

A Pariah Among Parvenus: Anne Fischer and the Politics of South Africa's New Realism(s)*

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Throughout the late 1930s and early 1940s, Cape Town became a hotbed of artistic and political activity as exiles from Europe joined South Africa's Left in the fight against the nation's burgeoning fascism. Among those who sought refuge from Hitler's Third Reich in South Africa was Annemarie Eva Fischer, a twenty-three-year-old German-Jewish photographer who would become one of the Union's most sought-after portraitists.¹ Although she later became acclaimed for her theater work and is well known by the many South Africans whose private collections contain her commissioned portraits, details about Fischer's life and the photographs she created outside of the walls of her Cape Town-based studio have largely been obscured.² Born in Berlin to a middle-class Jewish family, Fischer was introduced to photography at a young age by her mother, herself an avid (though amateur) practitioner.³ Finding the prospect of moving from object to operator empowering, she began a three-year apprenticeship in one of the city's photography studios shortly after she turned sixteen.⁴ When Hitler became

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1. The Union of South Africa was established in 1910. Although formally recognized as a self-governing dominion under the British Empire in 1934, South Africa did not become legitimized as a republic until 1961.

2. The first person to begin to recuperate Fischer's archive was Pam Warne. See "The Early Years: Notes on South African Photographers Before the Eighties," in *Women by Women: 50 Years of Women's Photography in South Africa*, ed. Robin Comley, George Hallet, and Neo Ntsoma (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2006), pp. 15–25.

3. Suzanne Belling, "Photography Is an Art for Anne Fischer," *South African Jewish Times*, November 16, 1984, p. 15.

4. *Ibid.* Information about Fischer's photographic training in Germany is somewhat conflicted. While Belling writes that Fischer's "training was a stringent three-year course in Germany, cut short when her instructor fled from the Nazis," other articles published in the same month state that she held an "apprenticeship in a photographic studio" in Berlin. See, for example, "Anne Fischer Exhibition," *South African Jewish Times*, November 9, 1984, newspaper clipping in a private collection.

chancellor, however, her formal training came to an abrupt end. Orphaned, and then abandoned by her mentor, who had fled a Nazified Germany, Fischer left Berlin for Tel Aviv in October 1933 with little more to her name than a small inheritance and her Rolleiflex.⁵ After a period in Palestine, she departed for Greece, backpacked through Italy and France, and eventually arrived in Britain, where, with the help of a Jewish-refugee group, she was able to secure passage on an ocean liner bound for South Africa.⁶ In March 1937, the young photographer set foot on Cape Town's docks, just as the Union was beginning to tighten its restrictions against those who were trying to escape Nazism.⁷

Politicized by the rise of fascism in Europe, Fischer was drawn to the fringes of the city's Left opposition soon after she arrived in South Africa. During her first few months in Cape Town, she met and became friends with a number of the city's radical intellectuals, avant-garde artists, and leftist political stalwarts and began attending meetings and parties at their homes. It was at one of these early gatherings that she met her first hus-



Anne Fischer, ca. 1935–36. Courtesy of Wendy Lopatin and Paul Herzberg.

5. Belling, "Photography Is an Art for Anne Fischer," p. 15, and Bernhard Herzberg, *Otherness: The Story of a Very Long Life* (Israel: Lehavot, 1998), pp. 68–9.

6. See Bernhard Herzberg, *Anne Fischer*, catalogue published in conjunction with *Anne Fischer: Faces in Streets and On the Land*, an exhibition held at the South African Association of Arts Gallery, Cape Town, June 4–23, 1984, unpaginated, and Herzberg, *Otherness*, pp. 68–69.

7. In his memoir, Fischer's first husband recounts fleeing Nazi Germany in 1933 only to be met at the harbor in Cape Town by members of South Africa's Boer-Nazi movement, who were "waving swastika flags and protesting against the admission of Jewish immigrants!" "You see," he had jokingly said to his companions, "those men want to make us feel at home!" Herzberg, *Otherness*, p. 60. Unlike Herzberg, who was unsurprised by the global reach of Nazi ideology, many Jewish refugees thought that they had escaped racial persecution and anti-Semitic hatred when they left Europe. How Fischer and her exilic female colleagues negotiated South Africa's racial politics and their own gendered experiences of exile during these years is more thoroughly addressed in my forthcoming essay "A Working Woman's Eye: Anne Fischer and the South African Photography of Weimar Women in Exile," in *Women and Photography in Africa: Creative Practices and Feminist Challenges*, ed. Darren Newbury, Lorena Rizzo, and Kylie Thomas (Abingdon: Routledge, 2020). For more on anti-Semitism in South Africa during this period, see Milton Shain, *A Perfect Storm: Antisemitism in South Africa 1930–1938* (Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball, 2015), and Lotte M. Stone, "Seeking Asylum: German Jewish Refugees in South Africa, 1933–1948" (PhD diss., Clark University, 2010).

band—a socialist, active trade unionist, and German-Jewish refugee from Hannover—Bernhard Herzberg.⁸ “When I saw Annemarie Fischer for the first time,” Herzberg wrote in his memoir, “it was on the balcony of a building facing the Atlantic Ocean, which shimmered in an unbelievably splendid sunset.”⁹ She “was strikingly beautiful,” he writes, and a “veritable bohemian.”¹⁰ She was also tough. Alongside Herzberg, Fischer became increasingly involved in Cape Town’s progressive social circles and aligned herself politically with the city’s Trotskyist groups. In addition to creating a clandestine series of images in Langa—one of South Africa’s first racially segregated locations—she also took photographs in Cape Town’s Malay Quarter, worked with members of the city’s Left opposition on an ultimately failed photo book, and traveled through the rural areas of the Eastern Cape documenting the realities of life in the so-called Native Reserves.¹¹ It is this latter work—and its complicated radicality in a South African context—that this essay more specifically addresses.

Despite her later success, Fischer was destitute when she arrived in Cape Town save for her camera and her “distinctive” photographic style—Weimar Germany’s aesthetically and politically ambiguous *Neue Sachlichkeit*.¹² While scholars have begun to explore the complex afterlives of the New Realism in Europe and the Americas following the collapse of Weimar democracy, its reception and mobilization on the African continent has received far less attention.¹³ In addition to affording an opportunity to recover early South African resistance histories and the roles women played within them, Fischer’s critically unexamined oeuvre enables us to explore how modernist aesthetics were used to both critique and uphold public fictions of race in the decade leading up to the advent of apartheid. Spread across a number of archives, the small part of Fischer’s oeuvre examined here comprises hundreds of negatives and a few dozen vintage prints that, when considered collectively, help shape our understanding of her project and its politics.

Among the many images she made in the rural areas of the Transkei and Ciskei between roughly 1941 and 1945, for example, is a portrait of a woman who has paused from tilling a field of recently planted maize.¹⁴ Looking up from her

8. Herzberg, *Otherness*, p. 68.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 69.

10. *Ibid.*, pp. 68–9.

11. South Africa’s “Native Reserves” were established by the Native Land Act of 1913. In addition to dispossessing Africans of their land, the act relegated and restricted their movement within designated rural areas.

12. Herzberg, “Anne Fischer,” n.p.

13. See, for example, Keith Holz, “German New Objectivity Painting Abroad and Its Nationalist Baggage,” in *New Objectivity: Modern German Art in the Weimar Republic, 1919–1933*, ed. Stephanie Barron and Sabine Eckmann (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 2015), exhibition catalogue, pp. 91–102.

14. The Transkei and Ciskei are two regions in South Africa that would later, under the apartheid government, become formally designated as Bantustans or “black homelands.”



Anne Fischer. Farmer's Wife. Ca. 1941–45.

Courtesy of Social History Collections, Iziko Museums of South Africa.

work, she addresses Fischer, and subsequently us, with an expressive force. By consciously angling her lens, the exilic photographer was able to divide the scene horizontally into thirds and to center her subject's face just above the distant landscape in a slightly overexposed sky. In composing her frame, Fischer sought to emphasize not only the steadfastness of this woman's gaze but the fact of her labor. Drawing our eye away from hers to the base of her back is a piece of bright white fabric that she has tied around her waist. From the bend in her torso our attention is led to her hands, which grip the long neck of a wooden hoe, and then

to a single index finger, which she points toward the land. Aesthetically, this photograph is a modernist study in line, form, and contrast. Politically, it makes a number of claims. It is largely around this relationship between aesthetics and politics—what Walter Benjamin would have referred to as the “quality” of Fischer’s photographs and their “tendency” in her new context—that this essay revolves, considering first how her employment of German modernist photographic aesthetics intervened in South Africa’s established visual discourses, and, second, how her verist translation of New Objectivity differed from that of her similarly trained white contemporaries.¹⁵

In order to situate Fischer’s photographs in their social, political, and artistic contexts, the first half of this essay traces her early involvement with South Africa’s Left and considers how her shifting relationships with its members affected how she mobilized her medium. As an active participant in Cape Town’s avant-garde art circles, Fischer was well aware of the visual economy she was entering into and the interventions she would be making with her lens when she decided to visit South Africa’s “Native Reserves” in the early years of the Second World War. While better-known South African photographers such as Alfred Martin Duggan-Cronin and his pictorialist colleagues were crafting soft-focused, romanticized images of the Union’s “noble savages” during this period, Fischer was marshaling the debris of Weimar-era photographic practices in order to portray the nation’s “landless peasantry.” Considering how the German-Jewish photographer attempted to disrupt South Africa’s conservative visual norms by employing representational strategies she had brought with her from Europe forces us to contend not only with the nuances of transnational modernism but with its paradoxes in a colonial context where avant-garde aesthetics and progressive politics were not always synonymous.

