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Looking and Telling, Again and Again

The Documentary Impulse

by Tom Rankin



Copiah County, Mississippi, 1990, courtesy of the author.

In the days immediately following the terror in Charleston, South Carolina, and the murder of nine people attending bible study at the Mother Emanuel A.M.E. Church, I was certain I heard a particularly revealing comment on the radio from Reverend Norvel Goff. Reverend Goff, presiding elder of the 7th District A.M.E. Church in South Carolina, became interim pastor of Emanuel A.M.E. after the murder of Reverend Clemente Pinkney. Reverend Goff officiated all of the memorial services in the weeks following. I'm convinced I heard him, in an interview with NPR or some other in-depth radio program, say that he and others at Mother Emanuel were to the point of "thinking in photographs," having witnessed so many images in the news. Reverend Goff's insightful way of talking about the power and primacy of the visual message struck me as even more interesting for the fact that he was so often the one photographed, so often among those represented in the media. Even those in the middle of such a dramatic and difficult time, I thought, could see how photographs were beginning to define the experience for all of us. As I went to confirm just what Reverend Goff had said so that I could quote him verbatim I could find no trace of any comments about photography. Had I dreamed it? Did I simply imagine this eloquent minister as visual culture critic? Or were the photographs working on me in a way that I was the one "thinking in photographs"?

Jon Sersie-Goff, Reverend Goff's son and a student in our MFA in Experimental and Documentary Arts Program at Duke, was not aware of his father's comments, but, like me, he was very much drawn to the idea. He, too, set out to confirm just what his father might have said. He found nothing. When he asked his father, Reverend Goff recalled nothing of the sort. I had, it is clear, heard something that was not said — or, more likely, imagined something that was never said, but certainly could have been. The powerful abundance and ubiquity of images does begin to define how we understand an experience, even for those within the action, even those whose lives and actions and words are the "content" of those images. Whether Reverend Goff was thinking of the Charleston terror in photographs or not, many of the rest of us were. Much of the darkness, power, and redemption in Charleston and the unfolding events throughout those several weeks came to us through images. Words almost always accompanied the pictures, but it was those still photographs, along with live and recorded video, that combined with all else we read and heard to describe and evoke place, emotion, and the relentless outpouring of anger and compassion.

We also learned as much or more about the accused and indicted murderer Dylann Roof through photographs as from any other source. We can never erase the images he made of himself — did he use a self-timer or did he have help? — at a range of historic sites around South Carolina. Posted on his own website, these photographs surely tell us as much about his twisted, evil madness as anything

else ever will. We know from this dark photographic collection where he went, what symbols he embraced, how he wanted to “frame” the historic sites he visited, and much about how he wanted those images to live in the world of the Internet. Frances Robles, writing in the *New York Times*, explained that Roof’s website contained “a stash of 60 photographs, many of them of Mr. Roof at Confederate heritage sites or slavery museums . . .”¹ The primacy of photographs in what little we do know about Dylann Roof is extraordinary, and mostly from his own self-portraits, his own self-documentation.

* * *

Driving in Anderson County, Tennessee, in 1990, I turned onto a divided highway in the town of Clinton and saw a car on the side of the road with an open hood emblazoned with a Confederate flag. Despite a range of southern stereotypes in the media and beyond, this is not a common sight in the modern South. I forget where I was going or how much time I had or didn’t have, but I quickly decided to stop in hopes of photographing. I asked what was wrong, and the driver said he thought the battery was dead. We proceeded to hook their car to my Isuzu Trooper to get them back on the road. I don’t recall exactly when, but sometime in the transaction I asked if it was all right to take some pictures, that I noticed the flag-painted hood, that photography is what I do. What else could they say but “yes,” given their own needs at the time.

