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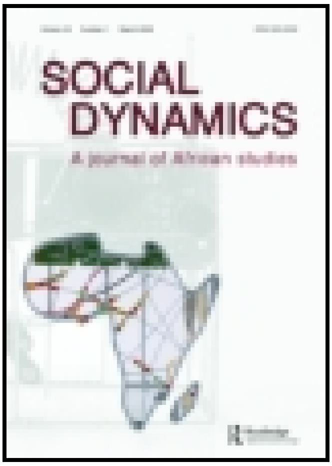

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Remembrance: the Essop brothers, *formative realism* and contemporary African photography

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Remembrance is the title of group of photographic artworks by Hasan and Husain Essop. Made in Europe, the Middle East and Africa, the artworks picture people and places, buildings and landscapes. At first look, the action within the frames is straightforward. The photographs present ancient and modern religious sites in digitally produced, staged scenarios. However, there is an unseen complexity to these composite images that are made of hundreds of individual still shots, shot one section at a time and then meticulously stitched together. One impact of these contemporary artworks is their ability to show the powerful impact of global Islamic culture. Dynamics of place and belonging, the picturesque and landscape, slavery, religion and race are offered to view by means of these images. I offer *formative realism* as a conceptual framework to think with and against these pictures made by photographic means. I will say something about the concept and context of formative realism, discuss principal features and propose a way of seeing. The central questions are these: what do the Essops' pictures show us about Islam in South Africa and beyond? How does this seeing matter to the ongoing activity of race, racism and "Othering" now? How does any of this matter to the dynamics of contemporary visual art in South Africa?

Keywords: art; art history; art criticism; cultural history; photography; theory; visual studies

Introduction

In 2012, I walked into an art gallery in Cape Town, South Africa, and encountered a group of photographic artworks picturing people and places, buildings and landscapes. Hasan and Husain Essop's exhibition *Remembrance* featured pictures (74 cm × 240 cm) curated to hang evenly throughout the gallery space. At first look, the activity within the frame seemed straightforward. The theme shared by the pictures is that of location and setting; and the photographs picture well-known global religious sites, both ancient and modern, and capture staged scenarios that explore religious and cultural practices (Garb 2011, 107). Digitally produced, some (but not all) of the photographs consist of hundreds of individual still shots shot on a tripod, one section at a time, and then meticulously stitched together. At first look, the activity in these scenes seems straightforward and easily describable: the artists, Hasan and Husain Essop, toured the various sites as part of their Muslim religious practice, and took snapshots as they travelled. But as I continued looking, something

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strange happened, because the object of my view started fluctuating between high visual definition and blurry incomprehensibility.

The artists' method of locating their bodies in a landscape and repeatedly locating themselves as the main characters of a scene evokes a rhythmic visual register as well as a sense of repeatability or reproducibility. Such associations work to generate in the viewer – at the level of systems of representation – a sense of appearance and disappearance, and stability in movement, while none is directly a part of the work's effect.

The Essops' artworks appear in this contemporary context and provide a useful lens for seeing the powerful impact of Islamic culture in South African life. The photographic pictures bring into view the dynamics of place and belonging, the picturesque and landscape, slavery, religion and race. The texture of race in South Africa is impacted by the conflict between the West and the Arab world. The Essops' photographs make a visual opening to the comparative and international scope of the issue of race, visual difference and legacies of racism that have global scope.[1]

At the heart of my inquiry is an interest in understanding contemporary visual art as it has emerged in the context of South Africa's social and intellectual turmoil over the past two decades. Analyses of creative phenomena necessarily intertwine with debates about memory, history, theory and practices of culture, and some artists in South Africa have, through their practices and discourses, sought to establish new roles and relationships in art, culture and society.

In the Essops' photographs, I see activity that links aesthetic practice to the articulation of thought, the shaping of community, nation building and ideals of democratic governance. My sense is that visual phenomena, like nothing else, has the ability to engage the conflicts that attend the unfinished and slow dismantling of imperialism, while demanding radical reinterpretations of global human rights (Figure 1).

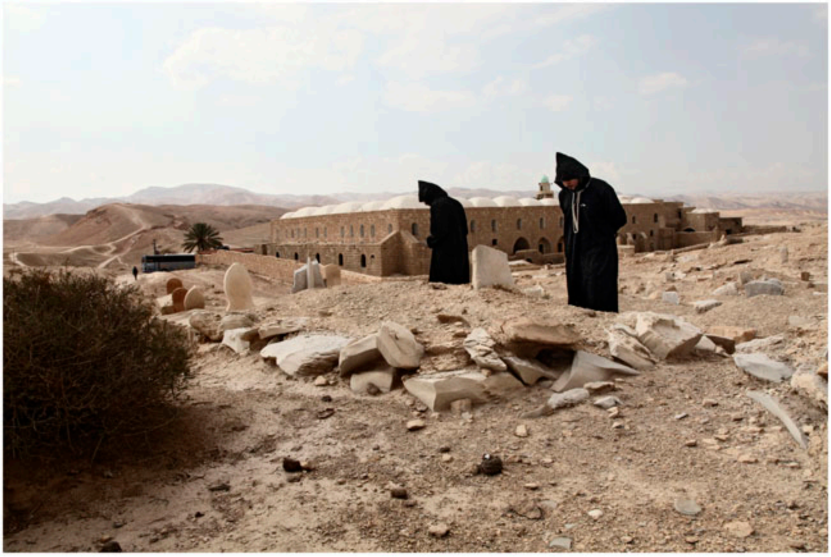

Figure 1. Grave of Moses, Jericho, 2011. Courtesy of the artists and Goodman Gallery.

Here, I advance my claims by offering *formative realism* as a conceptual framework to think with and against an exhibition filled with pictures made by photographic means. I will say something here about the context of *formative realism* and the concept's principal features while proposing a way of seeing what the Essops' images show about the social world, about the ways one thinks of Islam in South Africa and globally, and how this seeing matters to the active production of race and the "Other."[2] In general, my aim is to describe visual practices as theoretical exercises. Specifically, the Essops' *Remembrance* give us digitally produced, composite photographs that unfold a particular dynamics of seeing beyond uncertain projections of culture and society, as well as presuppositions undergirding those dynamics.

My ambitions are, necessarily, extremely limited: I focus on several artworks from the Essops' *Remembrance*, and while the following brief sections may be a prelude to analysing the artworks, they do not even begin that task itself.[3] Rather, my pathway into the entanglements of representation is a series of propositions about the context and content of these pictures.

My method, is to write about my experience of these photographs and I will seek to justify my interaction with the pictures as I go along. I will say something about my sense of what these images can do, describe the points of pressure or pain that I found hidden within them, and express why it is those tensions that are compelling. I write about features of the artworks' construction and detail, in order to eventually look beyond them.

