

**THE SELFIE AS NEW MEDIA STRATEGY:
THE ONGOING LEGACY OF VISUALIZING LATINX EXPERIENCE**

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Fig. 1. Lineadeluz 2021. *El selfie declara*. 2020

ABSTRACT

In this writing I connect historical and contemporary vernacular image practices in their use to provide diverse representations of the Latinx experience. Beginning with a brief overview of the camera, I present the historical use of photography in the biased representation of certain communities. I then discuss vernacular photography and the photo album as tools to counter stereotypical representation. Highlighting the impact of technological developments on vernacular photography, I arrive at how smartphones and social media fostered new media practices that continue the legacy of visualizing the Latinx experience. Situating the selfie within contemporary vernacular practices, I explain how it generates belonging while also working against erasure on biased platforms. I conclude by reiterating how the selfie requires innovative, transdisciplinary scholarship to explore how new media is contributing to the autonomous, pluralistic and performative representations of the Latinx community.

Keywords: selfie, Latinx, visual culture, vernacular photography, new media

INTRODUCTION TO THE POWER OF PORTRAITURE

The urge to document oneself is far from new. As social beings, there is a need to leave a trace of the self for others to perceive and engage with. Exemplified within the sphere of the visual, having a portrait taken was a sign of wealth and status. A claim to memory and history making intrinsically tied to the mediums of the times. As technology developed, photography went from a long and expensive process, to a quick and accessible action. Although photography became more accessible, this did not mean that everyone was captured in the same light. Photography became an instrument to construct biased social narratives. As a result, vernacular image making became the source of collective memory for racialized communities that were excluded from institutionally archived history. In this writing, I will demonstrate the connection between historical and contemporary vernacular photography practices by members of the Latinx community in their use to counter stereotypical representation. Highlighting the importance of social media, I will assert the selfie as a new media strategy in building autonomous and diverse communal narratives.

Beginning with a brief overview of the photograph as a historical document, I explain how the camera's technical abilities placed it as a reliable documentation technology for memory. I present how photography served as a reference for upholding biased political narratives. Then, relying on Aperture's Latinx Photography issue, I situate vernacular photography and the photo album as a strategy for collective memory building. Coming into focus on the prominence of smartphones and social media, I discuss how these developments impacted the making and sharing of vernacular photography. From here, I offer my personal and artistic explorations with the selfie to connect this medium to larger practices of vernacular photography in Latinx visual history. Through this parallel, I demonstrate how individuals in Latinx communities continue building on the legacy of the personal archive on social platforms. As a result, I bring awareness to the potentiality of this image practice as a tool for autonomous representation for narratives that are historically overlooked.

The purpose of this writing is to build a bridge between the history of vernacular photography, archived in the photo album, and the selfie, a contemporary vernacular practice archived on social media. Through this connection, I exemplify how image practices on social media platforms carry on the legacy of vernacular photography as autonomous representation and resistance against erasure. In this way, I highlight the need for innovative, transdisciplinary scholarship focused on exploring the nuanced potentials of these types of performative, new media practices in generating holistic visibility for historically underrepresented communities.

PHOTOGRAPHY AND THE CONSTRUCTION MEMORY

In order to properly ground the goal of my writing, it is necessary to provide a concise overview of the camera and its use as a technology for representation. Since their development, the complex technical ability of cameras to capture light in real time placed them as accurate tools for documentation (Museum of Modern Art). This allowed photographs to be used as historical record, serving as verifiable and unquestionable sources of information. When it came to photographs of people, intentional and consensual portraiture was something that only very few had access to. This means that most historical photographs of people were taken with someone else's specific intentions. Early on in the history of the camera, academics such as scientists and anthropologists used images as a reference to study and catalog people (Bright). Unfortunately, oftentimes these photographs were used as resources and evidence to advance colonial, imperialist and eugenic efforts (Maxwell). This historical use of the photograph demonstrates how the camera is not inherently a neutral device. Instead, its user engages with performative dynamics that, quite literally, frame the photographer's ideologies, whether intentional or not. Furthermore, situating the camera as an infallible memory mechanism, allows photographs the power to construct the dynamics of past-present.

