

## Fragments: Spectres of a Sojourning Sojourner

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The waiting that surrounds an impending death tears and suspends time, inducing a state of absence that is in relation, where the shadows of what we are, were and will not be are entrusted to the ether, to be reawakened in the breath of aliveness of those that remain. Last spring, my cousin, who I knew as Janet, died of cancer, ending her third trial of life and death at age forty-four. She was my closest cousin, two years senior, a woman of great richness: An accomplished and respected scholar, artist, classical guitarist, curator, art historian, lecturer and author who lived in Berlin. She held all that is living, but for life. In the prolonged waiting that unfolded, reconciling the paradox of her incompleteness became the heart of my Why.

Why: A predictably complicated complex that opens and unravels patterns of two cousins living artfully, creating relationships with the arts that are and were in part genealogical. Yet it was in the realization that I mourned deeply for a woman I had never met, a relative I only knew through childhood photographs, traces of words and select stories retold that I began to question my relationship with photography: why my understandings of relatives were almost entirely constructed through photographs, and why photography was a medium of research shared by Janet and me.

In this expression of life writing with light, I draw on the theoretical lens of literary métissage as a sojourning sojourner, contemplating stories of the past, as Leggo suggests, “that actively shape who we are in the present” (Hasebe-Ludt, Chambers, & Leggo, 2009, p. 97). Métissage is a form of life writing that attends to the “counternarrative...to the interval between different cultures and languages...a way of merging and blurring genres, texts and identities” in a mixing of spaces and places and memories and histories that is my becoming (Hasebe-Ludt, Chambers, & Leggo, 2009, p. 9). I offer fragments of life writing as a response to the provocation of literary métissage, taking up the notion of sojourning as a way into grand (familial) narratives, narratives so protected I can only offer glimpses within the confines of an article, but narratives I acknowledge as always flowing in the background, in the recesses of words, images and movements. Such fragments are intentionally open to interpretations, to relational connections, to questions for which there are not necessarily answers. My fragments are ambiguous, and deliberately so, as all stories are deliberate and shared in the particular, like a sequence suggesting continuity that is actually discontinuity, much like the triptych I call *Spectres*, implying a conversation across three generations, from a grandmother I never knew, through me, to my mother and back again:



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### *Spectres*

Disjuncture began my quest into life writing with light as a methodology of practice in which the spectres, in this case my mothers' family, are continually reflected back in life interests, choices and directions Janet and I have taken. We shared parallels: Pursuing the arts, finding expression through writing, seeking homes in the academy, and studying dimensions of photography as cultural expression. I wonder: Had we unknowingly become the living spectres of our relative relationships? And if so, how is it we did not even know we shared such spirals in life as we actively pursued shared interests in our locations across the world? Recognizing "this coincidence is a kind of metamorphosis," I entered with uncertainty to reconsider my ways of seeing (Barthes, 1981, p. 109).

Photography defines my earliest experiences, both as imaginative creator and image-object. In fact my introduction to the camera was due to the unintentional work of the sister in-between my mother and Janet's mother, our aunt Lore. Lore created photo logs of the next generation as small children, reprinting and distributing those images to her siblings in different countries across two continents. Through photography, we, who did not know one another or in some instances share the same language, were offered a forum to dialogue. These photographs, as Bal (2004) suggests, served as sites of "acute reflection," where continued "visual interactions" with portraits were "the essential constituents" of identity formation, making family portraits "triggers" for interaction, identification and expressive action (pp. 6, 7). Lore created hundreds of images, if not thousands over a quarter century. In her central location in Toronto, Lore was geographically poised to keep us all connected between Europe, the United States and Canada. In part because of her geographic place, Lore became the keeper of our stories. This may have been a role she created by default, for as an employee of Kodak, the company where she spent her professional life, generous benefits included free film development. As an aside, it is curious to consider how Kodak made photography accessible to the masses, where the snapshot redefined ways of seeing and became emblematic of memory, identity and place, and how it was the significance of such cultural attributes of photography that Janet and I would come to trouble in academic spaces. However it came to be, all our lives seemed to flow through Lore's lens.

I still recall the consuming childhood excitement when Lore's letters arrived, and the social affinity and bonding I experienced knowing these photographs were 'my people' too. Today, I recognize in the vernacular of Lore's domestic snapshots the aesthetics of a gifted photographer of moments, emotions and candour. She had a talent to render our lives in her light writing. Each photo presented a story of a time and place in the stages of growing up into which I, for one, read meaning and developed a sense of kinship through an exposed piece of photographic paper. It was Lore, our visual storyteller, who became the "mediator of a truth" (Barthes, 1981, p. 70). Her camera served as an instrument to bridge differences within, to create a collective consciousness. Lore's photographs remain the heart of my family's archive and it was through her images that I came to know my extended family. I venture this may be true for my cousins, maybe it was so for Janet too.

