

CENTRING SILENCES

The Elusive Photographic Archive of Mabel Cetu



I wonder what her archives would reveal

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Archive of Mabel Cetu

Edited by
Stefanie Jason

Centring Silences: The Elusive Photographic Archive of Mabel Cetu

Edited by Stefanie Jason © 2020

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‘There is no past waiting intact to be retrieved for preservation; no immaculate past waiting for our return; no past waiting for blame. There is only our interrogation of what we have come to know about history, and what we can make of and with this coming to know in our attempts to human the future.’
– Zimitri Erasmus, 2017

Centring Silences: The Elusive Photographic Archive of Mabel Cetu is a conceptual reader on photojournalist Mabel Cetu, whose biography and photo archive are nebulously traceable in mainstream histories today. *Centring Silences*, which forms part of my Curatorial MA thesis, examines fragments of histories to draw attention to the absence of Cetu’s photography in institutional records and queries ways of centring her practice, when so little of it remains visible. I would like to note, before going further, that even though Cetu’s photography is crucial to my research, this work equally seeks to centre Cetu’s experiences; including her position as a photojournalist and black woman in apartheid South Africa. Since so much of black women’s work is entangled in their everyday, wherein the personal is political, it would be a missed opportunity to contemplate Cetu’s photographic practice without being attentive to the complexities of her life and the world around her.

As part of my thesis surveys the archives of *Drum Magazine* and *Golden City Post*¹ – just two of the many publications that Cetu worked for in the middle of the twentieth century² – *Centring Silences* complicates the role of history-making practices in shaping memory, and wonders how splintered, porous depictions of the past can be observed today to explore Cetu’s elusive photographic archive. In community with scholars, curators, artists and writers, *Centring Silences* stands as a site that traverses themes such as memory, media/photojournalism and the convolutedness of the “official” archive – all the while posing questions on engaging absences³.

Who is Mabel Cetu, née Sidlayi⁴? This reader does not aim to answer by doing the impossible and re-telling Cetu’s entire life story, nor does it try to represent her photographs. Instead, what this reader *does* seek to do, is sit in the sonance of silence⁵ that surrounds Mabel Cetu’s public memory. In thinking about the

glimpses of information available in institutional records and personal moments from those who knew or have done research on Cetu, this project also pivots on the phantasmal nature of Mabel Cetu's photography today. By doing so, *Centring Silences* aims to provoke the limits of dominant history and heighten new, alternative ways of remembering individuals pushed into the peripheries of the public imagination.

Despite photographer and curator Pam Warne locating Cetu's birth year to 1910 in what is now the Free State province⁶, many question marks and inconsistencies shadow Cetu's biography as presented in historical records today. In an interview with Zingiwe Cetu – Mabel Cetu's niece – in *Centring Silences*, the fractured nature of Cetu's history is further surfaced. Despite gaps in information, it is clear from writings, interviews and close readings of institutional archival documents that Cetu's career was dynamic and illustrious.

Mabel Cetu, who lived for many years of her life in New Brighton, Port Elizabeth, and passed away in 1990, held positions such as nurse, journalist, photojournalist and political activist, the latter which Zingiwe Cetu and photojournalist Neo Ntsoma point to in *Centring Silences*. Meanwhile, curator Dudu Madonsela shares her research on Mabel Cetu in *Centring Silences*, describing Cetu as part of the African National Congress (ANC) Women's League, an organisation which played a critical role in resisting the repressive policies of the apartheid state. Madonsela also highlights how one of the photographs she found in the *Drum Magazine* archive was Cetu "wearing the ANC Women's League uniform". Cetu's son, Churchill, was an anti-apartheid activist, says Zingiwe Cetu, who also recounts his brutal arrest and imprisonment on Robben Island. These vignettes of Mabel Cetu's life prompt contemplation for Cetu's everyday; her experience as an activist, as a mother, as a photojournalist, and the numerous ways in which she pushed back against the violence of a racist and gendered society.

In addition, Mabel Cetu played a major role in organising beauty contests. She was also a socialite, as Zingiwe Cetu and photojournalist Neo Ntsoma state, with a circle of friends that included famous musicians such as The Mahotella Queens and Dark City Sisters⁷. In a text message to me, Zingiwe Cetu recalls being a teenager and seeing her aunty carry her camera bag to Adcock Stadium in Port Elizabeth to photograph rugby matches. Later, in another text, Zingiwe Cetu also shares that Cetu formed the first rugby team for black women in Port Elizabeth.

Meanwhile, in the early eighties⁸, Cetu was appointed as community councillor, a position which arguably complicates her legacy today. Community councillor structures – or the Black Local Authorities (BLAs) – were introduced by the apartheid state in the early eighties "to concede some measure of power to local African communities in governing their own urban areas," writes Patricia Zweig.

At the time, "the climate of anti-government sentiment that then existed the BLAs were vigorously rejected by township residents who saw them merely as new government control mechanisms", says Zweig in a paper that draws on the tensions and contradictions of BLAs⁹.

Furthermore, in an essay in this monograph, photography scholar and curator Candice Jansen highlights the absence of Mabel Cetu's photography archive in dominant histories, and does so through the examination of an archival document that entangles Cetu to Bantustan policies. Posing questions relating to a "Mrs Cetu" in the archival document, Jansen asks: "Did Mrs Cetu stand on 'the wrong side of apartheid'? If she was Mabel Cetu, the photographer, is this part of the reason for her elusiveness in photographic history?" Candice Jansen's provocations expose hegemonic narratives – throughout apartheid and post-1994 South Africa – in amplifying or drowning out certain voices; and grapples with the lacuna of Cetu's work within the dynamics of power, race, gender and politics.

So, in thinking about agency, the quotidian and the gaps that permeate Mabel Cetu's legacy today, this reader signals a history that is intricate and entangled. In drawing on these varied, complex moments and the obvious absence of Cetu's photographs from institutional records, this work therefore critiques memory as a space that is "deeply political", as scholar and writer Athambile Masola posits in *Centring Silences*.

~
History is Storytelling.
– Yaa Gyasi, 2016
~

While going through the pages of *Drum* and *Golden City Post* between 1958 and 1970, the role of photojournalism in the middle of twentieth century South Africa is surfaced as a tool for fresh, nuanced narratives and a subversive practice in a society newly entrenched by oppressive apartheid laws¹⁰.

With unique photographic imagery of black experiences presented in publications such as *Drum* and *Golden City Post*, these sites platformed robust engagements on topics relating to race, gender, politics, culture and the day-to-day experiences of black people, which agitated against colonial and apartheid narratives. Black titles such as these were also spaces, within a patriarchal society, where close examinations point to feminist discourse and in which, as Tsitsi Ella Jaji says, "important debates over shifting attitudes towards gender roles"¹¹ took place. Furthermore, in *Centring Silences* Athambile Masola also articulates Cetu's career as a photojournalist as part of a legacy of black women media practitioners in South Africa, and argues, "Like other women who were pioneers before her –

such as Daisy Makiwane, a journalist who wrote for *Imvo Zabantsundu* in the late 1800s, and Nontsizi Mqgqwetho, a poet, who published in newspapers in the 1920s – Mabel's name remains as a refusal to complete erasure." Athambile Masola's writing thus underlines the contributions of black women in South Africa's media histories and comments on the systems of erasure that have attempted to deny their existence.

In contrast, publications such as *Drum* and *Golden City Post* have also been critiqued for not only challenging hegemonic structures but also upholding certain dominant ideas at the time, including furthering capitalist agendas¹² – an economic system prioritised by colonial and apartheid regimes – and being white owned¹³. Moreover, the gender dynamics cannot be overlooked in *Drum* and *Golden City Post* (1958 to 1970); this is glaring in the male dominance seen in the photo/journalistic credits on the page and the framing of women in areas relating to the home or beauty¹⁴.

Therefore, pondering Cetu's career within such a convoluted media landscape – affected by the dynamics of a racist, patriarchal and capitalist climate – invites a careful attentiveness to agency and the historical context of media and photojournalism. An insistence of a unique scrutiny on the political and personal moments in Cetu's history, also evokes questions such as: How was Mabel Cetu's position as a photographer shaped by, or how did it contest power constructs within the newsroom and broader society at the time? How does Cetu's presence in such male-heavy histories encourage different ways of thinking about photography and media in South Africa? And how might Mabel Cetu have contributed to a black photographic canon of the mid-twentieth century, which set into motion new, disruptive ways of seeing in apartheid South Africa?¹⁵

~
[...] Photography is an everyday strategy of affirmation
and a confrontational practice of visibility.'
– Tina Campt, 2017
~

While surveying the *Drum* and *Golden City Post* in the repositories of Wits University library, Pretoria Library and Bailey's African History Archives in Gauteng, I did not find any photographs credited with Mabel Cetu's name. Instead what I did encounter was the (dis)functionality of the archive and with such, omissions relating to Cetu's works. In addition, a widespread absence of photojournalistic credits in the *Drum* and *Golden City Post* (1958 to 1970) reveals practices of exclusion and gatekeeping that publicly recognised the photographic work of often a select few – mainly men.

Pam Warne's essay, *The Early Years: Notes on South African Photographers Before the Eighties* refers to Cetu's practice and contextualises it within "the silence surrounding black women photographers" in South Africa before the 1970s¹⁶. Warne's writing – a departure point for my research – as well as my examination of institutional archives, has encouraged me to think about how media and dominant history-making practices in South Africa have converged to marginalise black women's voices in photography prior to the 1970s, and the ramifications of this.

Laying bare institutional histories of photography in South Africa, Candice Jansen, in a 2017 article, exposes the exclusiveness of memory space Bailey's African History Archives¹⁷. Pointing to a R95 fee to "access the physical collection", which she infers as inaccessible to a majority of South Africans, Jansen announces practices that have denied naming certain photographers, and its hollowing effects today. Writing specifically on the archive's *Drum* photographic collection, Jansen argues:

The *Drum* photo collection is largely populated by anonymously authored photographs. Most of the photographers whose images are in the collection have not been identified, which means that their images circulate in books, films and exhibitions like stock photographs. They serve to ensure the visibility of this historic brand, but simultaneously reinforce the invisibility of its lesser-known photographers, who are mostly black. (2017)

Jansen's provocations implicate established archives such as Bailey's in marginalising photographers and calls out the gaps in histories which such systems create. Echoing the devastating effects of uncredited photographers in historical records is curator Dudu Madonsela. In an interview with me in *Centring Silences*, the curator explores the consequences of these practices on photojournalists such as Mabel Cetu. Speaking on Bailey's too, Madonsela argues that these systems have allowed for unrecorded photographs to be falsely claimed:

[Photographer] Alfred Kumalo told me that you would be so surprised by the work that is published today and people that claimed that work. We know that these works didn't belong to them but because of the absent credits, some took advantage of that process, especially if photographers were deceased. (2020)

Further articulating the repercussions of "authorless" photographs in memory spaces today, Madonsela states, "[...] Look at what we are suffering with today, we cannot trace Cetu's work because of the monopoly approach imposed by the

system – photographers were not accredited, how painful!" So, for researchers of photojournalists in South Africa's histories who are not named in "official" records – whose credits are absent or whose photographs are lost in the abyss of the maelstrom of dominant history-making practices – what becomes of these unattributed photographs?

In a photography canon predicated largely on the material – the photograph – the elusiveness of Mabel Cetu's archive is read as an urgent cue to reassess photographic matter as immaterial and intangible, yet undeniable and real. Given the description of photography by Okwui Enwezor and Chika Okeke Agulu as a "site of memorialization, a record of what has been", how can the opacity of Cetu's history and the condition of some of South Africa's photography records today therefore prompt us to further rethink the country's photography archive as a site of (contested) memory and a body of forgetfulness?

~
Every historian of the multitude, the dispossessed, the subaltern, and the enslaved is forced to grapple with the power and authority of the archive and the limits it sets on what can be known, whose perspective matters, and who is endowed with the gravity and authority of historical actors.
– Saidiya Hartman, 2019
~

In a conversation in 2018, curator and photography scholar Oluremi C Onabanjo – who speaks with art critic Jessica Lynne in *Centring Silences* – advocates for the archive to be reconsidered as a space for experimentation. Meanwhile, writer and academic Saidiya Hartman¹⁹ urges for a "writing with and against" the archival grain to reimagine the lives of historical figures whose identities are nebulously depicted in state records of violent systems and colonial dispositions. Therefore, approaches such as Onabanjo and Hartman's – alongside the works of artists, scholars, writers and historians interested in alternative writings of the past – have inspired my research to broach fresh, complicated readings of histories within and beyond the institutional archive. In so doing, the confines of dominant histories, as exclusionary, linear narratives are problematised and widened, and the "official" archive – to quote curator Anna Harding through the work of Erika Nimis – is transformed into a "starting point, not an end point"²⁰.

