Photography and Migration  
Colby College  
April 23-25, 2015  
Conference Program

All events take place in Olin 1 unless otherwise noted.

Thursday, April 23

6:30pm  Welcome from Eric Gottesman, Art, Colby College

Lecture by Aida Muluneh, photographer, *Past/Forward: Photography in Ethiopia*

Photography in Ethiopia has been around since the turn of the twentieth century; in fact, it is said that the first photographer of the land was Emperor Menelik II, who was keen on bringing new technologies into the country. When we look at image production and also the promotion of Ethiopia through images, however, we have to question the over-saturation of foreign photographers who have documented the country at different moments in its history. Looking at the growing photography market in Ethiopia that is based on studio and wedding photography has not correlated to increased visibility of photographers from Ethiopia. Therefore, this lecture is based on looking at trends of the past as well as future prospects regarding the development of photography in Ethiopia.

7:45-9pm  Reception in the lobby of the Colby College Museum of Art; short presentation by the winner of the Photography and Migration photo contest at Colby, sponsored by the Center for the Arts and Humanities

Friday, April 24

8-8:45am  Registration and coffee

8:45-9am  Welcome by Kerill O’Neill, Classics and Center for the Arts and Humanities, and Tanya Sheehan, Art, Colby College

9-10am  Lecture by Anthony Lee, *Photography and Migration: The Case of F. Holland Day*

Celebrated (and often censored) for his steamy pictures, the Boston- and Maine-based F. Holland Day tried, during his brief career at the turn of the twentieth century, to transform photography into an art form when the idea for such a thing was only just taking shape. In this he was wildly successful. Today, we regard him, along with Alfred Stieglitz and other members of the New York and New England photo-secessions, as a key figure of an aesthetic, pictorialist photography—of misty landscapes and dreamy nudes, of highly wrought myths and allegories, and of the exquisite photographic print. This lecture asks what can be learned of Day’s project if we take heed of the fact that most of his sitters were immigrants and migrants from Boston’s poor neighborhoods. It will lead to a more general discussion about migration and photography—the kinds of questions that might usefully be asked of photographs with an eye toward revealing the global flows that undergird them.
One of the largest immigration waves in the United States was the influx of six million Germans that occurred between the 1840s and 1880s. This movement of people across borders created a transatlantic network of photographic exchange. While scholars have traditionally discussed each country’s affairs in isolation from others, cross-cultural dialogue informs much of the medium’s history. By examining William and Frederick Langenheim’s daguerreotype panorama of Niagara Falls, this paper will bring to light how their identities as German immigrants not only advanced their own business interests, but also the development of American photography. In so doing, this paper will locate the brothers in a tapestry of social and cultural events that ground them in a liminal space between one culture and another. It will further use their view of the cataracts to explore an alternative to a unified history of the medium, one that adopts the concept of migration as essential to its narrative.

Response: Laura Saltz, American Studies, Colby College

Alfred Stieglitz's *The Steerage* (1907) is a canonical work of American modernist photography. What happens if we forget about the modernist discourse on photography and the repression of content it involved and start with the picture to see where it takes us? That is the intention of this paper, and it leads straight to the issue of migration, which in recent years has become strongly linked to the question, *Who are we?*. The paper thus proposes that the form of Stieglitz's picture is not simply an abstract formalism. Rather, it is tied to the questions about migration encoded within the picture; that is what is sublimated in the symbolism of the picture upon which Stieglitz famously meditates.

Response: Sharon Corwin, Colby College Museum of Art

Vilém Flusser (1920-1991) was a Czech-Brazilian media philosopher best known for books like *Towards a Philosophy of Photography* (1983) and *Into the Universe of Technical Images* (1985). His ideas were deeply influenced, however, by migration. Displaced by the Nazi occupation of Prague, Flusser lived in Brazil for thirty-two years before returning to Europe in the early 1970s. In addition to his technical image writings, he wrote *Freedom of the Migrant: Objections to Nationalism*, a book that addresses the issues of people forced to leave their homeland, or *heimat*. Rather than viewing migration as a negative force, Flusser approached it as a vehicle for human freedom with the migrant functioning as a groundless or *bodenless* (the German word also encompasses “rootlessness”) subject of “post-history.” This paper focuses on *Freedom of the Migrant* and draws parallels with Flusser’s technical image writings.

Response: Lydia Moland, Philosophy, Colby College
Around 1869, American photographer Alexander Gardner published his *Scenes in the Indian Country* series. *Scenes* synthesizes photographs of the Fort Laramie Treaty negotiations with Northern Plains Indian tribes (1868), of American Indian delegates to Washington, D.C. (1867–1869), and of the Kansas Pacific Railroad (1867). The series captures the migration of Native peoples and white Americans in the years following the U.S. Civil War. *Scenes* is a visual manifestation of the Laramie Treaty, which established reservations on the Northern Plains to settle and civilize “hostile” nomadic tribes who obstructed the migration routes of white Americans. This paper challenges our understanding of Gardner as generally sympathetic to his Native subjects by revealing *Scenes in the Indian Country* as a deliberate, unequivocal panegyric to U.S. expansion.

