

BLACK SPOTS, PHOTOGRAPHIC SPECTRES

By Oluremi C. Onabanjo

Seen under a microscope or through a loupe, an offset-printed photograph is an accretion of black spots. These halftone dots form rosette patterns, swimming before the eyes, suffusing planes of white space beneath. The spots flood the field of vision, until the lens is removed, and the image becomes whole. Black spots are the matter of the photobook, the means through which pictures take form—transferred from the printing plate onto a rubber cylinder, and then again, onto the sheets themselves. Page after page, these black spots of ink fill the surfaces of the publication. Huddled close and sequenced strategically, they form a visual narrative.

On page 64, Ernest Cole defines a “black spot” accordingly:

... a “black spot” is an African township marked for obliteration because it occupies an area into which whites wish to expand. The township may have been in existence for fifty years and have a settled population of twenty-five or fifty or seventy-five thousand people. Nonetheless, if the whites so decree, it can literally be wiped off the map and its people relocated in Government-built housing projects in remote areas.

Here, black spots mark Black communities soon to be spectres. Cole’s *House of Bondage* conjures them photographically, making visible the myriad forms of violence embedded in everyday life under the apartheid system. Deftly harnessing image and text, Cole mines the grounds upon which Black life in South Africa during the twentieth century was surveilled, regulated, and subjected to forms of punitive existence. His lucid analysis and sophisticated visual grammar produces a blistering critique that reverberates not through the register of the spectacular, but rather through the relentless documentation of so-called unremarkable scenes. With each image and caption, Cole wages an undeniable case against apartheid—fully formed and solid in its manifestation. Replete with haunting

images and searing testimony, this landmark publication is one of the most important works of twentieth-century photography, and its shadow looms large in histories of photobook making.

In conceiving of *House of Bondage*, Cole was profoundly inspired by Henri Cartier-Bresson. He has said, “in 1959, something happened that changed my life. I was given *The Decisive Moment* (1952), a book of excellent photographs which showed life as it was. Later I traded this book for Bresson’s *People of Moscow* (1955).” While Cartier-Bresson’s photobooks buoyed Cole with inspiration, the weight of responsibility soon set in, and according to Cole, “I knew then what I must do. I would do a book of photographs to show the world what the white South African had done to the black.”¹ Through almost seven years of furtive photographic work, he traversed the infrastructural and architectural, spatial and social environments of the country—picturing its police, its miners, its hospitals, its schools. In structuring *House of Bondage*, Cole methodically deconstructs every aspect of racialized life in South Africa through fourteen photographic sections, each of which he introduces. These sections function poetically and politically—an iterative ode for those who have neither the luxury nor the inclination to perceive such modes as separate.

Yet *House of Bondage* itself is a fugitive object—the work of a photographer who had seen South Africa with resolute clarity and recognized the creation of his work necessitated fleeing from his country’s hold. As such, the book is as much the product of transnational subterfuge as prolonged photographic study; Cole secured a passport under the guise of making a pilgrimage to Lourdes, France, and fled South Africa for Europe in May 1966. While a good portion of his contact sheets had been smuggled out by *New York Times* journalist Joseph Lelyveld when Lelyveld was expelled from the country a month prior, Cole carried a number of prints and layout sheets with him. To avoid the confiscation of his negatives, they

were left in photographer Struan Robertson's care to be mailed to him later.²

Cole arrived in New York on September 10, 1966, having spent prior months in London, Paris, Copenhagen, and Hamburg sharing his pictures and the book dummy with interested parties at the Paris and London offices of Magnum Photos, as well as *Stern*, *Paris Match*, and the London *Sunday Times*. At the time, the breadth and depth of apartheid rendered in his pictures had been neither seen nor fully understood by those beyond the bounds of South Africa, making *House of Bondage* appealing as both a social document and a photobook in and of itself. Almost as soon as Cole set foot in the United States, Magnum's New York bureau chief Lee Jones sold the story to *LIFE* and negotiated the publication of *House of Bondage* with Jerry Mason of Ridge Press, who packaged the book for Random House.³ An introduction by Lelyveld was commissioned, though it appears Cole initially had poet Keorapetse Kgositsile (1938–2018) in mind.⁴ Kgositsile has recalled,

