

Picturing Chinatown: Technology, Ideology, and Containment in Arnold Genthe's Photographs of Old Chinatown

Andrew J. Ramos

Writer's comment: Arnold Genthe's photographs represent some of the best known photographic evidence of daily life in pre-1906 Chinatown. Yet it was not their anthropological value that first caught my interest when I presented on them for my American Studies senior seminar, Dr. Nicole Fleetwood's "Race in Visual Culture." What amazed me was how Genthe used the darkroom to secretly manipulate his photographs of Chinese Americans, despite the fact that his work came nearly a century before the invention of digital editing. Having taken a class on conventional photography in high school, I knew that Genthe must have worked days—or even weeks—on manipulating a single print, adjusting the photograph's contrast so some of his subjects faded into the shadowy background, or scratching a negative so signs printed in English became unreadable. I wondered why Genthe would spend so much effort to produce altered photographs, and what these distorted prints might be able to tell us about the story of Chinese-American immigration to early-twentieth-century San Francisco.

– Andrew J. Ramos

Instructor's comment: American Studies 160 is a senior seminar that gives American Studies majors the opportunity to pursue research on a range of topics. The topic when Andrew enrolled in the course was "Race in U.S. Visual Culture." Early in the quarter, Andrew and a classmate gave an impressive presentation on "the Yellow Peril" and representations of Chinese Americans and immigrants in early twentieth-century San Francisco. While preparing it, Andrew discovered the photography of Arnold Genthe and began a passionate investigation into his work, its legacy, and the cultural and political implications of his practice. "Picturing Chinatown" is a complex, beautifully written analysis of the relationship between visual technologies, ideology, and racialization in San Francisco's Chinatown. This essay is remarkable in its level of sophistication and nuance. I look forward to reading future scholarship by Andrew Ramos.

– Nicole Fleetwood, American Studies Program

Beginning in the 1850s, Chinese immigrants in the Western United States faced a torrent of anti-Chinese sentiment. Increased immigration due to the labor projects like the transcontinental railroad, where Chinese composed more than ninety percent of the workforce, led the numbers of Chinese arriving in the United States to grow from 10,869 to 39,579 between 1870 and 1882 (Moy 49). Because the increasing numbers of Chinese proved to be a highly competitive labor force, white Americans began to picture these Asian immigrants as a “yellow peril,” a threat to the established racial, economic, and cultural superiority of Americans of Anglo and European descent. Their answer was to swiftly impose containment on the political, economic, and cultural power of Chinese immigrants. California imposed a law denying citizenship to “persons of Chinese or Mongoloid races” and a tax on all Chinese commerce meant to “protect free white labor against competition with Chinese coolie labor” (Moy 51). In 1883, the Chinese Exclusion Act became America’s first law barring the immigration of a specific racial group, and a decade later the Geary Act sustained the law with severe deportation requirements (Moy 51). These policies were so sweeping that by the turn of the century, anti-Chinese sentiment shifted from a policy of enacting political and economic containment to reassuring white Americans that the Chinese immigrants had already been successfully contained.

It is within this context of partially assured containment that Arnold Genthe began his photographic excursions into San Francisco’s Chinatown. Between 1895 and 1906, Genthe took more than two hundred photographs documenting everyday Chinese life. Later published in *Pictures of Old Chinatown* (1908) and *Old Chinatown* (1913), these works lacked the social documentary impulse that drove contemporary photographers like Jacob Riis and Lewis Hine to use their works for propaganda and social change (Rosler 262). Instead, Genthe, who would later build a career as a respected portrait artist, ensconced his project in both artistic and anthropologic terms. Because much of Chinatown had been destroyed in the earthquake and fire of 1906 and in its place grew a modernized metropolis, Genthe could position his work as an aesthetic memorial to a disappearing exotic culture. As Barnett Franklin wrote in his 1909 review of *Pictures of Old Chinatown*, by capturing Old Chinatown in his photographs,

Dr. Genthe, unbeknown to himself, was becoming Chinatown’s recorder, and his eloquent picturings of that which has passed away is fraught with great historical interest. The Chinatown that we have today is an eminently more healthful affair than the one before the fire, but it is

woefully far from being as artistic and interesting, and many picturesque elements of the former life are gone unquestionably forever.
(52)

Genthe's works went on to critical acclaim and until this day are some of the most cited evidence detailing everyday life in Chinatown before 1906.

