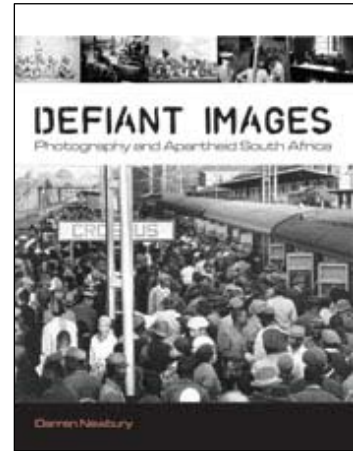


Darren Newbury, **Defiant Images: Photography and Apartheid South Africa**, Pretoria, South Africa: Unisa Press, 2009, 345 pp., \$36.60 (paperback).

Review by
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In *Defiant Images: Photography and Apartheid South Africa*, Darren Newbury sets as his goal the reimagining of the documentary tradition in South Africa “not as an authentic African tradition, whatever that may mean, but rather as a complex set of photographic ideas and practices that were self-consciously both modern and international, and at the same time thoroughly South African” (p. 3). His focus on context—intricately described and extensively researched, encompassing both political and personal stories of photographers and their work—effectively develops this theme. What results combines visual analysis with a history of culture and political ideas. This is also a living history. Although apartheid has ended, the powerful images of the struggle persist, reemerging and taking on new meanings in a country still deeply marked by the systemic violence they exposed.



Newbury's title is sensitively chosen. While he acknowledges the iconic status of particular images in apartheid history as well as South African, and international consciousness, this volume is more concerned with the self-definition of social documentary photography in apartheid South Africa. Newbury draws as much from the lived realities of photographers, curators, and subjects as he does from the images themselves. In so doing, he deftly dismantles the monoliths of “struggle photography,” post-colonialism, and the supposed African rejection of documentary photography.

Each chapter considers a small body of interrelated work by one or several photographers. This allows the author to develop a rich contextual picture, often with several different analytical components. Visual analysis is used to good effect to examine the influence of ethnographically-motivated “native photography” on photographers such as Constance Stuart-Larabee and Leon Leveson, exposing the dissonance between their professed humanism and the often naïve nativism of their images. In a later chapter on the Apartheid Museum, Newbury shows that the manner in which images are exhibited effectively draws in the viewer for a wider social context. The discussion of *Drum!* magazine is grounded in a social historical approach, with a stance to reconstructing a nuanced view of the publication and its founders that the author feels has been lacking in prior work.

Drum! is one of the most accessible media sources for urban black culture in the 1950s and 1960s, and has been extensively analyzed. The photographs that appeared in it have also been widely, if uncritically, republished. Those that are reproduced in *Defiant Images* are treated sparsely. By juxtaposing portraits of political, sporting and cultural figures of urban black life with crime-heavy American film noir-style underworld scenes, a point is succinctly made by the images themselves (pp.105, 119–123). The

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cultural construction of the images and their audience is uncovered in the tracing of a detailed social history. Using this approach, Newbury successfully distinguishes *Drum!*'s reformist/humanist bent from the structural critique of the apartheid system that would predominate in the years that followed.

The 1960 Sharpeville Massacre was a turning point for public consciousness of apartheid in South Africa and abroad. For photographers, Sharpeville led to increasing pressure to produce unavoidably political images—a shift made clear in *Drum!* photographer Peter Magubane's poignant description of his arrival just after the tragedy:

I had never seen so many dead people before you know. I got shocked, for a few moments I stood still, I couldn't move. When I started moving, I took pictures with a wide angle camera lens from a distance, and no close ups at all. (p. 161)

When Magubane returned to the *Drum!* office, he was admonished by his editor for failing to capture "pictures that would sell the paper." Ironically, the state of emergency imposed in the wake of Sharpeville prevented any of the photographs from being published in *Drum!* until several months later, but the tide of international condemnation was rising. The world had seen Sam Nzima's iconic photograph of Hector Pietersen shot by police, subsequently being carried in the arms of Mbuyisa Makhubu as his sister Antoinette ran screaming alongside. Against this backdrop, *Defiant Images* demonstrates convincingly how the non-confrontational humanist position of *Drum!* became untenable.

Newbury's chapter sequencing contrasts the ideology of *Drum!* with Ernest Cole's *House of Bondage*. *House of Bondage*, like the "struggle photography" work of Eli Weinberg and the Afrapix collective, was created from an explicit social position in the resistance movement. Cole's images are known for their unflinching portrayal of the systemic reach of "economic apartheid"—images of the work and lives of migrant laborers in the mines, black servants in white houses, and life in the segregated cities of the Group Areas Act of 1950. *House of Bondage* was banned in South Africa, and much of Newbury's analysis of the book relates to its use of the documentary style to convey a political message intended primarily for an international audience. When *House of Bondage* is revisited in discussions of the Apartheid Museum, this provides an interesting point of connection between the way the images were intended and the way they have been reused.

Although often working with similar subject matter, the photographers of Afrapix engaged in a conscious reworking of documentary photography to fit the activist ethic within South Africa. They wanted to subvert the "double act of subjugation" (Abigail Solomon-Godeau, quoted on p. 47), in which photographic subjects from marginalized social groups are further subjugated to the photographer's control of the image. This took shape in the training of township photographers, and in the self-identification of photographers with a systemic criticism of apartheid. Afrapix, in particular, was strongly aligned with the anti-apartheid movement, as is evident in the many images of protests, police violence and political funerals.

By tracing the trajectory of Afrapix through the struggle years to its eventual disbanding—the imperative of struggle photography now passed—in the 1990s, Newbury makes a powerful contextual argument for struggle photography without reducing it to an artifact of its time. Among other events, he

describes the 1982 "Culture and Resistance" conference in Botswana, from which emerged a call to reject individualism in favor of an urgent project of social documentary photography. Photographers were urged to document reality as they saw it, to "awaken the sleeping consciences of those who haven't yet realized their oppression and the danger of non-commitment to change" (McKenzie, "Bringing the Struggle Into Focus," p. 239) in "street exhibitions, advertisements for public meetings and acts of protest, and slide shows for community education" (ibid.). With its explicit and ambitiously imagined social purpose, Afrapix provides a powerful counterpoint to the postmodern cynicism of Western documentary photography in the 1980s.

The final chapter of *Defiant Images* explores the role of photography in the retelling of apartheid history with specific reference to two new museums in the greater Johannesburg area. Images of apartheid occupy a delicate position in the reconstruction of collective experience. Their creation arises from one ideology; their selection from another, and still for the viewer they retain a sense of authentic historical representation. Such constructions can be endlessly problematized. The museums, too, are not without their dissenters, and Newbury acknowledges this.

For me, however, the great achievement of Newbury's historical approach is that by exposing the explicit social and political aims of South African apartheid photography, he rediscovers an ethic of social purpose. This is evident in his powerful experiential description of the Apartheid Museum, and particularly its reuse of images from *House of Bondage*. Visiting the museum for the first time, I was deeply moved by Cole's images. They depict my own country's submerged history, not only as images, but also through the process of their creation. Their exhibition is part of a collective historical reimagining that is fraught, but essential to the reconstruction of post-apartheid South Africa.

Reading *Defiant Images* is similarly an experience of reconstruction. It is gentler in intensity and richer in detail, but equally poignant in its portrayal of apartheid, resistance and the lives of ordinary people.