Response: Frank Goodyear III, Bowdoin College Museum of Art

This paper addresses the role of photography in the construction and circulation of “the Indian” as an idea, disseminated to distant spectators in North America and overseas, in the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, when the physical mobility of Indigenous people was subject to extensive surveillance and often prohibited by legal sanction. Situating its analysis in the contemporary moment, the paper examines a 2014 online photo-activism project initiated by Métis artist Christi Belcourt in response to the Canadian government’s ongoing exclusion of Indigenous communities from the political sphere. Engaging with current debates about the shifting position of photography in a changing media environment it thus investigates the increasing use of digital or trans-modal technologies for the recirculation and reevaluation of highly charged photographic images.

Response: Beth Finch, Colby College Museum of Art

Photographers, archivists, and activists convened in Benin in 2014, a new effort to grapple with keeping diverse photo collections safe, mobilizing and expanding their access in regional and global contexts. These photographs have ‘slept’ in private and civic collections in west Africa and are at the point where they must migrate to new channels before they decay, are sold, or lost through theft and damage. Migrating photos and infrastructure are at the heart of these concerns, resting heavily on family and studio owners, especially given the iconoclasm and theft that have destroyed many collections. In an era of rising nostalgia for independence and post-independence-era photography, collections face immediate and extraordinary threat. What risk loss are not simply the small studios, little-known photographic ‘masters’ and extraordinary subjectivities thus far excluded from global
attention; these photographic communities, more democratic and demotic than any other record, before or after colonialism, exist nowhere else.

Response: Catherine Besteman, Anthropology, Colby College

4:30-5:15pm Karen Haas, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, *Gordon Parks: Back to Fort Scott*

In 1950, Gordon Parks was approached by *Life* to do a feature on segregated education, then the subject of national debate, especially in his home state of Kansas. With this assignment he set out to locate his classmates from the all-black elementary school they attended together. Parks’ powerful portraits of his friends—modeled after Grant Wood’s *American Gothic*—were designed to counter African American stereotypes and *Life*’s tendency to showcase the domestic lives of white middle-class families. These photographs document the migration experiences of black families in the years before the Civil Rights movement began in earnest and portray his classmates, in the Midwestern cities he found them, as strong nuclear families. This paper reflects on why they were never finally published and how Parks navigated between the demands of his job and the trust placed in him by these individuals who opened themselves up to such public scrutiny.

Response: Dana Byrd, Art History, Bowdoin College

5:30-7pm Dinner for speakers, discussants, and invited guests in the lobby of the Colby College Museum of Art

7-9:30pm Screening of *Through a Lens Darkly* and discussion with director/producer Thomas Allen Harris

**Saturday, April 25**

8-9am Registration and coffee

9-10:15am Lecture by Jason De León and Michael Wells, *Undocumented: Living and Dying on the Migrant Trail*

Since 2009, Jason De León has directed the Undocumented Migration Project (UMP), a long-term anthropological analysis of clandestine border crossings between Northern Mexico and Southern Arizona that uses a combination of ethnographic, archaeological, and forensic research to understand this violent social process. Michael Wells has collaborated with the UMP since its inception, photographing material traces of clandestine movement in the Arizona desert, undertaking ethnographic work in migrant shelters in Northern Mexico with recent deportees, and conducting interviews with the families of deceased and missing migrants. Their lecture explores how people prepare for crossings, the diverse ways that migrants experience the desert and what they leave behind while en route, and what migrant deaths can tell us about US immigration enforcement and state-crafted violence. They will reflect on the important role that photography plays in their attempts to document the complexities and ambiguities of border crossings, acknowledging the tension that sometimes exists between Wells’ images and De León’s ethnographic writing.
In 2014, nearly 68,000 unaccompanied children were apprehended on the U.S./Mexico border. Of this group, the majority was from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, a region known as the Northern Triangle. When this situation first began to attract media attention, many discussed it in terms of issues of immigration. More recently, however, the United Nations has stated that this situation needs to be understood as a refugee crisis. Why is this distinction important and what does it reveal about the long and complicated history of U.S. involvement in the region? Moreover, how has photography concealed or alternatively exposed this complicity? In response to such questions, two members from Borderland Collective will discuss how photography was used within their exhibition Northern Triangle to activate Blue Star Contemporary in San Antonio, Texas, into a history museum, community center, and classroom in which a critical dialogue around this crisis could be initiated.

Response: Emma García, Spanish, Colby College

The nature of photography’s effect and effectiveness as a tool for social change – the extent to which images achieve not just emotional power but political power – remain central questions within the contemporary media landscape. How these issues play out in the visual representation of refugees underlie this presentation, which presents documentary images of Burmese Chin refugees who have crossed the border into the neighboring Indian state of Mizoram. One of the least known ethnic groups in Burma, the Chin are among its most persecuted and have fled Burma in search of protection and security – only to encounter numerous additional hardships. Photographs of the Chin in Mizoram produced by the author in collaboration with Chin, human rights and NGO advocates have been used to mobilize awareness of the pressing need for intervention. This discussion will examine the distribution and circulation (a migration of sorts) of these evidentiary photographs and how they have been used to advocate for the Chin people and with what effect.

