

# Conotative Memories

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WRITING WITH LIGHT

PHOTOESSAYS FROM THE ARCHIVES

FIXED FORMAT RE-ISSUE

## Writing with Light

Writing with Light was created to bolster the place of the photo-essay within international anthropological scholarship. This project originated as a collaboration between two journals: *Cultural Anthropology* and *Visual Anthropology Review* and grew out of an initiative led by Michelle Stewart and Vivian Choi for the Cultural Anthropology website. The five-person curatorial collective at the helm of Writing with Light is committed to formal experimentation and it aims to animate an ongoing discussion around the significance of multimodal scholarship with an emphasis on the still image.

Multimodal scholarship changes what anthropologists can and should see as productive knowledge. Such projects compel anthropologists to begin rethinking our intellectual endeavors through an engagement with various media, addressing the particular affordances and insights that each form of scholarship offers. How, for example, does photography produce different types of knowledge than text or film? What criteria might we need to interrogate and evaluate each of these forms of multimodal scholarship? As part of a broader set of questions about the relationship between forms of scholarly work and knowledge production, we support the ongoing relevance of the photo-essay.

We would like to acknowledge the support of the journals *Cultural Anthropology* and *Visual Anthropology Review* in this publishing endeavor. Cultural Anthropology has hosted the Photo-Essay project since its inception.

Writing with Light is in reverse alphabetical order: Mark Westmoreland, Arjun Shankar, Lee Douglas, Vivian Choi, Craig Campbell

