PHOTOGRAPHY AND PHOTO-ELICITATION AFTER COLONIALISM

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With the growing interest in colonial photography, researchers—often anthropologists and museum curators—routinely take artifacts of this work back to the site of their original production to elicit data on the content and response to the images (e.g., Day and Leizaola 2012; Geismar and Herle 2010; Young 1998). This scholarship attempts to present local and alternative knowledge of the history of colonialism recorded *in* the photographs. With this in mind, I approached my fieldwork in The Gambia, West Africa, expecting to gather historical narratives and subaltern commentary on the politics of the colonial past. I received nothing of the sort. Instead, I listened to extended commentaries on the appearance of the photographs—how they looked "old"; evaluations of the people and objects depicted; guessing of the brand names of the cars and bicycles in the images; and criticisms of photographic composition. Instead of narratives, I received steadfast lists—denotations of objects rather than evocations prompted by the photographs. These comments never developed into an interest in or commentary on the colonial culture that I considered to be represented in the photographs, which caused me to question the ability of photo-elicitation to depict colonial life or to connect people to the past. Instead, photo-elicitation appears to offer us information about the aesthetic values governing the present.

This essay draws on ethnographic research into the relationship between photographic aesthetics and postcolonial studies. I analyze a series of interviews

centered on photographic images of life in the Gambia Colony in the 1940s and 1950s (see Buckley 2008, 2010).[1] Rather than interpreting the images historically, in terms of the politics and socioeconomics of colonial life, the interviewees resolutely focused on the photographs' aesthetic details. This attention to the surface features of the photograph suggests the viewer's disconnection or distraction from the colonial history depicted in the images.

The interviews generated data not so much on *what* was shown in the photographs but on the question of *how* photographs visually record and display their images. The viewers were interested in the photograph as a type of object, crafted according to specific aesthetic techniques, practices, and formalities of composition. These viewers make no attempt to salvage or excavate the meanings of an image's political history. The visual encounter is one of aesthetic evaluation and admiration rather than a perception of historical data. Viewers describe, offering the opposite of a "forensic" or "submerged" reading (see Edwards 2001, 87). It is, in fact, not a *reading* but a *viewing*.

METHOD AND CONTEXT

Photo-elicitation is a method of interviewing in which researchers ask respondents to talk about a set of photographs. John Collier (1957) first described this technique in an article published in 1957 in *American Anthropologist*.[2] Much of this discussion appeared again in 1967 in *Visual Anthropology: Photography as a Research Method* (Collier and Collier 1986). Photo-elicitation has a straightforward goal: "When native eyes interpret and enlarge upon the photographic content, through interviewing with photographs, the potential range of data enlarges beyond that contained in the photographs themselves" (Collier and Collier 1986, 99). Photo-elicitation solves "memory problems" and "evokes responses" (100–101): "Photographs sharpen the memory and give the interview an immediate character of realistic reconstruction" (106). This method works within a cultural context. The production of data is itself subject to a set of social norms, understandings, and expectations regarding the status of the colonial images on view and of the practice and products of photography in general within that locale. That subjects are deemed "experts" in their ability and authority to speak about the images also influences the data (see, e.g., Bell 2006, 198; and Kratz 1996: 62–63).

Verbal interviews and those also making use of images differ in the type and range of elicited responses (Harper 2002, 13). Two types of analysis occur during interviews with photographs. Direct analysis identifies the content of the photos

and provides commentary on the context for that content—for example, the circumstances leading to a particular arrangement in the image (M. Collier 2001, 45). The "encyclopedic value" of the photograph stems from its assumed ability to provide a realistic reconstruction of the site, people, and objects in the depiction (Lapenta 2011, 203). Indirect or projective analysis produces data that concern highly subjective responses and may have little formal relation to the actual content of the images. These responses may instead result from evocation, the "vivid memories, feelings, insight, thoughts and memories" triggered by the act of looking at the image (M. Collier 2001, 46; Lapenta 2011, 203).

Photo-elicitation studies ordinarily use photographs produced either by the researcher or by the respondents (Edgar 2004, 94). An additional method, and the one that I used, involves acts of so-called photo repatriation or visual repatriation, in which respondents view and comment on images produced during the colonial period that are housed in museums or archives. These respondents presumably have some connection to the original site, people, and contents of the images in question (see Dudding 2005). Photo repatriation has an explicitly postcolonial goal: "By freeing photographs from their immersion within European cultural expectation, visual repatriation allows other ways of seeing to emerge . . . [enabling] new spaces for the preservation and exploration of identity, history and culture" (Bell 2006, 192). The images used in my photo-elicitation interviews were originally produced by a group of local photographers in the early 1940s who worked for the Public Relations Office (PRO) of the Gambia Colony. The PRO hired photographers to produce visual media specifically tailored to local interests and trends. In turn, the participation of these photographers in colonial public relations formed part of a wider increase in the participation of Gambian colonial subjects in the governmental and civic life of the colony. The photographs depict new forms of participation at events such as parades, sporting affairs, the visits of dignitaries, and the opening of legislative sessions (Buckley 2010).

