

The Familial Baze

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The Image as Memorial:

Personal Photographs in Cultural Memory

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The personal photograph is an object of complex emotional and cultural meaning, an artifact used to conjure memory, nostalgia, and contemplation. The photograph of personal value is a talisman, in which the past is often perceived to reside so that it can be reexperienced. It evokes both memory and loss, both a trace of life and the prospect of death. Yet, while the photograph may be perceived as a container for memory, it is not inhabited by memory so much as it produces it; it is a mechanism through which the past can be constructed and situated within the present. Images have the capacity to create, interfere with, and trouble the memories we hold as individuals and as a culture. They lend shape to personal stories and truth claims, and function as technologies of memory, producing both memory and forgetting.

A photograph does not in itself state its status as personal or cultural. Yet, the photograph plays an important function in the relationship of personal memory, cultural memory, and history precisely because of the ways in which images can move from one realm to the next. If we regard personal memory as the memories that remain solely within personal and familial contexts, separate from a public sharing of memory, and history as a form of sanctioned narratives of the past, cultural memory can be seen as memory that is shared outside of formal historical discourse, yet is imbued with cultural meaning. As technologies of memory, photographs play a primary role in the traffic between personal memory, cultural memory, and history. When personal memories are shared and exchanged in contexts distinct from history making, they form a kind of collective memory, either as interventions into or resistance to official history. Cultural objects, photographs among them, often move from personal

memory to cultural memory to history and back. Hence, a historical photograph has the capacity to affect the personal memory of an historical survivor, and a personal image can often acquire cultural meaning or historical meaning. This is increasingly the case with the proliferation of personal images in the form of videotapes, where, for instance, the amateur image taken by George Holliday of the beating of Rodney King acquired historical meaning when it was shown on national television and became the catalyst for the Los Angeles uprising. At the same time, survivors of historical events often report that, after time, they cannot sort out what is personal memory, what the memories of others, and what derived from the images of the news media and popular culture. Hence, the public image, often marked as historical, can change and produce personal memories as well. Indeed, rather than positing memory and history as oppositional, as they are often described, we should consider them to be entangled, each pulling forms from the other.

It can be argued that the most poignant of photographs are those that were created within personal or familial contexts yet have since acquired a cultural, legal, or historical status. These images seem innocent and unsuspecting in retrospect—the casual image of a place that will later be destroyed, the framing of a group of friends, one of whom will soon be dead, the hauntingly informal images of the soon-to-be victims of war. Unlike the official images of war victims that were created by the Nazis or the Cambodians who systematically catalogued the soon-to-be dead, the informal and personal images that acquire historical status speak to a moment captured by the photographic camera that is totally separate from the weight it will come to bear. These images thus present a compelling prior innocence to which they offer a partial and enticing kind of retrieval. At the same time, they can be hauntingly tragic in their evocation of loss.

In this paper, I would like specifically to examine several contexts in which personal and family photographs journey into realms of cultural memory and acquire new meanings: the photographs left at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C., the personal pictures sewn into the AIDS Memorial Quilt, and the images of missing children disseminated on supermarket flyers, grocery bags, and television detective shows. In these three contexts, the images function both to memorialize their subjects and to speak to imagined audiences, though often with divergent purposes. Each is a particular form of address that reveals aspects of trauma in late-twentieth-century American culture, the trauma of untimely death, in particular those who died young and tragic deaths, and the trauma of the lost child. In the case of the memorial and the quilt, images are primarily viewed as forms of memory, and in the case of the missing children, they are used as law enforcement forms of identification. Yet they all demonstrate the fluid capacity of the image to change cultural status and, more important, the malleability of the personal images that acquire cultural status. All are fraught with the weighted meaning of the family

in contemporary American culture. The images I will discuss here are deployed for a number of personal and public agendas—among others, to memorialize the dead, to speak for and against the participation of the United States in the Vietnam War, to celebrate gay identity, to support families who have lost someone to AIDS, to refuse to mourn, to act as identification in criminal investigations, and finally to ask viewers to participate in searching for missing children among their neighbors. These agendas address viewers in different roles—as mourners, citizens, family members, and concerned observers. Each testifies to the traffic across the boundaries between public and private realms.

The Vietnam Veterans Memorial and the Image as Monument

Late-twentieth-century American culture has witnessed an unprecedented interest in the building of memorials. At a time when critics of postmodernism have labeled it antihistorical, it seems in fact that postmodern culture is preoccupied with the question of memory, and national culture has produced an increasing number of memorials to war and to figures of the past. This process began with the construction of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial on the Mall in Washington, D.C., in 1982, which then prompted the building of the memorials to Korean War veterans, American women soldiers, the civil rights movement, President Franklin D. Roosevelt, and the veterans of World War II. This process of memorialization also extended to the ongoing creation of the AIDS Memorial Quilt, which was begun in San Francisco in 1987 and which is periodically exhibited in its entirety on the Washington Mall.