When Ernest came to New York, when he got the offer to put that book together, initially he got in touch with me to do the text. He wanted a South African to write the text, someone who knew clearly what informed the photographs. In fact, when the photographs were ready, and they had all been selected and so on, he gave me a copy, to start working on it . . . Then I didn't hear from him. I think he must have been a bit embarrassed when the change was made, so he never told me that there was a change. So when I found out that it was being handled differently I was a little frustrated and angry, because I was *excited!* The photographs excited me, and I was looking forward to working with him on this.⁵

While settling into the swing of life in the United States, Cole came to grips with his new environment, creating a body of work about

Black American rural and urban experiences.⁶ Grasping the palpable parallels between contexts generated deep-seated discontent, but also provided a space of solidarity and photographic affinity with his Black American peers.⁷ Notably, Cole sat in on critiques with the Kamoinge Workshop, and is remembered fondly by C. Daniel Dawson as a photographer who “knew how to reduce a photograph to its essential elements be they graphic or political, leaving us beautifully crafted living artifacts of the human condition.”⁸

In August 1967, *House of Bondage* was published in North America. Measuring 11 3/8 by 8 1/8 inches (290 by 207 mm), it spanned 192 pages and 184 photographs, enfolded into a moody, dark dust jacket that framed the book somewhat sensationally, with the tagline: “A South African Black Man Exposes in His Own Pictures and Words the Bitter Life of His Homeland Today.” Beneath, the book was bound in cream-colored linen, the title emblazoned across the top right corner, debossed in gold. The publication was printed in Italy by Mondadori Editore, prepared and produced by Ridge Press in New York, and copublished by Random House in North America and later by Penguin's Allen Lane imprint in the United Kingdom. Magnum worked in tandem to serialize the story widely throughout the world in France, the United States, Germany, Great Britain, Italy, Sweden, Norway, Finland, Denmark, the Netherlands, and Japan—referred to in distribution sets as “Being Black in South Africa.”⁹ Predictably, the book was banned in South Africa in May 1968, months after garnering rave reviews in the United States.¹⁰ Despite this formal prohibition, the book still found its way into the homes and hands of photographers throughout South Africa.¹¹

As a finished object, *House of Bondage* elegantly demonstrates the means through which apartheid submerged all aspects of life. Through a close reading of the 1967 edition's front endpapers, Sally Gaule has called attention to how within a composition where there are no physical barriers, the separation across racial

lines remains crystal clear. Here, the original endpapers serve as bookmarks to the first edition contained within (pages 30–31 and 204–5). In their place are contact sheets, which crack open Cole's staid, restrained photographic tactics, which "ask us to read below the surface of what is presented," and take on the matter and meaning of that which is made invisible.¹²

Graphically, the book is concise, yet expansive—exquisitely defined in its articulations of interminable terror. This is a testament to Cole's discipline. As Geoff Mphakati (1940–2004) has recalled, "Ernest was a very strict person. He had very strict principles, which he adhered to. He was highly self-disciplined. He was one person who was so disciplined it was frightening."¹³ The treatment of pictures in *House of Bondage* mimics the editorial layouts with which Cole was familiar in his magazine work, recalling the mid-century photo essays for which magazines such as *Zonk!* and *Drum* were well known—the latter where Cole worked as a darkroom and then layout assistant. Double-page spreads feature full-bleed images—the open maw of the ravenous apartheid machine, engulfing blurred figures of young men scrambling in their commute (cover; pages 78–79) and punctuating the steady flow of photos tiling across open sheets. Incisive captions are nestled above and alongside image pairs, trios, and tableaux, whose columns and rows transgress the midline fold across left- and right-hand-side pages.

