

PHOTO-ESSAY

Reprints, Review, and Refusing Ventriloquism of the 'Folk': Providing Tellability to the Storied through a Family's Photographs

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ABSTRACT

We store boxes and albums of family photographs including those handed down from generations, whether good or bad. This paper considers the narrative of the plethora of photographs made by my family over the years. I spent three years printing enlargements of my family's photographic negatives from the 1930s through the 1960s. Multiple generations of my family wrote stories on the printed photographs. Of significance is how my family's writing synthesised the importance of the photographed moment as well as hinting to connections among all of the images and stories. I argue that without the photo elicitation to create a path for tellability by the 'folk' many family storytelling would be ventriloquism (the telling of stories) that would not provide the respect for generations to share through combining image and text to their own story. The family tradition of sharing stories and looking at photographs together is a common process since the nineteenth century.

In my early years I once 'wasted' an entire roll of film taking photographs of cars and squirrels. I was seven and visiting my grandmother in New Orleans, Louisiana. My thought at that time was that the world would change, and it might be nice to know what cars looked like during the early 1980s. I did not recognise it at the time, but this was the genesis of my fascination with photographs, snapshots, and the story behind them.

I also share my experience as an undergraduate at university. I was excited about learning with my focus on finishing projects and earning grades, not necessarily using the following narrative project as research. Whilst working on this project I discovered broad connections among family, word, image and the greater community. The following analysis of building the narrative argues that the text added by my family to the visual images is significant because their voice drives the connections through stories.

My family, the 'folk' of my project, decided what to share, what was significant, and what to silence. It is only in examining this inquiry decades later through the lenses of time and analysis of theory that I understand the process continues to follow Jasmine Ulmer's idea of 'Slow Ontology' where awareness and observation 'promotes alternative rhythms of inquiry through writing' (Ulmer 2017: 201).

Background

I chose photography as an elective during my sophomore year where I learned to use a bottle opener to pry open spools of film in the dark, muscle memory to blindly re-spool onto developing reels, and broom handles to mix 'chemistry'. I spent hours in the red-lit darkroom watching silver pieces clump on paper. I fell in love with the process of developing and printing — mirroring my enchantment with the art of taking and viewing the photograph. I took more semesters of photography as an undergraduate, not just because I remained mesmerised by the process, but because I discovered a cigar box that helped me unlock stories and connections among three generations of my mother's family.

I found the cigar box in a tall dresser of my grandparents' home during a weekend visit. There were several other cigar boxes in back corners of dresser drawers, but this box did not gape open with thick piles of scallop-edged, high-contrast snapshots from my grandmother's and mother's childhoods. It instead was shut tight with a purple metallic string stretched twice around the box's middle, its hinge not sprung from years of strain because instead of prints, it held negatives; many of them looked clouded and obscure. They were stacked tightly in small piles inside waxy glassine envelopes.

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Unlike the 35-millimeter negatives I saw almost daily in class and lab, wound around metal spools and hung to dry after developing, these negatives were large, some the size of the index cards. Others were square, neatly centering shadows of dresses and edges of houses. I could not tell much from the negatives other than that they were old, and I could only wonder how they would look as prints.

My grandmother agreed to let me take the cigar box of negatives after I explained, 'You will get all of the negatives back — just as they are. I know what I am doing. I am taking photography'. I knew I was lying to her. I had no clue what I was doing.

Methods attempting to add truth to my promise

Following my professor's instructions, I transferred the two hundred or so negatives to clear plastic sleeves and stored them in a binder. The cigar box sat on the corner of my desk, the purple string wound in a tight circle and stored with the empty glassine envelopes inside the box. That next morning I went to the photography lab to print contact sheets of the gathered sheets of negatives.

The first time I walked outside of the darkroom to look at one of my contact sheets in the light, I just stared down at those small pictures. I saw my mom as a baby and my grandfather and grandmother. I saw a lot of people I did not know, but I recognised well-composed images consisting of the geometric shapes of grouped family, lines of earth adjacent to the lines of a building and body, and a tight frame of a face with a blurred background of trees. I was in love with the compositions, intrigued by the characters, and knew that these images told a story — one that I didn't quite understand. I enlarged particularly captivating negatives, ones that were interesting from both an artistic and cultural standpoint (Zuromskis 2008). After printing a series of twenty pictures, I took another trip to my grandparents' home.

