

Watery Looking and Planetary Time

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Abstract

This photo essay explores the photographic work of Visual History students from the University of the Western Cape in the context of human and non-human relations as they stand in connection to the ocean and the Anthropocene. The photographs were taken on an annual class excursion to the coastal South African village of Pringle Bay and are in some ways a practical exploration of theoretical themes explored in the class, but also an exploration of South African space in terms of historical access. Here there is a layering of historical and climate injustice explored through the different liquid lenses or frameworks of Underwater, Horizon, Surface and Passage.

Keywords

Photography, visuality, human, non-human, Anthropocene, liquidity, oceanic, ecology, landscape.

These photographs are a collection of images taken by Visual History students from the University of the Western Cape in 2022-2023.¹ The images come from an annual photographic excursion to Pringle Bay, a small coastal village in the foothills of the Kogelberg mountain range. It is well known for its distinct *Hangklip* (hanging rock), which marks the eastern point of False Bay, and can be seen from Cape Point on the other side of the bay on clear days. This rock also marks the site of what was once a maroon slave community from about 1725 until the abolition of slavery in 1834. This group seems to have grown and waned sporadically until the 1800s, with about ‘fifty slaves that are known to have been connected to the *Hangklip* group at some stage or another’, but seemingly never more than ten individuals at a time, for ‘neither safety nor the available resources would have allowed more.’² In its first iteration it was led by Leander Bugis, and described by Robert Ross as ‘the most notorious band of runaway slaves in the history of the Cape colony.’³ This largely seems due to the group’s elusive nature, moving in and out of the central Cape Town area and largely escaping capture and clear documentation, but Ross says that the group also had a reputation as ‘social bandits in Cape Town [and that] their relation with the slaves on the farms was often that of terrorists and extortioners.’⁴ The earlier group ‘was far from being sufficiently well-established for any continuity from generation to generation to be possible,’⁵ although a later community encountered in 1800, which survived until the abolition of slavery, established a more sustainable ‘way of life that could be reproduced from generation to generation.’⁶ In relation to this later group, Ross writes that ‘a full century after the initial foundation of the *Hangklip* group, the maroon community once more breaks through the screen of historical invisibility.’⁷ There is something in this fugitivity of sight that comes through in the photographs contained in this essay.

In one sense, the photographic outing to Pringle Bay is a means of visualising and putting into practice themes explored theoretically in the Visual History classes. There has been an ongoing focus on the ocean, the non-human and the Anthropocene in the past few years, and there is a pedagogical component to the exercise in learning about the environment and encouraging new ways of seeing. This is to ask, following John Ricco’s query: ‘Can photography provide us with a way to think relations to extinction, to what is, at once, imaginable and unimaginable, such that photography might not only be a matter of leaving traces – graphic traces of light – but also a matter of the erasure and effacement of traces of existence?’⁸ But in another sense it is a practice in how to explore South African spaces when historically not everyone has had open access to them – to come in as an ‘outsider eye’. This exercise puts into play

1 This article is based on research and postgraduate teaching that has been supported in full by the National Research Foundation of South Africa (Grant Number 98911).

2 R. Ross, *Cape of Torments: Slavery and Resistance in South Africa* (Oxon and New York: Routledge, 1983), 62-63.

3 Ross, *Cape of Torments*, 54.

4 Ross, *Cape of Torments*, 61.

5 Ross, *Cape of Torments*, 60-61.

6 Ross, *Cape of Torments*, 69.

7 Ibid.

8 P. Ricco, ‘Moths to the Flame: Photography and Extinction’, in K. Coleman and D. James (eds), *Capitalism and the Camera: Essays on Photography and Extraction* (London and Brooklyn: Verso, 2021), 145.