In taking up this latter issue, this essay’s second half more closely examines the political ambivalence of New Objectivity and how it was disparately translated into a relatively conservative art world by Fischer and her white South African contemporary Constance Stuart Larrabee.¹⁶ Although both women brought their modernist lenses to bear on similar subjects during this period, their divergent

15. Walter Benjamin, “The Author as Producer,” in *Understanding Brecht: Walter Benjamin* (London: Verso, 1998), p. 86.

16. It is important to underscore the complexity of New Objectivity as a categorical construct. Coined in the early 1920s by Gustav Friedrich Hartlaub and later used to describe the work of artists as diverse as Albert Renger-Patzsch, August Sander, and John Heartfield, “New Realism” has no simple definition and encompasses a range of artistic approaches and political stances. In describing the work of *Neue Sachlichkeit* artists, Hartlaub differentiated between two political tendencies, one left-wing and one right-wing. While the left-wing verists were driven “to unveil the reality of chaos as the true countenance of our time,” the right-wing classicists sought to emphasize “timeless values” and “sanctify everything sound and healthy.” Although categorized by their shared interest in objectivity and a return to figuration, the politics of the aesthetics of these artists was far from congruent. See Gustav Friedrich Hartlaub, “Reply to a Questionnaire,” in *Art in Theory, 1900–2000: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, ed. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2003), pp. 247–49. For more on the heterogeneity of Weimar Germany’s realisms, see Barron and Eckmann, *New Objectivity: Modern German Art in the Weimar Republic, 1919–1933*.

politics drastically affected their images' ideological content.¹⁷ Unaddressed in the scholarship until now, Larrabee's training with a known Nazi in Munich and her intentionally obscured political sympathies necessitate a reevaluation of her early oeuvre. While Fischer employed a verist aesthetic in her depictions of rural black South Africans, for example, Larrabee's photographs of similar subjects are more representative of the right-wing version of New Objectivity that Ernst Bloch had disdained for "plaster[ing] over the surface of reality."¹⁸ Considering these women's work in relation to one another, I argue, allows us to probe the thematic and structural tendencies of fascist aesthetics and the ways (and extent to which) these were manifest in South Africa in the early years of World War II. It also, perhaps more importantly, sheds light on how issues of race, class, and gender inflected Fischer's experiences of exile and, in turn, how she mobilized her lens in South Africa as a young pariah among parvenus.

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Initially [in the group] there was Professor Farrington who took Ruth Alexander with him to England and there were trade unionists and painters, Gregoire Boonzaier and all that mull, and they used to have fierce discussions—Communists versus Trotskyites. The crucial point came when the war broke out.

—Bernhard Herzberg¹⁹

When the Second World War broke out in September 1939, South Africa's decision to abandon neutrality and fight alongside Britain wreaked havoc on the

17. This essay addresses only a small section of Constance Stuart Larrabee's oeuvre—photographs she produced in Basutoland between 1941 and 1943. For a more general overview of her life and work (although one that largely ignores the time she spent in Germany), see Peter Elliot, *Constance: One Road to Take, The Life and Photography of Constance Stuart Larrabee (1914–2000)* (Alaric, France: Cantaloup, 2018). For more critical considerations of her work, see Christraud Geary, "Life Histories of Photographs: Constance Stuart Larrabee's Images of South Africa (1936–1949)," in *Encounters with Photography: Photographing People in Southern Africa, 1860 to 1999* (Rondebosch, South Africa: University of Cape Town, 2000), pp. 49–57; Brenda Danilowitz, "Constance Stuart Larrabee's Photographs of the Ndzundza Ndebele: Performance and History Beyond the Modernist Frame," in *Between Union and Liberation: Women Artists in South Africa, 1910–1994*, ed. Marion Arnold and Brenda Schmahmann (London: Routledge, 2016), pp. 71–93; and Darren Newbury, "An African Pageant: Between Native Studies and Social Documentary," in *Defiant Images: Photography and Apartheid* (Pretoria, South Africa: Unisa, 2009), pp. 15–79.

18. Ernst Bloch, "Discussing Expressionism," in *Aesthetics and Politics: The Key Texts of the Classic Debate Within German Marxism*, ed. Ronald Taylor (London: Verso, 2002), p. 23.

19. Sue Clark, "Interview with Bernhard Herzberg," January 13, 1996 [Avi 4.06], Center for Popular Memory, BC1223, University of Cape Town Libraries' Special Collections.

Union's Left, and on Fischer's personal life. While South Africa's socialists and communists were fiercely anti-fascist, many, including Fischer, initially opposed the war on the grounds that it was an imperialist conflict.²⁰ Although she had experienced Nazism firsthand in Germany, the young photographer believed that South Africa had no part to play in the struggles that were being waged between rival capitalists in the theaters of Europe. "First Chamberlain throws Czechoslovakia into the lap of the Nazis and now we must fight for Poland run by the Fascist Pilsudski. No," she told her then-husband.²¹ Fischer's stance put her, and many on the left, in an awkward position. As Jack Simons describes it, South Africans were presented with two unappealing choices—to either "support [Jan] Smuts and the war *or* oppose the war and support the pro-Nazi, anti-Trade Union, anti-color Nationalists."²² Faced with what seemed like two impossible options, Fischer and many of her South African comrades chose a middle ground—to "oppose the war and resist the Nationalists."²³

Fischer's position, although in line with the leadership of the National Liberation League (NLL) and other organizations with which she and Herzberg had become affiliated, made little sense to her husband.²⁴ "If the Nazis defeat Britain, South Africa is a British Dominion. This will also become Nazified. Where will you go?" he asked her.²⁵ Openly and adamantly opposed to his support for the war, Fischer warned him not to join the Union's army. "There is no conscription in this country," she told him, "and our kind does not take sides in imperialist wars."²⁶ "All my arguments were useless," he recalled, "not even the assurance that half my soldier's pay would be allotted her."²⁷ When Paris fell in June 1940, Herzberg joined the military, against his wife's urging.²⁸ "When I came home and told Anne that I had joined up, she was furious. 'You acted against your own convictions and principles! You always claimed to be a pacifist,

20. Herzberg, *Otherness*, p. 110. See also "Cannot Support War Aims," *Guardian*, February 16, 1940, p. 3.

21. Y. S. Joe Rassool, "Interview with Bernard Herzberg," *What Next? Marxist Discussion Journal*, November 20, 2000, <http://www.whatnextjournal.org.uk/Pages/History/Herzberg.html>.

22. Simons, quoted in Alison Drew, *Discordant Comrades: Identities and Loyalties on the South African Left* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2000), p. 229.

23. *Ibid.*

24. According to the organization's membership books, Fischer joined the NLL in 1938–39. See Mrs. Zainunnissa Gool, Record Book 2, 1938–1939, NLL Membership List, Abdullah Abdurahman Family Papers, 1906–1962, BCZA 83/33, Box 4 (Reel 4), University of Cape Town Libraries' Special Collections. For a more detailed consideration of the Left's early opposition to World War II, see Drew, *Discordant Comrades*, pp. 231–33.

25. Rassool, "Interview with Bernhard Herzberg," unpaginated.

26. Herzberg, *Otherness*, p. 70.

27. *Ibid.*

28. *Ibid.*, p. 111.

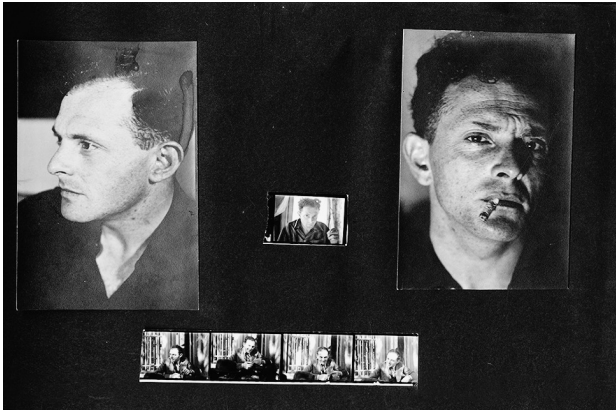
and now you turn out to be a chauvinist after all,” she exclaimed.²⁹ When he received leave from artillery training in December 1941, Herzberg returned to their flat on Adderly Street only to find Fischer missing. In his absence, she had begun an affair with his close friend Max Gordon, an avid Trotskyist and trade unionist whose politics more closely aligned with her own.³⁰ Although the exact length of their relationship is unknown, Fischer’s affair with Gordon led to the end of the photographer’s first marriage. “I am not prepared, whilst I am fighting against the Nazis somewhere in Africa or Europe, to be aware of that man’s presence in my bed—an individual who has been interned for his opposition to the war!” Herzberg told his wife.³¹ The following morning, he filed for divorce.³²

29. Ibid., p. 70. Fischer’s position (and her language) appears to come from Trotsky, who had written the following to the WPSA in 1935: “The worst crime on the part of the revolutionaries would be to give the smallest concessions to the privileges and prejudices of the whites. Whoever gives his little finger to the devil of chauvinism is lost. The revolutionary Party must put before every white worker the following alternative: either with British Imperialism and with the white bourgeoisie of South Africa, or, with the black workers and peasants against the white feudalists and slave-owners and their agents in the ranks of the working class itself.” See Leon Trotsky, “Remarks on the Draft Theses of the Workers’ Party of South Africa, 20 April 1935,” in *South Africa’s Radical Tradition: A Documentary History, Vol. 1, 1907–1950*, ed. Alison Drew (Cape Town: University of Cape Town, 1996), pp. 150–51.

30. See Herzberg, *Otherness*, pp. 72–73, as well as his interview with Sue Clark. A year earlier, Gordon had clearly articulated Fischer’s position when he declared at a meeting of the South African Trades and Labor Council (SATALC) that he was both “anti-Nazi and anti-imperialist war.” His stance stemmed in part from his organizing efforts with South Africa’s nonwhite workers, who felt little inclination to support a fight from which they stood to benefit not at all. As long as they lacked democratic rights, many black South Africans felt that the ethnicity of their white oppressors—whether English, Afrikaans, or German—was irrelevant. For a more thorough discussion of black attitudes toward World War II, see Baruch Hirson, *Yours for the Union: Class and Community Struggles in South Africa* (London: Zed Books, 1990), pp. 76–92, and Baruch Hirson, “Not Pro-War, and not Anti-War, Just Indifferent: South African Blacks in the Second World War,” *Critique: Journal of Socialist Theory* 20, no. 1 (1993), pp. 39–56. Notably, Gordon’s ability to mobilize black workers and his respected leadership position among the unions he organized was unprecedented. As Alison Drew notes, his success (perhaps unsurprisingly) sparked a tinge of resentment among members of the CPSA who openly begrudged his achievements. “The Trotskyists in Johannesburg can call a meeting of 10,000 Africans but the Party can’t,” Willie Kalk once grumbled, “[they] have succeeded because they had one man [Max Gordon] with considerable influence” (quoted in Drew, *Discordant Comrades*, p. 231).

