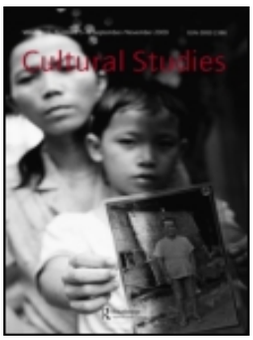

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CAROL MAVOR

COLLECTING LOSS

ABSTRACT

'Collecting Loss' develops themes from *Pleasures Taken* (Mavor, Duke University Press, 1995) with an emphasis on the fetishization of photographs and old clothes (exemplified, on the one hand, in Elin O'Hara Slavick's own girlhood dresses that she has stitched with haunting memories of her childhood, and on the other hand in the lush photographs taken by Sally Mann and the Victorian photographer Clementina Hawarden). As Christian Boltanski has written: 'What they [clothing and photographs] have in common is that they are simultaneously presence and absence. They are both an object and a souvenir of a subject, exactly as a cadaver is both an object and a souvenir of a subject.' Reading an old photographic album made by her own grandmother against other maternal collections of plenitude (whether they be old clothes or photographs or domestic bric-a-brac), Mavor reveals how such accumulated goods are made to fill in for the pangs of loss: lost childhoods, lost family histories, lost memories, lost friends. Mixing corporeality and critical theory, Mavor engages with Emily Apter's notion of 'maternal collectomania' as a site of provocative meanings worthy of placement alongside more conventional discourses on visual representation and collecting.

KEYWORDS

photography, clothing, childhood, maternality, family album, collecting

> All women . . . are clothing fetishists.
>
> Sigmund Freud[1]

> What they [clothing and photographs] have in common is that they are simultaneously presence and absence. They are both an object and a souvenir of a subject, exactly as cadaver is both an object and souvenir of a subject.
>
> Christian Boltanski[2]

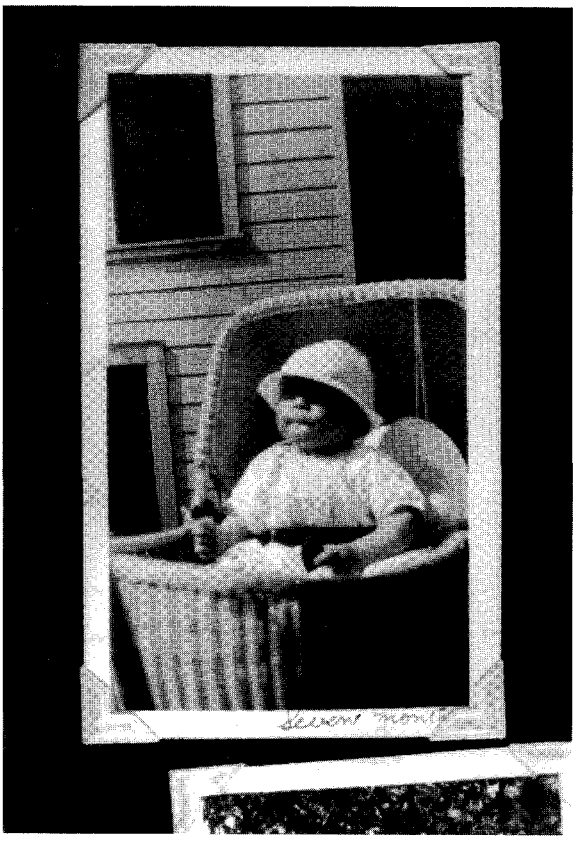
I fetishize two things in my life: clothing, especially old clothing, clothing with a past, and photographs. And it was not until recently that I understood that my desires for each were closely woven together. My story feminizes the fetish.[3]

But according to Freud's work on fetishism, the fetish is solely the prerogative of men: while women are often hysterics, they are almost never fetishists. As Emily Apter has pointed out, 'despite his [Freud's] admission

at the Vienna Psychoanalytic Society in 1909 that 'all women . . . are clothing fetishists', Freud typically supplied a male agent to the perversion by associating it with male homosexuality and coprophilic pleasure.[4] In her essay, 'Splitting hairs: female fetishism and postpartum sentimentality in Maupassant's fiction', Apter seeks to undo a gender-biased reading of fetishism. She finds the fetish objects of women spilling out of the drawers of turn-of-the-century French literature (Guy de Maupassant), the history of French psychiatry (Gaëtan Gatian de Clérembault, a psychoanalyst who was Lacan's teacher and who is famous for his photographs of Algerian women wrapped in excessive drapery), and even in the work of the contemporary American artist Mary Kelly (who collected and framed her son's nappies, cotton T-shirts, his early gifts of flowers and bugs and his first writings). While sniffing out traces of female fetishism, Apter comes across special boxes and bureaus and albums and other private places enshrouded with veils, fabrics and fur – mostly belonging to women – whose sole purpose is to preserve the relics of departed loved ones. The stories of loss range from spoiled love to death to merely growing up. Inside these feminine spaces we find letters, pressed flowers, locks of hair, nail clippings, pieces of clothing. The fetish objects (from the trivial to the exquisite) are most often passed down and gathered by the women of the family, 'by hook or crook' (a translation of *à-bric-à-brac*) in a continual process of 'acquisition and exchange' – which can be met with heated emotions (ranging from intense love to harboured jealousy to violence) between sisters, mothers and daughters.[5] Apter points out that this 'bric-a-brac-cluttered world' has been largely overlooked, even when it reaches a space of 'manic collectomania' because it has been naturalized as part of feminine culture. Apter's examples of female fetishes, taken from literature and art, are often visual, sometimes olfactory, but the majority of them relate to a sense of touch.

My 'bric-a-brac-cluttered world' is also haptic. My fingers are beckoned by a baby dress of white cotton and white eyelet, an abandoned pink baby blanket woven with pink and green satin ribbons, a once white wedding veil yellowed crisp, Grandfather's old camel mohair coat eaten by moths, a tiny but heavy glass-beaded bag (royal blue, deep rose, white and gold) cinched with a silk cord, tiny shoes of soft worn mildewed leather pressed flat by storage and polished powder blue. These are the things that clutter and fill the recesses of my home, my memories, my body.

