What Can We Not Leave Behind? Storying Family Photographs,
Unlocking Emotional Memories, and Welcoming Complex
Conversations on Being Human

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You know, they straightened out the Mississippi River in places, to make room for houses and livable acreage. Occasionally the river floods these places. “Floods” is the word they use, but in fact it is not flooding; it is remembering. Remembering where it used to be. All water has a perfect memory and is forever trying to get back to where it was. Writers are like that: remembering where we were, what valley we ran through, what the banks were like, the light that was there and the route back to our original place. It is emotional memory—what the nerves and the skin remember as well as how it appeared. And a rush of imagination is our “flooding.”

Toni Morrison (1995, pp. 98-99)

Everyone was startled by the flood that burst forth from my previously dry tear ducts, even me. What was supposed to be an ordinary oral presentation of a culminating assignment for Wendy Luttrell’s popular graduate school course on visual methodologies, Doing Visual Research with Children and Youth, had morphed into a strange waterworks festival starring me as the headlining performer. In addition to Wendy, a professor at the City University of New York’s Graduate Center, the audience included Tran Templeton and several other peers who were also my fellow doctoral students at Teachers College, Columbia University.¹ The course drew on Wendy’s work with children and youth in a public elementary school located in a working-class city in the Northeastern United States (Luttrell & Clark, 2018). Wendy’s intent was to inspire a “need to know more stance” (Luttrell, 2010, p. 233) about children and youth, that is, to cultivate a curiosity about how young people (re)constructed their lives and represented themselves, particularly with regard to the complex intersections of social identities, such as class, race, gender, and immigrant status. The assignment directions were seemingly straightforward: Wendy asked each student to peruse her extensive archive of photographs and videos, choose a focal child, then provide a visual analysis based on a video recording of that child making meaning of their own photographs.

I cannot recall precisely why I selected my focal child Jamesha (pseudonym); perhaps it was because the sights and sounds of her vibrant world—those unveiled in her photographs and videos—struck me as both strange and familiar. Using iMovie software, I developed a short video in which I placed Jamesha’s theorizing of her photographs in conversation with a photograph from my cherished archive of family albums (Figure 1). In the photograph I selected, my father, mother, and I—at age 3 or 4—are outside what I remember as my paternal grandparents’ home. My mother and I are staring at the camera, and my father is holding me close to his chest, gazing at me lovingly. I am multi-tasking, busy balancing a half-empty bottle of Fanta orange soda in my small hands and suspiciously eyeing the mysterious photographer. I captioned this photograph with Lucille Clifton’s (2012) poignant poem, “Good times.”

¹ Teachers College, Columbia University belongs to an Interuniversity Doctoral Consortium that allows all doctoral students who have advanced beyond their first year of study to take courses at any of the participating institutions.
my daddy has paid the rent
and the insurance man is gone
and the lights is back on
and my uncle brud has hit
for one dollar straight
and they is good times
good times
good times

my mama has made bread
and grampaw has come
and everybody is drunk
and dancing in the kitchen
and singing in the kitchen
of these is good times
good times
good times

oh children think about the good times

Lucille Clifton (2012, p. 44)
“[O]h children think about the/good times,” the poet commanded. I read these words aloud in Wendy’s class, crumpling in front of my alarmed classmates as the last few lines fell from my lips. My psyche was submerged in a wave of emotion as my tears found sanctuary in the space between my nose and my upper lip. I had not expected to cry at all—let alone so deeply, so loudly, and so publicly. Drenched in salty tears and the hot shame of embarrassment, I stilled my nerves long enough to mumble my way through the rest of the presentation. But I remained puzzled by my outburst. My subconscious was keenly aware that the moment captured in my family photograph had touched a tender spot. Intuitively, I knew that I needed to probe that rawness; I needed to remember where I had been and what valleys I had run through in order to find the source of my tears. I needed to narrate my way along that emotional route in order to find my way back to my original place (Morrison, 1995).

