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# Visual ethnography and racial theory: Family photographs as archives of interracial intimacies

France Winddance Twine

## Abstract

I propose a model for employing photograph-elicitation interviews in *longitudinal ethnographic* research on race and intimacy by drawing upon research that I conducted among British interracial families between 1995 and 2003. I evaluate my use of family photographs in photo-elicitation interviews as a methodological *tool*, a source of primary data and as evidence for theory. I used photo-interviews as a collaborative methodological tool to clarify and challenge theories that I had developed to explain how white birth mothers of African-descent children negotiate their “racial profiles” in public and private arenas. I analyse a case study of one transracial mother who strategically employed family photographs to project respectable “presentations” of her interracial familial life.

**Keywords:** Ethnography; photography; visual sociology; photo-elicitation interviews; interracial families; racial theory; Black British.

In 1901 while conducting research for an article that he was writing for *The World's Work*, W.E.B DuBois collaborated with Major A. Radclyffe Dugmore, a German photographer, who accompanied him to Albany, Georgia. Dugmore shot photographs of black men and women to document their work and leisure life as agricultural workers in what was known as the Black Belt. Eighteen of these black and white photographs taken by Dugmore were published to illustrate an article that DuBois published in June 1901 under the title ‘The Negro as He Really Is’ in *The World's Work*. Little has been written about DuBois’ collaboration with this German photographer and why they selected these particular photographs to illustrate his article. How did DuBois view these photographic records of black life at this particular historical moment? They were not reprinted or included in the 1903

edition of *The Souls of Black Folks* and have only recently been reunited with the text in a centenary edition of this book co-edited by Henry Louis Gates and Terri Hume Oliver. Why did DuBois exclude photographs from the original edition of *The Souls of Black Folks*? Did he fear that the inclusion of photographs would risk positioning his scholarship as photo-journalism? (Smith 1999)<sup>1</sup>

In 1914 when Albion Small became the editor of the *American Journal of Sociology* he banished photographs from the pages of the journal. Describing the status of visual evidence within mainstream sociology journals during the early twentieth century and the motivation behind Small's decision, Elizabeth Chaplin (1994) writes that 'Small believed the presence of photographs in a sociological text threatened the theoretical status and purpose of sociology itself. He claimed that although photographs might be an invaluable tool in the hands of those who argued for social change, the relationship of such a project to pure sociology was analogous to the relationship between public hygiene and biology'.<sup>2</sup> Sociologists have spent decades debating the contribution of visual methods to the development of sociological theory and to their use as 'evidence of theory'. The question of how photographs contribute to social theory has been debated among social scientists who employ visual methods and those who eschew them in favour of less messy and more generalizable methods. (as quoted in Chaplin, 206)

Ninety years have passed since photographs were not allowed in the pages of the *American Journal of Sociology*. Nevertheless, photographs remain marginalized from the pages of mainstream sociology journals that are not devoted specifically to qualitative sociology or visual sociology.<sup>3</sup> Howard Becker (1995) distinguishes between visual sociology, documentary photography and photojournalism. Becker explains why visual materials have been marginalized in the discipline of sociology since its inception.

Since visual imagery has not been conventional in sociology since its beginnings, when it was more tied to social reform, most sociologists not only do not accept that obligation, they see few legitimate uses for visual materials other than as "teaching aids". It is as though using photographs and films in a research report constituted pandering to the low tastes of the public or trying to persuade readers to accept shaky conclusions by using illegitimate "rhetorical" means. In short, visual materials seem "unscientific, probably because "science" in sociology came to be defined as being objective and neutral, just the opposite of the crusading spirit which animated the early muckraking work, itself intimately tied up with photography.

In his analysis of the marginalization of image-based research in visual anthropology and visual sociology, Jon Prosser also argues that the qualitative research community undervalues images. In a discussion of the arguments employed against image-based research, Prosser notes “Contemporary orthodox qualitative researchers are very limited in what they count as acceptable use of images. For them an image is useful: as a way of breaking the boredom of the written text; as illustration of an object, place, person or event that are fully (and ‘more properly’) explained by language or via traditional visuals namely tables, graphs and diagrams; and as a ‘record’... (Prosser 1998, p. 102)

Why do certain forms of data collection become defined as inherently ‘political’ while other forms are defined as ‘neutral’ and ‘scientific’? Historically photographs were discredited as a legitimate form of ‘evidence’ in mainstream sociology journals, in part, because in the early twentieth century sociology was engaged in a campaign to establish itself as a ‘science’ and anxieties were generated by visual images because they were associated with photojournalism and ‘political’ activism rather than viewed as apolitical academic inquiry.