31. Herzberg, *Otherness*, p. 73. Paired with his stance against the war, Gordon’s position as South Africa’s most active (and effective) trade unionist during this period had made him a prime target for the state, which found his organizing efforts threatening. Employing a set of recently imposed emergency regulations, the South African police arrested him in May 1940 and sent him to the Ganspan Internment Camp, where he was held for over a year with pro-Nazis, German Jewish refugees, and other leftist political activists. Shortly after his release in June 1941 he returned to Cape Town, where he and Fischer became reacquainted. For more on Gordon’s detainment, see Drew, *Discordant Comrades*, p. 232, and Hirson, *Yours for the Union*, pp. 47–49. During the year that he was interned, numerous articles were published in the *Guardian* that mention Gordon specifically. See, for example, “What Is Behind Anti-Nazi Internments?,” *Guardian*, November 21, 1940, p. 1; “Internments...Who’s Next? Strong Deputation to Minister,” *Guardian*, December 5, 1940, p. 1; and “Max Gordon Is Free!,” *Guardian*, June 5, 1941, p. 7.

32. Herzberg, *Otherness*, p. 73. The couple’s divorce was legally finalized in March 1942. For Fischer and Herzberg’s original marriage license and divorce papers, see “Illiquid Case: Restitution of Conjugal Rights, Bernhard Herzberg Versus Annemarie Herzberg (Born Fischer),” National Archives of South Africa, Cape Town Archives Repository (KAB), CSC, LEER, 2/1/1/1414.



Fischer. Man presumed to be Max Gordon. Courtesy of Wendy Lopatin and Paul Herzberg.

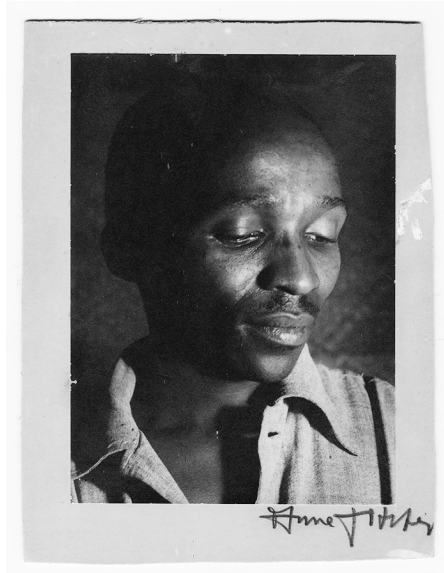
Fischer's separation from Herzberg in the early 1940s is important to a consideration of her work during this period, as it evinces her shift away from Cape Town's minority leftist faction, the Communist League of South Africa (CLSA), toward the majority group, the Workers Party of South Africa (WPSA), to which Gordon belonged. Notably, when Fischer pivoted in her politics, she also pivoted her lens. While members of the CLSA had focused their attention on organizing the urban proletariat, those in the WPSA were more concerned with issues of land and in programs that would help to politicize and mobilize the Union's rural populations. Looking to Leon Trotsky (with whom they had earlier been in contact), the leaders of the WPSA maintained that the revolutionary struggle in South Africa hinged on the Left's ability to raise the political consciousness of those they had characterized as the Union's "landless peasants."³³ Assuming the slogan "Land and Liberty," they sought to create the type of propaganda that Trotsky had argued "must first of all flow from the slogans of the Agrarian Revolution, in order that, step by step, on the basis of the experiences of the struggle, the peasantry [would] be brought to the necessary *political and national* conclusions."³⁴ Although there are no records of Fischer officially joining the WPSA, portraits that she made of its main members (such as Isaac Bangani Tabata) and projects that she later undertook in collaboration with them (in particular, the Marxist literary critic Dora Taylor) indicate her growing involvement with the cadre during these politically tumultuous years.³⁵

33. Trotsky, "Remarks on the Draft Theses of the Workers' Party of South Africa," pp. 146–51.

34. *Ibid.*, p. 150.

35. As a member of the Trotskyist Workers' Party and one of the founders of the Non-European Unity Movement (NEUM), Taylor contributed immeasurably to the programs and policies of South Africa's Left opposition. She was a prolific writer, and her plays, short stories, novels, political journalism, and extensive literary criticism helped shape the vibrant leftist community of which both she and Fischer were a part. By September 1939, Fischer's second year in Cape Town, Fischer and Taylor knew each other well enough that the Scottish émigrée served as one of two witnesses at her marriage to Herzberg. For more on Taylor, see Corinne Sandwith, "Dora Taylor: South African Marxist," *English in Africa* 29, no. 2 (October 2002), pp. 5–27.

In addition to providing insight into her relationships with these individuals, a brief consideration of the lesser-known photographs she took of them allows us to see how the young Weimar photographer continued to employ modernist representational strategies in her new context. In a 1941 portrait of I. B. Tabata, for example, the soon-to-be founder of the Non-European Unity Movement (NEUM) appears without a jacket or his glasses, the indentions of which can still be seen lingering on the bridge of his nose. Paired with Fischer's careful lighting, her lens's focus lays bare the imperfections in her subject's skin and draws attention to the coarse weave of his linen shirt, which he has left partially unbuttoned. In her early image of the young black political leader, Fischer's interest in capturing a complex range of tones and textures in her prints and her refusal to retouch the noncommercial photographs she made of those she knew are particularly evident. In addition to relating her formal interest in surfaces, this portrait also notably reveals her understanding of her subject, who, Ciraj Rassool has written, was generally averse to the medium and "rather reluctant" when it came to being photographed.³⁶ As Rassool suggests, emphasis on "collective leadership" among Cape Town's Trotskyists had led Tabata and others in the struggle to reject certain forms of political iconicity.³⁷ Photographed in a moment of quiet introspection, his presentation of himself in this image seems remarkably appropriate for a man who was then working to build a movement and uncomfortable with the idea of being venerated as its sole leader.³⁸ In breaking with a visual economy that trafficked in racial stereotypes, Fischer's "modern and intensely private" portrait of Tabata both con-



*Fischer. Isaac Bangani Tabata. 1941.
Courtesy of University of Cape Town
Libraries' Special Collections.*

36. Ciraj Shahid Rassool, "The Individual, Auto/biography and History in South Africa" (PhD diss., University of the Western Cape, 2004), p. 344.

37. Rassool addresses this at length in "Writing, Authorship, and I. B. Tabata's Biography: From Collective Leadership to Presidentialism," *Kronos* 34 (November 2008), pp. 181–214.

38. "It is she [Fischer] who took the photos of B [Tabata] in 1941 catching different aspects so well: jolly, 'intellectual,' youthful, and an impersonal, tragic face as if representing the experience of his people," Taylor later wrote in her journal. Dora Taylor, *Extended Diary*, Book 7 (June 1946–8), undated entry, Dora Taylor Papers, Personal Papers, BC1442.A2.1, University of Cape Town Libraries' Special Collections.

veys his individual personality and signals a societal type.³⁹ Before her camera, he presents himself as an emotionally complex intellectual and as a modern black man—identities that the young photographer’s white contemporaries had largely denied their African subjects.⁴⁰

Unlike the portraits Fischer made of Cape Town’s leftist political activists, the photographs she created throughout the Transkei and Ciskei during the Second World War relay little information about the individuals who populate her images or how she may have known them. Although Tabata, Taylor, and other members of the WPSA had begun making semi-clandestine trips into South Africa’s rural areas in 1940, nothing in Fischer’s or her colleagues’ archives indicates that she accompanied them on these organizing tours. In one of her diary entries from this period, for example, Taylor writes that she and Tabata had been “assigned” by the WPSA “to travel in the Transkei, in Goolam’s car,” with Tabata “appearing in [a] white coat as my ‘chauffeur.’”⁴¹ “I would stay at [a] hotel,” she notes, “while he visited [the] people.”⁴² Unfortunately, Taylor rarely mentions the names of those with whom they worked in the rural areas, and Tabata’s notebooks from these years are equally (if not intentionally) vague.⁴³ A number of Fischer’s photographs depict scenes that

39. Rassool, “The Individual, Auto/biography and History in South Africa,” p. 348.

40. This statement warrants a note about commercial photography studios in Cape Town during this period—such as the Van Kalker studio in Woodstock—which catered to Indian, Colored, and black clientele. While there were outlets through which nonwhite subjects could assert their modern identities, Fischer appears to have been the most prominent photographer for those on the left. In addition to making a number of portraits of Tabata in the early 1940s, she also photographed Dora Taylor, Jane Gool (Tabata’s wife, who was active in the Teachers’ League of South Africa), William H. “Bill” Andrews (chairman of the Communist Party of South Africa’s Central Committee), Betty Radford (editor of Cape Town’s leftist newspaper, the *Guardian*), Ray Alexander (Jack Simons’s wife after her divorce from the trade unionist and photographer Eli Weinberg), and many others.

41. Dora Taylor, *Extended Diary, Book 1 (1940)*, Dora Taylor Papers, Personal Papers, BC1442.A2.1, University of Cape Town Libraries’ Special Collections.

42. *Ibid.* Taylor includes notes about these trips somewhat sporadically throughout her diaries from this period. In Book 2 (October 1941) she writes, “He [Tabata] goes to the Transkei every year to organize among the peasants.” In Book 4 (December 1942) she notes in the margins that their first trip to the Transkei together was for fourteen days. “The ‘trip,’ our first assignment and journey together from which all started, July (June?) 1940 to the Transkei. He [Tabata] was meant to contact individuals.”

43. Taylor was extremely cautious about what (and how much) information she included in her diary entries in case her journals were ever confiscated by the South African police. Her journals from the 1940s onward are clearly missing pages which she removed after the National Party came to power in 1948. In Book 11 (which covers the period from June 1950 to March 1951) she writes that “the pressure of the time, the ever sharpening pressure of the new nationalist (fascist) laws increase our sense of responsibility. To destroy, or not to destroy, even my diary and our few letters, let alone hide the literature of the movement, B’s writing, his correspondence. My first thought is for him who has no protection, like ourselves, from police brutality.” On the outside cover of this same book she later noted: “The letters I destroyed, leaving only a few extracts. The political dangers were all around him [Tabata]. To express feeling itself was to add to that danger.” Fischer appears a number of times in the fragments that remain of Taylor’s diaries and is most often referred to as “Anna.” Dora Taylor Papers, Personal Papers, BC1442.A2.1, University of Cape Town Libraries’ Special Collections. Tabata’s “diaries” are more akin to date books and can be found in the UMSA/I. B. Tabata Collection, Diaries and Biographic Material, BC925.C, University of Cape Town Libraries’ Special Collections.



*Fischer. Untitled. Ca. 1941–45.
Courtesy of Social History Collections,
Iziko Museums of South Africa.*

Taylor describes in her journal about these trips—meetings with groups of men, conversations with workers in their homes, visits to schools, etc.—but there is little else that concretely ties her lens to her female comrade’s pen at this time.⁴⁴ Although whether Fischer may have physically worked alongside Tabata and Taylor in the rural areas remains unknown, their interventionist intentions for the images she made there were almost certainly aligned.