That moment in Wendy’s class marked the genesis of my interest in interrogating how family photographs enrich memory work and enhance narrative inquiry. Memory work can be conceptualized as “a set of practices...that help participants connect personal memories to larger social, political or economic issues and thus work through those issues in ways that engender a deeper commitment or consciousness” (Strong-Wilson et al., 2014, para. 5). My interest in memory work concerns the affordances of investigating photographs stored in family archives for “the study of narrative,” which is “the study of the ways humans experience the world” (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 2). Subsequent to this moment, my scholarship has explored the utility of family photographs for making visible the effects of social ills—such as anti-Black racism and misogynoir (Bailey & Trudy, 2018)—that are the course of daily existence for those of us who are perceived as subhuman in the modern world (Wynter, 2003). I continue to be intrigued by the possibilities that percolate—for the storyteller, the art of storytelling, and the audience to whom the story is being told—when photographs are researched and used as keys to unlock emotional memory.

Like Jonathan Silin (2018), “a fundamental assumption of my research and writing...has been that we are all always struggling to make meaning of our experience” (para. 1). As a researcher and writer, I wrestle with what family photographs offer with regard to be(com)ing “more tolerant of the fragmentary, incoherent nature of experience” (Silin, 2018, para. 2; see Ohito, forthcoming). Obviously, photographs do not “speak” for themselves (Rose, 2011, p. 302); language and words are the tools used to tailor stories from the memories that photographs awaken. “Language has unmistakably made plain that memory is not an instrument for exploring the past, but rather a medium” (Benjamin, 1999, cited in Assmann, 2011, p. 153). It is in this vein that I use language to demonstrate how memory work involving family photographs can invite conversations that crystallize the complexity of human nature. Those conversations—and the stories embedded within them—can irradiate the illusion of hierarchy in human relationships, such as those between professors and students, while illuminating the truth that we are all inextricably bound both to each other and to the banks of the furious river of emotional memory.

I waited until the discomfort of my embarrassment had dissipated enough for me to have a modicum of surety that I would not feel self-conscious in Wendy’s presence. Then, because I am a Black feminist—and therefore, a believer in the notion of dialogue as a site for meaning-making (Hill Collins, 2014)—I reached out to Wendy and requested that we have a conversation. She agreed, and on a warm spring morning, I boarded the C train from Barclays Center in Brooklyn, New York, and sojourned to Wendy’s office, which was located 35 minutes away in midtown Manhattan. A caring and generous hostess, Wendy welcomed me by brewing a fresh cup of hot tea for her nervous guest. I sipped on that tea—ginger, I think—as we talked for about an hour, first about the class, then about my tears, and finally about the stories of my family that were entangled in that photograph. As I prepared to leave, Wendy encouraged me to reflect...
further in writing. I did as directed, penning and then submitting the following reflection to Wendy on May 21, 2013:

Reading and discussing Lyn Yates’ (2010) article transformed my thinking about the possibilities for interpretation and (re)presentation of the data. I realized that approaching Jamesha’s photographs and video footage as a “window to the world” (p. 283) would allow me to consider the ways in which her particular stories speak to universal experiences of relationships in various constructs. This framework also gave me the freedom to consider my particular experiences alongside those of Jamesha—something I had been doing anyway, albeit hesitantly—and more importantly, to share those experiences as a way of articulating truths about the particular and the universal. I honed in on the father-daughter relationship...However, constructing a “window to the world” turned out to be much more challenging than anticipated. I soon hit a seemingly impermeable wall, both as a person—or emotionally—and as a researcher. There are two things that accelerated my crashing into that wall: First, I couldn’t investigate Jamesha’s relationship to her father outside of my relationship to my own father. The longer I was immersed in the data, the more challenging it became to separate when and how I was speaking about myself, from when and how I was speaking about, to, and through the data. I heard echoes of the question posed by Mizen and Ofosu-Kusi (2010): “Who is speaking and what is being heard?” Whose truths are emerging from my interpretations? ...After shedding many tears (sometimes publicly 😥) and gaining inspiration from my colleagues’ presentations, I returned to the data, the assigned and recommended readings...determined to speak truths about Jamesha and me.

