

# MULTIMODAL ANTHROPOLOGIES

## Commentary

### Heartened by Iconoclasm: A Few Preliminary Thoughts About Multimodality

Richard Powis

Washington University in St. Louis

In their article, “Multimodality: An Introduction,” Collins, Durlington, and Gill (2017) invite us to attend to multimodality as a productive disruption to traditional approaches to research, analysis, community engagement and collaboration, and dissemination. Multimodality rethinks and expands upon what is considered legitimate knowledge and knowledge dissemination. In doing so, it encourages novel forms of engaging both the public and our research participants. While multimodality, in the authors’ words, does not represent a “break from the past,” the emergence of “Multimodal Anthropologies” within *American Anthropologist*, the flagship journal of the American Anthropology Association (AAA), represents a monumental shift in our discipline’s approach to and endorsement of the processes of knowledge production and circulation that, until recently, were considered to be part of the fringe and were not taken seriously.

For me, multimodality means publicly documenting the trajectory of my research through text, images, and video across blogs and social media platforms like Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook. My goal is not only to report the data in near real time but also to demonstrate to my audience the process of what I do as an ethnographer. My hope is that I can successfully invite both my academic audiences and colleagues in the United States and my interlocutors in Senegal to engage with me and with each other in dialogue about the research topic and the research design. While my Senegalese colleagues (e.g., interlocutors and academics) have been highly receptive to and enthusiastic about this multimodal formulation, it has been met with a range of skepticism by senior colleagues at home: from considering my approach to be novel but ultimately extracurricular to regarding my approach as potentially dangerous and ethically unsound. Imagine my excitement to read that a multimodal approach to research is now endorsed and encouraged by *American Anthropologist*.

“Multimodality: An Invitation” builds on a long history of disciplinary reflections and critiques, and makes me hopeful and excited about the future of our discipline. Very recently, in 2011, paleoanthropologist John Hawks wrote an article for the online publication *anthropologies* titled, “What’s Wrong with Anthropology?” that echoed similar

concerns. In his indictment of our stubbornly technophobic colleagues, Hawks writes, “Anthropology’s hashtag ends in fail. If you don’t know what that means, you’re one of the reasons.” The essay was a call for routine integration of social media platforms into fieldwork—within our research design, methodology, or public engagement—as well as for the purposes of shortening the publication timeline that would allow scholars to interpret and report data almost as fast as it is collected. In the same year, Giovanni da Col and David Graeber (2011) hailed the return of ethnographic theory in their foreword of the first issue of *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory*. In their essay, da Col and Graeber noted that the spirit of *HAU* is one that inverts—or reverts—the order of events: theory should emerge *from* research and extend *into* disciplines outside of anthropology, as it once influenced Freud, Wittgenstein, and Sartre, rather than be carried from continental philosophy into the field, as it often is nowadays. Tricia Wang (2012) later published the workflow of her “live fieldnotes” methodology, a system of data management in which she organizes fieldnotes and images, and strategically shares them across social media platforms. I was elated to read these together as a junior in college preparing for my first research experience in Senegal. They complement each other, I believed, in that to report transparently about data and collection means putting oneself in a position to be held accountable by an audience in real time. It means collaborating with local interlocutors and considering their perspectives independent from Eurocentric interpretations of human sociality. As I learned about such innovations and disruptions, I started to feel that our discipline was on the brink of a sea change.

“Multimodal Anthropologies” is a long-overdue intervention that encompasses visual anthropology, networked anthropologies (see Collins and Durlington 2015), participatory-action research, and experimental ethnography to facilitate the use of both conventional and emergent forms of media and art forms. It accomplishes three things.

First, it destabilizes prescriptive and pedantic radicalizations of “ethnography” (see, for instance, Ingold [2014] and Shryock [2016]). Attending to the multimodal forces us to rethink idealized research timelines and geographies, including the boundary between “field” and “home,” which is already rendered porous by social media (Jackson 2015).

That boundary becomes indistinct when one asks, “When does research begin, and when does research end?”

Second, by confronting disciplinary doxa that demands the publication of articles in high-ranking journals and the production of monographs as a precondition for obtaining tenure, multimodality offers new possibilities for the circulation of our research with even greater prospects for public engagement while providing novel opportunities to make our work more meaningful to the interlocutors and communities it represents.

Third, by engaging with nontraditional media, emphasizing transparency, and highlighting collaboration with our interlocutors, a multimodal approach to research demands that we confront new ethical considerations in an era of connectivity, particularly with respect to protecting identities and minimizing risk.

As a doctoral candidate engaging with various digital media technologies, and getting ready to begin fieldwork, the primary concern that I have heard from faculty, institutional review boards, and grant-proposal reviewers is about the afterlife of the media that I intend to produce. Posting an image that I take during my research on Instagram or tweeting about my experiences in real time, my senior colleagues and professors argue, places my research participants at risk of being identified. In the event that my participants decide that they do not want to remain anonymous, there still exists a lingering paternalistic concern that a participant might go on to regret their decision to be identified. These concerns stem from the anxiety that “the Internet never forgets” (meaning you can never truly erase something from the Internet). Allow me to take a multimodal approach to addressing this concern.

