Interview

Photography, history and anthropology: An interview with Elizabeth Edwards

Ana Maria Mauad [*]

[*] Universidade Federal Fluminense (UFF). Niterói (RJ), Brasil. E-mail: anamauad@id.uff.br

ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6167-6712

Abstract: In her interview, Professor Elizabeth Edwards reflects on her training as a historian and anthropologist. Through remembering her trajectory, we follow the situations, people, and institutions that provided his encounter with photography. First, in the museological practice that allowed her to investigate photography's social circuits, uses, and functions as an object of material and visual culture, and, later, as a teacher and researcher in relevant institutions in the United Kingdom and Europe. Throughout the interview, relevant reflections were presented, highlighting the conceptual implications related to the materiality of photography, the anthropological approach to cultural systems, and the importance of photography as a platform for observing the relationships between past, present, and future. It combines her reflection with a relevant set of historiographical references that allow a precise configuration of its main interlocutors in elaborating a complex approach to photography.

Keywords: Photography; Knowledge; Human sciences.

Fotografia, história e antropologia: uma entrevista com Elizabeth Edwards

Resumo: Em sua entrevista a professora Elizabeth Edwards discorre sobre a sua formação como historiadora e antropóloga. Através da rememoração de sua trajetória acompanhamos as situações, pessoas e instituições que proporcionaram o seu encontro com a fotografia. Primeiramente, na prática museológica que a proporcionou indagar sobre os circuitos sociais, usos e funções da fotografia, como objeto da cultura material e visual, e, posteriormente como professora e pesquisadora em instituições de relevo no Reino Unido e na Europa. Ao longo da entrevista, relevantes reflexões foram apresentadas com destaque para a implicações conceituais relativas à materialidade da fotografia, a abordagem antropológica dos sistemas culturais e a importância da fotografia como plataforma de observação das relações entre passado, presente e futuro. Conjuga a sua reflexão com um conjunto relevante de referências historiográficas que nos permitem uma clara configuração de seus principais interlocutores na elaboração de uma abordagem complexa sobre a fotografia.

Palavras-chave: Fotografia; Conhecimento; Ciências humanas.

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On 12 June 2018, as part of my activities as a visiting researcher in Cambridge University, under the auspices of the Celso Furtado Visiting Fellowship, I worked on an oral history project called "Intellectual Trajectories in Visual Studies", consisting of a series of interviews recorded with scholars of photography based in England. On this occasion I had the opportunity to interview Elizabeth Edwards, one of the most important references for a critical approach to photography in the Human Sciences.

Elizabeth Edwards (1952-) is Emeritus Professor from the De Montfort University; curator of the Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford; associate researcher of the Institute of Social and Cultural Anthropology of the University of Oxford; honorary professor of the Department of Anthropology of University College London (UCL); and Andrew W. Mellon Visiting Professor in the V&A Research Institute.

I would like to thank Professor Edwards for her generosity as she checked and updated the information for this publication, as well as providing references for the cited works.

Ana Maria Mauad: Today is June, 12, 2018, I'm, here at Victoria and Albert Museum with professor Elizabeth Edwards to interview her for the project "Intellectual Trajectories on Visual Studies". I'd like to thank very much, professor Elizabeth, to receive me here. Could you tell us about your academic trajectory and how photography became a question for your research?

Elizabeth Edwards: It's a long, complicated history. I started my career as a mediaeval historian, that was my first degree, mediaeval history and archaeology. I was always interested in histories, I asked for a history book for my 4th birthday and got one, [laughter]. You can say I never looked back. [laughter] I went on to MA in English regional history, because I became very interested in things like regionality, in many ways the Middle Ages remains a first love, and my recent research has gone back to it (Edwards, 2012, 2019). I started a PhD on something extremely tedious, and then I discovered photography. I discovered photography because I was of that generation of graduate students, in the early 1970s, who were sitting at the feet of the new radical left historians such as Raphael Samuel. They were asking questions about women's history or immigrant history, Jewish history, and so forth. How do you write Histories submerged in or beneath the official record. For me, as a young woman trained in mediaeval history, focusing on topics such as the legal reforms of Henry II or monasticism, this was a revelation, it was almost like falling in love. "Ah! I didn't know doing history could be like this" [laughter]. Through that experience I became very interested in alternative forms of historicity, their sources and historical analysis. Photography was one of them. I got a job as a social history curator af-

ter graduating which started my interest in museums. So that's when I first really encountered photographs, often as postcards or lantern slides,[1] and started thinking about them.

Then I got a job as a very junior curator in library and archives at Pitt Rivers Museum, Oxford. This is a major university research collection in anthropology. I was not trained in anthropology but I realised that the kind of Histories I was working with, for instance around questions of cultural practices or identity, were actually very anthropologically-inflected kinds of history. I was at Pitt Rivers for a very long time, and very soon I had opportunities to expand my photographic interests. In those days the wonderful photograph collection of Pitt Rivers Museum was housed in an outhouse. No one was doing any work, except an ex-colonial officer who wrote lists of the contents of boxes – it was a start. We knew absolutely nothing, but we had a feeling that it could be interesting. I think it's very difficult for students today to realise how little we knew. We didn't know the names of the major anthropological photographers of the 19th century, we didn't know where this material was archived, what it was used for, we didn't know the history of science perspectives. Writing on history of anthropology didn't even mention photography, one thinks here of George Stocking's (1987, 1995) important early work, although that was obviously what intellectual context into which photographs fitted. I just had to learn on the job. So, through the second half of the 1970s, we were looking at material, thinking about it, and trying to piece it together. In addition to curating, by the early 1980s I was starting to contribute to teaching anthropology, undergraduate and postgraduate. One thing I should make clear is that Pitt Rivers Museum and particularly as its structure then was research department of the University of Oxford. So it had, particularly in those days, a very strong teaching remit. All senior curators, and I slowly became a senior curator, were teaching. And so I started doing basic visual studies – nobody else in Oxford was doing that.