"Images have the capacity to create, interfere with, and trouble the memories we hold as individuals and as a nation" (Sturken). Thus, photography holds a tremendous weight on how collective memory is constructed through a literal representation of who is being seen and who

is not—a dichotomy of remembering and forgetting. Both the act of remembering and forgetting in a nation’s attempt at collective memory building is intentional and strategic (Sturken). As a result, the nature of photography is not only performative but intrinsically political as well. When considering a diverse nation such as the United States, the importance of collective memory becomes a crucial aspect of the people’s historical memory influencing the way that people of that nation see themselves. If we understand ourselves only by understanding our past, what does it mean for those not represented in the history of a nation? (Fung). As Czech writer Milan Kundera puts it: “A nation which loses awareness of its past gradually loses itself” (Sturken). It is here that I begin to present the significant role that vernacular photography plays in upholding collective memory for those marginalized from the historical narrative.

Vernacular photography is a term used for images created by individuals, often considered “non-artists”, created for a variety of purposes and reasons (Tate Modern). Since photographic practices are intrinsically tied to technological accessibility, it is noteworthy to mention that the creation of the Polaroid camera in the 1960s is considered as a major influence in democratic image making (O’Hagan). People now had the possibility to document their environments instantly, on their terms without the need of external forces. This development in technology not only changed the way images were produced but also gave people the means to decide how their communities were represented visually. Accordingly, I arrive at the importance of vernacular photography in forging strategies against cognitive colonization that relies on visual references to dominate how certain communities are perceived (Linklater). From this point forward, I will focus on the reflections raised in Aperture Magazine’s Winter 2021 issue on Latinx photography to specify how vernacular image practices impact visibility and create a rich representation of the variety in Latinx experiences.

CRAFTING LATINX MEMORY THROUGH VERNACULAR PHOTOGRAPHY

In their Winter 2021 issue, Aperture Magazine asked Curator Pilar Tompkins Rivas to edit their issue on Latinx photography. Immediately, Tompkins Rivas highlights how individuals

maintain Latinx visual culture through vernacular photography. The edition presents images “across a spectrum of history and futurity” that ranges from the nineteenth century to present time (Tompkins Rivas). Throughout the issue there are various approaches to how vernacular image practices played an essential role in harboring a record of such a diverse community. As Tompkins Rivas so poignantly writes, “Latinxs, while being a part of the fabric of the United States since its inception, and ubiquitous in urban centers and rural areas alike, are often rendered largely invisible through ongoing systems of erasure, exclusion, and disenfranchisement” (Tompkins Rivas). The effects of this exclusion is painfully evident in how the lack of Latinx presence in US History leads people to misinterpret this erasure as a lack of historical contribution, rather than the product of intentional omission. This without a doubt influences how Latinx communities are constantly othered, seen as not belonging in the US and unfortunately are “always on the edge of erasure” (Alemán). This visual disenfranchisement does not mean a complete inexistence of presence, but refers to how representations of the Latinx community fed into narratives of symbolic violence—in the form of stereotypes.

Further contextualizing this stereotypical representation within the issue, I was particularly exalted by Colin Gunckle’s article “Capturing Movimientos”. This article recounts the role of photography in the grassroots social justice movements of the 60s and 70s in the United States. In this particular time of Chicano activism, Gunckle states how: “the mainstream media both ‘underexposed’ Chicanos by ignoring them, while ‘overexposing’ them as criminals or social problems” (Gunckel). This statement exemplifies how visibility does not equate with accurate and respectful representation. Gunckle goes on to mention how this sparked a need to provide critical counternarratives through images. He explains how photography served a diverse range of purposes: as references for alternative histories, as tools for organizing and as sources for journalism (Gunckel). Specifically for the purpose of this writing, this article emphasizes how photographs served as a way for community determination through self-representation. Gunckel affirms how members themselves were active agents in

constituting their own history on their own terms. This shows how image making becomes a mechanism for community formation, accentuating the connection between photography and em(power)ment. Gunckle's article serves as a testament to the ways that visual production and cultural production go hand in hand in the construction of historical memory. Through this we are shown that vernacular photography frames the power dynamics of social relations in a given time. This means that these image practices are situated within the realm of the political. In the next section, I note how vernacular photographs, like the ones discussed in Gunckle's writing, were housed not by institutions, but in personal photo albums.

