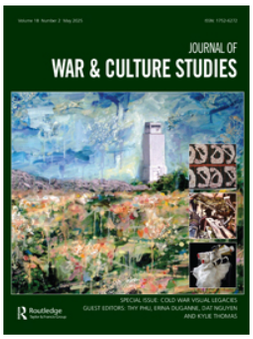
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Kylie Thomas & Darren Newbury

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# Cold War Photographic Diplomacy: Darren Newbury in Conversation with Kylie Thomas

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This interview focuses on *Cold War Photographic Diplomacy*, a detailed study of the United States Information Agency (USIA) and the vast archive of photographs it produced as part of its work in crafting political and social relations between the United States and newly decolonized African countries in the 1950s and 1960s. Newbury's book illuminates the central place of race in the Cold War imagination in the time of anti-colonial struggle and decolonization in Africa, and the civil rights movement in the United States. When the USIA was shut down at the end of the Cold War, its photographic collection was transferred to the US National Archives, and effectively disappeared from view. In this interview, Kylie Thomas speaks with Darren Newbury about the material his study has brought to the surface, and about what it means to consider these images in the present.

KEYWORDS Cold War, Africa, photography, USIA, archives, racism

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**KT:** On the one hand *Cold War Photographic Diplomacy* could be read as a study of how photography can and has been thoroughly instrumentalized in the service of the state, and of how blatant this approach was on the part of the USIA and the officials who directed it. But at the same time, in the book, you observe that something

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more complicated was happening, and you chart how the medium of photography came to be not only entangled in US foreign policy, but a critical component of it. What was the starting point for this work and for engaging with this massive archive?

**DN:** The starting point for the project was a question that formed around what the USIA, or the United States Information Service (USIS), as it was called in the countries where it operated, was doing in South Africa. My initial interest was piqued when I retrieved the security records on South African photographer Ernest Cole under a Freedom of Information request and found references there to his engagement with US diplomatic officers in the country. The implication was that in the period before he went into exile, he was storing negatives in the USIS offices in Johannesburg. From research in the last few years, we now know a bit more about those relationships (Sanders, 2022), but this is what first caught my attention. Aside from knowing about USIA sponsorship of *The Family of Man* global exhibition tour, this is the first time I'd really given any thought to the relationship between US public diplomacy and photography in Africa. So, I thought it would be an interesting lead to follow. I always had in mind the idea that somewhere in the US archives, in the correspondence files, Cole's engagement with the agency may be documented. I never found anything, of course – it's like looking for a needle in a haystack – but then my focus quickly moved beyond Cole.

In 2015, I had funding to spend a week in the US National Archives and made a connection with the archivist (Nick Natanson) who'd overseen the transfer of material when the agency closed at the end of the Cold War. He was a photographic historian and catalogued and organized the photographic material in the expectation that one day it would be of interest to researchers. The 'Staff and Stringer' files, which represented individual photographic assignments, were particularly important to me. I've always been interested not just in the circulation of photographs when they've been captioned, sequenced and published, but in the whole process of photographic production from beginning to end. Those files gave me access to who requested the photographs, who carried out the assignment, to contact sheets, and so on, and it allowed me to understand how the work of photography was organized within the agency.

So, as I say, it started with my interest in what on earth Cole was doing engaging with the US in South Africa. What was their interest? What was his interest?[1] But it very quickly became a project about the agency's photographic operation, which went beyond Africa of course. But I needed to put some parameters in place. In some ways, even trying to think about that operation in relation to Africa is slightly crazy. I knew the history of South Africa from my previous research, but my knowledge of the rest of the continent and its history was inevitably more sketchy. Trying to research across multiple continents would have been a step too far. So,

[1]For a detailed account of Cole's relationship with the USIA, see Sanders (2022) and Newbury (2022).

focusing on the work of the agency in Africa during this period seemed a workable frame, linking African decolonization and the civil rights movement, and the parallel forms of photography around civil rights.

