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Touching Photographs: Roland Barthes's "Mistaken" Identification

A photograph enjoys an unusually close relationship to its referent, according to a widespread theory about the nature of photography. As this theory would have it, the key moment in photography occurs when the shutter opens, allows light into the dark chamber within, and gives lasting representation to whatever is in front of its lens. This view of photography, however, characteristically ignores another, equally important moment: the moment of identification. Someone must identify photographic images, group them according to various criteria, and place them together in photographic albums or art books.

The moment of identification, unlike that of illumination, does not distinguish photography from other visual images, or even from encounters in the world at large. At work in any personal exchange, identification plays an integral role in the formation of groups. Moreover, it is not just identification of a subject that is at stake but, often, identification with it. The personal and social position through which the beholder is looking can bring what she or he sees into focus, or distort it beyond recognition. The encounter with an image might seem more one-sided than a meeting with a person, but it, too, is susceptible to the slippage between one kind of identification and the other. Whether scholars seek to avoid such slippages in their work, or to confront or exploit them, they disturb the simple relation between representations and subjects, between images and people, between photographs and their referents. Something had to be in front of the camera. Does it matter what?

Roland Barthes's last book, Camera Lucida: A Note on Photography, published in 1979, is grounded, ostensibly, in a statement of faith in a photograph's relation to its referent. The inseparability of referent and image that it seems to assume explains the extraordinary series of slippages between people and images, and between modes of identification that punctuate its exposition. The Roland Barthes character in this book, as I will call his first-person exposition, lays out in two parts a theory of photographic reception on the basis of the adherence of the photograph to its referent. Barthes (the author as opposed to the narrator of Camera Lucida) had developed a theory of photography based on its indexical nature in his 1964
essay "Rhetoric of the Image." That theory built on earlier writings about the nature of the modern "myth," in which Barthes examined everyday myths that support community identity: the Tour de France, the Eiffel Tower, the French menu. "Rhetoric of the Image" examined photography's remarkable suitability for myth-making through an ad for packaged pastas and sauces. Italianicity, he wrote, was evoked by the name of the company, Panzani, and the color—red pepper, green tomatoes—of the Italian flag. A string bag with these vegetables tumbling out of it, along with packages of pasta and cans of sauce, evoked the idea of shopping in an open-air market and the cultural associations of still lifes and cornucopias. But the fact that the ad was photographed, rather than drawn or painted, meant that these cultural and national associations seemed to come directly, naturally.

The naturalness of the associations came from the way photography represents its object: "although the Panzani poster is full of 'symbols,' there nonetheless remains in the photograph a kind of natural being-there of objects, insofar as the literal message is sufficient: nature seems to produce the represented scene quite spontaneously." This "natural being-there" is Barthes's replacement for the usual term in such arguments, index, or indexical, borrowed loosely from Charles Peirce. In Peirce, as in most discussions of photography, the index is opposed to the icon, which represents its object through resemblance. In relation to photography, similarity generally means visual resemblance: a photographed portrait, like a painted one, is an icon. An index, however, represents its object through contact: it points at its object, or it is itself a trace of, or mark made by, that object. A thumbprint is an index. Because the item had to be there for an indexical representation of it to exist, it is often thought that an index is inherently more persuasive than an icon. A photograph is both an icon and an index; it is like an icon with a seal of approval, or, as Barthes calls it, a "certificate of presence." Because the pasta had to be there to be photographed, we feel as though we are looking at it directly, not through a representational medium. The connotation of Italianicity gets a free ride on indexicality; it seems to be in the photograph along with the green peppers. All this seeming natural gives the myth—that one can get Italianicity and freshness out of a can—its persuasive force.

Camera Lucida uses a different strategy to move in a more agonized direction, but it, too, starts with the idea of the photographic index. The person—and here it is most often people, and never pasta, who are the subject (I shall return to pasta later)—must have been there for a photograph to have been taken: "I call the 'photographic referent' not the optionally real thing to which an image or a sign refers but the necessarily real thing which has been placed before the lens, without which there would be no photograph." The photograph, then, is a trace, a remnant, of the person who was there. The trace is tactile, like a footprint, or perhaps more accurately like a navel, given that in one passage Barthes describes photography as an umbilical cord. In a description that draws on the imagery of a medieval theory, rays move from the subject of the photograph, to the sensitive plate, to the
finished photograph and finally to the viewer of the photograph, who is literally touched (nourished?) by the photograph. While the first part of Camera Lucida develops the theory through “random” looking at mostly famous photographs, the second part raises the personal stakes: it engages Barthes’s grief for his recently deceased mother on the basis of a photograph of her when she was five years old. Because of this communication between the past and the present, a photograph has a memorial element, and relates directly to death, even if the person in question is alive still. Instead of the index that seemed to guarantee the myth, Camera Lucida dwells on the “That-has-been” of the photograph.

