

MOTHERHOOD COLLECTION: A CRITICAL-CREATIVE STUDY OF DOMESTIC
PHOTOGRAPHY IN THE DIGITAL AGE

by

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(Under the Direction of Andrew Zawacki)

ABSTRACT

This dissertation presents a reflective and critical investigation into the photographs mothers take or have taken of their children. The writer employs Roland Barthes's *Camera Lucida* as a model for the project's structure and style; accordingly, images represent sites of inquiry and discovery within the text. In this critical-creative study, the writer looks at pictures of children to visually explore motherhood in the digital age and consider the relationship between photography and maternity. In a series of beginnings followed by 21 sections, the writer pieces together images, reflections, theories, and anecdotes to perform an analysis of domestic photography in an attempt to access the essence of motherhood and understand what that essence demands of and means for mothers in their everyday lives. Specifically, the critical apparatus consists of theories and scholarship related to vernacular photography, family photography, feminist motherhood, rhetorical theory, and mourning. The theoretical framework is coupled with personal observations and reflections on photographic products and processes today, including the image composition and photographic activities made possible by digital technologies. The writer highlights two key changes incurred by the current technological landscape: namely, the extent and speed of social interactivity on digital networks. These changes mean that photography now

grants mothers the illusion that their children are and will be permanently accessible online. Thus, photography makes visible and satisfies the mother's desire for permanence; yet, this permanence is an illusion, one maintained by continual efforts to produce a comprehensive photographic record. The writer argues that photography ultimately creates virtual children who enable mothers to confront the inevitable departure of real, living children from the womb, the home, and the world. At the same time, the writer asks mothers to accept that having children necessitates loss as a condition of creation. By accepting this condition, the writer suggests mothers might be able to adopt an inventive approach to everyday life and discover new uses for their photographs.

INDEX WORDS: Motherhood, Photography, Identity, Representation, Collection, Time, Vernacular photography, Family photography, Feminist motherhood, Rhetorical theory, Everyday life, Digital technology, Roland Barthes

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DEDICATION

To my lovelies: Riley, Adrian, and Sidney. And my always, Shawn.

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Over the past four years, I have come to see that writing is inherently and intimately a collaborative act. A single text, like the one that follows, brings together so many voices: quotes from scholars and writers whose work I admire; feedback from my committee members and readers whose comments have guided my work and pushed me to consider new perspectives; encouragement from family and friends; and, conversations with my children, other mothers, and others about motherhood that have informed my thinking. I am thankful for all of these voices and what they have helped me create here.

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CHAPTER 1

BEGINNINGS

The myriad photographs of children, childhood milestones, family moments, and domestic spaces that circulate online and fill the home, coupled with the ever-quickenning speed of taking, making, and sharing digital images, require a confrontation with photographic practices, processes, and products at the hearth. Photography remakes the domestic world into streaming data, and this flow of images enters the home as a familiar presence—another member of the family. But what, I wonder, does this presence mean for who mothers are and how they live? “Motherhood Collection” sets out to answer this question by exploring the photographic nature of motherhood and the maternal nature of photography.

“Motherhood Collection” employs the form of the collection to create critical art.¹ It gathers within its pages sections that operate according to their own whims and reasons. It accumulates four family photographs from three personal collections. It assembles fragments, glimpses, and voices. Yet it remains partial, as Adrienne Rich suggests all studies of female culture are, as female culture itself is, thanks to the “male cultures, boundaries, groupings in which women live” (17). Following Rich, I recognize “Motherhood Collection” as the piecing together of “scholarship available to me where I found it suggestive,” the product of my “training, background, and tools” (16-7). I understand the equally limiting and inspiring ways my education and experiences have informed the choices I have made in terms of sources, materials,

¹ I first encountered the term critical art in Geoffrey Batchen’s *Each Wild Idea*. Batchen argues, “the critical art of our time is going to have to take on an infrastructure that is as much philosophical as it is mathematical” (174). “Motherhood Collection” operates according to this double logic by investigating humanistic and computational concerns.

approach, and style. But, and more importantly, I see the work I am doing here as my contribution to the ongoing, collaborative project of feminist scholarship, which Rich describes as “putting together other parts of this immense half-buried mosaic in the shape of a woman’s face” (17).

Because “Motherhood Collection” resists the conventional form of a monograph, it seeks to extend the project of feminist maternal scholarship into a consideration of form. I have designed this text to resemble Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s rhizome—only lines, “directions in motion” (21).² In assembling these lines, I have become a bricoleur, a curator, and a designer.³ Rather than a single trajectory, “Motherhood Collection” consists of a series of beginnings shared in this chapter, followed by 21 dimensions that extend from the psychological to the sociological, from analysis to invention, from critique to reflection. What I have aimed for here is, in the words of composition theorist Geoffrey Sirc, “piling stuff on to create a spellbinding, mesmerizing surface” (284). If digital images create an interface for motherhood, “Motherhood Collection” traces a map for that interface. This map, in turn, offers ways of navigating photographic processes and products that open the domestic realm up to perpetual inquiry and innovation. Here, I invite readers into an assemblage in which distinctions between

² Deleuze and Guattari introduce the rhizome in *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* as “a short-term memory, or antimemory” that functions according to “variation, expansion, conquest, capture, offshoots” and corresponds with “a map this is always detachable, connectable, reversible, modifiable, and has multiple entryways and exits and its own lines of flight” (21). I chose to use this concept as a model for “Motherhood Collection” because it can represent partiality and refuse the construction of a particular disciplinary genealogy. The rhizome motivates me to engage in scholarship that seizes upon interdisciplinary research and extends in various dimensions. Ultimately, I see “Motherhood Collection” as a map for the landscape of digital domestic photography constructed out of a series of lines, not “preestablished paths” (Deleuze and Guattari 21).

³ These roles suggest a different approach to research, one that aligns with Stephen Ramsay’s proposal for a more playful, selective engagement in scholarship, which he describes in his essay “The Hermeneutics of Screwing Around; or What You Do with a Million Books.” Ramsay suggests, “The world is vast. Art is long. What else can we do but survey the field, introduce a topic, plant a seed” (111). In a similar vein, this project proposes how to handle myriad domestic photographs and plants a seed.

the world, book, and author⁴ are consistent with the boundaries between experience, photography, and mothers: they have all been dissolved.

Beginning I: Moments

I can trace my motivation to study and write about motherhood back to two particular moments. Both of them took place in writing workshop class meetings when I was a Ph.D. student at the University of Georgia, on the first day of the semester, in the opening minutes of the class. In each case, I was on the outskirts of the conversation yet directly implicated by the expressed sentiments.

In spring 2012, seven of us sat around a conference table in early January. Author Judith Ortiz Cofer, the professor who would lead our workshop, sat at one end of the table, and the rest of us, all first-year Ph.D. student-writers, filled the other three sides. We went around the table to introduce ourselves. The man next to me went first. He talked about his background, writing interests, and the new addition to his family: a baby boy who was just over a week old, born the day after Christmas. Cofer congratulated him and then asked us all if we knew the rule. We shook our heads, and she said, “Writers can only have one child.” She looked at the man. “So you’re done.” I do not really remember what happened next. We may have talked about the time, effort, and energy children require. Diapers may have been mentioned. I know we laughed about this rule, but only a little. I am sure I shook my head. Then we took turns sharing the names of

⁴ For Deleuze and Guattari, an assemblage lacks a “tripartite division between a field of reality (the world) and a field of representation (the book) and a field of subjectivity (the author)” (23). In “Motherhood Collection,” I develop an assemblage to explore a similarly fluid arena for reality (maternal experience), representation (domestic digital photography), and subjectivity (the mother).

writers who had complied.⁵ Immediately, I could only think of one—Michael Griffith, a writer I had studied with at Sewanee University’s School of Letters.

Then it was my turn to introduce myself. I, too, shared a little about my educational background and writing interests. And I, too, shared family news. “I had a baby two weeks ago,” I said. “My third.”

The following fall, I took another graduate writing workshop, this time with writer Andrew Zawacki and six new creative writing students. Again, the first few moments of that class are ones I remember well. Before Dr. Zawacki arrived, most of us had gathered to claim seats and get acquainted or caught up after the summer months. I was chatting with my friend, the man from the workshop mentioned above, about his infant boy, now nine months old. He was telling me about new feats, new milestones, events and activities I was experiencing for the third time with my youngest daughter. On the other side of me, a new graduate student was listening to my friend talk. At one point, he looked over at us and said, “Kids.” I still remember the hostility in his voice. Curious about what seemed like open disdain for children, I asked, “So you’re not a kid-person?” He responded, “Kids aren’t special, and people who have kids aren’t special.”

“Huh,” I said. I did not know what else to say at the time, and the workshop started soon after.

⁵ On June 7, 2013, *The Atlantic* published “The Secret to Being Both a Successful Writer and a Mother: Have Just One Kid.” In the article, Lauren Sandler identifies numerous female writers who abide by the one-child-only rule, including Susan Sontag, Alice Walker, Margaret Atwood, Joan Didion, Mary McCarthy, Elizabeth Hardwick, and Ellen Willis.

Beginning II: Critical / Creative Context

In *Feminist Art and the Maternal*, Andrea Liss chronicles artists who explore maternal concerns and experiences from a feminist perspective.⁶ Dating back to the 1960s, initial work in this vein “sought to give women the right to articulate and represent their crucial experiences *as women*” at a time when the male art world imposed strict restrictions on female identity (Liss 1, emphasis in the original). Women had to choose. They could not be both artists and mothers. During the 1970s and 1980s, concern for representing female/maternal experiences shifted to concern for representing female/maternal bodies. By the 1990s, feminist maternal art again redirected its focus, this time to concentrate on cultural and professional repression, as in the work of Ellen McMahon.⁷ Digital technologies and media now call on feminist maternal art to confront social and networked practices and representations that limit and subordinate women, particularly as mothers and in domestic spaces, even when accompanied by celebrations of femininity and domesticity.⁸

⁶ Liss discusses the following artists and their work: Mary Kelly, Mierle Laderman Ukeles, Renée Cox, Ngozi Onwurah, Civia Rosenberg, May Stevens, Ellen McMahon, Gail S. Rebhan, Judith Hopkins, and Catherine Opie, as well as collaborative artist groups like Mother Art and M.A.M.A. (Mother Artists Making Art).