THE PHOTO ALBUM AS ARCHIVE FOR VERNACULAR IMAGES

As shown so far, vernacular photography is a potent source for piecing together the history of Latinx presence. However, a recurring theme throughout the Aperture issue is the challenging nature of sourcing the images produced by Latinx photographers. Throughout the edition, there is a constant mention of the amount of research needed to compile photographs of Latinx presence. Although there are some available in local city archives and university libraries, it seems that most are found in impromptu, personal collections (Alemán). Therefore, it is necessary to emphasize the importance of the photo album in housing the snapshots of everyday life that countered harmful narratives of the mainstream. Not seeing their lives accurately reflected in the mainstream US culture, led those with a camera to take their own images and build towards their own memory (Gunckel). The albums were central references for memory, constructing belonging in contexts of adverse migration and geopolitics. There is a symbolic importance of the photo album in preserving diverse aesthetics, ways of living and environments of the Latinx experience. These albums that housed individual histories implies a ceremonial dimension and can be conceived as "album rituals" (Görger). As a result, the photo album is crucial as a historical reference to draw parallels between the daily lives of individuals and the larger contexts of Latinx communities (Görger).

The diverse examples present in Aperture's Latinx issue that revalue and rework the album archives of Latinx histories, is an acknowledgement of the importance in generating a visual culture. Many of those mentioned in the magazine have undertaken the task of research and compiling Latinx photography out of their curiosity for the lack of references in their varied disciplines. This issue spans such a wide timeframe, reminding that there is still much that remains to be seen and critically analyzed for past and present Latinx photography. The institutional lag from across disciplines begs for a deeper assessment of these productions.

Personally, it made me wonder how these practices have paved the way for the type of contemporary image making happening within Latinx communities today—and the impacts of technology on these practices. I could not help but draw parallels between the camera/the photo album and the smartphone/social media feed. In continuation, I will present how vernacular image practices have shifted in more recent times, placing emphasis on the developments of social communications as a major influence in the way Latinx individuals are sharing their lives.

THE PHOTO ALBUM TURNED SOCIAL MEDIA FEED

Overtime, the camera has undergone many technological advancements and developments that have impacted the way images are made. Most notably, the integration of the camera into cell phones generated a new image culture. The 2007 launch of the iPhone allowed people to have a compact, relatively cheap image-making machinery with them at all times (O'Hagan). Photography took on a new role in the way individuals document their lives, with images being taken more frequently on phones over cameras. When Instagram was released in 2010, the focus was now on sharing photographs specifically taken on mobile devices (Blystone). This new presence of smartphones and social media platforms changed the way that individuals began documenting, storing and now, sharing their lives.

Undeniably, the use and prominence of the photo album in storing and archiving personal photographs changed with digital technology (Bright). As a result, Latinxs mobilized these new digital means for documenting and memory building. The social media feed is now

the place to share and archive vernacular images. As Star Montana explains, “on social media, people are actively practicing a diagnostic approach to sharing their experiences...there are more platforms for us to see each other” (Fragoza). As mentioned previously, Latinx presence and visibility within the historical institutionalized archive has been challenging to come by due to their intentional exclusion. Though the photo album served as a way to counter this, the material limits of the album still made it difficult for a widespread sharing of these communal histories. This was changed by social media whose infrastructure has generated new possibilities for personal expression, interpersonal connections and collective memory building.

Evidently, as social practices evolve so too must the way we analyze these changes. Aperture’s issue affirmed the need to create space for conceptualizing new strategies for assessing these image practices. Reading this issue as a queer Latinx visual artist, encouraged me to reflect on my experiences with memory making in my environment. Moreover, it made me question the challenge in finding a genealogy of language and concepts in order to contextualize my own practices and those of my peers. In the next section, I offer reflections regarding social media’s possibilities for an autonomous and pluralistic form of representative visibility. By aligning the selfie as a medium of digital vernacular photography, I present a material possibility for engaging in scholarship of contemporary Latinx photography.

