

## **Photography and African Futures**

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### **Introduction: Photographic Temporalities**

This special issue examines the history of photographic 'futurism' in Africa. It begins with the observation that from the time photography was first introduced on the continent, European explorers, missionaries and colonial administrators, in particular, developed a peculiar fascination with photographing African *pasts*; or, more accurately, rendering African *pastness* visible in the act of making photographs. In other words, and as a by now large body of historical scholarship has repeatedly shown, the camera quickly became a key technology for the establishment of colonial concepts of African history, European constructs of African 'traditions', and even widespread ideas about how certain African peoples represented previous 'evolutionary stages'. Thus, it is no coincidence that one of the first photographs ever taken in Africa – a daguerreotype produced by the Ottoman Viceroy to Egypt, Viceroy Ali, in late 1839 (just a few months after the official 'invention' of the medium) – took as its subject a scene of African antiquity: the ancient port at Alexandria (Haney 2010, 13; see also Perez 1988). It is indicative that newly-arrived Europeans were by the 1870s, at least, habitually using cameras as tools for their ethnographic surveys – producing images that played a key role in constructing 'stereotypical illustrations' of African 'tribes', through their focus on indigenous people's most 'exotic' of traditions (Ranger 2001, 203; see also Apter 2002; Hartmann *et al.* 1998; Faris 1992). And it is illustrative that anthropologists and their agents, from the late-nineteenth century onwards, produced significant numbers of physiognomic photographic portraits, in an attempt to establish an objective visual record of the 'average' physical characteristics of African 'races' (Shortland, cited in Pinney 1992, 76). These images were in turn used to support various theories of human physical and social evolution (Maxwell 2008; Morris-Reich 2016).

We would note, however, that none of these visual constructs of African pasts was ever entirely

stable. On the contrary, from the original photographic encounters onwards, many (if not most) were directly shaped by African photographic subjects themselves, and in some cases were highly contested. For example, as Jürg Schneider has shown, photographic depictions of African history were from the outset shaped by local historical and oral traditions (2010). As Christraud Geary's research has highlighted, European explorers' attempts to use the camera as a tool for surveying African traditions were often shaped by the demands of their interlocutors, and especially by their interactions with African kings, chiefs, and other elites, who had a vested interest in staging their traditions in particular kinds of ways (2002, 81-102; see also Geary 1988). And as Banks and Vokes have shown, even physiognomic photographic portraiture, that most staged and artificial of genres, has been subjected to 'counter-readings' that have attempted to go beyond or behind their producers' (presumed) intentions, to recover some historical traces of the people depicted (2010; see also Vokes 2012, 4). More generally, and more significantly, all of these colonial photographic constructs of African pasts have for a century at least existed alongside African photographers' own diverse representations of the continent's history, traditions and collective memories. As a wide range of recent scholarly studies and art photography projects have explored, colonial concepts may be everywhere unsettled by, and in some times and places directly contested through, such African-produced photographies (Bajorek 2012; Baloji and Jewsiewicki 2010; Haney 2012).

Yet, if photography was from the beginning a key means through which Europeans sought to establish, stabilise and disseminate concepts about African pasts, then so too was it a primary medium through which those same explorers, missionaries and administrators sought to forge imaginaries about African *futures*. Photography was quickly put to work by mission societies, not only to record the construction of mission schools and hospitals, as metaphors of modern Christian futures (Godby 2009, 358), but also to create more individualised and performative 'conversion narratives' (Lydon 2016, 26). The medium and its message signified the arrival of new temporalities in Africa. Going against the general current of historical scholarship on African photographies, our primary interest in this special issue, then, is to develop another reading of the

colonial photographic archive, in which this is probed less for traces of European constructions of African allochrony (to borrow Fabian's phrase, 1983) than for what it reveals about European concepts of African 'progress', about colonial planning for specific goals in relation to health, education and civic participation and about administrations' (later) attempts to encourage African nations to achieve 'modernisation'.