From contact sheet to page layout, one perceives a nuanced interplay between Cole's aim to encompass as much information as photographically possible, while cultivating a particular kind of attention on the pages of the publication. As a result, the emotive force of *House of Bondage* emerges through its resistance to spectacular forms of violence, and refusal to portray the Black South African in a position of static victimhood. The images resound clearly in their renderings of life saturated by domination—signified most clearly through signage (pages 94–97). The book's title forms what scholar Hlonipha Mokoena has defined

"as among many phrases and terms that may be called apartheid's past vocabularies," which are the "ideological, philosophical, and historical analyses that were deployed during apartheid to either assert its righteousness or delineate its injustices."¹⁴ Engaging the negation of Black subjectivity as his site of photographic production, Cole revealed the paralyzing paradox at play when one's home—the place one knows best—is the root of alienation. He exposed these structures with the expressed hope of bringing about a reality wherein such a space might offer something different for Black life.

Though *House of Bondage* was a success by any measure—selling out in less than a year—and Cole garnered a name for himself in the United States, the book was out of print by the 1980s and his later work in the United States was never published.¹⁵ As is often how the history of modern and contemporary photography on the African continent has unfolded outside of its borders, Cole's work made appearances in group exhibitions where South Africa occupied a place of import. However, in the 2012–13 exhibition *The Rise and Fall of Apartheid: Photography and the Bureaucracy of Everyday Life*, organized by Okwui Enwezor in collaboration with Rory Bester at the International Center of Photography, Cole's *House of Bondage* served as a photographic lodestar for the exhibition's expansion of the horizons of twentieth-century photography, in the process exposing the field's Eurocentric comfort zone and the limited discourse produced therein.¹⁶

Beyond this intervention into histories of photography, it is important to reckon with photography as history in South Africa through *House of Bondage*. As Darren Newbury has argued, "photography provided a means of apprehending apartheid, and it is impossible imagining the cultural landscape of contemporary South Africa without [its] documentary record."¹⁷ Through the prism of Cole's life, one might detect the unfolding genres of photojournalism, social documentary practice, the power of image and text in cultivating different forms of attention, and the

social networks forged through photographic practice during the course of apartheid, as well as those fledgling years after 1994.

Therefore, to trace the making of *House of Bondage* is to move into the darkrooms of *Zonk!* and linger in the breakrooms of Jürgen Schadeberg's *Drum*. It is to rove through she-beens with Alf Kumalo, revel in the sounds of John Coltrane and Miles Davis at the editing table with Struan Robertson, tarry with Peter Magubane on fiery debates about authorship, and grasp the visual world from which the palpable terrors of the Soweto Uprising emerge—immortalized by Sam Nzima's shattering image of Hector Pieterse being carried by Mbuyisa Makhubo. As Tamar Garb describes, *House of Bondage* “represents a departure from the photographic humanism of *Drum* and inaugurates the decades of underground ‘struggle’ photography that would become a crucial component of the anti-apartheid movement.”¹⁸

In kind, Cole is the quintessential South African photographer's photographer—both conceptually, and through the making of his legacy.¹⁹ The country's twin pillars, Santu Mofokeng (1956–2020) and David Goldblatt (1930–2018), sustain strains of Cole in their approaches. Perhaps most directly attending to spatial politics, the recent publication of Mofokeng's 1986 series *Train Church* and Goldblatt's 1989 monograph *The Transported of KwaNdebele* offer intriguing corollaries to Cole's “Nightmare Rides” (pages 72–81). Both emerging from a documentary tradition akin to Cole, these photographers are revered for their wedding of rigor with empathy, and shared belief in the power of the image being irrevocably tied to the marshalling of language.²⁰ Mofokeng deploys these forms to delve deeply into the interiors of Black life across South Africa, reveling in the mercurial movements of the spirit and the soul. In turn, Goldblatt embraces spatiality as an organizing principle, working to inspect the suffocating “structure of things” within the apartheid system—its white supremacist phantom limbs extending onwards through time.

With its publication, *House of Bondage* initiated a tectonic shift in photobook-making by South African photographers, paving the way for Peter Magubane's *Black as I Am*, made in collaboration with Zindzi Mandela (1978), Goldblatt's *In Boksburg* (1982), Roger Ballen's *Platteland* (1994), Zander Blom's *The Drain of Progress* (2007), Sabelo Mlangeni's *Country Girls* (2010), Mikhael Subotzky and Patrick Waterhouse's *Ponte City* (2014), and Zanele Muholi's *Faces and Phases* (2014), among others.²¹ Whether obliquely or acutely referenced, none of these publications exist without Cole's acuity of vision, unflinching focus, and courageous commitment to the photographic medium and the photobook as a generative form.