Crucial to this world are my photographs: some are made of soft matte paper printed with sepia tones, others are made of glossy paper printed with stark black and white, others are losing themselves in the faded colours of early colour photography, still others feature the surreal spaces of the Polaroid camera. My family's drawers, albums and boxes (and those of many other middle-class families) have been filling up with photographs ever since the invention of the *carte de visite* (the beginnings of cheap photography) and the never-ending succession of photographic inventions: mass-produced hand cameras (the Brownie, the Kodak, the Lilliput, the Tom Tumb, the Frena); drugstore developing; Sears' value packs; school



My father '. . . lips tucked in, as silent as he is today.'

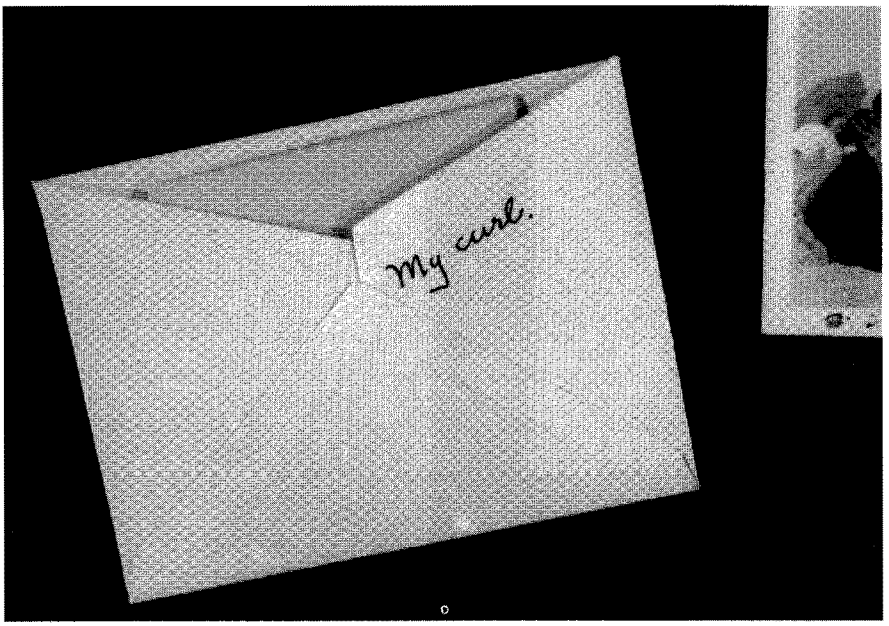
portraits; class photos; disposable cameras. Using such products of the photographic enterprise, my own grandmother spent the last years of her life preparing elaborate scrapbooks/photograph albums on each of her two sons to be left to us after her death.

My father's album (which he sent directly to me after my grandmother's death) begins with photographs not of himself, but of my mother when they were first married: the year was 1953. This blunt, one might even say shocking, beginning is an ending. It is the ending of something that I am only beginning to understand now: a final severing of that (umbilical) something between a mother and her son – that something which began with my father's tumbles inside his mother, his elbow poking between her ribs, in the months before his birth in 1926. Though my father remained devoted to my grandmother, marriage changes things between a son and a mother – especially when his father/her husband was barely there. As I turn the black pages weighted with pictures and other memorabilia (cards, an occasional newspaper clipping), I feel as if I am watching one of the old Super 8 family movies that we never had – only in reverse. (When I was a

'. . . my mother as a young bride, her lips darkened with red lipstick (when I came along her lips would be frosted pink) . . .'

child I loved watching other people's home movies this way.) Stopping and starting, the timing is all off; parts are left out. My heart feels heavy with the weight of the black and white photographs. I discover that the album finally ends (begins?) with pictures of my baby-father at seven months: white wicker pram, floppy cotton brimmed cap, lips tucked in, as silent as he is today.

In between the first page with the pictures of my mother as a young bride, her lips darkened with red lipstick (when I came along her lips would be frosted pink), and the last page with pictures of my father as a baby, there are many more pictures and things: a small lock of hair inside a tiny, tiny envelope, inscribed in my grandmother's writing (small tight cursive), with the words 'My curl', meaning my father's curl (I cannot bear to look inside); military pictures of my father in sailor caps and active-duty clothes and dress uniforms with harsh brass buttons; photographs of the three of them (my grandmother in a white dress with an enormous dark cotton bow under her collar that covers her chest, my laughing father in short pants, his brother in long pants) taken in succession as they happily stride towards the

