As the Fairy Tales Unfold

---Reimagining My Own Childhood with Autobiographical Stories

and Photographs of Other Children in China, Cuba and

the United States

Yangyang Geng

Faculty Advisor: Margaret Sartor
Center for Documentary Studies

April 2016

This project was submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in the Graduate Liberal Studies Program in the Graduate School of Duke University.
Contents

Abstract ................................................................................................................................. iv

Acknowledgments ................................................................................................................... v

The Photo Book (As the Fairy Tales Unfold) ........................................................................ 1

The Analytical Essay ............................................................................................................. 69

1. Olive Pierce ....................................................................................................................... 72

2. Wendy Ewald ................................................................................................................... 87

3. Sally Mann ....................................................................................................................... 105

4. Conclusion ...................................................................................................................... 123

Bibliography .......................................................................................................................... 125
Abstract

This project consists of two parts. The first part is a photo book, which includes my photographs of children and an accompanying text of individual stories of childhood, including my own. The second part is an analytical essay, which explores my process in creating and editing my photographs in the larger context of how other artists have approached the depiction of childhood. Specifically, I look at the work of photographers Wendy Ewald, Sally Mann and Olive Pierce, as each of these artists chose to depict the days of childhood by giving individual voice to the children who are most often overlooked or ignored.

Over the summer of 2015, I worked with and photographed children in an orphanage school in China. I continued to make photographs of children in Durham, North Carolina and in Cuba in 2015 and 2016. As the photographs pulled me back to the past of my own childhood, I discovered that in a child’s world, ordinary things became magical vehicles and that childhood is often about the awkward process of learning to inhabit a newly bulky, changed body with aggressive needs and intensified fantasies. As a photographer, I am drawn to the beauty and pathos of the moments, when, for example, a boy, in his games, becomes a pirate, a soldier, or a sailor, or a little girl plays with a doll and imagines she is the princess. I have tried to capture and evoke the daydreams and the feelings of being lost that are specific to childhood. With my writing and in my photo book project, I have also tried to create spaces in which I allow other’s perceptions to surface with my own.
Acknowledgements

There are several people who have offered useful advice, feedback and support to me when I was working on this project. Among family members are my father and my mother, who have loved me and took care of me since I was a child. I am very thankful for my advisor Margaret Sartor, who has helped me with my writing and editing the book from the beginning to the end, and her good judgment and advice are invaluable. I also appreciate the support I received from Professor Alex Harris as he helped me choose and edit my photographs.

This project was especially enriched by the children that I photographed in China, Cuba and the United States. Without them, this project would not exist. It is only by photographing and getting to know them that I came to know what I wanted to achieve and accomplish in my project.

I continue to be grateful to the Graduate Liberal Studies program at Duke University, and my academic advisor Donna Zapf.

Above all, my deepest love goes to the great childhood we all once experienced.
The Photo book: As the Fairy Tales Unfold

As the Fairy Tales Unfold

by Yangyang Geng

The front Cover

Geng 1
As the Fairy Tales Unfold
Reimagining My Own Childhood with Autobiographical Stories and Photographs of Other Children in
China, Cuba and the United States

by
Yangyang Geng
Foreword
I intended to capture and make a series of photographs of children that reveal something about their specific experience of being in the world and to write an accompanying text that includes individual stories of childhood, including my own. When I look at the work of photographers Olive Pierce, Wendy Ewald and Sally Mann, childhood seems like a period of time that is more visually rich than most, regardless of culture, and there are certain truths that those photographers reveal which are universal and belong to all human beings. Each of these artists chose to depict the days of childhood by giving individual voice to the children who are often overlooked or ignored.

This notion of depicting childhood inspired my project. I became interested in photographing children’s lives because I wanted to learn how to seize and convey the feelings that belong only to childhood, the upheavals in family relationships, different choices of friends, fantasized romance and new inner demands. I have begun to pay more attention to capturing the moments when children are expressing themselves and experimenting with new ideas. I am drawn to the beauty and pathos of those moments, when, for example, a boy, in his games, becomes a pirate, a soldier, or a sailor, or a little girl plays with a doll and imagines she is the princess.

In China, over the summer of 2015, I photographed children in an orphanage school where I also worked as a volunteer. I continued this project by making photographs in the United States in Durham, North Carolina and on the island of Cuba in 2015 and 2016. I found out that the images I took in these three places were inked with my personality and the things I have come to know. As the photographs dragged me back to the past of my childhood, I found out that in these children’s worlds, ordinary things became magical vehicles and that childhood is the time when we are all trying to inhabit a newly bulky, changed body with aggressive needs and intensified fantasies.

As I attempted to capture and evoke those daydreams and feelings of being lost that seem specific to the period of childhood, I also wanted to create spaces in which I allowed other’s perceptions to surface with my own. After all, the truth is that when we are looking at photographs, in a large part, we don’t see things as they are; we see them as we are. I believe that by placing the photographs I made in China, the United States and Cuba side-by-side in the same virtual space, that is, in this project, will make for surprising connections. Perhaps these connections will serve to minimize the social and cultural gaps that impact how we view childhood by evoking images and feelings that transcend the boundaries of nationality and maximize the intimacy between myself, the viewer and the subjects.
Girl in the blue Car. Havana, Cuba, January 8, 2016

Frontis Photo

verso
To see a photograph is, inevitably, to see a picture of past.
--- Miles Orvell

The photograph of Girl in the blue Car was taken at the crossroad of downtown Havana, Cuba. She is a little girl wearing a white shirt, red scarf, and looking at the camera. Her tilted head and subtle smile show me nothing but her own imaginative kingdom. She is so absorbed into her own thoughts that her eyes become almost vacant, and her body goes stiff in the picture. Her face is gentle and sensible and her eyes have these warm and kindly twinkles, which only belong to the days of childhood.

The girl reminds me of one night, a few years ago when my father and I were driving back from somewhere to home, after a huge fight between my father and my mother, and from the backseat I saw that my father was just sitting quietly and still. He wasn’t slumped back or anything. He was wide-awake, bolted into his seat, and driving. He didn’t say a word to me on the way back. So I moved to the right side of the car, looking out of the window. I remember there was wind whistling through the car and every now and then our car was filled with the bright brush of somebody else’s headlights.

By capturing the present, I know that the record would ultimately deliver a past.

I grew up as a small town girl born in northwestern China. Both of my parents were high school teachers. Our life at that time was hard, my parents earned little and they spent almost everything on my education. Time after time we were pushed out of a house for not paying the monthly rent on time, and all the while I was studying in a school only rich people could afford. Whenever I recall how my parents would always be sitting on that battered chair next to my electronic keyboard, which was covered by a piece of red cloth, always calculating our income and expenditure, and talking about how to spend money more wisely, it still saddens me. Even though my family was very poor at that time, I still had a thrilling and glorious childhood.
Up in the air. Durham, October 31, 2015
For me those were carefree days, but they were too short. I remember my mother was always worried because my knees were scratched or I came back home late, and my father was always conflicted because he had to punish me for my bad performance in school instead of being able to play with me. The squabbles I had with my sister over a lollipop or a doll. The old teacher whom I teased, the dog, the cat, and so many little things that I can hardly recall now.

I didn’t realize that I was standing at the crossroad of my life, where complicated puzzles were beginning to unravel.
Crying girl. Havana, Cuba, January 9, 2016
As these photographs dragged me back to the past, to the moments that photographer Alex Harris once described—“it is now difficult for me to remember what was real and what was fantasy, what I lived and what I dreamed,” I began to wonder: why do we try to capture these moments of our lives?

Maybe on one hand, it is like what Walker Evans said, “the eye traffics in feelings, not thoughts”, so that taking a photograph is about the effort to follow your gut and make something interesting using all the elements available. On the other hand, as I am reading the story “Hitting back” written by Padgett Powell, I feel like we should always try to discover and make sense out of our ordinary life and the voice of our past can always cause us to stop and see.
The girl behind the door. Havana, Cuba, January 13, 2016
As I wandered into the world of Cuba, I saw this little girl one afternoon in the Chinatown of Havana. I smiled at her, and she smiled back. She then waved to me as if I belonged and I waved back, tentatively.

The girl behind the door reminds me of a poem written by a Chinese poet, as the poem goes like, “You stand on the bridge watching the scene outside, and the one who pretends watching the scene is watching you. The moon decorates your window, while you adorn other’s dream.” This girl is lost in thought. Her chin cupped in the iron door, and her eyes are fixating somewhere. She is this daydreamer, starring herself in a scene and consciously wishing for something to happen. The darkness behind her forms a stark contrast with the lightness before her, which left me thinking that this could be the circumstance when she felt that she was trapped.

After taking the picture, I went up to the door and tried to talk to her. Sadly, I don’t speak Spanish, and she didn’t speak English. So we couldn’t understand each other at all. I said goodbye regretfully and left. Even though I tried to be attentive to capture any feelings, stories and details I encountered there, in Cuba, in my photographs, I still found out that there were lots of things that I could not capture. That is when I realized life is more mysterious than anything a photograph can capture. As this little girl stared at my camera when I was about to press the shutter, I realized that I could never grasp through the lens what is at the heart of her world. The only thing I could sense is she has those sad and beautiful eyes that hold the pure bewilderment and surprise for the outside world.
Handstands. Trinidad, Cuba, January 16, 2016
One afternoon in Trinidad, I was wandering around in the neighborhood looking for something interesting, and two boys caught my eye.

They were doing handstands. Kids lined up in a human corridor so they could showcase their skills. They used a wooden frame as their stage property. A back handspring, and then another handspring, people cheered, and they smiled when their feet landed on the ground. The air was thick with humidity and sweat was streaming down their faces. When the group grew tired, one of the boys came to me, and asked me for some money to buy a soda. “Two pesos.” I said I didn’t have any change, but I could buy him a soda at the shop. He stared at me for seconds, shook his head and left. Of course, I thought, he doesn’t understand what I said. Instead he must think I am a mean lady with a fancy camera on.

In Cuba, children eat hot dogs with ketchup and mustard, drink cold sodas in big gulps so that the fizzy acid burns down their throats, and chase each other in packs around the yard. I watched these kids and it mirrored some part of my childhood as well. I used to run with friends around the yard in pairs, yanking at one another in the sweltering days, fighting for the last cold drinks.
What you notice becomes your life. – Michael Chitwood

Charles Dickens once wrote: “It was the best of times; it was the worst of times. It was the age of wisdom; it was the age of foolishness.” Although he wasn’t depicting the days of childhood, somehow I think these words provide me a fully perspective of Childhood. After all, although our life persists as long as we live, the time when we are about enter adolescence, with all the remnants of the unfinished business of childhood, and try inhabiting our newly bulky, changed body with its intensified needs and aggressive wishes may be the most unique, poignant, and beautiful of all life’s seasons.