Moreover, concepts such as radical imagination fervidly heighten *Centring Silences* as a site of reimagining. Researcher Rashieda Witter argues Black Radical Imagination²¹ as a liberatory tool, "an intrinsic force ... allowing one to create without limitation"²². Witter expounds on the concept:

The Black Radical Imagination proposes ideas of creating spaces that are not restricting or limiting. It requires reclaiming and restructuring narratives so that they are not victimizing, but empowering. Above all, the Black Radical Imagination requires one to generate new narratives. (2017: 8)

So, in drawing from theories such as those mentioned above, *Centring Silences* aims to present a conceptual exploration of Mabel Cetu's history that unsettles dominant accounts and expansively ruminates on her life and photo archive so elusive in mainstream histories. In addition, African and Black feminisms became a ray of light, guiding and enlivening the process of this research, and which encouraged a practice sensitive to the nuances, layers and gaps in relation to black women's narratives.

Poet Toni Stuart, in a conversation with me in *Centring Silence*, shares her experiences researching historical figures poorly depicted in state archives, and her encounters in these repositories with colonial and apartheid foundations. Stuart speaks about why a feminist practice of care is essential to such work. "When I say a practice of care, I mean the care and attention I bring to reading the text and sitting with these things – giving them time and space," Stuart says. Advocating for an attentiveness not only when thinking about traumatic, fragmented histories, but also when thinking of self, Stuart contends that a feminist practice of care is:

... everything from making sure I eat well, making sure I exercise and sleep well, so that I am fit and healthy enough to hold the story in me so that I render it well. Because so much violence happens in the academic spaces – people pushing themselves and not taking care of themselves. So for me, a feminist practice is taking care of oneself through the process.

Therefore, throughout this research process – which included engaging with fragile and difficult histories, traveling to various repositories (in a country plagued with gender based violence) and working in and around the boundaries of the academy – a practice of care for self and this research, as emphasised by Stuart, became central for me doing this work.

Lastly, holding space with individuals across practices and temporalities has set into motion this work as a gesture inherently collective and continuous in its essence. Standing alongside ongoing research into Mabel Cetu's history by scholars, artists, photojournalists, curators and writers, *Centring Silences* offers a site that thinks deeply about Cetu's practice, experiences and legacy; what is (un) represented in memory spaces today, and why. In conversation with interventions

into ghostly omissions that lie awake in South Africa's archives, *Centring Silences* aims to contribute nuanced engagements of Mabel Cetu's photography and further new, alternative approaches into such complex and layered histories.

Notes

- 1 My thesis surveys the *Drum* and *Golden City Post* between the years 1958 and 1970.
- 2 Warne, 2016: 22.
- 3 Even more so, in *Centring Silences*, art critic Jessica Lynne poignantly poses the question: What does it "mean to resist the urge to name an absence"?
- 4 According to Zingwe Cetu, Mabel Cetu's maiden surname is Sidlayi.
- 5 Curator and photojournalist Pam Warne argues, "In the silence surrounding black women photographers before the 1970s and 1980s, the name Mabel Cetu (1910-1990) resounds like a bell" (2006: 22).
- 6 Warne, 2016: 22.
- 7 Zingwe Cetu, 2020.
- 8 In *Centring Silences*, Zingwe Cetu articulates that Mabel Cetu was appointed as a councillor in the early 1980s.
- 9 Zweig describes how BLAs provided a fraught sense of agency for black people by granting "them some political voice" but sorely compromised black communities by not offering a "sufficient solution to Black political aspirations". 2005
- 10 Scholar Andries Walter Oliphant states that in the middle of the twentieth century, the rise of documentary photography in South Africa "coincided with the ascendancy of apartheid in 1948 and the radicalization of nationalist resistance and marked a shift in the representation of Africans from passive ahistorical subjects to active agents involved in modernist practices of self-refashioning based on cosmopolitan, pan-African, and transatlantic African American identities" (2013: 348).
- 11 Jaji, 2014: 112.
- 12 & 13. Tomaselli & Muller, 1987.
14. Soobben, D. 2010.
15. In writing about documentary photography in South Africa, Okwui Enwezor argues, "...[A]fter 1948 African photographers became visible protagonists in shaping the image of their world" (2013: 29).
16. Warne, 2016: 22.
17. Bailey's African History Archives is home to archives of publications such as the *Golden City Post* and *Drum*, dating from 1951 to 1984 (Jansen, 2017).
18. Hartman, 2008.
19. Onabanjo, 2018.
20. Nimis, 2016: 351.
21. In her research, Rashied Witter credits Black Radical Imagination as originating from a set of dialogues produced by Erin Christovale and Amir George (2017: 5).
22. Witter, 2017: 4.

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wonder why her name is not in the books of history with the rest of the photographers that produced work for drum at the time.

I also

Posted by Lerato Maduna at 5:40 AM

Mabel Cetu established a reputation as a fearless photojournalist and community builder. In this image from newspaper archives, Cetu, centre, is inducted as president of the New Brighton branch of the National Council of Women at a ceremony held in the eighties at the War Memorial Hall, New Brighton, Port Elizabeth.

I also remembered the midnight in Grahamstown in the '70s when South Africa's first black woman photo-journalist, Mabel 'Sis May' Cetu, rubbing her palms together and speaking perfect Afrikaans using the address "baas", got us out of being charged with public disturbance when Bishop Limba Band's saxophonist, Hamma Qilingele, suddenly rendered an impromptu performance in a street. It was quite common for Africans to use this subservient attitude to get away from tight situations involving the apartheid law, leaving the policeman with a sense of superiority. The policy of black consciousness of Steve Biko and Barney Pitsoa would have viewed us as surrendering our souls to a white man.

In the silence surrounding black women photographers before the 1970s and 1980s, the name of Mabel Cetu (1910-1990) resounds like a bell. We are indebted to the Port Elizabeth Herald columnist, Jimmy Matyu, for his affectionate recollections of the life and achievements of this photographer. The journalist recounts how the Free State-born Cetu became a prominent figure in Port Elizabeth's White Location, first as a pioneering midwife and then as the first trained, black woman photojournalist in the country, working for *Zonk* magazine. In 1958 she joined the *Golden City Post* and, although there is no record of her in the Bailey Photographic Archives, *Drum Magazine*. She later became a contributor to *Umsobomvu*, the former Eastern Province Herald's weekly page, and the SABC's Radio Bantu. Widely known as 'Sis May', Cetu's

[continued on page 24]

It is a tragic story. A story involving thousands of people caught up in a social revolution that mercilessly tossed aside custom and tradition. We interviewed a prominent freedom fighter, a church minister, a teacher, a musician, an actor, a librarian and two beauty queens, of whom has survived two stormy marriages.

in the photojournalism of *Drum* magazine of the fifties. I know of only one black woman photographer, Mabel Cetu, from that time. She was said to be the first black South African woman photojournalist and worked for *Drum* and *Zonk* magazines, as well as the *Golden City Post*. Mabel was a rare breed, as Pam Warne confirms in her essay on the early years of women's photography.

Matyu, J. 2005. 'Sis May's house drew socialites, journalists', in *The Herald* Online. Available at: <http://www.theherald.co.za/colare/town/mj100805.htm>

'Sis May's house drew socialites, journalists'

social and political commitment to her community earned her the title 'Mother of the White Location'. In 1978, the Khayamandi Town Council named the White Location Cetuville in her honour (Matyu 2005).

Pam Warne
Iziko South African National Gallery

GOLDEN CITY POST, SEPTEMBER 20, 1959

planted a kiss on the POST woman's cheek.

WHEN Mabel Cetu, representative of POST in Port Elizabeth.

that people gathered at the beach were not breaking any law. But the sergeant reminded us that there was a law on March 21, 1960, Sharpeville massacre during which police could detain anyone for reasons of public safety in courts. Public meetings were banned, he reminded us.

the law. About 30 black men and women raised descended on the shack while some of them charged at the fleeing crowd. I was shouting up with the black ones and the aged who could not run fast enough, and I was shouting at their buttocks. I here we were not hitting me." Frightened children were screaming for help.

sea, she called out: "Go down to the sea, see the sea, see the sea, for the one who is coming the Son of God." The serious ones in the crowd suddenly obeyed the call and closed their eyes and seemed to be mumbling prayers. But there were those who remained to the shelter, which had a sheet of iron covering the door, to receive her blessings.

When the prophet suddenly appeared, the crowd surged forward. Nisimani had need to ward her with appeals to be healed or blessed. She raised her hands and told the gathering that she was the prophetess. There will be upheavals and the Lord Jesus Christ will come to judge as it will be judgment day. There is little time and of love. There is little time for repentance," she said.

And pointing towards the residents were running to the beach in their hundreds and my journalistic colleagues alerted photographer Sis Mabel Cetu, who joined me. Both of us were at the Golden City Post office. I saw a crudely built wood and grass shack, and inside sat the prophet, surrounded by a few obedient followers. The crowd, mostly women, had grown to about 100. Occasionally children were invited into the shelter, which had a sheet of iron covering the door, to receive her blessings.

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What was a quiet, almost religious, scene turned into chaos and pandemonium. Sis May and I remained next to the shack and she kept on shouting at the police. "No photographs," snapped a sergeant. There was an argument between the sergeant and Cetu. She insisted we were there at the invitation of the 'seer' and

● Eddie "Mr. Showbiz" Nemkhanwona of P.E. station, sees off his secretary, Mrs. Mabel Cetu, who visited Bloemfontein for a week to make final arrangements for the "Miss S.A. Teenage" beauty contest to be staged there in December.

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Surname CETU

Identity Number Sign in to View

Date of Birth 1914-07-15

Names MABEL

I am doing my masters on Mabel Cetu and I am currently traveling to PE, I leave on Friday morning. And I would love to know if you could recommend anyone for me to speak to re: Mabel Cetu. Whether it is yourself or Anyone else who would be able to speak to me on such short notice 11:47 ✓

Looking forward to hearing from you. Best wishes, stefanie Jason 11:47 ✓

Mabel Cetu is dead and she died long time ago. 16:23

Yes I know 16:26 ✓

I'm doing my masters on her and looking to interview people re: her

Counter-
memory

REMEMBERING

MABEL CETU

An interview with Zingiwe Cetu, who is the niece of Mabel Cetu and a retired teacher and clinical advisor based in Makhanda.

Stefanie Jason: How is Mabel Cetu related to you?

Zingwiwe Cetu: Mabel Cetu was my aunt, her husband and my father were brothers. Her parents were church ministers.

SJ: Both parents?

ZC: The father was a church minister.

SJ: And do you know where was she born?

ZC: I think she was born somewhere in Joburg. Because, at that time, the ministers were going all over the country, you know. To be stationed at a province, and then again, after four or five years they were stationed at another province. But she was born somewhere in the Transvaal.

SJ: I read somewhere that she was born in the Free State.¹

ZC: Oh in your research she was born in the Free State?

SJ: A [photographer and curator Pam Warne] wrote that she was born in the Free State. So are you saying she was born in the Transvaal [now Gauteng Province?

ZC: I don't really know where she was specifically born. But not in the Eastern or Western Cape.

SJ: Do you know her mother; what did she do?

ZC: I have no idea but at that time, in fact, in that era there were housewives. When a church minister married a woman, that woman shouldn't do anything so that she can be [present] for the congregation on

a daily basis. So I don't think she was working at anything.

SJ: So she came from a 'middle-class' background?

ZC: Yah, you could say that, it was middle class.

SJ: So when did [Mabel Cetu] go to the Eastern Cape? Because I read that she was first a nurse and then she was a photographer.

ZC: Yes, she was a professional nurse.

SJ: Where?

ZC: In Port Alfred.

SJ: Are you aware of when she moved from where ever – Transvaal – to the Eastern Cape?

ZC: ... I have no idea, but it was the thirties – whether it was the late thirties – because her only child in the marriage was born in 1940.

SJ: And where was he born?

