

Photographies in Africa in the digital age

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In recent years, all kinds of African photographs, both on the continent and in the diaspora, have undergone a digital ‘revolution’ (Ekine and Manji 2012). Without doubt, the key driver of this trend has been the rapid, and massive, influx to practically all African countries of ever more affordable third generation/advanced mobile phone handsets, or smartphones. Even compared with earlier technological revolutions on the continent, both the speed and the scale of this spread have been simply breathtaking. For example, the establishment of transistor radio sets – the process through which personal radios became ubiquitous across Africa – occurred over the period of at least a decade and a half (between roughly the late 1950s and the early 1970s).¹ Similarly, the original mobile phone revolution – i.e. the process through which early generation/low functionality mobile phones went from being a source of novelty, to a domain for experimentation, to technologies that were routinized in everyday life, throughout the continent – took more than a decade to unfold (the crucial years being those between roughly 1999 and 2010) (Vokes 2018b). Against both of those earlier processes, the emergence of smartphones occurred over a much shorter timeframe. Between 2011 and mid-2015 alone, the number of smartphones being imported into Africa – the majority of them sub-US\$100 Android-based systems – jumped from around 10 million units per annum to almost 100 million (Tshabalala 2015), as a result of which these devices became quickly established as a common feature of everyday life. Today, more than one-third of all mobile phones in Africa are smartphones, and this percentage is set to rise to two-thirds by 2020 (GSMA Intelligence 2017).

Among their many effects, smartphones and their associated infrastructures for communication – from high-speed internet connections to social media platforms such as Facebook, Friendster, Instagram, Snapchat, Twitter and WhatsApp – have vastly expanded the possibilities for taking, storing, manipulating, circulating and displaying photographic images. Most obviously, these devices have allowed their users to produce far greater volumes of photographic images than ever before, compared with earlier cameras such as 35 millimetre cameras and even standalone digital camera units (which rely on expensive Secure Digital, or SD, memory cards to function). So smartphones have also enabled photographers to store their pictures in new ways, given these devices’ capabilities for an immediate, and straightforward, placement of digital image files into virtual folders. This contrasts with previous processes, in which storage necessarily required photographers to first develop their images into physical photographic prints, and then to sort them

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¹See Fardon and Furniss (2000), Mytton (2000) and Vokes (2007).

and locate them in some kind of physical collection. Smartphone-based software has facilitated its users to alter images much more quickly and easily than ever before, in particular via all manner of photography-focused apps, which might typically do anything from changing an image's lighting to replacing its background – all with just a few touches. Again, manipulations of this sort would have previously required lengthy interventions by a studio at the very least. Finally, smartphones have allowed their users to share photographic images in new ways, especially through online 'social media' platforms such as Facebook pages, Twitter feeds and WhatsApp groups. These platforms have allowed photographers to share their images with much wider, and more geographically dispersed, audiences than ever before, and to combine their own photos with those taken by other photographers, and/or with other kinds of images – for example, with all manner of pictures downloaded from the internet – increasingly easily. They have also enabled photographers to engage with new online formats for display, including virtual 'albums', audiovisual/multimedia formats, and visual essays in blogs and online magazines.²

Unsurprisingly, these new possibilities for the production, storage, alteration, circulation and exhibition of photographic images have in turn brought about broader shifts in photographic practice across Africa. The most obvious of these has been a general expansion in the range of places and social contexts in which photography takes place, so that it is no longer an activity particularly associated with special events and occasions (from state and church functions to life-cycle events such as births, weddings and funerals), as it was from early colonial times onwards. Following the advent of smartphones, photographic practices have become a more or less ubiquitous part of everyday life, especially among young people. An example of just how normalized they have become in quotidian life is provided by Juliet Gilbert, who describes how, for young women in Calabar, Nigeria, photography has even become a primary means of simply filling day-to-day periods of boredom and inactivity, albeit in ways that become socially meaningful over time (2018: 247–8). Another effect has been a general proliferation of, and deepening engagement with, what might be termed the 'techniques of archiving'. In other words, the new possibilities for storing digital photographic images in multiple folders and albums appear to have also generated a growing interest in the possibilities for creating an ever wider range of different kinds of photographic collection. The days when many people simply added their physical photographs to a single, undifferentiated household collection may be coming to an end. Instead, people are now much more likely to arrange their digital shots in various folders and albums, which may typically be categorized in terms of different aspects of their own past, groups to which they have belonged, or social milieus in which they have engaged, among many other criteria. A third general effect has been a growing experimentation with and innovation in practices of display. In particular, the increased possibilities for manipulating digital images, for

