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~~Don't~~ Let's Look at the Nanny: Tracing the Photographic Occlusion of the Black Nanny in

Alexandra Fuller's *Don't Let's Go to the Dogs Tonight: An African Childhood*

Beth Pyner

Cardiff University and the University of Exeter

**ABSTRACT:** *Providing the first sustained scholarly analysis of the Black nanny figure in Alexandra Fuller's Don't Let's Go to the Dogs Tonight: An African Childhood (2001), this article highlights the memoir's problematic visual economies as a white-written memoir of a colonial Southern African childhood with occluded photographic representations of Black women nannies. The article signals the limitations of hegemonic approaches to images, particularly in materials treated primarily as literary. Only by accounting for Fuller's use of photography can we appreciate the importance and shape of the memoir's racial and gender politics. Drawing on theories of family photography and intersectional, Black feminist accounts of visibility, the article analyzes the two images of Black women in Don't Let's Go to the Dogs Tonight, revealing a dialectic of whiteness producing Blackness as its abject other, while Blackness remains crucial to, but occluded from, the production of the white colonial family. The article concludes that the co-constitution of visible whiteness and occluded Blackness mirrors the ethnocentric and masculinist hierarchies of colonialism and maps onto hegemonic medial hierarchies that privilege text above image. Where Blackness/images are the denigrated other—necessary but occluded—whiteness/text is a figuration of authority. This dynamic underscores the need for more perceptive and decolonizing methods of reading texts containing images.*

Fifty-nine black-and-white photographs structure Alexandra Fuller's memoir *Don't Let's Go to the Dogs Tonight: An African Childhood* (2001). The images rhythmically commence each

chapter with an additional handful scattered throughout the narrative. Despite their regularity, the photographs are sparsely captioned, often decontextualized, and never mentioned within the memoir's prose. Although scholars have noted that the skewed placement of images in autobiography replicates the "non-linearity of memory," the complete disconnection of the images in *Don't Let's Go to the Dogs Tonight* from its text imbues the photographs with a strangeness exceeding the supposed referential purpose of images in autobiography as "illustration" or "verification."<sup>1</sup> The photographs thereby pose an interpretative challenge within *Don't Let's Go to the Dogs Tonight* while also offering an opportunity to consider more broadly how to interpret images to which we are *not* invited to pay attention, in life writing and other genres (see fig. 1).<sup>2</sup> In this article, I argue that it is only by accounting for Fuller's use of photography and the memoir's intermedial, visual-textual form that we can appreciate the importance and shape of its racial and gender politics.<sup>3</sup>

*Don't Let's Go to the Dogs Tonight* narrates Fuller's childhood as a white settler in colonial Southern Rhodesia, and later Zambia and Malawi, during and after the Second Chimurenga—Zimbabwe's Liberation War fought between the Black majority and the white governing minority from 1964 to 1979.<sup>4</sup> Preoccupied with the tension between motherhood and the raced, classed, and gendered labor of mothering, the memoir's text frequently references a series of indigenous Black women nannies, whose presence and labor to an extent substitutes the Fuller children's emotionally, and often physically, unavailable mother, Nicola. Despite occupying the problematic center of gravity of the memoir—as a narrative of white family-building and memorializing—the nannies are largely occluded within the memoir's visual materials. The figure of the nanny features in just two images. Tabatha appears only in the description of a photograph, the sole image rendered ekphrastically—described textually rather

than represented visually. Violet's portrait is the only photograph with a Black woman as its singular subject.

How, then, are we to read the intermedial (dis)appearances of the Black nanny, the decentering of the racialized and gendered figure whose labor in producing the white family is paradoxically centered? Fuller has framed racialized exclusions in *Don't Let's Go to the Dogs Tonight* as deliberate and somehow anti-racist: "The way that blacks were all but invisible to whites is a very important theme in *Don't Let's Go to the Dogs Tonight*—on purpose they appear in that book only as servants, terrorists etc. because that's how it really was in apartheid-era Rhodesia."<sup>5</sup> She suggests that this frank approach is a critique of and a corrective to "most books out of Africa written by whites," which "are absurdly dishonest and/or horribly, insultingly romantic" (p. 45). Fuller has stated publicly that the memoir is her "answer to" the absences in those works, in which she cannot "see the neurosis of racism [. . .] how amputated the spirituality is of people who have decided to ignore the spirituality, dignity, and humanity of the six million [indigenous Africans] living around them."<sup>6</sup> These comments imply that the brutally honest portrayal of racism and racial segregation in *Don't Let's Go to the Dogs Tonight* does not aim to shock gratuitously but has a fundamentally antiracist intent.

A closer reading of the photographs, however, uncovers a deep racial ambivalence that exceeds the hermetic simplicity of Fuller's statements and fails to advocate for "the spirituality, dignity, and humanity" of the indigenous Africans who played a pivotal role in her upbringing. Taking seriously the strange decontextualization and intermedial assemblage of the images of the Black nanny uncovers affective and political excesses of meaning. These excesses offer an unprecedented view into the ideological workings of the memoir, exposing Fuller's vision of "how it really was" as a vision of whiteness *and* occluded Blackness and demonstrating how an



analysis of the memoir's intermediality exceeds or scatters its author's antiracist purposes.

Drawing on family photography theory and intersectional, Black feminist accounts of visibility and representation, this article examines the figure of the Black nanny in *Don't Let's Go to the Dogs Tonight*, revealing a dialectic of whiteness producing Blackness as its abject other while Blackness remains crucial to but occluded from the production of the white family.

My analysis elucidates the importance of accounting for the inclusion of photography in materials treated primarily as literary and indicates the risk of overlooking the interpretative potential that intermedial materials harbor. To date, scholars have focused on Fuller's convoluted representation of (post)apartheid-era Southern Africa and the problematic nostalgic lens through which Fuller recalls her past. Only Rosalía Baena has engaged with the intermediality of *Don't Let's Go to the Dogs Tonight*, observing that "visual and verbal means function as distinctive sign systems that intersect and merge to signify meanings at which neither one could arrive alone."<sup>7</sup> For Baena, the memoir's photography functions as a tool of white identity making and a search for a specifically white belonging, instigated by Fuller's position as one of a "generation of foreign-born English children who dwelt in an undefined place between the English and native cultures" (p. 142). Building on this scholarship, I argue that the memoir's intermediality offers a lens through which to explore the representation of race and gender in (post)colonial Rhodesia/Zimbabwe and Southern Africa more broadly, particularly as the construction of dominant whiteness prescribes a construction of occluded Blackness.

Aside from Baena's work, the lapse in analyzing *Don't Let's Go to the Dogs Tonight's* visuality is a predictable misstep. The memoir predominantly circulated within European and North American literary markets as part of a wave of nostalgic writing about Africa that aligns with J. M. Coetzee's definition of "white writing": "generated by the concerns of people no

longer European, not yet African.”<sup>8</sup> The memoir has thereby mostly been interpreted within Western epistemologies, which often code visual materials as secondary to text. As James Elkins emphasizes, even the field of visual culture studies “doesn’t tend to look closely at images,” particularly where they are taken “as examples of political, gender, and other issues.”<sup>9</sup> Instead, images suffer a philosophical “after-effect” (p. 29). Elkins explains, “After we are startled, bemused, entranced, and possibly persuaded by what we find in visual objects, we then write about them, and in our writing those objects become passive: they serve as reminders, examples, and illustrations of things we end up arguing in the texts that surround them” (p. 29). This “after-effect” is especially potent in autobiographical work containing photographs, the constituent parts of which are, Timothy Dow Adams notes, “commonly read as though operating in some stronger ontological world than their counterparts, fiction and painting, despite both logic and a history of scholarly attempts that seem to have proven otherwise.”<sup>10</sup>

By resisting the treatment of images as passive objects or realist-ontological props—which is also to resist *Don’t Let’s Go to the Dogs Tonight’s* imperatives as a memoir of and for the West—I unveil a racial logic that undermines and complicates Fuller’s stated antiracist purposes and demonstrates the risk of overlooking the formal properties of intermedial materials. In doing so, I extend work that scholars including Astrid Rasch, Rory Pulosof, and Ranka Primorac have undertaken in linking the memoir’s text to “strategic permutations” of a “colonially-rooted” Rhodesian discourse.<sup>11</sup> I begin by conducting close readings of Tabatha’s and Violet’s images, highlighting how the memoir’s intermediality works to consolidate the racial, gendered, and classed logic of colonialism. The images do not merely replicate “how it really was”; they also entrench the colonial status quo, not least as images that, presented as

neutral or evidentiary, are meant to remain as unnoticed as the constructive labor of the Black nanny.

Later, I undertake a more speculative, alternative reading of the images of Tabatha and Violet as active, agential subjects. This imaginative maneuver admittedly inheres a risk of projecting my own biases onto the photographs and the memoir. As a white, Western scholar, I am acutely aware that attempting to abstract an oppositional reading from the colonially captured and assembled images of two African women might result in a reading that reproduces the colonial hierarchies that Fuller has reproduced before me—also in the name of antiracism. To ignore the images and the women that they do and do not depict, however, would be to cede power to Fuller, taking her at her authorly word that the images, and therefore the nannies' individuality and specificity, do not really matter. To look away from the images would be to fail to appreciate how they already exert interpretative pressure on the text, if only we knew how to look at them.