AM: In the 80s?

EE: Yes. There was very little work done, the texts were almost impossible to find, beyond work by people like Jay Ruby (1975), John Collier (1967) or later, Paul Hockings (2003). The major debates were around the practices and value of ethnographic film or questions of recording or photo-elicitation as a field techniques for instance. Mead and Bateson's *Balinese Character* (1942) was perhaps the visual anthropology classic at the time. To try to find a language for what we were thinking about we turned, to the newly emerging body of photographic theory, such as the work of Victor Burgin (1982) or John Tagg, whose *The Burden of Representation* came out in 1988 wasn't it? Roland Barthes (1981) was

[1] Edwards refers to "magic lanterns", light projection devices common from the second half of the 19th century to the first two decades of the 20th century.

translated and later Pierre Bourdieu (1990). Then came the work of W. J. T. Mitchell (1994). Such texts became important baselines for us.

AM: Yes.

EE: As critical photo-theory began to be published, we worked with it for quite a long time, even though, I think even back then, we knew it didn't quite work. But that's all that was, and importantly it made us think. In many ways, it all just went on from there. At Oxford we started a MSc [Master of Sciences] in Visual Anthropology that I co-founded with Marcus Banks, who was interested in film and methodology. We were a good team. However eventually I left Oxford, because I wanted to spread my wings a bit analytically. I wanted the opportunity to work with different kinds of images, not only the colonial and anthropological. I wanted to find an environment where I could use anthropological ideas on a wider range of photographic production. I moved first to the University of the Arts, London which is a very high end art school. I had six interesting years there working with practitioners, particularly people working in photojournalism who were really good. I did a lot of teaching there, I developed a specialist PhD programme, and did a lot of work on research ethics and the like. And then after about six years of that, which time I had a huge European grant, PhotoCLEC, which looked at the work of colonial photography in European museums,[2] I moved to De Montfort University in Leicester. They wanted me to set up a Photographic History Research Centre which drew together and developed existing interests but that hadn't really been cohered. They were very keen to do something that was not art historical. I was there for six years doing that until I retired. I'm technically an old age pensioner, [laughter] but I am now Andrew W. Mellon visiting professor at the V&A,[3] where we are now sitting, I have an Honorary Professorship in anthropology at UCL [University College London], and I also have emeritus at my old University. I have a senior attachment to Oxford too, so I have four institutions now [laughter].

AM: Embracing you...

EE: Yes... So that's what we did, in a nutshell.

AM: It's a wonderful trajectory. We can see the foundation of the field of research in your trajectory, and this relation to the radical history.

EE: Radical history, yes, and I think the other key thing which I didn't stress was, of course, for 28 years I was a museum-based academic at Pitt Rivers. They were great years

[2] Available at: http://photoclec.dmu.ac.uk.

[3] 2016-2022.

in the Pitt Rivers Museum. We had large research grants such as *The Tibet Album*,[4] we had wonderful research teams doing really innovative work on all sorts of visual material practices within anthropology. I know that you will want to talk about materiality and the work I developed. That's very much part of the story because I was in this incredibly vibrant research environment at Oxford. In the late 1980s, early 90s, I was surrounded by people who were thinking about material culture, in very analytical ways – why people had objects, what they thought about them, how they dealt with them, what they meant to them, what was the symbolism, what did that materiality mean, what was the very nature of materiality, how did this work socially and culturally? These questions were part of the air we breathed every single day.

So it was almost a natural progression that, as head of the Department of Photographs as I was back then, that we started asking those questions of photographs and their use. We worked from the premise that photographs aren't just the matter of content, but vital social objects that circulate just as any other kind of object. It was being in that extraordinary vibrant research community at that particular historical moment that enabled me to begin thinking along those lines. Important also was having colleagues who didn't roll their eyes when I said "well photographs are objects as well". They completely understood the idea of photographs as things and actions. Photographs and the whole universe of actions surrounding them became part of that debate. One didn't talk about objects without talking about photographs, one didn't talk about photographs without talking about objects. They were, and are, completely integrated as a concept. So that's where my focus on materiality came from. They were exciting years, even though people moved on, interest changed, different political environment at university emerged, and so on. It was the moment I thought actually this is it, things are coming together and working. But I want to go try something else, so I did.

AM: It's great. So if we compile the uses of photography in anthropology we would certainly go back to the 19th century, however we can notice significant difference between the uses of photograph in field work of that time, and recent approaches such as yours. How do you evaluate this process? Do you agree with those whose observe a material turn in photographic analysis?