The interviews themselves occurred in somewhat of a vacuum of popular interest in colonial life. While colonial photographs appear frequently on the international scene in public venues such as galleries and exhibits (Banthall 1992; Thorner 2008), there has been little contemporary Gambian interest in the colonial period. The National Archives do hold a large collection of colonial-period photographs, but these do not appear in Gambian museum exhibits (Buckley 2005, 263). Gambian archival photography features images of urban life, while the Gambian National Museum has chosen to emphasize precolonial rural life, displaying traditional and indigenous artifacts that "survived colonialism" (Bellagamba

2006, 41). The television talk show *Sunu Coosan* (Our Tradition) occasionally focuses on urban colonial topics such as the police band and the "band tonight" dances in the capital during the 1940s. The cultural organization Banjul Demba (Banjul Yesterday) also stages annual festivals in Banjul that include celebrations of urban colonial life. And the electronic bulletin board "Bantaba in Cyberspace" often includes exchanges of background information on famous persons and buildings in the city. Other than these sparse occurrences, colonial life remains publically invisible.

The main context for contemporary photography in The Gambia is that of the portrait studio. Since the country's independence in 1965, portrait work has become part of a highly aesthetic cultural domain that also includes the decorative professions of tailoring and hairdressing. Studios are usually established in vicinity to beauty salons and dress shops. In addition to offering photographic services, studios also sell cosmetics and women's clothing accessories, such as purses and shoes (Buckley 2013, 293). Portraiture forms a central component of the realm of personal adornment and elegance. In terms of local concepts of material culture, photographic portraits belong to a set of objects and practices that exist in *jamano*, a Wolof word that describes existence in a state of ever-change, of being fashionable and up to date. As such, photography has no place in the realm of *coosan*, tradition, and of those aspects of life that do not change (see Buckley 2000). This distinction between jamano and coosan increases the perceived distance between the photograph and ideas of history.

My interviews made use of a selection of images from the ten albums of colonial-era photographs in the Gambian National Archives, consisting of 2,231 photographs in total. The albums are large objects, each one covering an entire tabletop when open flat. I was usually the only researcher in the archive, and the archivists often visited to see what I was examining. When I asked them questions about the content of the photographs, they responded by providing me with the names of people they felt more qualified than themselves to talk about the images. In one way, this first attempt at photo-elicitation with archivists produced no data about the photographs—no one would answer my questions. On reflection, however, their responses were appropriate and helpful. The archivists were in fact pointing out that they did not consider themselves suitable collaborators in this method of data collection. In their deference, they assisted me in redefining my approach to photo-elicitation based on a more local standard of expertise.

The archivists suggested people who had a privileged connection to the imagery—members of the family circles of persons who had participated in the

events depicted in the imagery. Furthermore, some of them were related to people who had served, from the mid-1930s onward, on the Cinematograph Board of Control. This board had advised the colony's administration on matters related to visual media and reviewed all imported imagery including still photographs, films, posters, and advertising material (Buckley 2010, 149). These people would have been children aged five to ten when the photographs were taken, and in their early twenties at independence. They were all Banjulians—Wolof and Aku men and women from families well established in the capital city of Banjul. The local term for such families is *gourmet*, recognizing their claims to sophistication and urbane manners. These families had a visible presence as bureaucrats in the colony's civil service, and they maintained these posts through independence (Mahoney 1963; Vidler 1998, 63). They were mostly Christian and active in the Catholic and Anglican churches of Banjul. The Aku families descended from Freetonian Creole communities in Sierra Leone (see Aspen 1986; Cohen 1981).

I could not conduct the interviews in the archive itself because the persons I sought were busy during the workweek and the archive's public hours. Using a camera on a copy stand with lights, I photographed and printed up a selection of images to use away from the archive. Sometimes I would take the selection of photographs to the house of one of the interviewees, while at other times people met me at my host's house in Serrekunda, a suburb of Banjul. The archivists were correct—my interviewees readily answered my opening sets of questions regarding the details and names of people, locations, and events in the photographs. On these occasions, my consultants would simply start to identify aspects of the photograph as soon as they saw it. They seemed to presume that since I came from elsewhere, I would not know anything about these images, and that this was why I wanted to ask questions about them. Their presumption was, of course, correct.

THE INTERVIEWS

I usually began an interview with the question, "Can you tell me about these photographs?" I hereby intended to elicit some factual information about the images and to initiate and develop a conversation. In photo-elicitation interviews, questions are routinely open-ended and non-directed (Lapenta 2011, 201; see also Edgar 2004, 46, 52; El Guindi 2004, 476; Kratz 1996, 67). The photographs mean to enhance the respondent's engagement and active participation in guiding the direction of the interview. Compared with other forms of interviewing, photo-elicitation is "driven" by the respondents; they have the authoritative voice

in interpreting the materials before them (Lapenta 2011, 206). As Francesco Lapenta (2011, 210–11) notes, the "turn-taking" system of asking questions and giving answers organizes a set of hierarchies and asymmetries between the interviewer and the interviewees. In contrast, in an open-ended photo-elicitation interview, photographs provide "a tool to break the directive nature of verbal questioning . . . unlike verbally delivered questions, images are not generally part of a turn-taking system." An image looked at during an interview does not belong to an established discourse such as that of the spoken question. It is thus not subject to particular forms of interpretation and resolution.

