

**Gazing through Transparency**  
Steven Feld

Text For  
**EXPOSURES: A WHITE WOMAN IN WEST AFRICA**  
by Virginia Ryan

For more than a century, countless white visitors have taken decorative and authoritative pictures of daily life and ritual in Africa. This massive body of Euro-American photographs has led to the general assumption that “African photography” means images of black subjects by white photographers, or images of colonial life with Africans in the background. Only the viewers of rare exhibits and catalogs like *In/sight: African Photographers, 1940 to the Present* are aware of another grand reality, a rich world of African-made photographs of African subjects. Neither of these legacies fully anticipates the complexly reorganized gaze found in Virginia Ryan’s *Exposures*. For here the subject is a white woman artist exposing her own daily life and ritual in West Africa, photographed by African and non-African friends, companions, and passersby.

Each image unleashes immediate questions about what might be going on in the frame, both socially and visually. What social dramas are on display about race, power, and gender? About masks, ritual, and ceremony? About bodily adornment, clothing, and appearance? About social interaction in public? About skin, gesture, and movement? Simultaneously, what photographic dramas are viewers witnessing? Images of people caught unaware? Images more deliberately posed but made to look off-the-cuff? What complicities unite those exposed and those behind the camera? In all: what kinds of performances are presented in these photographic juxtapositions of Virginia Ryan with strangers and intimates, innocents and collaborators? Does their viewing allow one to gaze through the transparency of racial difference? Does their viewing make one feel trapped in, or liberated from, the banalities of political correctness and transcendental universal humanism?

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*SF: How did this project begin for you?*

*VR: It began very soon after our arrival to live in Accra, in the collision of listening to a number of postcolonial speeches and sending this coconut image via email to some friends in Italy. The response was scathing. To me it was just a holiday picture, something I took and sent off as a way of saying “this is what I did yesterday.” But some friends responded with irony and anxiety, like “oh, poor thing, she’s going tropical, with the boys feeding her coconuts.” I felt strangely judged. But also intrigued by the unforeseen pregnancy of the image. And I*

*began to ask myself: where are the pictures and stories of contemporary white people in West Africa? Well, the answer was simple: there was very little documentation of the world of postcolonial whites actually living there. It seemed to me that whites often seized the power to write the books, take the photos, tell the stories, but were largely excluded as subjects of those representations. But of course as whites we were subjects--of African eyes, if not our own. With that realization I saw the kind of opening that incites art. I didn't set out to prove something, and I haven't. I just documented my experience living as a white woman in a largely black public.*

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### **White is a color**

White, the color of ghosts, bones, and angels, is, with real certainty for West Africa, the color of foreign, of colonialism, starched shirts, bleached pants, underwear, knee socks, sunburned skin. White is the color of pith helmets and documents, of paper, of missionized minds, the color of historical power. Colonial white is the color of invasion, the color of powerful intruders who imagined reality upside down, making "black" the color of difference, creating darkness as the exotic foreign while exalting whiteness as its knighted savior, its guarantor of improvement, of development.

In the culture of the colonial project, white is the color of cleanliness, from the application of Ivory or Dove soap to the drying softness of white cotton towels and robes. It is the color of linen sheets, pillows, of mosquito nets, the color of civilized coziness. White is the color of snow and down comforters, what one abandons for the white heat of the tropics.

White is the color of semen, breast milk, and the dairy, the color of genesis, essence, and nourishment. White is the color of refined flour, rice, salt, and sugar, the color of staple sustenance. White is likewise the color of refined wealth, of lace, linen, porcelain, *statuario* marble, ivory, pearl.

White is the color of peace, truce, amnesty, the color of surrender, of neutrality, of an end to hostility. White is the color of virginity, the color of white-wash, the color of hospitals, clinics, doctors' coats, nursing dress, the color of antisepsis. White is the color of death, of bodies wrapped in shrouds, the color at the end of all color.

White is blank (*blanc, blanco, bianco*), the surface onto which words, images, numbers, notes, are written, drawn, etched, sketched, printed, notated. White is the color to which the printed page only returns through erasure or White-Out.