Why are we as a nation so preoccupied with memory on the eve of the millennium? American culture is constantly referred to as a culture of amnesia, a nation with little sense of history, a society that identifies with the future rather than the past. Yet the relentless memorializing of the 1980s and 1990s reveals the fundamental role that national memory plays in the politics of the present.

In the early 1980s, Roland Barthes wrote: "Earlier societies managed so that memory, the substitute for life, was eternal and that at least the thing which spoke Death should itself be immortal: this was the Monument. But by making the (mortal) Photograph in the general and somehow natural witness of 'what has been,' modern society has renounced the Monument."¹ Barthes argued that the photograph had superseded the monument and memorial. Like others, he saw the emergence of photography as signaling the end of the monument, replacing it with the image technologies of memory. Yet, how could Barthes have foreseen, from his perspective on modernism and the photograph, the excessive memorialization taking place in Euro-American culture today? It seems, rather, that the contemporary photograph has not replaced the monument so much as it is demanded in its presence.

This can be seen through the interaction of visitors at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. Since it was built in 1982, the memorial has become a kind of national shrine. Unlike any other place on the Washington Mall or in the nation's capital, it invites a participatory interaction. As the most visited site in the nation's central tourist region, it has acquired a unique status as the place at which people feel they can speak to the nation in some form. The low, black walls of the memorial, sunken into the landscape, break the commemorative codes of the Mall; as such, they inspire contemplation and invite visitors to ritualistic forms of action. People may touch the engraved space of the names, make rubbings of names to take away with them, or leave objects at the base of the long black granite walls. These experiences of emotional engagement with the memorial have provided the material for innumerable coffee-table books of photographs in which the pain of a nation is enacted and rememorialized again.

Originally, when people began leaving letters, photographs, and objects at the memorial, the National Park Service classified them as "lost and found." Then, officials realized the artifacts had been left there intentionally and began to save them. There are now over forty thousand objects that have been left at the memorial, which are housed in a government archive and some of which are exhibited at the Smithsonian. These range from the expected (combat boots and military insignia) to the extraordinary (a Harley-Davidson motorcycle), to the evocative and poignant, objects long carried and finally let go, such as the wedding ring of a dead Vietnamese soldier, a pair of Vietnamese sandals, or a can of C-rations. More and more objects concerning contemporary controversies that are the focus of marches on Washington have also been left at the memorial. Hence, talismans regarding the Gulf War, the abortion debate, and the gay rights movement have been left there as a form of speech. However, a significant number of the artifacts left at the memorial are compellingly cryptic, ambiguous, and mysterious. It is clear that many of the stories behind these objects will not be told, because they were left at the memorial not to explain anything to its audience, but to speak directly to the dead.

Family and personal photographs proliferate among these objects, where they assert particular strands of memory. While many images of men at war have been left as tributes, there have also been many images that presumably represent the war dead in their youth, in times of prior innocence before they became first soldiers and then casualties. What inspires this kind of interaction at the memorial? The Vietnam Veterans Memorial is unique in its foregrounding of the loss of an individual in war. Its listing of names of those who died in the war, in chronological order of when they were killed, has produced a very rich and complex discourse of memory. The names, by virtue of their multiplicity, situate the memorial within the multiple strands of cultural memory. For many visitors, this has the effect of imagining the widening circle of pain and grief that extends out from each to family and friends, imagining in

effect the multitude of people who continue to be directly affected by the war. Despite the fact that the listing of names allows for a reclamation of codes of heroism and sacrifice in the nationalistic context of the Washington Mall, in its foregrounding of the individual over the collective the memorial is a powerful antiwar statement about the tragic and futile loss of so many lives.

The personal photographs at the memorial testify to the previous aliveness of the war dead. As images of states of prior innocence—the soldier as a child, the family gathering before the tragic loss of a family member, the now long-absent father hugging a child—these images demand an acknowledgment of the insanity of the priorities of war. Each seems to ask: How could this life, so simple and important in its ordinary experience of the everyday, have been worth sacrificing? How could a war—many would argue, in particular, this war—have warranted this price? Placed in the context of the memorial, these photographs condemn the act of war simply in the contrast between their ordinariness and their presence at a memorial to war dead. They personalize the names, give them flesh, faces, and family connections, and in so doing they speak to the incomprehensibility and irrationality of war.