While talking about the photographs, my consultants focused on the following themes: the sepia tint of the photographs' black-and-white coloring; the names of the objects and the clothes appearing in the photographs; the compositional style of the photograph; and the question of whether they—the interviewees— might have themselves been in the photographs. Each photograph elicited the same opening response in Wolof, "Yagga na torop" [it is very old]. It was the appearance of the photograph rather than the content itself that made it look old. Specifically, it was that the imagery was printed in black and white. For people born in the first decade of independence, black-and-white (B&W) images have negative connotations related to a perceived lack of modernism and cosmopolitanism. Some follow-up interviews with people born in the early 1970s, using the same set of photographs, similarly began with "yagga na torop." But this statement was always followed by a laugh and "dafa local" [it is local]. *Local*, borrowed directly from English, means something clearly produced locally and not imported. For older photographers, speaking of the days before color film in the late 1970s, to say that B&W photography was local meant that they could develop and print the images themselves in their own darkrooms (Buckley 2006, 71). Unlike color film, B&W did not need to be sent away for processing and printing in labs in the Senegalese capital of Dakar, or even in London. For an older photographer, *local* evoked the sense of pride in the autonomy of one's craft.

Clients of the photographers, however, considered these B&W photographs local when the new processing and printing technology of color film revealed the provinciality of established portraiture. In this context, *local* meant out of fashion, without any of the positive implications of the term *classic*. I sometimes saw "Old Pa" photographers and young "upstart" photographers spar in friendly and humorous terms about B&W imagery's moral worth or lack thereof. On one occasion, outside a studio, a group of men sat in the shade of the veranda passing

the day. The older photographer talked about the "old days" and the process of developing and printing B&W photographs. A young photographer, just starting out, interrupted, stating that he opposed B&W, then proceeding to purposely misconstrue the meaning of the word *film*: "Because, in the old films, in the black-and-white films, you see no black people. Like in all the war films—you would think only white people fought in the war. But with color film, you get to see black people. Color film is better." Everyone laughed, even the Old Pa.

Each photograph's discussion included a lengthy listing of the elements within the frame: "This is Cameron Street . . . this is Buckle Street . . . this is where the Methodist Bookshop is . . . this is Wellington Street . . . this is where the UAC [United Africa Company] was . . . this guy is smoking . . . this guy must have been in his seventies . . . this is the wife of the governor . . . nearly all Banjulians went to this school." Occasionally, conversation veered away from the photographs to people's memories of the types of scenery depicted in the images. For example, when looking at images of transportation during the late 1940s, one man spoke about riding his new bicycle out of the city to see and impress friends at Yundum Vocational College; about being offered and taking long rides in cars with Europeans; and about the trucks bringing people and goods to celebrations and feasts. Yet in each instance, the discussion would quickly return to the respective photographs on view, describing images and appearances rather than individualized experiences and events. In front of the photographs, people listed brand names— the names of the bicycles, "Hercules . . . Solex," the names of the cars, the trucks and their characteristics—the luster of the chrome, the dull matte of the unpolished leather seats, the worn-leather steering wheel, the shiny surface of the bicycle's bell.

Similarly, images depicting people participating in the rites of colonial civic life (Empire Day, Remembrance Day, the King's Birthday, etc.) elicited comments on how things looked rather than how the people may have thought or felt. The boys in the photograph of a Wolof woman selling poppies in MacCarthy Square on Remembrance Day 1948 were wearing amulets. The man in the photograph of veterans outside the British Legion office hailed from the provinces "up country"—he sported a plain, light-colored jacket (see figure 1). The children in the photograph of a King's Birthday parade were wearing Malfa Creek School uniforms, and those in the photograph of an Empire Day parade uniforms from St. Mary's School.

The commentary focused on the clothes that people wore "back then," but it dealt less with the past than with how children looked wearing their uniforms,

Figure 1. Photograph produced by the Public Relations Office of the Gambia Colony. Property of the National Archives of the Republic of The Gambia, filed under PHO1 (formerly CSO51), "Photographs, Bathurst Buildings and Various Others in Photograph Albums" (1942–1957).

the look of medals worn by veterans, how people raised their arms to hold flags, or with how one man held his cigarette. The surface realms of dress and appearance dominated viewers' perceptions.

People showed much interest in the composition of the photographs, including in the arrangement of the scene, the physical location of the photographer, and the aesthetic qualities of the setting. These observations suggest a finely tuned sensitivity to the deliberate, *performative* aspects of photography. I point here not

so much to the notion of "photographs as performance" developed by Elizabeth Edwards (2001, 16–22), which analyses the social biography of photographs as material things and the agency of images in making meaning in a variety of contexts—archives, albums, exhibits, and collections, for example. Rather, I am thinking of Johannes Fabian's (1996, 261–62) discussion of painting as performance: the image records and shows, within its materiality, its accomplishment as an aesthetically composed object. The Gambians I interviewed were interested in the photograph's production craft.