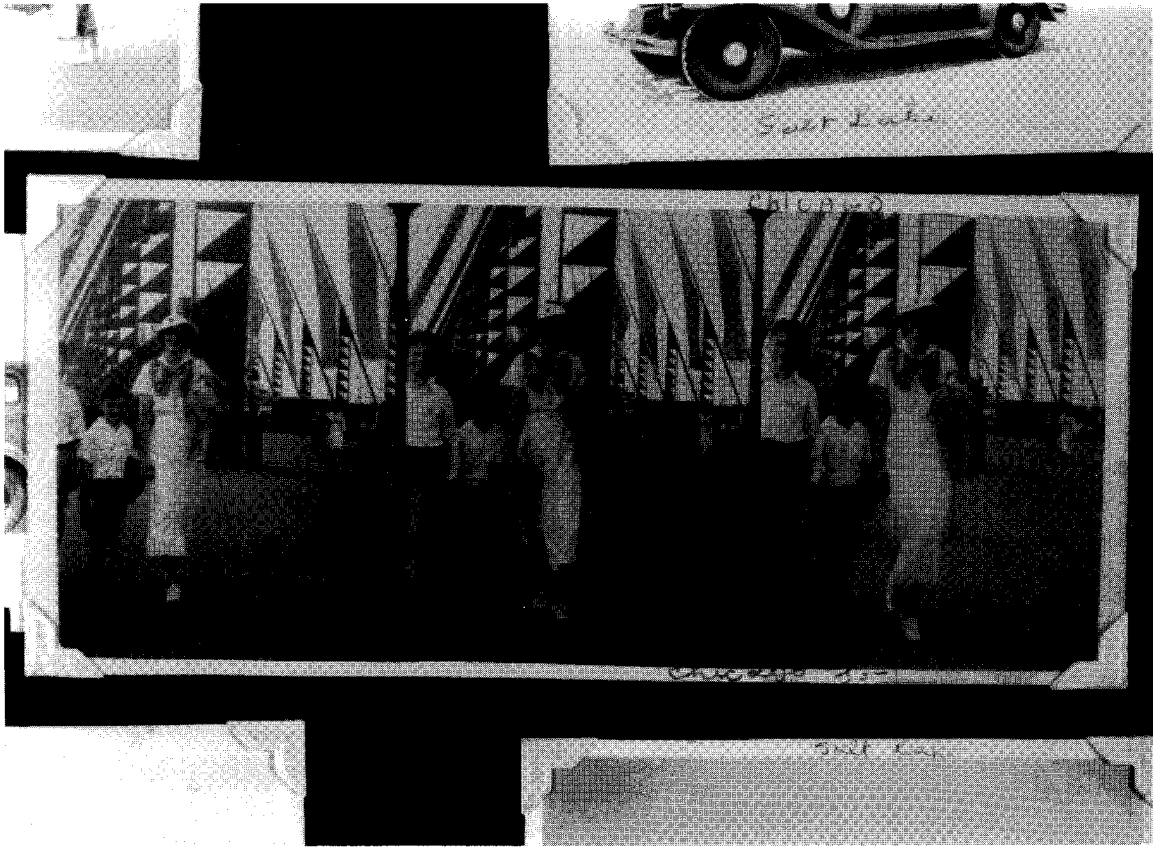


The envelope. '. . . a small lock of hair inside a tiny, tiny envelope . . . (I cannot bear to look inside) . . .'

camera at the 1935 Chicago World's Fair – my grandfather out of the frame, as he almost always is.

By arranging his life backwards, my grandmother has reconstructed my father's life as if it ends like some forbidding myth, with *their* beginning. As James Clifford has told us, 'Living does not easily organize itself into a continuous narrative.'[6] It is only after we have lived through cycles of our lives, in recollection, in photographs, that a narrative comes through. Afterwards, we tell narratives that may be partly true, but they are also narratives that must be fictionalized in order for us to make sense of our lives . . . in order to survive. 'We are condemned to tell stories', but we cannot (in our hearts of hearts) believe that they are altogether true.[7]

I learned from my grandmother that it is the mother's duty to create palpable narratives of our lives. It is the mother's duty to love things. My grandmother passed on to me this love of things (which is both wonderful and burdensome). Yet, not all things can be passed on; not all pictures make it into the album. Though I begged for and got my grandfather's old chair, he is virtually absent in the album. He is barely visible in the front seat of the Packard. Striding into the back door of the cabin, he turns his face away from the camera – the old Ford grimaces and returns the camera's gaze for him. In a family picture with unknown aunts, he stands so far apart from my father's hand which reaches out, futiley trying to pull him in, that it is as if he were not in the picture at all. There is a silent gap between them. Like a parenthetical phrase skipped, the space between them is calling to be read. (With



My grandmother, uncle and father at the Chicago World's Fair. '. . . my grandfather out of the frame, as he almost always is.'

My grandfather '. . . he turns his face away from the camera – the old Ford grimaces and returns the camera's gaze for him.'

each successive look, the silence between them bristles more and more. I feel my father's pain. I catch sight of my father-as-boy huddled on the front porch with his older brother: the crashing sound of the china cabinet overturned in a drunken rage by the silent man fills the brackets, amplifies the space.) Despite the scary silences that many of my grandmother's objects give way to, I collect the things that she has given to me: the chair, the albums, the huge Parisian turn-of-the-century glass vase whose surface imitates carved turtle shell, the odd dark little oil painting of a monk playing the trombone (painstakingly painted with a fine brush and plenty of linseed oil), the silver spoons collected from all over the world, the white fluted wedding teacups, so thin that you can see through them, as if they were made of paper or skin.

Henriette Barthes, Roland Barthes' mother, was also a 'keeper' of bric-a-brac. Shortly after her death, Barthes, finding himself lost, went through boxes of photographs, relics of their lives spent together and apart. Barthes claims that at that moment, he was not looking for her, that he had no hope of finding her. He, after all, had already cut himself off from her, had faced his/her absolute loss. 'I had acknowledged that fatality, one of the most agonizing features of mourning, which decreed that however often I might consult such images, I could never recall her features (summon them up as a totality).'[8] Yet his desire belies him, he continues his looking. Sorting through the pictures, he finds her not caught so much by the camera, but rather by the objects in the picture that define her. The objects that he writes about, some of which are clothing, are rich in fetishistic lure.

'Henriette Barthes, Roland Barthes' mother, was such a "keeper" herself.'

Source Family photograph of Henriette Barthes from *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes.* Courtesy Éditions du Seuil.

> With regard to many of these photographs, it was History which separated me from them. Is History not simply that time when we were not born? I could read my nonexistence in the clothes my mother had worn before I can remember her. There is a kind of stupefaction in seeing a familiar being dressed *differently*. Here, around 1913, is my mother dressed up – hat with a feather, gloves, delicate linen at wrists and throat, her 'chic' belied by the sweetness and simplicity of her expression. This is the only time I have seen her like this, caught in a History (of tastes, fashions, fabrics): my attention is distracted from her by accessories which have perished: for clothing is perishable, it makes a second grave for the loved being. In order to 'find' my mother, fugitively alas, and without ever being able to hold on to this resurrection for long, I must, much later, discover in several photographs the objects she kept on her dressing table, an ivory powder box (I loved the sound of its lid), a cut-crystal flagon, or else a low chair, which is now near my own bed, or again the raffia panels she arranged above the divan, the large bag she loved (whose comfortable shapes belied the bourgeois notion of the 'handbag').[9]

The photographs, objects themselves, record objects within them (dress, dressing table, ivory powder box): things that stand in for her, not wholly, but partially. It is no wonder that he never 'recognized her except in fragments'.[10] These mother-objects are tied to her and to Barthes, who (despite his claims) could never really cut the cord.

