

Caught in the Act: Seeing Photography as a Window to Reality

Pellom McDaniels III, Emory University

Photographer Alan Chin has a gift for catching the moment. His black and white photographs of the aftermath of hurricane Katrina get to the point of what it means to live in a racist, classist and sexist society. Chin's photographs have been reproduced in various popular magazines and newspapers throughout the world, as well as being featured on a number of popular websites where the topic of discussion has centered on the human loss and devastation of the gulf region of the United States. One of the many websites that features Chin's work is BAGnewsNotes. Of the more than twenty-five photos represented on the website, the most compelling image is one taken of Ms. Milvertha Hendricks – an 84 year-old African American woman displaced by the destruction of Katrina.

Recognizably, the image is both simple and complex: an elderly black woman sitting outdoors on a folding chair, with a blanket – designed to look like an American flag – draped upon her shoulders, a defining expression of emptiness is fixed upon her face as she looks down past her weathered and weary hands to a location out of the sight of the viewer. Indeed, a place we are not privileged to see based on the photographer's literal framing of his subject, as well as our overall inability to fully understand what Ms. Hendricks could or could not be, in fact gazing at: something real and tangible; or something remembered and lost. Clearly, within the frame, what is most compelling is the presence of the American flag-like blanket that when read metaphorically comes to symbolize the critical moment that black women, such as Ms. Hendricks will forever be linked with.

But how does one read a photograph, or for that matter why is it important? Is there a difference in seeing a person of color represented in a still photo, compared to someone who is white? What are the obvious problems associated with looking and seeing? Can one acquire the right set of eyes? And, does a photograph possess the potential to tell the truth?

“Photography” according to Roland Barthes, “cannot signify...except by assuming a mask”¹, a mask that is understood to possess the potential to reproduce a “literal representation” of an individual, while reflecting a set of values and mores, as well as corresponding state(s) of emotion. That the photographer assumes the task of capturing moments of life and death, love and hate, joy and despair as history unfolds, is an understatement.

Indeed, through images such as Chin's of Hendricks, the face of those “caught in the eye of the storm” were those most marginalized in American society: blacks, women, children and the poor, as well as their various intersections. The photograph of Hendricks is transgressive because it calls our attention to the failure of the American government to act on behalf of its most vulnerable citizens: the elderly in general and elderly black women in particular. Yet, images such as these also capture the powerlessness of those not able to flee the region and the consequences that vulnerability

¹ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, (1981), p. 34.

produced, creating the overall effect of race-ing and gendering hurricane Katrina as black and female.

Unmistakably, Chin's photograph of Hendricks is similar to Gordon Parks' *American Gothic* (1942), a photo essay concerned with the life and experiences of Ella Watson, a charwoman in Washington, D.C. during the 1940's. When Parks presented the photograph of Ella Watson to his employer at the Farm Security Administration, Roy Emerson Stryker replied "that picture could get us fired."² Clearly, Stryker's reading and reaction to Parks' image of Watson standing in front of an American flag hanging from the ceiling to the floor, stiffly holding a large broom in one hand and a mop in the other, revealed to be a potential infraction of certain consequences that neither could afford to tempt. Like Chin, Parks' image served to reveal the plight of a majority of black women in America: the effects of second-class citizenship, the reality of poverty, and the lack of a true opportunity to achieve the American Dream.

Both photographs are prodigious, as they deliberately juxtapose the American flag along side a specific symbol of human suffering, becoming what French theorist Pierre Nora describes as *lieux de memoir* or sites of memory: a location where the historical, social, cultural and political significance become embedded.³ Nevertheless, these sites of memory, these photographs have to be read (properly) and understood within a framework that allows one to see the significance of their social, political and cultural meanings.

In fact, in viewing both Parks' and Chin's photographs, each bring to the fore a reality that can only be read by those who understand the language of the body represented in photographs. In other words, "every photograph is contingent" and in need of a proper reading within an intersection of contexts. Within a race conscious and overtly racist society, the revelation of blackness as the marker of race produces a temporary halt: one that proceeds to agitate our emotional state of awareness; where blackness is in direct opposition to whiteness, and meanings associated with the American flag are conversely represented and realized.

For those memorialized in tone, light and shadow, photography represents a kind of excising from history: a cutting out or a sampling of time out of place. Both Parks and Chin in their work account for the past, present and future, revealing at once a common narrative of human existence masked by the social categories of race, class and gender. Yet, even images held frozen in time such as that of Ella Watson and Milvertha Hendricks, charged with clearly depicting a significant degree of displeasure and injustice, maintain and advance a set of limitations exclusively connected to the images in question, especially when they are lifted from their context and transmitted without pretext. But this too serves a purpose.

In *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (1992), Toni Morrison argues that institutionalized racism and its ability to weave itself into everything has become less than enigmatic. Morrison writes that:

Race has become metaphorical – a way of referring to and disguising forces, events, classes, and expressions of social decay and economic division

² Gordon Parks, *Half Past Autumn: A Retrospective* (1997), p. 32

³Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Mémoire*," (1994) p. 284.

more threatening to the body politic than biological “race” ever was. Expensively kept, economically unsound, a spurious and useless political asset in election campaigns, racism is as healthy today as it was during the Enlightenment. It seems that it has a utility far beyond economy, beyond the sequestering of classes from one another, and has assumed a metaphorical life so completely embedded in daily discourse that it is perhaps more necessary and more on display than ever before.⁴

Morrison’s recognition of how race has become embedded in American life to the extent that the very tools of white supremacy have become a part of *each* of our daily lives is a concrete dose of reality. Black people, as subjects of the photographer’s gaze, have been described as members of a marginalized group. Indeed, a group whose supposed existence within the periphery and whose presence is nonetheless essential to the maintenance of the dominant group’s “imagined” notion of itself has been integral in shaping the identity of the dominant society and how it functions. In other words, for whites to believe themselves to be superior they have to believe, invest in and advance the notion of black inferiority. Stories, narratives, jokes and metaphors are powerful vehicles for the dissemination of racist, classist and sexist rhetoric. And so is art and art production.

