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FAMILY FRAMES

photography narrative and postmemory

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RESISTING IMAGES

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.

ANNETTE KUHN

a family album

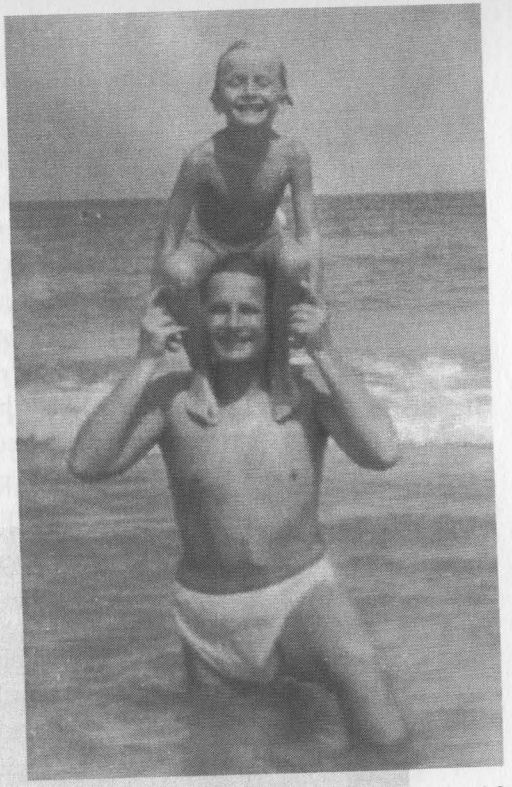
For my parents' fiftieth anniversary I make them an album. I make it for myself as well, to assemble their lives and mine within the pages of the pretty book I bought for the occasion. I begin with the few images I could find of them as children (only one of my father, and he is already about 14) and end with a triumphant, slightly mischievous picture my two sons took of themselves in their messy room with a self-timer. I make sure to include all the places in which my parents have lived, the people who have been most important to them. I try to find images of their parents, but don't know whether the young couple in turn-of-the-century clothing are really my father's parents. I worry as I assemble and arrange the images, that looking at them will make my parents sad, will emphasize the loss of homes, of friends and relatives, of their own youth. Until the last moment I am not sure I will really give it to them. It is this hesitation, no doubt, that causes me to stress repetitions and continuities in my arrangement of these pictures. I see how much my own feelings about this anniversary are projected into the album, how much their album is actually mine.

In the album there are several series:

Me as a three-month-old held by my parents under the kitchen lamp, then me in the same spot held by my grandparents and then—in a double break from chronology—each of my children held by my parents in similar poses though in different domestic settings.

6.1

6.2



6.3

6.4

My parents and me hiking in the Carpathians (I am about 9) followed by the three of us hiking in the White Mountains of New Hampshire several years later. The quality of the second photo is better but the pose is the same, we are sitting on a large rock by a brook—it could be the same mountain (Figures 6.1, 6.2).

My father holding me on his shoulders on a Black Sea beach—I am already too old for him to hold me comfortably but we laugh as we act out an earlier pose; we laugh even harder in the next image as he holds me on his shoulders at age 18, on Cape Cod, my boyfriend running alongside and making sure I don't fall off. There are two more such images—my father holding each of my two boys on his shoulders; we are in Florida and in New Hampshire and he takes pleasure in the repetition, though in the last picture his face is strained, he is not smiling. Acting out this scenario has become an expected ritual (Figures 6.3, 6.4).

The old pictures, especially, are small, hard to read, precious. I place them carefully on the page, and I admire the series I create. This is an earnest album—it occurs to me that I could make it funny, that I could juxtapose the pictures to highlight the breaks, the ironies, the discontinuities, that I could come up with witty captions. But that would not be appropriate here. This album erases the ruptures of emigration and exile, of death and loss, of divorce, conflict and dislocation. Those realities are submerged between the pages, imperceptible to anyone who looks at the album, and, I hope, invisible to my parents, at least on the occasion of their anniversary.

This chapter is precisely about the discontinuities I banished from my own family album. It looks at four texts in which family photographs are used quite differently from the way I used mine on this particular occasion: to reveal the ruptures and dislocations in the autobiographical and familial narrative so as to find in those gaps spaces for daughterly resistance against familial ideologies. The four works are Jamaica Kincaid's autobiographical novel *Annie John* (1985); Marguerite Duras's autobiographical novel *The Lover* (1984); two autobiographical essays by the British psychologist Valerie Walkerdine, "Dreams from an Ordinary Childhood" (1985) and "Behind the Painted Smile" (1991); and a photograph by Lorie Novak entitled "Fragments" (1987). In each case, family photos play an important role in the narrator's self-definition as familial daughterly subject, and in each the photos are manipulated, transformed, mishandled, destroyed, and reinvented, so as to reveal what alternate stories may lie beneath their surfaces or beyond their frames.

Although they are all products of the late 1980s, these four texts emerge from four vastly different cultural contexts with different traditions of visual and verbal representation—the Caribbean, France, England, the United States. In spite of their significant cultural differences, however, they use remarkably similar strategies of self-presentation in pictures and words, strategies relating to the retrospective interpretation of female adolescence. The works themselves attribute varying importance to other social demarcations inflecting the influence of gender: thus gender is a more prominent social marker in *Annie John* than race, while class is as foregrounded as gender in Walkerdine's work and the colonial context importantly shapes the gender identity of Duras's protagonist.

The focus of my reading is their strategies of intervention into their familial and personal stories: going beyond the conventional techniques of photography, they invent ways to expose the unconscious optics of adult femininity and its relationship to female adolescence. Rather than rely on enlargement, reduction, or slow motion to create more revealing images, these writers and artists use or describe the manipulation of already existing images: they erase, invent, or reframe them so as to discover fissures and absences within them, contesting the plenitude promised by photographs. Getting beneath the surface or around the frame of conventional family photographs can make space for resistances or revisions of social roles and positions in vastly different cultural contexts—of conventions upheld through photographic practice. Locating resistance in adolescence, these texts occasion an adult rereading of girlhood as a foundational moment of (re)definition.