Because photographs so poignantly speak of death and loss, they (as Barthes has written) wound us, prick us, reach us like 'the delayed rays of a star'.[11] Every photograph is a record of a moment forever lost – snapped up by the camera and mythically presented as evermore. The family album is always torn by the sorrows of loss: lost childhoods, lost friends, lost relatives, lost memories, lost objects, lost newness. Pressed into the album, not without joy, the images depress the beholder; they speak in melancholic tones. 'With the Photograph, we enter into *flat Death*.'[12]

And like childhood and new woollen winter coats and linen blouses and mothers and silk dresses and felt hats and distant cousins and grandmothers, photographs deteriorate, spoil, die, benumb, weaken. 'Not only does it [the photograph] commonly have the fate of paper (perishable), but even if it is attached to more lasting supports, it is still mortal: like a living organism, it is born on the level of the sprouting silver grains, it flourishes a moment then ages. . . . Attacked by light, by humidity, it fades, weakens, vanishes.'[13] The photograph dies like a body. And like a body, we simply cannot throw it out. (We bury the dullest, even the ugliest, photographs in drawers and boxes.) To tear or to cut the photograph is a violent, frighteningly passionate, hysterical action, which leaves behind indexical wounds, irreparable scars. (My friend Patricia snatched some albums away from her father. I was shocked to see that he had cut her mother out of each and every one of the pictures – even the wedding photographs. What absolute violence!)

I experience my friend's missing mother, or the ripped picture found at the bottom of a box, or those blank spaces in my father's album where paper photo-corners mark a picture's escape, as 'convulsive beauty'.[14] Such undue alterations captivate me for the ways in which they suggest untold, unimaged, lost and often purposely forgotten stories. My attraction to ravaged photographs lies behind my love for the endless photographs taken by Lady Hawarden of her ravishing daughters in fancy dress (1860s). I fetishize and desire these some 800 pictures, not only because the girls (Isabella Grace, Clementina, Florence Elizabeth) wear old clothes that their mother collected – magnificent party dresses, boys' velvet breeches, laced underwear, black riding habits, and silk flowers in their hair – but because their edges have been torn and cut, ripped and scissored. 'Originally they were pasted into albums, but before presentation to the Victoria and Albert Museum [by Hawarden's granddaughter] the pictures were cut or torn from the album pages.'[15] Hawarden's 'family albums' were preserved by her

'Their damaged edges invite me past seeing towards touch . . . I am torn by what lies between these young women.'

Source Lady Hawarden, *Clementina and Isabella Grace Maude c.* 1864. London, Victoria and Albert Museum.

relatives, only to be destroyed by them. Almost all the photographs bear the mark of this final gesture that completed their short flight from home (5 Princes Gardens, South Kensington) to institution (the Victoria and Albert right around the corner). Their damaged edges invite me past seeing towards touch. Looking at *Clementina and Isabella Grace Maude* (*c.* 1864), my fingers move along the picture's chewed edges only to feel the crispness of Isabella's net petticoats, the pull of Isabella's back sash, the tightness of Isabella's bound hair, the warmth of Isabella's forearm where it is graced by Clementina's hand, the burning of Clementina's gaze as it shoots like a star into the eyes of Isabella. I am torn by what lies between these two young women.

Yet most of us are anxious to preserve our images of ourselves and our loved ones (as whole and as undamaged), like 'flies in amber' (as Peter Wollen has written).[16] So, we often ask ourselves, what are we to do with these traces of bodies that fill drawers, boxes, shelves, attics, basements, closets? It is as if our pictures contained thin ghosts of the actual person photographed (of our aunt, our cousin, our mother, our childhood friend, our self). We are haunted by our family photographs. If thrown away – 'What is it that will be done away with, along with this photograph which yellows, fades, and will someday be thrown out, if not by me – too superstitious for that – at least when I die? Not only "life" (this was alive, this posed live in front of the lens), but also, sometimes – how to put it? – love.'[17] As Barthes has told us, photographs have an umbilical connection to their referent, to life itself.

Likewise, because clothing is 'perishable' and because it takes on the body (it takes form, smells, dirt), 'it makes second graves for the loved being,' even before death, but especially after death – when we found ourselves confronted, not only by dresser drawers, and shoe boxes and vinyl albums of photographs that have traced the loved one's body, but also their clothes. For me, wearing the clothes of a loved one or a friend, in which their smells come forth, in which their body has worn the cloth smooth or through, is akin to carrying a photographic image with me. Their body caresses me. I like to wear lockets with photographic images tucked inside. The locket (say, with a picture of my youngest son inside) or a friend's old dress, or a grandfather's retired jacket, or an aunt's abandoned hat – all carry spectres of my loved ones: I sense them skin to skin.

I guess that is why we have to keep so much in our dresser drawers (which function as miniature museums of our archived selves): 'the function of any drawer is to ease, to acclimate the death of objects by causing them to pass through a sort of pious site, a dusty chapel, where, in the guise of keeping them alive, we allow them a decent interval of dim agony.'[18] Like a photograph, the drawer of saved objects functions as a space between life and death. For not only do our photographs, our objects, signify death, they also (in the spirit of the fetish) keep death away. Collecting these objects in the nooks and crannies of our homes keeps them and our memories and ourselves alive. Objects keep death away by helping us to remember. Milan Kundera writes on memory's close link to death: 'Forgetting . . . is the great

private problem of man; death as the loss of self. But what of this self? It is the sum of everything we remember. Thus, what terrifies us about death is not the loss of future but the loss of past. Forgetting is a form of death ever present within life.'[19] I am so afraid of forgetting.

Elin O'Hara Slavick's mother never wanted to forget the childhoods of her five daughters. She feared the loss of the past. And, she must, I imagine, have feared a loss of herself. I know that, as a child, my own mother imagined me as a miniature copy of herself and I have always felt in turn that I was her mirror. Our connected identities register my birth as never complete. For the birth of a girl can be an everlasting process of cutting and stitching between mother and child, between stereoscopic images. (One of my students recognized this complex imaging and re-imaging in an old high school photograph of her mother, and wrote: 'Not only does it have a sense of aura because it is old, but because it is my mother/me. Like the multiple photographic copies of this image, I am a copy of my mother.'[20]) In addition to the family photographs and the Super 8 home movies, Slavick's mother saved most of their dresses. The dresses were worn by Elin O'Hara Slavick and her sisters to Mass, to school, to birthday parties and to family gatherings. As a result, the girls were often photographed in these dresses.

