13

Prepositional Spaces: Family Photographs, History, and Storytelling in Memoirs by Contemporary Western Writers

by Melody Graulich

Reflections

A photograph of my grandfather holding me on a horse (figure 13-1) occupies the first page in my mental snapshot album, my favorite photograph of myself.

Born in the Badlands of South Dakota, or so he said, my tall, handsome grandfather was a western drifter who rode buffalo, sang about a girl named Duckfoot Sue, and was descended from Geronimo, or, on alternate days, Sitting Bull. Gramps always said that while he never lied, it might be that he sometimes "prevaricated." Rambling with me in the California foothills, Gramps taught me the freedom of self-definition that comes in storytelling. Affectionate, emotional, he twice cried with me through *The Incredible Journey*. With him I could climb fences and trespass into outlawed territory, be grubby and loud-mouthed, swim in horse troughs, ride bareback. Telling me that *he* had wanted to name me

Figure 13-1. George holding Melody on Aliano's horse. Photograph by Howard Graulich, 1952. Reproduced courtesy of the author.

Rebel, he let me know that I, despite being a girl growing up in the 1950s, could do anything I set my mind to. The photograph, I have always felt, illustrates the story I have just told: provided by my grandfather with the chance to ride a horse, with the El Gabilan mountains forever etched as my special backdrop, I furrow my eyebrows in determination and meet the challenge.

My experience, of course, is not unusual. As the filmmaker Pratibha Parmar has suggested, "The deeply ideological nature of imagery determines not only how other people think about us but how we think about ourselves."[1] We all have family albums—or, at the very least, shoeboxes stuffed with dog-eared snapshots—and the images they contain become a primary means toward self-knowledge. All self-knowledge is limited, flawed, but perhaps the knowledge yielded by photographs is most suspect, for while photographs present the illusion of an objective reality, of a moment that "really" happened, their meaning is ultimately captioned by the stories with which we frame them. And the relationship between story and photo is a chicken-and-egg proposition: the

photo is as likely to engender the story as the camera is likely to capture a memorable moment. Memory is as much about what we have forgotten as it is about what we remember. We use photographs to construct memory, to discover what we have not looked at but can now see, in new contexts. And that is the subject of this essay, in which I will examine how four western women autobiographers situate their life stories within family albums. My subjects are Leslie Marmon Silko's *Storyteller* (1981), Yoshiko Uchida's *Desert Exile: The Uprooting of a Japanese American Family* (1982), Mary Clearman Blew's *All But the Waltz: A Memoir of Five Generations in the Life of a Montana Family* (1991), and Norma Cantú's *Canícula: Snapshots of a Girlhood en la Frontera* (1995).[2]

These authors' personal constructions of memory also recount alternatives to the conventional history of the American West. As photographers Jo Spence and Patricia Holland argue, "Family photography can operate at . . . [a] junction between personal memory and social history, between public myth and personal unconscious. Our memory is never fully 'ours,' nor are the pictures ever unmediated representations of our past. Looking at them we both construct a fantastic past and set out on a detective trail to find other versions of a 'real' one."[3] While Spence and Holland seem to imply that public myths affect our readings, the authors situate their photographs within memoirs to provide alternative contexts for reading social and political history, to complicate the West's dominating mythologies. Their photographs offer glimpses into overlooked stories.

The photographs in these family memoirs do occupy "junctions," exposing the intersections and boundaries between cultures in that quintessential location for cultural contact across generations, the West. The photographs locate the personal story within a historical space, reinforcing N. Scott Momaday's sense of our experience, described in his own family album, *The Names* (1976): "The events of one's life take place, *take place*. How often have I used this expression, and how often have I stopped to think what it means? Events do indeed take place; they have meaning in relation to the things around them."[4] Photographs are usually

viewed as stopping time, creating a moment of stasis, but the space they occupy in these texts is volatile. I call it "prepositional space," where textual crossings or movements "take place," establishing location and relationship. As if illustrating Hemingway titles, photographs define "within," "against," "over," and "across," allowing authors to present cultural interplay and conflict as dynamic, with no fixed or static meaning.

As art historian Martha Sandweiss has pointed out, "Visual objects provide us a way of looking at a vast interlocking network of cultural forces," challenging us "to uncover these fragile and constantly shifting associations of meaning." By focusing "on the static content rather than the dynamic context of . . . images, western historians have generally used visual documents as illustrations rather than as sources of primary meaning themselves." But, she argues, "we can begin to understand visual images as important bearers of social meaning. Then, instead of turning to a graphic image because we need it to illustrate what we already know, we will turn to it because it can teach us what we want to learn."[5]

I began this essay with an image illustrating what I already knew, my grandfather's stature in the mythic West and his long shadow in my life. As I thought about the image in relation to Sandweiss's quote, I wondered if it could teach me something about what I wanted—or needed—to learn. I wanted to destabilize my fixed, perhaps static interpretation of my past, to enter that more volatile space. I began to wonder who took this photograph that had become so central to my self-definition, who stands to the west, back to the setting sun, leaving a shadow to the left of the image. And then I remembered another photo (figure 13-2), clearly taken only moments after the first, as the horse moves forward. This is my father, the photographer of figure 13-1, who ran away from home in 1945 at seventeen to join the Merchant Marine to escape an abusive father. Here he is at twenty-five or so, trading places with his father-in-law, a loving and physically demonstrative man. My father, who has sometimes seemed distant, not that involved in my life, my father who recently died after a long illness. I notice how he leans back, almost out of the shot, lets me