White is the empty surface of the canvas, photographic paper, and the screen. White is the site of modern projection and illumination, the aesthetic surface onto which other colors are placed, beamed, projected, reflected, made luminous.

White is the color of *Innocence*, the whitest of Agnes Martin's Zen-spare white paintings.

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*SF: Your Irish ancestors, like mine from Jewish Eastern Europe, were, both pre- and post- migration, not simply or obviously "white" in any taken-for-granted way. Did living in West Africa make you aware that your Irish whiteness is something recent, that the label "Black Irish" was long ago and far away?*

*VR: Through conversation with American friends I was aware of the term "Black Irish" and knew that ethnicity and point of origin got mixed up with racial categories, class, and national alliances inside and outside Europe. But what living in West Africa did to me--and this was unique compared to my experiences living in Italy, Egypt, Scotland, Brazil, and ex-Yugoslavia--was to make it impossible for me to ignore the relationship of my perceived or named "white" skin color to my environment, everyday relationships, and experiences.*

*SF: How did that strong self-awareness of being classified as white create an artistic canvas for these photographs?*

*VR: I used my own skin because it was constantly available, always there. It was just an artistic intuition, I suppose, the idea that I could take my whiteness as extraordinary, not as a normal and obvious color or lack of one, but as something that the West Africans around me looked at and noticed. If they were so aware of my color, why shouldn't I be too? Sometimes it was just the burning I felt, suffering the heatstroke of displacement, white as nausea. But maybe there's something here too about being Australian.*

*SF: Do you mean because Australia was also once a British colony?*

*VR: Yes, there's that, but of course we were never slaves, and always a white--capital W--nation that was terribly abusive to its indigenous dark-skinned people. I think it is more about coming from the frontier. As an Australian woman I was probably let off the hook more in Ghana, was more free, more easily indulged. I think I was more licensed to be experimental, and less likely to be criticized than, say, an Italian woman, despite my Italian citizenship, or my attachment in Ghana to the Italian Embassy.*

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In the portraits of the 17<sup>th</sup>-century Dutch Masters, white faces and hands are always illuminated, the pink bits surfacing to create a temporal texture on milk-white skin, often set against the pure whiteness of neck ruffs, collars, linen. Painting here reveals the skin's porosity, its transparency, its emotional resolve and biographical content. Tender vulnerability meets stoic wisdom as light is reflected and absorbed at the skin's every pore. Painting, to paraphrase Maurice Merleau-Ponty, becomes a touching, an intimate *rendez-vous* of the artist's eye with the subject's skin.

Bartholomeus van der Helst's *Portrait of Gerard Bicker*, for example, peels back from whiteness the apple-like pinks of the skin to reveal the more intense pinks of the lips. Likewise Gerard ter Borch's portrait of two-year-old Helena van der Schalcke reveals vulnerable baby-white skin against the lace of an adult white dress amid a deep black surround. White ultimately becomes the purity of light and substance in Jan ver Meer's *The Kitchen Maid*, who pours a small stream of milk into a bowl as a vast stream of light pours onto her white head-wrap and skin from windows above.

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*SF: Given your artistic sensitivity to white as a European canvas of aesthetic illumination, what new meanings accrued to the color white in the West African context?*

*VR: I was so aware there of how much white can be principally deathly, ghostly, ghastly--flayed to the viscera. In Ghana I once heard that the word obruni, commonly used for white-skinned people, also carries the sense of being "peeled." It's like being skinned, white skin as a full exposure, having one's skin taken off. I don't know if that is linguistically accurate, but the fact that it was said to me at all made it hugely relevant, and quite shocking.*

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### **More questions, fewer answers**

In his book, *White*, Richard Dyer exposes whiteness as a critical historical category of privileged experience, with its massive cultural ties to Christianity, imperialism, purity in spirit and enterprise, and ideas of Aryan and Caucasian racial superiority. He traces ways that the power of whiteness in film, photography, literature, and culture shape persistent attitudes and imaginaries. But he also takes great pains to complicate the story through routes of class, gender, and sexual difference, making clear that there is no unitary "white" in the experience or understanding of whiteness.