Yet, when the Apartheid Museum opened its doors in Johannesburg, in November 2001—more than thirty years after the publication of *House of Bondage*—it marked the first time Cole's photographs were officially shown publicly in South Africa.²² In the permanent exhibition *Life Under Apartheid*, Cole's images were reproduced and mounted on large-scale sheets of dibond—floating expanses on brick walls, serving as a steely photographic passageway bathed in sunlight overhead. This was how I first encountered Cole's work: as a Nigerian immigrant schoolgirl in Johannesburg trying to make sense of a potent site of national memorialization during the country's first decade of multiracial democracy. As I write this piece in New York, the city where he died destitute and well before his time, I recall the 1968 feature of *EBONY* where Cole introduced the images of *House of Bondage*, stating “they should give readers some feeling of what it is like to be a black man in South Africa. And they may also explain why in, of all countries, I should feel somewhat at home in the United States.”²³

Whether legible through South African solidarity in the face of the eviction of Palestinian families from Sheikh Jarrah, East Jerusalem, to make way for Israeli settlements,²⁴ or heard through the collective screams of “Black Lives Matter” on the streets of Minneapolis,

Louisville, and Portland, *House of Bondage* is sobering in its continued relevance—over fifty years after its publication. This vital edition makes Cole’s indefatigable work available to a new generation of readers, and importantly, introduces a chapter of previously unpublished material culled from a cache of negatives returned to the estate in 2017 (pages 206–31). Cole had selected the chapter’s images on his contact sheets and appears to have titled it “Black Ingenuity,” but ultimately the section was cut from the first edition. Here, we encounter the section in its full glory—intimate and attentive to forms of Black South African social, cultural, and artistic expression that flourished despite apartheid, and which continue to exceed its restrictive frame.

This edition’s cover also reflects the mobility and strength of Cole’s imagery. Equally at home in the context of other publications, the picture was recently featured on the cover for Darby English and Charlotte Barat’s 2019

volume *Among Others: Blackness at MoMA*. For English, the image suggests how it “*feels* to break apartheid, even though we *know* it doesn’t, except in a small sense—albeit a small sense that matters, for making thinkable something otherwise very hard to think.”²⁵ The dynamism of the photographic composition—akin to the book itself—is rooted in its fugitivity. In an act of documentary defiance, the blurred figures attest to the possibility of Black life that can’t be contained by the strictures of apartheid. Indeed, *House of Bondage* is a manual for those reaching towards that seemingly impossible break—a counter to the inertia of unbelievable living conditions made believable. Resilient and resounding, it is an insistent affirmation of Black life in a world of sustaining structures that coax and prod, insist and disavow its possibilities. With impatience and precision, Cole’s images are a guide in movement and unending struggle—for those grasping for light, for those gasping for breath.

**HOUSE
OF
BONDAGE
BY
ERNEST
COLE**

Texts by Oluremi C. Onabanjo, James Sanders, and Mongane Wally Serote

ERNEST COLE (born in Transvaal, South Africa, 1940; died in New York, 1990) is best known for *House of Bondage*. After fleeing South Africa in 1966, he became a “banned person,” settling in New York. He was associated with Magnum Photos and received funding from the Ford Foundation to undertake a project looking at Black communities in the United States. Cole spent extensive time in Sweden and became involved with the Tiofoto collective. He died at age forty-nine of cancer. In 2017, more than sixty thousand of Cole’s negatives—missing for over forty years—resurfaced in Sweden.

OLUREMI C. ONABANJO is an associate curator in the department of photography at the Museum of Modern Art, New York.

JAMES SANDERS is a journalist and scholar specializing in South African history and politics.

MONGANE WALLY SEROTE is a renowned South African poet and writer, inaugurated in 2018 as South Africa’s national poet laureate.