Lore's photographic practice represented much more than a means to record. At an early age I learned there was a relationship between technology and the telling of stories. When I look at my family archive now, I am surprised to find images of myself, two or three years old, carrying different cameras. I have no memory of this. But as in any good story, foreshadowing is often embedded in symbolic acts, and I wonder if intuitively I chose photography, or if photography chose me. My interest in handling cameras continued with Lore's Kodak Instamatic 124, left behind during one of her visits. I spent countless hours investigating the inside of this camera. With the camera back open, clicking the shutter, watching the lens open and close, manually resetting the advance lever, and doing it all again, the kind of playing inherent in experiential learning well before any formal schooling. I understood the shutter years ahead of exposing my first roll of film, which was eventually made with the same Instamatic.

In grade six I learned how to develop and print black and white film in a temporary darkroom that doubled as the school kitchen on hot-dog day, and the cloakroom for the Christmas play. There I developed my first photographs. By then the ravages of playing, dropping, and even some dismantling of Lore's old Kodak had taken a toll and the lens was no longer able to focus, but images were still made, and I discovered the artistic medium I loved most. Perhaps I continue to practice because photography is arguably more accessible, and not as prescribed as painting or crafts, but innovative, eclectic and unpredictable. And as a teacher of teachers, knowing from experience children can be taught how to work a black and white darkroom convinces me we need to perceive and engage children differently, and not be afraid to develop challenging activities that extend beyond the simplicity of art that does not involve scissors.

I have spent over thirty years engaged almost exclusively in landscape interpretation. I cannot account for this thematic choice given my relationship with photography was informed by Lore's portraits in my early years. Yet in an ironic twist, today I teach photography as life writing, not landscape imagery despite my ongoing art practice. Instead I encourage students to find in photography a medium through which to tell autobiographical stories, just as Lore had taught me as a child.

Like a spectre in-between waiting, deliberating the why of Janet's death, I came to consider again my family archive entrusted with me only temporarily after my mother died. In recognition of the value, the preciousness of these photos, I planned to digitize and preserve, to dwell in this "uncommon place," and like a guardian of documents, create multiple copies so we could all share our memories (Derrida, 1995, p. 3). After eight years, I completed scanning only a part of my immediate family's very small collection of photographs and that part has since been lost

when technology failed, reminding me again of the value of materiality and the printed image. But technology was only part of the reason this project remaining unfinished. My inertia to document these photographs increased as I lingered with the collection, realizing as a researcher that these photographic stories were also stories of absence. I look at these photos now. Some arranged in albums, many loose-leaf, along with a small, tattered yellow box of slides, upon which I printed as a child, "I don't want this." Such an awkwardly printed statement of fact that now strangely seems to reveal my truth-telling. It is as if I intuitively understood then, a lifetime ago, what I am now contemplating about absence in this collection. I am struck by a profound fact. Most of these photographs are of families I have never met. And there is not a single photo of my immediate family all together, just ones, twos, threes, but never all five of us. There are no photographs of transformative moments in our immediate lives: birthdays, graduations, marriages, the birth of grandchildren. All this is silent. I cannot account for why, except that Lore was not there to record life writing with light. Always there was absence.

If I proceed into photography with an understanding that the photograph inscribes stories using literary traditions, how should I read this absence? Speculatively, literally, symbolically, or simply, out of context with unintended arbitrariness? Or as Sontag (1977) suggests, does the "true distinction" lie in "not having [my] body published at all" (p. 166)? Is this family album too unconventional? Or perhaps this absence constitutes photographic "violence," where the absence of each occasion silences stories so that nothing can exist (Barthes, 1981, p. 91). And if photographs represent our collective consciousness, the site where we hold our memories, what story does absence tell? Can I simplify multiple meanings to just one narrative of absence, ignoring the elements, structure and codes of each photo and the cumulative stories that are part of this whole? For Barthes (1981), there is the space between life and death in the act of photographing, a notion reiterated by Cousineau-Levine (2003) among others. Perhaps this is why I cannot complete the digitizing of this archive; the mythology has finally become too much and I remain suspended between photographic life and death.

In the few photographs of me as a child not made by Lore, I am frequently portrayed alone, objectified in the modelling of newly sewn dresses, or portrayed with my mother only. The lifelong effect of that isolating bond remains manifest in the guilt of failing to reproduce the archive, a guilt that compounds with each year, as does the strife. In the material layers of these images are stories of "encounters," like a performance where the intent is to create relationships through a specific kind of familial gaze that facilitates "a certain latency" (Barthes, 1981, pp. 27, 53). It was only with Janet's passing, a woman with whom I had artful parallels, that life writing shed light on the possibilities of my incompleteness. How can I, a life writer, in relation to relative life writers, fail to fulfil my storying?

