

Touching Seeing

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At the Edge of Sight: Photography and the Unseen. Shawn Michelle Smith. Duke UP, 2013.

Feeling Photography. Elspeth H. Brown and Thy Phu, eds. Duke UP, 2014.

The Camera and the Press: American Visual and Print Culture in the Age of the Daguerreotype. Marcy J. Dinius. University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012.

Photography, as Geoffrey Batchen points out, is an intensely self-reflexive medium: since its emergence in the 1830s, it has operated not only as a mechanism for viewing objects but also as a means for making visible our ways of seeing (9–10). This latter function was largely hidden by the longstanding belief in photographic objectivity and transparency, which positions the photographic image as an unmediated record of the world. When photography became a topic of serious academic study in the 1970s, semiotically and historically minded theorists of the medium began clearing away the obfuscating myth of transparency to illuminate the systems of economic power, racial subjugation, and other techniques of social control in which photography has historically been embedded.¹ Yet the long-dominant critical emphasis on photography's imbrication with power, so crucial to dismantling the fantasy of photographic objectivity, no longer suffices. As Maurice O. Wallace and Shawn Michelle Smith observe in *Pictures and Progress: Early Photography and the Making of African American Identity* (2012), "something vital has been overlooked in the effort to delineate photography's repressive functions" (4). An increased focus on previously overlooked archives, and especially on minor, indigenous, and non-Western counter-traditions, has done much to revitalize photography studies, as has a newly intensified pursuit of viewing/reading practices that bring the photograph to life. As widely as these practices vary, they favor a more capacious critical gaze, one capable of attending more closely to the photograph's synesthetic and emotional appeal. We might call this a "touching sight," in both senses of the term.²

There is, strictly speaking, nothing new about this way of seeing photography. What early writers on the medium called the "charm" of the photographic image registered this more-than-ocular address to the viewer. Yet it was neglected, for the most part, by

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historical materialist critics, since it seemed of a piece with the mystification that they saw themselves as combating. Thinking through the feel of the photograph threatened to prioritize an a- or even antihistorical emphasis on personal responsiveness above the hard-fought critical awareness of the social construction of sight. The best examples of this new critical attention to the multisensory dimension of photography, however, seek not to abandon but to reimagine the historical implications of photography studies. They shuttle provocatively between sensory attentiveness and historical awareness, crafting new relations between the two, as when Fred Moten finds in the sound of the photograph a “piercing historicity” that keeps the past alive (71).³ Because of the way photography keeps the past circulating in the present, as Zahid Chaudhary argues, it “contain[s] the potential to retrain the human sensorium itself” (194). Hence the optimism with which the touch of the photograph is often greeted: it keeps faith in the medium’s participation in inventing other possibilities for living.

The books addressed here provide an intriguingly textured view of the critical implications of touching sight, underscoring both its limitations and its undeniable speculative appeal. Elspeth H. Brown and Thy Phu’s edited collection, *Feeling Photography*, situates these considerations in relation to the “affective turn,” a loosely defined but provocative emphasis on sensation and emotion (7). Shawn Michelle Smith’s *At the Edge of Sight: Photography and the Unseen* shares many of these concerns (indeed, she contributes the first essay, drawn from two of her chapters in *At the Edge of Sight*, in Brown and Phu’s collection). Yet Smith’s attention to touching photography is routed through an extended meditation on the excesses and insufficiencies of photographic visuality as these spark the development of an alternative critical sensibility. By contrast, Marcy Dinius’s *The Camera and the Press* is invested in media archeology: her analyses are largely devoted to print, the medium, she maintains, in which photographs were initially elaborated and circulated. For Dinius, a keen awareness of the physical peculiarities of daguerreotypes—including how they materialize the metaphor of touching sight—helps, unexpectedly, to situate her book in dialogue with the speculative project that engages these other scholars, that of looking otherwise.

