

## Chapter 19

# Me and My Mom's Camera: Family Archives and Collaborative Memory Work

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### ABSTRACT

*This chapter considers a collection of 35mm slides taken by the author's mother, Gerry Neely, a keen photographer, who although wanting to study photography formally, was never able to. The evening class offered at the local university, called 'Me and My Camera', never had enough enrolments to justify running the class. This chapter will offer an account of the process of digitising the slides and sharing them with family over the last few years. Informed by what Annette Kuhn describes in her book *Family Secrets* as a kind of 'memory work', the author's analysis will present a collaborative form of memory work developed from discussions with the author's mom during the pandemic about their individual interpretations and memories of the images contained within the slides, as well as her own thoughts on the process of taking, selecting, and presenting them.*

### INTRODUCTION

My mom's grey and black camera bag sits on top of an old pine wardrobe. It's December 2021, and although I'd hoped to return to the States to see family, the new Omicron variant and the compromised immune system I was left with following a splenectomy in my teenage years, means it's not advisable. It's now been two and half years since I've seen my family there: my mom and my dad, my brother and my sister and their families. Like many, I am immensely grateful for the technology that enables us to stay in touch - for the shared texts and photographs and, of course, the video calls. My dad likes to remind me of how, when I first came over to Scotland in 1995 as an exchange student, he'd ring me on the pay phone in the corridor of my student halls and we'd talk in minutes for nearly the equivalent of what it would cost in dollars, sometimes more. Calls were therefore kept to a minimum. When the

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pandemic first started, I spoke to my parents most days. Although communication is now less frequent, we usually catch-up one or two times a week.

When I first talk to my mom about the camera, neither of us are sure when it was purchased, but it is likely to be from when she first took a real interest in photography, when we were living in Morgantown, West Virginia in the late 1970s. She wanted to take an evening class at the University, called 'Me and My Camera', but they never had enough enrolments to justify running the class. So she learned on her own through a process of experimentation and studying the limited manuals and books she had to hand. Her passion for photography continued throughout much of my childhood. As my mom became skilled at taking pictures, us kids - my sister, in particular - became adept at hiding from the camera.

In the early 80s, when we moved to Columbia, Missouri, another university town, my mom found a photography store that she liked, called Columbia Photo. Today she recalls how a visit to the store had induced similar feelings to those experienced when she went into the local fabric store, a place she visited regularly to meet local quilters, until the shop closed down just before the pandemic. Similar to her quilting experiences, it was the process she enjoyed: taking the film in to be developed, picking up the pictures, seeing new cameras, and talking to employees who might give advice on how to improve her technique.

My mom gave me her camera when I left for Scotland. She felt I would need a good camera to take pictures of the places I went. It has served us both well. Although these days it spends most of its time on top of my wardrobe, it is still in good working order. The cube-shaped grey polyester bag it is held in has many zips and pockets, containing lenses, an instruction manual, a flash, some lens wipes, as well as several boxes of my mom's 35mm slides.

This chapter will offer an account of my mom's slides and the process of digitising them and sharing them with family over the last few years, using the account as a point of departure for reflecting more broadly on the nature of slides, particularly in relation to personal and family collections. Informed by what Annette Kuhn describes in her book *Family Secrets* as a kind of 'memory work', a process requiring 'working backwards - searching for clues, deciphering signs and traces, making deductions, patching together reconstructions out of fragments of evidence' (1995, p. 4), my analysis will present a collaborative form of memory work developed from discussions with my mom during the pandemic, about our individual interpretations and memories of the images contained within the slides, as well as her own thoughts on the process of taking, selecting and presenting them.

My reasons for undertaking this kind of memory work was, admittedly, partly motivated by a desire to connect with my mom in a meaningful way at a time when we were unable to see each other in person. The memory work in this respect was cast in a very particular light since the memories and past events we are reflecting on were part of a material and tactile experience of family life that was temporarily unavailable to us. But I am also motivated as a feminist scholar of visual culture, whose research has primarily centred on bringing to light the work of women artists and filmmakers who were historically marginalised, often because their work was produced outside of traditional production contexts, within domestic spheres, and as a consequence was dismissed as amateur (Neely, 2009, 2014a; 2014b). Memory work itself was historically developed as a methodology used by feminist researchers who sought to make visible the aspects of women's lived experience that dominant theories and accounts failed to acknowledge (Haug, 2000, p. 156).