⁷ See Liss’s chapter “Mamas Out of Place” for a discussion of Ellen McMahon’s work. See McMahon’s website for images of her work along with information about her career as a teacher and artist: <http://www.ellenmcmahon.com>.

⁸ See Lindsey Harding’s essay “Super Mom in a Box,” published online in *Harlot*.

For Mary Kelly and Mierle Laderman Ukeles,⁹ feminist artists from the 1960s-70s who developed complex representations of the mother-child relationship and defined maternal tasks in scientific indices and performances, respectively, photographs served two simultaneous purposes: they recorded and exhibited the private, personal world of a mother, thus making this world visually available to a larger public. But today, photographs can no longer be the product of feminist maternal art,¹⁰ not when mothers regularly publicize their private lives by sharing, uploading, and posting images of their children, their domestic endeavors, and their family activities. The image landscape is saturated. Photographs are too familiar. Instead, I propose an extension of the feminist maternal art agenda that begins with the photographs mothers take, commission, and share—and, then repurposes them not as materials for an art museum exhibit,¹¹ but as media through which to invent a personal experience of motherhood. This addition

⁹ “Motherhood Collection” might be viewed as an updated and reconceptualized version of Mary Kelly’s *Post-Partum Document*. At the end of her introduction to the 1982 book publication of her gallery exhibit, Kelly depicts her project as a continuing narrative, which can remain open because of the way she imbricates theory and personal experience: “Problems remain. The debate continues. The *Post-Partum Document* tells that story” (xx). For my project, this comment offers an invitation—to continue the “on-going process of analysis and visualization of the mother-child relationship” that Kelly started (Kelly xv). Thus, while my project aligns with *Post-Partum Document* as a personal-theoretical exploration of maternal experience, I seek to extend Kelly’s project to study networked domestic images and how social, public representations reflect, determine, and have the potential to innovate motherhood.

The following projects by Ukeles represent the clearest models for “Motherhood Collection”: *Maintenance Art*, 1969, photographs that capture maternal, domestic labors in order to present them as art; *Dressing to Go Out/Undressing to Come In*, 1973, an arrangement of 95 photographs that capture the processes of putting clothes on and taking clothes off of two young children on a cold day in New York City; and, *Fall Time Variations III, Children’s Piece: Time Stop* (“*Tree Droppings—The Leaving Home of the Leaves*”), 1974, a project through which Ukeles contemplates a mother’s struggle to deal with children leaving the home. See depictions of these projects in *Feminist Art and the Maternal* by Andrea Liss.

¹⁰ See, for example, *Home Truths* by Susan Bright.

¹¹ In her essay “Ordinary Pictures and Accidental Masterpieces: Snapshot Photography in the Modern Art Museum,” Catherine Zuromskis analyzes museum exhibits that feature snapshot photography. For Zuromskis, The Metropolitan Museum of Art’s 2000 exhibit *Other Pictures: Vernacular Photographs from the Thomas Walther Collection* and the Paul Getty Museum’s 2004 exhibit *Close to Home: An American Album* exemplify the interaction between the museum and the snapshot, which yields a presentation of vernacular photography divorced from its social life, denied its historical context, and forced to submit to “formalist aesthetics or generalized nostalgia” (124).

suggests feminist maternal art as a dynamic recursive process, not the generation of static products or historical events that then become static products when documented for exhibits and later books.

Specifically with “Motherhood Collection,” I employ personal domestic photographs to reflect on and re-see motherhood—its activities, commitments, and demands. This type of project has roots in the work of Mother Art demonstrations from the 1970s and 80s, during which mother-artists gathered to create art from their personal experiences (Liss 1-4).¹² Yet what had previously been the primary subject and focus of feminist maternal art has become context in my project. Rather than look directly at maternal experience, culture, labor, and relationships, I investigate how these matters are represented in digital domestic images.

In her exhibit and book *Home Truths*, curator Susan Bright sets forth on a similar exploration of motherhood and photography today, yet she uses fine art photographs in her work, not the work of amateur photographers as I have done. Because of the image genres we have selected, our projects complement each other and together present a more holistic picture of domestic representation, from art photography to everyday imagery. Bright’s introduction to her curation of images from twelve international art photographers highlights changes in domestic art photography since the 1970s. She notes how “this new generation responds to a complex twenty-first-century backdrop of less-defined gender roles and less certainty when it comes to meaning and interpretation” and reflects on the way “these artists revel in contradiction and ambiguity, embrace the performative aspect of their practice, and, crucially, foreground the role of subjectivity and self-referentiality” (Bright 11). The complexity and ambiguity Bright locates in the photographs she studies are not readily apparent in networked amateur images, however.

¹² According to Liss, “Mother Art is a collective of artist-mothers who met through their involvement in the Woman’s Building in downtown Los Angeles in 1974” (1-2). The founding members of the group included Christy Kruse, Helen Million, Suzanne Siegel, and Laura Silgali (2).

The photographs I am concerned with are still largely ruled by conventions and practices that reinforce a single image of the mother as domestic laborer, a doting servant of her children, family, and home who remains beyond the frame, invisible.

Throughout “Motherhood Collection,” my main line of inquiry revolves around how I might re-use the domestic photographs that appear in my own home and circulate in social networks and digital spaces to reimagine motherhood as an ongoing process of creation that involves continually making and remaking connections through recursive engagement in cognitive and physical labor.¹³ For this vision of motherhood, I build off feminist perspectives that argue for dynamic conceptions of mother and motherhood,¹⁴ as opposed to ideological views that define motherhood as a model of behavior or a natural and archaic vision associated with women, even in the absence of pregnancy and children.¹⁵ In other words, I resist motherhood as a museum. Ultimately, this project seeks to critique and creatively repurpose digital imaging practices and conventionally coded domestic images that uphold specific maternal ideals in order to redefine motherhood according to its lived ambiguities and complexities.

¹³ In thinking about the cognitive labor of motherhood, I draw from Margaret Honey’s description of Sara Ruddick’s term maternal thinking: “reflective thought that develops around the demands of motherhood for preservation, growth, and social acceptability” (Honey 224). To this, I add Ruddick’s requirement for helpful, reflective maternal thinking to be “anchored in thinking about children” (qtd. in Liss 72).

¹⁴ See, for example, *Of Women Born* by Adrienne Rich.

¹⁵ Jo Reger, Sharon Hays, Verta Taylor, and Nancy Felipe Russo begin their feminist critiques of motherhood by identifying motherhood as a standardized set of behaviors assigned to women regardless of whether they have children. In the introduction to *Representations of Motherhood*, the editors describe the image of the white Western mother as “the ever-bountiful, ever-giving, self-sacrificing mother” and point out the large body of feminist scholarship that has critiqued this image by recognizing it as a “socially supported *myth* designed to keep women in their place” (Bassin, Honey, and Kaplan 3-4, emphasis in the original).

Beginning III: Content

What are we talking about when we talk about still pictures taken with a camera in the twenty-first century? Are they photographs? Are they images? Geoffrey Batchen considers the relationship between photography and digital imagery and suggests that we are now in the midst of a post-photography era, a time in which “photographic as a vocabulary of conventions and references lives on in ever-expanding splendor” (*Burning* 216). While technologies and practices have changed how photography happens today, we continue to encounter “a persistent economy of photographic desires and concepts” (Batchen *Burning* 213). Batchen describes this economy by outlining key topics that have accompanied photography’s persistence and the nature of their interaction with photography:

The concepts inscribed within this economy include things like nature, knowledge, representation, time, space, observing subject, and observed object photography is the desire, conscious or not, to orchestrate a particular set of relationships between these various concepts. (*Burning* 213)

Developments in digital technologies since Kodak revolutionized photography¹⁶ by moving it into the home have been matched by photography’s own developments to involve new practices, new formats, and new conceptual arrangements.¹⁷ At the same time, Batchen reminds us that photography remains what it has always been: an act of invention despite its claims to objectivity and truth.¹⁸ He writes, “In the mere act of transcribing world into picture, three dimensions into

¹⁶ In *The Snapshot Photograph: The Rise of Popular Photography 1888-1939*, Brian Coe and Paul Gates present the social and technological context surrounding the development of devices and practices that resulted in photography’s rise as a popular amateur pursuit. In 1888, George Eastman developed an image-producing system such that anyone could take pictures while “the processing could be done by specialists” (Coe and Gates 17). Eastman’s tagline—“You press the button, we do the rest.”—highlights photography’s shifting status at the time from a professional undertaking to an everyday activity (Coe and Gates 17).

¹⁷ See *From Snapshots to Social Media—The Changing Picture of Domestic Photography* by Risto Sarvas and David M. Frohlich.

¹⁸ See essays by Charles Sanders Pierce, Rosalind Krauss, and Scott Walden.

two, photographers necessarily manufacture the images they make” regardless of the manufacturing technology they use (Batchen *Burning* 212). With Batchen in mind, I will use the terms *images* and *photographs* interchangeably throughout this text to refer to artifacts produced by a camera as manufactured inventions. At the same time, Batchen’s conception of a persistent photographic economy presents a way to capture the desire that has motivated my work. That is, I want to understand the relationship between representations of motherhood and maternal experience.¹⁹

This project is fittingly fueled by photographic desires, conscious ones, to see relationships and then to write and rewrite them. While existing investigations into domestic digital photography have sought to explore the relationships among desire and the photographic concepts Batchen lists above,²⁰ I extend this scholarship by turning desire into my methodology and using photographs to understand the connections between photography and motherhood, mother and child, birth and death, and presence and absence.²¹

¹⁹ This desire seems to inform a number of recent photography projects by mother-photographers such as Sally Mann, Julie Blackmon, Elinor Carucci, Jessica Todd Harper, and Tierney Gearon. In addition, curator Susan Bright’s 2013 exhibit *Home Truths* also grapples with this same desire. For all of these artists, their work culminates with the public display of photographs—on a gallery’s walls or in a book.