More than a century after Genthe began photographing Chinatown, academics in history and visual studies have begun to question the notion that photographs are transparent representations of the past. In her analysis of gendered representations in Montana Farm Security Administration photographs, Mary Murphy argues in "Picture/Story" that photographs like Genthe's are the "result of complicated processes of ideological choice and technical manipulation that informed the instant when the photographer clicked the shutter and the production of the resulting print" (93). In this way, Genthe's photographs lay at a critical juncture between ideology and technology. Who and what gets photographed by Genthe, as well as the conditions that give him the power and will to take photographs, are all subject to complex structures of social and power relations. Photographs and photography are also subject to the possibilities and limitations of technology. The invention of sturdier and more rapid cameras and lenses and the increasing opportunity to significantly manipulate images in the darkroom inform all of Genthe's photographs.

In this essay, I will offer a visual and contextual analysis of two of Genthe's images. I will argue that these photographs reside within the larger context of anti-Chinese sentiment at the turn of the century and they represent a larger political project that sought to produce a visual anthropological record as evidence that the post-1906 rebuilding of San Francisco's Chinatown was no threat to dominant Anglo-American culture. Throughout I will emphasize the notion of "containment" as a visual strategy that soothed white fears about the political, social, and cultural power of Chinese immigrants. Finally, I will also argue that there is a political project at stake in radically (re)viewing Genthe's works. As Catherine Lutz and Jane Collins argue in their study of anthropological images from *National Geographic*, "The Photograph as an Intersection of Gazes," in most cases, the viewer's gaze at a photograph replicates that of the photographer's gaze, thus forcing the viewer to see the world from his ideological position (355). Yet by dissecting and decoding the image, one can disentangle the viewing gaze from the photographer's, allowing for oppositional readings of Genthe's Chinatown photographs.

John Tagg argues in "Evidence, Truth, and Order" that photography must be a historicized technology. Photography always exists within the "special historical spaces for representation and practices" which

constitute it: "Its status as a technology varies with the power relations which invest it. Its nature as a practice depends on the institutions and agents which define it and set it to work" (259). Photography, then, must be studied not as an essential art but as a practice circulated in historical institutional spaces. And the images that it produces must be subject to the same rigorous contextualization and not treated as timeless artifacts. To this end, I will point to three institutional spaces in which Genthe's images circulated. First, I will analyze the institutional space of white tourism in Chinatown, and the power relations and practices wrapped up in public/tourist photography. Second, I will analyze the roles that technology and ideology played in allowing image manipulation within the institutional space of the darkroom. Finally, I will contextualize Genthe's photographs within the photography marketplace occupied by white American consumers.

Tourism and Containment in a "Place" Called Chinatown

Historian Anthony W. Lee points out in *Picturing Chinatown: Art and Orientalism in San Francisco* that characterizing Chinatown as a "place" involves three different but inseparable elements (9). Geographically, Chinatown occupied approximately ten city blocks in the midst of a city owned dominantly by white Americans. Lee points out that while Chinatown was the obvious destination for newly arriving Chinese immigrants, it was also a passageway for non-Chinese who moved between day labor at the docks and their homes in the rest of the city (9). Historically and economically, Chinatown was less defined since "its role within the political and economic development of San Francisco was continually open to debate" (10). While the Chinese often chose to buy and trade exclusively with each other, they did retain political and economic contact (when they were allowed despite anti-Chinese sentiment) with the city surrounding Chinatown. Finally, as well as characterizing Chinatown geographically and historically, Lee argues, it must be characterized as a "place" in the imagination of the white Americans who lived outside of it. To them, Chinatown represented an exotic otherness, a place of danger and mystery. When Genthe's reviewer, Barnett Franklin, laments the destruction of Chinatown and the loss of "its streaming banners and curious beflowered balconies, uncemented, unglazed, un-Americanized," he articulates this discourse of exoticism that surrounded Chinatown at the time (52).

After the earthquake and fire of 1906, Chinatown was, in many ways, destroyed as a "place" in the sense that Lee uses the word. Franklin writes that in the white imagination,

The supremely artistic colony that antedated the great disaster has given way to an intensely commercialistic, ugly, modernized Chinatown blazing with the White Devil's incandescent lights and hideous with the downtown, glazed-brick style of architecture (52).

