

Hands

One night, shortly after arriving at UC Santa Cruz when unpacking and arranging my dorm room, it occurred to me that I hadn't packed any photos of family or friends; I had nothing to remind me of home. Immediately, I called my mother and asked her to send some to me. While going through the few photographs that she sent, one stood out to me, pulling me in. There was something about this photograph that engaged me, bringing me a feeling of joy and also a sort of sadness. The photo is of my grandmother, or Nannie, and me, sitting at a dinner table. In the photo, we are outside; there are other tables around us in the restaurant but not many other patrons sitting at them. My grandmother is sitting on a plastic white chair, with me on her lap. Both of us have big grins on our faces; she is about 65 years old, though her face is that of a much younger woman, and I couldn't have been older than seven or eight-years old. The emotional pull of this photograph gave it a special value, and inspired me on my search inward to try to discover where these feelings came from. Using the writings and ideas of Roland Barthes' *Camera Lucida*, I studied the photograph, focusing both on its aesthetic appeal and then on what drew me to it specifically. I wanted to understand where my feelings for this photograph came from and why it stood out to me. Furthermore, I wanted to understand for myself what this photo actually meant to me and how that meaning lead me to feel these deeper emotions. The emotional pull the photograph exerted on me stemmed not only from a familial comfort and familiarity I witnessed in, what Barthes would call, its *studium*, but also from a deeper, more personal realization of what that photo meant to me, specifically regarding its *punctum*, *noeme*, and *pose*, or its relation to death. My goal was to tie together these

concepts that I had learned from Barthes, so that I could understand the true nature of where my feelings for this photograph came from. I longed to find the root of these feelings of comfort and of certainty that I found distilled in this image.

I began my study with the *studium*, that being the general cultural or historical field of recognition one witnesses in a photograph, as Barthes describes: “The *studium* is that very wide field of unconcerned desire, of various interest, of inconsequential taste,” what I *like* about the photograph (27). The first thing I recognize and identify with: my Nannie and myself and the distinction between grandmother and granddaughter, the similarity in our faces, but with her subtle facial lines and shining, silver hair foreshadowing the future of the young, blonde child sitting on her lap. With smiling faces, our skin is bright under the night sky, but surrounded by a warm glow illuminating from the small string of lights in the background. My grandmother’s sweater is black and has patches of Navaho artwork on the front; her jewelry is silver with turquoise stones. These details bring me back to times spent at her house, which was filled with Navaho and Cherokee Native American artwork and rugs. Even my own clothes in the photograph bring me a certain feeling of joy, the button up red and yellow flower dress with mismatching, pink and purple checkered sleeves, their cute silliness reminding me of many childhood days spent at Children’s Orchard, or other local consignment stores, shopping with my mother or grandmother. Looking at this photograph, I feel joy but also a certain sadness, like that of a child being torn apart from someone she loves. Reminiscing on these times, I look again to the little girl in the photograph: I feel a stubborn wanting to express myself as she does, free from inhibitions, to show that the girl in the photo is the same one who exists today, though she may be hidden. As Barthes says, “What I want, in short, is that my (mobile) image, buffeted

among a thousand shifting photographs, altering with situation and age, should always coincide with my (profound) 'self'" (12). Barthes understood the feeling one experienced when being photographed: the hope that, despite the negative influences of time and the outside world, there could always be found the absolute truth about oneself in the connection between the 'self' and the image in the photograph. I too, feel myself searching time and time again for that little girl in the photograph, to find some semblance of truth in that image, to see that the little girl, with shining bright eyes, is still present today.

There grew in me a need, like that of Barthes, to find that "profound" self, which would link my present-day self – who I am here and now – with that of the self that I had long forgotten, finally revealing to me the essence of who I really am. I felt a pull to this photo, as Barthes did when he describes the work of the *Spectator*, who sees the photograph not as something in passing, unimportant, but as an active event, an experience; "As *Spectator* I was interested in Photography only for 'sentimental' reasons; I wanted to explore it not as a question (a theme) but as a wound; I see, I feel, hence I notice, I observe, I think" (21). Unlike the many usual images in my every-day life, the sight of this photograph pricked, wounded and beckoned me to follow my curiosity about it. As Barthes felt towards his studies into Photography, so my desire was to explore the subtle wound this particular photograph inflicted on me, as well as the sentimental aspect of the photo and the mixed feelings of joy and loss that gave this photograph such power over me. Late one night, as I was studying this photograph, reminiscing on times of being home and with family, it finally occurred to me what it was that drew me to this photo in the first place: the answer was in my grandmother's hands.

