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POINTS OF VIEW: THE STRUGGLE FOR THE PHOTOGRAPHIC IMAGE
IN COLONIAL NATAL.

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Recent developments in information technology have hugely increased the capacity of the researcher to store, manipulate and present the photographic image. Today's "paper", which consists of the projection of some 50 digitized photographs with associated commentary, draws on this technological flexibility. While this mode of presentation greatly facilitates group discussion of the image it also means that the presentation itself does not meet the conventions of this seminar – discussion around a read text – and the paragraphs which follow are meant to provide a short written context to the presentation.

At the moment my work on the early photographs of KwaZulu-Natal covers four different themes, all of them to do with portraiture. Firstly I am researching a set of portraits taken in Natal in the late 1850s and early 1860s which I believe are of special interest to South African historians in the way they avoid aspects of the colonial stereotype.



The second examines the reproduction a single photograph on different occasions in different contexts between 1865 and 1995 and the role it has played in the creation of the image of Zulu militarism – it is I might add a picture of an African in military dress – but it is not a picture of a Zulu warrior.



The third is concerned with the photographs and commentary used in my forthcoming book on Harriette Colenso. It takes the form of a photo essay in which the text seeks to illustrate the photograph rather than the photograph the text. Whether it will be possible to complete this project in the way I envisage is another question. To reproduce photographs and text in hard copy raises many problems, not the least of which are those which arise around the complicated question of layout. Today's presentation, the fourth of the projects, is an example of one strategy which seeks, if not to overcome, then at least side-step, the question of the presentation of text and image on the printed page. The projection of digitized text and photographs allows great flexibility in the manipulation and publication of the image.

The theme of this presentation is an implicit critique of what seems to me a position adopted far too readily by scholars who write on the colonial image – this is the camera's subordinating, dominating role as an instrument of conquest. The camera was undoubtedly part of the process of colonisation but it was not just the "colonising camera." Today's presentation deals with the way in which Africans were not just used by, but learnt to use – at times as a means resistance - the colonial camera and its images.

II

The approach to publishing historical photographs from Natal and Zululand has been, generally speaking, to reproduce them as unproblematic representations of the past. Portraits of the leaders of colonial society, street views of the colony's towns, transport systems - the railway in particular - dominate, together with stereotypical photographs of "natives in tribal dress".¹ Mirroring the historiography of the region itself inordinate interest has been shown in photographs of the British invasion of Zululand in 1879. Local photographers did what they could to exploit the fact that an event of world-interest was taking place on their doorstep: the fact that they were unable to

¹ J and A Vermaak. *Victorian and Edwardian Natal* (Pietermaritzburg Shuter & Shooter 1982).

create a corpus of work of any stature has been no obstacle to the repeated reproduction of their images, as writers on the war and their publishers try to lighten books weighed down by tired and repetitive texts. The photographs are often not sourced, incorrectly sourced, and frequently misidentified, the result usually of uncritically transcribing the errors and marginal speculations of archivists and researchers over the years.

The misidentification of photographs is a feature of the Natal collections. From the moment they were commercially available prints were copied and proliferated under the name of different photographers, were gathered haphazardly into albums, and carelessly labelled by their collectors and by subsequent local experts, librarians and archivists. But the problem of misidentification is far deeper I believe than a mere technical one. The assumption that images of Africans in vaguely similar dress or surroundings are of the same man or woman is frequent. A recent book on South African historical photographs, put together by a scholar of repute and integrity, has given authority to a number of gross misidentifications of African portraits from Natal, and if the patterns of the past are repeated it will not be long before other books repeat these errors. The propensity to fix labels on photographs, to perceive similarities which are not there, to jump to unwarranted conclusions, lies possibly in the reality which appears to be so unproblematically present in the photographic image. I would like to suggest that we assume as tentative all comments on historical photographs from South Africa, and also all attempts at identification.

But identification, correct or incorrect, is only one major problem: another is the gratuitous reproduction of images whose connection with the text, or the events which they are assumed to represent, is left unexplored. Of course the nature of the relation between the image and reality is a vast field of study and reflection.² To summarise my approach: I do not assume that a photograph represents reality: it does however represent realities, for the photographed, for the photographer, and for the person who has selected the image, and manipulated it visually and verbally, and for the observer of this image.

I am, furthermore, particularly interested in the historical photograph. (All photographs are of course from the past – so what is the historical photograph? – for the moment let me be content with photographs from the

² The field is vast and it would be impossible to do more than indicate some of the work which I have found most useful. Of the classics it must include Susan Sontag, *On Photography* and Barthes, *Camera Lucida*. Books with specific application to today's paper include Elizabeth Edwards (ed.), *Anthropology and Photography, 1860 – 1920*. (Yale University Press, 1992), W. J. T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory. Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation*. (The University of Chicago Press, 1995), and for portraiture Graham Clarke, *The Photograph*, (Oxford University Press, 1997) To refer to just one of the vast numbers of histories of the photograph I return most often to the multi-volume *Life Library of Photography* which came out in the 1970s, and to select just one of the many readers on the subject Jessica Evans and Stuart Hall, *Visual culture: the reader*, (The Open University, 1999) seems better than most. However for me the critic and commentator who has proved most influential and useful has to be John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* of course, but especially his "Uses of Photography" in *About Looking* (London: Writers and Readers Publishing Cooperative, 1980) which is supplemented by his article "Appearances", J. Berger and J. Mohr, *Another Way of Telling*, Cambridge, 1989

“distant past”). Berger uses the idea of the “photographic quotation” in his discussion on photograph and the way it is used. I find this useful but not sufficient for my purposes and have therefore chosen to treat the historical photograph as an historical *artefact*, and then, if it allows me, as an historical *source*. As an artefact it is a physical item from the past, which, through the interaction of light and light-sensitive material, has preserved an image of the past. But this historical artefact moves towards becoming an historical source when I discover in it clues and codes which allow me to enter further into, and even beyond, the past which it dimly and partially reflects. Like the written artefact this visual artefact might be commonplace and stereotypical³ and offer me little: or like the written source it might contain and reveal unique insights which suggest novel ways to a greater understanding of the past. To discover this I have to apply to the photograph my particular insights, and my particular knowledge of the historical circumstances in which the photograph was produced, - its historical context - in the hope that it will add more knowledge and allow greater insight to that context, the artefact of the past becoming a source in the present.

Today’s presentation is an attempt to make this connection – to historicise these images, to turn photographic artefacts into photographic sources – you can judge whether it is successful.

³ And perhaps it is the stereotypical which deadens so much colonial photography most effectively – what Homi Bhabha sees as the “fixity” of the colonial stereotype. See Homi K. Bhabha, “The other question: the stereotype and colonial discourse” republished in Evans and Hall, *Visual culture*.