The Essops

The Essops developed a trademark performance style in photographic artwork while in fine art school. Born and raised in Cape Town, Hasan and Husain Essop have been collaborating since their graduation from the Michaelis School of Fine Arts at the University of Cape Town in 2006. In *Remembrance,* the style resumes and the artists use their bodies, costumes and a variety of poses to enter into a dialogue with the landscape. The brothers work collaboratively, and they entered the South African art scene with a series of photographs portraying daily life in the crime-ridden working-class suburb on the Cape Flats where they grew up.

In what one critic described as a presentation of "their lives exactly as they experienced it," the Essops' photographic oeuvre takes the viewer inside mosques, to outdoor celebrations, to illegal pit bull fights and to street corners with an ugly history of South Africa's apartheid violence (Williamson 2012). In each scene, the duo plays every role, staging detailed views that display the complexities of the Muslim community in which they live, and dressing in fashion of international youth culture, in religious robes, in camouflage or whatever garb fits the location.

In *Remembrance*, as in other bodies of artwork, the artist brothers appear on location. Here, they inhabit the role of two pilgrims among many, and the resultant series of panoramic landscape photographs are as notable as much for moments of barrenness or banality as for moments of exuberance and exceptionality.

The oscillation between definition and incomprehensibility that I sense provokes me to look further, into and beyond the pictures themselves for the tension that incites a human person to become a subject. What I describe herein as *formative realism* is an operation that makes an idea instrumental to the ways that we live and act, including the ways that we see and represent ourselves and "Others."[4]

In her 2012 review of this exhibition, Sue Williamson astutely notes that the Essops have been

> conscious from the very outset of their careers of the negative feelings much of the Western world has towards young Muslim men [and in response], the twins made no attempt to placate this audience – or alternatively, to deepen any loaded preconceptions their viewers might have.

In response, Williamson writes, the Essops "sought to make their case by presenting their lives exactly as they experienced it, staging detailed scenes that displayed the complexities of the community in which they lived." *Remembrance,* however, takes on the current understanding of the subject's encounter with history as "memory."

Through the economy of a method that simultaneously documents what is seen and creates a different narrative altogether, the Essops' photographs explore the notion of memory, specifically in relation to the history and practice of religion, conflicts and convergences. In these images, the artists explore histories of various landscapes, "searching for the memory of what came before and examining its effects on the captured moment" (Goodman Gallery 2012). The Essops' act of memorialising anticipates the tensions between historical consciousness and collective memory, particularly with reference to religious sites, ancient and modern. The artists are also concerned with tensions inherent in photographic activity.

The statement accompanying *Remembrance* puts it this way:

> Tracing their travels to Mecca, Jerusalem, Amsterdam, Hamburg and Senegal, the photos seek to uncover and engage with the particular and unstable memories of each location – the birthplace of Islam in Mecca, inaccessible to most non-believers, and now paved over with parking lots and luxury hotel chains; the sacred sites of Jerusalem, fought over, destroyed and restored time and again for centuries; the ostensibly liberal cities of Western Europe, where paranoia, surveillance and religious profiling are becoming the new normal; and Dakar, where the legacies of slavery and colonialism gave rise to unique Islamic identities and practices, which are increasingly under assault by globalizing forces. (Goodman Gallery 2012)

As a point of departure, these constructed landscapes raise a series of issues relating to history, heritage, religious identity and the politics of place. The Essops' picturesque aesthetic may obscure the depth of its theoretical insight that the ability to visualise *manifests the authority of the visualiser.* The artwork catches the viewer in unexpected encounter with a visualisation that reframes the metaphor of veracity to anchor claims to indexical "truth." The artworks thereby challenge established, authoritative representations of people of colour and Muslims, through admixtures that interrupt the pace of the always-contestable renewals of the "real," the "normal" or the everyday. What appears to me in these artworks resonates across belief systems as they congeal in pasts and futures, shaping culture while impressing upon the viewer new memories and histories of self and "Others."

Iranian mosque

In the picture titled *Iranian Mosque, Hamburg, Germany, 2011* (Figure 2), twenty-first century sensibility meets the capacity of digital post-production and produces a photographic image made from multiple views that have been merged and stitched. At centre is a mosque in the centre of a scene made of overlapping views. The tiled,

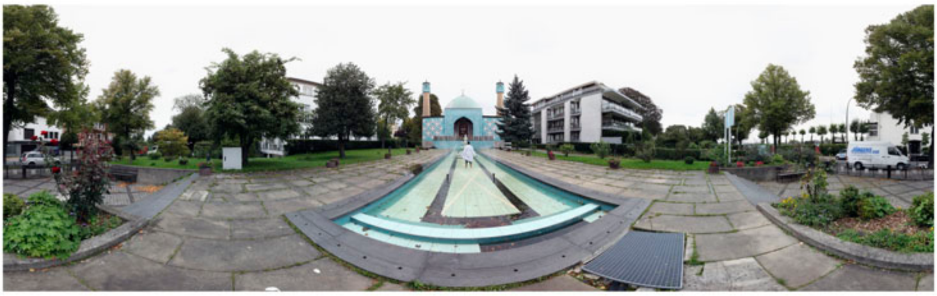

Figure 2. Iranian Mosque, Hamburg, Germany, 2011. Courtesy of the artists and Goodman Gallery.

green-blue building is in the middle of a deep focus view. To the right and left are multilevel grey and white residential and office structures, manicured lawns, bushes and trees. A fountain and pool of water stretches into the foreground, surrounded by the dark grey blue of the walkway's cement tiles. In the immediate foreground, the front edge of the fountain and the tiles curve in convex as they approach the viewer. Precise details clearly describe the objects in these colour prints with a wealth of detail, so much so that each tile of the mosque finds record. At the centre of this photograph is a singular figure, dressed in a white tunic. Facing the mosque, the male form stands in the fountain, knee deep in water. The clear water of the fountain shows green and black tiles on the pool floor, arranged in the shape of a rectangle. White tiles stretch from each corner and cross at the centre. The singular hero in this scene stands at centre; the "X" marks his spot.

Iranian Mosque, Hamburg, Germany, 2011 was shot on location in Uhlenhorst, Hamburg. The Imam Ali Shia Mosque (1953) and Islamic Center Hamburg (1966) are two of the oldest Shia mosques in Europe. Established in the 1950s by a group of Iranian emigrants to Germany, in the 1970s, the Center played a role in facilitating political activity of Iranian students in the West against the Shah and the Iranian Revolution. For decades, the mosque has been a place of religion, study and encounter.