ZC: Churchill, her son, was born in Port Elizabeth.

SJ: And when did Mabel Cetu meet your uncle?

ZC: In the late thirties. And my uncle was born and bred here in Grahamstown.

SJ: Okay, so did she meet him in Grahamstown or PE?

ZC: I think in PE because he was working in PE. They met in PE.

SJ: Was this New Brighton?

ZC: Yeah, in New Brighton because they were staying in a house in White Location. And White Location is in New Brighton; it's an old township.

SJ: So you say she was a professional nurse in Port Alfred, do you know which hospital she worked at?

ZC: No, I think she was working at the clinic there because the hospital then were for whites only.

SJ: So when did she become a photojournalist... a photographer?

ZC: In the sixties ... and then a journalist of some sort with *The Herald* newspaper.

SJ: She was a photographer and a journalist?

ZC: Ya. She wrote articles.

SJ: Do you have any of those articles that she wrote?

ZC: No, no, no [laughing]

SJ: So you are saying that she was a photographer and she wrote stories, and she was with *The Herald*?

ZC: Yah, *The Herald* newspaper, *The Daily Post* newspaper in Port Elizabeth. And I think [she contributed] some articles to the then *Evening Post*.

SJ: Did she ever talk to you about her work?

ZC: No, no. In fact, we black people didn't ask our elders about those things. But she was a socialite, she wasn't a strict parent. She was a person who loves good things. She even wanted us children to enter

beauty contests. She was active in those things. She trained me for Ms Teenager; trained me how to walk, how to answer the judges – like a modelling school of sorts.

SJ: So if she started photography and journalism in the sixties, and she was born in what, 1910 ... so she was fifty when she started this career?

ZC: That's why I said she was a socialite. She didn't care about age. She wanted progress in her life.

SJ: Wow, at the moment I am reading about newsrooms at the time of Apartheid ...

ZC: Do you know the part about [her] being a local councillor?

SJ: I want to know about that.

ZC: Yah, she was a local [councillor] in the early eighties. You know, when the government tried to make black influential people in townships in charge of their communities. She was a councillor, it started that way in the early eighties.

SJ: There was a place named Cetuville², was this named after her, do you know about this?

ZC: The street?

SJ: Is it a street?

ZC: Yah, it is a street. In kwaMangxaki, a township that was built in the eighties in Port Elizabeth.

SJ: Could you tell me about it?

ZC: Mangxaki. It's a township for nurses, teachers... people who worked for the government, and where they had subsidised houses.

SJ: Are you saying that there's a street in Mangxaki that is named after Mabel Cetu?

ZC: It is Cetu Street. Not Mabel, in fact all those streets in the area were named after influential people.

SJ: So this happened in the eighties, you are saying?

ZC: Yah in the early eighties.

SJ: So then Mabel at this stage – in the 1980s – is in her seventies.

ZC: Yah, seventies. But she was still a socially active person, very active.

SJ: Wow. What you are telling me is very interesting; it's really bringing her to life, you know. I can imagine her now, almost. Was she still a photographer and a journalist in her seventies?

ZC: No, no. When she was made a councillor, she left the journalist-photographic thing in the past. She wanted to have an impact with the township where she was staying.

SJ: And was she involved in politics then?

ZC: Yah, she was ... you know. But in a low, not that out-there [way]. Because it was very strict with government. And she was something like a mother of a Robben Islander, because her son was arrested in 1963.

SJ: Was he sent to Robben Island?

ZC: Yah, her son was on Robben Island for three years. In 1963 to 1966. She was a low-key person because of that.

SJ: So Churchill was in Robben

Island from 1963 to 1966?

ZC: Yah.

SJ: What happened in the 1990s? Because she passed away just before democracy.

ZC: Yah, in 1990.

SJ: And what was the cause of her death?

ZC: Of her death? In fact, three or four years before her death, she got, I think, Alzheimer's or, what is the other illness of the old people?

SJ: Dementia or Alzheimer's?

ZC: Yeah, of sorts. That's what she was suffering from.

SJ: And she was much older at that time.

ZC: Yeah she was old. In fact, since she was so active, a socialite, we thought she was suffering from all those bad things that happened to her and her son. Because when Churchill was arrested, he was sleeping, it was at 3am or 2am and he was naked, only had on underwear. And they took him, without any clothes. The apartheid police didn't take care in what manner they arrested a black person. Like my brother-in-law here in the Eastern Cape, where the Ciskei government was in charge, he was taken by the police at a funeral of his mother's brother. They didn't care how they arrested or take a person for questioning. In fact, I am saying that all those things and people suffering in the township, the White Location, people suffering under the apartheid regime. She wanted to do more for people but her hands were tied.

SJ: So when did you see Mabel Cetu? When you were in Port Elizabeth or when she came to visit you in Grahamstown?

ZC: No, we used to go to PE. because ... my mother was from PE, she was a nurse too, but we grew up with her parents in Port Elizabeth.

SJ: Do you mind me asking, when were you born?

ZC: 1946

SJ: So Churchill was older than you?

ZC: Yah he was.

SJ: Just to go back to Mabel's work as a journalist and photographer: did you see her at work and taking photos during the sixties?

ZC: Yah I did, in the stadiums. Like when there was a rugby match in the stadium.

SJ: So she would do sports photography?

ZC: Yah. She [would carry] this camera bag on her shoulder [laughs]. And go around the stadium taking photos.

SJ: At which stadium was this?

ZC: Adcock Stadium in Port Elizabeth. And there was a rugby field in the White Location where she stayed.

SJ: Did she like rugby?

ZC: Yah she loved rugby because her husband and husband's brother played rugby.

SJ: And was she also taking photos of the beauty contests – because

I saw photos of her at the beauty contest?

ZC: [Responding to an earlier question: 'Do you have any of Cetu's photographs?'] No, I have nothing. They were not arranged ... because we were going up and down [moving] house. Things got lost. She died in [Kwa]Dwesi township next to Magxaki.

SJ: Who was she living with in ... Dwesi location?

ZC: She left the White Location in New Brighton to go and stay in Dwesi. She was living with Poppy, the daughter she adopted but Poppy died after Mabel. She adopted Poppy from her friend Victoria who had a lot of kids. She adopted Poppy... She was staying with Poppy. Poppy said they must sell the house in White Location.

SJ: And when did your uncle pass away?

ZC: Not long after Churchill was born, I think.

SJ: Just to go back, you said that she was taking photos of rugby; what else was she taking photos of – this will help me when I do my research?

ZC: All the photos of beauty contestants, some shows, some dance competitions.

SJ: Was she traveling much?

ZC: She was, here in the Eastern Cape but also in Joburg. She had friends in Joburg, like the Bopapes. And she used to go to them for the weekend or they would come to PE ... And the ladies singing group, the Dark City Sisters, they used to go to PE for shows and they would stay with

Mabel. And The Mahotella Queens, when they were in Port Elizabeth they would stay with Mabel.

SJ: So she knew a lot of people.

ZC: That's why I say she was a socialite. Somebody who is out there entertaining, wants to be *there*, see what the world is doing or what people are doing. She was making my mother mad because my mother was so conservative, when we are with Mabel she treated us like equals. Not as kids.

**This interview has been modified for clarity and due to space limitations.*

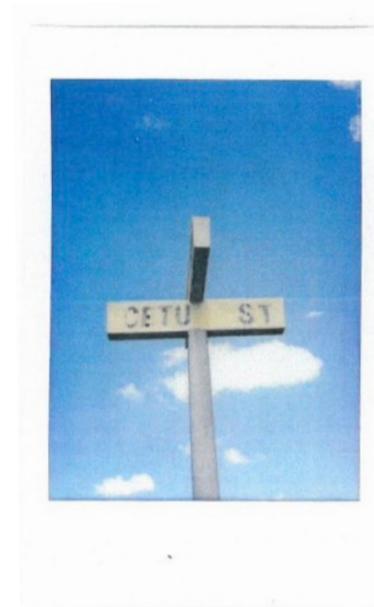
Notes

1 Pam Warne writes that Mabel Cetu was born in the Free State (2006: 22)

2 Warne argues, "In 1978, the eKhayamnandi Town Council named the White Location Cetuville in her honour", (2006: 24).

References

Warne, P. 2006. The Early Years: Notes on South African Photographers Before the Eighties. In R. Comley, G. Hallett, and N. Ntsoma (eds). *Women by Women: 50 Years of Women's Photography in South Africa*. Johannesburg: Wits University Press, pp 15-25.



Cetu Street, KwaMagxaki (left)
Adcock Stadium, Port Elizabeth (right)
Polaroid

MABEL CETU
A Refusal
against
Erasure

Athambile Masola

Mabel Cetu lived part of her life as a photojournalist possibly around the 1950s and 1960s. But there is no evidence of her pictures, even though she worked for publications such as *The Herald* and *Zonk Magazine* while living in Port Elizabeth's White Location in New Brighton. This kind of erasure is not unusual. Mabel joins a long list of women whose work has been unnamed and whose significance has been unrecognised. This is not surprising given the nature of the politics around memory: who is remembered and who is forgotten?

Memory is deeply political. Preserving the names of women who led public lives in the past is a constant battle against forgetting. In her book *What's slavery to me? Postcolonial/slave memory in post-apartheid South Africa*, Pumla Dineo Gqola works through the tension between memory and unremembering, which she says is a "calculated act of exclusion and erasure". Memory is about power and the decisions made by those who wield power. The work of challenging that power means that archival research needs to see and read into the silences. Despite names and pictures that have been unremembered, the fact remains: women lived and left a trail of evidence of their lives.

That trail of evidence can be seen in people's personal stories, family albums and unlabelled pictures in boxes. Parts of Mabel's life and work persist – in one instance – in journalist Jimmy Matyu's memory, as he recalls chasing a news story with Mabel in Port Elizabeth in the 1960s, which he writes about in a 2009 column for *The Herald*. This singular recollection challenges erasure. It stands as a reminder of the simplicity of stories and their ability to push against the larger institutional archive, which does not attribute Mabel's photographs with her name.

A project which recognises Mabel's life and work in spite of archival erasure is part of a long tradition established through feminist scholarship, which dares to call women by name and highlight their significance. This scholarship has been done internationally and locally. In her book *Women in South African History: Basus'iimbokodo, bawel'imilambo/They remove boulders and cross rivers*, Nomboniso Gasas highlights the nature of the work of resisting erasure:

Sometimes significance lies not in the absence/presence, silence/speech, but in the actual ways in which we read the historical documents, listen to the meta-narratives and pay attention to the details of history, including those which do not fit snugly into those long used, tried and apparently tested boxes that are our analytical tools. Most importantly, the question is how we read, reconstruct the archives and the texts, listen to the narratives and develop the analytical tools and framework we find of greatest analytical power.²

The challenge of reading, reconstructing and listening to the archive presents many challenges. The obvious question which arises is, what do we make of the silences? In my writing about Noni Jabavu, Charlotte Maxeke, Nontsizi Mqgqwetho, Lauretta Ngcobo, Adelaide Tantsi and Ellen Pumla Ngozwana, their names appeared through a series of events and conversations with people over a span of over 10 years. It was through finding books in obscure book shops, wading through newspaper archives and sharing documents with other researchers that I began to appreciate the meta-narratives, which Gasca refers to above. Often I think it is these women that I write about that send me clues about their lives and significance as a way of remaining alive even though they have passed on. Silences punctured by what can be called serendipitous moments. The global nature of this research which searches for women's historical accounts therefore suggests a refusal that is emerging through the stories of those who have passed on. This refusal is both metaphysical and emerges through poetry, songs, names and pictures in newspapers.

There are two poems which have grounded me in the research I have done in remembering black women's names and bringing them into public memory: Makhosazana Xaba's *Tongues of their Mothers* and Maya Angelou's *Our Grandmothers*. The line which echoes throughout Angelou's poem, "I shall not be moved", conveys the defiance of black women throughout time who refused death caused by oppressions such as slavery and patriarchy. This refusal is "a nod toward freedom", Angelou points out. Xaba's poem begins with the line "I wish to write an epic poem about Sarah Baartman", and continues with this lines as though it were a refrain replacing the names of the women in order to include: Mnkabayi kaJama Zulu, Daisy Makiwane, Princess Magogo Constance Zulu, Victoria Mxenge, Nomvula Glenrose Mbatha (Xaba's mother). While Angelou alludes to the collective grandmothers who survived, Xaba lists the names of women whose stories have remained even while they have at times been eclipsed by the grand narratives of history, which privilege the names of men. Xaba's poem ends on a sombre note that highlights the nature of this work of finding the names and significance of women who have been ignored:

These are just some of the epic poems I wish to write
about women of our world, in the tongues of their mothers. I will
present the women in forms that match their foundations
using metaphors of moments that defined their beings
and similes that flow through our seasons of eternity.
But I am not yet ready to write these poems.

