Book Review

Pegler-Gordon, Anna. 2009, *In Sight of America: Photography and the Development of U.S. Immigration Policy*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

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In Sight of America uses visual culture as a “prism” to investigate the shaping US immigration policy. The monograph, based on a doctoral thesis, argues that “photography played an important role in the delineation of the nation as a technology to control access to national membership and as a means of representing the members of the nation” (12) and as such “photography shaped the development of immigration policy in the United States” (7). The book delves into the micro politics of visual inspection and authentication of the body used at US borders for immigrants and labourers between the years 1875-1930.

Presenting what is essentially a history of immigration photography, Pegler-Gordon focuses on three case studies of photographic practices at Angel Island, Ellis Island, and the El Paso immigration stations. In the first case study, Pegler-Gordon correlates the development of representative photography with the policy of Chinese Exclusion. Beginning 1875, under the Page Act, Chinese women “were required to obtain photographic identity documentation that attested to their identity and their moral character” (24). Followed by the Chinese Exclusion Act (1882) and the Greary Act (1892), Chinese migration to the US was almost completely closed. Those entrants exempt from the exclusion laws, (including diplomats, merchants and their families, college students, and travelers), were required to provide photographic identity documentation and submit to a strip search and a series of tests. Pegler-Gordon points out that, “Chinese found the photographic requirements offensive both because of their connotation of criminality and because they recognized that photographic identity documentation could be used to harass all Chinese in the United States” (25). Supporters of photographic documentation argued that, “photographs were necessary on Chinese documents because all Chinese looked alike and all shared criminal inclinations” (25). Although the author does not engage directly with John Tagg’s concept of Photographic Truth, the book does associate the institutional construction of identity “truth” with the “apparent objectivity and detailed likenesses of the photographic image” (25). Pegler-Gordon insightfully points out that, “In Chinese immigration cases, the identity photograph was not only a form of identification but also a means of supporting an application through self-presentation” (p.48). Photo identification documents served both as indexical tools or signifiers of truth, and as material evidence of its fabrication.

Angel Island or the Chinese migration during this time is then juxtaposed with Ellis Island where, instead of photographic authentication, visual inspection of the body was used to process the arriving immigrants. “[P]hotographic documentation was never part of the official inspection process for European immigrants” (123), but was used as a tool to sanction the process of immigration to America. The focus of the institutional gaze at Angel Island was concerned with denying access to all but a few exempt individuals. The inspection at Ellis Island was argued to be a “snapshot” diagnosis of a body’s health and desirability and was part of the visual machinery designed to process and assimilate bodies rather than

differentiate between individuals. Unlike in the Chinese Exclusionary practices, the function of photographic representation at Ellis Island was used for typing immigrant bodies to construct visual arguments which were used to support political positions and opinions on immigration policy.

Where Chinese labour was seen as threatening the livelihood of Americans, European labour was desired especially for farming. Farm labour migration between Mexico and the US, was an established habitual practice. This reliance on Mexican labour contributed to the uneven enforcement of requirements and slightly different strategies of photographic representation. Immigration at El Paso was specifically designed “for the entry and inspection of aliens from or through Canada and Mexico, so as not unnecessarily to delay, impede, or annoy persons in ordinary travel” (195). After 1917, the attempts to control Mexican labour included “a process of registration and photographic identity documentation that drew on the Immigration Bureau’s experience with regulating the presence of exempt Chinese in the United States” (200). The introduction of photography at the Mexico-US border reflected both the habituated migration and the shift in policy and public attitudes towards Mexican labour. The implementation of a border crossing card called for photographic identification, but “there were no inspectors to review the cards or monitor the employers after the laborers were admitted” (202), so the practice seems to have been “uneven, ineffective, and open to negotiation” (198).

Looking at the three case studies, *In Sight of America*, does not make an emphatic distinction between different types of visual meaning production—placing visual inspection and mediated representation on the same rhetorical register. A more nuanced differentiation between unmediated inspection, photographic documentation, and the construction of visual rhetoric might suggest how photographic practices were shaped by visual culture and help different theoretical implications between the representational photography of identification documents and the nature of photographers like Lewis Hine to construct visual rhetoric about Americanization.

There is no denying that the deployment of photography became “the most significant means through which border crossers were regulated” (193). The policies and practices surrounding the use of photographic documentation helped shape identification practices and their eventual stabilization during the twentieth century. However the application of photography for identification between the years 1875 – 1930 seems to have varied significantly between ethnic populations. The author’s central argument, that photography shaped immigration policy in the US, falls short of discussing how visual culture contributed to this uneven application and to the shaping of policy and photographic practices in general; and it seems rather undeniable from the case studies presented, that immigration policy also shaped the deployment of photographic documentation. More engagement with the visual culture toolbox may have elucidated some of the underlining differences in policy and attitudes which then contributed to different applications of photography amongst the three studies. Despite these minor points, the book is insightful, clever and well written. It is well worth the read and definitely should be considered among the cannon of Surveillance Studies texts.