

By/For: Photography & Democracy (online, 6 Feb–4 Dec 26)

Online, Feb 6–Dec 4, 2026

Colleen O'Reilly, University of Pittsburgh

We are delighted to announce that our second season of programs will begin in February 2026. Please join us for a year of thought-provoking conversations with leading thinkers on photography and democracy.

February 6, 1-2pm EST:

To Show or Not to Show: Ethics, Censorship, and the Case of the Scourged Back with Anne Cross & Matt Fox-Amato

In April of 1863, the Baton-Rouge-based photographers McPherson and Oliver produced a series of images of a formerly enslaved man known as Peter and Gordon in which the subject bore his scarred back to the camera, testimony to the violence of his enslaved past. One version in particular came to be known as the “Scourged Back.” The display of this image has been the subject of much debate in recent years. Scholars, curators, and critics have raised ethical questions about looking at and circulating Peter/Gordon’s scarred body. More recently, efforts have been made to censor the photograph from public spaces. This session will reflect on the history of Peter/Gordon’s image and its afterlives, considering when and how it is appropriate to show and withhold from public viewing.

March 6, 1-2pm EST:

Studio Ilankai: A Tamil Photographic History of Sri Lankan Citizenship with Vindhya Buthpitiya
Sri Lanka’s recent history and present, characterised by majoritarian governance, ethno-nationalist conflict, and civil war, is entangled with the multidimensional marginalisation of the island’s Tamil-speaking communities, reinforcing an ethnicised hierarchy of citizenship. Within such a fraught setting, exacerbated by surveillance, securitisation and militarisation, what can the photography studio reveal about the relationship between the Sri Lankan state and its Tamil citizens? What role does studio photography play in the production of citizenship/s? Drawing on long-term ethnographic research focused on Sri Lanka’s Tamil-owned photography studios, I ask what the studio makes possible in terms of citizenship. I will consider the enduring significance of the photography studio as a dynamic space integral to post/colonial and post/war citizen-making, and in giving photographic shape to individual and collective aspirations and fantasies.

April 10, 1-2pm EST:

When Home is a Photograph: Blackness and Belonging in the World with Leigh Raiford

In this talk from her forthcoming book, Leigh Raiford examines how Black people use photography to make home in the world. She focuses on a selection of Black American activists and artists, (Marcus Garvey, James Van Der Zee, Eslanda Goode Robeson, Kathleen Neal Cleaver,

Dawoud Bey, Sadie Barnette) to explore the complex relationship between racialized subjects and the medium of photography. As they traveled the world for study, for work, for pleasure, or for survival, these artists and activists took and collected photographs to express their political platforms and personal sense of self. Raiford considers the everyday image-making practices that these Black Americans employed to improve the condition of Black lives globally by imagining, identifying, inhabiting, leaving, defending, and destroying “home.” Raiford shows how these figures did not merely utilize photography to emplace themselves in the world—they demonstrated how the use of photography is itself a way to mediate one’s relationship to the world.

October 2, 1-2pm EST:

War, Movement, and the Camera: Black Lives in Korean and Japanese Photography with Jeehey Kim

This talk explores how Black presence has been represented in Korean and Japanese photographic cultures from the mid-twentieth century onward. The Korean War and the Second World War brought large numbers of U.S. military personnel—including Black American soldiers—into both countries. Their arrival shaped not only social interactions on the ground but also the ways Blackness was visually framed and understood in East Asia, particularly in relation to mixed-race children born to Asian mothers and Black GIs. These postwar photographic encounters reveal how portrayals of Black culture in Asia were entangled with the legacies of colonialism and the pressures of the Cold War. These forces both enabled and constrained possibilities for Afro-Asian solidarity, leaving a complex visual record that continues to shape contemporary understandings of race, identity, and transnational encounter in the region.

November 6, 1-2pm EST:

By/For & Zahid R. Chaudhary

Zahid R. Chaudhary specializes in postcolonial studies, visual culture, and critical theory. His first book, *Afterimage of Empire*, examines early photography in India to explore colonial perception, truth, and embodiment. His second, *Paranoid Publics*, analyzes the psychosocial dynamics of conspiracy cultures, anti-democratic movements, and new media. His current project, *Impunity: Notes on a Global Tendency*, studies juridical, political, and aesthetic dimensions of impunity from the Cold War to today across postcolonial and U.S. contexts. He has published widely on photography, film, psychoanalysis, and visual culture.

December 4, 1-2pm EST:

Imaging Peace: What might a photography of peace consist of? with Tiffany Fairey

This question, posed by Fred Ritchin (2013), challenges photography’s long entanglement with conflict, suffering, and spectacle. While photography has been central to how war and violence are seen, far less attention has been given to how the medium might help imagine, foster and enact peace (Möller 2019). This talk will discuss Tiffany Fairey’s book and project, *Imaging Peace*, the first multi-country, multi-year study of localised and community-engaged peace photography in diverse conflict and peace settings. Initiatives range from photo-mentoring, counter-archives, cross-community, therapeutic and photovoice projects and indigenous collectives in countries such as Colombia, Northern Ireland, Rwanda, Nepal and Bosnia & Herzegovina.

By/For: Photography & Democracy is a collaborative partnership between three photographic historians, Dr. Tom Allbeson, Dr. Colleen O’Reilly, and Helen Trompeteler.

Explore season two and register for all events: <https://www.byforcollective.com/programs>

We'd also like to announce that at the end of our inaugural 2024/2025 season, we convened a reflective roundtable conversation with Shawn Michelle Smith, Brenna Wynn Greer, Thy Phu, Darren Newbury, Ileana L. Selejan, and Patricia Hayes. Together, they examined the stakes of photography in our contemporary moment and explored its complex entanglements with power structures and systemic injustice. Read the transcript of the conversation: <https://www.byforcollective.com/read/seasonononeroundtable>

Reference:

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