This time I did not go searching for pictures but brought them with me. I explained that we would look at the photographs they had made decades earlier and I printed days before, talk about the photographs, and write on them. I remember the questioning looks I received from my family, 'Write on photographs? The fronts of them?' Honestly, I felt those same questions and doubts about my decision to incorporate my family's voices through their own words, but I only suggested we might do a sample photograph together.

We briefly discussed the image, who was in it, who had made the photograph, where it was made, and wondered about why it might have been made. I then wrote what I knew about the photograph right below it with a thin Sharpie, explained what I had written and why, and then asked my mother, grandmother, and grandfather to add some words of their own below what I had written (see figure 1).

It was when I read my grandfather's writing on the picture that I realised there was more to these pictures than well-centered images or compelling compositions. I knew very little of what my grandfather had just explained so succinctly in his text, using an openness I did not recognise. 'This is one of my best friends', he wrote. 'We went everywhere together. We are still best of friends. We have never lived more than one mile apart. He is two years older'. It was so different from the information offered by my grandmother, mother, and myself — all of us so enthralled with the process of taking the photograph and looking at it — that we had forgotten the process of looking into it.

My grandfather had a gift for looking into the photograph to see what it meant, seeing not just the people or the dates or the places, but allowing these facts to become catalysts for deeper memory and understanding. Throughout my childhood, my family had often spent hours looking at and talking about our pictures, but we had never written the stories down. My grandfather took these hours of stories about pictures and people in them and put them on paper. He showed what I had not imagined could come across — the folk event of viewing photographs. My grandfather's writing gave the depth of oral history to a photograph already rich with the beauty of a thoughtfully created image.

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I passed each photograph around the living room. Starting with my mother, everyone said whatever they wanted to about the image — the background, the people, the dogs (that was a favourite topic) — and any story the pictures brought to mind. The interviews were informal, though I did record them. By the middle of the afternoon I had almost two hours of audio of my family's laughter and stories — stories about things my mother did as a child, memories about cousins and aunts and great-grandparents, and the early years of my grandparents' marriage. For each picture we would listen again to what our family had said and I would transcribe, word for word, what each family member decided was 'worth writing' on the picture. Then my mom, grandmother, or grandfather would copy it onto the final print.

Eventually, I asked my grandfather to write whatever he wanted on his own. I was amazed each time he would hold up another finished picture. His words were concise and sincere. He used no punctuation, which gave his sentences an oddly extravagant simplicity. 'This is Johnny Walker my nephew he served in Vietnam returned home got a job at a trailer manufactory was killed in less than 2 weeks' (see figure 2). Because of the lack of punctuation, the reader has to study his words more carefully to ascertain their meaning and while studying his words, one feels a closer connection to the words and the photograph.

My grandmother would tire after writing her first couple of sentences and, like she did with the camera, tended to shy away from the tape recorder. But she too managed to find her voice, discovering humour in the pictures of herself (see figure 3), struggling to remember a certain dog's name, and arguing with her daughter Deborah about what Christmas that picture was taken or who took it.

My mother's response to this possibly daunting and exhausting task was enthusiasm and a slight competitiveness. She focused on finding just the right word to describe a friend or relative, making sure she created the scene with a lengthy description of a particular object or the place the photograph was made. The end result was a well-written and slightly detached piece of text, although she consistently included the reader in her comments, as in, 'You know who this is?' (see figure 4). What I liked best about my mother's writing is that it displayed her 'roots' so well. Her perfect penmanship and structured style contrasted with her parents' writing, but some of her phrasing hinted at more colloquial speech. 'Here I am all cleaned up for Christmas' (see figure 5).

Over a three year process, I printed sixty additional enlargements from these negatives. After that first visit, I no longer crafted writings for my mother and grandmother using the transcripts of their recorded memories, but instead I would hold up an image, ask who wanted to write on that photograph, and hand it over. I wanted their voices to be solely their own.