In this article I propose a model for employing photographs in *longitudinal ethnographic* research on race and intimacy by drawing upon research that I conducted between 1995 and 2004 among British interracial families. First, I discuss the varied ways that photographs can be used in ethnographic research. I have used photographs as a *primary source* of data, such as a visual record to study the material and social *settings* in which my research subjects live and as evidence for theory. I also used photographs to clarify how the white birth mothers of African-descent children strategically employ family photographs to stage ‘presentations’ of their public selves for private and public consumption (Goffman 1959). I then present a case study from one family that illustrates how I employed family photograph albums as a collaborative research tool to *theorize* how racial and ethnic identities are projected for consumption in the context of racial hierarchies, class inequalities and heterosexual marriage.

### **Photography and ethnography: The visual in social theory**

As a feminist ethnographer and feminist theorist, I have employed photographs in field research conducted on interracial intimacy on both sides of the Atlantic and in both the southern and northern hemispheres including Brazil, the United States and the United Kingdom<sup>4</sup>. Photographs have been central in my analyses of racial consciousness among members of interracial families. An analysis of photographs can economically and effectively communicate the

**Figure 1.** *Sharon Elizabeth Dawkins explains to France Winddance Twine the meaning that she attaches to a particular photograph as they review a collection of 400 photographs that she keeps stored in shoe boxes in the attic. This photograph was taken during a photo-elicitation interview conducted in 2004. Copyright by Michael Smyth.*



socio-political stakes for individuals who either inhabit bodies that are perceived as racially ambiguous or who are ambivalent about their racial status.

Anthropologists and sociologists have used photographs from a wide range of sources in photo-elicitation interviews. They have used archival photographs (Modell and Brodsky, 1994), photographs taken by the researcher (Bunster 1977; Harper 1984; Gold 1986), photographs taken by professional photographers working with researchers (Dublin 1998; Duneier and Carter 1999), by participants in the research (Sprague, 1978; Harrington & Lindy 1998; Douglas 1998) and family snapshots taken by family members (Twine 1998). Douglas Harper (1984) has employed photographs in his work among dairy farmers in rural New York State. Steven Gold (1986) has used photo-elicitation in interviews with two sub-populations of Vietnamese refugees. Douglas Harper used photo-elicitation interviews to study the social impact of mechanization and industrialization on dairy farmers in rural New York.

For ethnographers, such as myself, who are devoted to an analysis of racial logics in interracial families, visual images can be used effectively as a research method to generate theoretical insights and as a source of primary data to map the *racial* networks. I have learnt from

photographs how to 'see' the socio-racial world in which my research subjects operate. In my longitudinal ethnographic research in Brazil and Britain I have employed photographs in the following ways: First, I employed photographs as a research tool for producing visual records and collecting data about the material world in which people live. Like the anthropologists John and Malcolm Collier (1986) I produced a 'cultural inventory'. According to Collier and Collier 'The value of an inventory is based upon the assumption that the "look" of a home reflects who people are and the way they cope with the problems of life'. (1986, p.45). In addition I hired a professional photographer to 'map' urban neighbourhoods *after* interviewing participants in the areas and asking them to identify specific places that had meaning for their families.

Secondly, as a feminist ethnographer I have used photographs to introduce 'reflexivity' during photo-interviews of what I term 'racial tours' of an interracial marriage. Between 2000 and 2004 I asked white transracial birth mothers of African-descent children to select photographs from their family archives to discuss with me. These photo-elicitation interviews were conducted several years after I had completed racial consciousness and life history interviews and participant observation. I did not use photo-interviews as a 'can-opener' to establish rapport (Collier and Collier 1986) but rather to clarify the differences between what was 'perceived' and said in the presence and absence of photographs. This type of analysis challenged me to re-examine and rethink my earlier analyses of the ways that race intersects with age, occupation, education, marital status and gender hierarchies to structure the lives of white members of interracial families. (Twine 1999). I have used photographs to examine the racial profiles that transracial parents project and the *shifts* in their racial logics as they reconcile the gaps between their intimate lives and how they are racialized in the public sphere (Twine 1998).

In what I term my 'racial tours' and 'racial consciousness' interviews that I conducted to complement my participant observation I examined family snapshots and professional photographs of weddings in what are known as 'photo-elicitation interviews' to engage in discussions with individuals about their place on the socio-racial spectrums in their families and communities (Twine, Warren and Ferrandiz 1991; Twine 1998; Twine 1999).<sup>5</sup> Finally, I worked collaboratively with Michael Smyth, a professional photographer to produce a visual data bank of black and white still photographs. These photos were used as a source of data, documentation of the research process and to provide copies of prints for family members who had participated in this study.