**KT:** As you show throughout the book, the USIA was constantly negotiating how to present the US as a friend to newly decolonized African states and their citizens, while contending with the circulation of images that depicted ongoing racist violence at home. And that point of tension runs throughout the period that you discuss, and it's one that you note was not ignored by the Soviet Union, for instance, as well as others critical of the United States. I found it so interesting that the images the USIA produced were not permitted to circulate within the US itself. You observe how, 'Although items surfaced periodically in ways that caused controversy for the agency, the program was conducted largely out of sight of the general public in the US, which, with a degree of caution, gave it license to depict issues of civil rights and racial integration in ways that would not have been possible for domestic audiences' (38).

**DN:** It sounds almost conspiratorial that the work wasn't circulated in the US, but it's important to understand the principles at stake here. First, was that of not propagandizing your own population; that happens, of course, but one doesn't usually explicitly say that's what is going on. So, that's one reason that it was restricted to overseas audiences. But equally important was the view that state image production shouldn't compete with the work of commercial image producers and agencies. For the government to produce this material is tantamount to socialism, replacing a competitive market for the production and circulation of images with state production. That's an ideological position, of course, but it's not conspiratorial. It's not that anyone was necessarily trying to hide what they were doing. This debate continued even for material that circulated abroad, with some questioning whether the agency wasn't competing with the large international press agencies if it was in the business of circulating material that is subsequently used in African newspapers or publications. So, that tension was an important consideration. I wouldn't want it to sound like the activity was all hidden. There's also an important distinction to be made between the USIA and the CIA, which as we know was heavily involved in cultural activities abroad. Although there is a point at which they overlap, USIA tended to be more upfront about what it was doing. Many of their publications were branded as USIA products because they wanted people receiving that material to know where it was coming from and appreciate the high quality of US print production, and so on. The medium was part of the message.

**KT:** It's a funny idea that they imagined that photography could be instrumentalized to this degree and work in that way. And of course, it did work to some extent, but at the same time, the medium exceeds the intentions of the people that produce the images, and they circulate outside of the networks that they're meant to remain

within. I thought it was interesting that they tried to contain the forms of circulation, and that was simply impossible. For instance, in the images you include that depict people coming from newly decolonized places to the US, and the interactions that they had while they were there that were organized by the government. And the images show this as quite a controlled process – staged, really. They very deliberately convey an idealized version of interracial harmony. But some of what really happened is also conveyed in those images, you do see traces of that. What we know from the lives of people who were forced to live in exile and found themselves in the US – Ernest Cole was one of them – was that, in fact, they had an incredibly difficult time over there and encountered racism in the US, but also just struggled to make a living and to find their way in the society.

**DN:** There are small glimpses of that. Of course, there are no images of people struggling, that wasn't what the USIA was looking to record. But there are odd glimpses in the archive of more troubled relations with some visitors, or others having a more difficult time in the US. They're usually marginal, or in some cases somewhat suppressed within the documentation.

**KT:** You write about how the USIA exploited what they saw as a 'special kinship' between African Americans and Black Africans. And at the same time, they sought to erase how this connection was forged through slavery and centuries of racial oppression, as well as histories of resistance. As you note, 'It is self-evident that Africans arriving from recently decolonized countries were not naive about the racism they might face in the US; nevertheless, it is a subject rarely broached in any of the documentation that accompanied these photographic assignments' (202). But you have found traces of this – one of them is the vignette that opens Chapter Five in which you describe photographs portraying the visit of four African people who were effectively 'inserted' into the historic American scenes at the Wax Museum in Washington. The whole chapter is just really fascinating to read, particularly in how it illuminates these points of resistance.

**DN:** That is interesting. It was when I came across that assignment that I realized I had a project. It was on my first visit to the US National Archives. At that point I had no idea what I would find or even if I'd find anything of interest. Then I came across those photographs and thought, you know, there's something here. It's interesting photographically, and it's interesting in terms of what it might tell us. I'd still say that's one of the highlights among the many picture stories and assignment I've looked at, one of those serendipitous archival finds.

