Looking Emotionally: Photography, Racism and Intimacy in Research

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Abstract
In this article I argue the need for a reflexive use of photographic images in research, mainly in the publication and dissemination phase and specifically when the topic investigated relates to issues of visibility, in this case racism and understandings of beauty. This analysis draws on my work on contemporary practices of racism in Mexico, where personal photographs were used as research-tools in life-story interviews, creating a sense of shared intimacy. Inspired by Barthes’ refusal in Camera Lucida (2000) to reproduce a photograph of his mother, in this article I focus on the dynamics between seeing and looking and suggest that ‘looking emotionally’ at both participants’ accounts and their photographic images, is a way to address the complexities of the gaze and discuss the specificity of different ‘ways of looking’. The notion of ‘looking emotionally’ refers to an engagement, of researchers and audiences of research, with participants’ lived emotional experiences that explicitly confronts the historical and social legacies of the visible. Here, photographs are understood not only as illustrative platforms from where experiences are organised, but also as ‘traps’ that both inform and ensnare (Gell, 1999). As such, the argument aims to problematise the intimate relationship between gaze and photographic image in a context where racism is constrained to the visible, both in its reproduction and also in its pressing ongoing critique.

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Introduction: On Seeing and Looking

I cannot reproduce the Winter Garden Photograph. It exists only for me. For you, it would be nothing but an indifferent picture, one of the thousand manifestations of the ‘ordinary’; it cannot in any way constitute the visible object of a science; it cannot establish an objectivity, in the positive sense of the term; at most it would interest your *stadium*: period, clothes, photogeny; but in it, for you, no wound. (Barthes, 2000: 73)

Photographs inhabit the visible; they are at the same time a visual expression and a sign to be decoded; they move within ‘chains of meanings’, from the cultural practice of producing them to ‘the cultural practice of looking and interpretation’ (Hall, 1999: 310). As such, important aspects that comes into play when reading an image are ‘the subjective capacities of the viewer to make images signify’ (ibid.). Barthes’ reflection above on ‘the’ photograph, the motif of his *Camera Lucida*, is puzzling in its refusal to reproduce this image and in the implications this has for the audience of his text. The image dates to 1898 and shows his mother, when she was five years old, with her brother, then seven. They are ‘standing together at the end of a little wooden bridge in a glassed-in conservatory, what was called a Winter Garden in those days’ (Barthes, 2000: 67). Barthes found this picture in his mother’s apartment just after her death when looking at her photographs: ‘gradually moving back in time with her, looking for the truth of the face I had loved. And I found it’ (ibid.) In a loving and poetic manner he describes to us the detail of a ‘just image’ that could give him a sense of justice and accuracy in the midst of his grief. He doesn’t want to run the risk of reducing his mother to the ‘ordinary’ and chooses not to show the picture. It seems as if he doesn’t trust us – the viewers and readers of the text – and our subjective capacities, to make this image signify. It exists only for him, for us it would be ‘indifferent’. While Barthes’ resistance might be understood as honouring the ‘wound’ of love, longing and absence, throughout his book there is a sense that we do get to *look* at the Winter Garden photograph even if we don’t *see* it, even if it is never
shown to us. But still we don’t see it: it is not physically printed on the page. Barthes’ ‘teasing’ has triggered and engaged debates about the relation between words and image. He is emphasising the context of interpretation where this image should, if shown, be understood. Hirsch (1997), for example, similarly to Mitchell’s ‘imagetext’ (1994), describes how the Winter Garden photograph ‘has been transformed into a “prose picture”’ (1997: 3) since we only have the words Barthes uses and his reaction: the rejection of showing the image.