²See, for example, the photo essays from Africa that are published by the blog *Africa is a Country* (available online at <<http://africasacountry.com/tag/photography/>>) and online photo magazines such as *Dodho* (<<https://www.dodho.com/>>), *LensCulture* (<<https://www.lensculture.com/>>), *OkayAfrica* (<<http://www.okayafrica.com/>>) and *Zam* (<<https://www.zammagazine.com/>>).

circulating them through Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp, and for combining one's own photos with other images have resulted in users creating and disseminating increasingly complicated and imaginative types of photographic display. To cite just one example, as I write these lines I am looking at the Facebook pages of a friend in Zimbabwe who is a university student in Harare. One of the albums included displays images of the young man taken over the past twelve months; in addition to more formal studio portraits, there is a large number of images that comprise complicated photo-collages and photomontages, or that have been heavily photoshopped in other ways, to represent him in the style of an American rapper. This album also includes photos taken from other people's Facebook pages (including from those of his relatives living in Europe and the US) or downloaded from elsewhere on the internet – as is the case, for example, with several pictures of well-known American celebrity musicians. Similarly, Gilbert's article in this issue explores how young people in Calabar, in south-eastern Nigeria, regularly produce online albums that include portraits of themselves placed alongside photographs of global celebrities such as Beyoncé, Rihanna and Cristiano Ronaldo.

Yet if the emergence of smartphones has altered photographic practice in Africa, in both a narrow and a broad sense, then a key question remains as to what effect this has had on wider photographic cultures – and visual cultures in general – across the continent. In other words, how have the new possibilities of digital photography altered the broader practices, relationships and social milieus within which photographic images are embedded? The central aim of this introduction and the following articles is to explore this question in detail, based on ethnographic evidence drawn from across the continent.

One of the challenges in trying to address this question relates to the issue of how, precisely, we define 'African photographic cultures'. The first difficulty here relates to the epithet 'African', which has long been recognized as a historically, politically and morally loaded category – emerging as it did within the inter-cultural encounter of European colonial expansion (Mudimbe 1988; Comaroff and Comaroff 1997). However, even without rehearsing wider debates on that much larger subject, the difficulties of specifying precisely which element, or elements, should be considered within *any* regional photographic culture remain significant. For the authors of one of the key early collections on African photographs, *InSight: African photographers, 1940 to the present* (Bell *et al.* 1996),³ the 'Africanness' of given traditions stemmed from the identities of the photographers who contributed to them. In other words, 'African photography' referred simply to those pictures that had been taken by people who resided on the continent, or who had once lived there, or who – in relation to the diaspora – identified themselves as African. By extension, cultures of 'East African photography', 'West African photography' and so on could be defined in similar terms. However, for the editors of another seminal collection in the field, *Anthology of African and Indian Ocean Photography* (Pivin and Saint Leon 1999), such a definition ran the risk of geocentrism in that it underplayed the ways in which even the most famous of African photographers and studios had invariably been connected with, and

³This was the catalogue for the New York Guggenheim Museum's major exhibition on African photography of the same name.

influenced by, photographers working in other parts of the world – and especially with photographers from ‘Western countries’ (*ibid.*: 7). In addition, a number of the contributors to that collection, as well as various other theorists writing at around the same time, also sought to define regional photographic cultures in relation to aesthetics. This was especially marked in the scholarship and other commentary that followed the discovery of West African studio photographers such as Seydou Keïta, whose work appeared to represent a distinctively African ‘aesthetics of modernity’ (Bigam 1999; Jedlowski 2008). Yet there were other important contributions to this line of thinking as well, including, for example, the work of C. Angelo Micheli, which, in its wide-ranging survey of West African photography, showed how double portrait photographs – in which subjects are pictured in pairs, while wearing similar clothes and striking the same poses – were especially popular in cultural contexts in which there was a marked ‘collective imagery inspired by myths and practices related to *twinness*’ (2008: 66, emphasis added). Finally, a growing body of more recent work, inspired by the wider ‘material turn’ within visual cultural studies, has sought instead to define ‘Africanness’ in relation to the physical photographs themselves, and to the way in which these may operate as culturally meaningful artefacts (Vokes 2008; 2012b). The argument here – which is made more or less explicitly by different theorists – is that ‘African photographs’ refer to only certain kinds of photographic image-objects: those that have been produced in identifiably African social and material contexts (for example, Bajorek 2010; Bleiker and Kay 2007; Haney 2004; 2010); are circulated through and are engaged with as part of the kinds of domestic activities, ritual practices and exchange networks that exist on the continent (see, for example, Behrend 2003; 2012); and invoke culturally distinctive kinds of embodied sensory responses from their viewers (Kratz 2012; Pype 2012; Vokes 2015). In other words, the ‘African’ qualities of particular photographs refer less to the identity of their producers or to anything that they represent, and more to *the work that they do* as part of their being incorporated into particular kinds of life worlds. So how, then, have the new possibilities for producing, storing, altering, circulating and exhibiting photographic images that have emerged since the advent of digital photography, and its associated infrastructures for communication, changed the work that photographic images do and the effects that they produce within African life worlds?