With epistemic humility, then, I explore what happens when we push past the assumption that images are mere accessories to text. Led by the innovative work of Black feminist scholars including Saidiya Hartman, Tina M. Campt, and Christina Sharpe in “looking (again)” at the images of the nanny, I engage what Hartman has called “a history of an unrecoverable past,” “a narrative of what might have been or could have been,” “a history written with and against the archive,” rather than attempting to intuit and impose a definitive understanding of those whose subjectivity is, in the end, drastically delimited in the memoir.<sup>12</sup> In this way, I repurpose the tensions between inclusion and occlusion, negation and centering that are suggested in the peculiar “Don’t Let’s” of Fuller’s title to consider the intermedial figure of the colonial Black nanny.

*Tabatha: Constructing the (Intermedial) White Family*

Tabatha appears only once in *Don't Let's Go to the Dogs Tonight*, in an ekphrastic representation of a family photograph that is not reproduced visually. The image's description appears beneath a photograph of Nicola and is separated from the text that follows by its italicized typeface and an asterisk (pp. 29-30; see figs. 2 and 3).<sup>13</sup> Neither the photograph nor the circumstances of its taking are mentioned in the surrounding text. The inclusion's mediality *as* photograph is only revealed by the ekphrastic description's final, throwaway sentence: "*Dad is taking the photograph.*"

Elsewhere, ekphrasis only features in the brief photographic captions that serve to identify the images' subjects—"Village," "Bobo and Van," "Bus stop" (pp. 24, 45, 100). The simplicity of these captions often fails to elucidate the intermedial connections between text and image, heightening the resonance of Tabatha's unexplained medial exceptionalism.<sup>14</sup> Tabatha's unique mediality *is* suggestive, however, of an importance belying her position as colonial Black nanny, her appearance affecting an interpretative "impenetrability" typical of ekphrasis: "leav[ing] the reader puzzled since s/he does not know how to link word and image."<sup>15</sup> Located near the memoir's start, Tabatha's ekphrastic image is nestled within a collection of visually reproduced photographs; that the number of images in this section noticeably surpasses the frequency of those found across the memoir signals its importance in Fuller's work of familial construction. The ekphrastic image therefore bears multiple markers of difference: as a unique moment of ekphrasis in an otherwise visually reproduced family album; as the only included image in which the Fuller children are pictured with a Black African; and as one of just two

images depicting a Black woman in a white family memoir. I propose that these markers of strangeness are precisely where the image's familial significance can be explored.

In the description of Tabatha's photograph, the nanny is locked in a circuit of gazes with Fuller's parents, Nicola and Tim; her elder sister, Vanessa; and her brother, Adrian, who died prior to Fuller's birth:

*Vanessa, signature tackie lips (lips that are rosebud full), a mass of fairy-white hair, toddling cheerfully, with that overbalancing, tripping step of the small child. And tottering after her, the little boy who could be her twin. In the background, a black nanny called Tabatha, in white apron and white cap, strong, shining arms outstretched laughing, waiting to scoop them up; she is half-shyly looking into the camera. Mum is looking on from the veranda. Dad is taking the photograph. (p. 30)*

A figure "in the background," like a colonial-Rhodesian version of the maid in Edouard Manet's *Olympia* (1863), Tabatha appears within and outside the orbit of the white family by which she is employed, in service to its "fairy-white" children. Her marginalized position in the family mirrors the ekphrastic form—the unseen nature of ekphrasis redounding to the unseen nature of Tabatha and the overlooked raced and gendered labor of producing the white colonial family.

Tabatha's liminality between visibility and occlusion activates and embodies a series of disorientating contradictions readable within the image, serving to complicate our perceptions of the nanny and her familial position. In contrast to her situation "*in the background*," Tabatha joyfully laughs with the children in her charge, "half-shyly" gazing out of the frame, a sliver of selfhood revealed, perhaps, in her hesitant look towards the camera. In this sense, Tabatha's visual inclusion/omission is highly suggestive—even as a semblance of individuality is registered in Fuller's text, the inscription of Blackness as individual subject is rendered somehow

impossible or unseeable. In the photograph's absence, we are unable to corroborate or refute Tabatha's affect, wholly determined as it is by Fuller's textual interpretation—an interpretation that manifests a “desire to don, occupy, or possess blackness or the black body as a sentimental resource and/or locus of excess enjoyment,” with little regard for the autonomy and authenticity of its depicted subject.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, the image's sentimentality bears a striking resemblance to the problematic figure of the colonial Mammy, an idealized figure created by proponents of slavery to protect the reputation of the slave trade in the ante- and postbellum periods. As such, and as Catherine Clinton has stated of the inclusion of the Mammy in white, colonial family portraiture, Tabatha's inclusion “does not, by any means, validate the ‘closeness’ of the races.”<sup>17</sup>

Nonetheless, a close reading of Tabatha's image uncovers her counterintuitive centering. The description opens with Fuller's attempt to foreground her siblings but quickly cedes to the nanny: Tabatha's gaze meets the camera's lens, the motion of Tabatha's body enlivens the image, Tabatha's emotion fills the frame. The family is situated in relation to her: the children toddle towards Tabatha's open arms, Nicola “look[s] on” passively, and Tim takes the photograph. The osmotic replacement of Fuller's siblings with Tabatha—a nanny Fuller never met—as the subject of the image suggests Fuller's identification with the act of interracial intimacy that, for her at least, the image portrays. The textual fragment commences with an act of interracial identification through Fuller's description of Vanessa's “rosebud full” lips as “tackie lips,” a term that Fuller identifies elsewhere as a racist epithet for full African lips (pp. 30, 52). Fuller shares similarly full lips, about which she is teased at school, writing that she tries to “suck in my lips, especially for photographs in case anyone thinks I'm part *muntu*,” a racist term for Black Africans (p. 52). In the description of the image, however, the term “tackie lips” is romanticized, forming a relational bridge between white family and Black embodiment within

a scene depicting an interracial idyll. To borrow from Roland Barthes, for Fuller, the image's *punctum*—"that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me)"—is Vanessa's lips, symbolizing an ambivalence towards racial segregation and an intimacy felt by Fuller towards the figure of the Black nanny.<sup>18</sup>

Reading the image's inclusion as a meaningful act of selection within Fuller's intermedial family-building project emphasizes its personal significance. Annette Kuhn has outlined the interpretative plasticity of the family album and the intimate connection between the act of assembling photographs and the construction of the family: "pictures get displayed one after another, their selection and ordering as meaningful as the pictures themselves. [. . .] In the process of using—producing, selecting, ordering, displaying—photographs, the family is actually in the process of making itself."<sup>19</sup> Fuller's weaving of photographs through the memoir thereby visually constructs a version of the family representative of Fuller's own conceptualization.

These projected patterns of familial inclusion and exclusion reflect the status quo of colonial Rhodesia, contextualizing Tabatha's hovering between visual presence and absence. As a construction of the white, colonial family, there should be no place for Tabatha in *Don't Let's Go to the Dogs Tonight*; thus she is visually omitted. Her ekphrastic reproduction, however, marks Tabatha as *more than* an omission, precisely because she is not fully omitted. Marianne Hirsch states that "familial subjectivity is constructed relationally," arguing that, "if looking entails a relationship of power, of domination and subjection, of mutuality and interconnection [. . .] these constitutive optical relations are often concealed and unacknowledged."<sup>20</sup> The racial politics of colonial Rhodesia necessitate the exclusion of Tabatha's photograph; the image is unruly, belying Rhodesia's policy of racial segregation in its depiction of interracial intimacy.



Further, the image is dangerous in its framing of the lived ambivalence between segregation and quotidian family life. In this sense, the photograph is doing the work of family photography in spite of its visual omission—the image “locat[es] [itself] precisely in the space of contradiction between the myth of the ideal family and the lived reality of family life” (p. 8).

Tabatha’s occlusion might thereby be contextualized, but an attempt to interpret the image in its ekphrastic mediality is again met with disorienting contradictions. In her inclusion *only* as ekphrasis, Tabatha is subordinated: she is visually absent, literally unshown. Her ekphrastic appearance also, however, exceeds the other images’ presumed autobiographical function to “reinforce the message conveyed by words” because the only words that Tabatha’s image might reinforce are those deployed in her depiction, separated and decontextualized from the rest of the text.<sup>21</sup> In Tabatha’s complete submersion in writing, then, she is overemphasized, buoyed and swollen with the privilege that Fuller endows to text throughout the memoir. As the only instance of ekphrasis, Tabatha is marked as different, suggesting an unexplained exceptionalism.

The sudden interjection of Tabatha’s ekphrastic appearance and her (in)visibility as an ekphrastically rendered subject punctures and subverts the hierarchical ordering of text over image in *Don’t Let’s Go to the Dogs Tonight*. W. J. T. Mitchell has described the disruption caused by ekphrastic images, which act “like a sort of unapproachable and unpresentable ‘black hole’ in the verbal structure [of a text], entirely absent from it, but shaping and affecting it in fundamental ways.”<sup>22</sup> Mitchell’s use of the term “black hole” is highly suggestive in the context of indigenous women’s status in colonial societies. Reduced to their most basic markers of identity—“Black” and “woman”—indigenous women were, and continue to be, assigned racialized and gendered roles and treated according to their position within (post)colonialism’s

ethnocentric and patriarchal hierarchies. While the slave trade relied on the “instrumental deployment of sexuality in the reproduction of property,” later post-slavery colonial societies also relied on the labor of indigenous women in the (re)production of the colonial family through pivotal roles such as the nanny.<sup>23</sup> Within both periods, the unacknowledged labor of Black women at once maintained the individual white family and sustained wider colonial hierarchies that placed systemic limitations on Black women’s freedom and power.

