

Marianne Hirsch and Leo Spitzer, *School Photos in Liquid Time: Reframing Difference* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2020), 264 pp, ISBN 978-0295746548.

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In the path-breaking book *School Photos in Liquid Time*, Marianne Hirsch and Leo Spitzer provide a novel study of school photographs. Unlike family photo albums and archived photographic records, school photographs have received minimal scholarly interest (p. 26). To this end, the book is commended for offering a full-length study devoted to school photos and for directing academic attention to a genre of vernacular photography that has received only a paucity of scholarly and historical investigation. The book offers a sustained focus on school photos taken in ‘times of extremity’ (p. 16), for example, of Jewish children in Nazi ghettos, and black children during the colonial period of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Significantly, for this group of school photos, Hirsch and Spitzer develop a “liquid” and multitemporal reading’ (p. 13) that seeks to underscore how the meaning of photographs can develop ‘in unforeseen directions when they are viewed and re-viewed by different people in different presents. In “liquid time” they are not fixed into static permanence; rather, they remain dynamic, unfixed, as they acquire new meanings, in new circumstances’ (p. 13).

The outcome of this reading is the movement away from a ‘retrospective gaze’ (p. 13) where priority is given to the narrative of the children as ‘about to die or doomed to lead traumatized lives’ (p. 11), and instead we are offered a searchlight to discover what the photos may tell us about the fine-grained specificities of the daily life and experiences encountered by the schoolgoing youths. In sum, Hirsch and Spitzer underscore how school photos provide a detailed and multifaceted narrative of the pictured subjects, while also offering us an awareness of the policies of exclusion and integration that were operational at various educational institutions.

The bulk of the book’s chapters offer a ‘broad comparative and connective perspective’ (p. 16) for school photos during epochs of extremity, in which the images of persecuted subjects – from across the globe – are placed in conversation with one another. Such a perspective allows the authors to provide a twofold investigation: first, to examine how class photos provide a record of ‘schooling’s role in the assimilation and exclusion of colonized and racially “othered” populations’ (p. 19); and second, to explore how class photos ‘disrupt, enlarge, reframe, and complicate’ (p. 19) the aforementioned roles of schooling. The hallmark of this twofold investigation is a deeply thoughtful understanding of school photos that keeps in view the institutional and contextual framings, but also the possibilities of reframing them, as well as bidding ‘us to form affective connections with the photographed children themselves, reclaiming their forgotten stories, imagining what they see as they face the camera, sensing their life and their imagined future that persists beyond the confines of the photographic frame’ (p. 17). The book closes with an enriching discussion of how artists reframe school photos by inviting the viewer to adopt a ‘disobedient gaze’ (p. 21) by inciting ‘us to see, feel and hear them from different vantage points across different moments in time’ (p. 21).

The authors envisage the book as holding the possibility of activating the 'readers' interest in their own class pictures, salvaging them from the anonymity into which they so readily fall and reinserting them into history' (p. 18). It is this aspect that inspired me to review my school photos to explore the multiple meanings that they contain. At first, I was very hesitant as viewing my school photos entailed becoming awash with feelings of resistance and unbelonging (p. 36). When looking at school photos, it is important to acknowledge that the uniformity of the pupils' appearance, dress, posture and demeanour is a product of the school's disciplinary gaze that removed noncompliant students from being seated before the photographer. Photo day at school entailed standing in long queues in which teachers would act as hawks and sweep through the queue to remove any pupil who failed to meet the assimilation standards of the school. For multiple students, this was a very stressful situation and every sweep conducted by the hawks would increase the risk of being abruptly and abjectly censored from inclusion in the photo. For students from a poor background, like myself, we were often ridiculed and derided for uniforms that were too tattered and torn, too dull in colour, too small or too big, and for wearing shoes that were barely attached to their soles. For students of colour, growing up in the late 1990s meant assimilation to the hair norms of white pupils. Missing in my school photos are students of colour with Afros, weaves and braids. Alarming, pupils of colour who rejected the hair regulations of the school were banished from inclusion in the photo. While the school's hair regulations and the panopticism practised by the hawks ensured that assimilation was depicted before the camera, in my senior years the students engaged in acts of agency and resistance (pp. 93–5). By way of example, students from the same friendship circle – but from different classes – would often swap items of uniform to ensure that their friends would pass through the school's surveillance channels and be granted permission to have their photo taken. I remember a friend of mine who, after having his class photo taken, immediately scurried over to me to dress me in his tie, blazer and jersey – my tie was no longer a deep blue but had become grey in colour, I had a second-hand blazer that I purchased from a thrift store that was several sizes too big for me, and my jersey had started to unravel from every stitch and hem. For pupils of colour, after passing the inspection by the hawks with hair that complied with the regulations, they would turn to their friends to coif and dazzle their hair to capture its African beauty.

My school adopted a perverse manner of assigning classes based on achievement and subject choice. In doing so, the school imposed over the class a generalised view of the pupils' potential for achievement, and implemented a biased regimen for the way in which privileges and prized opportunities would be distributed across the grade level. For example, invitations to participate in esteemed events and trailblazing activities would first be announced to pupils who were in class A – the class populated with top achievers in mathematics, science and accounting. Thereafter, in alphabetical order and in decreasing value of achievement, other classes would be invited. By the time it reached me – I was usually assigned to class D, E or F – all the positions were filled. In viewing my class photos, I am filled with feelings of regret at the opportunities that I was never offered, and I am unnerved at the 'deliberate

desubjectification produced by [a] schooling' (p. 35) system that denied me a fair and equal opportunity to apply for prized invitations. Nevertheless, I now recognise that despite the school's discriminatory practices, I still thrived. From grade 10 and onwards, the school assigned me to the art class that consisted of a heterogeneous pupil body. Friendship across race, sex and religion reigned in the art class, queer children were accepted, and we forged a commune of solidarity to survive the school's regimen of discrimination and desubjectification.

My initial feelings at the start of the school photo exploration stand at odds with how I now feel: while I resisted the assimilation practice of the school and felt an unnerving sense of unbelonging in the way the school peddled their discriminatory regimen, it is now apparent that friendship and solidarity underpinned my experiences. I am confident that *School Photos in Liquid Time* will provide many more individuals with a crucial resource to 'help produce photographic reading practices that exceed and deepen their own surfaces and frames' (p. 42).

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