

Abstracting American Photographs:
Racial and Aesthetic Patterns in Walker Evans's Photography

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In 1929, Walker Evans wrote a short story titled "Brooms." Never published, this literary piece foreshadows what would later be among the central concerns that haunted Evans as a photographer. The significance of the story should first be recognized in the very year it was written. 1929 was the time when Evans decided to engage seriously in the photographic mode of expression, giving up his long-cherished dream to become a writer. This can be inferred from the fact that, of all the images included in his first photo book *American Photographs* (1938), the earliest images date back to 1929. Evans, in fact, had been taking photographs prior to 1929, but he chose to include only those produced after that year. "Brooms" was praised by his friend Hanns Skolle, a German painter and writer, who went as far as to declare that it was "the best thing extant" of Evans's writings (*Unclassified* 136). Written at the transitional period in Evans's career, the story can be read both as a eulogy for his literary career and a prefatory remark about his photographic engagement.

The protagonist of "Brooms" is a poverty-stricken man, suffering from "the chaos" of his "inner life." In order to get rid of his mental chaos, he decides to clean his own room using a broom. The man's encounter with the broom is depicted by Evans as follows:

When I took this place I simply couldn't buy a broom. Couldn't buy anything. Sold, in fact, books, cameras; pawned watch. There was no broom until I found one in the alley back of the abandoned factory. It had a triangular shape. (I didn't know anything about brooms.) I carried it home and swept bitterly. (*Unclassified* 63)

Later in the story, it turns out that the broom, a supposed signifier of cleanliness, becomes generative of chaos, inducing the man to get "a vacuum cleaner" to "suck dust out of chaos." The last part of the story traces the process of the protagonist's growing uneasiness with the broom as a source of

his chaos:

Soon after I left the house, before I had even turned the corner, I saw a worn-out broom lying in the gutter. It is nothing, I said; it will pass. But I saw another, and yet another. All that horrible, suggestive triangular shape. It was too much. Today, this dateless day, I walked into Macy's and bought a vacuum cleaner.

Now I shall suck the dust out of chaos. (65)

The story thus ends with the man's replacement of brooms with a vacuum cleaner as a means to achieve orderliness. What is troubling about those brooms? From the man's perspective, a broom always takes "a triangular shape," becoming the very source of his terror. In other words, his qualms about brooms are that they force him to view them in their abstract form, a shape of a triangle. Being abstracted, the particular broom he encounters in his neighborhood turns into a shape infinitely replicable, haunting him wherever he goes. Thus, a broom becomes a sort of the instrument of abstraction, which in turn creates infinite replication. Whichever objects the man sees, they lose their particularities through his abstracting gaze. Therefore, the man's horror comes from his own irrepressible power of abstraction, turning everything into a pattern that is infinitely reproducible, generalizable.

But isn't there something counterintuitive about the man's horror in his own abstracting gaze? Especially in light of the sociocultural conditions in the 1930s as well as of Evans's own proclivity for abstract patterns as can clearly be observed in his images as a whole, it seems incongruent that Evans's last literary effort be devoted to the negative description of patterns. How then does Evans treat patterns in his photography? The fact is that Evans's attitude toward patterns in his photography is anything but clear-cut: he seems to be simultaneously fascinated and threatened by patterns. In the following sections of my paper, I will examine the ways in which Evans used patterns in his photography in order to express both his aesthetic and political concerns.

Before going into the in-depth analysis of Evans's images, I will first touch upon the sociocultural conditions of the 1930s to demonstrate how those conditions were in no small degree the outcome of what I regard as the 1930s' propensity for patterns. It is my proposition that even the New Deal policies, the decade's definitive modeling force, were to be characterized by the ubiquitous social scientific interest in patternization recognizable throughout the decade. I

will then move onto my own interpretation of some of the notable images produced by Evans, examining his use of patterns in his photography. By so doing, I will explore the ways in which patterns turn into both an aesthetically satisfying object and a socially anxiety-causing entity when presented through the lens of Evans's abstracting camera.

