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A Woman's Modernist Frame. Doing Justice to Constance Stuart Larrabee's Photographs of World War II

Constance Stuart Larrabee is one of South Africa's best-known photographers.[1] Shortly after being born in St. Ives, Cornwall, United Kingdom, in 1914, Larrabee and her parents immigrated to South Africa.[2] She received a Kodak Box Brownie for her tenth birthday and decided to study photography after graduating from Pretoria Girls High School in 1932.[3] After her studies at the Regent Street Polytechnic School of Photography in London from 1933 to 1934, she continued to study in Germany at the Bavarian State Institute for Photography in Munich from September 1935 to June 1936.[4] She then returned to South Africa, opening a portrait studio in Pretoria. She also started documenting Black people from across South Africa between 1937 and 1945, thus shortly before the introduction of apartheid, which followed the National Party's electoral victory in 1948. When two of these works were selected for the worldwide touring exhibition *Family of Man* as the only ones by a South African in the early 1950s, Larrabee had been widely known for her ethnographic photographs as well as for her commissioned work as the first South African woman war correspondent towards the end of the Second World War. In 1949, after her marriage to Sterling Larrabee, she moved to Chestertown, Maryland, in the United States of America (US), where her photographic career came to a halt. She passed away in Chestertown in 2000.

While widely acknowledged in artistic and photojournalistic circles, her reputation is arguably more prominent in the US than in South Africa. This can be related to the location of her archives in the US as well as to her numerous exhibitions there. Following her inclusion in *The Family of Man*, her work was repeatedly shown in some major institutions in the US, such as in the shows *Tribal Photographs* at the Corcoran Art Gallery in 1984 or *Go Well, My Child* at the Smithsonian National Museum of African Art in 1986. In these as well as later exhibitions, Larrabee's training in Nazi Germany was mentioned only in passing but did not receive much attention. This is also the case in the recent exhibition *Eastern Front-Western Front: World War II Photojournalism by Georgi Zelma and Constance Stuart Larrabee* shown at the American University Museum Project Space in Washington, D. C., in early 2023. In addition to a description of her photographic training in Munich, the curator Laura Roulet describes in the catalogue how the connection between politics and art has been discussed in relation to her work:

> Just in time to observe the rise of Adolf Hitler and the Nazi party, she studied at the Bavarian State Institute for Photography in Munich from 1935 to 1936. In Germany, she adopted the Rolleiflex, a twin-lens reflex, medium format camera, which remained her go-to camera throughout her career. […] Other lessons she learned from the German instructors were to

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> create sharp tonal contrast, focus on composition instead of cropping, and not to waste film. […] Her biographer Peter Elliott and later generations of South African photographers are somewhat critical of her anthropological approach to documenting Black South Africans, failing to provide social context during a turbulent political period leading up to the 1948 imposition of apartheid. I see her perspective as typical and expected for a White woman of her generation, raised in a highly segregated society. Larrabee's response in later life interviews was that her focus was always on aesthetics and professional assignments, not a political agenda. […] Examination of the underlying racial dynamics of her South African photography may be fruitful for future scholars. However, her World War II photography stands apart as a self-contained body of work.[5]

While the curator's focus lies on Larrabee's photographs taken towards the end of the Second World War, she dedicates some part of her catalogue essay on Larrabee's training in modernist photography in Munich and briefly mentions Larrabee's ethnographic studies and the criticism levelled at them. Yet, her treatment of Larrabee's training remains limited to technical skills and her response to the criticism of Larrabee's work falls rather short. What is the significance of the fact that so little attention is paid to Larrabee's training in Nazi Germany in the previous and current handling of Larrabee's photographs? How is this to be interpreted, especially regarding the criticism of her ethnographic portraits? Can her photography of the Second World War be regarded as «a self-contained body of work»? In this article, I will analyse some of Larrabee's photographs taken in Europe in the mid-1930s and mid-1940s in detail to explore what visual justice can mean for this convolute in particular and for photography in general.

Apolitical Photographs?