The Essops' picture offers a virtual view; it is an example of aesthetic practice in direct responsiveness to technological innovation. These photographs are both novel and yet continuous with longer histories of art's social interface with earlier technologies (Pollock 2010, 3).

The appearance of the figures in various global contexts initiates the play of visibility and invisibility suggested at the outset. The Essops and their images insist on being on site, visible as the main actors in a contemporary scene. This may seem unexceptional, until one recalls that since the colonial era, such coevalness runs contrary to typical representations of Muslims. The "uninhibited gaze" on Muslims in the Western world and in South Africa presents Islamic people and culture as exotic, submissive, static and, as Baderoon (2014) elegantly details, associated with the past. The "Orientalist" gaze is characterised by nostalgia and a longing for what is nearly lost or on the point of being forgotten. A picturesque figure of what is Islamic implies "pastness, evoking not only what is to be remembered, but what is to be forgotten" (1).

Forgetfulness

This paper stems from my adventures analysing recent art production and various attempts to come to terms with a challenging contemporary culture in South Africa. Muslims in South Africa have – since the colonial period – been presented as exotic, submissive and static. Islamic culture has been characterised by nostalgia, which is lost or nearly forgotten. The colonial period paralysed Muslim societies, interrupted thought and erased Islamic history. European colonial rule forced notions of race and class into Muslim society, and the delusions of global modernity envisioned an Orientalist "Other" as the opposite to a European "self." It is worth remembering Edward Said's observation "the idea of the Orient as other was central to the constitution of a Western subjectivity: 'the idea of an Orient exists to define the European'" (Said, quoted in Baderoon 2014, 33). Such planned production of difference functioned to turn the South African landscape into a stage upon which Western colonisers would be central actors, while indigenous people would be acted upon.

In historical context, the Cape is a locus for both colonial slavery and Islam. Islam became a refuge for enslaved people, for the indigenous Khoi and San people, and oppressed people from across the Indian Ocean. Muslims at the Cape endured slavery, enforced prostitution, colonial rule and a fraught post-emancipation period. Under apartheid, systems of race classification continued; the diverse ethnic texture of people linked by faith was flattened into unstable racial categories, and then redivided by religious identities. Since the formal dismantling of apartheid in 1994, complex images of Muslims have proliferated in South Africa. Since 2001, already impactful representations of and about Muslims have become part of a global imaginary about Islam.

A global imperial gaze established still-active legacies of race and racism. This framework for seeing theatricalised the sight of Muslims in South Africa and elsewhere so that although present, Muslim bodies of various hues were nothing to be seen, thereby clearing space for a "new" history, a new beginning and a new Westernised "timespace."[5] Such a rendering erases the memory of Islam's history in the shaping of South Africa from the very beginning. Black, Muslim bodies are thereby thrust into South African visuality – both past and present – without subjectivity. In the contemporary moment, such figures are to be seen but not heard, encountered obliquely and addressed in ways that make them present, but still invisible.

As exemplified in the work of various scholars of South Africa, the plentitude of meanings linked to the Muslim "coloured" community blurs legacies of slavery with racial determination, mixes issues of gender and sexuality with exoticism and pathos, links geography and landscape to the picturesque and cinematographic, abstracts both history and subjectivity while invoking memory and imagination, and makes seeing oscillate between visibility and invisibility.

The significance of the Essops as active figures in their photographs may not be easily seen, but this forgetfulness is imploded by the artists' renditions of narrative and landscape in works such as *Salmaan's Freedom.*

Salmaan's Freedom

In the photograph titled *Salmaan's Freedom, Mecca, Saudi Arabia, 2011* (Figure 3), three figures stand on a path and face away from the viewer. One male figure stands at centre with a white cap, and to his left are two female forms in black veils. All three figures look as if they are in motion, and stand at the end of what might be a

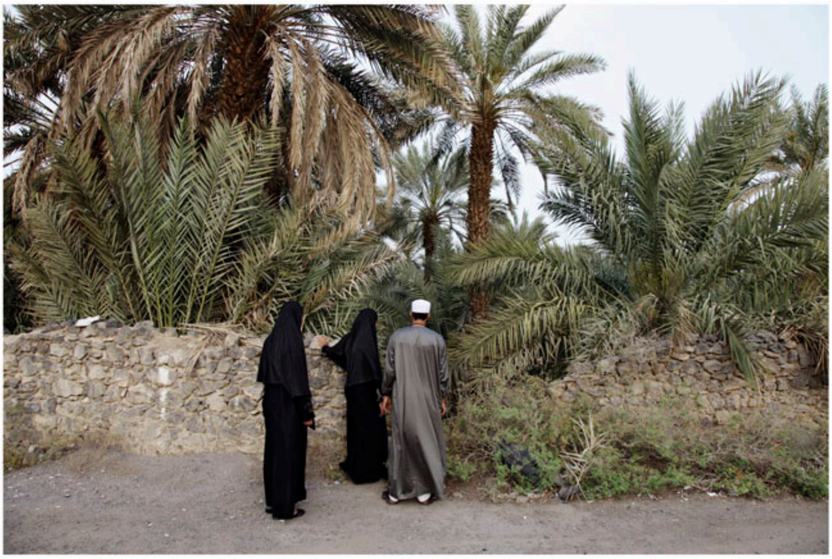

Figure 3. Salmaan's Freedom, Mecca, Saudi Arabia, 2011. Courtesy of the artists and Goodman Gallery.

long half wall. It is unclear where these figures are headed – the mid-ground and background in the picture are blocked by brush and palm trees. The wildness of the landscape seems to block the three characters' move into the depth of field. To the left of the man in a grey robe are two female figures in black veils. The women look like they are moving in an uncharted direction, embarking into the wilderness and away from the viewer's gaze.

Salmaan was both a historical figure and a legend. Credited with helping compose the Quran, Salmaan's birthplace was Iran, and his Persian identity gives specificity to a foreign, non-Arab origin. Salmaan abandoned his homeland in search of a better religion, became one of Muhammad's companions and played a role both in the Muslim community in Medina and afterward, when the Muslims controlled an empire. Salmaan's tomb became a destination for travelling pilgrims, who still visit today. The importance of Salmaan's Persian origins is not just with the establishment of Islam in Iran. Instead, the primary function of Salmaan's influence is to illustrate a major theme in early Arabic writings, namely, the acceptance of Islam by diverse peoples.

The story of Salmaan includes a meeting with Muhammad on his emigration, to a land "amid which grow date palms" (Savant 2003, 64). Salmaan's story also highlights encounters between Christianity and Islam in the context of slavery. Salmaan was an enslaved person, and in an encounter between Islam and Christianity, Muhammad frees him through an agreement that includes the planting of 300 date palm trees. The story of Salmaan becomes a site of memory, pointing to a perspective that values cultural assimilation and advertises meritocracy according to its own ideals (71). The Essops' rendition of Salmaan's freedom stages an encounter of people and religion and shows travel and palm trees. It also includes the image of veiled Muslim women.