Feeling Photography begins with Roland Barthes’s *Camera Lucida* (1981) as its touchstone. In what was ultimately his final book, Barthes had abandoned the structural and semiotic efforts to read photography, instead meditating on the *punctum*, the detail that pricks or wounds the viewer, which the editors invoke as an early rendition of touching sight. But for Brown and Phu, attention to Barthes’s *punctum* gives way to admiring what they call his “passionate and queerly affective” approach (“Epilogue” 349). This

type of reading, they explain, was, for a long time, not only distinct from but implicitly antagonistic to a critical field that privileged “the discursive production of meaning over feeling” (3). Brown and Phu associate the latter stance with Victor Burgin’s influential collection *Thinking Photography* (1982), which their own title deliberately plays against. As they later acknowledge, “feeling . . . has long been central to the history and theory of photography, in both the production and viewing of images” (8). Some of the influential work on photography and affect by scholars working in feminist, critical race, postcolonial, and queer studies, including Laura Wexler, Jacqueline Goldsby, Carol Mavor, and Marianne Hirsch (who coauthors an essay in this collection) among others is mentioned here. In light of the centrality of these thinkers to the essays gathered in *Feeling Photography*, a stronger genealogy of this body of work, beyond the dramatic opposition of Barthes and Burgin, would have been useful.⁴ Brown and Phu’s decision to forgo such an account is partly strategic; noting the diffuseness of the “affective turn,” they explicitly refuse to create an “artificial consensus over the varied meanings of affect, emotion and feeling” (7). Yet genealogies don’t need to be unified to be illuminating, and the powerful contribution made by *Feeling Photography* to the project of re-envisioning the history of photography in light of the affective turn indicates a parallel need for a revised history of critical takes on the medium.

One of the collection’s strengths is its privileging of minor and/or subaltern traditions (in implicit contrast, again, with Burgin’s collection, whose case studies were largely drawn from canonical Euro-American art photographers). *Feeling Photography* suggests that the need for a more intimate, affective/sensory approach to photography results in part from the expanded range of objects that photography studies now addresses. But it is also forthright about the political stakes of demanding a different critical optic, one dedicated, as Diana Taylor asserts, to “know[ing] . . . differently,” to activating the affective force of the histories they contain (249). Some contributors (Smith, Tanya Sheehan, Lily Cho, and Christopher Pinney) trace those histories to photography’s first century, though given the collection’s refusal of “artificial consensus” about the meanings of affect, there is no attempt to write a comprehensive history of feeling in photography. Nor, for that matter, is the location of photography itself obvious or stable. Essays examine the circulation of photographs in news media (Brown, Elizabeth Abel); the decorum demanded of subjects posing for portraits (Sheehan, Cho); the role of emotion in photo-criticism (Smith, on Barthes); the use of photography as archival practice (Ann Cvetkovich); and the employment of photographs in film (David Eng).

Despite this diffuseness, *Feeling Photography* reads as a conversation, not a cacophony. This confluence partly results from the consistent level of the essays' achievement, but it also emerges from a sustained focus on the kinds of political change that attention to affect may enable—on how seeing and knowing differently may enable living otherwise. This potential is powerfully suggested in the final essay, Eng's study of the photographs in Rea Tajiri's video *History and Memory: For Akiko and Takashige* (1991). This video recounts Tajiri's efforts to make sense of her family's internment during the Second World War, but the photographs Tajiri features complicate and redirect this effort by virtue of their insufficiency: they are too few and too general to serve as effective documentation. The medium's failure to document the past adequately, and hence to establish its proper distance from the present, enables the film instead to align the "social space of history" with a "history of the present" (339). Highlighting the photograph's active capacity to make past and present touch afresh, Eng's reading departs markedly from the melancholy view of the photograph's indexicality developed in *Camera Lucida* and elsewhere, where the photograph, carrying a trace of its (past) referent into the present tense of viewing, can only enact a "monstrous" immobilization of time (Barthes 142). In *Feeling Photography*, however, many contributors contend that the photograph enlivens the past, even in those essays where photographs perform a mourning or memorial function. According to Hirsch and Leo Spitzer, for instance, addressing Christian Bolanski and Marcelo Brodsky's use of school photographs to represent the ravages of state violence, "they keep developing, . . . activating and reactivating memory and affect in shifting present circumstances" (259).

In this light, Brown and Phu's comment, in the epilogue, that many of the essays resonate against Barthes's melancholy, insofar as they "favor a particular mood, one that at times appears elegiac, and for some gloomy even," comes as something of a surprise (349). While they don't fault the contributors for this inclination, which they see as characteristic of the "unhappy turn taken by affect studies more generally," they do wonder whether an increased "attention to pleasure and joy" better facilitates a "politics of optimism" (352, 350). But this seemingly commonsensical linkage between "pleasure and joy" and critical optimism is complicated by some of the work in the collection itself: Sheehan's meditation on the turn-of-the-century emergence of the photographic smile, for instance, finds it shadowed by a history of white racist stereotyping and appropriation of black expression; and Eng's exploration of a past marked by haunting, loss and racial melancholia ends by affirming the photograph's capacity to "unfold the world to us anew" (344). Critical and political optimism, that is, are not necessarily enabled by positive feelings, nor does

“good feeling” necessarily produce good politics. Affect, rather, is what enables the unexpected, what makes things move otherwise. Emotion, as Brown and Phu rightly contend, is both a source of vital information and a potential axis of resistance, yet its function with respect to the latter is never entirely unmediated, never wholly ours to predict.

