraib became known through the spread of the images on the Internet, Solomon-Godeau wrote that it

would seem that there are instances when photography, like a lightning bolt, illumines past and present, makes vivid and unforgettable what might otherwise be managed or domesticated [because, despite its shortcomings] it is still better to have the photographic evidence than not. (Solomon-Godeau 2004, p. 3)

While this new development clearly grapples with a mediation of social reality from the particular perspective of Western oppression through warfare, occupation of territory and political manipulation, it is also useful to pose questions in regard to less 'acute' visual representations and negotiations between race and sexuality, as well as race and gender from a documentary perspective about how we see what we see

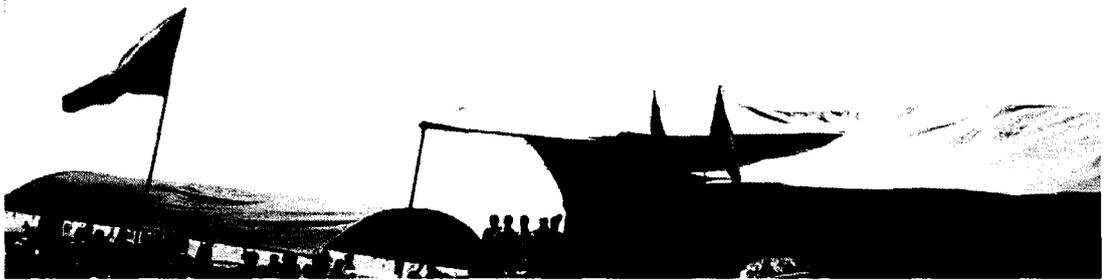


Figure 77. Nina Bacos, Ouidah, C-print (2006).



Figure 78. Nina Bacos, Cotonou, C-print (2006).

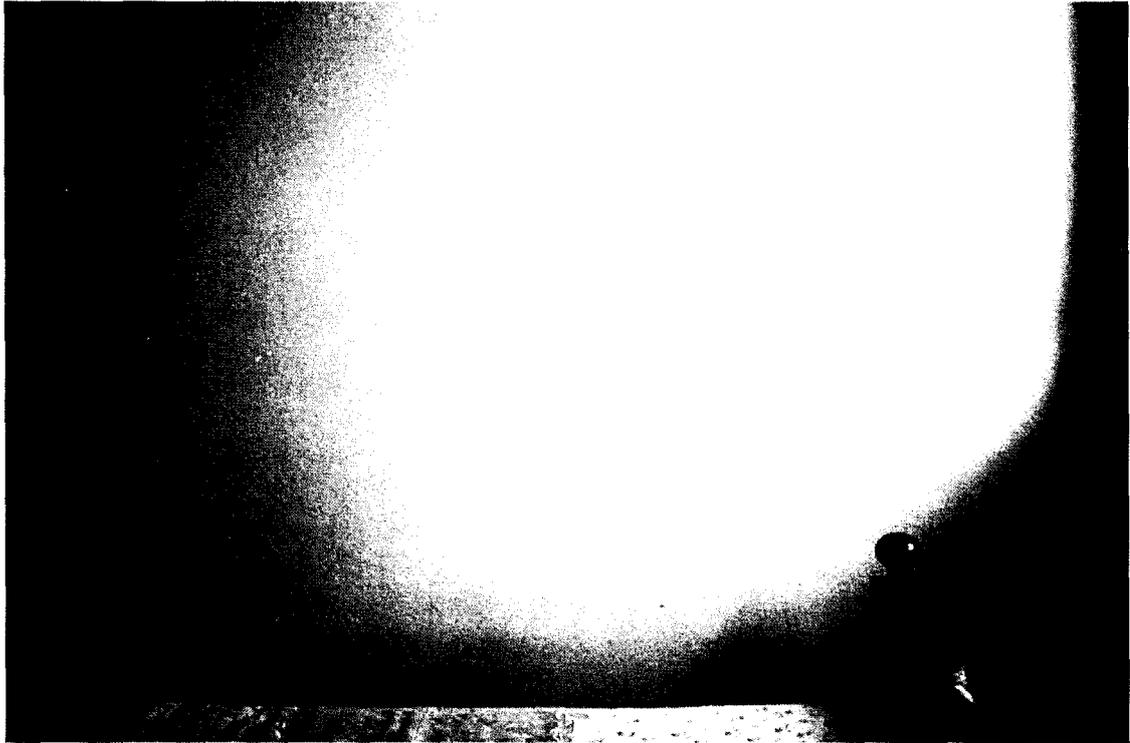


Figure 79. Nina Bacos, Lome, C-print (2006).

4

Travelling Light in Kpomassie's Footsteps

As previously stated, the field trips in Kpomassie's footsteps (2005–08) were carried out to examine the function of whiteness at a cross-cultural axis in an ontological, experiential as well as intellectual, analytical mode but with an emphasis on letting the experience have precedence in the research. I thought the critical practice would come to life between the conversation that I expected to actualize visually with Kpomassie's experience and my own journey.

4.1 Failing to Make the Connections

Kpomassie tells his story in the form of a straightforward travel narrative. He makes interesting but not very surprising points about the similarities between his colonized home and the colonized country he visits, and he subtly critiques the colonial power from a knowing subject's position as well as observing the spiritual similarities between Inuit culture and his own. Just as often, however, he compares the social and cultural differences between his native patriarchal Togo and Greenland. He embraces some of the differences between his own culture and the one he visits, describing incestuous sexual behaviour in a detached manner, rejoicing at the child's privileged position and the sexual freedom enjoyed by women, and describing how he accepts a husband's offer to be 'Kamak' (Kpomassie 2001, p. 209) with his wife in the voice of 'the close observer' (p. 144).

However, my experience turned out to be quite different. My journey had little to do with trying to look at and translate what I saw in another culture, nor was I setting out to analyse Kpomassie's travel story. Instead, I was hoping that the journey would shed some light on my own story. Of course I had fun, learnt things I did not know, embraced cultural experiences and generally enjoyed the field trip besides the research perspective, but the conversation I thought I would have with Kpomassie's story, through trying to travel and photograph in places he stayed, left me mute.

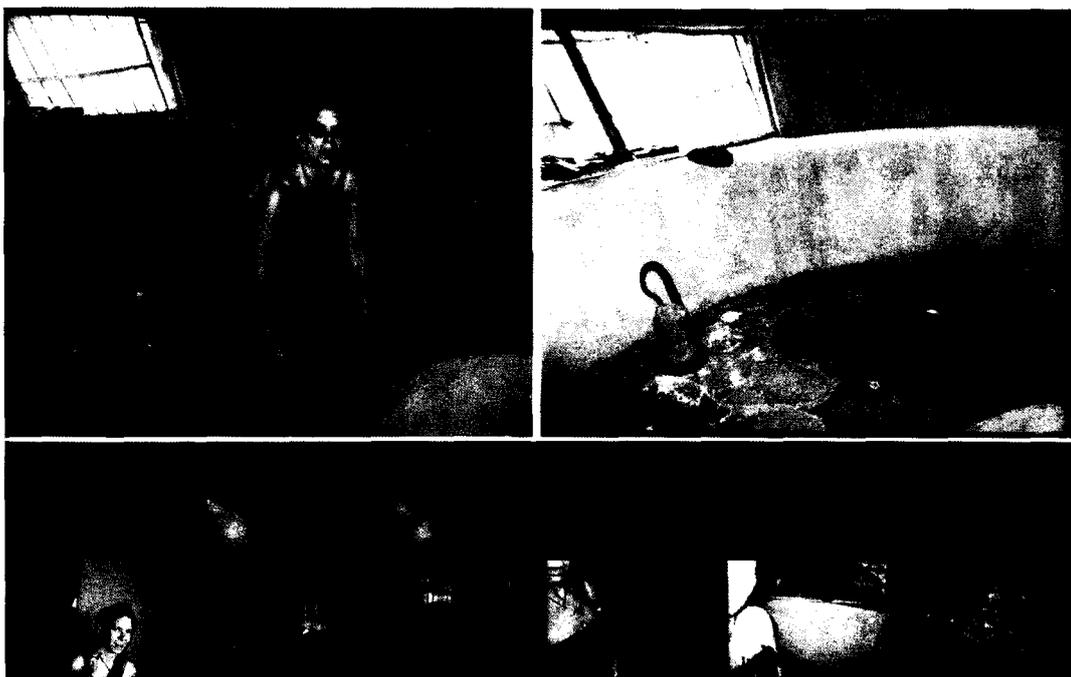


Figure 80. Nina Bacos, Ouidah. Contacts, colour negative (2006).

The contact sheet of self-portraits that I took in a snake temple in Ouidah, Benin (Figure 80), which related to the experience that initially drove Kpomassie to leave his home (page 5), was only a superficial action in relation to his experience. I had none of the fears he must have experienced as a boy. I went there willingly in broad daylight; he had to spend a terrifying night there unwillingly. I was met by tourist guides; he was met by snake-worshipping priestesses. I was a grown woman; he was a young teenage boy. I was healthy; he went there to be healed. I am not involved in voodoo; his visit was because of the voodoo practitioners' power to heal and his whole culture was permeated by it in a way that could be a reason for deep respect, but also often led to deep fear. I think I can empathize with some of what he went through, since he explains it well in the book, but my experience with the snakes had nothing more to do with his than the fact that I was there because I had read about his experience in his book. Instead, my meeting with his path actualized a number of other issues regarding photographic representation, exoticism and whiteness, which took precedence over the

fact that I travelled in his footsteps. In a [doubling of the act of] travelling in his footsteps, but not letting him remain a main character in my story – the fact that I could not, or chose not, to respond in a different way – one might conclude that, like so many other whites before me, I use him/the Other to produce a vision of myself. I shot the images hoping they would relate to whiteness's 'conditions of its emergence' (Butler 2005, p. 8) by bringing forward and accounting for the memory of historic violence as well as the way these conditions overlap with and are played out in the indexical present or ontological experiential.

The images with the snakes, however, are a staged scene and, in a sense, a monologue. They do not invite the unexpected to take place because the method of staging does not allow simultaneous contemporary narratives of others to take an active part beyond the structures the images reference. On their own, the images become those of a white woman appropriating a cultural expression, which may speak of tourism desecrating the sacred, or a white woman who is sincerely learning the secrets of the snake worshipper, perhaps studying to be a priestess herself. On their own, the images are less of a portrayal of an active reciprocal relation between the white 'I' and the Other than they would be in a series that included other images in which a contemporary existence of Others is allowed to be played out with less control on my part. The failure of the snake temple images to achieve an account of multiple narratives across time and space is no reason to abandon that kind of examination or expression. Rather, their lack of connection to the present described above provides a crucial argument for the use of documentary images in this travel journal. Images like these and similar images in the journal (e.g. the belly dance images [Figures 47 and 48,], *The Odalisque* [Figure 13, Appendix,] and *Waiting for the Barbarians* [Figure 4, Appendix,]) are locations that jolt

the account of my white/individual self out of its structural socket, which demonstrates how a critical practice that ‘is related to an ethics and indeed a morality . . . at times requires a first person account of oneself’ (Butler 2005, p. 21).



Figures 81, 82 and 83. Nina Bacos, *White Women*. Contact sheets, colour negative (2005–08).

4.2 Conceptualizing the Documentary Space

As discussed in Section 3.6, race and gender interact in ways that give support to their existence. In the vein of Donette Francis, who ‘shows that empire’s operating logic in colonial theatres was equally about regulating intimacy as it was about disciplining populations through military force’ (2010, p. 52), Section 3.7 demonstrates how sexual and racial politics have played an important role in colonial expansion through, among other things, racial profiling of female sexuality to control the black male body. The expressions of these politics are also manifest in exotic photography as ‘portrait art’ in which picturing the Other for pleasure (e.g. colonial postcards, which often took on a pornographic characteristic) mingles in photography’s history with other kinds of photographic representation of the Other (such as anthropology and ethnography) in ways that organize, sustain and invigorate these ideas in contemporary culture in a way that problematizes a stated documentary mode.



Figure 84. Nina Bacos, *A White Woman's Postcard*. C-print (2006).

Many of these practices became particularly significant when I started photographing in a documentary style during my field trips to West Africa in 2005–08 in a way that problematized the stated documentary mode. Gender and race, in particular, took precedence through the sexual connotations and fantasies regarding white female/black male encounter. This formed a visual structure that I could count on to be present, which arguably could call the documentary claim into question in a way that is demonstrated in the images *Cruising Black Guys* (2006) (Figures 85 and 86).

