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# QUESTIONING COLONIAL PHOTOGRAPHY

Maki Fukuoka

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*Afterimage of Empire: Photography in Nineteenth-Century India* by Zahid Chaudhary. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012. Pp. 272, 74 black-and-white photos, 13 color plates. \$90.00 cloth, \$30.00 paper.

Zahid Chaudhary's *Afterimage of Empire* treats the relationship between photography and colonialism, and the present and the past, encouraging its readers to meditate on questions rather than providing answers. Chaudhary poses critical questions about epistemology, ontology, evidence, value, and objectivity, extensively interweaving theoretical ruminations by seminal thinkers of modernity with close analyses of historical materials. This book will become one of a key group of challenging texts against which scholars of photography, modernity, and postcolonialism will need to locate their own work. In this regard, *Afterimage of Empire* establishes itself as a productive interface for scholars of photography across different regional specialties and cultural foci.

Chaudhary's methodology stresses the deployment of phenomenological elements as the backbone of his argument. Recent work on colonial photography relies heavily—in fact, almost exclusively—on Foucauldian readings, analyzing the dichotomic and hierarchical relationships between photographed subjects and photographer, as Chaudhary establishes in his introduction. Dissenting from this common approach, Chaudhary opts to mobilize the body and senses as negotiating conduits between the images and the viewers, allowing him to move beyond the

now-familiar power–knowledge critique of colonial photography.

Chaudhary's work shares similar methodological convictions with other body-focused analyses of Euro-American nineteenth-century visual culture—Jonathan Crary's *Techniques of the Observer* (1990), for instance—in which “the body” is identified as the heightened site of negotiation for transforming visuality through various apparatuses, including photography. But this book also breaks from its precedents when Chaudhary casts a much broader net, both geographically and temporally.

Indeed, *Afterimage of Empire* does not limit itself to the production of photographic images in nineteenth-century India or to their reception within the British Empire. Rather, Chaudhary is invested in articulating the connections between images and their viewers (to whom he sometimes refers as “spectators”) through particular attention to the related experiences between the images' representation of bodily affects and sensations and those of the viewers. The word *afterimage* used in the title aptly captures the author's intent: Chaudhary pursues the subsequent, belated illusionary sensations evoked by seeing photographs of nineteenth-century India. This book, in this light, can be seen as testament to his continued effort to affix afterimages left on his eyelids onto the pages themselves.

In his own words, this book “attempt[s] to provide a narrative of colonial representations that is noniconophobic” (31) and “seeks to work against notions of surface and depth, by reading ‘surfaces’ and ‘appearances’ as themselves constitutive of critique” (32). Chaudhary questions the all-too-comfortable habitual readings of colonial photography in order to examine the very political processes by which the viewing habit itself is formed. This book, then, “concern[s] itself with the practice of making sense, but also it refers to ‘the composing sense,’ or the mimetic faculty, the capacity that underwrites the means by which experience becomes commutable, framed, and transmuted” (35). Using what he calls “the rhetorical powers of the medium,” Chaudhary considers samples of colonial images that range from ethnographic and journalistic to landscape and missionary propaganda materials. His interpretations of these images are governed by emotive concepts such as faith and contamination (chapter 1), the phantasmagoric aesthetic of fear and violence (chapter 2), the picturesque and reproducibility (chapter 3), and sympathy and affect (chapter 4).

Guided by such intellectual ambitions and erudite theoretical resources, Chaudhary makes intriguing commentaries and conceptual connections. In particular, he successfully highlights the ways

in which attention to wider circulating patterns of images enriches the broader discourse of photographic history. By carefully incorporating the viewers' reception and demands that cannot simply be framed by nation/state categories, his argument demonstrates, in turn, the extent to which the reproducibility and circulability of photographic images must be taken seriously.

Broadly speaking, there are two different approaches in interpreting histories of photography: the *medium-specific approach*, which presumes photography as uniquely different from other pictorial media and thus as an internally coherent medium, and the *culturalist approach*, which situates photography as embedded within specific cultural practice. The medium-specific approach identifies photography's *specific* and *inherent* qualities as a meaningful way to interpret and differentiate stages of photographic history. The culturalist approach, on the contrary, is less interested in the medium's inert characteristics and instead presumes that photography could be applied and understood differently from its European counterparts and effectively produce different functions and meanings historically and geographically.

Chaudhary appears to fall into the first category and assumes the nominal category of *photography* as a self-contained and coherent entity

that does not itself warrant further scrutiny. The *camera* occupies, for him, the central feature of this medium, as it is understood to be rational, equipped with a "mechanized perspective . . . machinelike and decisive snap" (114). Recent works on colonial photography indicate that it would be productive for the field to find a platform on which both medium-specific and culturalist approaches could agree to share some critical vocabulary, and it is in this spirit that I offer the following suggestions.