In attempting to address this question, a second major challenge is to avoid making a simple assumption that, because digital image practices are new, they must have had a *transformative* effect on these wider social realms. In this regard, the continual repetition, both by scholars and particularly by media commentators, of the concept of an African ‘digital *revolution*’ may in fact be singularly unhelpful, precisely because this phrase implies rupture, rearrangement and radical change.⁴ Yet, as Gershon and Bell remind us, ‘when scholars of media attend to the material and historical particularities of [any] media, many recognize that “newness” is not a self-evident social category’. Instead, these scholars often end up drawing attention to ‘how people on the ground interpret and make use of the newness of their media’ in relation to ‘previously established possibilities for

⁴A recent report on Africa’s emerging digital economy by PricewaterhouseCoopers was even entitled *Disrupting Africa: riding the wave of the digital revolution* (2016).

storage, and for communicating across time, distance and with different numbers of people' (Gershon and Bell 2013: 259–60). To put it another way, just because a medium is new does not mean that it is necessarily disruptive. Instead, attention to users' ability to act as 'social analysts in their own right' (*ibid.*) may highlight the ways in which that medium has been incorporated into pre-existing processes of identity formation, regimes of aesthetics, patterns of relationality, and so on – albeit in ways that may greatly increase (or reduce) the spatial and temporal scales on which those phenomena operate.

The dangers of assuming that a new medium must necessarily be transformative are highlighted by a brief review of the trajectory of the scholarly literature on the emergence of early generation mobile phones. Much of the early academic writing on the subject, to say nothing of the media commentary, was similarly framed in terms of 'revolution'. This reflected the fact that much of the earliest research on the subject was conducted by those working within the paradigm of 'information and communications technology for development' (ICT4D).⁵ These researchers, and their associates in policymaking and development practitioner circles, had an obvious stake in emphasizing how an expansion of early generation mobile telephony might help African societies to overcome the 'global digital divide' in ways that would deliver overwhelmingly *positive* social changes. As a result, the early writings presented at times an almost utopian vision of the potential for mobile phone communications to generate increased political participation by facilitating new forms of 'civic engagement' – for example in public spheres such as radio phone-in shows and online forums (Brisset-Foucault 2018). It also outlined ways in which digital communications might engender new kinds of economic activities, additional educational opportunities, and improved health outcomes – through their ability to deliver all sorts of 'useful information'. It further emphasized ways in which these communications might advance the empowerment of marginalized groups, and especially women, by providing them with a new way of expanding their support networks.

The problem, though, was that from around the mid-2000s onwards an increasing number of empirical studies from across Africa, many of them intentionally written 'against' the ICT4D paradigm, began to demonstrate that mobile telephony was just as likely to reinforce existing social relations and structures as it was to produce radical change. In other words, more and more studies by anthropologists, geographers and media scholars began to show how, far from transforming existing political, economic and social configurations, the emergence of early generation mobile telephony was just as likely to have entrenched them. For example, Smith's work in Nigeria showed how mobile phones, by creating a new domain for communication among political and business elites, further alienated ordinary citizens from what were perceived to be closed and corrupt state and corporate networks. In so doing, they even exacerbated pre-existing political and economic divisions or tensions (Smith 2006). Slater and Kwami's study of mobile phones in Accra (2005) found that users spent much more time using these devices for engaging in the kind of 'mundane communication' they had always engaged in, rather than for accessing 'useful information' (cited in Archambault 2011:

⁵For a good introduction to the history of mobile phones and ICT4D in Africa, see Donner (2008).

446).⁶ Meanwhile, Archambault's study of mobile telephony in southern Mozambique found that mobile phone communications are just as likely to become a tool for extending control over women as for empowering them. For example, she cites one instance of a husband who, while working away from home, uses his mobile phone to 'check up' on his wife and to make sure that she is at home, which he does by making her wake up their son to put him on the line (2011: 450).⁷