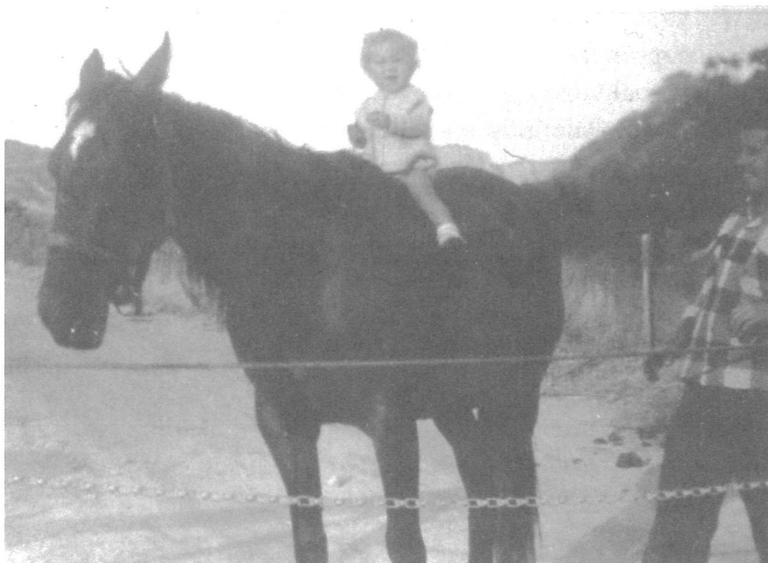

Figure 13-2. Melody on Aliano's horse with Howard. Photograph by George Russell Wilkerson, 1952. Reproduced courtesy of the author.

sit on the horse alone, lets me go. I see his pride and delight in me. I grin. I wonder where I can fit the pieces of his story. For now, I think of a movie that defined his generation, *Rebel Without a Cause*. In this photo, I find these reflections.

Tracing Stories in Photographs: Storyteller

Leslie Silko's *Storyteller* begins with a striking cross-cultural image: she describes a "tall Hopi basket" filled with photographs taken around Laguna Pueblo by her family.[6] Her basket of photographs brings into relationship traditional tribal arts and technology and reflects the cultural interminglings—in this case Hopi, Laguna, and Anglo—that define the Southwest and are central to her book. These family photos have a "special relationship to the stories" Silko tells, stories she uses to explore personal and tribal history. She invites us to consider their "special significance": "The photographs are here because they are part of many of the stories / and because many of the stories can be traced in the photographs" (1). The stories and photographs are embedded in each other; they are

mutually constitutive. Fluid, always evolving, the stories, and the storyteller, depend on interchange.

Let's trace a story in a photograph that appears late in the book (figure 13-3). The photograph was taken by Silko's Grandpa Hank: the subjects include Hank's father, Robert G. Marmon, Silko's great-grandfather; three of her great uncles; her father and uncle, the two little boys. Pa'toe'ch Mesa is in the distance. This photograph on page 273 recursively comments on stories that begin on the book's first page: "My grandpa Hank first had a camera when he returned/from Indian School, and years later, my father learned/ photography in the Army/Photographs have always had special significance/with the people of my family and the people at Laguna./A photograph is serious business and many people/still do not trust just anyone to take their picture" (1).

In subtle comments like this, Silko refers to the history of Anglo photography of American Indians, and she presents *Storyteller* as countering that long tradition of objectification, yet she also makes known her family's appropriation of technology acquired in white institutions. The photograph displays the trust between male members of Silko's family, trust exemplified in other

Figure 13-3. Untitled photograph of Robert Marmon, his sons and grandsons, ca. 1920s. Photograph by Henry C. Marmon. Reproduced courtesy of Lee Marmon.

stories the photograph traces. Very early Silko introduces her great-grandfather, an Anglo other whites sometimes called "Squaw Man" because he married a Laguna woman, settled there, learned to speak the language, and "never seemed much interested in returning to Ohio."

Grandpa Hank and his brother Kenneth
were just little boys
when my great-grandfather took them
on one of his trips to Albuquerque.
The boys got hungry
so great-grandpa started to take them
through the lobby of the only hotel in Albuquerque
at that time.
Grandpa Hank said that when the hotel manager
spotted him and Kenneth
the manager stopped them.
He told Grandpa Marmon that he was always welcome
when he was alone
but when he had Indians with him
he should use the back entrance to reach the cafe.
My great-grandfather said,
"These are my sons."
He walked out of the hotel
and never set foot in that hotel again
not even years later
when they began to allow Indians inside. (16–17)

Robert Marmon walks out of the white establishment, the way his understated but indignant comment walks away from the straight left margin of the page. In many ways this poem sets up the opening stories of the collection, which focus on white racism. But we must wait until nearly the collection's end, page 255, to understand how Marmon moved outside his own culture and

what we might think of as "white establishment thinking" to understand and explain his experience. Silko recounts a "very simple" "coyote story" her great-grandfather told Elsie Clews Parsons, in which a meadowlark teases a she-coyote by calling her

"Coyote long-long-long-long mouth!"
Until Coyote gets so confused and upset
she spits out the water
she was carrying back to her pups.
Four times Coyote tries to carry the water back
and four times Meadowlark sings this song
"Coyote long-long-long-long mouth!"
and Coyote opens her mouth
spilling the water.
When she finally gets back to her pups
they are all dead from thirst. (255)

Silko concludes that all she knows of her great-grandfather are stories like this one, told by her family, and the "old photographs" like figure 13.3.

He stands with his darker sons
and behind the wire-rim glasses he wore
I see in his eyes
he had come to understand this world
differently.
Maybe he chose that particular coyote story
to tell Parsons
because for him at Laguna
that was the one thing he had to remember:
No matter what is said to you by anyone
you must take care of those most dear to you. (256)

Figure 13.3 appears some twenty pages later, taken by one of those "most dear" to him, his son, Hank. While different viewers

can trace many stories in it, here is one: surrounded by his grown-up sons and their sons, he has rejected the socially constructed spaces and categories of the hotel. He is no longer defined by outsiders as "squaw man" but by his place in a racially mixed family, a traditional community and its stories, and a landscape. The photo tells Silko that his experience has changed him, that he has come to understand the world differently.

But he has also traveled between worlds, a legacy he will leave to his sons and grandsons, whose skills at photography were learned as they moved between worlds. The men are framed by a mesa, where many of the traditional stories in the book take place, but also by a car; both the mesa and the car are half in, half out of the frame. Cars figure prominently throughout the book, in text and photographs. Grandpa Hank, we've learned much earlier, had wanted to be an automobile designer and subscribed to *Motor Trend* and *Popular Mechanics* throughout his life. Indeed, on the same page as that story we see a self-portrait of a young "Grandpa Hank and his 1933 Auburn," while a few pages earlier a much older Grandpa Hank sits reading one of his magazines in a shot taken by his son (192, 272, 187).

