

Preface

This book has its origins in an earlier research project on photography in South Africa. In 2010, twenty years after his death, the file held by the South African security services on photographer Ernest Cole became available under Freedom of Information legislation. The records it contained shed light on how the South African state viewed the young Black photographer and what they knew of his movements during the period immediately before his departure into exile in 1966. More important here, however, is what it revealed of his relationship to the public diplomacy arm of the US government during those last few weeks in the country. In seeking to ensure the protection of his negatives, and their safe passage abroad, Cole turned to the United States Information Service (USIS), making use of the support and encouragement they offered to young Black photographers and journalists. The security records recount that on April 25, 1966, just two weeks before he left South Africa, Cole went into the USIS offices in central Johannesburg to retrieve a collection of photographic negatives. In exile, Cole composed a letter to friend and fellow photographer Struan Robertson instructing him to contact someone named Rockweiler at the USIS office to arrange for his remaining negatives to be transported to London. Robert A. Rockweiler was director of the USIS office in Johannesburg in the mid-1960s.¹

Cole is one of the most important Black photographers to emerge from South Africa during the apartheid period, and this incident adds to the intrigue surrounding his departure. But in seeking to understand its significance, I began to wonder more and more about what the public diplomacy arm of the US government was doing supporting a young and largely unknown Black photographer. It turns out that Cole's relationship with the USIS was hardly unusual. Since the late 1950s, USIS had begun to cultivate relationships with the non-White press in South Africa, even organizing "teas" on their premises in Johannesburg to "develop closer relationships" with Black editors and to provide their staff with "an opportunity to mingle with friendly, white Americans in a pleasant setting."² Broader questions began to take shape about the political context that fostered this engagement. What was the role of the United

States Information Agency (USIA) in South Africa, and indeed elsewhere on the continent, during this period? And how did photography feature in its activities? Before coming across this note in Cole's security file, I had little knowledge of USIA operations in Africa. Like many other photographic historians, no doubt, I was aware of USIA sponsorship for the global tour of Edward Steichen's exhibition *The Family of Man*. I had earlier argued that a number of South African photographers, including Cole, had been influenced by its presentation in Johannesburg in ways that challenged orthodox readings. Yet I soon discovered that USIA was engaged in the production of a vast amount of photographic material for dissemination overseas, material that is largely absent from the photo-historical literature. From the late 1950s, this program began to take a particular shape as it engaged with African decolonization abroad and racial conflict at home. It is almost as if, having defined Steichen's exhibition as the high point of a particular politically compromised form of photographic humanism or universalism, a chapter of photographic history was closed. If it is true from an art historical perspective that the late 1950s and early 1960s were a pivotal point for photography, the empirical weight of the USIA material and its internationalized production and dissemination suggested that there was something else to be accounted for here. This book is an attempt to grapple with the substantial collection of photographs and documents that comprise the USIA archive, and to delineate USIA's engagement with Africa, as both an idea and a continent of independent postcolonial nations coming into being.