Identifying results

Several years later I returned to the photographs and my interviews. I wondered what layers of meaning and memory my family's words had added to the images. The photographs were a distinctive set of objects that told stories through the images themselves and the texts added another original phenomenon to the images. Was there a larger story encasing the individual tales? The use of family photographs to discover cultural memories (Kuhn 2007) created connections that reached beyond research and questions. I had not yet understood the self-documentation of my family's writing as providing a way for individual reflexive thought.

The images as catalysts for conversations provided me considerable insight into my family's perception of how their lives had changed since arriving in the southern state of Mississippi as poor, rural farmers in the 1930s. The words my family had written on the photographs layered page upon page in creating a living family history I had not known previously.

The lives of my great-grandparents, grandparents, and mother had been consistently recorded through their lens of photography for almost three decades. The decision of what to make a photograph of was up to the photographers, mainly the three generations of Bruce women. They chose what to record of their lives while they and their families gradually attained three significant goals: stability with ties to the land, middle class status, and private business ownership.

Developing a conclusion

Over the years I found more negatives, most of them belonging to my great-grandmother and made during the mid to late 1930s and throughout the 1940s. I compared these to the images made primarily during the 1950s and 1960s. I began to notice photographic illustrations of those collective goals prioritised by my family as well as documentation of my mother's migration from the rural south to an urban centre. In the photographs my great-grandmother made of her work, land, and family, I saw the process of attaining residency within the community slowly evolve — moving from images of bright laundry hanging on tree branches and sides of dog-trot rental houses to portraits of her daughters holding flowers and her sons with their arms wrapped protectively around two dogs. When my grandmother and mother began making photographs, they chose subjects that continued to illustrate the place the family held within the community — documenting the event of building a home on owned-land and taking photographs of friends playing cards at their dining room table, and, later, expanding the documentation to school, shopping, and church. Taking the camera outside of their home illustrated their expanding definition of 'home' as their roots in the community deepened and grew. The comfort in the community mirrored the process made of moving out of poverty into middle class status within a single generation.

The last three generations of photographers in my family took photographs with the eyes of artists and the deliberation of documentarians to record the process of their family's gradual attainment of rootedness (see figure 6) and middle-class status. The progression of photographs — defining a life moving from poverty to middle-class leisure — narrated a story, one that revealed major changes over a period of several decades in the social standing and self-image of a particular family. The pictures gave graphic evidence of external changes in the family. They indicated an adjustment in living conditions, material possessions (see figure 7), and means of earning a living. They also implied inward changes in the family — an adjustment in apparent values, a probable re-positioning in the surrounding community, and a shift in self-perception in relation to others.

Reflection

I packed away the contact sheets and negatives twenty years ago. My grandmother died in 2009 and my grandfather in 2019. Now I filter my family's generations of stories and tell the tales to my children through my lenses of liberal consciousness, urban life, and modern aesthetic. The only family storytelling *not* told through this concept of ventriloquism (Ritchie 1993) are the ones recorded in my grandparents' handwriting located below my printed photographs.

The reflexive writing on the front of the reprinted image by the individuals in the snapshot provides a deeply participatory element to the documentation of lived lives. The way the examining 'folk' choose the path of their tellability, (Labov and Waletzky 1967) is by verbally narrating their memories. The ritual of both examining photographs and telling stories together places individuals and their physical items in relationship with one another in order to provide the 'social context in which the narrative occurs' (Labov and Waletzky 1967: 13). The questions of who, what, and why embed themselves organically into photographs. With my family and their responses, each person decided what parts of those answers they were willing to share. This is in direct conflict with most ethnographic studies and documentary photography where the researcher or artist makes the choice as to what is meaningful or most enticing to share with an audience of, most likely, the scholar's peers.