That son, Silko's father, Lee Marmon, a professional photographer, also negotiates between worlds, between "confinement" in "regular jobs" and escaping to photograph clouds (160). The conflict between economic work and art, between confinement indoors and freedom and fertility in open space, is pictured on facing pages in photographs of Lee Marmon lining up a shot with his camera in a sandrock landscape and standing behind the counter in the store the family owned (156 and 157). His images of landscapes with clouds, some including Laguna Pueblo, are scattered throughout the book, and he is an artistic mentor to Silko, telling her she should becomes a writer "because writers worked their own hours" and "can live anywhere," even in the hills (161). Silko does not tell us that she took his advice in so many words; instead she closes the text in her book with an image of herself in a sandrock landscape. Text and image speak to her father's influence on her decision to become an artist. She might also have inherited her

interest in cultural interminglings from her father. She includes her father's photograph of her baby self, laughing, on a cradleboard leaning against a beehive oven, a technology the pueblo people learned from the Spanish (108), although she does not include one of his most famous photographs, that of an elderly Indian man seated comfortably wearing high-top sneakers: the title is "White Man's Moccasins."

Throughout *Storyteller*, Silko uses photographs to show her life "taking place" in culturally intermingled spaces. Consider another Lee Marmon photograph of Silko's "Grandma A'mooh, in her kitchen with [Silko's] sisters, Wendy and Gigi" (269) (figure 13-4). At this point in the book (the photo is on page 33), Silko has established Grandma A'mooh as one of the influential storytellers in her life, who passes down traditional Laguna stories. The photograph suggests that she comfortably inhabits two worlds—the oilcloth tablecloth, the clock—and some sixty pages later we discover the significance of what she's reading:

Figure 13-4. Untitled photograph of Grandma A'Mooh in her kitchen with Silko's sisters, Wendy and Gigi. Photograph by Lee H. Marmon, ca. 1950s. Reproduced courtesy of Lee Marmon.

Grandma A'mooh had a worn-out little book that had lost
its cover.
She used to read the book to me and my sister
and later on I found out she'd read it to my uncles and my father.
We all remember Brownie the Bear
and she read the book to us again and again
and still we wanted to hear it. (93)

Grandma A'mooh initiates her children and grandchildren into American popular culture—*Brownie the Bear* is a "golden book," the kind sold in grocery and drug stores throughout the 1950s and still today, one I was bought as a child and have read to my children—with a Laguna inflection: "She always read the story with such animation and expression / changing her tone of voice and inflection / each time one of the bears spoke—/ the way a storyteller would have told it" (93).

Silko also includes a photograph tracing the relationship between the two most significant storytellers in the book, Aunt Susie, whose voice fills the early pages, and Silko herself, pictured as a toddler standing at her aunt's knee (figure 13-5). The New Mexican landscape recedes behind them, bounded by the barbed-wire fence so central to Anglo settlement of the West. It would seem to bifurcate worlds, yet Aunt Susie comfortably leans against it. A graduate of Carlisle school and Dickinson college, a "scholar" and student of history who "had come to believe very much in books" and schooling, a writer, Susie also "passed down an entire culture / by word of mouth / an entire history / an entire vision of the world" (6–7). Educated in two cultures, she leaves her mark upon the world in two languages, literally and metaphorically, as will her niece.

The barbed-wire fence moves the toddler and her aunt far forward in the picture frame, providing a sense of intimacy echoed in the aunt's fond and proud gaze at the child. Marianne Hirsch has described "the gaze in family albums"—between photographer and subject, between subjects within the frame of the shot—as "mutually constitutive," that is, the subjects are defined in a reciprocal relationship.[7] Although Silko does not look into her aunt's eyes, in film language, shots taken from the side, with a person looking outward, not at the camera, cast us into the future. Silko presents her aunt as the most significant influence on her writing, saying, "I write when I still hear / her voice as she tells the story" (7). In this shot by her father, her aunt's foundational support and mentorship are rendered visible.

With its unconventional mixture of oral storytelling, memoir, myth, poetry, fiction, *and* photography, *Storyteller* emphasizes cultural continuity and cultural adaptation. It reveals lives taking place in a western space where distinctions blur between story-

Figure 13-5. Untitled photograph of Aunt Susie and Leslie Marmon. Photograph by Lee H. Marmon, ca. 1950. Reproduced courtesy of Lee Marmon.

tellers, historians, and photographers, all valuing both tradition and technological change.

Taking Photos Was Against the Rules: Desert Exile

So, as I turn from Silko to Yoshiko Uchida, I argue that these authors use photographs to create historical spaces, particularized landscapes of a multicultural American West, within which the stories can be traced—but also against which they can be traced. As Susan Sontag points out, "Photography implies that we know about the world if we accept it as the camera records it. But this is the opposite of understanding, which starts from *not* accepting the world as it looks."[8] While Lee Marmon could photograph the West's most ubiquitous type of fence, the photographers in Uchida's *Desert Exile* could not. The War Relocation Agency forbade any photographing of the guard towers or barbed-wire fences in the "camps" in which Japanese Americans like Uchida were imprisoned during World War II. In Uchida's book, photographs distort, erase, ignore, suppressing historical "reality."

