

Susie Protschky, *Photographic subjects: Monarchy and visual culture in colonial Indonesia*. Studies in Imperialism (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2019, 244 pp., ISBN 978 1 5261 2437 1).

A powerful, recurring element in Alfred Birney's *The Interpreter from Java*, an autobiographical family saga about a son who discovers and conveys his abusive father's memoirs on his life in the Dutch East Indies, is the father's veneration of Queen Wilhelmina. As an adolescent living in Surabaya during the Japanese occupation, he proudly pins her portrait above his bed.¹ Wilhelmina symbolises his loyalty to the Dutch and his identification as Dutch rather than Indonesian, despite having an Indo-European father and a Chinese-Indonesian mother. His devotion to the absent queen and her portrait, one could argue, shows both the importance of visual culture in enabling encounters between a female king² and her colonial subjects, as well as how these creative engagements could be used to articulate subjecthood.

At least, those are the central arguments of Susie Protschky's *Photographic subjects: Monarchy and visual culture in colonial Indonesia*. The monograph, published by Manchester University Press as part of their series 'Studies in Imperialism', examines how the social and political relations between Queen Wilhelmina, who reigned from 1898 until 1948, and her subjects were mediated through photography across the Dutch empire. In her book, Protschky convincingly shows how 'looking at a Dutch monarch through the lenses of cameras in the East Indies sheds new light on Indonesian histories, Dutch histories and their entanglement with each other' (3). She, however, does far more than just shedding new light in this wonderfully rich, well-written and well-researched book.

In seven chapters, Protschky studies how the rise of mass photography changed ways of seeing imperial power as well as enabled people to make novel political communications. She uses photography to examine the social uses of Wilhelmina's portraits at royal celebrations in the Indies (Chapter 2), to study how 'familiarisation' of the photographic culture surrounding the House of Orange in the Indies and the Netherland could transcend the private sphere into public expressions of communal monarchist loyalties (Chapter 3), and to demonstrate how a visual rhetoric of modernity, specifically of electric illuminations, sustained the image of Wilhelmina's rule as enlightened and 'ethical' (Chapter 4). Furthermore, Protschky shows how photographic gifts enabled Central Javanese royals to engage in what she terms 'snapshot diplomacy', namely to present themselves and their sovereignty on their own terms (Chapter 5). She also points out how female kings could embody regional diversity and figure as a 'mother of the people' in explicitly feminised

representations in a Dutch context, whereas in a colonial context, Wilhelmina was figured as a supreme collector of the colonial ethnic diversity (Chapter 6). Finally, Protschky considers the emotional and strategical significance of monarchy by looking at Queen's Day celebrations photographed by Dutch soldiers during the Indonesian War of Independence (Chapter 7).

By moving away from the dominant focus on representation³ and instead approaching monarchy as a dynamic political interplay between various parties, Protschky demonstrates how both monarchy and photography afforded singular articulations of social and political positions in a colonial context. *Photographic subjects* thus constitutes an important contribution to both the historiography of European monarchs and their empires as well as to the scholarship on political status and visual culture. As can be surmised from the diverse topics of the various chapters, Protschky has opted to explore her research topic of Dutch monarchy and visual culture in colonial Indonesia from a broad scope. She considers a wide range of sources and features numerous political actors. Moreover, she looks at the production, content, and consumption of photographs, and considers photography as a social and cultural practice.

This extensive approach leads to beautiful chapters such as the fifth one, in which Protschky applies her comprehensive knowledge of Javanese visual culture to a compelling analysis of photographic albums compiled by three royals from Central Java and gifted to Wilhelmina. By analysing not just the materiality of the albums, but also their textuality, how they were sent and received, Wilhelmina's engagement with them, and the content of the images (poses, composition and dress), Protschky convincingly argues that 'snapshot diplomacy' allowed Indonesian royals 'to negotiate a more nuanced recognition of their own sovereignty in dialogue with Dutch authority' (120).

