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Visual Sociology in a Discipline of Words: Racial Literacy, Visual Literacy and Qualitative Research Methods

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Abstract

This article analyzes the limitations of qualitative research methods that over-privilege textual analysis in North American sociology graduate programs. I argue that visual literacy, as a methodological tool, is neglected and marginalized in the graduate curriculum. Training in visual culture including the use of photography, film and video, can contribute to theoretically grounded empirical research on race and racism. A form of academic apartheid continues to restrict the types of qualitative research methods that are authorized and regularly taught in graduate programs in sociology.

Keywords

critical race theory, ethnography, photography, qualitative research methods, racism and anti-racism, United States, visual sociology

In an essay titled ‘My Visual Diary’, Elizabeth Chaplin argues that ‘the camera can be used as a tool to think with, over a range of theoretical positions’ (2004: 47). Describing her desire to explore Erving Goffman’s contention that photographs are unable to record routine, she began keeping a visual diary on February 7, 1988.

I soon found photographs lead to the heart of social science theory. For while they do record – indeed they discover things our minds have failed to consciously register as we go about our lives – they never record neutrally. A photograph is ‘taken’ but at the same time, ‘made’. ...

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And how that photograph is viewed is not a simple matter either. A photograph is almost never viewed purely 'as a photograph': we tend to focus on the content of the image, and 'what it means' seems to vary according to the context in which it is viewed. Thus, when social scientists take/make photographs on a regular basis, they become unavoidably implicated in a theoretical maelstrom. (Chaplin, 2004: 36)

What do we learn from Chaplin's analysis of her visual diary? Keeping a diary enhanced her critical analysis skills. Below she describes the transformation in her vision.

[T]eaches you to look critically – to consider the wider significance of what you are seeing ... It also helps you to ... think abstractly in visual terms (as many artists do). It enables you to look back, take stock and reflect on how your life and interests have changed over a given period of time. It gives you the experience – on a regular basis – of marveling at, deploring, judging what is in front of your eyes (developing an aesthetic sensibility. In other words, keeping a daily photographic diary stop you from taking what you see for granted. And that, in general terms, is just what social scientists aim to do). (Chaplin, 2004: 43)

In a discipline of words, sociologists on both sides of the Atlantic must come to terms with the significance of visual literacy and its relationship to theory. We should develop courses, degree programs and funding streams that reward and encourage the development of visual sociology. If we are to generate *racial literacy*, that is a nuanced analysis of everyday racism and anti-racism, then we need to cultivate visual literacy.

The Future of Visual Literacy

What is visual literacy? Human beings interact with the world and interpret it primarily through their eyes. We use our sight to classify individuals into age, gender, racial and ethnic categories. We live in the era of Facebook, Google, Twitter, Instagram and other social media, which have radically changed how we communicate, acquire, conceptualize and store information. Smartphones, with built-in cameras, have enabled millennials (individuals born after 1982) to develop forms of visual literacy. The visual is primary, and yet few sociologists who study race are required to enroll in visual studies courses or become literate in the complexities of visual culture. They are not trained in the use of film, video or photography.

An analysis of visual culture and the teaching of visual literacy – particularly film, photography and social media – remain marginalized in qualitative research methods courses in US Sociology Departments. In contrast to the United Kingdom, where one can enroll in courses at top-ranked departments like Goldsmiths College at the University of London, or University of Westminster, where an MA in Visual Culture is offered, North Americans teaching outside of film and media studies devote little attention to the theoretical and methodological significance of an analysis of visual culture, visual production, the consumption of visual images, and meaning-making.

Of course, there are graduate students enrolled in PhD programs in US Sociology Departments who employ film, photography and other visual media in their dissertation research. However, the acceptance and integration of this method is uneven, and a culture of academic apartheid still positions 'visual' methods as less scientific, that is, less rigorous when compared to statistical methods. I imagine a future in which students who

major in Sociology in the United States and the United Kingdom will be required to enroll in courses on visual culture and will acquire visual literacy as a normative part of their undergraduate and graduate training. They will be trained in at least one visual medium including as part of their training in critical race studies and qualitative research methods. The academic apartheid that currently divides the areas of visual studies and critical racial studies will be history.

As a North American, feminist ethnographer and critical race theorist, who has spent much of my career conducting research on race, racism, and antiracism in the UK, I have found a home among British sociologists. The research of British scholars such as Elizabeth Chaplin, Les Back, Claire Alexander, John Solomos, Miri Song, among others has inspired my research on interracial intimacy and racial inequality. As I reflect upon my career during the past two decades, two themes and problematics emerge as central to my theoretical and empirical research on racial logics: training in field research methods and the absence of visual literacy.

Visual literacy has been critical to my work as a critical race theorist. I developed the concept of *racial literacy* ‘to theorize a form of intellectual and antiracist labor that has not been analyzed in earlier research on interracial families’ (Twine, 2010: 8). I define racial literacy as a set of practices. A nuanced analysis of the visual culture in the homes of British multiracial families, informed my development of the concept of *racial literacy* (Twine, 2003, 2004, 2006, 2010; Twine and Steinbugler, 2006).