Why have conventional and ordinary snapshots that represent predictable daughterly roles and positions served as privileged sites of intervention into familial and social scripts, as useful sites of contestation? If the camera gaze of the family snapshot can be said to construct the girl as a social and familial category, then resisting the image—either at the time or later in the process of rereading—becomes a way of contesting that construction, of rewriting the present by way of revising the past. Reading, rereading, and misreading thus become forms of active intervention: they enable a revision of the screens through which the familial gaze is filtered and refracted and thus a contestation of the gaze itself. In focusing on family pictures and albums, these forms of resistance not only contest but actually reveal the power of photography as a technology of personal and familial memory.

finding the space-off

Annie John is Kincaid's first novel. Composed of a number of stories originally published in the *New Yorker,* it tells the story of the narrator Annie's childhood and adolescence on a small Caribbean island (perhaps the author's native Antigua) which, at the end of the novel, she leaves for England.[1] In her later works, especially in *Lucy,* as we have seen, Kincaid writes about her own work as a photographer, which eventually leads her to writing. The control of the camera enables Lucy to move from her subordinate position as servant and immigrant to that of self-determining subject who gains consciousness by analyzing, visually, the situation in which she finds herself. In contrast to Lucy, Annie John is not a photographer but merely a reader of the conventional family snapshots on her night table. Yet her manipulation of the photos endows her with some of the control Lucy gains through taking, developing, and arranging photographs. Whereas Lucy makes pictures, however, Annie erases them, to expose the gaps that lie beneath and within them.

Photos in *Annie John* represent Annie's confinement within the institution of family—everything that at the end of the novel she rejects for a new life abroad. Thus, her mother's trunk contains, among the many objects collected since Annie's birth, a "photograph of me on my second birthday wearing my pink dress and my first pair of earrings, a chain around my neck, and a pair of bracelets, all specially made of gold from British Guiana" (20). As a young girl Annie delighted in rediscovering all of the objects in the trunk and hearing her mother's stories about them; in adolescence she concentrates on the rings and chains and bracelets, the images of entrapment in the script of daughterhood and femininity she eventually repudiates. The golden rings and chains are also reminders of a slave history Annie tries to leave behind when she goes to England. As she looks around her room in preparation for leaving the island, knowing that she will never return, she sees, for a moment only and without much regret, the "photographs of people I was supposed to love forever no matter what" (131). Annie's change in the course of the novel revolves around the figure of her mother, whom she adores and with whom she feels symbiotically merged when a child. In adolescence, however, she despises her, lies to her, tortures her, and rejects her. The transition between a comfortable sense of home and the urgent need to leave that home is told in a series of painful confrontations. A strange encounter with her family photographs is crucial in focusing Annie's shift from compliant, daughterly subject to resisting agent.

In the novel's penultimate chapter, Annie suffers from a protracted and inexplicable illness, mirrored globally in the three months of torrential rain that flood the island. Annie spends those months in bed in a retreat to childhood comfort in the constant care of her parents. Her illness follows the most serious fight she has ever had with her mother: immediately after, Annie asks her father to make her a new trunk. The fight is occasioned by Annie's first encounter with boys—a humiliating scene during which Annie chances to meet a boy she used to play with as a child, who subtly mocks her during the encounter. Later she remembers the last game they had ever played together as small children: the boy had asked Annie to take off all her clothes and wait for him under a tree in a spot that turned out to be a red ants' nest.

As she remembers this degrading and painful introduction to sexuality, Annie loses all sense of herself: "I began to feel alternately too big and too small. First, I grew so big that I took up the whole street; then I grew so small that nobody could see me—not even if I cried out" (101). This powerful image of alternately growing and shrinking—reminiscent of *Alice in Wonderland*—typifies the daughter's ambivalence about moving from childhood to adolescence; it describes the fractured and disrupted developmental progress of the female subject. Annie's first move into the world of adult sexuality—punished rather than supported by her mother who calls her a slut because she talked to the boys—sends her literally back to bed in a withdrawal that reads like a classic description of latency.

During her mysterious illness, Annie confronts the photographs that surround her bed. The photos suddenly protrude from the background of the room and "loomed up big in front of me" (118). Conventional family pictures, each illustrates one of the institutions into which Annie is in the process of being inducted as she becomes a social subject. In the first she is wearing her white school uniform. In the second, again wearing white, she is a bridesmaid at an aunt's wedding. The third is a picture of her parents, the father wearing a white baseball uniform, with a bat in one hand and the other hand around the mother's waist. The last photograph is the only one which elicits a memory and a narrative: Annie is wearing her white Communion dress and shoes with a decorative cut-out on the side, shoes her mother disapproved of as "not fit for a young lady and not fit for wearing on being received into church" (119). As Annie recalls the argument over the shoes—her wish that her mother were dead and the mother's terrible headache that made Annie fear she had indeed died—the photos begin to act very strange:

> The photographs, as they stood on the table, now began to blow themselves up until they touched the ceiling and then shrink back down, but to a size that I could not easily see. They did this with a special regularity, keeping beat to a music I was not privy to. Up and down they went, up and down. They did this for so long that they began to perspire quite a bit, and when they finally stopped, falling back on the table limp with exhaustion, the smell coming from them was unbearable to me. I got out of bed, gathered them up in my arms, took them over to a basin of water on the washstand, and gave them a good bath. I washed them thoroughly with soap and water, digging into all the crevices, trying with not much success, to straighten out the creases in Aunt Mary's veil, trying, with not much success, to remove the dirt in front of my father's trousers. When I finished, I dried them thoroughly, dusted them with talcum powder, and then laid them down in a corner covered with a blanket, so that they would be warm while they slept. (119–120)

The result of Annie's feverish manipulation of the photos is that they are completely transformed: "None of the people in the wedding picture, except for me, had any face left. In the picture of my mother and father, I had erased them from the waist down. In the picture of me wearing my confirmation dress, I had erased all of myself except for the shoes" (120).

