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**The General View and beyond: Social documentary photography, slum clearance and state social welfare programmes, ca. 1934 – 1944**

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**Introduction**

Illustrations to Ellen Hellmann's monograph *Rooiyard: a Sociological Study of an Urban Native Slum Yard* include a page showing readers a "General view" and "The yard surface after rain". The snapshot quality of the first photograph is accentuated by the slight angle at which the picture was taken, also adding to its strong sense of movement. A man looms past the frame, a woman bends over her washing. An original print, carefully preserved in Hellmann's manuscript copy, has an arresting profusion of detail. In the narrowing gap between two rows of buildings, men and women are visible as small figures receding or advancing in the distance. A young girl stands just off the centre of this activity in a posture of apparent thought or contemplation, perhaps of the pile of branches in front of her. In the second picture, two women pause for the camera in front of washing draped from lines, while another stands, perhaps watching them, at the left edge of the frame. One woman, holding a pole in one hand, also points her finger at the photographer. Half the pictorial surface is taken up by the trampled expanse of furrowed, water-filled mud. More careful examination of the print reveals small figures in the distance and – in still separation from the trajectories of looking in which photographer and some of those photographed are engaged – another woman who sits almost hidden from view by pale garments and a weathered tin drum **(figure one)**.<sup>1</sup>

Small wonder that several of Hellmann's photographs, with their quality of immediacy and focus on gritty details of African life in the City of Gold of the early 1930s, were incorporated as illustrations to Luli Callinicos' *Working Life*.<sup>2</sup> Informed by Hellmann's case studies of African women's survival strategies as washer women and brewers of illegal liquor, they were windows onto a past of which relatively few material or documentary traces remain. For all the strong privileging of photographs in her book, Callinicos was not concerned with how photographs may

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<sup>1</sup> E. Hellmann, *Rooiyard: A Sociological Study of an Urban Native Slum Yard*, (Oxford University Press 1948). Ellen Hellmann Collection, A 1419, 3.5, 9-10. Historical Papers, William Cullen Library, University of the Witwatersrand.

<sup>2</sup> L. Callinicos, *Working Life, 1886-1940: Factories, Townships and Popular Culture on the Rand* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1987).

be said to document the past – with their “particular roles ... in inscribing, constituting and suggesting pasts”.<sup>3</sup> It was enough that the realist approach of certain photographer-researchers enabled a new visibility of previously hidden histories, including those of impoverished black South Africans. Hellmann herself, although meticulous in her descriptions of her own research technique as a social anthropologist, never mentioned the taking of photographs. If attempting to read a photograph according to authorial intention is one beginning point of investigating its historicity, there are no direct answers here.

It is possible that, some ten years after she took her *Rooiyard* pictures, Hellmann read the words of another woman for whom photography was the centre of her work. “I photographed this old woman outside a news-stand because, to me, it seemed to symbolise something of the idea that poverty is international”. Constance Stuart (later Stuart Larrabee), professional photographer and war correspondent for the South African magazine *Libertas*, wrote this comment to a photograph taken in Italy in 1944.<sup>4</sup> Against a pattern of headlines, images and columns of newsprint, the woman stands apparently at ease. Hands in her pockets, her coat tied with a make-shift belt, she contemplates the viewer. Angled sunlight brightens her hair, glances down her cheek, partly softens deep facial lines, accentuates the hole in her sleeve (**figure two**). What was it about this picture that prompted Stuart Larrabee to pronounce it expressive of poverty as a phenomenon that crossed national borders? Probably, and with South African readers in mind, Stuart Larrabee liked her simple juxtaposition of woman and Italian text. The latter anchored the image in the time and space of war-time Italy, whilst making present news of places and events elsewhere. Stuart Larrabee’s captions to accompanying pictures also emphasised similarities between the sights of war-time Europe and her adopted home country – sometimes, European labour seemed peculiarly African. Here were Neapolitan *touleiers* and men who balanced loads on their heads in the fashion of “native women”.<sup>5</sup>

How was “poverty” framed by photographers in segregationist South Africa? This paper begins to explore visual images of people framed as problematically poor within a broader context of picturing working-class persons. I have chosen to begin with a discussion of photographs created and, to a limited extent, viewed in South Africa during the 1930s. Before World War Two there was no self-conscious genre of social documentary photography with any significant circulation in the regional visual economy. By 1944, subscribers to *Libertas* would be familiar with photographs of poverty, variously racialised as black, coloured and white, at home.

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<sup>3</sup> E. Edwards, *Raw Histories: Photographs, Anthropology and Museums* (Berg Oxford, 2001), p.5.

<sup>4</sup> *Libertas*, December 1944.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

My discussion of pictures taken by Hellmann, amateur photographer and trained in social anthropology, and of works by professional photographers of the 1940s involves thinking through what could be said to have constituted South African 'social', 'documentary' photography. I consider photographs created in the contexts of social scientific research and amateur photography on the one hand and by professional photo-journalists on the other. This paper is, crucially, about the new possibilities that war offered to professional photographers. However, I limit my discussion to opportunities for photography that opened up away from the battlefields and military activity. My work concerns the particular dynamics of a shift towards a social documentary photography aimed at shaping public opinion and at contributing to discussions about state social welfare reform. As such, it contributes to recent research that opened up questions about the early history of social documentary photography in South Africa, challenging the idea of a unitary tradition of oppositional documentary photography that was strongly identifiable from the 1950s onwards and that had roots in Leon Levson's pre-apartheid photographs.<sup>6</sup> An important and as yet totally neglected photographer in this respect is J.P. Vorster. As the official photographer for *Libertas*, his social documentary photographs were possibly more widely distributed than those by any other South African photographer during the 1940s.<sup>7</sup> The larger study of which this paper is part will also consider a series of photographs taken by Stuart Larrabee in 1947-1948, in order to document aspects of post-war reconstruction and the provision of state social welfare in South Africa.

### **Social anthropology and documentary photography ca. 1934-1938**

*The Golden City*, a commemorative volume about Johannesburg's past published in ca. 1934, includes a picture taken by editor Allister MacMillan in a neighbourhood that would soon be rebuilt with sub economic houses for whites. Captioned "Keeping the Home Fires burning in Ferreirastown", it shows an anonymous black family attentive to the camera as they might have been for a studio photographer. The seated couple with their baby are centred in a triangulated space formed by lines of washing on a makeshift pole and smoke drifting from two of several buckets and tin drums. The melancholy atmosphere of the picture is accentuated by the separate figure of a young girl who, apparently unaware that she is included in the camera's field of vision, leans against some object so that her posture contrasts to the upright self-awareness of the

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<sup>6</sup> Minkley, Gary and Rassool, Ciraj, *Photography with a difference? Leon Levson's camera studies and photographic exhibitions of native life in South Africa, 1947 – 1950* in Godby, M, and Davison, P, *Encounters with Photography* (UCT:Cape Town, 1999).