With the elimination of imaginative difference between Chinatown and the rest of San Francisco came two concerns for Franklin and the white San Franciscans for whom he was writing. First, Chinatown as a final sanctuary for an ancient and culturally rich people had been destroyed forever. Second, and more significantly, the destruction of Chinatown as a "place" meant that the Chinese would move toward increased assimilation and participation in everyday white San Francisco. The "yellow peril," then, could not be contained and would invade white economic, political, and cultural life. This thought informs Franklin's lamentation over the "White Devil's incandescent lights" in Chinatown, and the possibility that they would bring more than a physical copper-wire connection between the Chinese and the rest of San Francisco.

The discourse of exoticism and anxiety over containing the Chinese informs Genthe's own political project in Chinatown. Genthe's act of traveling into Chinatown while taking photographs creates what theorists have termed the "tourist gaze." In her article "Beyond the Boundary" about the use of realist photography in anthropology, Elizabeth Edwards argues that the tourist gaze can be interpreted with regard to two influential theories of tourism. First, MacCannell's argument that the "tourist quest is a quest for the authentic," and second, Graburn's belief that "tourism is akin to a sacred experience, a form of ritual journey from the ordinary state to a spatially separated non-ordinary for a finite period" (62). Therefore, the very act of photographing the "authentic" and "non-ordinary" implicates Genthe and his white audience in the meaning of his images. The tourist gaze and the images it creates are as much about picturing exoticism as they are about delineating and separating "otherness."

In addition to defining the self versus the other, the tourist gaze wielded by Genthe imposes a hierarchy of power relations. In a basic sense, having the power to "tour" Chinatown reinforces at once the containment of Chinatown as something other than white San Francisco, and also its penetrability under the power of the white gaze. In her article "Access and Consent in Public Photography," Lisa Henderson suggests that public photography is threatening to its subjects because it can invade their expectations of privacy without consent. Yet, she adds, public photographers often diffuse this fear by wielding the camera itself as a mark of entitlement, signaling to their subjects that by right of

technology they have the privilege to look (277). Genthe, similarly, exerts his own right to tour Chinatown by virtue of his will and power to take photographs.

While the tourist gaze is always present between Genthe and his subjects while he tours Chinatown, it is also present in the images he takes. His two photographic works, both published after the literal and figurative destruction of Chinatown as a "place" in 1906, were positioned as artistic anthropology, an aesthetic look at an exotic culture. They put difference on display in the guise of realism, making the Chinese both exotic and, by inference, contained within the literal and figurative limits of Chinatown. Genthe's image "Fleeing from the Camera" exemplifies this containment as a visual strategy. In the photograph, two young Chinese children cross the street away from Genthe and his camera. Historian James S. Moy points out that Genthe's photographs, like this one, often focus on Chinese children's "long queues," an obvious sign of racial difference (75). One child waves his arm in the photographer's direction, ostensibly hostile to or suspicious of having his photograph taken. The caption notes, "The children imitated their elders" and "scattered fearfully from the foreign touch." In the original published version of "Fleeing from the Camera," Genthe cropped the image so it included only the two children and a man directly in the background visually above them.

Genthe's cropping suggests the role that darkroom manipulation played in constructing the connotation that the residents of Chinatown are at once culturally anachronistic but also contained. In his 1901 article "Rebellion in Photography," Genthe told readers that with regard to retouching in portrait photography, "as little as possible will be done. The aim of the retouch ought to be, besides removing flaws in the film, simply to modify what the lens and plate have exaggerated" (99). Genthe is proposing the rather ironic notion that modifying the image in the darkroom is not a mode of image manipulation, but a way to manage the image in order to produce a more realistic depiction.

Yet in Genthe's Chinatown photographs, darkroom manipulation plays a large part in creating the photo's connotation. In "Fleeing from the Camera," the boy's waving arm might simply be for balance as he negotiates a tall curb, yet the caption suggests that he is waving away the photographer. As he "scatters fearfully" from Genthe, his action is supposed to become symbolic of the Chinese's own impulse to separate from white culture. This idea is supported by a bit of darkroom manipulation: Genthe cropped the photo, removing any signs that the separation between Chinese and white American culture might be faltering. At the far right side of the original negative stands a

middle-aged Chinese man in a Western-style hat and coat. His appearance is threatening to the visual strategy of containment and therefore must be eliminated.