When one begins to look, it is striking just how pervasive this address of photography to the future is in the photographic history of the continent. Take, for example, the surviving colonial archive from Uganda – a subject about which Vokes has previously written at length (see especially Vokes 2015). Re-reading this archive, we are immediately struck by the fact that, from the outset, colonists' imagery was saturated with tropes that, in one way or another, referenced potential futures. Thus, during the early decades of the twentieth century, photographs frequently included subjects like: Europeans arriving at their destinations (in which they could be seen climbing down a ship's gangplank, or walking down a jetty, or stepping off a train); indigenous African people preparing ahead (by, for example, building a house, or breaking a road, or planting crops); and both Europeans and Africans engaging in all manner of 'opening ceremonies'. So too, from this time onwards, colonists' photographs demonstrated an increasing concern with Uganda's future political and social development. This is evidenced by one of James Hayes Sadler's albums – Commissioner of the territory from 1902-1907 – which is dominated by images depicting his administration's ongoing attempts to integrate Uganda's indigenous kingdoms into a new unified polity, Christianise the country's population and rid the territory of trypanosomiasis ('sleeping sickness'). Later still, from the mid-1940s onwards, the Department of Community Development's Photographic Section produced thousands of images depicting the government's efforts to 'modernise' the country, through an expansion of industrial capacity (including industrialised farming), energy and transport infrastructures, the tourism sector, communications infrastructure, healthcare facilities, and arts and education institutions (see Vokes, this volume).

Moreover, across all of these examples, the photographs' orientation towards the future emerges not only from the semiotics of their representations, but also from the ways in which they were circulated and deployed, as 'image-objects' (Edwards 2012). Thus, early photographs of European arrivals often became part of propaganda campaigns that aimed to bring additional colonists to East Africa. Hayes Sadlers' photographs of his anti-trypanosomiasis campaign later played a central part in his (ultimately successful) attempts to elicit increased funding for the programme. Reading the photographic archive in this way draws attention to the performative quality of many of these photographic events, not merely recorded for posterity, but projecting into the future. As John Peffer (2015, 122) argues from a South African context, the prevalence of photographs in which African subjects were, quite literally, invited to perform historical, and we might add, with reference to missionary conversion for example, future roles and identities, has engendered particular understandings of photography on the continent. Whether the intent was to deliberately obscure the transformations entailed in these staged photographs or, conversely, to make them purposely visible, the medium has always been as much about fantasy, imagination and projection as about recording the visible social world.

### **Competing Photographic Futurisms**

If future thinking inhabited approaches to the medium from its arrival on the continent, it is equally evident that it was a sustained dimension of its deployment, from within and without, during later periods too. Unsurprisingly, photography played a prominent role in the project of imagining African futures during the era of 'high modernisation', coinciding, as it did in many places, with decolonisation and post-colonial independence. Throughout this time, which provides the context for several of the contributions to this volume (Schneider, Haney, Newbury, Vokes), there appears to have been a major proliferation of photographic futurisms across Africa. Outgoing colonial states, incoming post-colonial governments, and all manner of political parties, civil society organisations and ordinary citizens, sought to use photography both to picture departing colonial administrations and, more importantly, to develop their own iconographies of independence. Images

of outgoing orders were characterised by everything from sentimental nostalgia to signs of anger and violence, whilst those relating to decolonisation were saturated with symbols of the new, everything from major construction works, to architectural projects, to the possibilities of new African modernities.

A substantial body of scholarship on African photographs in recent years, as well as numerous curatorial projects and exhibitions, has concentrated on the compelling performance of self-confident, modern African identities for the camera, pictured in the portraits of photographers such as Seydou Keïta and Malick Sidibé, to name only the two most prominent figures (see for example, Lamuniere 2001; Miessgang and Schröder 2001). The emphasis in this collection, however, is less on the interrelationship between photography and individual self-fashioning, and more on the place of photography in relation to local, national and international political and administrative projects. To leave the discussion at the level of the individual is ultimately too limiting (Bajorek 2012, 164) and, of course, it is only one side of the coin. As Brian Larkin argues, there is a shared affective, imaginative and aesthetic dimension to modernisation that links major construction projects such as bridges and television stations, to the style and confidence of those in Keïta's portraits who presented themselves as masters of this modern world (2016, 48), and which we argue permeates many photographic projects of this period. And, as Tom Allbeson notes on his work on the photography associated with UNESCO during the 1950s, there is a consistent privileging of the city as an 'icon of an imagined global community' (2015, 16) despite urban dwellers forming only a small minority of the global population at that time.