In this article, I shall discuss the implications of using images to exemplify and disseminate research analysis focusing on the dynamics of showing, seeing and looking in specific contexts. The benefits of showing and seeing specific images go beyond the mere function of illustration, pointing towards their pedagogical, political or ‘raising-consciousness’ advantages. There is an expectation that the production, collection or display of certain images will allow understanding or at least be the starting point of dialogue of the issues at stake (consider, for example, Back, 2004; Knowles, 2006). This position has not, however, gone unchallenged. A relevant example is Apel’s (2003) excellent article about the touring exhibition *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photographs in America* (2000-2002). Apel discusses the heated debate generated in the United States, especially among African Americans, about whether to show a collection of photographs of lynchings that took place between 1880 and 1960. Mainly coming from the United States’ ‘Deep South’, some of these images – as with Barthes’ Winter Garden picture – were family photographs found in drawers, dusty corners, old chests in attics or family albums next to images of birthdays, weddings and vacations. In these photographs, lynch mobs smile proudly at the camera while cheering one of the most terrifying acts of racial violence. Overall Apel’s article argues that the consensus was for showing these images. While some were worried about the commercialisation of the suffering of ‘black’ people or that it would arouse ‘black’ rage and resentment against ‘whites’, the arguments for showing the images were more compelling. This is clearly summarised in the recognition that ‘the reasons one might be disinclined to show such photographs “are outweighed by the importance of showing how people who otherwise believed in basic democratic principles turned into self-exonerating murderers”’ (Apel, 2003: 466, citing Bauerlein). But Apel sensed an urge amongst the reviewers of the exhibition for witnessing, and explores how the exchange of looks is potent and even vital. For
example, she quotes a *New York Times* analyst writing that ‘we are a crowd looking at a crowd looking at a lynching. And we are looking at the lynching too. Again and again, a white mob looks back at us’ (2003: 460). It is this exchange of gazes, the fluidity of subject (is it the mob, or the victim, or the gaze of the white mob looking back to the spectators?) and the possibilities of (dis)connection that gave this exhibition the potential to shake the subjective capacities of its viewers to make these images signify both politically and intimately.

The stark contrast between Barthes’ intimate setting and these lynching photographs could imply that we are dealing with obviously different senses of ‘gravity’. While both of these cases deal with images found in familial contexts that are about death and witnessing, the arguments for whether or not to show these images seem to be based largely in a questioning of the audience’s capacity to make such images signify; can we trust the viewer? This question raises at least two other ones: who are the ‘we’ deciding? And who are the viewers? We could say that it is understandable not to show a family picture as it ‘enlarges’ its dimensions and adds weight to the narrative of a man facing death and honouring his intimacy with his mother (apart from elaborating one of the most important and now classic works on photography). It is Barthes’ prerogative. And, the ‘not showing’ makes this image poignant. We could also say it is understandable, then, that the showing of lynching photographs might be seen as necessary to humanize the victims ‘through “bearing witness”, that is, through the act of looking and seeing’ as active engagement that condemns racial hatred (2003: 467). But also, we might add, to shock the viewers, to open debate and perhaps to educate them. And here, the showing of gazes at play is what also makes these images poignant.

In this article, however, I propose a different approach to photographic images that extends both of these debates to a common ground. My interest is not in the explicit depiction of racism but in the subtle and everyday context of its reproduction and recognition through family photographs. Simultaneously, like Barthes’ ‘protection’ of his mother’s reduction to the ‘ordinary’, I am concerned with the need to honour the intimacy created in my research between the participants and myself, while being aware of the extent one can or should exercise this safeguard. The two examples above deal, amongst other things, with issues of representation and meaning in terms
of being able to (dis)connect the viewer with, say, death and justice (and of course issues of racial hatred). What I want to do here is extend the discussion about seeing and looking at photographic images to the context of research processes that investigate issues defined and produced by the same visibility, such as race and beauty. I am concerned both with the ambivalence of making use of the visible to ‘understand’ while acknowledging the need to denounce that same visibility as core to the production of forms of racism.

Based on research that uses personal photographs as central to the exploration of contemporary practices of racism in Mexico, I shall discuss the implications of using such images to exemplify and disseminate the analysis. This research project was concerned with a group of Mexican mestiza (racially mixed) women and their experiences of racism from the particular perspective of the visible, that is, the ways they see and are seen; the elements that interact to inform their gaze; the meanings and values of the metaphor of their own image. The participants’ social conditions as women and mestizas reproduce sexual and racial identities as stereotypes and prevailing postcolonial relationships: they are located within a context of being a visually fixed, stereotyped other where their bodies and skins are ‘signifiers of discrimination [that] must be processed as visible’ (Bhabha, 1999: 376).

In this context the use of photographic images proved to be a poignant method in researching a social phenomena marked by its visibility. It is my argument that showing and publishing these kinds of research-tool images as part of strategies of research dissemination has not been thoroughly problematised. I suggest that it is even more important to theorise issues of intimacy and trust when dealing with personal photographs than with other types of ‘found images’ that are ‘out-in-the-world’, or images produced through research processes by or with participants.