It is this performative aspect of photography that David MacDougall (2006) examines in his analysis of the photography of Jean Audema, who worked for the colonial service in what was then the French Congo between 1894 and 1905. MacDougall (2006, 185) makes his sociopolitical interpretation of Audema's images contingent on their compositional and photographic qualities. So what might look, for example, like an anthropometric arrangement of people in a photograph is better understood as a result of the photographer's interest in "achieving a balanced and varied composition of human forms. . . . There is a conscious interplay of diagonals." For MacDougall, Audema's compositional aesthetics are so clearly present that the viewer can see "theatricality" in the depicted scenes. The image clearly presents itself as the fabricated product of a creative and collaborative encounter between the photographer and his sitters—"only the most naïve viewer could ever interpret Audema's group photographs as pure reflections of reality" (204–5).

Similarly, the Gambian photographs demonstrated obvious aesthetic arrangements for the camera. Viewers quickly pointed out oddities in composition: the placing of an especially short man in a group portrait of cricket players; a jacket that appeared too short on the arms of a man in the portrait; a lineup for a race in which some of the runners were not on their marks. Shown a photograph of canons firing a salute at MacCarthy Square, the viewers mostly wondered whether the photographer had been in danger taking the photos (figure 2). Similarly, a photograph of a man pole-vaulting at a sports day also raised the question of the photographer's location. The twist of the body and the turned angle of the photographed athlete appeared particularly eye-catching. The viewers described not what made the photographs historical, but what made them visually engaging. The visual encounter with these photographs thus did not lead to the intellectual perception of the presence of embedded information; rather, it constituted a form of aesthetic contemplation and admiration.
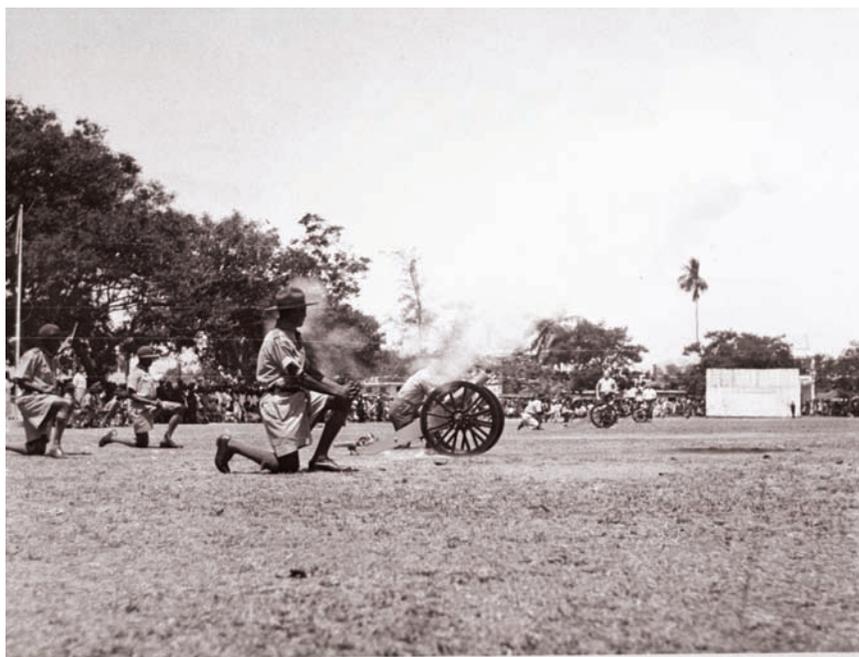
Figure 2. Photograph produced by the Public Relations Office of the Gambia Colony. Property of the National Archives of the Republic of The Gambia, filed under PHO1 (formerly CSO51), "Photographs, Bathurst Buildings and Various Others in Photograph Albums" (1942–1957).

In addition to weighing the aesthetic composition of the images, interviewees often imagined actually being in the photographs. For example, after describing the aesthetic composition of the photograph on view, one respondent wondered whether he himself might be one of the people depicted in it. Because the image had been taken before his birth, I replied that this was not possible. He disregarded this comment—he could still *imagine* being in the photograph, that is, being dressed and composed for the photograph by wearing the amulets, feeling the weight of the hat on his head, and the rub of the shirt's fabric on his skin. He saw himself turning his attention away from the finely dressed Wolof woman selling poppies on his left toward the photographer and his camera in front of him (see figure 3). In this case, photo-elicitation provided an occasion to wonder about fabricated childhoods and what it might have been like to have appeared and been photographed in that way. Such descriptions posit a relationship between individuals and colonial life based on *reverie* as opposed to memory— dreamy recollections of the past that require no preconditions or antecedents (Bachelard 1971). Indeed, the discourse of daydreaming regularly emerges in the practice of

Figure 3. Photograph produced by the Public Relations Office of the Gambia Colony. Property of the National Archives of the Republic of The Gambia, filed under PHO1 (formerly CSO51), "Photographs, Bathurst Buildings and Various Others in Photograph Albums" (1942–1957).

photography in The Gambia, giving rise to a style of portraiture using double-exposure techniques—allowing the viewer to see the sitter at multiple super-imposed angles (figure 4). This style of portrait is known as *xool sa bopp*—to day-dream (lit., to look at one's head) (Buckley 2000, 84).

