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Locating Photography

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Abstract: This essay confronts the question of photography's location. Is it singular or multiple? How might it be positioned between a field of infinite cultural variability and technical constraint? Much photographic history has had a decidedly EuroAmerican centre of gravity, but it is increasingly easy (and necessary) to reframe this history in a wider global network. Substantive examples and case studies are considered (including India, Japan and Peru). These empirical details flesh out an otherwise impoverished history but they also raise the question of whether we are dealing with multiple *photographies* determined by cultural and historical localities or, conversely, a *world system photography* of interlinked practices that help clarify the potentiality of photography as a technical practice. The essay argues that locating photography in an expanded global frame should help deliver a general theory of photography rather than multiple local theories of *photographies* as cultural practices.

Text:

The specter of global dissemination haunted photography from its very beginning. Fox Talbot's *The Art of Photogenic Drawing*, originally read as a paper before the Royal Society in January 1839 predicted that "To the traveller in distant lands, who is ignorant, as too many unfortunately are, of the art of drawing, this little invention may prove of real service" (Fox Talbot 1956:70). A decade and half later, Charles Dickens' *Household Words* noted that the far-away moon had "sat for a full-face picture" and that "travellers may bring home incontestable transcripts of inscriptions upon monuments, or foreign scenery" (Dickens [attrib] 1956:89) In a similar manner the first history of cinema, W.K.L. Dickson and Antonia Dickson's 1895 *History of the Kinetograph, Kinetoscope and Kinetophone* exuberantly foresaw the film-camera's documentation of

“riotous Texan cow-boys and Mexicans, Moors, Arabs and Indians, riding, lassoing, shooting, juggling and sparring” and noted the unique cinematic interest of “the Omaha war dance” and the Sioux ghost dance, the messianic movement that swept much of native America (Dickson and Dickson 1895: 37).

Here we see mapped two aspects of photography’s ‘globalization’: (a) its use as a ‘western’ technique to document an increasingly colonized world and (b) its dissemination around the world and its adoption by local practitioners. The first aspect encompasses the general field of travel or expeditionary photography (Hershkowitz 1980, Osborne 2000) together with more specialist practices of use to colonial regimes (Hight & Sampson eds. 2002) and experimental photographic practices which were developing alongside new academic disciplines such as Archaeology (Bohrer 2012), Anthropology (Edwards ed. 1992, Pinney 2011) and Geography (Ryan, 1997). This outward expansion of European and north American photographers involves a large number of figures who would figure centrally in any conventional History of Photography (such as Maxime Du Camp, Roger Fenton, Felice Beato, Francis Frith, Edward Muybridge and so). Du Camp who learned the calotype process from Gustave Le Gray famously accompanied Flaubert to Egypt in 1849-51. Encouraged by the Académie des Inscriptions et Belles Lettres to produce images of use to an emergent archaeology, Du Camp deployed his new technique systematically to “create the optimal conditions for securing good views of the inscriptions and relief sculptures” while also frequently including his Nubian travelling companion as *staffage* (Foster et.al. 2007:59). Fenton travelled to the Crimea in 1855, effectively as the first official war photographer, at the encouragement of Prince Albert with the intention of rousing a war-weary British public. Fenton’s images of the *Valley of the Shadow of Death* have, through Errol Morris’s detailed discussion (2011) played a significant role in continuing debates about the semiotics of photography. Francis Frith, an English Quaker, made three visits to Egypt and the Near East in 1856, 1857 and finally 1859-1860. His images numbering almost 500 – some produced with huge 20 x 16 inch negatives – mobilized a continuing Victorian ‘Egyptomania’. Firth also contributed to the heroic narrative of the photographer abroad (a characteristic detail: “I prepared my pictures by candle light in one of the interior chambers of the temple. ...from the roofs

were suspended groups of fetid bats” [cited by Foster et. al. 2007:63]). The Italian-British photographer Felice Beato (1832-1909) pursued an exemplary global career accompanying James Robertson to Constantinople in 1851, covering the Crimean conflict following Fenton’s departure before travelling to India to photograph in the wake of the Indian Rebellion of 1857-8 (he arrived in India in February 1858) and subsequently voyaging to China where he documented the Second Opium war and then settling in Yokohama in Japan. Beato had arrived in India after the unfolding of the main events of the Rebellion but was present in China to document a new Imperial aggression as it unfolded. Like Fenton he plays a seminal role in any history of photojournalism.

Following his acquittal for the murder of his wife’s lover in 1875 the English-born, but largely US-resident, Eadweard Muybridge travelled to central America, at the behest of the Pacific Mail Steamship Company. They commissioned him to produce images that might encourage investment in local agribusiness and it has been argued that his studies of the successive stages of work in the clearing of forests for coffee production prefigured his later studies of animal and human locomotion (Brookman 2010:72). Upon his return in 1877 he settled Leland Stanford’s question about the “unsupported transit” of horses when galloping and commenced the stop-motion photographic investigations which would establish his place in photographic history. Muybridge stands as an interesting figure in relation to the category of the “global”. He raises the question of why the transit from San Francisco to Guatemala underlines an aspect of the “global” more clearly than his (much longer) journey from Kingston, England (his birthplace) to the United States. Here the space of “Euro-America” is “ex-nominated”, rendered un-marked and un-located. Muybridge’s career can also perhaps serve as an instance of “provincialization” (Chakrabarty 2000) the importation from the “colonial” periphery of a practice which reconfigures the ex-nominated heartland. The careers of Fenton and Beato also demonstrate how any history of photography inevitably engages the question of photography as a global practice, even if it does not explicitly name itself as global.