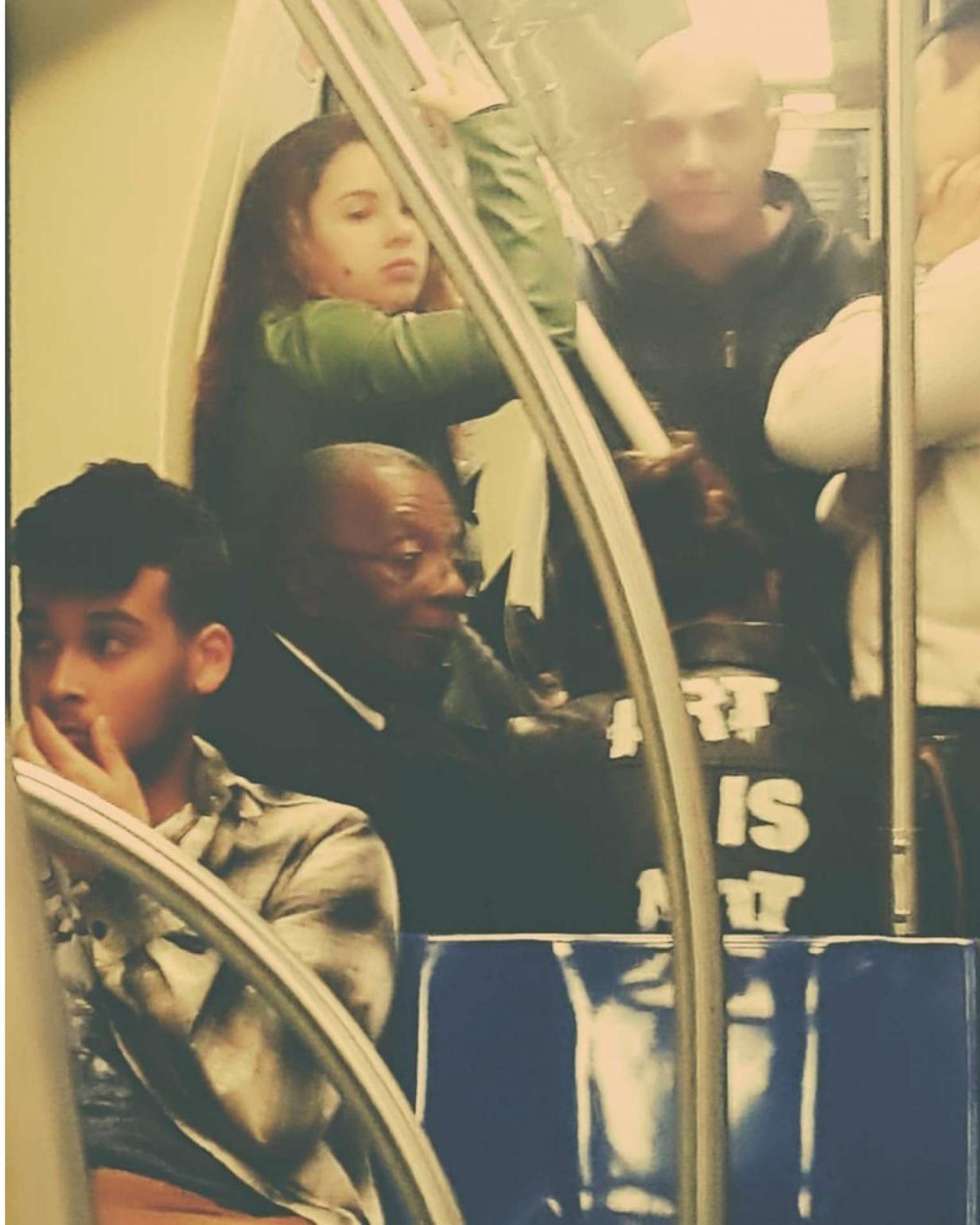
## Photoessays From the Archives

When the Society for Cultural Anthropology relaunched its website in 2019, it was no longer able to continue support for the custom viewer that hosted the Writing with Light photo-essays on its previous site. At this point we learned a material lesson in the difficulty of sustaining multimedia digital publications over time.

In response to the challenge of preserving digital photo-essays we created the "Photoessays from the Archives: Fixed Format Re-issue" series to give a fixed visual layout for each of the photo-essays in a more stable format (PDF). With permission from the authors and from the publishers we re-present these photo-essays in this new format.

Photoessays from the Archives is an initiative led by the Writing with Light collective. Mark Westmoreland, Arjun Shankar, Lee Douglas, Vivian Choi, Craig Campbell

Layout and design by Craig Campbell with the Writing with Light Collective



Recent events of violence in São Paulo, Brazil targeting Palestinian, Syrian, as well as Angolan, Nigerian, and Congolese bystanders during a protest against the new Immigration Law, make evident xenophobic anxiety and racist discrimination. These are signs of both repressive regimes and potentially epistemological transformation. The following story speaks to the nervous relationship between violence and change in the form of a memory.



When I was seven years old, I lost my mother and my little sister in a mysterious accident. They were killed by a subway train in São Paulo on May 10, 2017. My mother was Congolese, from Gemena, located 100 kilometers north of the Congo River. I was born in Kinshasa, but my sister was born in São Paulo. We three were all together on that dreadful day.

My mother Ntumba was registered as Angolan, which was typical among Congolese. A little bit less prejudice, given Angola's linguistic connection via Portuguese colonialism. The question on people's minds at the time inside the popular Palestinian restaurant, bar, and cultural center was: did my mother commit suicide or was she pushed as part of the maddening ritual of morning rush commute?

Of course, I don't really remember much. Or, maybe I do. People told me that I was unresponsive, that I shut down. I am telling you all of this not for the sake of pity. I am just trying to give you the back story to how I met Mônica. Our relationship, initially inspired by trauma, remains a lesson for me about place in a foreign land. My name is Claudine.



"Artur Alvim," a name I always mispronounced, placing too much stress on the first syllable, is both a place and a person. Artur Alvim is a far-flung neighborhood located on the sprawling east side of São Paulo near the greater landmark of Itaquera. Named after an elite engineer and land baron interested in developing railroad lines and land speculation during the 1930s, Artur Alvim has become an intermediary transport hub linking the impoverished and struggling working classes to the massive centers of commerce and industry located toward downtown.



"Stick close to me. Keep silent. Don't look at anyone and don't let go of my hand." I heard my mother and later I would come to remember her strict caution as an art of not seeing, an art of discretion.

One is not meant to stop and take it all in. Stationary souls are lost souls, perdidos, wandering fools getting in others' way. "Are you begging? What do you want? Senhora, please go to the patrol guard over there. He can help you." The contrast of motion and fixity is felt most dramatically on the platform.

The São Paulo metro is like any other subway, an institution. The design is intended to simplify management. Modernist angles, color coordination of signage, and the operative flat surfaces direct and facilitate massive flows of people. The escalators never stop, the turnstiles flip in disjointed cranks.



They say my mother had simply had enough that morning and had decided that neither she nor her two little girls could endure anymore. They said she was crazy, a shady African woman who had lost her man. They say she and other Africans carried Ebola to Brazil. They called her a dirty parasite, infecting the already struggling society and sucking the body politic dry of its paltry welfare resources.

Of course, my mother worked. Her job cleaning floors in the shopping mall Iguatemi was grueling, and we later discovered that her manager had just informed her that her contract would end in two weeks.

I remember that my little dress was tight that day. I remember a snugness, a discomfort that made me irritable. I must have worn on my mother's patience as she paid me no mind when I complained. I guess we were particularly late that day . . . I don't know . . . We continued to move through the crowds along the ridges of scuffed poured concrete, the grids and grooves of escalator steps and finally arrived at the line of raised flooring that marked the edge of safety. An aid to the blind, a color standard of yellow. Caution.