Here, when I speak of images, I refer specifically to the photographic image and to the ‘images we imagine’: those subjective images created mentally within specific socio-historical contexts and in dialogue with words, texts and narratives. Following Rose (2007) I also distinguish between vision (the capacity of the human eye to ‘see’) and visuality (the variety of social and cultural elements that construct, determine and structure such capacity of seeing) from the notion of visibility. Visibility can be understood both as ‘the capacity of being seen’ but also as the political degree to
which specific issues, identities, concerns, become publicly prominent, somehow ‘exposed’ and socially highlighted (Porfido, 2006; Puwar, 2004). The use of images in my research allowed the both participants and myself to grasp that the visibility of specific forms of racism were part of their everyday experience mainly in relation to their ideas of beauty and their family life. I will now turn to an example of this work to explore the ‘common ground’ where racism, visibility and research meet.

**Sharing the Seeing of Beauty**

And then I looked at myself and I said ‘I’m not that bad’. I was so ashamed, as if I was some kind of monster but that didn’t correspond to what I saw... but can you see how powerful the idea is? More powerful than the evidence, because I was looking at myself but the idea was more powerful. (Patricia, 37 years old, Huajuapan, Mexico, July 2002, personal interview)

Here Patricia, one of my interviewees, is telling me what she used to think when looking at a particular set of photographs of herself as a child. She told me how, when she was maybe 7 or 8 years old, she would very often take out these pictures. She liked looking at them to cheer herself up when feeling uncomfortable with her family:

I mean... how I must have felt... I felt in one way but saw myself in another way. I used to say: ‘no, but I’m all right’ I liked my photos but there’s this contradiction, that’s why I’m showing them to you now (Patricia, 37 years old, Huajuapan, Mexico, July 2002, personal interview).

In these two extracts the possibility of accessing the visible is redefined as an individual process that is never ‘innocent’ or a mere starting point in the process of looking. Patricia is talking about her capacity to make a fair and coherent judgement of her appearance and the struggle between sets of criteria that pull her perception in different directions. On the one hand, she sees her image in a photograph and is able to grant a value to her ability to see herself and to distinguish what she sees: “I wasn’t that bad”, “I’m all right”. On the other, she has an idea of herself and she is also able
to give a value to it: “I was so ashamed, as if I was some kind of monster”. This type of tension between evidence and interpretation, between seeing and feeling, is clearly revealed in Patricia’s extract, and has been thoroughly analysed by various scholars who reject the simplistic correlation of photography with ‘truth’ and ‘reality’ (Lalvani, 1996; Sekula, 1982, 1983; Tagg, 1988).

The struggle Patricia faces exemplifies the power of the configuration of the visible world and the different layers that determine what it is possible for her to see and the meanings she derives from her perception. These layers are the various aspects which, on the one hand, structure the visible world and, on the other, shape and organise not only the mere ability to see, but also the intricate process by which we give meaning to, and create a partial understanding of what crosses our field of vision. Such aspects refer to the practicalities of the immediate social context and the emotional responses that the visible generates and they establish the criteria of what is beautiful, ‘observable’ and visible, and what is inadequate, shameful and invisible. The visual appreciation of beauty works simultaneously as a cause, a process of construction and an effect of a discourse of hegemonic beauty over the body, where ‘regimes of difference’ (Ahmed, 1998), such as femininity and notions of race, stand in internal (dis)agreement with each other, where they collide.

Does it make any difference to the reader, in terms of understanding Patricia’s or Barthes’ experience, to look at these photographs? Could we ‘bear witness’ without seeing the lynching photographs that Apel discusses? Do I, the researcher, or you, the reader, get a better insight of the experiences of racism, the feelings of shame and ‘ugliness’, the sheer pain of death and absence, by confirming visually what is already racially and aesthetically informed? Patricia and the other women’s accounts of their emotions and experiences of racism, alongside the sharing of their images, make poignant the need to be reflexive about such images’ visual display. I argued earlier that Barthes’ resistance might be understood as honouring the ‘wound’ after his mother’s death, but also emphasised the relevance of honouring and humanising the victims of lynching. Questioning the display or not of my participants’ images and the implication of either decision, is also a way of thinking about how to honour the intimacies created with them in the space of a research project concerned with the experience of racism (the how-does-it-feel and what-does-it-do). One possible way
forward in assessing the criteria to think about and through images is to explore what photographs do, how photographs inhabit the visible and the layers/chains of meanings they bear.