First, the argument overlooks the even longer afterlife of books and articles. Excepting new and very expensive editions, authors and publishers cannot remove text, data, or photos from books and articles once they are already published.

Second, by positioning social media against conventional forms of publications (a false and unproductive dichotomy), the argument supposes that the ethical guidelines and criteria for what can and should be shared publicly are different for the two mediums. A more appropriate and democratic approach should be: if you would not publish it in an article or a book, you should not publish it elsewhere.

Finally, we must acknowledge that social media is not the only medium that is changing in the academic landscape. Books and articles in digital form—whether or not they are behind a paywall—are still accessible to our interlocutors by informal or illicit means. To believe otherwise is naïve at best and condescending at worst. But it also points to the ways in which different forms of academic knowledge are treated differently. Conventional publication practices are virtually unquestioned, while multimodal productions are treated with additional scrutiny and paternalism.

The advantage of multimodality is in its flexibility. My research approach is a tripartite integration of conventional

ethnographic methods, publicly shared fieldnotes and photography, and participant collaboration. But my approach is not appropriate for all research projects. Nor does it adequately address the different risks that research participants might encounter in regards to the use of multimedia during fieldwork. This elasticity means that research design and publication can range from conventional to experimental, independent of each other, and that they can even overlap temporally. A multimodal approach encourages us to be conscious of our interactions with our interlocutors, the communities in which we work, our audiences, and each other, and to employ all of the resources to which we have access; how one uses those resources is up to the researcher.

As Collins, Durlington, and Gill assert, a multimodal approach to anthropological research and knowledge production is available to everyone regardless of methodological training and technical skill levels. Millennials like me are particularly well suited to take a multimodal approach because we often keep up with cutting-edge trends in media production in our everyday lives. We are not yet fully enculturated into the doxa of academia and hence are better positioned to challenge disciplinary boundaries. It is incumbent upon graduate students, junior faculty, and young scholars like myself to challenge institutionalized norms of research design and publication. What we require from our senior colleagues and scholars at the helm of our discipline is their openness and their continued support in carving out a space in which to experiment and innovate and come up with new multimodal approaches to research and knowledge production. For senior colleagues who wish to be more engaged, multimodality is an opportunity to participate in collaborative mentorship with graduate and undergraduate students; while professors guide students’ research design, students can introduce professors to millennial modes of media production and engagement.

With their invitation and their editorial guidance of the “Multimodal Anthropologies” section in *American Anthropologist*, Collins, Durlington, and Gill’s efforts represent a push toward the acceptance of the kind of innovative approaches to research that inspire me. They urge us toward the acknowledgment of the importance of creating a space for the publication of knowledge that we produce with our interlocutors. This opens new doors for the consideration of unconventional forms of academic knowledge, both produced and disseminated in unconventional ways. Most importantly, multimodality renders our research malleable and accessible to our interlocutors in ways that allow our interlocutors to be heard more clearly by our audiences. I look forward to engaging with the work of multimodal researchers in this and other venues in the future.

## REFERENCES CITED

- Collins, Samuel Gerald, and Matthew Durlington. 2015. *Networked Anthropology: A Primer for Ethnographers*. London: Routledge.

- Collins, Samuel Gerald, Matthew Durlington, and Harjant Gill. 2017. "Multimodality: An Invitation." *American Anthropologist* 119 (1): 1–5.
- da Col, Giovanni, and David Graeber. 2011. "Foreword." *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 1 (1): vi–xxxv.
- Hawks, John. 2011. "What's Wrong with Anthropology?" *anthropologies: A Collaborative Online Project*, October 1. <http://www.anthropologiesproject.org/2011/10/whats-wrong-with-anthropology.html>.
- Ingold, Tim. 2014. "That's Enough about Ethnography!" *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 4 (1): 383–95.
- Jackson, John L., Jr. 2015. "Ethnography Is, Ethnography Ain't." In *Writing Culture and the Life of Anthropology*, edited by Orin Starn, 152–69. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Shryock, Andrew. 2016. "Ethnography: Provocation." *Cultural Anthropology*, May 3. <https://culanth.org/fieldsights/871-ethnography-provocation>.
- Wang, Tricia. 2012. "Writing Live Fieldnotes: Toward a More Open Ethnography." *Ethnography Matters*, August 2. <http://ethnographymatters.net/blog/2012/08/02/writing-live-fieldnotes-towards-a-more-open-ethnography/>.

## Photo Essay

# Tainted Frictions: A Visual Essay

Paolo S. H. Favero

University of Antwerp

"Tainted Frictions" is a **nonlinear visual essay** that generates a creative set of **tensions** between photographs and texts. Bringing **words** (in the form of a variety of quotes, snippets, and longer reflections) into an interrupted and unstable set of dialogues and frictions with **images** (photographs by the author of this essay), this work can be looked at as a simple and manual form of interactive documentary.