<sup>7</sup> However, *Libertas* never provided details as to its circulation and distribution. I have not as yet been able to determine the extent of its influence, and must also still do comparative research on other established magazines such as *Outspan* and Afrikaans illustrated magazines like *Die Huisgenoot* during the war.

parents (**Figure Three**) . Although this picture – unusually for a published photograph at this time – shows a black working-class couple of little means in a poor part of town – it was arguably not taken with ‘social documentary’ intent, at least not according to the retrospective definition of a photographic genre that emerged as distinct and self-conscious during the 1930s.<sup>8</sup>

Historians of photography in Europe and the USA trace efforts to use the camera in order to press for social reforms from the late nineteenth century, when it was first mobilised with intent to expose the living conditions of poor people. Price argues that “as photography established itself as an important component in an extensive series of projects to investigate and record the lives of the poor”, “the real took on a class inflection which it was not to lose for many years”.<sup>9</sup> The term “documentary” was coined by filmmaker John Grierson in the late 1920s and would quickly gain currency within photography.<sup>10</sup> A widely disseminated genre of photography called “social documentary” is seen as identifiable from the 1930s and has often been associated with the launch of the state-sponsored Farm and Security Administration photographic project in the USA in 1935. Tagg and others have explored the relationship between photographers and state bureaucracy with regards to the FSA and questions of hierarchy between photographer and subject, the institutional structures within which photographers worked and how race was articulated within these photographs.<sup>11</sup>

In South Africa, photography had long been used by charities and (from the mid-1920s) state-driven projects in order to present rehabilitated or rescued poor whites as beneficiaries.<sup>12</sup> If the camera was conventionally understood as an instrument of uncomplicated truthfulness, it was also seldom that photographers set out to contextualise people as *being* poor.<sup>13</sup> It was only in the late 1920s that a coherent photographic project to document poverty had emerged, as part of racialised research. As I have shown in a previous paper, commissioner for the 1929-32 Carnegie investigation into white poverty E.G. Malherbe photographed his subjects with social scientific intent, but this remained a minor aspect of the Commission’s public findings. In the 1930s, in spite

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<sup>8</sup> A. MacMillan, *The Golden City*, p. 204.

<sup>9</sup> D. Price, ‘Surveyors and surveyed: Photography out and about’, in L. Wells (ed), *Photography: a Critical Introduction* (Routledge New York 2000), p. 78.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> J. Tagg, *The Burden of Representation. Essays on Photographs and Histories* (Amherst, University of Massachusetts Press 1988). N. Nicholas, *The Black Image in the New Deal: The Politics of FSA Photography* (University of Tennessee Press 1992).

<sup>12</sup> Reports on the Losperfontein dam tenant farmer rehabilitation project in the Pact Labour Department publication *Social and Industrial Review* regularly included photographs of white men and women at work.

<sup>13</sup> However, in ‘Blank Verbeeld or the incredible whiteness of being: amateur photography and Afrikaner nationalist historical narrative’ (*Kronos* 27, Nov. 2001) I discuss several photographs taken from 1916 to ca 1924 and published in the cultural Afrikaner nationalist illustrated magazine *Die Huisgenoot*, of elderly persons presented as impoverished and deserving veterans of *voortrekker* history.

of the intense politicisation of the “poor white problem”, mounting agitation for urban slum clearance and for the provision of subsidised housing by the state, visual images of people described as poor still failed to appear with any special prominence or frequency in South African popular print media. However, the newly established discipline of social anthropology was yielding its first examples of photographs intended to document socio-economic circumstance. In 1934 (the year of publication for MacMillan’s *The Golden City*) Ellen Hellmann, sometimes supplementing her notebook with a camera, spent her mornings visiting homes in Doornfontein where landlords rented rooms to black families in need of living space near central Johannesburg.

Hellmann was amongst the first of the new generation of social anthropologists – and unusual within the broad spectrum of South African social science – to study and also to photograph members of a black community in the immediate vicinity of their homes in the city. She did so more than 70 years after commercial prints of colonised African subjects began to circulate in southern Africa and to find their way into settler albums and more than half a century after racial anthropologists began to systematise their use of photography.<sup>14</sup> She took her pictures at a time when strong ethnic and racial visual stereotypes were fixed onto the pages of popular print culture, often presented with the confidence of South African scientific studies – not least those published in anticipation of Johannesburg’s Jubilee celebrations and the Empire Exhibition of 1936. What were the points of connection or of disjuncture between her photographs of black people living in Johannesburg and the dominant, racialised visual culture of her time?

It is instructive to consider Hellmann’s visual records of Doornfontein against contemporary practices in South African anthropology and ethnography. Hellmann’s “general view” and “yard surface after rain” differed significantly from most photographs taken by scholars intent on studying African cultures at this time, while her pictures were also recognizably shaped by the young researcher’s induction into a specific school of *social* or *cultural* anthropology. Comparison with photographs from two contemporary volumes of anthropology and ethnography, *Western Civilization and the Natives of South Africa* (1934) and *The Bantu-Speaking Tribes of South Africa* (1937) in which some of her Rooiyard pictures were first published is instructive.<sup>15</sup> The second volume in particular confirms that ethnographers working in South Africa, intent upon using the camera in order to create records of bodily adornment, maintained a serious interest in

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<sup>14</sup> See, for example, C. Rassool and P. Hayes: ‘Gendered Science, Gendered Spectacle: Khanako’s South Africa, 1936-1937’ in *Deep hiStories* (Rodopi, Amsterdam 2002). A. Bank, ‘Anthropology and Portrait Photography: Gustav Fritsch’s ‘Natives of South Africa’, 1863-1872’, *Kronos* 27, November 2001.

<sup>15</sup> Both volumes were edited by social anthropologist Isaac Schapera.

photography well into the twentieth century. These often involved decontextualising and positioning bodies in a manner very similar to that of racial anthropology. Thus Van Warmelo's full frontal and profile head and shoulder photographs, classified into a typology of tribes, have a shallow depth of field so that his subjects are presented against blurred or uniformly patterned backgrounds. Where this ethnographer for the Native Affairs Department presented people within a physical environment performing an aspect of their culture the frame tended to exclude signs of modernity that could place his subjects in historical time.<sup>16</sup> Bodies were often placed in balanced relationship to each other or in the regulated patterning of ritual movement, emphasising a sense of order and stasis (**figure four**).<sup>17</sup>

Hellmann's Rooiyard pictures show a lack of interest to record human physical features and her almost arbitrary framing of street scenes do not focus attention on signs of cultural specificity. As such, they are identifiable as belonging to a strand of social anthropological photography in which the camera was not used to establish or confirm a racial or ethnic typology nor to isolate cultural performance. A different form of visual documentary was emerging – one in which it was important to present human subjects in a physical environment descriptive of both cultural and socio-economic practice. Schapera's own photographs in *Bantu-speaking tribes* and in *Western Civilization and the Natives of South Africa* exemplify this approach. In contrast to the more carefully orchestrated photographs taken by ethnologists associated with colonial administrative structures, the camera recorded the presence of material objects, whatever their supposed cultural origin (**figure five**).<sup>18</sup> Indeed, the study of "culture contact" and of how 'western'

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<sup>16</sup> An interesting exception is included in *The Bantu-speaking Tribe of South Africa*, which shows young women at an initiation dance as well as, against the edge of the frame, a man in shirt and trousers who seems to be participating in directing the ceremony. See also P. Hayes, '

<sup>17</sup> For example, Plates VIII and XXI in Schapera (ed), *The Bantu-speaking Tribes of South Africa: An Ethnographical Survey* (London: George Routledge, 1937). As a composite text, *The Bantu Speaking Tribes of South Africa* drew together various strands in the broad field of anthropological and ethnographic research. Illustrations reflected the close association of ethnography and racial anthropology. Ethnographer Von Warmelo's close description of bodily markings and attire was sufficiently compatible with Raymond Dart's racial anthropology to illustrate the latter's discussion of the "racial basis of the Bantu". Like contemporary works of popular ethnography, this more scholarly publication also included photographs that comprised performances of traditional culture organised or recorded by the South African Railways and Harbours, long a prolific distributor of photographs showing off South African vistas and the cultural attributes of the native populace. The same photographs – for example of what was described as an advancing horde of Zulu warriors, or as the interior of a Zulu hut, appeared in such publications as MacMillan's *The Golden City* as well as in *The Bantu-Speaking Tribes*.