Patterns of the New Deal

The New Deal policies in the 1930s revolved around a variety of reform programs conducted on the national level. Ranging from the controlling of the stock market to the recovery of industrial and agricultural stability, the New Deal was motivated by the progressivist idea of improvement through the efficient management of the national economy handled by the federal government. Evans got involved in one of the New Deal projects in the mid-1930s, the Farm Security Administration (FSA). He worked under the directions of Roy Stryker, the head of the Historical Section of the FSA, to record with his camera the "rural rehabilitation" achieved by the FSA support.

There was an inherent contradiction in the FSA's use of photography. FSA photography, as a vehicle for reporting the national reform program, should clearly be distinguished from the commercialized images widely circulated by the propagandistic campaign of the National Association of Manufacturers (NAM). As James Guimond observes, the NAM's billboards tried to show the images of the affluent white middle-class family, an illusion which in reality hardly existed in the age of depression (112). Contrary to the highly commercialized images of the NAM, FSA photography purportedly aimed at conveying the real conditions of rural America. The FSA photography, however, had another agenda at hand. As Maren Stange aptly points out, FSA photography was instrumental for publicizing and promoting the effort of the FSA project (117). That is to say, the FSA's photographic records, filled with images of the harsh conditions of rural America as the object of the governmental effort for improvement, were useful in advertising the increase of governmental power vis-à-vis the loss of individual agency during the period of unprecedented economic recession.

Alan Trachtenberg designates Roy Stryker's view of rural society as "an amalgam of social science [. . .] New Deal politics, and liberal reformism" (*Documenting America* 62). According to Trachtenberg, Stryker had a definite "master story" even before the FSA photographers made their pictures.

Stryker's master narrative was to show the ubiquity of poverty that required urgent improvement. Although Stryker left some room for the photographers to plunge into artistic experiments, he was quite adamant as to what the FSA photography en masse should express: the devastating effect of depression observed in rural America in dire need of national aid. For Stryker, the originality of each separate image was not really the issue. Rather, the images as a whole should be infinitely replicable so as to justify the FSA's view that poverty was spreading all over the rural areas of the nation.

In this respect, the NAM's propagandistic use of billboards to highlight the white middle-class affluence and the FSA's use of photography as a visual proof of the nationwide economic depression were not as qualitatively different as they first appear. Indeed, both projects were equally propelled by their social scientific interest in visual images. By their "social scientific interest" I mean their investment in the replicability and generalizability of visual images. Therefore, abstracting generalizable phenomena from concrete objects seems to be the characteristic gesture in the visual culture of the depression era. Whether used for commercial reasons or non-profit activities, visual images were instrumental for generating patterns that would justify the governmental or corporate visions of the society.

Such was the situation in which Evans found himself in the 1930s. As an aspiring but destitute photographer, Evans found it necessary to commit himself to the ongoing political or commercial enterprises that were in need of his visual support. For instance, Evans went to Cuba in 1933 on a commission to provide photographs for radical journalist Carleton Beals's *The Crime of Cuba* (1933), an exposé about the corrupt nature of the Cuban dictatorship. Furthermore, he signed to the FSA project in 1935 to take various photographs of rural America. In the following year, he and James Agee were commissioned by *Fortune* (a leading commercial magazine which included abundant consumerist images) to report on the daily lives of sharecroppers in the South. Although those photographic images were never actually published in *Fortune*, Evans's major assignments in the 1930s clearly indicate his involvement with the mainstream visual culture of the depression era.

As far as Evans's public statement goes, however, he was not at all interested in political—let alone commercial—commitments. According to Douglas Nickel, "NO POLITICS whatever" was Evans's answer when asked to join FSA. He was strongly opposed to having his images used as propaganda for concrete political purpose, denouncing such attempts as "lower rank of

purpose.” The following remark by Evans aptly shows his resistance against any sort of political affiliation:

I am not a social protest artist although I have been taken as one very widely. [...] If you photograph what’s before your eyes and you’re in an impoverished environment, you’re not—and shouldn’t be, I think—trying to change the world or commenting on this and saying, “Open up your heart, and bleed for these people.” I would never dream of saying anything like that; it’s too presumptuous and naïve to think you can change society by a photograph or anything else. (qtd in Nickel 88)