I met Betty at the downtown Havana, when she was standing in front of her house waiting for her friend. She said they were going to the telecommunication office to buy Internet. She was one of the few people I met in Cuba who spoke English, and she said she would like to go to Europe to be a model one day if she finds a European husband in Cuba. I asked how, and she smiled and chirped: “tourists.” She is 12 years old, and her parents work for the government. She said she has an older sister, but she hates her because she has to wear all the handed-down clothes from her. I said she looks beautiful, and she said: “I know. Boys have been telling me that.”

We talked all the way down to the telecommunication office, until she went inside to buy Internet. I asked: “why are you buying the Internet? She said, “to explore the outside world for a while.” She then asked me why am I here in Cuba? I said, “likewise.”

Betty. Havana, Cuba, January 15, 2016
After we said goodbyes, I kept thinking about what she said about exploring the outside world, and it got me to thinking that I myself am both observer and observable, and so a possible object of my own awareness.

For her, it seems as though my camera in front of her did not exist, and she could be standing still there all day, daydreaming about putting on a beautiful dress and encountering her future husband like a princess. Although we all know what is followed by childhood fantasy—the awkwardness of adolescence, when we all try so hard to adapt ourselves, with our young passions and follies, into the mature society. For me, when I have subsequently taken photographs in different scenes, often in other countries, I try to communicate intimate facts about people who I've never met but now want to know. These people, though obviously different, are just like me: they fall into difficult decisions and take silly chances and have their hearts broken and receive zigzags of wild joy.
As Michael Chitwood said, “what you notice becomes your life”. However, there is always one thing that puzzles me. Can we look into other people’s fantasies and inner lives without intruding upon them?

I tried to seize this kind of moment and tell stories about Betty and her dream; however, I could not help thinking that by simplifying the complicated relationship that I had developed with her into photographs, I was somehow colonizing her and her dreams.
As I ran into these two girls in the front of a primary school, I could not describe the feeling I got from them any better than I could describe a smell. It was like the scorch of electricity or the smell of a bitter orange. A sense of sensitivity and vexation flickered across their faces. The girl with the red scarf had a hand on her friend’s shoulder, which didn’t seem to help her to ease the feeling at all. Maybe they were late for school, or maybe it was their first day of school.

Their faces remind me that I was once an anxious and sensitive kid as well. I embarrassed easily and that embarrassment could escalate into irritation. Sometimes I felt lonely for no reason and that loneliness could swallow me whole. When I was growing up, my parents were very strict when it came to my performance at school. They rarely praised me but they often scolded. They believed that too much praise would spoil me, and steer my life towards a succession of failures. After my father split with my mother and moved out of the house, my mother took on the responsibility of making her own daughter — me — perfect. Most of the time, she could be very sweet, but other times I felt like I had to tiptoe around her, that any moment she might turn on me. There was hardness in her eyes, when my grades were not among the top three of my class, or I missed one note on the piano key. It burned. I hated when she looked at me like that, so I always tried to be perfect at school as well as at home.

Throughout elementary and Junior high, I ranked in the top three of my class. For me, such a feat did not come easily. After school, I read books, did homework, and played piano. Sometimes my father would stop by and spend a few hours with me. He must have seen, must have worried. Why else would he ask why I was not going out with my friends. He didn’t know there was a price to be paid for the rigid adherence to good academic performance. The truth is that I didn’t have any friends at that time, that somehow the responsibility I felt to be good and my continuous desire for continuous proud and affirmation stifled the way I made new friends at school and sometimes outweighed my apparent ability and talent for it.
Mother and daughter. Trinidad, Cuba, January 17, 2016
School day. Trinidad, Cuba, January 17, 2016
People say that everyone has a way of seeing things. When they photograph something, the end product will be imprinted with the personalities and characteristics of the photographer. I think they are right about that because in my process of making photographs, my eyes are fixated at certain places, where children are trapped into their own thoughts, alone, and almost isolated from the outside world.

I find myself taking complicated, disturbing and closer photographs, which represent what my life once was like. After I turned 11, the economic situation of my family finally began to improve, however, the emotional fabric that held the three of us together gradually deteriorated. I remember my parents’ endless quarrels and fights, and that would have broken my heart if heartbreak hadn’t already been so familiar.
Boy in a rickshaw. Trinidad, Cuba, January 16, 2016
"It’s the end of the world as we know it" says in Fucai’s (Middle) T-shirt. Yangxinzhuang Orphange, China, August 19, 2015
In dreams, ordinary objects became magical vehicles—Wendy Ewald

In the summer of 2015, I visited an orphanage school in Northwestern China and then became a volunteer teacher there. I taught the children English and math while taking photographs of them. The school has only one teacher and there are four students. Most of them are left-behind children, which means their parents went to big cities to find jobs. Their clothes are crooked and old. They are wearing ragged shoes without socks. It makes one of the girl’s ankles all red, but somehow they remained happy most of the time.

After spending a long time in the orphanage, I became friends with these children. More often than not, they asked me to photograph them when they were fighting, playing and posing. I was glad that I was given this access and became part of their community, a community known for its independency and insularity. Through means only made available by the camera, almost every portrait of these children reveals an eagerness to be seen. To me, these portraits of “orphanage children” not only mirror the experience and the life of these individuals, but also represent the shared experience of a group and a generation.
Cuicui’s magic Cape. Yangxinhuang Orphange, China, August 5, 2015
The girl in the photograph is named Cuicui. It was one day after class that she told me she had a surprise show for me. I waited in front of the classroom and saw she was wearing a piece of red rag and running towards me. I laughed and asked what is this? She said, “Can't you see, I am a superwoman and I'm flying now.” I remember when I took up my camera; she looked down coyly then back up at me, and said, “How do I look?” The moment was fixed when she lowered her head and her earnestly praying eyes hidden in the shadow spoke to me of nothing but hope with struggles.

Every time I think about her eyes and the red rag, it strikes that today we have higher buildings and wider highways in the city, but narrower points of view and fewer expectations for life. There are delicate houses built in the process of modernization, but more broken homes where people are trapped economically, and children who are entombed in obscurity.
Zhaoyang with her doll. Yangxinzhuan Orphange, China, August 19, 2015
Cuicui is one of the left-behind children in the orphanage; Zhaoyang is the other one. Her mother left her father for another man when she was little, and her father migrated to big cities to find a job. She said she couldn’t remember how her mother had left home, but her grandpa said that her mother was holding her in her arms and walking until they arrived to the bus station. She said sometimes she dreams of her mother as she disappeared from the bus station and it was hard to see her face since what was left of her mother in the dream was often just the color of her blue dress filling in the spaces of crowded people.

The blue doll she was hugging in the photograph is the only thing her mother left for her. She said the doll is her lucky charm because when she hugs it to sleep, sometimes she gets to see her mother and father in the dream. One day, her father called the school and said he might come home for this year’s spring festival. Later that day, she was all happy and joyful. The next morning before we got up from bed, she crawled over to the side of bed where I was sleeping and told me she had a dream about her father.

“My father is back. He was a little taller and stronger. No wonder grandpa always says food in big cities like Beijing will make people that way. He shook my grandfather’s reluctant hands after stepping into the house. Then he saw me hiding from my grandfather and he said, ‘What’s wrong with you? Come here and give me a hug.’ He asked me with a big smile on his face and grandfather said, ‘Oh, she talks about you all the time, now she is just too shy to come forward.’ Zhaoyang, it’s me, your father, I’m back.’ Then his stubbly face was in front of me, and his thumb was tracing a circle on my cheek.”
Everything was too real to be believed in that dream and when she told me, her eyes were drowned in tears because her time with her father just ended. I hugged her and cried with her because I know how it feels for a girl to miss her father.

Years ago my father got very sick. By the time I went to the hospital, I felt all dead inside myself. Although he was not around very often, once I saw his face, I cried so much that I couldn’t cry any more, and I was tired. My mother tried to comfort me, but that didn’t help. I remember my father was asleep and he looked so fragile. I stared at him for so long that in a moment, his face was once more peaceful, intelligently benign, and quietly observant.

Zhaoyang standing in front of her dormitory. Yangxinhuang Orphange, China, August 12, 2015
After I became friends with these children, one of the boys named Youyou told me that there are some “rich” kids in the village who bother him very much. I asked how and he said, because those rich kids only pay attention to the fancy stuff, pretty pencils, shiny books and boys who wear new clothes, and he is not one of the fancy stuff in their eyes. He said, “there is one time that a rich kid wandered into our classroom for no reason, and the teacher asked him to leave but he didn’t listen, so the teacher had him share textbooks with me, and the kid wouldn’t look at me when we were reading. He even tried to hold his breath when I was close to him. That bothers me.”

Youyou has a seven-year-old brother at home. He said sometimes his little brother was so hungry that he learned to tear his clothes because this was the only thing that he knew that would hurt their grandma. But grandma is old and smart enough to come up with a way to cope with his little brother. Grandma would walk in and take all his shirts from the room, leaving him only with shorts which were made of a kind of cloth with a texture that was hard to damage with bare teeth and fingers.
Portrait of Youyou. Yangxinhuang Orphange, China, August 14, 2015
Almost everyone in China is happy for spring festival to arrive because it is a time when families are gathering together and there will be a new start for everything, except Fucai (boy on the bottom). He knows it will be another hard year for his grandma and himself.

Years ago, his mother died of pneumonia and his father left home after that. The only way he gets to see his mother is through the photographs that his grandma keeps in a plastic bag in the drawer. His grandma named him Fucai, which mean “rich” in Chinese, so he could grow up to be rich someday. He said staying in the orphanage helps him not to think about his mother very often, but when New Year comes and every other kid is holding hands with their mother, he gets sad and envious.

Two boys playing with a discarded phone. Yangxinzhuan Orphange, China, August 19, 2015
One afternoon, while the children were reading books in the house, it began to rain and it kept raining for almost seven days. After the rain stopped, Fucai went to his grandma's house. When he came back, he said because their zinc roof leaked, almost everything they owned was water-stained — their clothes, papers, whatever food they had, and their cheap wooden furniture. He said he now understands why grandma keeps his mother's picture in that plastic bag. He told me that it was only because of that plastic bag that any pictures of his mother survived.

Fucai's portrait. Yangxinhuang Orphange, China, August 10, 2015
Blackboard. Yangxinzhuang Orphange, China, August 20, 2015

verso

Geng 43
Playground, Yangxinhuang Orphange, China, August 12, 2015
When I was staying in the orphanage school, Youyou and Fucal often told me that they were always wanting something that they could lay claim to, like books of their own, softcovers, books they could give to friends, doodle in the margins of, or in which they could mark the paragraphs they liked and wanted to remember.