The veiled Muslim woman is iconic of the Otherness of Islam. The veil has also driven fantasy and desire relegating real struggles, desires and achievements to metaphor. The lifting of the veil indicates a relationship of the visible to the invisible; Western philosophers veiled "truth" as female, then fantasised about drawing back the veil. Anne McClintock argues the vision of world knowledge once dominated by Europe was animated not only by an imperial geography of power but also gendered erotics of knowledge. As part of colonialism's legacy, modern knowledge came to be represented as a relation of power between two gendered spaces. The relation between spaces was articulated by both a journey and a technology. The journey involved Western, male penetration and the exposure of a veiled interior of the feminised Orient. The enabling technology was one of surveillance and capture, where the image of the female body was exposed through photography (McClintock 1995, 35).

The Western dream of colonial conquest was brilliantly analysed in Franz Fanon's revolutionary texts. Fanon invokes the metaphor of the veil to address the way race and racism relies on visual representation. Fanon treats race primarily as an optical phenomenon or "corporeal schema," which leaves out temporal, narrative and genealogical thinking (Mitchell 2012, 42). Race emphasised the realm of visuality and the self-evidence of "seeing as believing." The veil was, writes W.J.T. Mitchell,

> not only a medium of opacity and blockage but, like the medium of photography, an instrument of "second sight" and the revelation of what would otherwise have remained invisible and concealed; or like the cinema, a screen on which both realistic and fantastic images could be projected. (2012, 43)

Seeing the Essops' *Salmaan's Freedom* is an opportunity to remember the logic of imperial knowledge that linked women, property, nature, race and through photographic technology, the fiction and fantasy of landscape.

Landscape, picturesque, pilgrimage

Landscape is a culturally specific genre of representation. In a preliterate, animalistic or non-Western worldview, nature may appear as immanent and dynamically interactive with human behaviour, and there is something intractable, mythic and incommunicable about landscape. In this contrast to the colonial conception, any pictured landscape is necessarily incomplete. A recurrent feature of colonialist discourse is that colonised peoples are not supposed to be spatially there – for the lands are "empty" – they are symbolically displaced into the trope of *anachronistic space*, wherein colonised or marginalised people do not inhabit history proper and are bereft of human agency.

In landscape pictures – from ancient times up to and including the present – the author produces, selects and uses nature to generate spatial relationships between near and far, calculate relative intensities and link previously unrelated elements. The Essop's *Masijidal Haram* (Figure 4) is a landmark that indicates a convergence with ideas in cultural geography that address the power of landscapes. In this way of seeing, landscapes are signifiers of national identity that link heritage, representations of history and picturesque landscapes (Kinsman 1995).

The picturesque is a descriptive term that was formulated into an aesthetic category in late eighteenth-century Britain, with particular application to landscape

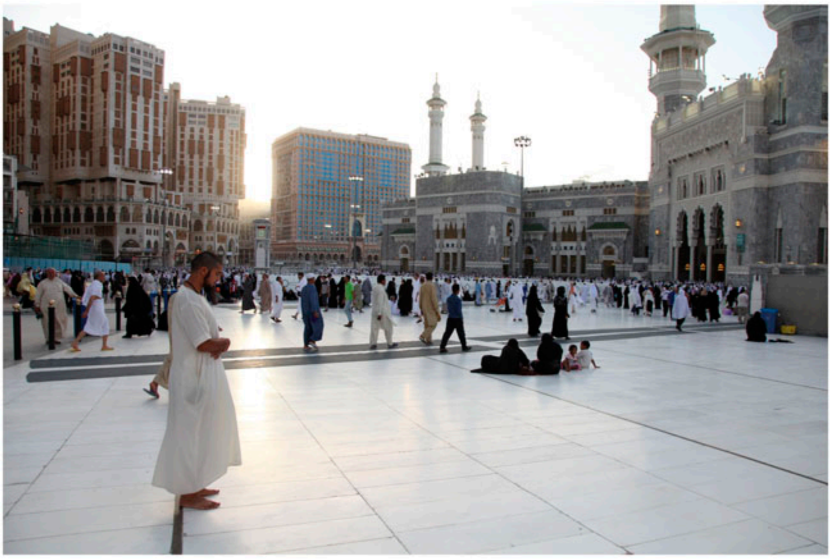

Figure 4. Masjidal Haram (Sacred Mosque), Mecca, Saudi Arabia, 2011. Courtesy of the artists and Goodman Gallery.

scenery and landscape painting. Irregularity, roughness, variety and the more wild parts of an area characterise the picturesque landscape. Areas that best exhibited such characteristics were frequently visited and examined by tourists who followed the cult of the Picturesque. Movement was an essential element of picturesque experience, and one that is hard to appreciate in static images.

The Essops have conceived the project as a journey, a path toward the production of a public common sphere. In *Remembrance*, the brothers appear as *pilgrims*, travellers on a journey to a holy place. Pilgrims are common to many religions; the pilgrim leaves the security of home and clan for an unknown destination.

The pictures in *Remembrance* offer visual spaces, whereby the recognition of the artists in the scenes as pilgrims refer to the spiritual literature of many religious belief systems, ancient and modern, but also to the experience of life in the world or to the autonomy discovered along the inner path of the spiritual aspirant who presents their being to another, and in so doing, one finds both the Other and their self. This sort of visual interaction is one facet of cultural production that appears through the interface of signifying systems as social subjects (Pollock 2010, 202). The interface – that is, the signifying system of the artworks displayed in *Remembrance* – proposes an innovative framework of understanding just who we are when we envision our contemporary world.

Each photograph is concerned with religious ritual and Muslim life, but they do not necessarily represent the artists' own experience. Instead, the picture's scope of visualisation is part of photography's expanded field. The "expanded field," Baker (2005) argues, is a structural one encompassing new formal and cultural possibilities, all of them ratified logically by the expansion of the medium of photography in technological and cultural directions. *Iranian Mosque* offers a still photographic image that is pushed into multiple social layers and incomplete image fragments. By presenting psychologically charged narratives on a grand scale, in 360° photographic panoramas, the landscape images in *Remembrance* couple references to the history of painting with a cinematic sensibility.

Cinematographic, narrative, photography

The Essops' images rarely engage with the actual cinematographic motion of the "still film," but the photographic object, argues Baker (2005), has succumbed to its digital recording, and the turn is more cinematic than photographic (122). This set of artistic practices organised around the parameters of photography since the 1990s have become "theoretical objects." Such artistic objects, as described by Rosalind Krauss, have been produced according to the logic of the copy, in resistance to normative conceptions of authorship or style, and embedded in mass cultural formations (122).

