

PhotoResearcher

Photograph Truths — *Imposing Narratives*

Guest Editor — Celio H. Barreto Ramos



福西堂製版印刷合資會

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From the Editor

This issue of *PhotoResearcher* investigates photography's manifestations under an array of power structures at several locations and points in the medium's history, with the aim to interrogate the power dynamics photographs have developed within and beyond the West. Each investigator's contribution to this special issue casts a light on nuanced photographic practices seen through the prism of relational forces at play at the time and place of their respective photographs' inception.

The development of photography is generally thought to have been fairly uniform around the world, and its technological evolution emerging largely out of Europe and North America. It is assumed its practices opened up to more people of lower technical and financial means than professional photographers into the 20th Century. With such a simplistic perspective on photography's development, the singularity of photography's powerful influence on artistic, cultural, intellectual and social frameworks outside the West tends to be uncomplicated, conceding that Eurocentric perspectives on photography's development deserve systematic attention, investigation, and collection. These attitudes often relegate photography beyond the West to a secondary or tertiary rank. The power of Eurocentric hegemony was such that many colonized societies adopted photographic history views and violent photographic language prevalent in Western halls of learning, commerce and industry. Together, they coalesced to dismiss non-Western contributions to photography's development as curious expressions manifesting in 'inferior' societies, unworthy of investigative rigor.

Throughout its history, there has been persistent, unsettled debate over photography's powers of representation; over whether it has the means to capture the 'truth,' or is instead a means to create an artificial vision of reality (___ figs. 1a & b). A crucial facet of this debate is the ways in which, in either case, photography allows us to experience and see the world as much through another's eyes as through a camera's lens. Indeed, each photograph is indelibly marked by the choices of its creator, and the contexts, ideas, and values of the moment of creation. Whilst this ability to see as others see has an inherent beauty, it also carries deep-seated risks that another's subjectivities become our objectivities, their nuances our normalcy. Without critical evaluation, ideas and values pass insidiously into our consciousness and perceptions of reality to varying degrees. However, the desire to represent and communicate truth, in spite of the myriad ways in which the medium can be manipulated in the service of subjective narratives, remains central to the production, reproduction and circulation of photographs and photographic images. Integral to photographic outputs are visual representation conventions informed by artistic, cultural, historical, ideological, social, and technological practices which the viewer needs to understand to unlock the preferred interpretation of the photograph.

Key to appreciating the inherent untruths within photographs is an understanding of the internal and external mechanisms of power which instigate, support, and police ideologies and values. Photographic works are used by structures of power



fig. 1a
Adolfo Farsari (attributed), *Geisha's Dancing*, Yokohama c. 1880, hand-tinted albumen print 23.3 × 25 cm.
KHM-Museumsverband, Weltmuseum
Wien, inventory number 7580.



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in ‘naturalizing, constructed views,’ creating a ‘privileging norm’ of material which enforces ideas and values alongside a ‘denial of the value’ of the works which embody the Other’s representations of the world.

Since these intentionally constructed illusions are permeated with the concerns of those who make or commission photographs in service of their agendas, the extent to which people represented in their images have had a say or have consented to being photographed remains difficult to pinpoint. After all, photography emerges during the industrial revolution, deeply rooted in ideals of exploitation. The violence of its language has been normalised and academics have largely grown numb to it despite calls over the decades to overcome it.¹

The control of photography’s technological affordances enable the pursuit of impulses to own instants in time, and make them reproducible and circulated for commercial or personal gain (___fig. 2). Photography’s objective virtues were characterized by Elizabeth Lake in 1853 as “the sworn witness of everything presented to her view”.² 130 years later in his book *Camera Lucida* Roland Barthes claimed that “photography never lies: or it can lie as to the meaning of the thing ... never to its existence”³. Early photographic images of the world, its objects, landscapes, natural phenomena and eventually its inhabitants and events could now be captured, collected and studied in centers of knowledge to form a greater (but necessarily inaccurate) picture of the world. This illusory perception of photographic truth is thus able to shape audiences’ interpretation of the representations contained within the photographic image, privileging their producers’ perspectives. Thus, for instance, peoples’ self-perceptions can be in large part shaped by the photographers’ view of individual subjects, social groups, political entities in the visual economy. Landscapes to be preserved, surveyed, explored, colonized, or conquered are often photographed extensively prior to initiating said endeavors.⁴

In figure 1a for instance, we have a beautifully composed photograph of two female-presenting people in non-western dress, demonstrating what appear to be performative practices perhaps associated with musical culture. The figure standing holds an extended fan in each hand, their pose in apparent motion, as if during the execution of a dance step, as their eyes gaze at some point of interest outside the picture frame. The seated figure, apparently gazing in the same direction as the first holds what resembles a stringed instrument, seen from a perspective that shows its general construction, and similarity in size and use to Western banjos or guitars.

