

ENTWINED PRACTICES: ENGAGEMENTS WITH PHOTOGRAPHY IN HISTORICAL INQUIRY

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ABSTRACT

The status of photographs as keystones of historical explanation has become a topic of urgent intellectual and cultural interest around the world, at the same time as methods of shaping historical narratives are also changing in ways that compel attention to the employment of photographs in historiography. By exposing the questions we ought to raise about all historical evidence, photographs reveal not simply the potential and limits of *photography* as a historical source, but the potential and limits of *all* historical sources and historical inquiry as an intellectual project. As the papers in this issue make apparent, this is precisely the promise and ultimate potential of the historical study of photographs—that it pushes their interpreters to the limits of historical analysis. This essay, which serves as an introduction to the Theme Issue, contextualizes issues raised by the articles and offers a critical synthesis of their impact on future scholarship about photography in historical analysis.

Keywords: photography, historical interpretation, documentary, evidence, historical method, practice

But photographs cannot tell stories. They can only provide evidence of stories, and evidence is mute; it demands investigation and interpretation. Looked at in this way, as evidence of something beyond itself, a photograph can best be understood not as an answer or an end to inquiry, but as an invitation to look more closely, and to ask questions.
—Phillip Gourevitch¹

The articles in this Theme Issue bring a variety of different perspectives to bear on the convergences among photography, theory, and contemporary historiography. From different vantage points, they share an interest in how photographs become evidence through their use as material sources in the writing of history and in the interpretation of society and culture. Such issues are timely, and not merely for

1. Philip Gourevitch and Errol Morris, *The Ballad of Abu Ghraib* (New York: Penguin Books, 2009), 148 I would like to thank Brian Fay and Julie Perkins for their editorial insights and practical advice, as well as Tina Campt, who joined the workshop in progress and whose insightful perspectives on the issues raised by the papers enriched the process. Several people made the “Eye of History: The Camera as Witness” series a success, including especially Nina Felshin, Curator of the Ezra and Cecile Zilkha Gallery; Clare Rogan, Curator of the Davison Art Center; and Suzy Taraba, Head of Special Collections and Archives at Wesleyan. The “Eye of History” series was underwritten through the generous support of *History and Theory* and the Allbritton Center for the Study of Public Life at Wesleyan University. I extend my sincere thanks to all of the workshop participants, including Wendy Ewald, Vicki Goldberg, Eric Gottesman, Anthony Lee, Susan Meiselas, Lynda Nead, David Levi Strauss, Andrew Szegedy-Maszak, and Laura Wexler, for their excellent and generous contributions.

historians and philosophers of history. The status of photographs as keystones of historical explanation, and the paths through which photographs acquire historical meaning and value, have become topics of urgent intellectual and cultural interest around the world. The capacities and constraints of photographs as the rudiments of historical narrative have stirred impassioned commentary in politics, journalism, and art in recent years as private and public photographic archives are becoming available to a much larger audience through documentary media and institutional environments such as schools, museums, and public collections. Who owns or controls access to historical images—and, consequently, to some of the chief ingredients of history—has become an urgent, weighty issue made all the more so by the commercialization and privatization of digital archives. Finally, debates about the ethical responsibilities of the photographic historian in a global image economy are calling attention both to the role of photographic images and to the power relations that sustain and make possible photographic meanings.² Even as historians and others begin to incorporate photographs into historical narratives, artists and documentary photographers too are cross-examining the uses of photography in history. Sometimes they are critical of working practices and ideologies of documentary photography, often motivated as they often are by a consciousness of what the future will inherit from the past and by a sense of urgency for recording, and interpreting, what is happening.³

Methods of shaping historical narratives are also changing in ways that compel our notice of the employment of photographs in historiography. As W. J. T. Mitchell has argued, a deep mistrust and even fear of visual representation underlies a tradition in Western philosophical thought that has come down to us from the Platonic distinction between *eidolon*—that which provide a mere likeness (*eilon*) or semblance (*phantasma*)—and *eidos*, or idea, as that in which the true essence of the (only apparently) material universe is crystallized. Mitchell suggested nearly two decades ago that there has been what he calls a “pictorial turn” in contemporary culture and theory in which images, pictures, and the realm of the visual more generally have been recognized as being as important and worthy of intense scrutiny as the realm of language. The suggestion of a “pictorial turn” calls attention to the importance of pictures and to how their history is to be understood. It challenges us to be observant and informed critics of visual history.