Likewise, Virginia Ryan's meditation on skin and place, on planned or spontaneous encounters, on attending or being attended to, is, in fact, far more provocative and unsettling than a simple look at how a white body is inserted into a distant, unnatural place. Parallel to Dyer's book, the photographs here challenge viewers to question the relativity of color in history. In viewing destabilized racial positions, can viewers imagine the next stage of the gaze's reversal? For example: an image of an African woman getting a facial or haircut from a white woman? An image of an African woman and her white cooks or driver? An image of a white jewelry shop attendant placing a gold necklace around the neck of an African woman? An image of an African woman having her foot massaged by a white reflexologist? An image of an African woman and her white bodyguards? An image of an African woman at a museum, crouching attentively to watch unclothed white men dance?

Such questions are also linked to a larger complex of concerns about the social position and experiential reality of the person in these images. One wonders: is the white woman benign? awkward? at home? amused? condescending? empathetic? caring? pitying? gracious? bored? unaware? compassionate? And, might any of these words--question mark included--be the ones chosen by those in the photos to describe the white woman?

By exposing multiple layers of her literal and metaphoric difference, does the white woman not equally invite her viewers to cynically mock and sympathetically embrace her? Does one, in the end, wonder if the white woman has gone too far, over-determining that she'll be viewed as repulsive in her act of self-exposure? Or, does the white woman overcome that risk, provoking a more profound meditation on what it feels like to be strange in the world, challenging viewers to experience their own skin as strange, asking us to gaze through transparency?

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*SF: Did you ever feel the project was dangerous, that making the images might offend, intrude, insult? Or did the process feel more gracious, more collaborative?*

*VR: Contrary to understandable and predictable politically correct comments from Westerners, I was never made to feel like an intruder by West Africans. I asked people if I could take the pictures. I invited complicity and kept this all quite public. Out of a couple hundred instances I was only refused once.*

*I always immediately showed people the picture on the back of the camera. When I was in more remote areas, outside of my base in Accra, the effect was heightened. Many people had not seen instant digital images like that before. There was a lot of joy in that. If for example I took three we would all look at them right on the spot and decide which was the one I wouldn't delete.*

*Even though I am a visual artist I did not think of these as art photographs so much as snaps of specific--often very mundane--moments. But of course, once invited into the image, people posed. In my experience, people loved being photographed; they found it quite validating. These were often playful moments together, moments that accentuated everyone's dignity, like what you witness in the elegant poise of the chief in Princeton.*

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### **From Invisible to Visible Whiteness**

Whiteness is the site of privileged imagining, the invisible standard.

-Patricia J. Williams

Fifty years ago, mainstream artists and intellectuals did not set out to critically represent, or to study, or to trouble white racial identity...To speak as a white intellectual, to create as a white artist, did not usually imply awareness of one's own particular racial interests, let alone pathologies. People of color carried those burdens. Whites could articulate universal truths. It was easy, even natural, to be white.

-David Roediger

Maurice Berger, in his *White: Whiteness and Race in Contemporary Art*, develops issues critically enunciated by Patricia Williams in the book's Preface and by David Roediger in the book's Afterword. Speaking to the still ubiquitous "invisibility of whiteness" in American society, he argues that "most white people, by their unwillingness to assign whiteness meaning, are free from the responsibility of accepting, or even understanding, their prejudices." Moreover, he concludes, "whiteness continues to offer white people of all classes a valuable dividend: the ability to exist in the world without having to think about the color of their skin."

Virginia Ryan's photographs take these critical themes to heart, showing how the artful acknowledgement of whiteness--literally its exposure--can talk back to the privilege of invisibility. Her other African projects, *Landing in Accra* (2002), a collaborative painting work with Accra's sign-writers; *Strangers in Accra* (2004), a memoir of complex and diverse African encounters; *Floating Wastelands, Castaways, and Goldfields* (2002), a painting-sculptural meditation on the "gold coast" and the detritus of history, are all rooted in a certain acknowledgement of difference and privilege, of how an out-of-place artist discovers and confronts strangeness. But it is in *Exposures* that Ryan most forcefully engages an aesthetics of visibility, using her own skin as an artist's material through which to question both how and what whiteness signifies.