PHOTO-ELICITATION AND COLONIAL PHOTOGRAPHY

Based on other postcolonial studies of photography, I had expected to hear narratives in which the interviewees used photographs to assert their sense of political lineage. These elicitations would suggest a point of departure from a Eurocentric and imperial view of the photographs' content. This belief that the colonial photographs might serve as vessels for postcolonial histories—as opposed to being objects of aesthetic contemplation—has its roots in the way that colonial photographs first emerged as objects of academic inquiry. The study of colonial photography initially developed within a discourse founded on Foucauldian con-cepts of power/knowledge and the imagery's genealogy within imperial systems of domination and ideology (see, e.g., Alloula 1986; Faris 1992, 1996; Gordon 1997; Ryan 1997).
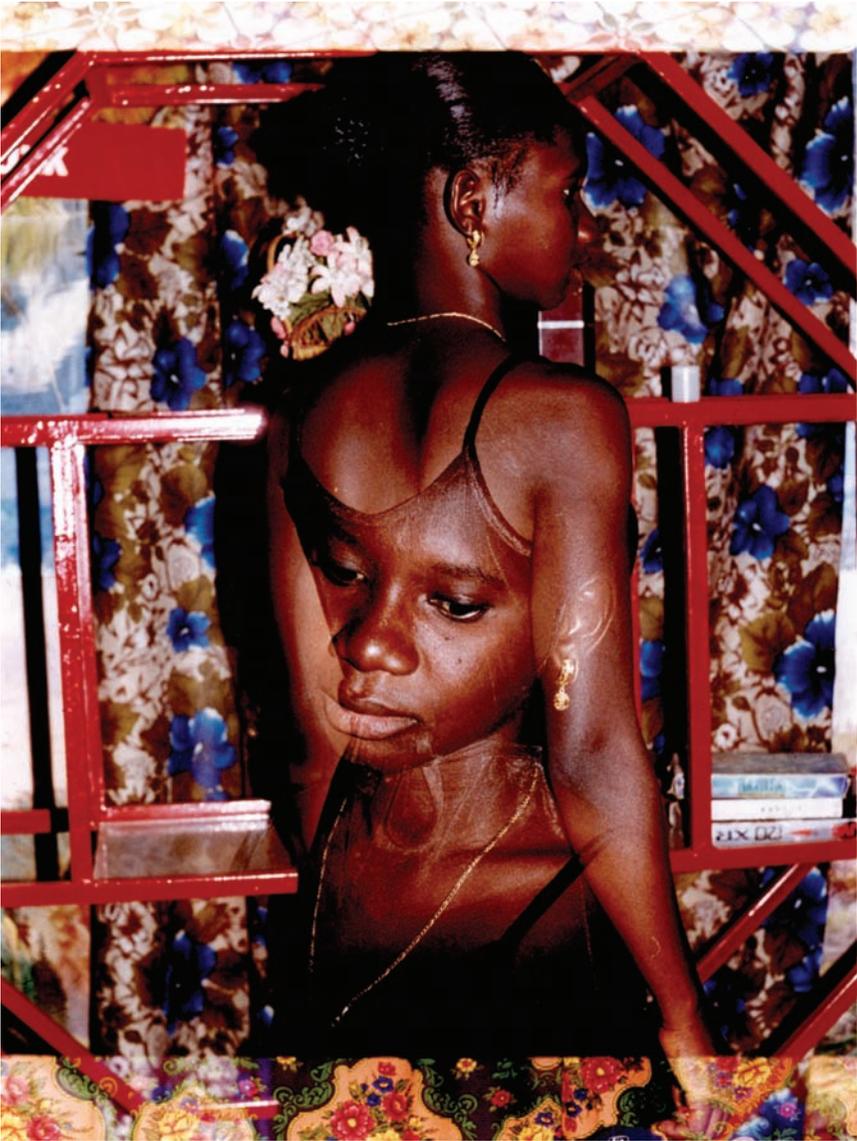
Figure 4. Xool Sa Bopp. Photographer: Doudou Jeng, New Millennium Image Hunters, Brikama 2000. From the collection of Liam Buckley.

This hermeneutic opens up with the question of whether colonial photography is actually able to offer any verifiable data about the scenes and persons in the depiction. It identifies the biases encoded within the imagery and formulates archival strategies for managing these biases in the collection and the analysis of visual data (Viditz-Ward 1985, 1987; Scherer 1990). In this context, colonial

photography depicts lives full of tension, ambivalence, and complexity rather than monolithic political domination (see Geary 1988; Gable 1998; Pankhurst 1992; Prins 1992). The focus on archival method also becomes evident in visual studies centered on the materiality of colonial photography and its engagement with colonial life through procedures such as image storage, transmission, handling, display, and collection (Edwards 2001; Edwards and Hart 2004).