During the **act of exploring** the essay, the viewers/readers are never allowed to take full visual possession of the "big picture" of the essay—that is, of the interface containing the texts and photographs on which the essay builds (see Figure 1; visit the *American Anthropologist* website for the full experience). The logic is simple. When zooming out in order to see an entire photograph, they lose the text (either entirely or simply because it becomes too small to be read). When zooming into the text, they can only see details of the photographs (see Figure 2).

The **interface** functions primarily as a container for a set of (textual and visual) frames that the viewers are constantly forced to "break" and redefine. Actively interpellated by the dialogues between images and text, they have to **frame** and **reframe**, to **zoom** in and out, to **rotate** and **slide**. They get engaged in a choreography that breaks down the act of viewing/reading into a series of small acts of selection enacted through an ongoing **decentering and recentering of the gaze** (see Figure 3). **Vision** mirrors here the process of critical **reflection**.

A theoretical key feature of "Tainted Frictions" is the move away from and beyond the fixity of the **frame**. A notion that has had fundamental status in our understanding of the meaning of images, the frame is today, in fact, under threat, challenged by hypertextuality, multimodality, and by the incorporation of metadata into the image (see Favero 2014). To play with the frame and to explore its present boundaries is of fundamental importance for our understanding of the changing meaning of the image in a digital

landscape. "Tainted Frictions" also translates onto a flat surface some of the principles that underpin **interactive documentaries** (see Aston and Gaudenzi 2012; Favero 2013), highlighting, in particular, the role of the viewers/readers as active spectators and of nonlinearity (Ranciere 2009; cf. Favero 2014). Nonlinearity has classically been addressed in the context of text and novels by scholars such as Barthes, Derrida, and Deleuze, and has become fundamentally important for understanding the construction of narrative in a digital landscape (Lambert 2013). In the specific context of this essay, nonlinear viewing/reading is generated through a series of **tense, ruptured** "syntagmatic relations" (Barthes 1977) between text and image, language and the visual. Mirroring the tensions between the colonizer and the colonized, the West and the non-West, the mind and the body (in a Cartesian sense), such dialogues promote the search for a new way of bringing text and images into dialogue with each other (beyond the logic of "the caption"). **Content** and **form** merge in the space of this dialogue.

As **active spectatorship**, "Tainted Frictions" has been designed to bring to the surface the viewers' "**knowledge-seeking strategies**" (Färber 2007). The images here interrogate not only the relationship between text and image but also conventional ways of controlling the polysemic character of images with the help of captions and other types of verbalized expatiations that consolidate the primacy of verbalized narratives and interpretations over the openness of the image. It is in response to this that "Tainted Frictions" refuses to allow for the creation of a hierarchy (or even a chronology) of viewing between image and text, leaving instead the desire for definitive explanations unfulfilled. Open to the ongoing reinterpretation generated by the viewers, this modality of viewing highlights the nature of **knowledge as something processual** rather than a static thing out there waiting to be discovered, captured, and eventually explained to an external audience, to paraphrase Banks (2001, 112).

In terms of **content**, the essay explores the meaning of color in the colonial encounter. Based upon original high-



FIGURE 1. The entire visual essay. Screenshots courtesy of Paolo S. H. Favero. [Color figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](http://wileyonlinelibrary.com)]

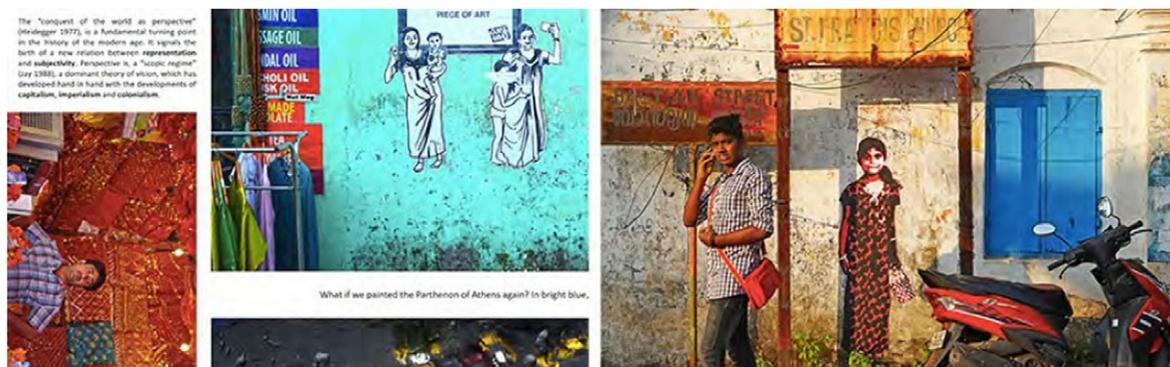


FIGURE 2. Close-up segment of the visual essay. Screenshots courtesy of Paolo S. H. Favero. [Color figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](http://wileyonlinelibrary.com)]

