

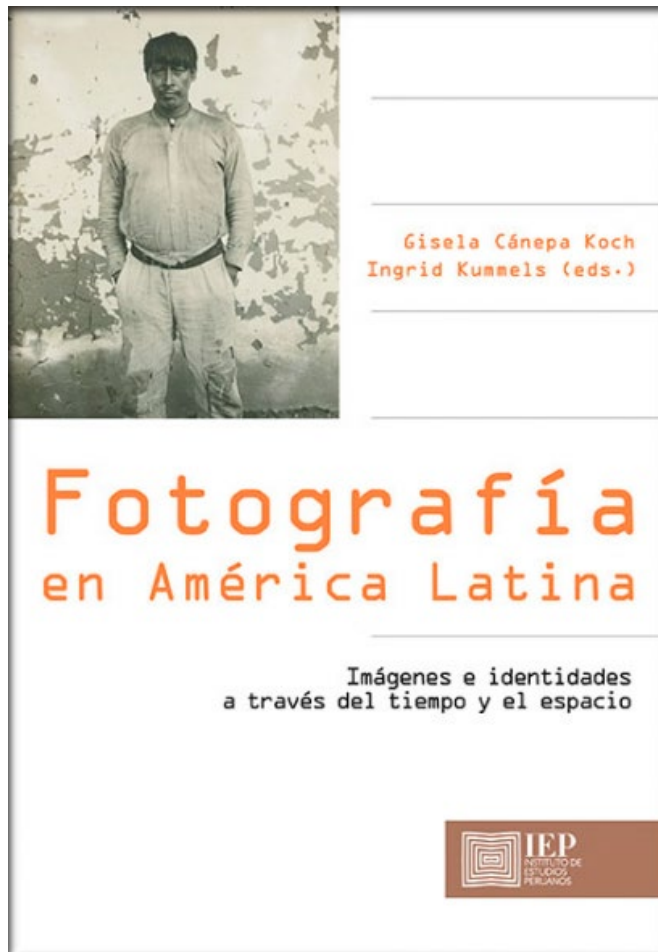
COASTING AMID SILENCES

Cánepa Koch, Gisela and Ingrid Kummels, eds. 2018. *Fotografía en América Latina: imágenes e identidades a través del tiempo y el espacio*. Lima: Instituto de Estudios Peruanos. Edited in English as: *Photography in Latin America: Images and Identities Across Time and Space*. Bielefeld: transcript, 2016.

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Us anthropologists – particularly those who regularly visit documental sets provided by other anthropologists – often find several photographic records among the diverse artifacts that mediate knowledge within this discipline. Such pictures may have been taken by the researchers themselves or reached their hands from other photographers. They may have been made as scientific evidence, as a log for further examination, as preliminary models of landscapes and contexts, and as identification tools of research collaborators or fieldwork acquaintances. Without directly addressing those purposes, they may work as snippets of knowledge process done through interaction, constituting different visual idioms insofar as sets of images are assembled with other sets of records. And it is not news that a great volume of photographic collections was made in anthropological investigations in the 19th and 20th centuries. Yet, these collections require proper treatment and methodology, developed in the current critical build-up, to be adequately characterized for their custody, circulation, and extroversion.

The book *Fotografía en América Latina: Imágenes e identidades a través del tiempo y el espacio* (2018), edited in Spanish by the Instituto de Estudios Peruanos, offers a rich occasion for readers to benefit from the kaleidoscopic effect propitiated by works dealing with different photographic collections in the singularity of the networks in which each of them was built. The book was organized by the professors Gisela Cánepa Koch, from Pontificia Universidad Católica del Peru, in Lima, and Ingrid Kummels, from the Institute of Latin-American Studies at the Freie Universität Berlin. The two of them gathered works, written by themselves and five other researchers, addressing the pathways of such collections from their places of accumulation and custody – mostly in museums and documental centres, as they awaited exhibition – towards what was expected (but not necessarily happened) to be the places and people among which the records were first created. Digitization projects, which may be deemed specific to our period, comprise a central condition for developing this kind of research.

To sum up the potentialities of the seven papers in the book is quite a thankless task, which also bears its own ironic epochal mark: critical tensions concerning the work done by anthropologists proliferate at the same time when collections of articles are established as the editorial genre best suited to model the meetings and exchanges of a numerous, diverse and internationalized scientific community. What the studies seem to share is a triadic approach: each researcher's perspective is connected to those provided by the discussed photographic collections – mostly created by ethnographers among indigenous peoples who inhabit Hispanic America – and to those emerging from different situations, aiming to elicit local discourses about such collections. Photographic sets

thus play the role of temporal refractors for local discourses on culture and identity, and for scientific discourses that display them as topics.

