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‘Photographs furnish evidence’: retrieving silenced women’s stories through the haunting of imagery

Abstract:

Ten years ago the discovery of a nineteenth century photograph of my great, great Aunt ‘Rebecca’ began a project, almost a quest, which is finally beginning to reach a conclusion. The discovery of the photograph led to the development of my novel *Portrait with Still Life*, a narrative that is part historical and part contemporary. In this paper I discuss the creation of the narrative through inspiration from the photograph that has haunted me for so many years, information from my parents’ self published genealogy and my own imaginative processes. I will also describe how a new image I recently received, a painted portrait I was told depicted Rebecca, had an impact on the narrative. This second image informed the writing of the last part of the novel in a way I could not have predicted. I will discuss the difficulty I had in reconciling these two very different images, and how the additional image created a sense of discomposure in the narrative and set the story on a new trajectory. I will also explore Susan Sontag’s idea that ‘photographs furnish evidence’, a concept that Sontag goes further to explain as ‘something we hear about, but doubt, seems proven when we’re shown a photograph of it’ (1977) and how these ideas informed the writing of the novel, and contributed to my goal of retrieving silenced women’s stories through the writing of fiction. I will illustrate these ideas with an excerpt from *Portrait with Still Life*.

Biographical note:

Lianne Broadbent is currently completing a PhD in Creative Writing at Victoria University under the supervision of Jenny Lee and Natalie KonYu. She has degrees in Fine Art and Teaching (secondary school) and a Graduate Diploma in English Literature. She is passionate about all aspects of the creative arts, and is particularly interested in the intersection between image and text.

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Does not the photographer – descendent of augurers and haruspices – uncover guilt in his pictures?

– Walter Benjamin

Ten years ago I went to a family reunion and discovered the photograph of my great, great, great aunt Lois. Her image intrigued me with its plaintive beauty and the way her calm face contrasted with her hard-worn hands – and so I began to research her life. My parents had produced a voluminous genealogy of my father's family and I read it with interest. What struck me was that although there was a vast amount of information about the men in my family, there was relatively little written about the women. This was due, in part, to the amount of written texts the men had left behind. As it was, my ancestors' life in Australia had begun with great hardship for they had travelled from England, on the ship 'The Buffalo', under the misapprehension that they were coming to a fertile land where they could make a living as farmers. In 1836, when my ancestors immigrated, Kangaroo Island in South Australia had been touted as the next great settlement, the place for the new capital (and a free settlement); however, it proved to be arid – uninhabitable. Like many others, Luke and Harriet and their five children lasted only a few years on Kangaroo Island, living in tents and then makeshift huts, before leaving to settle on the more fertile lands in the Adelaide hills. All I could find out about Lois was that she was Luke and Harriet's youngest child, born after the move to Adelaide, her age when she was married, how many children she had, and the date of her death. And her death was embedded in my family's mythology – an almost unspoken understanding that she had drowned herself in the water tank on her farm.

Ultimately Lois was reduced to a wife and mother in my family's history – and nothing more. To me, because of the whispers about mental illness and suicide, her story sounded much more interesting than the stories of the men in my family. The memory of the photograph of Lois stayed with me for a number of years until one day I found it on the Internet on a genealogical site set up to provide information about the people who had come to Australia in 1836 on 'The Buffalo'. Even though this image was a copy I printed on my computer, and not the original photograph, it had a dramatic impact on me, one I could only understand as a kind of haunting. The more I looked at the photograph the more I wanted to know about this woman, and this led to a desire to begin writing a narrative about her life. In her book *On Longing*, Susan Stewart proposes that the photograph, although it is in a sense 'silent', has the ability to puncture the two dimensional surface, to give a narrative poignancy:

The photograph as souvenir is a logical extension of the pressed flower, the preservation of an instant in time through a reduction of physical dimensions and a corresponding increase in significance supplied by means of narrative. The silence of the photograph, its promise of visual intimacy at the expense of the other senses (its glossy surface reflecting us back and refusing us penetration), makes the eruption of that narrative, the telling of its story, all the more poignant. For the narrative of the photograph will itself become an object of nostalgia. (Stewart 1996: 138)