The figure of the colonial Black woman mirrors and embodies Mitchell’s conception of the medial “black hole”—“entirely absent” from the larger body “but shaping and affecting it in fundamental ways.” Indeed, this colonial pattern of occluding the necessary labor of Black women is traceable in *Don’t Let’s Go to the Dogs Tonight*, where it is reproduced in Fuller’s medial hierarchy. The text, unable to represent accurately the complex relationship between the white family and the Black nanny, requires yet subordinates images of these women. Further, the memoir’s co-constitution of visible whiteness and occluded Blackness maps onto the medial hierarchy locating text over and above image. Where image is the denigrated other, necessary but occluded, text is a figuration of authority, aligning with the colonial power dynamic of Black subordination to white dominance. In the disconnection of the images in *Don’t Let’s Go to the Dogs Tonight*, they seem, at first, subordinate to the text. I argue, however, that the decontextualization separating image from text signals a function beyond that of perfunctory illustration. Like Mitchell’s black hole, the images appear absent from the wider text but instead are fundamental to its reading, exerting interpretative pressure in their apparent disconnection.

The observation of these black hole-like perturbations in the literary surface of the memoir presents an opportunity to question the intermedial relationships between text, image, and ekphrasis, as well as the gendered and interracial encounters at play within Tabatha’s

inclusion, while inviting a broader consideration of the photograph as a kind of racially abject form. Indeed, Tabatha's appearance in/as ekphrasis initiates a profound dialogue with the reproduced photographs and text surrounding her. Normally at risk of being overlooked in their presumed autobiographical facticity, these assembled fragments are endowed with new meaning through Tabatha's evasive presence.

The chapter entitled "Adrian: Rhodesia, 1968" begins with a photograph captioned "Mum, Adrian and Van"; Nicola sits on a blanket, baby Adrian in her lap, toddler Vanessa standing to her left (see fig. 2). Enacting a filial network conspicuously devoid of the nanny, all three look towards the camera: Nicola open-mouthed, mid-sentence; Adrian quizzical; Vanessa half-smiling. The family are pictured outdoors; their blanket spread on grass bordered by lush vegetation. A sense of familial idyll is mirrored in the chapter's text, commencing: "Mum says, 'The happiest day of my life was the day I held that little baby in my arms.' She means Rhodesia, 1968. She means the day her son, Adrian, was born" (p. 29). In the text's mid-1970s present, however, Nicola is ominously sad, "weeping into her beer" (p. 29). Lurching back through time to happiness, Fuller writes of her mother: "She is freshly married, they are white (a ruling colour in Rhodesia) [. . .]. Her children are the picture-perfect match of each other: beautiful, blond, and blue-eyed" (p. 29).

An asterisk between paragraphs then enacts a return to Nicola's sadness, registered in a photographic portrait captioned "Mum," representing Nicola during a frequent episode of depression (see fig. 3). Nicola sits in an armchair positioned between a ghostly shroud veiling a piece of furniture and a large antelope skull, prefiguring Adrian's death through the image's inclusion before the event's textual description. Staring blankly away from the camera, Nicola's eyes settle beyond the image's frame, her vacant gaze contrasting sharply with the conversational

engagement she shares with the lens in “Mum, Adrian and Van.” Enter Tabatha, whose ekphrastic representation appears between the photograph of Nicola and the textual revelation of Adrian’s death, again signifying Tabatha’s intimate position amid the family’s private tragedies. In a section of text separated from Tabatha’s image by another asterisk, Fuller writes: “Then Adrian dies before he is old enough to talk. Mum is not yet twenty-four and her picture-perfect life is shattered” (p. 30). Like the fairy-white hair of Vanessa, here Adrian’s whiteness is emphasized, even in death, as “cold, blond ash” (p. 30). The final photograph in this sequence, however, is “Adrian,” a portrait of a smiling baby, seemingly resurrected (p. 31; see fig. 4). The boy’s image, inserted directly opposite his mother’s portrait, hangs part way through Fuller’s description of Nicola’s alcohol-medicated grief: “The story changes depending on what Mum is drinking. If she is very drunk on wine, then the story is a bit different than if she is very drunk on gin. The worst is if she is very drunk on everything she can find in the house. But the end is always the same. Adrian is dead. That’s an awful ending no matter what she’s been drinking” (pp. 30-31).<sup>24</sup>

The intermedial assemblage of these images and textual fragments reveals varying modes of absence. The key, immovable absence is Adrian’s, for whom the chapter is named and whose loss Fuller understands as “the greatest tragedy of our lives. It is my tragedy, too, even though I was not born when it happened” (p. 31). The force of Adrian’s absence is unparalleled, forming a cornerstone of the family’s identity and absorbing Fuller herself, not least due to her mother’s tactless confession during Fuller’s childhood that Fuller is “the baby we made when Adrian died” (p. 31). Fuller’s decision to absent images of herself from the chapter also implies her status as the substitutionary child: the daughter whose birth is contingent on the death of the son, who replaces the irreplaceable. Her mother’s unassailable grief over Adrian’s death fuels an

emotional and sometimes physical absence from her surviving children, from reality—the vacancy in her portrait mirrored in Fuller’s textual description of her mother as “dissolving like soap left too long in the bath” (p. 31).

The absence of the white mother and the presence of the Black nanny evokes an interracial encounter between women both *within* the description of Tabatha’s photograph and *in the layout* of the chapter’s intermedial assemblage. In their consecutive positioning, the images of Nicola and Tabatha are placed in dialogue, situating Tabatha as substitutionary mother in the biological mother’s absence—even as the actual photograph visually reproduced is of Nicola. A consideration of photography’s historic “racial taxonomies” elucidates the relational dynamics of this interracial encounter—its oscillations between photograph and text, mother and nanny, seen and unseen.<sup>25</sup> The development of photographic technologies in the nineteenth century was contemporaneous with and facilitated the advancement of “race science,” providing a visual medium for the codification of race in and on the body, the legacies of which have continued to haunt contemporary photographic practices. For Laura Wexler, American women’s domestic camera work at the turn of the twentieth century functioned as a mode of misrepresenting and entrenching imperialist hierarchies at a time of colonial consolidation.<sup>26</sup> Women photographers during this period, argues Wexler, saw through “the innocent eye”: a “deeply problematic practice of representation that developed within the private domain of family photography,” leading to the photographic portrayal of white middle-class women as “looking out from within, without seeing, the race and class dynamics of the household” (p. 6). The “averted gaze,” states Wexler, “functioned to normalize and inscribe raced and classed relations of dominance during slavery and to reinscribe them after its legal end” (p. 6).

With her own “innocent eye,” Fuller’s use of photographs generates visual and allegorical effects that contravene her claim to be producing a work of critical segregation realism. Although the images within this chapter are not necessarily taken by a white woman—rather, Fuller’s father takes Tabatha’s photograph, and the photographer of “Mum” is unidentified—the images either visually capture the “averted gaze” of the white middle-class woman or display this gaze through their intermedial configuration. The vertical alignment of the images of Nicola and Tabatha generates a dialogue between the photographs and their subjects, centered around the shared sign of the white woman’s “averted gaze,” which conceptually and affectively separates the images from the chapter’s body while producing an interracial encounter between women that exceeds their original contexts, as well as Fuller’s wider project.

In Tabatha’s ekphrastic image, Nicola typifies the “averted gaze”; she “*look[s] on from the veranda,*” the destination of her gaze unspecified, indefinable (p. 30). Neither the subject nor the photographer, Nicola is inessential to the image, her presence instead working to “normalize and inscribe raced and classed relations of dominance” in colonial Rhodesia (Wexler, p. 6). The context of the chapter serves to justify Nicola’s absences through her maternal grief but only heightens the resonance of these hierarchies—the overlooked labor of the nanny moderates Nicola’s absences and contributes to the survival of her remaining and subsequent children.

The same colonial hierarchies are redoubled in the section’s intermedial assemblage. The absence captured in Nicola’s portrait and the photograph’s placement above Tabatha’s ekphrastic image produces a gaze that visually mirrors Wexler’s “averted gaze”: Nicola visibly “look[s] out from within, without seeing, the race and class dynamics of the household,” which take place directly below her portrait in Tabatha’s ekphrastic image (p. 6). Nicola’s placement above Tabatha thereby foreshadows *and* re-enacts Nicola’s averted gaze. Further, Nicola’s

photographic mediality emphasizes her visibility in contrast to Tabatha's invisibility. Nicola in effect prefigures and returns her own averted gaze in an infinite exchange between visual and ekphrastic images.

