5

Power and Representation

Chapter summary

This chapter is concerned with the camera's power to represent people, and the choices that photojournalists must make in depicting situations where they encounter difference or 'otherness'. There are many kinds of 'otherness': disability, sexual orientation, class, economic deprivation and gender, all of which present ethical questions when it comes to responsible photographic representation. But here, our focus is on race. Often, the ethical challenges of representation are impacted greatly by history, and this chapter uses examples from the history of British 'colonial photography' to illustrate some of the potential pitfalls involved in the representation of race in the present day. Discussing the power of the camera as a social apparatus involves looking at theoretical ideas to do with the nature of power itself and with the significance of 'the gaze'.

The camera is a tool of power

Most people can appreciate, in one way or another, what is meant by 'the power of photography'. Many of us have had encounters with photographic images that convey meaning with such potency that they impact us, stay with us and maybe even change us. Many of these will likely have been photojournalistic images, and this kind of affective power is very often among the greatest ambitions that photojournalists have for their work. But in order to appreciate the true social and cultural influence that photojournalism can have, it is necessary to consider power of a different kind, using a different sort of language. This is not the power of photography simply to move or impress its viewers but to shape the representation of situations, historical moments and especially people. This power is implicated in a complex set of ethical and political questions, and to address these questions we must begin with an understanding that before a single picture is ever taken, a camera is a tool of power.

When any two people encounter one another, a dynamic of power is at play between them through the exchange of gazes. Sometimes this dynamic is very subtle, almost imperceptible, because the degree of power they hold is more or less equal. This might be the case if two strangers exchange glances in the street, or if good friends greet one another. At other times it might be felt a little more distinctly, for example, if one of these people is a figure of authority, or if one is asking the other for help. When a teacher stands in front of a room full of students to deliver a lecture, an exchange of gazes is taking place in which power relations are at play. The students look at the teacher with the expectation that she will offer them something, and, in turn, by the social (and economic) convention of the student-teacher relationship, she expects that they will pay attention. As well as having the responsibility to speak, she has an awareness of the performative nature of her visible presence. Ultimately, she is the figure of authority within the situation and holds most of the power, but as the object of the students' collective gaze she is also exposed to their visual and critical scrutiny. There are complex dynamics at play. To take an even more pronounced example, consider a prison officer in a cell block. He walks up and down the rows of cells, inspecting and surveying each prisoner in turn. As he does so, they each look back at him, but their gazes signify very different degrees of power. He is free to move around at his own discretion, choosing what he looks at and for how long; they are not. He has the power, based on what he sees, to reprimand or punish; they do not. They know that a certain kind of behaviour is expected of them, and it is in their interests to be seen conforming to this. In short, by virtue of who he is, the gaze of the officer is powerful.

Now imagine a camera being introduced into any one of these hypothetical situations, and notice how, as an apparatus of power, it further alters the dynamic. The relationship between the two friends meeting in the street changes when one is suddenly a photographer and the other is their subject. The nature of their relationship in that moment becomes less equal: regardless of whether 'the subject' is confident or shy, willing or unwilling to be photographed, he is still 'subject' to the power of the photographer and how she will choose to represent him. In the lecture room, if one of the students takes out a camera and points it at the lecturer as she is speaking (which is not unheard of in photography lectures), there is an immediate and discernible shift in the dynamic of power that has existed between teacher and student, and even between that particular student and the others in the group. The lecturer must now consider why she is being photographed and how she will appear, and this will have an impact on her sense of her own subjectivity in that moment, if not on her outward behaviour. Now imagine a camera in the hands of either the prison officer or one of his prisoners, and consider the very different potential implications this would have.

When a photojournalist arrives at the scene of an event to carry out their work, their very presence, and especially the presence of their camera, will often have an

impact on that situation. The awareness of being photographed will often affect the behaviour, or at least the consciousness, of their subjects. Sometimes this is because of an awareness that photojournalists operate with an agenda to record and present events for the scrutiny of the public eye. Their cameras give them the power of accountability, of shaping a subject's image favourably or unfavourably – the same properties that all cameras have, but amplified by the added institutional power of their profession and the apparatuses of the press. In short, photojournalists have more power than most other photographers not only because they might make 'better' images but also because more people will look at their work. It is a cliché to say that with greater power comes greater responsibility, but the power of representation is a serious thing to undertake. A fundamental part of being a 'responsible' photojournalist is appreciating, first, the power embodied by the camera itself, and secondly, the stakes involved in how it is used.

As we observed briefly in Chapter 1, there is a great social, psychological and historical obstacle to gaining a clear sense of this responsibility. This is the enduring idea of photography's objectivity. In our work teaching photojournalism students, one of the most important principles we try to communicate, and often one of the hardest for them to appreciate, is that, one way or another, a photographer's political views will always manifest themselves in the aesthetic choices they make. What they choose to include in the frame and what is excluded; whether their chosen viewpoint is high or low; the minute subtleties of facial expression and body language that are captured; even the use of black and white versus colour: each of these choices may feel purely arbitrary, intuitive or aesthetic, but each has important implications for how their subject is represented. Each says something, intentional or not, about how the photographer 'sees' their subject. The power of the camera, and of photojournalism, is so great precisely because that point of view is then passed on as it is captured and seen again and again, sometimes by thousands of other people. These viewers may then, in turn, accept the image as 'objective', not realizing that their perception of a person or event has already been wordlessly shaped by a medium that is supposed to speak for itself. When the power of photographic representation and its presumed transparency intersect in the public space of the media, the stakes are often very high indeed.