A more varied examination of the photographic production of the time reveals that there are continuities in the visual order, as well as experimentation, novelty and radical change. In his contribution to this issue, Schneider points to 'the stabilising power of photographs', and the stability of photographic institutions, in the Anglophone regions of Cameroon in the period before and after independence. The Photographic Section of the Southern Cameroons Information Service

owed a great deal of its approach to the earlier deployment of photography and film for the purposes of colonial propaganda and mass education in British West Africa. Southern Cameroon's emerging political elite shared with its predecessors a belief in the value of the medium to the project of promoting unity and imagining the future, albeit now a national rather than imperial one. And in the visual record it created, there is a continuity of form even as the content transitioned from imperial to national; a process Schneider characterises gently as 'changing the scenery', rather than iconoclasm.

As the post-war world order began to take shape, Africa and its diaspora was increasingly the subject of what we might term 'world photographs'. There is a hint of this in the case study of the Southern Cameroon Information Service. Among the first events to be covered by the Photographic Section was the 1955 visit of a United Nations mission to assess and report progress under the Trusteeship Agreement. Trusteeship, of course, pointed towards a socially and economically developed future, and ultimately political self-determination, even if the timing of the latter may have been contested. Moreover, it brought the continent and the decolonising world into the ambit of new organs of world government, accompanied by an increasingly global circulation of images of its future. The attention paid to Edward Steichen's *Family of Man* exhibition of 1955, which toured Africa in the late 1950s, stopping in South Africa, Southern Rhodesia and Kenya, has tended to obscure the extent of the photographic production of organisations such as the UN and the World Health Organisation, and many smaller projects existing within the photographic space it opened up.<sup>1</sup> And it is worth observing that from its inception the UN was the subject of 'visual petitioning' on behalf of African and diasporic futures. In what can be termed a critical photographic futurism, photographs and film were submitted as part of the Indian Passive Resistance Campaign at the UN against the treatment of Indians in South Africa in 1946, the campaign against South Africa's annexation of South West Africa, and over several decades as part of the extended campaign against apartheid.<sup>2</sup>

The visual rhetoric of *Family of Man* itself pictured two alternative visions of the future: on the one hand, the UN General Assembly, metonymically representing self-determined nations working together in the service of a better future; on the other, the disaster of nuclear war signified in the final image of the exhibition.<sup>3</sup> Between these two poles, however, were many other photographic visions of the future, some of which envisaged greater continuity with the past than others. As Newbury explores (this volume), a new photographic language of development, modernisation and human rights did not displace earlier missionary narratives in their entirety, at least not right away, but rather there was a process of convergence and appropriation, one in which there remained points of visual tension. The photographic project the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel pursued in the British West Indies was intended to imagine, for a British public, a Christian imperial future for the region and its subjects, but one that signalled modernity and development, and which underpinned an argument for colonial welfare as a responsibility and a necessary stepping-stone to the future. In addition to the labour intensive work of sugar cane cultivation, the photographs pictured modern industrial methods of sugar filtration, and the futuristic steel infrastructure of a new oil refinery in Trinidad, alongside more familiar missionary tropes of schools and hospitals. It was not within the remit of the exhibition to show political agency on the part of colonial subjects however. And by this period, we should note, such visions were pitched not against perceived 'savagery' or 'backwardness', but against alternative imaginaries of the future projected by nationalism and communism.

As the polarities of the Cold War became stronger, the two superpowers of the time deployed photography to draw newly independent African nations and their citizens into globally competing visions of the future. From the mid-1950s onwards, the United States Information Agency (USIA) began to invest in a major programme of activity for the continent in which photography served to imagine capitalist, consumerist and democratic futures for Africa, modelled in its own image. One genre of USIA photographs that emerged during this period depicted African visitors to the United States as they toured US institutions of government, observed democratic politics in action and

were introduced to modern consumer products and lifestyles. The photographs were subsequently circulated to African countries as vouchers of an available future to be redeemed. In a reversal of the depiction of UN delegations touring trustee territories, African leaders were frequently pictured visiting the UN headquarters in New York. Kenneth Kaunda, soon to be president of an independent Zambia, appeared with compatriot Solomon Kalulu, set against a backdrop of the iconic UN building. Although ostensibly produced for US propaganda purposes, like earlier African leaders facing European cameras, Kaunda and colleagues had an interest in visualising their future status as actors on a world stage.<sup>4</sup> In parallel, and competing, fashion the Soviet Union too sought to engage citizens of African nations with an alternative imagined future, and likewise African-Soviet photographs abound (Nash 2016).