As for Fuller, regardless of her intention to challenge the romanticization of colonial hierarchies of race, her "unseeing eye" assembles the images and textual fragments in an arrangement that redoubles and solidifies the same hierarchies that she purports to reject. In these ways, the effects of Fuller's use of photography exceed her stated aim, belying her position as conduit and inheritor of her mother's racialized, gendered, and classed averted gaze. Fuller's intermedial arrangements in this chapter of *Don't Let's Go to the Dogs Tonight* result in an oscillation between Tabatha's centering and her marginalization. At once overemphasized and overshadowed in her ekphrastic representation, Tabatha is also subordinated and resubordinated by Nicola's visible averted gaze and its infinite return from image to text. Fuller thereby reproduces an intermedial interracial encounter that embodies the contradictions and violence inherent to colonial hierarchies of race, class, and gender.

#### *Violet and the Nanny-in-Series*

Just as Tabatha's portrait is distinguished by its ekphrastic form, Violet's image is unique in *Don't Let's Go to the Dogs Tonight* as the only Black woman whose photograph is reprinted. In addition, Violet's name is given as the caption to the image *and* the title of the chapter (p. 119; see fig. 5). The only other chapters named after a person in the memoir are members of Fuller's immediate family and, in one instance, a white family friend. Like Tabatha, Violet's exceptionalism indicates her proximity to and place within the family unit. Her image, however, is understated with little discernible detail. Grainy in its black-and-white reproduction, we would



struggle to recognize the woman labeled as Violet if we were to see her in the street. Violet faces the camera, carrying three bottles of milk—one in each hand, the third balanced on her head. The tight framing of this last bottle necessitates the exclusion of Violet's legs, photographically amputated below the knees, a peep of skin visible between the patterned fabric of her dress and the image's frame. A building and an agricultural gate located further along the dirt track behind Violet are suggestive of the Fullers' farming business and Violet's connection to the family, and by extension to Tabatha and the succession of nannies.

Unlike Tabatha, Violet is mentioned repeatedly across the memoir, some thirty-five times. She is thereby marked as prominent within a series of nannies whose total number is impossible to deduce and who are often lumped together, generically and possessively referred to by Fuller as "the" or "my nanny." However, a closer reading of the textual and photographic appearances and disappearances of the figure of the nanny alongside colonial ideologies of race and the body reveals an ambivalence toward the series of replicable nannies—a series, I argue, that Violet comes to represent textually and photographically. Violet's unrecognizability is notable here, working against the photographic medium's propensity for, and historic use in, identification and evidentiary purposes, particularly within colonial contexts.<sup>27</sup> Both Violet's and Tabatha's unrecognizability reflects Fuller and her family's racialized reluctance or inability to acknowledge the subjectivity of the women who played pivotal roles in Fuller's childhood, instead signaling the nannies' commutability for Fuller.

When Violet is first mentioned in *Don't Let's Go to the Dogs Tonight*, Fuller is a small child, not yet old enough to join Vanessa at school: "I had to stay at home with Violet, the nanny, and Snake, the cook," writes Fuller, while Tim works on the farm and Nicola is characteristically absent ("don't-interrupt-me-I'm-busy all day") (p. 41). During this recollection, Fuller willfully

disobeys Violet's instructions by playing in the forbidden bamboo patch, prompting Violet to interject. Fuller obstinately responds, "Then I'll fire you, hey" (p. 42). Later in the memoir, a strikingly similar scene unfolds. We read again that Fuller is not old enough for school and is left in the care of her nanny, while Nicola is away "resting" (pp. 139-40). This time, however, the nanny is identified only as "my nanny of the moment; they seem to change like the seasons" (p. 140). The anonymous nanny reprimands Fuller for recruiting local indigenous children to play a racialized game of "boss and boys," in which Fuller pretends to be the children's white employer and they her indigenous laborers. In response to the nanny's reproach, Fuller writes, "I've told her that if she shouts at me I will fire her," before declaring to the nanny, "I can fire you if I like. Anytime I want, I can fire you" (p. 140).

Although Fuller's child-self likely did possess the racialized and classed arrogance to threaten idly multiple nannies over their employment, her admission to having already threatened to fire *this* nanny returns us to the earlier scene with Violet being threatened. Both nannies *could* be Violet, either literally or metaphorically, suggesting that Violet's prominence across the memoir is due to her positioning as the agglomerated form of the entire series of nannies. In their unknowability as individuals in Fuller's memory, Violet subsumes them, becoming representative of a generic nanny figure. In her work on "composite" forms in modernist writing, Alix Beeston has conceptualized the "woman-in-series," an agglomerated form applicable to the nannies in *Don't Let's Go to the Dogs Tonight*.<sup>28</sup> Mirroring photography's "densely laminous and sequenced bodies," the woman-in-series is a "reiterated, sutured" figure that is "linked to and formulated through other female bodies along the linear track of the written word" (p. 5). In this, she is "coextensive with the reiterated, sutured bodies of the texts she populates" (p. 5). Like Beeston's woman-in-series, Fuller's nannies collapse into one another within an "intervallic

structur[e]” whose intermedial “aesthetic, and narrative logic [. . .] retains—even mines—fissures and seams” (p. 5).

Notably, the narrative does not disclose what happens to Fuller’s nannies when they leave the family nor is the transition between each nanny’s tenure marked. Rather, Fuller’s nanny-in-series almost seamlessly transforms from one iteration to the next, slipping through the intermedial frame, the irrelevance of their individuality—at least to Fuller—signaled in her ambivalence to these changes. This transience extends to the representation of the body of the serialized nanny both textually and photographically, likening Fuller’s intermedial representation of the nanny to a problematic embodiment of the racialized and gendered typologies inherent to colonialism. Having threatened the unnamed nanny, Fuller writes:

my nanny stands under the tap at the back of the house and rubs green soap on her legs. She doesn’t wash the soap off again, so her legs stay shiny and smooth and the colour of light chocolate. If she leaves her legs without soap, I can draw pictures on her dry skin with the sharp end of a small stick and the picture shows up grey on her skin. If I fall, or hurt myself, or if I’m tired, my nanny lets me put my hand down her shirt onto her breast and I can suck my thumb and feel how soft she is, and her breasts are full and soft and smell of the way rain smells when it hits hot earth. I know, without knowing why, that Mum would smack me if she saw me doing this. (p. 141)

The nanny’s body is available to Fuller—her breasts an illicit comfort, her legs a human canvas. By contrast, the nanny has highly codified and contingent access to Fuller’s body, which is compartmentalized into (im)permissible areas—Fuller’s face is available to wash, while her prepubescent genitals remain inaccessible, even from examination when something bites her there (p. 44). These boundaries marking the accessibility and visibility of racialized bodies

mirror colonial ideology's preoccupation with the politics of the racialized body, seeking to define and site race *in* and *on* the gendered body. As Sara Ahmed argues, colonialism relies upon "the direct and violent control of the bodies of others," including "the power seized over the bodies of natives in settler colonies," which exploit "the lives and labour of indigenous peoples."<sup>29</sup> Colonialism's ethnocentric and masculinist hierarchies, Ahmed notes, categorize the Black, female body as "the most primitive of bodily forms," "seen as hypersexual and deviant" (pp. 51, 52). The oversexualization of Black women is constructed in opposition to—and so constructs—white women's bodies, which must be protected from "contamination" by Black women's "bestiality and sexuality" (pp. 54, 53). Fuller's young body is protected *by* exploited Black labor but must also be protected *from* its corrupting potential—an oppositional dynamic reflecting the co-constitution of whiteness/text as authoritative and Blackness/image as denigrated other.

Fuller colonizes her nanny's body/bodies even beyond the limits of colonial interracial respectability, revealed by the intimate breast-fondling taking place out of sight of Fuller's mother. Such colonizing gestures are elaborated on in Fuller's fascination with her nannies' body parts throughout *Don't Let's Go to the Dogs Tonight*; she obsessively (re)constructs the nanny's racial otherness, essentialized in and on her body, marking out the Black female body "as the *site* of racialization itself" (Ahmed, p. 46). The inclusion of the image of Violet extends Fuller's bodily colonizing of the nanny during her childhood, visually fixing it onto the page. In Fuller's selection and assemblage of Violet's photograph, the individuality and specificity of each nanny is reduced to an essentialized form, heavy with colonial bodily signification—*this* body, indicates Fuller, is that of the Black nanny.

The comparative juxtaposition that follows the image further emphasizes Violet's portrait as a site of racialization. The chapter's first sentence, located directly beneath Violet's image, introduces Pru Hilderbrand, an idealized white, colonial mother described emphatically as "like a mum out of a book" (p. 119). The description of Pru's "soft-green, rocky garden" connects to Violet's rural location in the photograph, while the "soft, secret places" in Pru's house recall the illicit softness of the nannies' bodies for Fuller (p. 119). The dream-like quality of Pru's feminine domesticity contrasts with the understated photograph of the nanny and sets up the luxurious afternoon that Fuller spends at Pru's home, with its "fresh-cut flowers," squash court, and pool (p. 119).