In the same year that Fischer began visiting the reserves, for example, Taylor had turned to Trotsky’s *Literature and Revolution* (1924) and his more recent 1938 co-authored essay on a “free revolutionary art” to address what she believed was the “problem of the artist” in South Africa.⁴⁵ “It is futile to state the problem as one of

44. Dora Taylor, “Notes on the Transkei, 1940—On My First Journey with IBT During W. War 2,” Dora Taylor Papers, Personal Papers, BC1422.A1, University of Cape Town Libraries’ Special Collections. As neither Taylor nor Tabata appear in any of the photographs Fischer took in the rural areas, it is more likely that she made the majority of these excursions on her own rather than with the group. Out of the hundreds of negatives from these trips that have survived, however, there are four that contain the presence of another white woman, presumably one of Fischer and Gordon’s closest friends, the Marxist Fanny Klenerman. For more on Klenerman, see Veronica Belling, “‘More than a Shop’: Fanny Klenerman and the Vanguard Bookshop in Johannesburg,” *South African Jewish Affairs* (Pesach 2017), pp. 15–22.

45. Dora Taylor, “Literature To-Day: The Problem of the Artist” (1941), unpaginated, Dora Taylor Papers, Literary Criticism, BC1442.G2.2, University of Cape Town Libraries’ Special Collections.

choice between aloofness from the struggle, preserving the liberty of the artist's individual soul, and becoming the servant of a party, commanded to wield a mighty weapon of paper and ink for forging the revolution," she writes.⁴⁶ "That is to suffer from delusions of grandeur. And it is not Marxist."⁴⁷ If "art can become a strong ally of the revolution only in so far as it remains faithful to itself," as Trotsky argued, "how will it do that?"⁴⁸ "As I see it," she contended, "the problem of writing becomes the problem of living. The artist *must* choose. Aloofness from the struggle is



*Fischer. Untitled. Ca. 1941–45.
Courtesy of Social History Collections,
Iziko Museums of South Africa.*

impossible, ignorance is inexcusable, and impartiality is treachery."⁴⁹ Given Fischer's pointed stance on the war, it is quite obvious that she was neither aloof, nor ignorant, nor impartial to the events that were unfolding around her. While her inclination to visit South Africa's rural areas during this period was almost certainly driven by her shifting politics and the new relationships she was forging with members of the WPSA, the fact that many of the Union's white artists had looked to the reserves and its residents for their subject matter also no doubt helped to direct her lens. Her position within Cape Town's leftist bohemian social milieu, in other words, suggests that both her politics and the artistic precedent set by her contemporaries lay behind her impetus to create these images—photographs that, as we will see, were markedly different from the so-called Native Studies that were being exhibited in South Africa's bourgeois sitting rooms and fine-art salons.

Although no writing exists by Fischer on the subject, close friends of hers vehemently critiqued the ways in which South Africa's white artists were portraying those who had been designated as "other" by the state. In a 1935 article titled "The Black

46. Ibid.

47. Ibid.

48. Ibid.

49. Ibid.

Man and His White Artist,” for example, Frederick Bodmer—a professor of German studies at the University of Cape Town and chairman of the WPSA’s Spartacus Club—had railed against white artists and their romanticized depictions of black life in the Union.⁵⁰ The South African artist “never echoes in the least the Native as we know him from the factory, the police-court, and the petrol-pump,” he wrote.⁵¹

His exact genesis and habitat are rather difficult to state. Maybe the artist actually catches him where he is said to exist in the raw, unharmed yet by the wiles and vices of white civilization. Then he develops him in the purifying medium of his creative vision whence our canvas-native emerges full of that shining glamour and unaggressive dignity which so much enhance the charm of the South African drawing-room.⁵²

Like his fellow members of the WPSA, Bodmer condemned artists who emphasized notions of beauty over “social reflection” and who obscured the realities of contemporary African experience in order to better decorate their parlors.⁵³ Such art, he argued, made objects out of subjects and was antithetical to the type of cultural work that was necessary for the creation of a free society.

Although Bodmer was explicitly addressing the work of white painters in his piece, similar aestheticizing trends were also prevalent in the realm of photography. In South Africa, photographers such as Alfred Martin Duggan-Cronin had built distinguished careers on their ethnographic images which were extolled by anthropologists for their veracity and celebrated in the Union’s art salons for their artistry.⁵⁴ Duggan-Cronin’s photograph of two Tsonga women in Limpopo and

50. Bodmer was a highly influential Swiss philologist and linguist who left South Africa for the United States after UCT’s German department hired a “truculent Nazi” as its chair. Despite the rich intellectual and political life Bodmer led in Cape Town throughout the 1930s, he is now perhaps best remembered as Noam Chomsky’s predecessor at MIT. In the late 1970s, Dora Taylor returned to her journals from this earlier period and added an explanatory note in the margins next to one of her mentions of “Anna”—“Fischer, Bodmer’s friend,” she scribbled. In a later entry she writes that it was Bodmer who first introduced her and her husband, James, to the “club” and to Cape Town’s Trotskyist social and political circles. See Dora Taylor, *Extended Diary*, Book 7 (June 1946–48) and Book 14 (written in retrospect while returning to her earlier diary entries in 1976), Dora Taylor Papers, Personal Papers, BC1442.A2.2, University of Cape Town Libraries’ Special Collections. For more information on Bodmer and his social circle in Cape Town, see Baruch Hirson, “Ruth Schechter: Friend to Olive Schreiner,” *Searchlight South Africa* 3, no. 1 (August 1992), pp. 61–62.

51. Frederick Bodmer, “The Black Man and His White Artist,” *South African Opinion*, January 25, 1935, p. 15. My special thanks go to Corrine Sandwith for providing me with a scan of the only remaining copy of this article. For more information, see Corinne Sandwith, “The Work of Cultural Criticism: Re-visiting *The South African Opinion*,” *Alternation* 20, no. 1 (2008), pp. 38–70.

52. Bodmer, “The Black Man and His White Artist,” p. 15.

53. *Ibid.*

54. Duggan-Cronin’s images were lauded as exemplary not only by other photographers but by the Union’s politicians, such as Jan Smuts, who recognized their usefulness. While his photographs could be viewed in his De Beers-funded Bantu Gallery in Kimberly throughout the 1930s and 1940s, they were also widely circulated throughout the Union in exhibitions and in a series of eleven volumes that were published between 1928 and 1954. For more on Duggan-Cronin, see Michael Godby, “Alfred Martin Duggan-Cronin’s Photographs for ‘The Bantu Tribes of South Africa’ (1928–1954): The Construction of an Ambiguous Idyll,” *Kronos* 36 (November 2010), pp. 54–83.



Alfred Martin Duggan-Cronin.
Top: Tsonga (Shangaan) Women at
Thabina, Limpopo.

Bottom: Xhosa Mother and Child.
Ca. 1919–39.

Courtesy of the McGregor Museum, Kimberley.

portrait of a Xhosa mother and child, for example, are emblematic of the thousands of primitivizing images he produced in the rural areas between 1919 and 1939, a period in which black South Africans were being legislatively stripped of both their land and their rights.⁵⁵ As Michael Godby and others have noted, by omitting all references to labor or hardship in the reserves, the celebrated photographer's work endorsed "the myth of tribal Africa" and projected a deafening silence about the political climate in which it was produced.⁵⁶ Despite his medium's truth claims, Duggan-Cronin and the majority of his contemporaries were uninterested in depicting the lived realities of black South Africans.⁵⁷

Over the course of Fischer's first decade in South Africa, photography exhibitions, reviews, and articles published in local journals continued to build on Duggan-Cronin's work and the Union's deeper legacies of racist colonial imagery. By the 1940s, a visual lexicon had been firmly established for how white photographers were meant to depict their black subjects—as timeless, romanticized types devoid of agency. Complementing these photographers' constructions was their politically charged use of a soft-focus pictorialist aesthetic that, Godby writes, contributed to "a sense of nostalgia, as if one were actually looking at figures from the past."⁵⁸ Returning to Bodmer (who unintentionally employed the language of the darkroom in his article), we can see how Duggan-Cronin and his colleagues quite literally "developed" their subjects "in the purifying medium of [their] creative vision."⁵⁹ Although the images they displayed in the Union's photography salons as "Native Studies" represented little more than politically expedient racial fan-

55. In 1936, the Native Land and Trust Act further dispossessed black South Africans of their land and more firmly established the "Homelands" as reservoirs of cheap black labor for white farmers and industry. It was largely because of this act that members of the WPSA began organizing in the rural areas.

56. Godby, "Alfred Martin Duggan-Cronin," pp. 76–78. In his critique of white artists' fictionalized depictions of black South Africans, Bodmer writes that "what is even more striking about this modern version of the 'noble savage,' is the fact that nobody has ever caught him in the act of working, unless by working we mean the balancing of a calabash. Presumably he lives in some remote and tremendously fertile land where human beings need neither toil nor spin." "To put it differently," he writes, "it is an art that knows nothing of menial toil because the artist works within and for a privileged class which is not interested in the process of production." Bodmer, "The Black Man and His White Artist," p. 15.

57. Throughout the 1940s the majority of South African ethnographers and anthropologists used photography to artificially construct and affirm tribal and racial typologies. Some, however, such as Ellen Hellman, sought to escape the artificial confines of the ethnographic present and to document the lived realities of the Union's African population. For a consideration of the photographs Hellmann produced to accompany her fieldwork during this same period, see Marijke du Toit, "The General View and Beyond: From Slum-yard to Township in Ellen Hellmann's Photographs of Women and the African Familial in the 1930s," *Gender and History* 17, no. 3 (November 2005), pp. 593–626.

58. Godby, "Alfred Martin Duggan-Cronin," p. 63. For more information on how this aesthetic operated politically in South Africa throughout the 1950s, see Phindezwa Mnyaka, "From Salons to the Native Reserve: Reformulating the 'Native Question' through Pictorial Photography in 1950s South Africa," *Social Dynamics* 40, no. 1 (2014), pp. 106–21.