The division into two parts may suggest a separation between mind and emotion, the scholarly versus the personal. But both parts are personal. In part one, Barthes bases his theory of photography on his search for photographs that “exist” for him. To explain the ways that photographs can “exist,” he uses two Latin terms: studium and punctum. The studium denotes the field of its cultural or educational possibilities: emotion requires the “rational intermediary of an ethical and political culture.” This unitary “field” is pierced by the second element, the punctum, which breaks out of the cultural field and into the personal. It “shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces me.” The studium is the “field” and the punctum is that which pierces the field.

The punctum is always personal to the viewer, and is often a detail, “Barthes” tells us. As an example, he illustrates a photographic portrait by the Harlem photographer James Van Der Zee. Thematically, Van Der Zee is close to the heart of Camera Lucida. He is known for The Harlem Book of the Dead, containing funerary photographs taken in the 1920s, published in 1978. Roland Barthes may have seen it in New York on his visit there in November of that year. If he did, the recently bereaved Barthes may have been struck, and perhaps horrified, especially by Van Der Zee’s photographs of his own mother, both alive and after her death (figs. 1, 2).

Barthes did not, however, use a photograph from the book of the dead to illustrate his notion of the punctum but a portrait of a family that was alive when Van Der Zee photographed them in his studio in 1926 (fig. 3). Barthes describes the portrait’s studium in the following language: its enunciation of “respectability, family life, conformism, Sunday best, an effort of social advancement in order to assume the White Man’s attributes (an effort touching by reason of its naïveté).” Given that the subject was the studium, its cultural field could have been literature of or about the exponents of the “New Negro,” or he could have acquired his ideas about the context of the photograph in the course of reading the work of W. E. B. Dubois and others, who exhorted Negroes to emulate whites in order to be accepted by them. Van Der Zee himself was engaged as an official photographer of Marcus Garvey’s Universal Negro Improvement Association. The “Sunday best” might actually have been “borrowed best,” since Van Der Zee kept fashionable clothes on hand for clients with aspirations or imaginations beyond their means. Such observations indicate directions for further investigations of this studium.

But actually, Barthes’s *studium* was not very studious; he adapted his remarks from the commentary on the photograph in *Le nouvel observateur*, a special issue on photography that was the source for many of the photographs in *Camera Lucida*. The commentary tries to do justice to the family’s identity: “visibly American, and clearly something else.” The family is “desirous of giving itself an image conforming to the marks of prosperity of the American Way of Life.” At that time, according to the writer in *Le nouvel observateur*, “black is beautiful” was not a cry of defiance and despair.

*Figure 3. James Van Der Zee, Family Portrait, 1926.*
“Barthes’s” judgment of the family’s “naïveté” is no less problematic for the fact that both he and the editor of the French literary journal were viewing Van Der Zee’s subjects from the Harlem of the 1920s through the lens of the American 1960s as seen from Paris in the 1970s. Why are the sitters naïve? To think that the acquisition of “Sunday best” and jewelry (or to have themselves photographed in such costumes), will make them like whites? Or are they naïve to think that whites will treat them better if they see them in such garb? Which attributes does Barthes mean? Why does Barthes take the “American Way of Life” to mean “attributs du Blanc,” rather than attributes of the middle class, surely an aspiration of many of Van Der Zee’s sitters, and entry into which a portrait by Van Der Zee may already have certified? Are there attributes that are more properly theirs, and that they could display if they were less touchingly naïve? What “Imaginaire” (image-system or repertoire, to use Barthes’s expression) would they have created for themselves, had they chosen to construct their visual identities without the resources of Van Der Zee’s studio? Van Der Zee photographed more imaginatively costumed clients, but were they more authentic (fig. 4)?27 To what image of blacks in Harlem should Van Der Zee’s sitters have conformed? Why does Barthes call their identity into question? Do they misidentify themselves? What are they “by nature”?