From Calcutta to Constantinople

Photography's global dissemination, its "flow" as Bate (2009:149) terms it, was rapid in the extreme. Perhaps it is not surprising that François Gourand, Daguerre's agent was promoting the new technique in major cities in the USA in 1840 (Bate 2009:149). It may be more striking to note that in October 1839 there were discussions about "the new *photogenic drawing*" in the Asiatic Society in Calcutta (Pinney 2008:9). Daguerre's process was examined in three long articles in the *Bombay Times* in December of the same year and in January 1840 a Calcutta retailer was advertising Daguerreotype cameras for sale.

The first photograph made on the continent of Africa can be dated to 7th November 1839. Its authors were the French painter Horace Vernet and his student Frédéric Goupil-Fesquet who had been enrolled by the optician (and retailer of camera lenses) Noël-Marie-Paymal Lerebours to demonstrate the extraordinary potential of photography. The photograph depicted the Ottoman viceroy Mohammed Ali's *haramlik*, the building in which his wives and children lived, "with two indistinct male figures standing in its gateway" (Golia 2010:15). Goupil-Fesquet provide a memorable account of Mohammed Ali's reaction, "his beard quivering, puckering his great brows...when the fixed plate was taken from its mysterious bath, the viceroy's impatience was replaced with astonishment and admiration... 'It is the work of the devil!' Mohammed Ali exclaimed, examining the image" (cited by Golia 2010:15). Golia notes how – suitably misinterpreted – the response to this foundational image served to signify a European obsession with "the Muslim injunction against human representation", despite the fact that Mohammed Ali himself would soon pose for the camera (Golia 2010:15).

Cameras reached sub-Saharan Africa just a few months later. In January 1840 a Captain Bouët used a camera provide by the French Government to photograph coastal settlements on the Gold Coast (Haney 2010:24-5) and in 1856 the Scottish missionary Daniel West, travelling in the same area, recorded that "it is impossible to describe the excitement and wonder which the photographic process creates" (cited by Haney 2010:25). The African American émigré Augustus Washington established a photographic studio in Monrovia, the capital of the Liberia in 1853 and would

subsequently extend his operations through Sierra Leone and Senegal: many of the daguerreotypes made by him during this period survive in the archive of the organization which founded Liberia as a haven for freed slaves, the American Colonization Society (Haney 2010:26-7).

Vernet and Goupil-Fesquet's image, the first photograph made in Africa, was also the first one made in the Ottoman Empire to which further early daguerreotype images would be added by Goupil-Fesquet in Constantinople in 1840 (Öztuncay 2000:18). Other European photographers stayed in the city: in July 1842, Compa, a student of Daguerre, was to be found earning a living photographing the patrons of the Taksim Beklvü café. The first professional Ottoman photographer, Vassilaki Kargopolou, a Roum (of Greek origin), opened his studio in 1850 on what was then the Grand Rue de Pera in Constantinople's Beyoğlu (Öztuncay 2000:14).

An assemblage of the kind presented above is easy to compile. It demonstrates the fluidity of photography from its very inception, and the manner in which it immediately exceeded any geographical confinement within EuroAmerica. Within weeks and months of its European announcement, photography became a practice of connections and de-centred networks: it became what I propose to call World System Photography.

Ex-nomination and location

It is the nature of what Roland Barthes termed "ex-nomination" that necessitates that a photography which is sometimes addressed under the category of the global be engaged instead through the question of "location". Ex-nomination is the term Barthes used in *Mythologies* to describe the process through which an ideological fact disappears. The category he was concerned with was the bourgeoisie, "*the social class which does not want to be named*" (Barthes 1978:132). For Barthes the bourgeoisie was the source of an ideology which "can spread over everything and in so doing lose its name without risk" (1972:139). This is a set of observations that are quite easy to transpose to conventional histories of photography. For a start we might begin by noting that most histories of photography should actually be called (for the sake of geographical accuracy) histories of

photography *in Europe and North America*. These are histories of practices which are not required to mark their location as somewhere specific. Histories of practices outside of the ex-nominated core are usually presented as ‘belated’ (Chakrabarty 2000), and will have prefixes such as “Peruvian” or suffixes such as “in India” of the kind which are incompatible with ex-nominated knowledge.

Some of dilemmas which confront us as we approach the “location” of photography might be clarified through a brief consideration of the careers of two photographers, one Japanese and one Ceylonese. The first of these, Yasuzo Nojima was born in 1889 outside of Tokyo, and established himself as a leading Pictorialist,. He sponsored and published the leading photographic journal *Koga* (Light Pictures) which helped introduce *Neue Sachlichkeit* photography in Japan, and died after a long illness in 1964 (Maggia & Dall’Olio eds. 2011). The second photographer, Lionel Wendt, was born in Colombo in 1900, studied music in London, wrote and narrated Basil Wright’s famous pioneer documentary *Song of Ceylon* in 1934 (Wright subsequently described him as “one of the world’s best photographers at the time” [cited by Fonseka 200:26]), exhibited his (both Pictorialist and experimental) photographs in London in 1938 and died in Colombo in 1944.