REFLECTIONS OF THE SELFIE IN CRAFTING BELONGING

As Rosi Braidotti inquires, “what language is appropriate for expressing silences and missing voices?” (St-Gelais). For many, the selfie would hardly be the first medium that comes to mind as a strategy against erasure. Even so, this form has become integral to how we share ourselves currently. Oxford dictionary’s word of the year in 2013, the selfie is defined as: “a photograph that one has taken of oneself, typically one taken with a smartphone or webcam and uploaded to a social media website” (OED). Embedded within the larger socio-historical context of portraiture and self-portraiture, the selfie is a cultural response of our social interactions being mediated by social media platforms. A phenomenon of contemporary digital culture inscribing

the individual in a particular networked present (Eckel et al.). In the book “Exploring the Selfie”, editors Julia Eckel, Jens Ruchatz and Sabine Wirth compile tantalizing explorations regarding historical, theoretical and analytical approaches of the selfie within digital photography. Situating the selfie as both an image and a practice, they gather interdisciplinary contributions from the fields of: media studies, art history, cultural studies, visual studies, sociology, philosophy and ethnography (Eckel et al.). This book is a refreshing step towards enunciating the assorted explorations that selfie studies encompasses. However, there is a notable absence of analysis from the field of performance studies. The selfie is foremost an embodied practice. Engaging the individual physical and psychological performative action. Therefore, it is pertinent to present my own experience to appropriately expand on its effects.

As the daughter of Mexican immigrants born in the United States, my identity felt dichotomous. The effects of being crossed by so many cultural, geographic and historical divides constantly left me feeling that I was *ni de aquí ni de allá* (from neither here nor there). While I was exposed to both American and Mexican media, I never saw representation of bicultural individuals like myself. The only representations I had access to were the photographs my friends and I took of each other. Though I was constantly taking pictures, I did not think of them beyond a keepsake. However, this began to change after moving to Mexico City. Here, photography became a way for me to document my journey in this new phase of life. Instagram became the perfect way for me to share my images. Since the selfie was prominent within this platform, I began engaging more with this medium. The selfie became more notable in my explorations as an artist and it became an outlet for my yearning for belonging. However, the type of selfie culture that was common did not comfortably fit in with my intentions. This led me to start experimenting with face filters and editing in a way that evoked surreal, expansive representations of myself. These encounters with the selfie transformed frustrations regarding self-identification and morphed into a space to explore expressing my queerness.

This medium felt disruptive, my selfies had taken a turn to the abject— refusing to accept

norms, a way to reject and question visual languages. These images did not feel like self-portraiture, they had a different quality. They were the result of using very particular technology that platforms provided. Though many opposed relating to the selfie as a conceptual marker within their practice, I embraced the new set of possibilities it opened up. Reading Legacy Russell's manifesto *Glitch Feminism*, I encountered ideas that related to what I was perceiving. "Bodies in this era of visual culture have no single destination but rather take on a distributed nature, fluidly occupying many beings, many places, all at once" (Russell). Soon, my gender expression began informing other aspects of my identity. I no longer felt dichotomous, but felt more grounded in the naturalness of my multiplicity.

The diaspora of Latinidad left me unsure of where and how I belonged. Yet, the abject selfies I created opened up a new space for visually embodying the contradictions of identity. Visual artist Zhang Huan states, "the body is the only direct way through which I can know society and society comes to know me. The body is proof of identity. The body is language" (Bright). This sentiment came from my engagement with the selfie. It felt like finding a new language for ideas I have intuitively felt and understood but did not have the expression for. Through my network on social media, I found others also exploring the multifaceted aspects of their being. Others also challenging notions of gender, race and culture. This type of "embodied criticism" serves to recognize the lived intensity of being in resistance to hegemony through visual culture (Russell). It became evident that the selfie was becoming a way for individuals to express and challenge ideas around identity. The following section consolidates how the selfie situates itself as a vernacular strategy within the power dynamics of visibility.

THE SELFIE AS VISUAL STRATEGY AGAINST ERASURE

In order to appropriately attest to the power of the selfie as a visual strategy against erasure, it is necessary to contextualize how particular communities continue to be marginalized on social media. Although photography has granted an opportunity for individuals to represent themselves on their own terms, the platforms where these images are shared and housed

draws parallels to the continued historical exclusion at the hands of institutions. Technology is embedded with biases of its creators as much as those who use it—social media is no exception. The platforms we inhabit are built on normative algorithms that censor bodies that do not fit neatly into the white, cis, hetero expression of the self. Under the guise of community guidelines, there is substantial evidence about the disproportionate amount of censorship for gendered and racialized bodies on Instagram (Salty World). Censorship is varied and can mean: shadowbanning, removal of content, inability to promote posts or account deactivation. Particularly “shadowbanning”, does not offer a clear warning from Instagram in comparison to the other types of censorship. However, it is proven Instagram has the power to deprioritize accounts, meaning that content is restricted or hidden on the platform (Erlick). This shows that platforms, like Instagram, are inherently excluding communities that have historically been targets of disenfranchisement and exclusion.

