

RESEARCH NOTE

FUNERARY PHOTOGRAPHS AS ENDURING KINSHIP AND COMMUNITY TIES IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY APPALACHIA AND TRANSAPPALACHIA: MATERIAL AND RELATIONAL METHODS

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This research note proposes a relational methodology for examining the production and exchange of funerary photographs in which family and community members posed with the deceased in early twentieth-century Appalachia, and for exploring how this practice expanded through the mid-twentieth century between Appalachian diasporic communities in the industrial Midwest and their family members who remained “at home.” Initially associated with the Victorian period across European and Anglo-American contexts, these photographs evolved to serve crucial social functions in maintaining community ties across geographic distances. This research examines how the materiality and relational properties of these ritual objects were central to their exchange between families separated by economic migration. I draw on the suggestion of Elizabeth Edwards and Janice Hart to understand photographs as active objects rather than valuing them solely for image content, as well as Marilyn Strathern’s work on relationality, which demonstrates that material objects actively constitute rather than merely reflect social relationships.

Introduction

In the recent landmark publication *Hillbilly Highway: The Transappalachian Migration and the Making of a White Working Class* (2023), social historian Max Fraser examines how no fewer than 8 million Appalachian inhabitants migrated from the impoverished rural South to the industrial Midwest—a region he defines as “Transappalachia”—over the first two-thirds of the twentieth century. Building on earlier work by Feather (1998)

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and Obermiller (1996), Fraser argues that this demographic event has been nearly as impactful upon the United States as the Great Migration of African American inhabitants and the Dust Bowl migration to the western United States, yet remains under-researched (Fraser 2023).

While Fraser's research examines the social and economic impact of Transappalachian migration, particularly in what is now known as the Rust Belt, less attention has been paid to specific cultural practices that characterized Transappalachian migrant urban life beyond representations of "longing for home" in literature, folklore, and music (Fraser 2023). This article examines how funerary photographs functioned as what Levitt and Glick Schiller (2004) term "social remittances," which are cultural practices and objects that flow between sending and receiving communities in migration contexts, actively maintaining and transforming social relationships across temporal boundaries and geographic distances.

These photographs operated within complex networks of exchange that mirrored migration patterns themselves. When a death occurred in the home community, copies of funerary photographs—showing family members posed either with the deceased or at graveside services—would be sent to or accompany traveling relatives who had relocated to urban centers in Ohio, Illinois, Indiana, and Michigan. For Appalachian migrants, these photographs served not only as memorial objects but as active agents in maintaining social connections, often prompting reciprocal communications and visits between dispersed family members.

The Evolution of Postmortem Photography in Appalachia

The widely historicized practice of postmortem photography in Euro and Anglo-American contexts has roots in the Victorian Era custom of memorializing the deceased through portraiture. However, moving into the twentieth century, a distinct shift occurred in both the style and purpose of these photographs within Appalachian communities in the United States. As discussed extensively by anthropologist Jay Ruby, postmortem photographs in the Victorian period typically focused solely on the deceased individual, who was often posed to appear as if in peaceful slumber. These images served primarily as keepsakes for immediate family members, providing a last visual record of the departed. In his seminal work *Secure the Shadow: Death and Photography in America*, Ruby notes that "the desire to fix the shadow ere the substance fade was particularly poignant when the subject was already dead" (1995, 63). However, as the practice evolved in Appalachia, it took on a broader social significance.

Ruby noted that in the early twentieth century, funerary photographs began to include not just the deceased, but also gathered family and community members. This shift, he argues, reflects a change in the conceptualization

of death itself as a collective and transformational event within communities. Rather than focusing solely on the individual's passing, these new compositions emphasized the *mutual* nature of loss and remembrance. Crissman's work on death practices in Appalachia provides similar and valuable context for understanding this evolution (1994), observing that "Appalachian funeral customs often emphasized community participation and support, reflecting the region's strong kinship networks and communal values" (147).

In her work on the representation of death practices in Appalachian literature, Profitt (1996), herself a member of an Appalachian family that migrated to the industrial Midwest, describes and references the communal nature of the photography practice analyzed by Ruby:

To perpetuate the memory of the deceased, photographs of the body were often taken at the wake. Encircling the casket, family and friends would proudly pose with the dead body. By capturing the image of the loved one in death, relatives kept a carefully nurtured memory of the beloved dead. In James Still's *River of Earth*, the mother climbs up to the graveyard and declares, "I wisht to God I'd had a picture tuck of the baby so it could be sot in the arbor during the meeting. I wisht to God I'd had it tuck" [Still 1940, 177]. Photographs provided a visual record of the ultimate personal icon for personal remembrance and community veneration. (Profitt 1996, 162)

The timing of the shift from individual to communal funerary portraits is particularly significant when considered alongside the increasing waves of out-migration from Appalachia to industrial centers in the Midwest (Feather 1998). Fraser (2023) notes that "migrants often sought ways to maintain ties with their home communities, creating complex networks of communication and exchange that spanned the distance between Appalachia and the industrial Midwest" (178). As I will explore in subsequent sections, these photographs became more than images; they transformed into affective objects embodying enduring kinship and community ties, capable of reifying relations by bridging the physical distances imposed by economic migration.