EE: Yes... there was a clear epistemic shift from photographs being evidence of some sort, which is how they were used from the 19th century, to late 20th century concerns about what photographs 'do'. There're two camps in visual anthropology. First, are visual

[4] Available at: https://tibet.prm.ox.ac.uk.

anthropologists who are often filmmakers, but not always, who are using photography or film as an evidential tool to answer anthropological or sociological questions. The other camp, in which I belong, are interested in the anthropology of visual systems – questions about what people want photographs to be, what they do with them. This has become a really extraordinarily rich thread, or theme in visual anthropology, indeed one can ask if it is "visual anthropology", I think it's actually just an anthropology which has image uses as its topic, an anthropology of the visual.

Most field anthropologists use photographs, they take photographs as evidence of something, or as evidence of relationships. But the material turn, as we've talked about, has also changed this relationship. Anthropologists are very much more aware of what they are doing photographically as a material practice. This material turn has spread across all disciplines now – history, history of science, geography, not just anthropology – it's like the earlier linguistic turn when semiotics dominated analysis. Turns have their problems though! Who was it that said that turns are not a good idea. Everybody goes rushing off in one direction [laughter] for a few years and then they rushed back in a different direction, I forget who said that, was it Clifford Geertz? And I rather agree. Be that as it may, I think the most important impact and effect of the material turn has been the rise and rise of ethnography of photographic practice or visual practice.

AM: Sure...

EE: But going back to the category "visual anthropology", it can be very problematic, separating out those working with or on images from what is perceived as the mainstream discipline. We need to say, we are anthropologists, we are historians, we happened to work with the image and the visual as a form of anthropological investigation. We're doing nothing different from someone who's doing field work in Sudan, Peru or India. One thinks of anthropologists of the visual such as Chris Pinney (2004) in India, Karen Strassler (2020) in Indonesia, or Jennifer Deger (2016) in Australia, who have done wonderful visual fieldwork. Many are also really interested in the history or anthropology of visual systems, and particularly photographic systems, what people want photographs to be, what do they do with them including in digital environments, for example Shireen Walton (2016), who has worked on digital media in Iran. They all are coming out of that trajectory in integrated visual studies. It very satisfying to see these approaches maturing in this way into great 21st century ethnographies of visual things that matter in people's lives. That's meaningful anthropology. To me that has always been the more interesting question, but that's just me probably because ultimately I come out of history. [laughter]

AM: Yes, it's great because the difference between these two approaches is really important to understand the idea of circuit and the anthropological visual system...

EE: Yes... the other thing that's important here is the way that anthropology has really started influencing much wider work on visual systems – the influence of anthropology in, say art history, in the way that you probably didn't have thirty years ago. Anthropology, I think, has offered some key methodologies for working with photographs outside the aesthetic frameworks or those of intentionality and individuality for instance, that tend to dominate art history. Of course, you can think of art historians now who are doing really interesting work, which is actually quite anthropological in its approach.

AM: We can realise reading your texts that there is a great question that underlines your work, and it has to do with the consideration of the materiality of the images and the photographs in particular. In your concern, what does this question imply to the analysis of photographs? What kinds of mistakes can this perspective avoid?

EE: That's a very big question which we've already touched on. I think materiality brings to the surface why photographs matter to people, and my interest in this actually goes back to those years curating in the Pitt Rivers Museum. I sat in rooms where First Nations, indigenous people from Canada or Australia for instance, often as Nation or tribal delegations came to see photographs of their ancestors. I remember, thirty years ago, seeing people holding photographs and stroking them, people singing to them. It made me very aware of the politics and responsibility one carried. I remember one Australian aboriginal woman saying "well, it's very bad that you have this photographs of my ancestors but I can see that you really care about them and you look after them beautifully". This is why curatorial practice was so important. You actually had to perform that commitment to the politics that such a remark suggests. The materiality becomes really important there, because what most people want to do is hold the trace of the ancestor in their hand. Although these days it is as often as not on an iPhone, they are nonetheless profoundly material and embodied experiences. I have witnessed it all over the world... It doesn't necessarily mean it has to be the original material form, indeed it points to the complexities of the material argument – it can be part of a series of translations from archive print to copy print, to digital, it doesn't really matter.

However, on another axis, in that an important material strand in curating a historical collection is that you saw the archaeological traces of usage; how photographs existed as material objects in the world and things happened to them. If one merely looks at content, well, what you see and understand is very limited. But if you saw the original object and you realise what size it was, you see the scuff marks and tears are, where it has been fold-

ed. This is one of the drawbacks to digitization, it is easy to miss that kind of evidence. Going back to what I was saying earlier, we began using material culture techniques, began to understand the use and therefore the meaning of that object for certain audiences. Of course the significance of those materialities shift across different audiences, as I've just suggested, but I think these approaches completely revolutionized how we understand photographs. And it's not just the individual photograph, it's how it's been archived, the sets of relationships that its historical preservation set up, how do taxonomies work, how they performed overtime, how did labelling work? Writing on the image itself, for instance, is always fascinating because that is the sort of material addition to the photograph marks a clear intention around meaning. All these questions are really material questions that change how we understand that haptic relationship and usage of the image. I think it's also disturbed the idea that aesthetics had to be default value for photographs and their analysis.