I dwell on these questions because among Roland Barthes’s early “mythologies of the month,” were those in which he pointed out and deconstructed the myths that white people held of black people.28 There he did not indulge in commonplaces about the “attributes of Whites” or “touching naiveté.” To the Barthes of Mythologies, whites are just as naïve when they brandish their own attributes. The clue to “Barthes’s” use of the term naïveté may be his use of the modifier “touching.” That he finds the identification with whites not only interesting but “touching,” suggests that the studium conveys feeling just as does the punctum and, therefore, that the difference between studium and punctum may just be a difference of degree. The studium, while it may touch Barthes, however, does not prick him. The punctum that punctures the field of the studium is “the belt worn low by the sister (or daughter)—the ‘solacing Mammy’—whose arms are crossed behind her back like a schoolgirl, and above all her strapped pumps (Mary Janes—why does this dated fashion touch me? I mean: to what date does it refer me?). This particular punctum arouses great sympathy in me, almost a kind of tenderness.”29

The detail that stabs him is actually two details; rather, one detail, around the waist, strikes Barthes first, but another detail becomes more convincing as his eye moves down toward the feet. But later, without the photograph to distract him, a third detail, above the others, comes to him, making this work by Van Der Zee the prime example of another quality of the punctum: it illustrates the way in which (like the experience of a Romantic poet, although Barthes does not make this connection) the true significance can often only be specified later, when the image, no longer there, has “worked within me.”30 Having moved from the spreading waist to the feet, he settled around the neck, and realized that the punctum in Van Der Zee’s
portrait was not a pair of shoes, not a belt, but a necklace. “I realized that the real punctum was the necklace she was wearing; for (no doubt) it was this same necklace (a slender ribbon of braided gold) which I had seen worn by someone in my own family, and which, once she died, remained shut up in a family box of old jewelry. . . . I had just realized that however immediate and incisive it was, the punctum could accommodate a certain latency (but never any scrutiny).”

Never any scrutiny indeed. The reason that Barthes could only have recognized this punctum when he wasn’t looking at it, is that the detail he picks out, the slender ribbon of braided gold, is not there. The lady wears a string of pearls, as does her seated relative. Most readers probably do not notice “Barthes’s” mistake, since the
Van Der Zee photograph is several pages into the past by the time Barthes recognizes the punctum. Possibly for this reason, few writers have commented on it, and those that do merely puzzle over it, remarking that it is, after all, personal, or chalking it up to the reproduction, where “it looks white and rather thick.”

In fact, the punctum does exist, but it is in a different photograph, which Barthes reproduced, along with several other photographs of his family, in Roland Barthes / par Roland Barthes (fig. 5). This mistaken detail, then, not the necklace actually pic-
tured, led Barthes to the center of pain in the photograph, and to the time of the “strapped pumps.” Indeed, the wearer of the necklace, Barthes’s Aunt Alice, occupies the same place as Van Der Zee’s “solacing Mammy” in the family picture, or at least in the picture of the family, and the composition of a photograph, not the pumps or the necklace on a real person, enabled him to make the identification. Presumably, Barthes recognized the family constellation, even though to do it he had to move the detail, the punctum, from one photograph to another.

Barthes’s mistake may seem like a simple case of missing the forest for the trees. But the detail he thought he needed to search for was indeed important, if absent. His effort, then, illustrates other highly significant aspects of the punctum: the punctum may be the composition; the punctum may be forgotten; the punctum may be in a different photograph. The example illuminates an important aspect of memory: the deception at its heart, its ability to embroider and change, to be displaced, when it is “working on” one, like the details in a Freudian dream interpretation. Not just the memory of whatever incident or person the punctum reminds one of, but memory of the photograph, the spur to memory, can itself enact this displacement. But the mistaken memory opens up the possibility of comprehension. When Barthes’s memory replaced the pearls with the necklace that should have been there, the aunt who occupied the “solacing Mammy’s” place magically appeared. This braided gold necklace was, perhaps, the punctum of Barthes’s family photograph. He recognized, poignantly, the necklace he had seen his aunt wear and that lay, after her death, shut up inside a “family box,” inside a dark chamber, rather than the light chamber, or camera lucida, of Barthes’s title, a contrast to the better known camera obscura. But perhaps Van Der Zee’s portrait only reminded him of having seen the photograph of his aunt’s family, and even the jewelry shut up in the family box had itself lived, for Barthes, only in a photograph. As Art Spiegelman wrote, concerning his attempt to use family photographs in his own work: “Snapshots illuminate my past like flares in the darkness.... Although often they only help me remember having seen the photos before!”