Photographs as Relational Agents/Objects: Drawing on Edwards, Hart, and Strathern

To fully understand the agency of funerary photographs in Appalachian and Transappalachian contexts, it is crucial to situate this practice within broader theoretical frameworks of relationality and materiality. This analysis not only illuminates the specific case of Appalachian funerary

photography but also contributes to larger discussions in visual culture, material culture studies, and the anthropology of death and migration.

Edwards and Hart's foundational work on the materiality of photographs (2004) provides a crucial theoretical underpinning for this study, particularly when considered alongside Strathern's influential conceptualization of relationality (1999, 2020). Edwards and Hart's and also Strathern's approach, which emphasizes understanding photographs as objects with their own material properties and social lives rather than being solely *representational*, is particularly relevant to the way in which Appalachian funerary photographs operate as relational subjects capable both of producing and reproducing sociality. They argue that "materiality is closely related to social biography" (Edwards and Hart 2004, 3; Strathern 1999, 2020), emphasizing how the physical life of a photograph contributes to its meaning and significance.

Strathern's concept of relationality (1999, 2020) also provides additional theoretical depth for understanding these photographs as more than representations. Her framework suggests that material culture is constituted not simply of matter, objects, and things that "reflect" or *represent* relationships, but are themselves *constitutive of* relationships. In other words, cultural objects *embody* relations. In this view, the funerary photographs become *active participants* in creating and maintaining kinship ties rather than *passive records* of them. This theoretical perspective helps us understand how these photographs operated as more than memorial objects—they were actually doing the work of creating and maintaining relationships across time and space. This conceptualization builds on Edwards's later work (2012), in which she asserts that photographs function as what she terms "active social objects," arguing that they don't simply record social relationships but actively mediate them.

Through their production, exchange, and preservation, then, the communal funerary photographs acquire meanings beyond their visual content. The physical handling of these objects—their storage in family albums, their mailing between and travel with relatives, their framing and display—all contribute to their significance as mnemonic objects: as memory and connections materialized both in form *and* function. Visible stains, creases, and handwritten notes denoting photographs' functions almost as postcards are present and can, relationally, be understood anthropologically and materially as significant material traces of their social lives and the networks of relationships they embody (Edwards 2012).

From Breathitt County, Kentucky, to Fort Wayne, Indiana: A Photo/Object Material Analysis

The series of photographs below originate from my own maternal family archives, specifically the Walters and Fletcher families of Breathitt

County, Kentucky, who became connected through the marriage of my maternal grandparents, Leonard Walters and Laura Fletcher (figs. 1–5) in Breathitt County, Kentucky. These images, taken between 1936 and 1952, were exchanged among numerous family members who passed them between eastern Kentucky, southern Ohio, Detroit, Michigan, and finally northern Indiana, where my extended maternal family settled for work in truck axle factories in the 1940s. They were preserved in family photo albums that ultimately came into the possession of my maternal aunt, who recognized my anthropological work on kinship and death and chose to bequeath them to me. This personal connection provides not only privileged access to these materials but also offers unique insights into how these photographs operated as both material and relational objects within my own family's kinship network.

The first image (fig. 1) shows children gathered around my maternal great-aunt Nora Walters's coffin in 1936. What makes this photograph particularly valuable for relational analysis is its companion image—the reverse side (fig. 2) bearing stains, inscriptions, and notes about its sending. Following Strathern's conception of relationality, these material traces don't simply record relationships but actively constitute them. The inscription "Love, Kelly," identifying Kelly Fletcher (my maternal great-uncle) as the



Figure 1: Photograph of funeral of Nora Walters, the deceased, in 1936. Breathitt County, Kentucky. Photographer unknown.

Figure 2: The reverse side of the photograph shown in Figure 1, with stains, inscription of date, and ink marking of sender of photograph, Kelly Fletcher, nephew by marriage of the deceased, Nora Walters.



sender, along with the wear patterns suggesting frequent handling and postal transit, demonstrate how the photograph served as an active agent in maintaining family connections.

The sequence of photographs from Fred Fletcher's funeral in 1952 (figs. 4 and 5) further illustrates the evolution of these practices within our family network. Figure 4 shows the traditional Victorian-style individual portrait of the deceased, while figure 5 depicts the gathered Fletcher siblings—Kelly Fletcher, Molly Holbrook, and Laura Fletcher Walters (my maternal grandmother)—posed around their brother's casket. This pairing demonstrates what Edwards terms the "photographic relationship"—how the very act of creating and sharing these images helped constitute family relationships across time and space.

The material condition of these photographs—their preservation despite obvious handling, the way they've been kept together as a family collection—supports Edwards and Hart's (2004) emphasis on understanding photographs as objects with their own social biographies. The slight damages, creases, and marks visible in several images aren't defects but

Figure 3: Funeral of Nora Walters, 1936, Breathitt County, Kentucky. Photographer unknown.



rather, material evidence of their role in maintaining family connections, perhaps through repeated viewing, sharing, or sending between family members who had migrated and those who remained in Breathitt County.

