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The Narrative Power of Photography: Two Paragraphs and “The Limits of Forgiveness”

Abstract

A picture is worth a thousand words and a photograph can change the world. These may seem like exaggerated common phrases, however, the sense of freedom that prevails from both ideas casts light on the basic human needs to see, create, and believe. The thousand unspoken words in a picture set imagination free and leave the story up to the viewer to create. A photograph that depicts an emotionally striking reality changes how the entire world thinks and leaves the story up to the viewer to believe. Many photographs were taken to depict difficult times in history, such as the Civil Rights Movement. While it may seem that photographers’ goal with these photos was to represent an African American struggle, it can also be they wished to reflect *any* struggle of a demeaned human being. As seen with the 1957 photograph of Elizabeth Eckford and Hazel Bryan, photographs have effective narrative powers when viewers are able to see the story as less general and more specific to their own life hardships. Given this, it all comes down to questioning why the 1957 photograph is more trusted than the 1997 photograph even if the subjects are the same. It appears that a story of past injustice that was captured naturally can be so powerful and haunting as to set limits on the forgiveness that a modern staged photograph tries to portray. The photographer Will Counts tried to replace the past with the present, but distinct categories of “before” and “after” are not always possible. Thus, the “limits of forgiveness” that cast doubt on photographic truth is where this story begins and ends.

The headline reads: “A Life is More than a Moment,” just like a photograph is more than a scene with a subject. A photograph actually tells a story – a story that represents more than a simple moment in a person’s life that a camera captures. The power of photography can actually form a bridge between the story of the past and the story of the present. An iconic photograph has even greater narrative power since it captures the essence of the struggles of the time and age in which it was taken. Indeed, one of the most famous photographs of the Civil Rights era is the 1957 image of Elizabeth Eckford, a fifteen-year-old black student who sought to desegregate the all-white Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas along with eight other students. A black female was not the only subject of this photograph. The racist evil of the time period screamed through the face of a white student named Hazel Bryan, who specifically stood out from the mob

of angry people in the background. Will Counts, a young photographer for the *Arkansas Democrat*, captured the moment and the picture immediately flashed around the world (Masur 15). This photograph is rated one of the top photographs of the twentieth century and it is important to understand how it changed the world's outlook on racial integration. If anything, the narrative power of photography did not diminish after Eckford's hardships were portrayed. Yet, the photograph continued to haunt its subjects and viewers, allowing the story to extend over forty years until Counts decided to stage another photograph of Eckford and Bryan in 1997. Only this time, it would be under the alleged umbrella of forgiveness and human progress.

While both photographs have been challenged in terms of their photographic truth, the 1997 (staged) photograph, which tried to represent forgiveness, has been more of a controversial issue since the world is still haunted by the clear and horrid injustice reflected in the 1957 photograph. Also, the second photograph is debatable when the subjects' drives for self-interest are considered, especially because "some people accused Bryan of seeking the media attention that Eckford had spent a lifetime avoiding" (Tougas 36). Luckily, the narrative power of photography can be a useful tool to compare these two photographs. Since both the 1957 photograph and the 1997 photograph tell the story of the same two people, the question deals with why one of the photographs could be controversial in the meaning it represents while the other remains genuine with its world-impacting story. An important extension to this query deals with whether or not a photograph being staged impacts how viewers accept it as truth. The theoretical frameworks to explore this question will revolve around photographic truth, the implications of a fixed image, and "the limits of forgiveness" when considering why the second photograph is so hard to trust. There is no clear answer since the challenge of photographic truth can be applied to any photo. Being that both photographs were taken by the same photographer

and featured the same subjects, in theory both photographs should have communicated equal storytelling powers. Yet, there is more to photos than subjects. It is possible that since the 1957 photograph was taken so naturally and is permanent in the haunting meaning of injustice it represents, its notable storytelling power is what places the limits of forgiveness and the challenge of photographic truth on the (staged) 1997 photograph. Also, perhaps human nature identifies better with a story of injustice that may resonate with a similar situation the viewer himself was once placed in, rather than a story of forgiveness that is subject to skepticism.

