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For anyone interested in the real stuff of lived reality and how it is recorded, represented, disseminated and finally perceived in mediated form, the appropriately titled essay collection Remaking Reality has a great deal to offer. Bringing together a dozen scholars from the interrelated fields of English and American studies, African American studies, History, and Media studies, among others, it covers a lot of ground indeed with its focus, as announced by its subtitle, on “U.S. Documentary Culture After 1945.” Readers will soon discover, however, that several contributions and arguably the book as a whole are indebted to an even earlier period in US history, namely, the Great Depression of the 1930s, and for good reasons. For, without doubt, those of us too young to remember this time of crisis and mass precarity “know” it through the many documentary archives it spawned, with the massive photo collection compiled under the auspices of the New Deal’s Farm Security Administration (1937-1942) and then the Office of War Information (1942-1944) standing out among a plethora of documentary efforts across various media including film, painting, and literature.

Perhaps unsurprisingly given their magnitude, many parallels have been drawn, even in terms of naming, between the Great Depression and the Great Recession following the banking and housing crisis that erupted in 2008, as well as the public health crisis brought on by the corona pandemic in 2020. The latter, of course, has been considerably exacerbated by its equally deleterious economic consequences, such as mass unemployment and the subsequent threat of eviction as more and more Americans are finding themselves unable to earn a livelihood and pay their rent. Nor am I speaking of all those who have lost or are still going to lose their lives as a result of the pandemic and the wayward policy responses so far unable to control it. While these traumatic experiences are harrowing however one might look at them, it is through the photographs and the stories of those who are directly affected that we learn about the real toll of such disasters, in ways that figures or maps will never fully accomplish by themselves.

When it comes to covering such crises that hit the US at its core, film and photography have clearly remained the most influential visual media throughout the twentieth century and beyond. This is largely due to their status as privileged media of recording reality despite the challenge posed by the digital media and the internet making such truth claims increasingly problematic considering their evident manipulability. Indeed,
any public event, be it a political demonstration, a Fourth of July celebration, or an election rally, seems newsworthy only if it has been recorded and disseminated not merely via the official news outlets but also, and perhaps even more importantly nowadays, people's personal communication devices. Their widespread use ensures that coverage will reach much larger audiences via the social networking channels most of us are in the habit of patronizing. In consequence, anyone equipped with such a device and connected to the internet can become a media practitioner through their own production and/or distribution of images frequently accompanied by contextualizing frames in the form of captions, comments, likes, etc. Depending on circumstances, this makes thousands of people in attendance at a given event and their online followers in addition to their larger social media communities into potential media activists participating in an exponential increase in collective attention paid to a particular segment of reality thus remade into media spectacle. It is precisely this turn toward documentary activism that the book under review here explores, by offering contributions such as Grace Elizabeth Hale's discussion of “participatory documentary,” Rebecca M. Schreiber's piece on “counterdocuments,” or Joseph B. Entin's on “working photography,” among others.

The refreshing angle that all contributions to *Remaking Reality* have in common is their focus on documentary practices. Thus, while some theoretical concepts are introduced in each piece, the overall aim throughout is to shed light on how reality has been reproduced or, to invoke the title once again, *remade* across various media broadly speaking since the Second World War. Indeed, the editors understand documentary practices as a kind of “world-making,” in reference to Elaine Scarry's conception of language as a form of making or unmaking the world (1). The resulting collection therefore has multiple, overlapping target audiences, as it offers rich resources to both students and teachers of documentary culture in the US and elsewhere, even as the book’s “particular emphasis on documentary activism and the formal innovation it engendered” (1) will no doubt also appeal to media practitioners working outside of academe.

Those readers particularly interested in concrete case studies will likewise find ample materials to explore, starting with Jonathan Kahana and Noah Tsika's piece on military talking pictures, which discusses rarely studied documents of soldiers traumatized in the Second World War and who were encouraged to work through their trauma in a therapeutic setting relying on film footage. Trauma and the painstaking efforts at its representation are also at the core of Laura Wexler’s excellent essay on atom bomb manga based on accounts by survivors of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings that ended the Second World War but were the beginning of unimaginable suffering for those affected. The bleak fate of the survivors, renamed *hibakusha*, was made even much worse by the
fact that, for decades, their traumatic experiences were suppressed within Japanese society rather than heard and accommodated. The postwar genre of atom bomb manga counters and remedies this willful neglect in important ways. Wexler draws on recent research by Hillary Chute (2016), among others, in her discussion of the special capacity of graphic narrative to express the formerly inexpressible, thereby making it sharable in mediated form.

Rather than go through all the individual contributions – even though they would certainly deserve it – I would most like to draw attention to Matthew Frye Jacobson’s afterword written in 2017. This is not one of those specimens of the genre that are the textual equivalent of icing on a cake, i.e. nice to have but really not all that essential and perhaps even a bit too much of a good thing. On the contrary, I am tempted to recommend reading the afterword first, as it suggestively chimes with the core concerns of this volume as laid out by the editors in their expert introduction. However, very fittingly considering the overall aims of this book, Jacobson writes about his own practice as a teacher of documentary studies at Yale, where the campus, in his own account, “erupted in protest over a spate of racist incidents,” which happened in the fall of 2015 (210).

Reading this piece in the summer of 2020, which has seen a nationwide occurrence of even much more expansive protests across the US, gives it particular poignancy. Jacobson’s far-sighted take on documentary work not only situates it vis-à-vis historical realities past or present; his larger claim is that it enables the individual as well as collective experience by giving it expression in the first place:

This is not just any old genre, that is; it is at once a method of teaching and learning, a technique for apprehending the world, a mode of both inquiry and expression, a register of critique, an idiom of protest, a way of mobilizing one’s very subjectivity for the struggles at hand and, in the best instance, of mobilizing the subjectivity of others as well. (212)

In its entirety, Remaking Reality resonates with both past and present realities, while it also points toward the imminent future, for instance, by outlining new forms of collective protest and activism unfolding at what feels to many like an important crossroads in US culture and politics. Furthermore, it provides readers with historical depth and perspective, while also turning our attention toward the recent technological developments enabling new forms of media activism within and across diverse communities. Most importantly perhaps, the book reminds us that there can be no change without the proper practices to effect it, documentary and otherwise.