Yet the issue is even more complicated because writers like Uchida also use family photographs to claim a space in the national album and official public documents—photographs, letters, internment orders, proclamations, laws—to authenticate what happened, to provide "evidence." As bell hooks suggests in an essay from *Picturing Us: African American Identity in Photography*, "When the psychohistory of a people is marked by ongoing loss, when entire histories are denied, hidden, erased, documentation may become an obsession.... For black folks, the camera provided a means to document a reality that could, if necessary, be packed, stored, moved from place to place."[9] As Sontag remarks, "Photographs furnish evidence. Something we heard about, but doubt, seems proven when we're shown a photograph of it."[10]

Early in *Desert Exile*, Uchida describes the Issei's "great propensity for taking formal photographs to commemorate occasions ranging from birthdays and organizational get-togethers to weddings and even funerals. I suppose this was the only way they

could share the event with their families and friends in Japan, but it also resulted in many bulging albums in our households" (figure 13-6).[11] Passages like this one seek to "normalize" the Issei, to contain their "difference"—they are still connected to Japan—within the frame of their ordinariness: surely every American middle-class family has a family album, celebrating such events. Such passages and photos argue for acceptance. Back-to-back photos of Uchida in a kimono and playing with her dog "Laddie" reinforce the same duality, visually hyphenating her identity (figure 13-7).

Yet as she lost control of her freedom of movement, so did Uchida lose control over her visual self-representation after her family's imprisonment at Tanforan and Topaz. As we turn the pages of *Desert Exile*, moving from conventional private photographs to an unattributed Dorothea Lange shot of a newsstand, the headlines screaming "OUSTER OF ALL JAPS IN CALIFORNIA NEAR" (figure 13-8), the family album goes awry, and we trace the

Figure 13-6. Uchida Family Portrait. Photographer unknown, ca. 1931. Reproduced courtesy of the Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

Figure 13-7. Yoshiko Uchida in a kimono and playing with her dog, Laddie. Photographer unknown, ca. 1931. Reproduced courtesy of the Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

disjunction between the private story—the images of happy and ordinary family life in middle-class America—and the public text, in this case a newspaper headline, and recognize how entangled they are, what they reveal.

Uchida mentions a young "artist who lived a few stalls down" from her in Tanforan (formerly a race track) who in order to get privacy put up a "large 'Quarantined—Do Not Enter' sign on her door" and when asked what was wrong, shouted "'Hoof and mouth disease. Go away!'" (96). The artist was Miné Okubo, who later wrote: "Cameras and photographs were not permitted in the camps, so I recorded everything in sketches, drawings, and paintings. *Citizen 13660* began as a special group of drawings made to tell the story of camp life."[12] An artist, Okubo was able to draw her experience, but Uchida's photos are taken from the National Archives, Library of Congress, or private collections because the internees were not allowed to have cameras in Topaz, not allowed to document their own reality.[13]

Furthermore, while photographs of camp life would seem to provide documentary evidence, Uchida (and other internees) anticipate Alan Trachtenberg's point that "photographs shift and slide in meaning": "They may seem to offer solid evidence that objects and people exist, but do they guarantee what such things *mean*? The lesson of the photograph, as early photographers came quickly to learn, was that meanings are not fixed, that values cannot be taken for granted, that what an image shows depends on how and where and when, and by whom, it is seen."[14]

In numerous passages, Uchida raises questions about what photographs actually document, anticipating Sontag's point that understanding begins with not accepting the world as it appears. After a change of cooks had improved the food in the mess halls, pleasing everyone, she writes, "a friend told me that the Army had come to take films of her mess hall, removing the Japanese cooks and replacing them with white cooks for the occasion. She was so

Figure 13-8. OUSTER OF ALL JAPS IN CALIFORNIA NEAR! Photograph by Dorothea Lange, 1942. Reproduced courtesy of the War Relocation Agency Collection, National Archives. Accession number 210-G-1-A-36.

infuriated by this deception that she refused to go to her mess hall to eat while the films were being made" (92). These WRA films present the "official" history of what went on in the prisons, but, as Uchida makes clear, they were staged with whites in starring roles as those literally "providing for" the Japanese Americans, and the resistance of Uchida's friend is invisible.

This scene recalls an earlier anecdote that points to Uchida's self-consciousness about her erasure. She is the only Japanese-American girl in a "Girl Reserve" unit at her junior high school when a photographer comes to take a picture for the local newspaper: "The photographer casually tried to ease me out of the picture, but one of my white friends just as stubbornly insisted on keeping me in. I think I was finally included, but the realization of what the photographer was trying to do hurt me more than I ever admitted to anyone" (41).

In passages like these, Japanese Americans (many actually citizens) are literally pushed out of the national picture, making readers/viewers question all visual representations of historical events. Internee writers like Uchida also point out how private subjectivity is erased in public exposures. Here is a passage from Monica Sone's *Nisei Daughter* (1953):

> Newspaper photographers with flash-bulb cameras pushed busily through the crowd. One of them rushed up to our bus, and asked a young couple and their little boy to step out and stand by the door for a shot. They were reluctant, but the photographers were persistent and at length they got out of the bus and posed, grinning widely to cover their embarrassment. We saw the picture in the newspaper shortly after and the caption underneath it read, "Japs good-natured about evacuation."[15]

The FSA collection at the Library of Congress contains numerous examples of such shots, though the captions offer far more neutral readings. Uchida's use of photographs in her text and her editorial comments on them illustrate how, in Trachtenberg's words, photographs "shift and slide in meaning." To challenge the photograph's documentary objectivity and focus on viewer reception, Sontag turns to the example of internment photography, arguing that while in the 1960s many Americans would see the subject of internment photographs "for what it was—a crime committed by the government against a large group of American citizens," only a "few people who saw those photographs in the 1940's could have had so unequivocal a reaction; the grounds for such a judgment were covered over by the pro-war consensus."[16]

On one level documentary, the photographs Uchida includes reflect the failures of institutional, public history. Combined with her text, they offer counterpoint history, revealing the disjunction between the "objective" images and her subjective experience.

Superimposing One View Over Another: All But the Waltz

Uchida raises the question of whether images taken from without, by outsiders, can ever really represent an inner reality. In *All But the Waltz*, Mary Clearman Blew uses photographs to slide one reality over another, like a transparency, to slip through time. She occupies a paradoxical role in her family, seeing herself as simultaneously an insider and an outsider; she believes her character is shaped by her family but does not feel accepted by them. Each chapter in the book she subtitles *A Memoir of Five Generations in a Montana Family* opens with a photograph that helps her rethink the legacy of tangled feelings that defines her memory, to shift perspective, to move from looking at her family from within, with a child's eyes, to looking at herself inside—and outside—her family, from an adult's perspective. She can see in the photographs alternative stories and layers of meaning.

