

Patricia Hayes and Gary Minkley (eds), *Ambivalent: Photography and Visibility in African History* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2019), 376 pp, paper back: 978-0-8214-2394-3, hardcover: 978-0-8214-2393-6, electronic: 978-0-8214-4688-1

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*Ambivalent: Photography and Visibility in African History* is a collection of essays by young scholars who, with one or two exceptions, work on the African continent. It is the result of sustained collaborative work in and around the Centre for Humanities Research and the History Department at the University of the Western Cape (UWC), and between editors Patricia Hayes and Gary Minkley, who hold NRF SARChI Chairs in Visual History and Theory at UWC, and Social Change at the University of Fort Hare, respectively. It is a profound collaborative scholarly intervention that emerges from this vantage point, from Africa, and from two historically black universities.

The volume makes a 'pivotal contribution to the field of African History and beyond', as Elizabeth Edwards put it at the launch of the book. I offer here a few comments on the 'beyond' to which Edwards refers. To state this at first telegraphically, from *Ambivalent* I have learnt something about my own field, psychoanalysis, from which the editors of *Ambivalent* borrow its central concept. The title of the book, however, borrows not from Freud but from photographer Santu Mofokeng: 'Mofokeng is left "ambivalent about my ambivalence"' (p. 13).<sup>1</sup> If there is something about this concept borrowed from elsewhere that is useful in thinking about photography and visibility in African history, 'ambivalent' is, at the same time, the questioning of that use. The awkwardness of the quote also performs the question of whose concept is being set to work, and is connected to the second turning point of the volume, the claim that 'the so-called dark continent has its own histories of light' (p. 1). Whether one cares for psychoanalysis or not, there are more general lessons here, I think, for scholars working in the Humanities in Africa concerning how to draw on theory conceived in Europe.

The essays aim, as Hayes and Minkley state, to 'figure out ways to unsettle the strong residues of an imperial metanarrative of photography, introduce some disarray into the assumed legitimacies of genre and genealogy, and have an impact on wider photographic debates' (p. 1). It is predominantly through the second of these aims that the volume carries out the first and third, and it sets to work most immediately on the division between repressive and resistant images. The volume is not, of course, the first to note the instability – an overdetermined excess – of repressive images, whether bureaucratic or ethnographic, in which struggles have been waged by those made to live in the objectifying lens of the colonial state. The other side of which is the way images of resistance, or resistant images, recall the very objectifications they oppose. But what the concept of ambivalence provides the volume is a way to ceaselessly question old and new oppositions: refracted through ambivalence, repression and resistance pass into one another.

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1 Cited in P. Hayes and G. Minkley, 'Africa and the Ambivalence of Seeing', in Hayes and Minkley, *Ambivalent*.

Numerous related divisions are questioned. The opposition between the pass photograph of the apartheid state and studio photography, for example, is interrogated in Ingrid Masondo's chapter, the point of which is to reconsider how we might understand resistant, playful appropriations of the camera in light of the anxious ambivalence with which pass photography operated. Minkley's chapter, too, dwells on pass photographs. Here, the division between the 'colonial and racialized' pass photo and 'the decolonized studio portrait' is questioned, and 'both are actually "precarious framings" that translate and retranslate a "liberal spectral presence"' (p. 19). Likewise, in Phindi Mnyaka's chapter, the opposition between the settler photography of Joseph Denfield and the street photography of Daniel Morolong finds a shared, fractured view when, in a reading across ostensibly different genres, she makes their views adhere, if fleetingly 'at the point of ruination' (p. 229).<sup>2</sup> As Hayes and Minkley note, 'Morolong does not simply become the antidote to Denfield. The segregated genres associated with both are left in disarray' (p. 21).<sup>3</sup>

If this unsettling of accepted divisions between genres makes some uneasy, if it raises the question of how to take a stand, of how, faced with repressive images, one is to come to a judgement, this political imperative is itself artfully built into the volume's frame: judgement, that which 'separates the wheat from the chaff', requires 'upheaval', 'disarray', that 'the grain be tossed up in the clouds' (p. 307).<sup>4</sup> Far from being disabled by ambivalence, judgement requires it, is impoverished without it.

The concept of ambivalence is already at work in the field to which the volume contributes. The first lines of the Introduction are John Akomfrah's: 'the black body ... has come to be "literally framed by torment and bliss"' (p. 1).<sup>5</sup> As Hayes and Minkley continue, discussing how this is typically dealt with: 'Use of the term ambivalent is often the first sign of trouble, pointing, in part, to the basic problem of the promise and the effect of the photograph, between its ostensible truth claims and its unstable outcomes' (p. 2). This is a point of departure for the volume, an ambivalence invoked, which the editors and the contributors aim to rework.