Here, Evans explicitly voices his rejection of the kind of the ideal upheld both by the FSA and *Fortune*. As his wry phrase “Open up your heart, and bleed for these people” suggests, Evans was deeply skeptical about the idea of visual images as an instrument for provoking sympathy from a mass audience. In order to lessen the possibility of propagandistic use of his own images, Evans was required to posit alternative visions that would not easily be reduced to mere examples of replicable images which proliferated in the 1930s. By featuring patterns as an essential visual device for aestheticizing his images, Evans largely departed from the propagandistic use of patterns that was abundantly seen in various commercial magazines of the era. I will next demonstrate how Evans tried to incorporate patterns into his images. By so doing I will show how Evans, through the means of photographic abstraction, tried to explore the potential use of patterns as a way to de-commercialize his images. In the final analysis, I want to shed light on Evans’s way of problematizing the blatantly politicizing nature of the governmental and journalistic efforts vis-à-vis the use of photographic images, thereby bringing into relief what can be taken as Evans’s own photographic approach to “political” purpose.

Aesthetic Patterns in American Photographs

Published in 1938, *American Photographs* can be regarded as culmination of Evans’s photographic career in the 1930s. Mostly consisting of the images produced during his involvement with Beals, FSA, and *Fortune*, the book seems strangely devoid of political implications of the time. What Evans does at the outset is to establish himself as the sovereign author uninfluenced by any

institutional power: "The responsibility for the selection of the pictures used in this book has rested with the author, and the choice has been determined by his opinion: therefore they are presented without sponsorship or connection with the policies, aesthetic or political, of any of the institutions, publications or government agencies for which some of the work has been done." Evans's authorship is virtually synonymous with his editorship, which includes not only the task of choosing which images to be included in the book but also that of presenting his own images in a carefully designed order. Therefore, as Trachtenberg points out, the sequence of the images is particularly important in the appreciation of the book (*Reading American Photographs* 251).

In order to put his own manifesto into practice, Evans includes the kind of images that seemingly are hard to generate any politicized concerns in the readers. The governing principle of those images seems to be the foregrounding of abstract patterns. The first notable example is "#5 Sidewalk and Shopfront, New Orleans, 1935" (Figure 1). What at first captures our eyes is the existence of the diagonal lines painted on the wall of the barbershop. We then come across other kinds of stripes, too. In the middle is placed a sign pole painted with similar diagonal stripes; the entrance lamp of the shop again is painted in stripes. Most significantly, a woman standing at the entrance of the shop wears a shirt that bears concentric patterns. To place a sign pole in front of a barbershop is not at all an uncommon practice, but this shop is peculiar in its use of the wall as another sign of a barbershop. By painting the wall in diagonal lines, the shop distorts the law of perspective: while the relationship between the pole and the wall should be that of the foreground and background, the diagonal lines create an optical illusion as if these two objects stood in the same position. Their relationship gets further complicated by the presence of this woman whose shirt contains a similar pattern. Because of the conspicuous diagonal lines of the pole and of the wall of the shop, the viewer invariably takes notice of the concentric pattern on the woman's shirt.

So remarkable is the visual effect created by juxtaposition of the barbershop's diagonal lines with the pattern of the woman's shirt that the viewer hardly becomes concerned about the identity of the woman. Whether she is poor or rich cannot be our central concern in light of the striking pattern on her shirt. Her *raison d'être*, in short, is nothing but her shirt. Through her shirt, she aligns herself with other major motifs of the picture, namely, the diagonally striped wall and pole. Thus, the picture's visual effect is contingent upon the abstracting gaze of the camera and the viewer.

Figure 1. "#5 Sidewalk and Shopfront, New Orleans, 1935"

By perceiving the barbershop and woman as possessors of similar patterns, *not* as different entities, the viewer interconnects a human being with objects. While the woman becomes abstracted into a concentric pattern, the barbershop's diagonal lines, the supposed conveyor of the shop's identity, transforms the shop into a purely abstract pattern. Through these abstract patterns, the material conditions of the photographic subjects (the barber shop and white woman) slip out of the viewer's attention, and hence the successful aestheticization of the image.