The colonial gaze

This is best illustrated by looking to extreme examples, and some of the most troubling historical cases of photography's use as an apparatus of power date from the British colonial period. By its broadest definition, the British empire spanned a period of roughly five hundred years, from the arrival in the Americas in 1497 to the withdrawal from Hong Kong in 1987. But its peak was in the late Victorian

era and the first few decades of the twentieth century. At this time, British rule accounted for over a quarter of the globe in both population and geographical terms, making it the largest empire in history. This peak period coincides with the rise of photography as a widespread means of communication, a time of great openness in regards to what this new technology was capable of, how it should be defined and, in particular, how it might further the cause of British imperialism in a whole range of different ways. The empire has had far-reaching consequences to say the least: every place it touched has experienced both great injustice and, to some extent, advances (in infrastructure, technology, systems of governance, education and trade, and even language and sport). In turn, British society has been impacted immeasurably by the cultures and riches of its former colonies as well as by the ambiguous legacy of such huge power, and its subsequent loss. The influence of colonial expansion on the practices of photography itself has also been huge, and photography is very much implicated in some of the imperial project's darkest and most shameful violations.

In the hands of British colonial officers and administrators, photography was used for a wide range of purposes including the exploration of foreign landscapes, military strategy, education (both of colonial 'natives' and the British population at home), personal or commemorative record and, most notably perhaps, as a tool in the burgeoning science of anthropology. This range is a reflection of the diverse, and sometimes contradictory, motivations behind the imperial project itself. These motivations can be summed up as Christianity, civilization and commerce. For the Victorian ruling classes in particular, 'civilization' encompassed a commitment not only to bringing 'uncivilized' peoples into line with British social ideals by any means necessary but also to use the exploration of new territories to advance scientific knowledge, thus increasing Britain's claim to intellectual as well as economic superiority on the world stage. Photography was uniquely suited to these scientific objectives, which were more often than not, as literary theorist and pioneer of postcolonial theory Edward Said has argued, thinly veiled means of asserting control on local populations.[1] Photography could, with apparent objectivity and detached scientific rationalism, classify 'racial types' (Figure 5.3) and survey the strange and 'uncivilized' cultural practices of native populations. But because of the pronounced imbalance in the power relationships involved (consider again the example of the prison guard's gaze), objectivity and scientific detachment in these situations was, to say the least, a simplistic ideal. Instead, photography was complicit in upholding ill-founded theories of racial and cultural superiority that were both a cause and an effect of colonial domination. This kind of pseudoscientific propaganda was routinely presented in explicit terms, depicting human subjects as no more than specimens (Figure 5.1), but it also appeared in slightly more tacit ways, where the 'natural' inferiority of colonized people was normalized and represented as part of a God-given social order (Figure 5.2).

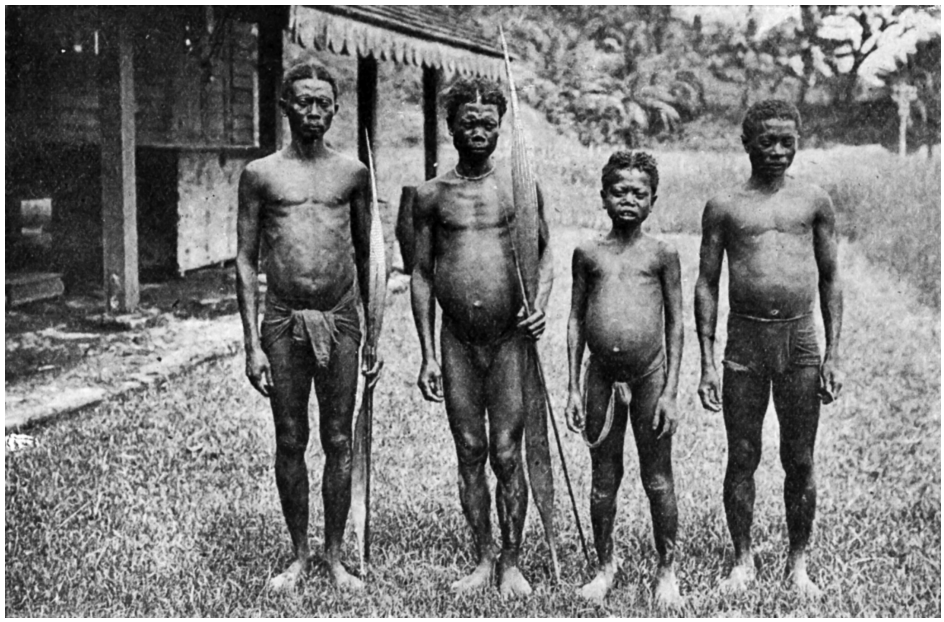

Figure 5.1 Andamanese, India, Anthropological picture, 1900 (Getty Images).

The danger of such imagery, of course, lay in photography's mode of address, as an irrefutably transparent window untouched by any political interest. For the original British viewers of such pictures, this transparency was accepted even more readily than it might be today, and as the only pictorial representations ever seen by many such viewers of a black or South Asian person, their influence was very great indeed. Not only were these pictures demeaning to their individual subjects but also for British viewers they were received as instructive documents that exponentially reinforced the hierarchy of imperial power, entrenching racist attitudes decades into the future.

The nature of 'otherness' is complex. In this chapter, we focus on the question of race: how the colonial legacy has shaped the photographic representation of race in the nineteenth century and today. But a person's race can never be separated from the other characteristics that make up who they are. Gender, age, ability, religion, sexual orientation and socio-economic background, along with other kinds of 'difference' including race, all intersect to make each person's identity unique. ('Intersectionality' is the name given to the study of how these overlaps combine, in particular to create systems of discrimination and disadvantage. It has predominantly been devoted to considering the intersection between race and gender.) For example, in terms of discrimination and disadvantage, a black middle-class man's experience cannot be presumed to be the same as that of a black lesbian woman from a poor background: even though their ethnicity is an important shared characteristic, it can be reductive to