Larrabee's photographs were mainly considered by their aesthetics alone for a long time. This can be attributed to her frequent self-description as apolitical during her lifetime. However, Larrabee did not stop at self-assertions but went even further by controlling what others could write about her. This is evident from a commented essay by Brenda Danilowitz about Larrabee's work, which ultimately was not included in a catalogue by the Yale Center for British Art after Larrabee demanded that it not be published because of its political statements.[6] Accessible at the Eliot Elisofon Photographic Archives, the handwritten notes illustrate Larrabee's emotional and angry reaction to Danilowitz's text, which she summarises in 13 points in a typewritten text dated 28 March 1997, with one point explicitly stating: «This exhibition is my life's work. It has nothing to do with politics. I resent the references to my student days in Germany. It gives an absolutely untrue impression of my attitude.»[7] Danilowitz's passage in question reads:

> With hindsight, the historical alignment of Constance Stuart's student days in Munich with the surge of Nazism there and throughout Germany in 1935, seems loaded with significance, especially for a fledgling photographer who, less than ten years later would return to Europe to witness the unravelling of Nazi power. Yet it is utterly credible that the twenty-one-year-old student photographer, though she stashed away vivid mental images of contemporary experiences could not anticipate their historical import and did not capture them on film. So she has intense visual memories of the theatricality of Hitler's parades, the obligatory choruses of «Heil Hitler» that greeted SS officers in the beer halls, and of how the mother of a friend reluctantly and in fear shut the door in the face of a Jewish neighbor who had called to wish the family Happy Christmas.[8]

These first extensive details about Larrabee's hitherto largely unknown years of study in Munich were never published due to the photographer's censorship. Even in another article by Danilowitz published in 2005, she admittedly mentions this censorship in a footnote but Larrabee's time in Munich only in passing.[9] Years passed after the photographer's death before Jessica Williams addressed the censorship incident in detail and shed more light on Larrabee's time in Munich. In her article from 2020, which deals primarily with Anne Fischer, a contemporary of Larrabee, she describes «Larrabee's training with a known Nazi in Munich and her intentionally obscured political sympathies».[10] Quoting letters and statements by Larrabee, Williams emphasises Larrabee's positive attitude towards the Nazis and her agreement with their social theories. By reflecting on her relationship with her photography teacher Rudolf Müller-Schönhausen, who was not only a Nazi but also a well-known portraitist and ardent advocate of New Realism, Williams also emphasises her technical photographic training, which was honed into New Objectivity and would henceforth be incorporated into her portraits. While Williams shows how Larrabee used this modernist training for her racialised, ahistorical portrayals of Black South Africans, I want to examine some of her photographs taken in Europe shortly before and during the final stages of the Second World War.

The Cause of World War II

During her time in Munich, Larrabee photographed Nazi propaganda posters, swastika flags and presumably even Adolf Hitler. The National Gallery of Art (NGA) in Washington D. C. holds two photographs of Hitler at a parade. While there is no concrete confirmation on Larrabee's authorship of these exact two photographs, which were part of her archive that first came to the Corcoran Collection and then the NGA, there is also no indication as to why exactly these two photographs of the twenty listed under her name on the NGA's website should not have been taken by her. So, if we assume that she took these photographs, then, contrary to Danilowitz's assumption, Larrabee captured «intense visual memories of the theatricality of Hitler's parades» on film.

At the head of a group of officers, Hitler walks along a dirt road flanked on one side by uniformed soldiers giving the Hitler salute and on the other by a large crowd of spectators with swastika flags (fig. 1). Taken only seconds apart, the images are striking for the proximity between photographer and subject. While one photograph shows Hitler shaking hands with another man in uniform, who takes up a large part of the picture due to his proximity to the camera, in the other photograph Hitler's full-body presence takes up the entire focus of the picture. In the latter photograph, the background is filled up to the upper edge with spectators giving the Hitler salute, trees and swastika flags hanging high, while the top right-hand corner of the picture above the soldiers' heads had once been empty. After the photograph was printed, however, someone, presumably the photographer herself, used this space to write «The Cause of World War II ~ 1939 – 1945 ~» into it.