The readiness which Xaba mentions has to do with the availability or lack of information in order for one to write an epic poem. Often, the information required

to write an epic poem about women from the past is not available and instead, one has to make other work available such as this publication. An epic poem can also be seen as a metaphor for any body of work about women whose archives are difficult to find: in Mabel's case it could be the photographs she took during her career. In a sense, Xaba's poem begs the question: if one wanted to do an exhibition of Mabel's work, what would they exhibit?

In the absence of Mabel's photography, we have her name and a few official records of the work she did. Like other women who were pioneers before her – such as Daisy Makiwane, a journalist who wrote for *Imvo Zabantsundu* in the late 1800s, and Nontsizi Mqgqwetho, a poet, who published in newspapers in the 1920s – Mabel's name remains as a refusal to complete erasure.

Notes

- 1 Gqola, 2010: 8
- 2 Gasca, 2007: 132

Tuesday, September 21, 2010

Mabel Cetu

Today i found out about a women who was a photographer in the 50's and 60's Mabel Cetu who did some work for drum and the herald in her time,the article i read by Nkosikhona Ngcobo, maid her sound like a very fashionable and socialite type of women,I had a picture of her in my head wearing her bright yellow Sunday dress and peep-toe heels ,wearing white gloves and holding her box camera.I wonder what her archives would reveal ,would they reveal all icons of her time gathered at different times in her living room,or would they reveal the typical images of her time,what kind of photography did this unsung artist produce.I also wonder why her name is not in the books of history with the rest of the photographers that produced work for drum at the time.The article also revealed that at her prime the former mid wife,was appointed to take a seat in her local municipal. Did she then stop making images or did she photograph her son and adopted daughter,I wonder wonder,why this women has not been celebrated.

Posted by Lerato Maduna at 5:40 AM



MABEL CETU

Between Politics and Photography

Candice Jansen

"Mr Chairman, I wonder if Mrs Cetu has anything to say?", asked an unidentified person in a partial transcript of the Ciskei Commission, dated 7th August 1979.¹ Mrs Cetu was a member of the Community Council of Port Elizabeth and the Commission was convened to hear submissions from members on the question, "is [Ciskei] independence acceptable to you?" Mrs Cetu was frank; "...I think that the feasibility of our independence has economic problems," she argued. "Economically speaking we don't have a leg to stand on, we do not. We still depend entirely on the South African government".

Mrs Cetu did recognise the "introduction of industries, for which of course we have to thank the friends of the Minister of the Ciskei and his cabinet". But Mrs Cetu proposed another view: "...how are we going to manage if we do not have the brains of the people who are supposed to run the industries that we get from the assistance of overseas countries?" She raised the issue of education: "We would not have any schools to train our children ... We must have the manpower to man these industries when we do have them." Mrs Cetu worried whether an independent Ciskei would be "accepted by the world outside" and contended that, "we must look at this point because we've already seen that up to now the states that are independent are abused by overseas countries, they are looked down upon".

Mrs Cetu wanted to know why this sentiment existed. She supposed that there may be good reason, but believed that the sentiment was "as old as the hills ... even with the Blacks against the Blacks", she claimed. "You find that there is apartheid from our birth right. A Fingo never liked a black Xhosa. A black Xhosa never ever cared for somebody who comes from the Transvaal." As far as Mrs Cetu was concerned, "I think it's as old as the hills and we should just cut it out." She returned to her earlier point and asked, "But how are we going to overcome our problem of getting our assistance which we so much need from the outside world?" Mrs Cetu considered the question from "a social point of view" and reemphasised her point by putting the independence of the Ciskei within the context of the recent Miss Universe Competition. "Even if we had somebody socially over there, it would have been madness because we do not feature yet." She admitted, "I don't know ... There is something that we should correct before we step into independence."

During the commission, Mrs Cetu had believed that to ascertain Ciskei's size and demography, a geographic survey was a good idea to also "see how much we can really boast of our dear Ciskei". She had become sentimental: "I'm terribly in love with the Ciskei. It's one place that I think should be developed. I like the Ciskei very much and at the same time, I'm very anxious, and strictly speaking everybody is feeling very proud of the mere fact that there is even a commission to look into the feasibility of independence – it hasn't happened anywhere and it is happening

here. So, we feel perhaps that there's going to be a difference in the independence of the Ciskei just because of this commission. We hope so."

Despite her wishes, Mrs Cetu admitted, "... I have a feeling that we are being misled. There is a big misleading stage between the homeland people, who are homeland-proud, who have the background of being homelander[sic] with the people in the Republic – I'm sorry to mention this – who have lost their birthright [sic]." Mrs Cetu felt the need to be open: "I have always felt we are terribly being misguided [sic] people like the Coloureds. The Coloureds are fighting a battle of loss of identity. You can't place a Coloured. You place a Coloured and you just end in the air. And now, because the Coloured has lost his identity ... They are very anxious to see us also lose our identity". Mrs Cetu went on, "There is always that friction of 'here we are, we must join the federation' ... where do they lead us? We are homelander[sic], we have an identity, the Xhosa will remain the Xhosa. And we have fought in the battle of being Xhosa...". Before finishing her submission, Mrs Cetu wanted to be understood as not "encouraging apartheid to the extent perhaps of saying that the people must shun each other...". She wanted to be clear: "I am so proud of being black."

Mrs Cetu concluded that Ciskei schools "be able to produce professors of all types of knowledgeable subjects in the line of industry so that we won't have to be clamouring for assistance from other nations". She mentioned the significance of agricultural training for womxn and children, before ending off: "that is my feeling and I don't know whether there is something else that I should say". A member of the council was asked for an opinion on newspapers' and officials' promotion of Ciskeian citizenship, and Mrs Cetu interjected, "Allow me to", adding, "... to have a Ciskei citizenship is an honour, you should feel proud to be a Ciskeian, and the people who are suggesting that we shouldn't take out Ciskeian citizenship because we are going to lose our identity as urban blacks are just plain silly, because they were the first people to take out citizenship. So, I am very proud to have it, and I took out Ciskeian citizenship because I am married to a thoroughbred Ciskeian".

Who was Mrs Cetu? Her first name appears as "Mabel" on the Ciskei Commission transcript. Is Mrs Cetu, member of the Community Council of Port Elizabeth, Mabel Cetu, the photographer? If so, what then does this "scrap of the archive"² evidence? What does it mark for black womxn's latent history in South African photography? If Mabel Cetu the photographer *is* Mrs Cetu, member of the Community Council of Port Elizabeth, then between her politics and her photography may be buried the memory of an *unreasonable*³ womxn, whose blackness may have served an unreasonable cause and what she imagined was her community. Never should we forget that the unreason of Mabel Cetu, the photographer, was also definitional.

According to the colonial reason of apartheid, she was never meant to exist. What kind of history, then, can her photography claim? Mrs Cetu's unreason returns us to the question, by which means can historic black lives be re-assembled for the present?

Did Mrs Cetu appear conflicted between who she was and how she may have meant to appear at the commission? If so, was that conflict symptomatic of the Bantustan paradox? Steve Biko described this paradox as rooted in the problem that the Bantustan was "... a solution given to us by the same people who have created the problem...". He believed, "The whole idea ... is made to appear as if for us, while working against our very existence"³. Biko wrote this seven years before the Ciskei Commission, which also preceded the establishment of civic associations such as the Port Elizabeth Black Civic Organisation (PEBCO) in 1979. Associations such as PEBCO rejected community councils similar to those represented by Mrs Cetu as they were recognised by the apartheid state. PEBCO and others opposed the racial segregation of local government⁵. Between Mrs Cetu's politics and Mabel Cetu's photography then, may lie buried an unreasonable black difference that appears as a difference between the history of the Bantustan and the memory of the republic⁶ – a difference that cuts into our image of the past and the legacy of black womxn photographers.

Did Mrs Cetu stand on "the wrong side of apartheid"? If she was Mabel Cetu, the photographer, is this part of the reason for her elusiveness in photographic history? How will she be remembered by a history of black photography during apartheid that can be overdetermined by categories such as "vernacular photography" or "defiant images". On the other hand, why is Mabel Cetu a figure left remembered largely in name, and not in photographs? How did her photography lose its visibility? Here, her politics may surface, but her photographs remain un-seen. Her voice may be heard, but it appears as if her vision has all but vanished, like histories of photography in the Bantustans that remain quiet past lives of the medium. How often did Mabel Cetu's name appear along with her images that were published in *Drum Magazine* or the *Golden City Post*? Who is still alive to have remembered her work as a photojournalist? Where has her archive been kept? Where did her images go? She is said to have taken up the camera late in life. What compelled her vision? By what means should her historical absence now be filled? With her own words? How then will she be heard? Will we recognise her voice? For whom will she speak? What can she open our eyes to? Yet, are we ready for her to be known? What does her rediscovery now yield?

Notes

1 Ciskei Commission: transcript of an interview with S. Singapi, Mabel Cetu, C. Kapi and R. Vantyi. South Africa Online. <https://www.sahistory.org.za/archive/ciskei-commission-transcript-interview-s-singapi-mabel-cetu-c-kapi-and-r-vantyi>.

2 Hartman, S. 2008. Venus in two acts. *Small Axe*, 12(2): pp 1-14.

3 'Unreasonable' is a term borrowed from historian Christopher J. Lee's *Unreasonable Histories: Nativism, Multiracial Lives, and The Genealogical Imagination in British Africa* (2014), p3. Lee extends Emmanuel Eze's notion of "ordinary reason" in *On Reason: Rationality in a World of Cultural Conflict and Racism* (2008) to explore the subaltern histories of "those who lost – politically, socially, and culturally – with the end of colonialism, whose histories have since been marginalized by the politics of African nationalism during the postcolonial period".

4 Biko, S. 2004. 'Let's Talk about Bantustans' in *I write what I like*. Northlands: Picador Africa, pp: 88-95.

5 Neocosmos, M. 'From People's Politics to State Politics: Aspects of National Liberation in South Africa'. In A. O. Olukoshi. 1998. *The politics of opposition in contemporary Africa*. Uppsala: Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, pp: 195-24. See also: Hussein, S. Liebenberg, I. 2017. *Consolidation of democracy in Africa: A View from the South*. Routledge: London.

6 Ally, S. Lissoni, A. 2017. *New histories of South Africa's Apartheid-era Bantustans*. London and New York: CRC Press.

02 05 89. Mr N. Singapi, Mrs Mabel Cetu, Mr C. Kapi, Mr R. Vantyi
Chairman: We hope you'll be able to help us. You come from the
Community Council of Port Elizabeth. Would you like us to question
you or would you like to make a statement, would you like just to give
your ideas?

Chairman: Mr Singapi, what is your view about the independence of
the Ciskei? Actually this question is directed to all of you here.
You can express your different views. Is independence acceptable
to you? If it is acceptable - why? If it's not acceptable - why?
Singapi: First of all, Mr Lalendle, this question is not as simple
as you say it is short. First of all I must say all people as a
whole would like to be independent, more especially the black people
who had ... frustrations but the question is going to arise
about the type of independence .. the Ciskei When we speak of
independence do we mean economic independence, do we mean
political independence? And as soon as I fix those two points I
must set now to priorities. What is priority number 1? I just want
to use an example of our own: children will always want their bit of
freedom from the parents. If their parents say 'OK, you're on your
own' and the parents withdraws whatever perks the child had. Ostensi-
bly the child is free, but can one call that freedom? I'm drawing this
conclusion because I maintain that independence of the Ciskei should revolve
mainly on economic viability and the other comes as a result of
that. how big is our Ciskei? Number two: what is the
population of our Ciskei, taking into account the Ciskeians that are
living in the urban areas? How attractive economically will our
Ciskei be? And having known another independent state like the
Transkei, will our independence also be run along those lines, that
shall we be restricted in the same manner as the citizens of a
Transkei are?