Could Barthes’s mistaken identification of the punctum illuminate his “mistake” (surely it was one) about the naïveté of the sitters in the studium? The naïveté he sees in the portrait can only be “touching” if the respectable family picture covers up a grimmer reality. It turns out that the touching naïveté he sees in the portrait, the respectable family life, indeed covers up the dreary life of a woman who, in her utter respectability, is utterly pitiable. But it is not the black family in Harlem whose naïveté is exposed. It is that of a white family in France, Barthes’s family. “This sister of my father never married, lived as an old maid near her mother and it always distressed me to think of the sadness of her provincial life.” And whether or not the black family identified with white attributes, certainly Barthes identified his own family with the black family’s attributes. He identified with their touchingly naïve, and mistaken, self-identification. But what is touching in someone else’s family is wounding in one’s own. Did Barthes understand these reversals, did he know
that the necklace was not there? Surely Barthes, the author, understood. Otherwise, "Barthes" the narrator, would never have remarked parenthetically that the punctum will not bear any scrutiny, thus, perhaps slyly, warning readers not to turn back several pages to look at the picture.37

The concept of the punctum is further complicated with the introduction of a second source of punctum described as "the lacerating emphasis of the noeme ('that-has-been')," the pure representation of the passage of time that connotes death.38 Any photograph has this about to die/already dead, quality, even if the subject is not dead—yet—and even though not all photographs will have this effect in the immediate sense that Barthes describes upon seeing a portrait by Alexander Gardner of a soon-to-be-executed would-be assassin.39 The extreme example that causes the narrator the most pain is not that of a convict, however, but a photograph of his mother taken when she was a small child. He found it shortly after her death, while sorting photographs in search of one in which he could do more than recognize her, in which he would find "the truth of the face I had loved."40 He found several pictures, some more characteristic than others, but one finally gave him what he was looking for. He christened it the "Winter Garden Photograph," because it was taken in a greenhouse.

My mother was five at the time (1898), her brother seven. He was leaning against the bridge railing, along which he had extended one arm; she, shorter than he, was standing a little back, facing the camera; you could tell that the photographer had said, "Step forward a little so we can see you"; she was holding one finger in the other hand, as children often do, in an awkward gesture.41

It is a pale, yellowed photograph; his mother’s face, unclear, is in danger of disappearing altogether. Yet it was revealing. It showed "a figure of a sovereign innocence, . . . In this little girl’s image I saw the kindness which had formed her being immediately and forever." Unlike the other photographs he discusses, he chooses not to reproduce this picture in his book, ostensibly because it would mean nothing to his readers.

But most likely there was no Winter Garden Photograph to reproduce, or perhaps only the one of Franz Kafka at the age of six, described, with its palm trees and Kafka’s soulful eyes, as well as an oversized hat, by Walter Benjamin in his essay "A Short History of Photography."42 Benjamin placed the setting tentatively in a "kind of winter garden landscape," but the French translation that appeared in Le nouvel observateur’s special issue on photography places Kafka definitively in a winter garden.43 Like that of Barthes, Kafka’s Winter Garden Photograph also remained unreproduced in this translation, but the editor illustrated the essay with several other photographs, among them Van Der Zee’s portrait of a family.44 If there was indeed no Winter Garden Photograph of Barthes’s mother and uncle, then Benjamin’s description inspired Barthes to reposition the photograph of the two children away from the frosty old grandfather of La souche, a family photograph Barthes provides later in Camera Lucida, and into a nurturing Winter Garden, where
he could preserve his mother (fig. 6). The grandfather's large hat, like one Benjamin
describes in Kafka's photograph, may have helped Barthes bridge the gap between
the picture of Kafka and that of Barthes's mother. The resemblance between
Barthes's described, but not reproduced, Winter Garden Photograph and La souche
has until recently barely been remarked. Like the pearls that were exchanged for
a slender ribbon, the distance between the description and the reproduction of the
photograph may have disguised the resemblance for some, although here it is the
photograph, rather than the description, that is delayed. The reader who reaches
La souche with the faded Winter Garden Photograph firmly in mind may have been
meant to smile knowingly, like a reader of a meandering novel who comes upon a sudden turn of events that forces a reconsideration of all that has gone before. If so, the author would have been disappointed had he lived to realize how few readers had done so. Not that the resemblance has completely escaped notice, even from the beginning. It has puzzled some readers, one of whom wonders why the Winter Garden Photograph was so much more powerful than this one, while another mistakes La souche for a portrait of Barthes’s father. Yet, when Diana Knight finally raised in print the likelihood that La souche is the Winter Garden Photograph, few readers were willing to follow this twist of the plot.