I understood that the photograph of Lois had interrupted my train of thought, had created what Barthes describes as the *punctum*, or a ‘sting, speck, cut, little hole – and also a cast of the dice. A photograph’s *punctum* is that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me)’ (Barthes 1980: 42) which impelled me further to discover more about her life. Barthes goes further to explain this idea, especially in connection to historical photographs as, ‘This *punctum*, more or less blurred beneath the abundance and the disparity of contemporary photographs, is vividly legible in historical photographs: there is always a defeat of Time in them: *that* is dead and *that* is going to die.’ (Barthes 1980: 96) What interested me in the photograph, what ‘pricked’ me, was the presentiment of her future I sensed from the image. I knew only a little of her story from my parent’s genealogy so I realised that I would have to use my skills as a writer and my imagination if I was to bring her back to life, to give her a way to ‘reappear’ (Solnit 2014). And although the image started this process, the words would give the ‘evidence’ I had found in the photograph a way to reach an audience.

Like most photographs from the nineteenth century the image possesses a static, fixed quality. This is not a snapshot but a carefully manipulated and constrained representation. One can almost feel the subject drawing in her breath to remain still. Her features are not very clear, her eyes are partially obscured by shadow, and her dress has been reduced to a flat, black outline. (Was she wearing a shawl? It is hard to tell.) It is difficult to read any emotion or feeling from her face – it is her hands, and the way they stand out, that give the sense of an uneasy hardness. Her hands, for me, spoke of work and grief. I felt sure I could understand a little about this woman, and her life, from this photograph.

It was this personal connection that led to the development of the part contemporary, part historical structure of the novel. I understood that if I was to include my own story, in fictionalised form, it could have greater impact for the reader and provide a stronger basis to reveal Lois’s life as I imagined it. It would also give me a way to explore fictional devices, the slippery nature of distinctions between history and fiction, and to discuss the subjectivity inherent in accepted forms of historical writing. I decided that in my novel my main protagonist Sarah would be writing a ‘biography’ of her ancestor ‘Rebecca’. Sarah would also be an ‘unreliable narrator’, not only about her own life, but that of her ancestor’s. The photograph of Lois could only give me (and Sarah in the novel) limited information; however, it had the ability to create Lois’s character, and her life, in my mind. As Sontag states in *On Photography*: ‘Photographs, which cannot themselves explain anything, are inexhaustible invitations to deduction, speculation, and fantasy’ (1977: 23). The writing of the novel progressed, with this image of Lois looking over me, and I felt I was succeeding in getting inside this character, in understanding what had made her so sad. It was her untimely death that propelled me in writing the conclusion – an untimely death that, in my mind, the photograph seemed to augur. Could the photograph, by the nature of its hold over me – by its *haunting* – be taking control of the story I wished to write? Were my feelings of connection with this character’s doomed nature getting in the way of finding the right conclusion? Was I just looking for the image I wanted to

find? Was I capable of making her more than just a fantasy? Sontag echoes my concerns when she writes:

Photography is an elegiac art, a twilight art. Most subjects photographed are, just by virtue of being photographed, touched with pathos. ... A beautiful subject can be the object of rueful feelings, because it has aged or decayed or no longer exists. All photographs are *memento mori*. To take a photograph is to participate in another person's mortality, vulnerability, mutability (Sontag 1977: 15).

These doubts continued as I began to write about the last days of 'Rebecca's' life in the novel, and then changed, in an unexpected way, when I received a new image of Lois from a family member. This new image was a photograph of a painting of Lois that challenged all my ideas about what she really looked like, and created a sense of unease about this woman I thought I had begun to know so well. I wondered, as I compared the two images, if I had relied too heavily on the 'veracity' of the photograph to 'furnish evidence' (Sontag 1977) and created a confusion within me about which image I could trust as being 'true'. As Sontag states further in *On Photography*:

While a painting or a prose description can never be other than a narrowly selective interpretation, a photograph can be treated as a narrowly selective transparency. But despite the presumption of veracity that gives all photographs authority, interest, seductiveness, the work that photographers do is no generic exception to the usually shady commerce between art and truth (Sontag 1977: 6).