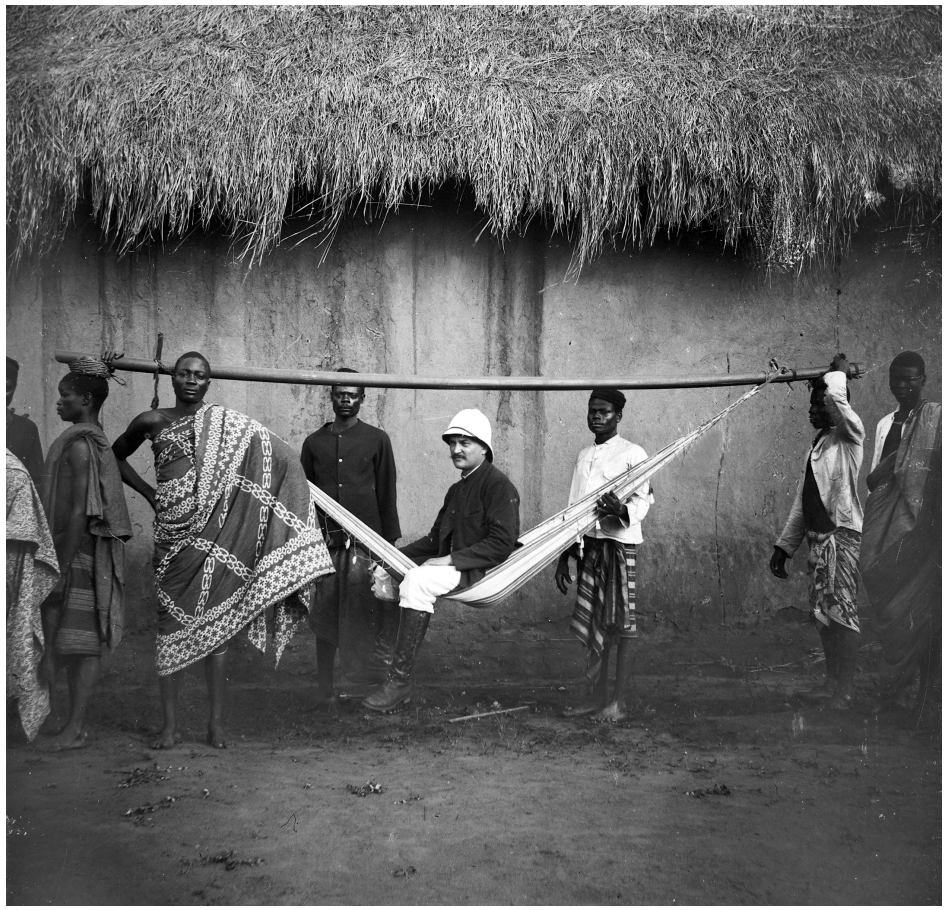

Figure 5.2 European moving in hammock, Allada, Benin, 1895 (Getty Images).

focus on this at the exclusion of gender, sexual orientation and class. We return to this issue in the discussion of later examples.

The apparatus and the gaze

Figure 5.1 is in some senses a very 'straightforward' photograph. The subjects are posed frontally and simply; the camera is positioned squarely and at close range; no elaborate staging or direction has taken place. The individual subjects do not appear to have been humiliated or abused in any way in its making. Aesthetically, it is neutral, as befits a picture that is constructed to operate within a discourse of science: objective, informative and clear. What is it, then, that makes such an image problematic? If we are proposing that the picture does a kind of harm to its subjects, is that harm located within the frame of the picture itself – can we see it visibly? – or does it somehow lie outside?

Figure 5.3 From *The People of India* archive: 'Kookie Man' (Getty Images).

We might also ask the same questions about Figure 5.3. *The People of India* is an eight-volume photographic study that was compiled between 1868 and 1875 by two British civil servants, John Forbes Watson and John William Kaye. The volumes contain 468 captioned photographs that aim to provide a comprehensive survey of the native castes and tribes of India. The 'jewel in the crown' of the empire, India was

both a source of magnificent wealth to the British and also a great cultural conundrum: its huge size, its inherent cultural diversity and, in particular, its baffling range of ethnic groups made it difficult to administer effectively. If a nation is to be properly controlled, it must first be understood, and Watson and Kaye's project was commissioned as a means of bringing a kind of order to this perceived chaos. This example (Figure 5.3) shows a man identified only as belonging to the 'Kookie or Kuki robber tribes of Cachar'. He has no name, and his function is to serve as a symbolic marker of an entire community. He is reduced to a 'type', a specimen. In contrast, unlike Figure 5.1, this picture, with its oval frame and upper-body three-quarter profile, conforms to the visual language of Western portraiture. This is a genre of image that, far from demeaning or reducing its subject (or 'sitter'), traditionally signifies respect. Since the European Renaissance period, portraiture of this kind has been a means of highlighting the individual characteristics of a person of note, predicated on the basic belief that this individuality is located and manifested most evidently in the face.

There is a disconnect, then, between the form of this image and its function. We might say, returning to the question posed previously, that the symbolic 'harm' inflicted by this photograph lies not within the image itself but entirely outside of the frame, within the apparatus of its use. The idea of 'apparatuses' of power comes from the French critical theorist Michel Foucault, whose writings, while they did not tackle photography directly, have been of great interest to the critical discourse of photography because of the way in which he conceptualizes power, and in particular the connection between seeing and control.[2] For Foucault, power is not a stable or quantifiable commodity belonging to particular individuals or things, but rather it is something that flows via social and political systems (themselves called 'discourses'). A Foucauldian understanding of photography recognizes that no photograph contains any power in or of itself, but can be invested with power in a way that depends absolutely on who is using it and for what purpose. This photograph of the 'Kookie Man' derives all of its meaning, and all of its capacity for oppressive control, from the political system of British rule within which it has been commissioned and implemented. As Said argues (and the creators of *The People of India* project freely admit), this kind of pseudoscientific knowledge is always a means of asserting some form of dominance over a subject. The 'Kookie Man' is not overtly 'dominated' in the process of sitting for a photographic portrait, but his image is part of a system of domination that reduces his humanity in a symbolic way. There may be no visible trace of this in his eyes, but when the context that surrounds the picture is taken into account, it is undeniable.