Through the lens, I see how difficult is the business of growing up and these children’s relationship with each other and with the land is their magic. It is where they play wild and study hard, where the doll becomes a lucky charm and a ragged cloth becomes a superwoman’s cape, where the ground is both their blackboard and playground.

When we are young, we feel that the world is ours to command. However, when I was saying goodbye to the children in the orphanage, I was feeling so blue that I was thinking maybe it will never be the case. Maybe at every stage of life we sustain losses, and grow in the process.

People always considered all the children to be the same, as they are these princesses, daydreamers, bullies, victims, and rebels. However, after making friends with the children in the orphanage, I also see how different is everyone’s story of growing up. The most beautiful thing I learned from them is they remind me of the truth about what poverty is, what friendship means, what love looks like, and what it means to be growing up. Looking back, I slide into myself perfectly fitted, as a diver meets her reflection in a pool. I have been angry, I have trusted, I have been poor; I have been a loner, a student, a neighbor, a girlfriend and an adult. I have also been the opposite, dismissing failed relationships for the glimmer of new ones, escaping the hard truth of my own history, assuming that somewhere some day some one else would fill those blanks that only the people from my memory could fill. The truth is we all have to understand the roots, the trees, and the leaves in order to understand the seasons and ourselves. That is, we should not be afraid of our own shadows.

Together. Yangxinzhuan Orphange, China, August 10, 2015
The heart sees what is invisible to the eyes. – H. Jackson Brown, Jr

My father. China, 1964
In the 1960s of China, my parents were born. My father was born in a poor rural family. Both of his parents are farmers. In the village, people relied only on the land to survive. If the days are good, there will be a harvest. If days are bad, then they will starve. My father said when he was a little boy; all he could think about was leaving that small village. He wanted to learn things, and he wanted to get off the road poor people keep walking on. Especially when there was no food and my grandfather beat him up, his desire for leaving just became stronger and stronger.

Many years later he did leave, traveling halfway across China to escape his hometown.

Somehow the photograph of my young father surprisingly speaks to me. I remember when I was young, I often saw the stylus stuck in a gramophone when the music was playing and so the piece of music was repeated again and again. As I grow up, I observed that people living in my town have the exactly same type of life just like the repeated stylus. They are seldom exposed to the wonderfulness of the outside world. And this deadening routine of life scared me. Thus, I kept studying hard and wanted to escape that place as soon as possible. Finally I managed to leave that place, my hometown, and went to big cities to study, and even now here I am in America. However, when looking back, I realized that that little town has endowed me a lot of things, even the tree, the mountain and the river there have shaped me to be who I am today. And from what I see, that is maybe partly how my father feels about his hometown.
My father. China, 1974
Both of my parents were born in the Cultural Revolution period, during which there were still political slogans on the wall declaring “Long Live Chairman Mao”, and people were required to work together in the community to earn the tickets for food. Everything was publicized, because everyone had to be equal. Lots of rich people were evicted from their own homes. Some of them refused to leave and hand in their money, so the local soldiers killed them and buried them under the land.

When my father was 11 years old, my grandfather asked him to drop school and only work only for the people’s community. My grandfather said: “You are my oldest son and you have to help me on the land to feed your five little brothers.” My father said no, and cried. At that time, he learned from school that “only knowledge can change your fate,” so he didn’t want to leave school. When my grandfather picked up the broom behind the door and tried to hit him, he rushed out of the door and ran until he couldn’t keep up his breath. Then he stopped somewhere he couldn’t recognize. It was near dusk, and there was no one around. He started to think that he might be standing on the place where the rich people got killed or buried. And he became scared because there were stories about how people who died of resentment may linger around in the present world, looking for chances for revenge, instead of flying away to the hell or heaven, to where they belong. My father said he began to hear some birds squawking, and then he realized not far away there were two owls standing on a tree branch staring at him. I know in the western world, owls stand for wisdom and happiness. However, in China, even these days, in the rural areas, the owl stands for evil and death. My father said he began to tremble, because the two owls, with yellow sulphurous eyes, began to call him.

He was so scared he couldn’t move. He closed his eyes and made a deal with the god of the land. He said to himself that if the god let him go home, he would listen to whatever my grandfather says. Somehow later he saw a distant and faint light from the chimney flashing out into part of the sky, and he knew immediately which way was home. He was right, because when he got home, my grandmother just had finished cooking.

“Where have you been? You think you can just go and never came back?” my grandpa asked.
“l’m sorry, I’ll quit and help you, father.” My father answered.
“No, your mother and I talked about this after you ran away. You can stay in school, but you have to help me right after class. And there will be a lots of work and nearly no time to rest.”
My father jumped and laughed. He said: “ Great! Thank you Mama and Baba. I got two hands and a heart as strong as a rock.” He stayed in school for another six years. He got thinner and thinner, so that before college, his clothes were hanging off him.
Eyes. Yangxinzhuang Orphange, China, August 3, 2015
Eyes. Havana, Cuba, January 13, 2016
My mother (left) with her oldest sister. China, 1978
My mother is five years younger than my father, and her family was relatively better off because her father was a high school teacher and he taught at one of the famous schools in a small town. My mother was my grandfather’s favorite because she was the youngest girl and the cutest in the house. My grandmother gave birth to six children. My mother was the fourth one. After my mother, grandmother gave birth to a little boy, but he died of pneumonia at the age of 1. After his death, my grandmother took the scissors and snipped him out of the family picture because she said every time she looked at her little boy, her heart hurt so much that she couldn’t stand it any more. Two years later, my uncle was born.
My mother said that before my uncle was born, the four sisters always played a little game, in which every one of them played a role in the family.

My oldest aunt would be the father; two of my younger aunts would be the mother and the brother. My mother would always get to play the little girl. She always had the last corn and got to sit at my grandfather’s lap. She was spoiled in the game and she was spoiled in reality. When my oldest aunt dropped out of the school and while two of my aunts were out all day to work on the land, my mother was home reading books in my grandfather’s bookshelf and helping my grandmother with little housework.

Two years ago at my grandfather’s funeral, my mother cried so hard that she fainted. When she woke up in the hospital, she told my oldest aunt that she could never be a kid anymore, because their father had just died.
Baby in the Family. Havana, Cuba, January 10, 2016

Geng 56
My parents told me that nowadays kids are more self-aware than they were. In their generation, they were taught to keep their hands busy and mouths shut. But nowadays we learn to speak up for ourselves and choose whatever we want to be. “Knowledge can change the fate,” as my father has always told me.

I was born and brought up in a small town in Northwestern China. At that time, both of my parents had finished college and become high school teachers. The era of the Cultural Revolution ended years before and my father named me Yangyang, which means “sunshine” because he believed in our generation, and that my future would be filled with brightness.

Our life at that time was hard. We were drifters until I turned 15. My father was overworked since he always believed that the husband should be responsible for making money and the wife in charge of taking care of the house. But we all know house chores are boring routine stuff—that is why everybody hates it. Back at that time, there was no dishwasher or laundry machine or vacuum cleaner. My mother’s housekeeping career began when my father first started assigning her varied duties in the name of gender equality.

He would say: “The man should be the breadwinner and the woman should be the housekeeper.” This was frustrating because my mother worked very hard outside the home as well. Both my parents were working in the same department at the local high school, basically earning the same amount of “bread.” Anyway, in no time, my mother began undertaking almost every chore in the house. She wouldn’t let me help her unless she was very tired from working, moping and making dinner. I remember whenever I offered her a hand after school, she would say: “Baby, stay out of the kitchen and read me a story.”
I liked to read when I was a kid, and the “read me a story” request became a routine in my family. I would put on a “reading show” everyday for my parents after dinner—sometimes poems, sometimes prose—and these shows continued for 6 years, until I graduated from middle school.

Things changed after we stopped moving. My father got promoted by the local government and was transformed from a teacher to an officer. Everything seemed to be going well. Not long after that we bought a new house, new furniture and almost new everything. But my father began to come home very late from time to time, sometimes 3 o’clock in the morning, sometimes 5, and sometimes he did not come back at all. My mother tried to talk to him, to pick a fight with him, to get him to talk or to confess, but sadly, this never worked out as she wished. They began a “not talking to each other” routine every now and then, and I knew this time it was different. It was different from any kind of quarrels they had before. It was not about money issues. It was something else.
Me, reading a story at home. China, 2002
Listen. Trinidad, Cuba, January 17, 2016
Like most married couples, my parents liked to exert themselves when having guests and relatives over for dinner, to be amusing, discussing things with passion and laughter, even though they had given up talking to each other. Most of the time, my father was responsible for the talk and my mother said little. She believed less. In the end, she was mainly in charge of the cooking. Once the guests stepped out of the door, our house would fall into a dull exhausted silence again. The only noise I can recall now is the noise of my mother walking back into the kitchen and washing all those dirty cups and dishes from dinner.

Sometimes, at night, the house was more than ever like a stranger’s home.

There was one night after a big fight, that my father just slammed the door and left. I went to my mother’s room and lay down beside her. I remember I could hear the world outside, the loud boys, the cars, and some insects buzzing around. I didn’t have a clue what my mother was thinking, but my mind was exploding with one thought: I want to leave; I want to run away from the house and from my father. Then I began to think about my escape plan. I looked the room over with a burglar’s eyes, deciding what might be worth taking, and what, on the other hand, I would just as soon leave behind. In my mind, my own various possessions were floating in their separate pools of shadowy existence, denying my ownership of them. You would probably assume that I wanted to take some expensive or useful things or sentimental things—money, clothes, the silver bracelet that my grandmother gave to me, perhaps my diary with the chaotic graphic symbols. The computer, some food.
But there was nothing I really wanted to take away with me.

My mother was so quiet that when I looked back at the bed, I was startled to find her lying next to me. Her eyes were closed and it seemed as though she too was detaching herself from where she was, from her things, the plaster walls. At that time I thought she had found the secret to silence. But now, somehow I think I know exactly what to pencil into all her unvoiced thought bubbles: Escape, Escape, and Escape. The discord between my father and my mother was like the crack in our old bathroom wall, in the house we rented when I was young, the one big hole that my parents got so used to circumnavigating that they sometimes forgot it was there. But I always remembered.

Years later, I asked my mother about what she saw in my father in the first place and she said: “He is a hard worker and somehow love teaches you. It clears your eyes of any rules. But it does not always teach you the right thing.”
As I started to write the accompanying texts for my photographs, I realized that when we are taking or looking at photographs, in a large part, we don’t see things as they are—we see them as we are. Photographs can be a window to see others and a mirror to our own life. And, as a photographer, if we are lucky enough to be granted access to what we are most interested in photographing, our heart will probably see what is invisible to our eyes.