In this way Ryan's project articulates closely with two presented by Berger. First there is Nikki S. Lee, a Korean-born artist living in New York. Lee's *modus*

*operandi* is to infiltrate alien communities, master their dress and visual-gestural codes, then pose in front of her camera, performing as an initiate and ratified member. Of *The Yuppie Project*--Lee's photographs of herself posed as a fully-validated member of New York's young Wall Street WASP money managers--Berger writes: "Masquerading in the fashion, makeup, and body language of these people, her Asian-ness, as well as her visceral discomfort, nevertheless read as distinctly as their whiteness." He applauds this political verve, and the aesthetic means of "...Lee's disquieting journey into the heart of white privilege, a world where whiteness is fiercely protected, but is always, blissfully, expediently invisible."

Berger also praises the well-known photographic work of Cindy Sherman. He presents *Bus Riders*, a 1976 series of fifteen black-and-white photographs of Sherman dressed up as various black and white bus riders in Buffalo, New York. Berger sees this project as "one of the earliest examples of conceptual art to mark whiteness itself as an identity worthy of examination."

Sherman's celebrated work is also based on the artistic exploration of masquerade and impersonation, and through it, categories of race, gender, class, and identity. She explores the boundaries and vagueness of persona, individuality, social membership, group membership. Like Lee, her method is mimicry, using the body as a surface for transformation. She performs for the camera, using disguise to pose as a multiplicity of possible persons, each a dense embodiment of class, gender, racial, and other identity designations.

At their conjuncture, it is very clear that *Exposures* is not "Nikki S. Lee does West Africa" or "Cindy Sherman does race." For nothing here is grounded in the aesthetics of masquerade, impersonation, feigned membership, props and disguises, infiltration, or the detached surfaces of postmodernism. Virginia Ryan does not appear in front of the camera as someone other than who she actually is. Her photographic intent is neither in dressing up to look comfortable or uncomfortable with her social position, nor positioning herself as the ultimate insider or outsider in the photographic frame. Her practice is far more radically situated in an aesthetic of documentary provocation. She is literally *herself*, digitally exposed in the course of doing what she did, day by day, year by year, in Accra and West Africa. Her photographic presence addresses her persona, not as a matter of disguise, but as a matter of self-questioning. Temporary residence and making a life in displacement are as key here as the obvious surface tales about privilege, power, class status.

So what is documentary provocation as an aesthetic alternative to postmodern masquerade? *Exposures* embodies an artistic practice of finding and expanding, in equal measure, the edges of dis-ease and strength, vulnerability and courage. The discovery is about self-strangeness, using the camera to record and reveal,

to provoke an introspective anthropology of self and social life. As opposed to Lee or Sherman's "intrusive" or "infiltrating" anthropology, Ryan's is an "intuitive" anthropology, interrogating the exotic and strange frontiers of her own skin and her own life circumstances, especially as constituted around diplomatic rituals like visiting schools, cultural institutions, hospitals, performances, celebrations.

And if Ryan appears here with the President of Ghana, with important public personalities, and with some of the country's best-known artists--the painters Almighty Akoto and George Hughes--she also appears with numerous ordinary workers, teachers, school children, refugees, market sellers, and passersby in the everyday world of Accra. Not to mention appearing with the people with whom she had an everyday working relationship in Ghana: local employees and domestic staff of the Italian Embassy, who took some of these images.

Although these photographic projects--Lee's, Sherman's, Ryan's--each perform race, make it visible, critique its hidden-ness, the stakes are unquestionably altered when a white public figure has her black employees photograph her in public, as in the image depicting a well-dressed white woman in an up-scale supermarket whose other clients appear predominantly African, or the image of a blurred-out white woman sitting on a distant bench press, far beyond the annoyed look of the African guard and bouncer at a hotel gym. Or the very behind-closed-doors image of a black nurse in white uniform attending the malaria-ridden white woman wrapped in her white bedding, with white flowers at her bedside.