"As far back as I can remember, a framed photograph of my great-grandparents hung in the house where I grew up," says Blew in a chapter called "Reading Abraham" (figure 13-9).[17] Abraham Hogeland was what we call a pioneer: he came to Montana Territory while working as a surveyor for the Northern Pacific Railroad, settled a ranch, and eventually became the Fergus County surveyor, measuring "every mile of central Montana" (21). "Surveying," says Blew, "is the application of geometry and trigonometry to achieve a representation of the land on a reduced scale. Surveying

Figure 13-9. Abraham and Mary. Photographer unknown, 1890. Reproduced courtesy of Mary Clearman Blew.

exchanges one perspective for another; it exchanges the physical for the abstract. As land is measured, it shrinks into its dollar equivalent. It can be purchased or sold. With its conversion into capital, land loses its primacy; it becomes a resource" (22). In the process Native peoples are dispossessed and "primeval grassland" contained into "straight lines and right angles," converting "place from habitat to real estate" (22, 36).

As these words suggest, Blew does not approve, nor does she accept, any inheritance from her great-grandfather. He would contain not only the land in predictable patterns, she thinks, but also her own deviations: "Where could I find certain footing or even air to breathe in his world of right angles?" (36). Her comments about Abraham emphasize mutual rejection: "I came to disapprove of Abraham and to believe that he would have disapproved of me" (16). Because Abraham's photograph "was a better likeness of [her] father" than any she owned and because she was still "smarting from the barbs and obstacles" she encountered for her ambition to get a Ph.D. and be a writer, she frames him in the terms in which she has come to understand men in her family: "Abraham had been a paterfamilias, an oppressor, a traditionalist like my father, who had tried to keep me home on the ranch" (16). Referring to Abraham's apparent refusal to look directly at her from the photograph, she writes, "Seen through Abraham's turned vision, I was a runaway daughter, a failed 'little wife,' an uppity woman who *somehow got the idea in her head she knows something, but by God she don't know a goddamned thing*" (36). She imagines her great-grandfather speaking in her father's familiar voice, and she thinks, "I had brought Abraham to life, but his life and mine seemed mutually exclusive. As I had suspected from the beginning, Abraham and I had nothing to say to one another and no way to say it if we did" (36).

But this conclusion implies that the past has nothing to say to the present, something Blew is not willing to accept. When she is in graduate school, her grandmother sends her pages and pages of scraps torn from Abraham's surveying ledgers, and she finds he was a writer. When her sister sends her the photograph to keep, Blew finds herself "[h]aunted . . . [by] the familiar mouth and cheekbones, the austere shape of the head," by questions and more questions, most particularly "Why did Abraham write?" (18, 26). The question reflects her desire for an acceptable patrimony. But her conclusion is unwelcome: "Abraham discovered that writing about the northern plains was another means of transforming them into space he could measure and control"; he "was pinning down and mapping and limiting . . . concealing" (28, 34–35).

Yet eventually a friend suggests that Abraham's writing had been a way of speculating about "our descendants unknown and their view of us," that "'perhaps Abraham had you specifically in mind as audience, and what a touching and lonely act his writing then becomes'" (37). Thinking about Abraham's writing as a lonely gesture toward her across time frees Blew to make a gesture toward him. Like him, she exchanges "one perspective for another," but she exchanges the abstract for the physical: her gesture is

imagistic, ambiguous, rather than linear and measured. Gazing out her Idaho window at the Snake River, symbolic of her move away from Montana and her family's constrictions and expectations, over the desk that represents her "uppity" achievements, Blew uses the photograph to speak back to him:

> Abraham, your photograph hangs over my desk. Above the reflection on the glass from the window opposite, Mary stands stalwart behind you while your gaze is set eternally over my shoulder. In the reflection, superimposed over you and Mary in your good formal dark clothes, the Snake River spreads its slow current as it rolls toward its confluence. The early lights of winter glow on the far bank of the Snake and glow again in the reflected depths of your photograph. (38)

Here Blew superimposes the present over the past without erasing it. The emphasis in this passage on the confluence suggests that Blew sees the past as flowing organically into the present, that Abraham has flowed into her, despite his determination never to look directly at her. She creates herself out of these reflections. And this metaphor echoes throughout her work. Her later book, *Balsamroot*, closes with another symbolic merger as Blew and her daughter head "home toward the confluence of rivers in the deepening Idaho twilight"—a hardwon and complicated bond between generations.[18]

Throughout *All But the Waltz*, Blew's female relatives offer her messages as contradictory and convoluted as those of Abraham, especially her mother, who passed on to her daughter her own sense of being unwanted. In this mother/daughter knot, the desire for merger coexists with the threat of being eclipsed. The chapter "Getting Married," devoted to Blew's mother, Doris, opens with a photograph of the two of them, a photograph that captures a moment when the child cannot differentiate herself from the mother, when the two seem merged in the mother's gaze (figure 13-10). Yet the adult Blew has often felt estranged from her mother; she recounts one key moment from the child's perspective when she realized her separation from her mother:

> For my mother was never a child. She had materialized, larger than life in her starched housedress, the day I slipped while climbing the wire gate and hung by my hand from a barb until I tore loose and fell. I was not three years old, but I carry the scar in my palm to this day, a tiny white line that diverges in a Y, and I carry that first memory of the woman who scooped me out of the dirt and bore me into the log house, scolding, "Can't you ever walk through a gate? Why do you always have to climb?" (127)

Walk through the gate: be conventional. Don't climb: copy my life. Scarred with a divergent Y, a fork rather than a confluence, Blew yearns for the connection suggested by her mother's gaze in

Figure 13-10. Doris and Mary. Photographer unknown, 1940. Reproduced courtesy of Mary Clearman Blew.

the photograph yet resists her mother's lessons and refuses to follow her lead.