Given the instability and uncontainability of affect, its frequent migration from object to method—from an aspect of the image being considered to a stance embraced by critics—makes a certain sense. Feeling, as Brown and Phu note, plays a crucial role in “both the production and viewing” of photographs, and critical viewing forms no exception (7). For Smith, as well as for Brown and Phu, the question of how critics engage the inevitable affective overflow of their reading practices becomes central. Smith’s focus in *At the Edge of Sight* is ostensibly not feeling but “the dynamics of seeing and not seeing introduced by photography” (7). She argues that an inability to see surrounds the medium from the beginning, as the camera’s capacity for detail, for noticing things overlooked or invisible to the human eye, reveals the insufficiency of ordinary human vision. The notion that photographic vision incorporates a degree of blindness is nothing new; indeed, an emphasis on exposing the cultural blind spots that enable the operation of power characterizes precisely the kind of repression-focused criticism that Smith, with Wallace, critiques in the introduction to *Pictures and Progress*. Yet her intent, both there and here, is not to dismiss that kind of reading but to expand its affective and sensory registers, so that critical revelations of blindness don’t always amount to seeing the same thing. She seeks, in effect, to synthesize the gesture of critical exposure with the diffuseness and critical vulnerability of reparative reading.⁵ Smith declines to outline a specific approach to reading the “unseen,” asserting that she aims to provide a “means” or “sensibility” for looking at photographs, not a method (16). It is here that touching sight comes into play; Smith could actually be said to *feel around* for the “palpable yet invisible” unseen in each of her chapter-length case studies (216), sensing its location rather than being guided there by a preexisting critical map. In this sense, Smith’s unseen resembles Barthes’s punctum, although she faults him for the way his responses to photographs absorb both history and difference into his own conflicted consciousness. *At The Edge of Sight*, in contrast to Barthes, maintains a consistently historical attention to what lies before or beyond the image, as well as a keen awareness of how the photograph’s imbrication of visibility and invisibility illuminates a certain play of power across the color line.

Given the multiplicity of Smith’s readings, the “unseen” might instead be termed the “more-than-seen.” In the chapter on English

photographer Eadweard Muybridge, the unseen is time that manifests as space: specifically, the white spaces between the frames of the photographer's famed stop-motion sequences, empty spaces pointing to the photograph's ultimate inability to capture movement. But the gridded form that Muybridge's studies adapt, first pioneered by white social scientists who used grids to organize and contain the bodies of color constituting their racial taxonomies, also gestures toward the racial and class politics lurking behind the images. In Smith's contrasting treatment of Augustus Washington, the unseen concerns the social dynamics that define relations between the photographer, an African-American man, and the subjects of his Daguerrean portraits, who, before his emigration to Liberia, were, for the most part, white men and women. In Washington's celebrated portrait of John Brown with his right hand raised, Smith argues, these dynamics evolve into a radical affirmation of equality, bringing Washington into the picture as himself the addressee of Brown's gesture. And in Smith's analysis of F. Holland Day's pictorialism, the unseen is imbued with queer desire. Modernist photographers disparaged pictorialism as staging and manipulating photographs to seem more painterly. But Day's pictorialist aesthetic, Smith contends, develops a queer photographic idealism; as queer desire manifests in images that are "made 'thick' with atmosphere," a new political strategy appears, pulling photography away from referentiality and toward speculation, separating the world-that-is, preferred subject of the realists, from the world-that-might-emerge (45).

The speculative aspect of the unseen also manifests in a series of interchapters featuring Smith's own photographs and writing, in which she makes lateral, often personal, connections with the objects of her analyses: musing, in response to Andrew J. Russell's images of western trains, on her grandfather's work for Union Pacific; or breaking apart one of Muybridge's sequences with the desire to save the female subjects trapped in his schema. In the context of a meditation on visibility, Smith's strategic self-presentation resonates suggestively against the aforementioned emphasis on exposure as the task of critical reading, which typically left the critic herself out of the power dynamics being exposed. Intertwining words with photographs, the interchapters seem intended to hold open a mobile space for memory, as John Berger proposes in "Uses of Photography," a meditation on reactivating the medium.⁶ Or perhaps, following Day, Smith would thicken the atmosphere of the academic monograph, seeking to access a critical praxis not yet in existence. Like Spitzer's autobiographical meditation in *Feeling Photography* on photographs from his own childhood, spent in Bolivia at a school for displaced German-Jewish refugees during the Holocaust, Smith's appearances in *At The Edge of Sight* indicate a desire to address how the viewer