Analyses of photography have been readily concerned with issues of content and representation, of how images accrue value. I want to extend this understanding to include the problems of how to judge viewers’ interpretations of images (Poole, 1997) and how photography and political claims of visibility meet. Gell’s (1999) argument about artworks as traps is compelling and useful for the understanding and use of photography proposed here:

A trap … communicates a deadly absence – the absence of the man [sic] who devised and set it, and the absence of the animal who will become the victim. Because of these marked absences, the trap, like all traps, functions like a powerful sign. Not designed to communicate or to function as a sign (in fact, designed to be hidden and escape notice) the trap nonetheless signifies far more intensely than most signs intended as such. […] Since this is a sign that is not, officially, a sign at all, it escapes all censorship’ (Gell, 1999: 200).

Arguing for a complex understanding of photography as traps means considering photography’s capacity to illustrate, explain and evoke but also, simultaneously, to fascinate, give pleasure and ensnare (we would still like to see the Winter Garden Photograph; the lynching photographs compels the viewer to look; maybe Patricia is “that bad” – let us see!). Such an understanding invites us to consider how we think about the use and content of photographs as research tools. But it also implies that the role of a photograph as part of a published text or a conference presentation has to be continuously critically assessed (for Barthes it’s straightforward: “It exists only for me” whereas for Apel, the exchange of gazes needs exposing; Patricia’s case is harder to pin down: should we see? What do we expect to find? What would our parameters of looking be? Would we dismiss her if we think she’s wrong and just paranoid, or would we sympathise?).

If photographs are traps, it is paramount to be aware of their quality, despite seeming ‘safe territory’, to ensnare. In this respect, Poole (1997) observes in her analysis of the
circulation of images between Europe and Andean South America, that one important element – easily dismissed in our rush to reveal the complicity between power and representation, or in this case race and representation – is that ‘we frequently forget that images are also about the pleasure of looking. Visual images fascinate us. They compel us to look at them, especially when the material they show us is unfamiliar or strange’ (1997: 17).

Considering the history and sometimes questionable social uses of photography can be useful to contextualise this ensnaring process. Since the invention of photography and its ‘coincidence’ with imperial expansion, scientific racism and changing forms of knowledge linked to logics of comparability and equivalency, images have symbolised a fascinating point of access to the ‘other’ (consider for example the works of Edwards, 1992; Pinney, 1992; Ryan, 1997; Williams, 2003). Poole argues that the wide circulation of photographic images played a key role in the ‘formation of the racial culture of European modernity’ since photographs were a core ‘support to an emerging idea of race as a material, historical and biological fact’ (1997: 15). She not only relates the historical coincidence of the emergence of ‘race’ with photography but also points towards the ambiguities of photographs’ interpretation and the pleasure images produce:

By phrasing identity in the rigorous methods and languages of the biological science of the time, nineteenth century racial theory translated the politics of colonial subjugation into the visual –and aesthetic- calculus of embodied “natural” differences. In saying this, however, I do not want to imply that race operates only or even primarily through visual technologies and discourses.

Nor do I want to say that either vision explains race, or race, vision. Rather, by looking at the historical intersections between visual and racial discourses, (…) vision and race [are approached] as autonomous but related features of a broad epistemic field in which knowledge was organized around principles of typification, comparability, and equivalency (1997: 14-15).

Photographs, discourses of race and beauty, and experiences of racism can be easily entangled with the pleasure of looking, forgetting their histories of formation and the material and symbolic meanings they have accumulated. Simultaneously these
processes of entanglement are further intertwined within the specific context of ‘doing’ and ‘disseminating’ research. When we approach images, what is implicit is an understanding that the visible world can be typified, compared and assessed with a series of parameters, such as racial and aesthetic ones, however shifting, that are already in place. So when listening/reading to Patricia’s assertion “I’m not that bad” / “I’m all right” we are compelled to see, to do an assessment of comparability (‘she is not as bad as’ / ‘of course she’s not a monster!’) and equivalency (‘she looks like this or that’ / ‘of course she’s all right!’). Thus, looking and the perception of the visible world becomes a key element in the racist moment and its political (in)visibility. The act of looking reproduces notions of identification and belonging attached to the visible. Images are visual representations of the ‘real’ that are continuously struggling to make that ‘real’ believable: their meanings can be unstable, usually expressing more than they really ‘want’ to. But significantly, an image can be seen as the tip of the iceberg. It is open to multiple interpretations: ‘the visible is defined by the invisible’ (Phelan, 1996: 14) and at the same time it can never provide a total or complete meaning of the ‘real’ that it intends to signify (it is seen from a particular perspective / place / viewpoint / experience). Phelan (1996) argues that these qualities/defects of the image are precisely the space of creativity where identities can be subverted and contested. Such instability opens ruptures and gaps that can facilitate mechanisms of resistance and change. In this way, the instabilities of the act of looking might not only reproduce discrimination and reify racial stereotypes but also open, or keep open, opportunities to challenge practices of exclusion linked to the visible world. With this in mind, I will now turn to discuss the methodological dilemmas I faced when researching the visible through photographs.