*Family photograph albums and racial registers: A method of studying interracial intimacies*

Shawn Michelle Smith (1999) has provided a historical analysis of how baby photographs came ‘to emblemize a racial fantasy as eugenicists claimed it for scientific evidence’ in the United States. Smith offers insights into how family photography became institutionalized as central to middle-class visual culture in North America. Smith’s analysis inspires and animates my own analysis of the value of family photographs as an analytical lens to *theorize* how photographs may be deployed by middle-class family members to negotiate racial identities and project middle-class respectability. Smith (2003) argues that:

Family photo album remains the most enduring colloquial register developed during the period of photographic expansion. Over the course of the nineteenth century, the album came to function as a visual family archive, a record of ancestral legacies – the site where individuals were positioned within a family history . . . . With the invention of the paper roll film and the handheld Kodak camera in 1888, photography pervaded the family as one of its self-identifying mechanisms. George Eastman aggressively targeted middle-class consumers with his popular advertising campaigns, and by the turn of the century the camera had become an accessible source of home entertainment. The photographic portrait, once the sole domain of professional photographers who could both afford and manage cumbersome cameras, became a product of family life itself. “By the 1890s, the family became a social unit increasingly imagined through the process of photographic representation”. (1999, p. 118)

During the past decade I have analysed family photographs in my longitudinal ethnographic research on race, racism and antiracism. They have generated theoretical insights into how racial and ethnic identities are negotiated by families that are not ‘racially unified’. Furthermore, they have helped me to identify competing racial logics operating in interracial families (see Twine 1999a). In the case of Brazil and Britain I have analysed family photographic archives that were compiled before and during my research study without any concern for my research agenda. These photographs are not ‘ethnographic’ outside of the social context in which they were viewed and discussed by me and the family members who possess them. They were produced by family members for private circulation and display as one method of visually recording daily life and documenting major life events. These include photographs taken by professional photographers hired to document significant life cycle events such as weddings, family reunions and christenings as well as snapshots. These family

photographs were selected by white transracial mothers who participated in my research project. They also granted me their permission to reprint them to accompany published articles, books or other academic texts. These family photographs constituted an important visual data bank in my field research.

I employed photo-elicitation interviews to go on 'racial tours' of the intimate lives of the white birth mothers of African-descent children after having established relationships over an eight-year period. My goals included the following: 1) to map the socio-racial fields in which transracial mothers operate, 2) detect changes in the racial and ethnic structure of the family over time 3) identify significant people in her social and familial network, 4) identify which members of her familial and social network were present at life events such as the birth of children, the baptism of children, the weddings and funerals of family and friends, 5) show the quotidian reproductive labour required to transmit cultural identities to their children through food preparation, games, reading and other activities and 6) identify contradictions and tensions between the themes that occurred repeatedly in private conversations and semi-structured interviews and the content of our conversation during these photo-interviews.

Over the course of four years I asked transracial mothers living in Leicester,<sup>6</sup> that is the white birth mothers of children of African-Caribbean descent, who were members of black-white interracial families to select family snapshots, wedding albums, vacation albums, baby books, and other stored photographs and explain their meanings to me in an open-ended interview. It was a collaborative activity in that the white mothers interviewed had to give me access to their private collection of photographs and they determined which photographs we discussed in our photo-elicitation interviews. The photographs that they selected do not represent all the possible photographs taken but constitute an 'edited corpus' of photographs. (Banks 2001, p. 79). These family photographs had no essential 'ethnographic' purpose or value and were not produced to facilitate my research agenda.<sup>7</sup> These photo-interviews enabled me to engage transracial mothers in a dialogue with them about the meanings that they attached to their family photographs while allowing me to probe for clues to shifts or reconfigurations in their transracial life.<sup>8</sup>

Following Marcus Banks (2001) I treat photographs as 'tiny mirror fragments' that provide a partial view of the social fabric of people's lives. While family photographs are not an accurate 'visual record' of what really happens, they provide partial maps of social life. Marcus Banks has argued that 'All visual forms are socially embedded, and many visual forms that sociologists and anthropologists deal with are multiply embedded. Using archival photographs to prompt memories or comments from informants in the course of an interview, for



**Figure 2.** *A gallery of photographs of the Dawkins family greets you when you enter their home. This hallway is in the entrance to the Dawkins home. On the top row there is a studio portrait of Sharon and Everal, followed by photographs of each of them, and on the bottom row there is a group portrait of their daughters followed by four studio photographs of them as infants.*



example, involves an appreciation of at least three forms of embeddings or frames'. (pp. 79–80). Marcus goes on to identify three contexts in which photographs are 'read including: 1) the context of the original production of the photograph, 2) subsequent histories of the photographs, and 3) the context in which the social researcher deploys the photographs in the course of an interview'.