herself is reflected in the act of looking at the photograph. It isn't clear precisely how this emergent ethos of moderated critical presence will heighten either the aesthetic perceptiveness or the political acumen of photography studies. In general, the wager appears to be that moving the act of professional reading closer to scenes of ordinary interaction with photography will generate a better sense of photography's social functions, and hence of its potential to revise social relations. *At The Edge of Sight* is, however, regrettably reticent about the stakes of this move, leaving the reader to draw her own conclusions. While this may have been deliberate, this reader would have appreciated a more direct contribution to the dialogue.

Dinius's media archaeology reminds us that the idea of being reflected in the photograph one looks at was quite literally true for the photograph's earliest viewers. *The Camera and the Press* moves in a different direction from the other works considered here; it seeks to redirect the focus of photography studies in the nineteenth century (specifically the heyday of the daguerreotype, from 1839 through the early 1860s) by rearticulating it as a branch of new media studies. The influential twentieth- and twenty-first-century theorists of photography populating the footnotes and indexes of *Feeling Photography* and *At The Edge of Sight* (Barthes, Walter Benjamin, John Tagg, Kaja Silverman) elicit little of Dinius's attention. Yet her phenomenological comments on the effects of the daguerreotype's material qualities (such as its reflective surface) echo—or, perhaps, predict—some of the speculative readings of the photographic image produced in dialogue with these theorists.

The unique visual and physical properties of the daguerreotype, Dinius reminds us, partly shaped its reception, a fact that many histories of photography overlook. Daguerreotypes are highly detailed direct-positive images; they cannot be effectively reproduced, even by photographing them. Most Americans, Dinius avers, initially encountered them as they were remediated through printed descriptions, ekphrastic mediations that, ironically, first established the account of the photograph as a transparent, unmediated view of the world. At the same time, the material peculiarities of the daguerreotype-as-object—what Brown and Phu call the “thingness of photographs” (354)—play a crucial role in Dinius's analysis. The incredibly fine detail of Daguerrean images, unrivaled by most subsequent photographic technologies, cannot be reproduced in sketches or even photographs. Nor can they convey the daguerreotype's most distinctive quality: its reflective surface and flickering image. Daguerreotypes can only be viewed properly in certain lights and will reverse from positive to negative when viewed from an angle. To be seen, they must also be touched, moved back and forth until the image showed correctly. Looking at a daguerreotype is thus a uniquely embodying activity, an

“untranslatable multisensory experience” exceeding what print could convey, though that very excess generates additional layers of meaning (6).

The Camera and the Press follows Alan Liu’s model of the “new media encounter,” in which debates over emergent media channel broader social conflicts. Its two sections consider, respectively, how the daguerreotype was a conduit for social anxieties about the encroachments of technology upon the artistic imagination, and the part it played in debates over democracy and racial justice. But Dinius’s engagement with Liu’s suggestive model is not extensive enough to structure this study effectively, and the book, as a result, feels uneven. The gap between white ones and black ones, in particular, remains unaddressed. The first section, considering canonical writers Hawthorne and Melville, highlights their insistence on a Romantic account of subjectivity seen to be at odds with the realism prized by mechanistic accounts of photography. The implicit whiteness of this model of subjectivity is, however, not considered, even though the second section outlines the embrace of that very realism by black writers and daguerreotypists (Washington, Frederick Douglass), who depicted photography as democratizing the “experience of full subjectivity” (209) represented by the portrait. (The neglect of whiteness as a subject of analysis here underscores Smith’s observation in *At The Edge of Sight* about the telling disappearance of whiteness as it hides in plain sight: “As portraits of white people became ubiquitous, whiteness itself paradoxically faded from view, into the cultural blind spot of normativity” (Smith 16). Dinius’s focus on the qualities of media is also uneven, despite her affirmation that the relationship between daguerreotype and print is “mutual, not hierarchical” (5). Apart from gestures to Meredith McGill’s *American Literature and the Culture of Reprinting, 1834–1853* (1997), which helps to explain the similarity of many early print descriptions of daguerreotypes, relatively little time is spent discussing print as a medium, rather than a source of information. She omits consideration of analyses of US print culture that highlight its negation of embodiment, although these would form an interesting counterpoint to what Dinius describes as the multisensory, embodying effect of Daguerrean viewing.⁷