59. Bodmer, "The Black Man and His White Artist," p. 15.



*Fischer. Untitled. Ca. 1941–45.
Courtesy of Social History Collections,
Iziko Museums of South Africa.*

Africans—it would be misguided to situate the work she produced during these years within the trajectory of “Native Photography.” Given her project and her aesthetic, it is more productive (and appropriate) to instead consider the ways in which her photographs engaged critically with the genre. While Fischer at times fell back onto problematic visual tropes—images of women carrying babies on their backs, or of older women wrinkled with age, for example—her photographs do not suggest a romanticized longing for a mythical primitive other.⁶¹ Quite the opposite. Rather than reflecting a desire to salvage a vanishing, supposedly “authentic Africanness,” her pictures collectively reveal her interest in the hybrid subjectivities that were increasingly being expressed due to the spread of industrial capitalism and the state’s imposition of a migrant-labor system. Fischer did not mourn the processes of urbanization taking place in the rural areas, nor did she seek to hide the urban signifiers that marked her subjects as modern. Indeed, store-bought jackets, fashionably tilted fedoras, and the like frequently appear in the portraits she made in the Transkei and Ciskei. In contrast to her South African

tasies, the visual arguments these fantasies put forth were powerful. By situating black South Africans outside of historical time, white photographers effectively denied them their modernity and, in turn, their right to be included within the consensus of the modern nation-state. Ultimately propounding the segregationist ideology that led to apartheid, their depictions of black South Africans as premodern “noble savages” supported claims by the South African Right that those who were indigenous to the Union were too “uncivilized” to belong to it.⁶⁰

This said, although Fischer imaged similar subjects—rural black South

60. Godby, “Alfred Martin Duggan-Cronin,” pp. 77–78.

61. Fischer’s archive of negatives also contains images of black South Africans wearing traditional attire. Her photographs, however, are markedly different from those produced by her pictorialist colleagues, and there is no evidence that she printed them during these years, perhaps because she was aware of how they might be read.



*Fischer. Untitled. Ca. 1941–45.
Courtesy of Social History Collections,
Iziko Museums of South Africa.*

woman and not the one that she ultimately chose to print. When seen alongside the other pictures Fischer made in this same session, what may have initially seemed to be a quickly but carefully constructed shot soon reveals itself to be the first in a dynamic series of portraits. Having seen Fischer approach her from across the field, the woman in these frames pauses from her work and moves to stand upright. Turning toward the young photographer, she leans her head against the wooden handle of her hoe with a slight smile. After a few noticeably awkward pictures in which she and Fischer seem to have been communicating, she becomes more settled, if not confident. Placing her head just in front of her tool, she focuses her expression, furrows her brow, and sets her gaze to determinedly meet the camera's lens.

As is the case with the majority of the photographs Fischer made in South Africa's rural areas during these years, her archive relates no information about this woman other than what is contained within these few extant frames. Considering the exposures that ultimately led to her final portrait, however, gives us insight into this particular photographic encounter and allows us to tentatively explore notions of agency that were no doubt complicated by the different facets of these women's identities. As a left-leaning German Jew, Fischer related to her black subjects quite differently than her more conservative white contemporaries. While political alliances had been forged between Jewish refugees and black, Colored, and Indian South Africans in Cape Town, the extent to which these were recognized in the reserves is unknown, though surely

colleagues, the Weimar photographer did not use her "creative vision" to craft a "print-native" full of "shining glamour," but instead mobilized her lens to depict an image of life in the reserves that others had first softened and then glossed over.⁶² "I'm not a landscape photographer," Fischer stated later in her life in reference to this earlier work, "and my pictures are not pretty, they're strong."⁶³

Returning to the photograph that she made of the now-anonymous woman in a field, we can begin to see how Fischer responded to, and attempted to make visually manifest, the political policies of the leftist faction with which she was then associated. Notably, this image is the first of nine that she made of this

62. Bodmer, "The Black Man and His White Artist," p. 15.

63. "Pictures from an Exhibition . . . 'Faces in Streets and on the Land,'" *Rand Daily Mail*, November, 1, 1984, p. 1.

limited.⁶⁴ With this in mind, it is important to acknowledge the fact that, although Fischer had been racialized by the Nazis and forced to flee Germany, those she met in South Africa's rural areas would have almost certainly perceived her—at least initially—as white and therefore capable of commanding the privileges that whiteness afforded. Without further information about this woman or how Fischer may have known her, this exchange, and the final image that resulted, tell us more about the photographer's intention than her subject's. In

64. Numerous articles in the *Guardian* addressed these alliances. See, for example, J. A. La Guma, "Against Segregation: United Front Wanted," and the anonymously written articles "The Nationalist Petition" and "Nazification" in the paper's January 13, 1939, issue. The *Cape Standard* also ran articles addressing the proliferation of anti-Semitic Nazi propaganda in the Union and calling for the political unification of Jews and non-Europeans. See, for example, "Coloured Views on German Riots," *Cape Standard*, November 15, 1938, p. 1, and "Segregation the Only Way Out: Jews Blamed for Demonstration," *Cape Standard*, April 4, 1939, p. 7.



*Fischer. Farmer's Wife. Ca. 1941–45.
Courtesy of Social History Collections,
Iziko Museums of South Africa.*

Fischer's last frame, this now-anonymous woman stands as a symbol of South Africa's black peasantry, a figure of the class that Tabata and the Union's Trotskyists had hoped to mobilize for the permanent revolution. It is this last image, marginally cropped, that Fischer ultimately decided to print—a portrait that is more agitational than complacent and that showcases the “aggressive dignity” Bodmer had argued was missing from the Union's white bourgeois drawing rooms.⁶⁵

Although Fischer took hundreds of photographs in South Africa's rural areas, the negatives that exist in her archive are accompanied by very few corresponding vintage prints. Indeed, only one print of the last image in this particular sequence is known to have survived. While it is possible that this portion of her oeuvre has simply been lost, it is more likely, given the expense of materials and the precarity of her financial situation during these years, that she was extremely selective about the photographs she chose to produce. That said, while the force of this portrait emanates from the firm resolve of her subject's facial expression and direct engagement with the viewer, it is also undeniably strengthened by the young photographer's framing and performative work in the darkroom. Trained in Weimar Germany, Fischer had brought with her a set of aesthetic conventions that diverged from those being celebrated in the Union's conservative photography salons. Rather than follow her South African colleagues in their attempts to echo and compete with painting, she chose to locate her practice in a tendency that was true to her medium and the particular qualities it afforded. Although she would later (misleadingly) be touted in the press as the Union's “direct link to the Bauhaus,” her modernist aesthetic quite blatantly set her work apart from that being produced by her South African contemporaries—with one exception.⁶⁶

Born in 1914, the same year as Fischer, Constance Stuart Larrabee had also studied photography in Europe in the 1930s. After completing her advanced studies at the Bavarian State Institute for Photography in Munich, Larrabee traveled through Europe on holiday and returned to Pretoria in June 1936, shortly before Fischer arrived in Cape Town as a refugee. Although both women visited southern Africa's rural areas during the same period and with the same cameras, they looked through their lenses with markedly different eyes. In the late 1930s and early 1940s, Fischer and Larrabee unapologetically broke from the pictorialist visual grammar that had become codified in the Union's fine-art photography salons. *How* they mobilized their shared photographic style, however, was ideologically at odds. Examining the work that these women produced separately but contempora-

65. Bodmer, “The Black Man and His White Artist,” p. 15.

66. Philip Todres, quoted in Shirley de Kock, “Time for a Retrospective: Picture-Perfect Portraits,” *Cape Times*, 1997, newspaper clipping in a private collection. Reference to Fischer being affiliated with the Bauhaus is also made by Anne Taylor in her article “Fascination with Faces,” *Cape Argus*, June 8, 1984, p. 15. Although Fischer certainly knew of the Bauhaus and was living in Berlin when it moved there from Dessau in 1932, there is no evidence that she attended the school.

neously to one another in the rural areas affords an opportunity to explore how the remnants of the New Realism (and its accompanying political ambiguities) continued to be employed after the collapse of the Weimar Republic. More importantly, however, it forces us to contend with how these aspects were variously translated into a South African context that was similarly grappling with the rise of white nationalism.

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Natives are the most photogenic people. They are a really marvelous medium for photography. Their skin reflects the light so well.

—Constance Stuart Larrabee,
“Talk of the Town,” *Pretoria News*, July 1942

Constance Stuart Larrabee is perhaps South Africa’s best-known mid-twentieth-century photographer. In addition to working as a photojournalist for *Libertas* magazine and becoming the Union’s first female war correspondent, she was featured by Edward Steichen in his seminal exhibition, *The Family of Man* (1955), and has, for decades, been touted as a pioneering artist. The breadth and complexity of her archive, paired with her tight control over how her photographs were discussed during her lifetime, have led to certain aspects of her work taking precedence over others in the scholarship to date.⁶⁷ Motivated by a sense of responsibility to her practice as a whole, as well as to the contemporary political ramifications of her positions, I return to an earlier period in Larrabee’s career that has yet to be adequately addressed—namely, the time she spent studying abroad in Germany and the images she produced shortly after she came back to South Africa. While critically examining this time in her life is important to the construction of a more accurate revisionist feminist history, it is also crucial to better understanding Fischer’s position and the photographs she was making on the continent during these same years.

67. In her essay on Larrabee, Brenda Danilowitz notes that “just as she controlled the framing of her images, Larrabee throughout her life quite narrowly controlled what was beyond the frame—the disposition, display, and discussion of her work.” In a footnote to this statement she provides a poignant example of the photographer’s concern with, and control over, the interpretation of her images. Having been commissioned to write a catalogue essay for the exhibition *Constance Stuart Larrabee: Time Exposure* (1995), Danilowitz produced a piece in which she had “attempted to place [Larrabee’s] work in the context of South African history of the period.” Her essay, however, was withheld from the catalogue by the Yale Center for British Art after Larrabee demanded that it not be published. “It is extremely politically oriented which appalls me,” Larrabee noted in correspondence about pulling Danilowitz’s essay. “I am totally A-political and always have been.” “Constance Stuart Larrabee’s Photographs of the Ndzundza Ndebele,” pp. 73–74, p. 90. Copies of Danilowitz’s original essay and discussions about its censorship can be found in Constance Stuart Larrabee Manuscript Collection, Temporary Folder 62, Eliot Elisofon Photographic Archives, Smithsonian National Museum of African Art.