I remember that after all my efforts to gain the attention of my mother, pleading for a new top, I retreated to shame. Shame of my looks and a shame of myself and, quite simply, us as a family. I became silent. My arms steadied to continue my chore of carrying little Marianne, but the rest of me went limp. A passive screen looking for a spark from the crowd. Anybody?

In some subway stations there is a gush of wind that accompanies the sounds of metal grinding announcing the train's arrival. Chatter stops and people face the blowing air in expectation and in humble respect for this awesome machine. Bodies gather in strategy and others cede their spots. During rush hours, a waterfall of sensation and power every minute.



I remember a crescendo of wind, noise, a building of pressure. I looked up to my mother one last time and saw a speck of rice or flour and water, a pasty fleck of whiteness on an otherwise deep, ebon face.

A brown girl was dragged by another adult woman to the other side of my mother. She stared at me. Disarmed me. I shut my eyes and was pulled apart. Artur Alvim was a trending topic on Twitter that day. I still don't know how to pronounce it.

My mother was born in Northeastern DRC, near the Mbuti people. She was raised with a certain notion of trees and forests. They were supposedly steady confidants; they would not leave the premises like stones and animals. You could count on them for a nice chat, a morality lesson, and a helpful tip on stuff like how to make boys into men. My mother learned the patterns of barkcloth and appreciated the wisdom held in the quiet voids of material spaces. What is between one thing and another, the gap. She followed that voice. A direct voice in the midst of all that São Paulo, Artur Alvim noise.



Mônica is the name I secretly give to my colleagues, those who I find provocative, who I think could teach me something. Few Brazilians have bothered to remember my name and I do this in turn. Over time we may really learn each other's name, but I do not assume so. Names of friends and family rise and fall like the floods after a summer storm leaving emotional memories and broken hearts. A residue of society. Untrustworthy. But, the contained escalators and stairwells, the hulking slabs of concrete flooring with sparsely distributed seating bolted down with screws the size of your hand. They remain steady as a beginning. No one knows of what.

I continue to inhabit Artur Alvim subway station not as an impressionable and occasionally frightened girl but as a voice. A voice among many other immigrant voices that are part of platform announcements and multicultural staff. It was one result of civic meetings like from the photograph I showed you. My presence in Artur Alvim is part of the public nature of suicide in the country of samba, carnival, and corruption.

## Commentary

If I tell you a story of a Congolese refugee, who committed suicide by throwing herself along with her two daughters in front of an oncoming metro train in São Paulo, interspersed with speculative opinions from knowledgeable acquaintances and witnesses, is that the same as telling such a story in the form of a memory from the perspective of the surviving elder daughter? Of course, it is not the same but are these simply different narrative forms or do they demonstrate the “limit of what is possible to say” (Stewart 2017, 228) in ethnography? Have I compromised the fidelity of writer-subject in the second scenario? Is such a transgression “a writerly excess that obscures the real” (ibid., 230) or can such maneuvers of narrative vantage point potentially open up understandings and reveal qualities of social encounters as well as the meanings of human-object-environment relationships? Wary of unequal relations of power and the ethical pitfalls of representation, I play on the creative incompleteness of memory to invite collaborative meaning-making. Like any art, fiction is a style of expression with techniques and infrastructure always refracted through individual and shared experiences. “Memory” is a trope, a trick, a call to assemble the social and the material.

“The relation between what we see and what we know is never settled” (Berger 1972, 7). The images, here, connote rather than denote. This is not a documentary. Moreover, the ethics of narration help monitor any encroaching danger that frequently accompanies transgression. The poetics of description and interpretation within ethnography come up against the foundational element of perspective.

Suicide, upon initial reflection, seems to constitute the ultimate expression of agency. A defining moment, an endpoint to existence. And, yet, as writers ranging from Albert Camus to Émile Durkheim, in addition to more contemporary scholars, such as Susanne Langer (Fincham et al. 2011) have written, suicide is expansive and essen-

tially social in its significance. A horizon of experience. For the purposes of this essay, I follow recent anthropological studies that posit suicide as a potential “diagnostic for the study of structural violence” (Münster and Broz 2015, 4). The rigidity of hard, defining limits evaporates and one might embrace the incompleteness of language and image and express a dissatisfaction with uni-modal representations of humanity.