<sup>18</sup> Schapera's interest in how "the spread of Western Civilization over South Africa" had "affected Bantu life" is already apparent in the earlier chapters of *Bantu Speaking Tribes*, which combine timeless descriptions of cultural practices and beliefs with Schapera's photographs which, unlike other ethnographic camera-work, often include clothing and household objects that may be read as signs of westernisation. His visual records of cultural ritual and everyday life therefore lack the systematic, careful elisions aimed at creating a sense of timeless tribal specificity so evident in much ethnographic photography from the early twentieth century. See Patricia Hayes, 'Northern

commodities were absorbed into indigenous cultures was now a central preoccupation. If cultural anthropologists still sought to describe cultures of 'origin', their photographs often incorporated signs of change and of cultural hybridity.

Hellmann set out to explore not only to what extent "the Native in the Towns" was adopting "European material culture", but also to document the socio-economic conditions in which Africans living in the city struggled to subsist. As she explained, "the desire of the urban Native to acquire European goods is limited only by his poverty. And poverty is one of the most outstanding characteristics of those Natives whose families have taken up residence in an urban area".<sup>19</sup> How and why the majority of Rooiyard residents were desperately poor was an important aspect of her investigation. Hellmann's photographs were unusual for her conscious attempt to contextualise her subjects with regards to socio-economic circumstance.<sup>20</sup> But exactly how she did she use her camera in order to show their poverty?

Hellmann's "General View" of Rooiyard is striking for the sense of movement and everyday activity of anonymous men, women and children captured within the frame. In fact, browsing through the published pictures and reading their brief captions, it seems as if Hellmann took a number of pictures whilst not specifically intent on showing people in her photographs. She wanted to visually record living spaces, and people often appear as if almost incidentally present in these photographs. Instead, her focus is on the bare surfaces of yards and buildings. In one photo of a "Rooiyard alleyway", she indicates the picture as "showing the assortment of tins used for beer-brewing, soap-making, washing, etc."<sup>21</sup> The partial presence of a man who has walked into the frame is accidental, arbitrary and the eye has to search for other distant or shadowy figures (**Figure Six**). Exceptions are photographs specifically showing women making beer. But they remain anonymous figures intent on the task at hand, their features often hidden in shadows (especially in the indifferent prints of Hellmann's published volume). More unusual is the portrait of a woman identified as "Angela with her daughter". She stands holding her baby, surrounded by the cheap metal surfaces and cloth of urban living: corrugated iron rooms, tin drums, a tin

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Exposures: the photography of C.H.L. Hahn, Native Commissioner of Ovamboland 1915-1946' in Hartmann et al (eds), *The Colonising Camera: Photographs in the making of Namibian History* for a detailed analysis of the force fields at work in colonial administrative photography as practised in South West Africa. Hayes shows how Hahn was careful to exclude signs of trade and migrant labour from his photographs of 'tribal' subjects.

<sup>19</sup> E. Hellmann, 'The Native in the Towns' *The Bantu-speaking Tribes of South Africa*, p. 407.

<sup>20</sup> Her Masters thesis on a "native slum yard" in Johannesburg has long been recognised as the first substantial social anthropological study of African family life in an urban South African context. Completed in 1934, it was published in 1948. For an early appraisal of Hellmann's work, see J. C. Mitchell, 'Theoretical Orientations in African Urban Studies', A.S.A. Discussion on the Anthropology of Complex Societies', Cambridge June 1963. Ellen Hellmann Collection, A1410/49, Historical Papers, University of the Witwatersrand.

<sup>21</sup> E. Hellmann, *Rooiyard*, illustration no. 3, no page number.

basin, a woven sack (on which happens to be printed, enigmatically, the word 'land'). It is difficult to gauge her expression, but it seems hidden rather than open – she faces the camera with a frowning look and with eyes that look sideways past the photographer, as if disengaged from this moment (**figure seven**).

But attempting to deduce intention and the nature of interaction between photographer and photographed from the image itself when trying to make sense of pictures as relics from the past must in large part remain an exercise of tentative interpretation. In 'Yard Surface after Rain' (**figure 1**) one woman smilingly points her finger. Clarke, discussing Barthes' idea of the *punctum*, suggests how a disconcerting detail that 'disturbs the surface unity and stability of an image' may 'like a cut, begin the process of opening up that space to critical analysis. Once we have discovered our punctum we become, irredeemably, active readers of the scene'. As Barthes would have it, the reader *animates* and is *animated* by the photograph.<sup>22</sup> What could this moment of heightened contact of eye and gesture between photographer and photographed – where the subject, even as she is pointed out by the camera, draws attention to Hellmann herself - signify? Hellmann's own comments on the dynamics of her research suggest some possibilities. In *Rooiyard* she wrote about the measure of suspicion with which she was regarded by local women when doing her research. She was judged (so explained Hellmann) a friend by some, but "the general attitude was one of amused indifference, every now and then changing into resentment and antagonism". It was the "continuous conflict with the authorities" about illegal beer brewing that had made "especially the women... very suspicious of all Europeans" who were all regarded as police agents unless proven otherwise.<sup>23</sup> Hellmann – 26 years old at the time and from a well-to-do Jewish family who had probably settled on the Rand at the turn of the twentieth century - conversed in English and Afrikaans, the languages of communication with white masters and mistresses in urban South Africa. When necessary, she used an interpreter.<sup>24</sup> There were huge gaps of socio-economic status, political power and culture between herself - a white, middle-class, recently enfranchised woman on her way to acquiring a post-graduate qualification - and her black, disenfranchised, economically marginal subjects.

Hellmann's own intention with her photographs was as illustrations to written text – and by reading them 'with' her words the pictures acquire new layers of meaning. Photographs are referred to briefly in her monograph, for example as illustrations to the layout of the yard or in her discussion of economic activities such as beer brewing – belying a more complex relationship

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<sup>22</sup> G. Clarke, *The Photograph* (Oxford University Press 1997). R. Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p.9.

<sup>23</sup> E. Hellmann, *Rooiyard*.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

between image and text.<sup>25</sup> For Hellmann, the camera enabled a form of visual note-taking in the field, subordinated to pen and paper. Verbal explanation based on field-work provided a necessary interpretation of the visual.<sup>26</sup> To eyes tutored by Hellmann's textual discussion, exteriors visible in the photographs assume new depths of meaning. The surface of communal yards and alleyways so prominent in a number of her photographs hid subterranean cellars crucial to women's livelihood and at the centre of struggles with police. In her description, objects that may first appear as incidental clutter also become receptacles essential for women's economic survival as brewers of beer. Unlike most photographs of African women taken at this time, they are here pictured not as the exotic signifiers of tribal identity but as producers for familial survival, their labours crucial for the equilibrium of fragile household economies.

Hellmann's choice of research topic for her Masters was shaped by a shared interest amongst social scientists of liberal persuasion to research Africans' socio-economic position at a time of the rapid growth of South African cities. She was a founding member of the South African Institute of Race Relations – as a student of social Anthropology at the University of the Witwatersrand in the early 1930s, Hellmann was also working with scholars closely involved with the presentation of evidence to the Native Economic Commission of 1932.<sup>27</sup> When her monograph on Rooiyard was published in 1948, Hellmann referred to the study as “revealing a naivety of outlook particularly in regards to its political immaturity and unawareness of the implications of national policy in this country”.<sup>28</sup> Writing at time of great tension around the provision of living space for Africans in Johannesburg, Hellmann probably had in mind official response to the growing urban presence of Africans, and bureaucratic preoccupation with the dirt and mud and infection-bearing effluent of a burdensome presence insisted upon as temporary by most officials. Given the pervasiveness of this discourse in public discussions about the need for slum clearance, Hellmann's photographs – often with a strong focus on the water-logged surfaces of yards and walk-ways, are descriptive of unsanitary conditions and could easily be read as taken within the framework of official and popular discourse about blacks as carriers of infectious disease in the city. In other words, a number of her photographs prompt the question of exactly how her pictures were framed *within*, perhaps also *beyond* the *general view* of her time.