Like Fischer, Larrabee was introduced to photography at a young age by her mother, who bought her her first camera. In 1933 she left Pretoria to study photography, first in London until 1935 and then in Munich until 1936.⁶⁸ Over the course of her training in Germany, she shed most of what she had learned during her commercial-studio apprenticeships in England and embraced a photographic realism that emphasized a more straightforward approach to form. When she arrived in Munich to begin her studies at the Bavarian State Institute of Photography, Larrabee was twenty-one years old and eager to immerse herself in the social, cultural, and political life of her new city. Her familiarity with Afrikaans helped her to learn German quickly, and she soon became friends with the other members of her class, which, she wrote to her mother, comprised nine men and three women.⁶⁹ During her training at the institute, she became quite close to her teacher, Rudolf Müller-Schönhausen, a well-known portraitist among Nazi circles who appears to have taken a personal interest in her.⁷⁰ “I am full steam ahead with portraiture now and Müller is really very good to me,” she wrote in a letter to her mother on December 17, 1935.⁷¹ “They say I am his favorite pupil.”⁷²

In addition to relating her attitudes toward her developing photographic practice and relationship with Müller, the dozens of letters that Larrabee wrote to her mother while she was abroad help give shape to her personal and political

68. Larrabee relates her reasons for wanting to leave England and pursue her studies in Germany over a series of letters she sent to her mother during this period. She was drawn not only to the innovative photographic techniques being explored in Berlin and Munich but also to the prospect of being internationally trained, which she (rightfully) believed would raise her status when she began her own practice. In her letters, she seems entirely unfazed by the prospect of living and studying in a Nazified Germany. “I told [Aunt] Prue about Germany yesterday and she is a good sport,” Larrabee wrote to her mother on August 8, 1935. “She thinks it’s quite OK except that she is scared of Hitler, but that is all bosh.” Constance Stuart Larrabee Manuscript Collection, 1933–36 Personal Correspondence, Folder No. 326, Letter No. 28, Eliot Elisofon Photographic Archives, Smithsonian National Museum of African Art.

69. Constance Stuart Larrabee Manuscript Collection, 1933–36 Personal Correspondence, Folder No. 326, Letter No. 37 (September 10, 1935), Eliot Elisofon Photographic Archives, Smithsonian National Museum of African Art.

70. In an interview with Scott Wilcox for her retrospective exhibition at Yale, Larrabee discusses her training in Germany and states that her teacher “Herr Müller” was “also anti-Hitler.” While it is possible that he may have had personal reservations regarding the Third Reich, there is nothing to support her claim that this was the case. That Müller signed private letters he wrote to her with “Heil Hitler!” suggests that Larrabee knew where his sympathies lie and was intentionally dishonest about them later in life. See Scott Wilcox, “Interview with the Photographer,” in *Constance Stuart Larrabee: Time Exposure* (New Haven: Yale Center for British Art, 1995), pp. 9–24, and Constance Stuart Larrabee Manuscript Collection, Letter from Müller from 1936, Temporary Folder 88, Eliot Elisofon Photographic Archives, Smithsonian National Museum of African Art.

71. Constance Stuart Larrabee Manuscript Collection, 1933–36 Personal Correspondence, Folder No. 326, Letter No. 50 (December 17, 1935), Eliot Elisofon Photographic Archives, Smithsonian National Museum of African Art.

72. Ibid.

positions during these years. In her letters she describes attending Nazi rallies and celebrations, expresses excitement at seeing Hitler during his visit to Munich that November, and relates details about a number of dates she went on with members of the SS, one of whom gave her a copy of *Mein Kampf*.⁷³ Somewhat unsurprisingly, Larrabee found the racial attitudes in Hitler's Germany similar to those at home. Indeed, the Nazi ideologies that she encountered in Munich seem to have only reinforced the segregationist attitudes she had been introduced to while growing up in a predominantly white-run South Africa. In a letter dated January 21, 1936, for example, Larrabee writes:

I have been to Carnival the last two Saturday nights, once with the SS and last time with a student from Marion's class—a Russian. . . . The life here is more like that of S. A. Old Müller says I have imagination enough to get on so I hope it's true. We have a Turk in our class, he looks quite white but I find it hard not to be patronizing when I talk to the poor thing!!⁷⁴

Although they cannot be given the attention they deserve here, her letters are dense with information that helps shed light on the prejudices she harbored during these formative personal and professional years.

While studying with Müller, Larrabee spoke with him about her intention to open her own photography studio in South Africa when she returned, a prospect that he enthusiastically supported. “[He] said he is going to help me as much as he can,” she wrote, “and we are going to do only portraiture now until I leave.”⁷⁵ As can be seen from the book of portraits Müller published of Hitler's “Alte Kämpfer” shortly after Larrabee left Munich, her teacher was, in addition to being

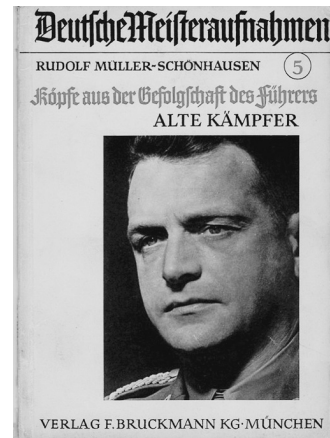
73. Shortly after she arrived in Munich, Larrabee wrote to her mother: “The teacher [Müller] criticizes our work each day and he has liked mine best so I hope I continue to improve. . . . People shake hands here everytime they see you and everywhere instead of saying Good morning, etc. we say Heil Hitler it is really very inspiring. They say he is coming here in November so I hope I see him as I am a fervent admirer of him.” Constance Stuart Larrabee Manuscript Collection, 1933–36 Personal Correspondence, Folder No. 326, Letter No. 37 (September 10, 1935). See also Folder No. 327, Letter No. 10 (January 13, 1936), Eliot Elisofon Photographic Archives, Smithsonian National Museum of African Art.

74. Earlier letters that she wrote from London express her disbelief at being courted by a man who in South Africa would have been designated as nonwhite. In July 31, 1935, she writes: “By the way the editor of that paper is of course an Indian and he thought he could get off with me. You would think they would know about the color bar in S.A. . . . Wouldn't I look a fool slinking round with an Indian. Don't get excited. I would not.” See Constance Stuart Larrabee Manuscript Collection, 1933–36 Personal Correspondence, Folder No. 327, Letter No. 11 and Folder No. 326, Letter No. 26, Eliot Elisofon Photographic Archives, Smithsonian National Museum of African Art.

75. “Müller told me yesterday [that] I shall be successful in S.A.,” Larrabee reported to her mother a month and a half later. “I nearly hugged him.” Constance Stuart Larrabee Manuscript Collection, 1933–36 Personal Correspondence, No. 327, Letter No. 4 (December 31, 1935) and Folder No. 327, Letter No. 16 (February 18, 1936), Eliot Elisofon Photographic Archives, Smithsonian National Museum of African Art.

a Nazi, a fervent proponent of the New Realism. “Following the laws of painting, photography took a wrong path and relied on half-measures,” he wrote in the introduction to his photo book.⁷⁶ “Communicating reality, that’s photography!”⁷⁷ In February 1936, Larrabee sent a few of the photographs she had made with Müller to her mother. “You will see they are rather straightforward but technically you can see every hair and you have no idea how hard it is to do that,” she wrote.⁷⁸ “I think you will agree I have learnt a lot here.”⁷⁹

Like his contemporary Albert Renger-Patzsch, whose photo book *Sylt, Bild einer Insel* was published by Bruckmann Verlag in the same propagandistic series as his own, Müller paid great attention to “the structural effect of surfaces” and sought to produce photographs that emphasized the clarity of form through attention to line, light, texture, and tone.⁸⁰ His advice to his young protégée—his “pearl,” as he once referred to Larrabee—was that she must become “as good as possible technically” while she was in Germany “and then develop [her] style in S. A.”⁸¹ When she returned to the Union in 1936, this is precisely what she did. Unlike Fischer, who had arrived in Cape Town penniless, Larrabee returned to her affluent family in Pretoria, where she opened what would become the first of two studios. In a photograph taken of her in the early 1940s we find her posed in the doorway of her professional storefront, wearing a fashionable polka-dot dress and a hip-length jacket. To her left is a closely cropped photograph of flowers reminiscent of those made by Albert Renger-Patzsch, to her right, a portrait of Captain Geoffrey Long, and immediately behind her one of the “Native Studies” for which she would become well known.⁸²



Rudolf Müller-Schönhausen.
Portraits of the followers of the
leader: old fighters. 1937.

76. Rudolf Müller-Schönhausen, *Köpfe aus der Gefolgschaft des Führers: Alte Kämpfer* (Munich: Bruckmann Verlag, 1937), n.p. Tobias Ronge briefly discusses this photo book in *Das Bild des Herrschers in Malerei und Grafik des Nationalsozialismus: Eine Untersuchung zur Ikonographie von Führer und Funktionsbildern im Dritten Reich* (Berlin: Lit Verlag, 2010), pp. 332–33.

77. Müller-Schönhausen, *Köpfe aus der Gefolgschaft des Führers*, n.p.

78. Constance Stuart Larrabee Manuscript Collection, 1933–36 Personal Correspondence, Folder No. 327, Letter No. 16 (February 18, 1936), Eliot Elisofon Photographic Archives, Smithsonian National Museum of African Art.

79. Ibid.

80. Müller-Schönhausen, *Köpfe aus der Gefolgschaft des Führers*, n.p.

81. Constance Stuart Larrabee Manuscript Collection, 1933–36 Personal Correspondence, Folder No. 327, Letter No. 16 (February 18, 1936) and Letter No. 5 (January 7, 1936), Eliot Elisofon Photographic Archives, Smithsonian National Museum of African Art.

82. This portrait of Long was used as the cover of the November 1942 (vol. 2, no. 12) issue of *Libertas*, a liberal Smuts-supported journal launched by T. C. Robertson in December 1940. Larrabee began working as a photojournalist for *Libertas* in 1944.



*Constance Stuart Larrabee, Pretoria, South Africa, ca. 1940.
Courtesy of Eliot Elisofon Photographic Archives,
National Museum of African Art.*

In the immediate prewar years, Larrabee, like Fischer, had become friends with a number of South Africa's avant-garde artists. Shortly after she returned to the Union, she began accompanying her modernist colleagues—namely, Alexis Preller and other Pretoria-based members of the New Group—on their day trips to the nearby “Native Reserves,” where they sought artistic inspiration.⁸³ In 1941, the same year that Fischer began visiting the Transkei and Ciskei to depict the lived realities of black South Africans, Larrabee traveled to Basutoland (now independent Lesotho) with her Rolleiflex. Inspired by the success of Duggan-Cronin's ethnographic work and heeding Müller's earlier advice, she applied the technical training she had received in Germany to the primitivizing genre of photography that had found prominence in South Africa. It was with this set of images that she had taken in 1941 and exhibited in Cape Town, Pretoria, and Johannesburg in

83. Danilowitz, “Constance Stuart Larrabee's Photographs of the Ndundza Ndebele,” p. 74. John Pepper also discusses these excursions in “Grey Areas and the Space of Modern Black Art,” in *Art and the End of Apartheid* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2009), pp. 1–40.