Another important theoretical idea presented by Foucault concerns the significance of the gaze in the power relationship between subjects.[3] For Foucault, the gaze refers not so much to a literal function of vision as to a subject position within a particular discourse. For example, he writes about 'the medical gaze' as one that

separates the personhood of a medical patient from their status as a body, contingent on the unequal power relationship between doctor and patient. It is not hard to transfer this idea to a whole range of other contexts, including 'the colonial gaze', and when we combine it with an understanding of the camera as a tool of power and the apparatuses in which photography is implicated, we have a theoretical framework by which we can respond to questions of photography and racial 'otherness', among many other things.

Accounting for the multiplicity of gazes that exist in and around a photograph can be a very productive method of critical analysis,[4] because it takes into account the various discursive frameworks and contexts of viewing as well as what is happening 'inside' the image. For example, Figure 5.1, formally simple as it is, represents a whole range of subject positions that are each invested in the picture in different ways. It is not easy to make out the eyes of the four subjects within the picture, but at least one of them looks directly at the camera, and at least one other looks beyond at something outside the frame. These different gazes signify different relationships to the camera, possibly including confidence, self-consciousness, defiance, confusion, compliance or aggression. As in most photographic images, the gaze of the photographer, who has his own specific agenda and relationship to the subjects, is aligned with that of our own as viewers, looking at the picture in a very different time and place, judging both the photographer and the group of subjects according to completely different terms than viewers might have in 1901. A full account of the image would also consider the various investments implied by the institutional gaze of the photo agency which controls the rights to the image in the present, historical or academic institutions specializing in the study of its ethnographic subject and, finally, its educational usage in this book. You, the reader, have your own gaze, informed by your own subject position, time and place.

The exotic

In examples such as those shown above, it is relatively easy to recognize the problematic treatment of people who have been depicted as inferior, reduced to indicative symbols of racial difference or presented as objects of scientific study. In such cases, it is clear not only that all of the power lies with the photographer but also that the camera has been used to reinforce this power imbalance, in the making of the picture itself and also often by institutionalizing it via apparatuses of state and officially sanctioned systems of knowledge (such as schools or museums). This kind of imagery is, for the most part, firmly in the past. The views and relationships represented in it are no longer acceptable, and we look at these photographs now as historic documents, as relics of a different time.

The reason why we include them here, in a discussion about issues facing contemporary photojournalism, is not because any photographer in the present is likely to produce imagery of this kind, but because these modes of representation carry a legacy. So ingrained and destructive are the patterns set in place by photography like this – in many cases so subtle and pervasive – that every photographer who engages with the subject of ethnic difference, or whose work involves subjects who are less powerful on any terms, has a responsibility to negotiate that legacy in a conscious way. A white Western photographer working in an African country, for example, inherits, whether or not they are aware of it, the baggage of colonialism purely by virtue of who they are and what they are doing. They must develop ways of responding to it progressively and positively, rather than allowing themselves to fall into systems of representation that, however subtly, reinforce over a century of status quo.[5] It may sound limiting, fatalistic or even contradictory to condemn particular photographers to such 'baggage' by virtue of their privilege or the colour of their skin. But this kind of consciousness – what might be called a 'historical self-awareness' – is part of what makes good photojournalism so difficult and so important. It is also one of the clearest means by which a photojournalist can hope to achieve the goal of really 'making a difference.'

As contemporary Western photojournalists have tackled these ethical issues in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, often in the context of representing conflict, poverty and endangered ways of life in formerly colonized parts of the world, a whole range of views has grown up around the question of responsible representation. In some cases, fairly clear and accepted codes of conduct have emerged with regards to treating subjects with respect, making images that preserve people's dignity as human beings, and avoiding negative stereotypes. Whole new forms and approaches, such as the emerging practice of 'participatory photography' (by organizations such as Photovoice – see Chapter 4) are being added to the repertoire of photographers who are committed to redressing the power imbalances that have plagued the history of the genre.[6] But in spite of all this progress, there is an enduring trait that exists particularly within the photography of ethnic difference that is more ambiguous, tenacious and difficult to negotiate. It, too, is part of the legacy of colonial photography, though it resists the same ethical judgements because it seems on the surface not to take power away from the subject but to bestow it. This is the idea of the 'exotic'.

The word 'exotic' comes from the Greek *exotikos*, for 'foreign', based on the prefix *exo*, meaning 'outside'. In contemporary usage, definitions of the word have two clear strands: 'from a distant place' on the one hand, and 'striking and attractive because unfamiliar' on the other.[7] Most basically, referring to something as exotic implies a conflation of strangeness and desire. This is a complicated combination. When we call a person (such as the man seen in Figure 5.4) exotic, we are celebrating them, saying, 'Look! You are beautiful and compelling. Your culture is rich and mysterious.