The memorial is perceived by many of the families and friends of the war dead to be a kind of living memorial, where the dead are located and can be spoken to, hence where, by implication, they can hear and respond. This means that many of the photographs that have been left at the memorial chronicle the continuing lives of those who have been left behind. These images, of grandchildren and family rituals, allow the living to feel that the dead can witness the continuity of life and its rites of passage. In one, a frame that contains an image of a fetal sonogram, is accompanied by a note, which reads:

Happy Father's Day, Dad! Here are the first two images of your first grandchild. I don't know if it's a boy or a girl. If the baby is a boy—he'll be named after you. Dad, this child will know you—just how I have grown to know and love you, even though the last time I saw you I was only 4 months old. I love you daddy, your daughter Jeannette. (Sgt. Eddie E. Chervony, 55E 6)

The sonogram "photograph," which is now the requisite first image in the baby album, is presented here as a form of connection and witnessing, a means of speaking to the absent father.

The names on the memorial act as surrogates for the bodies of the Vietnam War dead, and visitors to the memorial often make rubbings of names to carry away with them. Yet the presence of the photographs, letters, and objects attest as well to the incompleteness of the names. It is as if the names present the individual so powerfully inscribed in death that they demand the presence of photographs to bring the dead alive. What is, after all, a name marked in stone but a name that is irrevocably inscribed within a narrative of remembrance?

What does it mean to read a name? On one hand, it signals the life of the individual in war, on the other hand, it is a shallow evocation of their presence. Judith Butler writes, "But do names really 'open' us to an intersubjective ground, or are they simply so many ruins which designate a history irrevocably lost? Do these names really signify for us the fullness of the lives that were lost, or are they so many tokens of what we cannot know, enigmas, inscrutable and silent?"²³ The need to bring photographs and objects to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial and to leave them for others to witness indicates the need to memorialize the dead with images, stories, details, and specifics, precisely because of the way in which the name provides only an empty shell of remembrance.

By nature of its placement within the nationalistic context of the Washington Mall, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial constructs a narrative that foregrounds the loss of 58,196 American lives over those of the three million Vietnamese who died in the war. Yet one of the most compelling photographs that was left at the memorial is an image that speaks not to the dead whose names are listed on the wall, but to a dead Vietcong soldier. It is a worn, hand-colored image of a Vietnamese man, dressed in a military uniform, with a young girl beside him, both seriously regarding the camera (*illus. 1*). The note that accompanies it reads:

Dear Sir, For twenty-two years I have carried your picture in my wallet. I was only eighteen years old that day that we faced one another on that trail in Chu Lai, Vietnam. Why you didn't take my life I'll never know. You stared at me for so long, armed with your AK-47, and yet you did not fire. Forgive me for taking your life, I was reacting the way I was trained, to kill V.C. . . . So many times over the years I have stared at your picture and your daughter, I suspect. Each time my heart and guts burn with the pain of guilt. I have two daughters myself now . . . Above all else, I can now respect the importance that life held for you. I suppose that is why I am able to be here today . . . It is time for me to continue the life process and release my pain and guilt. Forgive me, Sir.'

As we read these lines, the photograph, with its crumpled image and faded color, evokes many narratives—the act of placing it within one's military uniform and carrying it into combat as a talisman of good luck, the scene in which it is taken from the dead man who carried it, the years it was kept and continued to haunt, the ways in which it most likely continues to haunt in its absence. The letter is deeply contradictory, both moving and troubling. I am moved by the evocation of guilt and helplessness in this note, yet disturbed by the impulse that resulted in its eventual arrival at the memorial. What does it mean to take a photograph from the dead body of someone one has just killed? Is it an act of remorse or a further violation? The photograph pulls from another place and another life a set of enigmatic and ultimately unknowable stories, each



1. Photograph left at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. Photo: Claudio Vasquez-Turner Publishing, Inc. Courtesy Vietnam Veterans Memorial Collection, Museum Resource Center, National Park Service/National Capital Region.

charged with loss. Where is that little girl now, did she survive the war or is she also memorialized here? Why did her father hesitate?