As this last example suggests, the politics of these competing visions of the future was not restricted to the realm of representation. It emerged too through the performance of photographic relations as, for example, new African leaders sought to use choreographed photographic occasions such as independence celebrations to project themselves onto the world scene, or routine forms of diplomatic photography worked quietly to perform and secure future international relations. ‘Friendship’ photographs and the idea of working together to build the future permeated US and Soviet photography in relation to Africa during this period. Operation Crossroads Africa, a forerunner of the Peace Corps, was the subject of numerous photographic narratives, depicting young Africans and young Americans working and playing together. This amicable vision of the future did not go unchallenged of course. Photographs of the violence and protest surrounding the civil rights struggle provided a visual counter-narrative to harmonious US-Africa relations, which circulated internationally. And neither was the Soviet Union immune. A recent exhibition at the University of Bayreuth displayed an archival photograph from 1963 showing Ghanaian students demonstrating in Red Square following the alleged racially motivated murder of a colleague.<sup>5</sup>

As these photographs of the future were circulated, and reproduced – in newspapers and pamphlets,

on billboards and notice-boards, and in political campaign materials – they helped to shape the key political emotions of the time, relating to future wealth, nationalist expectation and a growing pan-Africanism, contributing to an atmosphere of freedom and optimism, or indeed pessimism. Yet, these photographic visions of the future were both inherently unstable and, as several papers in this special issue demonstrate, often contingent on the trajectory of individual photographers for their realisation – leaving them open to alternative future readings. As Newbury’s contribution shows, the photographic projection of a clearly defined Christian imperial future sought by those who commissioned the photographs of the British West Indies was, despite their best efforts, only partially within their control. In related fashion, Haney’s research on the photographic archive of Priya Ramrakha (this volume) tracks the global circulation not so much of the photographs as of the photographer. One of Ramrakha’s earliest assignments was coverage of the bloody massacre at Lari, at the beginning of the Mau Mau insurgency and Britain’s dirty war in Kenya. The archive attests to the strict limits imposed on the representation of the violence that attended the end of empire in Kenya, and the even greater limits to the circulation of such images at the time. Yet, as a result of the relatively privileged mobility he enjoyed, Ramrakha was able to make images imbued with a degree of optimism, which figured the future in Kenya and elsewhere, and spoke to a wider pan-African imagination and global racial solidarities. Juxtaposed in the archive are photographs of anti-colonial protests in Nairobi, Kenyan trade union leader and activist Tom Mboya dressed in *kente* cloth, protests against racial injustice in the US, and Miriam Makeba in exile.

Equally, Drew Thompson considers the uneasy relationship between the photographer José Cabral and nationalist image making in Mozambique’s moment of independence. In his earlier research, Thompson (2013) has explored how the liberation movement Frelimo used photography to visualise the liberated zones and to project its image both locally and internationally. In his contribution to this volume, he examines the tensions between the photographer’s visual and aesthetic ambitions and the socially and politically imposed limits of representation in the period after 1975. Thompson makes an intriguing observation about the impact of independence on photographic temporalities:

prior to liberation there was very little concern to date images of the liberated zones, which operated therefore as abstract images of a nationalist future on the cusp of arrival; but from the moment of independence the idea of the historical accuracy of photographic representation was asserted, aligned with the project of nation building.

Drawn into the service of the new nation as a result of his photographic skills, Cabral's relationship to this context was at times tense. In what is an instructive example, Thompson considers a photo-essay on childbirth that Cabral published in the illustrated magazine *Tempo* in 1978. The graphic photographs of childbirth might be considered archetypal of images of the future circulating in world photography since at least the 1950s; and the story title, 'This is how we are born', has clear echoes of *Family of Man* style humanism. In the context of newly independent Mozambique, however, there was a furious backlash, from a public that regarded the photographs as scandalous and pornographic, with the outcome that the editor retracted the story and issued an apology. Cabral had misread the future of which he was now part, and how it might be represented photographically. Yet, through his research on Cabral's contact sheets Thompson also traces unpublished images of the future that existed in the interstices of public discourse, occasionally resurfacing to be seen, or not, in new contexts.