Nojima and Wendt both exemplify the complexities of thinking about the relationship between location and photography. Both their *oeuvres* articulate a distinctive sense of Japanese and Ceylonese lifeworlds and yet both are configured to the core by a photographic cosmopolitanism. They are cosmopolitans dedicated to a certain essentializing localism, although one could perhaps say that of most photographers. Consider Shinji Kohmoto’s observation that : “Yasuzo Nojima was a ‘modern boy’ in the best sense...Nojima came to demonstrate his talent in the world of *geijutsu shashin* (art photography) in Japan, where *kaiga shugi shashin* (pictorial photography) was then in full swing” (Kohmoto, 2011:21). I’m interested not so much in the specific information which Kohmoto imparts but the effect on the reader of the re-framing of art photography and pictorialism in their Japanese transliteration: how does *geijutsu shashin* differ from “art photography” and what is the Japanese career of pictorialism? Similarly,

with respect to Wendt, how are we to interpret, for instance, Pablo Neruda's description of him as "the central figure of a cultural life torn between the death rattles of the Empire and a human appraisal of the untapped values of Ceylon" (cited by Fonseka2000:17)? Wendt was an enthusiast for British modernism (he owned an image by the Vorticist Edward Wadsworth), persuaded the subsequently renowned avant-garde artist George Keyt to transfer his energies for poetry to painting and would be associated in the Ceylon press as one of the "bad boys of modernism". His subjects ranged from pictorialist inflected studies of Ceylonese rural life, ritual scenes characterized by a "Buddhistic" contemplativeness, extravagant montages inspired by Magritte and de Chirico, and solarized prints of nudes inspired by Man Ray's experimentation in the 1930s.

Perhaps the best parallel to this complexity would be that large arc of central European Foto-Modernity which - in Matthew S. Witkovsky's revelatory and incisive analysis - unites similar unlikely practices and attitudes: "For all its connotations of urban cosmopolitanism and industrial progress, modernity in central Europe included significant overtures to nonindustrial, rural life" (2007:161). Wendt and Nojima seem much less peripherally constituted and certainly liberated from Neruda's Manichean dichotomy once read against the background of Witkovsky's approach, and perhaps even less so when set against Colin Ford's observation that all hegemonic photographic modernism was (strange but true) Hungarian in origin. The anomalous and divided location and practices of Nojima and Wendt turn out to be surprisingly easy to suture with similarly complex modernist European practices determined by an "overwhelmingly important agrarian romanticism". In central Europe, Witkovsky notes "becoming modern meant in part 'recovering' ties to folk wisdom and to the land itself, ties that had been supposedly been severed by the incontestable reversals of history" (2007:161)

Another way of engaging the question of ex-nomination might involve imagining a spectrum with 'photography' at one end and 'culture' at the other. What might be called 'core' photographic history (by which I mean that which describes Euro-American practices) erases 'culture' as a problematic whereas 'peripheral' or 'regional' histories by virtue of their very regionality tend to foreground 'cultural' dimensions of practice. In

part this reflects the continuing neo-colonial conditions of global photographic history in which, as Deborah Poole has noted “...the non-European world and its images have been oddly elided [even] from virtually all the photographic histories that attempt to link photography with the history of disciplinary and ideological systems forged during the height of Europe’s colonial era” (1997:140). The ‘sovereign’ Euro-American Subject of whom Dipesh Chakrabarty wrote (and who, within conventional historiography, has now been largely displaced) remains – within the history of photography – alive and well. The ex-nomination of the centre endures: British and French photography is just ‘photography’ whereas African or Indian photography is always configured by an unshakeable ‘local’ specificity.

Ex-nomination versus Territorialization

This stress on locality is symptomatic of a ‘territorializing’ logic: photography imported into India, or Japan or Peru, presumed in some sense to be French or English, is co-opted by a new set of Indian, Japanese or Peruvian practices. These three locations are sites of fast-growing literatures. Peru for example was the subject of a short but significant monograph on early photographic practice by Keith McElroy (1985). McElroy traces the arrival in Lima of the French daguerreotypist Maximiliano Danti in 1842 whose studio, he notes, opened a month earlier than any similar studio in Berlin (1985:5). Itinerant daguerreotypists in Lima flourished alongside an enthusiasm for panoramas such as El Gran Cosmorana, El Diorama, and El Gran Gabinete Optico (1985:6). Throughout the late 1840s and early ‘50s daguerreotypists in Peru were predominantly from France and the United States and within this small part of Latin America we can see the active promotion of an emergent global system of expectation: French practitioners stressed the culture and refinement they were able to offer whereas US photographers stressed “speed, prices, and technical proficiency” (1985:8). Paper photography was introduced in Lima in 1853 by which time, McElroy suggests, the daguerreotype had become “so much a part of public thinking that it was used in a literary sense” in the same way that drawing and painting had informed metaphorical language in earlier epochs. Spanish terms for “daguerreotype” and “photograph” replaced the earlier use of “sketch” and “portrait” (1985:9, 75).

McElroy presents a portrait of Peru as a space transformed by the presence of photography, a presence which gave rise to various controversies. The popularity of *cartes-de-visite* in the 1860s for instance caused a columnist in *El Comercio* to complain that the demands for a photograph from everyone one met was costing each individual somewhere in the region of twenty US dollars (1985:21). This was a response to the demands of photographs as commodities, a quality uninflected by “Peruvian-ness”. McElroy observes that “Capitalism was the undisputed armature which gave form to the studios and the imagery, and it was the unquestioned creed of every photographer who worked in Peru” (1985:55).

Note here how – even negatively – the question of location has appeared. Even in its absence (practices uninflected by “Peruvian-ness”) the demand for a particular *nomination* makes itself felt. We might explore this pressure in other ways, and in a manner which in its self-reflexivity about my own earlier thinking reveals the extent to which this current text serves as a kind of exorcism of my own earlier “anthropologized” mis-conceptions. McElroy notes the popularity of post-mortem photography, practiced as early as 1844 in Peru. In the mid 1860s porcelaintypes for mortuary use became very popular, so popular indeed that a Lima journalist wrote about the existence of “another Lima”, a Lima “in effigy”: “The wise and the foolish, the rich and the poor, the great and small, the living and the dead, the thin and the fat, the beautiful and the ugly...! Oh, the showcases of the workshop...are the Valley of Jehoshaphat” (cited by McElroy 1985:82).