Trying to understand Doris as a woman rather than *her* mother, she asks her aunts what she was "like when she was my age?" (128). The anecdotes she hears get her no closer to her mother and so she falls back on photographs, poring "over those same snapshots with no more sense of finding my mother than I had when I was ten" (129). They show her mother smiling, young and slim, getting her teaching certificate, getting married. But these images are blocked out by figure 13-10: "I know the date is 1940 because I am the month-old infant lying on my mother's lap. She sits in a wooden rocking chair, in profile, her eyes on me. I can almost see the years settling in, the web of lines contracting her face. She has gained perhaps fifty pounds since her wedding day" (130–31).

The photographs lead Blew to see her birth as a Y—like the scar in her hand—where her mother's life splits. Doris carries the weight of a role she could not reject, only abhor. Mary comes to understand a story her mother told her: when Mary, echoing her grandfather, said no one had "'never saw so smart a kid'" as herself, Doris replied, "'I knocked that right out of you'" (132). Doris was preparing her daughter for the only role offered her, where being smart was being "uppity." But Mary refused to allow her mother to superimpose her choices on her daughter. The chapter's end, once again ambiguous, suggests Blew's recognition that her mother unconsciously read Mary's determination to escape from the work and the weight of poverty and male dominance as another abandonment. When Doris "finally told part of her story," she tells of a day when she picked up "'a chunk of stovewood'" and yelled at an intruder, "'*You get your goddamned hands off my mother!*'" (135). Recognizing that she will never be there to defend Doris in the same way, Blew watches "the two tracks of the road blur between the stubble fields" (135). Historical changes in opportunities offered to "smart" and "uppity" women allowed her to follow a new road, a path that left her "never" able to "know" her mother, yet the parallel tracks suggest that each woman was smart and perhaps even uppity in her own way. As she gazes at her mother gazing at her, Blew no longer frets about being eclipsed by the silhouette of her mother's life. Each occupying half of the photograph, she and her mother remain separate, yet they meet in the gaze, and their lives overlap: Blew closes the chapter with her desire to be "half as brave as she" (136).

Across Borders: Canícula

While Blew represents herself as personally divided, emphasizing confluences and partial overlaps, Norma Cantú faces cultural divisions and represents herself as comfortably consolidating cultures, using cultural symbols to challenge divisions. In Cantú's *Canícula: Snapshots of a Girlhood en la Frontera*, historical and political divisions turn into dualities. Dedicating her book to her "family on both sides of the border," who "argue amicably. . . about what happened," and using both English and Spanish, Cantú combines text and photographs to delineate and ultimately undermine divisions between fiction and history, past and present, Mexico and United States, Mexican and U.S. citizenship and identity (2). She uses her "family snapshots" to move across and challenge various boundaries, to explore what she claims as "that safe place between two countries."[19]

The word Cantú invents to describe *Canícula* conveys her ability to bring things together, to define and inhabit new spaces—"autobioethnography." She further complicates this generic category by undermining her photographs' transparent veracity. Her story, she says, "is told through the photographs," and yet "many of the events are completely fictional, although they may be true in a historical context. For some of these events, there are photographs; for others, the image is a collage" (xi). With the reference to collage, Cantú once again emphasizes the act of bringing together into harmony apparently disparate elements. She works into her "collage" the stories of her community, suggested in, though perhaps not fully represented in, the photographs: "So although it may appear that these stories are my family's, they are not precisely, and yet they are" (xi). In this description of her book, Cantú

most clearly blurs the lines between fiction and history, between personal story and social history.

The snapshots, rather like those in Silko's Hopi basket, lead her not to an orderly history but to a "collage of stories gleaned from the photographs randomly picked, not from a photo album chronologically arranged, but haphazardly pulled from a box of photos where time is blurred" (xii). Just as the dead return to visit the living during the Mexican festival *Día de los Muertos*, the "story emerges from photographs, photographs through which, as Roland Barthes claimed, the dead return; the stories mirror how we live life in our memories, with our past and our present juxtaposed and bleeding, seeping back and forth, one to the other in a recursive dance" (xii).

Like her section titles, some in English, some in Spanish, her family's photographs repeatedly identify their dual heritage and the permeability of the border between Mexico and the United States. Identity and selfhood are costumed in the popular culture and folklore of the borderlands. In a chapter called "Cowgirl," introduced by figure 13-11, in which we see a line of Hispanic kids dressed in the gingham and blue jeans associated with U.S. popular culture, a costume for a "square dance" for the end-of-the-

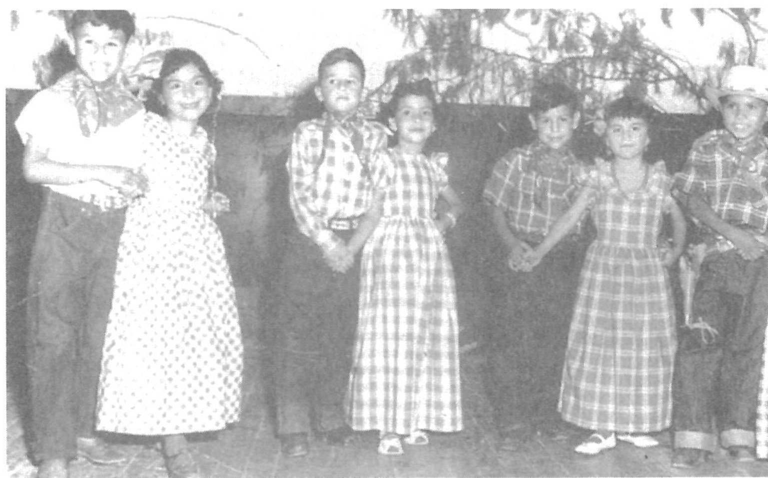

Figure 13-11. Square dance. Photographer unknown, ca. 1950. Reproduced courtesy of Norma Cantú.