²⁰ In “Domestic Photography and Digital Culture,” Don Slater studies how consumer culture, leisure, and domestic images interact. He points out a shift in use of domestic photographs from memorialization to presentation: “In a developed consumerism, the image is the way we present ourselves in the heat of the moment rather than the way we represent that moment as an object of reflection” (Slater 140). But this shift in use, he suggests, encounters a lack of opportunities to *use* the pictures taken, since in the 1990s, “there appear[ed] to be no leisure practices of the snapshot” (Slater 141). Yet, in the twenty years that have elapsed since Slater’s essay was published, digital technologies have enabled the design and development of “leisure practices” explicitly driven by the use of the snapshot, namely blogs and social media services like Pinterest, Facebook, and Instagram. While Slater’s definition of leisure—“the structuring of time through commodities”—still holds, time is now structured according to virtual commodities such as the post, the pin, and the status update, all of which largely rely on the production and sharing of domestic digital images (141).

²¹ The relationship between presence and absence has a long history for mothers in photographs. In photography’s early days, for example, mothers were frequently cropped out of or hidden within images (Bright Interview). In addition, it was brought to my attention in the course of revising this dissertation that the absent mother is a motif that also pervades other forms of visual and textual representation, such as children’s books like Dr. Seuss’s *The Cat in the Hat*. For the majority of that story, the mother is out for the day, and when she returns home at the end, she is only visible as a leg or pair of legs. See Louis Menard’s 2002 essay in *The New Yorker*, “Cat People,” for a reading of *The Cat in the Hat* that begins with “the trope of mater abscondita” and ends with our desire to be “taken care of” (Menard).

Beginning IV: Methodology

I have found it important to resist a single, straightforward approach to studying domestic photography and “to allow the gaps and inconsistencies as well as the insights to describe a process of reworking” (Kelly xx). I see the work I am doing here as layered, fragmented, and even at times conflicting. Ultimately, this work is motivated by the same desire Kelly describes in her introduction to *Post-Partum Document*: “our desire to understand and change our lives” (xx). In other words, this project’s multiple and diverse modes are commonly fueled by the desire to grapple with lived experience and transform it through mindful reflection and personal engagement.

Accordingly, photography can be seen as the ideal medium through which to proceed. For as Jane Tormey suggests, photography both mediates and substitutes for desire: “Desire seeps through photographs, by way of associations beside the visible referent or what is absent, and is resolved in representation and fiction as a substitute for that desire (fetish)” (113).²² By following desire through domestic photography and tracing its connections, I work to unsettle these substitutions and re-activate desire for the reworking I engage in here. Further, Jerry L. Thompson proposes photography as “an instructive example of what might be called present-day understanding” (4). He argues, “How we now—today—understand what photography is and how it works tells us something about how we understand anything. And it may appear that how we understand anything is not unrelated to how photography works”

²² In “Caught in the Current,” the final essay that appears in the volume *Consuming Motherhood*, Barbara Katz Rothman admits a problem that both saddens and depresses her: she wonders how to think about and talk about motherhood beyond consumerism. Rothman argues, “One can consume differently, but almost whatever one does as a mother becomes just one more cog in the consumer wheel. In a capitalist, consumerist system, motherhood and its defenses, its reinterpretations, the very battles of motherhood, will take this form” (286-7). Moving forward in this text, I strive to be mindful of this concern for language. I ask myself, as Rothman does, “How can we speak of that which we value?” (288), and I am compelled to actively resist using the language of the market, which has, as the essays in *Consuming Motherhood* attest, become naturalized in discussions of maternal thinking, experiences, and relationships.

(Thompson 4). I seek to understand motherhood in this way: through photography, as a photographic concept. At the same time, by investigating how domestic photography works from a personal, psychological perspective, as well as on the social scene enabled by digital networked technologies, I critique how we understand motherhood photographically. That is, to borrow a sentence from Thompson, “We use the concept without thinking about where it came from,” apart from lived experience, generalized and abstract, and thus steeped in ideological discourse (61). In turn, I propose an alternate approach, one also informed by photography. Here I employ photography not as a short cut for understanding but as a probe into everyday domestic life, a way to explore the relationships photographs expose alongside the details captured in the shots that remain disconnected. At the core of my project lies this photographic mechanism—the perpetual oscillation between connection and fracture.

In addition, much like previous feminist maternal art and scholarship, such as Kelly’s *Post-Partum Document* and Liss’s *Feminist Art and the Maternal*, “Motherhood Collection” involves “the interplay between theory and passion” and seeks to reinforce and extend previous attempts at uniting the maternal body and mind (Liss xix). For example, Liss “redefines scholarly and autobiographical methodologies, intertwining crucial theoretical texts with strategic first-person voices” (xix). In discussing Kelly’s career as an artist and theorist, Liss points out Kelly’s “concerns about the formation of a maternal space in language and culture” (18). In “Motherhood Collection,” I develop a map for the maternal space created from representations of

children that reimagines the mother at the intersection of the past and future, self and other, where she has the power to create new connections and redefine existing relationships.²³

Further, I attempt to enact this perspective of the mother and maternal potential in “Motherhood Collection,” which means that the following chapter operates according to a rich network of interdisciplinary approaches. The breadth and diversity of the theory and scholarship I reference and build upon is motivated further by changing conditions and methods of knowledge production and new social and cultural practices that reflect and extend from developments in digital technologies.²⁴ For today, mothers are entangled in a maze of images—the ones they take, commission, and share; the ones that stream on their phones and fill their hard drives; the ones they look at; the ones they wish they had taken. Studying these images and related photographic practices as rhetorical artifacts and activities requires running through this maze again and again, but each time differently. In the end and specifically for “Motherhood Collection,” this recursive process creates a comprehensive appraisal of domestic digital images that is at once built upon theoretical underpinnings and accessible beyond the silos of specific scholarly fields.

²³ This power can be seen as a public-facing version of intersubjectivity, a concept Liss identifies to reimagine the mother-child relationship as a collaborative venture that “recognizes the possibilities for mutual acknowledgments and continuous unfolding of selves between the mother and the child” (24). For the mother, the benefits of intersubjectivity are twofold: it “gives the mother her own sense of agency” at the same time that “it also allows for infinite forms and textures of relationship between mother and child” (Liss 24).

²⁴ See Alan Liu’s *The Laws of Cool: Knowledge Work and the Culture of Information* for a comprehensive discussion of post-industrial knowledge work influenced by rapidly developing information technologies. Liu employs the concept of *cool* to describe what it means to live in the world of information while being both for and against the data produced by today’s knowledge-generating systems and institutions. Liu’s concept of *destructive creativity* informs “Motherhood Collection,” as well, as is evident in the project’s efforts to use the products of knowledge work to critique the cool process of accumulating information.

See Sherry Turkle’s *Alone Together: Why We Expect more from Technology and Less from Each Other* for a reflective, ethnographic survey of how digital technologies and the practices they encourage are changing social and cultural activities and interactions, from interpersonal communication to companionship.

See Nicholas Carr’s *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains* for a critical appraisal of how online behaviors are influencing our abilities to think, learn, and solve problems. Much like “Motherhood Collection,” Carr’s work employs a diverse set of research tools, including personal anecdotes, empirical brain research, and interdisciplinary theories.

Beginning V: Form

The form of this project pays homage to the way photographs are commonly displayed and stored in collections. Whether exhibited in a museum, streamed on social media, or preserved in a leather-bound album,²⁵ collections unite diverse photographic material according to a unifying purpose. I am engaged in a similar pursuit in what follows: drawing together 21 sections—each its own snapshot of domestic digital photography and, by extension, motherhood.

In addition, artists historically have used collections to call attention to arrangement as a meaning-making device. For instance, Joseph Cornell's multimedia boxes provide a three-dimensional model for the expressive power of the collection.²⁶ According to Elena Filipovic, Marcel Duchamp's work consistently conveyed a similar message: "*Pay attention. The way things are exhibited matters*" (emphasis in the original). Thus for Duchamp, boxed collections served as "portable museums" and challenged the standards of art in the mid-twentieth century (Filipovic). Specifically, in assembling his oeuvre in a single suitcase, as Duchamp does in *Boîte-en-valise (Box in a Valise)*, Duchamp calls attention to the creative potential of replication, appropriation, arrangement, and design. Now with "Motherhood Collection," I see the potential of its form to challenge the conventions of academic scholarship, support a diverse set of methods for conducting humanistic inquiry, and attract a wider readership.

Susan Stewart's discussion of the collection in the context of longing further suggests the productive consequences of the collection as a form of scholarship. Stewart points out that this meaning-making container expresses "example rather than sample, metaphor rather than

²⁵ According to Martha Langford, the earliest photo albums were used by scientists in the 1830s-40s and contained images of their specimens. Family photo albums became popular when roll film cameras entered the market in the late 19th century (Langford). When photography moved out of the studio and into private life, amateurs needed a container to store and preserve their snapshots.

²⁶ On the website *The Joseph Cornell Box*, Joan Sommers and Ascha Drake introduce Joseph Cornell's box projects as "visual poems in which surface, form, texture, and light play together. Using things we can see, Cornell made boxes about things we cannot see: ideas, memories, fantasies, and dreams." In "Motherhood Collection," I aspire to a similar goal: to use visual materials to explore motherhood.

metonymy” (151), attributes that enable my discussion of domestic photography and everyday practices to comment on motherhood and the figure of the mother. Stewart further depicts the collection’s relationship to time, which points to the potential of the form to create meaning apart from time, outside of history:

The collection does not displace attention to the past; rather, the past is at the service of the collection. . . . The collection seeks a form of self-enclosure which is possible because of its ahistoricism. The collection replaces history with *classification*, with order beyond the realm of temporality. In the collection, time is not something to be restored to an origin; rather, all time is made simultaneous or synchronous within the collection’s world. (151)

As time flattens in the collection, the organizational schema achieved by the collection might be considered according to enclosed space. By refusing to acknowledge history and contexts of origin, the collection erects distinct boundaries for space and time and cannot reproduce or produce beyond those boundaries. Specific historical moments—pieces of the past, of time—are placed within the collection-as-container to develop a key—an example, a metaphor, a map—which might in turn be used to understand what occurs *in* time. Here, that occurrence is a woman’s engagement in motherhood.

Final Beginning: What I Want

I see this project as a photographic exploration of twenty-first-century motherhood and a corresponding and necessary inquiry into the forces of culture, ideology, and technology; at the same time, it functions for me as an exercise in working through an impossible confrontation with the mortality of my children and, though less devastating, their departure from the home. At

the core, my work is an attempt to prepare for those events by figuring out what to do with the images of my children I possess. I want to know how I might look at them in order to embrace the ambiguity and complexity of my maternal experience. I want to know how I might rise to face the inevitable challenge of letting go. I want to learn how to reposition the fear of loss in light of the connections and future motherhood makes possible for me.