Since I first read that, over twenty years ago, the account has stuck in my mind as a kind of exotic crystallization of “photography in Peru”, where the proliferation of photography produced a shadow society, a society in effigy. With hindsight I see that it performs (or more accurately, I made it perform) a nominating “anthropological” function of particularisation. It seemed to exemplify a localization of practice of the kind that anthropologists (the social-cultural variety) were traditionally trained to locate. It was this sensibility that underpinned many of the assumptions in *Camera Indica* my first book – an ethnography of popular photography in central India -whose title genuflected to Barthes, but also invoked the hierarchy of Camera as species and Indica as genus. It was the same sensibility which informed the introduction to a coedited collection (Pinney and

Peterson 2003) in which I proclaimed that the volume “refutes...technological histories by revealing long traditions of photographic manipulation and concluding that it is cultural practice that is the true motor of photography” (Pinney, 2003:14)

McElroy himself does not make an exceptionalist Peruvian claim for this post-mortem material, choosing instead (wisely) to fold it into a general observation about what he terms photography’s “third state” between life and death something akin, perhaps to Ernst Jünger’s “second consciousness” or even a Benjaminian “optical unconscious”. Subsequent publications (such as Ruby 1995) have documented the centrality of post-mortem photography to mid-nineteenth century US photography. Pinney (1997) and Strassler (2010) suggest that such practices are likely to be found wherever people die before they have been sufficiently photographically “archived” during their life. From this one might conclude that post-mortem practices reflect societies’ differential encounters with photography, rather than “cultural” beliefs about death or ancestor worship.

Deborah Poole’s hugely significant *Vision, Race and Modernity* (1997) advanced the understanding of photography both as a ‘technical practice’ and as a practice harnessed to local agendas. Both of these are held in creative tension. On the one hand a Benjaminian argument about photography’s “aesthetics of the same” is advanced, through which the “equivalency or comparability” of the carte-de-visite becomes an agent for the possibility of racial “difference”. The uniformity of representation foregrounds somatic variability in ways that earlier technologies did not. It is in this sense that “Andean *cartes-de-visite*...can help us to rethink both the history of photography and the parallel histories of colonialism and racial ideologies” (1997:140).

Alongside this Poole explores photography’s mobilization as part of Peru’s *indigenismo* or new native movement through Juan Manuel Figueroa Aznar and subsequently Martin Chambi. Crucially, however, she positions Andean photographic developments within a world system. Poole does not conjure up a zone of photographic activity which is detached from events elsewhere as a distinct “culture”. Rather, she proposes a more encompassing “visual economy” within which local practices are ensnared. She explains

how a Bohemianism which was pitted against the bourgeoisie in Europe was refracted in the Andean world into a spatial opposition (in this instance the celebration of Cusco as an Inca citadel opposed to the colonial centre of Lima). A transnational artistic identification was translated through a local category – the *walaychu* (1997:177) – into a sentimental attachment to land. The *indigenismo* that this spurred was a pastiche of global borrowings whose “locality” was a product of a complex colonial world history.

Chambi would retain a lifelong adherence to the purity of the photographic image but other *idigenista* photographers such as Juan Manuel Figueroa Aznar would increasingly use paint alongside photography. In part this was because Andean photographers could not invoke European pedigrees (as could the various European-run studios in the Andes) to differentiate their commercial products. Overpainting (for instance in the technique labelled *foto-óleo*) managed to deliver “both the aura of an original work of art and the allure of modernity...as an industrial and, above all, imported technology” (1997:172).

Poole’s exemplary account of how “localization” is in part a function of a world photographic system can be usefully contrasted with Judith Mara Gutman’s pioneer but flawed study *Through Indian Eyes* (1982). Gutman sought to establish how an imported technology was bent to the purposes of enduring Indian aesthetic practices and how photography became, in this context, effectively a form of late painting. Gutman’s claim for the “locatedness” of Indian photography is initially articulated within a liberatory paradigm: “Until now we have been so culturally root-bound that we have generally considered European, or Western, images as the ‘standard’ for all photographic imagery” (Gutman 1982:15). The practice she describes holds the promise of challenging this EuroAmerican hegemony but not, unfortunately, its ex-nomination. Her strategy is instructive because, admirable though it is in many ways, it ends up tracing a journey which ends up nominating Indian photography in all its exceptional particularity. She asks some interesting questions about “what *was* Indian” given the complex history of conquest and conversion in the sub-continent but in the end she opts for the aesthetics of north Indian courts and a setoff practices which (when set against Poole’s approach) are stripped of their historicity. The photographs she finds and eulogizes are those that demonstrate a continuity between an alien technology and an “indigenous” aesthetics and

which in this continuity eviscerate history: "...these Indian images were part of a history of Indian tradition and visual pattern-making. They used the same organization of space as if the model for a photograph had been remembered from a collective unconscious..." (Gutman 1982:15). History in this incarnation denotes a "tradition" produced through the suturing of culture with locality. This is not a history characterized by contingency or the complex mimicry and translation of a world system.

It is easy to read Gutman's text as an object lesson in cultural essentialization but it is probably equally important to place it alongside studies of ex-nominated photography such as Peter Galassi's influential *Before Photography* (1981) which sought to explain photography in terms of a pre-existing set of representational conventions and expectations. One might perhaps view these as politically non-radical alternatives to the emergent Foucauldian analyses of the time. If the 'Central Polytechnic of London school' was about the manner in which disciplinary state power informed images the 'school of New York' (both Galassi and Gutman were based in NYC) rejected a radical politics and espoused the tenacity of cultural tradition as the determinant of what happened within photography. Both agreed that photography's "technology" changed nothing, or at least very little.