Cruising Black Guys #1, is posited between the purely staged and the 'purely' documentary. Because of the predictability that a woman (white or otherwise) travelling alone would be approached by men who want to flirt, platonically play in passing or really try to pick her up, the photographs in this series can be seen as staged within an institutional configuration. The decision to paraphrase Piper's *Cruising* series in the title

emphasizes the relation these images bear to her work on race and gender, but the mode of working should not be confused with the way she worked with the Mythic Being.



Figure 85. Nina Bacos, *Cruising Black Guys #1*. C-print (2006).



Figure 86. Nina Bacos, *Cruising* contact sheet, colour negative (2006).

Piper entered an alternate state of being by dressing up in drag. In a sense, she tried to remove her own identity in order to understand something about her reality. I am trying to do precisely the opposite by entering into my corporeality as white. Thinking of the activity in the images as pure constructions based on the idea of the woman as a passive

bystander does, for example, not account for how her 'to-be-looked-at-ness' (Mulvey 1989, p. 19) can be used in a performative mode to negotiate the conditions in her social setting. As such, an emphasis on the staged quality can fix me in a position in which I am freed from taking responsibility for putting a racial discourse into play. These interpretations fix the female as gendered Other and the male as raced Other in a perpetrator/victim binary. If one opens up the discussion and accepts that the realist mode of photography can relay the relationships that take place between the subjects within an image, it is possible to think differently about what goes on in this (and other) photographs. This act allows them to be inscribed by more than the social, economic and political structures that surround them. The image is a working attempt to approach the space in which both the predictable and the unpredictable can be enunciated through a critically informed realist discourse.

In the case of Figure 85, the two young men approached me because they wanted to take pictures of themselves together with myself and another white female friend. We agreed on condition that I be allowed to take images with them on my camera. The staging was theirs – they chose the place and the way our bodies were placed in their images – and I merely copied that, but with the difference that instead of one of the men being flanked by my friend and myself, I am flanked by each of them. We were all aware of the trade-off that was going on – they were going to show their friend the images with the Yovo (white) women they found on the beach, and I was going to use their images for the PhD project to reference white female sex tourism. I had not anticipated their contribution to the project, which they made through their expressions while being photographed. Their faces showed both disrespect and an exaggerated melodramatic sadness, which we never agreed upon. This act calls into question how far

they honoured their end of the agreement. Perhaps it indicated that they were mildly interested in satisfying my agenda or perhaps they were consciously actively contributing to it by expressing their own personal opinion of the trade. In any case, their act added a dimension to the image that I could not have planned, which indicates how the un-staged quality can add dimensions of resistance. A staging of this on my part would have been one-dimensional and would have changed the meaning of the act, instead downplaying the ethical complexity of my own position.

From this perspective, one can see how the documentary or realist aspect of the image has the potential to educate the viewer (photographer included) through visualizing unforeseen acts that force the reading for imagining alternative relationships and modes of operation between people and positions. It is not that another discourse than that intended in the photographic moment can't be raised in the situation when an image (staged or documentary) meets the eye of the viewer. However, contrary to the dominant assumption of the last 30 or so years of critical theory that there 'is no use to pin down photographic or cultural meaning outside the context of the reception' (Rosler 2004, p. 217), the evidence of the *Cruising* images (both Piper's and my own) as described above suggests that there is much to be gained by thinking of the photograph outside the context of its reception. I must have looked at the *Cruising White Women* documentation hundreds of times before I saw the body language of the people Piper photographed during her performance, which proves that I am susceptible 'to normative exclusive lists' reliant on categorical analysis that claims itself 'not to be all-encompassing' (Hannula 2011, p. 50) in a way that limited my ability to look and really see. For example, my categorical focus on the interpretations surrounding Piper's work *Cruising White Women* without linking them to an expanded context placed the Other in

a fixed position within the social space by eliminating how crucial the presence of whiteness is to the Others' positions is in that space.

Reading photography by excluding the possible agency of the subject of the photograph (what the subject might want to say) and dismissing the photographer's intent (regardless of the success or failure of that intent) makes the subject's presence one-dimensional or objectified. Similarly, fixing the interpretation of a photograph within a single discourse, and a single temporal reading, ignores how interaction and context change over time. This limits the possibility that something in the image suddenly 'emerges within our contemporary life and makes us rethink the histories we have told about how we got from one place in history to the present' (Butler 2009) just as my initial introduction to Piper's *Cruising* image did. My realization that my reading of Piper was limited suggests that utilization of the documentary mode encourages alternative readings of a photograph in an expanded ontological field. Furthermore such a reading may 'have the effect of producing converging temporalities in the present, which allows us to reorient ourselves in non-identitarian ways' (Butler 2009) and create a feeling of belonging rather than of estrangement.

4.3 Intentionality and Actuality

The contradictions that were created through the invasion of these topics – the intention of a critique and how a categorical execution of it could counteract its intention – forced me to accept that my involvement with Kpomassie's story was flawed. Not only was it creatively superficial, but it also tended to take the shape of a critical reading of his

journey rather than a conversation with it. This made it difficult to fulfil the criterion of keeping a focus on the account of the subject of whiteness because his otherness became central.



Figure 87. Nina Bacos, Contact sheet Friend and Family Fidgie Rose, colour negative (2007).

Because Kpomassie lived with Inuit families and shared their customs and habits, he regarded himself as someone who experienced Greenland quite differently and perhaps more truthfully than the white (mostly Danish) people he encountered on his journey. After having got bored with and disappointed by the shattered culture in Greenland's larger coastal towns, where very few of the natives worked or hunted (but instead lived on Danish welfare), he travelled north in search of a 'real Inuit' experience. 'This,' he says of the coastal town where he first landed, 'was not the Greenland of my dreams. I wanted to live with seal hunters, ride a sledge, and sleep in an igloo!' (Kpomassie 2001, p. 112). I was not looking for an experience of the Other that matched a romantic image of a life undisturbed by colonialism and modernity, so I could not cross-reference with Kpomassie's story in that sense. Again and again, I found myself in a present that connoted exotic leisure and tourism rather than challenges, expeditions and adventures. My story was sightseeing, the bars and the parties, the reckless abandon of the white tourist and the contemporary commodification of the West African social landscape. This was where I 'discover[ed] bits of the past in the present' (Laferriere 1994, p. 65) without allowing that past to gently gloss over my interaction with the present.

My finding in Morocco that Eberhardt and Kpomassie's stories would provide a shelter to hide behind rather than a critical opening in my imagery held true.



Figure 88. Nina Bacos, *Red Bar*, Cotonou. C-print (2007).

My involvement with Kpomassie's journey, however, took a point of departure in (or with) his blackness or African-ness and had an element of fixing him as the Other to justify my involvement with that Other and ultimately undoing the categorical binary fixity of the racial subject through the critique of whiteness.

It is fair to say that Kpomassie went in search of the authentic Inuit. Looked at from a categorical perspective, his narrative could be seen as more valuable than a white man's because Kpomassie is black and a colonial subject and thus has some overlapping experiences with the Inuit colonial subject. However, such an approach will also implicitly have to categorize the differences between Kpomassie's own cultural identity and the Inuit identity, thus calling his account into question on the same grounds. At

first glance, these approaches seem incompatible, but we cannot choose one of them without giving some credibility to the other. The similarity or difference between Kpomassie and the Inuit or white people cannot make complete sense in one case (between him and the Inuit) and none in the other (between him and the white man) or between the others (Inuit and the white man). Both judgements are based on cultural difference, which allows for no individuality and gives a dominant role to racial ethnicity as opposed to making explicit the fact that any one social individual's identity is composed and influenced by multiple signifiers (e.g. gender, class or sexuality). Although the idea of common ground between colonial subjects attempts to problematize the dominant position of whiteness and humanism's false universality, it fails 'to capture the open-endedness of racial [identity] meanings' (Alcoff 2006, p. 182), because it does not contextualize the multiple axes of any individual identity. Thus, in relation to whiteness, all other difference is reduced to sameness. 'Kpomassie's status as (formerly) colonized subject and travelling African turns what, in the case of the Westerner, would be perceived as a manifestation of colonialist behaviour, into a "fraternal" embrace' (Célestin 2001, p. 109). While it is tempting to see Kpomassie's story as offering/presenting a more authentic representation of Inuit life because of his identity, we have to recognize that, because of his identity and its multiple characteristics, this assumption fails. 'Kpomassie's position does not, in the end, "make all the difference," in the sense that it does not result in an *active* dismantling of colonial, tropical, traditional exoticism.' (p. 117) His search for authenticity may instead be read as an example of how tropes that proliferate in exoticism reproduce themselves in the way we tell stories (or is it the way we listen?).

4.4 The Critical Allure



Figure 89. Nina Bacos, Greenland, contact sheet, colour negative (2008).

I think it is partly the tendency to exoticism that makes Kpomassie's story so attractive. Interpreting his description of the Inuit and Greenland as a reversed gaze allows us to enjoy the exotic. The first of these was definitely partly the case for me when I read his story for the first time. The second time I read it, I was more interested in his travel journals to help me problematize a too categorical interpretation of identity.

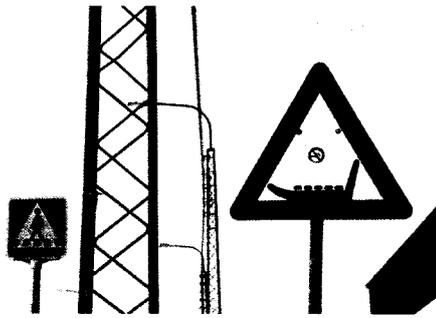


Figure 90. J.Edel Hardenberg, C-print (2005).



Figure 91. J.Edel Hardenberg, C-print (2005).

The Greenlandic artist Julie Edel Hardenberg's *The Quiet Diversity* (2005) creates an image of a Greenland that is not 'a collection of people centred around a common history, culture and language' (Hardenberg 2005, p. 22). The exotic vision of the Inuit and Greenland in Kpomassie's story shares space within the images with a contemporary Greenlandic landscape and social reality. Humorously (as in Figure 90, with the traffic signs of a pedestrian crossing juxtaposed with a warning sign about dog-sledges, of which the latter is tagged with a no smoking sticker), she portrays a modern Greenland, which also echoes a global movement in the yellow takeaway sign on the roof of the intensely blue Café Hong Kong (Figure 91). Elsewhere she is gently didactic, as in the image *Nonstereotypes* (with three children apparently of African descent in traditional Inuit clothing) as well as in the portraits *Parents and Children* where race and nationality also gives way to hybridity.

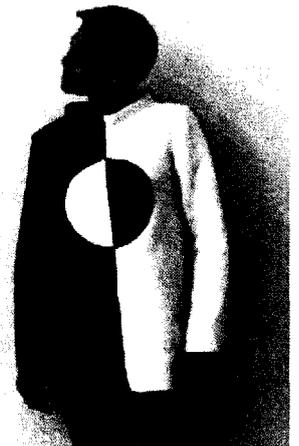
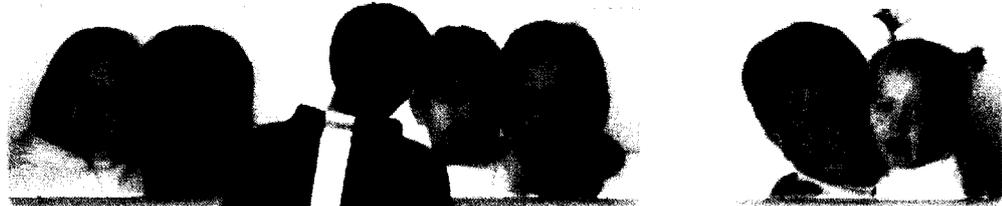


Figure 92. Julie Edel Hardenberg, *Parents and Children*. Installation (2005).



Figure 93. Julie Edel Hardenberg, *Nonstereotypes* (2005).

Hardenberg's work discusses 'authentic' identity from a postcolonial perspective. She understands the need to make the majority pay attention to the minority, but she problematizes a simplistic interpretation of what the Greenlander is. Her work also emanates love for her country (and for the complexities it harbours) and was completed 50 years after Kpomassie was in Greenland. When he travelled there, the idea of an authentic identity was not a problematic concept, and Kpomassie, of course, never intended to have his story read out of his historically subjective context; he never made any claims to cover anything but his subjectively experienced journey. 'His reason for writing was not to contribute knowledge of otherness to a common repository, whether it be called "Anthropology", "Arctic Studies" (or "Post-colonial Studies" or "Cultural Studies", for that matter)' (Célestin 2001, p. 109). There are multiple ways of reading or examining his story (one may actually just read it and enjoy it as a good story), but seeing it as a postcolonial text, which it is often presented as, can even be an essentializing gesture because this move seems to have more to do with the fact that he

is African than that he challenges the colonial discourse in some crucial way. However, while one cannot avoid paying attention to his position without in some sense fixing his ethnic/racial identity, neither can one pretend that his ethnicity has no importance at all to his story. To do so would be to ignore the historicity and contemporary implications of colonialism and racialization on individual lives as well as the fact that Kpomassie himself occasionally uses the fact of his African-ness to describe how he feels about what he experiences. While African hybridity is no doubt at least as complex as the Greenlandic, the visual quality of the images I took in West Africa and those that were staged in a black/white racial binary were more unresolved and richer in evidence of the habit of identity profiling racial categories in cross-racial circumstances than the Greenland photographs.