Adapting an idea from Jay Winter (2006), one might want to consider here a distinction between major and minor photographic utopias. Set against the major photographic utopias of Christian imperialism, post-colonial national building, pan-Africanism and socialist revolution, are moments of utopian imagining in a minor key, small acts of world-making that endure in photographic form, discernible in the archive as images of persistence and defiance in the face of conflict, and occasionally in the photographic encounter itself as a form of mutual exchange, elements of which seem legible in images such as Ramrakha's photograph of Makeba as she stops off in Los Angeles to visit African students in an act of support and solidarity.

## **Digital Futures**

If the era of high modernisation, from roughly the end of Second World War to the late-1960s, led to a proliferation of photographic futurisms across Africa, both by governments and their citizens, then the current historical moment appears to be generating similar developments. The drivers of the contemporary renaissance of future oriented imagery are various, but include recent shifts in Africa's wider political economy, as well as the roughly parallel rise of digital photographic technologies (the so-called digital revolution). In relation to the former, the past 10 years or so has witnessed an increasing number of African governments attempting to propel their nations forward economically – to achieve economic 'take-off' – through the adoption of ever-more ambitious National Development Plans (NDPs). These plans often envisage a vast and rapid expansion of manufacturing, services and hi-tech industries – and related infrastructures of energy, transportation and communication – to be funded through a combination of commodities, new 'soft loans', and other kinds of cheap credit (especially from China, and other 'non-traditional' donors). More significantly here, these plans – for example, Vision 2010 (Nigeria), Vision 2020 (Rwanda), Vision 2030 (South Africa), Vision 2040 (Uganda), Vision 2050 (the East African Community) – are invariably accompanied by a vast array of post-photographic imagery projecting fantastical visions of future development outcomes. In other words, it is today common for these 'Vision' documents to be saturated with large numbers of digitally manipulated photographs and computer-generated images, as a means for illustrating their anticipated benefits. It is equally standard for a vast array of other media besides – from public billboards to official policy documents to government departments' promotional posters and leaflets (which in Uganda, at least, are typically circulated as glossy newspaper inserts), and all kinds of officially sponsored websites – to carry these same kinds of images. Indeed, so ubiquitous have they become, that they may even be said to now constitute a new public visual culture, across the continent.

As with the photographic futurism of the post-war era, this contemporary visual culture is again significantly influenced by global visual imaginaries, and especially by those associated with an

emergent worldwide, and urban focused, ‘millennial capitalism’ (Comaroff and Comaroff 2000). Across all of these documents – or at least, across all of the ones we have seen – the imagery’s semiotics are therefore remarkably consistent. Their digitally manipulated and computer-generated images represent Africa’s future cityscapes in ways that bear an obvious general resemblance to existing centres of global capital such as Dubai, Hong Kong or Shanghai – with their ‘Corbusian modern[ist]’ architecture of glass towerblocks, geometric roads and manicured gardens (to paraphrase Watson 2014, 215). In many cases, they even incorporate buildings, architectural motifs or additional features from those other places. For example, Watson notes that one of the images for Rwanda’s Kigali Masterplan 2040 includes a picture of London’s iconic skyscraper ‘The Gherkin’ (2014, 217), while Vokes has observed that one of the public signs associated with Uganda’s current ‘Vision 2040’ pictures a Dubai airport train travelling through central Kampala. Another image from the same document, illustrating the new Kampala-Entebbe Highway, simply shows the United Kingdom’s M1 motorway digitally montaged with an image of a Ugandan landscape. Indeed, these documents’ images may on occasion become so saturated with the signs and symbols of an imaginary ‘global modernity’ that only through the incorporation of some or other iconic feature of the local landscape or built environment – such as the Congo River, in Kinshasa (de Boeck 2011), Mount Kigali (Shearer 2014) or Workers’ House, in Kampala (above) – can one decipher to which city the picture is actually meant to refer. Yet this peculiar combination of features tends to lend these images an element of pastiche.<sup>6</sup>