**KT:** In that chapter you write:

> In September 1964, three African students studying at Howard University – Jonathan Ajeroh and Gilbert Ola Ogunfiditimi from Nigeria, and Jacob

> Quaye from Ghana – along with Lieutenant Colonel Belachew from Ethiopia were photographed visiting the wax museum in Washington. In carefully staged photographs, the African visitors were inserted into several tableaux representing moments in the history of the US, or more specifically its founding as a nation: the signing of the Declaration of Independence, Betsy Ross making the first US flag, and George and Martha Washington receiving the Marquis de Lafayette at Mount Vernon. […] Absent from the picture, however, as regular US visitors to the museum would have noticed, was a more troublesome sign of African presence in the American past. In order to facilitate the photographic shoot in a way that suited the purposes of its commissioners, and was sensitive to its subjects, the museum had kindly agreed to 'remove completely' the figure of a slave from the tableau of George Washington's porch at Mount Vernon. The word 'completely' here signals a certain degree of anxiety, and the perceived need not simply to move the slave figure so as avoid its appearance in the photographs (a matter of representation) but to put it out of the sight of the visitors altogether, lest it offend (a matter of diplomatic etiquette). (169–171)

You show how the USIA sought to promote an idea of American and African co-operation and used photography to effectively fabricate an enclosed alternative universe within which slavery was excised, but you also note how the visitors themselves did not seem to be entirely duped by this production, and one of them at least, is shown irreverently serving what appears to be a small dish of butter to the wax figure of Martha Washington (Figure 1).[2] You write:

> Although there is no evidence to support the interpretation beyond the photographs, I wonder if the posture Lieutenant Belachew adopted toward the wax figures of George and Martha Washington was not in fact a parody of racial deference, an indication that he understood the representational game in which he was being asked to perform a role and chose to subvert it, reinserting the troubling history of racial injustice that his hosts had sought to remove from the picture; or, if that is going too far, then at the very least a sign that he knew there was something slightly absurd about the whole routine. (202–203)

**DN:** It's difficult to determine the extent to which those gestures should be read as a political critique or simply as a mischievous, playful response to being part of this slightly crazy photographic shoot in the wax museum. Where it sits on that continuum is an interesting question, one it's impossible to conclusively answer. There's also a nice post-book story to those images, in that within a week or so of the book being published, the granddaughter of one of the African students contacted me asking if she could see the image. It was a wonderful coincidence of timing as her grandfather died some years ago, but it was coming up to a significant birthday for her father and she was assembling an album of photographs to give him.

[2]The practice of manipulating exhibits at the National Archives Museum in Washington DC to excise aspects of the racist and violent history of the United States continues in the present. See Pontone (2024).




FIGURE 1. Lieutenant Colonel Belachew interacts with the wax tableau of George and Martha Washington receiving the Marquis de Lafayette at Mount Vernon. 'Africans visit Wax Museum' (Photographer: Joseph Pinto), September 22, 1964. Photographs from Staff and Stringer Photographic Assignments Relating to US Political Events and Social, Cultural and Economic Life, 1964–1979, RG306, NARA. 306-SSA-4-3720.

She'd obviously been searching on her family name and came across my book. She hadn't seen the image, but the name had come up, and then she found me and contacted me about that image, and fortunately I was able to send her a copy. She knew her grandfather was quite proud of his time in the US and liked talking about it, which is why it was an important thing for her father.

**KT:** this is interesting to think about in terms of the work that you've done in making some of these images visible and in thinking about archives and repatriation.

**DN:** Yes, that was an important part of the project. There is next to no scholarship on this work. The photographs have sat dormant in the archive since the USIA was wound down. So, it was good to be able to include so many images in the book to make this material more visible. Hopefully others will go back and look at other material and make connections between the photographs and the document collections. One of the things the book doesn't get to as much is what was happening to those images in Africa. That's the other part of the story – I'm sure those images were turning up in places unexpectedly. It's probable that some of the people who traveled to the US on exchange trips had copies and were circulating them locally, no doubt some of them would have been proud of their time in the US, and one can expect the images to turn up in odd places and find uses beyond their official promotion of US-African friendship.