The old memories pulled me back into those shabby houses I once lived in, the weathered table I used to sleep on, and the joyous family I used to have. I don’t know where these memories will take me, but I see exactly how closely they are entangled with my parents’ lives and their relationship. Looking at my photographs, words pour out, stories that have been buried in my heart for so long. I don’t mean to defame my father in his relationship with my mother, because deep in my heart, I do love him. Nowadays I say “I love you” to him over Skype or phone or face-to-face occasionally and that affection is not and cannot be faked. However, what I write here is the truth I saw or as I remember it. We all know that childhood experiences provide materials that individuals use to forge their very identities, including the sense of self, their notion of what is true and what is not. For me, the memories of my childhood also shape my view of family, demonstrating who has power and who is powerless, who is allowed to exercise force and violence, and who is not.

As I wrote in my diary in the year of 2005, July 15th. People are complicated. A good father doesn’t equal a good husband.

Mother. Havana, Cuba, January 15, 2016
Father. Havana, Cuba, January 11, 2016

verso

Geng 65
Bubbles. Havana, Cuba, January 11, 2016
Maybe those feelings and memories of unrequited love and wounded pride— in short any emotions or perplexing thoughts I once had, are all because I love my father. I told myself this as writing these stories dragged me to the past. My dad, the man who was once a little boy trying to change his life, the man who was once laying on the hospital bed, the man who broke my mother’s heart so many times, the man who once held me so tightly so I wouldn’t fall off my bike, is after all, just human and he is my father.

Someone once described childhood as bubbles, in the sense that whenever we venture out in the world, we feel there is a bubble surrounding us, a bubble of privilege, which keeps us from interacting with the outside world. Working on this project, I have realized that my parents were once my bubbles. They kept me happy, satisfied and safe from the chaotic and complicated world.

When I was little, my parents are how I spent my time. When I was a teen, they helped define me, telling me the hard truth that not every couple is meant to be together. Now that I am finally grown up, they bring me back to my own memories by unveiling some of theirs. They make aging all right, turning it into the journey that I’m sharing with them now. My father and my mother, the bubbles of my privilege, at a certain point, became the materials of my narrative. They became the characters and plots of my childhood, the image of my old house, the story of my life.
Back Cover of Book

Geng 68
The Analytical Essay---How Other Photographers Approached the Idea of Depicting “Childhood”

Timothy Dow Adams stated in his book *Light Writing and Life Writing: Photography in Autobiography* that “sophisticated theorists of photography, imagery, and semiotics have repeatedly demonstrated, in a history remarkably similar to that of autobiography, that photography is equally problematic in terms of referentiality, that the old notions that photographs never lie…and that photography…is an objective ‘naturally mechanical’ process of reproducing reality are much more complicated than they might first appear” (465).

This summer at home in China, I sifted through our old family album. I organized it intuitively based on their compositional rhythms and on my obscure memory, even imaginative narratives. The recurring themes emerged as whimsy, tenderness, and solitude. What surprised me is how, through those yellow stained photographs, my parents and I come across as children at the same time.

My father. China, 1974

My mother with her oldest sister. China, 1978

Portrait of me. China, 2002
These three photographs were taken when my parents and I were each about 11 years old.

Looking at them, I find my parents are somehow unfamiliar to me. Seeing my young father staring back at the camera and my young mother smiling, I began to wonder about the small village where they used to live, about the only food arranged on their plate, their house, their ragged clothes, and their farming tools, none of which I’ve ever seen. And I wondered about my parents themselves when they were children, whom I just briefly “meet” in these photographs. When I close my eyes and think very hard, the likeness between my parents as children and adults comes back to me, but only vaguely. Yet my parents are always here, in my life, in their magnificent stories, and in the weaving they make of my life with theirs. Clearly, I can’t touch, experience or feel their childhoods and their pasts directly, but their lovely, lyrical existence is right here, in those old photographs.

As I reviewed broader memories of my family over time, I found photographs which appeared not only to be of the visual world but also aligned with qualities and experiences that I had difficulty expressing in any other way. The notion of “reality” and “truth” in photography stand up to me as something important. Does a photograph mirror reality? To what degree? Do photographs lie? Just as photographer Sam Abell once said: “I see something special and show it to the camera. The moment is held until someone sees it. Then it is theirs” (Richardson 65). So when photographs stand as some immutable photographic texts in this fast changing world, and yet were and will always be interpreted and reinterpreted by flesh and blood viewers, the questions are: if your way of seeing is different from mine, does that mean that photographs can lie? What is the truth? Do photographs help us clarify life or complicate it?

I’m not sure about the answer, but I do understand that each of my family’s photographs appears to be a proof of the existence of my parents’ pasts, their childhoods as well as mine.
Some of them are intimate enough to resonate powerfully as voices from the past, but some are distant enough to merely stir my curiosity.

After taking photographs in China, Cuba, and the United States, I tried to use my pictures of children to construct an autobiographical narrative of “childhood” that accesses a variety of sources, including memory, family albums, photographs, oral histories, and interviews. I’m interested in using photographs of “childhood” to evoke other people’s own feelings and memories. As I tried to reconstruct my parents’ childhood stories, and mine, I found out that the notion of “truth” came to my mind very often. Did that thing really happen? How can I make sure that my or another’s memory didn’t lie? As photographer Alex Harris described in his introduction to the book *A World Unsuspected*: “it is now difficult for me to remember what was real and what was fantasy, what I lived and what I dreamed” (Xiv). Like Harris, I kept questioning the notion of “truth” in my stories, yet simultaneously I relied on the sources that I had called into question in order to document and create a context for my photographs and stories. Beyond that, I’m also interested in inviting other childhood stories to engage with mine. Therefore, my accompanying writing worked as another layer in that engagement, one that draws together the different childhood stories divided by time and space.

As I attempted to capture and make a series of photographs of children that reveal something about their specific experience of being in the world and to write the accompanying text that included individual stories of childhood, including my own, it became clear that it was also very important for me to attempt to place those stories and my process of creating and editing those photographs within the larger context of how other artists have approached the depiction of childhood.
1. Olive Pierce--“It requires constant vigilance to see people as they are.”

- The Portraits of the Jefferson Park Housing Project in Cambridge and No Easy Roses

I looked through Olive Pierce’s two collections from 1973 to 1985: The Portraits of the Jefferson Park Housing Project in Cambridge and No Easy Roses, which are photographs of students at the Cambridge school where she worked. Here childhood is portrayed through photographs taken in and around the large urban high school in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and through students’ testimonies. I feel I could have known each person in her photographs, as though they could be me, someone I know in real life, or some characters I once read about in books.

I have heard it said, “A good story of real importance is at once a presentation and an invitation.” And I think for photographs, an invitation means creating the possibility for a viewer to have an imaginative response to the existence captured by the photographer. Good photographs invite viewers to find their own connection to the story and coax them into the imaginative realm where they can fully participate in the life of another. After poring over Olive Pierce’s works, the stories written or implied in those photographs made me feel as if they were mine. Olive Pierce captures the vivid moments of children smoking, socializing, dating and learning. Her photographs deal with flesh and blood, as those children are trying out adult roles while struggling to be true to themselves.
The girl in the photograph is reminiscent of a picture I took in Cuba, where a girl is also looking out at the window.
Both of the girls in the photographs are lost in their thoughts. Their eyes are fixating somewhere and they are daydreamers, staring themselves into a scene and consciously wishing for something to happen. There is a slight sense of vulnerability and sadness flickering in their faces, and in both photographs, these girls’ pale, haggard faces are gentle and sensible and their brown eyes have warm, kindly twinkles. The darkness behind them forms a stark contrast with the lightness before them, which left me thinking that this background could be the circumstances they are trapped in at that time. Maybe both of these girls were standing at a crossroads in their life, maybe for the very first time, where the darkness and lightness juncture.

Maybe the truth is that all of us were once dreamers but few of us dream anymore after growing up. Most of us tend to be overtaken by the day to day routines. We work hard constantly in pursuit of wealth and success, but we often fail to live in the present and instead dream about who we are and where we intend to go. Yet in childhood one’s dreams can be attended by
powerful desires and idealistic goals, and then the dream serves the purpose of gratification, control and reinvention of oneself and the world. Like the two girls in the photographs, I was once just like that. It was in childhood that I encountered for the first time the emotions of uncertainty, the betrayal of expectations, forgiveness, love unrequited or offered, and I did so usually on terms I would not have chosen. I never thought of myself as beautiful at that time because of the pain of learning within growing up. Ironically, behind every beautiful thing, there is some kind of pain.

![Cooking Class, 1983](image)

There is a sense of humor emerging in the picture above, as the boy has covered his face with a piece of tissue. We could not know what his face looks like, nor do we know his inner
thoughts. He is immersed into his own world, and we are not allowed to enter. Unlike other pictures by Olive Pierce, there is no eagerness to be seen in this photograph; on the contrary, it conveys a feeling of insecurity and insulation.

Even though Olive Pierce is attentive to capture many details in her photographs, we find here that there is something that she could not capture. There are two worlds existing in this picture, one is what we can see as she presents it to us, and the other world is in this boy’s mind. The coexistence of these two spaces left me in a position wondering that what is at heart of this boy’s life? Clearly, it is not about the cooking class, the teacher behind him, or the classmates sit over him. After all, this world we see surrounding him is only related to his own.

In the hall, 1983

I would not call “In the hall, 1983” a beautiful photograph, because it gives me a feeling of antipathy. It reminds me of the concept of “freaks” in photographer Diane Arbus’s collections, as
this image lacks warmth and compassion to me. Looking at this picture, I feel that everybody who sees them would know right away what labels to use: a bully and a victim.

In this photograph, the girl who has been “captured” appears reluctant and wooden; her tilted body shows she feels uncomfortable being grabbed by both arms. The boy, who is staring straight at the camera, shows a cheerful smile with a sense of pride. They both knew that they were being photographed. And we can feel the visibility of the photographer in this picture as well. Like the boy who is standing in the background of the picture, Olive Pierce is one of these onlookers.

One thing I find interesting about Pierce’s photographs is that there are the obvious images of the "privileged" characters in school cultures—athletes, cheerleaders, gifted students and kids who know how to play the system. However, at the same time, she also shows us some things that are less “glamorous”: the cliquishness that marginalizes the poor, the disabled and the differently gifted young people, and those considered “freaks” who are afraid that they cannot find a way to fit into this world. And it gives me a feeling that the photographer was not so much photographing the school, the basketball games, or the cheerleaders and the bullies, but the relationship of all walks of life, as they were thrown into this world called “school” and trying so hard to live their own lives while interacting with each other.
After reading the testimonies in the book of *No Easy Roses*, I came to know the story of Glynis and her baby girl Natasha. She is one of the teenage moms who got pregnant at an early age and she also had two brothers who were born with intellectual impairment, thus Glynis’s mother babysits three “children” during the day while Glynis is in school.