definition photographs of “tainted public spaces” taken by the author in **India** (Delhi, Kochi, Mumbai, and Kolkata) and **Cuba** (Santiago de Cuba and Havana), “Tainted Frictions” addresses color as a terrain of confrontation and friction between the colonized and the colonizer. Refusing to reproduce the simple dualisms of **chromophobia versus chromophilia** and of **West versus the rest**, the essay nevertheless challenges the “unstable mix of attraction and repulsion” that characterizes Western relations to color in general and vivid color in particular (Taussig 2006, 31). Dominated by ideas about rationality, mathematics, geometry, and lines (see Crary 1990; McQuire 1998), the West has looked upon color as secondary to form. Diverging from **the white, heterosexual, civilized (bourgeois), male norm**, color became associated with **women, children, and primitive** people. Goethe famously wrote, “savage na-

tions, uneducated people, and children have a great predilection for vivid colors” (1970, 55).

With its ambivalent status fluctuating between **science and magic**, and between **material and visual culture**, color was hence a fundamental actor in the colonial encounter. There were many conflicts in which color was involved—for instance, the case of *purree*, or Indian Yellow (cf. Bailkin 2014), and the case of *indigo* (see Eaton 2014). Repulsively attracted to it, the West tried nevertheless to **conquer and control** color. In the nineteenth century, for instance, it became an important tool for cataloging (and representing) scales of racial difference. Bailkin (2014) states that “starting in the 1860s art teachers began to offer skin-color charts and proposals to standardize terminology—especially terms like *dusky*, *swarthy*, and *pale* that might provide clues to racial identity” (94; italics in original).

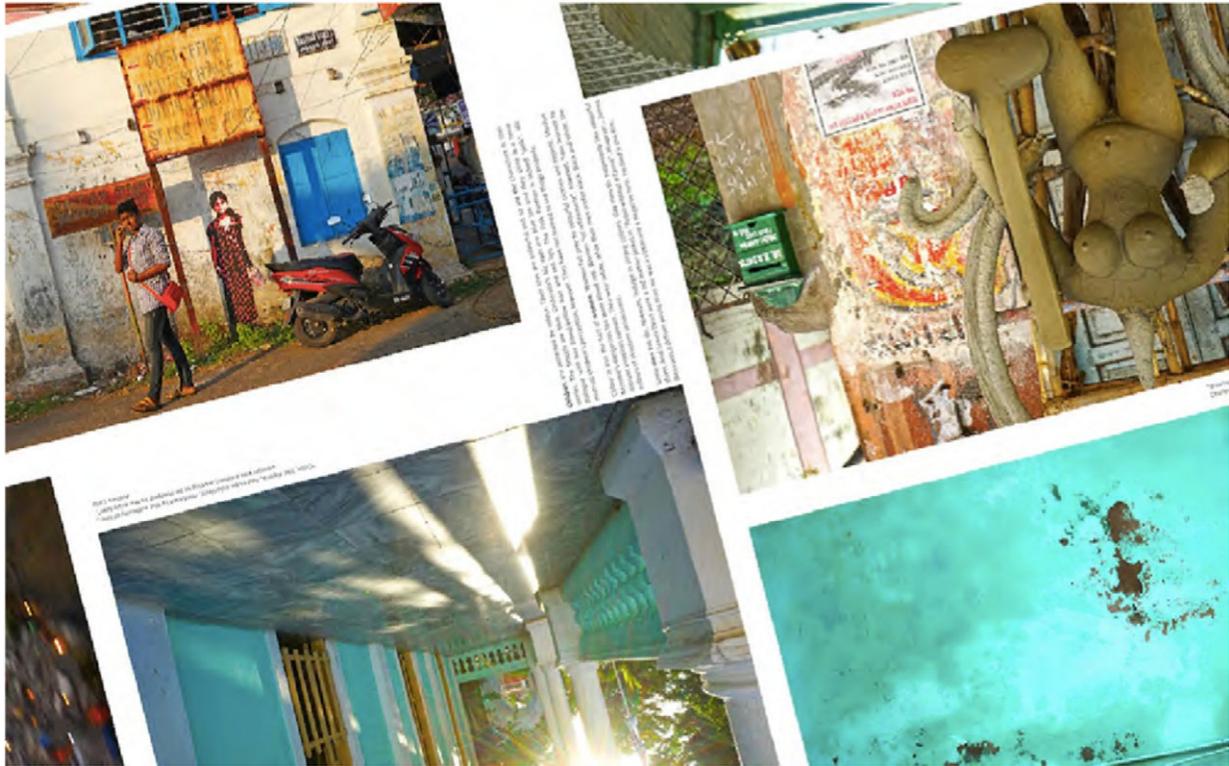


FIGURE 3. Close-up segment of the visual essay. Screenshots courtesy of Paolo S. H. Favero. [Color figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](http://wileyonlinelibrary.com)]

But it is not the goal of this essay to offer an in-depth linear exploration (or explanation) of the meaning and role of color in colonial societies. Quite the opposite. My ambition here is to let the tensions between color and form, senses and the intellect, the colonized and the colonizer, feed (and be fed by) a series of creative, contrapuntal dialogues between images and text. In a constant **merging of content and form** (or to use Chris Wright's [1998] terms of "anthropological relevance" and "aesthetic composition"), I will rather attempt to let such dialogues and frictions open up the horizon of meaning and of experience. Attempting to feed new ideas and visions, this essay will hopefully constitute a step in the search for a language capable of finding the connection between the senses and the intellect, the body and the mind.