Not long ago, Slavick told her mother that she wanted to use the worn and mended dresses in an art work – she wanted to embroider her own text

'The dresses were worn by Elin O'Hara Slavick and her sisters to Mass, to school, to birthday parties and to family gatherings.'

Source Elin O'Hara Slavick, *A Wall of Incoherent Dresses*, 1991. Collection of the artist.

on to them. Slavick's mother, a female fetishist in her own right, agreed to send the material of her maternal collectomania to her youngest daughter – the one who used to get mad and kick people's shins. (I am still surprised that the mother agreed to give them up.) The dresses, like my father's family album, came to Slavick in the mail. Like my father's family album they contained the histories of a family. Like my father's album, they prompted memories.

Trained as a photographer, Slavick has reconstructed her childhood, not with photographs, but in response to photography. (As Susan Sontag writes in *On Photography*, 'Now all art aspires to the condition of photography.'[21]) Slavick sees the dresses as photographs of how she remembers her body:

> The work is informed . . . primarily by my own small memory of being a girl. An investigation of my childhood produces a synthesis of distorted memory, my real history, and my adult desire to interpret and remember. Poetic and confessional texts are sewn in the dresses that my mother saved since my childhood. Each dress becomes a surrogate of my body, a photograph of the memory of my body. The absence of actual photographic imagery of that body implies the loss of multiple bodies; the hiding body, the invisible body and the dead child body which we all possess within our adult selves.[22]

But unlike the photographs that are found in the usual family album, Slavick's dressed take on images that are almost never found in family

A photograph of Slavick's sister in her First Communion dress that would eventually bear the text: 'In thy womb have no shame'.

Source Family photograph taken by William H. Slavick. Collection of the artist.

'. . . Slavick told her mother that she wanted to use the worn and mended dresses in an artwork – she wanted to embroider her own text onto them.'

Source Elin O'Hara Slavick, from *A Wall of Incoherent Dresses*, 1991. Collection of the artist.

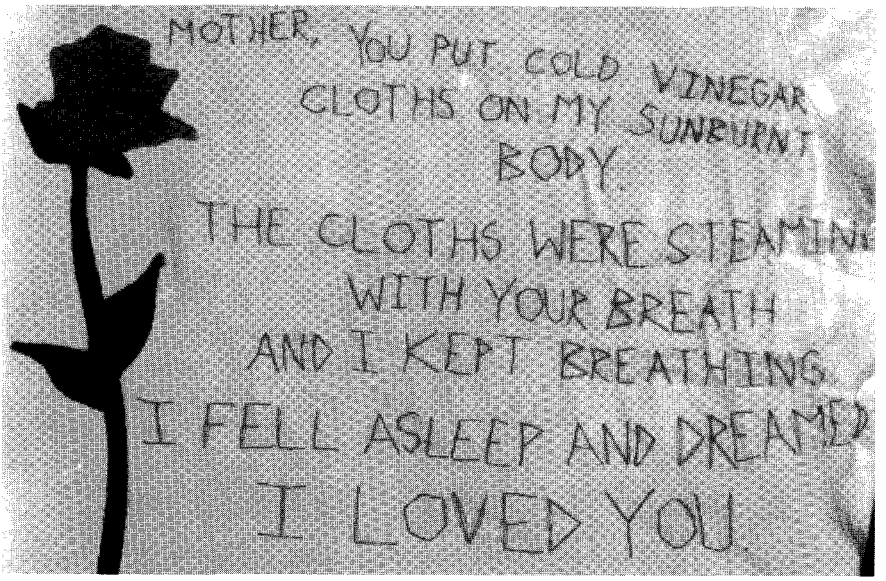
Slavick wearing the dress she would eventually embroider with the words 'mutter mutter mutter mutter mutter'.

Source Family photograph taken by William H. Slavick. Collection of the artist.

pictures. 'Slavick's childhood dresses no longer can pretend innocence. They are transformed through adult texts and become surreal evidence in the absence of the original snapshots that they might have been.'[23] The dresses function like the missing pictures in an album, or the tears alongside Hawarden's photographs. They manage to *picture* the unsaid. For example, on the creamy soft bodice of a beautiful cotton dress – with a full green skirt whose hem holds the extra weight of a full four inches from being turned up for one of the girls so that it could dance just above her knees – Slavick has stitched:

MOTHER, YOU PUT COLD VINEGAR
CLOTHS ON MY SUNBURNT
BODY.
THE CLOTHS WERE STEAMING WITH YOUR BREATH
AND I KEPT BREATHING.
I FELL ASLEEP AND DREAMED
I LOVED YOU.

It is a family picture: a child's sunburnt body, maternal care, child sleep, a child's profound love for the mother. But it is not an image that many of us



'. . . it is not an image that many of us could find in our family album.'

Source Elin O'Hara Slavick, detail of one of the dresses from *A Wall of Incoherent Dresses*, 1991. Collection of the artist.

could find in our family album. Pain, nakedness, the unposed, the unconscious, the smells of the home, the breath of the mother, the unmasked, a grown child's sleep, the everyday, a sensual confession – such steam and chill are rarely there.

Like most of us, Reynolds Price can only find 'innocent' and 'posed' pictures in his family's shoe boxes, albums and drawers. As he writes in the afterword to Sally Mann's *Immediate Family*,

> [My parents] exposed yards of film, not only in their frank satisfaction in a child but also in pursuit of visible proof that I was glad to be their product, a moon to their sun – and I generally was – but they likewise early enlisted my cooperation in a long concealment or denial that my becoming moon had hid a dark face, which was where I lived for far more hours – and now for nearly six decades – than any of them would have wanted to hear, not to mention confirm in permanent image. Like most veterans of family photographs then, my face and body – so far as they manage to outlast me – will survive as a highly edited version of the whole person I managed to be behind an ever-ready grin.[24]

Price would 'give a lot to have a stack of black-and-white pictures of moments' that captured such things as the 'furious look' in his 'father's gray eyes on a warm Sunday evening' when he told his wife that 'she'd stolen his share' of Price and his brother.[25] But there are no such pictures for Price, for most of us. Family albums are closely edited; they 'tend to include [only] those images on which family members can agree, which tell a shared story.'[26]

