

BOOK REVIEW

Peter Elliott. *Constance: One Road to Take. The Life and Photography of Constance Stuart Larrabee (1914–2000)*. Alairac: Cantaloup Press, 2018. xiii + 196 pp. Photographs. Bibliography. Index. \$29.00. Paper. ISBN 978-1-7202-5806-3.

Little known outside of South Africa and the United States, photographer Constance Stuart Larrabee always has been an enigma to the historians and critics who have considered her work. Her technical proficiency, mastery of form and figure, and ability to capture intimacy in portraiture are universally acknowledged; the quality of her output, particularly her images of African tribespeople shot in the 1930s and 1940s, places her in a small group of masters. But Larrabee's lifelong refusal to contextualize her South African photographs, along with her reticence to articulate her artistic vision or explain her photographic practice, have bedeviled efforts to critically assess her work. In *Constance: One Road to Take*, Peter Elliott sensitively reads between the lines of Larrabee's few interviews, reconsiders her more enduring photographs, and traces the multiple phases of her long career to offer the most complete account of this artist to date.

Although Elliott succeeds brilliantly in presenting Larrabee's life story—from her girlhood as a British immigrant in Pretoria through her later years in high society Chesapeake circles—he never quite reveals the inner photographer; her motivation, choice of subjects, connection to the social currents of her time, all remain hidden or opaque. Much of this has to do with Larrabee herself. Even when, after a long period of obscurity, she began to receive renewed critical acclaim in the 1980s, she distanced herself and her work from the movement against apartheid and almost mechanically repeated the hollow lines she had used at mid-century to downplay the significance of her photographs and resist their being placed within a documentary record of native and urban life under segregation and, later, apartheid. In an important early chapter on “Myth and Reality,” Elliot considers Larrabee's “evasions and clichés” about her work. He shows, for instance, that despite her coy insistence on the spontaneity of her photos, in reality she carefully arranged shoots and often chose a final photograph from a contact sheet of a dozen or more variations, often radically cropping to

secure the sort of framing she desired. He also demonstrates that Larrabee consciously presented her portraits of Ndebele, Xhosa, and Sotho tribespeople as “timeless” and “universal” pieces of art as a way of sidestepping the politically charged context out of which they emerged.

Despite this opacity with regard to Larrabee’s own thought, *Constance: One Road to Take* excels in two important areas. First, the book provides a visually stunning overview of her tribal photos—and here the publisher deserves credit for producing beautiful full-page plates that offer a representative sample of this part of Larrabee’s repertoire. Most of these images have been seen before, but the author interprets them in a fresh and convincing way, and his painstakingly constructed appendices allow interested readers to follow their institutional and archival provenance. Second, the volume is especially good in tracing the emergence of urban black life as an important subject for Larrabee in the 1940s. Dramatically different in style from her rural portraits, these photographs anticipate the later genre of street photography and have a candid feel to them. Yet it is precisely here, in the images Larrabee captured in squatter settlements in African sections of Johannesburg and Malay commercial neighborhoods in Cape Town, that her reticence to engage with the social issues of the day is most problematic. Elliott surmises that Larrabee’s turn to urban themes may have been influenced by her familiarity with the American social documentary tradition, most notably the photographers attached to the New Deal’s Farm Security Administration and, specifically, Richard Wright’s 1941 publication *Twelve Million Black Voices*, to which she alluded in the notes to an exhibition of her work at Cape Town’s Argus Gallery. Yet, if this were the case, unlike her American contemporaries, she firmly declined to put her work to political purposes, and with only a few exceptions, opted to depict urban poverty and homelessness as aspects of city life worthy of capture by the camera and not as abuses of power, political problems, or challenges to the established order.

Elliott’s book also covers later aspects of Larrabee’s career: her photographs of diamond miners in Kimberly and gold miners on the Rand, her work as a wartime journalist in France and Italy, and her projects on rural white poverty and Afrikaner religious festivals. *Constance: One Road to Take* is the only full-length treatment of Larrabee’s life and art, and this alone marks Elliott’s achievement as an important one. Yet in the end, Larrabee herself remains as elusive as ever.

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For additional reading on this subject, the ASR recommends:

- Castellote, Jess, and Tobenna Okwuosa. 2020. "Lagos Art World: The Emergence of an Artistic Hub on the Global Art Periphery." *African Studies Review* 63 (1): 170–96. doi:[10.1017/asr.2019.24](https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2019.24).
- Kaplan, Flora S. 1991. "Fragile Legacy: Photographs as Documents in Recovering Political and Cultural History at the Royal Court of Benin." *History in Africa* 18: 205–37. doi:[10.2307/3172063](https://doi.org/10.2307/3172063).
- Killingray, David, and Andrew Roberts. 1989. "An Outline History of Photography in Africa to Ca. 1940." *History in Africa* 16: 197–208. doi:[10.2307/3171784](https://doi.org/10.2307/3171784).