The **photographs** selected for this essay are the result of a series of visual searches (enacted in the present) for visible traces (belonging mainly to the past) of chronic resistance. Aiming to **evoke** rather than to explain, to **affect** rather than to document, the chosen images address the natives' engagement with color as a tool for taking possession of space and for creating a visible tension with the colonizers' desire for orderly whiteness (or white orderliness). Colors mark out space here, claiming back what was once taken away. In line with this visual approach, the **texts** that make up the essay should not be reduced to excerpts of a linear essay. They are designed to **intervene** and **interfere** with the act of viewing the photographs that are the center of the essay. Offering a different way (beyond the caption) to con-

ceive of the role of text in relation to images, these texts are to be seen as **provocations**, as **glimpses** into what **could be known**. It is in the ongoing act of "swimming" into this big image composed of photographs and texts that each viewer will find her or his meaning, stimulated by the ongoing series of critical acts of zooming, reframing, rotating, and shifting in which they get involved.

The wish is that "Tainted Frictions" will provide inspiration for rethinking the role and form of the visual (photographic) essay in a digital habitat, and inspire the creation of a variety of adaptations of the logic that underpins its functioning into different ethnographic and theoretical terrains.

#### HOW TO INTERACT WITH THE ESSAY

In order to explore this visual essay do the following steps:

1. Visit the page for this essay on the *American Anthropologist* website.
2. Download the JPG file.
3. Open the file with image-viewing software (Preview, Image Viewer, etc.).
4. Start swimming in the image.

#### FURTHER INFORMATION

The essay is available as a JPG. The original physical size of the image is 202×172 cm but it can be compressed to a variety of (physical and memory) sizes to fit any platform. The picture in the attachment to this document is 28.6 mb.

## REFERENCES CITED

- Aston, Judith, and Sandra Gaudenzi. 2012. "Interactive Documentary: Setting the Field." *Studies in Documentary Film* 6 (2): 125–39.
- Bailkin, Jordanna. 2014. "Indian Yellow: Making and Breaking the Imperial Palette." In *Empires of Vision: A Reader*, edited by M. Jay and S. Ramaswamy, 91–110. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Banks, Marcus. 2001. *Visual Methods in Social Research*. London: Sage.
- Barthes, Roland. 1977. *Image-Music-Text*. London: Fontana Press.
- Berlin, Brent, and Paul Kay. 1969. *Basic Color Terms: Their Universality and Evolution*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Chowdhry, Prem. 2001. *Colonial India and the Making of Empire Cinema: Image, Ideology, and Identity*. New Delhi: Vistaar Publications.
- Cole, Michael, and Sylvia Scribner. 1974. *The Role of Schooling on Memory: Cross-Cultural Research*. New York: Wiley.
- Crary, Jonathan. 1990. *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Eaton, Natasha. 2013. *Colour, Art and Empire: Visual Culture and the Nomadism of Representation*. New York: I. B. Tauris.
- Eaton, Natasha. 2014. "Swadeshi Color: Artistic Production and Indian Nationalism, ca. 1905–ca. 1947." *The Art Bulletin* 95 (4): 623–41.
- Färber, Alexa. 2007. "Exposing Expo: Exhibition Entrepreneurship and Experimental Reflexivity in Late Modernity." In *Exhibition Experiments*, edited by Sharon MacDonald and Paul Basu, 209–39. London: Wiley.
- Favero, Paolo. 2013. "Getting Our Hands Dirty (Again): Interactive Documentaries and the Meaning of Images in the Digital Age." *Journal of Material Culture* 18 (3): 259–77.
- Favero, Paolo. 2014. "Learning to Look Beyond the Frame: Reflections on the Changing Meaning of Images in the Age of Digital Media Practices." *Visual Studies* 29 (2): 166–79.
- Goethe, Johann. 1970. *Goethe's Theory of Colors*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Greenfield, Patricia M. 1966. "On Culture and Conservation." In *Studies in Cognitive Growth*, edited by Jerome S. Bruner, Rose R. Oliver, and Patricia M. Greenfield, 225–56. New York: Wiley.
- Govea, Marcos. 2011. "El prejuicio del color en el colonizado en el pensamiento de Frantz Fanon." *Revista de filosofía* 67 (1): 99–109.
- Keesing, Roger. 1981. *Cultural Anthropology: A Contemporary Perspective*. Fort Worth, TX: Harcourt Brace College Publishers.
- Kuper, Adam. 1988. *The Invention of Primitive Society: Transformations of an Illusion*. Oxford: Routledge.
- Hastrup, Kirsten, and Jan Ovesen. 1980. *Främmande kulturer: Den moderna etnografins grunder*. Hedemora: Gidlunds.
- Heidegger, Martin. 1977. *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*. New York: Harper.
- Jay, Martin. 1988. "Scopic Regimes of Modernity." In *Vision and Visuality*, edited by Hal Foster, 3–27. Seattle, WA: Bay Press.
- Lambert, Joe. 2013. *Digital Storytelling: Capturing Lives, Creating Community*. London: Routledge.
- McQuire, Scott. 1998. *Visions of Modernity: Representation, Memory, Time and Space in the Age of the Camera*. London: Sage.
- Metz, Christian. 1982. *Imaginary Signifier: Psychoanalysis and the Cinema*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Nash, Katie. 2012. "Modes of Interactivity: Analysing the Webdoc." *Media Culture Society* 34 (2): 195–210.
- Ranciere, Jacques. 2009. *The Emancipated Spectator*. London: Verso.
- Sahlins, Marshall. 1976. "Colors and Cultures." *Semiotica* 16 (1): 1–22.
- Said, Edward. 1995. *Orientalism*. Stockholm: Ordfront.
- Schultz, Emily A., and Robert H. Lavenda. 1990. *Cultural Anthropology: A Perspective on the Human Condition*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Sheikh, Gulammohammad. 1997. "The Making of a Visual Language: Thoughts on Mughal Painting." *Journal of Arts and Ideas* 30: 7–32.
- Stafford, Barbara Maria. 1997. *Good Looking: Essays on the Virtue of Image*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Taussig, Michael. 2006. "What Color Is the Sacred?" *Critical Inquiry* 33 (1): 28–51.
- Taussig, Michael. 2009. *What Color Is the Sacred?* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Wright, Chris. 1998. "The Third Subject: Perspectives on Visual Anthropology." *Anthropology Today* 14 (4): 16–22.