We talk often about reciprocity in the documentary process, about the nature of the exchange when photographs are made. I remember thinking in that moment, with more than a little silent internal irony, that this exchange might be one of my clearer reciprocal formulas: a jump start of a dead battery for 8–10 photographs. How could they know what I was really seeing in the moment? I didn’t even know what any of it meant—do I even now?—and yet I knew from intuition and the obvious sense of paradox that I simply had to make pictures. The Lost Cause emblem was what drew me to the scene—that, combined with the sense of the Old South stranded on the side of the road. The broken-down South—this particular South, stars and bars so prominent—was undeniably objectionable but also visually alluring, so powerfully evocative for what it suggested about our time and place far beyond the particularities of these people’s auto dilemma. While I was very glad to help someone get their car back on the road, this was hardly a simple Good Samaritan act, as I knew why I had really stopped. In this very quick engagement with these folks (perhaps ten minutes all-told) is the conundrum of the documentary process. They had a Confederate flag on their hood for one reason; I saw in it something very different, something representative of a more troubling reality. How could one not photograph?

“Documentary is an approach, not a technique,” wrote Roy Stryker, the head of the Farm Security Administration historical section. “An affirmation, not a



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negation.” One could easily misunderstand his focus on “affirming” to be simple celebration or praise, a kind of uncritical look where the documentary artist steps lightly so as not to render any scene, community, or group of people in critical light. The documentary tradition has always included points of view that seek to embrace and affirm, to bring respect and notice to populations and places that are deeply misunderstood or not well enough known. And the documentary tradition is also filled with expressions of critique and concern, work that seeks to intervene and make change. As Scott Matthews reveals so completely in his analysis of documentary work in Hale County, Alabama, the “privilege of perception” that often accompanies the documentary enterprise can leave us all pondering just whose world we are seeing, hearing, or reading—the world of the observer or of those observed? Just what does it mean to make work to “affirm” rather than “negate,” how do we find a documentary voice that makes room for the documentary artist’s point of view, yet also embraces what Matthews terms the “resistance of the documented,” those voices of local people who talk to us in ways we understand but would rather not hear? In our acts of documentary telling where we, in Stryker’s words on photography, “take off the waste[,] take off the essentials, and there stands the stark, exciting, . . . the thing that was most important about that particular scene,” we describe and interpret only a fraction of our experience,

often revealing only a sliver of the core in hopes of creating with authenticity and power. And, in so doing, we leave out as much or more as we describe, edit our individual vision to tell what we know from being there.

This special issue of *Southern Cultures* attempts to explore the myriad tangles of making documentary work—ethnographic, literary, photographic, historical, artistic—about ourselves, others, and a variety of places both intimate and unfamiliar. Katy A. Clune’s essay about the Laotian community in Morganton, North Carolina, reveals the powerful ways in which food serves as core identity, a kind of completely portable home, a way to enter the new and strange lands of western North Carolina, establishing and embracing home through the making, eating, and sharing of food. Kyle Warren and photographers from Student Action with Farmworkers use detailed documentary description to render the quotidian lives of migrant farmworkers, transient and eloquent when looked at and listened to carefully. With a natural narrative gift for empathetic description, Warren paints an expansive picture of farm work stretching across the American South, made possible by his firsthand observations.

Many years ago I worked in collaboration with the Learning Center in Tutwiler, Mississippi, on a project with University of Mississippi graduate student Daniel Sherman. Continuing in the spirit of some of that work with children, Paige Prather’s collection of photographs and writing locates the control of perception and representation with the youth of Tutwiler. In their photographs and collaborative poetry, they provide a deeply intimate view of their own place, not as strangers come to town, but as residents trying to develop a way to talk about the most common and perhaps mundane aspects of the everyday. Cody Sykes, in his “Shy People,” transports us to the heart of the documentary gaze when he writes: “They don’t want anyone to see their faces. / They feel like someone is going to make fun of them. / They put their hands up.”

With a similar interest in the community’s vision of history and culture, Karida L. Brown’s “On the Participatory Archive,” about African American life and memory in Eastern Kentucky, is a powerful example of the universal impulse of the documentary enterprise. “Returning” to her family’s home in Lynch, Kentucky, for her own research, she collaborates with others whose own personal and family archival collections are local windows in on the rich experiences of African American coal families in Harlan County, Kentucky. An archive, so often thought to be a passive collection of “documents,” becomes a vital, living, narrative force when led and curated as Brown is doing in collaboration with community members and the Southern Historical Collection at UNC.