I concluded, that what I was doing was investing in that 'shady commerce between art and truth', in fact, that is what I was attempting to comment on within the novel. This led me to understand that both images held an element of truth, as Timothy Dow Adams writes in *Light Writing and Life Writing: Photography in Autobiography*:

Just as autobiographies are obviously artificial representations of lives, so photographs are clearly manufactured images: sitters are artificially posed and lighted, made to conform to the laws of perspective and the ideology of the photographic culture, reduced in size, reproduced on a flat plane often without colour – and yet there is something undeniably different about a photographic representation of a person as opposed to a painting of that same person (Adams 2000: 5).

With this in mind I began a new chapter of the novel. This new image, a painted portrait that endowed my character with *colour* and *life*, had changed, in my mind, her very being, and sent the trajectory of the narrative on a new path.

This new path was, in part, based on my understandings of how both photographs and paintings have the ability to 'furnish evidence' and the differences between them. As Sontag explains in *On Photography*, 'Something we hear about, but doubt, seems proven when we're shown a photograph of it' (Sontag 1977). Berger goes further with this idea in relation to photography's power versus an artistic rendering when he states, 'Unlike any other visual image, a photograph is not a rendering, an imitation or an interpretation of its subject, but actually a trace of it. No painting or drawing, however naturalistic, *belongs* to its subject in the way that a photograph does' (Berger, 2013 p.51). I had always thought that my photograph of Lois had given me

the ability to see something of the person she had been. I believed it was an authentic depiction of her, but when I was confronted with the painting, an image that showed a very different woman – a lighter, more refined representation – I had to concede I had been manipulated by my natural inclination to *believe* in the veracity of the photograph. What the painting showed me was a woman of a different class to the one I had imagined. It also gave her an aspect of happiness, of fitting in with her environment. Was I to believe this when I had always ascribed a sense of uncertainty and unhappiness to Lois, something I had taken as a given from the way she appeared in my photograph? As a writer did I ‘tend to think of the photograph as revelation in which secrets may be disclosed’ (Price 1994, p.42), as opposed to a painting created by an artist? If I was to understand that the painting was an accurate representation of Lois, how would this change the way I was going to write about the last days of her life? The effect of the painting was indeed a revelation for me, but it didn’t change what I did know about Lois – that at the age of 36 she drowned in the water tank on her farm. I decided that the painting could inform a more rounded method of writing about her life, that it had the ability to imbue her character with more *colour* and *light*, but what it lacked, something undeniably present in the photograph, was a more abstract quality of *aura*.

This quality, if we think of it as Walter Benjamin describes it in his essay *A Short History of Photography* as ‘A strange web of time and space: the unique appearance of a distance, however close at hand’ (1931: 209), or more recently by Herve Guibert in his collection of essays *Ghost Image* as ‘The passage of time across a photograph’ that creates ‘a mask of makeup; time bears the photograph along, deflects it.’ (1982: 130), then could my photograph, with its aura, its sense of haunting, provide a way for me to bring this character to life in a way that the painting could not? Benjamin was writing about photography as a relatively new technology in 1931; however, he gets at the heart of my narrative’s conclusion when he writes about a photograph taken in 1843 by David Octavius Hill and Robert Adamson:

In photography, however, one encounters something strange and new: in that fishwife from Newhaven who looks at the ground with such relaxed and seductive shame something remains that does not testify merely to the art of the photographer Hill, something that is not to be silenced, something demanding the name of the person who had lived then, who even now is still real and will never entirely perish into *art* (Benjamin 1931: 202, emphasis in original).

