Walking in the city centre of Bulawayo one easily feels in a time-warp. One sees wide streets constructed to cater for ox-drawn wagons barely crowded by traffic and lined by colonial-style buildings, many from the inter-war period, with their wide stoeps providing space for the numerous pedestrians during daytime, while lying almost deserted at night. Bulawayo is a quiet and laid back city which makes it even more striking to notice passers-by commenting on the lifestyle shown in the Thatha Camera exhibition at the National Gallery of Zimbabwe in Bulawayo. The Gallery is situated in the city centre, in a turn-of-the-century colonial building with a wide veranda-style porch and indoors with beautifully sanded floors and doors, lots of light and an open courtyard. It contains several exhibition spaces, the main and biggest one on the ground floor where its huge windows allow passers-by a glimpse at current exhibitions and which draws much attention in this way. This is especially the case with Thatha Camera. While the main space shows a conventional placing of one row of photographs along the walls, the windows facing the street also contain commentary from magazines and an almost voyeuristic glance at a migrant labourer’s sorrowful dwellings.

Yvonne Vera, the renowned writer and director of the gallery, conceived the exhibition as a social history. Through Bulawayo township photography, largely of the 1960s and 1970s, Thatha Camera gives an amazing insight into what Vera in the introduction calls ‘desire’ as ‘the tone of self-expression’ at the time. According to her, fantasy and reality merge into one, once they are captured in a visual image that is ‘pocket-size, portable, reproducible’. Conspicuous, however, are the silences, such as an amazing absence of anything nationalist or even related to the Second Chimurenga, the Zimbabwean liberation war which was fought at the time. And it is the one photograph of soldiers from the war which makes this absence even more striking, as the reality for every African man was to be drafted into the Rhodesian army or the decision to join the guerrillas. However, what the photographs project are choices of style and body language rather than those of politics. Unfortunately, Vera does not give any details on the selection of the photographs or an analysis outside her ‘desire’ idiom.

Within the limits set by Vera, the argument is presented with elegance. Her eloquent explanation of the assertion of African individuality in these photographs makes an important contribution to our understanding of urban African identities which for Zimbabwe is still largely lacking in the historiography, especially for that period. However, three points of criticism towards the conceptualisation of the exhibition and its catalogue can be raised.

First, while it is useful to see the photographs as an expression of ‘desire’, township life of the 1960s and 1970s tends to be romanticised. This is
apparent, for example, in the introduction in which Vera juxtaposes the kinship-based identity of earlier times and the individualised expression of personhood in the photographs. She does so in an undifferentiating voice as ‘we Africans’. Moreover, a critical questioning of the sense of style and bodily representation and practices is somewhat missing. While Vera’s argument that these photographs document ‘desire’ is important, she neglects to draw attention to the fact that bleached skin, permed, straightened or afro-look hair, wigs, mini-skirts, plateau shoes, and tight clothes not only express an aspiration for affluence, style, and beauty, but also, especially for women, a harsh body regime. This becomes particularly obvious when, due to the rising popularity of the radio during the liberation war and in reference to a beauty ideal of extreme slimness, women became referred to as ‘portables’. While Vera makes the important observation that these photographs are not content to show but the full body (other than in Indian studio photography in Africa at the time, for example), the costs of these practices are not apparent in the photographs which show beautified and beautifying images.

Secondly, the photographs’ expression of ‘desire’ lacks historical placing. There is no periodisation. Nationalism and the liberation war remain outside the camera’s view. Editorially it is regrettable that in the otherwise well-designed volume, the source, title, and date of the photographs are relegated to an index at the end which does not do justice to the community approach of the entire undertaking.

Thirdly, no information is given on the practice of photography: Who are the photographers? What does it mean that some are taken in a studio, others elsewhere? Who kept the photographs and how – were they displayed in homes, arranged in albums? After all, the strength of this exhibition lies in the self-representation of township people, as those depicted in the photographs were mostly the ones who gave them to the gallery.

A final remark on minor inconsistencies. The title Thatha Camera is nowhere explained. Under the heading ‘vegetation’ as background, there is a photograph of school girls at Rhodes’ grave in the Matopos which shows only rocks. Vera makes an interesting argument that nurses and railway workers epitomised the new women and new men of Bulawayo, but illustrates this in one photograph which shows a white train driver in the background. While the great majority of photographs were taken in the 1960s and 1970s, some are older. In particular there is one in the first chapter ‘Matabele New Woman’ (while the caption on the photograph reads ‘Matabele New Women’) of a bare-breasted woman in pre-European dress, sitting on a bicycle that is striking, not least for its pin-up style. But it is difficult to understand why the one image from 1890 was included in the volume. Surely, this is not the very first photograph ever taken in Bulawayo. Moreover, Vera interprets the picture as ‘clearly’ confirming that the young woman cannot cycle. Here it seems that the author’s imagination runs away with her; as she is reading her meaning into the picture and thus succumbs to the temptation to use it as an objectifying means of her own fantasies. The very appeal of photographs as sources lies in their apparent objectivity and capacity to be interpreted from within, while they are problematic if not critically contextualised and thoroughly investigated for their possible meaning.
Vera juxtapositions what by the photographer or the photographed was often seen as a dichotomy between tradition and modernity, with for example a young couple and their small child in urban attire photographed in a studio in front of a painted image of huts, apparently aiming at emphasising their progress as a ‘modern’ nuclear family. The volume would have profited from breaking this narrative and showing the ‘costs’ of modernization, such as beauty ideals and the reality of an extremely racist society as the backdrop against which the ‘desires’ of township dwellers need to be seen. It would have been helpful, for example, to have side by side with the quotation from the Parade magazine, evaluating the merits of young women’s legs when clad in mini-skirts (which is part of the exhibition but not of the catalogue), some account of the scarring due to the use of skin bleach or the effects of eating-disorder on young women. While there is a danger in overstating the argument that African colonial life was that of struggle and deprivation, giving in to the temptation of idealising township dreams denies important parts of African life worlds.

The exhibition at the Bulawayo Gallery has been a great success, especially as a community project. At the opening, township music from the 1960s was played, with the organisers and some visitors sporting mini-skirts and bell-bottoms and the generous providers of the photographs admiring representations of themselves in a formal museum space. The slim volume Thatha Camera allows the reader an intimate glance into the photograph albums of township residents. Together with the introduction, the images make an important contribution to both an understanding of African photography as well as African ‘desires’ in Rhodesia of the 1960s and 1970s.