The Essops' photographs relate to cinematographic photographs of artists like Jeff Wall or Gregory Crewdson, but diverge from the singularity and unified nature of tableaux. Rather, the Essops multiply visual codes within reproducible but singular still images made from multiple shots. The Essops' images are structured like Renaissance altarpieces and predellas in ways that call to mind the photographs and film installations of Sam Taylor-Wood. For instance, the figure in the fountain of *Iranian Mosque* is captured in a personal moment of self-reflection, despair or prayer. The Essops' photographs depict human dramas and specific emotional instances, such as this lone hero, whereas the people portrayed in Taylor-Wood's works are self-absorbed and seemingly detached from their own environment; in the Essops' pictures, *they* are the people reflecting on and in their environment. This exploration in the power of landscape via multiple layers of reference and many modes of representation echo Ingrid Pollard's visualisations of the complexity in human–environment relationships and issues of access and land, or Renee Cox's challenges to ethnicity, gender and identity on a variety of scales (Kinsman 1995). In each instance, the artists are always already convivial and share in what they represent, thereby unsettling an idealised landscape.

While all of the axes of photography's "expanded field" potentially open onto cinema through the folding of the narrative concerns into the photographic construct, the Essops' characters are seen as people in solitary, awkward or vulnerable moments. These assembled forms open possibilities beyond postmodern pastiche to provide a fusion of stasis and narrative, a conjunction of digital recording and linguistic supplement.

The artist brothers reappear in each image as characters acting and reappearing in these imaginary, virtual worlds: in *Cave of Refuge*, Husain is at centre, sitting against a wall; in *Jabal Arafat (Mount of Mercy)*, the artist is seated in the centre foreground, hands raised in prayer; in *The Dome of the Rock*, Hasan stands at the entrance; in *Oudste Kerk, Amsterdam, Netherlands, 2011* (Figure 5), reality invades fantasy when the artists appear repeatedly across an interior scene that is structured like an altarpiece.

History, memory, event

The Essops say their work stages "a battle between religion and art." While surviving their training as fine art students, Hasan and Husain were repeatedly told to question their Muslim faith and culture. In a 2010 interview, the brothers recall that

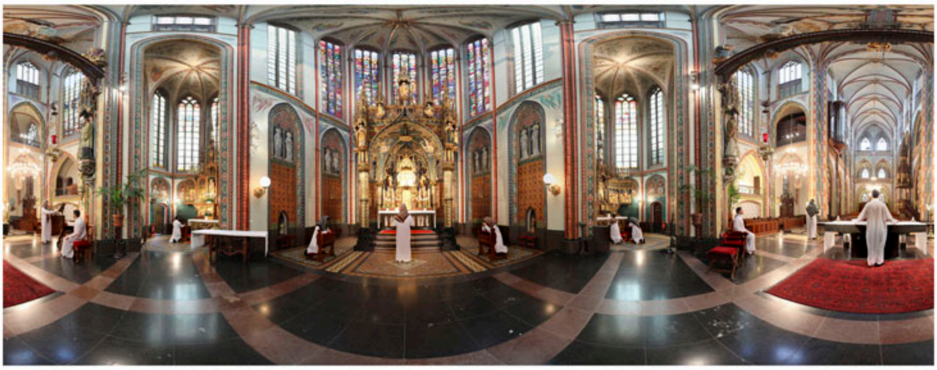

Figure 5. Oudste Kerk, Amsterdam, Netherlands, 2011. Courtesy of the artists and Goodman Gallery.

in the beginning, they did try to conform and question their faith in ways that led to psychological distress. In their second year, they adjusted their assignments to include Koranic texts and calligraphy. This artwork was also rejected, labelled propagandistic and received failing marks. Husain Essop comments: "That's when we realized we are conforming to those people's ideas, to make them happy, not making ourselves happy, not producing work that expresses what we feel and are trying to say." On a personal level, the brothers want the ability to determine what is visible and sayable. The Essops put it this way: "Art in Islam is not really defined. We want to have both – religion and art http://www.goodman-allery.com/files/upload/news/4163Newsessopbrosenjnmarchapril2010.pdf (Accessed 18 Dec 2014) (O'Toole 2010). While looking at the pictures in *Remembrance*, it is not immediately apparent how the artworks stage this battle between religion and art. It may have something to do with a practical, if somewhat outdated general distinction drawn between religious societies that display an absence of images as opposed to those that actively denounce them in displays of iconophobia. But the visual effects and picturesque aesthetic of these particular narrative landscapes refuse such confrontational censorship, and I am pulled back from commentary on iconoclasm by a strange tension in visual representation; between the modes of seeing and knowledge typical of our cultures and media and our architectures for the transmission of myth.

Other themes are important, but I here choose to focus on how the artworks become signifiers of history, event and the picturesque through attention to their structures and settings. This way of looking triangulates the question of aesthetic form, the subjectivising event, and an imaginative encounter that invokes *theoria*. *Theoria* is "to look at, to view, to travel to see, to be sent to visit an oracle, to judge one thing by another," writes Pollock (2010, 207). Theory *itself* is a mode of seeing; a kind of witnessing that involves the experience of sight and its opposite, blindness. The seer here is enabled by the practice of imagining.

This provocative form of address presents both a limit and a horizon. The limit specifies the Essops themselves, that is, the articulation of the artist heroes appearing in character, while the horizon points to the artistic, social and cultural circuits that come together as aspects of the artistic project's drive toward the production of knowledge through seeing, through gestures that invent visual exchange.[6] The framework within which this takes place has both political and aesthetic objectives, but rather than subsume the concerns of art and artists into the narrow terrain of Western institutional aesthetic discourses, thereby continuing the current crisis; these photographs offer an opportunity to identify the distortions in an uneven power relationship between the West and a "visuality" imposed on the Islamic world for centuries.[7]

Seeing, mythology, heroism

The Essops' current interest in memory and history has been in development through their artistic practice since at least 2006. The pictures, generally, show moments of exceptional encounter through unexceptional means. Specifically, by means of digital reproducibility, the artists play the role of hero in dramatic encounters in various settings. The encounters, however, are always with their selves.

The heroic role played by the artist in the drama of these theatrical monologues disrupts the narrative – it functions both as a direct address to the audience and as commentary on the story. This is a deliberate engagement with *representation* and mimesis. It is implied by the object-bound presentation of each work and the way in which the conscious assembly of each scene provides a register of appraisal. The repetition of the subject–figure and its unchanged scale works as intrusion into the imaginary.