That emphasis on the word *art*, however you would like to take it, seems to speak of the photograph as possessing something other than just representation – almost as if the image itself has the ability to speak and, ultimately, to transcend a chasm of years. In essence, it has a spectral nature. Like all images that give the viewer presentiments of death – just like those shocking photographs after the atomic bombing of Japan in 1945; photographs that show an absence, or ‘a persisting shadow’ (Jones 2006) where a life had been suddenly obliterated – my photograph of Lois, instead of losing its resonance for me because of the painting, impelled me further to write about this woman’s thoughts and fears with greater certainty. John Berger clearly articulates this idea when he writes that, ‘A photograph is effective when the chosen moment which it records contains a quantum of truth which is generally applicable, which is as

revealing about what is absent from the photograph as about what is present in it' (Berger 2013: 20). Could my photograph be an effective implement in my desire to discover not '*what is no longer*, but only and for certain *what has been*' (Barthes 1980: 85) and give me the inspiration to conclude my narrative with pathos and empathy? I knew from my parents' genealogy that a year before her death Lois had given birth to a girl who had only lived for a three months. This was a documented fact. The photograph helped me to stretch out, in a kind of *chiaroscuro*, her thoughts and fears – the painting helped me to fill in the *colour*.

As I prepare to write the next, and last, part of Rebecca's life I easily slip into fictional mode and gather up the remnants and memories of my own past. This past also slips easily into fiction, almost as if I am looking at a photograph of myself as a much younger woman – a woman coming to the conclusion of her own difficult time.

Excerpt from *Portrait with Still Life: 2010, FINE ART*

Photographs furnish evidence.

– Susan Sontag

I have been looking at the portrait of Rebecca for so long it has become a talisman of sorts. I have traced Rebecca's features so often in my mind I am sure I could draw her face from memory – and the image of her white elegant hands often haunt my dreams. (Sarah's hands are small, almost childlike, and wrinkled from the plastic gloves she wears at work.)

When I was eighteen I had gone to university to start a Fine Arts degree where I began to learn about *perspective*. I remember all those hours standing at an easel in front of a pile of wooden planks in the middle of the studio floor, picking out only the vertical lines, and drawing them in isolation on the page. That was the first two weeks. Then we were instructed to pick out all the horizontal lines, then the angles. This went on for months. My page was a mess of rubbings and holes and badly drawn angles. It was tedious work. (Wasn't she supposed to be painting?)

My teacher, a short man with a dislike for the colour yellow, came over to my easel, stabbed at my work with a stubby finger and said,

'It looks like you've attacked the paper with an iron bar!'

If I had been older I would probably have laughed, but then, the blood had shot to my face and I had looked down with shame. The urge to destroy my work had been strong, but I continued on, looking and judging distance, right past my teacher's head, avoiding his eyes. I knew, then, that it was meant as a hard lesson. And I did learn. The exercise taught me how to *see*.

Sometimes I wonder if I am beginning to lose this hard won ability, or if it needs daily application to remain viable. All around me I see life going on but I do not feel a part of it. The modern connection to life is a series of photographs posted on a computer screen. I constantly see photographs of children, holidays, weddings and celebrations. I have nothing to share. My life, these days, is firmly rooted in my imagination. I wonder if I am losing the ability to differentiate between reality and fiction.

When I look at the portrait of Rebecca what I see is the woman I have created in my mind. The facts I know about Rebecca's life – her date of birth, her date of death, the number of children she had, the name of her husband – furnish the story I am weaving, but the rest is left to my imagination. The story behind Rebecca's death remains a mystery. Can I really be sure Rebecca drowned in the water tank on her husband's farm? I have heard this story but I am unsure when I heard it, and who told it to me. The story had always been there, told in muffled tones. I wonder if this 'fact' is also just a piece of fiction. What I am really waiting for is that magical piece of paper.