Response: Winifred Tate, Anthropology, Colby College

Over the last decade, new relationships between professional journalism and artistic practices have changed how Western audiences encounter photographs from distant wars. Recent transitions in the media landscape have enabled artists such as Simon Norfolk, Alfredo Jaar, Thomas Hirschhorn, and Laila Shawa to find novel ways of engaging with war photography, facing new practical and ethical challenges. Focusing on the material transformations of photographs as they migrate from newsprint or computer screens into art galleries, my paper tackles several important questions that remain unasked in both cultural theory and photography studies: How does the placement of war photographs in art installations offer new modes of interactivity? How do their material transformations influence viewers’ experience of space, temporality, proximity, and subjectivity? And, what are the particular qualities of the gallery and the museum as contexts that shape the active and embodied role of the visitor?
Response: Eric Gottesman, Art, Colby College

12:30-2pm  Brown bag lunch in the lobby of the Colby College Museum of Art; tour of Davis and Landay galleries led by students in AR498: Photography and Migration

2:15-3pm  Gabrielle Moser, OCAD University, *Circulating Imperial Citizens: The Colonial Office Visual Instruction Committee’s Photographic Lantern Slides, 1902-1945*

From 1902–1945, the Colonial Office Visual Instruction Committee (COVIC), a branch of the British government, designed a lecture series intended to teach children what it meant to look and to feel like an “imperial citizen.” Using photographic lanternslides, the lectures asked students to identify with the subjects of the photographs as fellow citizens. Photographs of (e)migration and metaphors of circulation were central to COVIC’s definition of imperial citizenship. Using the COVIC lectures as its script, this presentation—designed in collaboration with artist Oliver Husain—reenacts this early attempt at picturing citizenship as a mode of belonging based not on place of birth or on national residence, but on the freedom of movement and migration. Juxtaposing some of the 6,700 photographs included in the lectures with photographic evidence of imperial citizens who were denied the right of (e)migration, this talk questions the limits of photography in securing the rights of citizens as immigrants.

Response: Shalini Le Gall, Colby College Museum of Art

3-3:45pm  Thy Phu, Western University, *Vietnam in Flames and the Diasporic History of Tears*

This paper explores the afterlives of *Vietnam in Flames*, published in 1969 by the government of the Republic of Vietnam (RVN), which featured the work of photographers ARVN Colonel Nguyen Ngoc Hanh and Nguyen Manh Dan. Though the book was initially produced to boost moral for the anticommunist South Vietnam, in the wake of the Fall of Saigon in April 1975 select images from it occupy a central place in diasporic Vietnamese communities—on websites dedicated to preserving memories of the failed military struggle, or in Black April commemorations mourning the loss of nation and homeland. By examining the visual trope of tears in these photographs, the paper considers how their contemporary deployment helps fashion a tale of communal loss, one that with the benefit of hindsight can be seen as anticipatory and productive. This tale enables the diasporic community to articulate a collective memory of South Vietnam, important because the history of tears is one that is not written. Tears are a powerful visual trope in the book, offering a way for Vietnamese refugees to mourn and re-pledge their allegiance to the lost nation, even after establishing themselves in new sites of resettlement.

Response: Elizabeth LaCouture, History and East Asian Studies, Colby College

3:45-4:30pm  Grace Aneiza Ali, City University of New York, *A Portrait of Migration in the Guyana Photographic Archive*
This paper examines images from the Colonial Office Photographic Collection, British Guiana, 1870-1931 in the National Archives, London. Featuring posed portraits of “Negroes,” “Chinese,” and “East-Indians” these images represent systems of slavery and migration that brought Africans and Asians, respectively, to British Guiana. These movements laid the foundation for the multi-ethnic nation of modern Guyana. This paper explores how the archival photographs point to the underbelly of the migration experience. They lend insight into the intersecting histories, cultural dynamics, and tensions among different racial and ethnic groups in Guyana and represent black/brown bodies as bonded in their complex relations to the politics of migration.

Response: Arnout van der Meer, History, Colby College

4:30-5:15pm Beth Zinsli, Lawrence University, Captioning Collective Memory: Vernacular Photography from the Dominican Diaspora

Family albums provide powerful visual representations of memory. Yet the ubiquity of vernacular photographs, their ordinariness and presence in everyday life, have made them almost invisible to critical inquiry. Precisely because of familiar and recognizable visual conventions like handwritten captions, however, vernacular photographs have a crucial place in the assembly and articulation of collective memory in the diaspora. Like remittances and letters, photographs with handwritten captions circulate among family members both in the Dominican Republic and the U.S. diaspora. Through an analysis of a set of vernacular photographs in the Juan A. Paulino Collection in the Dominican Studies Institute (CUNY), this paper argues that familiar conventions like the handwritten captions on vernacular photographs legitimize and reinforce selective aspects of collective memory for Dominican diaspora communities. Further, the photographs reveal shifting conceptions of Dominican racial identity in the diaspora that reach beyond the boundaries of the albums and archives that contain them.

Response: Chandra Bhimull, Anthropology and African-American Studies, Colby College

5:15-5:30 Conclusion