What is of interest in the Essops' *Remembrance* is not a definable process of subjectivisation; the artists are not searching for a stable *place* from which they can claim a right. After all, the subject is logically always-already historical, situated, generationally and locationally over-determined; each of us emerges from a location or situation, even if we are not defined by it. Likewise, the Essops picture in and through the cultural framings that anticipate the subject's becoming and accessing of the symbolic order. The artworks do this by presenting a mythic structuring of figures and places into stories that service ideologically and culturally charged interests.

Of interest in the Essop's *Remembrance* is the tension that arises when the structure of seeing, mobilised by a viewer, shows a pattern for the visual reception of what is mythically familiar. In the Essops' artworks, the element that prompts this sort of looking is uncanny figural repetition – the brothers' appearance in the cinematographic, picturesque landscape – which reveals a deep mythic structure in operation.

Artworks can hold the double frame of the psycho-symbolic and historical time before the viewer, the space of the social subject and the psychic space of the subject (Pollock 2010, 206). The visualisation of history is an exercise of the imaginary, and manifests the authority of the visualiser. Visuality's first domains were the slave plantation, monitored by the surveillance of the overseer, writes Mirzoeff (2011a, 475). Visuality then became a tradition of *heroic* leadership, which visualises history to sustain authority. This form makes the processes of history perceptible to authority, and was the attribute of the hero alone.

The material consequence of these processes manifested, for example, in British imperial visuality's organisation by an army of missionaries on the move, bringing light to darkness by means of the Word, actively imagining themselves to be heroic subjects (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991, 35, 52–53). In the case of South Africa and elsewhere, colonial evangelism seemed to retain a hold on popular revisions of the past. Whereas monuments and relics endorse a dominant image of the heroic role, re-commissioned monuments, as images and as *lived* landscape, tell a different tale.

Its unauthorised, anti-heroic inhabitants proclaim that history has many modalities that the singular, authorised narratives never say it all.

The Essops' visual process thereby produces something *anamorphic*: for the viewing subject in the exhibition cannot master or grasp the whole work from any single position, but becomes a subject in and of the space whose rhythmic prose "narrativises" events for that decentred human. Such reclaimed ruins open up the historical terrain of the everyday and, above all, the domestic. This, significantly, is the terrain on which the Essops' pilgrimage pictures anchor their work of "salvation": they seek to remake themselves as anti-heroic figures by means of ordinary things like external appearances and clothing; here the distant forces of history and memory come to rest in localities and on local ground. The images in *Remembrance* decline reliance on a normative situatedness defined by having to answer to, and for, histories that we may not have previously conceived as our own (Gonzales 2010, 197–198). Instead, the Essops picture the task of producing and reproducing historicity, which, against a generalised history in which white subjectivity is central, insists not on the construction of the "Other," but on self-actualisation and non-compliance.

Process, counter-visuality, Realism

The Essops' artwork is produced through a "counter-visuality" that enables a glimpse of an ethical dimension, and it appears through the process and materiality of the artwork. The digitally produced, cinematographic images refer to now-archaic forms of the picturesque; are historically freighted in form, content and setting; and assert their own viewpoints from which to look at the world.

Observation of contemporary life is the central tenet for Realism, the movement in mid- to late nineteenth-century art in which an attempt was made to create objective representations of the external world. Consciously democratic, Realist artists included in their subject matter and audience activities and social classes previously considered unworthy of representation in high art (Rubin 2014). Distinct from naturalism, Realism implies a style in which the artist tries to observe and then faithfully record the subject without idealisation, stylisation or imagination. In Realism, the imaginative aspect of art was emphasised, while externally imposed aesthetic ideals were rejected. It is worth noting that the historical movement also blurred genre distinctions and increased demand for landscape pictures.

The Essops' digitally constructed landscapes gesture toward an indexical relation to a historical real, but a "real" that *bypasses* conventional senses of "realism," authenticity or immediacy. These notions have, as Pollock (2010) describes, been virtualised to such a degree that what we might in old-fashioned terms call realism can no longer be called a *social* realism, but an *ethical* one.

Formative realism

What I call *formative realism* is an *ethic* that involves active modes of visualising through virtual and virtualising problematics of representation. The term "formative realism" arises by elision of the phrases "formative practices" and 'critical realism." By means of visual artworks, some "form of newness" has a chance to enter the world, and formative realism works toward sighting a multiplicity of narratives and dilemmas that link reality and being.

Held by the fine details of the movements in the Essops' recent pictures, formative realism refocuses attention on the ethic of "realism." This conjunction requires a defamiliarisation of the concept "realism" in visuality, so let me first cite three main and familiar aspects:

First, as an historical movement in the figurative arts, its aim was to give a truthful, objective and impartial representation of the real world based on a meticulous observation of contemporary life (Nochlin 1979, 13–56). Proper to the visual arts, historical Realism is connected with central problematic philosophical issues that include an ambiguous relationship to "reality." In contemporary manifestations of the long-standing Platonic opposition between "true reality" and mere appearance, art is situated between the illusion of this material world on the one hand, and the "true" content of events on the other. Realism involves a claim about *existence* in a concrete world.

Second, the commonplace notion that Realism is a transparent style, a "mirror image of visual reality," is a barrier to understanding the phenomenon as it assumes the possibility of "pure" perception. Photographic mediums, which come closer to fulfilling a desire for transparency through precise detail, rely on the photographer's choice of viewpoint, length of exposure, size of focal opening and so on, decisions which intervene between the object and the image printed or projected. These two points are enough to understand why I don't think the *meaning* of the Essops' photographs relies on straight forward visual transcription. However, the architecture of the pictures reveal a desire to expand experience beyond the illusion of straightforward representation of what is pictured and toward a more expansive view that expresses something about the place of the visual image in Muslim religion and Islamic culture in the past and present.

What I also wish to pick up on at this point is the way in which the historical Realists stressed the importance of confronting reality afresh, of constantly stripping their minds of ready-made formulae (Nochlin 1979, 23). There is a radical ethic behind this approach, their antiquated interest in visual fidelity aside. A new and broadened notion of history and an altered sense of time are central to a Realist outlook, and there is a connection between history and experienced fact. For the historical Realists, history and value, history and faith were torn apart by criticism and science, leaving facts in a vast landscape of events in time. Pictures from the historical Realists share a common attempt to place the daily life of a given chronological period in a convincing, accurate, factual milieu. In Realism, there is a demand for historical accuracy through sense of conceptual possibility.

