In this paper, I contrast the circulatory qualities of big news atrocity photography with the restricted movement of more mundane, little photographs of blacks in South Africa in the 1960-70s. The technology of instant photography, Polaroid especially, was employed by the apartheid regime to create and control populations. The purpose of the passbook photograph was to bind its subject tightly to the reference book—to firmly and formally fix an identity. The passbook photo locks the person into an inflexible relationship with his picture, as a single unit that forms a legal identity; the one is incomplete without the other. In this paper, I examine the intersection of three important scenes of passbook photography that associate the technology with a particular kind of civil death: Athol Fugard, John Kane, and Winston Ntshona’s play Sizwe Bansi is Dead (1972); black South African photographer Ernest Cole’s illegal documentary exposé of life under apartheid, The House of Bondage (1968); and the Polaroid Revolutionary Workers Movement in Boston, whose activism precipitated the first divestment of a multi-national corporation from South Africa.

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