Perhaps justifiably. Certainly there could have been a Winter Garden Photograph. Maybe whenever his mother and her brother posed, they automatically took the same positions, she nestling one finger in her other hand, standing back a bit, he, coming forward, leaning on and extending his hand on whatever was handy, railing or knee. They posed the same way wherever they were: at the end of a wooden bridge or at the end of a life; among the branches and palms of a flourishing winter garden, or around and between their grandfather, on the bare dirt of a garden in winter, with no trees except themselves, two offshoots of the souche (stock of tree, founder of a family), as Barthes calls the old man. But even if the Winter Garden Photograph was always in that chamber of light, where an unclouded vision could have seen it at any moment, what needed to be hidden, unlike Edgar Allen Poe’s purloined letter, was not the photograph but its meaning. The reader must be discouraged from wondering how this banal photograph could have inflicted such a wound, and the children must be placed in a winter garden, by themselves, not in the distracting company of this old man. “What relation can there be between my mother and her grandfather,” he wrote, concerning this photograph, “so formidable, so monumental, so Hugolian, so much the incarnation of the inhuman distance of the Stock [souche]? Indeed, if La souche is the Winter Garden Photograph, then not only did the fabrication of the winter garden translate his mother’s photograph to suit Barthes’s metaphor of a bright room, it removed the inconvenient grandfather at the same time. The braided gold necklace should have been there; the old man should not. Man and necklace are present but absent. The punctum is the detail that is not there, or that one wishes were not there. Absence, in this book about loss, is presence. Like Jean-Paul Sartre’s mental image in L’imaginaire, to which Camera Lucida is dedicated, the punctum is “a certain way an object has of being absent within its very presence,” or perhaps present within its absence. The punctum’s Lacanian counterpoint is the gaze that traps the eye.

But the displacement of the detail is just as Freudian as it is Lacanian. And the detail is displaced here, just as in the photograph by James Van Der Zee. Barthes emphasizes his mother’s look of sovereign innocence as the picture’s distinguishing mark. He mentions, however, other details in the picture as well, for example, that “awkward gesture” of his mother’s, “holding one finger in the other hand, as children often do.” How often do children make that gesture after all? Perhaps they do
every day, although a search through several generations of my own family photographs failed to turn up any examples of it. Assuming there really was a Winter Garden Photograph, then Barthes's mother presumably made that gesture more than once. That would make a minimum of three such gestures in Roland Barthes's family album, two by Barthes's mother and one by Barthes himself as a small child, published by Barthes in Roland Barthes (fig. 7). Perhaps here, as supposedly in the portrait by James Van Der Zee, the punctum is a detail. In the Winter Garden Photo-

Figure 7. Roland Barthes, n.d. In Roland Barthes / par Roland Barthes, 29.
graph, Roland Barthes discovered not his mother, or not only his mother, but also himself, himself as a child, specifically as a child known from photographs. A chain of photographs leads Barthes, searching from image to image, to the unexpected discovery of himself as his own mother, just as he had been his mother’s mother while he cared for her during her last illness.

But he was Aunt Alice as well. How different was this woman, who never married but lived alone near her mother all her life, from Barthes himself, who, as he does not fail to tell us later in the book, lived alone with his mother until her death, two years before his own? In Camera Lucida he wrote that, in certain photographs, he had his “father’s sister’s look.” They have been compared by Diana Knight, the perceptive observer of several of the anomalies of Barthes’s favorite photographs, because “between them [they] incarnate the termination of the paternal line.”

Indeed, although they were both unfertile limbs of the family tree, what struck Barthes about her was her loneliness, not her lack of progeny. “The father’s sister: she was alone all her life,” reads the caption of a portrait of Alice in Roland Barthes (fig. 8). Did the graceful portrait of Alice with her parents on the preceding page (fig. 5) cover up the sadness exposed in her childhood portrait? The portrait of Barthes as a young man also sparks an insight into “l’irréductible” in himself: “in the child, I read quite openly the dark underside of myself,” an original darkness that inhabits the man as well.