Third, a central possibility for Realism was a new demand for democracy in art. This requirement accompanied the demand for political and social democracy, which opened up a new realm of subjects hitherto unnoticed or considered unworthy of pictorial representation. The artist thereby erases aesthetic boundaries between beautiful and ugly, and the depiction of the commonplace or marginal in pictures enlivens the relation and importance of the social dimension. There is, in addition, a commitment to "sincerity" as the central epistemological or moral imperative, and this commitment, alongside a refusal to idealise, shapes the Realist's moral stand. All forms of Realism are marked by a desire for verisimilitude of one kind or another, but there can be no perception without cultural movement, affected as it is by variants of general beliefs about heritage and the world (Nochlin 1979, 51).[8]

Formative realism relates, then, to an intransitive or ontological dimension that develops satisfactory social relations in the face of the *relativity* of knowledge in the transitive or epistemological dimension.[9] Building on these foundations, the operation of formative realism does not necessarily require mimetic modes of imaging, but rather an attempt to come to terms with a global imaginary that has emerged from modernity's tendency to exceed understanding of local dynamics and a complex and flawed set of responses to its permanent revolutionising of conditions of existence (Mirzoeff 2011a, 477). Pictures that operate through a formative realism may perform the indexical relation, not via the icon but via the material as transport medium. The medium is capable of inciting a trans-subjectivity that has the ability to decline voyeurism or identification (Pollock 2010, 212). Formative realism is, I am suggesting, a discernable ground from which visual images – including the Essops' digitally assembled images – can be seen as meaningful renditions of an event.

Claims of representational realism or literalism in images in a Western context usually relate to their degree of conformity to traditional European artistic conventions (Elias 2012, 16). On the contrary, writes Elias (2012), Muslim attitudes toward images display contradictions that include taboos on depiction, a religious culture that is rich in images, reacts to the images of others in complex ways and is spatially focused around an object – the Ka'ba building in Mecca – and its associated primary ritual of pilgrimage, which incorporates somatic engagement with material objects. There is, Elias writes,

> a complex attitude toward images, and religious images in particular, [that] continues in Muslim society to this day, such that it is impossible to speak in terms of comprehensive and pervasive perspectives on religious image, be they of Muslim or non-Muslim origin or content. (13)

Here, my focus is on the *transformatively* practical moments of "realism" in an effort to reimagine something like experience under the conditions of mediated culture. I do not imagine formative realism as a clearly delimited, stable concept, but a cluster of meanings and relations that appear in various configurations inciting a non-ambiguous trans-subjectivity, a situated emergence that is neither voyeuristic nor identificatory (Pollock 2010, 212).

The Essops' images calculate aesthetic forms that respond to the rhythms of seeing in cinematographic, narrativised space. The viewer is invited to engage with its forms, bringing a new perspective to bear on how contemporary representation emerges via the remembrance of history.

Islam, race, representation

In *Remembrance,* the question of subjectivity and historical memory erupts with the juxtaposition of South African-born people of colour in Muslim attire, in various religious contexts. Muslims comprise less than two per cent of the population, but form an integral part of the post-apartheid nation and are visibly represented in the public. Muslims are disproportionately visible, marginalised and exoticised. Muslims are conceived paradoxically, as alternately benign and threatening, but the people have, and continue to play, an enduring role in the formation of the continent's history and culture.

The Essops' *Remembrance* disrupts claims to authority over Muslim visuality by portraying their own specific and idiosyncratic experience of Islamic life through a complex and resonant set of images. *Remembrance* offers a formative realism that affords a complex vision of contemporary life in South Africa and elsewhere. Islam and race are interwoven in the history of South Africa, and slave labour shaped the culture and character of the nation. "It is not possible to fully understand enduring concepts of race, sexuality and belonging in the country today," Baderoon (2014) writes, "without attending to the crucible of colonialism, slavery and Islam in which they were formed" (6). The Muslim community takes shape under conditions of enslavement, enforced prostitution, and colonial rule, and the legacy of these conditions extend into the fraught post-emancipation period (12). *Three Imams, Dakar* (Figure 6) and *Slave Lodge, Dakar* (Figure 7) are direct visual references to this legacy. Whereas histories of colonial photography provide a useful context for understanding the impact of photographs of Islamic life and people in the past, the Essops offer a view of Islamic life in the present as an outcome of that past. Rather than framing their photographs in metaphors that shape the "Other," Orientalism or a desire to capture an "authentic" Muslim experience, *Remembrance* points to the complexity of the present in the wake of the past's unmitigated disasters.

Ideas of race are still central to South African nationhood in constantly reinvented forms, and the legacy remains a fundamental element of defining nation today. The subjectivity that emerges contra assimilation, then, is volatile, polyglot – and even while in pilgrimage – it is a way of being that is unconcerned with discovering an "original state" or "place." Perhaps the group of photographs offers a realism that shows ethnicity as decoupled from nationalism, imperialism, racism and the state.

This paper suggests a way of moving through zones of analysis that provide an ensemble of specific possibilities that relate to being of, and being in, what Moten (2003) calls an ensemble of "specific impossibilities" (27). The specific impossibility apparent in the Essops' artworks points to an ontological resistance. This resistance to the status quo produces an expanded conditioning of possibility that *opposes*

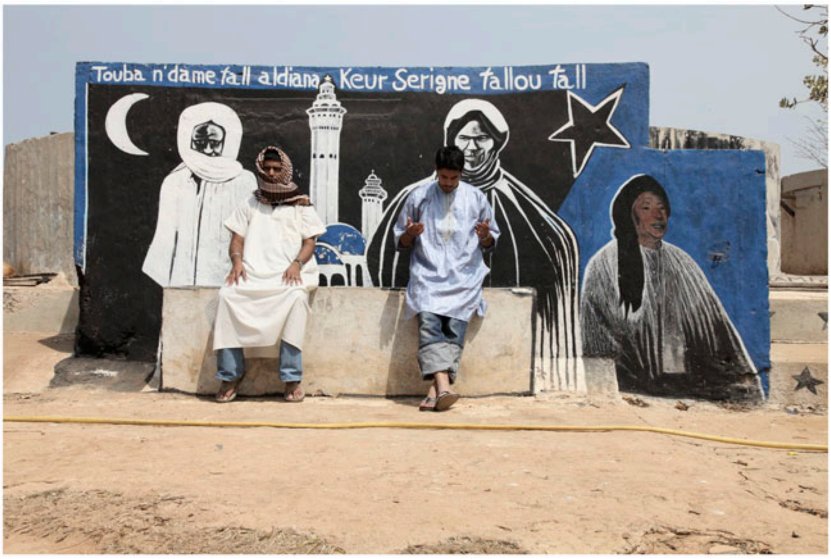
Touba n'dame fall aldiana Keur Serigne fallou fall

Figure 6. Three Imams, Dakar, Senegal, 2010. Courtesy of the artists and Goodman Gallery.