Again, this is the field where anthropology and, particularly its material culture arm, has been absolutely central to really rethinking how people deal with photographs. I find it very interesting how many artists have picked up on this over the last thirty years, and really started doing incredible work around the materiality of photographs, on for instance, how they make memory, how they contest colonial memory. Often they're coming to these questions through a very material and materialist sense of the image. And then finally, of course, and this is something artists have also addressed very effectively, photographic technologies themselves telling you an enormous amount. If somebody chooses to print in platinum rather than gelatin, this is saying something about how they see the image working, what they wanted it to do. Techniques in the 19th century in particular, carry a very different semiotics, they turn a photograph from being a hard image into a soft image, and vice versa, just by the way the chemical sits on or in the paper. So I think that's another strand of materiality that is really important.

AM: It's interesting, I read your commentary about an exhibition that happened in Tate Gallery and then the idea 'art' as the default value for photographs (Edwards, 2015). I was thinking about if this default value it's not a kind of, also, and aestheticization of history too...

EE: Yes, and I think this is one of the great challenges of displaying photographs within the museum gallery context, because the minute you put it in the frame, with a mat around them, they start being read as precious objects, as art. Certainly an aestheticisation of history. But, conversely, there has been a lot of interesting experimental work, the kind of work that Stefanie Klamm has been doing around collections in Berlin, about the dis-

play of whole archives, its interpretation, and the meaning of boxes (see Bärnighausen et al., 2020). There's been quite a lot of work around of that kind...

AM: So one of the aspects, or the mistakes, is avoided when you deal with photograph materiality is not to take this as just representation?

EE: Exactly, yes, it's an object that exists in social and cultural time and space, and it's used. That's why we need anthropological questions in play [laughter] because materiality can be used to disrupt aesthetic categories. But they can also confirm of course, because arguably connoisseurial approaches to define photograph were effectively a material reading... You have the fine print and the cult of the calotype, and those sorts of approaches. This is something I've always struggled with. As I've said, I think that materiality has been a really useful way of thinking, but conversely I fear it's become a little bit of a cliché now: "Oh, but we have to think about the materiality", but it's not really pushed through analytically why we need to think about the materiality in every instance – of course we should, but we have to be clear about what exactly it is contributing analytically and interpretatively.

AM: Like a de-turn...

EE: Yes, a de-turn, yes, I like that! But I think the achievement of material thinking is to really sensitize archives, museums and galleries to what they're doing. They are much less likely to throw things out now because, for example, they are seen as duplicates, instead they have taken on board the material culture argument about multiple performances, multiple originals. Here at the V&A, the whole place is completely full of photographs, there are millions and millions and millions of photographs in the V&A which are not part of the curatorial department of fine photographs, but are nonetheless central to the ethos of the museum. We are just beginning to work out how many there are, and what they're doing. That's one of the things I'm doing here at the V&A, and that again is a very materially informed analysis.[5]

Here I like historian of science, Lorraine Daston's notion of the epistemic image. Values become materially performed in very interesting ways, thinking through spheres of influence and exchange of "reliable" photographs within an emergent discipline of anthropology. One can make the same argument for other disciplines too: art history, geography, archaeology, geology for instance. One of the really interesting things that came out of our

[5] This project has now been published as Edwards & Ravilious (2022). Open access. Available at: https://www.uclpress.co.uk/products/192313.

early work on collections, forty years ago now, is that almost all museums in Europe, and many in North America, effectively have the same images from the 1870s up to the 1890s, that is until field tradition and different trajectories of national field practice begin to kick in to photographic production. At that point it begins to go different directions. But until then you can see the museums of Europe and the academic and scientific learning societies of Europe as a giant exchange network creating what Bruno Latour called "centres of calculation". Going back to one of your earlier questions, one of the things that we learn looking at the history of these collections, wasn't just what they represented, but how the emergent discipline of anthropology was this extraordinary fluid dynamic network, through which flowed images and objects, was integral to knowledge formations. Because of this we started working with Bruno Latour's usage of network theory, but increasingly I have turned (maybe this is another turn!) to Tim Ingold's (2011, p. 63, 70) of meshwork...

AM: Meshwork?

EE: Meshwork, yes, very entangled sets of relationships where the dynamics are not just the nodules of connection, but in the links themselves. Those links can be brought into multiple juxtapositions – imagine squashing a fishing net in your hands. Meshwork is becoming a very influential model in contemporary research in anthropology and photography, not only with historical material, but also thinking about the way contemporary images work in digital media. As I said, I first started along with some other people thinking about networks using Bruno Latour, his actor-network theory. But then I read a wonderful essay by Marilyn Strathern (1966) called "Cutting the network", which is about kin relations and dimensions of responsibility. The implication of Starthern's argument is that the trouble with network is you can just decide when to cut it off, beyond the point it's not relevant, so you can just deny analytical responsibility for it. A meshwork model is more completely contained. It loops back on itself, and it's much more difficult to cut it, because it's so densely involved in itself, if you like, – that fishing net crumpled in your hand. Therefore, I find it much better way to think about photographs now, because it has that density of model, it's just so complex, these set of relationships. But I think meshwork expresses what photography does so much better, and particularly in digital age. And it's much more difficult to cut, it's much more difficult to deny analytical responsibility. One has to take all the implications on board, we can't just deal with a little bit and the rest will drop off, you can't do that, intellectually. It has major implications for how we think about "context".[6]

[6] I discuss "context" at length in Edwards (2022), chapter 6.