Most families agree on the same shared stories: Happy Holiday, Happy Vacation, Happy Graduation, Happy Birthday, Happy First Bicycle, Happy New Home, Happy New Baby, Happy Wedding. Though, as family members we can read other stories between the lines; there are solid similarities between family pictures (the pose, the occasion, the smiles, sometimes the clothes), a general covering over that 'perpetuate[s] dominant familial myths and ideologies.'[27] It is in this way that all family pictures are masked: they assume the mask of the familial. 'Photography,' writes Barthes, 'cannot signify (aim at a generality) except by assuming a mask.'[28]

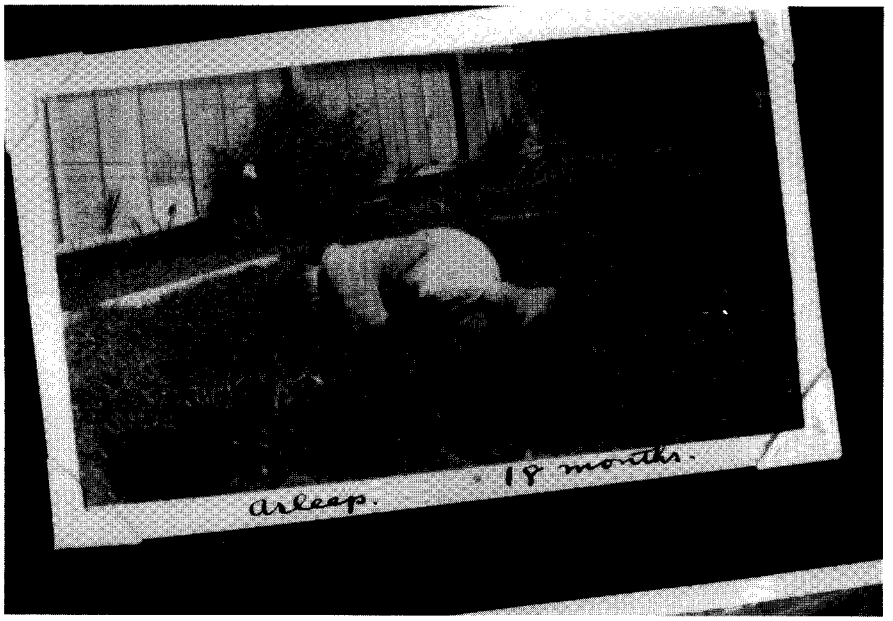
Yet in a play of contradiction, childhood photographs often seem like an extraordinary touch with the real: as evidence of the unmasked self. Looking through my father's family album, I see all the essential traces of him: his quiet way, his tight-lipped smile, something moral and self-assured, his surprising love for wearing silly hats that stands in direct contrast to his hatred for costume, the pure pleasure he feels in being with the right people, his always very thick hair, a comfortableness with his own body, his love for dogs, his devotion to his mother. Some will say that I am reading what I want to see into these photographs, but I say, 'Nevertheless, I see it.' I know that you can see it too (a little bit of truth) even in pictures of people you and I only know through pictures.

I have found such kernels of truth lodged in the baby and childhood photographs of artists and cultural critics that are reproduced in the centre

pages of *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures* – the fourth volume in a series ('Documentary Sources in Contemporary Art') edited by Marcia Tucker.[29] It has been said that the book is one of the most important texts on the topic of cultural marginalization, but rarely do I get past the old family photographs. I guiltily admit that these childhood snapshots are my favourite part of this book. I take perverse pleasure in matching up what I know (or what I imagine must be so) of the adult as it exists in the childhood photograph. I am especially delighted to find a picture of Simon Watney (the cultural critic who is one of the most important AIDS activists of our time) framed by grass and backyard shadows, head down, bottom up, pants short, shoes sweet, face buried. The photograph is familial; it is reminiscent of a photograph of my own father-as-boy, in which my father's face (like Watney's) is also buried in a grassy heaven of seclusion and childhood privacy. (My grandmother, with her familiar and comforting cursive, has inscribed the picture of my father with the words 'Asleep. 18 months'; yet I suspect that my father is wide awake and hiding.) But in *Out There*, it is the little picture of Nancy Spero (the painter whose biting, figurative works have been central to feminist art since the 1970s) that gives me what Barthes has so famously referred to as *punctum*: a sometimes unexplainable, but always personalized, sense of being wounded or pierced by a photographic image. Looking at the charming snapshot of her sitting on an oriental rug that has only temporarily landed, that appears ready for take-off, I see a flash of *her*. I recognize her startlingly wide-eyed smile, the tightness of her skin, the clarity of her ears, the fall of her hands, a certain love of the world, an excitement that I swear I have seen before in photographs of her as an adult. In the childhood picture, I see an essential image of her that has achieved 'utopically, *the impossible science of the unique being*'.[30]

Simon Watney as a little boy. 'The photograph is familial . . .'

Source Photograph from *Out There*. Courtesy of Simon Watney.



My father asleep, 18 months. '. . . I suspect that my father is wide awake and hiding.'

Nancy Spero as a little girl. '. . . I see a flash of her.'

Source Photograph from *Out There*. Courtesy of Nancy Spero.

Our childhood photographs are an extraordinary touch with the real because they are able to capture an essence of a unique being that we carry within ourselves from birth to death *indexically*. Like footprints in the sand or fingerprints in wax, photographs leave a trace of the referent. All photographs are traces of a skin that once was. Balzac understood this; that is why he feared losing thin ghosts of himself, like layers of skin, with each photograph 'taken'.[31] Barthes is in touch with Balzac when he writes:

> The photograph is literally an emanation of the referent. From a real body, which was there, proceed radiations which ultimately touch me, who am here; the duration of the transmission is insignificant; the photograph of the missing being, as Sontag says, will touch me like the delayed rays of a star.[32]

Maybe this is why when I see an old childhood photograph of my father, my grandmother, myself, I have an urge to touch it, to really feel it. And, even though I (really) feel nothing but smoothness – in my body, in my heart I feel a weighty ache, a pang of loss. I believe like Balzac, like Barthes, that the child before me is touching me. He weighs me down, she weighs me down, with grains of light that emanate from a small body that wears such childhood things as short trousers, cotton dresses, white cotton shirts (without collars), striped sweaters (with pointy collars), socks that bag and crinkle at the ankle.