In a practical sense, art can be described as the use of concrete and tangible materials by an artist to express a set of concerns, desires and/or positions within a particularly real or imagined world context. In other words, art is a malleable vehicle for self-expression and the development of social signifiers for the advancement of particular ideas: cultural, political, and aesthetic. In the theoretical sense, art takes on a number of meanings, all of which are subjective based on notions of time, place, space, class, race, gender and politics. However, within this particular structure of understanding the nature of art, photography like painting maintains no assumed narrative.

In order to be read completely, allowing for an appreciation of the initial intent of the work, a back-story is needed to frame the context from which the work was created. The images in and of themselves hold no presumptions and are accommodating enough to allow for individual interpretations. Needless to say, photographs gain meaning and substance when viewed and critiqued from the personal standpoint of the spectator, who, undoubtedly brings with them his or her own self-contained myths, histories and ideas about the subject in focus. An image, which, of course, cannot challenge assumed notions about its origins, relates the humanity of its primary subject or account for the overall value of the moment as meaningful. Recognizably, as it relates to black people and the stereotypes that have persisted over time, and have been embedded in American culture, there is an assumed knowledge about the collective based on western notions of blackness.

In *Souls of Black Folk* (1903), the preeminent scholar of African American life and culture, W.E.B DuBois testifies to the plight of blacks in America under the banner of Jim Crow segregation: an American style of democracy responsible for maintaining within its’ darker citizens a sense of double-consciousness. DuBois explains that:

⁴ Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (1993), p. 63.

After the Egyptian and Indian, the Greek and Roman, the Teuton and Mongolian, the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil and gifted with second-sight in this American world, a world that yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness,-an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.⁵

Indeed, Du Bois' description and accounting of daily black life is unsettling, in that it recognizes the tensions pulling and tearing on the black body: a body under siege. However, this sense of double-consciousness, the "peculiar sensation...of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others" is only reserved for those who have come to realize their identity as black within an America that they too can claim as theirs.

Both Chin's and Parks' photographs speak volumes directly to the shameful and debasing reality that African Americans in general, and African American women in particular have had to accept as part of their citizenship. For blacks, America means something much different than for their white counterparts, who can claim an authentic American-ness through the acceptance and support of the institutions that uphold the laws responsible for the continued oppression (and depression) of people of color, poor people and those collectives that run counter to a heterotopian ideal. Through photography, historical moments such as Katrina, remind us more about ourselves than many of us realize or want to know.

For black people, how they are represented in popular media, both print and electronic, in many ways serves to advance the claims of the white dominant culture. Within the context of photography, specifically as it relates to black women's bodies, assumptions are made based on historical notions of black womanhood made real. Indeed, the ghettoization of black motherhood, black female sexuality and a trivialized political powerlessness, characterized as non-existent by popular culture, have become the sources of damnation for black women. In most instances the history of slavery and the conditions of black women's servitude under the institution are all but forgotten. The violent nature of the appropriation of black women's bodies as the location for production – their own unpaid labor and the production of children for the use within the plantation system – is absent from the conversation.

In "Facing Difference: The Black Female Body" in *Art on My Mind: Visual Politics* (1995), Bell Hooks argues that, "Few contemporary American artists have worked with images of the black female body in ways that are counterhegemonic."⁶ In other words, American artists have lacked the depth to present black women's bodies in progressive ways that speak truth to power with the intention of refuting ghettoized assumptions, while redefining the black female body as a vessel of life and wisdom. Indeed, as the location for understanding the intersections of race, class and gender,

⁵ W.E.B. Du Bois *The Souls of Black Folk* (1990), p.13.

⁶ Bell Hooks, *Art on My Mind: Visual Politics* (1995), p. 96.

realizing the reality of the historical chances and circumstances, black female bodies become *lieux de memoir*, to be acknowledged, listened to and rendered as significant.

Photography has the potential to tell these truths, when advanced within a narrative understanding of the social, economic and political situations and circumstances people of color have traditionally experienced in a white dominant society. Indeed, the works of Gordon Parks and Alan Chin are important examples of truth narratives that individually, as well as collectively capture and explore the reality of race, class and gender in twentieth and the twenty-first century America. Most importantly, these images represent how those intersections of categories that have been played out on the bodies of black women. Clearly, the pain of disappointment, the fear of death and dying, and the need for love and affection are emotions and states of being, which all can relate to, and therefore read within the framework of a photograph.

This understanding advances the need for reading images within their proper contexts, fully accounting for the historical significance of the image in question and the various meanings embedded within the frame of the photograph. The “interaction between history and memory” intertwined with the art of photography allows for the rearticulation of historical events from the position of the individual caught in the act, and not that of an object situated within the lens of the photographer, or that of the spectator’s unchallenged use of imagination.

What I am suggesting is that within images such as those of Ella Watson and Milvertha Hendricks, the narratives worth knowing are always and forever present. The notion that memory is both resolute and autonomous to an individual’s conscious existence, both within and outside particular historical moments allows for the reading of photographs with the proper set of eyes. A connecting with the subject on a human level, where one is able to feel what is seen. Indeed, the significance of black women as individuals, as women, as corner stones within black communities, and as Americans is revealed in these two photographs through their expressions, their clothing, and bodily positions. These images reveal the truth and consequences of what it means to be American for black women caught in the act of being human.

Works cited

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