Another image, "#16 Child in Back Yard, 1932" (Figure 2), is perhaps the best example of Evans's efforts to depoliticize his image through abstraction. The visual effect of this image is immediately noticeable: the juxtaposition of graffiti with a girl. The graffiti, probably drawn by the girl herself, seems to be the girl's own self-portrait. The difference between the girl and her likeness lies in their outfits. While the girl wears a ragged shirt, her likeness is formally dressed with a bonnet on its head. One might say, therefore, that the picture can be interpreted as the girl's longing for the material wealth that would enable her to dress nicely like the image of a girl drawn by herself. However, one senses something uncontainable about this image, defying such a class-inflected analysis. The image's recalcitrant nature derives from two aspects: the direction of the eyes of the girl and of those of her likeness, and the primitive quality of the graffiti. As to the gaze of the girl and her likeness, they both stare at the same direction, highlighting their horizontality. As to the graffiti, the likeness apparently drawn by the girl herself consists of such simple lines and shapes as triangles, squares, and circles, so that the graffiti comes to appear like a combination of patterns. Hence my previous suggestion as to the image's visual effect being caused by the juxtaposition of a girl with her self-portrait should somewhat be modified. Being horizontally placed, the girl and her likeness embody the very process of abstraction—the girl becomes abstracted into the graffiti of herself which consists of the combination of patterns.

As the viewer's attention directs itself toward the process of abstraction, it is unlikely that s/he should raise any overtly politicized issue such as the economic disparity between the girl and her likeness. Watching the actual girl turning into her abstracted image, we experience such optical pleasure that cancels out the middle-class visual condescension toward the lower class. Any attempt to specify the sociocultural context of the image ("Where exactly is this 'backyard'?" "Why does the background seem so run-down?" "Why does she wear such a ragged shirt?") may seem largely irrelevant in the face of the strong

Figure 2. "#16 Child in Back Yard, 1932"

visual impact of abstraction.

By featuring abstract patterns, Evans skillfully manipulates our attention to his images so as to induce us to appreciate his work aesthetically rather than politically: while the patterns proliferated by contemporary governmental and corporate institutions are permeated with socioeconomic implications (e. g. the wealth of the white middle class and the material poverty of the lower class), Evans's use of patterns is aimed at draining such material connotations. By transforming themselves into diagonal stripes, triangles, and circles, the people in Evans's pictures tend to become abstracted into patterns. In this respect, the viewer of these images replicates the same act of abstraction that the man in "Brooms" practices. The way we come to view the girl as the combination of patterns seems to iterate precisely the same gesture of the man in "Brooms" who regards a broom as "a triangular shape."

However, we haven't yet touched upon the aforementioned issue of the anxiety that the man in "Brooms" seems to suffer through his act of abstraction. For what I have emphasized in the foregoing discussion of the two images is largely the pleasure generated through the dominantly aesthetic reading. In order to investigate the nature of anxiety caused by abstraction, we need to turn our attention to a different series of Evans's photographs. In the next section, I will deal with Evans's images whose visual effects owe more than anything else to their racial implications. Although racial issues have rarely been touched upon in the studies of Evans's photography, I will contend that they are fundamental for further understanding of the nature of Evans's photographic abstraction. Through the careful analysis of the images, I will explore how patterns in Evans's images become anxiety-ridden, particularly when coupled with racial issues.

Racial Abstraction in *American Photographs*

Let us now turn to another sequence in *American Photographs*. The case in point is "#33 Coal Dock Worker, 1932" (Figure 3), a picture Evans took during his visit to Cuba. It captures the frontal gaze of the old African American coal worker, showing Evans's characteristic propensity for clarity and detail in his images. Beaumont Newhall, in the same year when *American Photographs* was published, stated that Evans's penchant for detail represented the characteristic of what Newhall named "'straight' photography," the emergent school of photography comprising such eminent photographers as Evans,

Figure 3 "#33 Coal Dock Worker, 1932"

Berenice Abbott and Edward Weston (71). As Newhall suggests, Evans's "desire for precise detail" induces the viewer carefully to analyze and detect the patterns within the subjects of his images (71). As for "#33 Coal Dock Worker, 1932," what we notice at first are the wrinkles on the man's face. Equally recognizable are the grain patterns on the man's wooden helmet and the handles of shovels he carries.