Realism and Aesthetics in the Image

Genthe's careful manipulation of his images casts doubt on the ostensibly anthropologic project he was undertaking in documenting Chinatown's culture. Yet like Genthe's comments about darkroom manipulation, the photographer and his contemporaries did not seem to equate photographic manipulation with making the photo somehow less "real." Even as early as 1898 when his photos were beginning to be published in magazines, Genthe admitted influencing the composition of his Chinatown photographs by claiming that he waited three hours to capture the right grouping of subjects before a Chinese Joss house ("Overland" 502). Yet the article's writer still claims that "there is prose as well as poetry" in the picture, "truth as well as beauty," conceding that despite Genthe's manipulation, the image still carries an inherent realism about its Chinese subjects (502).

One of Genthe's most famous images, "An Unsuspecting Victim," exemplifies how containment as a visual strategy was often less about realism than aesthetics. In the photograph, a white man examining a camera at the center of the image is actually Genthe, and he may have had an assistant take the photo from a nearby tripod. Behind him and to the left, a middle-aged Chinese man seems to dissolve into the shadowy Chinese temple. On the right side of the frame, a young Chinese child, dressed in a traditional outfit, stands frozen in mid-step as he leaves the temple.

When "An Unsuspecting Victim" is compared with its original, un-retouched negative, Genthe's manipulation becomes obvious, if not shocking. Overall, Genthe has added shadows to the image by darkening the background while keeping the foreground light. But he has also completely erased a white man that was standing at his side, and a Chinese youth on the right edge of the frame. Given the technology of Genthe's time, the final image he published must have taken many hours of trial and error in the darkroom. Yet its overall aesthetic and connotation must have been important enough to his overall political project.

Part of the image's power—and the reason for Genthe's manipulation—derives from the physical contrast between the image's subjects. The older man on the left mysteriously sinks into the background, perhaps afraid of Genthe like the children in "Fleeing from the Camera." The young child on the right wears his traditional outfit as

an obvious sign of racial difference, similar to the long queues Genthe was so fond of photographing, and suggesting that the boy is already set to follow in the exotic ways of his ancestors. The two figures Genthe excised from the image were too westernized and threatened the visual strategy of containment.

But Genthe's place in the image is perhaps the most important. He stands at the focal point of the image, a symbol of modernity in his expensive clothes and with his camera in hand. The photograph's title, "An Unsuspecting Victim," derives its humor from the fact that the roles have been reversed, and the photographer is now the subject (although given Genthe's white American audience, perhaps whites have been the "subject" of his photos all along). This role reversal plays on a pervasive assumption in Genthe's works about who has the power, will, and responsibility to take images. Genthe, with camera in hand, is asserting his power and will to photograph Chinatown's inhabitants, with or without their consent (and Genthe had remarked that he preferred to photograph without consent because it preserved the image's "naturalness"). And, in a way, Genthe and his audience translated this power to take images of Chinatown into a paternalistic responsibility to memorialize Chinatown after its destruction, as if the surviving Chinese could not accurately put into record their own feelings and experiences. It is this project of memorializing by molding Chinatown's visual history that made the visual strategy of containment so heinous. Not only did Genthe's images have an immediate effect, calming white fear of the "yellow peril," but they also revised the history of Chinatown.

Native American activist Jimmie Durham has written on the power of white American photography to revise the past. In "Geronimo!" he ponders a peculiar photograph of the famous Apache warrior. Taken late in his life, the image shows Geronimo in a suit and top hat, driving a car. Commenting on the surprised reactions he has received from many people who view the photograph, Durham writes,

We do not want to see the valiant and "savage" old warrior in a top hat, as though he had given up and accepted "civilization." We do not want to see him in this century. We want him to remain in the (designated) past. (57)

Similarly, Genthe's photographs provide an ideological version of Chinatown, one that "contains" the Chinese in the past as exotic and anachronistic. This mode of representation has the same effect as the impulse to thrust Geronimo back in time to the nineteenth century. It denies the reality of oppression and suffering faced by both Native Americans and the Chinese, and it denies the possibility of political or social change. Yet by dissecting and decoding the image, as I have

attempted in this paper, one can disconnect the viewing gaze from Genthe's, allowing for a critical glimpse at how images like Genthe's are manipulated by ideology and technology.

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