CHAPTER 2

MOTHERHOOD COLLECTION

Now I find myself in the midst of my children's lives—that is, the time of their lives thus far, their childhood. My participation in three mother-child relationships suggests my participation in motherhood, a term I use to capture the ontological, affective, social, and everyday aspects of being a mother.²⁷ My reflections on my own particular experience of motherhood, however, fail to shed light on motherhood itself. In her seminal work *Of Women Born*, Adrienne Rich affirms the concept's inaccessibility when she writes, "The institution of motherhood cannot be touched or seen" (276). When I think about being a mother, I recall time spent with my children and our family's day-to-day life, from dressing little ones to tucking blankets around their soft bodies at night. I consider household tasks that vie for my attention: the baskets of laundry to fold, for instance. Rich identifies the "many fragments of lived experience" associated with motherhood as "connecting fibers of this invisible institution," which, she suggests, "determine our relationship to our children whether we like to think so or not" (277). I understand this determination, the autopilot of domestic life and child care.

Memories, routines, expectations, and to-do list items prevent me from accessing the critical distance I need to see motherhood and make visible its essence. I turn to photography to

²⁷ Here, my aim is to depict motherhood as the full range of cognitive, emotional, and physical experiences that involve caring for one's children. This updates the way motherhood is commonly referenced in feminist literature as an oppressive institution that exists apart from mothers' lived experiences. Sara Ruddick describes this distinction as an achievement: "Fortunately, in the feminist tradition numerous writers neither fear nor romanticize mothers and their work. These feminist writers distinguish the experience of mothering from the oppressive, confining, isolating institutions of motherhood that spoil that experience for so many women" (39). Following Adrienne Rich, whose work focuses on "motherhood—my own included—in a social context, as embedded in a political institution: in feminist terms" (ix), I consider motherhood throughout this investigation holistically, as a range of experiences that are at once deeply personal and undeniably public, social, and mediated.

create distance from my maternal experience—a powerful influence on my thoughts, actions, and emotions—and simultaneously remain connected.²⁸ For as Roland Barthes explains in *Camera Lucida*, “A sort of umbilical cord links the body of the photographed thing to my gaze: light, though impalpable, is here a carnal medium, a skin I share with anyone who has been photographed” (81). I am by no means the first mother to employ photography as a tool to better understand her identity, relationships, and roles. Indeed, this investigation recognizes a rich history of women and photography, which Tirza Latimer and Harriet Riches rehearse in their 2013 historical overview for *Grove Art Online*. What I hope to add to this history is a perspective that addresses what digital technology has brought into focus through increasing the rate of photographic practices and the sheer amount of images of children mothers can possess, interact with, and encounter in their daily lives.²⁹

As Rich does in her feminist critique of motherhood, I set forth to “scan the territory using instruments then most familiar to me” (xxv). As it is, pictures of my three small children fill my real and online worlds. I have either taken the pictures or hired an amateur photographer to take them. I have selected and ordered them. I have uploaded and framed them. Their existence, like that of my children, depends on me. I see prints of Riley, Adrian, and Sidney on the walls of my home, framed on my dresser. I see their images in my Facebook profile, my Instagram feed, and 52 folders on my computer’s hard drive. Images I ordered online through Mpix.com or Shutterfly.com sit on my office bookshelf and hang on the fridge. Yet, on a day-to-

²⁸ My decision to use photography as a critical thinking device fits into a larger context of women employing photography as a tool for a variety of reasons—documentation, expression, empowerment, agency, autonomy, and ideological critique (Latimer and Riches)—a number of which I employ throughout “Motherhood Collection.”

²⁹ Lee Humphreys presents a compelling historical analysis of microblogging to call attention to what is actually new about communication practices that use emerging technologies: namely, the social interactivity and the speed of interactions (4). Following Humphreys, I recognize that the activities I am participating in here—taking, looking at, and studying pictures of my children—are not new activities. Now, though, I must acknowledge the speed and ease of taking and viewing pictures. Now, with so many images saved and at my disposal, I must first select and curate if I am to begin my investigation at all.

day basis, I do not see these pictures. Their conventional presence renders them invisible to me. My experience supports the argument Risto Sarvas and David M. Frohlich make: now that our interactions with photographs have become fully integrated with everyday activities and family life, “they almost escape our notice” (1). Catherine Zuromskis reiterates and extends this point when she writes, “Embedded as they are in our daily private lives, they seem natural and inconsequential. At the same time, and for this same reason, they have the power to function on the register of myth” (*Snapshot* 17). Pictures of my children are at once entirely banal and powerfully symbolic, and that tension contained within them resonates with the range of experiences I associate with motherhood—from changing diapers to giving birth. An array of rituals, moments, and interactions structures my daily life, determining to a large extent what I can and cannot do; at the same time, motherhood contains a generative potential that I have encountered each time one of my children has become a presence in the world. I wonder how to access that inventive potential in my everyday existence. Perhaps my pictures can show me how.

I seek now to linger on images of my children so that they might be defamiliarized, made to seem strange enough that I can look beyond their content and explore the fundamental tension that constitutes their essence and the way that tension reflects and informs my experience of motherhood as both limiting and liberating.³⁰ I resolve to disallow the commonness of my images, even as the sheer number of pictures on my devices and in the cloud compels their familiarity. This pursuit locates a precedent in John Tagg’s study of portraiture photography, which focused on the personal and social value and meaning of portraits.³¹ Following Tagg, I

³⁰ Catherine Zuromskis compellingly discusses the competing powers of snapshot photography. She argues, on the one hand, snapshots act as a “regulating force, encouraging citizens to achieve emotional gratification by playing out normative scenarios of familial harmony for the camera” (Zuromskis *Snapshot* 10); on the other hand, they contain “a site of democratic possibility, a means of using the genre’s rhetoric to gratify the most private, individual, and external desires” (Zuromskis *Snapshot* 17).

³¹ See John Tagg, “A Democracy of the Image: Photographic Portraiture and Commodity Production,” *The Burden of Representation*.

now ask of images of my children, “What do such pictures do for us? What uses do they have?” (35). Ruth Furlong’s research on digital technologies in the home in the 1990s suggests the importance of asking questions like these to focus attention on personal experience. She argues, “In terms of cultural theorizing, we need to pay as much attention to ‘mapping’ the interior as the exterior world” (Furlong 185). According to Furlong, the exterior world is marked by a recognizable instability such that the home and the family have become metaphors that represent “complex territory where a number of people, objects, ideas and experiences intersect” (184). I proceed with the intention of mapping a mother’s interior world, a world I know from personal experience and reflection to be a similarly “complex territory,” characterized by uncertainty and ambiguity. I will do so by looking at how a mother interacts with pictures of her children as a fundamental practice of everyday life, an activity built into the fabric of her day-to-day existence.³² For this experience—increasingly more interactive and extensive due to digital imaging and communication technologies³³—offers a way to visually explore motherhood in the digital age as a product of domestic digital photography and its related practices.³⁴

To conduct this visual appraisal, I employ *Camera Lucida* by Roland Barthes as a formal and stylistic model.³⁵ Nancy Shawcross describes one facet of this model as “the now-familiar

³² With the development of digital technologies, Slater describes the active presence of images in the domestic sphere: “images that have a live place in everyday life are those which are bound up with forms of practice rather than memory or commemoration” (139). See *The Practice of Everyday Life* by Michel de Certeau for a more extensive critical investigation into daily life.

³³ Zuromskis suggests that digital technologies have made snapshot photography “more ubiquitous and increasingly ephemeral” and “more public” (*Snapshot* 16).

³⁴ Susan Bright’s exhibit and later book *Home Truths* might be seen as an alternative version of this project, one motivated by an “interest in representation of Mothers in the media” (Bright Interview). My version here focuses on personal representations of a mother, in which she never appears in the frame. This angle enables me to consider and engage in a more intimate experience and analysis of domestic photographs. I am interested in exploring what images of children mean for a mother in her daily life.

³⁵ In paying homage to Barthes’s style, this text is not alone. James Elkins’s *What Photography Is* offers a return and response to *Camera Lucida* and even imitates its format with the use of “brief numbered sections” (x). Elkins explains, “The idea, which I will try to justify as I go along, is to write about photography by writing into or through Barthes’s book—ventriloquizing if necessary, inhabiting the book, writing at first from inside it, in order finally to be outside it” (xi).

Barthesian style of the fragment,” which Barthes uses to critique and complicate a straightforward critical analysis (24). In the following units, I piece together images, reflections, theories, and anecdotes to perform an analysis that channels the instability of voice James Elkins finds in Barthes’s work: “on one page it lectures, and then suddenly it becomes a rhapsody or a soliloquy; at one point it is lucid, and then instantly nearly incomprehensible; in another place it is gently and calm then almost demented with sadness” (x). While the variety of voices in *Camera Lucida* seems fitting as a formal reminder of Barthes’s grief and mourning, here, this variety suggests the emotional range motherhood involves.

At the same time, *Camera Lucida* and this work rely on different mechanisms to navigate the photographic content the two texts contain and discuss. Barthes ultimately concentrates on a single image of his mother, the Winter Garden Photograph,³⁶ and establishes a relationship between motherhood and photography founded on the analogy of light as an umbilical cord (Barthes 81). The maternal essence of photography that Barthes identifies compels me to consider the photographic essence of motherhood. In other words, I want to know how motherhood might be understood as a photographic pursuit. So I reverse Barthes’s gaze. I concentrate on images of my living children to understand the composition, meaning, and function of our relationships and my experiences as a mother. Beyond the fundamental principles and terms Barthes’s defines in *Camera Lucida*, the work as a whole guides my own photography-based inquiry, directing me to present reflective observations and personal

³⁶ For Barthes, moving through the image landscape he constructs requires a guide: the Winter Garden photograph. According to Nancy Shawcross, it functions as Barthes’s “Ariadne that will lead him out of the maze of paths that photography tenders” (61).

experience through a theoretical lens.³⁷ While Barthes set out to discover in 1980 “by what essential feature [the Photograph] was to be distinguished from the community of images,” I want to look at pictures of my children now to understand the essence of motherhood, and what that essence demands of and means for mothers and children in their everyday lives (3).

Look here!