George Yancy's *What White Looks Like: African-American Philosophers on the Whiteness Question* and David Roediger's powerful anthology *Black on White: Black Writers on What it Means to Be White* also take on the "invisibility" issue, literally turning it inside out. Across a whole historical panorama, these books add up to a massive acknowledgement of African-American observational and experiential expertise about whites and whiteness. In her *Black on White* essay on "Representations of Whiteness in the Black Imagination," theorist bell hooks puts the matter into anthropological terms proper. Speaking of her students, she says: "Their amazement that black people watch white people with a critical 'ethnographic' gaze is itself an expression of racism." To all of this, Roediger poses the critical summing question: why have white writers oozed across the pages of history proclaiming expertise about black experience, while there is scarce acknowledgement of black expertise on whiteness?

The parallel questions we might ask for West Africa are obvious. How many African "experts" have studied white privilege compared to the number of white "experts" who have studied black "poverty"? And why is it such a unique experience to read Tété-Michel Kpomassie's *An African in Greenland*, a Togolese chronicle of life among the Inuit? Or to read the Martiniquan psychiatrist Frantz Fanon's brilliant analysis of the white colonizer's psychology

in *Black Skin, White Masks?* If such questions open anew the politics of *Exposures*, it is because they ask why so few black photographers have had the opportunity to photograph white privilege--white life on stage and backstage--compared to the number of white photographers who have photographed black "rituals" and "culture." And they ask, what is at stake when a white artist colludes with Africans to photograph the public and backstage world of her own white life, including the world of diplomatic ritual.

When we scan these exposures for signs of how white consciousness emerges in black surroundings, there is no denying that the images speak multiply: to the visible realities of postcolonial hegemony, to how art might inspire a de-colonizing consciousness in viewers. The mixture of awareness and critique moves powerfully because Ryan's image choices radiate the comfort and awkwardness of the subject position that is distinctly hers. Yes, there is a privilege that comes with her standing, but it is not the privilege of hiding, of invisibility, of forgetting, not the privilege of taking skin for granted.

What comes with Ryan's take on her whiteness, then, is a particular awareness of being looked at, of being gazed upon, of being wondered about, of being studied, of being a question mark, of always being a sign of something, including things she is and is not. This sensitivity colors the vulnerability she and others experience in negotiating each other's motives, needs, agendas, desires, and hopes. What is unique is the way she mobilizes these dimensions of mutual fear, vulnerability, gazing, wonder, and courage, turning them into images with the power to mentally de-colonize some sector of West African "documentary" photography, and to artistically anthropologize her experience of everyday whiteness in Accra.

The words of Italian art critic Achille Bonito Oliva, writing of Ryan's *Landing in Accra* project, equally apply to *Exposures*: "In Virginia Ryan's work, art has the dual need to affirm itself and confirm the world. Thus nothing is excluded. With sharp vision, Ryan makes sure the creative act does not happen in an atmosphere of shortage, of subtraction. Art becomes the field of amplification and complexity, supported by a logic which does not correspond to any norm of functionality. In fact, art is more functional when it is based on the meeting of opposites and the affirmation of differences."

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*SF: What do you see as the greatest risk in using the whiteness of your skin as an artistic canvas?*

*VR: The greatest risk is that someone might interpret this as an "in praise of whiteness" photo story. That someone could see it as the new version of the*

*photo story of white success in Africa--the white explorer posed in the center of the picture, with Africans as decoration. I've put myself on the line here. When an artist is this aware of being a foreigner, this aware of being white, this aware of sticking out, then there is a need to find a way to express the discomfort of the experience.*

*SF: Does that discomfort play a subversive role in the project?*

*VR: For some people, the presence of a white person in these photographs immediately signals an authority hierarchy. All they'll think about is my power and the presumed lack of power of those around me. Well, it's true that there is a lot being questioned here about power and position. But there are also many images here to challenge and overturn banal or simple assumptions. There are many images that show me as a bystander, images that show Africans making the decisions, in charge of what is going on. Like the photograph of Almighty Akoto telling me what I'll have to pay for a painting, or the image of me and other whites in a photo opportunity with the president of Ghana.*

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### **White is a (gendered) photographic color**

Compelling as these matters of representation are in aesthetics and anthropology, Virginia Ryan's project speaks in an equally provocative way to critical questions about the art of photographic realism. In this context it is useful to juxtapose *Exposures* with Jane Gallop's memoir, *Living With His Camera*. A deep interrogation of photography's 20<sup>th</sup>-century theorists, the book is also a personal account of being an image subject for twenty years for her domestic partner, photographer Dick Blau.