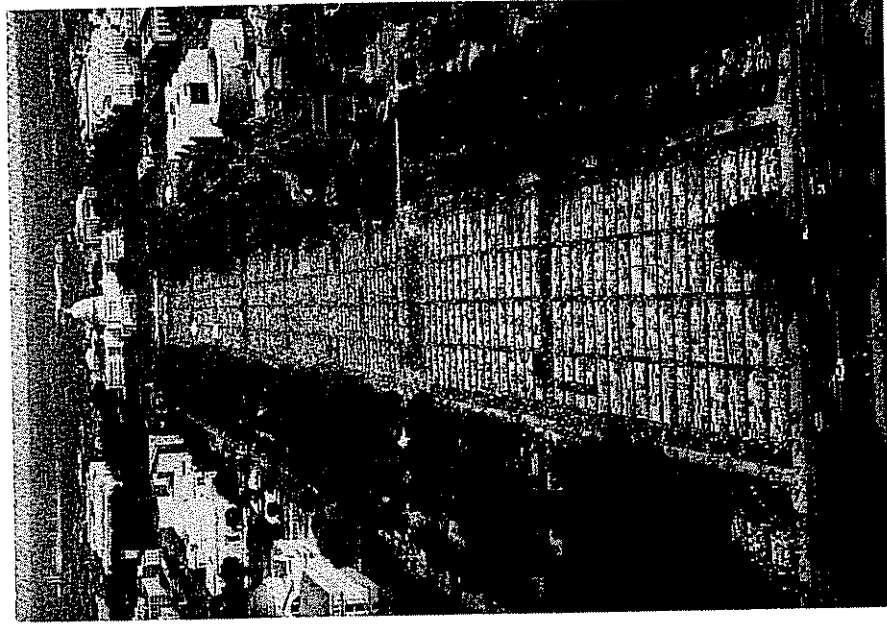
Above all, the photograph contains a startling view into a moment of prior innocence—how could they have known in that moment not only the fate of the father but the eventual trajectory of the image itself: that it would be carried for many years by the father's murderer, left at a memorial in Washington, D.C., that commemorates not the Vietnamese but the American dead, held in an archive by the United States government, and photographed for a coffee-table book of that collection, purchased by middle-class Americans? Indeed, its trajectory continues. In the summer of 1997, Richard Luttrell, the veteran who left the photograph at the memorial, contacted the embassy and received a letter from the dead man's son, who had identified his father in the photo-

graph with the help of relatives. At the time that I write this, he is planning to travel to Vietnam to return the photograph to the family.⁴

These unanswered questions occur in the movement of photographs across the boundaries of personal and cultural memory. The photographs at the memorial change status several times, from personal and family images, often placed in family albums, to images that are meant to be shared by the audience at the memorial. Often, as is the case with this image, this means an attempt to bear witness to one's pain and a need to ask forgiveness at a site where the dead are perceived to be present (even the dead who are not named on the wall). Once placed at the memorial, these photographs acquire the status of cultural objects and shift from personal to cultural memory. When they are subsequently placed in the archive, they acquire the status of historical artifacts. Those that are exhibited in the Smithsonian are also described as artistic artifacts and assigned authorship, where possible, by curators and writers. Awarded authorship and secured within a historical archive, where they are treated as precious objects and held only by gloved hands, these photographs and objects are pulled from cultural memory, a realm in which they are meant to be shared and to participate in the memories of others, and reinscribed in official narratives. Yet the majority of the objects and images that have been left at the memorial are either unexplained or, like these images, powerfully evocative of untold stories. Many are compelling in their anonymity and ambiguity. Their refusal to tell all their stories and their impulse to speak directly to the dead, rather than to the memorial's audience, continues to work in tension with the narratives of history.

The AIDS Quilt: Reclaiming the Bodies of the Dead

Like the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, the AIDS Memorial Quilt memorializes by naming the dead and presenting their images. The quilt, which now consists of more than forty thousand panels, each three by six feet, is a collectively produced, grass-roots project in which lovers, friends, families, and concerned strangers make panels in tribute to those who have died of AIDS (illus. 2). Quilt panels have been created from an enormous variety of materials, ranging from cloth, clothing, stuffed animals, cowboy boots, wedding rings, letters, and feather boas to photographs and cremation ashes. In their attempts to symbolically evoke aspects of the lives of the dead, many makers of quilt panels resort to highly literal forms: a scrub tunic for a doctor, scissors for a hairdresser, or a crib cover for an infant. Other panels are anticommemorative in their gestures, deploying humor, anger, and an aesthetics of antimourning. Because quilt panels allow for a hyperindividualization of the dead and because the aesthetics of the quilt is often vibrant and irreverent, it is often perceived as a testimony not to death but to lives lived.

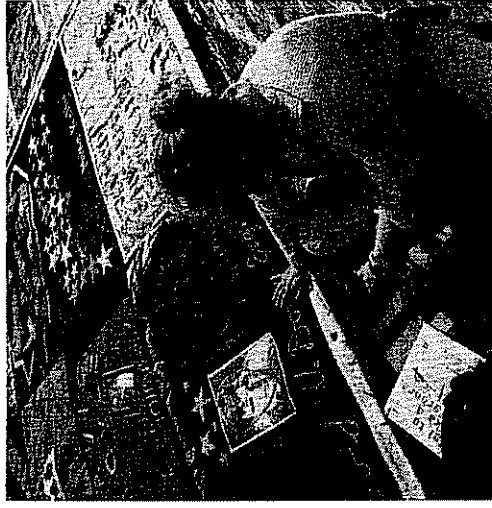


2. The AIDS Quilt, Washington, D.C., October 1996. Photo: Paul Margolies. © NAMES Project Foundation.

Like the memorial, the quilt memorializes primarily through naming the dead, yet this naming is individualized through the testimony, objects, and photographs embedded within the quilt. In many ways, the quilt presents a conversation with the dead, in which questions are asked, testimony provided, and entreaties presented, all with the implication that the dead are located within the quilt and can witness and listen from there. The voices of the quilt speak to an imagined audience, often perceived as either the community of people affected by AIDS or as a naïve and uninformed audience that needs to be educated as to the value of the lives lost (illus. 3).