It is not hard to imagine the heartbreak Glynis went through when her boyfriend said he did not want the baby, or the great difficulty of raising a baby on her own. She is only 15 years old. However, I do not see impatience or self-pity on her face. This is a moment about intimacy and reliance between a mother and a daughter, and the story behind the picture opens up a universal truth that love can be the source of power and healing.
While the photograph Glynis and Natasha reminds me of the photograph I took in Cuba, there are important differences. Beyond my first sympathetic reaction, I found there is something substantial in each of these two photographs, something worthy of holding on to. In the Glynis and Natasha photograph, Glynis is holding Natasha’s little hands, as if she found some precious treasure. In the photograph I took in Havana, the girl seems to bear a burden of loss and frustration because of her confused look. This young girl is 12 years old. She told me she misses her friends at school, that her parents made her drop out of school because her belly will soon become too “big”. She was very shy, so when I took up my camera, she looked away when I clicked the shutter. When I was talking to her, I found out that her darkened eyes were vacant while also being sorrowful. I could almost hear her saying to herself: why did all this happen? I
wanted to sit down with her, listen to her story, but her English words were limited, so we shared
one bag of snacks I had purchased from one of the government assigned grocery stores before I
said goodbye and left.

If I had been able to ask, she may have told me that she had a wonderful childhood before
she became pregnant, before the innocent days of the past appeared like dreams in front of her,
that she did not know why suddenly everything changed and that the loneliness of not being able
to attend school and meet her friends is like a sharp arrow struck deeply into her heart.

There are two couples immersed in looking at each other. The girls open their eyes wide, but
I can’t see the boy’s face. I imagine their eyes are closed and their faces are enchanted, as if they
left time behind and the world around them became quiet. They are lost in “love” because they
found each other. To me, this photograph feels like such a gift, as it exposes me to something that, while common, I never would have been aware of. And it left me thinking that I will never want to forget about the great time I had growing up, because I worry that one day I'll become one of those adults who couldn't relate to their kids because they simply can’t remember having been teenagers themselves. I want to remember the flowers that the boy gave to me when no other boy would, and the goofy poems my first boyfriend paid his friends to write and passed along to me as his originals. It is a time when we have such an appetite for words, for love and the energy to pursue a world of questions. In photography, there is a term: “the decisive moment.” This is when the photographer captures a vivid and magical scene and that scene is fixed and becomes a masterpiece. While looking at Olive Pierce’s work, I thought there must be a decisive moment for love as well, and it happens when we are young. You somehow master the most significant code of intimacy with someone, the code that resists translation.

The most fascinating thing about this photograph is the relationship that must have developed between the photographer and her subjects. This photograph, however, mostly presents an eagerness to be seen. To produce such intimate photographs, Pierce must have spent a long time with the children and students in Cambridge, becoming quite familiar with the community. It is clear that in these two collections Olive Pierce became an insider and she almost became “invisible.” Through the lens of Olive Pierce, these photographs remind me of the truth about what courage is, what love and friendship look like, and what it means to be “young at heart.” The photographic texts make their personal stories jump alive. Those faceless statistics in my head become real people, and that’s the magic of these photographs.

- Portraits taken of Iraqi children in Baghdad and Basrah in 1999
Writer Michael Ignatieff once said, “Memory heals the scars of time. Photography documents the wounds.”¹ In 1999, Olive Pierce went to Iraq to take pictures of Iraqi children. She was an outsider in Iraqi, with both the language and cultural barrier, and she managed to document the life those Iraqi children were leading at that time, when sanctions were imposed after the Gulf War, and people were suffering in a difficult time. *Iraqi Children* is a powerful selection of photographs because it presents an intersectional and nuanced evaluation of Iraqi children, while bringing together the themes of poverty, suffering, war, identity and nation in one collection. I am stuck by how moving and diverse this selection is. Each photograph serves as a witness to the incisive wounds after the War in Iraqi, but also it portrays the humanity of Iraqi children which are in common with all the children around the world, and they fill the gaps in people’s understanding of the life and imagination of Iraqi.

The girl’s classroom is one of my favorites in the collection of *Iraqi Children*. I was amazed by how different those girls’ facial expressions are and how some of them present eagerness to be seen and some do not.

In one photograph, there are so many different emotions and expressions revealed: the tilted chin, the proud face, the terrified look, the praying eyes, the guarded arms, and the jauntily held-back hair with a ribbon or a band. These girls delivered whatever emotions and meanings they had at that moment for the photographer and the camera, reminding us that each photograph snatches a moment out of time and arrests it. Given that it is notoriously difficult to draw out people’s emotions, photography's ability to depict them effortlessly is one of its great attractions to me. By photographing these girls sitting in a classroom, somehow the world of Iraqi children was cut to the scale of a classroom.

These girls remind me of the children I met in the orphanage school of China. They remind me of how their classrooms are decrepit and old, how they are wearing ragged shoes without socks, and how they often told me that they want something that they can lay claim to, like books of their own—softcovers, books they could give to friends, doodle in the margins of, or in which they could mark the paragraphs they liked and wanted to remember. Once I saw the connection between the orphanage children and Iraqi children, I couldn’t seem to see them separately. Every time I look at Pierce’s photograph of “Girl’s Classroom” and my own photograph “Blackboard”, it strikes that today we have higher buildings and wider highways in the city, but narrower points of view and fewer expectations for life. There are delicate houses built in the process of modernization, but more broken homes where people are trapped economically, and more children who are entombed in obscurity.
My feelings are that I had found some nobility in the hard lives that these children led. It seems that these girls and boys have been accepted and loved, but it also leads me to ask what would happen to them if they were growing in a place that had been traumatized by war or poverty? What future would they have? What kind of friends, education, professional possibilities and work would be available to them? What would their life be? I find myself asking these questions that no one can answer. In fact many of us in the world often overlook the fact that such post-war and left-behind children exist.
This image, like every other photograph in this collection, stops time and drags us back to the ordinary events in our life. I imagine Olive Pierce was standing in front of the little girl, not very far, not very close, watching the passing crowd, and waiting for the right moment to click the shutter. The girl was dressed in a black robe and looking directly into the camera. She is comfortable and a slightly mysterious smile rather than nervousness shows in her face. On the contrary, from what I see, Pierce’s camera is a vehicle for her and through it she says to the viewer, “Come and buy some seeds, please. If I had enough money, I could go back to school and I’ll choose a better way to live.”
In *Iraqi Children*, children stare into the camera, study in the classroom, play in the street, yank at each other, and, in the most interesting picture, stops on a street corner in Safaafir Market to sell the seeds and give you an “unreturnable gaze”.

![Five children, Basrah, 1999](image)

After looking at the work of *Iraqi Children*, I wondered how much the war and violence impacted these children and just how many have been affected. When searching “children in Iraq”, a presentation given in the Dialogue sessions of the Kuala Lumpur War Crimes Tribunal, May 2012 came up. “…Line up the bodies of the children, the thousands of children — the infants, the toddlers, the school kids — whose bodies were torn to pieces, burned alive or riddled with bullets during the American invasion and occupation of Iraq. Line them up in the desert sand, walk past them, mile after mile, all those twisted corpses, those scraps of torn flesh and seeping viscera, those blank faces, those staring eyes fixed forever on nothingness. This is the
reality of what happened in Iraq; there is no other reality….”2 The presentation made my heart tremble. It is not hard to imagine how the daily hardships -- bomb blasts, gunfire, killings of family members and sectarian violence have wrecked the lives of Iraq's children.

When poring over all the photographs in Olive Pierce’s work carefully, I do feel the land of Iraq's heavy breathing, with the wounds of the war and the pressure of economic development. However, at the same time *Iraqi Children* is not entirely about despair, war and decline. There is a sense of brightness, freedom and peacefulness that belongs to the time of “childhood” and reveals itself even in the midst of the uprising tension of Iraq. Maybe Olive Pierce decided to let memory heals the scars of time, but using photography to document these children’s sorrow and joy to raise our awareness, that we are all children once, that we are all human beings.

2. **Wendy Ewald--“Their eloquence with the camera was a passage of childhood.”**

When photographing other people, to some degree we have to intrude on them and sometimes on their lives. The question, however, is in what way do we intervene on their lives? That is to say, what kind of vision do we impose on the subjects when we are photographing them or asking them to photograph things? And how honest can this vision be when an outsider presents his or her subjects?

Some people, such as the anthropologist Jay Ruby, have come to the conclusion that only self-reflexive documentary, “giving the camera” to those represented, evades authoritarian distortion (Ballerini 175). Even when the camera remains entirely in the hands of professionals, photographers often make claims of hoping to avoid accusations of authoritarianism and subjection. Olive Pierce may have felt the need of shying away from the accusation of

---

authoritarianism, so she provided the student’s testimonies in the book as material evidence that her photographs are telling the real stories. As a matter of fact, I found out that in the process of editing my own photographs and stories, I couldn’t help but somehow emphasize that, “it was truly my story and their stories together.”

What Wendy Ewald does with her work is give the camera to the children while guiding and informing them, therefore imposing some of her own vision on them and combining the two visions (hers and theirs) together to create something that is closer to what those children’s worlds are like. As she stated in one of her interviews: “I began thinking how amazingly children can get involved so deeply in their fantasy play, and I was wondering how I could access that visually. So I thought that they could get the sense that they can actually create an image, that photography is not just finding images, but that they could control and create one.” Therefore, when Ewald’s images are placed on equal footing with those of her students, we experience her voice as one among many. We are required to guess who is the photographer. This approach keeps the question of authorship in the foreground. It destabilizes viewer’s expectations. We cannot take for granted who is seeing and who is being seen. It is also not clear who is the teacher and who is the student (Hyde 172).

• *Portraits and Dreams: Photographs and Stories by Children of the Appalachians (1985)*

In the book *Portraits and Dreams*, Wendy Ewald asked children between the ages of six and fourteen to photograph their dreams and fantasies. As those photographs compel viewers to see the lives of those children, it also serves as an interpretation of a story about the photographer’s own emotional journey.

---

In the beginning, Ewald’s emphasis on idyllic Appalachia was its “ties to the land, families and community, rooted in a cultural past and bound to nature’s rhythms of birth, growth and decay and where most families tend gardens and keep a few animals.” Within its isolated mountain culture, the notion of family and community is a relatively strong bond to everyone’s existence. However, although she hardly mentions the extreme poverty in her work, through those children’s photographs, we can see that the place is one of the most brutally exploited places in the United States, rife with disease and hunger.