I admitted that I could not examine Jamesha’s covetable and evidently loving relationship with her father outside of my relationship with my own father. There it was, in my own words—an introspective truism. It was cloaked in the discourse of academia and the conventions of academic writing, but it was there. Finally, I had articulated to Wendy and to myself the crux of the dilemma that had brought me to tears.

The truth is that my childhood remembrances of my father involve few recollections of good times. My father was a bruised man with a beautiful mind—an undeniable organic intellectual in Gramscian terms. The truth is that he could neither outrun the torment of his childhood nor tame the demons that, in adulthood, inhabited the dark recesses of his beautiful mind (Ohito, 2020). The truth is that he broke me. The truth is that I wholeheartedly loved the first man who caused my heart to splinter into sharp fragments. My daddy was a tornado, and what should have been a comforter-like fiction of childhood innocence was lost in the debris of his destructive path. What else, besides tears, could come from the mélange of mourning and missing manifested in that photograph?

“Mourning is regularly the reaction to the loss of a loved person, or to the loss of some abstraction which has taken the place of one, such as fatherhood, liberty, an ideal, and so on” (Kuhn, 2002, p. 125). Perhaps I cried because I was mourning and missing the ideal father—and perfect childhood—that the photograph reminded me I desire(d) but lacked or lost en route to adolescence and adulthood. Perhaps I wept because I was wise enough to know that despite the missing and the mourning, parental perfection is simply an idealized fiction, even in familial contexts far less turbulent than my own. Yet that evocative family photograph documents other truths. It tells of a rare time that my father treated me with care. It also tells of one of the only times that my mother was not carrying a child, literally or figuratively. For a moment she was free of the burden of motherhood. For just that fleeting moment, she was free.
There are many more—much more complex—stories embedded in this photograph of my father, mother, and me, but those are not mine alone to affix to language and words. The poem that I used as my photograph caption in Wendy’s class allows me to tell a single narrative inspired by the visual reminder that my troubled relationship with my father included moments of true tenderness. Those moments, however temporary, were treasured, by both him and me. I need/ed to story those tales in order to salvage what I will not and cannot afford to leave behind as the sea of time churns, and my tumultuous childhood recedes, gradually becoming nothing more than a fading memory.

There are numerous narratives that a storyteller can spin from photographs, scores of tales that can be woven from the threads of memory. “Memory is, in fact, fact, fiction, and filter” (Ohito, forthcoming). Photographs, too, function similarly, sometimes portraying facts that, through the filter of memory, morph into fictional stories, or fictions that, through the storyteller’s play with words, sound like facts.

My parents are now both dead. I miss them in wildly surprising and overwhelmingly sensorial ways. The loss of the family they embodied has aroused in me an insatiable and deep desire for the lost familiarity of their smiles, scents, sounds, and touch. I mourn more than their lost lives; I mourn the loss of their stories about this and other photographs—that is, their knowledge of the secrets the photographs simultaneously conceal and disclose with regard to our family, our bonds, them and me, then and now. Like what remains of their bodies, those tales are buried thousands of miles away from New York City, far below layers of soil. This particular photograph still brings me to tears. If captioning this image in the present, I would simply write,

sometimes
i smell my parents
on my words
and i weep

Nayyirah Waheed (2014, p. 34)

A long time ago—long before graduate school was the direction to which my compass pointed—deep in the land of the Council of the Three Fires and the ancestral home of the Kickapoo, Fox, Ho-Chunk, Miami, Menominee, Sac, and Illinois Nations—I taught writing and reading in a public elementary school located in a working-class neighborhood on Chicago’s South Side. Typically, I launched my thematic “Memoir and Memories” unit by invoking Robert Frost’s provocation for those brave enough to wield a pen: “No tears for the writer, no tears for the reader.” Frost’s words were an entry point into a series of scaffolded writing and reading assignments that I designed. The related activities aimed to reveal the dialectic between writer and reader, and to engage the writer as a reader of her own lived experience—that is, an agentic maker of meaning of her own life.

Evoke emotion, I urged my writers and readers; resist the familiar urge to don armor; prod at the façade, and fuel your writing with the vulnerability contained in your unshielded, awakened heart (Heard, 2016). To emphasize the embodied, psychological, and spiritual elements of writing (Lockhart, 2017), I encouraged each student to remember and (re)turn to the tenderest part of her heart, the place from which her tears were sourced, as she played with voice, style, and structure in her writing.