Figure 94. Kpomassie in Ilulissat, (No date)



Figure 95. Nina Bacos, *In Ilulissat*. C-print (2008).

Thus although I did go to Greenland and in this sense followed his trajectory, the disconnection between his story and mine resulted in the bulk of my research material being collected in Africa, because that's where my presence in the racial delimitations and the remains of imperialism was most evident to me. My final attention to his story (which consists of letting go of it) is precisely because of this seemingly irresolvable dilemma of how categories manifest themselves in unwritten rules of representation.

The only way I could really pay attention to the function of whiteness was to give up trying to find a resolution between Kpomassie's authorship and my own.

4.5 Critical Limitations (Pope.L, Walker, Mercer and Mapplethorpe)

To find a productive way to avoid this resolution I looked at how political correctness has been used critique representations of the black body and the way this has been played out with regard to William Pope.L and Kara Walker as well as Kobena Mercer's work on Mapplethorpe's nudes. The idea that racial categories trumps other categories puts pressure on black artists to perform or represent blackness as if they have a cultural obligation to address race which is intimately connected with the idea that cross-categorical representation as a whole is problematic.



Figure 96. William Pope.L *Tompkins Square Crawl*. Performance documentation (1991).

In the *Tompkins Square Crawl*, which is part of a series of performances by William Pope.L in different settings since the late 1970s, the artist and his cameraman, were

accosted by an angry black man who demanded an explanation of the behaviour he observed. At first, the man asked Pope.L if he was OK. After this, he confronted the white cameraman, asking him angrily what he was doing 'shooting him lying in the street with a flowerpot? You're showing black people like this? Is that what you are doing?' (Pope.L 2002, p. 48) Finally, Pope.L had to intervene, trying to calm the man by explaining that he had hired the white man to document his performance. When the man learnt that Pope.L himself was the instigator, 'his compassion turned to contempt and the performance itself intensified into a spectacular image of the way black politics is traversed by asymmetrical relations of class and sexuality' (English 2007, p. 273).

Pope.L's crawls are about dispossession and homelessness, but for the man who accosted him Pope.L contravened a 'tacit agreement among middle class blacks regarding standards of behaviour' (English 2007, p. 280). The man's behaviour reveals 'how frail the most rehearsed and unselfconscious identity performances become in the actual encounters with others and perhaps especially when the bond of sameness is breached' (p. 280). Pope.L's insistence on continuing his performance despite the man's protests against what he felt was demeaning to him as a black person reveals a difficulty in separating the person (in this case mainly his blackness) and the art piece.

These functions also come into play in the reception of the work of the African American artist Kara Walker. She addresses the ambivalence and double binds in American racial belonging and the history of racialized fantasies and epidermalization. Through her recycled antebellum aesthetic she combines a narrative of guilt of assaults and guilt of complicity, invoking Fanon's claim 'that the juxtaposition of the white and black races has created a massive psycho-existential complex' (Fanon 1997, p. 11).



Figure 97. Kara Walker, Detail of *Gone: An Historical Romance of the Civil War as it Occurred Between the Legs of a Dusky Negress and Her Heart* (1994).

Gwendolyn Dubois Shaw calls this ‘the unclaimed discourse of the unspeakable’, which ‘continues to impact the ability of many European Americans and African Americans to confront the terrible impressions that the legacy of slavery continues to have’ (Dubois Shaw 2004, p. 7). Echoing the debate about what is proper for a black artist to concern her/himself with, Walker has been critiqued in a way that suggests her ‘images reveal her character’: a traitor who is too close to the white world, too desirous of its success. ‘In this view the observer’s reading is paramount: We know what type of people do this, they make dirty pictures and marry white men and have nappy hair.’ (Gilman 2007, p. 30).

These critiques structurally mirror debates that were initiated by the reception of Mapplethorpe’s nudes of black men in the 1980s. The debates took place in different camps: one that was outraged at the racial objectification of the black male body by a

white photographer and another that was outraged by the homoerotic element in the images. Interestingly the latter group's fury finally led to an 'amendment that sought to restrict national funding on art it deemed "obscene"' (Kraynak in Anastas and Brenson 2006, p. 37), by mobilizing arguments that 'implicitly rested on theories of representation' (p. 34) developed to a large extent in the first group.

Kobena Mercer, who in 1982 offered a critique of Mapplethorpe's work based on the objectification of the black body, revised his argument in his essay 'Skin Head Sex Thing: Racial Difference and The Homoerotic Imaginary' (Mercer 2003). In the later text, he admits that his initial reaction to the reduction of the black body to 'visual "thing"' (p. 237) was also fraught with ambivalence because of the illicit pleasure looking at these images released. Taking this ambivalence as a point of departure, he states that the former feeling needed to be reassessed because he was stuck in not being able to make up his mind about Mapplethorpe. Reframing his initial text, he suggests an approach to this ambivalence 'not as something that occurs inside text, (as if cultural texts were hermetically sealed off or self sufficient) but as something that is experienced across the relations between authors, texts, and readers, and relations that are always contingent, context bound and historically specific' (p. 237). Citing his initial argument that the racial discourse in the imagery says 'more about the white male subject behind the camera than they do about the beautiful bodies we see depicted' (p. 238), he points out the failure in this argument to give voice to other discourses that the imagery puts into play. The initial reading of subordination and domination remained on the level of institutional power by subordinating sexual subjectivity under a dominant racial signification of the subjects in and outside of the images, which fails to acknowledge the 'polyvocal quality of Mapplethorpe's photographs' (p. 245).

4.6 The (Unruly) Discursive Black Penis and Supremacist Mythology



Figure 98. Nina Bacos, *Guess Who's Coming for Dinner*. C-print (2006).

Kobena Mercer's reappraisal of what happens in the text (image) through shifting relations to its context closes the distance between the ontological/experience and the epistemology/what we 'know' to be true, and helps to reduce the distance between the constructed imagery and the un-staged imagery in this research. The implications of the binary categorical interpretation (which, Mercer admits, his own original text about Mapplethorpe's images was guilty of) is echoed in the reaction of the man who tried to stop Pope.L's performance and in the interlaced sexist and racist critiques of Kara Walker's person/work.

More disturbing, however, is how the same critical methods developed to examine 'various ways in which cultural discourses and institutions proffer particular ideology (white heterosexist male) while repressing the very active nature of this ideological formation' (Kraynak in Anastas and Brenson 2006, p. 35) effectively became appropriated by different interest groups like the Christian Coalition and The Conservative American Family Association. These groups employed the methods to lobby for legislation against art that they 'deemed offensive to their basic value system' (p. 36) to promote 'a discriminatory political of cultural censorship and ideological coercion' (Mercer 2003, p. 253). The logic of the 'realm of acceptability' (Kraynak in Anastas and Brenson 2006, p. 36) in photographic (or other) representation in these examples indicates that a conceptualization of context as well as analytical methodology needs to be reconnected and reappraised continuously to the ontology of experience or else categorical constructions will impinge on the subjectivity of both individuals and collectives.

The image *Guess Who's Coming for Dinner* (Figure 98) portrays a marriage between a white woman and a black man. It is also an image that is 'fraught with sexual and racial tension' (Ware 1992, p. 4). Present in the image is not only the couple but also the vision of the fetishized big black dick. Discursively larger than life, Mapplethorpe, Pope.L and K. Walker all mobilize it in their imagery.



Figure 99. Mapplethorpe, Detail *Man in a Polyester Suit* (1980).

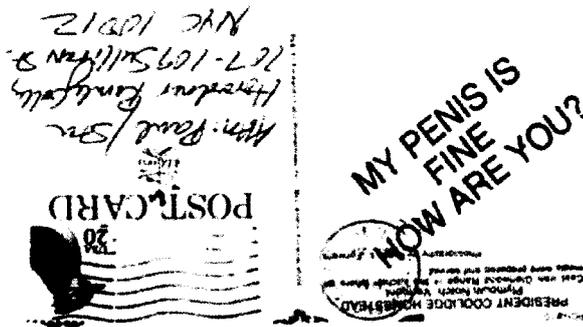


Figure 100. William Pope.L (1994).



Figure 101. K. Walker, Detail of *Gone: An Historical Romance of the Civil War as it Occurred Between the Legs of a Dusky Negress and Her Heart* (2004).

It is inflated with constructed meaning, as in the detail from Kara Walker's *Gone: An Historical Romance of the Civil War as it Occurred Between the Legs of a Dusky Negress and Her Heart* (1994) where a black man gets elevated by his giant penis, making him slowly rise towards heaven, while a white man on the ground (being given fellatio by a black girl) enviously raises his hands to the sky in an apparent attempt to reach him. The white man has the girl (literally owns her), the land and the power, but he can never have the hyper-sexuality he has invested in the black man, and he will never get over that fact. In Mapplethorpe's *Man in a Polyester Suit* (1980) (Figure 99), which visually paraphrases a gay calling card with the explicit message that 'everything you ever knew about black men is true' (Mercer 2003, p. 255), the penis hangs elegantly out of the suit in the slit of the waistcoat as an elongated tie. While I don't want to argue with Mercer's observation that the lack of an actual text suggests that gay viewers share a series of 'inter-textual references' (p. 256) that may be lost on a non-gay viewer, the formal shape of the penis doubling the shape of a tie suggests to me readings that in this context more importantly connote power and male sexuality as tropes, perhaps not interchangeable but valued with similar currency. This reading however is subverted in the image *My Penis is Fine, How Are You?* (2001) in which Pope.L paraphrases a performance, *Schlong Journey* (1996), where the artist walked around Harlem with a white cardboard tube mounted crotch high on his person. Pope.L's manifestation of a hollow white tube as a stand-in for the penis in 'a piece about trying to own whiteness, male whiteness' (2002, p. 53) reshapes the penis's mythic powers and questions the over-determination of power and penis and how these myths are kept alive through conventions and agreements. Is it still the white man's supremacist anxiety? Or is it, as Pope.L's question – 'when did you ever hear a black man complain that he has been having problems because racism makes his penis too

big?’ (p. 67) – suggests, a collaboration between a supremacist discourse and hyped black masculinity?

The different takes on the penis’s discursive powers in the works described here helped to contextualize an examination of my own white female body’s proximity to the penis to grapple with the connection between the female white tourist and myself.

4.7 Between the Epistemological and the Ontological

The safari images taken during the Biennale Boulv’art in Cotonou, Benin in 2006 are the result of an attempt to render visual the entanglement of experience as ontology and experience as an epistemological construction in interracial relationships.

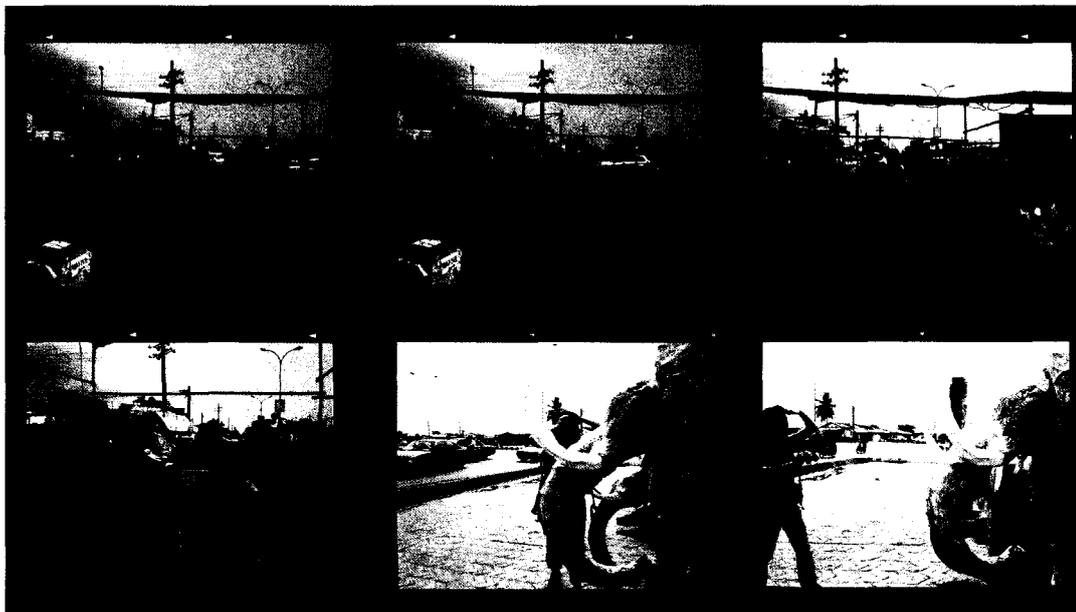


Figure 102. Nina Bacos, *Safari*. Contact sheet, C-print (2005).