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<sup>25</sup> Prints related to her Rooiyard fieldwork in the Hellmann Collection correlate exactly with those published in her monograph.

<sup>26</sup> Edwards (writing primarily about British trends) discusses the shift from photographs as objects collected and exchanged by practitioners who treated them as 'examples of isolated phenomena for the purposes of comparative study' to 'an increasingly integrated model of social structure for which the photograph was perceived as a less satisfactory mode of recording and expression' and where photography became one aspect of recording field-work. E. Edwards, *Raw Histories*, pp. 38, 47.

<sup>27</sup> The SAIRR was founded in order to organise the presentation of expert evidence to the Native Economic Commission of 1932.

<sup>28</sup> Max Gluckmann quotes this comment in his preface, the context being her decision to publish the thesis in its original form in spite of perceived defects.

By 1935 already, she had emphasised that urban researchers must understand “the Native policy of the municipal authorities” and the “economic structure of Western civilisation” as it impacted on African lives. “I do not hereby maintain that it is the duty of the field-worker actively to plunge into the field of politics nor that it is his duty to become a political advocate in the cause of justice. I merely submit that he must take cognizance of practical politics in so far as they affect the group with which he is concerned”.<sup>29</sup> In fact, Hellmann was herself at the beginning of a long career as researcher and liberal activist who rejected key aspects of segregationist policy and publicly worked for reform towards a just political dispensation. By the late 1930s she was taking a keen interest in the affairs of the recently established township of Orlando, the older Pimville (subject of frequent discussions about inadequate sewage provisions and its proximity to a sewage plant) and freehold areas such as Sophiatown and Alexandra. She did so not only from within the SAIRR but also as member of that cornerstone of urban trusteeship, the (Johannesburg) Joint council of Europeans and Natives. She had also embarked on her doctoral studies on the educational opportunities available to and juvenile delinquency amongst ‘native’ youth. Hellmann was, once again, taking photographs. This time however, she pasted a number of pictures – some destined for use in her PhD, many others never to be published – into an album.

Hellmann’s compilation of pictures included street scenes from Sophiatown, Alexandra, Pimville and the soon-to-be eradicated Prospect. She presented a visual account of such diverse events as a local election and a wedding, interspersed with many photographs of children and youth on township streets. She portrayed families and individuals living in Pimville as well as in the newly established township of Orlando. A thorough exploration of these images is not possible here, but a beginning may be made by again considering how selected photographs may be read within or against prevalent images from this time and the more general discursive context in which the urban presence of blacks were associated with disease and the danger of epidemics. By the late 1930s, Hellmann’s research was also centrally informed by what Deborah Posel has recently termed ‘the politics of the urban African family’.<sup>30</sup> Enormous poverty amongst Africans and ‘the disintegration of family life in urban African townships’ were the defining and inter-linked features of the ‘urban native question’ as articulated at this time. Several years before, Carnegie Commissioner E.G. Malherbe’s pictures of poor whites were informed by a politics of social welfare that ‘insisted and believed in the power of state-driven initiatives to intervene positively in economic and social life.’ Similar belief informed ‘a different set of initiatives to manage the dual problems of poverty and family instability in urban African communities, spearheaded by various

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<sup>29</sup> E. Hellmann, ‘Methods of Urban Fieldwork’, *Bantu Studies* (Sept 1935 Vol IX no 3), p. 199.

<sup>30</sup> D. Posel, ‘The Case for a Welfare State: Poverty and the Politics of the Urban African Family in South Africa in the 1930s and 1940s’. Workshop on South Africa in the 1940s, Southern African Research Centre, Kingston, September 2003.

groupings of liberals, missionaries, academics, urban African leaders and urban administrators...<sup>31</sup> What was imagined was 'a racialised welfare state, with racially differential – if improved – investment on the part of the state in the 'upliftment' of all the country's racial groups'.<sup>32</sup>

If Hellmann's 1934 research already sought to document the survival of African families in Johannesburg, pictures she took whilst researching how family and schools socialised African children in the city reflected these concerns more insistently, and certainly reflected greater effort to visually present the familial.<sup>33</sup> The first photographs pasted into Hellmann's album are of Sophiatown and Alexandra, and show children and women (going about their daily tasks) in unkempt streets and yards or on the verandahs of dilapidated houses. Once again her framing places emphasis on surfaces of mud, dust or dirt with little specific focus on the people. If her focus seemed to complement contemporary press reports on the dangers that 'native' slums posed to European health, several of Hellmann's photographs also showed the empty dusty streets and neat rows of houses in Orlando, the township built at a satisfactory distance from Johannesburg's 'white' suburbs. Thus photographs of "Shifting Prospect" forefront the churned up mud, an open drain, a scrounging dog, rusted metal and other discards, with brick houses and people appearing in the background (**figure eight**). These are followed by two pictures of "Orlando – settling in". One picture includes the expanse of dry, empty ground that fronts neat freestanding brick houses of the new township; another presents one home within a tighter frame, so that the women and children labouring at moving into their new home are more clearly visible (**figure nine**). If the photographs are unusual as documents of removals from 'slum' to 'township', considered by themselves they do not seem to question official policy and popular white support for the need to provide (some) 'native' families with segregated urban living space.

While these pictures show a clear narrative of departure and arrival, other juxtapositions that involve people and their homes are more enigmatic. One striking page is unusual for its juxtaposition of township vista and the portrayal of an individual. Far off small houses form straight lines in the veld, under a large sky bleached from its blueness in the photograph. A woman watches mildly as she sits in her chair, dressed in black, her face and the hands in her lap

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<sup>31</sup> D. Posel, 'The Case for a Welfare State', p. 2.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid. Posel explains her hesitation to label 'this position as liberal – 'although many of its exponents were ardent liberals – since its principal focus was social and economic amelioration, avoiding the issue of political inequalities and the denial of political rights and freedoms to Africans' (Ibid).

<sup>33</sup> I have yet to research how Hellmann conceptualised 'family' as a researcher. She may have specifically worked within the concept of a nuclear and without reference to extended or polygamous African familial structures, for example in her selection of subjects for research.

lined with age. Hellmann captioned the first picture “Orlando”, the second with the words “Mourning” and “Ester Dineko’s mother” (**figure ten**)

Understanding how these photographs may be animated as image-text that convey information about the past to a twenty-first century reader requires careful disaggregation of how meaning is made in the process of looking. With a longer sweep of South African history in mind, my own eyes are informed by the knowledge that conventional, official photographic representations of townships as spaces for the proper control of Africans in South African cities sometimes circulated in postcards or published in illustrated magazines and closely resemble the first photograph.<sup>34</sup> Knowledge of Hellmann’s scholarly interest brings awareness that she probably took the second picture while seeing through the eyes of a social anthropologist fascinated with questions of ‘westernised’, African customs associated with a death in the family. But if this was intended as a photographic study of ‘native’ ritual within the context of family, the photograph also satisfies contemporary conventions of familial portraiture. As a closely framed portrait of an elderly black woman not identified by her own name but also not anonymous, seated comfortably in front of a house, looking directly at the camera, this is a relatively unusual picture for this time, when black women were most often photographed as bodily signifiers of specific ethnicities and rarely identified in terms of familial relation. Moreover, read within the longer history of the cultural uses of visual technology the inscription of “Mourning” invokes photography’s long association with loss, with death and with (often familial) remembrance of loved ones. Considered within the South African historical context of African families’ struggles to survive in the face of official attempts at segregation and the gendered control of living space in the city, the juxtaposition of the conventional image of distant regulated township homes with this portrait of an elderly African woman, probably a widow, who remains unnamed but is yet identified in terms of familial relationship, also creates a strongly ambiguous visual energy.