A primary intervention in the “privilege of perception” is certainly the widening of the lens, the expansion of the conversation to include more voices from both outside and inside communities. As Brown’s project does so compellingly so does the self-documentation by Nora Carpenter, featured in Emily Hilliard’s



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“Written and Composed by Nora E. Carpenter.” Known in her day and locales as the “Queen of Magoffin County,” Carpenter’s collection and song performances sit beside and in contrast to folksong collectors such as Alan Lomax who traveled into her community and the surrounding area.

Two photographic essays transport us to two very different terrains of the South. Aaron Canipe, beginning with his long associations with his uncle’s store in Lincoln County, North Carolina, looks at his home territory as “a native son posing as a tourist.” These images, rich in the sense of color of familiar place and ritual, reveal patterns of complexity and luminance in the most benignly obvious spaces and situations. Marcus Journey, through his Shreveport, Louisiana photographs of Mormon missionaries and their work, explores the transience of Mormon service and calling, doing documentary work within his own religious background and through clear understanding and reciprocity (pizza and rides around town in exchange for considered observation and photographs).

Kenneth Janken’s essay on the value of memoir in reconstructing history—an exploration of the challenges of discovering the possible power and limits of personal memory—reminds me of how important the emotional truths of story can be even in their most misremembered or distorted iterations. I’m also reminded of Frederick Douglass’s autobiography and the power of the first person witness

he brings to the page; there, his narrative contains the truths of both head and heart. Douglass's accounts, contends scholar Houston Baker, "carry more weight as 'authentic' utterances in a literary universe of discourse than in an historical one," suggesting the delicate merger of history and of personal experience as told in a story, of the more detached views of the outsider and the more complex familiarity of "being there." We see here the implicit tension of first-person accounts, subjective and singular, when held up against the ideal of a more "objective" goal of historical writings. Janken affirms the value of embracing both the remembered and the documented, the personal account of things past along with the primary sources from traditional archives. With poetic resonance in keeping with remapping our earlier days, Jesse Graves's poem, "Astronomy," instructs us to "Let the past have its dominion tonight," urging a look, a read, a tracing *again*.

In her first novel *The Cheer Leader*, my wife Jill McCorkle has Jo Spencer, the main character, looking through an old scrapbook and a box of family photographs. "And I did look again — again and again," says Jo. She sat on the floor with the box of photographs, going "through one by one and try to put them in chronological order so I could see myself, my history, the parts I could not remember." Writing "B.J. (before Jo)" on the photographs taken before she was born and circling herself when she appeared served as an important act to mark the collection as her own. "I call them pastshots," McCorkle writes, a clear nod to the power of snapshot in helping us recover lost memories. In the process of looking through all the pictures Jo Spencer comes across an "unexposed" photograph, completely dark, nothing recognizable in the frame. And yet, based on the other pictures it is grouped with from a Girl Scout campout, she imagines what is actually there, what the picture holds in the darkness, how even the remnant of a flawed image conjures worlds previously forgotten. At the conclusion of Jo's tour through the photographs, through the "pastshots" and "loose shots," she comes to one of herself as a young college girl and reflects, "I'm not even looking at the camera. I'm looking at my hands like a complete fool, but pictures get that way, old and strange, some of them total misrepresentations of the given moment." And yet, we keep looking, keep returning, keep finding fundamental truths in our pictures, keep making more pictures. Like the range of contents in this issue of *Southern Cultures*, we strive with all we have to make full representations of what sits in front of and around us, trying to make something lasting and true that will bring us back once again to reflect — again, again, and again — on just what transpired, what it all means.

NOTES

1. Frances Robles, "Dylann Roof Photos and a Manifesto Are Posted on Website," *New York Times*, June 20, 2015, http://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/21/us/dylann-storm-roof-photos-website-charleston-church-shooting.html?_r=1, accessed December 7, 2015.