Moreover, the new practices of digital photography, as I have described them above, certainly could be read in a similar way: that is, less as revolutionary, and more as a means through which users have simply extended the kinds of photographic performances, aesthetic elements and image relations that, in a sense, have always characterized African photographic engagements. However, there may nevertheless be some inherent dangers in developing such a 'counter-intuitive' reading, to borrow Archambault's phrase (2011: 453) – i.e. a reading that stresses not transformation but continuity. (This is a criticism that has also been levelled against the scholarship on early generation mobile phones.) For one thing, such an interpretation might underplay the way in which the new possibilities for photography afforded by smartphones may also become 'a source of dynamism in [their] own right', as Tenhunen puts it (2008: 531). In other words, it may understate the ways in which these new ways of producing, storing, altering, circulating and exhibiting photographic images may also produce all kinds of unforeseen or unintended consequences (cf. Postill *n.d.*). More importantly, a counterintuitive reading may also fail to capture actors' own perspectives on the subject; for them, the new photographic practices associated with smartphones certainly *are* perceived, in most instances, to be highly significant agents of change – which is precisely why they invest these new practices with such a wide range of desires, aspirations and fears for the future (which are documented at length in all of the articles collected in this part issue).

The goal, then, is to try to specify how photography's position and effects within African life worlds have been altered by the emergence of the digital age, but without reproducing a naïve view of the latter's transformative potential, and without simply repeating the kind of 'continuity thinking' that characterized some of the literature on early generation mobile telephony and that could be read into this subject as well. In the remainder of this introduction, I attempt to do this through the study of three alternative yet overlapping areas of inquiry: (1) the nexus between photographic technologies, practices and images and political power and authority in Africa; (2) the relationship between photography and situated (or vernacular) cosmopolitanisms; and (3) the practices and politics for archiving African photographs, and for conducting other research on and through them. In recent years, each of these areas has provided a rich discursive frame through which scholars have developed new histories of analogue photographs in Africa (see Morton and Newbury 2015; Newbury and Vokes 2018; Thomas and Green 2016; Vokes 2012a). The three areas have also provided the contours for nascent discussions of digital photography (see, for example, Siziba and Ncube 2015; Buggenhagen 2014; Nimis 2014 respectively). Most importantly

⁶Molony has made a similar point, based on his work in Tanzania (2008: 339–40).

⁷See also Burrell's work in central Uganda (2010: 238).

for my purposes here, they are all areas to which the articles collected in this volume speak – in one way or another. As such, they are all fertile areas through which to examine the intersections between photography and African life worlds, and to explore how these have been reconfigured by the coming of the digital age.

The nexus between photography and political power and authority in Africa can be traced back to the emergence of photographic technologies and practices on the continent. Not only was photography initially spread by European explorers, missionaries and colonial administrators, among others, but it quickly became a key tool for colonial governance, one that was used ‘both to symbolize the power differential in the colonies, and to bring it into visible order’ (Edwards cited in Peffer 2009: 242; cf. Sharkey 2001: 180; see also the seminal Hartmann *et al.* 1999). This stemmed from the way in which, in colonies and protectorates throughout the continent, administrations frequently employed or commissioned photographers to depict ‘official state events, civic life, examples of “progress” and portraits for helping categorize individuals’ (Buckley 2010: 147). Colonial authorities also patronized photographic studios extensively to achieve the same ends (Behrend and Wendl 1998). For example, in Côte d’Ivoire during the early decades of the twentieth century, the administration’s requirement that all citizens needed to have an individual ID or ‘passport’ photograph incorporated within their official documentation in order to participate in any of the ‘modern’ institutions of the colonial state – from schools and courts to hospitals and prisons – eventually resulted in studios primarily focusing on the production of these kinds of photographs (Werner 2001).⁸ Later, a number of British colonial administrations in particular set up their own dedicated government photographic services or sections.⁹ These services were invariably housed within the Ministry of Information, and they photographed everything from state ceremonies and government development projects to the territory’s subject populations – widely circulating the resulting photographs both within the colony itself and more widely. Moreover, in Uganda’s case at least, this nexus between state power and photography further deepened in the postcolonial era, reaching its zenith during Idi Amin’s rule (1971–79). Reflecting Amin’s fascination both with his own image and with all things media (Peterson and Taylor 2013), following his accession to power he expanded the state’s official photographic section in order to document his every move, and he also encouraged a cadre of international photojournalists to document the state’s activities as widely as possible. Following the expulsion of the Ugandan Asians in 1972, many previously Asian-owned photographic studios were handed over to military men, while the central Kodak agency – which, in theory at least, had a monopoly over the processing of all colour film – was placed in the hands of a senior army officer (Vokes 2012b; this issue). Indeed, so marked did the state’s control over photographic production become that I have even documented a number of cases in which the authorities arrested people simply for being in possession of photographs that were not officially sanctioned.

⁸See also my discussion of ID photographs in colonial Uganda (Vokes 2012b: 210–12).