The description of this blissful afternoon is then juxtaposed with the family's discovery of Violet's wounded body on their arrival home. Violet has been attacked by July, the Fullers' Black cook, during a burglary. Although not explicitly stated, it is implied that Violet was defending the property of her white employers, highlighting the problematic politics of economic precarity and loyalty in colonial employment. The discovery of Violet prompts a troublingly visceral account of the scene, during which Violet's suffering is repeatedly appropriated in multiple associations made between Violet's injuries and Fuller's afternoon spent in watery leisure, swimming in Pru's pool. The swimming pool's location "in the belly of some rocks" transforms it into an allegory of Violet's body, which is described in saturated terms: Violet is "wearing a dress that is stuck perfectly to her body and [. . .] she is viscous and shiny with blood, as if someone has poured oil on her, or wrapped her tightly in black plastic" (pp. 120, 122). The flowing of the pool's spring water, "allowed to slosh [. . .] like a waterfall," mirrors Violet's blood, which soon saturates the blanket used in an attempt to stem its flow (pp. 120, 122). Violet's blood, writes Fuller, "is running and alive and keeps replenishing itself over the sleek

lustrous skin of her dress, like a new snake's skin" (p. 122). This "new" skin corresponds troublingly with the skin-peeling effects of Pru's "crisp towels in the changing rooms, which rub our skins raw" (p. 120).

The Fullers strive desperately to save Violet's life, as her slippery body "makes a noise like a wet sponge" (p. 122). This chaotic scene is then strangely interrupted by an asterisk, the narration cutting abruptly to a short recollection of the first aid training Fuller has received at school, which again problematically appropriates Violet's suffering. Fuller describes herself "breathing into the soft, red, ripe cave of someone else's body," echoing the cavernous hollow of the pool's location and evoking Violet's body as a rapidly draining vessel (p. 123). Fuller continues, "I practise on a small girl called Anne Brown. My tackie lips feel as if they might suffocate her, hovering above hers" (p. 123). As in her description of Vanessa, the term "tackie lips" signals a bodily closeness to the figure of the Black nanny—through Fuller's ambivalence towards racial segregation and her colonizing of the nanny's body—here inserted in the midst of Violet's trauma. Further, the term implies a link, made through juxtaposition if not made explicitly, between Violet's injuries and her "suffocating" proximity to the Fuller family; while the structure of the white colonial family remains intact, Violet's loyalty to the Fullers has ultimately incited her suffering.

Returning to the text's present with another asterisk, Violet's body is described viscerally as "sliced, like rashers of bacon, all the way up her thighs, across her belly, her arms, her face" (p. 124). Nicola administers first aid, as she wills Violet, "Don't die. Hold on" (p. 124). By the time medics arrive, "Violet has had three drips, one in one arm and two in the other, and her eyes have fluttered open once or twice, but each time the pain washes over her again and drags her back deep into a blessed, dark, empty place. Near death" (pp. 126-27). Despite the situation's

urgency, the medics and Fuller's parents bizarrely find time to share a cup of tea before Violet finally disappears, from both the family and the text: "And then [the medics] drive away and we never see Violet again. We hear later that she got out of hospital and went back to her village" (p. 127). Violet is referenced only once in the remainder of the memoir, included in a list of indigenous people whose surnames Fuller never knew (p. 150).

In its problematic representation of Violet's suffering, the chapter operates as a key site of racial and gender anxiety, overloaded with significance. The chapter begins by asserting Violet's familial place through the inclusion of her portrait, compares her to the image of ideal motherhood by juxtaposing her with Pru, and then graphically details her suffering. Violet's attack instigates her final exit—suggested as a self-directed one—when following her recovery she neither returns to the Fullers' employ nor contacts the family whose livelihood she defended. (p. 127). As the height of the representation of Black women in *Don't Let's Go to the Dogs Tonight*, the scene demonstrates the politics to which Black women's bodies are subjected in (post)colonial contexts. Violet's body is appropriated by Fuller even at the climax of her suffering—a suffering reproduced as spectacle in a white-authored memoir purporting to critique colonial hierarchies. The racialized power dynamic that translates Black suffering to/as spectacle is typical of colonialism; as Hartman writes, "the spectacular nature of black suffering" goes hand in hand with "the dissimulation of suffering through spectacle."<sup>30</sup>

The shift in time between the conflict itself and the twenty-first century setting from which Fuller recounts these memories further complicates the representation of Black women's pain. In returning to memories from the present day, Fuller relives a version of the past, recounting events in the present tense as they happen. Fuller thereby represents Violet's suffering synchronously from both the past and the present, creating a continuous time loop in which



Black suffering functions endlessly as a tool for Fuller's reassessment of the past. As Rasch notes, within memoirs of white colonial childhoods, "the confession of racist guilt may pave the way for self-redemption."<sup>31</sup> Rather than acknowledging Violet's evident trauma, the recounting of her suffering functions as a form of twisted rejuvenation and renewal: the white family replenishes itself through Violet's labor and blood, while Violet's exit makes way for the next iteration of Fuller's nanny-in-series.

### *Reimagining*

Having unpacked the colonialist functions of the images of Tabatha and Violet as they interact with the text, I am drawn to asking: is there a more radical way of reading the absent presence of these women, so objectified and violently treated, that does not simply reiterate the images' colonial functions? Rather than arguing to affix concrete significance to the images—which, as Elkins states, only "impoverish[es] images by controlling their meaning"—I explore the radical potential of the images' affective resonance (p. 29). In undertaking a counter reading of the images of Tabatha and Violet, I build on new work at the intersection of critical race studies and feminist visual culture studies by scholars such as Wexler, Ariella Azoulay, and Tina M. Campt, drawing particular influence from Campt's call for the application of "excessive attention" to the seemingly "trivial, the mundane, or the banal" photographic practices that have been used to record and regulate (post)colonial Black lives.<sup>32</sup> Campt works to

[reclaim] the photographic archive of precarious and dispossessed black subjects [. . .] by attending to the quiet but resonant frequencies of images that have been historically dismissed and disregarded. Refocusing our attention on their sonic and haptic frequencies and on the grammar of black fugitivity and refusal that they enact reveals the

expressiveness of quiet, the generative dimensions of stasis, and the quotidian reclamations of interiority, dignity, and refusal. (p. 11)

In the images of Tabatha and Violet, I notice an affinity with Campt's repeated language of Black "refusal." In reading the women's *failure* to be reproduced photographically instead as an *act of refusal*, I connect the stasis captured within their images with Campt's quiet acts of resistance. In Tabatha's ekphrastic image, the description of her half-shy gaze is at best an assumption, at worst a projection, her employment with the family having preceded Fuller's birth. The photograph's visual omission is perhaps indicative of Tabatha's affect belying Fuller's interpretation of the image. The visual absence of Tabatha's gaze can thereby be read as a refusal to engage, a refusal to acquiesce to Fuller's representation. Further, Tabatha's body can be read as rigid, her "*strong, shining arms*" locked in stasis, rather than in motion (p. 30). Fuller interprets Tabatha's bodily positioning as a kinetic act of welcoming intimacy, but what if we read it instead as an act of refusal, Tabatha's arms holding the camera, the colonial eye, and the hierarchies dictating her familial position at bay?

Violet, too, refuses Fuller's gaze, textually and photographically. In Fuller's description of Violet's attack, she writes that Violet's "eyes have fluttered open once or twice, but each time the pain washes over her again and drags her deep into a blessed, dark, empty place. Near death" (p. 127). This dark, empty place resonates with the language of the black hole. Violet's limiting status as a Black woman in a colonial setting—"entirely absent" from but fundamental to the colonial societal whole and the individual colonial family—becomes her refuge.<sup>33</sup> As Violet disappears from the Fullers' lives and thereby from the memoir's narrative, she occupies instead an unreachable, negative space; within the dark, empty spaces of the black hole-like perturbations, spaces materially embodied by the gaps between the medial fluctuations of

Fuller's visual/textual form.<sup>34</sup> Violet's portrait photograph embodies this refusal. Her eyes are unseeable, swallowed within a darkness mirroring the black hole, which obscures her face and visually replicates and foresees the fluttering refusal of her gaze at the height of her trauma. Violet's body, too, is frozen in a tussle between motion and stasis. Her right arm, clutching a bottle of milk, is held aloft as though in motion, its sharp angle defying a natural position of rest. Yet there is no photographic blurring of her arm or the bottle on her head to suggest movement. These positions intimate a tension holding the body poised in effortful stasis.

In *Listening to Images*, Campt undertakes a radical, alternative reading of five ethnographic classification-style photographic portraits of indigenous women taken in 1894 at the Mariannhill Trappist Mission in South Africa. The portraits capture the women in "statuesque" poses of bodily stillness; their bodies are taut, their gaze firm (see figs. 6 and 7).<sup>35</sup> Whereas in the images' original use, the stillness of the women functioned to produce a colonial and reductionist view of "timeless Africans frozen in an unspoiled wilderness," for Campt, "These are not women frozen in time or by the camera. Their taut demeanor is an active, tense, and expressive practice of both restraint and constraint" (p. 57). Campt continues, their *tense* expressions of self fashioning register quotidian practices of refusal—a refusal to engage the colonial, ethnographic, and missionary gazes that produced these photos and to allow those gazes to subsume their black subjects. Moving beyond stillness to engage the muscular forms of stasis they enact makes audible both the uncomfortable frictions embedded in the visual economies in which these images circulated, as well as those between the mission and its indigenous communities. (p. 59)

Like the bodily stillness of the women in the Mariannhill photographs, Tabatha's and Violet's bodies, also held in positions of tense stasis, can be read as vestiges of their refusal, suggestive of

“black powerfulness in the midst of debility, a form of resistance expressed through a refusal to accept or acquiesce to defeat” (p. 50). Rather than indicating a permanent subjugation to the colonial eye, Tabatha’s and Violet’s positions of stasis expose the “uncomfortable frictions” of the colonial hierarchies inherent to Fuller’s white settler upbringing and emphasize the nannies’ quiet refusal of Fuller’s objectifying, colonial gaze.