The displacement of the punctum leads to another, less personal, meaning of the Winter Garden Photograph that its absence disguises. If the punctum is displaced, like an alibi, then the detail that is not there, the “That-has-been,” never was. And neither was the indexical power of the photograph. The fact that something was before the camera when the photograph was taken is no longer unproblematically the source of the photograph’s power. I do not imply that Camera Lucida would suffer if the Winter Garden Photograph turned out to be an invention. To the reader of Camera Lucida it should matter little whether it existed or not. The fictional truth of the unseen Winter Garden Photograph is powerful enough to survive its possible nonexistence, just as the missing necklace of Van Der Zee’s sitter only gains in power through its misplacement in a similarly novelistic turn. But the fact that it does not matter has consequences for any theory of photographic indexicality. To raise the possibility that these images do not exist, and to realize how little their existence matters is to cast this founding concept into question. The fact that something is in front of the camera matters; what that something was does not. What matters is displaced.

Barthes’s identification of the irreducible does matter. Barthes’s sadness and that of his aunt Alice, like his mother’s transparent simplicity, shone through their childhood photographs. Just as the Italianicity and euphoria of Panzani appear to be directly represented in the ad through the indexicality of the photograph, so Barthes’s irreducible darkness, his sister’s loneliness, and the kindness that had formed his mother’s being, were visible in their youthful photographs. The photo-
graph is traced to an originary being in front of the camera, and the person is traced to an originary childhood. One sees right through the pasta to its Italian ethnicity. A child, no more able than a vegetable to disguise its essence, reveals the "irreducible" just as indexically as the Panzani vegetables reveal their Italianicity. With one difference: the telling details, whose presence before the camera guarantees the authenticity of the ad, are absent. Essence is not guaranteed.
Yet the pain is there, even when the necklace is not. If the immense power of the photograph does not come from that which was in front of the camera, it lies elsewhere. To find it, we can look in the network of identifications that these photographs establish. They begin with Barthes’s family, but they go beyond it as well. If Barthes identifies with Aunt Alice, then in a cross-gender, cross-Atlantic, interracial identification, through his tender care of his mother become daughter, he is also the “solacing Mammy” in Van Der Zee’s photograph, the woman who “on account of her necklace,” had, for Barthes, “a whole life external to her portrait.” Barthes’s aunt gave him piano lessons on his boyhood visits to the provinces, and he went to stay with her after the death of her own mother, Barthes’s grandmother. But when Barthes’s mother died, his aunt was not there to solace him, her necklace already encased in a “family box.”

Barthes’s “identification” of these people links multiple photographs in a chain of identificatory relationships. His community of photographs that “exist” for him links his family to a series of strangers. But as an encounter with either a portrait or a family, Barthes’s encounter with Van Der Zee’s sitters, like most encounters in this tragic narrative, is at best missed. In order to make the sitters part of his family, he emptied their identity of everything but their status as representatives of a marginalized class open to assimilation by the narrator. Indeed, marginalized figures take up a large share of the illustrations in Camera Lucida, including among its twenty-five photographs, a gypsy, retarded people, a condemned man, slum children from Little Italy, three African-Americans including Van Der Zee’s sitters, and an African. These subjects were perhaps important objects of identification for Barthes, who enumerated most of his own claims to marginal status in Roland Barthes. There may have been a wishful element as well. Barthes could well have interpreted the black woman’s stance, and her fashionable clothes of the 1920s, as displaying a self possession that he could well have wished for his aunt. Barthes’s relation to the lady in her Sunday best is one-sided, misleading, and unknowable, but poignant and meaningful all the same. The rhetorical analyst Barthes, of an earlier moment, would have unmasked his comments about this picture as an example of mythological thinking; the earlier Barthes, however, wrote essays. Camera Lucida, as I have tried to show, is not an essay. Rather than expose the naïveté that makes pasta ads effective, he places himself “in the situation of a naïve man, outside culture, someone untutored who would be constantly astonished at photography.”

