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Rebecca Peabody, Steven Nelson, and Dominic Thomas, eds., *Visualizing Empire: Africa, Europe, and the Politics of Representation*. Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2021. vi + 191 pp. Eighty-eight color and five black-and-white illustrations. \$55.00 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-1-60606-668-3.

Review by John Zarobell, University of San Francisco.

This Getty publication celebrates its 1997 acquisition of a portion of the archive of the Association connaissance de l'histoire de l'Afrique contemporaine, or "Association to Foster Knowledge on Contemporary Africa" (ACHAC), compiled by scholars in France between 1990 and 1995. Getty curator Frances Terpak describes this archive and what it elaborates: "Ranging from government posters to educational cards advertising chocolate bars to children's board games, ACHAC's array of materials underlines how public and private initiatives furthered the colonial mission's entry into every facet of French society" (p. 10). This collection of essays represents the scholarly unpacking of this archive, albeit without any exhibition component, and seeks to plumb the significance of the materials assembled from a variety of scholarly perspectives.

For a museum famous for its European masterpieces, it might come as some surprise that the Getty would collect ephemera, but this volume demonstrates not only the broad reach of the Getty's collecting strategy (this archive is part of the Getty Research Institute) but also the broader cultural and political implications that the institution seeks to explore through its collecting. In an essay written by two members of ACHAC, Pascal Blanchard and Dominic Thomas explain the group is a network of more than 600 international researchers in more than thirty countries. "What they share is an interest in history, relations with French overseas departments and territories, postcolonial issues, the question of immigration to Europe from the Global South, and the production, representation and visualization of colonial culture" (p. 17). Aside from the archive addressed here, the group has produced a series of collected volumes on topics from human zoos to Asian Paris to the colonial legacy in France. ACHAC is concerned not with colonial relations for their own sake, but because they continue to condition relations among the residents of France and its former colonies today. The images they have collected, these authors agree, are fundamentally political in nature. Given the extensive recent politicization of race in France--which remains a category that the government refuses to collect statistics on--their point seems more than salient. Indeed, residents of the United States will find much in this book that corresponds to the way that historical monuments and works of art have been reconsidered in light of racial justice movements.

The fact that objects previously considered to have little significance among art historians, such as postcards and board games, communicated such messages as completely as avant-garde paintings, and that they are taken seriously as bearers of meaning, owes to the rising prominence of visual culture studies in the field of art history. While art historians have raised these issues for decades now—the first edition of the *Visual Culture Reader* was edited by Nicholas Mirzoeff in 1998—the movement really emerges from an interdisciplinary consideration of images that may or may not qualify as “art.”<sup>[1]</sup> Edward Said’s *Orientalism*, originally published in 1978, considered representations made by Europeans of exotic others, whether from life or imagination, and decoded their political and cultural significance.<sup>[2]</sup> Countless scholars have followed Said’s lead, which focuses on literature, the social sciences and, finally, universities themselves. Art historians, beginning with Linda Nochlin (among others), have used Said’s model to analyze paintings and images of all sorts which, in the French context, primarily emerge from some form of colonial contact.<sup>[3]</sup>

It comes as something of a surprise that the essays in *Visualizing Empire* do not make references to any of these seminal texts or scholars in this collection of essays. While this might at first appear neglectful, it is also possible to argue that the editors of this volume and the authors who wrote for it determined that it is important to turn the page, so to speak, and reconsider how scholarship operates in a new era. For as long as there have been academics, scholars have reconsidered, corrected, clarified, and reframed debates innovated by their predecessors, leading to a burgeoning of sub-fields and sub-sub-specializations that owe their existence to longstanding debates in a particular discipline. As scholarship turns to transnationally-networked interdisciplinary engagements, the traditions of analysis are ceding territory to the objects of analysis. By focusing on the visual ephemera of twentieth-century French colonialism, aren’t these authors entering a new scholarly space requiring novel tactics? Shouldn’t these authors be forging ahead with new methods if their goal is to cast light on contemporary social issues and the ways that visual information frames such issues with an inherent bias?