The photographic image itself does not reveal details of the figures’ identities, restricting its description to the physical objects they hold, wear and those they are framed within. A short caption inserted at some point in the process of the photograph’s reproduction, inset within an oblong dark shape at the bottom right corner of the picture frame, informs us that this specific image is the sixty-second photo print in a larger collection, that the figures represented are geishas, and that they are dancing. Are they truly geishas? Are they both really dancing? We are being told that they are, and at least in part, our lack of familiarity with the true artistic and cultural

fig. 1b

關西寫真製版印刷合資會社製 (Kansai Syashin Seihan Insatsu Goshi Kaisha sei / Kansai Photograph Printing Company Ltd.), Picture Postcard of Lady in kimono holding a piece of paper (letter?) in both hands, about 1900, hand-written with brush and charcoal ink, Collotype on card stock, 14 cm × 9 cm, Posted Military Mail System, May 23rd, Meiji 38 (May 23rd, 1905). Celio Barreto Picture Postcard Collection, Toronto, Ontario.

1 ___ Aphrodite Désirée Nayab, ‘Re-Picturing Photography: A Language in the Making’, *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 35, no. 1 (2001), 69–84.

2 ___ Lady Elizabeth Eastlake, ‘Photography’, in: *Trachtenberg, Classic Essays Photography*, 65.

3 ___ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, New York: Hill Wang, 1981.

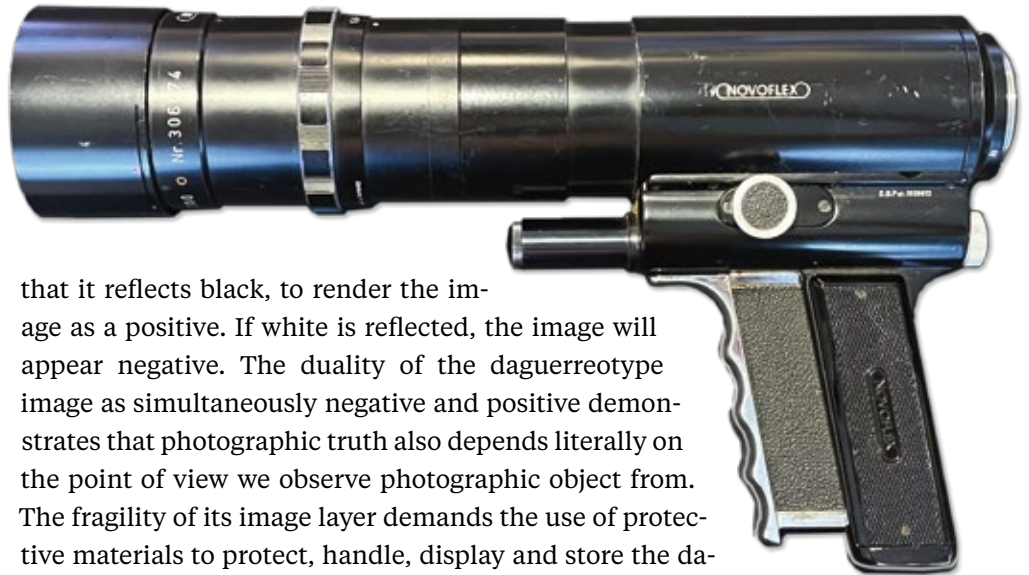
4 ___ Malcolm Daniel, ‘Mission Héliographique, 1851’, in: *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History*, New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000–. <http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/heli/hd_heli.htm (October 2004)> (20.09.23).

practices of geishas, opens the acceptance of someone else's interpretation of this constructed image as the preferred understanding of the photograph. In other words, who the figures in the photo are and what they are doing are subordinate to what the Western photographer states through the superimposed caption, true or not.