Other photographs suggest how Hellmann’s vision was shaped by the discourses of contemporary social science as well as by other, familial modes of amateur photography, perhaps because this was also a personal record of relationships with people whom she met through her research. Several individuals whose portraits appear in Hellmann’s album are specifically named – why this is so is not clear. One shows a “Makoti wearing Hlonipha shawl” standing on the veranda of a corrugated iron house, who is also identified as “Lena Mapumula. Pimville”. Again (possibly simply by virtue of her chronological placing of photographs) Hellmann has created an unusual juxtaposition of woman and bleak township landscape by pasting Mapumula’s picture next to one of women visible in the distance and hurrying across an open, bare expanse with

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<sup>34</sup> G. Minkley, “Corpses behind screens’: Native space in the city” in Hilton Judin and Ivan Vladislavic (eds), *Blank: architecture, apartheid and after* (David Philip 1998).

loads balanced on their heads (captioned “Women returning from station. Orlando Oct ‘37”) (**figure eleven**). Amongst a number of pictures taken on her wedding day is a also one of an uncomfortable looking “Lena Mapumula in bridal atire”, although other photographs are more conventionally posed as if for a wedding photographer. A Pimville photograph of a mother with her sons suggest more relaxed participation from her subjects, certainly from the two older boys who obviously enjoy the symmetry of their stance (**figure twelve**). The final pages of the album combine photographs of homes in Orlando with separate portraits of Mapumula and of several other women (also identified by name) sitting in the living rooms of their Pimville homes. As portraits of black women and their children taken in pre-apartheid South Africa, these slivers of time and space are possibly the most unusual of Hellmann’s photographs, not least as amateur pictures of individuals taken in the interior spaces of township homes.<sup>35</sup> Perhaps Hellmann was drawn to take pictures of women seated within their neat small houses as a proponent of reform that would provide adequate housing for Africans in the city, and that valued perceived efforts of familial self-discipline. What remains visually compelling however, is the absence of men in many of these photographs of family groupings.<sup>36</sup>

The Pimville homes she photographed were also likely self-built, as Africans living in this small township had been allowed to build their own homes on plots provided on 99 year lease.<sup>37</sup> These and pictures of Orlando houses were taken whilst Hellmann was actively engaging with the question of how to resolve the intensifying problem of adequate housing provision for black people in Johannesburg. Even as Hellmann wielded her camera in Pimville, Prospect and Orlando she was attempting to publicize her views on the inadequate provision of “native” housing in the local press: “E. Hellmann. We have made careful inquiries into the ‘six points’ on which your letter is based and are satisfied your information is not correct” noted *The Star* in September 1937.<sup>38</sup> In this letter (never published by the newspaper), Hellmann agreed that “native slums” had to be removed since they were “veritable plague spots... a source of danger to

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<sup>35</sup> Most amateurs at this time did not attempt photographing people inside their homes, perhaps because they were aware of the limited capacity of basic box cameras to take pictures in low light conditions.

<sup>36</sup> I have only begun to consider Posel’s paper and ideas, and must also still thoroughly consider the gender dimensions of Hellmann’s photographs. The album contains a few pictures of men (posing in on the street and in smart suits for Hellmann) and of men and women interacting in social rituals (a wedding, a funeral) but never shows men and women posing as part of a family portrait. In Rooiyard, Hellmann mentions that her day-time research, usually conducted in the morning meant that she interacted with women rather than with men as the latter was away from home. She may also – or so it has recently been pointed out to me - have specifically chosen ‘nuclear’ families with male household heads for her research – I must still confirm whether this was the case for her research in 1934 and for her PhD.

<sup>37</sup> I am grateful to Phil Bonner for pointing this out to me.

<sup>38</sup> *The Star*, Sept 1 1937, p. 21.

the white populace of Johannesburg”.<sup>39</sup> Orlando’s municipal houses also improved upon the “miserable slum rooms” from which people were being moved. But Hellmann insisted that “real facts” must not be “completely distorted by illusion”. Her six points concerned defects in the houses overlooked by newspaper reports in which Orlando had been described as a model township. Her list mentioned such defects as the lack of ceilings, floors, insulation and adequate cement binding for bricks.

I watched Prospect Township Natives arriving and being deposited with their belongings in the dreary desolation of Orlando. The first matter which of necessity claimed their attention was the floors, bare veld. The heaped up sand swirled with every movement in the room. To make the place at all tolerable they had first to drench their floors with water and thereafter commenced the arduous job of stamping and hardening them. And in these damp and draughty rooms they had to sleep...<sup>40</sup>

Hellmann explained that the provision of “houses, the poorest and cheapest of their kind... to accommodate people whose former habitations were a menace to the health of the city”, together with inadequate transport facilities, corresponded to the administrative agreement “to treat our urban natives as temporary labourers from the rural districts and not as part and parcel of our population”. It was the “smug and complacent” acceptance of this status quo that had to be challenged.<sup>41</sup>

But while Hellmann campaigned vigorously for the provision of adequate housing – she was soon to be a pivotal member of a new subcommittee of the Joint Council of Europeans and Natives that specifically dealt with conditions in townships – her photographs of homes and those who lived in them remained in the private space of a researcher’s album. She did not specifically seek to portray the inadequacies of housing in Orlando through photographs, and never used her photographs for publicity. Perhaps as she began to know families better during the course of her doctoral research (which included investigating the effect of cramped housing conditions on juveniles and investigating the circumstances of various households), she added pictures that seemed to focus not simply on neglected streets or on groups of people engaged in ritual activity, and therefore to blur the boundaries between the researcher’s social scientific study and a more personal photography. Perhaps, such pictures as those of interiors in Pimville were intended as visual records of familial respectability and of African women’s desire for a permanent urban-based domesticity.

These were portraits of women at home, and included pictures that showed women, identified by name, seated in the carefully arranged domestic spaces of small township living rooms. Lena

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<sup>39</sup> AD1433, Cj2.1.17 (file 2) JBG Joint Council correspondence. Letter to The Editor, The Star, 17 Aug. 1937. This copy is not signed, and has tentatively been attributed to “R.F.A. Hoernle ?” .*The Star*’s note to Hellmann proves that she was the writer.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

Mapumula appears, serious as ever, sitting in a living room with trunks and packing cases arranged along the walls. In another tiny picture sits “Winnie Nolefi” of Pimville with her child, a book and sewing machine on the table, a dressing table with carefully arranged plates against the wooden walls of her home (**figure thirteen**). Apparently, Hellmann never used them outside of the pages of her album, that conventional space for private contemplation, personal remembrance, the collection of the colonial picturesque or exotic and more rarely, for the systematic arrangement of visual evidence relating to social scientific research. For Hellmann, the printed word remained her primary tool as researcher and activist intent on pushing for reform that would touch the lives of women such as these and of their families. But barely a year after she took these portraits, others were beginning to harness photography to their public campaign against slum conditions in Johannesburg.