the layering of historical injustice and climate injustice – the spatial and time depths of different kinds of inequality.⁹ In some ways these layers are blurred, and here Macarena Gómez-Barris has implemented the term ‘colonial Anthropocene’ which ‘emphasise[s] the expansive and durational destruction wrought forth by colonialism.’¹⁰ In Amber Musser’s words, for ‘Gómez-Barris, colonialism highlights the biopolitical dimensions of [environmental] exploitation, enabling one to see continuities between colonial projects of domination and contemporary manifestations of extraction.’¹¹ As Hugo ka Canham puts it, ‘Like we have to read the rock face where the Khoekhoe documented their lives before conquest, we have to read the ocean as a place that bears our histories both within and outside enslavement and colonialism. We have to recognise the power of the natural world in ordering our lives across these time scales.’¹² The ocean then perhaps requires us to look at it, and photograph it, through a ‘quizzical’ lens that is both ‘oriented to the future and historically focused’, with a sense of ‘simultaneous vision across sensorial registers.’¹³ (Ka Canham uses the notion of *ukwakumkanya* to describe this multi-temporal, multi-sensorial mode of vision.) Although this draws together different kinds of time or temporal scales, there is a sense of shared extinction, one which is also ‘manmade’. The Anthropocene describes a ‘planetary “we” as not only *impacted* by the geophysical force of climate change but *as* that self-impacting, self-reorganising, geophysical force.’¹⁴ This ‘shifts the scale at which human agency operates’¹⁵ in that, as Dipesh Chakrabarty reminds us, ‘[t]o call human beings geological agents is to scale up our imagination of the human . . . to attribute to us a force on the same scale as that released at other times when there has been a mass extinction of species.’¹⁶ Michael Richardson outlines Timothy Clark’s “derangement of scale,” which flattens or fragments ‘received concepts of agency, rationality and responsibility’ and burdens even seemingly insignificant acts in a ‘bewildering generalising of the political.’¹⁷

Many of the Visual History students have had little or no previous experience with practical usage of the camera in creating their own images in documentary or artistic ways. It is a whole new realm of creativity and way of viewing the world through the frame of the lens. The practical photography class conducted as part of the Visual History course and led by Eric Miller, previously of Afrapix collective, guides students through a series of traditional photographic exercises including still life, landscape and portraiture, but it often seems to be the Pringle Bay exercise, this *immersion* into the landscape, the environment, that helps students to find their feet and become more comfortable with a camera. Photography is a ‘dry’ medium, and

9 I. Baucom, *History 4° Celsius: Search for a Method in the Age of the Anthropocene* (Durham and London: Duke University Press), 14.

10 A.J. Musser, *Between Shadows and Noise: Sensation, Situatedness, and the Undisciplined* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2024), 90.

11 Ibid.

12 H. Ka Canham, *Riotous Deathscapes* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2023), 62.

13 Canham, *Riotous Deathscapes*, 8.

14 Baucom, *History 4° Celsius*, 92.

15 M. Richardson, *Nonhuman Witnessing: War, Data, and Ecology After the End of the World* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2024), 121.

16 D. Chakrabarty, *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2021), 206-7.

17 Richardson, *Nonhuman Witnessing*, 124.

the proximity of the camera to the water, the damp sand and rocks, can feel rather precarious – this somewhat awkward apparatus through which one must view the world, but which must be carefully handled and protected from the elements. What we have found in this exercise, however, is that although water can cloud vision or the camera lens, it can also open up interpretation. There are so many different ways we as humans relate to the sea – as surface, underwater, passage, horizon, beach, playground, archive, spiritual place – perhaps where we most viscerally come into contact with the non-human, that sense of vastness beyond ourselves, where ‘we become conscious of our own finitude.’¹⁸ Even as we try to measure the ocean’s depth in fathoms, it possesses a time and age that is unfathomable. Water can hold or carry things inconceivably heavier than what it appears to be in its amorphousness, its slippery lightness that appears to have no weight or density. It can forge paths through sedimented layers much older than itself – sand dunes, rock formations that have been built up over millennia and trees which have been rooted for hundreds of years. It can change the formation of the sand beneath itself and in so doing continually change its own course. The flow of liquid fills and fits any form, infiltrates or penetrates even the densest of materials. Liquid in spilt or poured form, as photographer Jeff Wall describes it, ‘takes a shape which is not really describable or characterisable, but which provokes many associations. A natural form, with its unpredictable contours, is an expression of infinitesimal metamorphoses of quality.’¹⁹ To focus on the sea as subject has also meant to take photographs *for* the sea, following Hiroshi Sugimoto’s *Seascapes* (1980–1991), which he has displayed in site-specific works mounted on rocks facing the ocean. This is to reverse anthropocentric looking, to focus on a kind of ‘nonhuman witnessing’²⁰ and to contemplate what the water sees when it looks back at us in its liquid intelligence. Such a mode of ‘nonhuman photography’ describes a ‘photography increasingly decoupled from human agency and human vision.’²¹ In its extreme, this may mean an ‘embracing [of] imaging practices from which the human is absent – as its subject, agent or addressee’, for example ‘photographs that are not *by* the human’ such as ‘contemporary high-tech images produced by traffic control cameras, microphotography, and Google Street View, but also outcomes of deep-time “impressing” processes, such as fossils.’²² To look to the rock formations which also make up an integral part of the coastal landscape and feature prominently in this set of photographs turns us to a contemplation of ‘geological formations [which] witness the passage of deep time, the arrival and departure of ice ages, the life and death of forests, and the passage of animal life.’²³ For Michael Richardson, this form of ‘nonhuman witnessing describes the fixing of fossils records: captured in mud or peat or sand, bodies shape the earthy matter that spills over and claims them, an ecologi-