**Intimacy, Photographs and Research**

The coupling of intimacy and sociological research can be instructive. They both rely on movements from private to public realms and vice versa though in no strict (pre)determined way or order. Intimacy has to do at the same time, with the most private and the most publicly regulated acts and practices. Berlant writes that ‘the inwardness of the intimate is met by a corresponding publicness’ (Berlant, 2000: 1).
Often, doing and writing sociological research is the process of intimate listening, of developing the difficult ‘art of listening’, that is able to extend a story and its small, private minutiae to a ‘bigger picture’ of public issues (Back, 2007). So being intimate, doing intimacy is what research is all about. Moreover, research practices usually involve facing decisions related to intimacy on a continuous basis.

There are at least three moments when these decisions become pressing. Firstly, when we have to determine what sorts of limits should be established between researcher and participants: what to do with the tension between seeking closeness and deep understanding while maintaining distance? Secondly, the choices we face when trying to ‘separate’ the data from its narration in order to analyse it. And finally, once the data is analysed and ready to present or publish, we have to decide to what extent our conclusions are further adapted to suit both our theoretical allegiances and the particular audiences we talk to or write for. In this process the corresponding ‘publicness’ of the intimacy of research (which is by no means linear but rather convoluted), the loyalties that emerge through research relationships and intimate moments can, and sometimes are, suspended.

Such moments of suspension in research refer to the understanding of what intimacy and intimate relations can be, and what their relationship with a sense of ethics is. The questions emerging from such a decision-making process are about the limits of loyalty (to participants, data and analysis) created through processes of intimacy and the various uses and understandings of ethics that cross the research process. What are the methodological arguments that underpin such decisions? How can we avoid a simplistic ethics argument that doesn’t account for the complexity of the politics and commitment to intimacy involved in the research process?

I faced one such dilemma of intimacy in my research when I had to decide what to do with the personal photographs the participants shared with me. I must confess I did not think carefully about this before doing the interviews. Then, I only thought that the photographs from the participants’ personal and family albums would somehow be at the centre of the development of my research. Indeed, that was what happened. The aim of this research project was to explore the qualities of the participants’ experiences of racism and the importance of discourses of mestizaje (racial mixing) in
everyday life (Moreno Figueroa, 2006). In 2002, I conducted six focus groups in three Mexican cities: Huajuapan, Oaxaca; Leon, Guanajuato; and Mexico City, with a total of thirty-nine university-educated, working and middle class women between the ages of 18 and 55. Sixteen participants agreed to additional life story interviews where they brought personal/family photographs to guide not only their life stories, but also discussions of how they saw themselves and their experiences of discrimination and/or racism. During the sessions, the participants displayed the images and used them as a guide for their life stories and to reflect on the metaphors of their own visual representation, as exemplified above by Patricia (“I wasn’t that bad”/“I was so ashamed, as if I was some kind of monster”).