⁹On examples from the Southern Cameroons and Uganda, see Schneider (2018) and Vokes (2018a) respectively.

However, if colonial – and, later, postcolonial – administrations tried to control photography from the outset as a means of extending their authority, then so too were their attempts invariably incomplete from the very beginning. In other words – and as a growing body of recent scholarship has highlighted – their efforts to dominate the photographic domain were always and everywhere undermined by other kinds of photographic practices that were going on at the same time, and that in many cases were antithetical to their state-building projects. For example, Liam Buckley's work in the Gambia has highlighted how, from the start of colonial rule, government-employed photographers would frequently also conduct their own private or commercial photographic work 'on the side' – the products of which often presented a quite different view from the official line on the nature of the colony's 'progress' (2010: 147–8; see also Haney 2010). Similarly, Jennifer Bajorek's work in Senegal has shown how, throughout the late-colonial period in particular, state-sponsored studios also produced their own images, which later became central to a nascent iconography of African nationalism (2010). Meanwhile, in Uganda, and into the postcolonial period, the state's attempts to forge a dominant genre of official photography were increasingly undermined by the growing availability of privately owned cameras, which, combined with informal (at times clandestine) networks for processing film, eventually became the dominant means of photographic production in the country. Moreover, throughout Africa, all of these trends only deepened over time, as government-sponsored photographers and officially sanctioned photographic operations and agencies had to compete with ever growing numbers and types of professional photographers, commercial studios, and privately owned imaging devices.

In this context, then, the emergence of digital photography could again be cast as simply an extension, or acceleration, of trends that have been present ever since photography first arrived in Africa. Indeed, following the arrival of smartphones in the late 2000s, one might even have predicted that so widespread would these trends soon become that the very concepts of 'official photography' and state control of the photographic domain would soon be things of the past. After all, even at that stage, it was already obvious that smartphones would effectively turn anyone with access to a handset into a photographer, would render many of the previous practices and functions of studios obsolete, and, by making cameras and photography a ubiquitous part of everyday life, would vastly expand Africa's 'total photographic archive' – to such a degree, in fact, that no one genre, or set of genres, 'official' or otherwise, could possibly dominate it. The fact that these technologies also provided access to social media and the internet, and the whole world of images that these entail, further underlined this point. Also, by the late 2000s, it was becoming clear that smartphones, given their new possibilities for image editing and for accessing social media and the internet, would further destabilize a genre of official photography in other ways as well: in particular, by allowing state-sponsored images to be reworked and circulated more quickly and easily, in potentially subversive ways. In one particularly poignant example, Siziba and Ncube (2015) describe how, in 2015 in Zimbabwe, attempts by the ruling party to represent Robert Mugabe in terms of a 'heroic' iconography were undermined when an image of the president falling over became rapidly reworked into a series of satirical memes, which were then widely disseminated over social media. In a slightly different example, Agbo

(this issue) traces how, in Nigeria, both federal and state governments' efforts to represent their spending programmes as successful may be frequently subverted by even the most visually mundane of images on social media. For example, he records how the official claims made for several quite disparate initiatives were undermined by the multiple re-emergences on Facebook of one image of a group of Nigerian schoolchildren using breeze blocks as desks (an image that was widely interpreted as representing government wastage in the education sector).

However, to stop there would be to miss a number of key ways in which the advent of smartphones, and digital photography in general, has also provided African governments and their agents with entirely new possibilities for depicting their state-building projects (and for circulating the resulting images); for visually classifying their populations; and for exerting more general control over the photographic domain. In particular, and as my own article in this issue explores at length, the advent of digital photography, while eroding governments' control of photography in general, has also provided states with highly privileged access to international advertising agencies, which are capable of producing visual projections of states' future developmental and political goals, using the most sophisticated of post-photographic techniques and computer-generated imagery (CGI). In addition, governments may also have privileged access to the media through which these projections are then disseminated, including public billboards, newspaper inserts, and other forms of political advertising. Indeed, since the genesis of digital photography, states' uses of these techniques and media have become so widespread that images of planned infrastructure projects, housing developments and cityscapes are now ubiquitous throughout Africa, especially in urban spaces. Such futuristic imagery may even be said to constitute a new public visual culture today, one that is clearly recognizable across the continent (see Vokes, this issue).