There certainly is history behind the world-famous 1957 photograph of Eckford and Bryan. The setting is in the South, in the year 1957, when President Dwight D. Eisenhower sent the 101st Airborne to escort nine black children to Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas (Cose 41). Eckford was among the nine students who had been selected to enroll. This high school was the first high school in a major southern city set to be desegregated since the United States Supreme Court ruled three years earlier in the *Brown vs. Board of Education* case that separate education was unconstitutional (Margolick). After claiming that desegregation would lead to violence, Governor Orval Faubus ordered the National Guard to keep black children from attending the school. However, the black students still made plans to enter as a group. Eckford's family had no phone, so Elizabeth never got the message. When she came alone, she was sent away by Faubus's soldiers and left to the angry mob (Cose 41). David Margolick, author of the book *Elizabeth and Hazel: Two Women of Little Rock*, explains how this photograph promised a historical bond, since for Eckford and Bryan “within an hour or so they would, and from that moment on, their lives would be inextricably intertwined. For long after that—as long, in fact, as the tortured saga of relations between the races, in the United States and everywhere else, still mattered, or as long, when it came right down to it, as people can see—they would be linked”

(2). This shows the unparalleled power of photography in making a captured moment the eternal bond between two subjects, which endures through time as long as people have the ability to see and hence believe. Thus, this photograph is a constant reminder of the struggle of the Civil Rights Era and just like it represents history it actually made history in terms of how it brought the realities of racial tensions to the forefront and changed the world perception of integration.

Moreover, since the Arkansas Democrat is what published Counts' lasting photographs, it is important to elaborate on the role it played in making the Civil Rights struggle a visual reality. The executive editor today, Griffin Smith jr., declares that "at the time, the two Arkansas papers were "covering their hearts out". During the 37 days in 1957, the competing papers printed 385 front page stories and 134 front page photographs" (Robertson). Indeed, such intense circulation correlates with the need to make the 1957 events national news, especially during a time when everything regarding desegregation was such a hot topic. Thus, this was their chance to "cover their hearts out" not solely with words, but with photographs that offer a stronger connection with the story. When discussing the objectivity of reporting in 1957, Assistant Managing Editor Jack Schnedler suggests it was very accurate as he says, "obviously there weren't any black reporters on either paper to my knowledge. But the coverage, to my eye, was fair and not in any way what I would call pro-segregationist" (Robertson). This implies that although desegregation had not reached the papers yet in terms of jobs for black people, the editor still believes the reports can be deemed accurate representations of the events going on in 1957. Furthermore, to commemorate the 40th anniversary of the Little Rock school desegregation crisis, the paper went as far as to reprint the front pages of the newspaper at the time instead of asking people to rely on faulty memories (Robertson). This gives way to the idea of photographic truth in the sense that if these reports and photographs were accurate in 1957, then they must be accurate forty years later

and more reliable than people's memories. Thus, this provides a possible reason to why people identify with the 1957 photograph more since the reprinting of the past can cast doubt on the present. In other words, constantly reminding society of the injustice in the 1957 photo can prevent them from believing that a reconciliation photograph forty years later is genuine.

Some theories and frameworks will help to dissect the storytelling power of the two cases of photographs, taken by Counts and starring Eckford and Bryan. There are two frames that are general to the field of photography and one that is specific to this case. The first general frame deals with photographic truth and the implications it has on the story communicated and how viewers relate to the photograph's message. The author Louis Masur states that the 1957 "images of Elizabeth raise questions about photographic truth and documentary expression and much work has been done on these issues" (17). Photographic truth deals with whether the scene captured on camera is a depiction of reality or actually has misleading messages and self-driven intentions. Photographic truth can serve as a flaw to the narrative power of photographs and it is important to explore what makes the story of certain pictures so convincing in viewers' eyes. This flaw is what puts the 1957 and 1997 photographs in battle for viewers' trust, based on which photograph people connect with more. There is also the general theory of a fixed image's implication on imagination, which is discussed by both Baetens and Riascos and extends the idea of a viewer's ability to relate to a photograph. Riascos is a storyteller and Baetens compares and contrasts a fixed image to a photographic sequence. Riascos' perception is that a fixed image, being resolved and finished, leaves no room for further speculation by the viewer (257). Baetens contradicts this notion by claiming that a single, fixed photograph is so impacting that it allows the viewer to construct their own fiction of what is happening, perhaps by substituting their own life experience (147). These ideas are applicable when exploring which one of these theories

regarding fixed images applies more to the world famous 1957 photograph and helps explain why society's response was so strong to such a depiction of injustice. Was it the limits on imagination or the freedom of imagination that invoked this response in people?