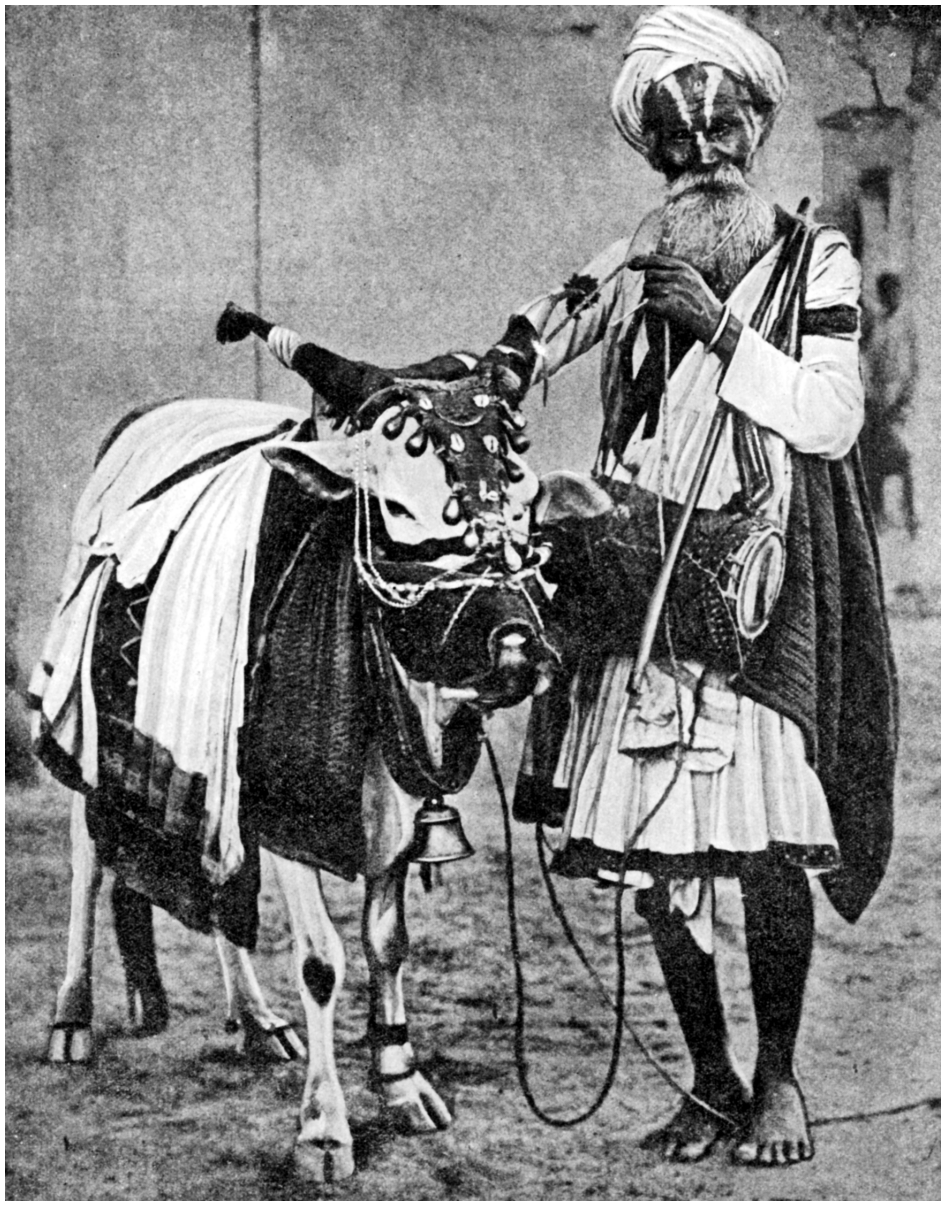

Figure 5.4 Hindu man with sacred cow, India, 1936 (Getty Images).

This photograph of an Indian Hindu man with a sacred cow is from Harold Wheeler's enormously popular 1936 book *Peoples of the World in Pictures* (London: Odhams Press), an illustrated guide to the different races of 'man' throughout the world. In modern terms, the book is highly exoticizing, reductive and even racist. For example, the section on China is introduced as follows: 'The Chinese are a sedentary race, with none of the Western passion for exercise. Their virtues are patience and perseverance, an immense aptitude for work and an ability to live comfortably in any clime and in surroundings devoid of any hint of comfort. They have a keen sense of humour, but no sense of time.'

We marvel at you!' It seems to elevate and pay respect. But all of this comes on the condition that the person be kept at arm's length, looked at but not identified with, valued not on the basis of their humanity but of their novelty. In short, it objectifies. Objectification is a complicated notion too: we very often see this in discussions about the media's representation of women, which for the most part conditions women not only to accept that they will be valued according their appearance but also to embrace this condition of their value, for example, in feeling so affirmed (or 'flattered') by positive judgements of their appearance that it seems like a kind of empowerment. Even though we do not want to be seen as objects, the double-edged ambiguity of this desire can be confusing, especially for the young and the vulnerable. A similar tension exists within the idea of the exotic. Just as a person can be 'objectified', so too can this adjective be turned into a verb with overtones of violence, as whole cultures are 'exoticized', reduced to a level of visual novelty for the consumption of curious Western eyes.

This exoticizing impulse has been especially potent when applied, within the context of colonial photography as well as more generally, to the representation of women of colour. In such images, the exotic, as a conflation of strangeness and desire, has the effect of doubly reducing women, by presenting them as objects of both cultural curiosity and sexual voyeurism. Here is a pertinent example of the kind of 'intersectional' discrimination mentioned previously in this chapter. Many photographs of this kind were made for commercial purposes around the turn of the twentieth century, often to be reproduced as picture postcards.[8] Hundreds of examples exist of these postcards, in which female subjects from a whole range of cultures are directed to pose according to the conventions of Western painting, and are photographed in studio settings furnished with carefully chosen props and painted backgrounds. Each of these images operates on the premise that the woman's difference, her culture, her sex and her individuality as a human being, are reduced and carefully arranged for consumption on purely Western (and male) terms. She is a stereotype who has no name. In many cases, even the cultural convention of her dress is appropriated in a clumsy conflation of the Western genres of nude painting and cheap pornography: a particularly popular category of postcard featured female subjects from cultures in which it is, or was, customary for women to be bare-breasted, allowing the Western colonial viewer to consume her nudity without any of the moral taboos associated with looking at pornography. These photographs are now relics of history, but they illustrate impulses that continue to persist in other, subtler, forms.