Personal photographs take many forms in the quilt. They are often sewn into panels or screened onto cloth. This sometimes gives panels the quality of

3. The AIDS Quilt, Washington, D.C., October 1996. Photo: Winifred Cambrecht. © NAMES Project Foundation.



fabric photo albums, which depict the absent person in many different places and states of being. Photographs are clearly perceived in the quilt to offer not only the trace of the dead person as alive but also concrete testimony to his or her existence. They are a primary means by which the quilt provides evidence of the human loss of the AIDS epidemic. Because the quilt responds to the fear that the AIDS dead will be forgotten, their lives less valued and their loss less mourned than that of other dead, quilt panels often testify simply to the fact that these people existed—they lived, loved, and felt pain; their lives were tragically cut short. Personal photographs affirm this existence.

To evoke lives lived, the quilt often attempts to render present the bodies of the dead. Each panel corresponds approximately to the size of a body or coffin, and many quilt panels conjure the absent bodies of the dead through a variety of likenesses—as outlines of the frame of someone's body or empty articles of clothing that echo the body that once filled them. Here, photographs are used almost exclusively to establish the dead as youthful, healthy, and alive. The representation of bodies in the quilt must be seen in the context of the discourse on bodies of the AIDS epidemic itself. One of the distinguishing features of AIDS is the aging effect of the opportunistic infections that ultimately cause death. These diseases waste away once-strong bodies to skeletal frames, making those in the advanced stages of AIDS appear to be decades older than they are. Theirs have been, in particular in the beginning of the epidemic, bodies that were coded as contaminating and untouchable. Through the fabric and tactile quality of the quilt itself, these bodies are retrieved as warm, touchable, loving, and erotic. In photographs, the dead are presented as vigorous and healthy, bodies that emanate sexuality and energy. These images seek to restore these bodies to their pre-AIDS status and retrieve some of their dignity.

These are images that convey, like the images left at the memorial, a profound sense of prior innocence. In a panel for Bill Bell, who died in 1984, a series of casual photographs frame a swatch of Japanese fabric. Here, smiling white costumed at a party, eating dinner, sitting in Golden Gate Park, he conveys a sense of the profoundly irrefragable everydayness of his life. His friend Paul Harman's panel frames a series of casual snapshots with elaborate fabric and two cats guarding the image of the Golden Gate Bridge. Many quilt panels evoke this sense of a tragically produced photo album, its images chosen in an attempt to convey the facets of a life now gone. These images function as icons, along with the symbols of places visited and professions pursued, of the pleasure of life before the presence of death. In this context, the casual aspects of their snapshot qualities convey a terrible sadness.

The photographs in AIDS quilt panels testify to previous states of being, to lives lived before AIDS entered the gay community and the lives of the AIDS dead. Many are highly nostalgic images, which defiantly reclaim the exuberant hedonism of the 1970s gay community before AIDS devastated it and irrevocably changed its status. These photographs of young, healthy men thus inevitably became political statements that refuse to apologize, regret, or moralize. They achieve a kind of poignancy through their lack of awareness of what will come, representing a time when the onslaught of AIDS was unimaginable.

Photographs in the quilt not only retrieve a time of prior innocence but also reaffirm connections to those who are still living. Many of the most moving quilt panels have been made by families and contain within them family photographs. Removed from the context of a family album, these images acquire political status in the quilt. While it can be implicated in many of the divisions between the communities affected by AIDS, the AIDS quilt has succeeded in fostering new communities across lines of sexuality, race, and class. Many stories surround the quilt of strangers meeting and coming together to mourn the dead and celebrate their lives. The numerous stories of alienation, rejection, and discrimination, of lovers excluded by families or names removed from panels, are balanced by moving stories of the construction of an AIDS-affected community unified in loss. They speak directly to the stereotype of young gay men as inevitably estranged from their families and the popular refusal to acknowledge the kinds of extended families that are constructed within the gay community. The discourse of gays as existing outside of the notion of family in the context of AIDS has been so extreme that the term *family* has often been equated with being HIV-negative. This was most evident in 1986 with the passage of a bill that legalized the creation of designated-donor pools that would allow families to donate blood within the family to prevent transmission of HIV, implying that families are inherently HIV-negative and those who are HIV-positive remain outside family structures.⁵

This larger context renders the presence of family photographs within the quilt a politically charged statement about the capacity of families to love and

care for the sick and dying, to work against homophobia, and to participate in the work of gay and lesbian communities. Like the teddy bears that proliferate in the quilt (and at the memorial), family photographs of the dead also suggest not only how young many of them were (there are many children memorialized in the quilt, however most of the dead represented in it were young men when they died), but also a desire to revisit a time when they were unmarked by tragedy, as they now inevitably are.