I tell few people I am writing a novel. I'm not even sure if that is what I am doing. When I mention books at work most people say they don't read, or if they do, they like to read something that is *real* and not made up. At lunchtime I often take a book into the cafeteria and people always ask me what it's about. I usually tells them it's just a novel and hope they don't ask further questions. This habit I have for reading, I think, strike my colleagues as slightly odd, but hardly consequential. During the daily trivia quiz they often look to me for the answers to difficult 'literary' questions. *What was George Orwell's real name?*

I have borrowed my parent's self-published genealogy so they know I am writing something about the family. They are happy I have found something to keep me occupied, and my mother seems fascinated by my interest in my ancestor. I think that my mother understands the allure of the photograph of Rebecca, but I sometimes see a look of concern in her face, as if she thinks I have gone a little too far and I am becoming obsessed. I re-read my parent's genealogy constantly in the hope I have missed something – that salient piece of information that will explain everything. But it is always the same, an unfinished story waiting for the next chapter, for the conclusion it so desperately needs. This cannot be left up to my parents for they are getting old and beginning to become absent minded. (And her mother recently confessed that she is starting to *lose interest* in the whole thing.)

The days continue in a bland wakefulness – my fingers rip apart plastic packets of frozen vegetables and prise open steel containers of cooked food. I deposit vitamised food onto plates in neat, rounded scoops and whisk instant gravy, a salty mixture of gluten and flavouring, with boiling water to make a viscous sauce that masks all flavour. My arms continue to be burned by the searing surfaces of the hot boxes and ovens. The plates of food go up to the wards and then come back to be scraped clean. This dance could go on forever.

The nights remain my own, alone in my room – my fingers playing with the keys on my computer – and then I receive the photograph from my parents in the mail.

The photograph is inserted inside a greeting card with a funny message about becoming old and absent minded. In the card my mother writes, ‘Just returned from a fraught five days in Adelaide and nearly died in the heat! Bliss to be back. This time I’ve remembered to send you this photo of a painting of (we think) Rebecca Braddock. We thought you might be interested.’

The photograph shows an elegant woman of indeterminate age with strawberry blonde hair, perfect porcelain skin and green eyes. I stare at it in an attempt to see Rebecca as I have known her for so many years, but she looks like a completely different woman. It is true there is a certain sadness in her countenance – she looks away to the side – maybe in contemplation of her future, or it could just be a pose prescribed by the artist, as an aid to her natural beauty. And she is beautiful. A lovely English Rose.

I place the photograph of the painting, and the black and white portrait side by side, but it is no use, however much I stare at them both I cannot see that they are depictions of the same woman. I wonder how it could be possible that the woman I have known for so long had blonde hair? In my portrait her hair looks black, and then I notice something for the first time. It occurs to me that in my portrait Rebecca is wearing a headscarf that almost completely covers her hair. How could I have been so blind? I begin to see that the features are the same, or certainly similar, in both women: the set of the mouth, the line of the cheek and the chin, the spaces between the eyes and the forehead. And then I begin to wonder if I am making this all up, that I am being led by my imaginative desire to *see* the evidence. Can I be trusted in this investigation? (Sarah is also disappointed with this new image for it lacks the pathos of her portrait, and it begins a series of questions in her mind about Rebecca, things she has never thought about before, the foremost being a question about *class*.)



Before I go to sleep I look at my own hair. It has grown since I cut it very short just after I left Eliot. I remember that I was blonde as a child and after puberty it had turned a dark brown colour. These days it grows silver at the roots. I wonder if women in the nineteenth century were ever unhappy with the colour of their hair. Would Rebecca have been tempted to exaggerate the golden hue of her hair with unnatural products? Once again this seems to be a fantasy – a twenty-first century intrusion on the ideals of female beauty. I am tempted to give my hair the obligatory *100 strokes* before I retire, but I have never owned a brush. Did Rebecca sit at a dressing table to take down her long hair at night? Did she have a *looking glass*? What did she see when she looked at her reflection?

Before I continue writing about Rebecca and Ellen I have to decide which image I am going to trust. The painting seems problematic to me – it is someone else's idealised image of a woman – but this idea makes me uneasy for it is clear I am in the process of constructing an identity in a similar way, only using words instead of paint. I am also afraid of spoiling the paper with badly drawn angles and unsightly smudges. My sense of perspective has been changed.

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