Almost all of filmmakers I have researched are from Scotland or have lived and worked in Scotland. It wasn't until I began digitising my mom's collection of slides while I was simultaneously in the process of digitising the personal slides of the Scottish filmmaker and poet, Margaret Tait, that it occurred

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to me that my own memories of my mom's photography within the context of family life might have also been guilty of rendering certain aspects of her own experience invisible. The lens of time led to me looking at the slides differently. I notice their aesthetic qualities more. I see them as more than just as family photographs.

This project, undertaking a kind of visual autoethnography, through the collaborative memory work with my mom and the process of writing and reflecting on the experience, aims to unpick the ways in which memory is constructed in relation to my own family memories. Annette Kuhn describes the process of memory work as engaging with memory 'not as "truth" but as evidence of a particular sort: material for interpretation, to be interrogated, mined for its meanings and its possibilities. Memory work is a conscious and purposeful staging of memory' (2000, p. 186). Through this process, the fluid nature of memory is revealed. As Susannah Radstone explains, 'memory work focuses on the reinterpretation and re-contextualisation of memory, in the service of revised understandings of individual or collective selves' (2000, p. 12). Memory work, according to Radstone occupies a 'liminal space' and carries with it the potential for 'collective and self-transformation in the present' (p. 12). Collections of family photographs and family albums in particular, have been described by Kuhn as playing a unique role in the way they have historically been used as 'prompts for the performances of memory' (2010, p. 300). The collection of my mom's slides is comprised of several boxes of Kodak Kodachrome slides, mostly taken in the late 1970s to mid 1980s. Featuring the highlights rather than the lowlights, and constructed as a kind of classical narrative, the collection follows the familiar pattern of the family photograph collection which Kuhn describes as characterised by 'cyclical repetitions of climactic moments – births, christenings, weddings, holidays' (1995, p. 19). The chapter will also reflect on these broader sociocultural resonances through a comparison with other collections of slides, including found slides which form the basis for collections such as the Anonymous Project, as well as Margaret Tait's slides.

Furthermore, approaching the collection of slides as a form of contemporary archaeology (Harrison, 2011), an additional focus of the chapter will be on the slide's unique format and material qualities. In its handheld form, the slide has a satisfyingly tactile appeal that delights in its ability to miniaturise the subjects contained in the small 35mm acetate squares. When projected, the image is rendered in a relatively gigantic scale. Kodak's tagline in the 1950s was 'for sparkling pictures big as life'. It is these distinctive qualities of the slide – its ability to both literally and metaphorically magnify and reduce memory – which plays a significant role in the way in which memories are shaped and recalled.

### **The Photography and Memory Workshop**

While I was in the process of scanning my mom's slides, I took part in a workshop delivered by Annette Kuhn which considered the personal photograph and its relationship to personal memory and wider forms of collective and cultural memory. Asked to bring along a personal photograph that exerted some element of mystery, I brought along an image from one of my mom's slides. I chose one taken from a series featuring my childhood hometown, Morgantown. An image with strong emotional connections for me, it features a parade in our neighbourhood organised for the Fourth of July, a day of special significance because it is also my birthday. Each year, the local children would parade their bikes through the neighbourhood before finishing at a party at someone's house featuring fireworks and a special Fourth of July cake, something I was always told was for my birthday. I enjoyed the celebrations and in some of the photos from this particular series you can see I have a number four affixed to my shirt, indicating the age I was turning on the day.

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For the workshop, in keeping with Kuhn's line of enquiry in *Family Secrets*, participants were asked to spend time describing their photograph, writing in the third person (using 'she' rather than 'I'), before considering the overall context of the photo – who it was taken by, when, where and why, and any other elements such as the technology used, the aesthetics, as well as the wider historical and social contexts. For some, it proves an emotional process. Writing and talking about the images with such scrutiny inevitably unearths details of memories long forgotten or perhaps never acknowledged in the first place.

When it comes to personal photographs, there is always a game played between what is visible and what is not. Often it is the things below the surface that tell the true story of our past - 'the secrets [that] haunt our memory stories, giving them pattern and shape' (Kuhn, 1995, p. 3). In the workshop, as participants shared and discussed their photographs, complex memory stories emerged. What might seem a fairly typical photo is likely to contain a complex network of memories and emotions.

In terms of my own photograph, the emphasis of discussion was on the novelty of its subject, particularly when viewed from within a British context. The details of American suburban life that had seemed common place to me, were remarked upon as being almost exotic for their conformity with visions of American life made popular through film and television. Within my family, the photographs are notable for marking a moment in our personal family history that is looked back on with great fondness. A few years later, my dad took a job at the University of Missouri and we moved across the country, to the Midwest, where we settled into a new neighbourhood, with even bigger houses that were even more spread apart. Shortly after we moved there, the expense of the house proved a burden and over time my parent's marriage fell apart. So, for many reasons, Morgantown represented a happy time. The memory story evoked by the photograph is one which involves looking back through the lens of what came later. When looking at the photographs with my mom, she recalls how my brother had said it had been the best place we ever lived. Describing the geography of the neighbourhood - how the houses were nestled into a hilly area and featured a network of cul-de-sacs branching out from a central road, which meant there was only one way in and one way out - my mom says that, for her, 'the whole place was just comforting'.