In their refusal, the returned gaze of Tabatha and Violet—returned to the photographer in the taking of their images, to Fuller in her assemblage of them, and to the audience of *Don’t Let’s Go to the Dogs Tonight*—remains unrecoverable. As Paula Amad has noted, one focus of postcolonial visual culture studies has been the analysis of the “specular antagonism underpinning diverse colonial encounters” and the return of the subaltern’s gaze toward their observer, captured in photographic and filmic practices.<sup>36</sup> In Fuller’s own terms, *Don’t Let’s Go to the Dogs Tonight* is a study of colonial antagonism—an attempt to highlight colonialism’s lived truth. The returned gazes of Tabatha and Violet are momentarily suggested in the ekphrastic and visual inclusion of their images: Tabatha is “*half-shyly looking into the camera*” while the reproduction of Violet’s gaze is attempted visually in her photographic portrait. On the drastically constrained limits of such encounters, however, Amad emphasizes that “returned gazes [. . .] become the fetishized trace of our contemporary desire for—based on the historical lack of—the irrecoverable reverse shot of the Other’s view of the world” (p. 56). Put another way, Fuller’s limited representation of these marginalized women inevitably fails, reproducing a fetishized view of the racial other, likened by Amad to “a form of visual ventriloquism”: “the colonized puppet might appear to be alive, but the strings are still being pulled by Western discourse’s (now enlightened postcolonial) expectations and desires regarding the subject of the Other” (p. 56). In *Don’t Let’s Go to the Dogs Tonight*, Tabatha and Violet, as well as the wider

nanny-in-series, can only be seen in relation to Fuller, as appendages to Fuller, reflecting wider colonial strategies by which Black women are and are not seen. The same, of course, is true of any attempt I might make to re-subjectify Fuller's nannies. *All* attempts to do so will fail, the self-serving nature of speculations overpowering the drastically delimited representation of Tabatha and Violet in the memoir.

Nonetheless, there remains something significant and politically important in undertaking a counter reading of these images. The mapping of ethnocentric and masculinist hierarchies of colonialism onto medial hierarchies, such as the relationship between whiteness/text and Blackness/image, reveals the problematic visual economies within *Don't Let's Go to the Dogs Tonight*. More broadly, this hierarchy highlights the limitations of Western epistemologies of and hegemonic approaches to images, as well as the need for a more perceptive and decolonizing analysis of texts containing images. As for Fuller's nannies, the unrecoverable returned gaze of Tabatha and Violet elicits the enticing potentialities of futures that are fundamentally unknowable to Fuller and, indeed, to us. We can, however, come to a point of recognizing the significance of how little we know about these women. Into the dark and empty but generative spaces venture Tabatha and Violet, reaching the unknowable spaces beyond Fuller's grasp—spaces whose depths are punctured through and across the textual surface of the memoir.

BETH PYNER is a doctoral candidate in English Literature at Cardiff University and the University of Exeter. Beth's research examines the potentialities and affordances of intermediality in representations of encounters between women, as they are framed within women's contemporary conflict memoirs. Beth's work is interdisciplinary in scope and intersectionally feminist in approach, connecting intermediality to hierarchies of gender, race,

and class, and to the representation of the self and the other. Beth's research is supported by the South, West and Wales Doctoral Training Partnership (AH/RO12776/1).

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Joseph Cummins and Ashley Barnwell, "Michael Ondaatje's *Running in the Family* and the "familia-graphic" Gaze," *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 58, No. 3 (2022), 397; and Timothy Dow Adams, *Light Writing and Life Writing: Photography in Autobiography* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), xxi.

<sup>2</sup> As demonstrated in fig. 1, the photographs that head each chapter often do not have any clear relation to the text that follows and therefore do not function as either "illustration" or "verification" of the text. The photograph "Bobo and Van," for example, might be read as referring to the "long-limbed, high-browed, intelligent" children of the Great Dyke described beneath it but might just as well refer to the children of the Burma Valley, described in the chapter's second paragraph as "elbow-knee wormy and hollow-orange with too much heat, [and with] skin-pinching dehydration" (pp. 45, 46). Either connection would be allegorical rather than

literal. The photograph's relation to the text is thereby ambivalent and strange. Moreover, the image is ominous and overloaded with significance; the gasping pose of Fuller's sister, Vanessa, seems to prefigure the death of another sister, Olivia Fuller, who drowns later in the memoir, a death for which Fuller blames herself (pp. 89-94). In similar and different ways to "Bobo and Van," the photographs interspersed throughout the memoir evoke more questions than answers and warrant attention in analyses of *Don't Let's Go to the Dogs Tonight* and as they relate to broader discussions about the form and function of intermedial materials.

<sup>3</sup> *Don't Let's Go to the Dogs Tonight* is intermedial in its integration of prose and photography. Intermediality is an interpretative model for analyzing the relationship between various media within and across texts, "contesting both the sustained hegemony of logocentrism and the conventional and disciplinary boundaries between different arts and forms"; see Bernd Herzogenrath, ed., "Travels in Intermediality: An Introduction," in *Travels in Intermedia[lity]: ReBlurring the Boundaries* (Hanover, New Hampshire: Dartmouth College Press, 2012), 2. This article builds on intermediality scholarship, particularly work relating to the relationship between writing and photography. As Karen Beckman and Liliane Weissberg have explored, intermedial texts that combine writing with photography generate an "uncertain energy, the kind of energy we find in the realm of the experiment, the crossed border, and the bastard outcomes of surprising encounters"; see Beckman and Weissberg, introduction to *On Writing With Photography*, ed. Beckman and Weissberg (London: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), xii.

<sup>4</sup> Prior to gaining independence, Zimbabwe was officially named Southern Rhodesia while Northern Rhodesia was the name of pre-independence Zambia. In common usage, however, the name "Rhodesia" referred to what is now Zimbabwe. For this reason, in this article I shorten the name Southern Rhodesia to Rhodesia. For a historical analysis of the end of white rule in

Rhodesia, see Josiah Brownell, “The Hole in Rhodesia’s Bucket: White Emigration and the End of Settler Rule,” *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 34, No. 3 (2008), 591-610.

<sup>5</sup> Quoted from an email to the author in Zoë Norridge, “Dressing Up for the Man in the Mirror: Racial Boundaries in Two Short Stories by Alexandra Fuller and Alexander Kanengoni,” in *Crossing Places: New Research in African Studies*, ed. Charlotte Baker and Norridge (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2007), 45. For an overview of racial etiquette in Rhodesia, see Allison K. Shutt, “‘The Natives Are Getting Out of Hand’: Legislating Manners, Insolence and Contemptuous Behaviour in Southern Rhodesia, c.1910-1963,” *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 33, No. 3 (2007), 653-72. Subsequent references to Norridge’s quotation of Fuller will be cited parenthetically in the text.

<sup>6</sup> Alexandra Fuller, “Travel Light, Move Fast,” Politics and Prose, 25 September 2019, video, 56:33, accessed 7 July 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QZakB--aP94>.

<sup>7</sup> Rosalía Baena, “Photographs as Discursive Strategies in Life Writing: Alexandra Fuller’s *Don’t Let’s Go to the Dogs Tonight*,” in *Análisis del discurso: Lengua, cultura, valores: Actas del I Congreso Internacional* [Discourse analysis: Language, cultures, values: Proceedings of the first international conference], vol. 2 (Madrid: Arco Libros, 2006), 147. Subsequent references will be cited parenthetically in the text.

<sup>8</sup> J. M. Coetzee, *White Writing: On the Culture of Letters in South Africa* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), 11. Search results from WorldCat indicate that in addition to English editions published in the United States and the United Kingdom, *Don’t Let’s Go to the Dogs Tonight* has been translated into Chinese, Danish, Finnish, French, German, Italian, Norwegian, Polish, Portuguese, Serbian, and Spanish (<https://www.worldcat.org>, accessed 20 October 2021).



<sup>9</sup> James Elkins, “An Introduction to the Visual as Argument,” in *Theorizing Visual Studies: Writing Through the Discipline*, ed. James Elkins and Kristi McGuire with Maureen Burns, Alicia Chester, and Joel Kuennen (New York: Routledge, 2013), 27. Subsequent references will be cited parenthetically in the text.

<sup>10</sup> Adams, *Light Writing and Life Writing*, 17.

<sup>11</sup> Ranka Primorac, “Rhodesians Never Die? The Zimbabwe Crisis and the Revival of Rhodesian Discourse,” in *Zimbabwe’s New Diaspora: Displacement and the Cultural Politics of Survival*, ed. JoAnn McGregor and Primorac (New York: Berghahn Books, 2010), 211, 203. See also Astrid Rasch, “Postcolonial Nostalgia: The Ambiguities of White Memoirs of Zimbabwe,” *History and Memory*, 30, No. 2 (2018), 147-80; Rasch, “The Family Connection: White Expatriate Memoirs of Zimbabwe,” *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 44, No. 5 (2018), 879-93; and Rory Pilosof, “The Unbearable Whiteness of Being: Land, Race and Belonging in the Memoirs of White Zimbabweans,” *South African Historical Journal*, 61, No. 3 (2009), 621-638.