The juxtaposition between the *Safari* images and the image of the wedding emphasizes the impossibility of consensually ripping apart a social fabric that is intertwined with history without also accepting the necessity to implicate racial construction. Simultaneously it demands acceptance for cross-categorical identification through the wedding ritual. The decision not to give the image of the couple getting married in Figure 98 a documentary title was intended to lift them out of the naturalized or essentialized racialized space without averting the gaze from the prolific character of racial complexities. Entitling the image *Guess Who is Coming for Dinner* and then juxtaposing it with the *Safari* (Figure 102) contact sheet is a way of visualizing the culturally embedded questions about when love and ‘eroticism mingle with political solidarity? When it produces an effect of empowerment?’ as well as the question ‘When does the identification imply objectification and when does it imply equality?’ (Mercer 2003, p. 265)

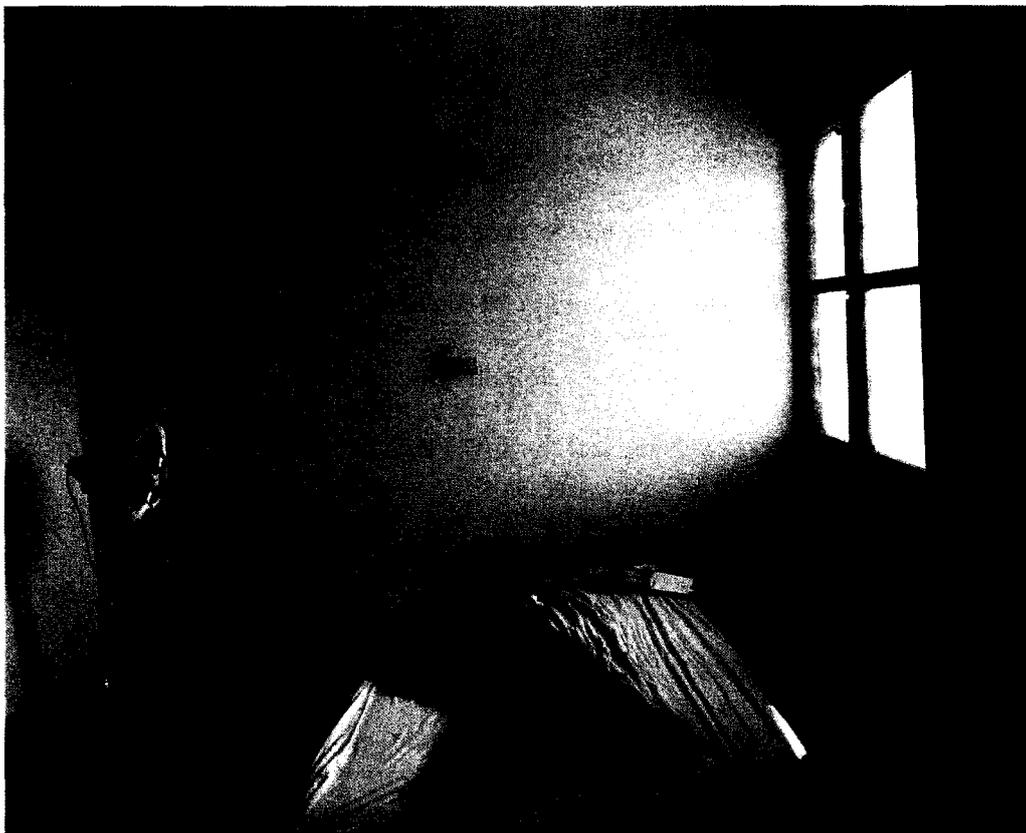


Figure 103. Nina Bacos, *The Lover*. C-Print

The documentary/auteur-style part of this project seeks to actively break the tendency not to treat photography 'as something' that is 'experienced across the relations between authors, texts, and readers.' (Mercer. 2003 p. 237). To achieve this, while also always recognizing that those relations are 'contingent, context bound and historically specific' (p. 237) it part challenges but also develops many conclusions about photography in the latter part of the 20th century.

The last 30 years of art making manifests an exploration and re-exploration of polemic ways to question modernism/realism and its conceptualization of the real through the structurally specific. While Mercer's work exemplifies that this grip has been loosened and become more inclusive through the explosion of radical queer, race and gender theories, it is still difficult to verbalize or visualize an anti-categorical relation to the real through realist discourse in photography. The nature of this part of the research project is much more difficult to verbalize, not only because there is, as Val Williams mentioned (p. 56), a lack of development in realist discourse regarding photography, but also because it forms a kind of counterpoint to the critical self-reflective analytical 'I'. The counterpoint or place should not be regarded as something that the 'I' is taking ownership of and trying to define, although sometimes I will surely be guilty of just that because if I do not make mistakes I will not test any limits or produce any new evidence or insights. Instead it should be viewed as a return to the place where the conversation between the constructedness of being and the nature of understanding the ontological experience began in order to try to re-conceptualize a relation between these from the perspective of agency. These images actively want to break the hold of 'the anxiety in the face of the real' (Mbembe 2011) and should be viewed as a Universal space, a

landscape where the multiple narratives of any number of particulars can meet and communicate to help us make better sense of the world we live in.



Figure 104. Nina Bacos, *Africa Cup*. C-print (2006).



Figure 105. Nina Bacos, *Looking for Arcadia #1*. C-print (2007).

The Return to the Journey (Concluding Summary)

5.1 Recapping the Question

Throughout this research, I have demonstrated a methodology for addressing the complexity of categorical as well as conceptual constructions. The central thesis with which I began was that a photograph can convey multiple narratives and that these are connected to the past, present and future, which render visible the personal individual in the social structure without losing sight of either. By creating a body of photographic material that was anchored in an examination of my own whiteness, during journeys in the footsteps of Tété-Michel Kpomassie, I connected the research to a rich tapestry of critical material which I have employed to test and challenge the development of the research.

This research tests the hypothesis that photography provides an excellent tool for engaging with the overlap between the personal and the structural as it constitutes a social space in which one may break the power of history by 'remak[ing] ourselves in non-identitarian ways' (Butler 2009). In this space it is possible envision a society in which categorical constructions do not limit political, social and private alliances intended to form new and less unequal futures. To achieve this, I worked with the following research questions: 'How might a photographic travelogue based upon personal first-hand experience and dialogic modes of self-representation actively embody and engage with the implications of whiteness as it impacts on racial

hierarchies? And ‘What ethical considerations need be taken when it is a white woman undertaking such research?’

5.2 Summary of Research Progression

During the research I progressively found that the experiment of working with someone else’s story or with too close a relationship to critical theory when the visuals were intended to mobilize a critical narrative about the self was problematic. Initially it was tempting to remain with the story of another person because it placed a filter between the act of photographing in the immediate here and now and the responses I felt as a subjective white individual. A close relation to critical theory with its focus on epistemology and the concept of already constituted knowledge tended to prompt a distance between the experiencing self and the thinking self, which made it difficult to maintain a connection to the ontological space and meet the environment in the way it came to my eye. However, once I learnt to let go of the tendency to let my critical voice lead the eye and censor what I photographed, the conversation with critical theory led me to conclusions that helped me transgress the structural look.

In Section 3, ‘Towards a Visual Methodology’, I gave an account of important moments in the early research development as well as my rationale for how and why I have put to use concepts developed by Adrian Piper and Judith Butler. ‘The Orientalist Journeys of Isabelle Eberhardt and Nina Bacos’ (Section 3.2) explored methodologically and practically how to respond visually to a written piece and clarified a number of difficulties. Instead of succeeding in visually contextualizing the historicity of whiteness

and its relation to my contemporary white subjectivity, it became clear that the focus on another text made it difficult to drive the research forward through the photographs in the way I had planned. Plans to use costume like Eberhardt suggested that a woman could not travel freely in the region today, which is quite contrary to what I experienced. Being asked to use traditional dress in order not to draw too much attention to myself at a wedding reminded me more of a postmodern artist's play with identity constructions than an examination of my relationship to the social space around me. Significant for these early findings was that the connection to the historical context emphasized a critical awareness, which wanted to influence/censor what I chose to photograph. I became aware that this way of managing the photographic act was also a way of managing my own feelings of anxiety and guilt over white privilege while at the same time maintaining a benevolent image of myself. While the knowledge of historical, contemporary actual and epistemological violence is crucial to analysis, it became apparent that to be able to explore the outer limits of what photography could do I needed to cross the boundaries set by my interpretations of critical discourse. Thus I continued to photograph the things that I noticed because of their beauty even when my gut feeling told me not to while also focusing more specifically on my own image as a white woman interested in other cultures.

'The White Girl's Lament' (Section 3.3) and 'Contextualizing the Practice in the Studio (Staging Exercises)' (Section 3.4) discuss the aftermath of the initial trial field trip as I continued working in the studio with self-portraiture both to explore different ways of expressing my corporeality's white raciality as well as to process the feelings to which this gave rise.

The White Girl's Lament (Figure 46) gave me a platform for contextualizing the relationship between my practice and other practices that deal with identity and power constructions.

A discussion about *Colonization* (p. 57) by Jo Spence further established the need to lose the censoring control that I tended to exercise in order not to reproduce a victimizing or exoticizing photographic act. As a point of comparison, I looked at the way black artists like Rotimi Fani-Kayode (Figure 59) among others managed identity on multiple axes while employing a ritualistic aesthetic that connotes not only the structure of representation but also a subjectivity that is unknown or veiled and uncontrollable. This study made it clear to me that while *The White Girl's Lament* told me something about the narcissistic quality of white guilt, it was only a stepping stone towards defining the importance of losing control in the photographing act. It was only by shooting what pleased my eye that I could learn something about white subjectivity (as it manifested itself through me unconsciously) in a social realist or ontological experiential space. It was also clear, however, that more staging was still going to take place.

'Discursive Myths, Sexuality and Desire (Staging Exercise 2)' (Section 3.5) accounts for how I continued my exploration of my self in the social space by physically turning the gaze onto my own body in shots of my crotch reflected in a mirror, which I called *Meditation*. This strategy was a starting point for a closer examination of how race and sex interact with each other through individual subjectivity. The image caused me to think of making pictures that dealt explicitly with interracial sexuality and how racialized sexuality comes to express itself in white female desire.

Experimenting with different ways of the white female gaze, I made some test images in which I stalked black men in public spaces. A stalking image shot in a park spurred me to make a complete series on the theme throughout the development of the research. They are entitled the *Gaze* series (with an individual prefix for each image – the scopophilic gaze, the intellectual gaze, etc.).

Photographing the *Gaze* images brought Adrian Piper's *Cruising White Women* to mind. Although I had not consciously thought of this series when I started shooting the *Gaze* images, it was obvious to me that her work had a subconscious impact on the way I had chosen to photograph, so I developed the habit of reading the *Cruising White Women* performance repeatedly and comparatively with my own work. From this practice, which continued from 2008 to 2011, I became – as I describe in 'Cruising White Women (Cruising Black Guys)' (Section 3.6) and 'Other(s)' Ways of the Gaze (Colonial Remnants)' (Section 3.7) – aware of racialized and sexualized issues in Piper's *Cruising White Women* images which I had not noticed before. I decided to take what I saw at face value in order to develop a theory of a blind spot regarding the way whiteness operates, which evolved around one of the white males in the image. This finding supported my hypothesis that the tendency to believe that a reading of a photograph is only valuable if it is read in relation to the context in which it is viewed and produced limits the ability of photography to narrate across different contexts. The discovery of how I could have been so blind to something that I was so actively looking for caused me to look more closely at the unstable point at which female as victim meets the racialized female and how they interact to maintain supremacist discourse by returning to the *Gaze* series in 'The White Female Gaze' (Section 3.8). The work, which

was produced in both Africa and Europe, consisted of varying versions of the same subject which in the final exhibit would bind the narrative to a crucial point of white femaleness and racial hierarchies. In 'Between Subordination and Dominance in and out of Photographic Representation' (3.9), which concludes 'Towards a Visual Methodology', I offer a short summary of some theories about photography's connection to the real and lead the discussion into the work made during the field trips to Africa. Here I establish that examination of power usually takes place from a subordinate point of view towards a dominant point of view or between individuals from groups that are considered to belong to the same category. Relating this chapter to some work that has been done about the lack of developed theories about photography's connection to a social reality, I show why the work needed to oscillate between the structural analytical and the uncontrolled experiential to try to narrate my subjective racialized and sexualized whiteness during the journeys beyond a critical discourse. I did this to avoid a preconceived knowledge about what can and cannot (or should or should not) be done with the medium in a way that can limit experimentation with expressions and experience. This discussion demonstrates critical issues that are examined in the extended Section 4, 'Travelling Light in Kpomassie's Footsteps', which problematizes reinforced categorical interpretation of identity as something that is always inscribed by the power of the dominant cultural majority.