Moreover, the interrogation of a photograph necessarily includes the study of its physical characteristics, rather than the exclusive focus on the subject representations on the image. The richly complex material attributes reveal just as much critical information about the past as the represented image does, and sometimes even more. Photographic culture, practices, and technologies are engaged in relationships of reciprocal influence with one another, as they develop through time and space. A photograph reveals the state of technology, industry, cultural attitudes, conceptualization, and socioeconomic and political significance of the medium at the time of its creation, reproduction, publication, and ultimate consumption.

Case in point are daguerreotypes (— fig. 3), prized as much for their physical characteristics as for the virtual images they bear. The laterally reversed image on a daguerreotype can only be properly appreciated by angling the plate to such a degree

fig. 2
NOVOFLEX Noflexar 1:5,6/300 pistol grip lens, Made in Germany. Author's collection. The technical similarities between the instruments of violence and those of photograph-making can be disturbingly similar in form and function, betraying photographers' ideologies and values.



that it reflects black, to render the image as a positive. If white is reflected, the image will appear negative. The duality of the daguerreotype image as simultaneously negative and positive demonstrates that photographic truth also depends literally on the point of view we observe photographic object from. The fragility of its image layer demands the use of protective materials to protect, handle, display and store the daguerreotype. Each of these object layers, the mat, the cut glass, the preserver, and the case, reveal manufacturing and production techniques, materials processing, and of course decorative and stylistic conventions that when studied help narrow down the daguerreotype's production location(s) in space and time. The same applies to every photograph. They are products of their time, usually produced in the cheapest, fastest and easiest, method needed for their intended circulation and audience. This includes photomechanical reproductions to be used on mass media such as newspapers, magazines, postcards, etc., as well as digital formats for electronic media.

The making of photographs over time leads to the creation of multiple reproducible prints. The photo album emerged as the preferred location for photographic prints to be collected, purposely designed for the affixing of prints in a specific sequence, creating a conscious and deliberate narrative by the compiler. The photo album format allowed creators to tell stories, as creative outputs for private enjoyment as in



fig. 3
Unattributed photographer,
daguerreotype portrait of a man,
circa 1850, 1/6th plate in union
case. Author's collection. Note the
size of the sitter's hands to that of
his head, they appear enormous
by comparison. This is due to the
sitter's hands and legs falling inside
a barrel distortion area around the
center of the image.

the case of family, and school and albums. or as formal as official records of diplomatic missions, geographic and/or ethnographic surveys of people and places near and far. Albums necessarily obscure the verso of photographic prints, where inscriptions, marks and other information may inform the photograph's narrative in more detail. The album however affords their compilers to incorporate the metadata obscured by its format, to be directly inscribed to the leaves and pages, directly or in separate captions to be affixed with the photograph. Albums then act as vehicles for the constructed narrative, creative or documentary, preserving a chronology defined by the compiler themselves (— fig. 4).

The power of photography to represent gender is of particular interest in this issue. Western power structures require not only effective means to control those deemed 'external', as evidenced through our discussions of colonization, but also effective 'internal' systems of control, as expressed for instance through the dominance of patriarchal discourses within Western culture. Akin

to the ways of seeing previously discussed, there is a well-established understanding of the dominance of the male-gaze within the visual arts.⁵ Here, it is the male ways of seeing which become the default viewpoints, with women relegated to observable objects. The effect of this is to allow male "phantasies and obsessions" to become normalized by "imposing them on the silent images of women" who, in this dehumanized, objectified state, can only be "the bearer of meaning, not the maker of meaning."⁶ Alongside a removal of female agency, the act of 'capturing' women through visual images can also form a symbolic representation of their social captivity, demonstrating the power and ownership which male ways of seeing and perceiving has over them.

Moving beyond the denotative and connotative taxonomic discussion of photographs

This issue of *PhotoResearcher* brings together the work of scholars examining photography, its manifestations, and uses under an array of power structures from across the medium's social and historical contexts. Narrative construction through photography under various power-systems throughout the history of the medium and global geography are at the core of the issue. As a collection, these works critically examine the power dynamics photographs have developed within and beyond the

5 — Laura Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', in: *Visual and Other Pleasures*, London: Macmillan, 1989 [1974], 14–26.