It wasn't without careful study that I was finally able to discern what Barthes calls the *punctum* of the photograph, "that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me)" (27), that is: the aspect of the photograph that wounded me with a shock, but that also lingered, leaving a reminder of the emotional wound it had inflicted. In the photograph, my grandmother's arms are wrapped tightly around the fragile frame of the child sitting on her lap; her upper torso is leaning forward and her face is pressed to the side of mine, tightening the embrace. Her hands are what constantly catch my attention. Her two hands are closed in separate fists in front of my body, holding me close but not too tight, and looking closely you can see the two small, childish hands folded within. The subtle placement of our hands together is what pricks me, moving in me a sense of togetherness, but also a feeling of separation. Her arms, while warm and loving, also give me strength and support. It is with this realization that I connect to my grandmother's hands in this photograph, as Barthes does in his encounter with a photograph of Napoleon's youngest brother, Jerome, saying "And I realized then, with an amazement I have not been able to lessen since: I am looking at eyes that looked at the Emperor" (3). In this instant, I realized that those hands are the ones that raised my mother and her brother, that held tightly to a weeping new-bride who only spoke Vietnamese during a plane ride through a tsunami, that drove a tank in Korea, and rode a water buffalo in Thailand. Those hands that keep her up, often late into the night, as she writes letters to send to everyone she knows and loves, hands that held and comforted a half-dozen grandchildren and all of the family friends who regarded her as their own grandmother; those strong hands that cared for my grandfather for years, as his body grew weak and frail. My Nannie never wavered but, like her hands, she remained strong and took care of him, as well as us all, her

ever-expanding family she collected with love and with care. I have never seen my Nannie's hands shake. The tight embrace I examine in my grandmother's arms gives me a feeling of warmth and connection to this woman who has been such a huge and positive influence in my life. Her forearms hold me tight to her, initiating and maintaining the connection between the two of us, while her hands cradle mine in hers, reassuring and strengthening this familial bond. I feel, with it, a sense of connection to the rest of my family and to the love and support I receive from them. It is this feeling, however, that brings with it the sense of loss I also experience in the photograph; now feeling disconnected both spatially and temporally from my family and from that close connection I experienced in childhood.

After locating the *punctum* of this photograph, I now understood the *noeme* or its essence. With every glance at the two smiling faces, I am reminded of the love and comfort I feel from home and from my family. Barthes describes the *noeme* as the "that-has-been," the principal of the photo that reassures me that what is in it has indeed existed. The feelings I experience when looking at the photograph and the connection of the grandchild (me) to the grandmother is very real and true. (77). However, the comfort I felt from this connection was offset by a certain sorrow I also felt in the photograph. By Barthes's logic, the sadness I felt was a result of the realization of the distinction between the "Real" and the "Live," concepts which help us realize that the existence of reality in a photograph does not constitute that it is alive; rather, he says, "by shifting this reality to the past ("this-has-been"), the photograph suggests that it is already dead." (79) This realization scared me, as it brought with it the idea of Death, which Barthes declares is to be found in every photograph. Looking at this photograph of a young girl with her grandmother, I understood what Barthes spoke of regarding a photo taken by Alexander Gardner of Lewis Payne in his

jail cell: “By giving me the absolute past of the pose (aorist), the photograph tells me death in the future” (96). The aorist, I have come to understand, describes the pose, the subject and their position, in a particular moment in time – a “still shot” of life. Robert S.

Kawashima describes the aorist, in *Biblical Narrative and the Death of the Rhapsode*, as “a ‘punctive’ rather than ‘durative’ or ‘progressive’ verb form, as a ‘still shot,’ if you will” (250). In this, I drew a connection between Kawashima’s use of the adjective “punctive” and that which Barthes described as *punctum*, that aspect of the photograph which pricks, or wounds us carries with it the ability to capture the absolute essence of a person in that specific moment in time (through our study of that wound), and thus foreshadows its ability to foretell the certainty of death in the future.

This finally led me to an understanding of what Barthes describes as the “new” *punctum*, “This new *punctum*, which is no longer of form but of intensity, is Time, the lacerating emphasis of the *noeme* (“*that-has-been*”), its pure representation” (96). The *noeme*, which is only a reminder of the reality of what once was, has an emotionally tearing, wounding effect, and that essentially is Time, that which represents the pure knowledge of “that-has-been,” in a photograph. It struck me that my grandmother’s hands, those that represented such strength and gave me such comfort, also represented that awful, wounding effect of Time and foretold the ending result of Death. It occurred to me that one day she will die, and this is one of the few photos that I will have left of her memory. This moment also felt to me like the death of my own childhood, with the realization that those comforting hands might never again hold me in the same way they once did. This feeling is one that is particularly strong and relevant at this point in my life, as I transition from the

world of childhood play to that of adult reality, leaving the comfort of my family behind for the uncertainties and lonesomeness of the “real world.”

Works Cited:

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Kawashima, Robert S. *Biblical Narrative and the Death of the Rhapsode* United States: Indiana University Press, 2004. Print.