Figure 13-12. Mami as China Poblana. Photographer unknown, no date. Reproduced courtesy of Norma Cantú.

year program, Cantú describes pledging allegiance to the U.S. flag in the morning, yet the movie plots the kids imitate after school show that they could step out of line and into stories with alternate images of the western past: "We played cowboys and Indians, feeling 'Western' for a long time. At the Azteca or the Cine México we watched Pedro Infante or Jorge Negrete be Mexican cowboys who sang and wooed and never fought Indians; and on TV we watched a different story. . . Zorro, Hopalong Cassidy, Roy Rogers, the Cisco Kid, the Lone Ranger" (34). Heroes in a culture descended from Indians, on screen at the "Azteca," Infante and Negrete star in plots apparently not determined by a history of Indian fighting.

While men dominated the cowboy culture of both sides of the border, Cantú also describes female models, also from both sides. One image shows Cantú's "mami," who "wasn't even born in Mex-

Figure 13-13. China Poblana One. Photographer unknown, ca. 1950. Reproduced courtesy of Norma Cantú.

ico, who went there as a ten-year-old knowing only to read and write in English, dressed as 'China Poblana' with 'Viva Mexico' on her charro hat" (40). (See figure 13-12.) Later Mami makes Cantú her own China Poblana "costume" to allow her to try on her ethnic past, making her "feel like the Chalupa in the lotería game, like María Félix, Dolores del Río [another border crosser], a movie star frozen in costume" (39) (figure 13-13). Unlike Blew and her mother, who seemingly define themselves in opposition to each other, Cantú and Mami mirror each other, both cultural cross dressers who have access to but cannot be contained by multiple cultural roles.

Cantú makes the same point about the flexibility of her identity through photographs of legal documents, which also seek to define identity as one thing or another rather than both. She illus-

537153

Al portador (a)

se le expide la presente por haber demostrado su nacionalidad MEXICANA, estando autorizado (a) para salir y regresar al país sin más requisito que la presentación de esta tarjeta.

MEDIA FILIACION

Señas particulares

Lugar de nacimiento

Fecha de nacimiento

Estado Civil

EL JEFE DEL SERVICIO DE POBLACION

ESTA FORMA SE EXPIDE GRATUITAMENTE

Figure 13-14. Official U. S. immigration papers. Reproduced courtesy of Norma Cantú.

FILIACION

Edad: 16 años
Estado Civil: soltera
Profesion: estudiante
Estatura: 1.62 mts.
Color: moreno
Ojos: cafés
Pelo: negro
Señas particulares: ningunas

Lugar de nacimiento: Nuevo Laredo, Tamps. 3 enero 1947
Domicilio: 104 San Carlos St. Laredo, Texas.

FIRMA DEL PORTADOR

Reg. Ext.
6-890-531.

NOTA: Esta Matrícula deberá ser refrendada cada dos años

Figure 13-15. Mexican citizenship document. Reproduced courtesy of Norma Cantú.

trates a chapter called "Mexican Citizen" with two photographs, one from her "official U.S. immigration papers" (figure 13-14) and another from a document claiming she is a "Mexican citizen" so she can travel, at age twelve, to "Mexico without [her] parents" (21) (figure 13-15). "The papers flourishingly signed and decorated with an official stamp—I am declared a Mexican national" (21), but in Mexico she finds herself desperately "homesick for my U.S. world full of TV—Ed Sullivan and Lucy and Dinah Shore and Lawrence Welk." Both photos, she declares, contain eyes "that stare back at me . . . when I look in the mirror and ask 'Who am I?'" (21).

But Cantú is not lost or bewildered. Her book is filled with speculations about the variety of roles available to her. Late in the book, in a section introduced with a snapshot of her high-school classmates, she imagines a "different life" than the one she lives, "a beauty shop of my own, a two-story house in front of a neighborhood plaza, a life as a Mexican," which leads her to conclude with a passage about movement back and forth, never fully settled: "And some of us leave, and some of us never come back. Some of us keep coming back. Some of us love, and some of us hate, some of us both love and hate our borderlands. Some of us remember, some of us forget" (132).

The inhabitants of Cantú's "frontera" cannot be readily framed in any single shot. Like those from John Sayles's *Lone Star*, they tell history from multiple and sometimes contradictory points of view.

Their world is defined by constant negotiations between cultural traditions, and in their very beings—caught on film—they represent the changes and adaptations that define western history.

The Queen of Spades

As I grew older, my view of my grandfather was shaped by the name he had intended for me. In my own stories, stories like the one with which I began this essay, he became the quintessential American hero. As figure 13-16 suggests, he loomed over my life, offering me a silhouette, a space to grow into, if I could just stretch tall enough, and I planned to follow in his rebellious, freedom-seeking footprints.

In my early twenties, after his death, I was confronted with some unwelcome implications of the heroic misfit story my grandfather embodied for me. One night my mother described a scene that had occurred many times during her childhood: my grandfather beating my grandmother. She shared with me details she had never before talked about—"he yanked her out of the car by her hair and threw her in a ditch"—and described how she had felt powerless, embarrassed, responsible. Although I had never seen my grandfather hit anyone, I accepted this information calmly, meanwhile gathering all my unconscious psychological strategies to hold on to my feelings about him. When I saw my grandmother, I could not identify with her suffering. I thought only of trying to find a way to explain my beloved grandfather's inexplicable behavior.

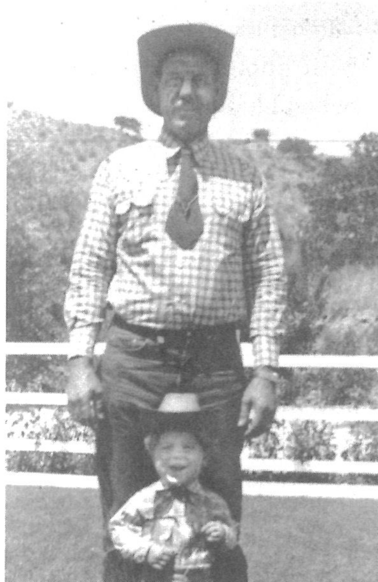

Figure 13-16. Dad and Melody. Photograph by Gloria Graulich, 1953. Reproduced courtesy of the author.