## Book Review

## Shine: The Visual Economy of Light in African Diasporic Aesthetic Practice by Krista A. Thompson

Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015, 368 pp.

Eryn Snyder Berger

Temple University

*Shine*, by Krista Thompson, presents a compelling investigation into the transnational aesthetics of hip-hop, bridging distinct visual practices, artistic forms, and modes of visibility in the African diaspora. Situating her work within art history, Thompson provides rich, multisited ethnographic

research that spans the United States, Jamaica, and the Bahamas, allowing her to interrogate the intersecting cultures, histories, and media flows of the geopolitical region known as the circum-Caribbean. From street photography in New York to Jamaican dancehall videos, Thompson brings into dialogue disparate visual and embodied practices to provide a thought-provoking study on the mediation of the African diaspora in the circum-Caribbean.

Thompson's theoretical approach to conceptualizing the African diaspora draws on the foundational works of Stuart Hall (1994), Paul Gilroy (1993), and Brent Hayes Edwards (2003) to foreground how diaspora is created and enacted through practices and cultural forms embedded in both local contexts and transnational exchanges. Thompson draws attention to the ways in which visual cultures and technologies can extend virtually across geographic spaces and "create the reflective surfaces of interaction between African diasporic groups" (p. 13). She proposes that black subjects participating in visual practices of hip-hop culture are actively engaged in the "practice of diaspora" and the production of diasporic imaginaries and selves (p. 7).

Central to Thompson's argument is that the visual practices that she documents are based in a counter-cultural diasporic aesthetic and visual economy that values "light." Thompson's understanding of "light" in this book is manifold. "Light" is the near-blinding beam of the camera; it is the glittering surfaces of bedazzled, high-status consumer goods; it is the bright lights of an urban cityscape. She argues that "light," "shine," and "bling" are part of an aesthetic and system of value that connects prestige and power to the visual appearance of material commodities and acts of conspicuous consumption (pp. 23–25).

Thompson details various ostentatious displays of consumption staged and performed before cameras: dancers wave money before the camera lights in dancehalls (p. 148), youth orchestrate spectacular prom entrances in "tricked out" cars (pp. 180–81), a man poses in front of a backdrop featuring a diamond-encrusted Rolex (pp. 98–99). She contends that the power and value attributed to "shining" in these instances reside not in the material objects themselves nor in the image that is produced but in the ephemeral, photographic moment of "being seen" and rendered visible in the public sphere. Noting that such displays are often decried as "deviancy" and "unbridled hedonism" (pp. 154–57, 181), Thompson interrogates the complex historical relationship between blackness and consumer culture, and proposes that modern black subjects manipulate materialist aesthetics to assert their agency, access visibility, and "negotiate their personhood and citizenship" in postcolonial, capitalistic global contexts (p. 32).

In each of the four chapters of *Shine*, Thompson explores a different visual "practice of diaspora" and performance of "being seen" in the circum-Caribbean. In chapter 1, Thompson describes a genre of street photography found in black urban areas in the United States (and, less frequently, in Jamaica) where subjects pay to pose in front of painted backdrops that depict material wealth, tropical destinations, and city skylines. Thompson's analysis of this phenomenon highlights the "performative moment" of being photographed. By striking poses in front of the camera, paying customers perform the status and role of a photographed subject (p. 69), while backdrops enable them to visually occupy consumer fantasies (p. 105).