Gradually, Ewald found out that her intervention did little to change their lives, as she wrote in the conclusion of her introduction to the book. By admitting that “almost all my young students finally lost interest in photography, even though, unlike some other projects, the inexpensive cameras they were using were theirs to keep.” She accepted the truth that “those children became mountain men and women with the limitation and protection of their society. One girl quit school to get married, one boy joined the army, and another girl who wanted to be a lawyer is a waitress at the local Pizza Hut.” She leaves the reader with a nostalgic note about a boy, now a grown man, bringing his wife back to visit the darkroom where they used to make photographs. As she wrote in the book: “I realized I was trying to hold on to a period of their lives that they had let go of. (Those children) their eloquence with the camera was a passage of childhood” (Ewald 20).
This photograph is one of my favorite image in *Portraits and Dreams*. The thin horizon, the dancing figure, the weight of the brick wall on the left, and the pale and dazzling sunshine squeezing out in the right corner worked as a strange magic of balance and perspective in this photograph. Denise is dancing in her bathing suit while reaching for the red star sky. As she says in the book: “I told my girlfriend, Michelle, how far away to stand and to take the picture when I said. I like people in action, and I always look for a certain time to take a picture” (Ewald 114).

Denise was one of Ewald’s favorite students in the community, as Ewald’s described that “she had a distinctive and original sense of composition, and she never ran out of ideas as some of others did” (18). Unfortunately, she quit photography class when she hit puberty. “She had lost her interest but couldn’t explain why” (19). This gets me to thinking that even though Denise
must have grown up and her time of photographing was ended, the pictures remain, and the time when she was vivid and lithe and seemed to laugh in the face of suffering and death and to struggle for her personal power remain. Maybe that’s part of the magic about photographs. It records some moments and then the moments become part of the history in people’s lives, revised and revisited by others as time goes by.

In this photograph, the little girl and the three dolls are sitting side by side. There is a small distance between the doll and the girl that distinguishes the girl from the group of dolls that compels viewers to look closer. When the girl is placed with those dolls, it seems like she is one of them, decorating the table with imagination and fantasies, and also some plain and direct humor. However, when I stare at the photograph longer, my eyes are caught by the little girl’s
frightened look, her twisted gesture, the contour of the small body, and the crease in her flesh. The photograph shows us these things, but only we get to decide what they mean. I wonder what the little girl was thinking at that time, why she seems a little afraid, and what is at the heart of her world. Then I considered that though the exterior world we see is different from the interior world, “Maybe childhood is painful for all of us sometimes and that’s what some of us remember…and if you have direct access to expressing it, maybe that’s what comes out” (Hyde 174).

Looking at the photographs of the dolls in *Portraits and Dreams*, reminds me of the photograph I took in the Yangxinzhuang Orphange of China, where there is a little girl who had dreams with her doll.
The blue doll the girl is hugging in the photograph is the only thing her mother left for her. Her mother left her father for another man when she was little, and her father migrated to big cities to find a job. She said sometimes she dreams of her mother as she disappeared from the bus station and it is hard to see her face since what was left of her mother in the dream was often just the color of her blue dress filling in the spaces of crowded people. Gradually, the doll
became her lucky charm because when she hugs it to sleep, sometimes she gets to see her mother and father in her dreams.

One day, her father called the school and said he might come home for this year’s spring festival. Later that day, she was all happy and joyful. The next morning before we got up from bed, she crawled over to the side of bed where I was sleeping and told me she had a dream about her father. “My father was back. He was a little taller and stronger. No wonder grandpa always says food in big cities like Beijing will make people that way. He shook my grandfather’s reluctant hands after stepping into the house. Then he saw hiding from my grandfather, and he said, ‘what’s wrong with you? Come here and give me a hug.’ He asked me with a big smile on his face and grandfather said, ‘Oh, she talks about you all the time, now she is just too shy to come forward.’ ‘Zhaoyang, it’s me, your father, I’m back.’ Then his stubbly face was in front of me, and his thumb was tracing a circle on my cheek.”

Everything was too real to be believed in that dream and when she told me, her eyes were drowned in tears because her time with her father had just ended.
Denise Dixon---I dreamt the twins tried to kill each other
“I like to take picture from my dreams, from television, or just from my imagination. I like those kinds of pictures because they are scary. If I didn’t know how I took them. I’d be scared by them” (Ewald 114). This is the photograph Denise took with her twin brothers. One day she had a dream about them being killed and then she asked her brothers to lie down and act like they were dead. She also put make-up on their faces in order to make the scene look real.

These two photographs make me uncomfortable. When looking at them, I find myself questioning why a little girl would be this “crazy” voyeur who is longing to see the moments when her brothers are hurting each other. However, the scene of the boy lying quietly and peacefully in the second picture also provides viewers with a sense of calmness and beauty. Looking at this photograph it is easy to imagine the little boy stiffening on the ground next to you and somehow the broken wood and the dirty ground become his semi-public and semi-secret sanctuary.

Photography historian Miles Orvell writes: “The camera has woven itself into the texture of our lives so completely that we can hardly conceive of an event ‘happening’ unless it has been photographically recorded. So also with our sense of ourselves, our ancestors, and our families: we know them, we know ourselves, through the images that we and others have taken. We study them, we ruminate about them, we remember them, and they constitute, in a way, the silent narrative of our lives” (Orvell 161).

Portraits and Dreams tells stories about other children’s families, friendships, dreams, death, love and identity. When one of boys tells a story about how he had a fight with his best friend in reality and then he dreamt that he killed his friend, it reminds me of the story of my childhood friend, and my dreams about him.
He was my adult neighbor and the king of the kids in our community because he liked to hang out with kids and everyone in the neighborhood just loved him. He would drive the pick-up car from the construction site and take us down to the market and buy us popcorn and candies. He was one of my best friends at that time. We shared a area behind our house that his two daughters and I liked to play in. Most of the time it was fun. Occasionally we would squabble over a jar of jam or a doll, but whenever my parents’ quarreling sounds began to raise the roof, my father would open the back door and basically chuck me out on that playground without a word. That was the part I hated.

My neighbor was very tall and I was small so he had to stoop slightly to talk to me. When he started to talk, he gazed at you with these sharp and lightened eyes. He was a construction worker and his wife worked as a nurse in the local hospital. They were a happy family, I remembered thinking, because there was always bread in the basket and tea in the mugs at their home, and they often welcomed me to eat dinner with them when my parents were having huge fights. They would tell each other jokes in a high giggle, as the wife tangled her fingers in their young daughter’s unruly hair. In that lovely home they allowed me to escape what was happening in the home next door where I lived, and they made me feel as if I belonged because their love for each other was so deep and settled that they somehow could manage to hold me in it for a while as well.

He liked to read people’s palms, and he always said the same thing to the people he met for the first time: if you want to learn about your life, you should have your palms read. He said that the woman who lived across the street had long and curvy palm lines, which is not good for marriage. Once I asked him to read my palms; he refused. He said I was too young and that my palm lines weren’t grown completely yet.
After I turned 12, I began to realize that the whole palm reading thing was bizarre and unjustified. Only on TV, I thought, are people willing to believe their palm readers will help them find their true love or guide them to seize their fate as if there are any concrete steps. You don’t want to live your life surrounded with a fantasy that was told to you by someone else as a reality. However, my neighbor said palm reading is not superstitious but scientific. He said everything is fated and everything happens for a reason. The reason was written down on your palms.

There was one day that my father was so mad at my mother that he slammed the refrigerator door so hard that the milk exploded, and he turned around and told my mom to shut up or he would punch her in the face. I don’t know if he did it or not, but I remember my mother was choking with tears. I was extremely angry and sad at the same time but all I could do was rush out of the door.

When I ran into my neighbor taking his two daughters out for grocery, I gulped down a sob and tried to smile at them. They asked me if I wanted to join them. I remember he touched my head while I was nodding.

One day he was taking us, me and his two daughters out for a drive. His wife was at work. I was sitting in the backseat, and watching out the window as suddenly two cats bolted out from one side of the road and dashed towards the car as he braked. After he steered around and pulled over, we found one cat lying in the middle of the road looking just fine—except it was dead. The other one was bleeding, but it was hard to tell from where exactly because blood was all over its body. The cat kept breathing for a few minutes before it stopped. It had tire tread marks through its middle. The younger girl wouldn’t stop crying and my neighbor just kept saying he didn’t see the cat and he was very sorry.
When I got back home that night and sat at the dinner table with my parents, I felt like throwing up. My mother asked me where did I go and I said I was over at our neighbor’s house. She asked if I was ok, I said yes, but I went to bed crying, thinking that we killed two cats.

After I turned 15, we moved to a bigger house with white walls and fancy furniture. I heard people saying that my old neighbor had a new baby. But his baby was born with down’s syndrome. I heard that when he asked the doctor to see the baby, and when he moved the fold of cloth to look upon his tiny face, he gasped. I remember watching him holding the baby embarrassed and sad outside in the crowd. I was on my way to school and passing through the old neighborhood. Once I went over and said hi. He smiled and asked me if I wanted to see the boy. There was a sense of pain flickering over his face when he tried to talk to him. “Hi, it’s your big sister who used to live next door coming to see you, smile.” He sighed because he knew that his son’s life would be a succession of heartbreaks since there would be no opportunities, no assistance and no hope for kids with down’s syndrome in that small town of China.

Allen Shepherd—–I dreamt I killed my best friend, Ricky Dixon
That is probably the last time I saw my neighbor, when he still had the dreams of buying a new house, of curing his baby’s illness, of growing old with his family. One year later, he died, with his baby.

It was years after his death before I heard from my mother and other people that he had been sick for a long time. Depression is what turned him into such a sad person. He began to spend most of his time at the bedroom window looking out and he stopped working and reading other people’s palms. I guess the medication he took never actually helped him. He said in his will that he felt sorry for everything. But he hated his baby being sick forever, that he couldn’t sleep at night, that he wanted to seize fate or the universe by the throat and make it leave his baby alone.

I never saw his wife but I met his two daughters once in the old neighborhood, the sisters with whom I once shared laughter and friendship. As my eyes locked on them, I manage to remember nothing about their father but to talk about school, clothes, everything except for their loss. After he died, I wrote about him in my diary and kept having dreams of fire time to time for several weeks.

He is dead. One of my childhood best friends died at the age of 38. The fire ran all over his body, and the poor baby, who hasn’t had the chance to see the world carefully, also died. He gave the poison to his child first, and then splashed gas all over his body. That’s what I heard. I feel sad, really sad. He was such a nice person and the baby was so innocent. My friends now became girls without a father.

August 13th, 2004
I wondered if physical suffering was more transitory for him than his emotional sufferings. Sometimes I thought about those cats too. Maybe death is not really all that cruel or enduring. I wondered if he ever read his own palms. I wondered what did his fate tell him.
I have always known that not all photographs touch all the people and different people are touched for different reasons. Therefore, I don’t know what other people would make out of this photograph, but I find myself immersed in the picture and it is impossible to say why.