179
41
Singapi: I would have to come back to my other point - as I said:
What is the size of the Ciskei, what is the population of the Ciskei?
It is an accepted fact that: (1) We can't all be in Ciskei, just as
English cannot all be in England but those English people who
left their homes to go and work don't come up against restrictions.
In other words, what they earn overseas can always go back home by
investing in developing the area. What I'm trying to say is, even if there
are no large industries in Ciskei the movement of the Ciskeians
should not be hampered with more than it is now ..(Masked by coughing).
I said, will there be no restrictions? I want to cite another
example. In the urban areas there is this talk about the 99-year lease.
If I'm a Ciskeian, as I am, what is going to happen to my children.
I cannot force my children. Say my children don't - say the Ciskei
becomes independent tomorrow and I have property here. It is in
fact that if you don't live in the area, your children can only
inherit it from a sale of property.
Chairman: They can't inherit?

Singapi: They can't inherit. What will happen then if Ciskei is
independent? I already carry a citizenship and I don't see myself
withdrawing already I am 25 myself, but I am still
concerned about my children: what is going to happen to my children?
Because I have my roots here; my children may not want to go to the
Ciskei and being Ciskeian, will they not be debarred now from

are in town, for instance when it comes to work - I have come across
a lot of cases that they are not given preference when they want to
go in for work, that is if they are carrying their documents because
there are two types of Transkeians: there is the Transkeian who
carries the reference book and there is another Transkeian who has a
passport. Immediately you carry that passport invariably you come
against some restrictions when it comes to work. I don't know whether
perhaps it is because of certain laid-down procedures - I don't know.
I have a case now in my office of a child coming from Johannesburg,
having worked in Johannesburg during the time she had a reference
book, but the minute she changed her reference book into a passport
the employer was not interested in her.
Chairman: But we thought
Lalendle: ... that if one is independent he is treated in the same
way as other Africans of dependent states. Do you deny that?
Singapi: Well, as I say, I've got a case in point.
Lalendle: Is that the only case on record?
Singapi: There are other cases, such other cases, but this particular
case actually came to my office for assistance.
Chairman: Mr Singapi, would that be just an isolated case? I mean,
is it just the thought of the official, or is that, do you think, the
government policy?
Singapi: Well, I queried this myself because I like to keep abreast
with activities. I said to this child: 'I cannot understand the
position because according to what I see in the press there should be
no restrictions, but the fact of the matter is that there is.'
Chairman: What then do you see - I know there are all these
alternatives, but what do you see, what would you think is the
solution to the problem which there is at the moment?
Singapi: Do you mean in relation to this case?

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job opportunities. I've read in the Riekert Report that, I suppose
the commissioners are also thinking about the establishment of these
labour bureaux in order to get people from these black states. And
although it is not very clear to me, it's not that these labour
bureaux would be in the black states themselves but very near the
black states so that the black states can bring labour into the
labour bureaux to come and work in the white areas. Well, being
an urban black, those are other things which we don't really accept.
They are there, but we don't accept them. But because they are
sort of imposed on us and because we cannot do anything, we just
have to work in the And if now the Ciskei is going to be
independent, would not it be wise that the citizens of the Ciskei be
treated like citizens, like other white citizens from other areas?
The whole thing revolves on this ... Those would just be my points,
but the big thing is that all people want to be independent but you
cannot just accept independence anyhow. You want to be satisfied
that your position will not go down, instead you will be elevating
your position.
Chairman: Do you want to speak, Mr?
?: I think my argument sort of revolves in the same manner as
Mr Singapi. First of all it will be a land issue .. agreed? .. with the
Ciskei. How are the people of the Ciskei going to be affected by

Mr Lalendle asked you to start off with.
Singapi: That is why I say before one can answer that question, one
would have to look at what is
Chairman: What do you think?
Singapi: Personally I believe that/I can be economically strong
there is nothing to stop me from being politically strong. Now,
the thing is: will our Ciskei be economically viable? Because if
it is economically viable, then it will be an attraction, there will
be an exodus from the cities including the Ciskei and these difficul-
ties that I was talking about, there will be no need for people to
leave an economically viable area for an area where there are
restrictions.
Chairman: How would you make the Ciskei economically strong?
Singapi: Well, there's just one way. The government must make the
Ciskei strong by providing employment. More money should be poured
into the Ciskei, thereby opening more avenues for work.
Chairman: What sort of employment?
Singapi: Industries.
Chairman: Industries and just the matter of money. It's a matter
of knowledge too.
Singapi: I accept. Our position as Ciskeians and as Blacks --
I take it, for the foreseeable future, we still must rely on the
Whites' skills but there must be a genuine sharing, I hate to say
there must be a genuine attempt, but there must be a genuine sharing
so that the Blacks can take the skills and in time to come the Whites
who are in the Ciskei can be replaced, those who are replaceable.
Lalendle: What other alternative or option do you have? For
instance, if we find that this economic viability is not possible at
present, must Ciskei remain where she is? If, for instance, as I
say, this economic viability requisite is not possible, what is the
other alternative?

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there shouldn't be any talk about it. It is Ciskei land and
go to the Ciskei.
Chairman: Do you think
?: From experience, already there are some other black states
are closed in, that is interland with no seaports. The only way
going out of that black state is if you cross another black state.
They have no way of - as I have said they are interland states
they depend, even if they are independent they still depend on
states.
?: Other states? Lesotho?
?: but it is still dependent because it depends
there's the question of restrictions. As I have already qu-
other black states, for instance, if - I'm sorry about this
a Transkeian or any other black who is in this urban area, I
Elizabeth, wants to have a business licence a long ... proced-
involved, though he was born and bred here, because his/father of
grandparents belonged to Lesotho - there should be a long p-
Application should be done to the Minister of Cooperation and
Development and he should approve. But the man has all the
in Port Elizabeth. There are those restrictions you f-
that priority has been given to urban blacks who have not at-
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Application should be done to the Minister of Cooperation and
Development and he should approve. But the man has all the rights
in Port Elizabeth. There are those restrictions you find
that priority has been given to urban blacks who have not attached
themselves to any other black state.

Lalendle: How is the pass situation - do you find a lot of people
being arrested because of passes?

?: That is another thing You know, there are present
Ciskeians who are working but those Ciskeians, their children
and their families have no right to be here. A man is but
unfortunately he never had a chance of having a dwelling-place.
He came in here at 10 years old, 25 years and he left his family
in the homeland. And now he is having ^{the} difficulty of breaking the
family. The family cannot come to Port Elizabeth because, firstly,
the children were not registered, the wife was not registered. So

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that is, he will have to
th the present layout of Ciskei.
or?

It is just a natural -

INTERVIEW

WITH

DUDU MADONSELA

Curator at the Bensusan Museum
and Library of Photography at
Museum Africa

Stefanie Jason: In 2018 I shared some of my research with you, and you had told me about the work you have done around photographers in Africa's histories, including Mabel Cetu. Do you mind sharing more about this, and what that journey was like?

Dudu Madonsela: I came to know about Mabel Cetu through *Drum Magazine* archives at BAHA [Bailey's African History Archives]. I went there because I was curious to know more about histories of African photographers. The reason I was interested in taking that direction was prompted by the exhibition I was doing for the 2010 Fifa World Cup in South Africa. For the exhibition I wanted to include photographers from the six African countries that were going to participate in World Cup event. As you know, *Drum* was started in the 1950s and later expanded into the rest of Africa. So at the time, I was hoping to get work of women photographers from the continent. It was then when I coincidentally came across the name Mabel Cetu. Around August 2010 I also met Khwezi Gule, then Chief Curator of Hector Peterson Museum, who resuscitated the name and brought a lot of support. It was around that time that I began to consider looking at our archives, the Bensusan Museum. However, I realised that we were not covering the scope of black photographers, including women photographers. I then began to think about people that would be of assistance. I got the late [photographer] Alfred Khumalo, as well as journalist from the Eastern Cape, pap' Jimmy [Matyu] – who passed on in 2012. Those were the people that actually gave me confidence to dig more on her. Because they said, "Yes, we were working with her and she

was ... [a] photojournalist." My interest developed from there. When I wrote something about Mabel Cetu, beyond Alf Khumalo and Jimmy Matyu, my other references were Mike Mzileni and Nkosikhona Ngcobo. I also contacted *The Herald* newspaper and started to research *Zonk* magazine archives. I tried the Western Cape Archives, where I was told there was nothing under her name. The only thing that I can say was substantial from my research, was the fact that all of them confirmed that indeed she was there, and was in the industry. I spent almost 18 months researching and was so looking forward to exhibiting her work. The Western Cape government wrote me a letter to say that they couldn't find her work. I think I was irritating them because I wanted to know how they could have not had her work in *Zonk* archive, and why her work cannot be found. They wrote me a letter on letterhead to say, "We've done our job. There's nothing we can do".

SJ: At the time you were interested in curating an exhibition on Mabel Cetu. May I ask why you chose not to go ahead with it, and what other interventions did you ultimately decide were fitting in relation to the history of Cetu?

DM: A blow was to not find her work. I was excited thinking about curating her energy. I wanted to showcase her work. But after realising that it was impossible, that's when I resorted to starting a women's photography seminar to keep her name going. That's not to say that she does not have work, it's just that we cannot connect to it because of the system. Bailey's knew what they were doing. For me, Jim Bailey gave another perspective different from the currencies of

photography. I think of there being two currencies of photography: generosity and humility. If you look at the photographic histories, the French government after purchasing copyright from Louis Daguerre, gave photography as a gift to the world. On the other hand, you look at people like Baileys, they failed to embrace the spirit of photography. Hence, look at what we are suffering with today, we cannot trace Cetu's work because of the monopoly approach imposed by the system – photographers were not accredited, how painful!

SJ: On the topic of photo credits, this is something I grapple with in this research and in engaging the *Drum* and *Golden City Post* archives: The photo credits are often blank, they are inconsistent, there's an obvious male-dominance, and often credits denoting city, like "Port Elizabeth Reporter". How did such practices affect your research relating to Mabel Cetu?

DM: The late Alfred Kumalo said it was going to be difficult for me to get Cetu's work because when they [photographers] were given opportunity to identify their work in the BAHA archives, Mabel Cetu was already dead. It's not to say that they do not have her work at *Drum* but it would have been difficult for them to identify it because she was no longer there when they were given the opportunity to do so. The [BAHA] archive also exposes us to the high risk of people stealing other photographers' work, and claiming it as their own. Alfred Kumalo told me that you would be so surprised by the work that is published today and people that claimed that work – we know that these works didn't belong to them but because of the absent

credits, some took advantage of that process, especially if photographers were deceased. He told me, without disclosing names, about photographers that would, in this process, steal other photographer's work. For example, Bob Gosani's work was. It exuded set back. On a positive notes Cetu's circumstance made me vigilant and sensitive about significance of provenance and accreditation of artists inclusively so.

SJ: Earlier you mentioned that you wrote something on Mabel Cetu. Could you elaborate on this please?

DM: What I meant by this is that I was researching. After being disappointed by the outcome of the research with BAHA, I was hoping that I would get something from *Zonk* magazine archives. I did however get pictures of Mabel Cetu when she was involved with the ANC Women's League. But I was not interested in her portrait as such. In 2015, with [photojournalist] Neo Ntsoma, we worked on an idea, which we still embrace, to have an annual public lecture and women photography seminar at the Bensusan Museum of Photography. It was supposed to be an annual project in South Africa – in Africa – but it happened once in 2015. That public lecture was entitled, In Honour of Mabel Cetu. At the time of the seminar, we had an exhibition on Jane Plotz, also a female photographer but of Jewish origin – a descendent of Lithuanians, born in Port Elizabeth but lived her life in Johannesburg. She was a photographer between 1929-1974. So we had the exhibition at the Bensusan Museum and in order to create cultural material, we had a public lecture and walkabout. It was attended by artists, mainly photographers. We tried to invite

about five generations of South African women photographers. While the exhibition was on display, a young activist from Vosloorus, named Mzwakhe Mahlangu came up to me and said, "Well done on the exhibition but I've noticed that out of the 62 images that you selected for the exhibition, only two are about us". He asked me why, and I said these were studio images and people went to the studio to have their photographs made. I understood he wanted to politicise studio images. I learned that when he said, "Us", he was talking about him and myself as black people. The two pictures were of nannies. At the end of the day, I was able to draw some parallels, developed an oral history and produced a paper out of that conversation.