Selected images punctuate this text as cornerstones upon which my experiences as a mother and the critical apparatus of this investigation can interact. These images come from three collections that feature my older daughter Riley and my son Adrian. The first collection was shot in November 2010, at a park in Gainesville, Florida, near a thin tree that had dropped a wide orange bed of leaves. Riley is two years old, Adrian six months. The morning was sunny and warm for November, but I had dressed the kids in wintery outfits. The photographer was a former high school student of mine, Christi López, now an artist studying at Ringling College of Art and Design. López took the pictures for my second set of images, as well, seven months later. We met at a different Gainesville park, one we called “Sand Park.” This time, the children wore bright colors and patterns, more summery outfits, and I brought toys—two brightly colored, oversized balls. The third collection comes from a Portrait Café photo shoot at the kids’ daycare in November 2011. Riley and Adrian were dressed in vintage clothing, and some shots involved old-timey props like a boxy black camera.

³⁷ This approach follows Bright’s recommendation for photography projects concerned with the maternal. In an interview about her exhibit *Home Truths*, she states, “I, however, believe looking at a relatively new medium such as photography, especially when it is concerned with a very ancient subject matter, charting the changing representations and entomology is vital. This doesn’t mean to say I reject photo theory entirely. I use it up to a point and then turn to other ideas when it can no longer be useful for me” (Bright Interview).

These images represent instances of domestic photography, which photography historian and theorist Geoffrey Batchen identifies as a specific type of vernacular photography.³⁸ For Zuromskis, whose work builds off of Batchen's, vernacular photography consists of neither the singular nor the universal; instead, it is "a genre that is at once deeply moving and intensely banal" ("Ordinary" 125). These theorists call attention to the tricky business of investigating vernacular photography from historical and theoretical perspectives. Zuromskis questions how snapshots might provide insight into understanding photography in general. She wonders, "[W]hat exactly might such a vernacular history [of photography] look like" (Zuromskis "Ordinary" 105). Batchen cites the paucity of attention to vernacular photographs to suggest that such a course of study "is no simple matter" (*Each* 76). According to Batchen, vernacular photographs should not be approached as "yet another, autonomous object of study" (*Each* 76). As both a lens onto photography in general and a specific instance of photography, vernacular photography resists a direct, straightforward analysis.

For the domestic sphere specifically, Don Slater argues that photographic actions and products constitute part of family life and a mechanism for seeing and representing that life (15). In this context, then, Batchen's remarks about the power and function of the vernacular are particularly revealing. For Batchen, vernacular photographs "frequently collapse any distinction between the body of the viewer and that of the object, each being made to function as an

³⁸ See Batchen, "Vernacular Photographies," *Each Wild Idea*. Vernacular photography claims as its subject matter everyday life, which consists of ordinary events, routine activities, and domestic relationships. Perhaps the most popular, recognizable examples of vernacular photography are the images shot by Walker Evans during the Great Depression, which document the lives of three American sharecroppers and their families. See *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* by James Agee and Walker Evans. At the same time, vernacular photography is often used to classify anonymous, amateur, and snapshot photographs, which Slater defines as "images taken by ourselves of ourselves, the self-representation of everyday life" (131). Examples of vernacular photography exhibits/catalogues include *Snapshot Chronicles—Inventing the American Photo Album*, curated by Barbara Levine and Stephanie Snyder, a 2005 exhibit featuring images from 1898 to 1935 curated from 70 American photo albums; and, *Snapshots: The Photography of Everyday Life, 1888 to the Present*, curated by Douglas Nickel and exhibited at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in 1998. The images I study and feature here exemplify the amateur status and domestic subject matter consistent with vernacular photography.

extension of the other” (*Each* 77). This I feel instinctively when looking through the picture collections described above: my children and I are part of a fluid, distributed network of mortality and biology, hopes and fears. Batchen develops the interactive nature of vernacular photography further when he argues, “[T]hese objects are less about conveying truthful information about their subjects than they are about enacting certain social and cultural rituals through morphological design and object-audience interaction” (*Each* 77). That is, a mother’s pictures of her children hold less value as documentary memory aids than they do as social and maternal stock, by which they confirm a mother’s relationship with her children and her participation in maternal culture. To communicate this fundamental relationship and a mother’s recognizable status of mother, domestic images, like all vernacular images, rely on “conformity to (rather than difference from) established genre conventions” (Batchen *Each* 77). This means “making, commissioning, and/or witnessing these objects are all, at least in part, acts of social placement and integration” (Batchen *Each* 77). Zuromskis affirms Batchen’s analysis and further addresses the social life of such images. For example, she writes, “To take a picture of a child on her birthday is not only a gesture of love and intimacy, but also a subscription to social mores and the family-oriented value system they represent” (Zuromskis “Ordinary” 106). When the camera enters the home, the home enters a larger social system, one Zuromskis defines according to “American values, familial stability, and national pride” (*Snapshot* 9). The pictures taken in the domestic sphere reproduce “a set of readily identifiable public conventions” through the ritualistic enterprise of snapshot photography (Zuromskis *Snapshot* 9).

The privileging of conformity and the implications of that conformity for social identity require me to acknowledge the role ideological discourse plays in defining the visually recognizable standards and conventions of motherhood. Tagg defines ideological discourse as “a

well-constructed, coherent and systematic totality which contains our thought within its apparent consistency” (161). Tagg further notes the way concepts like family, home, and mother lose their historical specificity in ideological discourse and come to be considered at “the archetypal level of *natural and universal*” (160). At the same time, the “mythical schema” put forth by ideology simultaneously informs and disrupts the historical reality of the photographed moment (Tagg 160). This means that for the mother, images of her children reveal her as a mother, associate her with other mothers, and confirm her engagement in motherhood at the same time that they capture children in a particular moment in time. By following Batchen’s suggestion to employ “a kind of anecdotal, novelistic approach to vernacular photography, a historical version of Barthes’s *Camera Lucida*” (Each 78), I hope to discover what the mythical information expressed in domestic photographs means for mothers and how that information influences their actual relationships with their living children.

Photo Fertility

I display images from my three collections in sets of five throughout the year on three shelves in our home’s family room, above the television set. Select images are constantly on display, framed and resting on the piano and my dresser. I have looked at these photographs countless times. They confirm that I am a mother, that I have children, but what else? Now I want a deeper understanding. Why do these pictures of my children mean so much to me? And *what* do they mean to me?

More and more, I have wondered what the *process* of pictures means for me. Photographs of children involve mothers in four distinct actions: taking, looking at, storing, and displaying the images—whether as prints, in books, or as digital artifacts on social media feeds or in online

spaces. When I consider photographic representation of my children and each of these activities individually, I suffer an amount of stress, sometimes even a sort of obsessive madness. Alix Cleo Roubaud, in notes for a film production of her photos—*Les Photos d'Alix*—writes, “All that we risk losing, our children, will soon be unrecognizable; they must be photographed” (232). As a mother, I know that risk, and I feel the imperative to take pictures of my children. Always, I wonder if I have enough. Roubaud reminds me that when the subject is loved, “one takes, one possesses, either one, or an infinite number of photos. That's to say, never enough” (233). Perhaps I will never rest until I have an archive that reflects the entirety of childhood for each of my children to make them always immediately recognizable. Though the endeavor is futile from the start, I feel responsible for at least trying. “Never enough” becomes an exhausting enough.

In this fatigue, yet surrounded by myriad images still, I consider this compulsion to take and possess even more photographs anew. Through Rich, I have come to appreciate the critical attention that all maternal instincts demand. I see how my insatiable desire to take pictures of my children represents an instance of “bending to some ancient form, too ancient to question. *This is what women have always done*” (Rich 25, emphasis in the original). For Rich, it was sweeping a floor that motivated the thought “[n]ow I am a woman” (25). For me, it is in interactions with photographs of my children that I sense a similar determination: now I am a mother. The form I am bending to concerns the mother’s responsibility for recording, memorializing, and publicizing the family’s growth, health, and satisfaction, which, in turn, explicitly dictates what can and cannot be photographed, what gets preserved on backup hard drives and what gets deleted. Rich rallies against efforts to curate the maternal world for positive content. She writes, “I believe increasingly that only the willingness to share private and sometimes painful experience can enable women to create a collective description of the world which will be truly

ours” (Rich 16). Her call motivates me to use my images, the ones I have been compelled to take, for purposes beyond updating the family’s photo album and decorating our home. Now through images of my own children, I wish to grapple with and explore the psychic pain of maternal experience.

Riley, November 2010

In a picture of Riley from the first November collection, her face and the top of her plain white shirt fill the frame (Fig. 1). On the left, strands of hair blow across her forehead and around her bright red lips; a loose braid hangs along the right side of her face. Her eyes, bright blue, especially in contrast to her pale skin, blonde hair, and white shirt, stare directly at the camera. Her gaze is direct, fearless. A confidence that is almost aggressive accompanies the slight scrunch of her nose, the lips parted to reveal small white teeth. Yet the braid and blowing wisps are playful. Golden hair softens the look, and also frames it, protects it.



Fig. 1. Photograph of Riley Harding, November 2010. Author's personal photograph.

I am drawn to her eyes because I find them stunning, but perhaps also because I want to be seen as a mother, and that is what eyes do—they see. Enlarge the photo enough, and I might literally be visible as a reflection in them. The softening effect of the hair might capture my maternal drive to protect my children. In the traces of haughty self-assuredness ascribed in Riley's nose and red lips, I see the intimation of pride and confidence in myself as a mother, feelings which would become fully realized only after the birth of my third child, two years after this picture was taken.

Even now, even still, I have a hard time looking away from this picture. In my struggle to avert my gaze, I feel the image's immersive pull coupled with my own desire to be an observer, to keep my distance and just look. I want to be part of the scene and apart from it. For this photograph and all photographs of my children, I am a voyeur. At once engrossed in and removed from my children, I occupy a treacherous position. As Mieke Bal argues, "The voyeur is constantly in danger, since alienation robs him of his self when he is not interacting with the other" (169). I am compelled to wonder, *who am I when I am not seeing my children? If I did not look at pictures like this one, would I be able to identify myself as a mother?* Bal points out the complexity of seeing when she explains that "the question, 'Who sees?' is dramatically made meaningful by the complementary questions, 'Who is being seen?,' 'Who is not seeing?,' and 'What kind of act of seeing is at stake?'" (168). In this picture of Riley, I see and I am seen. Seeing serves as a way to recognize and accept an identity, to point and nod: yes, I am a mother.