2. Ariella Azoulay provides a compelling rethinking of the political and ethical status of photography in her recent book, *The Civil Contract of Photography* (New York: Zone Books, 2008). On the historical significance of iconic photographs, see Vicki Goldberg’s classic monograph, *The Power of Photography: How Photographs Changed Our Lives* (New York and London: Abbeville Publishing Group, 1991); and Robert Hariman and John Louis Lucaites, *No Caption Needed: Iconic Photographs, Public Culture, and Liberal Democracy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007). Implications of the “digital revolution” for photography are foregrounded in Fred Ritchin’s book, *After Photography* (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 2009). For an excellent short introduction to contemporary issues in photography study, see Steve Edwards, *Photography: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

3. For an introduction to questions of ethics raised by documentary practices that have been central to debates in photography, see especially David Levi Strauss, *Between the Eyes: Essays on Photography* (New York: Aperture, 2005); Susan Meiselas, *In History*, ed. Kirsten Lubben (New York: International Center of Photography, 2008); and Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Picador, 2003).

Although art history continues to be the primary mode for the use and evaluation of the photographic medium for history, there has been a steady growth in the employment of photography across a range of diverse historical studies since the 1970s. In his influential essay, "The Eye of History," British social historian Raphael Samuel made the case for the potential value of photography, especially vernacular photographs, for historians who want to study a new kind of past.⁴ Today, historians across a range of different subject fields are working intently with photographs; indeed, one of the most productive developments with respect to the "visual turn" is the dramatic proliferation of photography in multiple sites of historical investigation. Photography has become the site of analysis and debate for fields as diverse as memory and "post-memory" studies, trauma studies, Holocaust studies, science and technology studies, and African diaspora studies, for example, all of which use photographs to enact a reckoning with history that takes the measure of the residual effects of the past in the present, as well as in the future.⁵ Here the photograph serves not only as a historical document or source, but also as a reflexive medium that exposes the stakes of historical study by revealing the constructed nature of what constitutes historical evidence. The question of memory becomes particularly salient here, for the historical status of photography is deeply imbricated in its social, psychic, and material life as an object of memory.⁶ It is equally important in this context to consider the research of historians of subaltern studies whose work has emphasized how subaltern as well as dominant groups have used photographic practices to reconstruct racial and national histories, fashioning more than merely individual selves.⁷ Recent findings about the history of visual objectivity, meanwhile, affirm that making sense of objectivity and subjectivity as historical values requires a deep understanding of

4. Raphael Samuel, *Theatres of Memory* (London: Verso, 1994), II, Part V, "Old Photographs," 315-380. Allan Trachtenberg's influential writings on American photographs as a way of interpreting the past are manifest in *Reading American Photographs: Images as History, Mathew Brady to Walker Evans* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1990).

5. Ulrich Baer, *Spectral Evidence: The Photography of Trauma* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2002). Baer applies psychoanalytic theory to photographic criticism and suggests comparisons between the notion of the photograph's "arrested moment" and how the human psyche processes trauma.

6. Photography is a prime example of what Régis Debray would call a "technology of memory." Geoffrey Batchen, Marianne Hirsch, Annette Kuhn, and Laura Wexler have written compellingly about the "memory function" of photography. See, for example, Geoffrey Batchen, *Forget Me Not: Photography and Remembrance* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2004); Marianne Hirsch, "Projected Memory: Holocaust Photographs in Personal and Public Fantasy," in *Acts of Memory: Cultural Recall in the Present*, ed. Mieke Bal, Jonathan Crewe, and Leo Spitzer (Hanover, NH, and London: University Press of New England, 1999), 3-23; and Laura Wexler, *Tender Violence: Domestic Visions in an Age of U.S. Imperialism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000). "As historical artifacts residing in the present," Batchen writes, "photographs have therefore come to represent not their subjects, but rather the specter of an impossible desire: the desire to remember, and to be remembered." The "photographs remind us that memorialization has little to do with recalling the past; it is always about looking ahead toward that terrible, imagined, vacant future in which we ourselves will have been forgotten," *Forget Me Not*, 98. Annette Kuhn writes about photography, film, and memory in *Family Secrets: Acts of Memory and Imagination* [1995], 2nd ed. (London: Verso, 2002) and *Locating Memory: Photographic Acts* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2006), co-edited with Kirsten Emiko McAllister.