The use of photographs was core for the participants to make what I have called ‘contextual translations’ of their images, which allowed them to articulate their life stories in relation to experiences of racism. The idea of ‘contextual translations’ refers to the process undertaken by the research participants of intimating with a particular image, of ‘reading’/‘interpreting’ an image which is then shared in the context of research where ‘looking emotionally’ allows understanding. The notion of ‘looking emotionally’ refers to an engagement, of researchers and audiences of research, with participants’ lived emotional experiences that explicitly confronts the historical and social legacies of the visible. I will come back to this below. Contextual translations and looking emotionally are processes based on the idea that photography has capacities for readability because of its association with what Sekula (1982) calls ‘hidden or implicit text’. Here it is important to emphasize that the photographic image allows not one but multiple capacities for readability, as well as multiple and complex readings. On the one hand, there is the hidden or implicit text that moves within historical and cultural discourses of power. But on the other, there are multiple potential ways of reading a photographic image due to: the subject of the reading (Who is reading and from where?); the interpellation of the listener of such a subject (Who is listening and from where?); the sharing of the stories and meanings (What is being exchanged? What is it possible to tell at any given moment about an image? What is being translated?). So the process of readability undertaken by the women in this research was analysed mainly in terms of the contextualisation – the experience – of the event reading a photographic image: it was in that moment that the participants became subjects of contextual translations and what I have called ‘looking
emotionally’ was possible. The use of images created ‘experiential events’: the sessions became intimate moments/spaces that operated as experiences in themselves at the same time that the women’s experiences were discussed. Those moments can be characterised as particularly intimate not only because they created closeness, familiarity and a sense of loyalty between the women, their images and me as researcher, but also because the narratives that disclosed the qualities of the racist experience were produced imparting a sense of understanding which informed my writing.

The use of photographs in this research was more than a ‘tool’ for memory, a mnemonic device or a way to elicit narratives. It was the key that opened up a possibility for the participants to exercise contextual translations of their images in order to articulate their life stories in relation to their experiences of racism. But using the images also raised the question of what to do with them next: to show or not to show? Regardless of the fact that most participants gave me a copy of their photographs, and most of them also authorised me to show and publish the images where pertinent to the research, I wondered whether displaying such images in the completed text would actually enhance the understanding of what these women shared with me. Would it make any difference? If so, what sort of difference?

In asking these questions, I was concerned with two main things: a) respecting the intimate relations created but also a questioning of the ways in which such intimacy is then redistributed and perhaps diluted in the process; and b) the risk that the images would simply constitute a visual confirmation of the stereotypes that inform the discrimination these women experienced in the first place. I also wondered who would be looking? What contexts would inform their gaze? How could the privileges of intimacy be respected but also honoured? As Barthes says when looking at his mother’s photographs after her death, ‘if I were ever to show them to friends I could doubt that these photographs would speak’ (2000: 64). I decided not to show them.

Let us look to a further example that unpacks this decision. When talking with Consuelo and exploring her relation to issues of beauty, appearance and shame, she looked at a portrait of herself and told me about the comments she had received from some of her relatives, mainly her uncles, while growing up:
They used to call me: “prieta [dark], cabezona [big head], and dientuda [goofy]”, and I used to say: “Why do I have such big teeth?” “Why am I so morena [dark]?” (Consuelo, 29 years old, Leon, Mexico, July 2002, personal interview).

Prieta and morena, refer to a female with dark (or darker-than) brown skin and can have a pejorative connotation depending on intonation. Within the context of these expressions and Consuelo’s intonation in the interview, these words here have a pejorative intention. Consuelo approaches her understanding of beauty via what it is not. If ‘they’ call her those names with the intention to offend and bully her, then it seems that for her the contrary is the acceptable and adequate appearance. To be beautiful then means not to have dark brown skin, not to have a big head, and not to have big teeth. But then this belief leaves Consuelo in an upsetting situation where she asks herself: ‘Why I have such big teeth?’ ‘Why I’m so morena?’ These questions have no satisfactory answer. They seem to be asked as if an answer is both possible and impossible, making them poignant. Is there something to be explained? Is it just a rhetorical complaint resigned to silence? That she feels it is even possible to ask for a reason for her appearance seems to me to be the key question. Would then looking at her image give us– and her– an insight to the sources of such beliefs? Would you be able to ‘get into’ her experience if I show this image here? Could we then ‘really’ understand her terms of adequate and acceptable appearance?