18 R.D.G. Irvine, *An Anthropology of Deep Time: Geological Temporality and Social Life* (Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, New Delhi and Singapore: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 8.

19 J. Wall, ‘Photography and Liquid Intelligence,’ in P. Galassi (ed), *Jeff Wall: Selected Essays and Interviews* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2007), 109–110.

20 See Richardson, *Nonhuman Witnessing*.

21 J. Zylinska, *Nonhuman Photography* (Cambridge and London: The MIT Press), 2.

22 Zylinska, *Nonhuman Photography*, 5.

23 Richardson, *Nonhuman Witnessing*, 117.

cal affectivity in the transformation of materialities as they fix into enduring form.²⁴ Jeffrey Cohen remarks how '[s]tone would call you transient, sporadic,²⁵ and Richard Irvine agrees when he says that '[s]tone provokes us – even humiliates us.²⁶ Similarly to Sugimoto's seascapes for the sea, Irvine has described how the *Estádio Municipal de Broya* in Portugal was intentionally designed with granite rock as 'spectator', its one wall made up of entirety of a rock face which the stadium was built around in an abandoned quarry.²⁷

If we are to simultaneously take on a liquid intelligence and to learn from stone in its slow, infinitesimal, almost invisible or 'non-visible' movements, what might we learn, how might we think? For Ka Canham, to look and 'to think with water, land, and shoals is to embrace fluidity, movement, liminality, here and there, unknowability, and unsettlement'.²⁸ To visualise the environment, but also to *look* and *see* differently. It would mean to accept *not* having graspable answers or certainty – to settle into unsettledness, constant flux or flow – to keep in movement even in stillness, to be with sea change, in transience. But it would also mean to be challenged by 'geology as a presence in our life'²⁹ with its 'vast duration, slow movement, and inhuman scale'.³⁰ This is to consider the 'geologies of the image'³¹ or in Siegfried Kracauer's words, 'the residuum that history has discharged'.³² As he puts it, the 'photograph is the sediment that has settled',³³ and as such, the photograph inherently has layers of time packed into it – it is striated. It is an accumulation or piling up of time – time thickening, rather than flowing. To move in slow motion, then.

Underwater

When we swim underwater we immerse or submerge our senses in a sublime otherworldly space. We must hold our breath, bubbles emerge from our mouth and nose; sound becomes distant, distorted, removed from our immediate experience; we see through a blurred and rippled lens. It becomes a labour to move even while the sensation of floating feels effortless, our gravity-bound bodies weightless in the liquid. To go underwater 'away from the above-world of human terrestrial existence and social life', is to 'deal with representational problems of scale, depth and visibility'.³⁴ In the accompanying images we find 'snails and anemones living lives of their own', which evoke the uncanny sensation that K of J.M. Coetzee's *Life and Times of Michael K* experiences when he stumbles upon some rockpools³⁵ – a sense that

24 Ibid.

25 J.J. Cohen, *Stone: An Ecology of the Inhuman* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), 30.

26 Irvine, *Anthropology of Deep Time*, 10.

27 Irvine, *Anthropology of Deep Time*, 9.

28 Ka Canham, *Riotous Deathscapes*, 45.

29 Irvine, *Anthropology of Deep Time*, 10.

30 Cohen, *Stone*, 27.

31 P. Hayes and G. Minkley (eds), *Ambivalent: Photography and Visibility in African History* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2019), 4.