Making sense of an image involves looking closely at the detail in the frame but also considering what lays outside the frame. Our reading also changes through the shifting lens of time and, for many families, photographs serve as a way of marking the passage of time, through a focus on significant occasions, holidays and annual events. As Susan Sontag observed, all photographs are '*memento mori*' or 'melancholy objects' and that 'by slicing out this moment and freezing it, all photographs testify to time's relentless melt' (1977, p. 15). This slicing, or isolation of a particular moment is echoed in Sontag's description of the way in which a photograph's meaning can sometimes 'come unstuck. It drifts away into a soft abstract pastness, open to any kind of reading' (p. 71). Many of the slides in my mom's collection were also printed as photographs which were assembled into family albums. My familiarity with them, having looked at them on many occasions throughout my life, sometimes with other family members, but most often with my mom, means their meaning is continually transformed: they become something else. Memory is mediated through these different contexts, but also through the increasing gulf in time. Even when looking at the slides which were never printed as photographs, I am sometimes surprised to find that the image doesn't really match my memory of the event.

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Figure 1. Fourth of July Parade in Morgantown, West Virginia, 1978. (© 2022, the author)



## Sorting Through the Slides

Julia Bell writes in her book *Radical Attention*, that ‘the best way to glimpse meaning is to start small, to pay attention to detail, and give your deliberate attention to what is in front of you. To try and notice what happens. To make time. To choose to look.’ (2020, p. 117). For many, the act of photographing something serves as a way of focusing attention. Margaret Tait wrote of using her camera as a way to ‘peer at things’. Tait also described this intense method of observation as ‘stalking the image’, a term she borrowed from the poet, Federico García Lorca (Neely, 2016). The process of looking at and sharing photographs also enables attention to be focused in particular ways. It is an approach which shares much in common with contemporary archaeological practices, giving careful attention to surfaces and details as a way of exploring and making sense out of places and artefacts from our more recent past. It goes against more familiar archaeological metaphors to do with depth, e.g. ‘digging deep’, ‘deep time’, etc. In relation to contemporary archaeological practices, photography can be both a tool for exploring the recent past, but it can also be an artefact of the past itself (Shanks and Svabo, 2013).

The experience of considering the now somewhat fragmented and diminished collection of analogue slides with my mom during the pandemic, connecting virtually across considerable geographical distances, offered its own kind of focus for our discussions during a challenging time, with scarcity in many ways becoming a virtue. When I receive the slides from my Mom they are in a jumble of different envelopes and small boxes. I imagine how at one time they would have been neatly ordered. Over time, like memory, things disintegrate, they fall apart. After several house moves, my parents’ divorce, us kids moving away, and the general changes of life over the passage of time, the slides eventually ended up in a drawer in my mother’s house - an outmoded format discarded and retrieved later in life, when it had taken on an almost novel quality. The various contemporary projects bringing to light the discovery of

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collections discarded by their original owners, provide further testament to the shift in attitudes towards the technology. What was once outmoded junk becomes a new generation's treasure. Perhaps most notably, the *Anonymous Project*, established by Lee Shulman in 2017 after he had obtained a collection of slides at a vintage market, seeks to collect and preserve colour slides from around the world, something which the project website describes as vital for contributing to the wider collective stories of humanity (www.anonymous.com). In more recent years, other similar initiatives have been established which make use of social media. For instance, Los Angeles based photographer, Antonio 'Miko' Javiniar (@holamikoo), presents recently discovered collections as short Instagram reels which make an appeal to the general public to find out more about the images' subjects.