The second chapter explores the aesthetics and embodied experiences of video production in Jamaican dancehalls. Thompson details how dancehall attendees invest significant time and capital into their appearances, believing that capturing the "video light" will provide them with "the most viable means to transcend their geographic environments and social status" (p. 149). While describing how some dancers go as far as to bleach their skin to make their faces more legible to the camera, Thompson provides a fascinating illustration of how diasporic subjects refashion and orient themselves in relation to visual technologies and modes of visibility.

Chapter 3 introduces the reader to the spectacle of extravagant prom entrances in the Bahamas. In a vignette reminiscent of the "legendary" balls documented in Jennie Livingston's *Paris is Burning* (1990), Thompson describes young black prom-goers in dazzling attire strutting and posing in front of paid-off faux "paparazzi" to create the appearance or "illusion" of celebrity. As in Livingston's film, Thompson asserts that these staged prom entrances provide working-class black youth an opportunity to reenvision themselves outside of existing hierarchies. In that moment, they can "inhabit the privileged role of tourists" within their tourism-driven postcolony (p. 201).

*Shine* concludes with chapter 4, which explores how hip-hop aesthetics and Western art traditions intersect to inform contemporary art of the African diaspora. While the previous chapters analyze various "performative moments" of "shining" across the circum-Caribbean, her final chapter investigates the works of Afro-diasporic studio artists and their relationship to historical traditions of visualizing black bodies in art. Focusing on the optical effects of light and shining surfaces within artistic depictions of black subjects, Thompson draws conceptual parallels between "light" and the social and political visibility of black subjects.

While hip-hop as a global culture and medium of transnational exchange has been well documented (Condry 2006; Ntarangwi 2009), *Shine* contributes valuable ethnographic insights into the relationship between visual technologies and the constitution of diasporic selves, adding to anthropological discussions on the "mediation" of cultural identities and social realities (Mazzarella 2004). *Shine* presents an innovative conceptual framework for multisited visual research by tracing a shared aesthetic as it is replicated and refracted across diasporic communities. Whereas anthropologists studying media have often taken a production-to-reception approach to studying the "social lives" of media (Ginsburg et al. 2002), Thompson's focus on diverse and localized visual practices refuses the centrality of the visual product.

*Shine* also builds upon and adds to research that explores how modernity and citizenship in the African diaspora are deterritorialized and often constituted through transnational exchanges and practices of capitalist consumption (Clarke 2013; Miller 2009; Perry 2015; Thomas 2004). Thompson writes that hip-hop aesthetics provide diasporic

communities the ability to see themselves as “modern and global subjects and consumers . . . a perspective that looks across the African diaspora rather than upwardly at local social hierarchies” (p. 198). Yet, *Shine* also raises important questions about the uneven contours of visually mediated cultural exchange across the diaspora. For instance, American music videos inform aesthetics of “bling” for youth in the Bahamas (p. 178); however, dancehall videos from Jamaica have “limited” transnational circulation (pp. 125–26). *Shine* highlights diasporic connections while also revealing asymmetries in diasporic media flows that merit further exploration. Ultimately, *Shine* presents a convincing argument about the role of aesthetics and visual practices in shaping diasporic identities and strategies of black visibility in post-colonial global capitalism.

### REFERENCES CITED

- Clarke, Kamari M. 2013. “Notes on Cultural Citizenship in the Black Atlantic World.” *Cultural Anthropology* 28 (3): 464–74.
- Condry, Ian. 2006. *Hip-Hop Japan: Rap and the Paths of Cultural Globalization*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Edwards, Brent Hayes. 2003. *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Gilroy, Paul. 1993. *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Ginsburg, Faye D., Lila Abu-Lughod, and Brian Larkin, eds. 2002. *Media Worlds: Anthropology on New Terrain*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Hall, Stuart. 1994. “Cultural Identity and Diaspora.” In *Colonial Discourses and Postcolonial Theory: A Reader*, edited by Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman, 392–403. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Livingston, Jennie, dir. 1990. *Paris Is Burning*. Miramax. DVD, 76 min.
- Mazzarella, William. 2004. “Culture, Globalization, Mediation.” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 33:345–67.
- Miller, Monica L. 2009. *Slaves to Fashion: Black Dandyism and the Styling of Black Diasporic Identity*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Ntarangwi, Mwenda. 2009. *East African Hip Hop: Youth Culture and Globalization*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- Perry, Marc D. 2015. *Negro Soy Yo: Hip Hop and Raced Citizenship in Neoliberal Cuba*. Reprint edition. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Thomas, Deborah A. 2004. *Modern Blackness: Nationalism, Globalization, and the Politics of Culture in Jamaica*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

### Film Review

## Let There Be Light

Anna Wilking, dir. 52 min. Ecuador, 2013.