**KT:** I was thinking about how Belachew's critique or playful action in the museum could be read by white American audiences, who might not get the joke, seeing instead an inability to understand American cultural practices. Something similar occurs in the photograph you include that implies that interracial relationships



FIGURE 2. 'An American student and a student from Africa find much to smile about in the current exhibit of sculpture in the Main Gallery of the Wisconsin Union at the University of Wisconsin in Madison. Standing is Janet Holloway of Madison; kneeling at right is George Kalu, Lagos, Nigeria.' 'Nigerian student George K. I. Kalu at University of Wisconsin' (Photographer: Duane Hopp), February 5, 1963. Staff and Stringer Photographs, 1949–1969, RG306, NARA. 306-SS-9-121-F.

were not only possible between white American and Black African students, but that they could be happily pursued, even though this was clearly not the case at the time as interracial marriage was only legalized across the US four years after this photograph was taken (Figure 2). I was wondering about the image of the Nigerian student and his US counterpart in the gallery at the University of Wisconsin, which as you note, has romantic overtones, and even has the student from Africa kneeling in the position he might adopt if he was proposing marriage to the woman, who is shown smiling down at him. And the aspect I was wondering about was how this man is depicted touching the sculpture, which might convey the fact that he is unsure of how to comport himself in a gallery; but given your research on the staging of these kinds of images, it could be that he was touching the sculpture on the instructions of the photographer. It is these small elements that show these students to be simultaneously strategically positioned in place, and also painfully out of place, in the racist regime that was and is the United States. In drawing attention to moments like where Lieutenant Belachew reinserts the troubling history of racial injustice back into this image archive, you show

how central racism, and the politics of race, are to understanding the Cold War period. Your book makes an important intervention in this regard.

**DN:** In terms of foreign policy scholarship, it is well understood that race was an important factor. I'll leave it to foreign policy scholars to tell me if I've added an interesting photographic dimension to these debates. But there hasn't been much research on how the engagement with Africa shaped ways of thinking, and how it shaped the agency's photography.

**KT:** The book certainly makes a significant contribution to the history of photography, but I do think there's something really interesting here too about the histories of racism not being sufficiently thought in relation to Cold War histories, and Cold War history not being thought in relation to histories of racism. They're often separated out, or at least the archives are not brought together in the same way that you have done in your book, weaving together the Cold War, decolonization in Africa, the civil rights movement, and the connections between them.

* * *

**KT:** You began this project in 2015, when Barack Obama was President, and you completed it in the wake of the resurgence of white supremacy in the US after the election of Donald Trump in 2016, and the storming of the US capitol buildings in 2021, after Trump lost to Biden. We are discussing the book a few days after Trump's re-election in 2024. It's clear that racism is no less significant now than it was in the time of the Cold War, but also that the place of Africa in global politics is no longer the same.

**DN:** Yes, the early 1960s was a moment where both sides in the Cold War thought that it was important to engage with these new African nations. But, of course, by the late 1960s, things are not going so well in post-colonial Africa, and the continent takes much more of back seat from a US foreign policy perspective. There was also an ongoing argument within the agency on whether or not they had overdone the emphasis on race, that argument was there from the beginning, actually. But you're right, I think we can be sure that Africa won't feature so highly in the second Trump administration's imagination.

**KT:** It's sort of fallen away to some extent, right? Other than references to the 'shithole countries'. It's as if Trump has just written Africa off.

**DN:** You're right. I mean, no high-level US politician would have said that during the 1960s. They were aiming to treat African leaders with a level of respect, and, at the start, considered it a matter of equal treatment to have an active agency presence in every one of the newly independent countries. That ambition didn't last, and there were arguments made that activity in, say, Upper Volta is not really going

to change things, so it should be downscaled. But nonetheless, this is a very different kind of position.

**KT:** I was thinking about how the anxieties about race that animated a lot of the production of this archive, and of the work of the USIA, and their concern with the thorn in their side that racial violence was for their public image in Africa at that time. And I was thinking about that in the wake of Trump's re-election, and the blatant embrace of the all the worst things. In the present time there's no attempt to put a veil over anything at all.