*A case study in photo-elicitation interviewing: Sharon Elizabeth Moul Dawkins*

My use of photographs is collaborative and involved the approval and active participation of the transracial mothers whose albums I viewed. I employed family photographs that were selected by the transracial mothers to conduct a form of photo-elicitation. Here I will examine the photo-interviews that I conducted in the spring of 2004 with Sharon Dawkins to show the methodological and theoretical benefits of this collaborative process. Sharon Dawkins is the daughter of Julia Moul and Raymond Charles Moul. She was born Sharon Elizabeth Moul on 15 July 1959 in Leicester, England. She met her husband Everal, in 1979 and they were married on 30 July 1983 after living together for three years. When I recruited Sharon for my research study in 1995 she had been married for twelve years and was the

mother of four daughters between the ages of 9 months and 13 years (see Figure 1)

I conducted my first photo-interview with Sharon in her home in March 2004. During this photo-interview, Michael Smyth, a professional photographer based in Dublin, accompanied me to shoot additional photographs of Sharon's home.<sup>9,10</sup> Sharon directed me to specific aspects of the photographs that were meaningful to her and thus she provided a 'frame' that brought into relief her racial logics. These photo-interviews allowed Sharon to revisit selected moments in her life and to discuss the meaning of race in the photographs.

I was introduced to Sharon in September 1995. I conducted my first racial consciousness interview with Sharon on 13 September 1995. My participant observation and home visits with Sharon began in 1997 when I moved to Leicester and established a residence for eight months.<sup>11</sup> Between 1997 and 2003 I conducted seven semi-structured interviews with Sharon.<sup>12</sup> In addition to participant observation I observed in her home and spent four overnights. After I told Sharon that I felt my understanding of her life was limited by my inability to talk privately with her black mother-in-law, she arranged for me to interview her in private in the spring of 2003.

Returning to Marcus Banks' discussion of the significance of the 'context' in which photographs are interpreted, we can consider the photographs taken of my photo-interview with Sharon as one way to

**Figure 3.** *Imani Dawkins, the youngest of four daughters of Sharon Elizabeth Dawkins and Everal Dawkins, poses beneath a family portrait of her family that is displayed on the wall of the dining room. This family portrait was taken in 1997 when Imani was two years old. Copyright by Michael Smyth.*



capture that process of ‘reading the visual’ as a collaborative project. We are in Sharon’s living room and she is ‘directing’ the reading. I am simply unable to ‘read’ the symbolic meanings that she attaches to these photographs without her. Sharon and I are equally invested in the production of visual images that document our collaboration (see Figure 1). During the eight years that I have worked on this project, Sharon has assisted me in various ways and talks about ‘the book’ as one talks about a family member that has not yet arrived. Sharon’s collaboration and her willingness to be photographed as part of the research study can also be understood as one way that she ‘claims’ partial ownership of this research. Sharon is also the co-director of the social event that constitutes our joint reading of her family photographs.

*Photo-interviews: Mapping the socio-racial contours of interracial family life*

The smell of the smoke of Mayfair cigarettes floats in the air and encircles me. The sound of Sharon’s contagious and throaty laughter fills the room. Sharon has agreed to review with me hundreds of photos that she keeps stored in boxes in the attic. As we open the first box of photographs, I feel like a detective in a BBC drama who is about to make a discovery. As I sit next to Sharon she continues to puff away. Her laughter is intoxicating. Sharon always gives what my black relatives call a ‘performance’. The previous evening, her husband, Everall, put on a blue work jumper and went up into the attic to retrieve close on five hundred photographs in boxes that are uncatalogued, unframed and unremarkable to the family.

We are seated side by side on a couch in the living room on a spring morning to sort and review the first several hundred photographs kept in shoeboxes. Sharon is now showing me photos taken between 1994 and 2004. Sharon and I systematically count every photo and discuss them. She provides the historical context and analysis as I listen and ask probing questions. The tape recorder is present and we discuss each set of photos on tape. The first photograph that we discuss is one taken during a family holiday in 1995 one day after we first met. This photo illustrates her close friendship with Roxie (also a participant in my research study), a white woman of working-class origins who is also married to a UK-born black man of Jamaican parentage. Roxie’s daughter and Sharon’s daughter are best friends.

As we review the photographs, Sharon provides ongoing commentary about the events depicted. I listen carefully for changes and continuities in her narrative as I evaluate the ways that Sharon constructs and reconstructs the narrative of her interracial life and of her marriage. I listen to how she simultaneously ‘erases’ race and

**Figure 4.** *'Children don't come with instruction manuals'. In an interview conducted in the spring of 2000 Sharon explains the ethnic boundaries and cultural differences that she has to negotiate within her black Jamaican family to France Winddance Twine and her best friend. Photograph taken in 2000. Copyright by Michael Smyth.*



racializes herself. I am particularly interested in the way that 'race' does and doesn't figure as a character in the family dramas depicted in the snapshots. We see a snapshot taken by Sharon from her hospital bed of her husband and her youngest daughter just moments after her

**Figure 5.** *In Sharon's kitchen examining Imani's baby book. Imani and Tanika look on as Sharon says 'I'm pregnant with Imani', Sharon says. Ev's mom, Ev's sister-in-law and Ev's brother-in-law are in the photograph that we are discussing.*



birth. Everal is holding Imani in his arms only moments after her birth. Sharon tells me that she is behind the camera. The next photograph is of Sharon talking on a cell phone after the birth of Imani? This photograph was taken by her sister-in-law. We then encounter several photographs of hospital room family gatherings to celebrate the birth of her two youngest daughters, Tanika and Imani. This is followed by the after -birth party at her home with her father sitting on the couch next to Sharon's sister.