7. *Photography's Other Histories*, ed. Christopher Pinney and Nicolas Peterson (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), Introduction by Pinney, "How the Other Half..." 1-14.

both the essential place of visual representations in scientific practice, and also of how particular ideals surrounding visual representation in science and medicine emerged and developed within a longer, complex series of changing epistemic values and concepts of truth. All this has made postulations about the unmediated character of photography clearly inadequate, as if the goal that photography was once thought to achieve—objectivity—itself escaped historical production.⁸

In other words, the “visual turn” that we witness in the widespread interdisciplinary engagement with historical photography has been produced not as the result of a sudden or spontaneous preoccupation with visual culture but rather as the result of the insistent needs of historians to excavate new subjects and answer questions that exceed a limited or straightforward engagement with photographs as either documents or historical evidence, and which go beyond the conventional frames/boundaries of formal art-historical analysis. Such inquiries have necessitated coming to terms with photography as an aesthetic, material, cultural, and psychic object of social attachment, yet always within the context of a broader set of historical questions that have required historians to turn to photographs and to bring forth meaning from them in the process. These engagements have produced generative dialogues that reveal both the tensions within and among different methodological approaches to the analysis of photography, as well as the rich potential of photography as a medium that, in equally dramatic ways, lays bare the very processes through which we constitute historical truth and construct the historical record.

Given this, the question as to why historians are often flat-footed when it comes to interpreting photographs offers particularly intriguing insights into the nature of historical study itself. Some of the authors in this issue suggest answers to this question that are both ideological and practical. Practically, historians’ lack of training and their lack of a method for analyzing images is recurrently cited; another deficiency often noted is historians’ lack of proficiency with photography theory.⁹ Ideologically, it is hard to deny that there remains, for many historians, a persisting tentativeness and even distrust about the use of visual materials as historical sources that differ from historians’ scrupulous, rigorous assessments of other types of historical documents, such as letters, newspapers, or legal papers. As historian Peter Burke writes: “Relatively few historians work in photographic archives. . . . When they do use images, historians tend to treat them as mere illustrations, reproducing them in their books without comment. In cases in which the images are discussed in the text, this evidence is often used to illustrate conclusions that the author has already reached by other means, rather than to give new answers or to ask new questions.”¹⁰

8. Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison, *Objectivity* (New York: Zone Books, 2007). See also Jennifer Tucker, *Nature Exposed: Photography as Eyewitness in Victorian Science* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005).

9. For insight into aspects of the current critical debates about the photograph’s complicated status as a theoretical object, especially among art and literary historians, see *Photography Theory*, ed. James Elkins (New York: Routledge, 2007).

10. Peter Burke, *Eyewitnessing: The Uses of Images as Historical Evidence* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001). 10. Burke explores how iconographic and post-iconographic methods are both useful and problematic to contemporary historians.

Yet what is often overlooked in this discussion is that the debate is not simply about whether/how historians interpret photographs. Rather, the distinctions among historians' uses of photographs often relate to differences in their conception of what constitutes *history*, including the nature of proper objects for historical study. Historical writings that engage photographic sources exhibit a broad range of problems and critical practices. They encompass varieties of evidence and problems of interpretation, as well as different methods, objects, and models of historical explanation and reasoning. Coming to terms with the different concepts and practices of historical narrative that shape writings on photography is essential, therefore, if histories of photography are to be more meaningfully integrated into historical scholarship in the future.

Rather than positing a lack of "experience" or "method" of using photographs, perhaps the more salient point is to consider the photograph in relation to the complexities of the historical use of any document. What should be clear in this context is that photographs are neither more nor less transparent than other documentary sources. Many of the same questions must be asked of photographs as of any other type of historical source: Who took the photograph? To whom is the photograph addressed? To whom was it given? How was it circulated, and with what effects? Photographs are simultaneously a seemingly privileged historical source and, at the same time, objects that invite our suspicion as sources of evidential claims—a suspicion that is aroused by highlighting the questions historians ought to ask of them. By exposing the questions we ought to raise about all historical evidence, in other words, photographs reveal not simply the potential and limits of *photography* as a historical source, but the potential and limits of *all* historical sources and historical inquiry as an intellectual project. Yet this is precisely the promise and ultimate potential of the historical study of photographs—that it pushes their interpreters to the limits of historical analysis.

