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Christopher Pinney with the PhotoDemos Collective (Eds.), **Citizens of Photography: The Camera and the Political Imagination,** Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2023, 368 pp., $29.95 (paperback).

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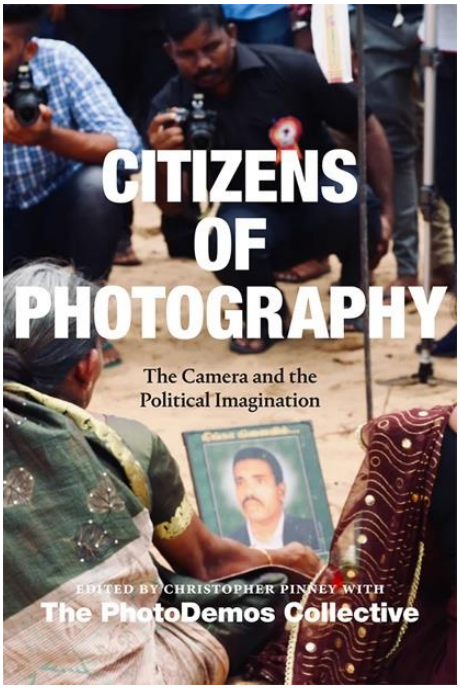

In the history of photography, the camera is often cast in one of two roles: the documenter or the surveyor. It can be used to document the lives of civilians, the abuses they suffer, or the joys they experience. Or the camera can be at the service of the state, as a surveillance tool to establish boundaries of citizenship or for evidentiary purposes. More often, though, the camera and its medium, the photograph, exist in a liminal contested space, meaning different things for different viewers in the past, present, or future, offering what Walter Benjamin (2008) calls a contingency, a brief spark of contestation and relatability captured in the stillness of the photo. For decades, the Foucauldian panopticon school of thought dominated theoretical conversations of photography, arguing that photography is primarily an instrument of surveillance, a way for the state to catalog, archive, and control its subjects (Sontag, 1977). But in ***Citizens of Photography: The Camera and the Political Imagination***, editor Christopher Pinney with the PhotoDemos Collective argue otherwise. Using case studies from Greece, Cambodia, Nicaragua, Nigeria, Sri Lanka, Nepal, India, and Bangladesh, they attempt to restore theories of the rhetorical power of the camera from the bureaucratic archive and place it in the hands of the people.

This expansive, multisited ethnographic work is the culmination of years of archival and interview research examining how the medium of photography contributes to the narration of past atrocity and present contestations. This book reads less like a collection of essays and more as a manifesto for a different approach to photography that refuses to treat non-Western practices as belated or peripheral. Instead, it argues that the image's most vital political work is happening precisely where the state is most contested.

The intellectual core of this volume is a response to Ariella Azoulay's (2008) concept of the "civil contract of photography" (p. 103). Azoulay argued that photography creates a space of political relations that are not mediated by the state. Anyone who participates in the "event" of photography, whether as the photographer, the subject, or the viewer, enters into a form of "visual citizenship" that exists even when legal citizenship is denied. Pinney and his collaborators subject this "civil contract" to a stress test through participant observation and interviews at the various case study sites examined in each essay. They ask: Does the camera actually offer a form of political recognition in advance of ordinary citizenship? Does the camera offer a way to address past injustices? Does the camera offer different imaginings of a future deferred by state violence?

The book moves away from the idea that a photograph is a "paltry piece of paper" that acquires meaning only when state power inscribes it (Tagg, 1988, p. 63). Instead, the authors lean into Walter Benjamin's (2008) concept of the "tiny spark of contingency" (pp. 267–277). They argue that the photograph is unruly. Because the camera captures more than the photographer intends: the background details, stray glances, movement, the "suchness" of a moment wherein "that long-past minute the future nests still today" (Benjamin, 2008, pp. 276–277). The camera can cause even the "most dense of colonial documents" to "spring leaks" that the state cannot plug (Edwards, 2001, pp. 5, 12).

The strength of *Citizens of Photography* lies in its granular, ground-level ethnographies. The PhotoDemos Collective does not just look at photos in digital or physical archives, as these are often sites of their own power struggles; instead, they live with the people who make and use them across all the case study sites. Broken into individual chapters, each essay operates with its own strength and argument, while also contributing to the larger theoretical framework and argument of the book project.