This naïve viewer is perhaps everyone when photography enters the delicate sphere of human relations. Relations to people can be as one-sided as relations to photographs. Even people do not determine our response to them through preexisting essences. We endow them with attributes we need them to have, hang gold ribbons around their necks when they would prefer pearls. One might say that not only do we misidentify them, we misidentify with them. A reading of Camera Lucida suggests that the most significant indexical power of the photograph may consequently lie not in the relation between the photograph and its subject but in the
relation between the photograph and its beholder, or user, in what I would like to call a “performative index,” or an “index of identification.” *Camera Lucida* allows us to see its narrator use photography to satisfy his desire to possess or commune with his mother, to absorb her into himself and preserve her there through his identification with her. Photography is a winter garden, like a *chambre claire* that lets in light in the winter and keeps alive artificially that which should otherwise have died.

The narrator of *Camera Lucida* performs, rather than argues, the meeting in the winter garden because he, like many an art historian or critic, is caught up in the rhetoric of proof and existence, the truth of his mother’s face. He looks for what a photograph is “in itself.” But an “in itself,” a “truth,” could only have been an external guarantee of the relation that was his goal, a relation established, like most relations, with no guarantees at all.

**Notes**

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5. Most of them were originally published primarily in the journal *Les lettres nouvelles*, Touching Photographs: Roland Barthes’s “Mistaken” Identification


10. *CL*, 76/120, original emphasis.


13. *CL*, 77/120–21. In the French edition, this essence is referred to, in Latin, as the “inter-fuit,” and in French, as the “Ça-a-été.” I plan to develop the memorial character in the beholding of images further, in an expansion of the present essay.


18. *CL*, 43/73.


21. Ibid., 44–45.

24. Ibid. 25. Ibid.
27. The garb of “A Prophet” in figure 4 would most likely have belonged to the sitter. See the caption for this photograph in Willis-Braithwaite, *Van Der Zee*, 86. I would like to thank Camara Holloway for kindly providing me with information on this and other aspects of African-American photographers.
29. *CL*, 43/73–74, original emphasis.
32. Derek Attridge writes, in a footnote, “It is Barthes who identifies the necklace as a ‘slender ribbon of braided gold’: one cannot see this in the reproduction, where it looks white and rather thick—and identical to the other necklace in the picture, from which no punctum shoots. This discrepancy is of no account, however; even if we did see what Barthes describes, we would remain impervious to the punctum’s laceration”; Attridge, “Roland Barthes’s Obtuse, Sharp Meaning and the Responsibilities of Commentary,” in Rabaté, *Writing the Image After Roland Barthes*, 88 n. 4. Diane Knight refers to “the supposed retrospective punctum of her necklace”; Knight, *Barthes and Utopia: Space, Travel, Writing* (Oxford, 1997), 263.
34. The “camera lucida” is contrasted to the “camera obscura” in chapter 44 of *CL*, 106/164.
37. The French author Georges Perec records a subjective mistake concerning a family photograph in a novel originally published in 1975. His narrator records his own mistake, however. Barthes, perhaps intentionally, allows the reader to find his narrator’s mistake; Georges Perec, *W, or the Memory of Childhood*, trans. David Bellow (Boston, 1988), 27 and 33 n. 1. I am grateful to my student Timothy Straveler for the reference to Perec.
42. Walter Benjamin, “Kleine Geschichte der Photographie” (1931), in *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser, vol. 2, bk. 1 (Frankfurt,


44. Le nouvel observateur, Special Photo 2 (1977), 19.


46. Knight raises the issue in Barthes and Utopia, 265–66. See, for an example of a response, the rather hesitant reference to Knight’s “suggestion” in Attridge, “Roland Barthes’s Obtuse, Sharp Meaning,” 86 and 89 n. 9. It never seriously occurred to me that there really was a Winter Garden Photograph, but, like Knight, I have had mixed success convincing others.

47. Diana Knight refers to Edgar Allen Poe in relation to the Winter Garden Photograph, Barthes and Utopia, 266. Barthes used the Poe story as a parable relating to the concealment of meaning; Daniel Ferrer, “Genetic Criticism in the Wake of Barthes,” in Rabaté, Writing the Image After Roland Barthes, 225.


49. Sartre, Psychology of Imagination, 104.


51. CL, 72/112.

52. Ibid., 103/161.

53. Knight, Barthes and Utopia, 264.


55. Ibid., 22/28. In the U.S. edition, a slight change in spacing made the caption for this photograph look as though it went with a different photograph, of Barthes as a toddler.

56. Although to some in the audiences to which I have spoken it has mattered a lot.

57. CL, 57/90–91.

58. Calvet, Roland Barthes, 43.


60. This speculation is my response to a series of astute observations on the photographs by Sally Stein.