To enhance their writing, I had students simultaneously read coming-of-age literature and gather resources stored in their family members’ memories and their family archives. For example, for a memoir
themed “Before I Was, There Were,” I relied on Eloise Greenfield’s (1979) Childtimes: A Three-Generation Memoir and Caroline Castle’s (1993) Grandpa Baxter and the Photographs as mentor or anchor texts. I required that, prior to putting pen to paper, students interview at least three family members who were alive before their birth, and supplement the raw material composed of interview transcripts by taking or fetching elucidative photographs. Students then preserved the family lore shared in the interviews—that is, the distinctive (hi)story of each family—in multimodal memoirs, each a “prismatic proliferation of voices” (De Robertis, 2017, p. 8) accentuated by family photographs.

The memoirs depicted students and their families remembering not only the good times and the good days, but also the bad times and the bad days, the joys and the pains, and the unspoken, unearthed, repressed, or disavowed truths and lies. On the whole, my students crafted moving memoirs that used familial experiences of myriad events—births and deaths, emigrations and immigrations, estrangements and reconciliations, marriages and divorces, failures and triumphs—to travel to and from the crossroads of memory and visuality. Crucially, their memoirs served as records of lived experience, illustrating the unique thumbprints that students and their families were living as they navigated the world and made meaning of the complexity of the human condition.

Families are our first world and our place of origin, irrespective of the quality of the relationship we have with each family member, or the strength of our (un)attachment to the idea, ideal, and institution of family itself. Sometimes we need to tell ourselves fictional stories about our families in order to make sense of ourselves—and to make ourselves make sense. Sometimes we need these fictions to face the facts. Sometimes we need to filter through the facts and fictions in order to face hard truths about lies. Sometimes the lies are true stories, too. What I mourn now is not only my father and mother’s physical presence, but also the loss of their words—which gave form to memories of their lived experiences—and the feelings of belonging that listening to those words produced, each utterance locating me in my parents’ textured worlds, welcoming me home.

Family photographs return us to our origin, whether or not we wish to revisit that place. They remind us that we are bound to (a) place by familial bonds, however betrayed or broken. Photographs can function as glue when we find ourselves pining for the disappearing past or needing to piece together broken fragments of ourselves, our families, or those parts of ourselves broken by family (members). The poet Rumi is said to have remarked that the broken place—the wound—is the place where the light enters. Family photographs can be floodlights on the path towards that wound because they are ledgers of families’ memories, and families’ memories are an assortment of narratives—some true, some false, and all of real, soothing import for the storyteller and/or the story’s listeners. There are lessons about who and what we cannot, must not, leave behind, that we can welcome into our lives. There are ways that still images from our family albums can move us, emotionally, to remember who and what we cannot and must not let wither away and die.

Family photographs are relevant for research, writing, and teaching because they serve as visual reminders that we each carry a river of stories within us, a magnificent river of powerful emotional memories. These photographs can catalyze narratives, and narratives can emerge from conversations about these still images. The process of conversing about the family photograph featuring my father, mother, and me—first with Wendy and then with myself in the practice of self-reflection—was instrumental to my subsequent storytelling, story making, and meaning (re)making of my childhood.
“Our childhood memories can be a source of personal strength and a resource for teaching [and learning]” (Silin, 1998, para. 19)—about others, yes, and pertinently, about ourselves, too.

Each of us can learn by investigating, translating, and transforming the meanings that we make of our complex experiences as humans vis-à-vis our photographed lives, families, and histories at the nexus of “where we were, what valley we ran through, what the banks were like, [and] the light that was there” (Morrison, 1995, p. 99). Either on our own or in undefended dialogue with another—that is, in the sanctity of closeness kindled by conversing about our human vulnerability—each of us can raise the floodgates, story the emotional memories that burst forth as we remember the place from whence we came, and cathartically cleanse in the tears that fall torrentially like unimpeded bodies of fresh water.

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REFERENCES


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