How are we to interpret Annie's strange intervention? The transformation of the pictures occurs just at the point of her recovery—a symbolic rebirth, a break from her girlhood past, after which she needs new clothes and shoes, speaks with a different accent, develops great contempt for her classmates, and eventually leaves home. Annie's encounter with the photographs is a moment of resistance in which she attempts to erase the familial and social script where she is positioned as daughter and social subject, shedding one by one the institutions that have interpellated her.

Described as independent agents in the text, the photos enact the process of growing and shrinking, the ambivalent confrontation with adolescent development. They grow and shrink, they are exhausted, they perspire. In Annie's narrative they play the role of dolls—inanimate objects endowed with human characteristics, objects to be cared for and nurtured. Annie reduces them, like herself, back to infancy, so as to have a chance at a different start, one in which bodies, faces, and clothes interact differently and acquire different dimensions. We could say that she acts out her fear of adult sexuality as, synechdochically, she tries to remove the photos' bad smell, erase her parents' bodies below the waist, and rub out the stain on her father's pants and the wrinkles in the wedding veil. At the same time, however, she is more deliberate, motivated more by disgust than by fear, as she chooses to resist all the confining white dresses and the institutions they represent.

Annie stages resistance by means of a manipulation of photographs. Photography can further her act of opposition because the family pictures mark Annie's relation to her *past* and therefore to a *future she wants to choose*. In washing and changing the pictures and the relationships they depict, Annie can attempt to weaken the "this has been" of the photographic referent, Barthes's "ça a été"—the presence of the past moment. She can attempt to intervene in her past, to rewrite her memories in favor of representations that better fit with the new life she wants to explore. She can assume an adult role in relation to her own childhood poses as she bathes the pictures and powders them as though they were her babies. She can thus try to manage the confusing emotions of adolescence, figured by the powerful smell the photographs emit. When she finishes the feverish bath, she has erased the wedding party except for her own face, she has removed her parents' sexuality, and she has preserved the subversive shoes. Her face, her shoes, and her parents' torsos are all that remain, building blocks of new memories and new materials for adult life.

In addition, the photograph, especially a family photograph which depicts the subject interpellated by the familial gaze, embedded in relation and ensconced in institution, reinforces for the subject an imaginary sense of coherence and plenitude. The still picture freezes one moment and enshrines it as a timeless icon with determinative definitional power. Thus, the single still photo can be seen as a form of suture through which the subject closes herself off from the symbolic and the unconscious, from contradiction and lack. The subject gazing at her own image can find this coherence as she bridges the gap between herself as spectator and as object of representation. Annie contests this totalizing and rigidified sense of self—a girlhood self constructed according to social requirements—by creating open unmarked spaces in the pictures. Staring at the ruined images the next morning, she can find in them a more tentative, more fluid and permeable subjectivity—one that can include a desired imaginary wholeness even while opposing and rejecting it.

As Annie settles into her berth at the start of her transatlantic escape from a predetermined future, she repeats the erasures she performed on the photos: "I could hear the small waves lap-lapping around the ship. They made an unexpected sound, as if a vessel filled with liquid had been placed

on its side and now was slowly emptying out" (148). This image of emptying reinforces Annie's rejection of an imagined plenitude. Annie's departure requires not continuity with past experience and the preservation of memory but empty open spaces on which new narratives can be inscribed. This is the opening she makes when she washes the photos.

To describe such a locus of ideological resistance, Teresa de Lauretis borrows a term from film theory, the "space-off," the "space not visible in the frame but inferable from what the frame makes visible."[2] De Lauretis describes a particular movement of resistance staged by "the subject of feminism," a movement I see Annie as charting:

> It is a movement between the (represented) discursive space of the positions made available by hegemonic discourses and the space-off, the elsewhere of those discourses: those other spaces both discursive and social that exist, since feminist practices have (re)constructed them, in the margins (or "between the lines" or "against the grain") of hegemonic discourses and in the interstices of institutions, in counterpractices and new forms of community. These two kinds of spaces . . . coexist concurrently and in contradiction. The movement between them, therefore, is not that of a dialectic, of integration, of a combinatory, or of *différance,* but is the tension of contradiction, multiplicity and heteronomy. (26)

In recasting her family pictures, Annie finds the space-off that was already inscribed in the incongruity between her confirmation dress and the cut-out shoes. Bringing the space-off to the surface and into the frame, Annie moves from interpellated subject to agent in her own story. She has replaced the old trunk, full of her mother's memories of her and her mother's memorabilia, with her own tabula rasa—a new trunk to contain the objects she herself will select. Thus Annie's resistance depends precisely on absence, discontinuity, and incongruity—a revision of the screens of a compliant girlhood. It depends on the negativity with which she has inscribed her adolescent break, her refusal to consent to a prescribed adult femininity.