<sup>12</sup> Saidiya Hartman, “Venus in Two Acts,” *Small Axe*, 12, No. 2 (2008), 4, 12. See also Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997); Tina M. Campt, *Image Matters: Archive, Photography, and the African Diaspora in Europe* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012); Campt, *Listening to Images* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017); and Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016).

<sup>13</sup> Alexandra Fuller, *Don’t Let’s Go to the Dogs Tonight: An African Childhood* (London: Picador, 2015), 29-30. Subsequent references will be cited parenthetically in the text.

<sup>14</sup> Fuller has not publicly commented on Tabatha's medial exceptionalism, and at the time of writing this article, Fuller has not responded to an invitation to discuss the intermedial patterns of inclusion and exclusion in *Don't Let's Go to the Dogs Tonight*.

<sup>15</sup> Gabriele Rippl, "Ekphrastic Encounters and Word-Photography Configurations in Contemporary Transcultural American Life Writing," in *Intermediality, Life Writing, and American Studies*, ed. Nassim Winnie Balestrini and Ina Bergmann (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2018), 159.

<sup>16</sup> Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 21.

<sup>17</sup> Catherine Clinton, *The Plantation Mistress: Woman's World in the Old South* (New York: Pantheon, 1982), 202.

<sup>18</sup> Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections of Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (London: Vintage, 2000), 27.

<sup>19</sup> Annette Kuhn, *Family Secrets: Acts of Memory and Imagination* (London: Verso Books, 2002), 19.

<sup>20</sup> Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 9. Subsequent references will be cited parenthetically in the text.

<sup>21</sup> Rippl, "Ekphrastic Encounters and Word-Photography Configurations in Contemporary Transcultural American Life Writing," 150.

<sup>22</sup> W. J. T. Mitchell, "Ekphrasis and the Other," *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 91, No. 3 (1992), 700.

<sup>23</sup> Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 87.

<sup>24</sup> The image breaks up the text, coming after "the worst is if she is very drunk on" and before "everything she can find in the house" (pp. 30-31). This layout is identical across the 2003 and

2015 print editions, although it differs slightly in the 2015 digital edition, within which the portrait “Adrian” is inserted at the end of the paragraph rather than in the middle, evoking a similar effect (pp. 30-31). See Fuller, *Don’t Let’s Go to the Dogs Tonight: An African Childhood* (London: Picador, 2003); and Fuller, *Don’t Let’s Go to the Dogs Tonight: An African Childhood* (London: Picador, 2015), Adobe Digital Edition.

<sup>25</sup> Shawn Michelle Smith, *At the Edge of Sight: Photography and the Unseen* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), 83.

<sup>26</sup> Laura Wexler, *Tender Violence: Domestic Visions in an Age of U. S. Imperialism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 5-6. Subsequent references will be cited parenthetically in the text.

<sup>27</sup> For an overview of the histories of colonialism, race, and photography, see for example, Eleanor M. Hight and Gary D. Sampson, eds., *Colonialist Photography: Imag(in)ing Race and Place* (London: Routledge, 2002); and Paul S. Landau and Deborah D. Kaspin, eds., *Images and Empires: Visuality in Colonial and Postcolonial Africa* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).

<sup>28</sup> Alix Beeston, *In and Out of Sight: Modernist Writing and the Photographic Unseen* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 5. Subsequent references will be cited parenthetically in the text.

<sup>29</sup> Sara Ahmed, “Racialized Bodies,” in *Real Bodies: A Sociological Introduction*, ed. Mary Evans and Ellie Lee (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002), 48. Subsequent references will be cited parenthetically in the text.

<sup>30</sup> Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 22.

<sup>31</sup> Rasch, “Postcolonial Nostalgia,” 149.

<sup>32</sup> Campt, *Listening to Images*, 8. See also Wexler, *Tender Violence*; Ariella Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography*, trans. Rela Mazali and Ruvik Danieli (New York: Zone Books, 2008); and Campt, *Image Matters*. Subsequent references to *Listening to Images* will be cited parenthetically in the text.

<sup>33</sup> Mitchell, “Ekphrasis and the Other,” 700.

<sup>34</sup> This reading is influenced by recent work in visual culture studies on the radical potential of the margins and borders of and between photographic frames. For Smith, the photographic medium “brushes against the unseen, and photographs bring us to the edge of sight”; Smith, *Edge of Sight*, 8. Beeston has built on this work, arguing that in photographic modernist writing, “women’s bodies [. . .] perform a series of more-or-less evasive maneuvers in and through the intervals of the composite text. These textual openings can serve as sanctuaries from, or passageways out of, the social and political order whose injurious dictates they also materialize”; Beeston, *In and Out of Sight*, 8.

<sup>35</sup> Given this article’s privileging of the visual, my decision to reproduce two of the women’s portraits from the Mariannahill Trappist series discussed by Campt was not taken lightly and is not intended to serve as “illustration” or “verification” in support of my (or Campt’s) argument. As images that “were not taken at the behest of their sitters” and were “at best coerced and at worse compelled,” I am aware of the potentially problematic dynamics of reproducing them, particularly given my white, Western background (Campt, p. 49). Rather, I am led by Campt’s argument that “archival juxtaposition is necessary. [. . .] it is profoundly illuminating to view the Mariannahill portraits in tandem with” other archives (p. 60). Placing the Mariannahill portraits in dialogue with the ekphrastic and photographic images of Tabatha and Violet—images taken some seventy-five years later and in very different circumstances—extends our understanding of

the lingering photographic legacies of colonialism that reverberate across time, place, and genre. Bringing the images together amounts to a “disordering and disruptive archival practice” that underscores the powerfulness of quiet forms of refusal, as it stimulates new encounters between the images and their subjects—the full stakes and potentialities of which remain fundamentally, radically unknowable (p. 8).

<sup>36</sup> Paula Amad, “Visual Riposte: Looking Back at the Return of the Gaze as Postcolonial Theory’s Gift to Film Studies,” *Cinema Journal*, 52, No. 3 (2013), 50. Subsequent references will be cited parenthetically in the text.

## The Burma Valley



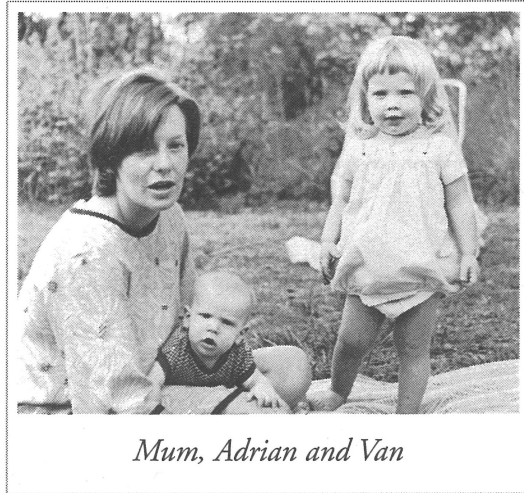
*Bobo and Van*

The central vein of Rhodesia rises up into a plateau called the Great Dyke. It is where most of the country's population have chosen to stay. The edges of the country tend toward extreme heat, flat heartless scrub, droughts, malaria. The central vein is fertile. Rhododendrons will grow here. Horses will gleam with fat, shiny coats. Children look long-limbed, high-browed, intelligent. Vitamin sufficient.

And then, in the east, beyond Salisbury, there is a thin, strangled hump, a knotted fist of highlands. And there if you look carefully, nestled into the sweet purple-coloured swellings, where it is almost always cool, and the air is sharp and wholesome with eucalyptus and pine and where there are no mosquitoes, is

Figure 1, first page of the chapter "The Burma Valley," headed by a photograph of Alexandra and Vanessa Fuller, titled "Bobo and Van," from Alexandra Fuller's *Don't Let's Go to the Dogs Tonight: An African Childhood* (London: Picador, 2015), 45.

## Adrian: Rhodesia, 1968

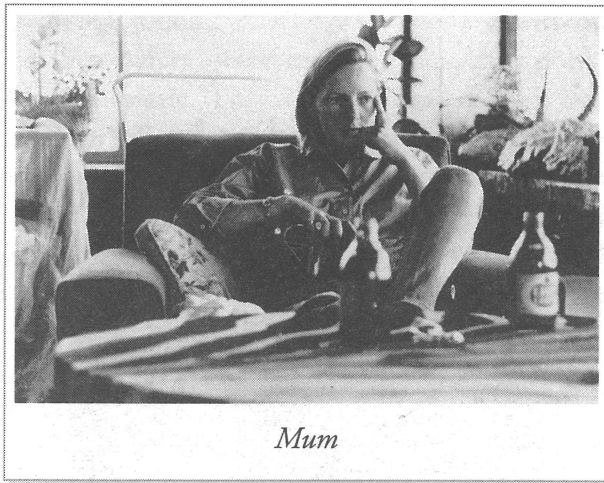


Mum says, 'The happiest day of my life was the day I held that little baby in my arms.' She means Rhodesia, 1968. She means the day her son, Adrian, was born.