In my research, I found that *visual literacy was central to their practice of racial literacy* among the British interracial families who practiced anti-racism. One-fourth of the White parents had developed a nuanced understanding of the symbolic value of whiteness in British visual culture. They had learned to decode local and national geographies of race. In other words, White parents raising children of African-Caribbean heritage, recognized that their children had to negotiate an often anti-Black racist visual culture in which people of African descent were either invisible or hypervisible – when symbolically representing an inferior and denigrated culture. Parents worked hard to collect objects, books, art, furniture and toys that constituted an anti-racist *visual culture* in their home. Families designed the interiors of their homes as a symbolic resource to counter the racist depictions of Blacks in public space

Visual Sociology as a Research Method

I described visual sociology as a two-headed beast; separating the empirical from the symbolic. ‘My argument included the simple suggestion that sociologists record the visual aspects of reality as part of relatively conventional research activities ... this simple idea still seems revolutionary in sociology’ (Harper, 1998: 24). Visual sociology, and by extension visual literacy is not central to the curriculum in field research methods, qualitative research methods or in sociology of race courses in Sociology Departments in the United States. A methodological wall divides sociologists in the United States along the lines of qualitative versus quantitative methods. In my journey as a researcher during the past decades, I have worked hard to communicate across these walls or methodological divides, with varying levels of success.

Sociologists based in the US academy are expected to distribute one’s ‘data’ and research in conventional formats such as peer-reviewed journal articles or books. The

sociological analysis of visual materials is typically often perceived as less than 'scientific', even among qualitative researchers (Becker, 1974, 1995). The top-ranked Sociology Departments in the US are neither required to receive training in visual culture, and thus do not acquire visual literacy, and they are also rarely allowed to submit a film, video or photographic study to fulfill partial requirements for a doctoral degree. Thus, we have a pedagogical and reward structure that operates against visual sociology.

In the late 1990s, I launched a research project that focused upon the experiences of White birth parents of children of African and/or Caribbean ancestry and their family members living in the United Kingdom. My research was animated by the question: 'How do White members of transracial families translate, transmit and transform the meanings of race, racism and their own whiteness in postcolonial Britain?' I wanted to understand how birth mothers who identified and classified as 'White' negotiated the race and racism that their children may encounter.

I spent more than a decade conducting research in Leicester and London on this topic. I learned a number of important lessons. First, as I studied the parental practices of White and Irish mothers of children fathered by Black men, I identified a number of practices that were designed to counter forms of everyday racism that their children experienced. I learned from White birth mothers that visual culture was central in their negotiation of racism (Twine, 2004, 2006, 2010). I developed the concept of racial literacy 'to theorize a form of intellectual and antiracist labor that has not been analyzed in earlier research on interracial families' (p. 8). One of the central dimensions of racial literacy involved *visual culture*. Parents used the interior design of their homes as a resource to counter the racist depictions of Blacks in public spaces. Of the families who participated in my research, one-fourth carefully selected Black-produced art, material objects, music, toys and symbols that celebrated Blackness and that they argued would facilitate a positive identification with the Black diasporic community.

Conducting a longitudinal ethnography required me to spend many hours with families in their homes and communities. Early in my research I began taking photographs of the participants. This trained me to pay careful attention to their material environment – including the visual images on their walls, their photo albums, books, furnishings and toys. I learned to look critically and to see what I would have taken for granted. I became increasingly aware of the significance of *visual literacy*, which I first described in an article in which I analyzed a British family photograph album (Twine, 2006).

After conducting five years of research in Leicester and London, I decided that I could benefit from the assistance of a professional photographer. With the help of an Irish colleague, who had earned her degree at the University of Chicago, I found Michael Smyth, an Irish photographer who had earned a degree in photography and digital media in England. He agreed to collaborate with me and we began a six-year research partnership. He traveled to England and accompanied me on visits to the homes of British multiracial families with whom I had been working. After securing the permission of a subset of families, I took him to the sites that these families had identified as significant in their daily lives. I introduced him to them and we scheduled several photo shoots. These photo shoots served three purposes. First, they revealed the

racial and ethnic spectrum on which family members might be socially classified. Second, they provided me with a unique form of data, which in combination with photo-elicitation interviews, assisted me in analyzing the meanings that the family members attached to the visual culture in their home. Third, they were a form of material culture that I could share with the families. I provided all of the family members with black and white prints of the portraits taken of their family members. They were given copies of the same photos that were published in my book.

In this case, the process of photographing families, provided not only a form of 'data' or 'realism' but also taught me how to read and 'interpret' their strategic use of visual culture. I also learned the conflicts, contradictions and negotiations that occurred in families as they struggled to 'code' the sometimes racially ambiguous bodies of their children. The inclusion of photographs also forces the reader to confront their racial logics and to analyze their assumptions economically communicating the gap between multiple readings of a 'body' and that individual's self-identification.