But Annie's retrospective location of her resistance in a moment of adolescent rupture follows yet another ideologically predetermined script. From the perspective of Carol Gilligan's reading of girls' development, Annie rewrites her story of childhood connection in favor of what Gilligan calls the "canonical story of human development" in which breaks are mandated and childhood relationships must be devalued in adulthood.[3] Adulthood, in this script, demands a break from the powerful relationships of childhood,

particularly from maternal attachments. Annie inscribes this break in her story as an act of erasure in which photographs play a central function. Photographs stand for one aspect of her childhood, the conventional, institutional side of girlhood leading to a consent to femininity as culturally constructed. And they allow her to forget, or to disavow, the other side of childhood, the world of ecstatic mother/daughter connection, the space of friendship and the feeling of being at home in the world that she presents in such lush detail throughout the novel's first part. That intricate world of intersubjective connection is not available to photographic representation: it remains in the rich texture of Kincaid's written narrative. Erasing the photographs creates spaces within them where such richness might be inscribed, but only by severely reinventing an available photographic medium.

la photographie absolue

The Lover, like *Annie John,* is an autobiographical story of individual development and cultural displacement.[4] Like Annie, Duras's protagonist/narrator ends up leaving her family in French Indochina for a writing career in France. Family photographs are the pretexts of *The Lover,* which was originally entitled "La photographie absolue." According to an account notorious in the publishing world, the novel actually originated with a box of old photographs which Duras's son found among his mother's belongings and tried to publish. When the publisher asked that his mother add some captions, Marguerite Duras wrote *The Lover.* The text was too long for the first publisher and so *The Lover,* Duras's commercially most successful book, was published by the Editions de Minuit but without the pictures.[5]

This account of the novel's origin explains some of the incongruities in Duras's text and its loose structure. If we imagine the narrator leafing through a series of photos, returning to linger over some, building a narrative on the basis of images, we accept more easily the mention of Duras's friends from the period of the Occupation in Paris who mysteriously appear in the midst of a narrative that takes place in Indochina in the 1920s and 1930s. We also understand the point of the seemingly gratuitous reflections on image and photography included in the narrative of the family's life in Indochina.

Yet photographs are ambiguous for Duras; juxtaposed with written narratives they invariably represent the fixity and rigidity that the fluidity of writing aims to challenge. "I believe photographs promote forgetting,"

Duras says in *Practicalities*. "The fixed, flat, easily available countenance of a dead person or an infant in a photograph is only one image as against the million images that exist in the mind. And the sequence made up by the million images will never alter. It's a confirmation of death."[6] It must be this perception of photography that leads Duras to feature an absent picture, the "photographie absolue." In *The Lover* the "photograph" that was never taken becomes the medium of an alternate set of memories on which the rest of the novel is based. And this "photograph," retrospectively constructed, "records" the moment of adolescent rupture which alters the course of the narrator's subsequent development. It allows Duras to redefine the limits of still photographic representation.

Throughout the novel, the narrator needs to contest the formal family photographs her mother has taken of her children year after year:

> We don't look at each other but we do look at the photographs, each of us separately, without a word of comment, . . . we see ourselves . . . Once they've been looked at the photos are put away with the linen in the closets. My mother has us photographed so that she can see if we're growing normally. She studies us at length as other mothers do other children. She compares the photos, discusses how each one of us has grown. (94)

The formal portrait photographs the narrator grew up with equalize their objects, attenuate singular traits in favor of promoting, through similar pose, dress, and expression, what must have been considered a comforting resemblance—a generational and class belonging which erases particularity and self:

> All these photographs of different people, and I've seen many of them, gave practically identical results, the resemblance was stunning. It wasn't just because all old people look alike, but because the portraits themselves were invariably touched up in such a way that any facial peculiarities, if there were any left, were minimized. All the faces were prepared in the same way to confront eternity, all toned down, all uniformly rejuvenated . . . they all wore an expression I'd still recognize anywhere. (96–97)

Photographs can well promote this erasure of the particular as they reinforce the plenitude of the imaginary and the external signs of class and institutional allegiance. The touched-up picture her mother had taken before her own death is a good example: "In her photo her hair is done nicely, her clothes just so, a tableau" (96; my translation). Duras contests this rigid image-construction in the very form of her own imagetext: her verbal "photographie absolue" is composed in direct opposition to formal portraiture. As Duras verbally describes a picture that was not taken she bypasses the technical properties of photography and reappropriates the process of "touching-up," taking it to an extreme.

The Lover begins with the description of the narrator's ravaged old face—the opposite of the touched-up photo of her mother. Contemplating her own face leads her to consider the sudden break, between the ages of 17 and 18, that produced it: something happened to her appearance to give her the face she was to keep, which would then continue to age more gradually. The narrator emphatically describes this break between 17 and 18 and its ravaging effects, but she never directly motivates it in the long narrative that follows. Throughout the novel, we look for hints as to what happened between 17 and 18 to make her age so drastically. Duras, however, is more interested in the rupture itself than in an explanatory narrative that might have the undesirable effect of bridging it.

The Lover thrives on such discontinuities: "The story of my life doesn't exist. Does not exist. There's never any center to it. No path, no line" (8). Contrary to visual images, as Duras perceives them, writing can be made out of emptiness and rupture: "Sometimes I realize that if writing isn't, all things, all contraries confounded, a quest for vanity and void, it's nothing. That if it's not, each time, all things confounded into one through some inexpressible essence, then writing is nothing but advertisement" (8). Image and writing are opposed in Duras's text, one signaling fixity and cohesion, the other freedom and permeability.[7]

The "photographie absolue" is one of the text's multiple foundational images—the photograph that was never taken but could have been. This image of the girl crossing the river at age 15½ is, in both senses of the word, a cliché of adolescent rupture and discontinuity: "It might have existed, a photograph might have been taken, just like any other, somewhere else, in other circumstances. But it wasn't. The subject was too slight . . . It never was detached or removed from all the rest. And it's to this, this failure to have been created, that the image owes its virtue: the virtue of representing, of being the creator of, an absolute" (10).

Why does this memory, as significant or insignificant as it may seem in the narrator's autobiographical musings, take the form of a photograph in particular? In what ways does photography enable Duras to construct the specific kind of subjectivity that emerges in *The Lover*? If Jamaica Kincaid's

Annie needs to weaken the "ça a été" of her photos' referent and thereby the fixity of memory and the past, Duras's narrator may need to do the opposite: to strengthen her memory and to solidify the lover's and her own tenuous earlier existence. If reference is, as Barthes says, the "founding order" of photography, a picture may be the optimal medium for such a process of consolidating the past and of bringing it into the present. When we look at a photo, or even when we read a description of one, we do assume that the referent is the "necessarily real thing that was placed before the camera." Even as the narrator tells us that the picture was never taken, we read its content and are able to imagine it in great detail. A picture described verbally is the same whether it "exists" or not: the referent of the picture itself seems more solid, but the referent of the description is more or less so according to what the narrator tells us. In this case she tells us that this picture is a construction, and we "see" it more clearly because the construction is described as a picture, but less so because she explains that it was never taken.