The mix of simplicity and complexity of many quilt panels attests to the difficulty of summarizing and representing a life. Indeed, the presence of photographs both at the memorial and in the quilt testifies to the fact that the names are not enough. The names act as surrogates for the bodies of the dead, yet they remain incomplete. The photographs within the memorial and the quilt are attempts to fill these empty names with individual significance. Yet these memorials also demonstrate the inability of the photograph to conjure the dead: while these images attempt to make the dead present, they testify to the profound incommensurability between the dead and the living. Ultimately, it is contestable whether these images can conjure in any sense the presence of the dead. Photographs have been used since their invention to signify a trace of the absent one, yet their complex relationship to contemporary memorials might, indeed, suggest that this capacity is profoundly limited. Perhaps we need to consider the ways in which the desire to build so many memorials in the late twentieth century constitutes a recognition of the incompleteness of the image (the same image that Barthes believed signaled the end of the monument) to provide rituals of remembrance and make present those who are absent.

Images of Mortality: Photographs of Missing Children

Images that move through the realms of personal memory, cultural memory, and history cross the porous boundaries between the private and public arenas. When the images left at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial or incorporated into the AIDS Memorial Quilt acquire cultural and historical status, they function as public memorials for the dead. These photographs have been transferred from personal to cultural memory with the aim of speaking to a larger audience about the impact and resonances of a life. But what of the photograph that unintentionally acquires cultural status? I would like to turn finally to the meaning of the images of missing children, which have proliferated in American culture in the 1980s and 1990s. These personal photographs, like those of the memorial and the quilt, have acquired specific cultural meanings. Unlike those images, they are awarded legal and investigative status. Yet, because of their status as photographs, they also function, despite their intended role, as image memorials.

past—once a photograph is taken, its moment is situated in the past, unlike the video image, for instance, which can operate in the present. This quality allows the photograph to function as a means of retrieval from the past, but it also gives the photograph an aura of death. Its stillness produces a sense of finality, and allows the photograph to be, in Eduardo Cadava's words, "the uncanny tomb of our memory."⁹

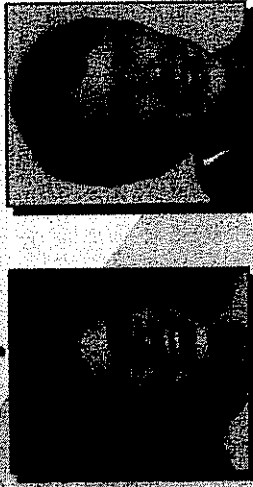
The photographs of missing children are highly self-conscious in their status as the what-has-been. Because we understand that these are photographs of children, people whose appearances can change dramatically in a relatively short period of time, these images often entreat us to note immediately the date on which the child was reported missing, and to look again at the photograph to gauge its pastness. After all, we know that it represents a child who no longer looks like this. These images are often computer-enhanced for "age progression" in attempts to update the children's images for better identification. Who is this child who is asking us if we have seen him or her, a virtual child who may or may not resemble the real child who may or may not be out there somewhere? This computer enhancement gives these images the quality of time slipping quickly away, rapidly erasing the original face and morphing it into another, older, perhaps more awkward visage.

This use of the "age-progressed" photograph, which falls into the realm of the more low-tech police sketch in terms of witnessing, has taken on the kind of narrative of wonder once reserved for the photograph itself. The traditional wonder at what the photograph can represent of the absent is replaced by the "gee whiz" response to the capacity of technology to predict the aging process of child to teenager. This can be, under examination, profoundly unnerving. I recently received an image flyer of Jacob Wetterling, who has been missing since 1989. In his photograph, the eleven-year-old Jacob smiles innocently for the camera. In the age-progressed image ("sponsored by the ADVO Tampa Sales office") he has morphed into a teenager, yet with the exact same smile. The image is uncannily convincing, yet, like many digital images, disturbing in its lack of referent. Is Jacob alive? Does he look like this?