These developments express the overall goal of describing colonial photography according to the vantage points of the subjugated and those in ambivalent and hybrid positions of power. Research based on photo-elicitation best illustrates this postcolonial turn—taking colonial photographs back to the locale of their first production as interview instruments. The resulting data are the stuff of postcolonial commentaries, offering historical and substantiate alternative accounts of colonial life (Edwards 2001, 87–96, 98): "Contrasting, and even ultimately competing, historical refigurations, creating . . . plural frames of history." For example, photo-elicitation among Australian Aboriginal peoples typifies the postcolonial approach to the inventory of colonial material culture as a means of accessing the history of the colonial past. These studies examine the viewing of colonial photographs as an occasion for recuperating historical knowledge and Aboriginal identity (see Edwards 2005). The photographs testify to losses in the past and provoke acts of history-telling in the present. The telling of the history encoded in the image constitutes "a grounded empowerment, repossession, renewal and contestation" (Edwards 2005, 29).

As such, photographs themselves serve as a "form of extended personhood in that they constitute a sum of relations over time" (Edwards 2005, 31). The emphasis on the historical consciousness evoked by colonial photography fits with the importance accorded to memory work in the wider context of postcolonial studies (see, e.g., Kuhn and McAllister 2006). Both fields of inquiry constitute efforts in "reclaiming the shadows" (Edwards 2001, 84) and in recognizing the extent to which local political consciousness differs from state-oriented and official memorializing (Cole 1998, 105; Van Dijk 1998, 169–70). In the Australian Aboriginal examples, colonial photographs elicit a sense of continuous identity derived from memory work and a claim to historical knowledge of a particular place. Knowing the place depicted in a photograph becomes the basis for geopolitical tenure. In front of the photographs the tellers re-establish and reclaim relations with their ancestors and the land.

In light of this politically charged analysis, the rather mundane data I collected in the course of many interviews surprised me. If I wanted to respect the

need to enhance interviewees' agency in the process of generating data, my thwarted expectations could be interpreted as a mark of legitimate methodology. For example, Joshua Bell (2006, 200), in his study of photo repatriation, describes a similar situation in which his respondents focused on the discussion topics that interested *them*—topics that did not correspond to those that Bell had original found worthwhile. In some ways, this situation validated his work. The telling of Gambian colonial photographs made by my interviewees belongs to a genre of performance and to a set of expectations different from those described in the account of Australian Aboriginal photographic culture. The difference centers on the way the scene depicted in the photograph is viewed and engaged. In his phemenological study of the experience of viewing photographs, *Camera Lucida*, Roland Barthes (1981, 38–40) describes the contemplation of a photographed place. He suggests that images are compelling when they engender in the viewer a desire not just to visit but to inhabit the place in the photograph.

Edwards's account of Australian Aboriginal responses includes an attempt on the part of the respective respondents to articulate what it might take to imagine living in the place depicted in the photograph. Yet my data on Gambian imaginations of the same type differ in how the photographic imagery *invites* a sense of belonging to the place of the photograph (see Magee 2007). In the case of the Australian Aboriginal studies, the sense of belonging has a juridical basis, centered on the salvaging of a historical continuity for land rights and kinship relations. Data from the Gambian photo-elicitation, on the other hand, suggest a sense of belonging based on judging the look of life in the depicted scene—it has an aesthetic basis. A critical difference obtains between these two senses of be-longing. Edwards's studies suggest that viewers experience a direct and political connection with content of the photographs. Gambian data offer no such clear connection. While the data about the look of the clothing may concern colonial history, they do not resolve into any experience of a clear link to that history. Here the sense of belonging is not politicized—instead, it remains unresolved, imagined, sometimes fabricated and highly aestheticized. This sense of belonging attends to the fashion and architectural details of the colonial past, but it does *not* constitute a form of colonial nostalgia (see Bissell 2005). Nostalgia involves a *longing* for some lineage with an idealized past. Furthermore, the discussions and evaluations of the clothing and style in the imagery do not suggest a "technique of the self," whereby the viewers of the photographs construct and intensify an attentive sense of their own selves as they review the photographs (see Behrend

2002, 57–59). Their lists of clothes and places proffer a straightforward aesthetic critique of beauty, fashion, and intelligent photographic craftwork.

MODERN PARALLELS

In trying to understand my interviewees' almost purely aesthetic approach to photographs of the colonial past, I found it useful to compare their comments to what they said about contemporary photographs. For Barthes (1981, 87), the essence of a photograph, that which distinguishes it from other expressive objects, is its status as a "certificate of presence." As such, culture imbues the photograph with a powerful certainty—what Barthes (107) refers to as the certainty of the *this-has-been*—the uncontestable fact that at some point a photograph was taken of something that existed and was in front of the camera at the moment of the shutter clicking. In photo-elicitation, the question of what postcolonial viewers feel they share with those depicted in the photograph—other than posing or appearing similarly—remains open. That the people photographed existed in the past does not posit a relationship with them. The aesthetic evaluations that dominate my photo-elicitation data are not limited to the viewing of colonial photographs or images of the past. The same aesthetic is active when Gambians judge photographs of modern nationhood—for example, identification cards, school admission forms, or job and bank account applications.