'Failing to Create Connections' (Section 4.1) returned to the difficulty of connecting with another's story while exploring ways to make the visual narrative, which also occurred with Eberhardt's diaries. While her story had presented a way to connect discursively to the historic dominance of whiteness, I chose not to further develop the connection to Eberhardt's work for the benefit of maintaining focus on my subjective

whiteness. Kpomassie's story, on the other hand, did present me with a few dilemmas, which converged in how I could ethically regard or disregard his author-hood. Firstly, his story had been my stated framework for the research as well as my inspiration, and I thought that I would be able to establish a conversation between me reading his story and me making my own. Everything I tried, however (e.g. the way I photographed in the snake temple, pp. 123–5), was immediately invaded by contemporary issues and issues that connected to my whiteness in ways that formally overdetermined the historical connections. This made it difficult to contextualize the complexities of the contemporary experiences in a way that was organic rather than analytically structural. While looking for ways to connect, I tried to examine similarities between Kpomassie's and my own stated purpose and journeys, but this turned a critical focus on him in an analytical textual way. The distance grew as I photographed, while the issues I had already started to attend to in Europe and Morocco regarding sexuality/race stayed present in the presence of sex tourism and the culture of flirting, which surround a single woman's tourist leisure. An example of this is demonstrated in 'Cruising Black Guys' (Section 4.2), which references both Adrian Piper's *Cruising White Women* performance and also informally her *Calling Card nr2*. In this section, I demonstrate the photographic field as a place for negotiations by all the subjects involved through problematizing the structural interpretations of the photographic act and proving that it actively constitutes an act in which different narratives are given an opportunity to resonate. While the allusion to sex tourism may have been felt to be speculative, the game between me and my co-subjects proved that the photograph is a productive place in which to explore how sexed and raced structures interact both on formal and informal levels. To imagine these photographs as un-see-able, as documents that should not have been produced because they re-victimize, or re-stereotype ignores that their limits are

also the places where we can 'reorient ourselves in non-identitarian ways' (Butler 2009).

In Sections 4.3 and 4.5, I continued discussing the absence of conversations that I had imagined between Kpomassie's and my own journey and compared them again. It became clear that his desire to experience the Other was not comparable with my desire to see myself. My story was in the bars, the parties, the sightseeing and everything a tourist/traveller can be imagined to do. Gauging the photographic material, I realized that the only connection to Kpomassie's story that I could maintain was to stop trying to justify my journey by means of his. I looked at Julie Edel Hardenberg's work *The Quiet Diversity* and confirmed that the Greenland I met bore little resemblance to what Kpomassie described. In the end, I needed to admit that his journey constituted a place in which I thought I could find a way to let his gaze, which was an exoticizing gaze, rationalize the employment of stereotypes and exoticism in my own photographic activity. This forced me to rethink my understanding of the representational space of this project. I remained, so to speak, true to the origin of my project in Kpomassie's story, partially because I felt letting go of it would be an act of silencing a black authorship. In the end, the act of letting go of it theoretically and practically constituted an act by means of which I could take responsibility on a structural level for my whiteness because if I had chosen to continue trying to work with the story for reasons of not silencing a black authorship I would have failed to engage my subjectivity in the problem of binary manifestation which would have omitted the possibility of taking responsibility for my relationship with the Other.

To problematize my own tendency to overdetermine identity and faith in the power of methodological rhetoric, I made comparative notes of various receptions of William Pope.L's and Kara Walker's work (where their persons were conflated with their artwork), the reception of Mapplethorpe's nudes in the 1980s (and subsequent reconsideration of the initial outrage) and some worrying similarities in conservative right-wing rhetoric regarding the function of representation. In this line of argument, the image *Guess Who is Coming for Dinner* was employed together with work by Mercer, Walker, Pope.L and Mapplethorpe to take the discussion out of the critical verbal space and into the visual. In this moment, I also employed the black penis as an invisible presence in the image of the marriage scene to connect to how the surrounding context invades the personal space. However, the image of the marriage itself constitutes relational negotiations beyond this context. Although the marriage in *Guess Who is Coming for Dinner* is on one level structured by the Christian Church and highly gendered, it also represents a bond between two different people that takes place outside of an institution.

In the aftermath of this account, I mention the images I have taken for my own visual pleasure, which constitutes my journey into the unknown – not the unknown as in exotic tropical tropes of faraway places, but the relational space I share with all the people who can come in to this narrative. I do not know precisely who will be engaged in listening to/viewing my account of myself in this narrative. The persons I imagine could be receivers who 'may not be receiving at all, may be engaged in something that can not under any circumstances be called "receiving" doing nothing more for me than establishing a certain site, a position where the relation to a possible reception takes form' (Butler 2005, p. 67). The aesthetic in these images is that of the documentary

photographer; they differ from the preconceived images (like those with different men) and the staged images (like the *Gaze* series) but are equally important in helping me break away from the controlled narrative. The documentary images make up a space where 'my own selfhood' in the self-portraiture and the auteur-like snapshots gets reflected. They function as a universal space where I can place the other images because 'it seems strategically the best way to make concrete' (Piper in Berger 1999, p. 97) those experiences. This mixed, non-planned and, to a certain extent, un-theorized material argues that there is value and force in the fact that artists do 'not have privileged access to the significance of what they are doing' (p. 97). The element of not having total access to the significance of one work is pivotal to creating a photographic work, which permits an exploration of the way 'ethics require us to risk ourselves'. If the visual material is controlled through editing away what is uncomfortable or inexplicable to protect my subjectivity from being understood negatively, I lose the 'the moment of unknowingness, when what forms us diverges from what lies before us, when our willingness to become undone in relation to others constitutes our chance to become human' (Butler 2005, p. 136).

Contribution to Knowledge

To what conclusions do the research questions – ‘How might a photographic travelogue based upon personal first-hand experience and dialogic modes of self-representation actively embody and engage with the implications of whiteness as it impacts on racial hierarchies? And what ethical considerations if any should be taken into consideration when it is a white woman undertaking such research?’ - finally lead?

The research gives evidence of a visual narrative that raises a number of issues about photography and identity categories and how these interact in relation to questions of representation. Subject-specifically it demonstrates a way to relate to white subjectivity as well as to the ‘conditions of its emergence’ (Butler 2005, p. 8) and to take responsibility for the implications of this by accounting for how the personal and the structural overlap with and are played out in the indexical present or ontological experiential.

Methodologically, the research demonstrates through an eclectic use of different aesthetic strategies how a photographic practice can narrow the distance that often occurs between a critical theory or a critically driven photographic project and the structurally complicit individual. The findings suggest that by letting the photographing act be the driving force that gives momentum to a piece of work the photographer will make images that are unstable. They will be fractured by a number of unaccounted-for narratives that puncture the image in ways that can activate multiple discourses and

meanings and make it possible simultaneously to experience, visualize and examine structural and individual relationships as they take place over time. Whereas the photograph is admittedly unstable in relation to hierarchical orders in time/space, the evidence in this research suggests that there is ethical and practical cause to view this as a strength rather than something that has to be harnessed in order not to re-create structural oppression through the photographic act. In contradiction to a purely analytical theoretical examination, photography has an organic quality that transcends time and space by connecting to the ontology of both the subjects involved with the photographic act and the context of the viewing subject. Arguably, this is a methodological advantage that permits photography to deal with issues that were explicitly aimed at or thought of when photographing while at the same time giving space to other unpremeditated subject matters. Paying attention to this quality in the photograph narrows the distance between the ontological and the epistemological and as such between the critical subject and the critiquing subject, allowing a closer look at how those converge in the (in my case privileged white) complicit subject. This evidence supports a photographic approach in which the photographing act is not controlled by a preconceived idea about what the act constitutes. However, the progression in the discussion that takes place in the research notes suggests that it may be beneficial to use theoretical interventions to draw attention to how the multiple narratives of the image visualize an act or an event beyond one's initial intention. Viewing the photographic space in this way requires one to understand and accept the importance of the particular's ability to be expressed in the universal and how this can ensure equal attention to different social power structures, minor histories as well as the visual imaginations of different futures.

The research builds on a large prior body of work, which in its moment of time was necessary and which constructed contexts without which this PhD would have been unthinkable. While this research project constructs a methodology that both acknowledges and challenges the importance of works that examine the connections between photographic practices and hierarchical structures, its findings implicitly indicate its most important contribution to new knowledge is that the ‘need to undermine conventional perceptions by bringing incoherence to the surface of life’ (Mbembe 2011) is endangered by methodological complaisance. While much critical theory still ‘remains magisterial and devoted to the index, to the “nothing to say”’ (James 2007) instead of mining the world, which is so much ‘richer in surprises and creativity than the photographer’s own mind’ (Davey 2008, p. 110), this thesis argues for the importance of ‘reanimat[ing] the idea of life understood as a regenerative force’ (Mbembe 2011) and that any methodology carried out without serious reflection on how it interacts with life as such, where it wants to go and what ethical responsibilities it has to go there will risk complaisance whatever its intention.

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Appendix



Figure 1. Nina Bacos, PhD Exhibition (2012).

Critical Commentary on A White Woman's Photographic Travel Journal

Introduction

This appendix consists of a description of the final PhD exhibition. It includes an illustrated critical commentary that cross-references the dissertation and research development and an exhibition portfolio in digital format. Its objective is to complete the chain of evidence that clarifies the significance of the exhibition in bringing the *hypothesis* and *methodology* together to make a *new contribution to knowledge*. References to the dissertation will have the following format [see xx].

The Exhibit: Thoughts, Practicality and Process

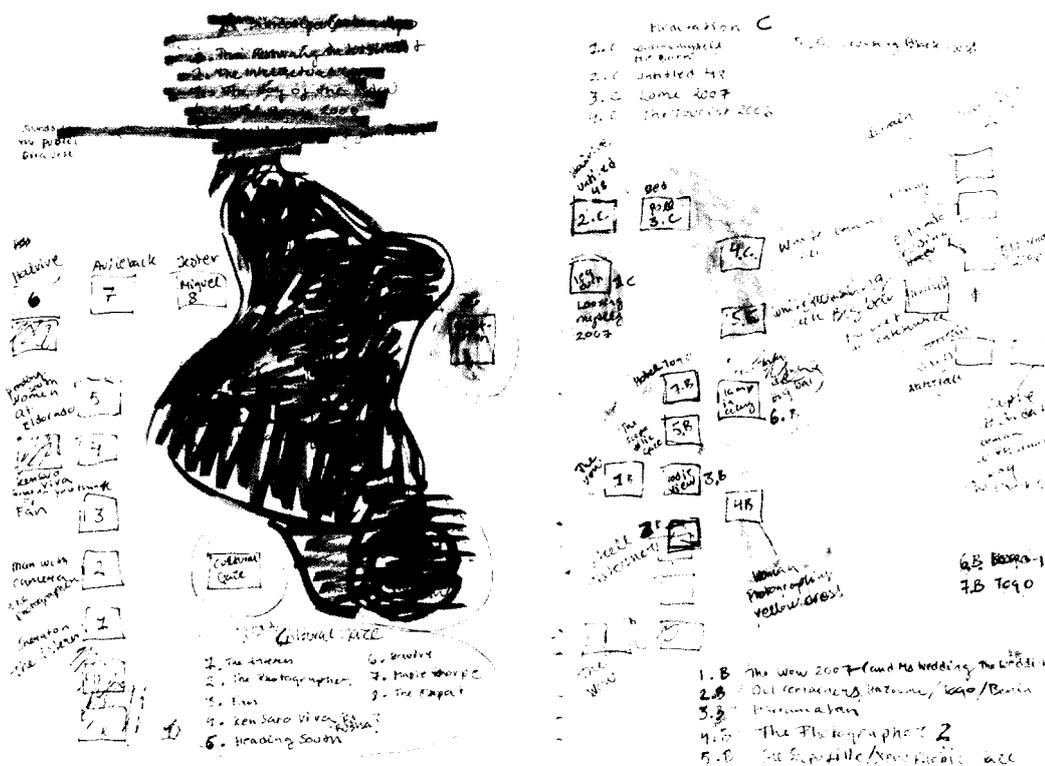


Figure 2. Nina Bacos, Drawing of Clusters (2012).