A series of photos taken in the summer of 1994 show Sharon in various settings when Sharon was in an advanced state of pregnancy. Sharon was carrying her youngest daughter Imani who was born in October 1995. These photographs were taken six months before I recruited Sharon for my research study. I listen carefully as Sharon explains to me her analysis of this period in her life so that I can compare her translation and interpretation of this photograph to my analysis. I have developed a theory after listening to the years of taped conversations that we have had in which she discussed this same period.

*A wedding album: Official registers that conceal and reveal*

The wedding album is of white leather and consists of fifty pages. It is a treasured family archive of the career of Sharon and Everal's

marriage that demands to be opened. It is stored within easy reach of family members in a cabinet in the dining room that faces the garden. This album bears testimony to the 'official' formation of an interracial family and displays a 'white' wedding. White weddings are distinguished from 'civil registry' weddings in that the bride wears white and there is typically a church ceremony followed by a reception with family members and close friends. Sharon and Everal were married on 30 July 1983 five months after giving birth to her first daughter Rhea.

Sharon takes me on a visual tour of her wedding day in 1983 only months after the birth of her eldest daughter. The album depicts a handsome couple that has achieved respectability and appears to have the acceptance and support of their family.

Figure 6 is a photograph of Sharon and Everal smiling with his white parents-in-law. This photograph conceals the dramatic conflicts and struggles that Sharon described during the one year prior to this wedding. Sharon reported having been coerced into having an abortion by her mother, father and her future mother-in-law one year before giving birth to her eldest daughter Rhea. Describing that period to me in 1995, she explains what led her to decide to terminate her first pregnancy:

**Figure 6.** *Clockwise, Raymond Charles Moul (Sharon's father), Sharon Moul Dawkins, Everal Dawkins and Julia Moul (Sharon's mother) standing in front of the Leicester courthouse on her wedding day. Reprinted with permission of Sharon and Everal Dawkins. This is number 22 in the wedding album.*



My mum and dad weren't very happy either. And it was, well, they all came down for a family discussion. Everal's dad didn't come because Everal's dad isn't at all – he wasn't racist. He loved anybody and everybody... The family discussion consisted of Everal's mother, me, Everal, and my mum and dad... Everybody thought I should get rid of this baby. And they were like discussing me like I

**Figure 7.** *Sharon signs the wedding registry at the City hall. This photograph appears on page 16 of the 50 photographs that comprise the wedding album of the Dawkins family. Reprinted with the permission of Sharon and Everal Dawkins.*



wasn't there, you know . . . well, then Everal went and had a good talk with his mum and decided that he was going to finish with me [end the relationship].

These wedding photos conceal the trajectory of social suffering that preceded the marriage. The abortion and subsequent breakup between Sharon and Everal are not captured in any of the photos that appear in Sharon's album or in the boxes of photos. The photos that she shows me provide documentary evidence of a successful and happy marriage.

We are looking at one of my favorite wedding photos (see Figure 7). This photo was taken by a professional photographer hired to memorialize their wedding. In this photo Sharon is looking up directly into the camera as she signs the wedding register – this is the recording of the marriage for the state. Six months prior to this wedding Sharon gave birth to Rhea, the eldest of her four daughters. The last of the fifty photographs in the wedding album includes Rhea, her infant daughter.

Sharon and Everal were married in the summer of 1983 after a three-year struggle and a three-month separation following the termination of her first pregnancy. According to Sharon when Everal recommitted to their relationship, they agreed to what Sharon terms 'new ground rules' in which she renegotiated her role in his extended

**Figure 8.** *Clockwise Tanika Dawkins, Sharon Dawkins, and Rhea Dawkins in the kitchen discussing Sharon's wedding album with France Winddance Twine. Copyright by Michael Smyth. 2003.*





family. Within the first year after their reunion, Sharon became pregnant with Rhea. She described her pregnancy as an ‘unplanned planned pregnancy’. In my private discussions with Everal he never mentions the abortion or their separation although he did acknowledge that his mother made it clear that she wanted him to establish a relationship with a black woman, preferably of Jamaican parentage.