Christine Mladic Janney

New York University

In Latin America, the influence of Catholicism on gender norms often results in the polarization of mothers as saint-like and sex workers as sinners in the social imaginary. Anna Wilking spent three years conducting research among women who were both mothers and sex workers in Quito, Ecuador, exploring how they navigate these subjectivities. Her plans to make a film capturing these women’s perspectives changed drastically during the process of filming, when she began following the less-commonly narrated story of a single father’s struggle to provide for his family after his partner and mother of his children—and also the sole financial provider for the household—disappeared. This decision to follow a single father revealed friction in Wilking’s own approach to studying sex and gender, which had previously privileged women’s positions, and helped her to include and explore masculinities in her work as well (Wilking 2016). *Let There Be Light* not only offers an intimate view of one man’s journey through parenthood in a socioeconomically marginalized sector of Ecuado-

rian society, but also is the product of an anthropologist’s negotiation of the politics of representation in her own work.

From the opening scene of the film, Wilking’s presence behind the camera is a prominent feature of the narrative and influences the form and content of the action unfolding in front of the camera. Both observational and participatory, the film brings viewers into the personal spaces that her interlocutors inhabit through frequent close-up shots and use of a handheld camera. The film focuses around Javier and Kati, a middle-aged couple who have been together for five years. Javier is the main childcare provider for the three children—Javier Jr., Melly, and Josué—while Kati provides for the family financially. Although Javier is from Guayaquil, a port city about seven hours from Ecuador’s inland capital, the family lives in the historical center of Quito at the beginning of the film due to Kati’s work. Wilking follows the family through their daily activities, moving from the streets to bedrooms and bathrooms, from appointments with doctors to meetings with government officials. She regularly converses with her interlocutors from behind the camera, launching questions: “Has your wife come to visit



**FIGURE 1.** Javier with son Josué and daughter Melly in Guayaquil, Ecuador, 2013. (Courtesy of Fabricio Morales Ordóñez) [Color figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](http://wileyonlinelibrary.com)]

you?” “What have you been eating?” “Do you think you inspired your brother [to quit drugs]?”

Early in the film, we learn that Kati supports the family through sex work. Javier stays with the children while she works. His remarkable level of patience, which is captured in multiple scenes, seems to benefit especially the youngest child, Josué, a toddler who was born with cognitive and physical difficulties. During the day, while the two older children are at school, Javier takes Josué to see doctors and to inquire at governmental aid offices about financial assistance to help address the toddler’s special needs (Figure 1). Drug use is a regular feature of the parents’ lives, although Kati’s addiction appears to have taken a much greater toll on the family. Over the course of the film, we see Javier change his stance on why their youngest son might have developmental delays, from first asserting that Kati had fallen during her pregnancy to later disclosing that she abused drugs up until the time of his birth. Kati’s abrupt disappearance and the resulting absence of income leave the remaining family members financially unstable, changing the direction of their lives and the film. After searching for Kati throughout Quito, to no avail, Javier takes the lead, moving the children from their rented hotel room in Quito to Guayaquil. There, they can live with his brother, aunt, uncle, and niece in the small home they inherited from Javier’s mother, without having to pay rent.

Although Javier can provide for his children in Guayaquil through pickpocketing and petty theft, the film captures a significant shift in his approach to parenting: he wants to definitively stop using drugs, and he is increasingly deter-

mined to secure governmental aid in order to better support his disabled son and create more stability for all three children. Not only does he openly lament his previous drug use as unproductive, but also, as a single father without access to childcare, Javier is acutely aware of the fact that his imprisonment for petty theft would result in his children being left unattended. He joins a local evangelical Pentecostal church with the hopes that membership will strengthen his resolve to quit drugs and is ultimately successful in ending his drug use. The film closes with Javier finally receiving his first installment of governmental aid for the care of his disabled son, after three years of pursuing it. He can thus give up pickpocketing and petty crime for income and become a full-time stay-at-home father dedicated to raising his children.

*Let There Be Light* offers complex portraits of parenthood in Javier and Kati’s relationship to their children, showing consistencies and contradictions in their character, behavior, and narration of day-to-day circumstances. In its portrayal of Javier and Kati’s struggles to support their family, the film also addresses ideas about economic advancement among the urban poor in Ecuador and the challenges and opportunities that parents with disabled children face. In an article about her work, Wilking (2016) explains that much of what she captured in her film was not what she regularly encountered during her research. In her experience in Ecuador, most sex workers did not use drugs, and most fathers did not assume the role of being a single parent and full-time caregiver. Kati’s sudden departure also stands in contrast to what Wilking found among other sex workers who were

also mothers. By highlighting the less-commonly found story of a single dad from the sex working world in Ecuador, this film could thus serve to expand existing representations of and anthropological inquiry into this world.

#### REFERENCE CITED

Wiling, Anna. 2016. "Filming Sex/Gender: The Ethics of (Mis) Representation." *Somatosphere*, March 28. <http://somatosphere.net/2016/03/the-filmmaking-case-the-ethics-of-misrepresentation.html>.