The family album as a site of spectres became my impetus for undertaking this reflective inquiry through the arts. For my mother's family, photographs were symbols of hope, expressions of betterment, authenticating familial recovery and demonstrating stories of conformity through social and cultural integration. From an older generation through to the children of my generation, photographs were symbols of the promise of purpose, the sacrifice obscured behind smiles, and the prospects foregone because of war, loss, death, destruction. As Hirsch describes, such "postmemory" is "familial inheritance":

The relationship of children of survivors of cultural or collective trauma to the experiences of their parents, experiences that they 'remember' only as the narratives and images which they grew up, but that are so powerful, so



monumental, as to constitute memories in their own right. (Hirsch, as cited in Crownshaw, 2004, p. 215)

These photographs were made to remember what words could not, to exchange as social markers between family, to prove we existed and to guarantee each life would bring forward lost dreams, making each photograph “a form of agency” (Hirsch, as cited in Langford, 2001, p. 29). Such life writing offers a way to respond to spectres within the family album, and perhaps more so, the “naturalizing cultural practices” that “makes [photography] particularly powerful,” and thus an “insidious instrument of social conformity” (Hirsch, 2002, p. 251). In this in-between space, I began to question our naturalizing cultural practices, and by extension, how I, as a first generation Canadian, feel far less Canadian than my immigrant parents.

I am hyphenated in my social conformity, consigned to the Canadian landscape where I have yet to find a sense of home, and to the European, to lands I still have not visited and which will never be home, despite holding a dual citizenship. Perhaps as Crownshaw (2004) suggests, photographs are “inscribed with the agency of witnessing,” in effect, revealing the “ethical dynamic of postmemory that resists a colonizing impulse” (pp. 232, 235). My sense of kinship to home-places remains tenuous and shifting, belonging to both and yet neither. Extending Cousineau-Levine’s (2003) thesis that contemporary Canadian photography reflects “the space in-between two zones” of our “dualistic reality,” dividing “realms of here and elsewhere,” I utilize the camera as a form of identity construction. But unlike my aunt Lore, I turned to the aesthetic distance of landscapes rather than portraiture to explore notions of belonging in an art practice I have lived for decades (p. 7). Perhaps this is why I remain happiest when I am in movement, passing through the landscapes that possess my photographic attention. Perhaps this is why I elect to reside where the landscape dominates conceptions of what is Canada: the far west coast as an extreme landscape. Here my archive has burgeoned with tens of thousands of images, almost all landscapes. It may be, as Sontag (1977) states, “people robbed of their past seem to make the most fervent picture takers, at home and abroad” (p. 10). Perhaps that was Lore’s story too.

Janet’s passing bore witness to that which was unseen by me for so very long. As an arts researcher and teacher, I continue to pursue the stories I cannot obtain, seeking in life writing what I lack in my own story: A belonging, a rootedness, an identity I can claim. This absence is chaffing in the background, in my unsettled solitude, a solitude that is always looking to escape into images. Is it possible that as researchers, we are always seeking in our work what we lack in our own stories? That our research is most strongly motivated by that which we cannot find in our narratives of becoming? My research has a long-standing trajectory of life writing, and like a shadow, my teaching of photography consistently focuses on how photography can tell our stories. I mindfully encourage class after class to render their lives visually, to enter a space I do and do not easily enter myself.

My life story is not traumatic, not vivid, not exceptional; instead my story begins in erasure, in my family photo album, in the erasure of my mothers’ family when they were children, a burden that became the burden of the next generation. Yet this contested space is also where my life-long obsession of life writing with light began. My relationality is geographic, shape-shifting between the familiar-unfamiliar along borders and notions of citizenship in a “longing to inhabit” (Barthes, 1981, p. 40). I now consider how Lore’s portraits are literal interpretations of family as spectres, while my scenic landscapes are social projections of the spectres of family, metaphors calling into and answering back the stories imprinted in me as a first generation Canadian, where

unbelonging is littered with structural dualities like margins-centres. In this way, the spectres, as Peim (2005) suggests, “conjure a present absence,” an incompleteness that endures (p. 74).

Broaching my relationship with photography as life writing has been challenging. This is a story that is riddled with obligation to and scrutiny of a family that I effectively do not know, doubling my necessity as an arts researcher and teacher to open spaces that have long been absent. I agonize over every detail, the implied and explicit meanings, and my desire to honour those who are no longer in this world but form part of this conversation. This is an ethical quandary that often ends with my self-silencing. Bal (2004) suggests this is not geographic but ontological distance, “a distance normally erased in the routine of perception when it is embedded in affection,” but for me, this distance is emotion braided in métissage, operating spatially and as the essence of being, deeply entwined in the texture of photography as social biography (p. 11). At the same time, I am mindful of the potential of such hybridity to “decontextualize” or “distort” meaning through “formalistic reduction” of “a phrase or a word” from the whole “discursive logic of philosophical text” (Porter, 1997, pp. 93-94). Simply, for me life writing begins with an ethic of caring, and as a methodology of writing with light, I look to landscape interpretation as my means to encourage connections across time and place, a coming to know between Janet and me, not as confession, but as a practice of heightened awareness of relational events that has informed our lives.

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