

Power: remaking selves, archives, environments



At one level, there is a longstanding debate about photography and power, and the power of photography. Who controls representation, and what does it mean for the historically marginalized or dispossessed to take the power of representation into their own hands? These shifts in representation, past and present, often pivot around collective self-empowerment, the remaking of selves, and claims on belonging.

But what if we also think about power on another and nonhuman level? Power in these terms might reference the “natural” elements, such as water, earth, air and fire. Photography’s darkroom practices have been associated with an archaic “liquid intelligence” (Wall). Coming from the “stratigraphic medium” (Tucker), a photograph is also the “sediment” deposited by history (Kracauer).

Power also references energy that is industrially generated such as electricity and light. These operate through often invisible infrastructures, which only become apparent through crisis. Modernisation has been about the distribution of such power, but its history is also unequal, long producing an “artificial darkness” for the socially marginalized in South Africa for instance. Not only does Africa have “its own history of light” (Hayes and Minkley), but perhaps the continent has always been differently lit. Such inequalities are tied up with racial thinking, reinforcing associations of Africa with lack of technology and know-how (Collier). These features have prompted responses that situate the slave trade and colonialism within the “long night” (Mbembe) which in their turn, inflect positions like the Black Anthropocene (Iheka) that holds white supremacy, extractive capitalism and cultures of disposability to account for our planetary predicament.

Photography and other media are part of ecocide with their “chemical affinities” and dependencies on mineral and other forms of extraction, contributing to environmental decline. Related to this, toxic waste and gradual degradation of stored media also constitute an archival question. We are seldom required to think about the plants, animals and minerals in archival media, thanks to chemicals, electricity and air-conditioning that keep materials in a state of suspended decay.

What does this mean for “preservation” and futures? Are conventional concepts of the archive, as well as existing categories and epistemic approaches, adequate to the challenges of thinking about the “forces of history” in the same frame as the “forcings of nature” (Baucom)?

This international workshop seeks to link older debates about representational power with new ones about the changing ecologies in the world. Participants are invited to consider power not just in terms of a “luminous glare” of flashlight press photography that Martin Luther King articulated in the 1960s, but also in terms of remaking and belonging on the earth when power–luminous or otherwise—is no longer a human-centred question.

Our keynote speaker will be Professor **Leigh Raiford**, Department of African American Studies, Co-Director and Co-PI of the Black Studies Collaboratory, University of California, Berkeley, author of *Imprisoned in a Luminous Glare: Photography and the African American Freedom Struggle* (2013). The keynote title is “When Home is a Photograph: Blackness and Belonging in the World.”

The workshop is inter-disciplinary. We invite participants to submit short abstracts that address issues of power, image, archive and environment. These might include environmental issues; ephemeral or precarious archives; artistic responses to ecocide; challenges to colonial and other forms of power in the history of photography. Papers are not restricted to photographs. The discussion of other kinds of images and technologies related to images are welcome. The workshop will be in-person.

Workshop date: 27-28 July 2023

Deadline for submission of abstracts: 15 June 2023

Venue: Centre for Humanities Research, University of the Western Cape

Abstracts & Enquiries: to Patricia Hayes at visualhistoryuwc@gmail.com

Photo credit: Santu Mofokeng, *Chasing Shadows. Thirty Years of Photographic Essays* (Munich: Prestel, 2012).

References

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Cajetan Iheka, *African Ecomedia. Network forms, planetary politics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020),

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Achille Mbembe, *Out of the Dark Night. Essays on Decolonization* (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2020).

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