SJ: In closing, what were some of the moments in your period of research on Mabel Cetu and thereafter that really stood out to you?

When I learned about Mabel Cetu being photojournalist at the time, what poked out in my mind is that I would've loved to have known: how did it feel to be a photographer in those times and how did she survive the industry. I always assumed that it was a kind of triple oppression – state, race and gender – a cocktail of exclusion when it came to Mabel Cetu. Being a black female photographer at the time. Remember, in 1958, apartheid was only 10 years old. At the same time, they say that she was a socialite, she was just exuding that energy. If you are listening to the stories, you would hear that she would host the likes of Hugh Masekela, Miriam Makeba. With the exposure of Sophiatown, I believe she wanted to duplicate and/or extend Sophiatown in Port Elizabeth. She was also in the African National

Congress (ANC) Women's League, because one of the photographs that I got from the Drum magazine, was her wearing the ANC Women's League uniform. She was also sanctioned/ banned from some events and was involved in municipal activities. Also, when I learned that from ubaba Alfred Kumalo that Mabel Cetu was the first black woman photographer, it resonated because as the first black curator of the Bensusan, I know the challenges, frustrations and feeling like a misfit. Because when I came over to the museum, the people who at that time were embracing the existence of the Bensusan Museum didn't have trust in me. Having said that I am forever indebted to people like John Fleetwood and Mike Feldman – they just believed in me. At the same time, the people that I could feel comfortable with were black people – but black people, people like me, were not that much in touch with the Bensusan Museum. It was even worse with some of photographers who were vocal and did not want any association with the Bensusan Museum. I was happy to connect to Neo Ntsoma, also a power and force around me. In 2016, we came together to work on an exhibition in China around the 60th anniversary of the women who marched against the pass laws in 1956. Infact not so many people know about the first pass law march that was led by women in Bloemfontein in 1913, our concept unearthed that episode, in terms of a historical perspective that is not at the public domain. The exhibition talks to the women who marched. All these things are the culmination of the interest that we both had in Mabel Cetu. We knew each other but our relationship blossomed delving into this research.

**This interview has been modified for clarity and due to space limitations.*



e-mail: [redacted]
Tel: [redacted]
fax: +27 21 483-0444
Our reference: WCA12/4/5/1/2/2
Enquiries: [redacted]

Dear Ms Madonsela

I respond to your enquiry of 2 April 2014, regarding photographs and information on Mabel Cetu.

Despite an intensive search by means of the National Automated Archival Information Retrieval System (NAAIRS), I could not trace any photographs/information on the above-mentioned person in this repository.

Yours faithfully

[redacted]
[redacted], WESTERN CAPE ARCHIVES AND RECORDS SERVICE
Date: 7 April 2014

72 Roeland Street,
Cape Town, 8001

Private Bag X9025, Cape Town, 8000
webaddresses: www.westerncape.gov.za
www.nationalarchives.gov.za

Cultural Affairs and Sport : ImiCimbiyeNkcubekonezembidialo : Kultuursake en Sport

MANYATSA
MONYAMANE





Manyatsa Monyamane
Ba tšweletše, Mamelodi 2019

OLUREMI C. ONABANJO
AND
JESSICA LYNNE

In Conversation

Jessica Lynne: I'd like to start, in a more personal manner, with your intellectual relationship to Mabel Cetu's work. Perhaps, though, intellectual is not even the best word as we also form, in and through study, personal and or emotional relationships to these artists. So, having said that, I'd love to start here.

Oluremi C. Onabanjo: My relationship to Mabel Cetu is one that, as a scholar, is the most unsatisfying one. It's one where – and I think I mentioned this to you in a prior conversation – when I was thinking through a South African history of photography, which to me was my introduction to the histories of photography, it was her name that I would see in footnotes, or as part of a larger group of people. I was like, oh, wow, okay, there was a woman who was there. But to this day, I have never seen an image by her and of course, at least as of now, I don't think anybody has seen an image of her from her archive. When I think about my encounter as a scholar with histories of photography in South Africa, she's always in the liner notes and in the margins, like a kind of spectre. It frustrates me.

My relationship to the histories of photography moved and shifted. I was thinking about other regions on the continent and different timeframes that prohibited me from doing the work that I think amazing South African women, as you mentioned, are doing which I'm grateful for. But from a theoretical perspective, that question of visibility within the archive has sustained. It is something that I know is really informing my work – for example, with Marilyn Nance and the FESTAC '77 archives – as I think about images that float freely, that are unhinged from their authors, but also

women who were working among the men, which we understand as the intervention in histories of photography. So, what does it mean to heighten the intervention?

JL: What are the ethical, social, or political responsibilities of writers and scholars in a context such as this? In what ways can excavation manifest?

OCO: If we are thinking historicist histories, those are ones that are moving forward with a sense of irrevocability. If we want to consider materialist histories and be sceptical about the events, and the mutability of the archive – that thing which encases those histories – we have to think about what the indexical moments or capacity of photography has, and then also what traces are outside of it.

To me, that means looking or revelling in the things that we don't see. The absences are just as important as the presences. That's where it becomes a question of being sceptical towards visibility and thinking more about what it means to speak into a silence, and to actually consider a sustained engagement with an artist or photographer's practice in a moment we recognise is a moment of very high visibility.

JL: What feels fascinating to me, with regards to this conversation about the ethical responsibilities of caretaking, if you will, for instable or evolving archives is the argument that this very gesture could be read as also being deeply connected to the romanticisation of the archive itself, and perhaps the way in which a figure like Mabel could become or is at risk of becoming a kind of figure

that we lust after.

Having said that, can we talk about what it might mean to resist the urge to name an absence? How much are we responsible for that caretaking process? The counter to this, posed by, I think, elements of Black Feminist theory, which argues for careful recovery lineage work. How might we navigate between those two poles?

OCO: I was reading a really beautiful article by Abbe Schriber, who is one Dr. Kellie Jones' students. She's writing a dissertation on [David] Hammons and her article is in *Women & Performance: a journal of feminist theory*. It's beautiful because she speaks a lot to questions that have been coming up for me over the last few months about refusal versus erasure. She specifically puts it in terms of a relationship to Glissant, obscurity versus opacity, when we think about agency and how an artist is deemed obscure or made invisible or flattened out. What is an insistence of refusal to adhere to the terms of consumption, be it visual, conceptual, or, material? I feel like that is, not an answer, perhaps, but it's something that feels like it's a really cogent tension for that dilemma. Should we resist the urge to recuperate? Maybe, then, I do have an answer for you.

Maybe it's in the nature of recuperation. Is that actually the thing we should be doing or is there another way? Maybe the subject matter – specifically here in thinking about Mabel Cetu – as only an individual or a practice that can appear as foremother is not the framework. If the thing here is acknowledging the difference between refusal and erasure and how the archive might

sustain an expectation of something having to be recuperated because it was erased and needs to be brought in and celebrated, then does that diminish the complexity of what that practice could have been?

JL: What do you consider to be boundaries of representation as we think through photographic histories, the ways in which they've been contained by institutional archives or not? What can revision look like for archival materials and presences that have already garnered a certain type of visibility? And perhaps, as we kind of think through the terms of refusal, are there ways to revise efforts that have previously been made that might not suit the acts of remembering in the ways we've discussed?

OCO: The question that we're both swimming around, I feel, is what happens after the passing of an individual. Once that person who has taken stead of the archive – has made it make sense for her, has accounted for all of the ways that it can be, for lack of a better term, preserved or at least respected in whatever form it appears – what happens to those who come after?

I think, then, the thought is, how do we approach with respect? This does put a lot more expectation on the researcher, the person encountering the work because perhaps the ethical way to go forward is to look from a historiographical perspective and ask what are other archives at this time looking like? What are the archives of the subject matter looking like? How would one consider where this would be situated or depart from? Then to be as close to "archive as text" or what exists as text and remain mindful

of that, while incorporating those other perspectives. I feel like this is something that is less so recuperative and more so a weaving or threading together of what does exist materially and not letting the thing become more valorised than it is.

For example, if, say, 50 contact sheets appear out of nowhere from a fantastic photographer of the calibre of Mabel Cetu, what does that mean for people going forward? To me, that means we ask where are the family members? Who are the people who are around her? Who are those who are already speaking? What is the extant literature that people are doing fantastic research on and how can that be situated in relation to the images? Then practically, the other question is, in terms of capital, how do you make sure that that work is being sustained? How do you make sure it is being deployed in a manner that is mindful, especially with histories of photography of subjects and makers from the African continent?

JL: Is there something about photojournalism's relationship to contemporary art as a category of contemporary art that affects or has affected the way in which a photographer like Mabel is spoken about, cared for, revered or not or unseen, even?

OCO: Yes, for sure. I think especially because the way that we can think about South African photography is one where social concerns are operating right next to aesthetic matters, and the photographers who we "love" are the ones who are taking those matters and infusing them with a personal angle. They are continually shooting; they are continually moving, considering questions, for example, of

spirituality, mobility, black structures and monuments, and thinking about the way that a particular nation state propagates lies about itself.

In this way, for me, the stakes of being able to be exposed to somebody who lives within that milieu, who had a perspective and was producing work in that milieu – is to say, well yes, women were capable of that kind of ingenuity, nimbleness, that capacity to be aesthetically, socially, and conceptually sophisticated as those who were producing work at that time.

Now of course, this again gets us back to the questions of refusal as that statement I just gave you operates from a place of wanting to "bring in". In recognising where that "bring in" sentiment comes from, I still think it's important to consider the perspective of someone like Mabel Cetu from that time period. Especially given what it means for South African photography. This is where we get back into the archive and photo indexicality. She was there. We still need to affirm that. That is so necessary and important. From there, we can move forward to look at the way that her lived experience and position, and the material manifestations of those things, have given us a space in the archive rather than a presence that we see materially, and we can be sceptical about. It doesn't negate the fact that she was there. That affirmation I find to be so vitally important.

On
un / seeing

Mis-Over-Seen:
36/17

Julie Nxadi

Mise-en-scène. That is; the arrangement of the scenery or props on stage for theatre.

Mis-seen. That is; to see incorrectly, misperceive visually, take a wrong view of, or see in a false or distorted light.

Over Seen. That is; to see too much.

Overseen. That is; to survey, to watch.

In a house on a street filled with eyes - Eyes next door and across the way - Eyes that cut through the sky every time they pray. In this house on this street full of eyes there are lives. Two lives, let's say: Works of fiction, daughters of today. Where are their mothers? Still wives, let's say to martyrs and soldiers and askaris and prey. Still wives, they stay in full lives they made from nothing but warm milk and Joko and doyleys on trays. Where are their daughters? Those daughters of today? They are alive. They're alive in a house on a street filled with eyes.

There's a kitchen.

There's a bedroom.

There's a lounge.

There's a door.

There's a stoep with two steps.

There's tapeti on the floor.

There's a blue sky too clear for it not to be ominous. There's a toilet outside and a gate with no latch on it.

There's a girl: 17, hanging her panties on the line (there's chipped red on her nails and there's a lot on her mind).

There's a woman: 36, inside on a sofa – fast asleep (a slight gold chain around her neck – a child's blue jersey draped on her feet).

There is no blood between them, there's a covenant instead: 'If you guard me while I fantasize, I will hold you while you rest.'

Now, there are rumours that 36 cannot be trusted worth a damn, and true to a life with no foundation hers unfolds without a plan. Where is her child? She was pregnant. Where is that man that she stole? Her body was built for entertainment. Who granted her anguish? Who said she could toll? What of her father, they said he was absent yet his disorientation is set in her eyes. Why won't she stay sexy? Why won't she stay funny? Who taught her resentment? Why will she not cry? She moves like a criminal, her ethics salacious, she seems so wide

open, does she know she is watched? There are whispers that she's dying in plain sight on purpose, so that they cannot wear her carcass and say that she did not. Some eyes say its theatre, they say they'll believe her if she shows them a story that they recognise. But they watch so closely because they do not believe her and they will not believe her and she must not survive. So she sleeps, on a sofa, gold chain in the sunshine. And onlookers wait for her to conjure ever after while she's mending, and massage their swollen and aroused attention. And avoid their gaze while bringing them to happy ending. And not only is she capable but she has done it before: She has bought herself rest by charging at the door. And with her bit of rest she has bought a deep sleep; deep enough for her to thrash and for 17 to dream.