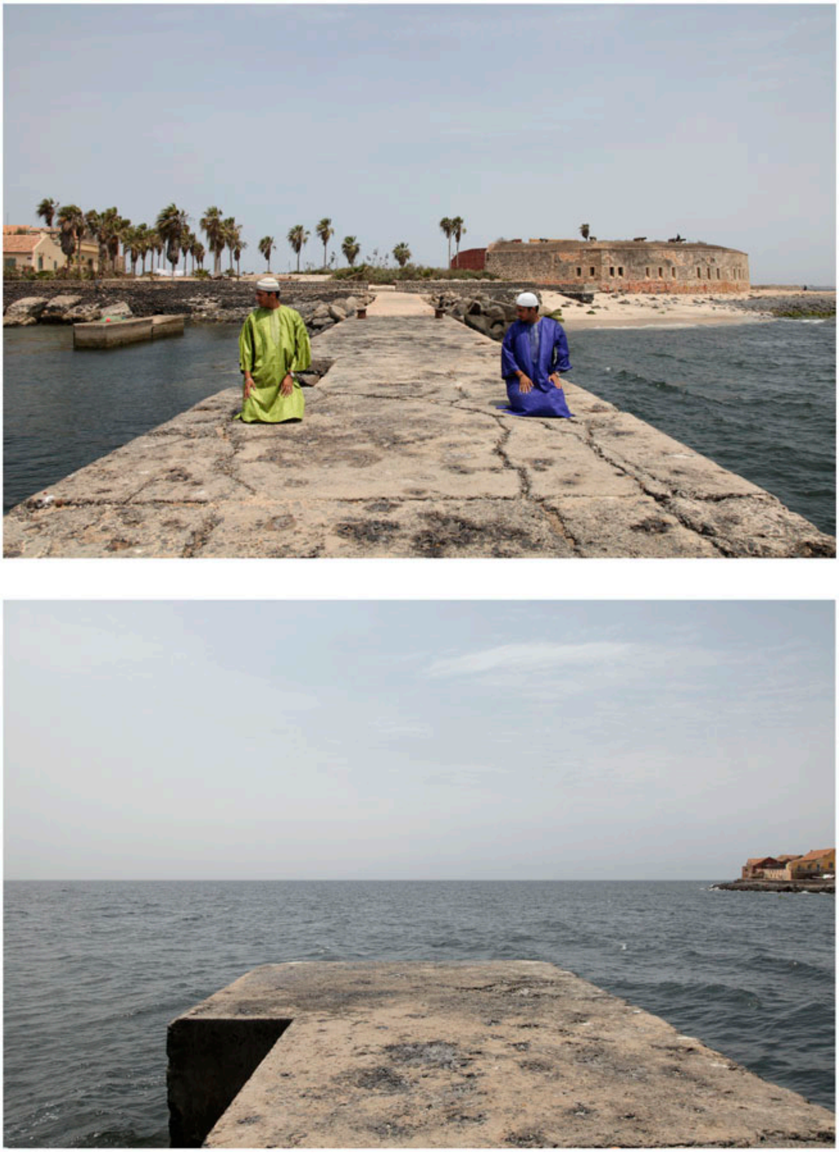

Figure 7. Slave Lodge, Dakar, Senegal, 2010. Courtesy of the artists and Goodman Gallery.

extant discourses framing this or that thing as lawless or ungovernable. New possibilities remember and rebuff neurotic oscillations between acceptance and denial. *Remembrance* offers pride of place to belief, history, language and culture in the *formation* of a subjectivity that relies on a freedom in the imaginary.

Notes

1. I am thinking of complexes of power and authority as variously described by Enrique Dussel, Walter Mignolo, Ramon Grosfoguel, and Lewis R. Gordon, among others. For

examples, see Morana, Dussel, and Jáuregui1 (2008); Grosfoguel (2008); and Gordon (2008, 220–248).

2. Following Elias (2012, ix), I have tried to follow the convention of distinguishing between the adjectives "Islamic" and "Muslim," with the former connoting things that are civilisational and shared by all citizens of the Islamic ecumene regardless of religion; the latter connotes things that are specifically religious even within a civilisational context.
3. This format mimics Roland Barthes's in *Camera Lucida* (1980), Walter Benjamin's propositions in *Illuminations* ([1936] 2008), and more recently, James Elkins's reflections on photography in *What Photography Is* (2011).
4. This sort of analysis is undertaken by Damian Sutton in his study of the photograph which looks back through cinema to "understand" the photograph. Sutton's elegant work discusses the nature of time in photography, especially our experience of it, turning to Deleuzian treatments of time in cinema; Deleuze argues that a different kind of cinema grows from a resistance to classical systems of narration and monstration and by growing gives us a glimpse of the pure time within which we live. See Sutton (2009, ix).
5. Noting a "radical unevenness" in the nature and quality of time itself, Jon May and Nigel Thrift describe spatial variation as a constitutive part rather than an added dimension of the multiplicity and heterogeneity of social time – what they call *TimeSpace.* See May and Thrift (2001) especially pages 3–6.
6. Mirzoeff describes this as the common, an exchange without the creation of surplus: "You, or your group, allow another to find you, and, in so doing, you find both the other and yourself" (Mirzoeff 2011a, 474). See Mirzoeff (2011a, 2011b).
7. Mirzoeff (2011a) writes: "Visuality is an old nineteenth-century term, meaning the visualization of history. This practice must be imaginary, rather than perceptual, because what is being visualized is too substantial for any one person to see and is created from information, images, and ideas. This ability to assemble a visualization manifests the authority of the visualizer. In turn, the authorizing of authority requires permanent renewal in order to win consent as the "normal" or everyday because it is always already contested" (474).
8. The varieties of realism and philosophical inquiry into realism's nature and plausibility is so controversial that no brief account of it will satisfy here. However, it is worth noting – because it matters to the *formative realism* I am attempting to sketch here – the varieties of realism matter because it involves claims about meaning and existence.
9. The phrase "a form of newness" is used by Mitchell (2012, 10) in the context of an analysis of race that describes it as an image and medium for understanding the social world. My lever for entering discussion of "formative realism" is the movement in philosophy and the human sciences called "critical realism" as described by Archer et al. (1998, ix–xxiv). I am not an expert in philosophy, nor realism, and my credentials as a scholar of culture rest on a few essays related to visual activity that have focused on intersections of vision and human difference. Among my hopes in preparing this paper was the thought that by taking up "formative realism" from a relatively distant viewpoint, I might be able to open some insights that would be less than obvious to people interested in the artworks, socio-political difference, and the interconnectedness of race, racism and vision. On "critical realism," see Archer et al. (1998).

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