The papers included in this Theme Issue partake in and invigorate wider interdisciplinary conversations about photography and historical interpretation. Given that negotiations around photography and historical interpretation today are happening both in and beyond the domains of art history and history, this Theme Issue links writings by scholars whose work enriches critical approaches to the understanding of the evolving relationships between photography and historical interpretation from different perspectives, including visual anthropology, history, art history, cultural studies, literature, and museum and curatorial studies. Different modes of apprehending photography and history are presented as the authors ask us to think about some of the multiple methodologies and approaches for thinking about photographs in relationship to the historian's craft.

The issue had its genesis in a workshop hosted in the fall of 2009 by *History and Theory*. This workshop was itself part of the "Eye of History: The Camera as Witness," a series of events that included exhibitions, artists' panels, and film screenings, and brought a number of distinguished scholars, curators, critics, and photographers to Wesleyan University to explore how photographs are used to shape the meaning and interpretation of history.¹¹ The workshop and the series more generally sought to address a number of provocative questions, among oth-

11. For the full listing of events, such as exhibitions and lectures, visit <http://eyeofhistory.wesleyan.edu>.

ers: In what ways, if any, can photographs tell us about the past? Do photographs differ in character from other kinds of historical sources? What conventions guide historical observation in photography, and how do they compare to those governing written sources? What role does the intention of photographers play? How have photographs functioned, and how should they function, as historical evidence? Why, and in what ways, do some pictures, and not others, acquire iconic power and come to represent in condensed fashion a historical moment? In what sense is photography *history*?

The articles emerging from these discussions are presented here in the format of three dialogues and several essays. The authors interpretively engage with a wide range of photographs and photographic genres—street photos, world press photos, photographic icons, artworks, propaganda, family photos, and photographic portraiture. They provide new critical perspectives on such well-known texts as Roland Barthes's *Camera Lucida* and John Tagg's *The Burden of Representation* while providing new and expanded avenues of inquiry that go beyond familiar perspectives.¹² They not only point to some paths that open up when thinking theoretically through photographic materials in historical practice. They also suggest various practical ways of making evidentiary sense of the thousands of extant photographs in photographic archives: neither ignoring them, nor merely using them as historical examples to support already reached conclusions about either photography theory or some historical event.

Marianne Hirsch and Leo Spitzer lead off the issue by engaging the complex ways in which institutional environments (museums, private and public collections, and so on) militate for or against, or otherwise impact, how historians will access (and ultimately use) photographs, tracing the ways in which photographs circulate through multiple contexts of use, display, and meaning. Geoffrey Batchen, in his response, contextualizes the practice of street photographs, compelling our attention both to the potential of vernacular photographs as historical evidence and to the complexities of interpreting them. Patricia Hayes and David Campbell, in their dialogue, bring out a different aspect to the links between photography and history, drawing on the case of contested representational practices in South Africa under the regime of apartheid as an occasion for turning over the question of the reciprocal relations and effects of dominant genres of photography and history. How do photographs and historians deal with what Hayes calls "alternative expository truths" in the process of coming to terms with both the paradigms of history and photography? What wider factors are at work in the global image economy that either operate, in some cases, to consolidate pictorial hegemonies, or on the other hand, to foreclose the possibility of other, alternate visualizations?

Robin Kelsey and John Tagg give prominence in their dialogue to a disagreement over the import of different views of photographic authorship, intentionality, and chance for the historical significance of a photographic image. How do questions about will or chance, including the artist's purposive intentionality, cut

12. Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, transl. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981); John Tagg, *The Burden of Representation: Essays on Photographies and Histories* [1988] (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993).

into and across the photograph's status as a historical record? Kelsey and Tagg invigorate a wider debate among scholars who work with photographs over the status of formal analysis in the process of historical signification of the photographic image; but they go beyond this debate as well, asking through what apparatuses photographs signify, and what are the potential stakes in the question (for photography? for historical analysis)? What becomes clear in this context is how questions about photography are, at their base, also questions about what constitutes an adequate historical reckoning with the photographic image: Which contexts are taken as salient and which are not, and what are the consequences for the study of photography, and for the writing of historical narratives of the choices historians make?

The individual articles that follow the dialogues relate conceptions of history and historiography to the study of photography in other ways. The questions Michael Roth poses are fundamental: "How is the notion of the photograph as a 'certificate of presence' related to [an] attempt to get beyond the mediations of language?" What does the turn to photography signal about the complexities of historical desire? Stephen Bann offers new critical perspectives on the nineteenth-century French photographer Nadar, who by his own lithographic and photographic practices, Bann argues, probed the very concepts and conditions of historical experience brought about, in part, by changes in the technologies of visual representation. Bann and other contributors to this issue make it apparent that there are many different kinds of duration that ought to be considered, from the role of the archive in constructing the linkages among past, present, and future, to the relationship between photographic image and viewer in history to the photographer's (and critic's) own particular mode of (haptic, optic) apprehension.