*Figure 2. Scanning the Slides at Stills Gallery in Edinburgh. (© 2022, the author)*



With the slides in my carry-on luggage, I returned to Scotland and, later in the Summer, I began digitising them at Stills, a gallery and centre for photography in Edinburgh. The gallery had recently held an exhibition that featured Margaret Tait's work. It was during the planning stages of the exhibition

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that I began scanning a selection of Tait's slides which her niece given to me and are now deposited with the Orkney Archive. The slides were largely from an earlier period of her life, when she was experimenting with a stills camera, and before she began focusing solely on moving image. Taken across the decade following World War II, the collection includes images from her time living in London, Orkney and Edinburgh, as well as photos from when she was studying in Italy – first at the Italian School for Foreigners in Perugia and then later when she was enrolled as a film student at Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia in Rome. Similar to her films, the subjects Tait focuses on in her stills photography includes a mix of the familiar and unfamiliar. She is using the camera to explore the world around her, whether that be friends and family in the familiar environments of Edinburgh and Orkney, or her encounters with new places and people in Italy and London. Although my mom's slides are dated later and span a much greater time period – from the 1960s to the 1980s – they share the same vibrant colour palate of Kodachrome, the colour reversal film first introduced by Kodak in 1935 which came off the market in 2009. When I first sift through the slides, I am distracted by the format of the slides themselves and their cardboard casing, featuring a wide-variety of designs, colours and fonts.

The collection of slides, like the family photography album, includes family holidays and annual events, such as the Fourth of July parade, as well as a selection of less formal, everyday activities. There are a few of the more obviously posed family portraits, as well as more candid snaps. There are also photos where the focus is less on family and more on experimentation - on her and her camera rather than us kids.

Although I recognise some of the photos from family albums, I don't recall ever viewing them on a projector. When I ask my mom she says she was never really interested in putting on slideshows, but rather it was something she associated with her own parents. We both remember their slide shows presented during our annual summer visits to their farm in Virginia. Mostly they would share slides of their travels. In the 1980s, as part of the 'people-to-people' exchange programme established by President Eisenhower in the late 50s, they visited local farmers in several countries, including Russia and Scotland.

Although a collection of slides may be similar to the photo album in the way that it is narrativized and structured by its maker, aiding the shaping and articulation of familial memory, unlike the photo album, and the inherent fixity of the images on its pages, the sequencing of slides is less secure, and therefore more at risk of becoming untethered from their original intended meanings. Sorting through my mom's slides, as well as Margaret Tait's, feels a bit like solving a jigsaw puzzle, with contents jumbled and out of chronological order. Labelled boxes rarely match their contents and a few slides seem entirely out of place altogether.

My mom's interest was in taking the photos but she also remarks on the pleasures of holding the slides in their small portable format. Annabel Nicolson, one of the few female filmmakers associated with the London Filmmakers' Coop, described the importance of the tactility in the work she was creating when she first moved painting to filmmaking, saying that working with material film and the 35mm slide format was 'something that I felt comfortable with that I could hold in my hand' (Sparrow, 2003). For Nicolson's 1971 film, *Slides*, she used scraps of 16mm and 8mm film, as well as 35mm slides of her paintings, which were cut into strips and then reassembled as a long film strip which was then fed through the contact printer at the London Filmmaker's Co-op.

When I examine the slides – holding them up to the light – I feel in many ways there is an affinity with the experience Tait describes in relation to 'peering' through the viewfinder of the camera. There is a particular charm in holding a moment of life encapsulated by a slide in the palm of your hand. The experience reminds me of the View-Master slide-viewer toy I enjoyed playing with as a child. Entranced

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by its themed card discs and the loud click of the black plastic lever as I scrolled through the selection of images, I am taken into new imaginative spaces both within and beyond myself. In Susan Stewart's oft-cited book, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (1992), she equates the miniature with interiority and the gigantic with exteriority. Although some might argue the rendering of worlds in miniature can be tied to a compulsion to shrink down and control, the miniature worlds presented by the slide format can also serve as a portal of expansion through which we can explore memory or imagine other worlds or possibilities.

### **Talking to My Mom: The Slides**

The meetings with my mom took place on FaceTime at irregular intervals over a couple of years, starting in 2019. During this time, she was in her house in Missouri and I was in my flat in Glasgow. The slides were separated into groups based on time and location and included slides from my family's time living in Michigan and a holiday in Switzerland (both before I was born), as well as slides from our home in Morgantown, West Virginia, my mom's parents' farm in Virginia, my dad's parents' home on Kent Island in Maryland, and vacations in Longboat Key and Disneyland, Florida. The general idea for each session was for my mom to select a favourite slide which we would then discuss in detail.

#### **1. Taking Pictures of Other People's Flowers**

When my mom talks about her and her camera and how her photography figured in the landscape of family life, she remarks that it was often a source of ridicule. My siblings and I frequently gave her a hard time for taking so many pictures. Although it is sometimes a struggle to recall the events depicted in some of the photographs, I have vivid memories of us kids moaning as my mom took yet another picture of a sunset. Reflecting back on this now, I am unsettled by the realisation that it was the instances my mom was taking moments of pleasure for herself that we objected to. Our complaints about having to wait for what seemed like an eternity while she finished her coffee at our favourite fast-food outlet is another example that comes to mind.