Writing of the futuristic imagery that has been produced by the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) government since the mid-2000s – much of it associated with President Joseph Kabila’s ‘Cinq-Chantiers’ (‘Five Public Works’) development plan – Filip de Boeck notes that these pictures again represent, as did the country’s official photographs of the 1960s, ‘a mirror of modernity’. Unlike the photographs of that earlier period, however, the new visual culture ‘no longer reflects the earlier versions of Belgian colonial modernity, but instead... the aura of Dubai and other hot spots of the Global South’ (de Boeck 2011). Observing the still and moving imagery associated

with the Kigali Masterplan, reflecting President Paul Kagame's wider project of forging a 'post-genocidal state' in Rwanda – which has long been characterised by an erasure of the specificities of place and history in the country (cf. Pottier, 2002) – Samuel Shearer notes that it is similarly designed to cast Kigali as a future 'Singapore of Africa' (2014, 183). In this way, the imagery both feeds off, and feeds into, a 'collective ambition to reinvent Kigali's future as somewhere else'.<sup>7</sup> Writing about the new visual culture across Africa as a whole, Vanessa Watson also notes that its fantasy landscapes may be partly explicable in terms of the fact that its imagery is often produced for African governments by international media companies or commercial property developers (2014, 215-16). These firms may have an ongoing stake in the projects themselves, as a result of which they have a vested interest in representing the continent in ways that invoke a global capitalist discourse about 'Africa rising'. This can be itself interpreted as little more than marketing ploy designed to attract global investors into what remain high-risk property markets, and perhaps also a way to avoid confronting the present.

Once again, however, the politics of these visions of the future is not restricted to the realm of representation but, rather, emerges from the ways in which these images are circulated and 'performed'. In particular, it has now become a commonplace for African states to make extensive use of these future visions (as incorporated into policy documents, posters, leaflets) within their existing public works projects, which themselves tend to accelerate in the run up to elections. Vokes documented this during a period of fieldwork in 2015 in rural South-western Uganda, when such image-objects played a prominent role within a rural electrification scheme being rolled out ahead of the country's 2016 presidential and parliamentary elections. Briefly, a few days before this rural electrification scheme was due to reach Vokes' long-term fieldsite in Bugamba Sub-country, a small team of officials and engineers arrived in the village to begin mapping out where the new line's poles and transformers were to be placed. Where these fixtures were located on private land – and in practice, almost all of them were – the team promptly handed out cash payments to the homeowners, as 'compensation' (*okurihirira*) for the inconvenience. These payments ranged from

one to three million Uganda Shillings – equivalent to between one and three years’ salary for an average wage labourer – as a result of which, many households became in an instant fabulously wealthy. But the key point here is that at the moment these payments were handed over, the officials also gave the householder some or other piece of official literature replete with glossy computer-generated images of fantastical future development projects, and went to great lengths to ‘narrate’ the proposed benefits of these. These actions in turn appear to have further amplified the effects of the compensation payments themselves, by suggesting that these already extraordinary payments were just a beginning, and that much more was to come. In other words, the circulation and performance of these image-objects seem to have created a general impression that if this initial, relatively modest, infrastructure project had already delivered such great fortunes, then one could only imagine the scale of the future compensation payments that would attach to these future, and much grander, infrastructure schemes. As it has done in the past, but with greater intensity, photography serves advance notice of a future that is due to arrive from elsewhere.

### **Mobile Photographies**

If the ‘digital revolution’ has given rise across the continent to another wave of photographic futurisms that express major utopian ambitions, to transform African cityscapes in the image of global capital, it is equally necessary to attend to the ways in which digital technology has enabled the expression of more minor future imaginings. African citizens are not simply the subjects of photographic futures but increasingly agents in their creation, not least as digital photography becomes ubiquitous within everyday life.<sup>8</sup> As the era of high modernisation witnessed the compelling performance of new, self-confident, African identities for the camera, so the emergent epoch of digital photography has seen similar developments. Without doubt, the key driver of this trend has been the rapid, and massive, influx to practically all African countries of ever more affordable ‘third generation’ advanced mobile phone handsets, or ‘smartphones’. Between 2011 and mid-2015 alone, the number of smartphones being imported into Africa – a majority of them sub-US\$100 Android-based systems – jumped from around 10 million units per annum to almost 100

million per annum (Tshabalala 2015), as a result of which these devices became quickly established as a common feature of everyday life. Today, more than one-third all mobile phones in Africa are smartphones, and this percentage is set to rise to two-thirds by 2020 (GSMA Intelligence 2017).