I spent many years researching and writing about violence against women before I realized that by focusing on my grandfather I was contributing to the silencing of my grandmother, Mae, and mother, Gloria Maye (both born on May 1). I now remember my grandmother's spunk and humor—the way she giggled when she gave me the queen in hearts, the witch costume she sewed for me that Halloween—and repeat my mother's stories. While I know that watching her mother being beaten left my mother with indelible, if invisible, bruises, I now realize that both women are much more than supporting actors in his melodrama.

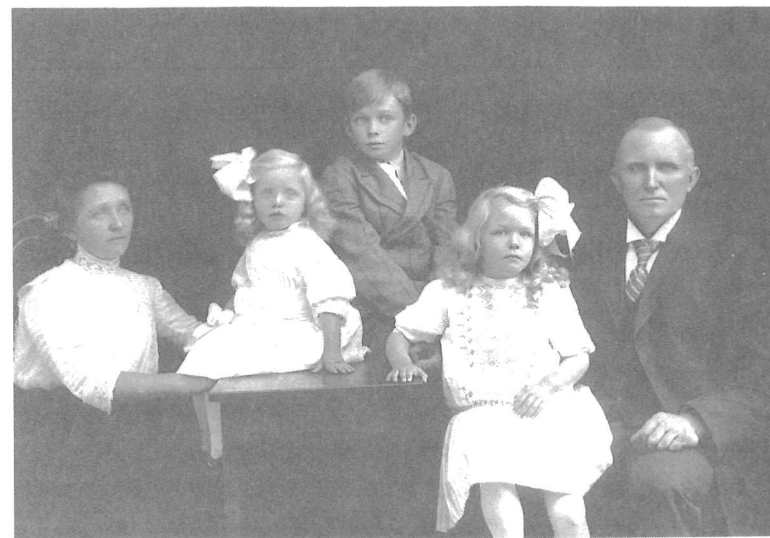

Figure 13-17. Schluyter family. Photographer unknown, ca. 1910. Reproduced courtesy of the author.

Figure 13-18. Agnes, Mae, and Oscar Schluyter. Photographer unknown, ca. 1910. Reproduced courtesy of the author.

As I try to imagine my grandmother's story, I turn to the family photographs I, like Cantú, keep in a cardboard box. I study my grandmother's parents, Karen and Leo Schluyter, Danish immigrants who settled in the beet sugar company town, Spreckels, California, and their spruced-up, aspiring-to-middle-class family (figure 13-17). I remember my great-grandmother, Karen, singing the Danish National Anthem and tying bows in my blond hair. I finger a professional studio shot made into a postcard, probably taken on the boardwalk near the "plunge" at the working-class seacoast town, Santa Cruz. My grandmother and her older sister, Agnes, look nervous in their (rented?) bathing suits while their brother, Oscar, seems at ease in his sailor suit and bathing cap (figure 13-18). Perhaps the photograph that speaks most directly to me was also taken at Santa Cruz, though it could also be the tonier

Figure 13-19. Mae Schluyter. Photographer unknown, ca. 1920s. Reproduced courtesy of the author.

Pacific Grove or Monterey (figure 13-19). My grandmother is still slim and stylish, as was Blew's mother in the "before" shot. Dressed like a flapper with bobbed hair, she gaily flirts with the cameraman. Who was he? The photograph is on stiff paper, passed down to me in a fancy brown cardboard wallet frame as if taken by a professional. My beautiful grandmother, years before my grandfather knocked her tooth out, looks like a model. I imagine the life she hoped for. Like the women in *Canícula*, I "hold the photographs reverently" and hope "the stories come to" me (2).

Notes

1. Quoted in Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames*, 7.

2. Photographs traditionally appear in autobiographies but usually in a block of pages. The self-conscious placement of photographs throughout the

text is still relatively rare, yet, as Deborah Willis points out in *Picturing Us: African American Identity in Photography*, "There is a sharp increase in the number of artists who are using family photographs in their work today" (11). In *Light Writing and Life Writing: Photography in Autobiography*, Timothy Dow Adams explores the relationship of photography and photographers to autobiography from a variety of angles, but he does not discuss the authors I examine here. Examples of western writers include N. Scott Momaday, *The Names*; Sheila Ortiz Taylor and Sandra Ortiz Taylor, *Imaginary Parents*; and Louis Owens, *Mixedblood Messages*, among others.

3. From Spence and Holland, *Family Snaps: The Meanings of Domestic Photography* (London: Virago, 1991), quoted in Hirsch, *Family Frames*, 13–14.

4. Momaday, *The Names*, 142.

5. Sandweiss, "Views and Reviews: Western Art and Western History," 185–202, 186–87.

6. Silko, *Storyteller*, 1. Page numbers follow subsequent quotations in the text. The relationship between photographs and text in *Storyteller* has also been perceptively discussed by Bernard A. Hirsch, "'The Telling Which Continues,'" 151–84.

7. Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames*, 11.

8. Sontag, *On Photography*, 23.

9. hooks, "In Our Glory: Photography and Black Life," 43–54, 48.

10. Sontag, *On Photography*, 5.

11. Uchida, *Desert Exile*, 19. Page numbers follow subsequent quotations in text.

12. Okubo, *Citizen 13660*, ix.

13. Uchida makes this point herself in *The Invisible Thread*, in which she includes one of her own paintings with this caption: "Since we were not allowed to have cameras, I painted this scene of a dust storm in Topaz." The painting appears in a group of illustrations between pages 52 and 53.

14. Trachtenberg, *Reading American Photographs*, 19–20.

15. Sone, *Nisei Daughter*, 170–71. For another example of photography's misrepresentation of Japanese American internees, see Mitsuye Yamada's poem "Evacuation": "the *Seattle Times* / photographer said / Smile! / so obediently I smiled / and the caption the next day / read: / Note smiling faces / a lesson to Tokyo" (Yamada, *Camp Notes and Other Poems*, 13).

16. Sontag, *On Photography*, 17.

17. Blew, *All But the Waltz*, 15. Page numbers follow subsequent quotations in text.

18. Blew, *Balsamroot*, 211.

19. Cantú, *Canícula*, 2. Page numbers follow subsequent quotations in the text.

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