It is self-explanatory that this contextualisation of the photograph must have taken place later. Around the time the photograph was taken, which the NGA dates to around 1935, Larrabee saw her subject quite differently. In one of her letters addressed to her mother, she wrote in September 1935: «People shake hands here everytime they see you and everywhere instead of saying Good morning etc. we say Heil Hitler it is really very inspiring. They say he is coming here in November so

1 Constance Stuart Larrabee, *The Cause of World War II, 1939–1945*, c. 1935, gelatin silver print, 24.77 × 33.02 cm

I hope I see him as I am a fervent admirer of him.»[11] By December, Larrabee «also went to a Xmas party given by the S. S. (Hitler's special military guard) it was very interesting for me as I was among his most enthusiastic supporters so felt quite German saying Heil everytime I was introduced to anyone».[12] This enthusiasm and her support for Hitler and the Nazis' ideology are not only evident in letters, but also in photographs of Larrabee, in which she is sitting on a bed in front of a swastika, for instance.[13] While it is surprising that Larrabee did not destroy the evidence of her sympathy with the Nazis, but instead left it to some major archives, the footage of Larrabee's time in Munich proves that the photographer was not «Just in time to observe the rise of Adolf Hitler and the Nazi party» but that she was involved in German fascist society, sympathising with Nazi ideology. Later, however, Larrabee labelled the person she had admired so much in her early twenties as the cause of the Second World War. Larrabee's experiences as a war journalist in 1944 and 1945, when she returned to Europe towards the end of the war for the first time since 1936, may have played a decisive role in this change of opinion.

Les femmes tondues

In 1944, the South African Department of War Information commissioned Larrabee as the inaugural South African woman correspondent. Subsequently, she travelled with the 6th South African Armoured Division and US-American troops, photographing in Egypt, France, Italy and England from 1944 to 1945.[14] These images were later published in the South African magazine *Libertas* and in the form of an illustrated war diary in the magazine *Spotlight*.[15] Among the photographs is a series of images that Larrabee took in St Tropez. On 27 August 1944, Larrabee photographed French

women who were accused of having collaborated with the Nazi troops during the occupation, whose hair was first shaved off and who were then paraded through the streets for punishment and public humiliation. These reprisals took place in all departments of France and resulted in about over 20,000 women being shaved, often with little or no legal recourse.[16]

One of Larrabee's square-format black and white photographs shows a close-up of a young woman from the waist up, turning her shaved head to the side and covering her face with her right hand with a scarf (fig. 2). She holds her left arm bent in front of her stomach. A tuft of long dark hair lies on it. She is wearing a striped, short-sleeved top through which her breasts can be seen and a ring set into her right middle finger. The woman is surrounded by other people standing next to her. While only the cut-off arm of the person on the left can be seen, the uniformed man behind the woman on the right looks attentively into the camera. This direct gaze in the background reinforces the averted gaze of the woman in the centre. The naked forearm held upwards and the hand covering the face draw the viewer's gaze to the upper edge of the picture to the woman's shaved head, from where it descends to her naked neck and onto the tuft of dark hair held in her arm. Larrabee thus creates a thought-through triangular composition that reinforces the expression of individual suffering and public humiliation through showing and concealing, physical exposure, and entanglement.

This and the other pictures of this series result from Larrabee's training in Munich. In a letter to her mother in 1936, to which she had also enclosed some of her photographs taken under Müller, the young photographer wrote about her learning progress: «You will see they are rather straightforward but technically you

2 Constance Stuart Larrabee, *Untitled (woman accused of collaboration, St. Tropez, France)*, 1944, printed later, gelatin silver print, 19.37 × 19.05 cm

can see every hair and you have no idea how hard it is to do that.»[17] This detailed, crisp depiction characterises Larrabee's series of photographs in St. Tropez in 1944. Indeed, every hair can be recognised in these pictures. And it is precisely the clearly recognisable stubble that remains on the young woman's head after shaving and the hair that she holds in her arms, drawn as sharply as possible, that record the punishment for the viewer.

While men take centre stage in Larrabee's photograph of the *Cause of World War II*, they only act as marginal figures in her series of photographs taken in St Tropez. Here, the women, *les femmes tondues*, are in the spotlight. Some photographs show the crowds witnessing the public humiliation. However, most of Larrabee's images portray the shamefully averted heads of the individuals, in a gesture that is as voyeuristic as it is empathetic. One wonders what Larrabee might have felt taking these photographs, given that she had once been close to Nazism and could even have been on the other side of the lens under different circumstances.