The grain patterns and the wrinkles, both, as the markers of age, seem to draw similar trajectories. In effect, we come to conflate the black man's wrinkles with the grain patterns of shovels and the textural pattern of the helmet. Evans's signature close-up of the black man's face thus forces us into an act of abstraction. I use the verb "force" deliberately since there is something disturbing about our abstracting gaze at this particular image. The image's major departure from the two images I have previously analyzed is that the abstraction occurs at the level of the black man's skin. Since the wrinkles are observed only on the black man's face, to abstract his wrinkles into the grain patterns is to view his face as a wooden object. Such abstraction is problematic in two respects. Firstly, our aesthetically abstracting gaze is doomed to failure since the black man's face cannot be transformed into a purely abstract pattern devoid of sociocultural implications. Abstracting his face with a pure pattern can resurrect racially disturbing gaze, precisely because the conflation of the black man with the natural non-human object can replicate the very manner of the racist gaze that stereotypicalizes black people. Contrary to the visual effect produced through the previous two images, this close-up of the black man's face forces us to recognize the racially overdetermined way of perceiving a human subject. To reduce the black man's face into a grain pattern is synonymous with the re-enactment of the logic of slavery: blacks are more akin to tools than to their users.

The second factor that problematizes the visual abstraction is predicated on the black man's frontality. Surrounded by the grain-like wrinkles, his eyes cast an unblinking gaze toward the viewer. His powerful gaze directly confronts the viewer's abstracting gaze, as if warning the viewer of the dangerous proximity of his/her abstracting gaze to the racist stereotypicalization. It is the combined effect of the patternization and frontality of the black man's face that can provoke anxiety within the viewer's mind.

Evans further challenges the viewer by placing another racially problematic image immediately after that of the coal worker. In "#34 Minstrel Showbill, 1936" (Figure 4), Evans again chooses a close-up to capture his subject.

Figure 4. "#34 Minstrel Showbill, 1936"

Although the poster is torn, Evans makes it possible for his viewer to grasp what is happening in the image. The showbill, consisting of at least ten black characters, conveys a sort of comic chaos caused by the case of a theft—of hens and a watermelon—within a black community. In the foreground, a black woman stumbles upon her washtub, while in the background, another black woman throws a bucket of some liquid from the broken roof at a black man with a banjo. Thanks to Evans's clear shot, we are able to see the detail of the showbill. But can the detail matter so much in this image? Does it change our overall view of the image when we focus on its detail? The answer would be negative: however closely we look at the image, it fails really to alter our perception. For instance, if we pay attention to the left end of the image, we notice that a dog is trying to catch the black man who is stealing a watermelon. Even though the showbill deals with two kinds of crimes (theft of hens and watermelons and destruction caused by the theft), it by no means expresses its subject-matter in a serious manner. Rather, it humorously presents the good old American society, so to speak, which is an exemplary American myth based upon racial stereotypes.

But one might further argue that, the tear of the showbill can still change the meaning of the image. My answer to this would again be negative. Because the poster is torn, we can look into the actual brick wall that is consonant with the other brick wall depicted in the showbill. The image is thus contrived to feature the abstracted pattern of brick. Nonetheless, even if the viewer tries to connect the wall with the poster through the brick pattern, pure abstraction does not actually occur. What is perhaps most remarkable about this picture is that the fact of the poster being torn does not make any difference in terms of our viewing of the poster. The tear may add a temporal dimension to the purportedly free-floating, mass-reproducible advertisement, but the poster is already filled with a particular sense of the past, black minstrelsy being by nature the very commercialization of the American past. To be sure, the tear may signify human violence, but the brick pattern which appears through the tear is assimilated all too quickly into the same pattern appearing in the comic poster. Thus, however closely the viewer may look at the detail, and however hard s/he may try to abstract the image into a pure pattern through the brick wall, genuine abstraction is perpetually deferred. Our abstracting gaze slips into stereotypicalizing gaze, the gaze that is precisely consumed for propagandistic use.

The image on which I would like to focus last is not from *American*

Photographs but nonetheless equally relevant to my line of argument. The picture was taken in Havana, simply titled “Communal Fountain” (Figure 5). Quite predictably, the image was not included in *The Crime of Cuba*, since it did not really suit the book’s theme, namely, to expose the corrupt nature of the Cuban government. The issue that the image seems to connote is related more to America than to Cuba.