Consuelo’s questions are simultaneously directed towards the family and the nation. On the one hand, she is confronting the specific sets of relationships established amongst her family members that allow comments like the above to be shared openly and with no second thoughts (although I would argue that this is by no means a unique characteristic of Consuelo’s family but points to a specific sense of cultural ‘tolerance’ where these utterances are acceptable). On the other, we can also locate her questions in the specific socio-historical context of Mexico and most of Latin America, where racial ideologies of mestizaje operate (De La Cadena, 2001; Knight, 1990; Lomnitz, 1992; Martinez-Echazabal, 1998; Wade, 2004). The process of mestizaje has offered the subjects of the nation a promise of a ‘physical flexibility’, of moulding, of a form of racial mixing that, contrary to the US ‘one-drop rule’, is able
to enter in processes of whitening and therefore direct its legacy towards ‘perfection’. This promise has stated that the ‘race will be improved’, and if it isn’t, if people’s appearances don’t approximate to the ‘white ideal’, such ‘failure’ has involved the blaming of individuals for their lack of adequate planning. Consuelo’s questions (‘Why I have such big teeth?’ ‘Why I’m so morena?’) seem to arise from the notion that ‘things’ can happen to the body. It seems that ‘things’ such as specific sizes, colours, heights, and features work in favour of beauty or ugliness. But these questions also point to the idea that such ‘things’ could have been manipulated, planned, worked out previously giving depth to the lived experience of the racial discourse of mestizaje (racial-mixing) that prevails in contemporary Mexico. Thus, resonances with the colonial understanding of mestizaje as a ‘highly flexible’ social identity within the caste system appear in this extract from Consuelo. The racist logic of ‘improving the race’ by ‘whitening’ the population towards a ‘white-Europeanised’ ideal is implicit in Consuelo’s story. Her questioning of her appearance bears this racist logic and testifies to the non-spoken rules of a social hierarchy of distinctions and of the codes that circulate within the particular Mexican configuration of the visible world. The specific promise of mestizaje brings the element of chance as the only explanation when the ‘race’ is not improved. It is as if mestizaje has worked in favour of hazard, giving some Mexican women and men the benefit of beauty and others the benefit of dreaming what it could have been like to ‘look’ different. Would they perhaps have fair colour skin, ‘coloured’ eyes, ‘fine’ features; would they then be beautiful?

I question whether showing her image here would help the reader to become intimate with Consuelo’s experience. Would the image help us ‘truly’ understand her questions and her notions of adequate and acceptable appearance? Would seeing the image help us deal with the nexus of intentionalities at play? It might be that showing that particular image – or indeed any image – interacts with the history of the emergence of the modern concept of race, within the ideological framework of positivism and scientific racism, and the (post)colonial function of photography, or with the weight of conventions that a photograph has as a cultural object and practice. These conventions, such as photography’s illusion of truth and its expected revelation of the real might in turn become conflated with prescribed and racialised notions of beauty. My concern in analysing the participants’ accounts, however, was mainly to put
forward their lived experiences of racism, how they came to confront their racialised and beautiful bodies, and in which ways and in what moments these were related and relevant to being Mexican, a national subject. So in this quest, I argue that the expression and articulation of the complexity of Consuelo’s account, for example, comes into being through the use of her photographs during the interview. Nevertheless, the understanding of her experience goes further than social and cultural racialised visual codes. It is my argument that ‘looking emotionally’, as a specific way of looking, is a way forward to approach not only what Consuelo sees when in front of her portrait but also how it feels, what is it like. It is a way to both honour the intimacy of the process that generated this account and question our own expectation of what a morena might look like. The proposal is to think of the visual without images, that is, access the configurations of the visible world by looking through images, beyond their immediate display to reach their sites of production.

**Looking Emotionally**

The backdrop of this discussion has been the notion of intimacy, both as closeness and deepness, as demanding private communion, a sense of sharing and public responsibility (Berlant, 2000). I am not arguing just for ‘showing’ or ‘not showing’ photographs, but rather inviting viewers/readers to exercise their agency through reflexive caution. So, while the photos used in my research were core for looking at issues related to race discourses, notions of beauty and experiences of racism, the ambivalent processes that relate to showing and seeing these images have to be considered for their political implications. On the one hand, it is to turn back to the participants of research projects and honour the intimate space created between us by listening, engaging and ‘looking emotionally’ at their experience rather than taking for granted our (readers, students, researchers) informed gaze as altogether critical and beyond racist and racialised aesthetic prejudices. On the other, it is to critique the visual politics of beauty and racial stereotyping by engaging with the question of the visible, physical and imagined body and actively decide the sorts of engagements we, as audiences, want to have with the visible. It is to think about, for example, what to do with the ensnaring visual differentiations of skin colours, types of hair, facial
features, heights and weights and how to deal with the risk of fixing body differences when aiming to expose the racially informed ‘ways of seeing’. As Poole rightly asks, ‘how it was that “race” [and beauty] came to be seen at all?’ (Poole, 1997: 22)

