

Black Aesthetics and the Affordances of Photography

International Conference, Amerika-Institut, LMU München

Philologicum, 9-11 June 2027

Thinking through and with the concept of **Black Aesthetics** this conference addresses the **Affordances of Social Justice Photography** in order to consider the medium's possibilities toward placemaking, activism, and social justice as well as the varied agencies inherent in photographic images and in different processes of looking.

Photography has long been involved in anti-racist work, whether in Frederick Douglass' abolitionist efforts and the Daguerreotypes he employed, the imagery of the Harlem Renaissance and its seizing of cultural citizenship, or the photographs of the Civil Rights and #BlackLivesMatter Movements. It has engaged in worlding, world making, and the creation of alternative spaces, and to document lived experiences of Blackness and imagine possible futures. Meanwhile it counters various fixed and stereotyped definitions that link all the way to the 'afterlives of slavery' and 'scenes of subjection' (cf. Hartman 1997; 2006), while certainly not being exempt from the violence of photographic fixation, (pseudo-) scientific discourses, and misrepresentations. This photographic potential has branched out into other efforts toward social justice and anti-precarity work, rendering images important participants in various activist practices.

In all of these – as well as in other instances – an agency emanates from the photograph, in the “event of photography” (Azoulay 2012), that renders images compelling actors in Black liberation and social justice efforts. Through active involvement of photographers, photographed persons, the images' dissemination, or through the agency of the photo itself, these **uses of photography** and **practices of looking** partake in larger socio-political dimensions and in efforts to place human vulnerability and embodied experiences at the center of politics. Photographs work to trouble and interrogate perceived norms, such as white European (self-)perceptions, and engage in the larger processes of building anti-racist and just social relations and socio-political structures.

How, then, does photography acquire and realize this political potential? What forms of images are active in the creation of Black belonging, space making, and activism (Raiford 2026); Which elements of these photographic practices can be transposed onto the larger field of social justice work; And what are the **Photographic Affordances** that allow for possibilities of a visual agency in photography? Recognizing the inherently political character of the medium as event, representation, document, memory, claim, public sphere, and art, this conference seeks to address this **Agency in Photography** and to consider the medium's affective dimensions, political configurations, and the theoretical dispositions that make room for activist engagements and for envisioning different ways of being in the world.

Through the focus on **Black Aesthetics** it opens the discussion to instances of unsettling, unfixing, and disrupting that reveal the cracks in seemingly natural logics, allowing us to think of other ways of doing, making, and perceiving. Like the passionate scream of a commodified slave disrupting the fundamental structures of a supposedly fixed order in Fred Moten's *In the Break*

(2003), this “aesthetic of blackness” reveals the breaks and fissures, the illogicality and dissipation, inherent in what is perceived as a social, cultural, or political norm.

Essentially based on an understanding of the fundamental “politics of aesthetics” (cf. Rancière, 2008) the concept is applied, for example, in the “webs of affiliation” (cf. Colbert, 2017) that seek conjunctions with artistic and photographic practices of the past, and in the “troubling visions” that unveil, disrupt, and reconfigure the ways in which “blackness gets produced through visual discourse” (Fleetwood 2011, 7). It is posited in the articulation of *A Black Gaze* (Campt, 2021) that sees Black artistic and political agency as powerfully constituted through the precarity and vulnerability in Black lives.

We invite papers that address the affordances and the political work of photographs in the wider field of Social Justice activism, Black studies and liberation, and the questioning of gazes, thinking along the lines of the aesthetic break in activism as, for example, the rupture inherent in processes of looking, relations to possible pasts, presents, and futures, as well as theories of perception and aesthetic philosophy. In which ways is photography employed in artistic or activist practice, what is its role in literary or filmic productions, and where does photographic agency become palpable? How have the perceptions of iconic images changed over time and how do different photographs speak to each other?

Possible topics may include, but are not limited to new research on:

- The uses of photography in art, activism, and Black liberation
- The work of contemporary photographers
- Historical practices and instances of photographic engagement
- The role of photographs – both actual and ekphrastic – in literature and culture
- Discussions of social justice photography
- Affective and ecological analyses of photographs
- Artists’ engagements with socio-political and ecological concerns
- Representation of Black lived realities in photographs, series, and exhibitions
- Photography history connected social justice and anti-precariety work
- Decolonial photography, shadow archives, and aesthetic resonances
- Museums, exhibitions, and curation
- Documentary modes of photography
- Ambiguities and uncertainties inherent in images and their uses
- Collaborations and intersectionalities negotiated in and through photography
- Diasporic practices of photography
- Photojournalist representations of Blackness and their contestations
- Political aesthetics in photography
- The image’s role in (re)claiming spaces and places

In addition, the organizers invite papers that breach into the wider field of visual culture studies and political aesthetics, as well as presentations by photographers and artists.

Please submit an abstract of 300-400 words and a short biographical note (100 words) for a 20-minute presentation to Nicole Schneider (nicole.schneider@lmu.de) no later than **September 15, 2026**.

Contact:

Dr. Nicole Schneider,

American Literary and Cultural Studies,

Amerika-Institut, LMU München

Schellingstr. 3 VG

80799 München

nicole.schneider@lmu.de

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