AM: This kind of entangling different kinds of materials?

EE: Everything, at one level it is an extended form of Deborah Poole's (1997) visual economy... Which is another model we all used for a very long time, and still do. But I think meshwork is beginning to take over as sort of theoretical perspective "*du jour*"... [laughter].

AM: This is great, it's good to know. The next question was asked by a professor friend of mine, Mauricio Lissovsky (1958-2022): did the study of social lives of photographs imply a kind of animism to photos, or is it an alternative historical approach to the traditional history of photography?

EE: I think it's both. Certainly it's an alternative to traditional histories of photography. And certainly animism is part of it, going back to what I was saying earlier, that's what people expect and want photographs to do. I do think that photographs have a propensity to animistic qualities, because of what they are ontologically. There is an almost animistic response to the power of the photograph of the ancestors, for instance, which is very focused on the ideas of the trace and the index. The trace and the index have been highly and critically theorized in photography, while people using photographs would not use that language, but the trace and the index are actually what people are interested in, because of what photographs are. That trace of something that was there, an ontological scream: it was there, which theorist found so disturbing. So in many ways a kind of animism is what the majority of people in the world want photographs to be. Because of that ontology I mentioned a moment ago, and because of that pattern of expectation, of what images should to do for them. I keep coming back to this point, but it is so important in the kind of work we are doing now. So I certainly think we have to take a sort of quasi-animistic view of photography quite seriously, certainly as anthropologists we must.

It would be very interesting to re-theorise this question. I'm not suggesting collapsing back into 19th century theories of animism, that would not be helpful. But I think we need to find the kind of theoretical languages that will work for this. If one reads theorists like Victor Burgin, or Jean Baudrillard, their positions effectively close down the realist possibilities of photographs. That is a theoretical position, but it's not what happens ethnographically. This is why, again, I think anthropology/ethnography becomes such a disturbing presence in work on photography. It is also why, I believe, forms of visual anthropology are being read outside anthropology in a way that I think most anthropological work is not. It doesn't necessarily show up in citations, but many people have said to me "Ah, I've been so influenced by your work", and they can be historians and sociologists, artists, curators, and often people who wouldn't necessarily always read anthropology. Why is that? It offers, I think, a very different perspective on things that have become entrenched. It also works in the other direction one should add. In my own case, I read very

widely in theory of history, history of science, ethnological theory, and so forth, so my work has both multiple frames of references but also provides multiple points of connection perhaps. Difficult for me to say. As I read, my question is always: what happens when this idea intersects with photography? This is how I approached the Strathern paper on networks I mentioned earlier. So, often my reading doesn't start even with the visual. You'd probably be quite shocked if you knew how little formal history of photography I read, because I find a lot of it very repetitive, it's just a different case study, which might or might not be interesting, I'm always looking for bodies of ideas that we can intersect with photography, and this is where the network and meshwork debates came from....

It makes you change your mind – a de-turn in your lovely phrase! For instance, the question about social biography as a model, I've used it a lot, we all read Appadurai (1986) and Kopytoff, way back in the 1980s, I now don't use it, and the reason I've abandoned it is that I find it far too linear a model for the kind of work I am doing with photographs now. It works brilliantly a singular object, a Pacific Island paddle collected by Captain Cook that goes into an ethnographic collection, it works brilliantly for a Rembrandt painting that moves around and then it ends up at the Rijksmuseum. While one could still make the biographical argument for some photographs, produced as art works and precious objects, certainly there are some here in the V&A, but, as I say, I find it too linear, it can't deal with the complexity in multidimensional nature of photography and our analysis of it. So this is why I moved on first to a Latourian network and then on to Ingold's meshwork.

AM: But you have been rehearsing this perspective in your previous texts...

EE: Exactly, but in this stage we didn't have a name for it it has now, it's got a theoretical shape, something we can hang on to. The other thing that I found very interesting is some work coming out of theory of history on ideas of presence. I've been concerned to find a language for presence in colonial photography that does not necessarily imply agency. Agency to me suggests that people had political cultural freedom to behave otherwise. Often in colonial situations they did not. We can gloss this as oppression, indeed, yes, but I felt that it was really important to find the vocabulary through which to express social being and subjectivity, that accounts what happened to people, something they lived through and, above all, experienced, that does not reduce the subject to passivity, however oppressive the encounter. I first published this in an essay entitled "Facing History" (Edwards, 2016), but have developed it since.[7]

[7] I have since discussed "presence" at length in *Photographs and the Practice of History* (Edwards, 2021b, chapter 5).

AM: It's great. The next question was asked by Marcos Lopes, who is a curator in Benjamin Constant Museum with a great collection of photographs: When photographs are seen and talked about by Native or traditional communities, many variants play an important role in the impact of the image, like sensibility, subjectivity and the feeling of belonging and identity. For example, a Brazilian Bororo Indian has recently looked at the photograph of his village in the 1930s. He said those images were showing both his ancestors and himself, and that he missed being like those in the pictures. He didn't care about authorship, materiality, or trajectory of the photos. How can we take this uncanny reactions into account in our analysis about photography?