The PhD exhibition *A White Woman's Photographic Travel Journal* (2012) was shown in Glasgow School of Art's Macintosh Museum. It consisted of 45 images in 3 different sizes, which were organized into 8 clusters and 7 stand-alone images hung in irregular mosaic-like patterns on the gallery walls. The asymmetric organization of the exhibition completed three chief aesthetic standards regarding photographic methodology, visual content and appearance that I have used throughout this research.

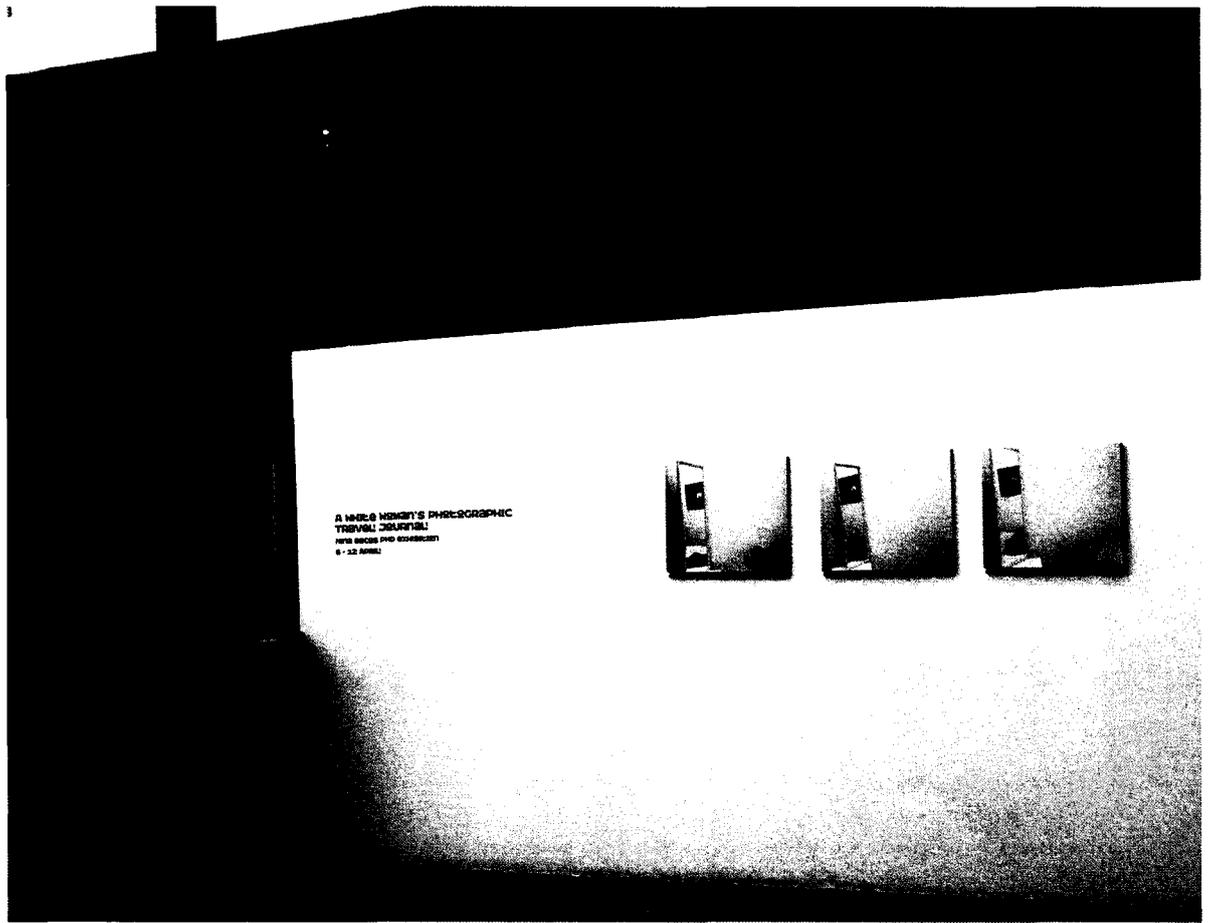


Figure 3. Installation shot, *Waiting for the Barbarians 1-3* (2012).

Firstly, although the order within the groups sometimes follows one strict thematic, such as in Figure 3 (*Waiting for the Barbarians 1-3*), they are more often created by both documentary and staged imagery, such as in Figure 5 (*Overview of Left-Hand Wall in Gallery*). (Such a separation, however, is not always clear-cut, as I demonstrate in *Cruising Black Guys* (see Section 4.2).)

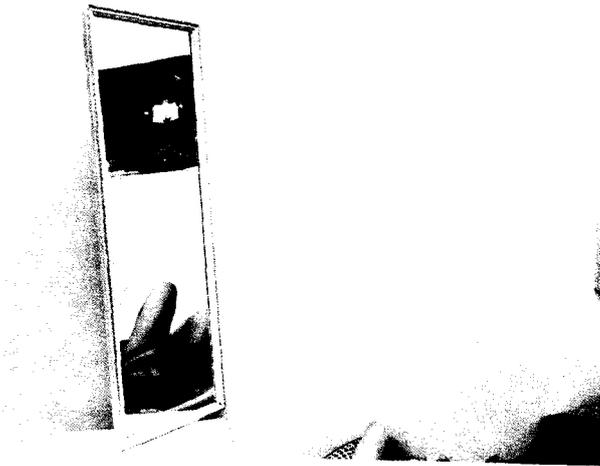
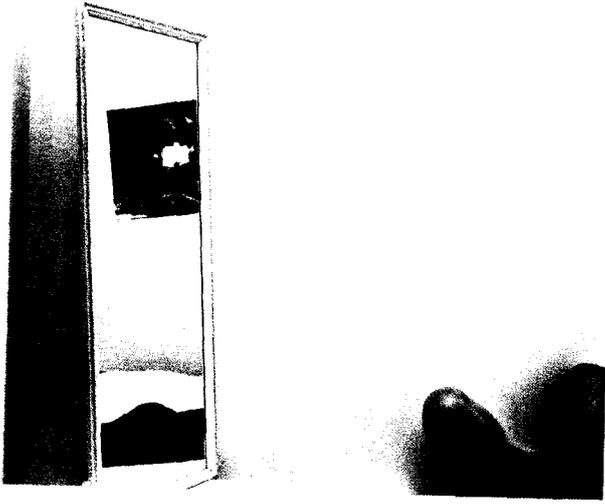
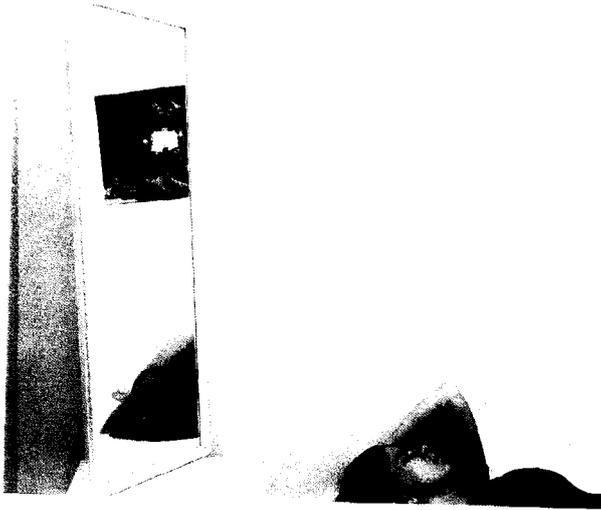


Figure 4. Nina Bacos, *Waiting for the Barbarians* 1-3 (2005)

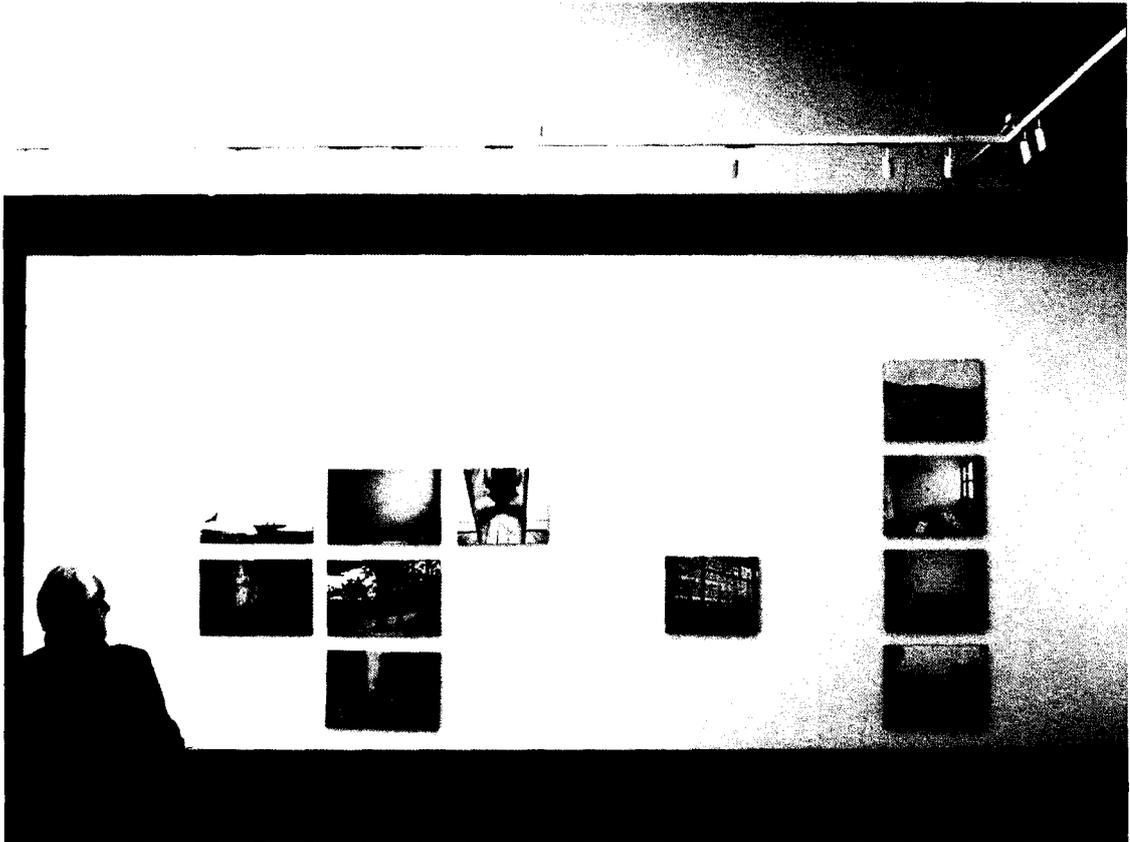


Figure 5. Nina Bacos Installation view of left-hand wall in gallery (2012).

Secondly, the distinctions between what is an actual documented experience (alluding to the ontological) and what is staged (alluding to the epistemological) may be further aesthetically blurred in individual images and, contrary to appearances, be carefully staged, such as in Figure 6 (*The Xeno-Phobic/Philic Gaze*, 2005).



Figure 6. Nina Bacos, *The Xeno-phobic/philic Gaze* (2005).

Thirdly, the separation of the fictional and factual is complicated by the fact that documentary or snapshot photographs are variously titled both by things unrelated to what was in front of the camera and by titles that directly or anecdotally relate to the situation in which they were shot, while a staged image always references a critical subject matter [that cross-references some issue I have looked at more closely in the during the research.]



Figure 7. Nina Bacos *The Lover* (2007).

According to this pattern, Figure 7 (*The Lover*, 2007), is un-staged and suggests a detached voyeuristic pleasure while referencing Marguerite Duras' book of the same title. Following this, Figure 8 (*The Day of the Voodoo*, 2006) and Figure 9 (*Bed*, 2006) document an occasion, thing or place in time as a 'counterpoint to the self-reflective "I"'; Figure 10 (*Reckless Abandon*, 2007) is an emotive documentary image about the carelessness of a traveller; while Figure 11 (*Ken Saro-Wiwa or Ed Rusha*, 2007) is a homage to the activist/poet Ken Saro-Wiwa¹ as well a critical contextualization of art-references, such as the term 'appropriation' (see Section 2.2); the staged image Figure 6

¹ Together with eight comrades, the Nigerian poet Ken Saro-Wiwa led a non-violent fight against the oil companies (mainly Shell) that drill for oil on the land of Ogoni people with little or no benefit to those people. For this, they were sentenced to death and executed in 1995 on fabricated evidence after what was thought to be collaboration between Shell and the Nigerian government. In 2009, Shell accepted liability for the atrocity and agreed to pay \$15.5m (£9.6m) in settlement of a legal action to the families of Ken Saro-Wiwa and his eight compatriots. (Source: *Guardian*, 9 June 2009.)