Virginia Ryan's photographs raise certain parallel issues to those taken up by Gallop: how the image has a social life, how it simultaneously operates at multiple levels, as material object, as social intermediary, as *aide-memoire*, as story-starter, as act that joins or separates actors. And Gallop, like Ryan in her introductory statement, also confronts embarrassment and anger, the possibility that others will see things in photographs of her that she does not want them to see. Alongside these fears, Gallop, again like Ryan, confronts the gender of the image, the pleasures of looking at herself, of having others look at her, of exposing herself and being exposed in the process of composing a life.

To connect Gallop's project to Ryan's is to struggle with the sensuous power of images in everyday experience and memory. What is it that "in-the-moment" photographs lead us to remember, question, and wonder about times and places, people and feelings? To enter the image is to enter the transparency of a

possible world. Peeling back the transparency, gazing into the stories imagined to reside beneath its surfaces, is a matter of asking about the shifting and overlapping layers that constitute a world, asking how it is somebody's world of what was, what is, what may be, what wasn't, what could have been, what could be.

Whiteness, key to an aesthetic anthropology of self and performance here, is also a key to *Exposures* as a work of photographic art. For aren't these little color pictures also about what cannot be said about race in black-and-white "art" photographs? Don't these images go beyond the binary of black and white, of photographic positive and negative? Don't they expose "white" as a photographic color, not just a "racial" color and texture but something that is compositional and spatial, a fully valorized color in a spectrum of colors? By photographically playing with whiteness, literally framing it and exposing it (occasionally under- or overexposing it as well), Ryan's images ask how the color of skin talks to the color of photographic realism. They ask how the color of the snapshot talks to the color of experience.

The power of this idea is revealed by juxtaposition with the high-fashion *Vogue* magazine-style photographs of Carol Beckwith and Angela Fisher's *Faces of Africa*, or Ettagale Blauer's *African Elegance*. In these coffee-table books the position of women photographers and writers is overwhelmed by shadows of a distinctly male colonial gaze. On display are photographs meant to appeal to universal humanist concepts of elegance, dignity, pride, beauty, the visual seduction of costumes, rituals, ceremonies, gestures, and most of all, adorned faces. But like many images by their male predecessors and contemporaries, the photographs are contained within a timeless primitivist framework and an aesthetic of exoticism. There are virtually no signs of the colonial or world encounter, no signs of modernity, no signs of postcolonial life, no signs of intercultural experience, and absolutely no signs of whiteness anywhere nearby. How much more real is a photographic Africa where postcolonial black realities are not sanitized by the removal of white presences?

The history of photography has been unquestionably dominated by men as photographers and women as photographic subjects, whether the genre is portraiture, fashion and advertising, documentary, pornography, or family photography. But it is equally unquestionable that the past thirty years have seen an enormous rise in women photographing women, of women photographing themselves, of women representing women as actors, agents, subjects, bodies.

Such concerns are forcefully consolidated in *Women*, by acclaimed portraitist Annie Liebovitz, with an essay by Susan Sontag, author of *On Photography*, arguably the most influential and widely discussed book ever written on the subject of photographic representation. Sontag is immediate and razor-sharp on the stakes for women as photographic subjects. "Nobody looks through a book of

pictures of women without noticing whether the women are attractive or not." She traces how the visual history of being female is a history of the concept of attraction, a concept that assumes a male photographer, a male viewer, a male gaze, a male judgment. With male subjects, she shows, "character" is judged and photographically represented in diverse ways; with women subjects, "character" gets equated with photographic beauty, with a male judgment of attractiveness, a judgment based on notions of how well the female subject is groomed, dressed, how looked-after, taken care of, how presentable, how done-up for public display. Gender and class cultivation come together; "In a woman beauty is something total. It is what stands, in a woman, for character. It is also, of course, a performance; something willed, designed, obtained."

