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“Life Between Fingers”: A Response to News Photography of an “Urban Ghetto”

This photo essay updates research previously presented in Visual Communication Quarterly about news characterizations of a “Black neighborhood” in Iowa City, Iowa. Shot by preschoolers in the city’s Southeast Side, the images in this essay—peppered with the inadvertent appearance of the photographers’ fingers—added to an artistic value that cast life there being other than dangerous, dark, and devious.

Whereas hands can often be used to conceal, the fingers in these photographs frame special and specific glimpses of life, ultimately presenting a counternarrative to neighborhood characterizations constructed by news photographs.

Robert E. Gutsche, Jr.

In 2011, this journal published an article that examined how news photographs characterized two “Black neighborhoods” in Iowa—a mostly White state—as being an urban ghetto (Gutsche, 2011). The scene of a 2009 murder and street “riots” that led to a nightly youth curfew and the construction of a police substation, Iowa City’s “Southeast Side” became a term used to describe crowded, low-income apartment buildings. The term has also become derogatorily associated with a neighborhood that has become a first stop for many Black residents wishing to escape Chicago and St. Louis to find schools, jobs, and quieter environments deeper in the Midwest (Keene, Padilla, & Geronimus, 2010; Spence, Lawson, & Visser, 2010). In turn, the Southeast Side is now a place that represents the fears of longtime locals that the inner city is spreading to their doorstep—and those “from the Southeast Side” embody the very people who will alter the community’s traditional feel and its future (Gutsche, 2014a).

In that first *VQC* article, I wrote that “when it came to local news coverage of the ‘southeast side’ media capitalized on the perceived history of the space: crime-ridden, populated predominantly by minorities, and dangerous, feeding off of the resonance that crime is Black, urban, and contained to the ‘bad side of town’” (p. 141). News photographs of dark alleys, abandoned lots, police, and crime tape supported

cultural narratives of devious, urban Black ghettos (Burgess, 1985; Entman & Rojecki, 2001; Lule, 2001) and placed otherwise unrelated events involving Blacks from the Southeast Side into a media-constructed crime wave. Furthermore, whereas news photographs of other neighborhoods in the city revealed the “liveliness” (Gutsche, 2011, p. 152) of those spaces—through images of daily activities, business, schools, sports, and resident profiles that identified the spaces’ potential to contribute to the broader community through—news photographs from the Southeast Side revolved only around crime.

In the time that has passed since that article appeared in these pages, local arts communities and activists have attempted to undermine the veracity of dominant stories about Iowa City’s Southeast Side. For instance, the documentary *Black American Gothic* premiered at a local film festival to a sold-out crowd of 600 people in 2011. Featuring Black residents who had moved to Iowa City and who faced racism and segregation in their new home, the film placed these voices among a cultural history of Iowa and perspectives of longtime White Iowans who honestly expressed confusion and concern about their city’s changing color. After the screening, as many as 100 people participated in several community dialogue sessions throughout downtown to discuss the issues presented in the film.

The following year, a local theater troupe performed *Mayberry*, a stage play titled after the traditional, wholesome, and fictional town featured in *The Andy Griffith Show*. The play, informed by interviews with dozens of Iowa Citizens, focused on similar issues as *Black American Gothic* and highlighted what some in the city considered inequalities in housing, schools, and access to public transportation. Combined with university and community college journalism and literature classes that focused on issues of place-making, stereotypes, and activism, these efforts successfully put pressure on local government officials to address inadequate public bus routes that served the Southeast Side (Sullivan, 2012).

At the time of this writing, however, Iowa City's Southeast Side remains out of local news for its "disorder," sinking back into the local landscape, making its narrative free and accessible to be redrafted. Therefore I publish this essay for three reasons. First, I wish to recognize the efforts of community activism that was part of challenging dominant news narratives of the Southeast Side coming out of the violence there in 2009 and 2010. From this simple project that, as I argue in this essay, holds complex meanings, I hope to contribute to the understanding that art and activism at the local level can have an impact that, at the very least, can allow individuals to complicate the often-uncomplicated narratives in the press that describe and explain social conditions. Second, this article contributes to research previously published in this journal about neighborhood place-making via photography, particularly in terms of reinforcing the power of and need to resist dominant scenes and stories constructed in the news. Third, I hope to solidify the notion that neighborhoods are more than merely what appears in the news and to share this essay as an artifact that can be used later in Iowa City, or elsewhere, the next time spatial storytelling is dominated by the press, which may ignore the voices—and faces—of the people the press is reporting about (for example, see Gutsche, 2013, 2014b).¹ In the following, I present a brief introduction to how the essay was created and reflect on its meanings, thereby allowing the photographs to stand on their own merits as a narrative from the perspectives of their creators.