Rose Satiko, a Brazilian visual anthropologist and colleague, once told me that in her experience with migrants and refugees in São Paulo the main challenge in forging meaningful relationships was not language per se (Kreyol, Lingala, Wolof), but about overcoming or somehow approaching the idiom of trauma. Anthropologist Victoria Sanford (2003, 2008) has written cogently about the “double trauma” of violence, a moment of blunt pain and anguish, followed by an unresolved path to replace that moment through the ever-present idiom of violence.

Perhaps everyday spaces afford a shared vocabulary to build new, connected experiences. The distinctive mark of migrancy is, in part, spatial and migrant presence forces a reflection on the spaces we all inhabit. It follows that memories can become material occupations. A suicide spreads into the life experiences of family, friends, bystanders, and loved ones. A daughter survives, remembers, and re-articulates herself into the everyday geographies of the city.

“In memory, I am,” so the proverb goes. As Idowu William (2009, 424) writes on African identification, the memory is “a potentiality, i.e., a becoming, not an actuality.” The contingency of temporality is matched by an interdependency of place. In the case of Claudine, the memory is of a moment of loss, a culminating moment of frustration and desperation. To re-member for the narrator is to transform the pain and confusion of maternal death into a spark of emplacement, situating self in what had been a morass. Artur Alvim, a mysterious speculator and a circuitous layout of improvised housing and haphazard lines, spatializes a waiting to escape, the banality of work, and, then exhausted, a return home. And, then, do it all over again. That is São Paulo.

This photographic essay is an experiment, “a dramatization,” in the words of W.J.T. Mitchell (1994), of the entangled relationship between language and photography. It is, again borrowing from Mitchell (1994), an attempt “to picture theory” rather

create “a picture theory,” which stems from the assumption that certain arguments require multi-modal material and a thoughtful mixture or juxtaposition of language and the sensorial.

I assert that fiction contributes to an engagement with migrant lives and thus should be part of anthropological migration scholarship. Not merely as a topic of interpretation but also as a mode of ethnographic representation. Moreover, I contend that migrant presence is constitutive of both the materiality and sociality of the city. Tactility and identification. Finally, I posit that suicide represents an existential articulation and not a finality. These three positions are not only linked but also purposefully left at the level of suggestion.

To this end, I deliberately draw attention to what Roland Barthes (1981) called the “connotation procedures” of image-text relationships, and, in my case, I direct meaning-making to the imaginative through a perspective of alterity. A liberty, a usurpation, and a violence. A robbing of an experience that is only partially true. A memory that tells the hard, unforgiving edges of urban materiality and, yet, *shows* very little.

Some might justifiably attest that this essay is odd; the substantive story is located in the captions with the ruminative context left in a theoretical afterword. Perhaps, I misuse the category of caption, for I do not intend to “capture” or “seize” anything with these still images but rather allow the image to open up a narrative flow. The American philosopher Charles Peirce revolutionized linguistic approaches to meaning but was quite conventional in his notion of the caption, when he described it as an extension of the visual sign that essentially proposes an alignment, e.g., “Cheyne Walk, London” (in Jappy 2017, 33–34). I utilize captions not as a direct or even a symbolic index pointing the reader to a place or person, time or sentiment. Instead, captions and images act contingently and concomitantly; their juxtaposition is evocative as it connotes.

“Writing with light” in anthropology is necessarily an ethical act, as connotations between image and text often reinforce the violent, inter-subjective trappings of the gaze. I suggest that the “loose” or indirect relationship between narrative captions and selected images helps ameliorate this violence. My employment of fiction and the specific literary device of memory not only creates a distance away from trans-

parency and photojournalist orientalism but also facilitates the creative imagination of the reader, which is particularly apropos given the subject matter of migrant subjectivities, suicide, and urban transportation.

The contingencies of social encounters, especially acute among migrants and refugees, were neither resolved nor destroyed for the narrator in the captions. The unsteady, lingering fragmentation of death, racism, negligence, and stigma both traumatize and instigate. A spark of change, rarely triumphant, occurs. But a change nonetheless.

## Acknowledgments

I want to thank and give respect to the Brazilian, Angolan, and Congolese activist communities in São Paulo, who gathered, debated, and came together to search for answers about this tragedy and who organized themselves to address the grave issues facing the surviving daughter. I would like to acknowledge, in particular, the openness of Alex André and Chris Kamanda to my queries. In addition, I thank Dr. Lucas Oliveira for helping me with the photography for this project and Dr. Arjun Shankar for his overall encouragement and feedback on the essay’s initial version.

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This peer-reviewed photoessay was originally published as:

Pardue, Derek. 2019. "Connotative Memories." Writing with Light, Cultural Anthropology website, October 29. <https://culanth.org/fieldsights/connotative-memories>