In the first article, Michael Kraus discusses the digitization and exhibition of photographs taken among Amerindian peoples by some of the first culturalist ethnographers to work in South America, such as Karl Von Den Steinen (1855-1929), Max Schmidt (1874-1950), Theodor Koch-Grünberg (1872-1924), and Erland Nordenskiöld (1877-1932); the collection is now gathered in the Ethnologisches Museum, in Berlin. The article offers an interesting perspective on the exhibition of portraiture and the possibilities and limits of the typological thinking and depersonalization often perceived in the visual genres of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. In the second article, Gisela Kánepa Koch discusses the collection created by Heinrich Brüning (1885-1970), now in the Ethnologisches Museum, in Berlin, and the Museum für Völkerkunde, in Hamburg. The author describes the collection's role in characterizing the cultural identity of the Muchik people in Peru. The ageing of Brüning's work by the Muchik is presented as a key factor for projects seeking the digitization and circulation of visual records.

In the third article, Aura Lisette Reyes recovers the visual discourse of Konrad Theodor Preuss's (1869-1938) by discussing the discomfort surrounding the process of creating visual ethnographic records. For that, Reyes stresses the efforts and constraints experienced by Preuss in scientifically documenting both the archaeology and the ethnography of Kogi cultural landscape, and the silence and embarrassment she herself experienced, when Kogi collaborators read the images during a fieldwork she did in Colombia. In the fourth paper, Mariana da Costa Petroni discusses other visual collections of culturalist ethnography – with a clear integrationist approach – produced among the Zapotecs by the Mexican Julio de la Fuente (1905-1970). Here, the cultural-historical perspective, which was articulated around the concept of *acculturation* and anticipated the integration of Native peoples into a diluted national identity, is modified through Petroni's encounters with new Zapotec interpretations for Fuente's images: cultural change and cultural loss remain a matter of concern, but as an idiom of identity is articulated from local viewpoints, it entails new, different consequences.

The fifth paper, by Ingrid Kummels, describes the circulation of a collection historically and personally closer to her own trajectory than any of the previous. The pictures taken by her husband, the photographer and anthropologist Manfred Schäfer, documented the struggles of Ashaninka and Nomatsiguenga peoples in the Peruvian Amazon in the 1970s, under the so-called *action anthropology*. This collection has been used, since its creation, in different situations of indigenist and

environmentalist mobilization. When Kummels came back to Peru, a few years after Schäfer's death, the pictures were reactivated not only for the indigenous struggle, but also for a sort of recognition game, in which her Indigenous colleagues tried to recognize themselves and their acquaintances (that is, not merely as bearers of a culture and ethnic identity) in the pictures. Looking for one's kin and their relations, by the way, appears recurrently in the book, although it seems insufficiently explored as a general and informative matter. After all, we might ask – what lasts (or what should last): *culture?* or persons and the mostly familial networks they have been weaving through time?

The question of how photography may mediate presences of relatives returns in the article written by Mercedes Figueroa on family pictures of undergraduate students that were reported missing or killed by state terrorism in 1990's Peru. The recognition game is reversed: instead of looking for oneself in albums made by others, family albums appear as places for a residual presence of the lost people and for the endurance of the potential demobilization caused by bereavement. Figueroa engages with the transformation of family pictures into public images and amidst grief-stricken families, poignantly framing the matter of what a person is and how long she or he may or does persevere in time. Still regarding the visibility of traumas and political conflicts (not necessarily indigenous) in South America, María Eugenia Ulfe and Ximena Málaga Sabogal expatiate on the formation of photographic sets and the public agencement of pictures in the context of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in Huancasancos, a province in Peru dramatically affected by violence and authoritarianism between the 1980s and the 2000s. Here, the elicitive potency of memories as a photographic exhibition is assembled seems to reach maximum voltage, due to the historical proximity of remembered events, and to the contrastive and comparative effects that are necessarily prompted by any assemblage: what is incorporated in, and what remains out of a selection of pictures? And what does it mean to leave something out in that moving context?

Among the most important triggers for these discussions, is the power of photographic reading. Its advantages for communication around historical themes, in contrast with the different mediations that are required when working with textual material, place photography – in these as in so many other works – as a powerful tool for research collaboration. And this is an interesting pathway for evoking the ideas of gift, return, and reunion, as well as by the silences, noises, and asymmetries surrounding each of the circuits of images, landscapes, gazes and discourses mapped here. Somehow, that entails a shared risk between the researchers and their collaborators, a risk not always recognized in discussions on the so-called “archival” research.