**DN:** That's true. I was writing most of the book during the first Trump presidency, but I wrote a first draft of the epilogue shortly after Trump had been defeated and left office, in early 2021. At that time what I'd written had a sense of optimism, the idea that one could return to this archive and think about these images as providing, not so much a fake or manufactured view of the US, but a certain idealized vision of racial progress in America which might, despite all that it obscures, offer something to the present. I draw a parallel between Cornel West's comments in a CNN interview, which finds hope in images of interracial protest as part of Black Lives Matter, and the emphasis on the interracial photographs in the USIA coverage of events such as the March on Washington. But when I came back to it later it seemed ridiculously over-optimistic. So, I rewrote it in a more cautious or restrained, and certainly less optimistic, vein. Sadly, events seem to have borne that out, and my first draft would have seemed wildly out of kilter with the current moment.

**KT:** I think there was a genuine optimism in the post-war period, in spite of the threat of nuclear war, and in spite of the wars that did in fact take place during the Cold War. I'm thinking about images of the 1956 Women's March in South Africa that showed women of all races united against discriminatory laws, the global movement against apartheid, and later the United Democratic Front, and movements for peace in different places in the world. As you said, let's not use the word fake. For people who had those ideals, they genuinely believed a different world was possible – the images of the March on Washington, or of the Women's March in South Africa attest to this. That was there, that was also real.

**DN:** There are different levels. Clearly, the output of the USIA can be described as propaganda. They were instrumentalizing the medium to achieve certain things. But the photographers working on the ground sometimes made images that didn't necessarily fit that narrative, even if their work was part of the system, and they had very little control of it once they handed over their negatives for processing. What they were thinking as they were photographing, and how they saw and understood the world is not necessarily the same as the agency's masters. And so, there is the possibility to go back and retrieve some of that from the archives and use it in ways it wasn't intended to be used that might serve other ways of seeing. I discuss a




FIGURE 3. 'Jane Steidmann and Fred Miller sorting books.' 'Mississippi Orientation Program' (Photographer: Harlan Johnson), July 10, 1964. Photographs from Staff and Stringer Photographic Assignments Relating to US Political Events and Social, Cultural and Economic Life, 1964–1979, RG306, NARA. 306-N-65-1304.

handful of assignments on civil rights that can be viewed in this way, they are different to the mainstay of illustrative photographs, where the message is defined in advance. I see them as more documentary in the sense of photography as a means of looking at the world to try and understand it (Figure 3). Those images are there in the archive, even if they were never actually picked up and used in any USIA publications.

**KT:** Right. And that the archive holds that potential to be read against the intentions of the makers, or with them, when they align with what you might be trying to do. But the possibility remains to read the archive in the way that you have in this book, opening up all these kinds of questions. In the context of the re-election of Donald Trump it might prompt a kind of nostalgia for what now seems like a naive type of optimism that things could take a different shape, even maybe on the part of some of those propagandistic ideologues working in the agency who might have actually thought, well, we could manipulate things to

bring about global peace. Were they as cynical and nefarious as those who currently hold power?

**DN:** I think some of them were cynical and some of them weren't. At times, one gets a sense people believing their own propaganda, they are so busy promoting the idea that American democracy offers the solution. I quote someone very early in the book saying, yes we're worried about the impact of racial tensions, but in a few years' time it might all have resolved itself. There's an optimism to that, but at the same time a level of naivety that's frightening.

**KT:** Oh, absolutely. I mean, I think that's always been an element of this in US politics. I remember being in the US in 2002 and 2003 and attending the massive demonstrations against the war in Iraq. And I was always struck by the fact that what people were chanting was, 'This is what democracy looks like!' And I was thinking, wait, I think you're mistaken here because exactly what you're trying to critique in protesting against your own government, is that this is not what democracy looks like. But they were quite self-congratulatory about the fact that they could turn out in the streets, and they had this right to protest, which in itself is certainly good. But their ability to comprehensively critique their own state seemed to be limited by a certain kind of patriotism that was just unshakable.

**DN:** Yes, that self-congratulatory element does run through quite a lot of material. There is a genuine belief in the US model, that can't be ascribed to cynicism. And no doubt that was equally true at the end of the Cold War, when US politicians and advisors sought to assist in the reshaping of the former Soviet Union. And that didn't work out perfectly either.