(*The Xeno-phobic/philic Gaze*, 2005) references postcolonial theory; and so on, making the work oscillate between the mundane and the specific.

Throughout the show, the only exception to the pattern is Figure 12 (*Meditation*, 2005), which is staged but documents in an anecdotal manner the way I was thinking about ‘how my body has been socialized in supremacist and sexist discourse’ while I photographed it (see Section 3.7).

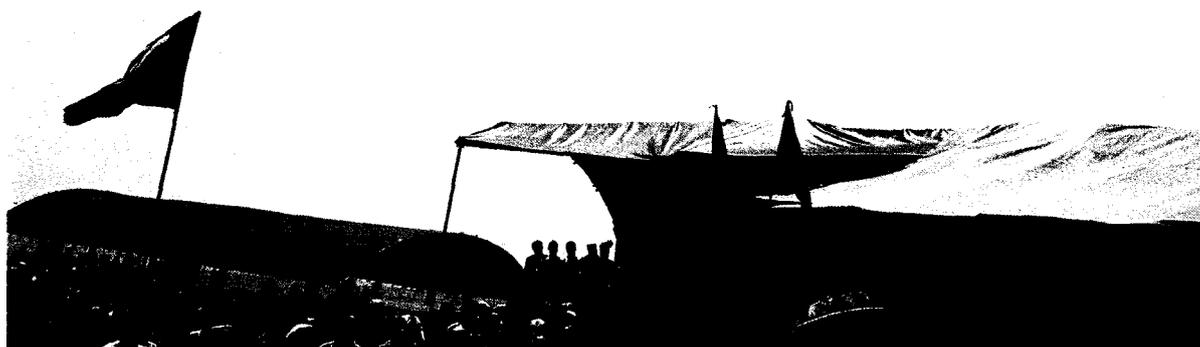


Figure 8. Nina Bacos *The Day of the Voodoo* (2006).

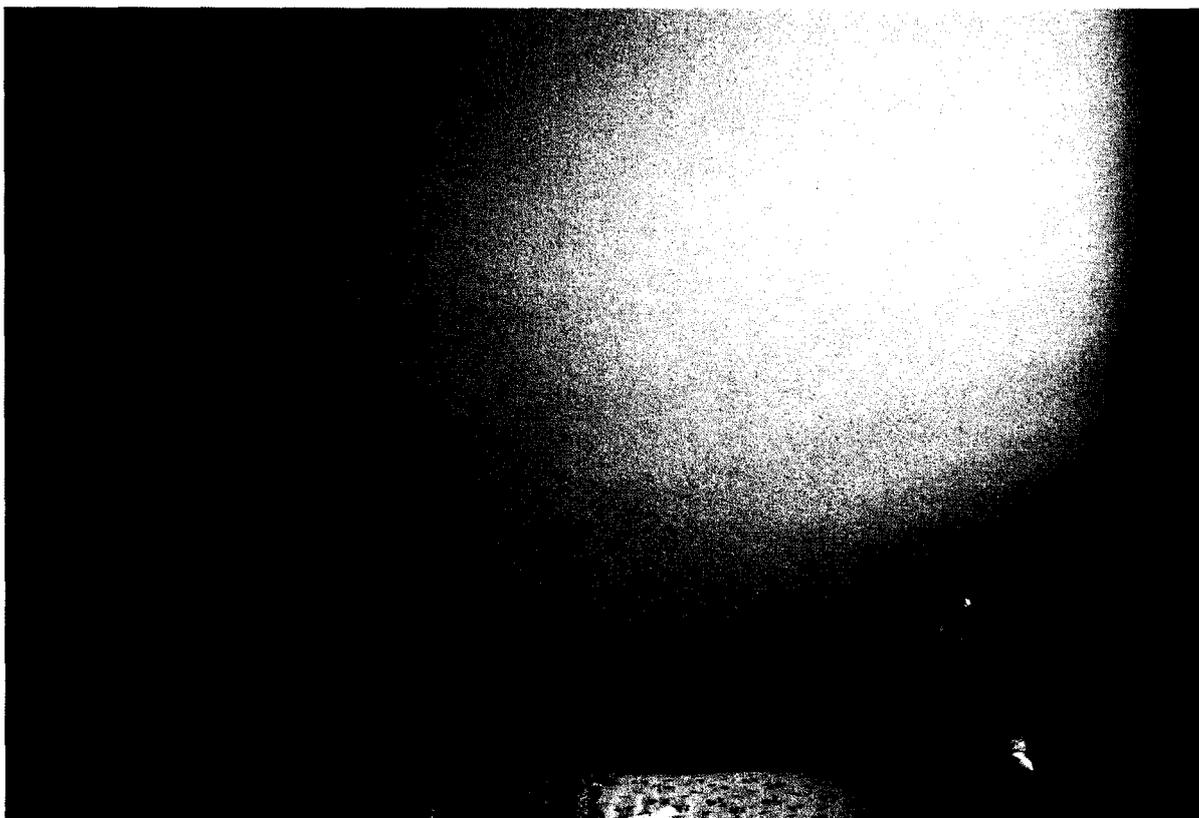


Figure 9. Nina Bacos *Bed* (2006).



Figure 10. Nina Bacos *Reckless Abandon* (2007).



Figure 11. Nina Bacos *Ken Saro Wiva or Ed Rusha* (2007).



Figure 12. Nina Bacos *Meditation* (2005).



Figure 13. Nina Bacos From top *Untitled* 2005, *The Odalisque* 2006, *Cultural Appropriation* (2006).

The trajectory in this visual organization can be roughly traced to three pre-viva exhibition incidents. In *The Jubilee Exhibit 2007* (Figure 13), I examined the possibilities/limitations of my own subjective position as a white woman and its relatedness to colonial as well as postcolonial frameworks in contemporary practices (see Sections 3.2–3.5). After installation of the 2007 exhibition, however, the Orientalist *mis en scène*, which they presented (so reminiscent of appropriation) (see Section 2.2), manifested a demonstration of a theoretical and practical conception of photography rather than a subjective self-reflection. As a result, the structural historical connections overshadowed the contemporary ones, placing me at a distance by a simulated criticality. The result did not situate my own individual, subjective, contemporary, ontological whiteness within a collective space (see Section 3.2) and thus it could not fulfil the criterion of being self-reflective. The experience mirrored the conclusions I had reached during my first field trip (2005) (see Sections 3.4, 3.5) regarding the importance of explicating the structuring white gaze from a subjective point of view. The difference was that while I had started photographing differently after this conclusion, I still had not managed to negotiate how to show the images. One difficulty lay in the fact that the still image was too powerful, too embarrassing and intimate when it materialized my own self as part of the tapestry I was examining as opposed to viewing them in a slide show, (while speaking of complicity and conflicting discourses) in a seminar or at a conference where the subject matter tended to feel more descriptive than experienced.

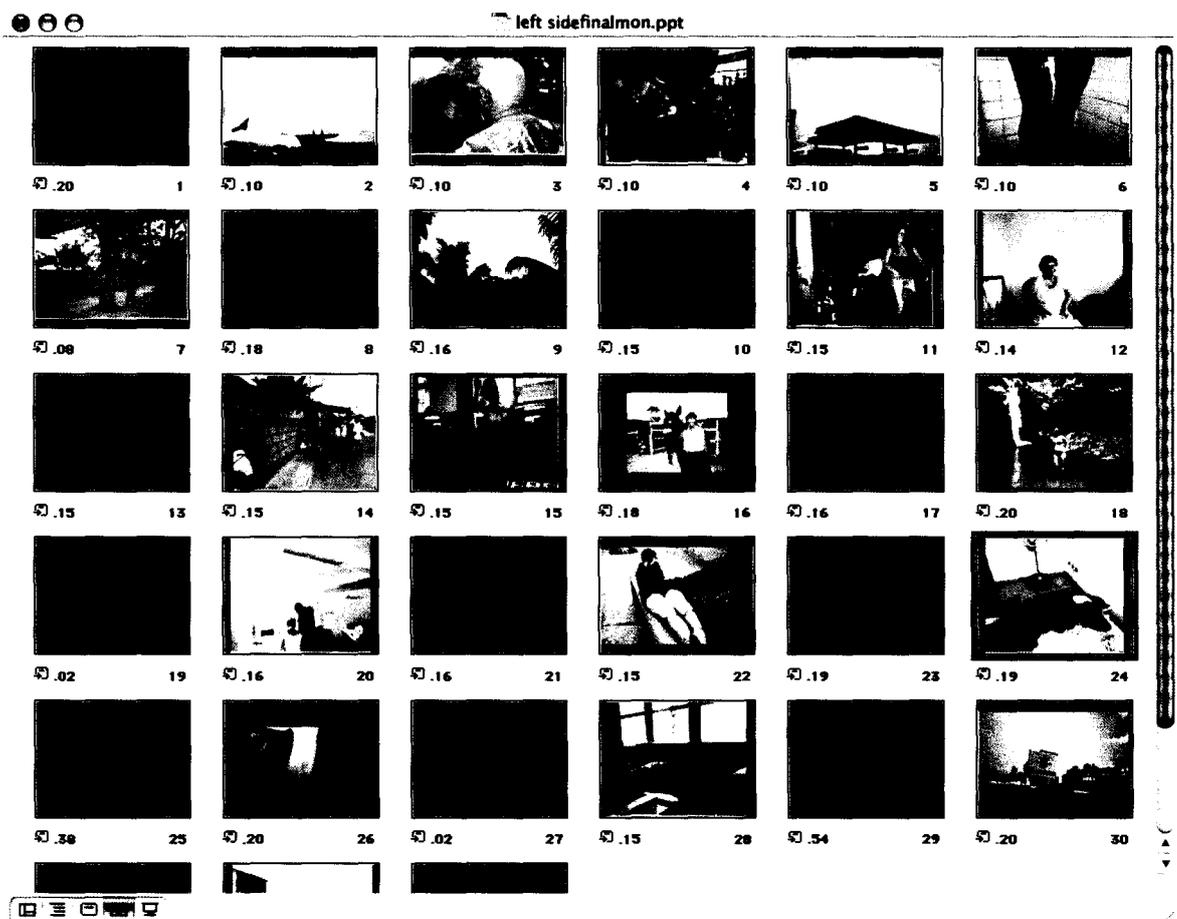


Figure 14. Slideshow. Nina Bacos *Common Work*, *Art in a Social Context* conference, Glasgow 2007.

Later that year, at the conference *Common Work, Art in a Social Context* 2007 (Figure 14), where the organizers provided three projectors, I got the opportunity to experiment with a more creative way of showing the research portfolio. Using black frames, I organized the slideshow so it forced the viewers to move their gaze across the images that appeared with uneven rhythms on the three different screens. While the event still provided a kind of protection against my felt vulnerability in the face of the still image, the slideshow embodied a sense of what I spoke about regarding complicity and conflicting discourses, which clarified the importance of employing the visuals spatially to achieve that feeling of coexisting narratives and photography as a relational space. During 2008, I worked with different approaches to find ways of connecting the theory and practice aesthetically.

In March 2009 I got an impulse to photograph the reading list I was working with *Photographic Reading List, 2009*, (Figure 15) which despite its apparent insignificance led to a sense of achieving an aesthetic connection between the theoretical and the visual properties in the project. This image compelled me to make a kind of photographic mind map using my own photographs in which I puzzled together texts and terms with images. This was not to claim that the words and images meant the same or that they translated into the same thing but rather to give them equal value, in order to experiment with the critical mode which so often has ‘reduced one to the other’s terms’ (Foucault 1994, p. 9) (see Section 2.2).



Figure 15. Nina Bacos, *Photographic Reading List* (2009).