As a way of seeing, the exotic is still very much alive in the practice of Western photojournalism and documentary photography, and there is a huge demand for it, particularly as traditional ways of life in tribal and indigenous cultures all over the world are under threat from globalization, environmental degradation and industrial/economic expansion. 'Capturing' such cultures while they are still in existence

has been a motivation for many photographers, but arguably the value of this kind of photography is often outweighed by the damage done through objectification, 'othering' and, in some cases, even outright exploitation.[9] When a photographer is drawn to a subject primarily on the basis of difference rather than identification with another human being, they are likely to create photographs that invite the same response from viewers – especially if they neglect to contextualize their imagery with a rounded view of their subjects as people with names and personal histories, who operate in specific political, social and economic conditions. Whatever the photographer's conscious intention, such images will inevitably reduce, simplify, distance and 'other' the subject, perpetuating age-old power imbalances in a newer, more socially acceptable guise.

The camera of the colonized

Postcolonial studies is an academic field that considers the legacies of colonialism across a very diverse range of perspectives. Broadly speaking it is concerned with examining the history of colonialism from the point of view of the colonized subject, seeking, in a sense, a retrospective redistribution of power. In the case of photography, this has involved an interest in practices that break established patterns in which the colonized subject is looked at but cannot look, and is represented but denied the power to represent. This revisionist history has opened up entire indigenous canons of photography that have been unrecognized or ignored by dominant accounts of the medium. Across India, for example, photography has a history that is inseparable from British influence but that includes strong and unmistakably Indian 'voices'. The list of these voices is long (as an introduction to the subject, see the writing of Christopher Pinney detailed in the further reading list below), but one of the most distinctive is Raghubir Singh.

Singh is an important figure within the colonial and postcolonial histories of Indian photography not only because of his photographs but also because of the political self-awareness shown in the writing which has accompanied and contextualized his practice. In *River of Colour*, his final book (published in 1998), Singh includes a long written introduction that presents his entire career as a continual negotiation with the Western photographic influences that have pervaded his country and his medium. Personally acquainted with many of the leading figures of Western photography, he was well placed to comment on the differences in attitude, motivation and aesthetics that set them apart. Singh spent a formative week with Henri Cartier-Bresson in Jaipur in 1966, and also worked for a time with Lee Friedlander, whom he felt was too interested in the 'abject', having an aesthetic interest in poverty that was peculiarly Western (another variation of 'the exotic' that persists well into the twenty-first century). He has much to say about the legacies of colonialism for Indian art and culture, and specifically how

the photography of the British administration brought with it a way of seeing that was utterly alien to Indian culture, being implicitly laden with Christian ideas about death that he saw as oppressive. It is futile, he writes, for the Indian photographer to try to conform 'to the Eurocentric Western canon of photography, in which the contemporary concepts of morality and guilt push aside the idea of beauty. Beauty, nature, humanism and spirituality are the four cornerstones of the continuous culture of India.'[10]

The thing that sets him apart most obviously from these other photographers, however, is his commitment to colour. Despite Cartier-Bresson's early influence on his work, Singh photographed from the beginning exclusively in colour, which represented for him an intrinsically Indian way of seeing: Western photographers 'know' colour through the mind, while Indians know it through intuition. One reason why he can be called a pioneer of colour photography is because, as he writes, Indian photographers simply 'cannot produce the angst and alienation' of American and European photographers such as Brassai, Bill Brandt, Robert Frank or Diane Arbus. He argues that 'psychological empathy with black is alien to India',[11] and even that Indians did not 'see' in black and white until the arrival of colonialism and photography: if Indians had invented photography, its history would have been completely different.

In his 1991 book *The Ganges,* an image of a 'pavement mirror shop' in Calcutta acts as a striking emblem of Singh's India. It is a street scene that demonstrates his eye for vibrancy and colour, without resorting to reductive stereotypes. Photographed closely and tightly framed, he uses the mismatched collection of mirrors being sold at the stall to fragment the picture plane, creating a compelling montage of pictures-within-pictures. Faces are layered over one another, some passing in front of the camera, others behind, reflected back at the viewer. These portraits include young and old, smartly dressed and poor, each absorbed in their own activity. One small mirror at the upper edge of the frame has caught the photographer himself – his reflection is the only element not sharply in focus. Each of the other vignettes is perfectly composed, the elements of colour and form impeccably balanced across the entire frame. Other pictures in *The Ganges* are elegant and lyrical, evoking a kind of 'magical realism' (associated with the literature and visual imagery of Latin America). But this picture presents a different facet of Singh's vision, charged with a frenetic energy and complexity that are still far removed from the 'exotic'.

Across India and the whole of the formerly colonized world, photographers continue to negotiate the legacies left behind by British (and other colonial powers') ways of seeing, not only in how they and their communities might represent themselves in its aftermath but also in some cases by questioning the nature of photography itself as it has been handed to them.[12] We might even say that the very idea of the camera as a tool of power is inseparable from these particular histories of its use. By beginning to align it with other subject positions, political priorities and aesthetic forms, postcolonial photographic practice, as well as contemporary research into indigenous photography of the colonial period, has the capacity for profound disruption of existing power structures.

Legacies of the colonial gaze: representing famine

Curiosity about the world and the impulse to document threatened cultures are not, of course, the only contexts in which contemporary Western photographers engage with non-Western subjects. Much more frequent and high profile is the coverage of humanitarian stories. From breaking news of natural disasters to longer-term charity campaigns, humanitarian photojournalism raises the stakes of ethically responsible representation because of the huge potential for regression into stereotypes of victimhood. The coverage of African famine by Western photojournalists has proven in particular to be a minefield of stereotypes and entrenched visual cliché, because it is an area in which so many questions of power and representation collide.