6 — Mulvey 1989 (reference 1), 15.

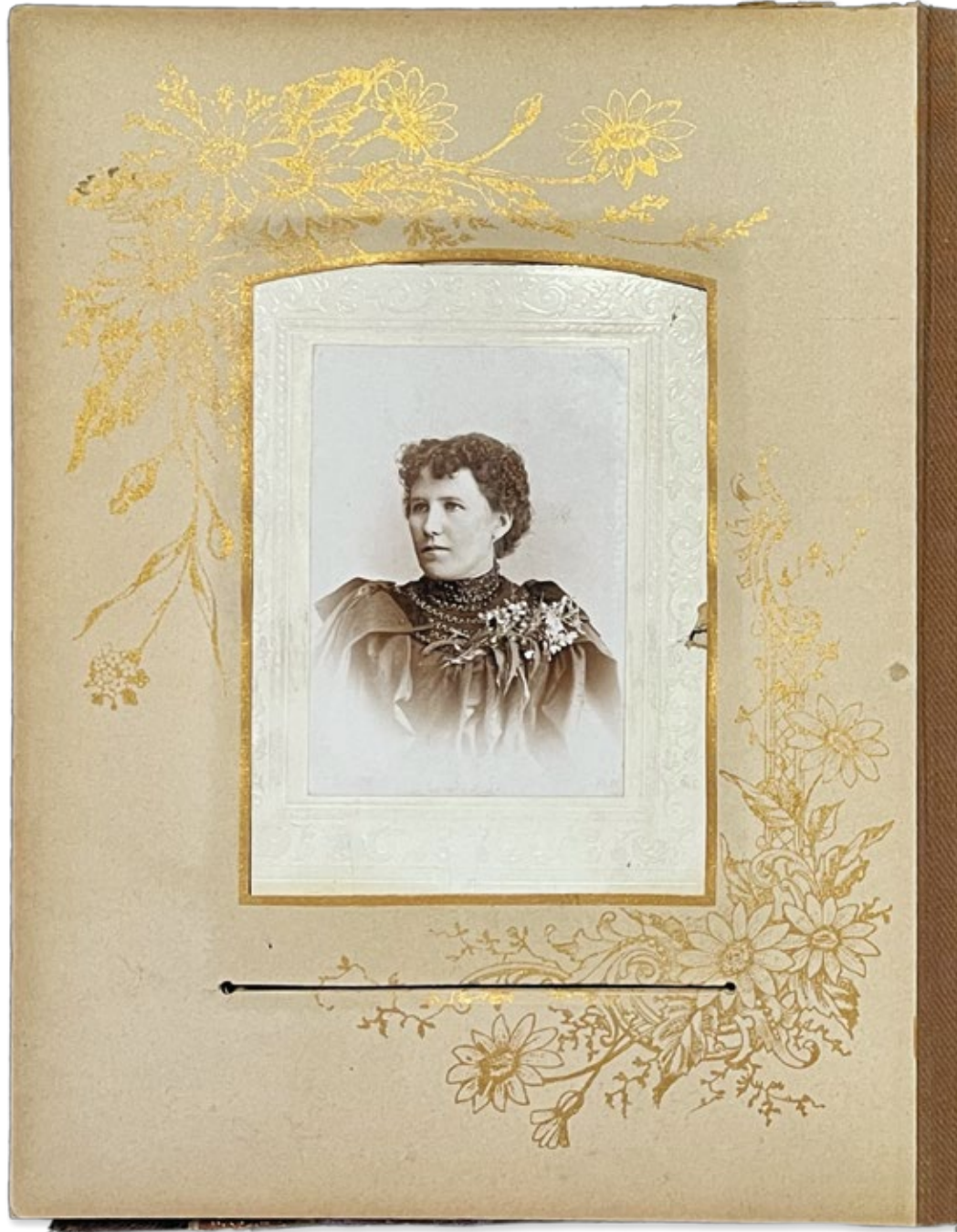




fig. 4
Unknown photographer, Victorian
era photo album, Author's collection

West. Each of the investigator's contributions to this special issue shines a new light on nuanced photographic practices and perceptions, as seen through the prism of relational power and control.