A similar narrative can be developed for Japan. Following Shunnojo-Tsunetari's thwarted 1843 attempt and subsequent success in 1848 in importing a Daguerreotype camera into Nagasaki, Eliphalet Brown took a daguerreotype camera to Japan as part of Commodore Perry's 1854 Expedition, and in the same year the first Japanese Daguerreotype manual appeared ("Ensei Kikijutsu" – "Use of Novel Devices from the West") and it is then only a matter of time before photography appears incarnated in a territorialized guise. Thus Kinoshita Naoyuki in his extremely interesting account directs our attention to photography's co-option as "ihai", the wooden memorial tablets "on which were written the Buddhist names of the deceased" (Naoyuki 2003:18-19).

Within the history of photography regionalization is, as I've suggested, a mark of centre-periphery asymmetries. But it is also evidence of a more general desire to dissolve technical practice in the balm of heroic human activity. Photography in these accounts is

simply, or chiefly, a void, waiting to be filled by pre-existing cultural and historical practice. These stories of photography are like those eighteenth-century object narratives (“The Story of My Pipe” etc) described by Roland Barthes which he suggested were in fact not the stories of the objects themselves, but of the hands between which those objects passed (Barthes 1972). These stories of heroic culture and heroic man triumphing over the camera are articulated within a structured choice between what Latour describes as the notion of technology as “neutral tool” and its obverse, technology as “autonomous destiny” a dichotomy that might be rephrased as a choice between “culture” versus “technological determinism” (Latour 1999:178-180).

Terra Infirma: Photography Beyond the Nation

Latour opens the way toward a *different* kind of history of photography, one which allows an escape from the choice of either a technological determinism, on the one hand, or (on the other) a belief in photography’s *neutrality* in which what matters are remarkable individual practitioners, or photography’s “Indian-ness’ or ‘Peruvian-ness’, all of which give colour to an otherwise blank space. Latour originality explored this problem through a consideration of the relationship between guns and gunmen which can be seen to bear a starkly analogous relationship to camera and cameraman. The two propositions “guns kill people” and “guns don’t kill people: people kill people” exemplify (in Latour’s admittedly simplistic opposition) the useless choice between technology as “autonomous destiny” and its obverse, “neutral tool”. In the first account the gun acts “by virtue of *material* components irreducible to the social qualities of the gunman”, in the other the gun is a “neutral carrier of human will”. The alternative, which folds human and non-humans “into each other”, involves a translation between the essences of subject and objects towards the “hybrid actor comprising...the gun and gunman”: a collective actant (1999:178-79).

This provides (potentially) a useful model for thinking about the entangled practice that coheres around the translated forms of camera and cameraman - that “object-institution” (1999:192) which we might call “camerawork”. But this is only half the story for ‘entanglement’ has to be temporalised: given a processual historicity. Photography is not

something that magically drops into society pre-formed as a determinate “technology”. It is, from the start (and remains until this day) blurred and uncertain. Photography’s potential had to be explored *experimentally* through engagement with equally blurred and uncertain subjects, and a blurred and uncertain history and temporality that reconstituted all of these terms.

Latour’s general argument engages the phantasmatic presence of categories enthroned in what he terms the “Modern Constitution”, of which the central ones are subjects and objects. Latour’s title (*We Have Never Been Modern*) points to the particular paradoxical space which he evokes: a tenacious modernity which is both present and not present, simultaneously persuasive and improbable. The problem with (“purified”) categories such as subjects and objects is that they have become part of a habitus and *at the same time* are also seen to be increasingly incapable of describing the complex (“translated” 1993:10) hybridity of the world.

Much the same might be said about the nation state. Arjun Appadurai’s stress on “scapes” directs our attention to the multiple spaces of the “post-national”. In a parallel manner, Prasenjit Duara pointed to the manner in which those very technologies (such as “proliferating mass media) upon which nation-states depended “to facilitate the nation-building project” (1995:9) also had the power to undo those projects, However, despite this there is still resistance to histories that “do not belong to a contemporary nation” (1995:3).

This continuing attachment to the nation state as a location for photography throws up many problems. Justine Carville, discussing the historiography of “Irish Photography” observes some of the pitfalls. He notes that prior to his recent survey there were two book-length histories of photography in Ireland. Both retrospectively project onto the nineteenth and early twentieth century the political division between the Free State/Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland that dates from 1922 onwards. Thus one book presents a story from the south, the other presents a history from the north. A parallel conundrum was confronted by *Where Three Dreams Cross*, a major exhibition of

South Asian photography shown at the Whitechapel Gallery and Fotomuseum Winterthur in 2010 (see Ogg ed. 2010). Originally planned as a show of “Indian” photography, it confronted the paradox of having to note that many important images were made in locations which after Independence and Partition in 1947 were no longer in India. The show was accordingly reformatted as engaged with South Asia in general (meaning India, Pakistan and Bangladesh) and a good deal of important recent and contemporary work from Pakistan and Bangladesh subsequently included. But this in turn revived an anachronistic possibility that some images made before 1947 were made in locations which would become Pakistan or Bangladesh. A later political history served to attenuate the “Indian-ness” of such photographs though they were unquestionably “made in India”.

The hotly contested political history which led to Partition (creating India and East and West Pakistan) in 1947 and subsequently the independence of East Pakistan as Bangladesh in 1971 underlined the difficulty of exhibiting photography which had not yet been “rescued” from the nation to recall Duara. Depending on the year of its creation, a photograph could theoretically be labelled with a location which was “India”, “East Pakistan” or “Bangladesh”. Partly in response to this quandary, and with the help of a wonderful title (from T.S. Eliot’s *Ash Wednesday*), *Where Three Dreams Cross* completely eschewed such locational conundrums.

