

REVIEW

Julie Bonzon, *The Market Photo Workshop in South Africa and the 'Born Free' Generation: Remaking Histories* (New York: Routledge, 2024), 197pp., ISBN: 9781032411439

Founded in 1989 by the legendary David Goldblatt (1930–2018), the Market Photo Workshop, as Julie Bonzon writes in this careful exploration of the school's history and influence, 'stood in opposition to apartheid's segregation policies and was designed from its inception as a non-racial pedagogic and cultural institution'.¹ And in the years since it opened its doors, the MPW has played an important role in the history of South African photography, perhaps even eclipsing Fine Arts departments at historically white universities in influence.

The MPW's list of distinguished alumni includes internationally renowned photographers such as Zanele Muholi and Jodi Bieber, a recipient of the 2010 World Press Photo of the Year, but perhaps the largest indicator of the school's outsized reach is that it is believed that as many as 'seventy percent of South African photojournalists active today have studied in this institution, almost a third of whom were women'.² And yet despite this, Bonzon argues, there is surprisingly very little in the way of scholarship devoted to exploring 'the history and the influence of the MPW on contemporary photographic practices in South Africa'.³ With the exception of MPW's own 2002 publication, *SHARP: The Market Photography Workshop*, which features text and photographs from some of its ex-students, 'literature on this institution is almost non-existent'.⁴

Bonzon is a London-based writer and independent photography curator, and she holds a Ph.D. in History of Art from University College London. *The Market Photo Workshop in South Africa and the 'Born Free' Generation* – an assured debut scholarly work – draws on Bonzon's doctoral research but the book is not aimed at providing readers with a comprehensive institutional history. *The Market Photo Workshop* begins at the school, metaphorically speaking, and then ventures outward, mainly

1 J. Bonzon, *The Market Photo Workshop in South Africa and the 'Born Free' Generation: Remaking Histories* (New York: Routledge, 2024), 8.

2 Ibid., 8.

3 Ibid.

4 J. Bonzon, *The Market Photo Workshop*, 8.

through the work of four MPW students, to examine ‘how photographic practices are currently being reshaped and rethought in South Africa.’⁵ As signaled by the phrase ‘the “Born Free” Generation’ in the book’s title, Bonzon’s interest here is in exploring the work of the school’s new generation of photography students, and how it engages with the legacy of The Market Photo Workshop.

At the risk of undoing Bonzon’s meticulously plotted arguments, what is at stake here are changing ideas about photography, and to a degree, the role of the photographer in society. The MPW opened its doors in Newtown during the violent twilight years of apartheid in South Africa, and Bonzon argues that the school’s ‘foundation is inscribed within the 1980s and early 1990s, a moment in time when photography was widely considered a “truth-telling genre” and an important source of material articulated against the structural and physical violence of the apartheid regime.’⁶ Bonzon’s study examines how the work of the school’s new generation engages with this tradition; a tradition which for a long time held fast to ‘the assumed neutrality, objectivity and detachment of documentary photography.’⁷

A word here on the contentious nomenclature, ‘born free’, may be necessary. Bonzon acknowledges that the term is a misnomer; it is widely refuted by the generation it purports to name as a ‘strange neologism coined to signify the idea that one is “born free” of history, free of the past’⁸ simply because one did not experience apartheid at first hand. Though the phrase is misleading, it is nevertheless a useful here in establishing temporal coordinates for an intergenerational conversation. ‘The notion of a “born free” generation has been a phrase mobilised within the context of the Market Photo Workshop by documentary photographers active in the 1980s and early 1990s,’ Bonzon writes, ‘as a form of praise or a critique formulated against what the work produced by young students seems either to enhance or be “lacking”.’⁹ This relationship between the documentary photographers who were active in the 1980s and early 1990s and the new generation at the MPW, whose work they sometimes regard as ‘flamboyant’, ‘navel-gazing’, ‘imaginary’, ‘cool’ or ‘chic’¹⁰ is at the centre Bonzon’s book. It is the apparent tension between a ‘then’ and a ‘now’¹¹ that *The Market Photo Workshop* addresses.

In order to look closely at ‘how the aesthetic values inhabited by an older generation are engaged and possibly counter-acted by young students’,¹² the book is organised into four chapters, with each chapter directing our attention to ‘a body of work produced by a photography student at the Market Photo Workshop, elaborated in the context of a relationship with a mentor.’¹³ Lebohang Kganye’s astonishing series *Her-story/Heir-story* (2012–2013), Sipho Gongxeka’s *Skeem’ Saka* (2013–2014), Matt

5 J. Bonzon, *The Market Photo Workshop*, 1.

6 Ibid., 3

7 Ibid., 1.

8 P. Chigumadzi, ‘Bound to Violence: A Southern African Conversation,’ *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, 42, 431.

9 J. Bonzon, *The Market Photo Workshop*, 22.

10 Ibid., 1.

11 Ibid.

12 Ibid.

13 Ibid., 20.

Kay's *The Front* (2014–2015) and Phumzile Khanyile's *Plastic Crowns* (2015–2016) form the bedrock of Bonzon's investigation. Though the 'figure of the "successful" photographer shifted' – in the years following the political dissolution of apartheid – 'from having a highly visible profile in international newspapers and magazines as a commentator and an observer to an artistic figure in the art world',¹⁴ what emerges from Bonzon's absorbing account is that the experimental work of this new generation remains deeply socially engaged, asking questions of society and photography itself. 'The phrase "born free" is misleading', Bonzon writes. 'However, it is against the implications raised by the opposed adjective "free" that the disillusion and concerns shared by a large part of this generation take shape.'¹⁵ In other words, now, as it was then, the question of freedom is still in focus.

Bongani Kona

University of the Western Cape, Department of Historical Studies

<https://orcid.org/0009-0004-9277-240X>

¹⁴ Ibid., 8.

¹⁵ Ibid., 3.