In her analysis of Lee Miller's published photograph of a *femme tondue*, Claire Gorrara argues that the woman photographer's approach is remarkable for her focus on the individual and not on the public humiliation of the head shaving, highlighting how the image «draw[s] attention to under-represented stories of war».[18] She points to how the photographs of violated female bodies showcase one part of a gendered Liberation that also included gendered punishment.[19] This assigns the images a rather justice-orientated interpretation in the form of evidence of unjust and discriminatory punishment. At the same time, Gorrara notes that many of the existing photographs of *femmes tondues* are not to be regarded as unbiased evidence or illustrations but must also be perceived as a medium for which the mostly male protagonists, the *tondeurs*, posed with the *femmes tondue* in group pictures taken during and after the public humiliation.[20] Larrabee's series also contains some of these uneasy group pictures, taken during and after the head shaves.

Claire Duchen goes further than Gorrara in her argumentation and claims: «Photographs of *femmes tondues* confirm the equation of Resistance as male, collaboration as female, male as heroic, female as guilty; male as combative, female as passive.» [21] According to Duchen, the resulting strong dichotomies are mainly due to inadequate categorisation of the images:

> The attribution of collaborationist guilt to all women is achieved by the contemporary use made of the pictures in the press and in newsreels, by the anonymity of the women captured on film, by the lack of precise information accompanying the images. […] The way the photograph makes specific women anonymous and representative of all women confirms the mythic status of the image. Its symbolic significance far outweighs the actual incidence of headshaving. To misquote Roland Barthes, the photograph without context transforms history into myth; myth then turns history into nature.[22]

Thus, according to Duchen, the gender stereotypes embodied in the photographs reinforce them and thus become imprinted in the collective memory through the repeated display of the images. This is only possibly because of the missing context of the photographs and the resulting anonymity of the women.

In *Mythologies*, Barthes names another large collection of uncontextualised photographs portraying numerous anonymous protagonists to make a point about the importance for the context of photographs to be meaningful at all: the exhibition *The Family of Man*. He writes about the exhibition that «Everything here, the content and appeal of the pictures, the discourse which justifies them, aims to suppress the

determining weight of History», he writes, «we are held back at the surface of an identity, prevented precisely by sentimentality from penetrating into this ulterior zone of human behaviour where historical alienation introduces some ‹differences› which we shall here quite simply call ‹injustices›».[23] According to Barthes, the mere reproductions created by photography are not meaningful, but «to gain access to a true language, they must be inserted into a category of knowledge which means postulating that one can transform them, and precisely subject their naturalness to our human criticism».[24] It is only through the contextualisation of photographs that the circumstances of the photographed event can be questioned, criticised, and thus also changed. The extent to which Barthes' argument is relevant to Larrabee's photographs is discussed below.

Doing Justice to Larrabee's Work Today

Despite her known sympathy for Nazi Germany, Larrabee's work continues to be widely exhibited until this day. This is potentially also due to a greater focus on women photographers in recent years, as illustrated, for example, by her inclusion in the touring exhibition *The New Woman Behind the Camera*, which first opened at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City in 2021. Next to a photograph of the collaborators in St. Tropez, the show also displayed two of Larrabee's photographs of Black South Africans in the late 1940s in another room. One depicts young couples dancing at a social center, while the other portrays a Xhosa Woman in the Transkei (fig. 3). The latter image had also been included in the famous *Family of Man* exhibition. While the long-overlooked work of some women photographers should certainly be recognised in a series of exhibitions, I maintain that each of these bodies of work pertains to critical examination and contextualisation, and Larrabee's work is no exception.

In her dashing review of the exhibition *The New Woman Behind the Camera*, Anne McCauley writes about the inadequate contextualisation of individual photographs in the exhibition section on *Ethnographic Approaches* which, with one exception, displayed photographs of non-white people taken by white women. Referring to Larrabee's portrait of a *Xhosa Woman Decorating Her Face* (fig. 3), McCauley argues that by «[r]hyming Larrabee's ‹artistic› and ‹elegant compositions› with Ré Soupault's similarly posed enlargement of a fashionably dressed Tunisian woman applying lipstick, the curators leveled cultural difference and erased what Jessica R. Williams, in a recent *October* essay, has shown to be the racist assumptions underlying Larrabee's ‹Native Studies›».[25] This levelling of ‹differences› in the photographs, which Barthes refers to as «injustices» in reference to *The Family of Man*, once again robs the exhibited images of their expressive power and thus their political potential, as this can only be achieved through clear contextualisation.