The “crossing” or mixing of these national “dreams” was an imaginative solution to what we might think of as the nation-state problem. This of course is a problem with a much longer history in the context of photographic exhibitions and it would be remiss not to briefly address that major monument to the extra-national, Edward Steichen’s 1955 *Family of Man* which championed what Barthes termed the “solid rock of a universal human nature” (1972:102) over history and politics. As befits its time this was a celebration of an essentialized humanity in what Blake Stimson describes as “postnationalist, postreligious nuclear world” (2006:64). The exhibition’s utopianism had two inter-related dimensions: placelessness and universality. Place or location would have reintroduced that very history and politics which the exhibition in its commitment to a universal human subject was committed to abolishing. Universalism – what Adorno

memorably termed the “bleat not to forget humanity” (cited by Stimson 2006: 60) inscribed that central totem of the Modern Constitution, the “human” subject. Steichen, indeed, was given an award by the Urban league for “making mankind proud of its humanity” (Stimson 2006:64)

World System photography

Studies such as Gutman’s are avowedly localizing and establish India as a stable location determined by site-specific traditions. However, several studies suggest that itinerant, or transnational populations consistently operate in the vanguard of the historical process of what we might term photographization: European colonizers, the Chinese in Indonesia (who contributed to photography’s identification with an “alien’ modernity [and] translocal circulation” [Strassler 2010:23]) and (the group that is relevant to Gutman’s study of photography in India) the Parsis.

Zoroastrian refugees long settled largely in Bombay, Parsis were prominent among Indian founder members of the Bombay Photographic Society, and ran many of the earliest commercial photographic studios in the Kalbadevi area of Bombay, the liminal zone between the ‘white-town’ and ‘blacktown’. The archive of Indian ‘sentimental realist’ portraiture which is sold off at Chor Bazaar (thieves bazaar), slightly north of Kalbadevi, the thousands of faded and not so faded *cartes-de-visite* and cabinet cards produced by studios in Bombay, Surat and other major cities in western India reveal Parsis’ enthusiasm for what the camera could produce. I would estimate that 80% of the nineteenth century photographs to be found at Chor Bazaar depict Parsis (singly, conjugally, or in groups).

The majority were produced by Bombay studios, but the scattering of images from Surat, Baroda, Mhow and Neemuch provide a glimpse of the commercial interests that drove Parsi entrepreneurs north of Bombay. But among these Indian produced images there is a

thinner, but nevertheless regular vein of images that trace longer journeys to Singapore, Batavia, Hong Kong and Shanghai.

W. J. T. Mitchell asked “What would it mean to talk about images as migrants, as immigrants, as emigrants, as travellers, who arrive and depart, who circulate, pass through, thus appear and disappear” (2004:14). The *cartes-de-visite* and cabinet cards from Hong Kong, Singapore and elsewhere encourage an easy conflation of the human migrant and the photographic migrant: the condition of photography (in which as Barthes noted “I can never deny that the thing has been there”) is that those that appear in these images were in those locations and it is unreasonable not to assume that these images were asked not only to represent and embody the act of travel but also formed (by virtue of their portability) part of the literal baggage of that travel: that after all is how they came to be in Bombay.

Acknowledging the *itineracy* that informs much photographic practice can help erode the localizing and territorial boundaries which certain approaches to photography in its nominated forms have sought to establish. We can also do this through a parallel itineracy of method which might encourage us to think about parallels between differently located practices of photography. In my own earlier “anthropological” work I stressed the specificity of Indian studio practices and tried to territorialize them through an analysis of local conceptions of personhood and the forensic potential of somatics (or to put this more simply, the extent to which local viewers expected bodies and surfaces to reveal reliable information). In later work, with the benefit of a knowledge of studio practices elsewhere (for example in Ghana through Tobias Wendl’s work), but also with the benefit of a fuller grasp of a key theoretical breakthrough by Roland Barthes in *Camera Lucida* I came to grasp that the detailed ethnographic study of photographic practices should also feed into a broader history of photography, rather than simply provide a nominated footnote to an ex-nominated history of photography (in other words an account of what photography “In India” [or “Peru” or “Japan”] is *as opposed* to what photography “in general” is).

Lessons from the Studio

A more detailed account of this and of the linkages between locations might clarify the consequences this might have for theorizing a “world-system photography”. The key breakthrough by Barthes, I believe, is the distinction he draws between *corps* and *corpu*. In India, as elsewhere, the power of the camera has been understood to reside in its ability to capture an *event*, rather than anything as abstruse as “reality”. In a studio, this event is created by the ensemble of poses and accessories presented to the camera at the moment of exposure. It is marked by the particularity and specificity of what Roland Barthes called the body (*corps*) whose singularity he contrasted with the generality of the *corpu* (1980:4).

Corpus can here stand in for that problematic concept “reality”. It denotes all those abstracted and normalised concepts which are so often invoked in discussions around photography (is the image ‘true’? or, conversely, does the camera ‘lie’?). The realisation that a photograph can only ever deliver a singular body – as Barthes puts it ‘the event is never transcended for the sake of something else’ (1980:4), that it is always bound to the specificity of the moment of exposure – can be seen to inform a long lineage of photographic practice within India. The event of each photograph becomes a distinct world, one in which what matters is the rightness of fit within that world. The secondary question of the fit between that world and a wider world (the corpus) is *not*, countless Indian practitioners seem to have understood, strictly speaking a *photographic* question. It is a consequence of photography’s technics, and its necessary entanglement in the specificity of time and place, that it can never go beyond the body and towards the corpus. The camera records what is placed in front of it and on its own is incapable of making distinctions about the relationship of its visual trace to psychic, social or historical normativity.