Famine, especially in Africa, has its own unmistakable iconography. The visual cues of the emaciated black body, empty eyes, distended belly, tears and 'flies on eyes' are its hallmarks. David Campbell has argued that this iconography 'should be roundly condemned as simplistic, reductionist, colonial and even racist'.[13] Imagery such as this (as seen in Figure 5.5) is implicated, he says, within the legacies of

Figure 5.5 Finn Frandsen, November 1984, Ethiopian famine victim (AFP/Getty Images).

colonialism not by any association with the exotic as such but because it perpetuates a stereotypical power relationship between helpless, dysfunctional Africa and the rich, compassionate West:

> The message is that someone is suffering, and that we should be sympathetic to his or her plight and moved to do something. However, the lack of contextual support means that viewers are most likely to regard action to alleviate suffering as coming from outside. Indigenous social structures are absent and local actors are erased from these images. There is a void of agency and history with the victim arrayed passively before the lens so their suffering can be appropriated. This structuring of the isolated victim awaiting external assistance is what invests such imagery with colonial relations of power.[14]

Associated with these colonialist attitudes is the tendency, all too visible in the British tabloid press, of representing Africa as a whole, undifferentiated continent defined by famine. Beyond simple ignorance, this is a throwback from an era in which Africa was 'the dark continent': a vast and mysterious mass awaiting exploration only by the brave. Even the more innocuous misconception of the whole of Africa as suffering a perpetual state of starvation is a destructive stereotype that photography often does little to dispel. Sometimes called the 'Live Aid Legacy', this view is associated

Figure 5.6 Paul Lowe, 1992, Mogadishu, Somalia (Paul Lowe).

Paul Lowe's photograph highlights the media circus surrounding a malnourished boy during 'Operation Restore Hope', the American intervention in Somalia following the overthrow of its president.

in particular with the devastating Ethiopian famine of 1984 (Figure 5.5), which prompted British celebrities led by Bob Geldof to mount a high-profile publicity campaign that succeed in raising a large amount of money in a short amount of time, but resulted in a long-lasting distortion of Africa in the British public imagination.[15]

The very uncomfortable idea of the famine victim being 'arrayed passively before the lens' is illustrated in this photograph (Figure 5.6) taken by Paul Lowe in Somalia in 1992.

By taking a few steps backwards, Lowe has been able to capture the troubling nature of the media presence in this part of Somalia, where famine has become a story to be pursued and starving children are hunted like prizes by the waiting press.[16] Of course, the press is an industry that is necessarily supplied by photographers doing their jobs, and though he has stepped outside it for a moment to show us the bigger picture, Lowe is himself, as a white European journalist, part of the scene he is documenting. A pragmatic interpretation must also take into account the utilitarian argument that photographing famine (which is in this particular case directly associated with political chaos and injustice) is a means to an end. International awareness, emergency fundraising and the political pressure that can be put on governments by effective photographic coverage are all arguments in favour of photography that does not shy away from representing famine in a clear and uncompromising way. History has shown that the photographic coverage of famine in the news media does have the power to effect change, and can be seen, in humanitarian and political terms, as part of the solution. The question of whether this justifies the perpetuating of stereotypes that are (in Campbell's words) 'simplistic, reductionist, colonial and even racist', remains open. It is one that photojournalists and news editors must negotiate on their own terms, arriving at a critically informed position that sits as comfortably as is possible within the parameters of their professional practice and conscience.

Race and representation in modern Britain

On 22 June 1948, the *SS Empire Windrush* sailed into the Port of Tilbury, United Kingdom, carrying 490 Jamaican men and two women (Figure 5.7). At this time, when the Second World War had greatly depleted the male working-age population of Britain, an open-door immigration policy was in place allowing free passage for any colonial subject from one part of the British realm to another. Though people from all parts of the world had been living and working in Britain for many years prior, this was a watershed moment, marking the beginning of modern multicultural Britain. This is partly because of the numbers of people involved – as these men settled and were in many cases eventually joined by their families, whole neighbourhoods (most

Figure 5.7 Jones, 22 June 1948, *SS Empire Windrush* arrives at Tilbury Docks (Daily Herald Archive/Getty Images).

famously the Brixton area of South London) quickly developed strong West Indian identities. But it is also because of how these communities were represented. Not only did the cultural and demographic landscape of Britain's cities begin to change from

Figure 5.8 22 June 1948, Jamaicans disembarking *SS Empire Windrush* (Planet News Archive/Getty Images).

this moment on but there was also a profound shift in perceptions of the relationship between Britain and its formerly colonized subjects. People of colour, who were previously only seen in picture books and postcards from the other side of world, perceived as exotic, strange and in most cases inherently inferior, were now neighbours and co-workers.

This uncomfortable adjustment can be read into the photographic coverage of the time, including press photographs of the arrival of the *Windrush* itself. The media coverage of the event had a high profile, introducing Britons in a most literal way to their new neighbours and a new era. Figure 5.8 shows a group of passengers as they disembark the ship. On the whole they appear smartly dressed and sophisticated, and while there is an understandable air of apprehension about what might await them (the stiffly posed young man in the oversized suit, far left foreground, personifies this in an especially poignant way), many of the facial expressions and much of the body language convey self-assurance, agency and a readiness to participate in British life as equal, self-determining citizens. Consider the gaze of the man standing about halfway up the stairs, in the hat and dark coat with upturned collar, and compare it with the gazes of the Andamanese men in Figure 5.1. In both cases, they look squarely into the camera lens and, by extension, squarely at the viewer. But their subjectivity is constructed so differently by these two photographs that their gazes impact the viewer in completely different ways. In the earlier image, the subjects have been stripped of their agency and power by the camera, and if their collective gaze makes any direct address to us as viewers it is one that evokes discomfort, self-consciousness or, for some, even the vaguely guilty recognition of a problematic system of oppression. By contrast, the other seems figuratively to say, 'You may photograph me and you may look at me, but it will be on my own terms, and in looking right back at you I assert my presence as an equal.' These gazes, and the viewers' own surveying gaze, also have different meanings today than they would have at the times when either photograph first appeared in the British public sphere. In 1948, this photograph of the *Windrush* passengers would for ordinary Britons come as something of a shock. These men have arrived from the Caribbean and not from Africa, but because they are black, colonial imagery of the 'dark continent' was at the time the only readily available frame of reference. Considering that the only photographs of people of colour that many Britons had been accustomed to seeing looked like Figures 5.1–5.4, above, we can begin to understand why the multicultural history of Britain has been so fraught, and how much misunderstanding and outright racism is attributable to misuses of photography.