EE: Indeed, I've touched on this already in relation to presence but also the earlier question on animism, but we can pull it together here. First of all it's about the expectations of photography. Photography does different things in different spaces, and in Native traditional communities as I said, people want photographs to do certain things. Alison Brown and Laura Peers (2006) make this point in their brilliant study of Kainai Nation and history in Canada. Questions of authorship are completely uninteresting, in many ways that's an archival and almost art historical question, about origination, it helps us frame the photograph historically, and in more detail, but that's of no interest to communities, and why should it be? Materiality probably is of interest but isn't articulated in those terms. The materiality enables the trace, the photograph, to be held in your hands, even if its on an iPhone, and connect to that photograph, to questions of belonging and identity. So, I think materiality is important but not necessarily in the way that we would write about it curatorially or analytically or in looking at anthropology's on history for instance. We must remember that there are many histories entangled and many different readings of materiality. This is why I said a few moments ago that I'm a little bit concerned that materiality is becoming a little bit of a cliché. I think we need to unpack what materiality is actually doing in different situations. Sometimes is more important and sometimes it's not.

I think also that we find it very difficult to find the language in our own theoretical tool kit to deal with responses, such as your colleague has described. Photo-theory, as I've said, isn't always great on the reality of photographic desires. That's our analytical problem. Like authorship and intentionality for instance, materiality is an analytical category that informs our analysis. But they are not ontological, and I think the materiality and the desire for the trace, the ancestor, is an ontological desire, not a theoretical desire, and I think we have just to unpick this. What is ontological here? It's the trace. The power of the trace of the ancestors. As I said earlier it is the primal scream of photography. Such desires were intrinsic to many responses to photographs that I have seen over the years: it was there, he or she was there, and therefore I am here. This is something very, very powerful, which I've

seen repeatedly across many different cultures, including European ones, as a response to the historical image. It's materiality in curatorial terms – is as a 19th century print or a copy? That doesn't matter at all. But, as I said earlier, there are forms of materiality that are important here.

Again, in answer to your colleague's question, I think that this is why ethnographies of photographic practices are profoundly important, because they provide a framework and tools to understand what photography is, and what is expected to do in the given community, and the given historical moment. How can we take these uncanny responses into our analysis of photography? This is a very major question and it's one I am thinking about at the moment as it happens. I've written a paper on the topic, which I am about to rewrite for a conference in September, it's not published yet, and may never be published [laughter].[8] I'm asking how we can use both anthropological concepts and concepts that are about photography but come out of the voices of different communities and peoples. What do those categories bring to photography, how do they challenge our theoretical and hierarchical assumptions about photographs? In a way, it's another variation of privileging the indigenous voice. But I think what is particularly important in photography is how do we find a critical language that reclaims the reality effect of photographs, without collapsing analytically into a naïve realism? I think there is a need for a new critical realism. It is actually one of the great challenges at the moment.

Because we talk about "global photographies", but the theoretical frame still looks very Euro-American – at least to me it does. This is of course tied in with current "decolonizing" debates. But, we shouldn't use Euro-American theory effectively to shut down debates about what photography means to people out majority practice. For instance, the way Foucault was used in relation to colonial photography served to shut down a debate. Actually, what resulted was a disenfranchisement of the very people who were meant to be empowered by the postmodern debate. We need something that destabilizes some of the assumed categories of photographic analysis, because like all theory, they come out of their very particular historical moments, they are very geopolitically located, Walter Benjamin for instance or Roland Barthes. While they are not necessarily unhelpful, indeed not, they can constrain a debate, as to open it up. In many ways, I think the standard theoretical text I still find the most useful, and going back to the question of subjectivity of belonging, is Roland Barthes' *Camera lucida*. I still think it one of the finest things ever written on photography, because it is about emotion, it is about poetry, it's about subjectivity, about history. These are actually the categories that we encounter anthropologically when working with people photographs, because that's what people want them to be, going

[8] It is now published as Edwards (2021a).

back to what I said in the beginning. We need to reclaim that ontology as I have said. I have found some of the new work around the new ontologies in history very helpful here, for instance the work of Eelco Runia (2014), to try and find that theoretical language. Some of the people doing this ethnographies of photography are coming up with some conceptualisations of the medium which might offer us not an alternative language but an alternative form and landscape around what photography is and what it does.[9] I remain alarmed, however, by the ease in which we all, including me, will collapse back on to Western art historical categories, if we are not careful. [laughter]

AM: And finally, how do you evaluate the impact of your approach in the studies of photography, do you feel any kind of resistance among anthropologists, art historians or in visual studies?

EE: It's hard for me to say, actually. There were certainly resistances. There are resistances, interestingly not so much in art history, because they were trained to work with the visual, and are much more open to seeing different possibilities theoretically around the image. The resistances I find are not so much resistances to the way I approach photography, but the resistances to the importances of the visual generally, particularly in history, although there has been some good work, the situation is pretty terrible, quite frankly [laughter].