In doing so, they have gone back over Freud: 'There is a general-usage notion of ambivalence that implies a generic sense of mixed feelings and operates as a kind of default understanding of the term,' Hayes and Minkley write, and while not fully relinquishing this they aim 'to push the possibilities further ... by invoking ... Freud's usage in *Totem and Taboo*, where ambivalence is the simultaneous holding of different ...

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2 P. Mnyaka, 'The Profane and the Prophetic at a South African Beach', in Hayes and Minkley, *Ambivalent*. It would be difficult to try to describe with justice the elegance of Mnyaka's brilliant chapter without giving away the poetic conclusion in which these views 'almost meet'.

3 Hayes and Minkley, 'Ambivalence of Seeing'. Other oppositions are interrogated. I will not attempt to attend to all of them here. To note just three more crucial ones, 'the split between politics and aesthetics' is crucial to the book's argument. Hayes and Minkley, 'Ambivalence of Seeing', 15. The frontier between photography's arrival and the pre-photographic, as in Isabelle De Rezende's searching essay, and, relatedly, the divisions between photography and its adjacent media, written and oral texts. I. De Rezende, 'Photographic Desire, Anxiety, and Knowledge in Nineteenth Century Central Africa', in Hayes and Minkley, *Ambivalent*, 35–55.

4 P. Hayes, 'An Expanded Milieu', in Hayes and Minkley, *Ambivalent*. Hayes is discussing Georges Didi-Huberman's conception of critique here.

5 Hayes and Minkley, 'Ambivalence of Seeing'.

positions that are perhaps irreconcilable. Two opposing ambivalent drives may exist on different planes, the one conscious, the other unconscious' (p. 3). 'Freud's usage' of ambivalence – if Hayes and Minkley borrow ambivalence, it was already, for Freud, on loan – is used to trouble certain oppositions taken for granted by many scholars dealing with images.<sup>6</sup>

But psychoanalysis is anything but slavishly applied, and for good reason. Ambivalence, in Freud's hands, is marked by the very colonial unconscious it can be used to read. 'There are men still living who, as we believe, stand very near to primitive man,' Freud writes, 'far nearer than we do, and whom we therefore regard as his direct heirs and representatives. Such is our view of those whom we describe as savages or half-savages.'<sup>7</sup> This is the point where many, repelled by the anthropological language Freud inherits, stop reading 'Totem and Taboo'. What significance could a text that begins this way have for African history?

Freud's theorisation of ambivalence in 'Instincts and Their Vicissitudes', published two years later, appears more closely related to the questions *Ambivalent* poses, examining, as it does, scopophilia and exhibitionism, sadism and masochism. Why, then, is 'Totem and Taboo' invoked, and not this later text? In this later text, Freud presents a formulation of ambivalence that begins with love and its opposite, hate, or, rather, love's three opposites: hate, being loved, and indifference, conjuring a libidinal fluidity associated with early infancy. Divisions between opposed feelings, between activity and passivity, and between the subject and its objects have not yet, for the infant, hardened as they will have for the adult they are in the process of becoming; if, later on, the subject can shift from love to hate of the same object, and vice versa, and if sadism and scopophilia always can satisfy masochistic and exhibitionistic wishes, it is because something of infancy passes, untranslated, into adult life. Even self-reflection, for Freud, can bear a sadistic element that has been turned around, not from an active to a passive position, but into a reflexive one. Coiled into the most sublime self-reflection can be a wish to love and to hate, hurt, be hurt, obliterate the other in whose name there is self-reflection. In his discussion of ambivalence, Freud notes that sympathy, too, can be a 'reaction formation' against sadism – not sadism disguised as fellow feeling, but, rather, its impassioned denial that nonetheless carries, transmits, what it forbids.<sup>8</sup>

All of this would seem to have relevance for *Ambivalent*. In his chapter on an 'iconic' image of the massacre of Namibian refugees at Cassinga, Vilho Shigwedha writes of the 'belief that the camera could operate within the formal conventions of documentary photography and photojournalism and provide evidence of the violence

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6 Ambivalence was of course coined in the early twentieth century by a Swiss psychiatrist, Eugen Bleuler, and later taken up by Freud.

7 S. Freud, 'Totem and Taboo', in J. Strachey (trans. and ed), *Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. XIII (London: Hogarth Press, 1953 [1913]), 1.