Finally, there is a framework that deals specifically with the photographs of Eckford and Bryan regarding "the limits of forgiveness", an idea that is introduced in Masur's article. Masur states that "Elizabeth and Hazel serve to expose the limits of apology and forgiveness. There is nothing about which to feel upbeat, no easy moral, no simple narrative. The story is corrective to our collective fantasy that we can rectify the past" (17). This declares that forgiveness is not always as genuine as people would like it to be in effort to satisfy guilt over the wrongdoings of the past, which stare back from iconic photographs like the 1957 photograph. A photograph does tell a story, but it is not a "simple narrative". Nevertheless, this 1957 photograph is so permanent and arresting with the story it represents that it is hard to ignore it and try to take a new photograph not haunted by the photograph of the past. This theory is the backbone of the comparison between the photographic truth of the 1957 photograph and the 1997 photograph because it works to connect the past (limits) with the present (forgiveness). In the end, all three theories are related because to first connect with the photograph, the idea of a fixed image's implication on imagination comes into play. Next, photographic truth is under speculation and finally, the limits of forgiveness help modify how society accepts that visual "truth".

A black-and-white photo. A black, composed female in the front. A mob of angry, white people in the back. The nonexistent protection. The scream of racism. The silence of justice. The impeccable power of storytelling in photography is made clear through how the 1957 photograph continued to haunt not only Eckford and Bryan, but the entire world. A photograph does not simply have a transient effect on people, rather, its message and story endures throughout time

and serves as a constant reminder of history, which may seem as an intangible subject. A photograph is what makes history perceptible and everything that follows is subject to critique based on the message that is already set. In this specific case, the message that was set in 1957 was that Elizabeth was trying to get an education and Hazel did not want her to. Margolick says, “I think the picture kept pulling them back into the spotlight, because the picture became more and more famous with passage -- with the passage of time. It was the kind of thing that everybody, that you and I both saw in our American history books” (PBS). This explains the control that a photograph has on its subjects even after much time has passed. The photograph “pulls them back into the spotlight” because the message of the story that the photo tells is so socially impacting and is also an integral part of many lives. The picture did not end the story back then, but it keeps pulling the two women back as a means of seeking some sort of closure.

Ellis Cose, a renowned journalist, extends Margolick’s social influence perspective to an emotional response that this photograph sparked. “Fifty years after it first flashed around the world, that image retains its power -- evoking sorrow, even anger, that one so young would face such cruelty. Now a 65-year-old woman, Elizabeth Eckford still bears scars from that long, lonely walk as one of the Little Rock Nine” (Cose 41). This declaration gives way to the power of photography in exposing the truth since people would normally not believe by word of mouth that a young girl with a basic hope for education “would face such cruelty”. It also discusses how Eckford still “bears scars”, which can be taken literally as physical scars but also figuratively to go along with how photographs are so permanent and will continue to show a scar in history. Furthermore, simply comparing the facial expressions of the two women is haunting in itself since “Elizabeth Eckford’s stoic expression was in sharp contrast to Hazel Bryan’s snarling face” (Tougas 30). The “stoic expression” will forever be a reminder of the African American

perseverance for equal rights and the “snarling face” will forever represent a scar in history due to American race tensions. Therefore, a characteristic property of photographs lies in their withstanding power to haunt the world no matter how much time passes. This is an important consideration when evaluating why the recent photograph claiming forgiveness is such a controversial issue in terms of its story. The world cannot simply stage a new photograph which ignores the past that stares back from an old photograph. Meaning builds upon meaning and starting from scratch is not always feasible, especially when that meaning is a scar from the past.

A colored photo. The background of people disappeared. The Central High School building is the substitute. Only two people remain: one white and one black. Both silent; both smiling. The 1957 photograph told an unforgettable story of a Civil Rights fight and the same photographer Counts thought it was possible to replace a story of the past with a story of the present through a new photograph, under the headline of forgiveness. Masur described that Counts’ “new photo of Hazel and Elizabeth reunited, arms behind one another’s backs, made headlines. Here was proof that the civil-rights movement has not gone backward. Here was proof of human progress and the power of forgiveness” (16). This rather extreme opinion is significant in the way it suggests that such a simple photographic moment can tell the story of the passage of time and how it pushed for progress with the wronged being visually compensated. However, the word “proof” and its repetition is subject to doubt when analyzing what counts as solid evidence and how this is different for every viewer, especially one who remembers the 1957 photograph and identifies more with its story of hardships. John Tagg, author of the book "The Disciplinary Frame: Photographic Truths & the Capture of Meaning," complicates Counts’ idea of replacing the past with the present. Tagg believes “photography, is a map of motley differences, identities, jurisdictions, borders, and exclusions that charts a territorial project: the marking out of a yet-to-

be-occupied landscape by the closures or power and meaning” (179–80). This suggests that a photograph is really nothing without a viewer’s own interpretation of “identities, jurisdictions, borders, and exclusions” that eventually fill the “yet-to-be-occupied landscape”. Thus, the “power and meaning” of a photograph varies from person to person, hinting that not everyone will learn to accept the 1997 “reconciliation” photograph because they may fill that unoccupied landscape with fragments of the story of the past: the story of 1957. It is likely that it all comes down to forming an identity and meaning for the photograph by relating to experiences that a viewer best identifies with. Thus, the idea of “proof” that Counts attempted to force on modern society is up to challenges of how the relative meaning of photographic truth varies from person to person based on what they already know from the past and how they relate to any story.