If that is not considered a novelty – as neither is the proliferation of confluences, narratives, and exchanges through which anthropology is deemed as a practice which implies displacement and tension – it would be difficult for someone dedicated to study the Brazilian anthropology, as is my case, to avoid a certain melancholy when reading the book and facing a series of blind spots of our respective territories of ethnographic familiarity. Except for Petroni, who is Brazilian, we are talking about the work of researchers from Hispanic America and Germany with whom, despite a few exchange efforts, the research area dedicated to Amerindian societies still speaks significantly less than with anglophone and francophone colleagues. It is ironic (not to say a bit shameful) that I have accessed the work of German-speaking colleagues through a publication in Spanish disclosed by a neighbour country, and knowing that the anthropology developed in Peru has a limited circulation in Brazil. To that sense of disjunction, we may add, from a historic perspective on the discipline of anthropology, our vague, somewhat myopic (or, in a vocabulary more akin to Amerindian thought: forgetful) consideration of ethnographic studies made in German language since the 19th century – a myopia due to the historic cooling down of relations, translations and reading, and to changes in vocabulary and work processes. These processes occur despite the importance of this work in the beginning of the so-called “tropical Americanism” and a remarkable German presence in Brazilian anthropology, particularly Curt Nimuendajú and Herbert Baldus.

Such melancholic reaction is certainly an exaggeration. We have been witnessing an increasing number of works on these and other characters of Germanophone Americanism, fostered by decades of research on the histories and historicities of Indigenous Peoples of South America, and the history of anthropology itself. Under more attentive inspection, and considering the articles of the book, this reaction may gain theoretical and methodological traction. It might tell us that, amidst the present academic multitudes and the proliferation of information, a possible anthropological work will be made through an erudite appreciation of fragmentary narratives continuously dispersed in a variety of scales and territories. The diversity of scales, reactions, and articulations surrounding the circulation of photographs makes the book edited by Cánepa and Kummels a good opportunity for wandering through the continent and face unsuspected neighbourhoods and estrangements. By collecting a set of articles of limited extension, which are deemed as insufficient for satiating the curiosity of a foreign – Brazilian – reader, the book fosters (in this preliminary contact with a different academic community) some sort of dissatisfaction. Yet, such reaction is certainly beneficial, as it engages us into searching for new references and possible interlocutions, at the same time illuminating the gaps in our local canons.

And yet, still another kind of gap and another melancholy were to be found when reading this book. These concern the encounter with the academic idioms used in clubs that are not our own. I wonder if the feeling of insufficiency that might and should move us to more exchanges is not only a consequence of the extension of the articles and the mismatch in our territories of frequentation. It may also be an indicator of the limited possibilities made available by the notion of cultural identity when we wish to speak of encounters loaded with equivocation, doubt, and mistrust, and in which joy seems to result from seeing one as a person rather than a culture. Thus returns an issue that is as unsettling nowadays as it has been for a long time for anthropologists: to what extent a characterization of difference in terms of culture, and the connection of persons, families and territories in the culturalist idiom can actually counter the diverse modalities of violence that span the history of colonization and inequalities in South America? And to which extent can it address the motivations and effects implicated in the re-encounters of these collectivities with images that are said to be *theirs*?

Fotografia en América Latina not only presents photographs and ethnographies, but also exposes a counterfield of extractivism, forest devastation, linguistic and customs coercion, guerrillas, and forced disappearances. Widening our perspective to include this field, the effect of connection between persons and moments in time and space propitiated by photographic collections may – as seems to be a strong idea in the book – articulate cultural identities and visibilities, shaping in concrete cases the widely assumed, maybe even obvious, idea of cultures as dynamic descriptors. From that angle, it is possible that such collections offer a space to reflect and react to the devastating dimension of a historicity recurrently presented as violence. The authors of the article, however, seem quite aware that power relations, tensions, suffering, and oblivion of somewhat imprecise sense – they also do persist in time.

Maybe such impasses should be taken as given, and the collections are shaped as a kind of irrefutable legacy with which each of the parts implicated in encounters mediated by photographs will have to deal with using their own tools; and maybe the ideas of culture and identity are a part of that ambiguous legacy. Facing the misencounters and silences between these different communities – the academics and their counterparts – who make and remake exchanges and contacts, mutually (but not equally, nor indifferently) get closer, question, present themselves and one another, photographic collections seem to allow the beginnings of a conversation. In this moment, the safest procedure is more similar to a coasting navigation than to a boarding, a colonization or a fulfillment of gaps and silences. That these problems are so clearly perceived in a reading is a merit of the book, and of the researchers who share the



paths they waded. Maybe new alliances may reveal themselves in the same counterfields, silences, voids and obscurities upon which a Humboldtian inspiration for the mapping and the inventory of landscapes and cultures seemed to proliferate findings, typologies, illustrations; and maybe in such a way we could properly demonstrate the due respect to the density of the forest and mountains at this side of the Atlantic, and the many *Völker* who once inhabited, and still today inhabit them.

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