Photos are not a straightforward representation of social reality, rather they are, to some extent, staged, selected and assembled images that can convey contested aspects of a family’s interior life. Photo albums are ‘edited’ versions of family life since they rarely represent the total number of photographs that were taken or could have been taken. In my field research I have treated photograph albums as socio-racial maps that provide insights into how families ‘archive’ their intimate lives and assert particular racial projects (Twine 1997). How do families decide which photos are taken, collected, arranged, and chosen for display while others are discarded, destroyed, left buried in boxes in basements or attics? Answers to these questions provide insights into how families actively cultivate and generate representations of their intimate lives for private circulation and consumption by family members and friends.

**Figure 9.** *Sharon and her youngest daughter Imani “jerking” chicken for their Sunday dinner of traditional Jamaican jerked chicken, rice and peas, and vegetables. Sharon’s mother-in-law Mrs. Eileen Dawkins taught her how to properly season and prepare Jamaican jerked chicken. Copyright by Michael Smyth 2003.*



Family photo albums are a conventional form of storing, recording and negotiating the memories of individuals and families. Photographs tell particular versions of events in familial lives. In the case of Sharon and Everal Dawkins a journey through their album tells the story of two upwardly mobile people of working-class origin, both born in England, who fall in love and establish a family. It is a love story. It is the story of a white woman and her London-born husband of Jamaican parentage, who are parenting four daughters and now live in a spacious five bedroom, three bathroom home in a posh section of Leicester. Their boxes of photos chronicle twenty years of their relationship.

Yet another story remains outside the frame of these family snapshots. Another set of photographs that were not taken or never preserved provide a different set of images and tell another story. It is a story that Sharon has told me again and again over the past eight years. This is a story of abortion, abuse, alcoholism, alienation, and redemption. A young woman from a working-class family watches her mother physically battered each weekend by rituals of routine domestic violence. It is a home where childhood friends are banned from entering. It is the story of an abortion that is not recorded in the family album and of which her husband doesn't speak. This is the story of an interracial couple who encountered strong opposition from some of their family members. This other 'reading' remains outside the frame.

I 'read' these snapshots of Sharon and Everal's intimate life as their refusal to be constructed as anything but a respectable and loving family. These photographs insist on their respectability. Sharon has repeatedly said that she did not want her mother's life. Sharon argues that she married 'the opposite of my father'. She married a man who is neither white, nor an alcoholic, nor an abuser. None of the family photographs that Sharon pulls out of the boxes depict the conflicts and tensions of the first seven years of her marriage. Rather, they depict social cohesion and interracial harmony. Over the past eight years Sharon has described this same period to me as full of conflict. Instead, these photographs depict the joyful years – and the joyous events – the mundane and the momentous – the birth of children, the weddings, the annual holidays, the diaper changes, the laughter on couches, the children playing and the Christmas holidays.

*Conclusion: 'Honorary blacks' and the presentation of self*

A comparative analysis of the content of the photographs that Sharon collected and displayed in her family albums and the content of our semi-structured interviews and conversations over eight years (1995–2003) revealed tensions between the narrative that Sharon presented

**Figure 10.** Sharon Dawkins and France Winddance Twine in March 2004 in her living room 'reading' 400 family snapshot photographs taken between 1983 and 2003. Copyright by Michael Smyth.



during our private semi-structured interviews and our discussions with the photographs acting as a 'third party'. While these family photographs of planned events such as weddings, family annual dinners and birthday celebrations could be viewed as both 'staged' and 'spontaneous', these 'snapshots' of intimate moments, nevertheless also present idealized representations of Sharon's family life and her position in her extended family as what I term an 'Honorary Black' (Goffman 1959).

Hours of taped conversations over her kitchen table, at restaurants, in bars, in home improvement check out lines, and 'girls-only' nights out provide the context for my theoretical analysis of the photos as Sharon 'reads' these same photos to me. Photo-elicitation interviews provided a reflexive space for Sharon and I to discuss the *meanings* that she attaches to these visual representations of her familial life. This research method enabled me to compare how Sharon narrated her life with and without the photographs. In the context of eight years of conversations her analysis of her family photographs provided a lens on the racial struggles occurring outside the camera 'frame'. The photographs trigger memories but they also provide an opportunity for me to examine shifts and changes in the 'frames' Sharon employs in her analysis of her marital career. Sharon explains the changing dynamics of her relationships with her husband, mother-in-law, sister-in-law, friends and daughters. Her life is neither frozen in one moment

nor is her racial identity fixed, rather we can 'visit' her at different moments in her life through the photographs.

Sharon's analysis of her situations has changed over the years. Because this was a longitudinal ethnography she was able to rethink and analyse the continuities and changes in her familial relationships as she developed new repertoires and strategies for managing race and racism. Finally, Sharon's readings of photographs occasionally challenged or contradicted my analysis of her dynamic transracial life. The photographic archive that Sharon selected and discussed provided me with a reflexive method of evaluating and enabled *us* to revisit themes that we had discussed over the previous eight years. It also enabled us to critique or challenge the socio-racial maps that I had produced of her familial and friendship networks.