The broad scope of the book also has its downsides. Partly, Protschky simply addresses so many issues in the limited space of approximately 200 pages that the central argument loses strength. A more prominent cause for the loss of comprehensibility is the fact that the book does not have a proper scholarly introduction or conclusion. The first chapter, however, does provide historical background on the House of Orange, the public image of

1 Alfred Birney, *De tolk van Java* (Amsterdam 2017) 120.

2 Following William Monter, *The Rise of Female Kings in Europe, 1300-1800* (London 2012), Protschky and others use the concept of female kingship to consider how gender impacted the political institution of hereditary monarchy, highlighting, for example, how female kings combined roles usually divided between a king regnant and queen consort.

3 Protschky states that the focus on the intentions behind royal spectacles of influential scholars like David Cannadine, rather than on the audiences' response, is 'a major lacuna in recent studies of monarchy and empire that has prompted the writing of this book' (6). By studying photography as a dynamic cultural, social, and political practice, she also moves away from a – still – dominant focus on (intended) representation in visual culture studies.

the monarchy in the Netherlands and the role of photography therein, and the involvement of Wilhelmina in colonial politics during her reign. Furthermore, it briefly discusses the historiography, whereby Protschky places her research in a dominantly British imperial tradition and is primarily Leiden oriented in her discussion of Dutch colonial scholarship. Some concepts and theories from anthropologists and historians studying colonial photography are introduced in the individual chapters, such as Deborah Poole's 'visual economy' and Elizabeth Edwards' ideas on the materiality of photographs. However, an overarching theoretical framework, methodology or introduction of key concepts is absent. This is a missed opportunity since Protschky's broad, all-encompassing approach to visual sources has proven to be rich and worthwhile.

There is one aspect of *Photographic subjects* in particular where Protschky should have developed her argument further and in dialogue with existing scholarship, namely, the consideration of photography in relation to subjecthood. Protschky rightly claims to 'have shown how positions of agency and subjecthood were articulated [...] through photography' 'by a range of people' (208). However, several key elements in this statement suffer from a lack of definition, namely 'agency', 'subjecthood' and the 'range of people'. The photographs in *Photographic subjects* mainly originate either from the regime or the colony's well-to-do, such as families of Europeans and Indo-Europeans of the professional classes, wealthy western-educated Javanese, and of Chinese merchants and businessmen. What 'subjects' are under consideration specifically is not reflected upon in *Photographic subjects*. It seems, however, that many of the political articulations discussed by Protschky as 'workable alternative[s] to juridical citizenship', would have been accessible only to the elite few in the upper echelons of Dutch Indies society (17). It raises the question whether and how the other populations in the Dutch Indies – for example the intermediaries, interpreters, guides, or companions, but also 'daughters' who go unmentioned or unnamed in figures 2.2 (31) and 3.3 (59) – who were involved in practices of photography in different ways, were excluded from certain forms of 'subjecthood' but might have been able to articulate, or were designated, others. Much has been published in recent years on photographic negotiations of citizenship, especially pertaining to colonial photography.⁴ It would be very interesting to examine in what way

4 Ariella Azoulay has published widely on sovereignty and citizenship as articulated in photography, her most recent monograph being *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism* (London 2019). Other noteworthy studies include: Gabrielle Moser, *Projecting Citizenship: Photography and Belonging in the British Empire* (University Park 2019); Tina M. Camp, *Listening to Images* (Durham 2017); Thy Phu, *Picturing*

Model Citizens: Civility in Asian American Visual Culture (Philadelphia 2011); Lorena Rizzo, 'Visual Aperture: Bureaucratic Systems of Identification, Photography and Personhood in Colonial Southern Africa', *History of Photography* 37:3 (2013) 263-282. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/03087298.2013.777548>; Jennifer Bajorek, *Unfixed: Photography and Decolonial Imagination in West Africa* (Durham 2020).

photographic negotiations of subjecthood differ from, or are similar to, those of citizenship.

To conclude, *Photographic subjects* is a refreshing, comprehensive study of the articulation of social and political relations in the East Indies during Wilhelmina's reign through visual culture. Protschky uses a novel, broad approach in which photographs serve as a topic, source and prism for looking into the Dutch empire. A more thorough introduction would have strengthened this approach, and engagement with a growing scholarship on (colonial) photography and citizenship would have added to Protschky's insights.

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