In anthropology photographs/photography are accepted now, although, as suggested earlier, a lot of people still say "oh yes, visual anthropology is very important", but actually they would never dream of doing it or relating its potential to their particular research interests! But it is changing with the younger generation doing all this great work on digital cultures, and so forth. But throughout my career I certainly have felt a lot of resistance. First of all the belief that photographs weren't interesting, or as I said, weren't "a real subject and source for anthropology". I remember, about forty years ago, showing a wonderful set of colonial anthropology photographs taken in about 1915 to a leading specialist on that area. He glanced through them and said "they're of no anthropological interest, they might be interesting to someone who works on that period in the area but they are of no anthropological interest". And he said that to my face. "Oh really?' I thought to myself, because I was quite young then, uhh! [laughter] Oh dear! What times! But I think that the methodologies we've developed, around social biography, materiality, meshwork, presence and so forth, have proved to have happy abilities to sail through different disciplines over the years, such as geography...

[9] See http://www.ucl.ac.uk/anthroplogy/research/photodemos. And Chris Pinney et al. (2023).

AM: And history...

EE: History – yes although that is an uphill struggle! I am actually editing a special issue at the moment, dealing with precisely the problems intersecting photography with the common places of historical practice.[10]

History of science has become very well attuned to these sort of arguments have contributed so usefully. So, it's interesting that visual anthropology method is popping up everywhere. I often felt that I wasn't taken very seriously in anthropology, what I did was very marginalized, I feel it less so now. But I used to feel, " why am I doing all this work? Nobody cares". And I used to feel that/if I were run over by a bus, there would not be even scar tissue to show I was ever alive! But I don't feel that anymore. I look at the younger global generation doing fabulous work all over the world, with all sorts of different interesting questions. So I do think actually it was worthwhile. And I suppose I've had some influence there.

But back to your question, although that resistance is certainly waning, there is another, second, resistance that I encounter, and still do, in anthropology. It's my argument that the archive is a field site and what we do is a form of fieldwork doing anthropology, asking ethnographic questions, but I'm asking them historically. The archive becomes, to my mind, a serious field site – and I think anybody else who works in the same areas as me would say the same. I find the work of Ann Laura Stoler (2009), and her discussion in *Along the Archival Grain* very helpful here. Her work gives me courage, precisely because she sees the archives as a field site. I think the other point of frustration and resistance, which I mentioned earlier, is the idea that photography is an obscure and contained field. Yes, photography has been the central strand of everything I have done for 48 years now, but, like many others, I've always used it to ask much bigger historical anthropological questions. There is, however, this assumption that just because I work on photography, I don't know about anything else. Again, this is complete rubbish. As anyone who works on photography will tell you, you cannot understand the photography without understanding their meshwork of values and epistemic assumptions, and hierarchies of materialities. Oddly, I think that's a kind of weakness of my work – that I have to be very well informed over a wide range, which is very hard work, enormous amount of reading. I don't have that privilege of saying "oh well, I'm a New Guinea specialist and I don't know anything about Torres Strait", next door! I have to know. Because, in many ways, photography saturates everything, from about 1850 onwards. It moves around doing different things. And they are all connected within their meshworks.

[10] This became not a special issue but a monograph, *Photographs and the Practice of History* (Edwards, 2021b).

One of the things I'm working on at the moment is the flow of images through the proto-disciplines of the 19th century, and the ways in which photographs become remediated and recoded within interdisciplinary environments in the 19th century. Consequently, one has to understand the history of science of the 19th century, photographic technology, to understand business and industrial practices. One has to understand so much just to do the work on photography. As I say, I sometimes feel that sort of a weakness, and that maybe the stretches over a vast territory makes one vulnerable to attack, too easy to stick the knife in! [laughter]. You have to work so hard!

I think this feeling is part of that problem of resistance. Again we are back to this point about photography not being central to thinking through anthropological or historical questioning, that it's always an add on at some point or other. I still find it frustrating sometimes. However, there are some excellent moves outside my discipline too. A good number of art historians are receptive to these broader ways of thinking, people like Sarah James (2013) writing on the social history of East German photography exhibitions, asking very similarly shaped sorts of questions, but asking them of material is usually classified as art, or an aesthetic production of some sort. I find such work very interesting. Strangely I find I have a reputation for being very anti-art history [laughter]. And people say "well, you are not going to like this comment because it's about art". It's not actually true, what I find difficult is that persistent concern with author, authorship, with individual images, aesthetic vision, when I find cultural productions, seriality and circulation more pertinent to what photography is. And I'm very suspicious of the way, particularly aesthetic histories of photography feed into the art market. I think a lot of our canonical history of photography is actually written for the art market. And so, I'm very resistant to that. In visual studies...

AM: Is it a new discipline?

EE: It's a new discipline indeed, we do things differently. I think the problem again that I have a reputation of being difficult, because I refused to genuflect to the canons of photo-theory. I think the problem with some of the key areas of photographic theory, which has been really important in visual studies, is the way that, again they've become a little bit of a cliché, that everybody cites Foucault, often without reading him. I actually love *The Archaeology of Knowledge* and the *Order of Things* – they are absolutely brilliant books, completely brilliant, and I still use them. But in too many cases of photographic theory is cited as evidence in itself. It is not, it is a tool kit to think through a series of questions, a series of analytical propositions, and it may be useful or it may not be, but the trouble is so much work in the visual field is that it is used evidence not as a tool kit. Theory is not anthropological evidence, it's not ethnographic evidence, in a way that we would want it to be. For