In particular, the photographs on elementary school application forms elicited extended commentary as to how long the images would resemble the children in the photograph. Hollywood, named after his portrait studio in Serrekunda, showed me a photograph of his five- and seven-year-old daughters. In the picture the girls stood next to each other—one taller than the other. Both wore the same type of dress and shoes—small, crisply white sports shoes, the loops of the large thick laces almost touching the floor. They both held the same kind of lunchbox. The backdrop was a beach scene with palm trees—the one Hollywood was using for all his portrait work at the time. As is typical of the Gambian practice of transforming portraits into identification images, Hollywood was about to cut out the two faces to make them the size required for passport images. The girls were entering the school system and needed photographic identification to accompany their admission paperwork.

As we looked at the photograph, Hollywood began to discuss whether these photographs would bear any resemblance to future photographs of the girls when they had grown up. Hollywood doubted that we would we be able to discern that the same two individuals inhabited both sets of pictures. He was not alone

in discerning the vagueness of the supposed certainty offered by children's identification photographs. I met many parents similarly bemused by the state's request to have their children photographed for official purposes. The fact that these children existed in a photograph would, with time, become irrelevant. This questioning of the a photograph's capacity to identify its content for its viewer runs contrary to presumptions about the modernism and rationalism of photography's representational qualities and about its capacity to generate the experience of particular types of personhood:

> How many thousands of days passed between infancy and early childhood vanish beyond direct recall! How strange it is to need another's help to learn that this naked baby in the yellowed photograph, sprawled happily on rug or cot, is you. The photograph, fine child of the age of mechanical reproduction, is only the most peremptory of a huge modern accumulation of documentary evidence (birth certificates, diaries, report cards, letters, medical records, and the like) which simultaneously records a certain apparent continuity and emphasizes its loss from memory. Out of this estrangement comes a conception of personhood, identity (yes, you and that naked baby are identical) which, because it cannot be "remembered," must be narrated. (Anderson 1991, 208)

Hollywood's critique of a photograph's capacity to maintain identification with its subject resembles the detachment obvious during the interviews on colonial photographs. In both cases, a disposition toward photography emerged that is mostly concerned with the *ways* in which a photograph visually represents, rather than with *what* a photograph represents. This form of evaluating photographs indeed provides a point of departure from a Eurocentric and imperial view of photographic content. Yet it does so not by generating alternate or competing views on the content of the image, but by offering a critical assessment of the core indexical value of photographs—that is, of photography's capacity to craft and evoke a definite and persuasive link between the image and the actual people and objects appearing in it (see Wright 1992, 26–27).

DISTRACTION

My Gambian consultants seemed distracted from the historical content of the photographs by the surface details of the images and their method of production. They would provide a litany of brands and place names and descriptions. This way of looking and showing uses "tactile optics," touching and grasping at

the details on the surface of the image and lingering there (see Taussig 1991; Marks 2000, 163). This *distracted* way of seeing focuses on the aesthetic features of the photograph, rather than on any message it might have to offer. States of distraction have become central to the analysis of subjectivities—moral and political—in postcolonial African life. These studies routinely focus on sacred states of spiritual and physical ecstasy and spirit-possession when persons "tune into" forms of radical alterity (see Werbner 2002). The insights expressed by Gambians looking at colonial photography more resemble Walter Benjamin's (1979, 229–30) concept of "profane illumination," by recognizing the arbitrary and provisional nature of everyday life. Significantly, both these forms of distraction— sacred and profane—challenge the dominance of state-centered, secular accounts of rationality and modernity.

In her examination of Okiek reactions to photographic portraits, Corrine Kratz (1996, 67) notes that her respondents "looked though" the actual image in front of them to focus on the content of the imagery depicted. They had no interest in the photographic techniques of fabrication. In marked contrast, my data demonstrate a great interest in photographic production. Why this discrepancy? It may have to do with the persons chosen for the interviews—those people my archival consultants deemed experts. All of them had themselves experienced the act of photography within a portrait studio setting. They understood the importance of arrangement, perspective, and aesthetic detail that dominates the production of studio photographs. For my photo-elicitation research interviewees, the craft of photography constituted an undeniable, everyday presence.

A distracted way of seeing attends to so-called residual data—those impressions created by style, arrangement, conventions of dress, and other apparent trivialities. These cannot be understood as monuments to a notion of the "archaicized past" (see Feldman 2004, 164–65). I was left with the question of how to understand and position my data in a theoretical field dominated by ideas of political identity and resistance. Was my data useless, shallow, and arbitrary? Or did it question the theoretical expectations of photo-elicitation to produce politically significant or subaltern responses? Can the photograph even do what we take for granted—connect the present with the past and effectively represent the past to the present? My interviewees did not seem to feel connected to the colonial past as the result of viewing these images, nor did they have any comments or criticisms related to the imperial situation that had produced the images. Instead, they wanted to talk about those same details of appearance and arrangement that concern them as they go to have their own photographs taken today. Ultimately,

a sense of mystery surrounds the notion of a connection between the viewing self and the visual content of a photograph. The fact that the past happened remains certain. Yet the way Gambians engaged colonial photographs suggests that any proximity between the past and the present relies on aesthetic rather than political concerns.