Another way of naming the *event* is “the profilmic”. The celebration of the profilmic as a space of ‘sovereign Contingency’ where all that matters is rightness of fit *within* the image (rather than an agreement with a pre-existing something else) is also apparent in the work of Umrao Singh Sher-Gil (1870-1954), the philosopher, Sanskritist, Persianist,

and photographic-enthusiast father of India's great modernist painter Amrita Sher-Gil. Vivan Sundaram makes a good case that Sher-Gil was one of the invisible pioneers of modern Indian photography. He experimented with autochromes and made stereoscopes, but his most powerful legacy lies in his elaborate self-presentation through photography. Sundaram notes how these self-portraits 'explore a range of characterisations: an assertion of [Sher-Gil's] physical being, his intellectual countenance, his melancholic moods, his liminal being' (2001:5). His physical being is displayed in a number of images where he stands in dhoti or shorts, his arms stretched to display his bare chest. In these images he acts the role of the diffident yogi, self-regarding but unsure of his worth. Melancholy pervades other self-portraits where he presents himself (he was an ardent follower of Tolstoy and had his 'attire designed to resemble the tunic in which Tolstoy was usually photographed'⁷) as a hybrid Russian intellectual and peasant, his face emerging from a straggling flurry of white beard, by turns resolute, stoical, and seemingly burdened by his country's own struggle with feudalism and the rule of tyrants. Other self-portraits relocate meaning away from the face and onto repertoires of other signs. In images where he appears in front of his library shelves, or posing at a desk on which heaps of learned tomes are stacked, the face is still called upon to signify, but as an astronomer peering through his telescope we see simply the body performing the role, and as a writer, seated on his bed, he is just a blur of activity as he hammers away at his typewriter.

Sher-Gil's extensive investigation of his multiple photographic incarnations find a deep resonance in vernacular portraiture practices. In rural and small-town central India, the studio retains a central place in most peoples' encounters with photography. Increasingly cheap and easy to use cameras have yet to sustain serious practices of self-photography: consumers still opt to surrender themselves to their local studio impresarios, in the hope that under their skilled direction they will 'come out better'. This sense of wanting to come out better in their photographs – *is se bhi zyada acchha mera photo ana chahie* – is the aspiration of every visitor to the studio. They denote by this the desire not to replicate some pre-existing something else (for instance that impossible subjectivity of who they really are), but to submit themselves to masterly profilmic technicians who are able,

through the use of costume, backgrounds, lighting and camera angles to produce the desired pose, look, *mise en scène*, or expression. One such technician is Vijay Vyas of Sagar Studios who noted that ‘everyone wants to look their best’ and then proceeded to catalogue the activities and interventions that fed into the transformative zone of the pro-filmic: ‘...they hope they will look their best in photos. They don’t want to wear their everyday clothes. Just like you – if you want your photo taken, you’ll brush your hair, wear your best shirt...They don’t want *vastavik* [realistic] photos. They always say I want to look good...everyone says I am like this but I want to come out better than this in my photo. So we try’ (cited in Pinney 1997:30).

All these observations might provide the basis for a localizing account which stressed cultural constructions of personhood and of gender and which related these practices to an enduring Hindu ontology and/or commercial cinema aesthetics (which inform certain aspects of studio practice). Barthes however allows us to extract a conclusion which we can export to other locations: these studio visitors seem very uninterested in the historical record of the ‘something else’, of the corpus, choosing instead the specificity and freedom offered by the ‘sovereign Contingency’ of the *corps*. We might want to export this conclusion to France, export it directly back into the heart of the ex-nominated empire. But instead, let us detour via the anthropologist Tobias Wendl’s examination of Ghanaian photographers’ exploitation of the possibilities of the profilmic. Mobilizing sharply-styled clothing and fantastic painted backdrops of ‘an idealized society of mass consumption’, Ghanaian studios celebrate that fact that it is impossible to deny (to recall Roland Barthes) that ‘the thing has been there’ (1980:4). Studio backdrops depict luxurious bourgeois domestic interiors, well-stocked fridges, international airports, and dramatic cityscapes. One Kumasi photographer, Alfred Six, described himself as a ‘king-maker’ and he possessed ‘all the accessories necessary for transforming ordinary citizens into traditional chiefs of kings, and women into *ohemmaa* (queen-mothers)’ (Wendl 1998:150) Another photographer, Philip Kwame Apagya, offers a studio backdrop with the ‘traditional royal umbrella of the Ashanti kings’.

The 'thing that has been there' produces unstable effects. On the one hand it is utterly compelling: Apagya narrates how his successful career ('like a jet taking off') was indebted to his realistic and highly coloured backgrounds. People saw the resulting photographs and gasped 'How beautiful! A roomful of precious items. Whose house is it?' (Wendl 1998:154). Having reluctantly been persuaded that it was taken in a photographic studio they too flocked to have their portraits taken. Stories circulate of angry husbands who refuse to believe that a studio posed photograph was not taken in the commodious home of a wealthy lover. On the other hand photographs are valued precisely because of their phantasmatic character. Wendl positions them within an Akan culture of semiotic ambivalence. He notes a popular motto to be found on Ghanaian buses and taxis: 'Observers are Worried!' Photography enables Ghanaians to wander through 'the frontiers between illusion, desire and reality'. Akan notions of 'reality' invoke a domain which is not visible to the human eye, and it is precisely through 'lines of fracture with "normal" reality that the universe of Ghanaian photography reveals all its richness and multiplicity'(Wendl 1998:154).