In the Fall of 2008, I submitted my book manuscript *A White Side of Black Britain* to Duke University Press for a final review. I was astonished when one of the reviewers suggested that I 'remove' the photographs and the chapter that discussed Visual Ethnography. According to this reviewer, my use of and inclusion of photographs was 'emotionally manipulative' of the reader and unnecessary. I chose not to follow the suggestion of this reviewer and to retain the photographs, which I considered a unique form of data. Reflecting back upon this experience, I recognize that in the mind of this reader, photographs were neither 'data' nor theoretically significant. Instead, they were 'read' as intrusion into the 'text'. The question that continues to haunt me as I develop graduate courses in research methods is 'Why is training in visual medium not required or rewarded in Sociology programs?'

Learning Not to See: The Invisibility of Visual Culture in Research Methods

Visual sociology remains an orphan in graduate curriculum in the United States. A cursory review of the required Sociology courses at the graduate level reveals that courses in visual sociology, photography, film and video are non-existent or marginal to degree requirements in the United States. There are virtually no ranked departments that require candidates for a doctorate to receive formal training in visual culture or the visual arts. I teach on a university campus with a distinguished Film and Media Studies Department that is ranked among the top four in the United States. The Sociology Department is located in the same building as the Film & Media Studies Department, so it would be relatively easy to conceptualize and coordinate a menu of one or two courses for those sociology students interested in developing their visual literacy as another research method in their arsenal.

Although a number of distinguished North American sociologists, including Howard Becker and Douglas Harper, have contributed to debates in this growing field of visual sociology, a regional and disciplinary imbalance remains. In contrast to the United Kingdom, where Goldsmiths College at University of London and the University of Westminster offer graduate training in visual literacy and visual sociology, it is difficult

to identify a top ranked Sociology Department in the United States that even offers courses under the title visual sociology or that include visual literacy in their required research methods curriculum.

In the 1990s, I enrolled in a qualitative research methods course in the Sociology Department at the University of California at Berkeley. During that time, *visual literacy* – that is, training in the history, theoretical debates and use of film, photograph, video and other forms of visual culture, were not a part of the curriculum in either the Anthropology or Sociology Department. As a graduate student interested in racial and ethnic boundaries, social inequality and the body, I developed a research project that prevented me from neglecting the visual. I was interested in how students of multiracial heritage, who were often racially and ethnically ambiguous in appearance, adapted to the political climate at Berkeley, a culture in which students were expected to declare and affiliate with one primary racial or ethnic group.

I initially interviewed 25 undergraduate students of multiracial heritage (all had one US Black parent). I submitted a research paper based upon this in a qualitative research methods course taught by the sociologist Kristin Luker. I struggled to describe the bodies of students who self-identified as multiracial. I was dissatisfied with the paper because my description did not enable the reader to adequately ‘visualize’ the problem – that is, the difference between how their bodies might be (were) ‘read’ or ‘coded’ by people unaware of their parentage and their self-identification. In other words, there was a visual literacy gap. With a camera borrowed from the media department, I decided to re-interview a subset of the students.

After shooting a series of short video-recordings, which became the basis of the documentary film *Just Black?*, I analyzed and compared the audio-taped and video-taped recordings. I discovered that the information necessary to understand the student’s identity dilemmas was missing from audio recordings (see Twine et al., 1992). I was astonished at how powerful the video-recordings were, because they provided a different and unique form of data. For example, being able to visualize a woman of African ancestry, with an Anglo-American mother, who had naturally blonde and straight hair but whose facial features also reflected her father’s African ancestry, enabled the viewer to better understand her struggles to negotiate the ethnic boundaries between the Black and non-Black community. This project resulted in a collaboration with two other graduate students that produced the documentary *Just Black? Multiracial Identity*, which premiered at an Ethnographic Video Festival in 1992 and is still regularly taught in the undergraduate Sociology curriculum at UC-Berkeley.

As an ethnographer and critical race theorist, I have devoted my research career to a nuanced analysis of racism and anti-racism, and the mundane ways that racial, gender and class inequality structure the intimate lives of multiracial families. Yet, much of my ethnographic writing cannot adequately capture the nuances of social exclusion, racial discrimination and intersecting forms of inequality because words are not adequate in a world where humans organize ‘data’ visually. Our realities are constructed and interpreted primarily through our eyes.

In the future, when North American critical race scholars and social justice scholars reflect upon the contributions of British sociology to the transnational literature in social inequality, they will learn many lessons from British sociologists who have included an

analysis of visual and spatial culture in their research. It is my hope that North American sociology departments will move beyond the orthodoxies that now organize graduate training and develop courses in visual culture and literacy similar to those taught at Goldsmiths College at the University of London. We must innovate and renovate post-graduate programs and bring visual literacy into the curriculum.

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