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*SF: "What looks right, or attractive, in a photograph is often no more than what illustrates the felt 'naturalness' of the unequal distribution of powers conventionally accorded women and men. Just as photography has done so much to confirm these stereotypes, it can engage in complicating and undermining them." What do you think of this quote from Susan Sontag on photography and gender?*

*VR: I think that she's right about depictions of power. Exposures certainly participates in confirming stereotypes. But the photos are much more about complicating and undermining conventional power arrangements. The way they complicate and undermine them is to ask about how I as a white woman in West Africa have many kinds of relationships to power, some of them roughly like white men's relationships to power, some of them quite different. The photographs ask about how power is being expressed and used, how it is felt and experienced. They ask about what it means to subvert conventional ideas of gender and power in the context of white-black interactions.*

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In *Chocolat*, French film director Claire Denis, who grew up in West Africa as the daughter of a colonial official, tells the story of a white French woman in her late twenties who returns to Cameroon. Revisiting her childhood home, a colonial outpost where her father was a captain in the French army, the protagonist's memory is flooded by images of her childhood experience of racial tension and colonial conflict.

Denis concentrates on the intimate relationships among a few key characters and the ways they interact in a house marked by racially separated public and private spaces. The humiliating lack of privacy for blacks is depicted through the ways servant spaces, including an outdoor shower, are in colonial view.

Power relations are also sexualized, for example, in a sub-plot about the mutual desires experienced by the mother and the servant, desires that are impossible to situate outside of colonial relations. Following a tense encounter, the woman has her husband fire the servant.

Denis mostly uses images rather than words to articulate how conflict and desire permeate the racially separate spaces of the colonial compound. Many of the film's most memorable scenes take place without any dialogue. It is largely the positioned gaze that visually tells the story of power, possibility, desire, gender, and postcolonial racial positions.

Precisely so too in *Exposures*, where emphasis on the intercultural gaze also serves to clearly avoid the nostalgic identity politics trap articulated by Kwame Anthony Appiah and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. in their introduction to "The White Issue" of the Afro-cosmopolitan journal *Transition*: "While much of the work on whiteness is intriguing, there is a danger of insularity, a narcissistic temptation intensified by the often confessional nature of writing about one's own white skin."

*SF: One last question: why did you choose the image of packing the container to end this essay?*

*VR: Because it was the end of my life there and then, and thus the end of this project. In that picture you see something quite special. You see formality completely collapse in the moment of the last snapshot. For four years that Embassy guard barely said a word to me. He was utterly formal. I mean, regarding power, he was very much in a service role with me. Yet in that moment he could put his arm around me--unimaginable otherwise--because of what was licensed by taking the photograph. I'm sure he was aware of being so much more powerful in that moment of me leaving, it being his place, not mine.*

## **Postscript**

*SF: When you returned to Ghana in 2006 you brought along a mock-up of this book. How did people respond?*

*VR: The responses were, in nearly all situations, gracious, nuanced, and warm. People expressed pleasure about the dignified way people stood and appeared at ease together. There was a "hey, look at that!" quality to some responses, certainly with none of the nervousness and surface dis-ease -- at least it wasn't expressed to me -- that I've found with some white viewers. Africans are not amazed to see Mars candy bars in the supermarket, or white and black people in comfortable rapport. They are not amazed to see the cosmopolitan nature of*

*society in Accra, for they see it every day. I saw gentle smiles on the faces of people as they looked. I think they were quite pleased that I brought the pictures back to show like this, that I was interested in their opinions. Most people, anywhere, feel somehow validated by such recognition. Why would it be any different in Ghana? From my side, it was important to bring the material back to its place of origin. I needed that, as part of the artistic narrative of contact.*

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