The establishment and normalizing of a powerful group's ways of seeing (and speaking) are not merely incidental to their acts of violence and control, but are in fact integral to them, since "the development of the one is intrinsically bound up with the development of the other."⁷ Whilst fundamental, the forms of control enacted through cultural works and their narratives rely on successful and successive acts of illusion, whereby the perception of the powerful becomes acknowledged as material fact. Indeed, "at a deeper level their claim to objectivity simply serves to hide the imperial discourse within which they are created."⁸ The question arises, in the case of uncolonized societies, who are the powerful controlling the means of discourse? Are they effectively silencing, discrediting, absorbing, or indeed removing any counternarratives from the West? When describing comparable silences imposed by the power discourses around race in American literature, Toni Morrison argues that rather than mere omissions, these silences "became an unbearable violence,"⁹ one which necessarily must be addressed and stopped. Key to this is a reassertion of alternative ways of seeing, thereby destabilizing the totalizing gaze of the powerful.

Each article reveals a specific vested interest in capturing and telling – or retelling – stories. It's a combination of vested interests in self-representation as in Japan and Africa through the adoption of what is at first a foreign technology which later becomes a natively innovated one. A story of violence in the making of images for the oppressive administration of occupied peoples, or the surveying of territory using photography in the service of Empire and personal enjoyment, of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, both the Head of State and an individual, in whom the two natures cannot be separated.

Jürg Schneider provides us with an insightful article on the first contacts of photography and locals in Africa in the 19th century. This detailed and comprehensive analysis gives us a glimpse into the ways in which photography depicted and was later integrated into African everyday life. Schneider opens a window into photographic cultural practices beyond the making of images, but that also includes the importance of the materiality of the photograph in its local context.

Carole Naggat introduces us to a sequence of images which show impressingly a selection of partly unpublished portraits of Algerian Berber and Muslim women made in 1960, intended for use in identity cards for local villagers at a time of violent political turmoil as Algeria fought for its statehood against France's colonial grip. French army draftee Marc Garanger was tasked with this mission, and forcibly unveiled his sitters to complete this task over a period of ten days.

Mathias Boehm and Uwe Schögl demonstrate the dual dimensions of photography from an expedition of more than four months of a sixteen-ship flotilla through the Mediterranean, which the then young Habsburg Archduke Ferdinand Maximilian

7 ____ Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back*, London: Routledge, 2009 [1989], 3.

8 ____ Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 2009 (reference 1), 5.

9 ____ Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992, 23.

(and later Emperor of Mexico) accompanied by the young photographer Franz Mai, who was his age at the time. The voyage also coincided with an itinerary of diplomatic visits with regents of Mediterranean lands, and shows us in the numerous topographical and naval-species photographs exemplary the respective of the photographer and the Archduke as commissioning authority of this landscape encompassing two continents. For the first time this photographic sea voyage, photographic as well as naval-historical, and which has come down to us in six albums, purely for the private of Emperor Franz Joseph I of Austria and his family.

Aurore Montoya-Yamagata's contribution takes us into the world of Japanese school graduation photo albums, emerging in the late 19th and in the early 20th century and which function as tools in the rapid modernization of Japan. The author treats them as the legitimate objects of study at the intersection of visibility, schooling and history. and explores the role of these albums in the construction of identity of student groups at the conclusion of their academic experience. This analysis reveals a carefully composed narrative structures providing insights into the photographic culture practices during the late Meiji Era.

Sarah L. Hart focuses on soldier photographs of children in the examination of how Canadian soldiers' photographs perpetuated norms of race and gender in the early Cold War era. Hart critiques the way in which soldier photographs of the Korean War of 1950 to 1953 enforce ideas of masculinity and nationalism using the idea of "hidden transcripts".

Emma Wilde explores the use and abuse of photographic images of female victims of violence in Victorian England, from police evidence to newspaper illustrations, to their contemporary commodification focused on the violence performed on these victims by their murderer, objectifying and dehumanizing them. Today, the desecration of the victims continues in a new way, as commercial interests using the images to market a new museum in England.

It is thus with great interest that I look forward to sharing this very special issue of *PhotoResearcher* No. 40, Photograph Truth: Impose Narratives, with you and have new and overlooked histories of photography widen our horizons to the special ways in which the medium developed beyond our familiar cultural, historic, intellectual, physical and temporal frames of reference.

Celio H. Barreto Ramos
Toronto, November 2023