sure, the theoretical writers, from Allan Sekula to Katja Silverman, have a lot of interesting and useful things to say, but much is vastly overrated, because it carries many meta-level assumptions, but seldom actually deals with what photographs mean to people in the world. It assumes a meta-level role for photography. This works at one level, but they are not always the right tools for drilling down anthropologically. We need another language, as I was saying earlier. I suppose my problem is that in many cases, and I'm sounding like a grumpy old woman now, [laughter] is a distrust of theory for theory's sake. People complain that some of my work is too theoretical, so it isn't as I'm "anti-theory" – far from it. But for me it is never evidence, rather I am trying to provoke questions to make photographs work in new or different ways. So overall I suppose there is a set of resistances, on both sides, and as I said, I found more useful way of working now. For me, as I said earlier, very wide reading in areas like theory of history, philosophy of history, ethnographic theory, anthropological theory, history of science and think about points of intersection, is the key. Sometimes the answer is nothing, [laughter] or they belong on completely different planets. But surprisingly often you think "well yeah, actually if you tackle photographs like this, actually it does work". This how I became interested in questions of presence, which I talked about earlier. A number of people in anthropology are now working with this, Haidy Geismar has written something about a presence, as has Chris Morton.[11] We are all thinking along the same lines. I think it comes back to the point I made earlier about trying to find a different theoretical language where we can provincialize Europe to use Dipesh Chakrabarty's (2000) famous phrase. This is a global practice, it has many, many manifestations, and it is entangled with many forms of desire, and animation, and performance. Our jobs as anthropologists is to understand those performances and animations. So, as I keep saying, we need to find the theoretical language which will allow us to think about it in a much more fluid ways. This is where I think anthropology so important, because actually, anthropology's been so much more creative around this question than any other discipline.

AM: I have to agree with you. I think there's a whole new generation of historians that are much more connected with the anthropological perspective, specially in terms of cultural history...

EE: Yes, I agree. Despite the resistences we have discussed, things are moving. Chris Pinney's (2005) work has been enormously important here. I have found his essay on temporalities extremely useful to think with for example.

[11] Special issue of *Photographies*. v. 8, n. 3, 2016 - edited by Christoher Morton and Haidy Geisamar.

AM: And I think of how all these references arrived in Brazil, along the first decades of twentieth-first century, especially, your books, among them, *Photographs Objects Histories* (Edwards, Hart, 2004), your introduction of this book is very famous...

EE: It is actually. Though I say it myself, it was a ground-breaking book on materiality. But you were asking about resistences earlier – unbelievable now, but we had big peer review problems with this book – anthropologists, even visual anthropologists, who couldn't or wouldn't see the point of it. Do you know that book still sells, it's nearly 15 years old. It's quite amazing, I don't know how many times I've seen it cited. It made it across disciplinary boundaries and bits of it have been translated into numerous languages, Greek, Italian, Polish...

AM: Because of the great variety of images and approaches that were presented in this book. Not just one type of methodology....

EE: Yes, it sounds crazy but I have a certain resistance to "visual methodology." Certainly we need methodology, but I think sometimes in a way that it's written about, it becomes a sort of pick and mix, "well I'm going to psycho-analytical, or I'm going to do feminist", as if they are different compartments. In many ways, scholars in all disciplines need to develop a fluid sensitivity to the image, and how it's intersecting with other data forms. In many ways, one of the problems we've had is to pull out the visual. As a separate field of study. We've done it because we had to do it to be taken seriously, as an exercise in strategic essentialism, saying "hey, visual is really, really important", so we all write lots of wonderful stuff on the visual. But, in many ways, I'm not sure I was ever entirely convinced by that myself. Again it is that integrated anthropological viewpoint. I see the visual is just part of the meshwork of cultural experience (and I've written a lot on the sensory image),[12] to be interested in photographs is to be interested in the printed image, the digital image and so forth. And this is why it has to be completely centered in our anthropologies, of whatever we are working on.

I'm currently very interested in what happens to the very practice of history or anthropology in the age of photographs, even for people who are not interested in visual, particularly historians. Because how can you imagine history in a post-photographic world, or a post-photographic invention world? Photography completely changes our relationship with the past. Many commentators, from Kracauer to Le Goff, have made this point, it's hardly original. But I think what is important is that it's made no impact at all on categories of historical practice, none at all.[13] And I always used to ask my undergraduate class, I

[12] See Edwards, Gosden, Phillips (2006) and Edwards (2008, 2009).

used to say, "Imagine, tell me, what does the Second World War look like and feel like for you if you have no photographs? No D-day landings photographs, no Pearl Harbour photographs, no Holocaust photographs, no reparations photographs, no propaganda photographs, no bomb damage photographs – you have nothing, just some texts, no images at all". The response was always the same, every year, and it was brilliant. The students sat there in complete silence with their mouth opened, and, eventually some brave soul would stumble out half an answer. At that point I said "no, you're all completely right, it is unimaginable". Complete stunned silence with mouth open is the right answer [laughter]. And then they all laughed and relaxed and started to think. They suddenly realized the power of photographs to shape their discipline, it is unimaginable. An absence we cannot comprehend and thus the importance of visual imagery in anything that they or any of us is doing.

AM: Great interview, thanks so much!

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[13] This is the key question of my book *Photographs and the Practice of History* (Edwards, 2021b)

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