All I know from the photograph is this boy named Scott Huff imagined himself on a spaceship and it was about to take off. His head seems to be sticking directly out of the photograph towards me, as his stubby legs remain closely entangled in the branches of the tree. I imagine stepping into the space and standing in front of him, and feel the strong wind shifting under my feet, my legs and my hair, just like what it feels like when an airplane is taking off. I don’t know this boy, but that doesn’t get in the way of me projecting my own imagination onto him and his photograph. I find myself looking at him so carefully, and because of his undivided
attention I follow his stare, focus on his move, and forget it is just a scene from this boy’s imagination.

In the book, a girl named Darlene Watts writes: “I’ve gotten lonely before, and I stayed out in the yard and just listened to the birds. Then imagined that they came down and played with me. I sat there and dreamt all day. I’d imagine there were bears that lived around here that would come down and play with me. It seems they were real people and they found the best clothes they could to wear. The bluebirds found the best color of blue. We played and drank tea”(Ewald 95). All of these beautiful dreams and imaginings draw me to the beauty and pathos of the moments when, for example, a boy in his games becomes a pilot, a soldier, or a friend with animals, or a little girl plays with a doll and imagines she is Dolly Parton.

As I pored over the book Portraits and Dreams, I found myself asking whether these photographs taken by these children are good art? If not, then what makes a photograph a piece of art? Clearly, these children were not professional photographers, they hadn’t been trained to look at the world through a machine and a frame before Ewald trained them in a relatively short time, some of them had never held a camera before they met Ewald, but is that a sufficient reason to deny that they have made art of their fantastic and sometimes grotesque imagination and dreams?

There is an old Chinese saying that says, “a good photograph borrows from life.” Through the lens of children in the Appalachian Mountains, I came to understand their life and their relationship with the land where they play like children and hunt like adults, where animals are both their friends and dinner. Maybe in Portraits and Dreams, the camera became less an instrument for art, but more a way of expressing feelings, a vent for these children’s delightful self-representation.
Ewald is genuinely committed to her work. “In fact, she often displays an almost missionary zeal in speaking about her collaborations with underprivileged children. She has given years of her life, and at times her private financial resources, to carry out her project. Her work is not shoot-and-run ventures” (Ballerini 163). By spending a long time with the children, just like Olive Pierce, Ewald also was given access and became part of this community. In fact, through means only made available by the camera, every child presented an eagerness to be seen in their own photographs. As Ewald wrote in the book, “working with the children in Kentucky was like having accomplices in a secret game, that we were both looking at things very hard, and photographing things, which the adults didn’t really understand was going on” (13).

The written texts in Wendy Ewald’s collaboration work with children in the Appalachian Mountains also play an important role. The narratives or captions assist and guide viewers of the photographs to know what we are to see and how we are to see it. The written and visual languages inform and strengthen each other. The narratives also create the external conditions that provide the photograph with an explicit meaning and story.

To me, *Portraits and Dreams* provides human context to social conditions and complicates the simple idea of what childhood looks like. “The poverty in the community where Ewald worked is evident in the barren yards, rundown houses, and equally rundown bodies of the adults who are coal miners, but the foregrounding of the imaginary puts such actualities into an insignificant and negligible background” (Ballerini 180).

Although I found some of the photographs in *Portraits and Dreams* made me uncomfortable at first, in terms of those imaginative, sometimes scary and ominous photographs, the truth is that I saw pictures with a quality of “stickiness”. They are sticky because they make you feel. And it was because of that “stickiness” that stories that Ewald tries to tell were remembered. She
manages to undermine the categorical notions about childhood as “simple and carefree”, and to reconsider the traumas, dreams and fantasies of these youth. Her work does not fall into the common rut of simplifying the complicated relationships children have with their friends and family into a few short and plain words that are dismissive of their complexity and individuality, but instead invites viewers to see children as the emotionally complicated human beings that they are.

3. Sally Mann—“Photographs open doors into the past, but they also allow a look into the future."

• *Immediate Family, 1992*

*Immediate Family* deftly portrays Mann’s three children, while navigating the elusive breach between reality and dreams, facts and fiction in her photographs. Sally Mann selected photographs of her children, which are made from their birth to the time they were grown up, editing them to create a highly personal and interesting body of work. “Many of these pictures are intimate, some are fictions and some are fantastic, but most are of ordinary things every mother has seen—a wet bed, a bloody nose, candy cigarettes. They dress up, they pout and posture, they paint their bodies, they dive like otters in the dark river” (Mann 7). As Mann tried to record and represent the ordinary moments of children in her photographs, some critics pointed out that “Mann staked in her photographs an astonishingly authoritative, intensely personal claim.” As concerns include the sale of such provocative works, assumptions about a mother’s protective role, and the consent of the children have been brought up: “the very scope of issues that Mann’s photographs raised indicated their success in confounding viewer’s

---

expectations, arousing unmentionable fears, and challenging assumptions about childhood innocence” (Bussard 79). As the title of this work implies, Mann managed to emphasize her physical proximity and immediacy of feelings with her subjects, both her children and the place, the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains in southwestern Virginia, where she and her children have grown up. “Even though I take pictures of my children, they’re still about here. It exerts a hold on me that I can’t define” (Mann 5). Mann’s photographs are also rooted in her past, for she was herself photographed nude by her father, Robert Munger, a Lexington doctor and amateur photographer.

Personally, I can’t well imagine that Mann’s children will regret their mother has seen or arranged parts of their past and lives. To the contrary, I think what they’ll have all their lives is a very precious opportunity to look back at their past, their childhood, their awkward, bitter and happy moments, and to study the existence of those memories and their meanings. As Eric Ormsby wrote in the article “Childhood House”: “somehow I had assumed that the past stood still, in perfected effigies of itself, and that what we had once possessed remained our possession forever, and that at least the past, our past, our childhood, waited, always available, at the touch of a nerve, did not deteriorate like the untended house of an aging mother, but stood in pristine perfection, as in our remembrances,”5 so if our past and childhood are always available to us but only in need of a touch to a nerve, then clearly photography is one way to recollect the dispersed pieces of memories, no matter if it is for a remarkable or unremarkable person, a forgotten story or something worthy. Photography is the bridge connecting them to us. Sally Mann, with her work, built that bridge and tries to bring herself, her children and the viewers back to a lost paradise, a forgotten landscape and a pristine memory.

---

At the very first glance, this little girl, Virginia, caught my eyes. She is pale, her expression caught somewhere between shock, denial, anger and prayer. Her hair falls to the line of her chin, then bluntly stops short. Feelings of gentleness, vertiginousness and fear all emerged in this photograph at the same time.

The elderly lady sitting next to the little girl is the older Virginia. She is an African American woman who helped raise Mann and her two brothers in Lexington, Virginia. "My parents were important but Virginia may have been the single most important person in my
life,”6 says Mann in an interview. She named her youngest daughter after Virginia. The older Virginia is in a peasant skirt; one of her hands is rubbing the little girl’s hair. She is propped against the white wooden door, and her posture shows a sense of fatigue and calm.

It is just another ordinary afternoon. Older Virginia’s hands reach out, hours will be consumed and voices won’t go dim in the night. “Ninety-three years separate the two Virginias, My daughter and the big woman who raised me. The dark, powerful arms are shrunken, even as the tight skin of my daughter’s arms pucker with abundance.”

This photograph suggests that the re-imagination of the worlds of childhood and adulthood, and the line between these two worlds, can become unclear and blurry. By looking at it, I find myself wondering: Who would ever know what could go on in this young girl’s mind? How much can we know what is at heart of the world of this old lady who sits next to her?

---

This photograph is full of contrasts. The old Virginia’s gray hair and flabby body cast a stark contrast with this young Virginia’s wrinkle-free face and sturdy body. They are looking in the same direction, but they are heading for different paths of life. When one gets old, it means his or her journey of life is about to end. In this picture, I imagine old Virginia wrinkles her brows into deep concentration, and her body posture is stiff and static. She may not know how many days she has been given to spend, but she may feel her hands are getting empty and that thousands of days have already slid away from her, like a drop of water disappearing into the ocean. Her days are dropping into the stream of time, soundless and traceless. And now, already her hair is gray, and the wrinkles climb up on her face, her hands and her body.
While the young girl’s open arms convey feelings of vigor and vitality. Her eyes are full of curiosity, as if life has given her too many questions and she finds no answers yet. These series of contrasts within the picture form a unique beauty to me.

By putting the two Virginias in the same space and frame, these photographs got me to thinking that the old Virginia’s past could be the young Virginia’s present. The young and old Virginias in the photograph somehow constitute these two-fold realities. As these two worlds conflict with each other, they produce an odd kind of vitality. The young girl may be the “spitting image” of the older Virginia, and also a reflection of the photographer, a virtual replica of her mother and older Virginia. It is not hard to imagine that this young girl’s access to adult experience and feelings could be condensed and borrowed from the old Virginia.
As these photographs capture the ordinary life routine and extend the story of Mann’s relationship with her children as well as the notion of “family”, Mann managed to constitute a reflective and detailed narrative to her own life, her past and childhood as well.

In the photograph, Mann’s daughter Jessie is wearing a white Easter dress and looking at the camera. Her titled head, dramatic gesture and subtle smile show the innocence and faithfulness of childhood.

Although this photograph shows the girl, the landscape, the kids behind the fence, and a plethora of other things, it refuses to explain any of them. There is only the caption “Easter dress”. Through research, I found out that this Easter dress was made for Mann when she was six.
by her mother and her grandmother, Jessie Adams. “When Jessie Mann, thirty years later, spreads out that skirt, the hills that surround her are the same modest ones of our home,” says Mann in the text of *Immediate Family* (3).

It strikes me that not only does this Easter dress bear the memory of the two-generation, but it is still demanding attention and insisting on its presence in the photograph now. Just as Mann wrote in the book, “Memory is the primary instrument, the inexhaustible nutriment source. Photographs open doors into the past but they also allow a look into the future” (7).
I have heard childhood described as bubbles, in the sense that whenever we venture out in
the world, we feel there is a bubble surrounding us, a bubble of privilege, which keeps us from
interacting with the outside world.

Looking at the photograph I took in Cuba, I have realized that my parents were once my
bubbles. They kept me happy, satisfied and safe from the chaotic and complicated world. When I
was little, my parents are how I spent my time. When I was a teen, they helped define me, telling
me the hard truth that not every couple is meant to be together. Now that I am finally grown up,
they bring me back to my own memories by unveiling some of theirs.

Maybe Mann was once her children’s bubble as well; maybe when they grow up, they will
be thankful for what Mann did with their childhood moments by turning them into the journey
that they’ll share with her in the future. Mann, the bubbles of their privilege, at a certain point,
may become the materials of their narrative, the image of their old house, the flowers on the porch, and the story of their life.