Vindhya Buthpitiya's contribution on Northern Sri Lanka is arguably the book's emotional core. She examines how Tamil families of the disappeared use National Identity Card (NIC) photographs, originally tools of state surveillance, as icons of resistance. Through repurposing, these sterile ID photos are photoshopped, enlarged, and hand-painted into memorial portraits. In the hands of mourning families, a document meant to prove one's status to a soldier becomes a demand for accountability from the state that took them away.

Sokphea Young explores the afterlife of the infamous S-21 Tuol Sleng prison photographs. Under the Khmer Rouge, these images were taken before execution. Today, however, Young shows how they have been repurposed into national icons of post-genocide conciliation. This visual emancipation demonstrates how even the most horrific archives can be reclaimed by a citizenry to imagine a future beyond trauma. Yet she complicates this reclamation, pointing out that Cambodia's president also uses this photographic history to maintain power.

Konstantinos Kalantzis takes us to the highlands of Sfakia, Crete. He examines how locals interact with historical images of traditional shepherds, originally captured by German tourist photographers in the 1960s and 1970s, and how this history intersects with the lost evidence of World War II atrocities committed by the German army. The Sfakians, however, reanimate these images, finding new narratives. Instead of "othering" tourist photos, they see ancestors, feuds, and local reputations. Kalantzis highlights how photography becomes a site for oral tradition and cultural enrichment between Germans and Cretans as they navigate a path forward on the now-shared land.

Ileana L. Selejan investigates the making and unmaking of the Nicaraguan revolutionary state. Her work highlights the tension between the revolutionary ideal image and the messy reality of the "insurgent archive." She shows not only how photography was used to construct a new revolutionary subject but also how those same images now serve as a haunting reminder of the revolution's unfulfilled promises.

Naluwembe Binaisa's multisite ethnography in South West Nigeria explores how photography facilitates belonging amid shifting technologies. Moving from colonial-era portraiture to ubiquitous mobile

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digital imagery, she examines the image as a site for negotiating identity and nationhood. Through local photographers like Hajj Hammed, who continue studio portraiture practices, Binaisa argues that evolving technology enables ordinary citizens to navigate neoliberal landscapes, reclaim political visibility, and articulate potential futures beyond state-dictated narratives.

The recurring theme across all chapters, including the final chapter authored by Pinney, is the contested contingency of photographs. In discussing the editing of memorial portraiture in Nepal, India, and Bangladesh, Pinney points out that "through time, photographic renewal leads the image further and further away from its primal indexical trace and fortifies it for the future" (p. 293). This is why photography is so dangerous to authoritarian regimes and so vital for marginalized citizens. The state wants a photograph to be a fixed data point (a name, a number, a crime). The citizen uses the photograph as a tool; authors routinely invoke photography's "prophetic" nature to conjure a future and visualize a self or a community that the current political order does not yet allow to exist.

Citizens of Photography is not a light read, given its theoretical density. However, for those willing to do the work, the payoff is immense in understanding understudied sites of photographic theory. A main argument of the text concerns "ex-nomination," a term borrowed from Roland Barthes's (1972) *Mythologies.* Ex-nomination, as Pinney points out, refers to how studying European photography makes you a "photographic theorist." But if you study Nigerian photography, you are a "commentator on Nigerian photography" (p. 2). *Citizens of Photography* does important work to shift the lens and widen the aperture of photographic theoretical studies.

The book's design also deserves mention. Published by Duke University Press, it is richly illustrated, allowing the reader to see the overpainted photos and portraits the authors describe. This visual evidence is crucial; without it, the arguments about "the spark of contingency" might feel abstract. Seeing the physical alterations made to an ID card in Sri Lanka makes the "civil contract" feel tangible and urgent. Any media scholar seeking a more global understanding of image culture would find this book a useful resource. Additionally, scholars with area studies specialties may find a number of case studies useful from historical, media, and ideological perspectives. *Citizens of Photography* offers a valuable contribution to the field of visual anthropology and photographic theory. It successfully moves the conversation from what photography represents to what it does in the world.

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