Although Dinius does not explicitly theorize the relationship between mediated and materialist perspectives on the daguerreotype, that relationship remains central to some of her most innovative arguments. Dinius supplements the history of meanings that coalesced around the photograph by exploring how that “untranslatable multisensory experience” peculiar to Daguerrean viewing shaped those meanings at the outset, and how that information, in turn, was scripted as social or political intervention—an intervention, that is, into

both sight and sensibility. The daguerreotype's distinctive tactility and unstable visuality connected viewers to images as well as to sociality. For instance, the flickering nature of Daguerrean images, Dinius proposes, extended appeals to imagination for Romantic writers as they provided the Daguerrean portrait with an enchanted dimension. Since those images reversed from black to white depending on how one held the object, the daguerreotype also allegorized the arbitrariness of racial boundaries as they offered visions of trans-racial possibility. The power of sympathy could thus be manifested through the medium's "unique reflectivity," permitting viewers to glimpse themselves alongside the subjects of the portrait and by rendering "sympathetic identification based on the recognition of a likeness . . . possible—not inevitable, but possible" (215). It's impossible, of course, to know how often such identifications actually took place, or even whether daguerreotypes, as prized personal possessions, were frequently shared across racial boundaries. Yet the critical force of such claims comes from their speculative potential rather than their facticity. Moving past a strict history of social "use," they imagine how photography can direct us toward new points of connection between the sensory and the historical.

On the whole, Dinius's account of the "age of the daguerreotype" is more descriptive than speculative. At the close, she even moves to limit the fantasies of spatial immediacy and temporal transcendence to which this type of speculation may give rise. Our knowledge of history, she reminds us, can never be one of full recovery, since "our relationship to the past—and to the present—is always necessarily mediated" (238). Still, her evocation of the romance of the daguerreotype, both through and beyond its mediation in print, resonates powerfully against *Feeling Photography* and *At The Edge of Sight* as they dwell on the haunting force of connection to, and through, the photograph. Both *Feeling Photography* and *At The Edge of Sight* nod to an enchanted genre, spirit photography, as exemplifying the photographic presence they pursue: connections with the invisible, the ineffable, with presences always mediated but nevertheless palpably, powerfully there. The ultimate promise of touching sight, in this sense, is less the historical claims or social practices it reveals than the enchantment it summons: not a return to "magical thinking," to credulity or delusion or the political passivity that Marx aligned with organized religion, but the allure of their alignment of looking differently with the opening-up of what Dinius calls "other ways of experiencing the world" (7).

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Notes

1. See Alan Sekula, "On the Invention of Photographic Meaning," *Artforum*, 13.5 (January 1975): 36–45; Rosalind Krauss, "Photography's Discursive Spaces: Landscape/View," *Art Journal* 42. 4 (Winter 1982): 311–19; Victor Burgin, ed., *Thinking Photography* (1982); John Tagg, *The Burden of Representation: Essays on Photographies and Histories* (1993) and *The Disciplinary Frame: Photographic Truths and the Practice of Meaning* (2009); and Smith, *American Archives: Gender, Race and Class in Visual Culture* (1999).
2. See Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *Touching Feeling* (2003), whose introduction outlines the links among texture, affect, and more capacious critical alternatives to the hermeneutics of suspicion.
3. Moten explicitly distinguishes the sonic dimension of the photograph from Barthes's punctum, which he identifies as "sensually unary" and "absolutely visual" (68).
4. This positioning of the Burgin/Barthes opposition as exemplary of the field of photography criticism in the late twentieth century also structures Edward Welch and J. J. Long's "Introduction: A Small History of Photography Studies," in *Photography: Theoretical Snapshots* (2009), 1–15.
5. For an overview of this turn under the sign of the reparative, see Robyn Wiegman, "The Times We're In: Queer Feminism and the Reparative Turn," *Feminist Theory* 15.1 (April 2014): 14–25.
6. "The remembered is not like a terminus at the end of a line. Numerous approaches or stimuli converge upon it and lead to it. Words, comparisons, signs need to create a context for the printed photograph in a similar way; that is, they must mark and leave open diverse approaches" (62–63). See Berger, "Uses of Photography," *About Looking* (1980), 27–63.
7. See, for example, Michael Warner, *The Letters of the Republic* (1992).

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