32 S. Kracauer, "Photography," in *Critical Inquiry* (19), 429.

33 Ibid.

34 I. Hofmeyr, S. Nuttall and C. Lavery, 'Reading for Water', *Interventions* 24 (3): 2022, 313.

35 Ibid.

other worlds exist right before us, underneath our feet, underwater microcosms which we can only imagine. This rupture of relationality shows how scale, as Richardson conveys, ‘is one means of making instrumental and practical sense across difference, a means of managing relations between one thing and another. [It] helps anchor perception in worlds that extend beyond the perceptual reach of the human sensorium; it enables one to conceive of entities far bigger or smaller, say, than can be contained within the human visual field.’³⁶ Photography helps to achieve this in the ways in which ‘the camera discloses details and captures motion that the unaided eye cannot see, making one newly aware of hidden worlds.’³⁷ According to Shawn Michelle Smith, ‘Kracauer [...] proposed that one of photography’s (and film’s) most striking characteristics is its capacity to “reveal things normally unseen” [which] include “the small and the big”, “the transient”, and, most compellingly, “blind spots of the mind”’.³⁸ There is a kind of dreaminess about the images, capturing fantastical sci-fi lands, perhaps a reflection of the sleepy ‘fantasy land’ of Pringle Bay – now predominantly a retirement village and holiday destination for the well-off, who own holiday homes which are occupied only in the warm summer months and mostly otherwise unoccupied, in this case a *blind spot* or disconnect from the realities of the ‘big city’. The photographers’ immersion in the space shows a different kind of relationship with the material through which the images become mediumistic – an ‘ontological shift that might be precipitated by going underwater.’³⁹

Horizon

In the Visual History class over the years, we have often turned to discussing the ocean – what it means to us, how it makes us feel. It has been remarked that the ocean’s horizon seems to offer endless possibility or potential, gives perspective, takes you out of yourself because of the scale, but that there is also a foreignness to its unknown depths. We look to the horizon for answers, for perspective on our comparably small human lives. It offers us a sense of deep time and duration. The ways that we relate to and conceptualise landscape in photography and painting traditions relies heavily on a horizon line, and shifting the horizon line, shifting scale and dimension, subverts our conventional mode of seeing, suddenly allowing us to see things from a different angle or perspective. It is perhaps true that the horizon marks a particularly anthropocentric way of seeing. To mark a horizon line situates the subject in a grounded space, sorting it into horizontal and vertical lines, creating backgrounds and a foreground. If the ocean, which seems to be made up predominantly of horizontal lines, looked back at us, it might encounter verticals for the first time, and be surprised, perhaps even disturbed by the view. So it is perhaps contrastingly this verticality in the aesthetic realm that marks us as human subjects – gives us ‘liveness’.

³⁶ Richardson, *Nonhuman Witnessing*, 121.

³⁷ S.M. Smith, *At the Edge of Sight: Photography and the Unseen* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2013), 6.

³⁸ Smith, *At the Edge of Sight*, 6.

³⁹ I. Hofmeyr, S. Nuttall and C. Lavery, ‘Reading for Water’, 313.

The photographs seem to contain a sense of deep time or planetary time which holds long-term geological processes. Shadows become black holes or voids, galaxies in themselves, layers of lichen and mossy seaweed growing on rocks show the stillness and solidity of rock formations, rockpools seem to hold creatures from a prehistoric time, a bird rests in a lunar landscape. Different kinds of time and temporal scales again harken back to a sense of shared human and non-human extinction which brings together timelines of historical injustice and climatic injustice, and looks to how these overlap in the Anthropocene or capitalocene. Irvine, in his ruminations on deep time, asks: ‘What are the horizons of a society’s sense of time?’⁴⁰ ‘What is the relationship between human rhythms and the rhythms of the more-than-human world within which humans live? ... What is the significance of our time horizons, their proximity, or their distance?’⁴¹ Or in other words, what are the correlations between social rhythms and ecological and geological rhythms?