The details of the picture can begin to suggest the kind of intervention into her life story that the verbal composition of this nonexistent photograph constitutes for the narrator. It is a "picture" of herself at 15½ on a ferry crossing the Mekong river on her way from home to school. As a white girl, she is as striking a presence on the boat as the large black car belonging to the Chinese man who is to become her lover. Her description of her appearance begins with her silk dress, so old it is already transparent, hardly suitable for school. The leather belt she probably borrowed from one of her brothers and wears with it adds to her improper look. She is not sure about the shoes, and here the difference between photography and memory is clearest, for, if this had indeed been a photograph, the shoes would have been fixed in its image. Her assumption—that she was wearing gold lamé high-heeled sandals—soon becomes fixed in *our* vision, however.

But it is the hat which contains the picture's "determining ambiguity." It is a man's felt hat, flat-brimmed, pink, with a broad black ribbon, such as no one wore at the time. As clearly as she can still remember the hat, as unclear is her memory of its origin. She imagines that she might have tried it on as a joke and then talked her mother into buying it for her because wearing it transformed her appearance drastically: "Beneath the man's hat, the thin awkward shape, the inadequacy of childhood, has turned into something else. Has ceased to be a harsh, inescapable imposition of nature. Has become, on the contrary, a provoking choice of nature, a choice of the mind. Suddenly it's deliberate. Suddenly I see myself as another, as another would be seen" (12–13).

This shift from the given to the deliberate in her appearance is in itself an active intervention; the narrator wears the hat in a defiant gesture of self-definition—the self-definition of the adolescent in the process of breaking away from her family and her childhood. Yet the incongruities in her appearance are the "photo's" most important feature—not the hat but the ways in which the hat clashes with the rest of her clothes. In its contradictions the image can undo the suturing of the act of its construction: with its conflicting effects the picture acts out the opposing forces that define her subjectivity.

In constructing the photograph that was not taken, the narrator consistently underscores the otherness embedded in the self-portrait: her self-portrait needs to be an allo-portrait. Contrary to Annie's attempt to move from center to space-off, Duras's narrator creates an image in the space-off that then absorbs the focus as though it were centrally located within the frame. This ambiguity between the construction of memory as a photograph (an attempt at solidifying the "ça a été") and the chaotic aspects of the image itself (a reintroduction of fluidity and discontinuity) dramatizes the process of constituting the autobiographical subject out of different positions and within the framework of contradictory impulses and desires. In *The Lover* different subject-positions, the otherness of the self, emerge distinctly as the narrative switches, quite unpredictably and without clear motivation, from first to third person. "I" at times becomes "she" or "the girl"; she acts in the text and, especially in her encounters with the Chinese lover, she watches herself act and be acted upon. The narrator and the girl in the pictures are but two of the different positions Duras assumes in the text. In this sense, the photograph that was never taken would have been an allo-portrait.

Paul Smith, in *Discerning the Subject*, sees negativity—the space in between different subject positions, the space binding and unbinding them—as central to the subject's construction.[8] Photographs are perhaps best suited to demonstrating the ways in which we want to convince ourselves of our plenitude: the photo is, of course, literally developed from a negative. In *Annie John* negativity is nevertheless exposed as Annie wipes clean certain sections within her photos. Duras describes a more complicated process of negotiating between fullness and emptiness. The absolute she finds in the invented picture is negativity itself, the absence around which it takes shape in the narrator's and her readers' imaginations. By resisting the plenitude and fixity contained in conventional family pictures and finding a negative space, the familial subject returns to a break between life moments when subjectivity was less fixed, more fluid, more productive of different possible futures. That moment, for the narrator of *The Lover*, is the moment of

adolescent rebellion—when she contests bourgeois colonial convention to take a Chinese lover, when she allows him to give her family money, when she identifies with him rather than with her mother or brothers, when, eventually, she leaves for France to become a writer.

But we might ask our earlier question again: in constructing the photograph as an "absolute" break, in stressing negativity and emptiness, what knowledges, what continuities, might she be denying? What affiliations emerge in the "photograph"—to her mother who bought her the clothes, her brother who lent her the belt, her lover who first sees her on that boat—that her own interpretation downplays in favor of its unique incongruity and thus the path to disaffiliation it can open? In the story of a girl's move from childhood to adulthood in a patriarchal and colonial social context, the line between adherence to convention and resistance can be difficult to locate.

behind the painted smile

Unlike Kincaid and Duras, Valerie Walkerdine comes to family pictures not as a writer but as a professional reader of images, an analyst of film, photography, and other popular visual media. The two essays I would like to discuss here appear in two collections that feature photographs either as illustration *(Truth, Dare or Promise: Girls Growing Up in the Fifties)* or as subject *(Family Snaps: The Meanings of Domestic Photography)*.[9] In her two companion essays, Walkerdine traces both her personal emergence from a small-town working-class British setting in the 1950s and her developing insights as a feminist theorist and activist in the late 1980s. Photographs of herself permit Walkerdine not only to interpret her childhood and family but to engage in a feminist class-conscious practice of reading. Her analysis evolves from an early Mulveyan perspective on women as objects of the male gaze to a more complex positioning of women as both objects and subjects, both creators and readers of their own images. In confronting radically different images with one another, Walkerdine focuses in depth on a break in her life story—a break she locates not in adolescence but earlier in her girlhood—and she finds in that break the possibility both for active resistance and for insight.