8 S. Freud, 'Instincts and Their Vicissitudes', in J. Strachey (trans.), *The Penguin Freud Library, Volume II: On Metapsychology* (London: Penguin), 126.

of mass civilian death and burial, thereby generating sympathy and stirring public response...’ (p. 164).<sup>9</sup> In the humanitarian images used to garner support for history’s victims, can one not discern the very violence photographic exposure seeks to call into question? Similarly, Alfred Duggan-Cronin’s images, as Napandulwe Shiweda writes, ‘posited African cultures as pure and authentic – cultures that needed to be rescued from the encroachment of the modern colonial world’ (p. 186).<sup>10</sup> That this sympathetic gaze that sought to make Africans the passive, obedient recipients of paternal guardianship may bear within it an unconscious sadistic scopophilia may seem clear enough. But to their credit, the editors of *Ambivalent* do not frame the essays in this way, and nor do the contributors.<sup>11</sup> As tempting, and as gratifying, as it would be to use psychoanalysis in this mode – one could call it the psychoanalysis of the police – ‘Instincts and Their Vicissitudes’ does not readily make available a socio-genic unconscious; it offers a genealogy of love and hate – of the two, hate is the older, more primary – that finds its support in biology.<sup>12</sup> It is the ambivalence of instincts, not drives.<sup>13</sup> To recall Hayes and Minkley, they are dealing with ‘ambivalent drives’.

Freud’s discourse on ambivalence is itself divided. Ambivalence on the other side of the divide, the one from which *Ambivalent* proceeds, emerges from Freud’s reflections on identification, most often starting with a discussion of a little boy’s identification with his father. The child would like to be just like the father, whom he loves; the father, however, also stands in his way, and there is a current of hate that runs alongside, leans on, his love. Identification – the model for which is eating, ingestion, taking in, and thus, as Freud argues in several texts, cannibalism – satisfies both love and hate: the father, with whom the boy identifies, is devoured, destroyed, taken in, incorporated.<sup>14</sup> Of course, the little boy identifies with the mother, too, the other rival, the father also being a love object, and this is a part of the ambivalence of the ego formed by the taking in of lost objects, an ego that does not pre-exist this introjection. The ego loves and hates the same object, which is also, for it, two things.

In ‘Totem and Taboo,’ this theme of identification is taken up at the level of

9 V. Shigwedha, ‘Photography, Mass Violence, and Survivors’, in Hayes and Minkley, *Ambivalent*.

10 N. Shiweda, ‘Images of Ambivalence, Omhedi, Northern Namibia’, in Hayes and Minkley, *Ambivalent*.

11 Shiweda, for example, focuses on the reception of such images by the descendants of those objectified in them: ‘Photographs that were produced with colonial connotations of objectification arouse very different feelings from what was previously intended ... The photographs are mute witnesses that nevertheless can be made to speak in unexpected ways.’ Ibid., 202, 204. What, indeed, is the genre of an ethnographic image whose mortified objects speak – about, among other things, the dissolutions of the boundaries between invented and lived tradition’ – across generations?

12 Here, hate springs from self-preservative drives, love from sexual drives: ‘They did not arise from the cleavage of any originally common entity, but sprang from different sources, and had each its own development before the influence of the pleasure-unpleasure relation made them into opposites.’ Freud, ‘Instincts and Their Vicissitudes’, 136.

13 I draw on Laplanche here for an issue that was never explicitly spelled out by Freud, and was complicated by the English translation of both *Trieb* and *Instinkt* as instinct. It is not that there are only drives; there is sexual instinct for Freud, and it is innate and, therefore, primary, but its onset is late, puberty: ‘Drive comes before instinct ... and when the sexual instinct arrives, the seat is already occupied.’ One can therefore speak of an instinctual ambivalence, which must be opposed to the ambivalence of infantile sexuality. J. Laplanche, *Freud and the Sexual: Essays 2000–2006*, J. Fletcher (ed), J. Fletcher, J. House and N. Ray (trans.) (International Psychoanalytic Books, 2011), 22. From the beginning there is, however, for Laplanche, self-preservative instinct. One would need to speak of ‘the double opposition between self-preservation and sexuality on the one hand, and drive and instinct on the other.’ Ibid., 35. At the risk of splitting hairs, even self-preservation has an object, starts out in a ‘relation’.

14 See, for example, S. Freud, ‘Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego’, in J. Strachey (trans. and ed), *Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. XXVIII (London: Hogarth Press, 1953 [1921]), 69–143.