Surface

The surface is where we are made aware of change, where change is visible – an *emergent* visibility – which ‘insists on being looked at rather than [acting as that which] we must train ourselves to see through’.⁴² It is ‘not inert, but vibrant, pulsating, and constantly in motion, undulating, like a wall of water’.⁴³ The ocean’s surface also contains swells, folds, waves and ripples which rise up in relation to wind and other elements, and Ka Canham, via Therí Alyce Pickens, reminds us that to ‘think of the fold as shifting and unsettled we have to conceive of surface and depth as continuous and as spaces for the creation and sustainability of possibility’.⁴⁴ In one particular year that we visited Pringle Bay, the seemingly relentless South East wind was howling and whipping up the surface of the water, creating a wild spray which refracted the light into rainbowed spectrums. The photographs also show the effect of light on surface and how its refraction distorts our view of what is within the depths below. Looking into rockpools or into the depths of the deeper ocean, we may lose our bearings.

The surface perhaps offers a platform or screen for a visual form of insurgency, of floating, rising up, uprisings – a site of refusal, for performing insurgency visibly. In this regard, Christopher Pinney has outlined how ‘[i]n [postcolonial photographic] practices the surface becomes a site of the refusal of the depth that characterised colonial representational regimes’.⁴⁵ He says that the ‘surface was a window onto a field of spatial and temporal correlations that encoded a colonial “rationality”. The opacity of the surface becomes a refusal of this rationality and an assertion of cultural singularity’.⁴⁶ Ka Canham talks to race (specifically ‘Mpondo blackness’) as a kind of

40 Irvine, *Anthropology of Deep Time*, 1.

41 Irvine, *Anthropology of Deep Time*, 4.

42 S. Best and S. Marcus, ‘Surface Reading: An Introduction,’ *Representations* 108 (1): 2009, 9.

43 U.M. McMillan, ‘Introduction: Skin, Surface, Sensorium,’ *Women and Performance* 28: 2018, 11.

44 Ka Canham, *Riotous Deathscapes*, 47.

45 C. Pinney, ‘Notes from the Surface of the Image: Photography, Postcolonialism, and Vernacular Modernism,’ in C. Pinney and N. Peterson, *Photography’s Other Histories* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2003), 202.

46 Pinney, *Notes from the Surface*, 203.

aesthetic surface medium, ‘as pliable and opaque rather than finite. It is much more fractal and rippled than it is transparent and complete.’⁴⁷ Here Ka Canham is thinking about ‘people provisionally designated “coloured”’.⁴⁸ In their relation to surface and relationality – that their hybridity is synonymous with surface and skin, and in their relation to what the ocean’s surface brings in the meeting of blackness and whiteness. This version of coloured identity which he dubs ‘Mpondo’, ‘defies categories’ in terms of ‘language, culture, and lineage’ and ‘represent[s] something that unsettles the narrative of categorisation and certainty’.⁴⁹ This figuring is productive as a relational and ‘unconventional way of thinking of the overdetermined straight chain of race that predominates race thinking in South Africa and elsewhere. It is an enlargement of blackness.’⁵⁰ As Tina Campt says, ‘the reading of surfaces, particularly of flesh and skin, is profoundly implicated in the pernicious role photography has played in the history of racial formation.’⁵¹ So if surface is also skin, what could be applied to skin if we are to think of it as oceanic surface?

Passage

The beach is the most easily accessible zone of the sea for humans, and only ‘recently have humans dipped much below its surface, with depth exploration historically having been limited to the shoreline.’⁵² The seashore is a kind of gateway to the other – the otherworldly in the form of oceanic sea life which we can only have partial access to – a watery looking only allowing us access to what our ‘dry’ vision can see. (Here, Caio Simões De Araújo’s essay in this issue is very evocative in what it shows us about water and vision and the “watery eyes” of watery looking.) It is a mode of suboceanic living that we can only access at a very limited level. Even with technological modes of underwater looking, there is still only a very small percentage of this life that we gain access to. The beach is thus the place we gain most open access to the world of the ocean in our bipedal non-gilled humanness, and the majority of the ocean remains an unknown ‘extraterrestrial’ world to us. Indeed, seeing images of those rare deep-sea creatures is unnerving and fascinating – that we could exist on the same planet as these quite alien beings. In this collection of photographs we see an otherworldly aesthetic, a framing of a fantastical mood, a sci-fi landscape – the spatial in terms of the planetary – but there is a further connection to the spatial other in relation to the racial other in European exoticism and colonial tourism.