In April 2010 I took part in a group show for the practice-based PhD students called *Half Knowledge/Half . . .*, which proved that I had not yet come to terms with how to negotiate between the ‘complex mediations involved in the construction’ of my subjective account and ‘the inevitable partiality, instability, and uncertainty of this’ (Tuanzon in Cole 2000, p. 77). Only the bottom image in the triptych (Figure 7; see also Figure 12, *Meditation*) transgresses a plain or direct reference to an examination of my own gaze as connected to my physical body in a structural framework. Even so, this image is literally veiled by a curtain through which I have photographed a shadow of a person. While it problematizes issues relating to the white female gaze and the black body, it evades troubling my gaze as an active agent. Turning ‘away from claiming a voice to deconstructing it’ (p. 77), the peepshow reference suggested by the box-like structure evades complicating my voice/gaze as a racially complicit activity at the centre of cross-cultural representations. As such, the installation played down the relational dynamic between ontology and epistemology by emphasizing a sense of captivity within the structures, thus arresting everyone in stereotypes. As such *Half Knowledge/Half . . . 2010*, demonstrated a move away from the critical but distant aesthetic of the 2007 exhibition (see Section 3.7) to an aesthetic that works with different narrative connections between race and gender. It suggests a progression, but the hypothesis about photography as a complex social space for relational negotiations had not yet been tested. By suggesting a deeper insider position and a subjective voice (Figure 20) but not treating the photographs as objects with connections to a social space where this voice is an active agent, *Half Knowledge Half . . .* manages to produce an ironic aesthetic which effectively is more distancing than the aforementioned *Jubilee Exhibit 2007* (Section 3.9).



Figure 17. Installation shot, *Half Knowledge/half . . .*, at Grace and Clark Fyfe Gallery, Glasgow (2010).

As a result, even though I had taken measures not to avoid whatever left my narrative open to intrusion by others (Sections 3.3 3.4), I still avoided giving the activity in those relationships a concrete presence. Concluding this, I began the process that led to the organization of the images described at the beginning of this appendix. I continued using mind-map techniques, coupling images to issues (such as the white bald man right next to my crotch, Figure 20) with words such as ‘white supremacy’, ‘white female sexuality’, ‘control of the black body’ next to them to suture the discussion about sexuality and race (see Sections 3.7–3.8.) with the social space constituted by the images.

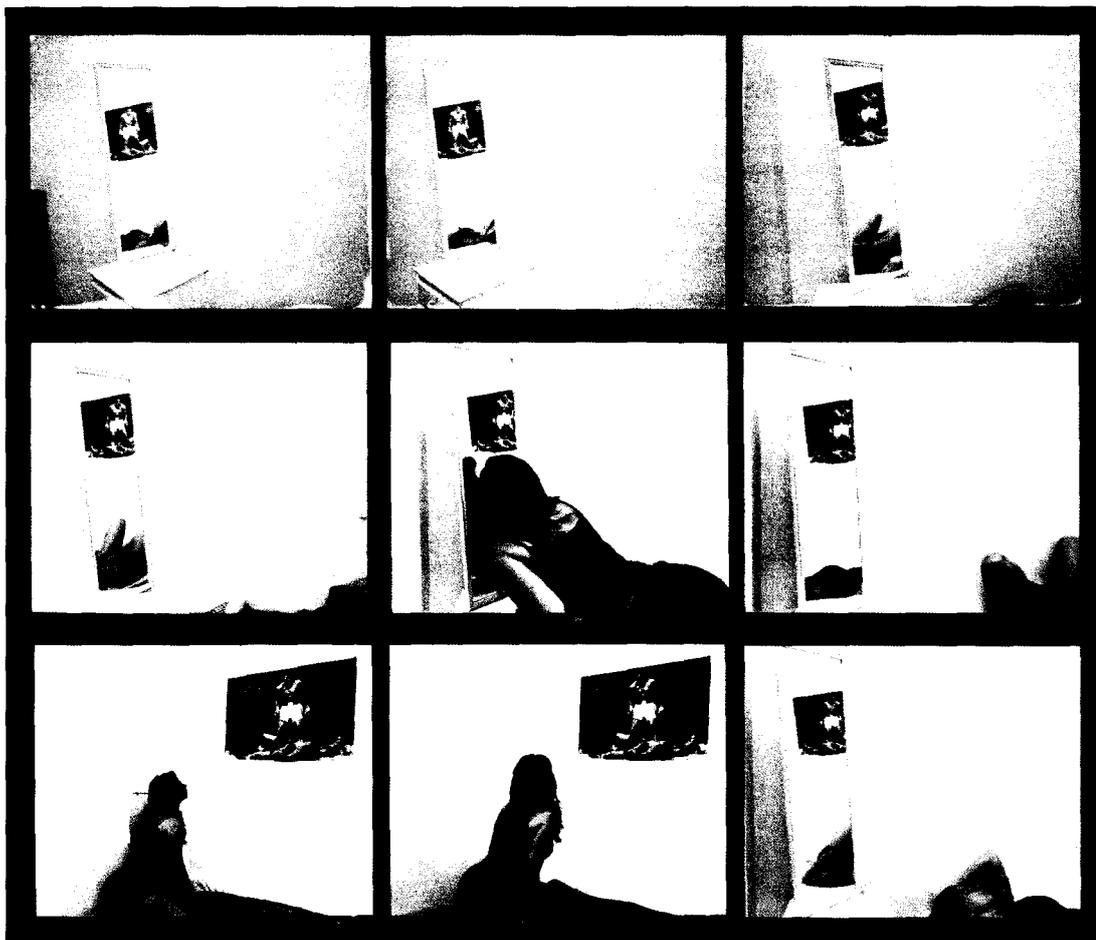


Figure 18. Nina Bacos, Light-box grid, *Half Knowledge Half . . .* (2010).



Figure 19. Nina Bacos, *Mind Map* (2010).

This activity slowly developed to incorporate terms that related in different ways to the research. Subsequently I started using some as titles but intermittently mixing them with documentary titles. In the PhD show *Beltainne* 2011, I exhibited eight images that were representative of staged and documentary material, including *The Lover* (2007), *Africa Cup* (2006) and *The Imperial Gaze* (2005). The outcome of this started to resemble an account that visually brought different voices (personal, colonial, postcolonial, critical) to the fore, where a negotiation between these narratives and experiences became possible (see Section 3.1.2). While *Beltainne* was successful as a trial, the limited number of pictures in the exhibit produced a relatively tight aesthetics, which did not achieve a sense of ongoing experience ‘as something that does not break even’ (Hannula 2011, p. 107). This outcome provided an important clue to the significance of using many more diverse images to accomplish the ‘openness and internal traffic of conflict and incoherencies’ (Hannula 2011, p. 107) for which I was aiming.

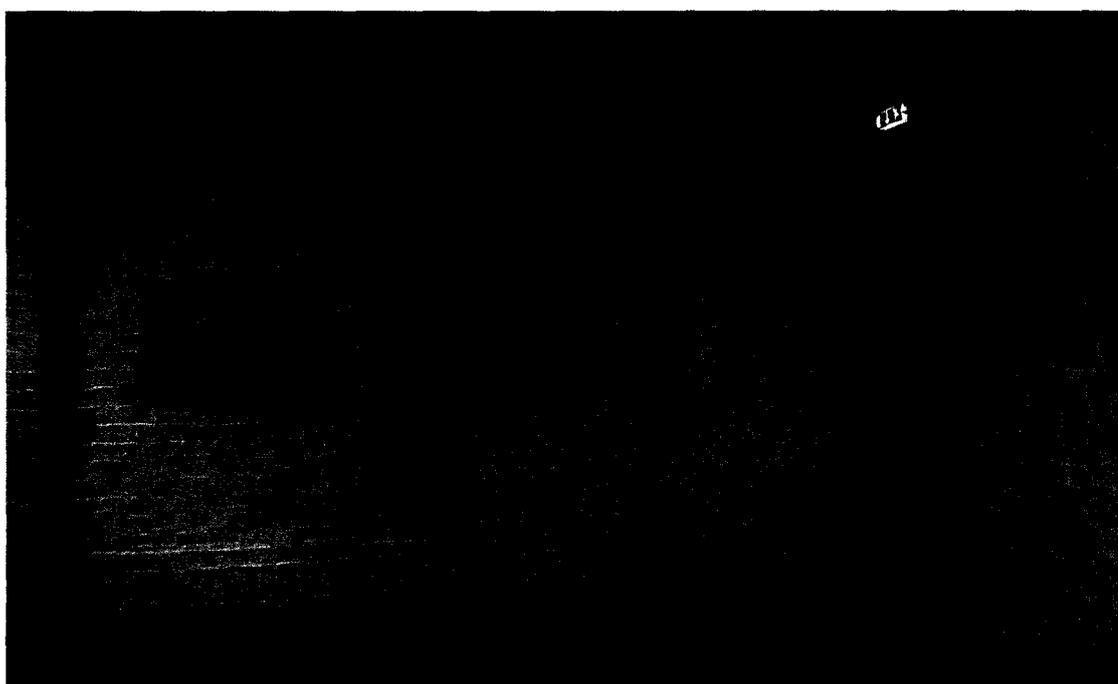


Figure 20. Bacos PhD installation exhibition *Beltainne* at The Glue Factory, source Heikie Lovenstein (2011).

In the remaining year that led up to submission, I continued working with approximately 70 images. These were edited down to 45 exhibition prints for the final show in order to achieve an intelligible perspective from which to challenge a 'conventional perception' (Mbembe 2011) (see Section 6) of structural categories. Without avoiding the conflicts of these structural categories, the final exhibit (2012) sought to explore the transformative power of the photographic act. The reoccurring self-portraiture displayed throughout the installation made my own authored or distinct subjectivity transparent (see Sections 3.1–3.1.3), but the documentary or snapshot images enabled the critical enquiry to expand in to a wider cultural space.



Figure 21. Nina Bacos Installation shot Viva Show 2012.

This aesthetic measure, which is at work within the individual image as well as in and across the different groups (between staged, documentary, self-portrait and snapshot), multiplies the different narratives that are formed and re-formed continuously. Treating the essential concept that photography is a 'structuring system' (Burgin 2003, p. 137) (see Section 1.4) as a relational possibility rather than a conclusive delimitation, the exhibition event brings different possible interpretations and understandings to the fore with equal attention. Every constellation is thus 'fractured by a number of unaccounted-for narratives that puncture' (Section 6,) one's own imaginary master narrative.

The achievement is a methodology which, by means of aesthetics, successfully subordinate conceptual dichotomies about photography as a transparent document or as a structuring system to the importance of finding ways to mine photography's transcendence of 'time and space' in regard to 'both the subjects involved with the photographic act and the context of the viewing subject' (Section 6).

Thus, by probing the photographic act as a relationship, the exhibition constitutes a space in which it is possible to 'elaborate on an ethical perspective' (Butler 2005, p. 101). As such, it provides an essential part of this research's contribution to knowledge regarding the significance of 'the idea of life understood as a regenerative force' (Mbembe 2011) and the importance of measuring a methodology by continuously re-engaging with 'where it wants to go and what ethical responsibilities it has to go there' (Section 6,).

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- Figure 18 Nina Bacos, Light-box grid, *Half Knowledge Half . . .* (2010).
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- Figure 20. PhD exhibition *Beltaine* at The Glue Factory (2011). Source: H.Lovenstein
- Figure 21. Nina Bacos, Installation shot Viva Show 2012 Heike Lowenstein

Title list for Electronic Portfolio

1. Waiting for the Barbarians 1, 2 and 3 (2005)
2. Looking for Arcadia 1 (2006)
3. The Day of the Voodoo (2006)
4. Haivive Tree (2005)
5. Bed (2006)
6. Untitled 48 (2005)
7. Reckless Abandon (2007)
8. Meditation (2005)
9. The /Xenophobic/philic Gaze (2005)
10. The Sheltering sky 1 (2005)
11. The Lover (2007)
12. The Odalisque (2006)
13. Looking For Arcadia (2006)
14. The Imperial Gaze (to the right after the corner of the room)
15. Ken Saro-Wiwa, Ed Rusha? (2007)
16. Heading South (2006)
17. Living Room (2006)
18. Fan (2007)
19. The Photographer 1 (2005)
20. The Intern 2006
21. The Cultural Gaze (2005)
22. The Sheltering Sky 2 (2006)
23. The Photographer 2 (2005)
24. Cultural Assimilation (2007)
25. Border Crossing (2006)
26. The Couple (2006)
27. Eldorado Beach (2006)
28. Cruising Black Guys (2005)
29. Cultural Appropriation (2006)
30. Haramatan (2007)
31. Guess Who is coming for Dinner (2006)
32. Christmas decoration (2007)
33. Striplight (2006)
34. Red Haired Woman (2006)
35. The Invisible Man (2006)
36. Lou Lou Cherinet's Whiteman (2006)
37. Braided Tourist (2006)
38. Africa Cup Final (2006)
39. The Intellectual Gaze (2006)
40. Thai restaurant Sisimiut (2008)
41. The Photographer 2 (2006)
42. Building Site Abidjan (2006)
43. Self-Portrait Ilussiat (2008)