The photo-elicitation interviews revealed that Sharon is one of several white women who have formed stable domestic partnerships with black men in her extended family. She is not the lone white woman in the photos of her family. Women whom we have not discussed before appeared regularly. We come across a photograph of a white woman with blonde hair holding a baby standing next to Everal's older brother, a handsome black man. This is Tracey, Sharon's sister-in-law. She is the second wife of Everal's brother. When Sharon fails to comment on her or to identify her, I ask her to explain who she is because I thought that she might be Sharon's biological sister.

Another photograph taken from the perspective of Sharon's hospital bed in 1995 shows a white woman with a blonde pony tail holding Imani, shortly after her birth and smiling directly into the camera. This is Nicole, the best friend of Sherrill, Sharon's sister-in-law. She regularly appears in photographs of 'family dinners' and at 'hospital births'. Nicole appears to be invited to most of the major family holiday dinners and private events. In our previous conversations in the absence of photographs Sharon has emphasized her racial isolation. Her white sisters-in-law have not been central in Sharon's narration of her life. Nevertheless they regularly appear in the photographs of intimate family moments, of births, weddings, annual family holiday dinners – events that display social cohesion. During the photo-elicitation interview it becomes apparent that several other white women have been incorporated into her black extended family. What distinguishes Sharon is not her whiteness, but rather her class origins. She appears to be the only white woman who is marked as being of *working-class* origin in her family. Sharon's commentary on these sets of photographs suggest to me that perhaps it is not her *whiteness* or racialization that has contributed to her feeling marginalized but rather her working-class origin and her cultural style. In other words, her discussion of her whiteness may sometimes be a code for her *class* disadvantage and that she brings a different set

**Figure 11.** *Sherrill Dawkins (sister-in-law) and Eileen Dawkins (Sharon's mother-in-law) clarify how race and class impact upon their relationship with Sharon. This photograph was taken during an interview with France Winddance Twine in 2004. Copyright by Michael Smyth. Reprinted with permission of the Dawkins family.*



of tastes into the family that threaten to disrupt the trajectory of upward mobility of her husband's family of Jamaican origin (Bourdieu 1984).

The family snapshots and staged photos of interracial harmony that depict family members smiling, kissing, hugging, eating and vacationing together also conceal the opposition to interracial formation from both sides of their family that Everal and Sharon have discussed with me. In separate and private conversations Sharon's mother-in-law, Mrs. Eileen Dawkins and her sister-in-law Sherrill agree that there have been conflicts. Mrs. Dawkins, argued that it was not Sharon's whiteness, but the cultural values that she had acquired from her parents that posed a threat to the respectability of her family. Sharon was perceived as not being capable of running a household that was either morally or culturally appropriate for Jamaican-British children. The conflicts and tensions between Sharon and her Jamaican mother-in-law are concealed by photographs that show them laughing and engaged in playful banter on Christmas Day.

The conflicts that they each described were performed beyond the frame of the camera lens. Should we dismiss the scenes of harmony and laughter depicted in these family photos? Do these scenes of harmony and laughter represent 'partial truths' or do they reflect

what this family aspires to and desires – the ideals of intimacy that they share?

Ten years ago when I first met Sharon she seemed to be still struggling with her grief and anger over the termination of her first pregnancy. In our earlier interviews Sharon focused primarily on conflicts and tensions with her mother-in-law. Sharon may have emphasized certain aspects of her family life while de-emphasizing others because of what she was struggling with at that particular moment in her marriage. At that time the questions that I posed may have directed Sharon to focus more on issues that concealed the degree of social cohesion and affection that exists in this family. Another interpretation is that Sharon may consider 'my' research study as an avenue for her to give voice to 'her' concerns and frustrations about her black mother-in-law.

During the photo-interview Sharon viewed her life from the perspective of a 20-year marriage that had produced four daughters, marital stability, financial security and immersion in a black extended family. Our photo-interview called my attention to how much she appeared to enjoy her social life with her black in-laws. I could almost hear the laughter in the photographs. The photo-interview combined with my analysis of the photographs brought into sharp relief the emphasis that I had placed on conflicts, tensions and racial troubles while not considering the degree of social cohesion that existed. Sarah Pink cautions us to remember that photographs are ambiguous and unpredictable in their meaning. She argues that 'Like other items of material culture, visual images have their own biographies. When they move from one context to another they are, in a sense "transformed": although their content remains unaltered, in the next context 'the conditions in which they are viewed are different' . . . Photographs and video images are interpreted in different ways and by different individuals at different points in ethnographic research, analysis and representation. (p. 95) The tensions between these staged and harmonious images of Sharon smiling, laughing, playing with her family members and the private suffering she reported to me over the years including the termination of her first pregnancy demonstrate how photographs can be used in photo-elicitation interviews to revisit themes and introduce reflexivity by creating the discursive space for family members to revise and reframe past struggles in the context of the changes that have occurred in their lives.