Particularly striking is how these photographs embody what Strathern describes as the mutual constitution of relationships through material objects (1999; 2020). The gathering of siblings for Fred Fletcher's funeral portrait (fig. 5) both records and creates family unity—the photograph doesn't simply document their presence but actively participates in constituting their relationship as siblings mourning together. The formal composition, with all three siblings positioned to be clearly visible to the camera, suggests an awareness that this image would serve as a material connector to absent family members.

The preservation and eventual bequeathment of these images to me by my aunt adds another layer to their relational significance. Her decision to pass them to me because of my anthropological work on kinship and death demonstrates how these photographs continue to actively constitute family relationships and cultural memory across generations. In this way,



Figure 4: Funerary portrait of Fred Fletcher, Breathitt County, Kentucky.



Figure 5: Funerary image of Fletcher siblings, Kelly, Molly Holbrook, and Laura Fletcher Walters at the casket of Fred Fletcher, 1952, Breathitt County, Kentucky.

they serve not only as research materials but as active agents in maintaining and transforming family connections through time.

Analysis of these photographs as relational objects also reveals the temporal dimension of these practices. The sixteen-year span between Nora Walters's funeral (1936) and Fred Fletcher's funeral (1952) shows both continuity and evolution in how these photographs operated within my family. The later photographs demonstrate the increasing emphasis on group composition and communal mourning that Ruby identified as characteristic of Appalachian funerary photography, while still maintaining elements of earlier Victorian traditions.

The preservation of these images as a coherent collection of artifacts further illustrates Strathern's conception of how material objects actively constitute kinship relations across time. Together, they form what Edwards might term a "photographic genealogy": not simply recording my family's history but *actively participating in its constitution and maintenance* across generations and geographic distances. The fact that these images have remained together and have been preserved, eventually finding their way to me through my aunt's bequeathment, suggests their ongoing role in maintaining family connections and memory, even as the practice of funerary photography itself has evolved.

This close analysis of my family's photographs demonstrates how theoretical frameworks emphasizing materiality and relationality can reveal the complex ways photographs operate as active agents in maintaining family and community connections. Rather than seeing them simply as historical records, we can understand them as participants in the ongoing work of constituting and maintaining relationships across the geographic and temporal distances created by migration, and now, across generational distances through their preservation and transmission within the family. In the context of migration studies, these photographs can be seen as what Peggy Levitt and Nina Glick Schiller (2004, 1026) term "social remittances": that is, the ideas, behaviors, and social capital that flow between sending and receiving communities in migration contexts. Levitt and Glick Schiller (2004) argue that these "play a critical role in transforming social and political life in sending communities" (1026). The persistence and widespread nature of this practice suggest its deep significance within Appalachian culture.

Contemporary Significance and Understanding

As we moved into the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, the practice of funerary photography in Appalachian and Transappalachian communities has evolved but has not disappeared. Its contemporary significance and understanding provide insight into how these communities

continue to negotiate issues of identity, memory, and connection in a rapidly changing world.

Shannon Lee Dawdy's recent work on contemporary American death practices (2021) offers a framework for understanding how Appalachian funerary photography has evolved in the twenty-first century. She argues that Americans are actively re-imagining death rituals in response to changing social, technological, and environmental landscapes. This perspective provides a useful lens for examining the ongoing relevance of funerary photography in Appalachian communities.

In many Appalachian communities, both in the original region and in Transappalachian areas, funerary photography remains a meaningful practice, albeit one that has adapted to changing social norms and technological capabilities. For many families, continuing the practice of funerary photography is a way of honoring their Appalachian heritage. It serves as a link to past generations and an assertion of cultural identity (Williams 2002). In the age of social media, however, there's an increased awareness of privacy issues surrounding these intimate family moments. Even prior to twenty-first-century sharing platforms, many families have tended to treat funerary photographs as private documents for decades, shared only within closed family circles rather than publicly (Laderman 2003; Marwick and Boyd 2014; Ruby 1995).

Conclusion

This examination of Appalachian funerary photographs through the lens of relationality reveals how material objects actively create and maintain social relationships across geographic and temporal distances. By analyzing these photographs through the theoretical frameworks of Edwards and Hart's materiality and Strathern's relationality, we can understand them not simply as passive records of death and mourning, but as active agents in maintaining kinship and community ties between Appalachia and Transappalachia during periods of significant demographic change.

The material properties of these photographs—their circulation through postal networks, their movement with Appalachian workers and their families along Transappalachian routes, their physical handling and display, the accumulation of stains and notations—*constitute* rather than merely *reflect* social relationships. As Strathern argues, these objects do not simply represent relationships but embody them, becoming active participants in the maintenance of kinship ties across time and space. The photographs' movement between mountain communities and urban centers therefore mirror and maintain the complex networks of migration and continual return that have characterized Transappalachian movement. Such death practices, as Dawdy (2021) notes, continue to evolve in response to changing social and

technological landscapes, but their fundamental role in maintaining social relationships remains crucial.

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