**‘Don’t say ‘shame’, do something about it’:  
publicising poverty through photography, 1939-1947**

From 1939 new incentives to publicize the fact of people living in conditions of poverty through photography and film emerged. On the Rand, the first concerted effort to do so was led by a labour party member of the Johannesburg City Council, David H. Epstein, who accused this council of being the largest slum landlord in its own jurisdiction, and of failing to make adequate use of resources readily available from the Union government’s central housing board in order to clear or improve slums in areas within the municipal boundaries. The *Daily Express* reported that two hundred people had to be turned away for lack of space when Epstein first showed “The Slums of Johannesburg”, a film made at his incentive and “taken on a recent tour of the city’s slums”.<sup>42</sup> Those who crowded into the city’s public library were “shocked” at scenes of “slum squalor”. The film, which drew on the occasional practice of politicians to “tour the slums... in order to obtain first-hand information of the whole housing position”,<sup>43</sup> may have been shot in such areas as Pimville native Location and certainly featured Fordsburg. In Epstein’s accompanying lecture and in newspaper reporters’ responses to his presentation, poverty was described as visible in the ramshackle conditions of dwellings, in the fact of “Europeans mixed with coloureds” in a “crowded yard”, on faces and bodies. Epstein urged viewers to “watch particularly the poverty on the faces of the children”. According to *Die Vaderland*, the film brought

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<sup>42</sup> *Daily Express*, 25 Nov. 1938.

<sup>43</sup> For example, ‘M.P and Mayor to Tour Reef Slums’, *Daily Express*, 25 Nov. 1938. I have thus far been unable to locate this documentary, but hope to do so and to provide specific analysis of footage. It seems likely however, that in key respects the film version resembled still photographs used in Epstein’s pamphlet.

to light the “smerigheid” (filth) of slum dwellings and children’s “uitgeteerde toestand” (emaciated condition).<sup>44</sup>

Epstein continued his campaign against “Johannesburg’s bad record” with regard to slum eradication through newspaper articles and a pamphlet, *The Crime of the Slums*, early in 1941. Published by the South African Labour Party, Epstein’s pamphlet was issued in English and Afrikaans, and apparently reached beyond a middle-class audience to the Labour Party’s white working-class support base. The first ten days of production made up four print runs of 20 000 copies, and a number of unions aligned to the party participated in its distribution.<sup>45</sup> The film had been pronounced “particularly good in its contrasts” - photographs published in 1941 also juxtaposed disorderly yards and run-down, ramshackle “hovels” to the clean grounds, ordered gardens and neat brick “homes” of sub-economic housing schemes.

Epstein was pressurising the city council to take more vigorous action within the ambit of current housing policies. He articulated his views within the conventional and long-established discourse of slums as breeding-grounds for disease. While the pamphlet’s cover showed a group of blond and fair skinned children in the comfortable surroundings of a crèche, the first photograph of a child featured within was closely focused and cropped so as to draw attention to the flies clustering on his pale skin. The author warned that “with conditions of this nature, even worse in the Native localities and Coloured areas, it is a miracle that Johannesburg has not been visited more frequently with plague and pestilence”<sup>46</sup>. The caption to another photograph featuring black city dwellers watching from the dark, broken window and doorway of a corrugated iron building explained that families “in hovels like these” used “rat-infested rooms” and the “cave-like” brick cellar under the house as living space. The photograph was published “courtesy of the Public Health Department, Johannesburg” (**figure fourteen**). The Johannesburg Department of Public Health was now using photographs as part of its own publicity material, including the pictures that purported to document progress “from hovel to home”. Other acknowledgments suggest that at least one newspaper had also been publishing its own photographs of slum conditions.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> *Die Vaderland*, 3/2/1939.

<sup>45</sup> These were the Tramwaymen’s Union, the S.A. Typographical Union, the Amalgamated Society of Woodworkers and the Ironmoulder’s Association of S.A. *Forward*, 31 Jan 1941. Organisations also mentioned for assisting in the pamphlet’s distribution were the Democratic League and the S.A. Municipal Affairs Association.

<sup>46</sup> D.H. Epstein, ‘The Crime of the Slums: A better life for you and your children’ (S.A. Labour Party, Johannesburg 1941).

<sup>47</sup> *The Sunday Express*. I must still investigate whether these pictures were part of a larger photographic project and taken by the newspaper’s photographers. Also whether the Garment Worker’s Union in its own campaign against slum conditions in Fordsburg used photographs.

More careful research needs to be done in order to establish whether photographs of slum conditions and of local government's efforts to combat poverty were commissioned once the city decided to establish a department of social welfare in 1939, and whether Epstein's in fact drew on this effort. By the mid to late 1940s, the city's efforts were certainly publicised not only through illustrated poster exhibitions but also through commissioned photographs.<sup>48</sup>

Photographs that set out to document and publicise the circumstances of people regarded as problematically poor clearly became common from the early 1940s. Why this was so is not immediately apparent – the technical means to publish photographs in newspapers and magazines had been available for decades. What about the fact that the Labour Party's campaign co-incided with the start of World War Two? Epstein's argument often included military metaphors, an appeal to war-time patriotism and reference to the unfolding debate about the nature of a post-war socio-economic order. Could the newly prominent use of photographs documenting poverty by the Labour Party be explained with reference to the war-time visual economy? This may be difficult to prove. However, a far more visually complex and ambitious project of social documentary photography was clearly the product of the burgeoning South African photo-journalism of the early 1940s – the latter being intensely focused on the war effort.

*Libertas*, the illustrated monthly edited by T.C. Robertson and Naomi Levinson and published from 1940 to 1947, represented the most ambitious incorporation of photographs into a magazine format in South Africa to date. Some four decades previously, the South African war had occasioned the first mass production and world-wide circulation of photographs taken in South Africa; World War One had also boosted South African participation in Kodak snapshot photography focused on family and on chronicling soldiers' experiences. The Second World War was the context for a massive international circulation of images by professional photographers published in illustrated magazines and newspapers. *Libertas*, possibly modelling itself on such publications as the British Picture Post, drew on this proliferation of images, but also provided opportunities for South African photographers to create pictorial essays and articles in which photographs featured as prominently as words.

One J.P. Vorster, photographer and photographic editor of *Libertas*, was responsible for illustrations to a series of articles on poverty in South Africa written by Robertson and launched in 1941. For the most part their image-text practised strict racial segregation. The first article focused exclusively on deficiencies in diet amongst "European" children; others addressed the

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<sup>48</sup> Municipal social welfare/health records kept in the State Archives do not include any photographs. In 1947 *Libertas* published an article with photographs by Constance Stuart Larrabee that showcased the Johannesburg City Council's social welfare projects for poor whites – this may have been commissioned by local government.

struggle for subsistence of white pensioners and of woodcutters in Knysna. Poverty amongst “coloureds” was the leading article in a 1943 edition. An extensively illustrated essay on the “African and Eurafican” township Alexandra was published in 1942; the physical well-being of black South Africans was also discussed in features on infectious disease associated with “bad housing and malnutrition” such as tuberculosis. Throughout, the theme of war waged on South Africa’s second, home front was maintained. The magazine was critical of aspects of government policy and bureaucratic practice but also articulated a confidently patriotic ideal of an increasingly independent, industrialising South Africa on its way to creating better conditions for citizens and subjects. In 1942 a two-page spread of photographs from a variety of previous features included pictures of (mostly white) labourers in factories and at the docks, of an impoverished white family, of the construction of “native” housing. Captions included statements such as that “after the war, the resources of Greater South Africa must be tapped and developed” and that “the revolution is teaching us to produce the materials necessary for our own tanning industry”. *Libertas* proclaimed that “malnutrition will be conquered and housing provided on a big scale” and that “the urban native population will be given decent homes to live in”.<sup>49</sup>