Mum is Chapter Two, weeping into her beer. It's a sad story. It's especially sad if you haven't heard it a hundred times. I've heard one version or other of the story more than a hundred times. It's a Family Theme and it always ends badly. To begin with Mum is happy. She is freshly married, they are white (a ruling colour in Rhodesia), and she has two babies, a girl and a boy. Her children are the picture-perfect match of each other: beautiful, blond, and blue-eyed.

\*

Figure 2, first page of the chapter "Adrian: Rhodesia, 1968," headed by a photograph of Nicola, Adrian, and Vanessa Fuller, from Alexandra Fuller's *Don't Let's Go to the Dogs Tonight: An African Childhood* (London: Picador, 2015), 29.



*Vanessa, signature tackie lips (lips that are rosebud full), a mass of fairy-white hair, toddling cheerfully, with that overbalancing, tripping step of the small child. And tottering after her, the little boy who could be her twin. In the background, a black nanny called Tabatha, in white apron and white cap, strong, shining arms outstretched laughing, waiting to scoop them up; she is half-shyly looking into the camera. Mum is looking on from the veranda. Dad is taking the photograph.*

\*

Then Adrian dies before he is old enough to talk. Mum is not yet twenty-four and her picture-perfect life is shattered.

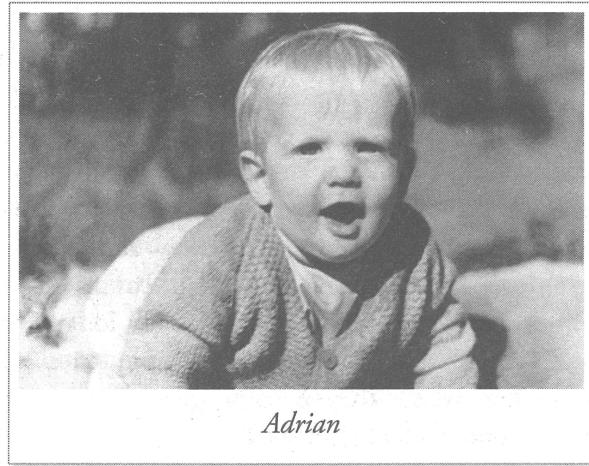
She says, 'The nurse at the hospital in Salisbury told us we could either go and get something to eat or watch our baby die.'

Mum and Dad take Vanessa to get some lunch and when they come back to the hospital their baby son, who was very sick with meningitis an hour earlier, is now dead. Cold, blond ash.

The story changes depending on what Mum is drinking. If she is very drunk on wine, then the story is a bit different than if she is very drunk on gin. The worst is if she is very drunk on

Figure 3, portrait photograph of Nicola Fuller, immediately followed by Tabatha's ekphrastic image in Alexandra Fuller's *Don't Let's Go to the Dogs Tonight: An African Childhood* (London: Picador, 2015), 30.





*Adrian*

everything she can find in the house. But the end is always the same. Adrian is dead. That's an awful ending no matter what she's been drinking.

I am eight, maybe younger, the first time Mum sits down in front of me, squiffy in her chair, leaning and keening and needing to talk. The Leaning Tower of Pissed, I say to Vanessa when I am older and Mum is drunk again. *Ha ha*.

Mum tells me about Adrian. I understand, through the power of her emotion, her tears, the way she is dissolving like soap left too long in the bath, that this has been the greatest tragedy of our lives. It is my tragedy, too, even though I was not born when it happened.

Usually, on nights when Mum is sober, and we are kissing her good night, she turns her face away from us and puckers her lips sideways, offering us a cheek stretched like dead-chicken skin. Now that she is drunk and telling me about Adrian she is wet all over me. Arms clasped over my shoulders, she is hanging around my neck, and I can feel her face crying into the damp patch on my shoulder. She says, 'You were the baby we made when Adrian died.'

Figure 4, portrait of Adrian Fuller in Alexandra Fuller's *Don't Let's Go to the Dogs Tonight: An African Childhood* (London: Picador, 2015), 31.

# Violet



*Violet*

Figure 5, portrait photograph of Violet double framed with the nanny's name as caption and chapter title in Alexandra Fuller's *Don't Let's Go to the Dogs Tonight: An African Childhood* (London: Picador, 2015), 119. The portrait is the only photograph of a Black woman reproduced in the memoir.



Figure 6, image of a Nguni woman taken in 1894 at the Mariannhill Trappist Mission in South Africa and discussed in Tina M. Campt, *Listening to Images* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 58. Images courtesy of Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen, retrieved from Wikimedia Commons, accessed 3 February 2023, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Collectie\\_NMvWereldculturen,\\_RV-A15-19,\\_foto-Portret\\_van\\_een\\_Nguni\\_vrouw,\\_fotograaf-Trappisten\\_Missie\\_Mariannhill,\\_1894.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Collectie_NMvWereldculturen,_RV-A15-19,_foto-Portret_van_een_Nguni_vrouw,_fotograaf-Trappisten_Missie_Mariannhill,_1894.jpg). Used under CC BY 4.0, <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>; image has been cropped and rendered in grayscale.

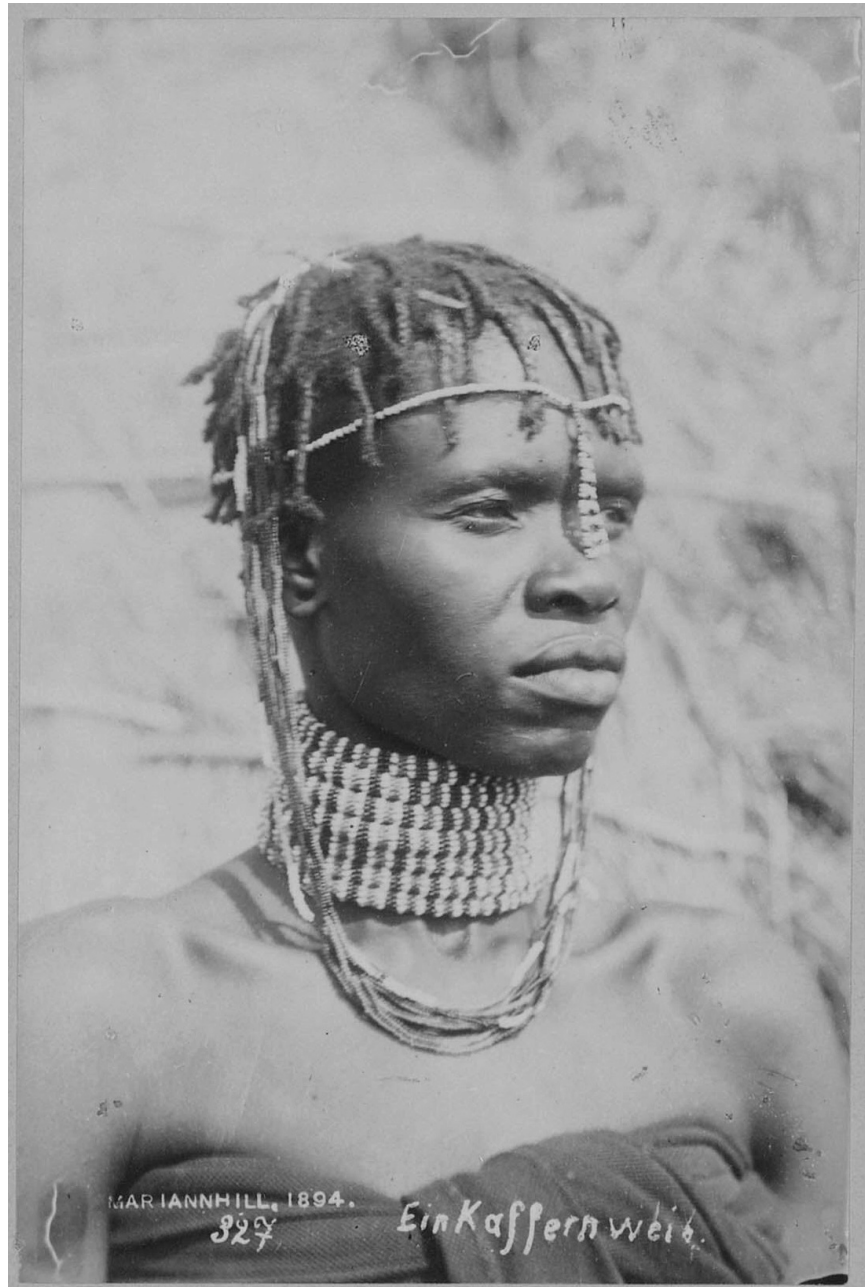


Figure 7, image of a Nguni woman taken in 1894 at the Mariannhill Trappist Mission in South Africa and discussed in Tina M. Campt, *Listening to Images* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 58. Images courtesy of Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen, retrieved from Wikimedia Commons, accessed 3 February 2023, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Collectie\\_NMvWereldculturen,\\_RV-A15-9,\\_foto-Portret\\_van\\_een\\_vrouw\\_met\\_parelsnoeren\\_om\\_hals\\_en\\_hoofd,\\_fotograaf-Trappisten\\_Missie\\_Mariannhill,\\_1894.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Collectie_NMvWereldculturen,_RV-A15-9,_foto-Portret_van_een_vrouw_met_parelsnoeren_om_hals_en_hoofd,_fotograaf-Trappisten_Missie_Mariannhill,_1894.jpg). Used under CC BY 4.0, <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>; image has been cropped and rendered in grayscale.