

BOOK REVIEWS

Writing with Light

Ambivalent: Photography and Visibility in African History

Edited by Patricia Hayes and Gary Minkley. Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2019. Pp. 376. \$36.95, paperback (ISBN: 978-0-8214-2394-3); \$90.00, hardcover (ISBN: 978-0-8214-2393-6).

Giulia Paoletti 

University of Virginia

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Writing almost a decade ago, Christopher Pinney lamented that histories of photography at ‘the margin’ continued to remain footnotes to a Eurocentric master narrative and asked, ‘How do we account for the divided and apparently contradictory nature of photographic practices if it is indeed a photography (singular)?’¹ In centering archives, images, histories, and writers from and in the African continent, *Ambivalent: Photography and Visibility in African History* moves beyond this apparently insolvable impasse, as its contributors account for and embrace — rather than resolve or reduce — photography’s plurality, incommensurability, and ‘endless plasticity’ (2, 17).

This groundbreaking edited volume gathers 11 scholars from across the continent to explore, expand, and explode many of the assumptions that have limited and even thwarted understandings of photography’s histories and possibilities. Edited by Patricia Hayes and Gary Minkley, *Ambivalent* presents original research, nearly all stemming from recent postgraduate thesis work on photographs produced and consumed in South, Central, and West Africa before, during, and after colonialism. The volume is neither linear nor monotonal, but polyphonic as it collects the diverse voices and pitches of anthropologists, historians, artists, curators, and art historians whose arguments, often contradictory rather than complementary, constitute the volume’s central and most radical contribution.

Ambivalence, as defined in volume’s introduction, serves as the book’s *fil rouge*. Adapted from articulations by psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud and photographer Santu Mofokeng, it indicates the condition of two opposites’ simultaneous and irreconcilable coexistence — conscious and unconscious, transparency and opacity, light and non-light, resistance and repression. But though the book recognizes the ambivalence photographs can figure forth, it does not stop there. It strives to ‘hold open the potential tensions’ — an active gesture that allows space for opposites to be seen and new interpretations to emerge (4). If scholars have for decades explored photography’s ‘chameleonic character’ and ‘capacity to become unfixed’, recently, as the medium’s instability seems to have been exacerbated by the field’s expansion across media, geographies, and disciplines, many may have gotten the impression that photography ‘can be anything to anybody’ or that, as ‘it seems to offer everything’, it might be ‘nothing again’ (1–2).

Against such posturing, which threatens to dangerously flatten power differentials as well as the medium’s potential to say anything at all or confront injustices past and present, the editors posit ‘an ambivalent framing’, not as a catch-all concept, but as a critical — aporetic — method whose

¹C. Pinney, ‘Seven theses on photography’, *Thesis Eleven*, 113:1 (2012), 2, 14.

transformative theoretical possibilities only begin to reverberate in the book's pages (5). In what has often been a polarized and polarizing discursive space, through these authors' interventions photography — and by extension, the continent itself — is finally not reduced to one thing, but can be 'full *and* empty', true *and* false, disclose the visible *and* the unseen (24, my emphasis).

Focusing on distinct case studies, the 11 chapters introduce a wealth of new material through the framework of ambivalence, which allows them to challenge 'the assumed legitimacies of genre and genealogy' (11). As the authors tackle key photographic practices and categories, their approaches demand 'that we look harder', and engage in 'a new kind of conversation' (9, 17). Each pushes for a rereading of images whose seeming familiarity and legibility have limited our ability to interpret them (17). Ingrid Masondo and Gary Minkley respectively explore ID and pass photos in South Africa to challenge the 'dichotomy between repressive and honorific photography' and by extension the opposition between the scopic regimes of the state and liberal humanism (17). Patricia Hayes and Vilho Shigwedha engage with ethnographic and iconic images of Namibian subjects, forcefully subverting canonical interpretations of such genres as realist or evidentiary to reveal their 'categorical emptiness' and 'nothingness' (56, 171). While Napandulwe Shiweda accounts for unexpected reappropriations and remediations of colonial photographs which today connect and elicit memories, Phindi Mnyaka complicates framings that distinctly oppose the gazes of settlers and 'natives' by looking at two photographers active in East London in the 1950s. Building on the volume's aspiration to expand definitions of photography, Okechukwu Nwafor, George Emeka Agbo, and Jung Ran Forte consider the medium's interactions and interferences with fashion, the digital, and the sacred. From Drew Thompson's exploration of images that show 'the simultaneity of decolonization and colonization within an empire' to Isabelle De Rezende's investigation of photography's citational power and oral articulations, each article offers surprising new avenues by which to approach the medium (13–14). Read as a whole, the volume seems to demand that we move vigilantly beyond a passive acceptance of outdated assumptions about the medium and its histories in Africa and account for both the 'excesses' and 'emptiness' of these images. In a similar manner, the African-ness of the volume's authors is not just a claim to authenticity in the struggle between insiders and outsiders. Rather, it is framed by the editors as an opportunity to consider one's 'distance and proximity' to the objects marking 'a shift in the historiographical order of things' (12).

In giving precedence to Africa's own history of light, *Ambivalent* not only accounts for the continent's specific histories of photography, which predate and exceed 'any European intentionality' (3). *Ambivalent* rethinks and expands what photography is and does in its irreconcilable extremes. In a continent that continues to be the receptacle for outside projections — whether they are of darkness or futurability — these writers exhort us to look closer at these images as they 'overturn unified, linear, and chronological ways of thinking' (11). These writers and viewers have an invaluable ability to rest in that opacity and instability, in that impossible act of balance, without compromising their determination to address and redress histories of violence documented and perpetrated through the camera (15). One can only rejoice at the plurality of imaginaries this volume makes available for future research, which the so-called peripheries, rather than the hegemonic center, alone seem able to envision.

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