**KT:** Are we in a new Cold War political landscape? And if so, what has shifted and what remains in place?

**DN:** In relation to Africa, I think there is an echo of the period I write about in the book, a faint one perhaps, rather than continuity. Under the Biden administration there was more interest in Africa, albeit that could quite easily be overstated. Kamala Harris visited Africa in 2023 and Biden was due to visit Angola in October 2024, although that trip was cancelled. Of course, the interest in Africa is in part driven by the influence of China on the continent, as well as Russia. The way in which African governments have responded to the war in Ukraine can, in part, be seen as a legacy of the Cold War and memory of Soviet support for African liberation movements. But then the question is what is the place of photography now in these engagements? You continue to have the heavily choreographed diplomatic photography surrounding the visits of foreign leaders that formed such an important part of the USIA archive (Figures 4 and 5).



FIGURE 4. 'Kenneth Kaunda of Rhodesia and Secretary Williams' (Photographer: George Szabo), May 22, 1963. Staff and Stringer Photographs, 1949–1969, RG306, NARA. 306-SS-13-722.

**KT:** That kind of state posturing through photography to produce the public face of nation states asserting their relations with each other certainly remains.

**DN:** The other aspect I was thinking about are the digital renderings of national development projects. In the 1960s, photography often served to represent modernization projects, as well as picturing African visitors to the US as modern consumers (Figure 6). The equivalent of that today would be the 'post-photographic' digital images of new developments that appear on billboards in public spaces as well as posters and government documents, visions of future infrastructure and construction projects, which Richard Vokes comments on in the editorial for the special issue we put together on 'African futures' a few years ago (Vokes & Newbury, 2018).

**KT:** Are these relations of photographic diplomacy more difficult to grasp now, given that the whole visual media landscape has just exploded to the extent that



FIGURE 5. 'Basutoland Chief [Constantine Bereng Seeiso, Moshoeshoe II] at the State Department' (Photographer: Jack Lartz), February 27, 1962. Staff and Stringer Photographs, 1949–1969, RG306, NARA. 306-SS-3-10071.

it has? What would form this archive now? Would there be a way to recreate something like the archive that you looked at if somebody wanted to do that now?

**DN:** The US State Department always had its own photographers, as did the White House, separate from USIA, and presumably still does. But yes, the proliferation of images and the way in which they circulate make it harder to go and find any singular archive of this material. In a way that takes us back to an earlier question, the US felt it needed to step into media production in Africa because it was competing with China and Russia in spaces where there was less media available. If the major press agencies such as Associated Press or Reuters or whoever are now able to service those needs, then arguably the work USIA once did is no longer required.

**KT:** So, the massive growth of those types of industries in some ways accounts for this shift away from overtly state-produced media, but they are still doing that work to some extent, right? These media organizations which are also connected to states in different ways.

**DN:** Of course, and there was also local production in these contexts. But they didn't have access to the same capacity or channels of circulation that that that



FIGURE 6. 'Mrs. Donald Geddes demonstrates her upright vacuum cleaner for Ali Nestor Mamadou.' 'African students with American host families at East Grand Forks, Minnesota' (Photographer: Bud Nagle), September 24, 1964. Photographs from Staff and Stringer Photographic Assignments Relating to US Political Events and Social, Cultural and Economic Life, 1964–1979, RG306, NARA. 306-SSA-4-3725-3.

were available to larger media organizations or states. The other thing I was thinking about in terms of legacy is the training of photographers, filmmakers, journalists. I know there's some research on African filmmakers, and photographers, who trained in East Germany or in the Soviet Union. The archival material is one kind of legacy, but individual careers also represent a legacy of this period. All the US cultural centers would have had local people working for them, some of whom would have been making photographs. There's certainly scope for more research on that aspect, and it strikes me as an interesting and important legacy. Though my sense is that for the US photography was more about projection, even at the level of

medium itself, where the agency saw itself as understanding the medium and showcasing the best (American) work for overseas audiences. I make a comparison at the end of the book with an invitation from the Soviet Friendship Society for Africans to send in their images, an approach you never saw from USIA.

**KT:** Right, which on the surface is a more open approach, but also one that we know could not have been uncomplicated. It's interesting to think about these forms of social engineering through photographs in relation to the other articles in this special issue on the visual legacies of the Cold War.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Notes on contributor

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