"Life Between Fingers" (Figures 1-8) emerged out of what I initially saw as a mistake of amateur (in this case, preschool) photographers. I had arrived at the Broadway Street Neighborhood Center on Iowa City's Southeast Side in March 2012 to work with middle school students involved in a local media group. The

goal of the group—and of my own activism in the city—was to counter dominant narratives in the press and in public discourse that explained social conditions on the Southeast Side as being that of "Black culture" and "ghetto" behavior (Bailey, Law, Mason, & Phillips, 2011; Coalition for Racial Justice, 2013; Gutsche, 2011). The project for this day was to help students tell their stories of their community and to share the challenges that they faced in struggling for access to proper public transportation in the city (Sullivan, 2012). Then, while the middle-schoolers were busy preparing for our meeting, I stumbled onto the preschool's playground. Children ran all over, crawled on the ground, screamed, laughed, and chased one another. It seemed like a perfect scene to show an alternative story about life on the Southeast Side.¹

I pulled out my iPhone. The first—and only—photograph I took to tell the story of this playground on the Southeast Side featured a short, lone basketball hoop. In the background, children were gathering on the other side of the playground. Made out of a laundry basket and attached to a wooden post, the drooping hoop represented the stories I had heard about the Southeast Side—a neighborhood stuck in poverty and in disarray—and showing the children there, I hoped, would show a sign of sweetness and innocence. Then, even amid the activity and potential risks, I handed over my iPhone to the little ones to talk to them about taking photographs. Off they went.

As I followed them around, guiding some of their shots, showing them how to aim, breathe, and shoot, they crawled all over my shoulders, my ankles, my back. They crawled over one another. Grabbing for the phone, few wanted to stand in front of the lens. They wanted to tap and snap. When I left the neighborhood center at the end of the day, I had hope that theirs would be great photos, which, combined with my own, would make for a great project we could publish in local news media. But what I found on the phone was a mess: blurred images, off-center landscapes and profiles, shots that were too close to friends' faces, and dozens of photographs of fingers covering the lens. Swiping through the images, the little fingers emerged as what I initially saw as the project's biggest flaw. I wondered, "How could I have forgotten to help them keep their fingers clear of the camera lens?"

I quickly realized, however, that in these "mistakes" the preschoolers had captured scenes of their lives from their own perspective—that what I was looking at was the world from their height and their excitement: blurry images

represented their quick movements, their curiosity of looking in one direction and then another; faces that were cut out of the frame came from our proximity to each other, our physical closeness in this time together. And indeed, the fingers themselves served as a consistent element that framed the images, revealing between them scenes of activity and innocence, moments of play and life in a part of the city consistently cast as dark and dangerous.

It was then that I realized that my photograph—the one of the basketball hoop—told the same old story, the same dominant photographic narrative of the Southeast Side that appeared in the local press. Instead of countering those narratives, I had supported them. I had taken a photograph that, without much context, showed the children's backs to the camera; that lessened the environment's human element; that—as the children's photographs showed love, care, and fun—appeared to be haphazard and sad. Their photographs came to signify the Southeast Side's resiliency, its life, creativity, innocence, and innovation. Mine did not.

Here, I present this photo essay: the images, which were all shot by preschoolers and which may sometimes appear as accidental, hold an intentionality that shows a different perspective of the Southeast Side and the lives of people living there. I let the essay, a portion of which was published in the local newspaper, stand on its own to reflect its potential meanings for the Southeast Side and for those wanting to resist dominant stories about their own neighborhood and its people.

The author wishes to thank the staff, parents, and children of the Broadway Street Neighborhood Center, particularly Sue Freeman and the children, for contributing to this project.

Note

¹ My time at the neighborhood center was in the capacity as a journalism instructor and activist. I was, at all times, accompanied by center staff, who confirmed parents and guardians of each child had signed release forms that provided permission for their child to be photographed and for the photographs to be published. The author maintains copyright for these images. The families of the children who appeared in the essay received two copies of their children's photographs, and the neighborhood center received a collage of the essay.

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Figure 1 Preschoolers on Iowa City's ominous Southeast Side—such as Destiney, shown here—taught one another how to take photographs in March 2012. The accidental fingers over the lens provided an added dimension and flavor to stories about this city space.



Figure 2 A preschool photographer captures a close-up of (left to right) Jhael and Khalil.



Figure 3 Tyree (top) and Osvaldo (foreground) play on the slide. Preschoolers come from all sorts of backgrounds and pockets of nearby neighborhoods.



Figure 4 Light pushes through the trees behind the neighborhood center. Such a bright image counters many of the published tales from the neighborhood that show the space as being dark and desolate.



Figure 5 Children cluster during play throughout the afternoon. They move about quickly among groups of friends, play equipment, and toys.



Figure 6 Shadows stretch across the playground as preschoolers learn how to use the camera.



Figure 7 Tyree appears beneath the photographer's finger. © Robert E. Gutsche, Jr.

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