Who Needs Whom?

Mothers are seen in baby pictures. "Every picture of a child is also, however indirectly, a picture of the mother," writes Marianne Hirsch in *Family Frames* (165). "Mothers are always exposed by and through their children" (Hirsch 165). So while the camera lens captures the child, the child reveals the mother. Mothers themselves, especially in the early years of child-raising, often disappear into the more pressing (and more loudly voiced) demands of children for food, milk, dry diapers, clean bodies, and comfort. They do not pose for photographs because they are either holding the camera or soliciting smiles from their children for someone else who holds the

camera.³⁹ But in pictures of their children, mothers return. Hirsch remarks that this visibility may not be desired. “[T]hey might wish to remain unseen” so that they do not “inevitably expose themselves and their own ambivalences about maternity” (Hirsch 187). For when mothers put their children before a camera, the camera becomes a mirror,⁴⁰ reflecting back to mothers their experiences of motherhood. Yet this reflection is not immediately apparent; it is not instantly accessible. The child must first become unrecognizable. Only when we look at the image a certain way for long enough can motherhood and its ambivalence surface. Most of the time, however, we cannot linger on a single image because already another picture has appeared on our screens, already another moment has occurred, and we need to click before it, too, passes.

Lifeblood

In looking at pictures of their children, mothers experience a doubling of states: motherhood and the return to pregnancy. “Looking,” writes Hirsch, “provides the right stage for mutuality and intersubjectivity: when I look I am also seen” (176). While photographs let mothers recognize *that they are* mothers, the act of looking recovers what mothers experience in pregnancy: the blurred boundaries between mother and child. Compared to reproduction, though, looking both externalizes and etherealizes the creation process. The magic that occurred beneath the skin to *create* life is now evident in the magic happening with pixels on a screen to *preserve* life. For Barthes, the connection achieved in looking at a photograph corresponds with the physical link

³⁹ The history of mothers hiding in photographs extends to the beginning of photography. See *The Hidden Mother* by Linda Fregni Nagler, a collection of 1000 photographs from the 1800s to early 1900s that feature babies in the foreground and mothers concealed behind blankets and cloaks in the background. The longer exposure time of earlier photographic procedures required children to sit still for an extended period of time, so mothers entered the frame in disguise to ensure cooperation from their children (Bathurst). This genre of photography is cited in Harriet Riches’s exhibition review as the “point of origin” for Susan Bright’s 2013-2014 exhibition *Home Truths* (27).

⁴⁰ John Szarkowski proposes this metaphor in his exhibit *Mirrors and Windows: American Photography since 1960* to identify one of two axes on a continuum that represents what photography after 1960 is and does (“Mirrors and Windows” 3). The mirror metaphor highlights the way photographers are projected onto photographed people, objects, and/or scenes and ultimately revealed in their photographs.

between mother and child during pregnancy. That is, between “the body of the photographed thing” and the observer’s “gaze” extends “a sort of umbilical cord” (Barthes 81). The mother looking at her photographed child thus visually restores the intimacy of the pregnant body, as well as the bond childbirth severs. Ultimately, pictures of their children invite mothers to have it all: their own separate bodies, children to care for, and still a visceral, binding link between the two. Rather than bodily tissue and fluid, this secondary link consists of vision and light and thus grants mother and child greater physical freedom and greater visual interdependence, accordingly.⁴¹

Need Means Never Let Go

The motivation to take and then look at pictures of my children seems to be a way of negotiating and navigating the distance between mother and child. As the child moves further away from the mother over time and with increasing independence, the mother pulls the child back with pictures. In these opposing activities, the mother is poised for necessary paradox: at once marveling at and encouraging the child’s growth and development while resisting a decreasing reliance on her, the looming threat of departure.⁴² Motherhood seems to involve simultaneous straining towards connection and freedom, a tension both alleviated and fueled by the camera’s incursion into family life.

Thus, the camera occupies the mother so she can worry about its products, not her own. It provides her with an activity that requires what mothering does—attention, care, desire—near

⁴¹ See Jacques Lacan, “What is a Picture?” in *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis* for more on the power of the gaze to identify the other and define the self.

⁴² This paradox features strongly in Mierle Laderman Ukeles’s work *Fall Time Variations III, Children’s Piece: Time Stop (Tree Droppings—The Leaving Home of the Leaves)*, which Liss discusses in *Feminist Art and the Maternal*. Ukeles considers the mother-child bond through the tree-leaves relationship to address the hardship and necessity of children growing and leaving home (Liss 64-67).

but apart from her children. While children may become frustrated or fatigued when told to sit still, look, and smile, the camera reliably accommodates the mother's desire to take pictures. Each time it snaps a picture, the camera enables a further connection between a mother and her child. Given the visual immediacy of this connection, the mother accepts an easy substitution: in acquiring images of her child, she acquires the child. The camera also lets mothers rehearse absence. The shutter closes and children disappear. In a flash, they return, and then they are there, where their mothers put them, for good, or at least for as long as the image files remain on hard drives or in online media storage accounts.

I tell my children regularly, "No matter how old you are, you'll always be my babies." The words soothe me against the rush of minutes that will inevitably and ultimately take my children from me, our home, our lives together. But I can keep their pictures, and upon them, time's havoc works more slowly, more predictably, less violently. So for me, looking motivates further taking. I want to continually tether myself to my children—and be separate, free, in control. Thank goodness the umbilical cord itself cannot be restored, but at least an ever-growing archive of images enables me to maintain a network of virtual umbilical cords through which connections to children can approach permanence. In the act of looking and within the images themselves, I return to a perpetual pregnancy, and there, my children are as close as ever, as close as possible, their impending departure impossible. They are mine. Always.

Return to the Womb

Pregnancy's associations with baby pictures extend beyond the act of looking and into the looked-at images, where mother and child are united as subject and their intersubjectivity becomes visible, embodied. Though the photograph appears flat and unmoving, it is doubly

pregnant, inhabited by mother and child together. In pictures of their children, mothers are visible on the surface not only in any genetic resemblances, but also in the decisions that went into taking or having the pictures taken: the clothes the child wears, the setting, the occasion—whether planned or spontaneous. So the frame not only captures the child, but also discloses the mother’s inherent involvement in that seizure. In the picture, mutuality between mother and child becomes conspiracy between mother and camera to use the child as a medium to make visible what cannot be seen on its own: the essence of motherhood.

But how to separate that essence from its medium?

Precious, Punched

To understand the photographs that interested him, Barthes famously defines two elements that account for a hierarchy of engagement. The first he refers to as the *studium*, “a kind of general, enthusiastic commitment” (Barthes 26). The commitment attached to photographs of children might be identified as the drive to produce a visual record of childhood. Thus the *studium* attaches to the pictures produced by such effort words like *adorable*, *handsome*, *beautiful*, and *sweet*—adjectives that confirm the standard narratives of childhood as a happy, carefree time and children as sweet, innocent, and beautiful.

The *punctum*, the “element which rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces” the viewer, has to be something more, something beyond that which is recognized as deriving from “the photographer’s intentions” (Barthes 26-7). My instinct is that only the mother is truly capable of recognizing a *punctum*, of looking past the conventional, familiar nature of a picture of her child to see that which “pierces.” Barthes refers to the *punctum* as “an addition,” something added to the image by the viewer and “*what is nonetheless already there*” (55). Surely

the mother sees herself, already there, in her child's features, even if that recognition is unconscious. Barthes acknowledges the "truth of lineage" revealed only in photographs—"a genetic feature, the fragment of oneself" (103). For mothers, this truth points simultaneously to the future and the past. Generations collapse, and the mother becomes her child, herself as a child, her mother, her grandmother, and so on. In both ways, genetic features are "already there" in the image; yet, in complicating the representation of time, they gain the power to pierce. What *will be* and *has been* for the mother simultaneously *is* present in the detail that signifies the punctum.

Bone to Bone

What is added to the picture, then, is mother as an entity and consciousness separate from the child, distinct from any biological resemblance, apart from the photograph itself and removed from a particular historical context. It is the role of mother, as well as any corresponding feelings, thoughts, and values. In other words, I add to pictures of my babies my personal maternal air, which Barthes defines as "a kind of intractable supplement to identity" (109). Photographs of my children define me as mother far more than pregnancy does. While the post-partum uterus eventually shrinks to its initial size, baby pictures endure as objects, shareable media, and data, at once private and public, intimate and social.

Thus it is through the maternal air that photography responds to the institution of motherhood, which Rich identifies as that which ensures women's subordinate role in a system of male power and control (13). While the institution of motherhood—armed with its ideological discourse and normalized conventions—divides private and public experiences and perceptions of motherhood, photographs—those that capture the maternal air—can repair this gap; they can

create a bridge between private and public worlds. With their pictures of their children, mothers can align personal and social photographic practices so that their experiences as mothers validate their own personal understandings of motherhood.

Yet this connection is not easily earned. The maternal air can be especially troubling for mothers to encounter because it draws attention toward “a kind of subtle beyond” (Barthes 59). Barthes claims the punctum signals a departure from the surface and motionlessness of the image. It tilts whatever is in the frame to a future past. For mothers, this state can be incomprehensible: that there should ever be a time when children cease to be in the home, held close in maternal arms, or cease to be at all. Of this brutal knowledge, Sally Mann asks in her introduction to *Immediate Family*, a collection of images of her children, “How is it that we must hold what we love tight to us, against our very bones, knowing we must also, when the time comes, let it go?” The child in the picture is firmly implanted in a specific past time. The photograph lets the mother keep that child, that time near. Proximity is comforting. But the punctum requires the mother to acknowledge the need to let go, an impossible requirement that surfaces sooner or later, at some unknowable yet definite future time. And when it does, then what? Once the mother lets go, what else remains to be done except, perhaps, look and long?