The significant role played by women in documenting, preserving and sharing familial memories through taking photographs, creating family albums and sharing and disseminating the family's photographic archives, has been widely acknowledged. In some Marxist Feminist accounts, the work of the family photographer is another form of invisible labour often undertaken by the women of the household. In many cases, the recognition of this labour is further diminished by its interpretation as legitimised play (Daniels, 1987; Oakley, 1974). The ridicule of my mother's photography is likely two-fold. It is partly to do with her shift in focus from her 'work' as family photographer; it also stems from a resistance to take her creative endeavours seriously when they are read as a form of play. Like the work of the women filmmakers I research, the domestic context prohibits serious consideration and renders it amateur.

Many years after the images contained in the slides were taken, when my mom visited me when I was studying as an exchange student in Scotland, she captured my exasperation on video as we walked through the residential part of Edinburgh where our Bed and Breakfast was situated. Camera rolling, she shifted focus from a front garden she was filming to me, walking several metres ahead. I turn round once, scolding her for filming other people's plants: 'Would you want someone to film your flower pots?' The fact that the main focus of my research for over a decade has been on a filmmaker (Margaret Tait) whose main subject is domestic spaces – often including gardens – is an irony that is not lost on me.



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*Figure 3. The Switzerland Trip, c. 1971. (© 2022, the author)*



When I begin the process of going through the slides with my mom, I'm surprised that when asked to select one slide for our first meeting, she selects one entirely absent of human subjects. While I'd assumed she would select one of the family photographs with us kids, she selects an image of a lane in Switzerland. Looking upwards to a set of brightly lit stairs we see an entrance to a home lined with an impressive assortment of potted plants and flowers. It is a photo that I had somehow skipped over in my initial browse through the collection. Perhaps because I was more selfishly focused on catching glimpses of my childhood than giving more thoughtful consideration to my mom's photography. My mom's interest in the photograph rests on its aesthetics - her choices in framing, the beauty of the location and her appreciation of the way in which the resident had presented their home to passers-by.

At the end of our discussions over many months, she still refers to the photograph as her 'absolute favourite'.

## **2. 'The Light Showed You Where the Swan Was': Taking Pictures of Sunsets**

The second time we meet to discuss the slides, I am certain she will choose one with human subjects, so am surprised when she selects the one above: a picture of a sunset, her favourite subject. Our discussion focuses on the context of the photograph – the circumstances in which it was taken. My Mom and I laugh in agreement that taking the photograph would have likely been met with resistance from the rest of the family who would have wanted to keep moving. Like the moments spent lingering over cups of coffee, the long pauses for photographs of sunsets or picturesque gardens were regularly policed by us kids. 'Hurry up, Mommmmm!', was the default end to a nice day out.

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Figure 4. Longboat Key, Florida, 1979. (© 2022, the author)



While it is common for women to take the lead with taking and organising family photographs as custodians of family history or, as Joan Solomon describes it, ‘keepers of the family album’ (1995, p. 11), my mom’s decision to shift the lens away from this focus signals a break in this assumption. It is a small but radical act in asserting her own vision and individual existence outside of the family unit.

For many of the photography collectives which grew out of the feminist movements of the 60s and 70s, the focus on exploring personal and everyday experience through the lens of the camera was seen as integral to the process of asserting a sense of female subjectivity and agency. Collectives such as the Hackney Flashers, a group based in the East End of London, used focused photography projects as a way to document the lived experience of women, highlight the oppressions of patriarchy, and instigate positive social change. Pooling together skills and expertise, the collectives were also an opportunity to share subjectivities that were largely marginalised within mainstream media and the male gaze being theorised at the time.

Taking and sharing photographs is another way of telling stories about ourselves, each other and the wider culture. Although my mom was never part of a collective or group which exchanged photographs, her photographs – like many collections of family photographs - have been shared within the family and preserved with hope that they will be passed on to future generations. Although this destination, of course, is never a certain one. In order for photographs to continue to hold value and meaning, stories as well as the material artefacts must be shared. This is why so many orphaned photo collections can be found in charity shops and car boot sales. The sister of my former partner once gave him a photo album filled with a collection of old family photographs. Apart from one or two which had names next to them, many were left blank. Although the plan was to identify those pictured, it proved an impossible task. Too much time had passed and the relatives with any direct connection to them were long gone.

***Me and My Mom's Camera*****3. The Family Portrait**

For our second meeting, I decided I would offer my own selection as well.