Childhood clothes, like childhood photographs, link up (indexically) with our past childhood selves. Like old family photographs, our saved and cherished and often ravaged clothes from babyhood and childhood remind us that we have changed: that our bodies were once very small; that we dressed differently then from now; that we wore different kinds of clothing from children today. But most dramatically for me, childhood clothes contain traces of lost selves. Worn soles, stained collars, scents abandoned by the body attest to a body that once was, but no longer is. Such traces allow me a glimpse, a touch, a sniff at the child body that I have lost. And, in the case of my children's baby clothes, a glimpse, a touch, a sniff at the bodies that they have already lost.

Like Slavick, many of us feel the loss of the body/bodies of our own childhood. Indeed, many of us feel that our childhood selves are dead. We mourn the loss. We try to bring the child back. We save toys and clothes and other mementos from our childhood days: souvenirs that try to replace the loss. Childhood and death (as Lynn Gumpert has remarked) are closely linked:

> Although these themes at first appear at odds with one another, they share some fundamental similarities. We never know death directly; as Wittgenstein has succinctly observed, 'Death is not lived through.' Thus we must broach the subject from a distance, from observation. And while childhood is most definitely lived through, when analyzed or discussed, it is again almost invariably from a distance, from the vantage of adults who must rely on fragmented recollections and observations.[33]

Bringing the dresses out of the closet was a way for Slavick to touch the child that had died, that she had left behind – not only the death of her own child-body, but also that of the little brother who drowned. On a small silken slip that once rubbed against small silken girls, Slavick stitches the following:

I ATE FOOD IN THE BASEMENT.
I SUCKED LILACS.
I KICKED MY SISTER'S SHINS.
I PICKED DANDELIONS AND SOLD THEM
FOR A QUARTER.
I WANTED UGLY THINGS AND COULDN'T SWIM.
A BROTHER HAD DROWNED.
SICK EVERY SWIMMING DAY, HANDS UNDER
MY DRY THIGHS,
BROTHER, YOU HELD ME OVER THE WATERS.

Reading Slavick's dress pulls me into the closet of the family album of my mind's eye. Childhood images flash before me. Though I had no brother who drowned, I had a little cousin who left this world. I hid behind my bed. And even though he did not drown and even though I could swim, I hid in the bushes on swimming day. I did not sell dandelions, but I sold things that I made, really dumb things, door to door. Ugly things were really beautiful to me too . . . like my favourite toys made of brightly coloured plastic on various themes of grotesque cuteness. But like most of us, I have no photographs of such things, and maybe it is just as well.

But Sally Mann has taken pictures of such things. She has published her own family album, *Immediate Family* (1992). Pictures like that of (her son) Emmett sporting a shockingly bloody nose (*Emmett's Bloody Nose*, 1985), or Emmett with a back speckled by frightening chicken pox (*Pox*, 1986), or daughter Jessie with an eye painfully swollen and saddened by what I hope is only a bug bite (*Damaged Child*, 1984), mar the perfection of childhood that we all try to invent, not only for ourselves but for our own children. With each smiling photograph of the combed and primmed child that we dutifully place in the album, the box, the frame, the note to Grandma, we image childhood as prettied-up, overdressed, untouched, undamaged, undamaging and so unreal as to remain, always, far away from death. We preserve our children in an emulsion of Neverland, an imaginary place of tiny first teeth that never pop out. Yet, Jessie bites (*Jessie Bites*, 1985) and Slavick kicked her sister's shins.

Jenny's mom, Barbara, showed me where my boys were to sleep for the night. The two beds were covered with beautiful ageing quilts made of hundreds of tiny squares, the very size of old photographs, like those taken and printed and pasted in my father's album. Caressing one of the old quilts, Barbara explained to me that each square was from an old dress worn by her and her sisters. Each square, patterned with tiny flowers, dots and funny abstractions, lightly colourful in their muted washed-out colours, were

'Childhood images flash before me.'

Source Elin O'Hara Slavick, from *A Wall of Incoherent Dresses*, 1991. Collection of the artist.

'Yet, Jessie bites . . . and Slavick kicked her sister's shins.'

Source Sally Mann, *Jessie Bites*, 1985. Copyright © Sally Mann, courtesy of Houk Friedman, New York.

'. . . wearing the Easter dress that had been made for her by her mother and grandmother – she is only 6 years old.'

Source Family photograph from *Immediate Family*. Courtesy of Sally Mann.

dresses *taken*, like photographs: they represented years at home, with mother, father and siblings. Infused with the 'texture of perfume', each square, as if bites of (Proustian) madeleine cake, brought back memories.[34] Some good. Some bad. Some banal. They too, like my father's album, carried the weight of the past. Each seam was a memory, a seed sown. I thought of Slavick's dresses and I thought of the things that I hoarded in my closets.

Remembering that rainy night in Virginia and the quilts made of lost dresses, I recall a photograph, not taken by, but of, Sally Mann. Perched on a swing, wearing the Easter dress that had been made for her by her mother and grandmother – she is only 6 years old. You can see the lovely little dress showing its bright face again in Mann's *Easter Dress* (1986). Like the dresses in the Slavick family, passed down from mother to daughter, Mann has continued the process of acquisition and exchange by passing down the Easter dress to her daughter Jessie. In Mann's photograph, Jessie holds the bright white pleated cotton skirt, sprinkled with flowers, out into a wide smile for the camera. A little sister in a white baby dress hunts in the weeds for what? I am charmed. But I am also haunted, not only by Jessie's brother who pulls himself along the wire fence (his face strangely hooded, his legs in shorts), but especially by the torn nightdress that hangs on the clothes-line. The nightdress – caught in the gentle breath of the Blue Ridge

'. . . Jessie holds the bright white pleated cotton skirt, sprinkled with flowers, out into a wide smile for the camera. . . . I am charmed. But I am also haunted . . . by the torn nightdress . . .'

Source Sally Mann, *Easter Dress*, 1986. Copyright © Sally Mann, courtesy of Houk Friedman, New York.

Mountains, caught between the movement of a grandfather's dancing steps and the blur of a winged creature – is ripped at the back and at the hem. This dress is a horrible dress. Hanging and blowing like shed skin – it is a souvenir of loss, among shadows of change.