1943 that Larrabee fully introduced herself to the Union as a fine-art photographer.⁸⁴

Drawing on Duggan-Cronin's earlier work, Larabee put forth a revised version of his project that reaffirmed a modernist nationalist formula built on racist colonial clichés.⁸⁵ In what is probably her best-known photograph from this lesser-known series, for example, Larrabee depicts three sparsely clad children as they presumably play around the main stalk of a large aloe. Taken from a low angle, her photograph juxtaposes the plant's body and those of the boys against a cloud-filled sky in such a way that it becomes at times difficult to know exactly where the plant's limbs end and theirs begin—her image arguably presents these three boys not as beings *in* nature so much as physical extensions *of* it. In line with her white South African contemporaries, Larrabee depicted her black subjects as if they existed in an ahistorical natural world separate from the one they themselves inhabited. While her pictorialist colleagues employed a soft-focused aesthetic that harked back to the early days of photography, however, her prints' stark contrasts, crisp lines, and clarity of detail explicitly marked them as modern. Mobilizing the training she had received from Müller, the young



*Larrabee, ca. 1943.
Courtesy of Eliot Elisofon
Photographic Archives, National
Museum of African Art.*

84. Larrabee held a small exhibition of forty photographs in Pretoria shortly after she returned to South Africa in 1936. Two years later, she put together a joint show with her friend Yolanda Friend at her photography studio. While these two exhibitions received coverage in the local papers, Larrabee's Basuto photographs were the first to travel beyond Pretoria to South Africa's other major cities. They were shown at the Argus Gallery in Cape Town in March 1943, and then at the Gainsborough Galleries in Johannesburg in October of that same year.

85. Larrabee was almost certainly familiar with the regional photographic studies being produced by Albert Renger-Patzsch and his contemporaries during this period. Notably, her mentor's photo book, *Köpfe aus der Gefolgschaft des Führers*, was published by Verlag Bruckmann in 1937 as part of a larger propagandistic series which also included Renger-Patzsch's *Sylt, Bild einer Insel*.



Larrabee. Basutho (Lesotho). 1941.
 Courtesy of Eliot Elisofon Photographic
 Archives, National Museum of
 African Art.

velous medium for photography” and narrowly framing any reading of her work within a purely aesthetic discourse.⁸⁷ Her emphasis on her subjects’ (and her photographs’) supposedly apolitical “beauty” noticeably echoes earlier declarations by proponents of the right-wing New Objectivity who used what Walter Benjamin critically referred to as “modish” techniques to “[turn] abject poverty itself . . . into an object of enjoyment.”⁸⁸ As a photograph of her Pretoria storefront from 1943 reveals, it was precisely as “objects of enjoyment” that Larrabee marketed these particular photographs. In her studio’s display case she exhibited examples of her portraiture alongside a selection of her “Native Studies,” which her (presumably white) customers could order in various print sizes. Following her exhibition of these photographs in Cape Town at the Argus Gallery, Larrabee told a reporter for the *Cape Times* that she intended “to make an ornamental photographic collection of all other South African natives, Zulus, Swazis, and others—and also the natives who come to the towns.”⁸⁹ And she did.

photographer crafted a falsified vision of reality under the guise of objectivity, one that told her viewers that her black subjects, though present in 1943, did not exist there. “Not all people exist in the same Now,” Ernst Bloch had written in 1932, and it is the racialized notion of this—the idea propounded by segregationists that Africans were “premodern” and therefore ineligible for citizenship—that Larrabee’s “Native Studies” ideologically sustained, if not bolstered.⁸⁶

As Brenda Danilowtiz cogently argues in her consideration of the images Larrabee made of the Ndebele, the South African photographer cared little about the social and political contexts of her black subjects, choosing instead to view them as a “mar-

86. Ernst Bloch, *Heritage of Our Times*, trans. Neville and Stephen Plaice (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), p. 97.

87. Danilowtiz, “Constance Stuart Larrabee’s Photographs of the Ndundza Ndebele,” p. 71, pp. 88–89. Constance Stuart Larrabee, “Talk of the Town,” *Pretoria News*, July 1942. Multiple copies of this clipping are held in the Constance Stuart Larrabee Manuscript Collection, Folder 44, No. 904, Eliot Elisofon Photographic Archives, Smithsonian National Museum of African Art.

88. Walter Benjamin, “The Author as Producer,” pp. 94–95.

89. Larrabee, quoted by Alan Nash in “The World Goes by . . . Basuto Studies,” *Cape Times*, March 6, 1943. Clipping included in Constance Stuart Larrabee Manuscript Collection, Folder 44, No. 922, Eliot Elisofon Photographic Archives, Smithsonian National Museum of African Art.



*Constance Stuart's Storefront in Pretoria, ca. 1940.
Courtesy of Eliot Elisofon Photographic Archives,
National Museum of African Art.*

Despite breaking from the pictorialism that was so revered during this period in South Africa's salons, Larrabee's "ornamental" photographs of black subjects were well received by a viewing public unfamiliar with the aesthetics and tenets of the New Photography.⁹⁰ Although the South African photographer had published a short piece on the subject in a small Pretoria circular shortly after she returned from Munich, modernist ideas about photography had gained little traction in the Union.⁹¹ It was not until May 1941, for example, when the left-leaning South African literary journal *Trek* published a three-part series on modernism, that certain aspects of the "Nuwe Saaklikheid," as it is referred to in Afrikaans, were first presented to a

90. Ibid.

91. Larrabee's one-page article "Photography as an Art" can be found in the 1938–39 pamphlet *Pretoria: A City of Culture*, issued by the Pretoria Center of the South African Society of Music Teachers. Copies can be found in Folder 44, No. 915 and 916, Constance Stuart Larrabee Manuscript Collection, Eliot Elisofon Photographic Archives, National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution.

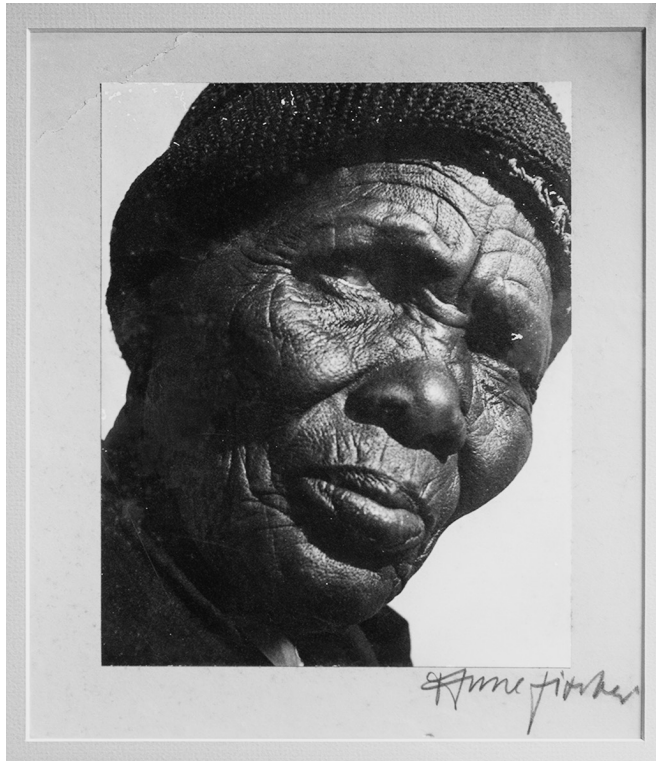
(slightly) broader South African audience.⁹² Authored by an anonymous critic under the nom de plume “Margadant,” these three roughly one-page articles were among the first to introduce modernist ideas about photography into this particular context. While Margadant touched briefly on photomontage in the first of these short pieces—including reproductions of Hannah Höch’s 1930 *German Girl* as a “Slegte voorbeeld” (“bad example”) and Wim Brusse’s 1935 cover for J. Huijts’s *Nieuwe mensen in Moskou* as a “Goeie voorbeeld” (“good example”)—the very real political ambivalences of the “Nuwe Saaklikheid” remained unaddressed. Given the lack of information in Fischer’s archive regarding the work she produced in the Transkei and Ciskei, any conclusions as to how her more left-leaning imagery may have been publicly received are necessarily tentative. Although some of her prints found their way into the private collections of South Africa’s leftist political stalwarts—friends of hers, mostly—she did not exhibit the photographs she made in the rural areas commercially in the years leading up to the advent of apartheid. That these particular images remained outside the larger public’s purview during this period is less a reflection of her intention, however, and more a product of the Union’s political climate and her circumstances.

During these years, Fischer was far less commercially successful than her bourgeois counterpart in Pretoria. While Larrabee was running a bustling studio and had toured exhibitions of her work throughout the country, Fischer was, at this point in the early 1940s, still photographing clients in the apartment she had shared with her first husband and developing her prints in her bathroom. Photographs she had made alongside Herzberg years earlier still remained to be printed, and the cost of materials for the projects she hoped to pursue was exorbitant for a woman of her class.⁹³ Given her precarious financial situation during these years, the question of what she chose to print, and how, takes on a particular poignancy that may have otherwise been lacking had she had access to more substantial capital. That said, Fischer had almost certainly seen—or, at the very least, read reviews of—Larrabee’s Basuto “Native Studies” when they were shown in Cape Town in 1943. Although there is no information in her archive to this effect, it is possible that the success of Larrabee’s exhibition had left the young exilic photographer unsure as to whether or not there would be a market for the sorts of images she made if she were to print them.⁹⁴ Although both women mobilized a degree of domestic sentiment in their work,

92. See Margadant, “Modernisme of Nuwe Saaklikheid?,” *Trek*, May 9, 1941, p. 16; Margadant, “Funksionalisme in die Kuns,” *Trek*, May 23, 1941, p. 18; and Margadant, “Die Nuwe Boukus,” *Trek*, June 6, 1941, p. 14. I say “slightly” broader because these articles were published only in Afrikaans.

93. Other Weimar women photographers who had sought refuge in Cape Town—such as the Bauhaus-trained Etel Mittag-Fodor—cited the expense of photographic materials in the Union as being one of the reasons they ultimately gave up their practice. For more information on Mittag-Fodor and other exilic women photographers in South Africa during this period, see my previously cited forthcoming essay.