Both the computer-enhanced images and the photographs that demand our gaze register a poignant and desperate grasp of the past, one that appears to be quickly slipping away. Like the photographs at the memorial and in the quilt, these are images coded with prior innocence, terribly ordinary pictures of childhood faces, smiling at the camera. In the context of a querying milk carton, they intend to shock and provoke us. The ordinariness of the image asks, how could such a seemingly average child be gone? Where is this child? We are not meant to look beyond the question to the potential problems of the narrative, although those images that feature the parent who is with the child disrupt this poignancy dramatically.

The photographs of missing children speak directly to us as citizens. They ask us to engage with them not as personal images, snapshots of the past, but

Have you seen me?



Name: Jacob Wetterling
 DOB: 2/17/78 Age: 19
 Ht.: 5'0" (4'11" - 5'11") Wt.: 75 lbs. (64 - 92 lb)
 Hair: Brown Eyes: Blue
 Sex: M Date Missing: 10/22/89
 From: St. Joseph, MN

CALL 1-800-THE-LOST (OR 1-800-843-5678)
 www.missingkids.com
 National Center for Missing and Exploited Children
 Over 80 children featured have been recovered.

4. Direct mail flyer with "age progression" photograph of a missing child.

Photographs of missing children greet us throughout our daily lives, in advertising flyers, on grocery bags and milk cartons, on the Internet, and on investigative television shows (illus. 4). They ask us to register the face of the missing child in order to scan the faces around us and offer identification. They ask us, "Have You Seen Me?" and demand that we respond by looking at them.⁶ The context in which these images are produced indicates as much about American culture in the 1990s as the AIDS Memorial Quilt evokes of the 1980s and the Vietnam Veterans Memorial of the 1960s and 1970s. The contemporary concern about the numbers of missing children is part of a larger context in which discourses of popular culture, fears about the state of childhood, and accusations of sexual abuse have produced a collective hysteria about the abuse of children and the experience of childhood.⁷ It is worth noting, for instance, that many of children whose images are circulated as missing children have either run away from home or have been "abducted" by one of their parents in a custody battle.⁸ This is an enormous topic, which I will not attempt to address here, but I would like to examine the ways in which the cultural status of these family photographs can have unintended effects.

Photographs have long been analyzed as objects of death. In its freezing of time in an instant, and its capacity to carry the image of the dead forward in time, the photograph renders a mortality to its subject. A photograph represents the what-has-been, awarding to its subject the quality of being of the

rather as participants in an investigation. Citizenship is defined through these images as the active surveillance of one's neighbors, always on the lookout for suspicious groupings of individuals and potential missing children under cover. These images speak a belief in the capacity of the casual family photograph to function as a form of identification and evidence in a search. They state that the child is retrievable through the photograph and that the photograph can aid in the reclamation of the family. Hence, the family image is deployed to make the country feel safe in the knowledge that the highly disruptive narrative of the missing child can be contained through technology—specifically the technologies of photography and digital computer enhancement. I do not mean to say that the stories of children who have been kidnapped are not deeply tragic and troubling. But the photograph of the missing child who is a runaway or with an angry parent also entreats us to respond with uncritical outrage. The photograph that prompts its viewer to feel anger about a missing child yet safe about the means to recover that child cannot accommodate the narrative of the child who left the family by choice or design, and who may actually be better off away from it.

The narrative of technological comfort is sharply evident in the photographs that form a part of the success stories of missing children searches. The National Center for Missing & Exploited Children (NCMEC) runs an online database and website in which the complex technological status of these images becomes evident.¹⁰ The website and database are allied with television shows such as *Unsolved Mysteries* and *America's Most Wanted* and the ADVO direct mail and supermarket campaigns in a complex web of nonprofit, commercial, and government interests. In one of NCMEC's online success stories, the recovery of three children, Hans, Heather, and Laurel Holmgren, is declared as the "direct result" of the age-progressed image of Heather, which was seen by a neighbor. However, other parts of the story begin to seep into the narrative, since it is revealed that the "abductor" who was arrested "within 45 minutes" was her "abductor father," whose photograph was also distributed. The story of this "abduction" is entirely unclear and unrevealed—who was searching for these children and why is their father now a criminal? Allowed to remain intact in this narrative of success, however, is the notion of allied technologies of surveillance which can be used to offer the public a sense of safety and security.