Among their many effects, smartphones, and their associated infrastructures for communication – from high-speed internet connections to social media platforms such as Facebook, Friendster, Instagram, Snapchat, Twitter and WhatsApp – have vastly expanded the possibilities for taking, storing, manipulating, circulating and displaying photographic images. This, in turn, has led to an almost limitless expansion in acts of photographic self-fashioning, and in the use of photographic imagery to forge all kinds of imaginary future selves. In short, just as the advent of digital photography has enabled African governments to produce new major photographic utopias of millennial capitalist cities, so it has also facilitated ordinary African people to develop their own minor photographic futures for the self. Till Förster's contribution offers one such case study of the impact of smartphones on everyday photographic practices in northern Côte d'Ivoire, based on long term fieldwork. Included among the examples he discusses is the case of a young hairdresser, Malik, who uses his smartphone to store a catalogue of hairstyles he has created previously, which then forms the starting point for discussions with clients of what he can create for them, supported by narratives of how the particular style may 'enhance their lives'. This particular smartphone archive, however, also provided a space of freedom and imagination for Malik that was not open to him in the more conservative city where he lived – among the photographs of hairstyles were several of Malik dressed as a woman – and which aligned with his aspiration to move to a bigger city such as Paris or Abidjan.

The smartphone 'revolution' has also enabled ordinary Africans to reengage with historic photographic imagery, including the kinds of photographic futurisms from the post-war period onwards. Thus, just as it has become a commonplace for phone users to produce and circulate 'selfies', photo-collages which include themselves and their relations, and to post online 'albums'

which narrate ideas about their aspirational lives to come, so too it has become an everyday practice for Africans to use their phone-cameras to re-photograph, and to re-post, all manner of historical family pictures, archival images and old newspaper. This, in turn, generates new narratives about the photographic futurisms of the 1950s and 1960s, in particular – which are today cast in an ‘historic future’ tense (to borrow a linguistic metaphor). Certainly, there is a danger that some of these narratives may today fail to get beyond the ‘surface of the image’ (cf. Buckley 2014). Yet so too, they may generate complex re-evaluations of the future planning of the past. Förster (this volume) notes the importance of files of photographs that are often sold with or transferred to mobile phones as they change hands. Alongside images representing religious themes and popular culture he found political leaders associated with the imagination of African futures in the early period of independence, including the country’s first president Félix Houphouët-Boigny, and figures such as John F. Kennedy, Julius Nyerere and Léopold Senghor. The first of these might be taken to indicate the success of a USIA strategy to associate Kennedy’s image with Africa, which extended beyond his short presidency; and the latter two, of course, are expressive of a pan-African imaginary. To take another example, Vokes is a regular follower of the Facebook page ‘History of Uganda’, whose still and moving images from the past have on occasion generated thoughtful critical comment on two periods key periods of utopianism in the country, namely those associated with the early post-colonial period, and the period following the National Resistance Movement’s accession to power in the late 1980s.<sup>9</sup>

In a variety of ways, then, new digital environments have engendered key sites for images of the past to resurface, and become recognisable (Benjamin 2003), in complex ways. This is perhaps nowhere more evident than in South Africa, with its specific temporal relation to decolonisation, and an alignment between photography and struggle that emerged during the apartheid period. As Kylie Thomas identifies in her paper, images of state violence, such as the shooting of striking miners at Marikana 2012, and subsequent protests on university campuses, as part of the Rhodes Must Fall (RMF) campaign, echoed earlier images of violence and protest such as those from

Sharpeville 1960 and Soweto 1976, or the death of Steve Biko in 1977. Yet, there are differences as well as similarities between the activism of the anti-apartheid generation and that of a younger generation disillusioned with the lack of social and political transformation and, as Thomas puts it, 'refusing to have the question of a decolonised future deferred any longer'. The differences can be tracked through the photographs produced and circulated during recent protests. Whilst it was the case that many photographers during the 1980s saw themselves as putting their photography at the service of the liberation struggle, Thomas argues that in the current context many of the most important photographs were produced on mobile phones and circulated via platforms such as Facebook and WhatsApp as a matter of course by activists who are unlikely to conceive of themselves as photographers at all. Furthermore, the rapid circulation outside of mainstream media outlets meant that for this particular version of critical photographic futurism the separation between image and activism seemed increasingly irrelevant. This is a point made most starkly evident in the disruption of the RMF photographic exhibition at the University of Cape Town by the Trans Collective, arguably refusing not only the content of the exhibition, and its institutional location, but its very form as wall mounted images, which they sought to counter with a live bodily presence, which was in turn put into circulation photographically through social media.