A nexus between photography and cosmopolitanism in Africa can also be traced back to the emergence of photographic technologies on the continent. In particular, following the arrival of the first photographic studios – which were established in ever greater numbers in urban settlements all around the African coast from around the 1860s onwards, and later in inland areas as well (Behrend 1999: 162; Hayes 2007; Vokes 2008) – these establishments quickly became key sites in which cosmopolitan 'theatricalities' could be indulged. By this, I refer to the ways in which, from the very beginning, both studio photographers and their subjects commonly made use of various poses, props, clothing, make-up and – most importantly of all – backdrops, to portray sitters in ways that referenced imaginaries of other peoples, social milieus and places elsewhere in the world (i.e. forms that were removed from the realities of their own lives). As many scholars of early African studio photography have long documented, it soon became typical for these sitters to be pictured in ways that referenced their European 'others'. As a result, much early African studio portraiture became saturated with the visual symbolism of Victorian-era European (upper-class) domesticity, with subjects dressed in lounge suits and crinoline dresses, posed on sofas and chaises longues alongside vases of flowers, draped curtains and hat stands, and in front of backdrops depicting European stately homes, manicured gardens and country parks. Equally importantly, these studio images often also conveyed an image of European familial relations, in which an (imagined) nuclear family was central, and in which the generations were both distinct and

hierarchically organized. The former effect was achieved through the selection of people to be included in the portrait, the latter through the symmetrical placement of adjacent generations within it.

However, it was during what is sometimes referred to as Africa's golden age of studio photography, from roughly the early 1950s to the 1980s (Wendl 1999: 147–8; Peffer and Cameron 2013), that this relationship between photography and cosmopolitan imaginaries became most fully established. During this period, which coincided with the classic era of 'modernization' – which itself brought a rapid expansion of international air travel, as well as an influx of 'Western' goods and global brands – African studios became increasingly playful in their incorporation of international cosmopolitan styles and motifs in their *mises en scène*. In particular, as Tobias Wendl has documented in his work on the studio traditions of the period in West Africa, it became increasingly common for studios' costumes to reference international fashions, and for their painted backdrops to depict 'an idealized society of mass consumption' (Wendl 1999). Photographers frequently captured their subjects in front of artistic scenes of international airports, fantastic cityscapes and 'bourgeois domestic interiors', to borrow Pinney's phrase (2011: 122), complete with the latest television and hi-fi equipment and other domestic appliances, and with global drink brands (such as Fanta Orange, Guinness and Bell's whisky; see Wendl 1999: 155). It was not only in West Africa that these practices became commonplace. For example, Heike Behrend's work on photo studios in Likoni, Mombasa has shown that in this East African setting the use of backdrops to depict scenes and symbols of imaginary international travel (aeroplanes, cruise ships and faraway places) and social mobility (the accoutrements of 'bourgeois' domestic life) was also typical (Behrend 2000).

Yet the nexus between photography and cosmopolitanism in Africa emerged not only from the semiotics of photographs that were produced in the continent's studios. From around the late 1970s, it became increasingly shaped by emergent practices of album-making on the continent as well. For example, in Uganda, from around this time, it became more and more common for wealthier people in particular not only to create 'personal' photograph albums as a means of constructing narratives about 'the modern self', but also to insert within these albums photographs of faraway places, of international political leaders and other celebrities, and of global news media events (Vokes 2008). In so doing, album-makers frequently generated new kinds of cosmopolitan imaginaries, given that the pictures they inserted – at least in all the examples I have ever seen – not only invariably showed places that the album-maker had never been to, people they had never met and events in which they had not been directly involved, but also combined these in creative and unusual ways. For instance, I worked on one personal photograph album from the early 1980s in which the album-maker placed, alongside images of himself and his family, photographic images of European capital cities, American fashion models, and an international meeting of African leaders. Initially, most of these inserted pictures tended to be made up of images the album-makers had cut out of newspapers, magazines or other publications (this was the case, for example, with all the pictures that were inserted in the album just described). However, these practices became so popular over time that a sizeable nationwide market grew up in photographic prints of exotic locations, global celebrities and major events. For instance, I keenly recall that, following the attacks on

the World Trade Center in New York on 11 September 2001, practically every market in Uganda had at least one stall – and often many more – selling photographic prints of the burning buildings and of people connected to the events, including Osama bin Laden. So large did the national market in photographs of bin Laden become around this time that it eventually became something of a national embarrassment, following which the authorities moved to close it down.