CONCLUSION: Photo-Elicitation after Colonialism

The data presented in this article—products of an extended attention to aesthetic details— create a theoretical challenge. As Clifford Geertz (1976, 1475) recognizes in his "Art as a Cultural System," "The chief problem presented by the sheer phenomenon of aesthetic force . . . is how to place it within the other modes of social activity, how to incorporate it into the texture of a particular pattern of life." Is it necessary to force aesthetics into a conversation with political concerns for it to be considered relevant data for postcolonial studies? Kris Hardin (1993, 9–10) notes that "until very recently the arts have been seen only as a reflection or mirror of culture, something that occurs after the fact. Researchers have tended to ask questions about what an object means, symbolizes, or repre-sents." Is it possible to conceptualize a relationship between aesthetics and politics, for example, that does not make the relevancy of aesthetic detail contingent on its relevancy to politics? One alternative is to consider aesthetic force its *own* mode of social activity.

As the interviews discussed in this essay suggest, the experience of viewing the surface details of photographs actually constructs—rather than simply illus-trates—its own social critique. This critique, however, is rooted in questions such as "Is this fashionable? Is this up to date? Does it look good? How were the subjects in this photograph arranged?" That the ubiquitous practice of photography in Africa would lead to a skilled and discerning artisan viewership, sensitive to the plasticity of the art of photography, should come as no surprise. It defies the presumption that the images' viewers and sitters have been wholly specimen-like and passive, uncritical, and disinterested in the technique of photography hap-pening in front of them. It displays "good taste." The views expressed by my interviewees were neither archival nor curatorial in type. Instead, they exhibited sensitivity to the artisan and vernacular aspects of photography as a craft-tech-nique. This craft has a primarily aesthetic goal—Gambians want to look good, elegant, and up to date (see Buckley 2006).

Are Gambians unusual in their preoccupation with the aesthetic when view-ing a photograph that may seem obviously political in nature? The type of data

examined in this article may well have appeared in the field work of other researchers without having been prioritized for analysis. For example, during her photo-based work with Okiek people, Kratz (1996, 69) notes several instances when her own photographic practices became interview topics: "Selena: Ai! Cory photographs anything!" Researchers may not have developed analyses of these types of data because of a social scientific approach wedded to the representational ideologies of photography. Photo-elicitation studies have prioritized and normalized political over aesthetic interpretations of photographs, attending to the politics of representation at the expense of aesthetic evaluations. While political criticism may have as its goal to make life more honest or fair, righting colonialism's wrongs, aesthetics remains aloof from these concerns. Instead this approach is fully cognizant of and engaged by craft, arrangement, and beauty, remaining wary of or at least unmoved and unimpressed by the politicized agenda that has driven photo-elicitation studies.

ABSTRACT

In photo-elicitation studies of colonial imagery, photographs are seen as repositories of historical data. This article examines the author's experience of photo-elicitation in the postcolonial context of The Gambia, West Africa. Here, Gambian viewers responded to the aesthetic and compositional details of colonial photographs rather than their historical content. This attention to the surface of the photograph and its aesthetic qualities suggests a disconnection or distraction from the colonial history depicted in the images. This photo-elicitation does not engage or resolve a historical relationship with the colonial past. Rather, it reveals an engagement with elements of the photograph in which the visual legacies of colonialism—identification, representation, memorialization—remain absent. The absence of acknowledged connections to the past calls into question the ability of the photograph to represent the colonial past or its subjects to the viewer. In Gambian viewers' preoccupation with aesthetic details, the photograph becomes a crafted object, rather than a link to colonial subordination. This calls into question the efficacy of photo-elicitation to demonstrate reactions to colonialism that move beyond Eurocentric frameworks. [photo-elicitation; colonialism; representation in photography; The Gambia]

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1. Following common usage, "the Gambia" refers to "the Gambia Colony." After independence (in 1965), the Gambia became "The Gambia," as in "The Republic of The Gambia."
2. Collier was not the first to use photo-elicitation techniques. Franz Boas used photographs of museum objects to gather data from his Haida consultants (Brown, Coote, and Gosden 2000, 266–67). Lila M. O'Neale (1932) similarly used "museum photographs" during her research with Yurok-Karok basket weavers in the early 1930s. The use and discussion of photo-elicitation remains steady in visual anthropology (see Harper 2002; see also Jhala 2004; Crowder 2007; Patton 2004). Along with "film elicitation" (see El Guindi 2004, 177), photo-elicitation plays a central role in applied visual anthropology (e.g., Chalfen and Rich 2004).

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