When poring over the *Immediate Family*, I ask the same questions the writer Reynolds Price asks in his afterword to the book: “Do the pictures of others coincide with what you believe to be your memories, and to what extent have the pictures created those memories for you or merely served as reminders of them?”(Price 75) For me, some of the Mann’s photographs do serve as the reminder of my memories.

Since I was a child, I have always understood that love is a fragile thing and can be easily lost, the heart easily broken. After my parent’s official separation, I should have known that once
someone gets a little escape velocity going, she or he hardly ever comes back. But my real problem is my desperate insecurity and the resulting need for love and affirmation. It is this that puts me in a tough spot because I somehow fail to accept the truth that not everyone will love me. I pretend I don’t have to pretend that I am proud and secure. I choose to believe I can be who I am and people will like me for it and give me the affirmation I want. It’s a predicament. Because sometimes no one shows up.

As Mann indicated in her book, “there’s the paradox: we see beauty and we see the dark side of things. And how is it that we must hold what we love tight to us, against our very bones, knowing we must also, when the time comes, let it go?”(7)

I remember sitting on a sofa like the one in the photograph on an afternoon after class, not naked, but among my furry puppets and colored clothes, among my books and newspapers. In
the spare quiet moments before my mother came back from work, I closed my eyes and threw my head back against the sofa. At that time, I knew that there was something deep down my heart longing to be changed. I wanted to mar the perfection of my grades, to make my mother less able to do all that she did, by which I meant, less able to make me practice piano, read books and take up my space all the time. I wanted to be cool and fun, just like my friend, Xiao.

She was the girl I met in junior high, who was usually sitting in the front of the whole class. She was taller, thinner, and prettier than me. She smiled a lot and that was what most set her apart from others. She had a lot of friends following her here and there, and I didn’t know why she saved a table for me in the cafeteria at lunch. Maybe I seemed lost as I tried to find a place to sit. However, that was the beginning of our friendship.

Looking at it then, I was happy that I had Xiao as my friend. I was happy about the way she told me the truth as we floated together, happily. At least I was feeling safe and secure. Until one day on my birthday party, when I waited at home patiently for Xiao and others to come to my party, and she stood me up. In fact, she showed up with my other friends at another girl’s party.

I don’t know why she didn’t come. I thought to myself: What did I do wrong? She didn’t even try, and our friendship didn’t concern her.
The next morning I called in sick to school. During the afternoon, Xiao called me. She said she was sorry but she couldn’t be my only friend and I shouldn’t be jealous of other girls with whom she also played because, she said, friendship cannot be noosed in or demanded from someone as I tried to do with her. She said I needed too much from her and she couldn’t afford to give it to me.

I was in enraged. I yelled at her, said I felt betrayed and hung up the phone. When you take a stand on a friendship, in rage, you make it clear, this friendship is over. Until then, I didn’t realize how big the empty space in my heart felt, how my need for friendship and my understanding of it somehow pushed my friends away.

My mother talked to me afterwards, and said she understood how hard it was for me but I had to be careful about whom I chose to be my friends so I didn’t get hurt.
“I felt confused.”

“I know.”

“I felt betrayed.”

“I know that too.”

“Don’t I deserve someone to be my real friend? Someone who really cares about me?”

“Oh, of course you do. You know sometimes the meaning of the word changes, but not your longings for it.”

I didn’t understand what my mother meant at that time, but years later one night after my boyfriend broke up with me I finally knew what she meant. Sometimes I am too caring, even possessive when it comes to love. I want to give all my love and attention to the one I care about while ignoring their needs and feelings. I want to be more than I actually am, and I want someone to notice. I always think that if you love something or someone well enough, you never let it go. But when my failure to forgive, to make time, to communicate, to engage, became a terrible threat to the way I care and love, I knew I had to change.
There are many nude photographs of children taken by Mann, and all of them are composed beautifully and unleash a sense of nostalgia. As her three children merely stare dead straight at the camera, proud, earnest, and defiant of any command to smile, this photograph recalls one of my favorite Chinese poems to my mind.

Those bygone days have been disappeared as smoke by a light wind,
Or have been evaporated as a mist by the morning sun.
Those that have gone have gone for good,
Those come keep coming
Yet in between, what is left in such a rush?
What traces have I left behind me? Have I ever left behind any gossamer traces at all in this world?

I have come to this world, stark naked,

Am I going back, in a blink, in the same stark-nakedness?

The truth is indicated in the poem. We have come to this world, starkly naked, and when we go, we are back in the same stark-nakedness because we can’t take anything away with us. Therefore, maybe Mann was trying to embrace the uncertain nature of time and the complicated views of her hometown in her work, as she had described--“in this confluence of past and future, reality and symbol, are Emmett, Jessie, and Virginia. Their strength and confidence, there to be seen in their eyes are compelling—for nothing is so seductive as a gift casually possessed. They are substantial; their green present is irreducibly complex. The withering perspective of past, the predictable treacheries of the future, for the moment, those familiar complications of time all play harmlessly around them as dancing shadows beneath the great oak” (7).

After reviewing the large body of Mann’s work, somehow deep down in my heart I wish more of my childhood was recorded. During the time when I was growing up, “don’t move and smile” was the watchword for studio photographers. My parents took me to the photography studio to take birthday photographs every year until I went to high school. They said in their generation, photographs are such luxuries that they were only made to commemorate the very special occasions, when a baby was born or dying or a man or a woman is getting married. Therefore, when the cost of making photographs fell, they realized the importance for me to take photographs to record some of my life. Despite my eagerness to please my parents, I didn’t like
the idea because every birthday snapshot of me turned out to be the “same”, with my grim eyes, “cheese” smile, and awkward posture.

Sally Mann’s work made me realize that there were scary, awkward, heartbreaking, ordinary moments in my childhood as well, but none of those moments were recorded. As I ask the question why wasn’t more of my interesting and messy childhood experience recorded, I realize that what Mann did with her work is use photography as a vehicle to represent personal experience, that sometimes memory is a locked sanctum filled with treasure and secrets, and photography can become the key to the mysterious place. We search it, explore it and somehow it brings us a lot of our own belongings we have almost lost. As photography historian Douglas Nickel has noted, when “the means by which people regarded their own histories changed; the way lives were lived became entangled in the way lives were now represented”(Douglas 11).

Sally Mann’s blurred, gritty photographs, sometimes compositionally askew, are very different from the clear, elegantly composed images of Olive Pierce’s work. To some degree, those photographs are similar to Wendy Ewald’s work in its grotesque and dreamy characteristics, but within a different approach. Mann’s photographs of her children are often tinged with a sense of nostalgia. They are portraits of a separate and surreal world of childhood that is long distant and beyond touch. Such effects of nostalgia and ambiguity are often achieved by the means of the light, “as the nuances of light, where the slightest shift can turn a sky from promising to threatening—further plays on issues of memory, so that the image of children at play look like the dreamlike recall of subject looking back toward an earlier time” (Steward 368).

In the introduction to the exhibition “Personal Stories, Public Pictures”, curator Katherine A. Bussard writes: “take one picture and stop time, preserve the moment. Take enough pictures over
enough time, however, and they may eventually shape, perhaps even transform, the way life is
lived and commemorated” (Bussard 9).

Mann’s work captures the ordinary life that we have all experienced as a child or as a mother.
These loving, fearful, humorous, trustworthy and profound pictures explore the nature of family
love, maternal and child response, and reflect on the connection between a mother and her
children, the children wanting to please their mother and the mother’ power over and empathy
for the child are both amplified. The most striking thing to me is that these photographic texts
make her daughters’ stories come alive, as Mann described these photographs in one of her
books: “We are spinning a story of what it is to grow up. It is a complicated story and sometimes
we try to take on the grand themes: anger, love, death, sensuality, and beauty. But we tell it all
without fear and without shame” (Mann 7). Mann’s photographs provide viewers with the
texture, the details, the sights, and above all, the emotions of important events happening in her
children’s daily lives, and it makes me think that when photographing other’s lives and dreams,
we are not only finding out about the world and the people in it, but also we are finding out about
ourselves.

As I reviewed the criticisms around the work of the Immediate Family, I found that the real
tension lies in the ground when those private and personal photographs are represented in the
public context, reviewed and commented on by a huge number of viewers, like myself. However,
the question is: are those personal images as private or individual as they seem? Maybe like
Mann, “once we recognize that the very public and collective nature of our notion of self, family,
relationships, childhood and even place and time, are not as private or individual as they seem”
(Bussard 17) and therefore, those moments and stories become part of our lives and stories as
well.
4. Conclusion

While interacting with the words and people in these photographs, I wondered how does the work by these three photographers’ relate to my own? Maybe, for photographers, photography is not only about seeing someone else, but also creating yourself. And if so, then each photograph is about the photographer’s unfolding self-creation.

Maybe when Olive Pierce captures the vivid moments of children socializing and learning, Wendy Ewald works with her students in Kentucky, and Sally Mann photographs her three children from the time they were babies, they are seeing themselves as well. Maybe when we are getting to know these new people, our own children, and new places, we are also getting to know more about ourselves.

In the book *American Photography*, Miles Orvell discusses how sometimes photographs can function as a kind of time machine, bringing us back in time to the moments in our own past lives, or in the past lives of our loved ones. When looking at the work of photographers Wendy Ewald, Sally Mann and Olive Pierce, childhood seems like a period of time that is more visually rich than most, regardless of culture, and it is true that photographs can record our lives but also enable us to look even further, into other people’s lives, distant in time and place from our own. Each of these artists chose to depict the days of childhood by giving individual voice to the children who are often overlooked or ignored. There are certain substances that these photographers reveal which are universal and belong to all human beings. These photographs transcend the boundaries of nationality, geography and time to light us up with a sense of déjà vu, feelings we find in ourselves as well as in others. And the story I find familiar within their works is what binds us together as human beings.
Maybe one should ask why these photographs have not lost any relevance or impact over the decades. To my mind, it is clear that these photographs deliver some universal themes to the viewers. But the most important thing I found about what Olive pierce, Sally Mann and Wendy Ewald each did with their works is that they did not photograph a closed world--each of their photographs leave space for our own projections. The more stories unfolding and more emotions conveyed through their work, the more I found out that the images made by these photographers conjured my own photographs and experiences, even to a degree that in some of their photographs, I see myself, my loved ones, my past and my childhood.

As Robert Adams put it in his book *Beauty in Photography*, “it [a work of art] outlasts its own age—suggests that the most important truths in it are less constraining than the codified world views of a particular time”(97). Paradoxically, these photographs are separate while staying coherent, changing while remaining stable. They break the long-held notions of opposing extremes in photography and create something new: reality and fantasy, fact and fiction, documentary and experimental, and a window to the outside world and as well as a mirror onto oneself.
Bibliography


