

Book review: Wright, Christopher. 2013. *The Echo of Things: The lives of photographs in the Solomon Islands*. Durham & London: Duke University Press.

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James Hevia (2009), in his work on Boxer-Era China, argues that a photograph's meaning rests not only in its content but the ways in which the photo, as a material object, structures and mediates social, economic, and political relationships in its travels through time and space. In the *Echo of Things* Christopher Wright provides an ethnographic account of how photos, as things in the world, assemble and mediate life in present day Roviana Bay, Solomon Islands. Wright's excavations in the colonial and indigenous archives provide him the visual grist by which to engage in conversation with the people of Roviana Bay about the distant and not so distant past. In some cases, he brings photographs from the colonial archive, faded and worn, to show to his interlocutors. To have them look at and touch a past rendered by the western gaze. In other cases, he delves into the family albums of the people he has gotten to know well in Roviana Bay and listens to the intimate stories that emerge as the photos from the albums are seen, felt, and remembered. Wright's nuanced description of the conversations he has with the people of Roviana coupled with his thoughtful analysis of the photos as they enact a tactile remembering and forgetting, provide a historically textured account of contemporary life in the Solomon Islands. Moreover, in his accounts of the collective exegesis of the photographic record that he elicits in Roviana Bay, Wright pushes the conversation forward in anthropology regarding how notions of modernity are wound together with image-making technologies and the ways in which collective memory is tethered to photographic images *as* objects in the world.

In his early chapters, Wright dives into the colonial record of the Solomon Islands. He utilizes European travellers, anthropologists and traders travelogues to demonstrate how their fascination with the practice of headhunting, where chiefs cured and displayed the skulls of the men they vanquished in battle, was deeply bound with their need to document the so-called savagery and 'Otherness' of the islanders. Wright goes on to describe the reactions of his interlocutors in Roviana Bay to the photos he shows them from the colonial archive, images which focus mainly on 'headhunters.' In one instance, he shows a group of people a photo taken by Charles Woodford, the first resident governor of the British Solomon Islands. When he shows them Woodford's image of a headhunter, his interlocutors at once express shame at the images depiction of a "time before" their conversion to Christianity as well as pride at the strength and fortitude of their ancestors.

In another instance, Wright shows a photo of a *banara* or village chief and 'headhunter,' to a man who recognizes him as his great-grandfather. Wright goes on to discuss the deep impact the photo made on the man, who saw the photograph as a direct connection to his past and thus a valuable artifact that allows him to keep his great-grandfather alive and present. The interaction between the photo and the man, he argues, is a way to understand Roland Barthes concept of *punctum* in a cross-cultural perspective. In *Camera Lucida* (1984), Roland Barthes discusses how one particular photo of his mother that he found after her passing, a photo that was not particularly well shot, managed to trigger deep emotions in him. Barthes named the idiosyncratic moment where one particular image has the power to evoke great feeling in its beholder where another image of the same subject might not, *punctum*. Wright argues that for his interlocutors in the Solomon Islands, the visceral impact of the photograph works much the same way that it did for Barthes. As his friend and interlocutor held the photographic-object, his long dead great-grandfather is conjured into the present, evoking a strong emotional response in him. Drawing from this example, Wright argues that while it is important to recognize how photo technology

reveals differences in cultural ways of seeing and being seen, it is also important to note cross-cultural similarities and that this case allows us to see the undeniable power that the photo-object has as a means to create affective ties with the past.

Wright, of course, also engages with photos taken by the people of the Solomon Islands to elucidate and analyze cross-cultural differences in seeing and being seen, arguing that photo-objects cannot be seen as a “nature that is the same across cultures”(60). Utilizing photos he recovers from a Chinese owned photography studio that operated on the Islands in the 1950s, for instance, Wright shows how Roviana people have an interest in keeping portraiture of themselves and their loved ones that depicts the body intact. In conversations with his friends in Roviana, he was told that for a photo to ‘come out good,’ the body shouldn’t be dismembered by taking head shot or mid shot portraits, nor should there be too much ‘rubbish’ in the background. Wright contrasts this account of Solomon Islanders describing the qualities of a good portrait photo with Chris Pinney’s (1997) project on photography in India. He argues that the Solomon Islanders desire to render realistic images of themselves is in direct contrast to the kinds of images that people in North India sought after in their visits to the photo studio during the early and mid- 20<sup>th</sup> century. Whereas, in India, where the desire to ‘come out better’ in the photograph outweighed any inclination to depict ‘the real’, in Roviana the desire to represent a close facsimile of oneself as a whole being was and continues to be of great import. I found *The Echo of Things* to be a nuanced and thoughtful monograph that utilizes the photographic record of the people of The Solomon Islands to provide an ethnographically ‘thick’ and theoretically rich account of photographs as social objects. Moreover, in addition to giving providing a rich account of The Solomon Islands vis-à-vis the photograph, Wright’s work on pre-digital photographs as objects in the world has pushed me to think about the materiality of the digital image in my work on visual culture in the age of social media. For that, I am grateful.

## References

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