Once again, then, in this context the emergence of digital photography could be seen as simply extending a trend that goes back at least to the establishment of the first studios on the continent. In a sense, the young people who now use their smartphones to depict themselves as global pop stars or sports icons, including by striking the relevant poses and wearing the relevant garb, by photoshopping their portraits against backgrounds of the Los Angeles skyline or Arsenal's Emirates Stadium, and/or by then placing these images in virtual albums that also include pictures of Beyoncé, Rihanna or Cristiano Ronaldo, are thus engaging in the same kinds of photographic theatricalities that people in Africa have always adopted. However, there are also key ways in which the advent of the smartphone has created entirely new possibilities for the exploration of such cosmopolitan identities. Specifically, the fact that the new digital photographic universe is primarily internet-based has afforded new opportunities not only for constructing such cosmopolitan imaginaries but also for incorporating them into new, 'real-time' modes of communication with people living elsewhere in the world (see Carrier, this issue; cf. Miller 2015). Neil Carrier's article (this issue) on the photographic practices of Somalis living in Nairobi's Eastleigh Estate explores the way in which the real significance of images, for the actors involved, lies less in what they show than in how they may be circulated via WhatsApp, in ways that enable people to participate in global conversations – and through these to create and maintain global social networks, especially with members of the Somali diaspora living elsewhere. For instance, in one of Carrier's most touching examples, he documents how it is primarily through the sharing of images over the messaging app that one of his respondents is able to maintain a sense of connection with his wife and child (who are now living in Minneapolis) and, through this, to relate to the reality of his family's now transnational existence.

Finally, the past twenty-five years or so have also seen the burgeoning of scholarly interest in the practices and politics of archiving African photographs, and in conducting other kinds of research on and through them (Morton and Newbury 2015). The origins of this growing interest may be traced to a series of parallel developments in history, art theory and anthropology, which began to converge from the early 1990s. In history, this new interest stemmed from a symposium on 'Photographs as Sources for African History' that was organized by David Killingray and Andrew Roberts at SOAS University of London in 1988 – the collected papers of which were published shortly afterwards (1989) – and that defined a new programme for visual historical research in Africa. It achieved this by providing one of the first comprehensive overviews of the history of photography on the continent, by offering the first systematic appraisal of surviving colonial, missionary and museum photographic archives, and by introducing a series of debates about the potential of photographs as a source of evidence for African history (debates that have become increasingly focused in the years since). In art theory, the emerging interest followed the establishment of new publications such as the French journal *Revue Noire* and the American *African Arts*, which carried

many articles on this subject from early on. Finally, in anthropology, the renewed interest in photography initially stemmed from a general re-evaluation of the discipline's own photographic archives, including from Africa, especially following the publication of Elizabeth Edwards' *Anthropology and Photography, 1860–1920* (1992). That collection looked at a range of historical ethnographic photography – including nineteenth-century anthropometric portraiture, which had been produced as part of a Victorian 'evolutionary' anthropology – that had long been rejected by the modern discipline of *social* anthropology as being overtly racist. However, what the contributors to Edwards' collection were able to show is that by developing 'counter-readings' of these photographs – ones that move beyond their producers' (presumed) intentions – it was possible to recover some historical traces of the people depicted, and to understand how their lives had become sutured into the anthropological project (see Banks and Vokes 2010).

However, over time, as scholars in all of these areas wrote more expansively, the boundaries between these various disciplines became increasingly blurred, and the wider field of scholarship on African photographic archives became more *inter-disciplinary* in character. Yet, for all scholars working in this field, a core set of methodological concerns were held in common: namely, (1) a need to identify additional surviving archives of African photographs (both in public and private holdings, and both on the continent itself and in institutional repositories elsewhere in the world); (2) a desire to preserve those archives once they had been discovered (this desire was given greater urgency by the often fragile state in which many archives in Africa were found, and in many instances resulted in photographic material being removed from the continent to museums and other institutions in Europe and North America); and (3) an inclination to try to make these archives accessible to as wide an audience as possible, especially among publics in Africa itself (i.e. among the very 'source communities' from which the pictures had come, as a means for both encouraging people to engage in their own visual heritage and for involving those communities in scholarly research projects). As Haney and Schneider have documented (2014), from roughly the late 1990s and throughout the early years of the 2000s, these combined imperatives generated new, and often highly transnational, networks of multidisciplinary scholars, museum curators, archivists, art photographers and commercial dealers and publishers, and led to a veritable explosion in the number of projects and initiatives aimed at identifying, saving, making accessible and in some cases bringing to market Africa's extraordinary photographic heritage.