But oh! their mothers, still-wives, long whispered shape into their dreams 'just say no and you'll stay pure, just say yes and you'll stay seen', and their fathers: everywhere and nowhere, martyrs, soldiers, askaris, and prey taught them to fight because nobody really wants daughters anyway.

Maybe the one drinks like a fighter, and the other fucks like a king.

Maybe she's too young to be drinking and maybe she's too old to be seen.

Maybe the eyes that peered from one house pitied that 17 was not in school, and loved that she was from a village, but hated her sass and her love for igroove.

Or maybe the eyes that watched the longest watched 36 grow, and then ripe, and then rot, and ogled her flesh and lapped at her lips and drank of her blood and then forgot.

Perhaps 17's dreams were poisoned when 36 lay beside her thrashing.

Maybe no one is nurtured when all are surviving.

Maybe it's hard to cum through the flinching and gnashing.

Or maybe it's easy. Let's say that it's easy. Let's say 17 is being looked at for that, and so all the eyes search her body for bleeding so the pain that she claims can be taken as a fact. Because she's a body, recall? She's a body: She's hips and she's tits and she's black and she's flesh. She's all satisfaction and zero desire and it's when you can taste her that she's at her best. But she's meant to be a sweet thing, so why is she bitter? Or is she salty, her flavour's unclear. She churns in the stomachs of those that consume her so they vomit her out but continue to stare. So why does she dance and laugh so sincerely, it must be psychosis, it must mean she's trouble. They watch: They want to see her win over adversity, but then disappear under all of its rubble. Buried alive. Dead to the living. Moving and breathing and agile but dead. Made of the gaze and fully in character, hanging

her panties, embalmed with unsaid. But what if she does not know that she is a native even though she lives in Native Unit number 6. Because maybe the girl that she kissed made her foreign, even while the soft of her edges made her fit. How is she so moist on her surface? How is she so soft to the touch? Maybe it's nobody's fucking business how she is loved so very much. Or is it lust? Was she rushed? Some eyes insist we cannot trust the circumstances and we must remember what she is capable of comprehending which not much. They say she atrophied some time between nine, ten, or eleven. Maybe that's why she reads like a menace. Kuthiwa into engapheliyo iyahlola so maybe she's a curse. Maybe she's penance. 17 could be everything that the eyes may imagine, but 36 knows that what they will imagine will always be bleak, because once she heard them praying and they did not ask to see her better, they only asked that she remain a lesson that they could learn and that they could teach.

But away. Away away -

17's mind is busy and far away. Her bare back warms beneath the sun, and her thoughts run far away. She wonders how many times she has stood in flip-flops and some leggings and a vest, in this life and ones before it, will she stand here in the next. She wonders how many times she has stood there, lips all shiny, face all matte. Nowhere to be but reporting for beauty she wonders if they're giving her credit for that. She knows that she wants them to look at her different, even though 36 said their vision is bleak. The trouble is each time she says "see me differently" all that they hear is "please look at me."

But when 17 dreams that her world is different and that she could go unseen even for just a day, she wakes beside 36 who is twitching and remembers the stories of when the eyes looked away. 36 says a man once gauged his eyes out and flung havoc on the walls of this house and called it love. And the eyes stood in awe of his bloody sockets, and the streets filled with silence and the house filled with blood. 17 knew that story by heart, not from the time that it was told, but from the thousand times after that she had watched it unfold.

She watches now. 17 watches.

She watches her kin self-eulogise. She watches her speak like she lives in her ending, like she'd rather try her luck in a world with no eyes. 17 has not told 36 that she's watching, that she is a coward now because she has seen. That behind all the eyes and the men with their sockets, 36 was all that 17 could see. 17 wants to know if she should tell this story. Or should she call for help, or should she just lie?

She loves 36 and she wants to respect her, but if she looks away which of them will survive.

WORKING WITH ABSENCES

Neo Ntsoma

Stefanie Jason: You hosted a photography symposium in 2015 centred on Mabel Cetu. As those details are hard to find online, do you mind elaborating on the event, the purpose of it and outcomes.

Neo Ntsoma: The symposium was not necessarily centered on Mabel Cetu. However, it was the most appropriate space for me to mention her name and acknowledge her legacy. Myself, Dudu Madonsela, curator at the Bensusan Museum and Library of Photography, Natasha Christopher representing the academic sector, Nocebo Bucibo and Dee Worman, initiated the symposium to connect emerging photographers with more experienced practitioners but also to create a safe space where women could feel free to discuss the challenges facing them in this male-dominated industry where women's voices tend to be silenced. With absolutely zero budget for marketing we managed to attract more people than anticipated.

SJ: Like me hearing about the symposium, which was through word of mouth, and other details of Mabel Cetu's life, I believe that conversations have played a significant role in the memory of Cetu. Do you mind sharing how third-person accounts or word of mouth have informed your own research on Cetu?

NN: My research on Mabel Cetu is entirely built on word of mouth because back in 2006 when I started my research there wasn't any reference of her life and work online. Prior to the publication of *Women by Women: 50 Years of Women's Photography in South Africa*, a book I co-authored with Robin Comley and Penny Siopis, Mabel Cetu's name was

largely absent in museums, libraries and the wider public domain, and only to be remembered by friends and family as well as a few that briefly crossed paths with her on their various professional pursuits. The one person that stands out among those I connected with in my desperate search was the late veteran photographer, Alf Kumalo. He was the one who provided me with the bulk of the information I needed at the time. From what I gathered from our conversation, Sis May was someone with a larger than life personality. Someone of good social standing in the community she lived and worked. She often hosted visiting musicians, actors and fellow journalists from the then Transvaal [Province] at her home those that were attending various social gatherings in New Brighton. Some of the notable names that were dropped during our conversation included Todd Matshikiza, Basil "Doc" Bikitsha, The Manhattan Brothers and Miriam Makeba whom she befriended at the time she offered to host female cast members of *King Kong*, the musical, at her house. Among those that spent a night at her modest house in White Location happens to be Phyllis Mqoma and Miriam Makeba, whom she had a sisterly connection with. Even though Mabel Cetu was a lot older than her, they forged a friendship that was cut short by Mam' Miriam going into exile. I had only one chance to speak to Mama Miriam at the Cape Town International Jazz Festival in 2006, and she confirmed having met Sis May shortly before she was exiled.

SJ: As someone who has done extensive research on Mabel Cetu and the silence around her work, you were in a way silenced too with regards to some of your research on

her not being credited. Do you mind sharing more on this?

NN: It is my belief that there is no research that can be successful and satisfactory without any financial backing, access to material and resources as well as an uncompromised dedication and commitment by the researcher to achieve the required results. From where I am standing, I wouldn't claim to have met all of the above due to financial constraints on my part and the lack of much needed institutional support to conduct research of this magnitude, which I believe would have made it easier for me to gather enough information. When I initially embarked on this "fact finding mission", my plan seemed unrealistic, complex and highly ambitious to those that I was seeking financial backing from. Despite the challenges I have faced in my pursuit, I haven't let that deter my spirit because this is a cause much bigger than me. It is really disheartening to realise that a decade has since passed holding on to a vision that I may never realise due to certain limitations relating to finance and my lack of "required" academic background, which I do not possess – not of my own making nor design but imposed on me because of my race and gender. I have since resorted to assisting others like you. I have to admit that at some point I became discouraged to continue with my research not only due to lack of access to resources but also due to the passing away of my sources, as time cannot wait for anyone. Extensive research on any topic or subject cannot be adequately completed without enough financial backing and be successful at least by large to a researcher's satisfaction – that's a fact.

SJ: I am really interested in your experience co-authoring *Women by Women: 50 Years of Women's Photography in South Africa* (2006) and would love to hear your reflections on the process for incorporating Mabel Cetu's story into the book.

NN: The approach we used when creating the book *Women by Women* was very much standardised, which in my view shouldn't have been the case when dealing with fragile histories such as Mabel Cetu's narrative. Now that I am older, wiser and a lot more exposed than then, I realise that perhaps a different approach should have been considered.

In my opinion, I think the most crucial move and perhaps the most realistic starting point should be the deceased's families followed by the communities in which they lived and operated before searching for their legacies from the same spaces that denied them existence in the first place. Take for instance Mabel Cetu's case. The Bailey's African History Archive seemed like the most appropriate point of departure as it would be expected that they would have her files preserved like they did with the rest of the photographers and journalists that served under the same umbrella. But no, that isn't the case with Cetu. Perhaps we need to recognise how issues pertaining to patriarchy and race have played out here and use that as a guiding map on how to approach cases of a similar nature in future. We also relied more on making contacts with sources through electronic means than we should have, and totally disregarded alternative ways of approach when researching on legacies of those we consider products of an oppressive

period in the political history of this country; based on the probability of not finding any records of them preserved anywhere. There was a constant reminder of the fact that the project was much bigger than just putting together a book of photographs, but actually rewriting our history as women in this country, and we also acknowledged that it was going to be practically impossible to try and accommodate or please everybody. We knew there was going to be criticism of some sort at the end of the project, especially when dealing with women's issues and race representation. It became very apparent right from the beginning that there was an obvious imbalance of race in the database we had compiled and somehow we tried to balance that by including student portfolios of some of South Africa's upcoming black female photographers to add to the numbers, which still was not enough. I also felt somehow it was my responsibility to try and represent my black sisters so they could also claim their place in the history.

SJ: As a photojournalist yourself, how do you grapple with the absence of works by historical photographers such as Cetu? And what does this type of erasure mean for the practice and histories of photojournalism in South Africa?

I think, firstly, we need to acknowledge the possibilities that may have led to the cause of the erasure of her legacy in the public domain. It should be noted that the lack of black women photographers [in history] is mainly a hangover from the apartheid years as it was not safe for any photographer to take images that carried any political content and this danger applied particularly to women like

Mabel Cetu, who was also an activist in her own right and used multiple platforms to advance her cause. Many photographers like her were regularly locked up; while others went into exile hence my generation was left without any role models. Considering the political climate of the time, she might have been advised to destroy the material to avoid a jail term or could have been destroyed the material out of her own will as an attempt to detach herself from the profession known to have destroyed great talents. Talent finds strength in truth and when suppressed, it suffocates. We should never disregard the effects and the extent of the psychological strain caused by apartheid. The scars are so deep that one cannot live through an ordeal like that and come out unharmed in some way.

Whatever the case, for as long as her spirit still resides in those that won't rest until her legacy is fully recognised, I have great hope that someday the truth will be revealed. My generation has had to learn through trial and error to navigate these spaces without any sources to reference from. We have paid a huge price to get to a point where it now seems acceptable for black women to occupy spaces that were previously a preserve for white folks. Truths such as these should be mentioned in public forums including spoken about in the corridors of academia so that the younger generation can understand and appreciate the price paid by others in order for them to occupy such spaces. The reason I am mentioning this is that I do not wish for mistakes of the past to be repeated.

**This interview has been modified for clarity and due to space limitations.*

ENCOUNTERS WITH A FRAGMENTED ARCHIVE

Q&A with poet Toni Stuart

Stefanie Jason: While doing this research on Mabel Cetu for my MA, I was mindful about how I engaged “official” archives to examine the fragments of mainstream history, and carefully mined these spaces of memory in a way that provokes systems of silencing and resists regurgitating colonial/apartheid archival processes. In a practice, such as your own, that ruminates on the experiences of historical figures marginalised in state records, what does a research/creative approach look like for you that is aware of the complexities of such work?

Toni Stuart: For me, it always comes back to: What is my intention? I say that because the thing I am very aware of is that I am not an academic researcher in the “traditional” sense. What I mean by that is, I don’t have an undergrad. I did a national diploma in journalism. I got into the MA program [at Goldsmiths University] and that was the first time I was in the university space. And the reason I say this is because I am aware of my way of coming into [research]. I come in as a poet, teacher and artist. As an artist, I’m thinking about, what is my intention with this work? My intention is always about honouring the story, honouring the woman – or whoever’s story it is. The reality is that sitting in the story, feeling it and living with it for so long means that it affects me and has an impact on me. Yes, there’s an intellectual impact but for me this is a deeply emotional exercise. There’s an intergenerational conversation, there’s an ancestral conversation. And where I come from, those things are sacred, and those things are important. So, the work for me is never just an academic and intellectual one. It’s a sacred one.