Adrian, June 2011

I am haunted by the shadow that creeps into my son’s right eye in this black and white image of him from the June collection (Fig. 2). That shadow, bleeding into his iris and cradling the entire right side of his face from forehead to chin, and his lips, drawn straight and tight, add years to his features. I barely recognize him. Darkness steals upon his white baby skin, transforming it, threatening the softness embedded there. I look at this picture, and I am forced to see how

fleeting his childhood is even though he is in the midst of it right now. In *Family Secrets*, Annette Kuhn writes about the all-too-rapid departure children make from infancy and the corresponding affect of that transition:

Time has passed, time will pass. The image of the infant, innocent in its nakedness, naked as the day it was born, cannot so much fix that moment of innocence as testify to the inevitability of its slipping away, of a slippage from grace. Hence the sadness, the sense of loss and longing. . . (50)

The punctum renders this beautiful picture of my beautiful son unbearable; it forces me to face anew the impossible struggle between holding on and letting go. Hirsch recognizes this struggle when she acknowledges, “Connection and separation are always in tension” (158). So I long to freeze time and end the struggle once and for all. To hold and hold and hold. I take more pictures.



Fig. 2. Photograph of Adrian Harding, June 2011. Author's personal photograph.

Chores

Maybe it is only in casual glances, when I focus on the stadium—my sweet, adorable, smiling children—that I can refuse to acknowledge time, and by extension, Death. In my daily life as a mother, coping with time's perpetual forward motion is a matter of organization and scheduling. Days are orchestrated according to bath and bed rituals, wake-up routines, meal preparation, cleaning sessions, work hours, and family time. Such rigorous control lets me escape, or at least manage, the sadness, the grief that accompanies the anticipation of loss associated with time. When I look hard enough at this picture, at any picture of my children, I cede control to the punctum, which points to beyond, and I am lost.

Contained

According to Bret Zawilski, the emotional power of photographs “arises from the ways in which they draw upon the ambiguity of the arrested past, where the discontinuity between the time an image was taken and the time it is viewed creates a need for interpretation” (421). Text can satisfy this need: text as composed words and text as a complete work, book or album. At the end of her introduction to *Immediate Family*, Mann recontextualizes time in relation to her children in the photographs: “The withering perspective of the past, the predictable treacheries of the future; for the moment, those familiar complications of time all play harmlessly around them as dancing shadows beneath the great oak.” The descriptive terms she uses—*withering* for past, *predictable* for future—name and thus control time. The comparison to shadows beneath a tree achieves the same effect, for the simile works as a naming convention, another tool the writer uses to exert her control. Barthes points out the role naming plays in the emotional experience of a photograph: “What I can name cannot really prick me. The incapacity to name is a good

symptom of disturbance” (51). By defining time explicitly as a weak and banal force, Mann demonstrates one way to access pictures of her children without being pricked.

Putting pictures of children into an album offers another way to assert control over them. Photographs are relegated to the page, surrounded by other pictures, and then cocooned with captions, paratextual elements, and a cover. As forms that enable images to be displayed and shared, these artifacts present an occasion for interpretive response, as well. For as Zawilski points out, “It is in the instance of an album, when we’re presented with a variety of interconnected photographs, that we find a form of interaction that invites the viewer to actively participate in constructing an interpretation” (423). The album steals meaning from individual images by creating new temporal and spatial experiences of the photographs in the acts of composing and viewing the album. Zawilski suggests, “[T]he spacing and placement of photographs bec[ome] another powerful way of signaling meaning” (428). Thus with an album, page layouts and sequencing enter into the meaning-making process, and a single image in the album becomes a node in the midst of diverse interactions among memories, composing context and purpose, viewing context and purpose, and materials—whether prints produced in a book or images arranged on webpages. The density of this network limits access to the punctum and complicates the representation of time. Albums make unbearable images bearable.

A Taut Net

Barthes calls photographs motionless images; “it means that they do not emerge, do not leave: they are anesthetized and fastened down, like butterflies” (57). The stillness promoted by photography resonates with their appeal to mothers, which, at least in my experiences, greatly exceeds the appeal of video. For photographs fix children in the home, in open arms, in

childhood in a way that feels permanent. Mothers desire motionlessness to reconcile the ultimate outcome of raising children. Or combat it. Or ignore it. Not ready for that inevitable departure, mothers take picture after picture, hoping to stall the leaving, to assert control over it. But departure threatens from day one, tied to a child's arrival. The clock counts up in years as well as down towards death. Pictures of children provide for mothers the illusion of resistance, an attempt to counter that continuous clock and hold fast to children. In the words of Eduardo Cadava and Paola Cortes-Rocca, photography offers a "utopic hope of interrupting or stopping time, of immobilizing the present and freezing it on a two-dimensional surface" (120). As children edge closer to emerging, to leaving, the less they rely on their mothers, the less they are present in the home. Pictures freeze children in a state of dependency, and in doing so, reinforce maternal worth and confirm maternal identity.

At the same time, pictures provide an occasion to confront the child as a separate being, connected but apart from the mother. According to Liss, this confrontation has roots in the work of feminist artist Mierle Laderman Ukeles, whose piece *Fall Time Variations III, Children's Piece: Time Stop (Tree Droppings—The Leaving Home of the Leaves)*, expresses an "acceptance that children are individual human beings both connected to and distinct from their mothers" (65). Indeed, just as Ukeles's artwork "concealed its desire to hold on to one's children under the guise of letting them go," so, too, does photography participate in a similarly ambiguous mixed message (Liss 65). Further, Liss's depiction of *Children's Piece* as the "secret code of the mother's mourning" applies as well to a mother's photographs of her children (65). Ukeles confronts the painful acknowledgement of the inevitable departure of her children by constructing "a psychic and earthly haven for mourning their leaving" (Liss 65). Photographs, too, provide a physical space to attend to the grief of this unavoidable loss.

For Ukeles, her dynamic, performative art enables her to stage, share, and display publically the great and terrible contradiction of motherhood. She makes maternal mourning visible, inhabitable. The camera now affords mothers a similar power to make mourning visible, able to be touched, displayed, possessed. And yet, because we are overwhelmed with images, the singularity of Ukeles's event is replaced by a fluid stream of endless photos. Too many to print and put in albums. Too many to share online. Too many to look at. The familiarity of these images enables mourning to sink below the surface, to disappear unless we pause long enough to look. And what mother has time for that?

Images on the Move

According to W. J. T. Mitchell, a still picture does not rest for long: "The picture wants to hold, to arrest, to mummify an image in silence and slow time. Once it has achieved its desire, however, it is driven to move, to speak, to dissolve, to repeat itself" (72). Domestic photographs speak specifically for the mother. They express her desires. But this expression is transitory, repetitive, like a baby's cry. Now our technologies and the practices they support and compel have given images what they want: unprecedented movement along optical fibers, astonishing reach through social channels and outlets, and an ambiguous commitment to existence, to being. As a result, mothers face the task of creating an unending domestic wonderland with happy, beautiful, and young inhabitants to share online. Picture by picture, mothers construct an immortal scene, preserving against the threat of time what they love most.

The public nature of the visual family narrative has textual roots in the semi-public diaries from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In an historical account of microblogging, Lee Humphreys notes that "[d]iaries, particularly by women, were shared during the diarist's

lifetime to maintain family and communication networks” (2). Despite all of the similarities Humphreys finds between Twitter today and diaries from hundreds of years ago as platforms for chronicling and sharing accounts of everyday life, the differences she suggests have important consequences for mothers in the context of their domestic images: social interactivity and the scope and speed of sharing (4). Now, our visual exposure to family life, children, and the home is far more extensive and happens more rapidly. We refresh our Instagram feeds and another image appears. Our communication networks are far more sophisticated—or congested. We no longer keep tabs on just our closest friends and family members. We see the babies our high school peers are having; we watch our co-workers’ children sleep, crawl, and lose teeth. We share our pictures with them. Now, we can interact with all of these other families as they make their way through familiar milestones and post a set of photographs similar to our own. We mark the passing of seasons and years through the pictures we see and also take. Our interactions with these pictures are just as standardized. We can “like” images and comment on them. By expressing our approval, we communicate *that we have seen*, just as we want to be seen. In leaving a comment, we point to the mother who is there, though most likely not visible in the frame. When the baby looks happy, we write, “You are such a great mom!” We say what we long to hear.

Gaming the Game

From documentation to presentation. From memory stockpiles to social currency. For Barthes, “[T]he age of Photography corresponds precisely to the explosion of the private into the public, or rather into the creation of a new social value, which is the publicity of the private: the private is consumed as such, publicly” (98). The idea of consumption suggests an emphasis on quantity

of images and cursory interactions with them.⁴³ With digital technologies pushing us into a post-photographic time,⁴⁴ the explosion Barthes points out has gone nuclear at warp speed. Our media landscape is rapidly overflowing with images, and the sheer volume of digital photographs we possess and encounter online compels us to skim, scan, and select, even while continuing to produce and view more pictures.⁴⁵ With mommy blogs and Facebook and now Instagram, Pinterest, and a host of other image-sharing applications and venues,⁴⁶ mothers can establish and maintain “the publicity” of their private family lives in a few taps, clicks, and swipes. They can make pictures of their children part of the Internet’s visual noise, and, in doing so, further distance themselves from the punctum’s punch. By introducing a larger audience to their photographs and albums, mothers also invite the interpretations of others—now often in the form of comments and likes—to overwhelm the punctum, to force it to recede into the distance where it remains ultimately unshareable, deeply and only personal. The social life of the image⁴⁷ on the screen grants the image what it wants—movement—and it gives mothers almost what they want—their children present and accessible, at all times, for all times.

⁴³ A Marxist analysis of motherhood and photography is beyond the scope of this dissertation. See *Consuming Motherhood*, edited by Janelle S. Taylor, Linda L. Layne, and Danielle F. Wozniak, a collection of essays that explores the interaction between capitalism and motherhood, especially with regard to ultrasound images, pregnancy, material culture, birth experiences, midwifery, miscarriage, and adoption. See “Labors of Likeness: Photography and Labor in Marx’s Capital” by Daniel A. Novak, an essay that explores photography as both commodity and mechanism for critiquing capitalistic production processes.

⁴⁴ See Batchen, “Post-Photography,” in *Each Wild Idea*.

⁴⁵ See Richard Lanham, *The Economics of Attention: Style and Substance in the Age of Information*.

⁴⁶ Bret Zawilski discusses the relationship between digital platforms and meaning-making processes related to photography. In “The (De)contextualization of the (Digital) Photo Album,” Zawilski investigates “how the interface mediates our experience with the photograph” (433), and in looking ahead to the future of photography, he enacts a call to “attend to the way that we might blend the affordances of the physical and digital, seeking both to explore the possibilities of digital design while not overlooking the importance of selection and arrangement that are privileged in a physical space” (440).