With this in mind, Johan Peters say that in ‘one sense ... the ocean is the primordial medium-free zone, immune to all human attempts at fabrication. In another, however, the ocean is the medium of all media, the fountain from which all

47 Ka Canham, *Riotous Deathscapes*, 49.

48 Ka Canham, *Riotous Deathscapes*, 47.

49 Ibid.

50 Ibid.

51 T.M. Campt, *Image Matters: Archive, Photography, and the African Diaspora in Europe* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2012), 33.

52 J.D. Peters, *The Marvelous Clouds: Towards a Philosophy of Elemental Media* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 53.

life on earth emerged. Life in all its varieties pays homage to the sea in its structure and function.⁵³ The sea can also be seen as a medium of spirituality and spirits, a conduit or passage, but also a medium in the aesthetic sense – an elemental media or “ecomedia” in both the representational and technological senses of the word. In this regard, Johan Peters says that ‘environments are also media. Water, fire, sky, earth, and ether are elements – homey, sublime, dangerous, and wonderful – that sustain existence.’⁵⁴ These media are networks ‘in their entanglement of time past, present, and future; in their interconnection of spaces across boundaries; and in their depictions of the interrelationship between humans and animals.’⁵⁵ Ka Canham considers the ‘role of waters in arrivals, departures, and creation [and the ways in which] water cleanses and fortifies the body ... its role as a medium of relationality to ancestors.’⁵⁶ He speaks to the duality of the sea when he says that ‘water sustains material life and cosmological relation.’⁵⁷

The beach or seashore is itself a kind of passage, a liminal zone which is the creative space of ‘what is left behind on the shore.’⁵⁸ Ka Canham says that it ‘creates an opening’ or ‘sliver to relatedness.’⁵⁹ He continues that the ‘opening provided by the borderlands of the tumultuous ocean stages possibilities for newness and new ways of attending to old things. The shoreline is a place of surprise where one may look up and see something bobbing on the water or washed ashore from somewhere else.’⁶⁰ Similarly, for Phindi Mnyaka, the beach ‘through its constitution simultaneously as a pioneering point, a site of ruination, and an opportunity for pleasure – becomes a site of crossings.’⁶¹ To pay attention to what the ocean washes up each day, every day anew with each rising and falling tide, is to consider a world quite unlike our own, and in so doing shift perspectives of our own lives. When the sea becomes animated on land it can be bewildering, wild, unpredictable, a force that could go either way. It offers the duality of the sense of home, but also the dangers or unpredictability of home. So the shoreline is a place of surprise encounters and crossings – many of which can be witnessed in the Pringle Bay photographs – and it is perhaps as E.E. Cummings says, ‘it’s always ourselves we find in the sea’⁶² There is some echo of this in Mnyaka’s analysis of a series of Daniel Morolong’s beach portraits from the 1960s. She describes how in the portraits there is a sense that as ‘numerous figures gestured toward the photographer, they posed as though *they* are the ones to be delivered, emerging out of the ocean itself and taking up space on the wet stretch between land and water where the coastline is continually drawn and washed away.’⁶³

53 Peters, *The Marvelous Clouds*, 54.

54 Peters, *The Marvelous Clouds*, 3.

55 C. Iheka, *African Ecomedia: Network Forms, Planetary Politics* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2021), 3.

56 Ka Canham, *Riotous Deathscapes*, 45.

57 Ibid.

58 Ka Canham, *Riotous Deathscapes*, 54.

59 Ibid.

60 Ibid.

61 P. Mnyaka, ‘The Profane and the Prophetic at a South African Beach’, in P. Hayes and G. Minkley (eds), *Ambivalent: Photography and Visibility in African History* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2019), 213.

62 See e.e. cummings’ poem ‘maggie and milly and molly and may’.

63 Mnyaka, *The Profane and the Prophetic*, 221.

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Page 31 – Zena Hendricks
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Page 34 – Julia Raynham
Page 35 – Limpho Makapela
Page 36 – Emma Minkley
Page 37 – Patricia Hayes
Page 38 – Luther George
Page 39 – Zena Hendricks
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Page 43 – Rory Tsapayi
Page 44 – Zena Hendricks
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