Many agree that photographs do have narrative power, however, there is controversy over whether or not a photograph tells a trustworthy story. The “limits of forgiveness” place doubt on the photographic truth of the 1997 staged “reconciliation” photograph of Eckford and Bryan, taken by Counts forty years after the original 1957 photograph. The most common controversy deals with the second photograph; however, there is also a counterargument to part of the thesis that supports the 1957 photograph in terms of its photographic and narrative truth. The thesis suggests that the 1957 photograph was not staged and was iconic in the way it so *naturally* captured the struggle of the time period. However, the counterargument raises the possibility that it may have been staged in a way. Hannah Arendt, one of the most influential political philosophers of the twentieth century, suggests that some circumstances could have staged the 1957 photograph, casting doubt on its photographic truth. Arendt states that “by all accounts, the black students’ parents and families had been told to stay away from the school – “It will be easier to protect the children if adults aren’t there” as School Superintendent Virgil Blossom had

put it. The girl, obviously, was asked to be a hero, that is, something neither her absent father nor the equally absent representatives of the NAACP felt called upon to be” (Lebeau 4). This quote hints that the 1957 photograph may not have been captured unexpectedly since the circumstances of no adult and police force intervention to protect Eckford worked to stage the famous scene. On the other hand, Masur’s description hints that there was no planning that staged the 1957 photograph since “Elizabeth, who never wanted attention, became the heroine of the story of desegregation; Hazel, who loved being on stage, was frozen in time as the contorted face of racial hatred” (15). Being that neither of the subjects got their rightful qualities represented in this photograph, this supports photograph truth and that the self-interest of the subjects is not a determining factor for analysis like it is with the recent photograph. Surely, the challenge of photographic truth is inevitable when discussing the narrative power of any photograph. Yet, it is different to say that circumstances staged a photograph versus Counts actually bringing the two women together after forty years and trying to force the idea of forgiveness on modern society.

Many times, small details of a photograph go unrecognized because viewers are too overwhelmed with the subjects and the background. For Eckford, it was the dress that was noteworthy. Margolick writes, “But when Elizabeth removed her skirt that night, then folded it up and handed it to her mother, she already knew she would never wear it, or even want to see it, again. As everyone else was coming to recognize it—for a time, that simple cotton skirt was just about the most famous piece of clothing in the world—Elizabeth set out to forget about it. It promptly went into the attic, and no one—Elizabeth included—ever laid eyes on it again” (2). This reflects how the skirt that “was just about the most famous piece of clothing in the world” was useless in the eyes of Eckford because it did not fulfill the purpose she initially had for it to represent a new beginning. Instead, it was captured on camera in a scene that represented

injustice and discrimination and she wanted to get rid of it because it will constantly haunt her. This exposes the permanency of photos and how moments that need to be forgotten cannot be since they are forever captured on camera. Thus, the “limits of forgiveness” makes an appearance early on in the story, even before the 1997 photograph. If Eckford cannot forgive a dress that she worked so hard on because it reminded her of a painful walk, how can she forgive Bryan who contributed to her pain? The professor Ulrich Baer brings up an interesting point about photography that may explain Elizabeth’s attitude towards her dress. “Photographs thus may uncover that experience is not solidly banked into the river of time but that it occurs outside of such a narrative, and that our lives are filled with moments that do not fit into any coherent sequence of a before and after” (Baer). This suggests that experiences, or in this case, difficult times are not just left to flow “into the river of time” and that it is not always feasible to have distinct categories of before and after. If it was possible to draw the borderline, it would have been much easier to believe the 1997 “after” story without referencing to the 1957 “before” story of the dress that went to waste. If there is no clear boundary between before and after, then this itself places the limits of forgiveness and challenges of photographic truth on the 1997 photograph because there is nothing to prove this is really an “after” reality when the dress that made an appearance in the “before” reality is still locked up in the attic.