⁴⁷ In *Snapshot Photography: The Lives of Images*, Zuromskis “explores the social life of snapshot photography as a public and political form of visual expression in the United States in the latter half of the twentieth century” (10). Her study focuses on the snapshot in specific contexts and “as an agent within the social realm” (Zuromskis *Snapshot* 11). My interest in social life here follows the later perspective and highlights the work photographs do in networked spaces.

Once published online, pictures of children come to represent a mother engaging in the paradoxical situation motherhood presents: hold and let go. Mothers hold onto their pictures by putting them on their blogs and adding them to their Facebook timelines. But as digital, networked artifacts, the pictures circulate. They have their own lives; they create their own economies. They can be linked to, copied, downloaded, edited, and reused. Here is a version of Sigmund Freud's *fort—da* (gone—there), but now the game is played by the mother, not the child, with photographs, not toys. Freud describes in “Beyond the Pleasure Principle” how *fort—da* allows the infant to rehearse his mother’s disappearance and return so that he can accept her absence. The mother alters the game, accumulating pictures and releasing them online so the child will always be *da*, even when *fort*. Virtual space offers mothers a game-like environment in which to deal with an “overpowering experience,” her child’s inevitable absence (Freud 600). Online, the game changes. *Fort—da* collapses into a simultaneous event; images are both stored and circulated; the child is both gone and there; the mother's experience is both active and passive. The rehearsal of departure becomes an act of prevention.

Trace Value

At once attached and freewheeling, online pictures of children are absorbed into identity formation processes for mothers and children.⁴⁸ In *Family Secrets*, Kuhn suggests the way family pictures work on identity in the present moment depends on how they are used: “Family photographs may affect to show us our past, but what we do with them—how we use them—is really about today, not yesterday. These traces of our former lives are pressed into service in a never-ending process of making, remaking, making sense of, our selves—now” (19). So it is that

⁴⁸ According to Joan Solomon, representation and identity are constantly interacting. Solomon begins her introduction to *What Can a Woman Do with a Camera?* by pointing out “the very fundamental way that the representation of people helps to determine who they become” (9).

images of children displayed and shared online do more than represent; they create virtual children and virtual mothers who acquire in their online movement and networked identities the power to influence offline identities and relationships. These digital versions—composed from poses, outfits, context, expressions, and photographic conventions and practices—are ultimately reproduced by the mother, according to her desire to take or commission and then publicize the pictures. Barthes suggests that a photograph “offers an immediate presence to the world,” and in the digital age, the world is far more accessible online (84). Immediacy stretches across distance and time, no longer bound to a single, distinct moment and place. The digital medium thus grants images a greater role in identity formation for mothers and children through its affordances for speed and social interactivity. The presence photographs establish has temporal and spatial reach that far exceeds the offline presence children and their mothers inhabit minute by minute. Virtual children and virtual mothers can overwhelm and substitute for children and mothers as they are offline, the flesh-and-blood versions. Pictures with an online existence thus extend the process of creation past pregnancy, past birth, and into digital, networked mediation.

Riley and Adrian, May 2011

In this photograph from the June collection, Riley and Adrian are captured at a distance, playing near each other in an open field (Fig. 3). Both children are in motion—Riley moving toward a pink ball and Adrian about to slap a blue one with both hands. From these initial observations, I generalize. What I see in the image becomes a way of knowing my children, of recognizing the all-too-familiar characteristics of youth, innocence, and energy they exude as children. That is, the bright colors they wear express a bold liveliness. Their golden hair gleams in the soft sunlight, and I become aware of their sweet innocence. They are together and safe in a grassy

field. Here, hardship cannot touch them. They are close to each other and me. Play consumes their attention and engages their bodies; they are happy, fun-loving children.



Fig. 3. Photograph of Riley and Adrian Harding, June 2011. Author's personal photograph.

A Lasting Finish

When Barthes looks at pictures of his mother, he acknowledges, “Now I claim to know—and to be able to say adequately—why, in what she consists. I want to outline the loved face by thought, to make it into the unique field of an intense observation” (99). Thoughtful observation of a photograph yields knowledge of the photographed subject; yet ultimately, as Barthes points out, knowledge from a photograph amounts to only an even greater generalization: “that this indeed has been” (100). Today, with communication technologies and social media enabling the speed

and span of connectivity impossible to access in the offline world, a shift occurs: “that this indeed has been” becomes *that this is* (100). The Internet affords images the power to not only authenticate and represent, but also and simultaneously abstract and generalize. In the Internet’s ether, mothers and their children become mythical immortals.

Barthes expresses concern for the world in which people “live according to a generalized image-repertoire” (118). I wonder more specifically about the child legends for whom generalized image-repertoires exist and the mothers who labor to create image-repertoires that ultimately become generalized. When a photograph is generalized, Barthes asserts, “[I]t completely de-realizes the human world of conflicts and desires, under cover of illustrating it” (118). Thus motherhood and childhood acquire a glossy luster in the pictures of children that are posted online, a shine that makes the messiness of daily life invisible. Under this smooth surface lies the mother’s decision to subject her children to the “civilized code of perfect illusions” rather than have them face “the wakening of intractable reality” (Barthes 119). This is what photography gives to mothers: the ability to create and recreate their children as happy, innocent children. In photographs, mothers can ward off death, disease, despair, and all that time demands. They can preserve through posting and circulating online what they cannot bear to lose as they wish to have it always. And so photographs both mediate and make visible the mother’s desire to make her children last.

Bitkid

With digital, networked images, maternal desire operates more freely, more widely. As a result, spectacles abound, and time is seemingly conquered. For twenty-first-century mothers, the paradox of hold and let go is resolved, or at least suspended, by digital photography and the

Internet. The mother attempts to master the disappearance of her child by creating the illusion that she does not have to master it. In other words, I can publish pictures of my children on the Internet. I can let them go in that way, virtually. Then in the real world, all I have to do is hold on. I play *fort—da*, but I have not rehearsed anything. Rather, the game offers me solace: my children will always be somewhere I can access them. I want to keep playing.

Riley and Adrian, November 2011

In my three sets of images, I have noticed a progression in which genuine appearances and behaviors become increasingly marginalized. Ultimately, this progression reminds me that the children in these pictures are not the children I interact with on a daily basis. Here, for example, Riley and Adrian are in conservative costumes (Fig. 4). Adrian wears a burgundy ensemble, complete with a matching beret. Riley has donned a lace dress the color of oatmeal. Her hat and dark blonde hair blend in with the muted shades of the background—dusty pinks, blues, and browns. The clothes and hats my children wear summon the past. The baseball Adrian holds in two hands recalls pastimes, activities meant to be savored with a simple, carefree pleasure. I am forced to slow down when I look at this picture, as though the representation of an older way of living and enjoying life is translated into creamy lace and a velour vest. Riley and Adrian are centered in the scene, completely removed from their natural environment, though their smiles, beaming, seem entirely genuine. They look like they are having fun. They look happy. This is why I had to order these pictures. I want access to those smiles indefinitely. I want the constant reminder of their happiness. Here is proof of my maternal success: perpetually happy children.



Fig. 4. Photograph of Riley and Adrian Harding, November 2011. Author's personal photograph.

Into Beyond

Together, mothers and photography account for the creation of a child's existence and nonexistence, birth and death, real and virtual worlds and selves. A mother gives birth so that she might hold her living, breathing child; she takes and looks at pictures of that child so she might hold her dying, dead child, the one who *will have been*. For Barthes, piercing images require of him a final virtual experience in which life and death touch: "In each of them, inescapably, I passed beyond the unreality of the thing represented, I entered crazily into the spectacle, into the images, taking into my arms what is dead, what is going to die" (116). When a mother holds her

child, death is virtual, impossible. The beating heart so close to hers refuses to allow the possibility of an end. The pulse persists; living is audible. Touch is warm; life undeniable. But in a picture of the child, isolated from albums and studied alone, offline, death surfaces and refuses to be ignored. But this is death without the distance it will eventually demand. For while the child lives, pictures collapse the space between mother and child. They tether one to the other in order to let mothers confront what photography teaches us must be the essence of motherhood: creating means someday saying goodbye.

Should I think the unthinkable, should I imagine saying that goodbye, I doubt I would be able to look at the pictures that remain. For once the child passes away, I imagine and can only imagine, the mechanism reverses: death joins, and pictures sever. In his reflective study of mourning, Jacques Derrida reminds us that in death, the beloved becomes closer than ever.⁴⁹ In death, then, the child becomes part of the mother while also remaining distinct. Incorporated yet other. While death collapses the boundary between mother and child, pictures recover it. In the presence of absence, the frame resists disintegration, blurring, and fading. It acquires an iron composition, locking the child within, wrenched apart from the mother. Here, it is not the pictures that are unbearable; it is the looking. Jacques Lacan reminds us why: “...the eye carries with it the fatal function of being in itself endowed . . . with a power to separate” (115).

Mourning Sickness

Today pictures of children are everywhere—displayed, stored, networked, multiplied, and generalized. When shared and public, these pictures allow for the illusion, heightened by the illusions captured in the images themselves, that children are immortal. Our overflowing digital

⁴⁹ See Derrida, *The Work of Mourning*.

collections—now hundreds of images scattered across albums, hard drives, and the Internet—form a collage of what is and will remain of childhood and, at the same time, of motherhood.

What remains—the virtual child, the one that eludes death—is also death: death born of the mother as a photographic field that extends the real child. In this act of digital reproduction, the mother can refuse goodbye. She can produce pictures of her children so she does not think about a lived departure. In turn, her children become for her always present, visually knowable. For *being seen* offers a way of *being in the world* that approximates permanence. For her child, what beyond permanence can a mother desire? Or anything less? Photography reveals the mother's desire for permanence at the same time that it fulfills that desire through its reproductive powers.

Rebirth

And yet. Looking is only seeming existence. An “intractable” world of lived experience persists, beckons (Barthes 119). But first, we must resist the drive to reproduce that experience virtually. In accepting less-than-permanence as a condition of creation, mothers can simultaneously hold and let go. The paradox resolves in an engagement style that affords an inventive approach to everyday life. The gap between hello and goodbye dissolves. Departure no longer threatens; it inspires. And mothers can begin to imagine what else they might do with their cameras, their photographs, their albums, their archives.

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