Again, the coming of digital photography, and its associated infrastructures for communication, has accelerated and deepened all of these processes. On the one hand, the emergence of websites, web-based publications and Facebook groups dedicated to historical (and other) photographs from Africa has made it easier for scholars to identify surviving archives (especially private archives); in many African countries, these have turned out to be far more extensive than any of us working in the field would have imagined. On the other, advances in cameras and their associated technologies – especially advances in the capacity of memory cards and hard drives, and in internet-linked database capabilities – have made it increasingly easy not only to digitize vast numbers of photographic artefacts (including negatives, slides and prints) but then to make these available over the web. And although the latter development has generated a host of new complexities over issues of photographic copyright specifically and image

'ownership' more broadly, it has undoubtedly also had an extraordinarily wide-ranging effect in re-connecting publics across Africa to elements of their own visual heritage (Nimis 2014). This, in turn, has produced a spectrum of affective responses from those publics, including everything from anger at aspects of the colonial photographic record to fascination with some of the technological advances of the early postcolonial period, and to excitement at reconnecting with events and processes in which people themselves took part – at least some of which have been captured within academic research projects. For example, my own respondents in south-western Uganda had exactly these responses – and others besides – to a collection of some 650 historical images that I recently took to the field on my iPad and used in a photo-elicitation exercise.¹⁰ Finally, if the period from the late 1990s onwards witnessed the emergence of new transnational and interdisciplinary networks of scholars, museum curators, archivists, art photographers and commercial dealers, then the digital revolution has greatly extended these and has allowed for far more extensive, and technically sophisticated, projects and initiatives to be conducted on an international scale and in real time (Haney and Schneider 2014).

However, once again, if we were to stop at these observations, we would also miss a number of ways in which the advent of smartphones, social media and the internet have radically altered the distribution of power within – or rather the political dynamics of – this wider 'research ecology'. Specifically, and as a number of the articles in this issue document (especially those by Carrier and Graham), whereas once the outputs of the transnational research networks described above would have been significantly influenced by, and in some cases entirely controlled by, 'Western' scholars, museum curators and archivists, among others – and as other kinds of relationships assembled around researching photography in Africa would also have been – this is simply no longer the case. Of course, in many instances, Western scholars remain in a privileged position – defined in terms of their mobility, funding and institutional associations. Nevertheless, it is also the case that the advent of smartphones and the internet has significantly tempered the pre-existing power dynamics between researcher and researched that have been established 'over the last two centuries in the social sciences', as Jess Auerbach has pointed out (forthcoming 2019). Instead, as Auerbach's own work has shown, in its examination of her experiences of being blogged about by her respondents while she was in the middle of fieldwork in Angola and among the Angolan diaspora in Brazil, the new digital ecologies have created a situation in which a researcher may effectively have no control over how they are represented online, which in turn shapes how they are perceived as a researcher in the field (*ibid.*). In short, in a context in which the digital image world is increasingly becoming *the* site where 'truths are manufactured, contested and communicated', a reworking of the ways in which researchers are pictured on social media and in other internet forums significantly alters how they are positioned in the 'real' (i.e. offline) world as well. Meanwhile, Graham recounts an even more dramatic example, where a German photojournalist's naïve use of Twitter resulted in her losing all control over the meanings that attached to a photograph she had taken

¹⁰Cf. Buckley's discussion of the responses of interlocutors in the Gambia to an archive of colonial photographs that he employed within a similar set of research exercises (2014).

of some government soldiers in the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), and where disastrous consequences ensued.

In conclusion, if the past decade has witnessed a huge expansion of, and growing complexity within, global communications environments, then this has created a range of new possibilities for the production, storage, alteration, circulation and exhibition of photographic images. Yet how have these, in turn, altered the expectations that people have of photographs, and the effects that photographs actually have, within African life worlds? This is the focus of this introduction and of the articles in this part issue: to document ethnographically the work that digital photographic images do on, and through, the continent. In this regard, we must be careful not to assume that emergent intersections between photography and digitalization are necessarily revolutionary. On the contrary, as we develop our empirical studies, we realize that there is much in contemporary engagements with digital imagery that continues trends that have been present to some extent since photography first emerged in Africa. Nevertheless, as the articles gathered in this issue attest, there is still much that is 'dynamic' in the current contexts. On the one hand, the advent of the 'ubiquitous camera' (Agbo, this issue) has significantly altered the politics of photography in Africa, reworking visual economies that in some cases could be traced back to the earliest days of colonial rule. In some places, this has led to a general democratization of photography; in others, to the rise of new forms of state-controlled iconography. On the other hand, the technological developments of the past ten years have also significantly expanded the possibilities of photography as a medium for forging, and projecting, various 'projects of the self' (Vannini and Williams 2009). In particular – and as explored by a number of the articles collected here – the advent of the digital age has enabled these imaginaries to be communicated at speeds and on geographical and social scales that would have been simply unimaginable before, with effects that are both desirable (such as the internet 'fame' described by Auerbach (forthcoming 2019)) and hazardous (the controversial photojournalist described by Graham in this issue). In addition, the advent of the digital age has also produced new kinds of institutional photographic archives that in turn have generated new kinds of archival engagements, responses and contestations – in which are implicated not only academic researchers but all viewers of photographic images.

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