In the introduction, the editors write: “Through a diverse and interdisciplinary range of essays, our goal has been to reveal the complex ways in which the French displayed, defined and represented their empire” (p. 2). They elaborate further, suggesting that “This book has therefore been conceived with an eye toward exploring how these images and ephemera were primary agents in constructing and maintaining French imperial ideology” (p. 4). The book is clearly successful on these terms; the group of essays by authors in a variety of disciplines provides a sophisticated and nuanced interpretation of the ACHAC collection and the myriad ways that the objects therein adumbrate imperial ideology through images consumed at exhibitions, in journals, and elsewhere, in spaces both public and private.

Patricia A. Morton, whose book *Hybrid Modernities* explores the architecture of the *Exposition coloniale internationale* in Paris in 1931, focuses her short essay on the notion of the colonial archive and its limitations.<sup>[4]</sup> She clarifies early on that “I interpret it [the ACHAC collection] as an archive that presents a vivid counternarrative to the history of French colonialism and its racist propaganda” (p. 41). But the structure of the archive itself has some epistemological problems which an alternative view of colonialism cannot dispel, so she ends her essay by asking if it is possible to decolonize the imperial archive. Will we not end up just reifying the structures of power contained therein? This is a critical line of thought that cautions readers of the limitations that the process of decolonization by applying a critical perspective to these new subjects of scholarly analysis may confront. A scholar of travel writing and colonialism, Charles

Forsdick, perceives the same issue from a different perspective in his essay “Fragments of Empire: Ephemera, Toys, and the Dynamics of Colonial Memory:” “The challenge is to understand the messages and narratives these fragile, disposable objects conveyed, to situate them in a wider ideological frame and—often with great difficulty—to assess their persistent impact on the collective imaginary and on memory” (p. 65).

Needless to say, each author takes up these challenges in a different way, because “to understand” means something different in each imagistic context. Scholars with different disciplinary tools will approach this problem in divergent ways. But the real challenge here is “to assess their persistent impact on the collective imaginary” because that requires not just historicism—seeking to properly understand what such an image might have meant in its own time—but moreover, a reckoning with the ways that history casts a shadow. Further, it requires scholars to study carefully what kind of inheritance messages located in imperial imagery represent and how they are transmitted, if only to disavow such narratives. This work requires not only to seek knowledge from an uncomfortable history, but further, to discern how such historical imagery works, and to dismantle its mechanism so that its ideological structure becomes something that we, and hopefully others, can no longer believe. This is a challenge indeed.

Steven Nelson’s essay, “*La France et ses colonies: Mapping, Representing, and Visualizing Empire*” locates the ideological work of empire in French maps of the colonies from the turn of the twentieth century and popular imagery featured in the popular weekly, *Le petit journal*. This is one of the best-illustrated essays in the volume, with multiple images from the ACHAC collection juxtaposed to similar works in the collection of the Bibliothèque nationale in Paris. These comparisons, absent from other essays in this volume, help to situate the Getty archive in clear historical terms and employ an abundance of visual evidence to interpret the keystone of this piece, a map of France and its colonies from 1897. Nelson is very attuned to the particular mechanism of the illustrated map and exposes it when he writes “the [illustrated] scenes further underscore the ability of the composite image to enact the colonization of space itself [the literal border of the map]” (p. 173). What Nelson describes here is the way illustrated scenes actually inform viewers on how to interpret maps and how they shore up French imperialism in the process. Further, his interpretation of the enterprise *Le petit journal* that published the map emerges; it sought, through topics and imagery, “to form a public united by nationalist drives” (p. 165).

This is related to the topic of Lauren Taylor’s essay, “On Posters and Postures,” which follows developments in recruiting posters for *les troupes coloniales* through the twentieth century. When analyzing the last poster in her series, she is able to make an assessment based on the aesthetic and thematic developments presented in these military recruiting posters: “The public acceptance of French violence abroad—and indeed, a willingness to take up arms in such campaigns—required a revised understanding of colonialism’s purpose and a more adversarial and even dehumanizing relationship to the colonized subject” (p. 151). In fact, the poster here described was made during the war for Algerian liberation and, given the numerous war crimes committed by the French military during this struggle, a dehumanizing perspective must have been part of the job. To succeed in this conflict, France would also need its populace to embrace the idea that Algeria did not have a right to independence. The proof of the overall efficacy of such images is that the struggle for independence dragged on for eight years before the French finally let go.