The fate that awaited many of the *Windrush* immigrants and their families was not as bright as they might have hoped. To this day, British Afro-Caribbean communities are among the most underprivileged and economically deprived in the country, and accounts of everyday prejudice and institutional racism are still commonplace. Brixton, the South London neighbourhood in which many of the immigrants settled, and other urban neighbourhoods have repeatedly seen riots sparked by race-related police brutality (most notably in the early 1980s and mid-1990s), and as in the United States, such violence has been a feature of news headlines well into the twenty-first century. In the late summer of 2011, following the shooting dead by police of Mark

Figure 5.9 Peter Macdiarmid, 8 August 2011, A hooded youth walks past a burning vehicle in Hackney, London (Getty Images).

Duggan, a young black man in Tottenham, North London, a wave of rioting spread across the capital and beyond with a ferocity that mystified political leaders and local communities. Over an extraordinary six-day period, whole neighbourhoods were engulfed by violence – businesses were smashed and looted, vehicles overturned and set alight, police were overrun and five people lost their lives. Though Duggan's shooting was the initial catalyst, people on all sides of the political spectrum agree that these were not 'race riots' as such (One *Daily Mail* reporter called it 'an equal-opportunity crime wave'[17]). Some saw the disturbances as mindless vandalism and opportunism carried out by 'hooligans' in need of discipline, while to others they represented a cry for help from a disenfranchised generation in need of hope, not punishment.

People from a whole range of ethnic backgrounds were involved in the 2011 riots, but the great majority of them were young and from working-class or unemployed families. Social housing estates like the Pembury in Hackney, East London, became pressure cookers of violent energy, and, as in many of the other locations where the riots erupted, the vast majority of Pembury residents are black. Images like this one taken by photographer Peter Macdiarmid (Figure 5.9), of hooded and masked young black men, became emblematic of Britain's sudden social crisis. It is crucially important to talk about pictures like this in a context of race, but it is also difficult: this is a real photograph of a real crime. Whether or not this young man is responsible for

setting the vehicle alight, he was there. A great many of the rioters were young black men, and the taking or publishing of this picture is not a misrepresentation. However, photographs like this one add to a pattern of negative representation of black youth that is arguably endemic in the British press, and this pattern informs wider (majority white) society's cultural reception of this picture, feeding existing preconceptions and stereotypes in a way that goes beyond the specifics of August 2011. Adding to the complexities involved in the discussion of the photograph, it is again important to note the way in which not only race but also the factors of age, gender and economic background intersect here to create a particular kind of racialized subject. His various identifying characteristics – he is not just black but he is also a black male youth from a social housing estate – are not simply added together; rather, they multiply one another in a potent matrix of stereotype and judgement.

In approaching this photograph or any other media image, it can be helpful to consider what, as it were, the picture is 'inviting' viewers to believe. What are the instant, knee-jerk responses that the picture stimulates? What does it 'do'? (These questions are worth asking mainly because they are likely to identify the prevailing interpretation of the picture, whatever the facts or the intention of the photographer.) For example, the photograph seems to infer that this young man has set fire to this van. He has covered his face to avoid being identified, has been caught out by the photographer and is poised to run away. According to the analytical method set out by theorist and semiotician Roland Barthes involving 'denotation' and 'connotation',[18] the denoted meaning of the picture is that a van is on fire and there is a young, black, masked man nearby. The connoted meaning is that he started it. But this interpretation is not just informed by the picture itself. It is informed also by the history of patterns and stereotypes set out above. The audience is arguably conditioned by such stereotypes to assume that this man is guilty and to judge him accordingly.

But let us look more closely, beyond the initial 'invitation' of the image as prompted by its prevailing frames of reference, and consider what evidence is actually presented. The van is extensively charred, suggesting that it has been burning for some time. This either means that the man in the picture did not start the fire or that he started it some time ago and stayed nearby, or returned later to the scene of the crime, either of which is unlikely. The masking of his face by definition means that his expression is difficult to read, but the look in his eyes is ambiguous. Is he to be feared, or is he afraid? Just as a photographer's own political views are likely to be revealed in the composition of their pictures, so a viewer's interpretation of an image is always informed by their pre-existing political views. This becomes a completely different photograph depending on whether you are disposed more generally to see the rioters as dangerous or vulnerable, lawless or lost – to say nothing of perceptions regarding race.

Figure 5.10 Lola Flash, 2003, 'dj kinky' (london) from [sur]passing series (Lola Flash).

This picture is from a series made by Lola Flash as part of a long-term project on the impact of skin pigmentation on black identity and consciousness, and specifically the complex legacy of historic pressure on mixed-race people to 'pass' as white. Her subjects are posed against urban skylines in London, New York and South Africa, and represent a 'new generation, one that is above and beyond 'passing.'

The experience of being black in modern Britain, and expressions of black popular culture in particular, has been an important subject within postcolonial studies. It also, in large part, prompted the inception of British cultural studies, a school of thought initiated in the 1960s by Stuart Hall. Hall, a Jamaican-born social theorist and member of the 'Windrush generation', wrote prolifically and influentially about British multiculturalism and what it meant to be black in Britain. The scope of his work went far beyond any individual medium or cultural practice, but in one particular 1990 article for *Ten8* magazine, he considered the role of photography in the British Afro-Caribbean community, writing that, long after the fall of empire, there was still an urgent imperative to be conscious of the systems of representation that have excluded black people from picturing their experiences, identities and everyday realities, and to contest the visual stereotypes that perpetuate inequality and racism. For black photographers as well as for black subjects in front of the camera (Figure 5.10), the challenge is still, in Hall's words, 'how best to contest dominant regimes of representation and their institutionalisation, and the question of opening up fixed positions of spectatorship'.[19]

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