*Figure 5. At the beach with Jenny and Andy, Florida 1979 (© 2022, the author)*



I choose this photograph because of its pleasing composition – the placement of us within the frame, and the chalky hint of sun just above the horizon - but also because it stirs something in me that I can't quite explain. It isn't until I consider it in relation to the series of photographs it's a part of that I'm able to make sense of my emotional response. In another photograph taken in close proximity to this one, my brother and sister are further out in the waves resting on the inflatable raft. Shot from behind, I am standing at the edge, one hand raised in the air. When I talk to my mom about it, she says she likes the photo because it looks like I am kind of waving at them, and we determine that at that age, I was unable to go into the sea with them. The photo above, likely taken a few moments later, captures their energetic return, and my own settling in to quietly amuse myself along the shoreline. So it is not just the aesthetically pleasing nature of the composition that stirs something in me, but also what the composition reveals about us as individuals and the dynamics of our relationship – my brother as the mischievous one, me as the day dreamer, and my sister having oversight of us all.

All of us kids have fond memories of the beach. Living in Missouri, a landlocked state, we were lucky to see the sea even just once a year. Sometimes a few years would pass without sight of it. My mom tells me how when she shared the photographs with my sister, she remarked on the fact that we didn't really go on that many vacations. My mom's memory is slightly different. But as Joan Solomon asks, 'How

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do you photograph 'never having had a holiday'?' (1995, p. 55). In our family, the photographs from this series are central to our memories of summer vacations, even if they more likely represent a unique occasion rather than a ubiquitous one.

#### 4. Resisting Posed Portraits

In reality summer holidays usually focused on visiting our grandparents – my mom's parents' farm in Virginia or my dad's family on Kent Island in the Chesapeake Bay area of Maryland. Both were places that my grandparents lived from the time of my birth to the time of their death and are therefore places which became very familiar to me over time.

*Figure 6. Swimming off of the pier at Nanny and Granddad's, Kent Island, 1980. (© 2022, the author)*



Taken at sunset (already established as a favourite subject of my mom's), the above image was shot from the pier at my dad's parents' house. Judging by the distance, my mom is likely crouching down at the edge of the pier in an attempt to get closer to capture a more candid shot of my brother and sister swimming with our cousin, Cyndy, one of two cousins who lived in the house next door.

I can only think of a few formal photographs of my brother, sister and I, where my mom has made a concerted attempt to gather us together to take our photograph. There is one photograph which particularly stands out in memory, taken at my grandparents' farm in Virginia - my brother, sister, cousins, and I are sitting on the steps of their front porch. There are a few images from this occasion in the slides, but oddly not the more composed one which ended up in the photo album and picture frames. When my mom selects the image of my brother and sister swimming with my cousin Cyndy at my grandparents'

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house in Maryland, she makes the point that she hates posed photographs. She says she prefers the more informal shots, because the composition of the images is always more interesting – like this one, with everyone seeming to swim in a circle, causing the water to ripple outwards. When we are discussing the photo my mom talks again about the light. She laughs and says ‘I love how the light is directed to Andy, like he’s the chosen one!’

### **5. Mysterious Decay**

On the same day, I select a second one from the Maryland slides: one of myself on the dinghy playing with my cousin Chrissy. There is an odd flaw in the photograph - a willowy strip running across my face and discolouring the image. Although there is a similar photo in more pristine condition, it doesn’t have my cousin and her float in the photo, so looks more posed. But there is something I like about the mystery introduced by the flaw, a kind of *punctum* Barthes writes about, that pierces me in some way (p. 27). It draws attention to the chemical composition and the fragility of the image. Some of Margaret Tait’s slides contain flaws of this kind. In many ways, they bring attention to the surface of the photograph, causing you to look at the image in a different way. My mom again admires the way the light features, reaching across the water to outline the edges of the boat, before touching down on the crown of my cousin’s head.

### **6. Happy Analogue Accidents**

The photograph of my brother looking out of the window at the house in Battle Creek, Michigan is also singled out for discussion by my mom. It’s one she refers to as a happy accident. In some ways she considers it a flawed photograph because the reflected image is so dominant. As far as she can remember, the photograph wasn’t posed: she had just happened to catch Andy looking out of the window. Looking at it now, she says, ‘at first I thought it was a total failure, and then it turns out, you know, I didn’t count on the reflection in the window – then it made it more interesting, because – “look at Andy peeking in the window, is that really Andy or who is that?”’

I like the photo because of the way it situates him within the context of the surrounding environment – you get a glimpse of him as well as a glimpse of the neighbourhood where they lived in before I was born. So in some ways it provides an anchor for me to make sense of their memories and stories shared about the time.