In the case of Larrabee's photographs, there is a further aspect of decontextualisation, partly due to the style of her images. Addressing Larrabee's embrace of the «Modernist credo of form equals content», Marek Bartelik concludes his 1996 *Artforum* review by saying that she «allied herself with the formalist issues of her time, which kept her from having to address the broader implications of art and artmaking, and, perhaps, from confronting what stood on the other side of the camera's lens».[26] By framing her photographs in a purely modernist and aesthetic way, Larrabee denies her images their political potential and concurrently tries to make her political commitment invisible. I contend, however, that it is the work of

3 Constance Stuart Larrabee, *Xhosa Woman Decorating Her Face, Transkei, South Africa*, 1947

art historians and curators to provide a framing for these photographs that goes beyond the self-narrative of an artist and brings in further context. This includes showing what was on the other side of the camera lens and making the broader implications of art and photography visible. Revealing how the encounter between those photographed and the photographer came about and which power structures and asymmetries determined this encounter restores context and thus visual justice. In order to create visual justice and provide context, it is therefore necessary to rely not only on the visual qualities of photographs but also on their textual, oral, and historical embedding.

Concluding Remarks

Larrabee's photographs are characterised by strong contrasts, sharp edges, and a clarity of detail that is recognisable down to the last hair. She learnt this modernist approach to photography in the Nazi-influenced Germany of the 1930s and used it over the next decade both for her racialised documentation of Black South Africans and her records of Europe towards the end of the Second World War. Therefore, I contend that the connection between her photography training, the racial dynamics in her photographs and her World War II photography cannot be denied, but that all three are inevitably intertwined and cannot be considered individually as self-contained. Although this makes a simple celebration of her work difficult, a more

comprehensive and in-depth exploration of Larrabee's work seems essential for any future exhibition. Larrabee's involvement goes far beyond merely documenting the rise of the Nazis in Munich around 1935. When one realises the fatal consequences of her youthful enthusiasm, the photographer's complicated involvement cannot be described as a mere observation but must be revealed in all its complexity. Not least to do justice to the many anonymous people portrayed by Larrabee, many of whom belonged to underprivileged population groups. Highlighting some forgotten, censored, and undermined frameworks for Larrabee's work, I hope to give a more critically nuanced perspective on the photographer and her work in this article, showing how context can transform just an image into a just image.[27]

Notes

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4 Thomas 2021 (as note 2); Danilowitz 2005 (as note 3).

5 Laura Roulet: Eastern Front-Western Front. World War II Photojournalism by Georgi Zelma and Constance Stuart Larrabee, Washington 2023, p. 15–16.

6 Jessica R. Williams: A Pariah Among Parvenus. Anne Fischer and the Politics of South Africa's New Realism(s), in: October, 2020, No. 173, p. 143–175, here p. 163, https://doi.org/10.1162/octo_a_00406.

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8 Ibid.

9 See footnote 7 in Danilowitz 2005 (as note 3), p. 90.

10 Williams 2020 (as note 6), p. 148.

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20 Ibid., p. 332–33; Based on Virgili 2002 (see note 16), p. 83–85.

21 Claire Duchen, Crime and Punishment in Liberated France. The Case of Les Femmes Tondues, in: Claire Duchen/Irene Bandhauer-Schöffmann (eds.), When the War Was Over. Women, War and

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22 Ibid., p. 240–41; Based on Roland Barthes: Mythologies, Paris 1957, p. 229.
23 Roland Barthes: Mythologies, New York 2006, p. 101.
24 Ibid., 101–102.
25 Anne McCauley: Review of «The New Woman Behind the Camera», in: Caa.Reviews, 02.11.2021, https://doi.org/10.3202/caa.reviews.2021.99, last accessed on 27.01.2024.
26 Marek Bartelik: Review, New Haven, Constance Stuart Larrabee, Yale Center for British Art, in: Artforum 34, 1966, No. 5, 87–88, here p. 88.
27 Also see Roland Barthes' take on Jean-Luc Godard's famous quote in: Roland Barthes: Camera Lucida. Reflections on Photography, New York 2010, p. 70.

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1, 2 Courtesy of the National Gallery of Art, Washington, Corcoran Collection (Gift of the Artist, Constance Stuart Larrabee WWII Collection)

3 Constance Stuart Larrabee Collection, Eliot Elisofon Photographic Archives, Smithsonian Institution