Vorster created portraits and dramatised documentary images meant to celebrate leaders and ‘ordinary’ heroes of the war effort alike. A number of *Libertas* covers featured prominent politicians. His studio portraits of military men and women included one of “Lieutenant van der Spuy of the South African Air Force”, a “fine study taken in Pretoria shortly before the young pilot departed for active service ‘somewhere in North Africa’”. In Vorster’s skilled rendition van der Spuy became the enigmatic look-alike of famous silver screen heroes and fighter pilots. Dramatic and carefully angled lighting emphasised facial structure and bleached skin surfaces of unnecessary detail. **(figure fifteen)**. Cinematic glamour was also inspiration for photographs depicting the daily lives of working-class citizens. In one instance, this involved what was presented as a true-to-life photographic account of a day in the life of a garment worker. The reader was allowed to see “Edna”, a working girl at a well run “ladies underwear” factory waking up (“Early rising means full pay”), dressing “swiftly” to avoid cuts to her wages, having “a quick cup of tea... machine-minded Edna has her own hot-plate...”, walking to work in the pre-dawn streets, working at the sewing machine, reading a book from the factory’s lending library, receiving her pay, shopping and getting ready for an evening dance. In Vorster’s presentation, “Edna” (who seemed to wear her make-up to bed) was an attractive and independent young woman making the most of her small and neatly arranged living space, and whose stylish beauty stood out against the more drab appearance of fellow workers. As the text made clear, this member of the Garment Workers Union was better paid than most. Other pictures showed garment workers at their labours, contributing to the war effort by making uniforms. The image-

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<sup>49</sup> *Libertas*, September 1942.

text emphasised protective working conditions of what was clearly a factory employing only white, female labour even as it showed work-worn, ordinary women of varying age in their everyday wear and without Edna's glamour (**figure sixteen**).<sup>50</sup>

Vorster also took photographs that explicitly confronted readers with an ordinary and vulnerable populace in need of heroism. At a time when the official use of photographs in order to convey messages that would galvanise support for the war against Hitler proliferated, the editors of *Libertas* were convinced that photographs of poverty, properly contextualised with explanatory text, could help to inform, to conscientise and to spur its readers to appropriate action. As a headline splashed over a picture of malnourished poor white children proclaimed, "When You See These Pictures, Don't Say: 'Shame'. Do something About It!"

If support for the war effort could be strengthened with images of soldiers and workers that conjured up a cinematic world of glamour, the plight of the poor called for dramatic realism. The photograph printed largest in the first article of a series on poverty and malnutrition was of an unnamed young woman breastfeeding her toddler, seated against a rough corrugated iron wall with a dark entrance to the shack behind, her eyes slightly narrowed in strong sunlight as she gazed past the camera.<sup>51</sup> The caption, embedded in the picture itself, proclaimed this a "Despondent Mother: A human study from Zeerust". Vorster's picture was a deliberate attempt to create a symbol of beleaguered motherhood. The predominantly Christian readers of *Libertas* would probably have absorbed what was likely a conscious reference to religious paintings of the Virgin Mary and the infant Jesus in this picture of a mother-and-child ensemble, with the child cradled on her mother's lap. But this was a realist iconography of maternal poverty, intended as an image of hunger - the feeding child was clearly no infant. Even as it drew on powerful symbols of innocence and maternal care the photograph was also meant to shock. Here was a child nursed in the open, at a naked, 'European' breast, when to do so in public was certainly not within South African 'civilised' norms. In the past several years public campaigns to address 'the poor white problem' had emphasised the heavy toll on the nation of inferior poor-mothers.<sup>52</sup> In

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<sup>50</sup> *Libertas*, December 1942.

<sup>51</sup> Luli Callinicos chose this photograph, together with one of Vorster's cover photographs for *Libertas*, to illustrate war-time concern about poor whiteism. She did not, however name the photographer. Vorster's name is also not provided together with reproductions of the photographs in Historical Papers, University of the Witwatersrand where they are filed under categories of "white poverty" ('family portraits'; 'children'; 'housing').

<sup>52</sup> See my discussion of Afrikaner nationalist campaigner M.E. Rothmann's writing in the 1930s of how white 'armmoeders' (poor-mothers) could be transformed into *volksmoeders* (mothers of the people) through proper maternity care. 'Dangerous Motherhood': Maternity care and the Gendered construction of Afrikaner Identity, 1904-1939', in *Women and Children First, International Maternal and Infant Welfare, 1870-1945*, eds. V. Fieldes and L. Marks, Routledge 1992. pp. 203 – 229.

similar fashion, Vorster presented the whiteness of poor mothers and their children as brittle and endangered (**figure seventeen**).

Epstein and Vorster therefore used cameras in order to present poverty as inscribed on bodies and as evident from 'slum' housing. One could argue that the Malherbe's Carnegie photographs of poor white families or Hellmann's photographs of (for example) slum yard children was taken with similar intention. But the creation of realist, deliberately symbolic representations of poverty date from the start of World War Two, and Vorster's work was prominent in this effort. Why this is so, and how this relates to broader changes in the southern African visual economy of the late 1930s and early 1940s needs to be explained. Certainly, outside influences on local trends in photographic journalism may have been an important factor. This picture in particular suggests that Vorster was familiar with and influenced by the work of Dorothea Lange, specifically the photograph that came to be known as "Migrant Mother". Lange's picture was also closely focused on a woman with her children, although it did not suggest any transgression of respectable maternity. As is well known, it became an international symbol of "motherhood, poverty and survival"<sup>53</sup> after its publication in 1936. While the extent of circulation in South Africa of images produced by photographers working for the Farm Security Administration is not clear, it is possible that Vorster, with his specialist interest in photography, would have been familiar with the picture by 1941.<sup>54</sup>

Epstein had combined his photograph of the fly-infested boy with a poem from C. Day Lewis ("The stars in the bright sky/Look down and are dumb/At the heir of the ages/Asleep in the slum"). Dirt and the spectre of infectious disease, combined with images of innocent childhood was also a key element of Vorster's iconography of poverty. A photograph from an article on Knysna woodcutters resembled contemporary pictures of charming, innocent babyhood. But Vorster's close focus and the strong contrast of light and shadow isolated the body of the child to create an almost grotesque figure. The shallow depth of field drew attention to bare feet stepping down onto roughly textured earth, the little girl's smudged face and dirty pinafore, dusty glass objects, possibly recognizable as discarded medicine bottles, held in her hand (**figure eighteen**). The caption drove home the intended meaning. The child "represents...everything that child welfare should not be... If the conquest of disease and death is the ideal of human progress, this child

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<sup>53</sup> D. Price and L. Wells, 'Thinking about photography: Debates, historically and how', in *Photography: A Critical Introduction*, p.36 (Routledge 2001).

<sup>54</sup> However, I have yet to attempt tracing the distribution of this image in South Africa, or whether magazines accessible to photographers in this country already published Lange's work in the in the 1930s. When considering influences from the USA upon South African photography, it is also important to keep in mind that James Agee's famous *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* was only published in 1941.

symbolises an early and decisive defeat. If creating useful citizens is our object – well, here is another future wife for a woodcutter.”<sup>55</sup>

The spectre of infectious disease was also prominent in a front cover photograph showing two toddlers in dirty, tattered garments, and covered with flies that announced an article and photographic essay on poverty amongst “coloured” South Africans. The text emphasised the extent to which the state social welfare system failed to provide for “half the Cape’s population” while also enforcing a series of racial stereotypes. A number of photographs showed crowded shack settlements. “The galvanised iron of the pondokkies enters into the very soul of the people, corroding them physically and morally” explained a caption. Photographs showed people leaning over the balconies of city tenements and “delinquent” children at play in narrow lanes. Siblings were pictured asleep on the bare iron springs of a bed and toddlers being fed by their grandmother in a cramped kitchen. In “(t)he picture that symbolises district 6”, a young man rested in a wooden child’s cot too small for his body, his face turned away and his limbs slack as if careless of the presence of the camera, bottles of liquor visible on a nearby dressing table. “Poverty enforces... the six deadly D’s of Coloured life – death, disease, debt, dice, drink and delinquency...” explained the caption (**figure nineteen**).<sup>56</sup>

Vorster’s photographs placed the viewer at vantage-points that enabled surveys of cramped tin towns and of peri-urban flatlands (the familiar vista of mountains behind) in which the eye could pick out haphazard structures erected for shelter - shacks that made the poverty of those who dwelt within self-evident. As the editors of *Libertas* explained elsewhere, “the mud-walled pondok, not the stately Cape Dutch house, should become the symbol of South Africa’s architectural achievements. It could serve, too, as a suitable letterhead emblem for the men whose neglected duty it is to plan our post-war housing schemes”.<sup>57</sup>

Vorster had also entered domestic and private spaces with his camera – a rental room where families sharing cramped space danced because “it helps them to forget”, a kitchen where a meal was in progress, bedrooms where children lay asleep or where an adult lay resting. His opening up of homes for scrutiny allowed only a limited engagement between viewer and subjects. In none of these photographs of interior spaces did the people photographed look at or towards the photographer, and most were framed so as to maintain a measure of distance from faces and bodies.