The overlapping memories of image and story create the larger 'family memory' (Livingston and Dyer 2010: 26) that exists because of the true voices written below the images provided by my family. While gazing into an old photograph, the possible stories to the questions conjured by the image can be intoxicating for a viewer. However, the visual mode without the voice of those within the image only provides a way to speculate a story (Hirsch 1997). The multi-faceted process of examination, speaking, and writing provides a way to enact 'family storying' (Langellier and Peterson, 2004). The collective family creates memory and story while in these attempts to find universal memory within the stories, I find that the 'rhimositic story' model proposed by Sermijn, et al. (2008) provides an accurate description of the process involved in telling stories

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within a family group. Individuals share their thoughts, life histories, and connections to others through a 'rhimositic story' in which there are multiple points of entrance into one's story. These roots and branches of stories create pieces of a larger narrative. There is no expectation for a beginning, middle, and end in a 'rhimositic story' and self-reflection moves in and out of time periods of an individual's life where the stories 'form an ongoing process of co-construction and co-reconstruction' (Sermijn, Devlieger, and Loots 2008: 644). This is self-storying.

The freedom of expression emerges from the combination of images and words created by my family years ago. Using this art and story, I discover more than who the subjects were on the day the facts of their lives were preserved on film. The reflections develop my family's past and their dreams, those actuated (see figure 8) as well as those deferred (Hughes 1951). Side-by-side, writing and photographs present an unbroken whole of three generations of storytellers practicing autonomy in sharing stories using their own voices.

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Biography

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Sally Busby is a doctoral student in Literacy, Culture, and Language Education at Indiana University Bloomington. Her previous studies were in fieldwork and anthropology focusing on the Southern region of American Studies. Her current interests include 'ownvoices in literature and research' and the 'trajectories and results of life-long learning'.



This is pawpaw and his friend in front of some sign. Man
was with them that day.
This was probably made in 1952.
This is Saith May and Roy Bruce.
Roy is my husband.

THIS IS ONE OF MY BEST FRIENDS
WE WENT EVERYWHERE TOGETHER
WE ARE STILL BEST OF FRIENDS
WE HAVE NEVER LIVED MORE THAN
ONE MILE APART HE IS TWO YEARS OLDER.

Figure 1



THIS IS JOHNNY AND EUGENE THEY
ARE GETTING SET FOR A RACE AROUND
THE HOUSE UNFORTUNATLY JOHNNY
GOT KILLED WORKING AT A HOUSE
TRAILER MANUFACTORY AT AGE 21
THIS IS OUR 1939 CHEVY IN THE BACKGROUND

Figure 2



This is my pinup picture. I was about 19 Deborah my daughter would play in the grass while Wilma and I would go out & take pictures of each other in front of that old shed behind our house. We wasn't very good at what we were trying to do.

Figure 3



You know who this is? Adam Simpson's Aunt Annice. I guess those little boys in the car are Johnnie Ann's. This is in front of Mrs. Cordie Childers' grocery store. I think Mrs. Annice and Mr. John still lived in Memphis when this picture was made. The store is still standing, but it's closed now.

Figure 4



Figure 5



IONE-DEBORAH AND ROY ABOUT 1953 I DON'T
REMEMBER BUT IT LOOKS LIKE WE WERE
READY TO GO TO CHURCH IONE AND ME
WEIGHED ABOUT 125 LBS EACH BOY HAVE
THINGS CHANGED

Figure 6



SETH AND WILMA AND I ONE AND ME WENT SHOPPING
ON MAIN ST IN MEMPHIS WE WERE TO MEET
AT COURT SQUARE WHILE THEY WERE SHOPPING
I BOUGHT THIS 55 OLDS WE WAITED IN THE
CAR THEY COULDN'T FIND US THEY WERE
LOOKING FOR THE OLD CAR WE HAD TO FIND
THEM THEY WERE UPSET

Figure 7



THIS IS ROY BRUBE MY 1ST NEW TRUCK
1950 I BOUGHT AND SOLD LUMBER
FOR THE NEXT 10 YEARS BEFORE
GOING INTO THE AUTO PARTS BUSINESS
WHILE MY TRUCK WAS BEING UNLOADED
A SIGN PAINTER PAINTED MY NAME
ON EACH SIDE FOR 1 DOLLARS

Figure 8