As a way of approaching an image but also as an attitude towards it, ‘looking emotionally’ refers to the ongoing and open proposal of reflecting on visual research practices and assessing their accompanying processes. It also engages with recent debates about emotions, cultural practices and politics (Ahmed, 2001, 2004; Berlant, 2004, 2006; Sedgwick and Frank, 2003; Svasek and Milton, 2005; Zournazi, 2002). When using images, specifically personal photographs, as tools for research, these are not just devices for memory work or a mere elicit technique. Rather, photographic images offer an intimate context of interaction between the researcher and the participant that demands a deep listening and, moreover, an emotional visual capacity that engages with all the layers of meaning being conveyed: the album, wall or box where the picture is kept; the pose of the sitter(s) and the detail in the background; the pain in remembering/re-living the shame felt; the doubt about what can be seen and how it feels to see it again; the pervasiveness of racism that infiltrates the minutiae of everyday life. In her ‘sociality of emotions’ model, Ahmed proposes that emotions are relational in that they move us and attach us to others: ‘they involve (re)actions or relations of “towardness” or “awayness” in relation to such objects’ (2004: 8).

Moreover, emotions are also intentional, being ‘about’ things and involving directionality towards objects. Emotions are neither located within subjects, as a possession of the self, or without, as something affecting them. Instead, emotions are located in movement, circulating between objects: between images, participants, researcher and readers; between interpretations, contexts and moments of ‘reading’. Emotions are a response (we give to objects) which do not come from ‘inside’ us as ‘reaction’, but are produced in-between ourselves and others as ‘action’. Looking emotionally is located in such an ‘in-between’, in the movement and circulation: it is about engaging with the overall experience of selecting, showing, reading, seeing, interpreting and being affected by, a photographic image that is doubly entangled by its raw depiction and its charged ‘telling’ (by notions of ‘race’ and by the experience of racism). Looking emotionally means allowing that contact to shape the research interaction and establish a relationality between the researcher and the participant. It
happens when the intimate moment of seeing an image is shared, a moment that deals with what is seen but also with how ‘that’ comes to be seen at all.

I have argued for a theoretical honouring of the intimate relations that produced particular narratives of photographic images bringing together the different elements of the research process: participants/ researcher/ analysis/ data/ audiences. Looking emotionally in the context of this discussion is a call to engage with experiences of racism and exclusion and to question our own (as readers, academics, researchers) expectations of racial and beauty prescriptions. I am not saying that photographs reproduce racism but that the stories that emerge from the experience of racism, while deeply and intimately visible, are larger than what the photographic images can ever produce. I have been confronted at conferences and seminars about choosing not to show these images and I am certainly not implying that the viewers’ gaze translates in a racialised reading. I have also seen the ‘benefits’ of showing these photographs when trying to explain what mestizaje, mixedness, ‘looks’ like to European audiences. Observing a family with a widespread variety of skin colour tones visually shocks normalised ideas of what ‘black’ and ‘white’ bodies are expected to be, look like, and where their borders are.

When talking about deeply painful experiences such as racism, what is at stake is not a challenge for readers to visually confirm what the participants said, but to see with them the ways in which ‘a photograph is always invisible: it is not it that we see’(Barthes, 2000: 6) . Ultimately, what the participants shared was a means for us (researchers/readers) to engage in the production of their identities, understandings and concerns by looking emotionally. Seeing a particular image – or indeed any image – interacts with the weight of conventions that a photograph has in itself, such as its illusion of truth and its expected revelation of the real. Nevertheless, this doesn’t relieve us from the debate about ‘bearing witness’ by seeing and looking at images such as the lynching photographs. Rather, these different cases open the debate to engage with specific contexts and with reflexive spaces where issues of commitment, responsibility, and political intervention are at stake. While I agree with Barthes that the person or thing depicted in an image can be said to ‘have been there’, in the case of the photographs of my interviewees, the understanding of someone’s experience through the process of exercising a contextual translation of their photograph means
looking beyond the photographs. The invitation is then to look emotionally, that is, to attend to webs of shared social understandings, individual perceptions of the past, translated from the moment of the telling, and emotional reactions to the experience of re-living while narrating.

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Notes


Bibliography


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