Unquestionably, those deemed undesirable are targets of censorship by the built-in biases of platforms. Resisting this coded exclusion, the selfie is a ritual for upholding personal narratives by generating dissident presence on these platforms. This reframing of the abject presence of marginalized folks serves as a creative and disruptive force for political agency (Wark). The selfie resignifies the social complexities of self-representation through challenging representation on platforms. It is a poetic manifestation of presence against biased algorithms that censor non-normative, racialized identities. In this manner, the selfie continues the legacy of vernacular photography as a way to continue sharing lived notions of culture that would otherwise be unseen. A practice of visual decolonization showing that we are living in the multiplicity of our ways, despite efforts to continually exclude us. The discomfort the selfie generates results from the shifting dynamics of representation, challenging mediums of power that have historically excluded marginalized communities. Therefore, the selfie is a praxis of refusal against stereotypes that plague representation of marginalized bodies. A poignant reminder of the link between aesthetics and influence.

The selfie playfully blurs the line between self-portraiture and social document. It is a manifestation of the visual used for addressing social issues pertinent to communities (Bright). An evocative medium that speaks to the undeniable potential of vernacular photography as political praxis. Through a photograph, the body is potentiated as a vessel for politicized self-expression, becoming a space for navigating our own claims to history (Bright). This serves as a way to manage the historical trauma produced by the symbolic violence of a biased camera (Linklater). Through viewing the self as a reflection of social context, a nuanced focus on the selfie can shed light on the different lived experiences of a community (Bright). For a community whose history and culture spans transnational borders, the selfie encompasses the different ways identity expression is shaping up within Latinx communities. A way to establish authentic belonging through the recognition of the diversity of experiences. Through the proliferation of these vernacular photographs, there becomes a space available for others to identify themselves. In this way, the selfie is a worthy expression that serves as an invitation to the current state of visual memory making. A continuation in the autonomous footsteps of past Latinx photographers that perceived the importance of images as persuasive tools for crafting and communicating counternarratives for their own history making.

CLOSING REFLECTIONS TO CONTINUE QUESTIONING

Aperture's Latinx issue provides glimpses into the past while loudly announcing the need to continue inquiring into the contemporary photographic processes within our communities. The selfie is just one example of the vernacular engagements that are occurring on social media, which is providing unprecedented sharing of various curated archives. These examples can be seen in the archival work of Guadalupe Rosales with the Instagram account *Veteranas And Rucas*, which aims at "reframing our past by sharing our stories for better futures" (Rosales). As well as that of the *Archivo Trans* by María Belen Correa who wants to "protect, construct and revindicate trans memory" (Correa). Sharing photographs on social media can be a type of public testimony, one of the many strategies for communal healing

against historical traumas of being excluded (Linklater). Through these actions, remembering and sharing our lives becomes an act of survival, an active role in going against erasure. It is also a form of expressive therapy, inducing catharsis through visual autobiography. We have just begun to question and explore how individuals are using new media to build visual languages to tell their stories on their own terms.

Photography is an impactful tool that influences how we see history. An image practice that can either uphold or challenge what is seen as normal and accepted. What I have presented here raises critical assessments for the importance that digital vernacular image making, like the selfie, has in contributing to our visual culture. There is a transdisciplinary need to conceptually enunciate the effects and contributions of these practices in belonging for the Latinx community and the nation at large. Echoing Tompkins Rivas' closing remarks: "how may we understand the power of image making when we see young Latinxs rendering themselves visible through dress, style, self-possession and acts of personal agency?" (Tompkins Rivas). A question that confronts us with the need to foster scholarship towards generating a lineage of Latinx image makers and asserting our presence within visual history. Through the selfie and other forms of digital vernacular image making, we are revaluing the past and seeding the possibilities to create vibrant futures. Futures where we are represented and remembered on our own terms by our own hands. By visibly championing interest in these practices, we can support not only a worthwhile expansion of the discipline of performance studies, but also provide the loving and tender attention that Latinx history deserves.

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