

Minority Identities and Vernacular Visual Culture (Chicago, 9–10 May 25)

The Franke Institute for the Humanities, University of Chicago, May 9–10, 2025

Deadline: Dec 10, 2024

Agata Zborowska

Minority groups are often underrepresented in official archives, which has resulted in their continuing marginalization in historiography. Critical archive scholars argue for empowering such groups by developing and investigating archival collections. This symposium intends to expand this approach by demonstrating how the visual practices of underrepresented groups can be studied through underutilized data sources. To this end, the symposium will focus on diaspora communities seen through their visual production with the presumption that the vernacular representations of everyday life can provide substantial insights into evolving minority identities. Therefore, we want to explore the interplay of vernacular visual practices and the transformations of minority identities by posing two broad research questions: What is the role of vernacular visual practice in shaping minority identities? How does looking at identity through vernacular images challenge pervasive representations of minority groups?

Vernacular visual culture—commonplace, ordinary, or everyday images that people make and use—provides a rich set of material for the study of the culture of underrepresented groups. Yet, too often these materials are overlooked. As noted by Patricia Zimmerman, in the context of home movies, in popular imaginary, these images “are often defined by negation: noncommercial, nonprofessional, unnecessary.” Vernacular images were historically often considered subordinate; however, they constitute an essential corpus of sources produced “from below” by the community members. Our initial inquiry shows these marginal media forms can reveal depreciated or repressed histories that have failed to gain mainstream representation. One of the symposium’s key goals is to recognize the possibilities these sources offer in the context of writing “history from below.”

The symposium aims to map the uses and meanings of vernacular visual practices in relation to minority identities, with a particular focus on black and diaspora communities. We invite scholars working on different media and genres to address the question of the role and meaning of vernacular visual culture with minorities’ identities.

The symposium will be held in person only at The Franke Institute for the Humanities, University of Chicago, May 9–10, 2025. Participation in the symposium is free (there is no registration fee). Travel/accommodation support will be available for a limited number of presenters without access to institutional funding.

We request that proposals be received no later than Tuesday, December 10, 2024, at 11:59 pm

(AoE). If you are interested in presenting, please email Agata Zborowska (azborowska@uchicago.edu) with the following details:

- paper title,
- abstract of 300-500 words,
- short bio of 200-300 words,
- information on whether you want/need to apply for funding for travel/accommodation costs.

Accepted presenters are asked to submit their paper (or final draft) at least two weeks before the symposium date.

The symposium organizers

Agata Zborowska, University of Chicago, Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, and University of Warsaw
Eleonory Gilburd, Department of History, University of Chicago

Allyson Nadia Field, Department of Cinema and Media Studies, University of Chicago

Reference:

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