Furthermore, Baer’s idea also works well for Bryan’s case since many years after “she is suddenly realizing that these little kids who are at her feet are going to grow up and learn that that girl in the picture is their mother. And she’s going to have to explain to them and who she was and why she did it” (PBS). Here, there is a direct implication of the storytelling power that Bryan’s photograph had on her own children’s curiosity. Given the permanency of the photograph and the unquestionable rage on Bryan’s face that was captured, a mother is forced to

tell the story of the story in the photograph to her own kids. Again, there cannot always be distinct categories of before and after and this is why the past haunts so much of the present and Bryan learned this the hard way by realizing that there will come a day when she has to look back and explain. Ernest Green, one of the Little Rock Nine, explicitly said, “here she is framed forever with her mouth spewing out whatever she was spewing out, and no matter what she does in life, she can’t erase that photo” (Tougas 36). The word “framed” implies such a strong and permanent bond to the photograph and works to strengthen the theory of “the limits of forgiveness” even more. Whether it is the dress that Eckford tried to get rid of, or the raging face that Bryan tried to keep hidden from her children, both elements must not go unnoticed in the 1957 photograph because they work to set the limits of forgiveness on the 1997 photograph, emphasizing the idea that there is no clear meaning of before and after like people wish to believe. Thus, a photograph that captures the injustice of the past really can change lives.

This photography subject became so attractive to me when I realized that a photograph means nothing if its story does not represent some sort of truth to the viewer. It was a topic where I can go beyond the obvious question of whether a photograph tells a story, and choose a specific case where I can actually delve into the query of whether a photograph tells a *trusted* story and what factors contribute to the trusting relationship a viewer builds with the image. This type of storytelling is more complicated than simply listening to a story because photographs add a visual component to the full-circle process of storytelling, which is when a listener both receives information and gives back a type of feedback in the endless circle of a narrative. Photographs put more of the human senses to the test and allow viewers to react with the elements of the story on a more emotional level, which the author Tougas makes clear when describing how “Will Counts’ photo of Elizabeth Eckford told the story of segregation in an

instant. But it did more than tell the facts – it provoked a reaction” (38). It was such a powerful scene that it summed up years of struggle in one moment that said all that needed to be said in terms of the facts, but left the subjective reaction up to the individual. Luckily, the power of a fixed image sets imagination free to create whatever story holds true in the eyes of the viewer – it does not have to be the universally accepted story because very few of those exist in light of the challenge of photographic truth. Rather, it has to simply be the story the recipient best identifies with in terms of personal experience and outlook on the world.

This research contributed many tools for exploring the narrative truth in photography. The starting tool is to realize that a photograph is more than subjects and just because two photographs featured the same stars and were taken by the same photographer does not mean the story remains the same. Also, the detail of a photograph being staged versus taken naturally must be taken into consideration when analyzing why the staged 1997 photograph was so hard to believe. There is also the idea of meaning that varies from person to person based on what they choose to fill the “landscape” of the photograph with in their own minds. Moreover, there is not always a well-defined line separating a “before” and “after”, alluding to why the “limits of forgiveness”. They exist because the present builds on the past and discrete categories are not always possible even when people wish to forget or force an idea on modern society that they do not want weakened when compared to anything from the past, even if it is a photograph.

An iconic Civil Rights Era photograph seemed like an interesting case to explore the narrative power of photography. In other words, being that the 1957 photograph was a wake-up call for the world and many people identified with it, it must have communicated a very powerful, multilayered, and unforgettable story. When looking beyond the surface of what everyone can obviously see in terms of a black student being prevented from equal education, the

story becomes much more complex and multifaceted, paving the road to many questions - especially the question of photographic truth. In light of the researched idea called “the limits of forgiveness”, the challenge that the narrative power of photography faces with truth and trust was explored. Research made it clear that there is no easy answer to this challenge, not with the 1957 original photograph of Eckford and Bryan under the headline of injustice and not with the 1997 staged photograph of the two women under the headline of forgiveness. What makes a clear answer difficult is the different ways of evaluating what kind of photograph a viewer identifies with and trusts more. It is likely that an audience identifies more with a story of injustice because it may resonate with a situation they experienced before. Moreover, whether or not a photograph is staged could determine whether or not a person believes its message because self-driven intentions are usually a strong ingredient of staged photographs. It all comes down to a one-on-one interaction between the viewer and the story as they personally see it. They use the freedom that a fixed image allows in terms of imagination to put together the story and then they subject this story to the question of photographic truth, given the different elements that can be analyzed in the photograph other than the subjects. In this specific case, the limits of forgiveness is the element of analysis that explains why a photograph of the present cannot replace a photograph of the past, given the permanent and withstanding meaning of the 1957 photograph. A photograph tells a story, but can that story be trusted? It is possible that a photograph is worth a thousand words and can change the world only when it is not trying to replace another photograph, since it would not be comparable to anything. If this is true, then it is easier to portray injustice than forgiveness; the black-and-white said more than the color can ever say.

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