The practices of small-town Indian photographers which share so much with those of Ghana (and elsewhere) are part of the broader repertoire of a popular visuality upon which the contemporary artist Pushpamala N., working with the photographer Clare Arni, draws. Pushpamala N. recreates earlier images to ask complex questions about the body that the event deposits. Her carefully staged *Flirting* made in 2001 re-enacts a 1990s Kannada language film still. In the re-enactment, Pushpamala N. adopts a youthful guise and holds a tiffin carrier in her left hand as she flirts with the male bearer of a rose. The viewer immediately apprehends this image as *filmi* - part of the cinematic grammar of India's public culture - that is as referencing in some act of secondary homage; a filmic original.

Pushpamala N. engages the nature of the pro-filmic, that is the object or event that is placed in front of the camera. As Pushpamala N.'s captions make clear, however fanciful we might assume the image's presumed corpus, it is always, ineluctably, a body, tied to the material conditions and its own making. Hence *Flirting*, a C-type print on metallic

paper, is dependent on numerous physical acts which she meticulously documents. Among these are an eight-foot by eight-foot set painted by K. Sampath at Pushpamala N.'s studio in Bangalore, canvas cloth from a wholesale market at Okalipura, and linoleum flooring from JC Road. Pushpamala N. documents the source of the studio lights, and of the various costumes and props (*inter alia* the man's wig from Nataraja Dress Co., spectacles from Avenue Road, and tiffin carrier from Gandhi Bazaar market). This insistence on the pro-filmic – on the body which photography produces – is then subject to a recursive further enframing in *The Process Series*, subtitled *A Complete Record of the Procedures and Systems Used for Study* which documents the creation of each *mise en scène* recorded in Clare Arni's photographs.

In her *Bombay Photo Studio* series (2000-2003), Pushpamala N. mimics the conventions of nineteenth-century portraiture. From the 1860s onwards, numerous studios clustered on and around Kalbadevi Road (see above) pictured customers within highly formalized *mise-en-scène*, frequently conjured by a carpet, table, or pillar, and a vase with flowers. These constitute the repertoire for Pushpamala N.'s *Triptych (Portrait of a Mohammedan Woman, Portrait of a Hindoo Woman, Portrait of a Christian Woman)*. A refusal within the space of the pro-filmic by means of veiling and turning away (the Muslim and Christian women are veiled, the Hindu woman sits with her back to us) problematizes our role as viewers and seems to internalise the photograph's own space. The series was photographed by Vimal Thakker, the son of the leading creator of 1950s *filmi* glamour, J. H. Thakker. Thakker's India Photo Studio in Dadar was founded in 1948 and after a commission to shoot the publicity for the Hindi film *Chakori* established him as the pre-eminent purveyor of dramatically lit images of Bombay cinema's stars such as Nargis, Meena Kumari, and Guru Dutt. His son's collaboration in Bombay Photo Studio helps transform Pushpamala N.'s images into commentaries on the act of making the photographs; establishing the *mise en scène*, placing furniture, arranging lights and diffusers to create the appropriate mix of stark shadow and brooding depth. This concern with the profilmic – its apparent disinterest in anything outside the space of its own making – is heightened by the occlusion of veiling and turning away which emphasises

the peculiar relation of the sitter to the camera in the act of being photographed, rather than to us the viewer.

Conclusion: Locating Martín Chambi

Edward Ranney, who was involved in the recuperation of the Chambi archive and its circulation globally from the late 1970s onward, makes the interesting suggestion that we juxtapose Chambi with his broad contemporaries Eugène Atget and August Sander: “Like Atget, Chambi devoted a major part of his lifework to documenting with great care the city in which he lived. Like the portraits made in Weimar Germany, the pictures Chambi made of social types and native traditions stand as unique social documents of a culture and place still demanding study and understanding” (1993:10).

Ranney’s juxtaposition takes us to the heart of the questions of location and nomination which lie at the heart of this essay. For Walter Benjamin, famously, Atget and Sander were exemplary practitioners of what “was native” to photography. Atget’s work was important for Benjamin because of the way it fragments landscape into symptoms: his pictures “work against the exotic, romantically sonorous names of the cities: they suck the aura out of reality like water from a sinking ship” (Benjamin 518). In this respect his images were the forerunners of Surrealist photography. Ranney’s suggestion is especially interesting for the way it names and locates both Atget and Sander (in relation to Paris and Weimar Germany respectively) rather than proposing that Chambi be added to the ex-nominated pantheon of (European) photographic greats.

This may sound reminiscent of the standard choice between the “white cube” de-contextualizing logic of high modernism and the context rich ethnographic museum which insists on framing objects and practices in terms of territories. In terms of the distinction examined by the philosopher of art Arthur Danto, Ranney suggests that Chambi, Atget and Sander be located within a context-rich ‘artefactual’ field, rather than the utopian space of art.

A utopia is of course literally a non-space, an impossible location. All photography has a location: there is no magically pure photography, no photography that is not

contaminated by its appearance in the world. Equally, locations have to be re-imagined as (to borrow a phrase from Justine Carville) “Terra infirma”, unstable and complex positions which may have more of the quality of linking sections of a network than of territories. I hope in this brief commentary to have provided some of the tools to facilitate the refusal of such a choice (between Chambi as in some sense the “equal” to Atget or Sander, or the “reduction” of Atget and Sander to the status of ethnographers of their respective territories). A world system photography, seen in networks that fold locally articulated practices into trajectories that fuse technics, history and culture, can help us think in new ways about the “location” of photography.

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