Chaudhary's work highlights two fertile areas for further study using a phenomenological approach to colonial photography: (a) *the notion of the viewers* and (b) *the materiality of prints*. For a project that considers the ways in which photographic images evoke bodily and emotive responses, the category of viewership plays a significant role. Although the theoretical linking of phenomenological interpretations and modern perceptive experiences is carefully articulated, I was often left looking for more specific historicizing descriptions of the viewership.

This search was further occasioned by Chaudhary's repeated use of the pronoun "we." Chaudhary opens his introduction "Sensation and Photography" with this question: "How might we reorient our understandings of colonial representations if we shift our focus to that interface between bodies and

world that is the precondition for making meaning?" (1). Similarly, chapter 3 "Armor and Aesthetics: The Picturesque in Difference" starts with this sentence: "We are leaving the Scenes of 1857–58, and in this chapter I extend the discussion of anaesthesia in the context of the entirely different genre of landscape photography" (107). I read this "we" to signify contemporary readers of his book, undescribed by political, ethnic, and national categories, and thus understood Chaudhary's decision to deploy this pronoun to be a specifically countercolonial tactic. The evocation of a nonspecific "we" moves away from already differentiated positions of colonial hierarchy and makes room for a reexamination of the images of colonial India from a more even and open field. But Chaudhary seems to be suggesting that there are more philosophical and subversive reasons for choosing this "we."

For example, as Chaudhary explores the notion of *phantasmagoric aesthetic*, he analyzes the image known as *Sammy House* taken by Felice Beato in 1858 (99; image reproduced as figure 2.2 on page 74). In the following pictorial description of the image, he guides readers through the imagined process of collective viewing. He includes his readers by consistently referring to us as "we" ("we do not see the scattered skulls and bones," for instance [99]) until suddenly Chaudhary

claims, "Situating the spectator in the middle of this deathly path, the photograph seems to invite the spectator's recognition of his or her possible complicity in the violence that has taken place" (99). This abrupt switch in subject sent shivers through my body, making precisely the point that Chaudhary is illustrating in this book. But, at the same time, this experience made vividly clear to me that, even within contemporary viewership, there ought to be diverse responses to this image because both subjectivity and bodily reactions do differ by the individual. For studies of colonial images, further articulation of viewership, both historically and theoretically, seems to be a particularly potent subject.

The materiality of photographic images is another area that could provoke rich conversations in future studies. Indeed, Chaudhary makes a point of how the materiality of photographic images and the Foucauldian notion of governmentality worked in tandem historically as constitutive aspects of what he calls *phantasmagoric aesthetics* (chapter 2). But because Chaudhary treats images without disclosing either the dimensions or the names of the processes used for negatives or prints, the very "bodily . . . dimension" (84) of the images that Chaudhary elaborates in the text is inaccessible to this reviewer. Were they considered, these physical and material aspects would

offer extremely rich and productive possibilities on two fronts: (a) in further articulating the choices available to photographers and (b) in speculating about the bodily affect that these images might have evoked in historical viewers.<sup>1</sup>

For instance, in chapter 3 “Armor and Aesthetics,” the readers learn that Samuel Bourne used albumen prints for his travel photographs of the Indian Himalayas. What range of technomaterial choice was available to Bourne? What range of tactile and perceptive knowledge did the photographer instill in the production of images, and how? At least two technical steps are entailed in producing panoramic views such as Bourne’s—namely, first composing the image by using a medium format camera, which involves examining the reversed projected image on the back of the camera, and, second, printing the negatives on site from the wet-collodion negative. Further, these two steps require different kinds of perceptual and dexterous skills. If, as Chaudhary states, “The camera’s lens is, of course, inseparable from the habits of picturesque viewing” (120), then how did Bourne ensure that the picturesque view, projected upside down, was successfully transferred to his prints? Here, analyses of the very format of Bourne’s photographs would be productive for our consideration. Did Bourne sell them individually as prints, and

where? Was the image in question ever part of a folio? If so, then who bought it? How was the folio made, and what kind of physical interaction did it demand from the viewers? If personal albums contain this image, then how was this image sequenced in relation to others?

Answers to questions such as these would make Chaudhary’s claim of how the *colonial picturesque* regulated viewers’ bodily space fuller and more concrete. In a similar vein, thorough examination and discussion of stereoscopic photographs of colonial India would also serve as an extremely fitting subject for expanding and implementing phenomenological approaches to colonial photography.

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#### NOTE

1. For instance, *The Diving Well* by Robert and Harriet Tytler (reproduced as figure 1.3 on page 41 of Chaudhary’s book) gives a different impression when viewed in the online database of the British Library: <http://www.bl.uk/onlinegallery/onlineex/apac/photocoll/t/largeimage56080.html>, accessed 6 June 2012. Given that the figure’s copyright is attributed to the British Library, I assume this print at the British Library is identical to the image reproduced in the book.