### **Concluding thoughts**

Our aim in putting together this special issue has been to develop a new line of enquiry in the engagement with photographic archives and practices across Africa and its diaspora. Considerable scholarly attention has been paid to the many ways in which, especially during the early history of the medium, photography served to establish visually the idea of African pastness, in contrast to European modernity. Less attention, however, has been given to photography as a medium for the construction and imagination of African futures. And where scholarship has engaged with the medium's role in imagining futures, it has tended to concentrate on the photographic studio as a space of individual self-fashioning. Important as this work is, our contention is that the visual construction of photographic futures has been a feature of numerous photographic projects

associated not only with modern selfhood, but also with colonial development, anti-colonial struggle and post-independence nation building, as well as more recent national development planning. This issue features several cases drawn from the era of high modernisation, decolonisation and post-colonial independence, a period in which the visual presentation of African futures was particularly prominent, contrasted with the more recent resurgence of photographic futurisms associated with the ‘digital revolution’. No doubt there is further work to be done to elaborate and fill out the framework we have roughly sketched here, but we hope that the issue offers some productive starting points.

In framing the discussion of African photographic futures we have found it useful to think in terms of both critical and performative photographic futures, which, respectively, protest an oppressive present on behalf of an implied better future, or attempt to call the future into being, offering a template or model to be emulated, or in some cases literally embodied. The former has arguably been given greater space in photographic histories of the continent to date. We have also found it helpful to consider a distinction between major and minor utopias, imaginatively constructed through photography. During the era of high modernisation as well as more recently, African citizens have been subject to all-embracing visions of the future, driven by various capitalist, nationalist and socialist imaginaries. Yet, the medium has also provided a space for more minor forms of utopian imagining, photographic engagements and interactions that destabilise, or simply exist outside of, the hold of grand schemes. Finally, we want to acknowledge the dynamics of recovery and return of past photographic futures in the present; the photographic archive provides a rich repository for the creation of ‘potential histories’ (Azoulay 2013b) and re-imagined futures. And we are mindful that this is a process in which researchers are participants as well as observers.

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<sup>1</sup> See Rodogno and David (2015) for a consideration of photography associated with the World Health Organisation.

<sup>2</sup> The observation regarding the use of photographs as part of the Indian Passive Resistance Campaign at the UN is based on personal communication with Omar Badsha (1 September 2016). In 1950, Michael Scott produced the film *Civilisation on Trial*, which was shown at the UN as part of the South West Africa campaign. And a later example is ‘Apartheid: The Tyranny of Racism Made Law’, a photographic feature produced in the early 1980s by the UN Department of Public Information.

<sup>3</sup> See Azoulay (2013a, 48) for an alternative reading of Steichen’s selection of the UN General Assembly photograph.

<sup>4</sup> This is the subject of Newbury’s current research. See also Kunkel 2016.

<sup>5</sup> *FAVT: Future African Visions in Time*, an exhibition by the Bayreuth Academy of Advanced African Studies, November 8th, 2015 – February 28th, 2016, Iwalewahaus, University of Bayreuth, Wölfelstrasse 2, Bayreuth, Germany.

<sup>6</sup> This is a fact not lost on the photographic artist Kiluanji Kia Henda. In a project that brought together several visual futurisms (*Icarus 13, The First Journey to the Sun*), Kia Henda created a fictional documentary record of a 2006 Angolan solar mission, featuring Augusto Neto’s Russian-built mausoleum and a futuristic concrete cinema building, referencing the investment in a particular post-colonial African future on the part of the Soviet Union, as well as providing an ironic commentary on both past and present (Nash 2016, 122-23).

<sup>7</sup> A promotional video for the Kigali Masterplan can be viewed online at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iM0Y4EiCvGE>. Accessed 4 December 2017.

<sup>8</sup> This is not to deny the considerable agency of African photographic subjects across the history of the medium of course (see, for example, Newbury 2018), but rather to note its changed context and operation.

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<sup>9</sup> The page can be accessed online at: <https://www.facebook.com/HistoryofUganda/>.