community formation. Here, it is the primal father who is consumed, his authority internalised; love and hate have different sources, just as they do in ‘Instincts and Their Vicissitudes’, but the ‘conflicting affectionate and hostile impulses’ do not emerge from the internal depths of a psychobiological topos. Whatever the wager of drawing on ‘Totem and Taboo’ – and it is not a small one, given, for example, that George Agbo’s chapter on Boko Haram reflects, compellingly, on ‘photographic magic’ (p. 278),<sup>15</sup> or Jung Ran Forte’s chapter on Beninese Mami Wata cults – ambivalence is theorised in a way that, at every level, tends towards a social and relational ontology. If the two currents operate on ‘separate planes’, as Hayes and Minkley state, it is because a social contradiction has impressed itself as a psychic conflict; there is an unconscious truth to be apprehended here, but it does not lie beneath the surface, in instincts that have met social prohibitions: it resides, rather, in the social conditions according to which a conflicted masking takes place. In *Ambivalent*, ambivalence is distributed across what can only be called *the overdetermined scene of the photographic field*; it is located in photographic situations, in relations, and in the messages images were made to bear through their categorisation, exhibition, and archiving, and which have been ‘translated and retranslated’, as Minkley puts it, afterwards.<sup>16</sup>

The division between these two sides of Freud’s discourse on ambivalence and their different oppositions, however, is itself unstable, it leaks, and breaks down. If ‘Totem and Taboo’ represents only one side of this unstable divide, it is no doubt the better one from which to proceed. Far from a lapse in judgement, ‘Totem and Taboo’ is, to my mind, a very careful selection. What *Ambivalent* offers in borrowing from it is a reworking of the picture of psychic life Freud develops for his readers, distilling from it a potential inscribed on its other side.<sup>17</sup> This, as many will quickly note, is precisely what is reflected in the photographic situations that the essays aim to think with, rendering the essays reflections *of* no less than reflections *on* photography and visibility in African history. If ‘Totem and Taboo’ allows, among other things, this specular and speculative doubling between photographs and essays about them, the real provocation of *Ambivalent* comes from the way the volume asks after the specificity of the image. Between the lacunae of photographs and photographic archives, as Hayes argues in her chapter, and the lacunae of other texts, written or oral, no

15 G. Agbo, ‘Boko Haram Insurgency and a New Mode of War in Nigeria’, in Hayes and Minkley, *Ambivalent*.

16 This is of course a further allusion to Laplanche – Minkley’s chapter, and others, permit, to my mind, a reading through Laplanche. Insofar as ambivalence can be related to the visual field, Laplanche asks the crucial question: can one speak of an ‘ocular reduction of tension? Laplanche, *Freud and the Sexual*, 38. By which he means: can one speak of it as an instinct? Vision seeks excitation, not homeostasis; it is on the side of the drives. I mean overdetermined here in the sense in which Freud offers it in *Interpretation of Dreams*. It is through the joke about the borrowed kettle that Freud conceives of overdetermination, a scene with multiple determinations legible in composite, condensed dream images that, against a totalising ambition, are always, with different lines of defence, working against each other, on the brink of unravelling. Put schematically, overdetermination, marked by borrowing, is what makes deconstruction possible. Let me recall the words of Hayes and Minkley: ‘... Freud’s *usage*...’ He borrows ambivalence, and returns it, like the neighbour’s kettle, bent out of shape.

17 There are other reasons to invoke ‘Totem and Taboo’. Rey Chow, for example, offers an important rereading of it from which she derives a lesson about cautions against ‘race mixing’ and ‘intellectual intercourse’ with European theory in the formation of academic community. Her reading of Freud is a justification for reading Freud. R. Chow, ‘The Politics of Admittance: Female Sexual Agency, Miscegenation, and the Formation of Community in Frantz Fanon’, in A. Alessandrini (ed), *Frantz Fanon: Critical Perspectives* (London: Routledge, 1999), 34–56.

translation is possible; there is here a remainder the volume places before African history – and its ‘beyond’, which includes psychoanalysis – and a habitual use made of photographic images.<sup>18</sup>

Ross Truscott

*Centre for Humanities Research, University of the Western Cape*

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18 P. Hayes, ‘Empty Photographs: Ethnography and the Lacunae of African History’, in Hayes and Minkley, *Ambivalent*. Rezende’s chapter is also especially relevant here. Freud was not unaware of this difference. Dream images and dream thoughts, Freud insisted, cannot be translated, they have to be transposed. S. Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, J. Strachey (ed and trans.) (New York: Basic Books, 1900 [2010]), 295–296. Though he sometimes forgot it, when, for example, he described his notion of *Nachträglichkeit*, afterwardsness, through the metaphor of the development of a photographic negative. Psychoanalysis acquired, here, in this metaphor, a notion of development that is anything but linear and progressive. Ironically, it is precisely this aspect of Freud that can be used to unsettle ‘an implicit master narrative of unidirectional cultural development [that] remains too often unproblematized’ in African history. Hayes and Minkley, ‘Africa and the Ambivalence of Seeing’, 13. The difficult relation between images and texts cannot be settled by simply pointing to Jacques Lacan’s three registers, the symbolic, the imaginary and the real, containing images in the imaginary; the image operates in all three registers, as is clear in Minkley’s and Masondo’s chapters on the pass photograph.