These photographs of missing children, whether enhanced or not, often can have effects other than their intended role as identifiers. Because of the phenomenological relationship of photographs to the what-has-been, these images often convey a sense of finality and irretrievability, not queries of hope and investigative optimism but image memorials. These children who ask us to search for them look, in fact, already gone, marked by the mortality of the image. They appear arrested in a previous time, unable to grow older. They

offer moments of prior innocence that proclaim the end of that innocence. The computer enhancement only makes the problem worse, creating instead virtual images of the child who never was—by implication, the child who never will be. If this child is unreachable (by contemporary standards this means unphotographable) then his or her replacement with a morphed image signals only a kind of technological death knell. Hence, contrary to their intent to incite the reader to recognize and identify them nearby, these images seem to suggest the hopelessness of the search, the child as already lost. This unintended effect can also circle back again to the discourse of the threat to childhood that produces the anxiety about the missing child in the first place. If the child is already missing and irretrievable, then forces must be mustered to find him or her, indeed to retrieve childhood itself in a nostalgic state.

If these images signify a lost past and, hence, a kind of memorial, what kind of memorial is this? The images of missing children reach us through a variety of commodified contexts—flyers with coupons, grocery bags, milk cartons, television. Indeed, we see them almost exclusively in the context of commerce. They share cultural meaning with the increased number of electronic memorials—website tributes and memorial pages, for instance. In what ways do they ask us to shift from the mode of the consumer to the consumer-citizen to the citizen-investigator to the witness to memory?

The Public/Private Image

These family and personal images demonstrate the paradoxical cultural role of the photograph—both a testimony to the lives of those who are absent and an object that in itself renders mortality. Their proliferation in cultural arenas speaks not only of the technological development that has allowed for greater access to the production of public images, but also to an erosion of the realm of the private. Once released into public arenas, these images can operate as free-floating signifiers, open to diverse meanings and available to many different political agendas. They retain the status of personal, but their shifting meanings are evidence not only of the malleability of the image but also the fraught role played by the family as a signifier in contemporary politics. As snapshots, they are replete with the public meanings of the personal lives they depict.

Indeed, the capacity of these images to carry their poignancy into realms of cultural meaning indicates the ways in which the notion of a private realm separates from the public has always been a fallacy. For the so-called private moments that they depict are, of course, already coded with social meanings about youth, childhood, marriage, family, and the ideologies of American culture.

The photographs that move from personal and familial contexts into public arenas, from family photograph albums to public memorials such as the

Vietnam Veterans Memorial and the AIDS Memorial Quilt, from picture frames set on bureaus to missing children mailers and milk cartons, function as forms of speech in the face of cultural traumas. These photographs are offered up as testimony, hopeful evidence to the humanity once embodied by their subjects, proclamations of prior innocence, and often desperate cries for those who are absent, missing, or dead. They speak to a national public in ways that ask it to be both empathetic and vigilant. As they are pulled from personal memory into cultural memory and public discourse, they symbolize many of the hopes, fears, and desires that circulate through concepts of the family and the nation. In their ordinariness, they demand an attention to the small details and casual meanings of daily life. They are restless images, changing meaning and moving onward, asking us to pay attention to the stories, both declarative and secretive, that they tell.

NOTES

1. Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York and Wang, 1981), 93.
2. Judith Butler, "Review Essay: Spirit in Ashes," *History and Theory* 27, no. 1 (1988): 69.
3. This photograph and letter are included in Thomas Allen, *Offerings at the Wall: Artifacts from the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Collection* (Atlanta: Turner Publishing, 1995), 52–53. People who have left mementos at the memorial can contact the archive at NPS/MRCE, Box 435, Glenn Dale, MD 20769.
4. Identification of the picture was also aided by the fact that it has the name and place of the photographic studio on the back. There has been some controversy generated in Vietnam around the image. After Luttrell announced his intention to return the photo, an article published in Vietnam stated that it was a case of misidentification. The young girl in the picture remains unidentified. Associated Press, "Letter Ends Anguish of Vet's Vietnam 'Kill,'" *Newark Star-Ledger*, Aug. 19, 1997, and telephone interview with Richard Luttrell by author, Oct. 8, 1997.
5. See Jan Grover, "AIDS: Keywords," in *AIDS: Cultural Activism/Cultural Analysis*, ed. Douglas Grimp (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1988), 23.
6. Marilyn Ivy analyzes the paradoxical aspects of this speaking position on the advertising flyers, which read "ADVO Asks . . . Have You Seen Me?" in which ADVO the company speaks to the recipient, but the child asks the question. See Marilyn Ivy, "Have You Seen Me? Recovering the Inner Child in Late Twentieth-Century America," *Social Text* 37 (Winter 1993): 227–52.
7. I have written more extensively about contemporary concerns about recovered

memories of child abuse in "The Remembering of Forgetting: Recovered Memory Syndrome as Cultural Memory," *Social Text* (Spring 1999). See also Anne Higonnet's essay in this volume.

8. See Ivy, 231.
9. Eduardo Cadava, "Words of Light: Theses on the Photography of History," *Diacritics* (Fall/Winter 1992): 92.
10. See <http://www.missingkids.com>.