In a way, the image is similar to the minstrel showbill in that it also revolves around the issue of race and visual culture of the American South. What I propose is to view this image as the abstracted form of lynching photography. The main subject of the image is a black figure en dishabille whose arms are for some reason broken. Standing against the concrete wall, the figure is slightly tilted downward with its neck coming out below the joint of a water pipe. Because of the way in which the figure’s head is placed in front of a water pipe, it looks as if the figure had been hanged. As a result, the figure represents a black body mutilated and hanged.

Figure 5. “Communal Fountain”

Evans's interest in lynching photography can be observed in his scrapbook made exactly at the time when *American Photographs* was published. It contains a clipping of an article from a French newspaper titled "La Loi De Lynch," featuring the picture of a lynching in the American South (Figure 6). The image is typical of this genre: a hanged black body, burnt, is surrounded by white spectators. If we juxtapose this image with Evans's own image of a black figure (Figure 5), the compositional affinity existing in the two becomes apparent. The gray sky in the former image resonates with the concrete wall in the latter. By capturing the non-human object that looks quite alike the mutilated black body, Evans's image seems to represent the fundamental components of lynching photography (black body, mutilation, and hanging) in a highly abstracted fashion. However, it lacks one crucial element of lynching photography, namely, white spectators who surround the black body like those in Figure 6. This absence of white spectators urges the viewer to directly face his subject-matter, the semblance of the lynched body.

As a result, the gaze of white spectators becomes transferred onto that of the viewer. Just like those white spectators in the newspaper clipping who exert the scopic violence onto the black body, the viewer of Evans's image becomes a vital participant of the lynching rather than simply a detached observer of the scene of racial violence.

Our abstracting gaze detects another pattern in the image. On the concrete wall, we can recognize a number of traces of running liquid. Coupled with the mutilated black figure, the traces of the liquid look like those of human blood, comprising a disturbing pattern caused by racial violence. The viewer is inevitably robbed of his/her chance of experiencing the pleasure of aesthetic abstraction as s/he does with the first two images of a white woman and a girl. Looking at the image of the black figure through our abstracting lens, we are confronted with, and potentially complicitous in, the very shape of racial violence.

Our failure to enjoy the aesthetic pleasure, however, has a payoff. Let us return to the initial question I posed: why is the man in "Brooms" afraid of a triangular shape of a broom? While we never know the specific cause of the man's anxiety, Evans's photography at least vicariously makes us experience a similar kind of anxiety. Just as the man's abstracting gaze always urges him to recognize in the form of a broom a "horrible, suggestive triangular shape," our own abstracting gaze never fails to catch the "suggestive shape" of scopic

LA LOI DE LYNCH

Un nègre pendu et flambé achève de se consumer
(Ce document nous a été aimablement communiqué par notre excellent confrère « Vu »)

Figure 6. "Le Loi de Lynch"

racism that haunts the last three images I analyzed.

It cannot be overstressed that what the viewer shares with the man in "Brooms" should be a sense of anxiety and not that of easy commiseration. Indeed, commiseration is the last thing Evans's photography attempts to provoke, and it is his rejection of such easy sympathy that clearly distinguishes his use of patterns from those by FSA and NAM. Be it commercial or bureaucratic, the institutionalized visual culture in the 1930s utilized replicable images of human conditions to provoke sympathy from mass audience. Evans's use of patterns firmly rejects any easy attachment with his own subjects. By featuring racist merchandise more or less damaged (e.g. a torn minstrel showbill and a mutilated black figure), Evans's images gesture toward a certain kind of human violence. The kind of violence Evans seems to indicate is not only limited to the physical violence exerted upon black bodies. More importantly, the violence exists in our own way of viewing his images. It is our irrepressible desire for finding out the patterns in his images that in turn are destined to create anxiety in our own mind. Just like the man who recognizes the shape of a triangle within every object in Evans's "Brooms," the viewer of his images is urged to detect some sort of patterns in his pictures. At times, our abstracting gaze may generate the aesthetic pleasure in viewing the patterns in his images, but at other times, the images compel us to realize the pernicious effect that our abstract gaze may potentially bring about. And such transformative effect we find in some of Evans's photographs as discussed here, I argue, can be his very attempt to at once depoliticize and politicize the nature of photography-viewing in the American context. That is, while Evans rejected the politicized use of photography as propaganda, he was simultaneously demonstrating his own political use of photography, by foregrounding the race-inflected way of looking at things that exists at the heart of the American visual anxiety.

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