Leigh Raiford takes the investigation into still different domains, exploring how photos are used to challenge the oral/written witnessing accounts of historians and documents. The rendering of history itself is, she reminds us, no less than photography, a site of struggle over the interpretation of the past playing out in multiple public and private domains. Arguing that the photographic image must be seen both as a document and as a social practice, she considers the ways in which African Americans during the twentieth century used photography to interpret and critique dominant written histories that often rendered them invisible, and how archives of lynching photographs have played a controversial role in the interpretation of the history of racial violence and black citizenship in the United States. Elizabeth Edwards asks us to pay attention to the material practices of photography that themselves reveal much about how the makers of the photographs themselves saw the historical potential of their images. Edwards proposes that new methodologies are required for dealing with what she terms the "dispersed fields" of photographic collections: archives that, like recent history itself, yield more than what conventional canons might predict or even imagine. Drawing on her research about post-World War II photojournalism in Japan, Julia Thomas emphasizes some of the challenges raised by the demand for historical specificity in thinking about how people viewed photographs evidentially in the past. Her article concludes the issue with an account of the "contradictory means of knowing photographs" that invest historians' interpretive practices.

In their remarks at the workshop, three leading contemporary photographers offered their own reflections on their process of engaging photographs in historical inquiry that are pertinent to our explorations here. Award-winning documentary photographer Susan Meiselas described her photographic process as one of thinking about how photography brings together “traces” of the past. She compared the historian to a “needle” engaged in a process of sewing remnants of the past together rather than aiming necessarily toward a definitive “master” narrative of the whole.¹³ Photographer Wendy Ewald, pointing to the lack of depth in much documentary photography, proposes to make it more meaningful by getting subjects to work with photographers, reflecting her conviction that documentary photography is an inherently collaborative form of social and critical expression.¹⁴ Photographer Eric Gottesman noted how images work their way into cultural insights and become ways of developing cultural understanding, even empathy. These artists are asking pointed questions about the relationships between representation and history, consciously producing images that reflexively produce histories through the creation of alternative images—an activity that, Gottesman noted, also entails taking risks. In this sense, photographers, like historians, are engaged in “entwined practices,” a domain in which photography and history both are revealed above all as collective accomplishments, sustained through interactions (collaborative and resistant) among the people involved in them.¹⁵

Taking the comments of these artists as a generative point of departure, we can extend Susan Meiselas’s metaphor of sewing in ways that push it further. If we take seriously her beautiful and eloquent phrasing about the “historian as needle,” what is the *thread*? Questions like those being grappled with in the essays that follow are the photographic threads historians use to weave textured fabrics that become their accounts of history. Because no photograph can be completely woven into the fabric of any historical narrative, these fabrics are never either seamless or complete. They intentionally and productively unravel in ways that allow us to constantly apprehend their individual components, structure, and composition as complex and constructed accounts of the past. And in point of fact, this is what to many of us makes working with photography so challenging, so compelling, and so infinitely interesting: not the resolution of its ironies, dilemmas, or problems, but rather its capacity, through the questions and the problems it raises, to test both our understanding and the limits of historical analysis.

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13. Susan Meiselas’s work covering political upheavals in Central America and around the world has earned her numerous professional awards, including a Pulitzer Prize. She has edited a number of books, including *Learn to See* (Cambridge, MA: Polaroid Foundation, 1970), *Chile from Within* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1991), and *Kurdistan: In the Shadow of History*, 2d ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), and has published the photography books *Pandora’s Box* (Goteborg, Sweden: Trebruk, 2002) and *Carnival Strippers* (London: Steidl, 2003).

14. Wendy Ewald, *American Alphabets* (Zurich: Scalo Press, 2005); and Alexandra Lightfoot and Wendy Ewald, *I Wanna Take Me a Picture: Teaching Photography and Writing to Children* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2002).

15. For a definition in another context, see Attila Bruni, Silvia Gherardi, and Barbara Poggio *Gender and Entrepreneurship: An Ethnographic Approach* (Oxford and New York: Routledge, 2005); and Elizabeth Edwards, “Photography and the Material Performance of the Past,” *History and Theory*, *Theme Issue* 48 (2009), 130-150, this issue.