While the essays discussed so far provide a clear sense of how France projected its imperial project through quotidian imagery and communicated it to its own population, there is not much detail about how the colonial subjects might have received these representations and the structure of power that they supported. In this sense, David Murphy's essay, "Representations of the *tirailleur sénégalais* and World War I" makes a unique contribution. He begins with an analysis of a variety of images of colonial infantrymen from West Africa who played an important role at the end of the First World War, from the most demeaning (and commercial), a Banania advertisement from 1915, to postcards, cartoons, and even photographs. This array of representations allows Murphy to isolate the visual dynamics at work and to distinguish between overt racism/stereotyping and more sensitive and sympathetic portrayals, emphasizing the hardships the Senegalese infantrymen shared with other French soldiers, or *poilus*. Murphy ends his essay with the story of Lamine Senghor, a Senegalese *tirailleur* who was injured in Verdun and stayed in France after the war, where he joined the French Communist Party. Senghor eventually addressed the League Against Imperialism in Brussels in 1927, shortly before his death, where he deplored the hypocrisy of French colonialism and their treatment of Black subjects, who they considered French when they were soldiers, but became negroes when they demanded rights.

The example of Lamine Senghor reminds readers about the point of the entire volume: to demystify racism against Africans and, in the process, to undermine it. Yet the challenge of history, even the history of colonialism, is to find that which the archive has not preserved, or to read between the lines so that that which the archive has obscured can become visible. In that sense, as Morton reminds us, an anti-colonial archive is no answer to the colonial archive because both serve to obscure that which matters most, the power exercised over one group by another through the system of colonialism. To know the truth about such a system, it is necessary to listen to those whose lives have been so framed--and reduced in the process--and to resurrect those voices for the future. Murphy notes that Lamine Senghor (no relation to Senegal's first president, Léopold Senghor) became a hero to radical young Senegalese students in the 1960s and 1970s. The figures who resisted French colonialism, from Toussaint Louverture to Abd-el-Kader to Lamine Senghor and Frantz Fanon are just barely visible in the colonial archive, yet their voices call us to read it in a very different light.

#### LIST OF ESSAYS

Rebecca Peabody, Steven Nelson, and Dominic Thomas, "Introduction: Visualizing Empire"

Frances Terpak, "French Colonial Collections at the Getty Research Institute"

Pascal Blanchard and Dominic Thomas, "Documenting (Post)Colonial Visual Histories: The Global Impact of the ACHAC Research Group"

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Charles Forsdick, "Fragments of Empire: Ephemera, Toys, and the Dynamics of Colonial Memory"

Peter J. Bloom, "Intersecting Legacies of *bandes dessinées* and Belgian Colonial Instruction: *Les aventures de Mbumbulu* in *Nos images* (1948-55)"

Dominic Thomas, “French Colonialism: The Rules of the Game”

Michelle H. Craig, “Envisioning the Desert: The Sahara and French Colonial Visual Culture”

David Murphy, “Representations of the *tirailleurs sénégalais* and World War I”

Lauren Taylor, “On Posters and Postures: Colonial Enlistment Posters and the Nationalist Imagination in France”

Steven Nelson, “*La France et ses colonies*: Mapping, Representing, and Visualizing Empire”

#### NOTES

[1] Nicholas Mirzoeff, ed., *The Visual Culture Reader* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998).

[2] Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978).

[3] Linda Nochlin, “The Imaginary Orient,” *Art in America* 71, no. 5 (1983). See also Malek Alloula, *The Colonial Harem* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986) and Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Context* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995).

[4] Patricia Morton, *Hybrid Modernities: Architecture and Representation at the 1931 Colonial Exposition, Paris* (Cambridge, Mass: The MIT Press, 2000).

John Zarobell  
University of San Francisco  
jzarobell@usfca.edu

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