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Defining Women Subjects: Photographs in Trinidad (1860s–1960s)

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Abstract

This article proposes research methodologies for use in analysing photographs that represent and visualise women subjects of colonial Trinidad. Methodology has been developed on the basis of research undertaken into photographic material of the period in Trinidad from the 1860s to 1960s. The researcher encounters the historical photographs in the present, thus providing insight into the ways in which photographic technologies have visualised Trinidadian women and explores how these practices persist in contemporary visual culture.

Photography emerged as a mode of communication for ‘a developing capitalist *world order*’. No previous economy of visual technologies constituted a world order in the same sense, and it is from within this wider context that we may consider the complex creation, production and circulation of colonial photographs representing the woman figure. Photographic practice at the turn of the twentieth century was a contributive part of the imperial attempt to ‘unify the globe’ and equally became associated with the ‘myth’ of a universality of photographic language (Sekula 1981). Photographic practice contributed to a shift in the continuity of European ideas and thinking about the visualisation of the Other. Colonial photography determined the gendered construction of the colonial woman as subjected to heightened, fetishised, visual scrutiny.