I am reminded of my children's little baby sweaters, and the grief that I felt (and still feel) when I discovered that they had been ravished by moths. I try to convince myself that the loss tears at my body, not theirs. I try to console myself with Barthes' words on the pleasure of 'abrasions', the pleasure found in 'the site of loss, the seam, the cut, the deflation'. But one hole gives way to another tear. I become acutely aware of my futile attempts to fill the holes with family albums of perfect pictures.[35]

But now I know, at the very least, to hold my tongue when my son Oliver turns his back on me and my camera, dodging the (maternal) frame.

Notes

I am grateful to Jane Blocker for inviting me to present an initial version of this article at a conference, 'Seeing through the body', at Wayne State University, Detroit, April 1995. I also want to thank Jerry Blow for his generous help with photography.

1 Sigmund Freud, Minutes From the Vienna Psychoanalytic Society, 1909, published as 'Freud and fetishism: previously unpublished minutes of the Vienna Psychoanalytic Society', ed. and trans. Louis Rose, *Psychoanalytic Quarterly*, LVII, 1988, 159. As cited by Emily Apter in 'Splitting hairs: female fetishism and postpartum sentimentality in Maupassant's fiction', in *Feminizing the Fetish: Psychoanalysis and Narrative Obsession in Turn-of-the Century France*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991, p. 102.
2 Lynn Gumpert, *Christian Boltanski*, Paris: Flammarion, 1994, p. 110.
3 Emily Apter's book, *Feminizing the Fetish*, has been very influential in my approach to writing this text.
4 Apter, 'Splitting hairs', p. 102.
5 Susan Stewart writes: 'The term *à-bric-à-brac*, which we might translate as "by hook or crook", implies the process of acquisition and exchange, which is the (false) labor of the collector.' (*On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*, Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984, p. 159.
6 James Clifford, 'On ethnographic allegory', in *Writing and Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, J. Clifford and G. Marcus, editors, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986, p. 106.
7 Clifford, 'On ethnographic allegory', p. 121. Here, since Clifford is writing about ethnographic allegories/stories, I am twisting his intended meaning a little. Clifford's exact words are, 'If we are condemned to tell stories we cannot control, may we not, at least tell stories we believe to be true.'
8 Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, trans. Richard Howard, New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1981, p. 63.
9 Ibid., pp. 64–5.
10 Ibid., p. 65.
11 Ibid., p. 81. Barthes is quoting Susan Sontag.
12 Ibid., p. 92.

13 Ibid., p. 94.
14 André Breton, the 'Pope of surrealism', ends the most famous of the surrealist novels, *Nadja*, with the line, 'Beauty will be CONVULSIVE or will not be at all' (André Breton, *Nadja*, trans. Richard Howard, New York: Grove Press, 1960, p. 160). Interestingly enough, the novel's 'convulsive beauty' is substantially derived from the book's fragmented presentation of photographs that are provocatively, if only tangentially, related to the text's already incomprehensible narrative. But the most profound absence in the book is the lack of any photographic images of Nadja, an absence which only emphasizes her haunting presence in the text. Nadja's striking non-materiality is later and similarly mirrored in *Camera Lucida*. For Barthes' treasured Winter Garden Photograph (which propels the narrative, yet never appears among the twenty-five photographs which illustrate the book), is all the more present by its absence.
15 Virginia Dodier, 'Lady Hawarden', from the pamphlet that accompanied The J. Paul Getty Museum's show 'Domestic Idylls: Photographs by Lady Hawarden From the Victoria and Albert Museum' (Malibu: The J. Paul Getty Museum, 1990).
16 Peter Wollen, 'Fire and Ice', *Photographies* 4 (1984). As quoted by Christian Metz, 'Photography and fetish', *October* 34 (Fall 1985): 84.
17 Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p. 94.
18 *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, trans. Richard Howard, New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1981, p. 61.
19 Milan Kundera in 'After word: a talk with the author by Philip Roth', in *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, trans. Michael Henry Heim, New York: Viking Penguin, Inc, 1981, pp. 234–5. Quoted in Lynn Gumpert, 'The life and death of Christian Boltanski', from the exhibition catalogue *Christian Boltanski: Lessons of Darkness*, curated by Lynn Gumpert and Mary Jane Jacob and co-organized by the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles and The New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York, p. 64.
20 Melanie Pipes, unpublished essay, 1994.
21 Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1973, p. 149.
22 Elin O'Hara Slavick, artist's statement, in *Embodiment*, a catalogue prepared in conjunction with the *Embodiment* exhibition, organized by Angela Kelly, Randolph Street Gallery, Chicago, 22 November–28 December 1991, p. 13.
23 Angela Kelly, Introduction to *Embodiment*, p. 6.
24 Reynolds Price, 'For the family', Afterword to Sally Mann's *Immediate Family*, New York: Aperture, 1992 (no page numbers).
25 Price, 'For the family'.
26 Hirsch, 'Masking the subject: practising theory', in *The Point of Theory*, Mieke Bal and Inge E. Boerr, editors, New York: Continuum, 1994, p. 122.
27 Ibid., p. 109
28 Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p. 34.
29 Russell Ferguson *et al.*, editors, *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*, New York and Cambridge: The New Museum of Contemporary Art and The MIT Press, 1990.
30 Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p. 71.
31 Nadar addresses this in his discussion of Balzac and the daguerreotype: 'According to Balzac's theory, all physical bodies are made up entirely of ghostlike

images, an infinite number of leaflike skins laid one on top of the other. Since Balzac believed man was incapable of making something material from an apparition, from something impalpable – that is, creating something from nothing – he concluded that every time someone had his photograph taken, one of the spectral layers was removed from the body and transferred to the photograph. Repeated exposures entailed the unavoidable loss of subsequent ghostly layers, that is, the very essence of life.' (Nadar, 'My life as photographer', trans. Thomas Repensek, *October*, 5 (Summer 1978): 9.

32 Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, pp. 80–1.

33 Gumpert, 'The life and death of Christian Boltanski', p. 51.

34 Roland Barthes uses this phrase to describe the voice of Proust in *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, 'Odors', p. 135.

35 Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, p. 8.