"Dreams from an Ordinary Childhood" appears in *Truth, Dare or Promise*, a collection of twelve personal testimonies by British feminists of the postwar generation. Each of the essays locates the author within the institution of the family and in relation to social changes introduced by the Education Act of 1944 and the founding of the welfare state in Britain. The stories the twelve authors tell are stories of upward mobility made possible by the sense of future possibility and sense of personal entitlement to which they attest in direct opposition to the myths that define femininity during the 1950s. As the editor insists: "There was a general confidence in the air, and the wartime image of women's independence and competence at work lingers on well into the decade in the popular literature and in girls' comics of the day" (6). By going back to childhood, the authors attempt to trace the sources of feminist consciousness in their family histories and class allegiances, in the course their lives took in contrast to the lives of their mothers and fathers: "All of these accounts contain an implicit avowal of how we see the world: all as feminists, though perhaps speaking with the voices of different feminisms, and all informed by other commitments—to socialism, anti-racism, or to other recognitions of ways in which the world needs to be changed" (8). The childhoods described in the book are the childhoods of future activists.

Each of the essays is illustrated by a photograph which shows the author at a young age, either alone or in the company of a sibling. Some are family snapshots, others more formal photos taken for specific occasions. The picture illustrating Walkerdine's "Dreams from an Ordinary Childhood" is typical of the volume in that it reinforces stereotyped images of girlhood: it is a picture of a little 3-year-old dressed as a bluebell fairy. Holding a star, little Valerie smiles tentatively but sweetly at a space that is off camera, beyond the picture's frame (Figure 6.5). The picture appeared in the *Derby Evening Telegraph* with the following caption: "Three-year-old Valerie Walkerdine, one of the 'fairies' in the fancy dress parade at Mickleover children's sports and field day last night" (66).

Walkerdine's analysis of the picture focuses on the little girl's off-camera look, on the picture's "space-off":

> Whose gaze? In whose vision was I created to look like this, to display the winning charms, so that posing before the judges, they too, like the camera, would be won over? It is my first memory of what winning meant. But towards whom am I looking, who dressed me like this? Like all the fairy fantasies rolled into one? It was somebody's dream, their fantasy, my fantasy, meeting in the mutuality of the returned look; the gentle and uncertain smile created there too. (66–67)

6.5

That look, it turns out, belongs to her father, who called her Tinky and identified her with the fairy who might repair all his ills—his poverty, his sickness, and the threat of death.

Walkerdine's essay places the bluebell picture in contrast to her subsequent self—the fat, clumsy, frightened child who replaces the sickly and underweight but magical Tinky after she has her tonsils out. This is the break in her life story that the essay interrogates, but it is a break nowhere reflected in the illustration. But even in her new persona, one that fails to correspond to the "pre-adolescent feminist myth" of activity and athletic prowess, Valerie continued to please and to win—in school and in a variety of holiday competitions. Her strategy now is not the magic of Tinky but the plodding reliability and hard work that girls learn because it gets rewarded in school. This is the price of going from one victory to another, of being allowed to follow the dream of upward mobility: "They held out the knowledge, the position to me, and told me that I could claim it as mine, if I worked for it and had the ability" (75). But claiming the dream now, as she retells the story, is rejecting the good-girl image and asserting a dangerous power and knowledge: "We are beginning to speak of our histories, and as we do it will be to reveal the burden of pain and desire that formed us, and, in so doing expose the terrible fraudulence of our subjugation" (76).

Walkerdine's narrative takes her from the sickly bluebell fairy to the plodding reliable good girl to the rebellious Marxist-feminist who not only has followed the "dream of an ordinary childhood" but has turned that dream back on itself by exposing its fraudulence and its price. This is not a seamless linear tale. There is violence at the very center of it—the poison Tinkerbell drinks to save Peter Pan, the surgery Valerie undergoes which removes not only her tonsils but her magic and charm to be replaced by lumpiness and a disgust with her body. Femininity is defined either by frailty or by a "lumpen docility": "I find it almost unbearable to look at photographs of myself from that time on" (69). And yet Walkerdine emerges from the trap created by these two equally unacceptable subject positions as a feminist agent capable of claiming the power that comes with self-knowledge. How?

The gaps that remain in this narrative occasion a second essay, "Behind the Painted Smile," which appears in *Family Snaps*. In revising and supplementing "Dreams from an Ordinary Childhood," Walkerdine takes us beyond the space-off of the Tinkerbell photo and the father's gaze to the space-off of the essay itself, where she finds another, deeply suppressed and transgressive version of herself. In the first essay she described this other

self, but here she allows us to *see* it as well; the first essay contained an illustration and an analysis of it, while the second takes us through the work of reframing and reconstructing images: "When I wrote that piece it was as though I had said all there was to say, hut I knew at one level then, and I see more clearly now, that there are far more disturbing images to explore, which are hidden and covered over hy the erotic allure of the hluebell fairy" (35). To expose those images—and their visual nature is crucial—Walkerdine must first tell the story of the first essay's publication:

> When I wrote the piece I sent the publishers two photographs: one of the bluebell fairy and another, a school photo of me aged about seven, looking puffed out, sickly and fat. They wanted to publish the latter. I, having sent it to them in the first place, adamantly refused to let *this* image be the object of public scrutiny . . . I continued to hide behind a wall of words, academic words, which kept me from exploring the traumatic effectivity of that and other reviled images of myself. (35)

In her subsequent analysis and, even more powerfully, in the essay's illustrations, Walkerdine exposes her own and her generation's subjection as well as her attempt to exonerate herself of any responsihility for it: "On one level, the idea that we are constructed in the male gaze is reassuring. We remain somehow not responsihle for our actions, as though we were mere puppets to masculinity . . . It strikes me as easier to take apart a beautiful image, blame patriarchy, and yet hold on to that image (Yes, yes, I am that really) or to point to a void as its other side than to examine what else may lurk beneath" (36). To examine and ultimately to expose "what may lurk beneath," is the project of the second essay.