In the context of a longitudinal ethnographic study of race, ethnographers can employ photo-elicitation interviews to evaluate how individuals reframe, redefine and rework the meaning and significance of 'race' and racism over the course of a marital career. Race recedes and comes back into relief as individuals respond to

crises in their life. They develop repertoires for negotiating 'race' and 'racism'. Death, divorce, births, weddings, illnesses, and career changes can alter the ways that individuals interpret, narrate and present their intimate lives. Members of interracial families, like members of mono-racial families, continually 'edited' their previous narratives as their story lines were disrupted by births, illnesses, divorces, deaths and career changes.

In the case of Sharon Elizabeth Dawkins, when we discussed her life during photo-elicitation interviews, she emphasized what she had achieved during her marriage and her inclusion in the family as "an honorary black". The theme of social cohesion and respectability rather than isolation and alienation were more prominent as she examined her life. In contrast to earlier interviews, during the photo-elicitation interviews Sharon projected a racial self and a family profile that was more 'racially unified' than the one that she presented in previous years.

Sharon presented varied 'readings' of her life across the life cycle of her marriage. The differences in her analysis of the significance of 'race' and 'racism' in her life are linked, in part, to the dynamic nature of her relationship with her husband and her in-laws. Photo-elicitation interviews generate data that can complement and challenge field notes, participant observation, and racial consciousness interviews. They provide a rich source of empirical data that can advance theories of how race and racism are negotiated in the context of aging, class mobility, heterosexual marriage, racial hierarchies and gender inequality in longitudinal studies of interracial intimacy.

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## Notes

1. See the Norton centennial edition of *The Souls of Black Folks* by W.E.B. DuBois. In this critical centennial edition of *The Souls of Black Folks* which Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Terri Hume Oliver edited, the black and white photographs that originally illustrated DuBois' 1901 article were reprinted and included.
2. For a discussion of the use of the visual in sociology and anthropology see chapter five in Elizabeth Chaplin's *Sociology and Visual Representation* (Routledge, 1994), p. 198.
3. One exception is the journal *Contexts*, a journal established in 2002 and financed by the American Sociological Association, regularly publishes photo-essays.
4. I conducted racial consciousness interviews in Leicester and London. I only employed the photographs in my Leicester interviews.
5. See *Just Black?: Multiracial Identity* (1991) which was co-produced by France Winddance Twine, Jonathan Warren and Francisco Ferrandiz as an example of the use of video to produce a visual record of how individuals conceptualize the meaning of race in their lives.
6. Leicester is a city in the East Midlands that is located 99 miles North of London by rail. In 1994 Leicester had a population of 293,400 with whites constituting 71.5 per cent.
7. I produced a separate set of photographs that were not used in my photo-interviews. These included 1,650 photographs taken by Michael Smyth of the streets, material culture of the home and various family members. In 2000 after completing four years of field research I began a collaborative relationship with Michael Smyth, an Irish photographer who agreed to accompany me to the selected homes of twenty-five families who had granted us permission to photograph their homes and their family members.
8. My use of photographs differs from that of visual anthropologists and visual sociologists who have employed either archival photographs or images that they produced specifically for use in photo-elicitation interviews (Collier and Collier 1986; Schwartz 1989; Harper 1994). For example, Lauren Clark and Lorena Zimmer (1999) provided mothers with disposable cameras to document their lives and they employed the photographs generated by the mothers in their interviews and analysis. In contrast to this I only employed family snapshots or photographs taken by professional photographers hired by family members to record weddings, funerals, birthdays, etc.
9. Mr. Smyth had accompanied me to Sharon's home on two previous occasions in 2000 and 2003 to shoot photographs of her family.
10. All photographs were taken with Sharon's permission and with the understanding that I could not guarantee confidentiality if the photographs were published. Sharon and Everal gave their permission to publish their real names along with the photographs with the understanding that the photographs would be used to accompany academic publications that reported my research findings. I also provided Sharon with copies of photographs taken by Michael Smyth of her and her family, for her private use.
11. During the nine years that I have conducted research for this project Sharon has regularly invited me to her home to share meals, accompany her on family errands, attend social events on her 'girls-night' outings with her closest friends, and to business meetings with her business partner.
12. I conducted my first photo-interview with Sharon in her home in 8 March 2004. During this photo-interview, Michael Smyth, a professional photographer based in Dublin, accompanied me to shoot additional photographs of Sharon's home. Mr. Smyth also accompanied me to Sharon's home to shoot photographs of her and her family on two previous occasions in 2000 and 2003. Sharon directed me to specific aspects of the photographs that were meaningful to her and thus she provided a 'frame' that brought into relief her racial logics. These photo-interviews allowed Sharon to revisit selected moments in her life and to discuss the meaning of race in the photographs.



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