94. If Fischer did not come to this conclusion on her own, she was surely brought to it by Bodmer, who begrudgingly acknowledged that the commercially successful work of South African artists “in no way leads” but “merely reflects prevalent interest and tastes.” “If it rebelled,” he writes, “it would not be bought and hung. It would be ignored and scorned. Most probably it would be banned from public exhibition.” “The Black Man and His White Artist,” p. 15.



*Fischer. Untitled. Ca. 1941–45.
Courtesy of Mary Simons.*

Fischer's gaze was arguably less palatable to a white South African audience than Larrabee's.⁹⁵ A strong admirer of Käthe Kollwitz, she chose, in contrast to Larrabee, to print photographs that depicted the weathered hands of workers and the unflinching faces of proletarian mothers, images that were hardly suitable for the white bourgeois drawing rooms Bodmer had earlier critiqued for showcasing fictionalized "canvas natives."⁹⁶ In a colonial context grappling with the rise of white nationalism, black dignity was, unsurprisingly, unmarketable.

That not all members of South Africa's Left were able to differentiate between the left- and right-wing versions of the New Realism, however, can be

95. My understanding of Larrabee's "innocent eye" and how she mobilized domestic sentiment in her work has been immeasurably influenced by Laura Wexler's scholarship on late-nineteenth-century white American women photographers. See Wexler, *Tender Violence: Domestic Visions in an Age of U.S. Imperialism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

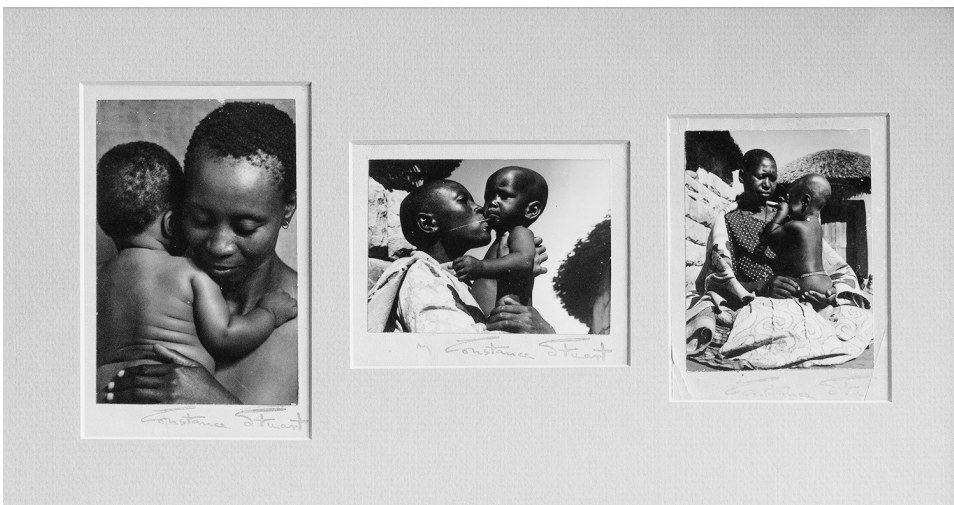
96. Bodmer, "The Black Man and His White Artist," p. 15. Kollwitz's deeply empathetic depictions of proletarian life were celebrated in South Africa's oppositional press and popular among Cape Town's Left during this period. Fischer personally owned a portfolio of Kollwitz's prints, for example, as well as a number of publications on her life and work. Notably, Jack Simons and Ray Alexander exhibited one of Kollwitz's 1921 self-portraits in their home alongside their photograph by Fischer.

seen in the fact that some of its most prominent members—such as Ray Alexander and Jack Simons—owned prints by both women.⁹⁷ In their home, the couple displayed three small photographs Larrabee had taken in Basutoland in 1941 of two mothers and their children beneath an assertive portrait of an older woman Fischer had made while traveling through the rural areas during this same period. In such a pairing the domestic sentiment of Larrabee's photographs counterbalances the aesthetic force of Fischer's larger portrait—a tightly cropped version of an image she had burned and dodged in her darkroom for greater effect.

Unlike the woman in Fischer's photograph, who looks up and out of the frame with her brow furrowed, in all three of Larrabee's smaller prints her subjects were directed to avert their gaze from her camera so as to invite the spectatorial privilege of their intended white viewers.⁹⁸ In Larrabee's archive, duplicate prints of the image on the far left bear the title *Black Madonna*, suggesting that she

97. Ray Alexander was a Latvian Jewish émigrée, staunch communist, and active trade unionist. In the mid-1930s, she served as secretary of the Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA) and later became one of the founders of the Federation of South African Women. After divorcing the trade unionist and photographer Eli Weinberg, she married Jack Simons, a communist and lecturer in African studies at the University of Cape Town. The couple's later joint political activity against the apartheid state led to their individual banning and subsequent life in exile.

98. In an article that was written about her exhibition of these images, the author stated, "[Larrabee] never had any difficulty in getting them to pose, she got on so well with them. Perhaps they understood she really liked them and was not merely condescending. Miss Stuart says that anyone who really knows the natives knows immediately whether a photograph of one is self-conscious or not." The condescension is palpable. To read the article in its entirety, see "Talk of the Town," *Pretoria News*, July 1942, Constance Stuart Larrabee Manuscript Collection, Folder 44, No. 904, Eliot Elisofon Photographic Archives, National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution.



Larrabee. Untitled. 1941.
Courtesy of Mary Simons.

intentionally arranged her subjects so as to echo iconic Western depictions of Christian motherhood.⁹⁹ Understanding the South African photographer's reliance on this deep-seated sentiment is key as it allowed her to not only dehistoricize her contemporary subjects but to appear well intentioned while doing so. By extricating her work from any social or political context and emphasizing the formal and aesthetic "beauty" of both her subjects and her prints, Larrabee was able to imbue her images with a flexibility that Fischer's more politically pointed photographs lacked. It would seem that she already knew in the early 1940s what Allan Sekula (echoing Benjamin) would remind us of decades later—that "only formalism can unite all the photographs in the world in one room, mount them behind glass, and *sell* them."¹⁰⁰

It was precisely the "unifying semantic regime of formalism"—that "universalizing system of reading" that, Sekula writes, "neutralizes and renders equivalent"—that enabled these two women's photographs to sit comfortably alongside each other despite the fact that they, and their respective work, were politically and ideologically at odds.¹⁰¹ The realization that her photographs could be so easily neutralized is, I would like to suggest, in part what would lead Fischer to begin work on a new project with her Trotskyist comrade Dora Taylor—a photo book that would allow the pair (if only momentarily) to anchor Fischer's images to a particular politics in the months leading up to South Africa's 1948 elections. Although beyond the scope of this essay, draft manuscripts of their ultimately unpublished project reveal not only their awareness of the power of the visual but their keenness to mobilize it propagandistically at a pivotal moment in history. Despite their efforts, however, their endeavor failed and Fischer was forced to witness the ascension to power of another white-nationalist regime.¹⁰² When she did finally print and exhibit this earlier work in South Africa—first in 1975 and lastly, with the aid of David Goldblatt, in 1984—Fischer was asked why poverty had been such a recurring theme in her earlier work. At what was then the height of apartheid, she retorted that it was "perhaps [because] I have a conscience."¹⁰³ Although ultimately impotent, Fischer's conscience—no doubt marked by her leftist politics and

99. What Fischer may have titled this photograph, if anything, is unknown. Additional copies of Larrabee's *Black Madonna* can be found in Folder 20, Constance Stuart Larrabee Manuscript Collection, Eliot Elisofon Photographic Archives, National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution.

100. Allan Sekula, "Dismantling Modernism, Reinventing Documentary (Notes on the Politics of Representation)," *The Massachusetts Review*, 19, no. 4 (Winter 1978), p. 866. See also Benjamin's critique of Renger-Patzsch in "The Author as Producer," pp. 94–95.

101. Sekula, "Dismantling Modernism, Reinventing Documentary," p. 866.

102. When the National Party came to power in 1948, Fischer left Cape Town for London, where she held an exhibition of her South African work at Foyles Gallery, opened two photography studios, and remarried. While my larger project considers the time Fischer spent in England and the work she produced there while living in a state of double exile, how she mobilized her earlier photographs post-1948 is beyond this essay's purview.

103. Anne Fischer with Noreen Alexander, SABC interview for *Portfolio* (1985); original VHS recording courtesy of Wendy and Brian Lopatin.

experiences of exile—set her early work apart from that of her white South African contemporaries.

While Fischer's oeuvre affords the opportunity to explore the transnational channels of New Objectivity and insists that we expand our consideration of modernist photographic practices, it also forces us to grapple with the very real necessity of reevaluating, as Susan Sontag did in 1975, the female photographers we have made into, and subsequently upheld, as heroines. In her seminal essay on Leni Riefenstahl's sanitized rehabilitation, Sontag wrote that the filmmaker/photographer's "de-Nazification and vindication as indomitable priestess of the beautiful . . . [did] not augur well for the keenness of current abilities to detect the fascist longings in our midst."¹⁰⁴ "Without a historical perspective," Sontag continues, "such connoisseurship prepares the way for a curiously absentminded acceptance of propaganda for all sorts of destructive feelings—feelings whose implications people are refusing to take seriously."¹⁰⁵ Faced as we are again with the global rise of white nationalism and right-wing extremism, the need to recuperate earlier examples of resistance carries with it a particular sense of urgency. It calls on those who have yet to do so to critically examine the fictions we have allowed to permeate our historical narratives and to take seriously the politics of representation.

The understanding of her work that Larrabee (and Riefenstahl) first helped to craft and then proceeded to maintain throughout her life has been upheld not because it was accurate but because she had power. In a period in which facts are increasingly being disregarded in favor of political expediency, reinstating the importance of history over the convenience of fiction has become the necessary task of thinking individuals. While working to overturn these fictions may not safeguard us against thoughtlessness, the process can help to showcase how ill-equipped our complacency on certain fronts has left us to address the challenges of our present. Considering the work Fischer produced in the decade leading up to the advent of apartheid alongside that of her white South African contemporary reveals how easily politics can become illegible, even in the face of left-associated image-making. It points not only to the necessity of implicating history into the process of honing our visual literacy but to the very real perils of not doing so. "You seem so much my type of people, who talk my language," Fischer wrote to her stepson in 1980. "If the children don't know what I am talking about, tell them."¹⁰⁶

104. Susan Sontag, "Fascinating Fascism," in *Under the Sign of Saturn* (New York: Vintage, 1981), p. 97.

105. Ibid.

106. Anne Fischer, letter to Aart and Valerie Bijl, November 8, 1980, private collection.