I find that academic, intellectual

spaces can often be inherently violent, even when they don’t mean to be. And I think that’s simply the nature in which the soil in which a tree grows informs that tree for the rest of its life. And so, if we think about academic spaces: the soil in which they are grown is white supremacist and colonial, and so the nature of research and the academy is this really harsh gaze on things. And I think for those of us who work with these things in an internalised way, where we understand we have to do it ourselves, understand our limitations and understand our prejudices, to ensure we do the best we can to not perpetuate those things. I think if we only approach this work as academic research without looking at who we are and why we are drawn to it or what impact it has on us, then it’s outside of ourselves and it’s more likely that we are able to perpetuate [violences] unconsciously.

SJ: Please can you share some the ways in which your poetic practice informs your work?

TS: My entire poetic practice is about listening, and whether that’s teaching, writing or whatever I’m doing, it’s about listening for a story that’s trying to come through, as opposed to giving or creating a story. I don’t like the phrase “giving voice”. It’s a very paternalistic idea that we give voice to people. For me, everyone has a voice. It’s about listening for that voice. I think the thing about listening is that it is something that, as a poet, you innately do. One of the practices of poetry is knowing when to get out of the way. There is something about the artform that is going to show you up when you are forcing things. So very early on you learn how to let the poem guide you and how to show you what it wants to be, and that’s an act of listening. So I’ve

learnt how to take that skill and apply it, so it becomes like the poetics of research, if there’s such a thing.

SJ: Your poem *Krotoa-Eva’s Suite – a cape Jazz poem in three movements* vividly reimagines the story of Krotoa-Eva, with nuance, and draws on her layered experiences in the Cape Colony during the 17th Century. Looking at the work of writers such as Yvette Christiansë and Saidiya Hartman, scholar Markus Nehl argues that researchers of violent histories are often “faced with the ethical and aesthetic challenge of finding an appropriate way to engage with the archive and deal with its silences and gaps, racist depictions and ‘pornotroping’ characteristics”. So, in researching and creating *Krotoa-Eva’s Suite*, how did you navigate and negotiate archival material to grapple the complexities of this story?

TS: There’s a second-hand bookstore around the corner from my house. One day I found two books, *Krotoa-Eva: The Woman from Robben Island* by Trudy Bloem and another book called *The Secret letters of Jan van Riebeeck* [by Robert Kirby], which are translations of van Riebeeck’s letters. Even just picking up the translation of van Riebeeck’s letters maak my bors warm; it makes me want to hurl shit at the wall. It’s just the gall and – this wonderful word that I like – “caucacity” of how they talk about the letters.

When you read the letters, van Riebeeck is clearly saying offensive things. But there was something about the way they introduce the translations: they don’t problematise van Riebeeck’s views, instead they are written about as no longer being in vogue and how the academic milieu has changed.

I think when we are working with archival stories, we are always working with ancestral stories. I’ve been doing research on cosmologies and there is this incredible book called *Venus Rising: South African Astronomical Beliefs, Customs and Observations*, which is about the ways in which different cultures in South Africa interpret celestial bodies. And what’s interesting is, there’s an understanding that there is no one way of looking at things. There is no one version of the truth. There is something about the way in which storytelling from across different African cultures inhabits that understanding that it can be looked at in different ways. So often the stories and the myths are vague and obscure, and you have to interpret them. And in order to interpret them, you have to be mature enough to do the inner work. Because of the archive that I am going to work with [while going back to work further on *Krotoa-Eva’s Suite*], I am very aware that it is a writing against, it’s a speaking back, it’s a disrupting, it’s an unapologetic, fierce “fuck you”, because you can’t make nice with violent renderings in word, which is what the journals are. The journals and so much of the archive is completely dehumanising. When I was first thinking about Krotoa-Eva’s story, I was thinking that she was not just a victim, something in me instinctively felt that she had agency, she had rage, she had a plethora of emotions, and a spectrum of experiences. So I am going to write into those things. That’s also where a lot of my reimagining is.

Also, in the film for *Krotoa-Eva’s Suite – a cape Jazz poem in three movements*, we don’t use her face. I was very intentional about not using Krotoa’s face because if her face was there, it makes her an object again. Whereas when she isn’t [pictured] you have to

listen to what the voice is telling you. And so, for me, it was a question of: 'What does it mean to centre her voice?', and to make that the main feature so that her story stands out. Not what she looks like. So for me, removing the image, which is from the archive, is about choosing what to use and how to use it.

SJ: In Priya Pitamber's article about your presentation² at the Decolonising Feminism conference at Wits University, Pitamber relays your contemplation of a feminism that considers the layered experiences of women in patriarchal societies. How do feminist frames and methods speak to the work that you are interested in and inform your process of approaching the archive to reimagine lives in the margins?

TS: I think, for me, I always feel the need to disclaim my feminism because I don't have a gender studies background. My feminism is one that I learned as I went along – if that makes sense. So I think first and foremost, it's a practice of care. when I say a practice of care, I mean the care and attention I bring to reading the text, and sitting with these things – giving them time and space. There are all these imposed deadlines [in academia], but when you're doing ancestral work, and sacred work, and telling stories in that way, they are going to decide for themselves when and how they are going to come through. And so it's everything from making sure I eat well, making sure I exercise and sleep well, so that I am fit and healthy enough to hold the story in me so that I render it well. Because so much violence happens in the academic spaces – people pushing themselves and not taking care of themselves. So for me, a feminist practice is taking care of

oneself through the process. I think [Krotoa-Eva's Suite] is innately feminist as it centres women's stories and voices. Toni Morrison, Zoë Wicomb, Zimitri Erasmus, Joan Anim-Addo, these are all black women who have informed my thinking in creating *Krotoa-Eva's Suite – a Cape Jazz poem in three movements*. The references are intentionally black women and feminist. So, the actual practice of making the work, is thinking about "What does the day-to-day look like?", because I don't think that we talk enough about that. So much of the conversation is centred on, "What does the text look like", and no one is asking, "Are you okay?", "Do you have what you need?", "Are you taking care of yourself emotionally, this working is triggering, this work is hard this work is emotional?" Making sure I can take care of myself, is making sure I can take care of the story.

**This interview has been modified for clarity and due to space limitations.*

Notes

1 Nehl, M. 2016. "Hertseer." *Re-Imagining Cape Slavery* in Yvette Christiansë's *Unconfessed* (2006). Transcript Verlag, pp 109-134

2 Pitamber, P. 2016. How South Africa can decolonise feminism. Online. URL. Brand South Africa. <https://www.brandsouthafrica.com/people-culture/history-heritage/how-south-africa-can-decolonise-feminism>. Date accessed: 2 October 2019.

Candice Jansen writes on photography. She conducted her doctoral research at WISER (Wits Institute for Social and Economic Research) as a PhD fellow in Art History. Her dissertation, *COLOURED BLACK: The Life & Works of South African Photographers, Cedric Nunn and Ernest Cole (2019)*, was completed at Northwestern University's Program for Critical Theory in the Global South as a pre-doctoral fellow. She is a Research Associate at the University of Johannesburg's Visual Identities in Art and Design Research Centre, and is responsible for archives, research and exhibitions programming at the Market Photo Workshop in Johannesburg.

Jessica Lynne is a writer and art critic. She is a founding editor of ARTS.BLACK, an online journal of art criticism from Black perspectives. Her writing has been featured in publications such as *Art in America*, *The Believer*, *BOMB Magazine*, *The Nation* and elsewhere. She is currently at work on a collection of essays about love, faith, and the American South. Jessica lives and works in coastal Virginia

Dudu Madonsela has been serving in local government in South Africa for more than sixteen years and is currently a curator at the Bensusan Museum and Library of Photography hosted in Museum Africa, which is a museum of the City of Johannesburg. Madonsela began her career teaching Social Sciences at schools in KwaZulu-Natal. She went on to become a curator of three museums in Vryheid, Northern KwaZulu-Natal. Between 2008 and 2018 Madonsela researched, produced and curated a number of photo exhibitions. The highlight of her exhibition making is *Womandla*, an exhibition she co-curated with Neo Ntsoma for 2016 Pingyao Photography Festival held in China. Madonsela is currently an Africa Correspondent for *PhotoWorld Magazine* where she is promoting Photographers from different regions of Africa.

Lerato Maduna was born in 1985 and raised in Soweto, Johannesburg. Currently based in Cape Town, Lerato is the Senior Photographer at the University of Cape Town. A graduate of the Market Photo Workshop, Maduna has a BTECH in photography and Diploma in Television and Film studies from Cape Peninsula University of Technology. For over a decade she has worked as a photojournalist and documentary photographer for publications and online platforms, as well as a creative researcher in the film industry. Lerato is currently reimagining ways to redefine, reclaim and rebuild her identity as a mother, photographer, sister, lover, friend and filmmaker in the making.

Athabile Masola is a lecturer in the English Department at the University of Pretoria. She is also a blogger, a poet and the co-creator of the podcast *Umoya: On African Spirituality*. She completed her PhD at the University-Currently-Known-As-Rhodes; her thesis was looking at the life writing of black women with a focus on Noni Jabavu and Sisonke Msimang. Her research interests include black women's historiography, newspaper archives and more broadly the intellectual histories of black women. She is also the co-founder of *Asinakuthula Collective*, which seeks to address the erasure of black women's intellectual histories in public discourse. Her writing has been published in academic journals and other platforms such as *Africa is a Country*, *Johannesburg Review of Books and Mail* and *Guardian*.

Manyatsa Monyamane is a Johannesburg-based visual storyteller and a Master of Arts in Fine Arts candidate. Monyamane was a finalist at Pop Cap 2016, New Media award winner for the Thami Mnye Fine Arts Awards and an Absa L'Atelier Art Competition award winner, which landed her a residency with the Ampersand Foundation in New York. In 2018 she was a finalist for the International Women Photographers Award with a travelling exhibition in Dubai, New Delhi, Tokyo and Paris. She was also awarded the Woordfees Award for Visual Arts category. Monyamane was part of a group exhibition titled *Where I seek Myself I find Myself* at Mocada Museum in New York and later exhibited at Photoville also in the city. She was selected by World Press Photo as one of the six African talents of the 4th edition of the 6x6 Global Talent Program. In 2019, she was selected to attend the New York Portfolio Review and also awarded the Tierney Fellowship.

Julie Nxadi is a writer and artist from Makhanda and Ngqushwa in the Eastern Cape, currently based in Cape Town. Her research interests are "intimacy and oppression in post '94 South Africa", a subject she is exploring using multiple mediums, writing just being one. Julie is currently the Creative Artist Fellow at the University of Johannesburg as part of the Gendered Violence and Urban Transformation Project in India and South Africa.

Neo Ntsoma is an award-winning South African photographer, educator and consultant whose photos have appeared in international publications and exhibitions worldwide. In 2004, Ntsoma became the first female recipient of the Mohamed Amin Award, the CNN African Journalist of the Year Photography Prize. Understanding of the importance of mentorship, she lectures frequently, both within and outside of South Africa. She has served as a judge on numerous photographic competitions. Furthermore, Ntsoma co-authored the book, *Women by Women: 50 Years of Women's Photography in South Africa*, which is a celebration of the 50th anniversary of the 1956 Women's March. In 2006, she was named one of the '100 Most Influential Women' by Media24, Africa's largest media group.

Oluremi C. Onabanjo is a curator and scholar of photography and the arts of Africa. The former Director of The Walther Collection, she has organized exhibitions in Africa, Europe, and North America. She is a PhD candidate in Art History at Columbia University.

Toni Stuart is a South African poet, performer and spoken word educator. Her work has been published in anthologies, journals and non-fiction books locally and abroad. Some of her performances include, sound installation *Between Words and Images* with curator and visual artist Ernestine White (South Africa, 2013); *Krotoa-Eva's Suite*, in collaboration with filmmaker Kurt Orderson for *Re(as)sisting Narratives in Amsterdam and Cape Town* (2016) and *I Come To My Body As A Question* with dotdotdot dance in the UK and Sweden (2016 - 2020). In 2013 she featured in the *Mail and Guardian's* list of 200 inspiring Young South Africans. In 2014, she was part of the Scottish Poetry Library's Commonwealth Poets United exchange. She has an MA Writer/Teacher (*Distinction*) from Goldsmiths, University of London, where she was a 2014/2015 Chevening Scholar. She was the founding curator of *Poetica*, at Open Book Festival.