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<sup>55</sup> *Libertas*, August 1944.

<sup>56</sup> *Libertas*, March 1943.

<sup>57</sup> *Libertas*, January 1944.

Photographic essays that homed in on conditions of want amongst black South Africans were closely focused on how social neglect created fertile ground for the spread of disease. A feature on Alexandra and another on tuberculosis reproduced the visual tropes of dirt, mud, and disease-bearing effluent of “sewerage water oozing through the streets”<sup>58</sup> The danger for Johannesburg’s white inhabitants was emphasised by captions describing small black children as “future nursemaids” (**figure twenty**).<sup>59</sup>

In the racial hierarchy of Vorster’s portraiture – considered within this racialised visual typology of poverty - his photographs of poor whites made apparent his flexibility as a portraitist who could harness his technical skill in order to present poverty as real and as dangerous whilst also inviting the viewer to sympathise with his subjects. Two pages of an article on malnutrition (which had also featured the “despondent mother”) flanked a large “V for ... Home Front Victory” with photographs of (respectively) an older sister and a mother crowded together with grubby children, all of whom were barefoot and wearing hats and *kappies* in the manner of rural Afrikaans-speakers. Unlike the photographs used by Epstein and most of the pictures taken by Hellmann - also unlike most of Vorster’s pictures of black subjects - these pictures were framed and focused closely enough so that details of facial expression and bodily posture were recorded. Viewers could contemplate the awkward limbs of a young girl at stiff attention for the camera, or the distracted downward glance of a toddler on his mother’s lap, and (possibly) hands holding a morsel of food (**figure twenty-one**).

Vorster’s professional expertise as photographer of the deserving poor is also apparent in an essay on the plight of white pensioners - his approach is shaped by his experience as portrait photographer. The first picture in the series showed “Dirk, aged 79 and Christina, aged 72”. Within the crowded frame an old man lay in a jumble of bed clothes, his wife by his side mending clothes (the small hands of a child is also visible on the right-hand edge of the frame), their worn faces serious, eyes focused on each other. As the caption, which also quoted Turgenev’s description old age (“days of darkness, of dreariness have come...”) interpreted for the viewer: “They look to each other for comfort and know that there is nothing for the future but anxiety” (**figure twenty-two**). Unusually for Vorster’s documentary photography, the names of his subjects accompanied their photographs. The portrait of a “family group” showed parents and their younger children posing inside their home. The ideal of family togetherness and childhood happiness was also present through framed portraits on the living room wall. The anxious faces of the adults, worn clothes and broken shoes contrasted to sentimental paintings of childhood, framed photographs of weddings and babies. The presence of *voortrekker eeufees* memorabilia

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<sup>58</sup> *Libertas*, August 1943.

<sup>59</sup> *Libertas*, August 1942.

added another layer to this backdrop of familial respectability (the boy at the centre of the picture also wore a *voortrekker* uniform). The caption emphasised the father's "oudstryder pension" as the mainstay of this household and that "the family's one meal for this day was some barley borrowed from a neighbour" (**figure twenty-three**).<sup>60</sup>

## Conclusion

From the late 1920s and for some ten years - co-inciding with the first years of the American FSA programme - those who set out to take pictures of South African itinerant farmers and *bywoners*, or of working-class whites and blacks and did so in order to record socio-economic circumstance were mostly sociologists and cultural anthropologists whose visual work had a limited circulation. Photographs showing the living conditions of African families in Johannesburg taken by social anthropologist and liberal activist Ellen Hellmann were only available to a specialist public of scholars. I have argued that the World War Two created new opportunities for professional photographers. Widespread discussion about the need for social reform and plans for the post-war provision of state social welfare co-incided with the war-time proliferation of photographic reportage. One consequence of this was the use of the camera to publicly present visual evidence of poverty that must be eradicated. In this respect, my paper seeks to contribute to the history of social documentary photography and to our understanding of how the camera's social use as instrument for the recording of 'evidence' changed through time.

Hellmann's pictures from the 1930s variously appear in her published work, are appended to her manuscripts and pasted into an album. The social documentary photographs of the next decade are available as reproductions in the bound volumes of a magazine once intended as accessible but politically serious reading for middle-class, white South Africans. These conventional compilations of image and written text – a researcher's album intended for private perusal, the photographs she selected as illustrations for an academic study, the public pages of a magazine – all included a conscious visual documentation of people perceived as living on the margins of the South African economy. Whether cameras were used as one tool for recording 'field' observations or as central to the work of a professional photographer, Hellmann and Vorster were both involved in the racialised portrayal of human subjectivity. This is hardly surprising of

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<sup>60</sup> *Libertas*, November 1943.

photographers at work in South Africa at this time. One intention with this research is to further explore this racialised representation of poverty, how pictures of poor people were shaped by prevalent social concerns and specific political commitments, and how such photographs may be read within the contemporary context and longer history of the southern African visual economy. The changing and multiple uses that a photograph may have - for personal remembrance, as a mode for gathering and presenting social-scientific evidence, as part of the public articulation of an argument for social change – also call for more careful examination.

The historian who attempts to place photography at the centre of her research and analytical endeavour is time and again confronted with questions about how photographs are (and are not) different from written text – as mute documents that seem to summon an exact, severed sliver of time and space into the present for our contemplation. For all their insistent immediacy of presence, the ‘ambiguity’ of visual language, the inherent slipperiness of visual signifiers have often been noted in discussions of photography and history. I have only begun to explore the questions raised by Edwards in her recent book in which she interrogates the ‘kind of past inscribed in photographs, and asks how their ‘apparently trivial incidental appearance of surface [can] be meaningful in historical terms’. Edwards (curator of the Pit Rivers museum and its collection of colonial ethnographic photographs) suggests that photographs are ‘very literally raw histories in both senses of the word – unprocessed and painful. Their unprocessed quality, their randomness, their minute indexicality, are inherent to the medium itself...’. As documents that present ‘a leveling of equivalence of information, with the trivial and the significant intertwined and shifting places’, they present particular difficulties for historical interpretation, and opportunities for the articulation of alternative histories.<sup>61</sup> ‘(W)hen we find a photograph meaningful’ reminds Berger, ‘we are lending it a past and a future’.<sup>62</sup> We follow Hellmann, or Vorster’s line of sight as we look into the flat surface of an old photograph, trying to imagine what they saw, animated by details that perhaps they never noticed. To visualise the world beyond this frame, the before and after of a woman sitting behind the washing line.

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<sup>61</sup> E. Edwards, *Raw Histories*, p.5.

<sup>62</sup> John Berger: ‘Appearances’ in J. Berger and J. Mohr, *Another Way of Telling* (London: Writers and Readers Publishing Cooperative Society, 1982), p. 89.