Getting to the space that lies beneath or behind the surface of the image is a complicated and painful, though ultimately powerful, process for Walkerdine—as deliberate an intervention as Annie's act of washing her photos or Duras's construction of a fictional picture. But Walkerdine goes beneath the absence and void central to the other two texts, in favor of the uncomfortable alternative of attempting to find, to touch, and to name what exactly lies outside the frame.

This involves work with images as well as work with words, and here Walkerdine's essay differs from Kincaid's and Duras's novels. Walkerdine expands the properties of photography beyond all convention, using every means at her disposal to expose through the photographs the family's unconscious optics, the gazes interpellating her, and the screens operative in her family album. She makes slides out of a number of family snapshots,

6.6

6.7

6.8

projects them on the wall, draws and colors all over the projected images, shades them in, writes on them, later makes pastel drawings from these new images, and exhibits them in an installation. She describes this as a shocking practice of self-mutilation which results in a series of extremely disturbing self-portraits—again, clearly in the form of allo-portraits, a number of which are reproduced with the essay (Figures 6.6, 6.7, 6.8). Two areas of the body are their main focus, the mouth and the abdomen, and the rest of Walkerdine's essay provides the analysis that explains their centrality—her obsession with food, her fear of speaking in public, and her fear of sexuality. Through her mutilation of the old images, Walkerdine finds what lies beneath their surface—"a terrible rage, depression and anger that have been entirely split off" (40) from her present self.

In her work with images Walkerdine negates the photograph's promotion of an imaginary plenitude, searching for its repressed unconscious content instead: "Like dreams, images are the manifest content which is only the surface cover for what lies latent beneath. Thus, although much radical work on photography has shown us how to read the semiotics of photographs it has not ventured much below the surface" (40). In finding a way to get beyond the surface and in reaching (doubly) outside the frame, and in naming what she finds there, Walkerdine can connect her present active intervention with the active impulses of her earlier self; she can find in the past not only frailty and docility, not only female impersonation and mimicry, but anger and rage, envy and greed.

Identifying her childhood anger and rage, envy and greed from the vantage point of her adult present constitutes a profoundly different definition of agency from what those emotions offered her in the suppressed past. During her childhood and even at the moment of the first essay Walkerdine perceived the break between the frail Tinky (identified with magic) and the docile schoolgirl (identified with compliance and plodding), but she did not perceive its violence. That violence, along with the anger it elicited in her, was hidden "behind the painted smile."

Both subject positions—the magical fairy and the docile schoolgirl—were dictated from the outside, projections of the familial and social gaze. The father constructs the fairy, the clapping hands keep Tinkerbell alive because they believe in her, the social institutions reward Valerie's diligence and award her the scholarships that allow her to leave home. Valerie fits into the images others project for her. And the only possibilities for her own active interventions are identified with unacceptable emotions and images: rage, greed, envy, eating too much, or saying something inappropriate.

"Covered over, I suggest, was the fantasy of the angry child, actively shouting out loud, crying and screaming; the all-consuming, rapacious woman with a large (sexual) appetite" (42). In her direct manipulation of images, Walkerdine can reach feelings—old and new—that she cannot reach through words, and eventually, as she reads the images, she can verbalize them. She can do this by reframing the images, by manipulating the screens that refract the institutional gazes. She rereads the images by substituting a feminist screen that can reveal hidden feelings and the possibility of appropriating them for positive intervention.

In her childhood the active girl was angry, the desiring girl greedy. In contrast, finding what lies behind the surface of the pictures and in the space-off of her first essay constitutes for the adult a redefined and politically meaningful form of resistance in the present. "I believe that investigating these issues takes us beyond a deconstructive examination of the feminine in representations. It takes us to an exploration of the powerful fantasies and anxieties which keep those representations circulating and provide us with the basis for other narratives of our histories and the claiming of our power" (45). Walkerdine can claim a power that has emerged through self-mutilation to acknowledge and revalue emotions deemed unacceptable. She finds these emotions on both sides of the break that constructs her story: leaving childhood and adolescence behind is not in itself a route to liberation. Adolescence, Walkerdine implies, is not the privileged moment of revision; that process needs to be repeated throughout adulthood. Power and knowledge can be found in the act of constructing and reconstructing, of reading and rereading, images both of compliance and of resistance.

fragments

Lorie Novak's photograph "Fragments," exhibited in the 1991 Museum of Modern Art exhibition "Pleasures and Terrors of Domestic Comfort," also constructs the female subject as both creator and reader of her own self-representations (Figure 6.9).[10] Both Novak and Walkerdine engage in a kind of photographic self-creation which begins with the positioning of themselves as camera objects and then deliberately transforms that stance in an attempt to gain control through the reframing and manipulation of archival photographic materials. Novak presents a female subject who breaks with a past plenitude to embrace fragmentation, discontinuity, and absence. But what kind of agent is this fragmentary subject? How effectively can she intervene in the ideological script of family and society?