### **7. Taking Pictures with Mom's Camera**

Because my mom was always the photographer, she is seldom in the frame. This photograph, taken at her parents’ farm in Virginia is one of the few she features in. It seems to be in a different format from the others, but the rest in the series suggest she has taken them.

I’m not in the photograph and since I must have been four or five when it was taken, I very much doubt I was the photographer. But what appeals to me is the familiarity of the gathering. We lived in West Virginia, a neighbouring state, so most summer vacations involved piling into our Oldsmobile station wagon and driving to our grandparents in Virginia and Maryland. On a few very rare occasions we would make the much longer journey down to Florida, for our own family vacation.

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*Figure 7. Out on the dinghy with cousin Chrissy, Kent Island, 1980*



The locations where our two sets of grandparents lived were quite a contrast. My dad's parents' house was on Kent Island in the Chesapeake Bay area and visits usually involved hanging out by the water, swimming and crabbing. My mom's parents had a dairy farm. My uncle, who also worked on the farm, lived nearby with his family. Visits to them included going out on the four-wheeler or on rare occasions with my Granddad on his tractor. I also remember the kinds of barbecues pictured here, centred around the women in the family. It seems appropriate that my granddad, a man of few words, quietly looks on from outside the frame, with only his bare feet and the legs of his overalls visible. When I talk to my mom about it, she laughs and says that looking at the photograph brings back memories of how bad the flies were. The cows (outside of the frame), she says, were always a magnet for the flies. I point out that I like that she is holding a glass of red wine in the photograph. She is slightly embarrassed by this fact. But we agree it is a photograph that is full of life. Everyone is engaged in different activities, including the person taking the picture. So much is going on and no one seems aware of the camera.

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*Figure 8. Andy in the window, Battle Creek, Michigan, 1970. (© 2022, the author).*



*Figure 9. Barbecue at Flowing Springs Farm, Virginia, 1978. (© 2022, the author)*



## CONCLUSION

### The Future of the Collection

In the last session I have with my mom about the slides, when I'm talking about which ones I am likely to include in this essay, she jumps in to offer a final statement: 'I kept wanting to go to that class. I could have been a better photographer. I could have learned more about it. But I just loved getting the pictures developed.' Part apology, part lament, it also returns to her point about enjoying the process. The camera was a way to experiment, to connect with herself and others, to explore her own individual sensibilities, perhaps at a time when – as a mother of three – it might have been difficult.

And she still enjoys this process, in relation to the photographs she takes (although now mostly on her mobile phone), but also with her quilting. When I FaceTime my mom one day as lock down was easing, she shows me around her house, sharing some of the many quilting projects which kept her occupied over the last couple of years. She also shows me a selection of photo magnets that recently arrived in the post. For awhile now she has taken to experimenting with printing off images in different formats - large format digital prints, sometimes canvases. She also likes to make her own digital story books, particularly ones featuring special vacations. One of the magnets she's just received is of a photo I sent her of me swimming at a beach in St Andrews just before Christmas. She doesn't know the people I am with, but it is a happy photo. Just out of the sea, we are a colourful assortment of wetsuits and woolly hats. It was taken on a mobile phone, so isn't a great photo, but she says she likes the colours.

I've never been much of a photographer myself, but during the pandemic when my environment was so restricted, my interest in photography grew. During the first lockdown, because of a compromised immune system, I had to shield, which meant not leaving the flat for three months. While subjects to photograph were extremely limited, taking photographs became a way of documenting what had become a somewhat nebulous passing of time. Worried about how the restrictions on mobility might impact on my health, I established regular routines, exercising three times a day using online videos, meditating daily using an app, etc. I also became increasingly fond of social media and sharing photographs of my daily activities with friends and family. The photos were mostly taken with my mobile phone, but I also began using another camera of my mom's, a Pentax Auto 110, a mini SLR which was originally marketed as a 'spy' camera. Its small size is a novelty – all of the features of an SLR camera, but shrunk down in miniature form. I sometimes have thought about the appeal of miniature. Its diminutive form would have enabled the photographer to snap photographs in less conspicuous way – for the photographer to, in a sense, shrink in terms of their own visibility.

Taking the photos is a way of focusing my attention. The look and feel of the camera, its unusual size and connection to my mother also adds a further material dimension, giving texture to what now feels a sterile environment. To look through the lens is a kind of meditation akin to Tait's way of peering through the camera described earlier, and similar to what Susan Sontag describes in relation the photographic image as 'enlarging our notions of what is worth looking at what we have right to observe' (1977, p.3). This is something which for Sontag forms a kind of ethics of seeing. I also enjoy this aspect of photography.

As I've grown older, I've come to understand my mom's interest in taking pictures of flowers and now take pictures of my own. It's a kind of visual foraging. When I first started going out for walks again, I decide to take a photo of each person I meet up with. It seems fitting to mark the occasion when meeting with friends after so long. I take a photo of my friend Nalini beside the River Kelvin, one of my colleague Katherine and her son who I bump into at the playpark, as well as my friend Maggie, when



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I meet her for a coffee. When I take a photo of my friend Annie with her son, Eden, he initially shows great interest in the camera, instinctively wanting to hold it, but soon after I release the shutter, he runs over to have a look and is quickly disappointed when he discovers there is nothing to see, that we will have to wait until the roll is developed. Sadly, when I have the photos developed a few weeks later, there is still nothing to see. For whatever reason, the photographs were a failure. At first I am upset, but then I realise, it is – as my mother says – more about the process. The act of taking the photos gave me a focus and encouraged me to look at things differently.

It's a process Jo Stanley compares to diary writing, as well as a kind of collective quilting which she says served as a 'three-dimensional form of accounting for lives on an American frontier' (1995, p. 15). Quilting and photography seem to have served a similar function for my mom. Although she only began quilting later in life, many years ago, when my grandmother was clearing out things in her house, my mom took on ownership of an unfinished quilt. Started by my great grandmother during the Depression using scraps from cotton feed sacks, my grandmother had worked on it over the years. Eventually when my mom began quilting, she finished the quilt, repairing some of the more delicate stitchwork and then adding a new backing. I was honoured when she gave it to me, explaining that because I live so far away it's even more important for me to hold onto these kinds of material artefacts. The slides, in some way, are the same. Like the generational quilt, I am adding my own layer to the story – by scanning them, by talking to my mom about them, and by writing this. And like quilting, the act of going through the slides with my mom, the process of this kind of memory work, is a transformative process whereby each participant, each revisitation, results in a reinterpretation.

When I eventually make it back to Missouri to see family – three years since the last time I've seen them – my mom brings out a small envelope containing a handful of small photographs, most of them taken in the early twentieth century. They are soft to touch. Worn down over time, they feel more like fabric than paper. She hands them to me to look through and complains about their size. My mom has always opted for the larger sized prints wherever possible. Bigger was and is always better to her. But the early family photographs are tiny in comparison. She complains that she is unable to see the detail, that the image is too small. I can barely make out any detail in the faces of the people pictured either. I take out my phone, snap a photograph and enlarge it between thumb and forefinger. We both are amazed by the technology. There smiling back at us is a photograph of my grandfather - her father - taken before she was born, when he was a young man. Eventually she gathers together a handful of the small-scale photos and puts them in an envelope for me to take back with me to scan. Worrying about their loss, I remind myself to put them in my hand luggage. They are precious, some of the few photographs of my grandparents in their youth.

While working with my mom's slides, I am occasionally reminded of an observation of Margaret Tait's I once came across in her archive - that she wished she had taken less photographs rather than more. Perhaps this is tied to Tait's desire to focus on things in a concentrated way or to prevent the act of photographing becoming just another endless cycle of consumption. The scarcity of material my mom and I are engaging with in our discussions is in some respects a blessing. In a digital age, will it be possible to engage with entire collections? As the ubiquity of the family album fades, in what new ways will memory stories be shared and take shape? As I finish writing this essay, my mom sends me a text: 'look, my phone put all of my sunset pictures together in a video!' While I failed to acknowledge the subjects dearest to her in her photography, her phone does so with great ease and finesse. Yet returning once again, to my mom's statement about what interested her in photography in the first place, working through the collection of slides with her highlights just how important the process is. That it is through

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the memory work involved in sifting through, sharing and making sense of what the slides contain, that enriches them with meaning and enables transformation.

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**KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS**

**Contemporary Archaeology:** The archaeology of contemporary artefacts, sites, and material.

**Kodachrome:** A popular brand of colour reversal film introduced by Eastman Kodak in 1935.

**Memory Work:** A focused act of remembering which adopts a critical approach to the way in which the past is reconstructed; an approach adopted by Annette Kuhn in her book, *Family Secrets*, for using photography to explore personal, familial, and collective histories.

**Memory Stories:** The narrativization of memory in both private and public contexts.

**Punctum:** Barthes identifies the punctum as a particular element in a photograph (a 'sting, speck, cut, little hole'), an 'accident' that jars in some way and produces a uniquely subjective and emotional reading.

**Shielding:** Term used by the UK government to indicate those at highest risk from COVID-19.