6.9

Throughout her career, Novak has worked with slide projections that embed archival images, both private and public, into new composite visual texts. Using interior spaces, living rooms, bedrooms, and kitchens, as the screens onto which she projects old and new images, Novak reenvisions and reappropriates the spaces of domesticity. The process of projection is both literal and metaphorical, both material and psychological for Novak; the layers in her work are the layers of memory, the competing claims of different family members, the interrelations between family members with public figures. Memory is both individual and collective as, in some of the work, private snapshots are superimposed onto images of public historical events. But, Novak cautions, "I feel that by projecting slides into any situation, I am raising questions as to what is real. In photographing a projected installation, I am, in a sense, documenting something that *is* but *isn't* there. I turn off the power and the subject no longer exists, but I have a photograph that shows that it once did."[11]

"Fragments" is indeed a collection of embedded images, the record of a

series of superimposed projections: the large black-and-white family picture from the 1950s projected onto a corner wall where it fits uneasily into the space, a picture which itself has a portrait at its center, and a color photograph projected over white pieces of board onto the floor which occupies the bottom half of the work and cuts off the lower portion of the black-and-white photo. There are at least four female images in the work: two images of the photographer as a child, dressed in the identical round-collar dress, one in the embedded painting, the other in the black-and-white photograph; two adult women, the pregnant mother in the black-and-white photo and, in color, the photographer herself presumably, but barely identifiable, lying upside down on the floor on an orange float in a blue bathing suit. There are also at least two male images: in the 1950s photo, the father holding the little girl who is sitting on the mantelpiece next to her childhood portrait, and a headless upside-down male torso lying in fragments on the floor next to the woman in the bathing suit.

In her construction of "Fragments" Novak has created a composite image which illustrates the kinds of interventions we have seen in the written texts of Kincaid, Duras, and Walkerdine. She has challenged the plenitude that might come from gazing at an image of one's past or present self, multiplying the self-image to reveal the multiple subjectivities and relationships, the incongruities constructing a life story. She has broken through generational continuities signaled in the resemblance between the daughter and the pregnant mother in the 1950s photograph. She projected that picture onto a corner to make it look three-dimensional while deliberately cutting up its frame and cutting off its bottom half. The alternate history she proposes lies in fragments on the bottom and aggressively protrudes beyond the cut-up frame. Here lies the woman of a new generation, refusing continuity and reflection, finding herself in fragments. As our eyes try to reassemble the fragments we notice hints of irreverence: her closed eyes which refuse to gaze back at the viewer or to smile like the compliant women in the black-and-white photos, her hand reaching into her male companion's crotch. But the woman of the new generation is not just the collection of pieces of glossy paper on the floor, she is also the photographer who has so subversively disassembled herself in them.

Conventional family pictures provide Novak with the space of contestation. As photographer and subject, she can find herself both in the collection of contradictory, incongruous, and discontinuous images, spread across a table and tacked unto a wall, and in the act of reframing and rearranging them to trace a personal (and perhaps also a collective) history against their

grain. But as she so deliberately attempts to reach beyond the constraining frame of the family snapshot, Novak also affirms its power in determining her personal identity and life story.

rereading images

In constructing this unusual "family album" in a single image, Novak reveals something about the structure of the conventional family album—its stress on chronology, continuity, and repetition within and across generations, its predictable framings and messages. In literally cutting up the frame, she shows to what lengths one has to go to get out of the family frame. Certainly Novak's fragmentary aesthetic and the subject-in-pieces she depicts seem more irreverent and subversive than my own equally deliberate construction of familial and personal continuity. It turns out, as the next chapter will show, that I fostered continuity even during my adolescence and continue to find it there particularly because, for me, adolescence coincided with the intense upheaval of cultural displacement. In that experience, photographs were useful not because they could be fragmented or destroyed but because they allowed me to reassemble and reconnect—to find myself constant across tremendous geographical and cultural distances.

Kincaid, Duras, Novak, and Walkerdine privilege fragmentation, negativity, and rupture. It is the consciousness of a break, exposed in the radical and irreverent manipulation of images, that enables intervention, contestation, and change—whether personal or collective. For them, the break occurs in girlhood and adolescence, even if it is not "read" until adulthood.

In contrast, my own construction of familial continuity across continents and generations, and across an entire life story, is complicit with familial ideologies that position the daughter as future mother, that present the family unit as harmonious and free of conflict, that disguise the passions and rivalries, the anxieties and tensions of family relations, and that accept rather than resist the plenitude offered by photographic images. Yet in highlighting the break they support another set of cultural constructions of adolescence as the moment of revolt. In reunifying a fractured personal history, even as deliberately and consciously as I did, I may forgo the possibility of a radical break, but I resist a discontinuity that has also become coercive.

As I contrast my family album with the images in these four texts, however, I begin to perceive the discontinuities within my own story as illuminating and enabling. Reading these texts against one another and against the images embedded within them is in itself a form of agency, one which has occasioned for me a process of rereading my own adolescence as a space of many possible stories, with many possible interpretations. Making the album and reading it, placing it into this comparative perspective, reveals, moreover, the difficult and elaborate personal work involved in the analysis of family pictures—the autobiographical reading practice it seems inevitably to engage.

I have suggested here that writing, making pictures, and reading them can be seen as forms of feminist resistance. When we intervene in the ideological scripts determining our own lives, I would like to maintain, we are also intervening politically. What kind of feminist agent is the maker and reader of images? She can, it seems to me, combine two necessary elements enabling her to transform hegemonic constructions. She can perceive familial ideologies and see herself both reflected by them and opposed or adjacent to them. She can understand her determinations and interpellations and attempt to confront and resist them. At best, therefore, she can be an empowered actor who can speak and act on behalf of women, for by going from the center of the image into the space-off, by refracting the familial gaze through different screens, by attempting to reveal the family's unconscious optics, she can make a space for "see[ing] differently."[12] Thus she can reclaim repressed and censored emotions that can perhaps free her to act. But, by reading and remaking familial images, she can also reveal, through splits and contradictions, through incomplete suturings, the complicated and painful process of identity.

She uses available technologies in the practices of her everyday life, reclaiming them from the oppressive spaces to which they have been relegated by cultural critics. She uses these technologies to reread and redefine coercive ideologies. But she goes beyond this deconstructive process to define a new aesthetic—one which assembles and reconstructs personal and domestic images that are individual yet collective, fragmentary yet continuous, revealing both breaks and interconnections. And she can use her anger and her rage, as well as her love, as motivating forces in her creation, defining an aesthetics of love and anger and pointing to its distinctive beauty.