

Chapter 13

Identity Politics: A Study of Diasporic Identity Mediated Through Family Photography

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ABSTRACT

Drawing from a well-established interdisciplinary history that focuses on the affective power of photography when animated through oral narration, this chapter looks at how diasporic identity is mediated through family photographs. One case study that uses photo-elicitation as research method is referenced in order to consider the mnemonic value of photographs or what can be described as the ‘affect’ of the image in evoking critical memories. In doing this, a sense of diasporic belonging to a new homeland, grief, trauma, and loss is investigated. This chapter concludes by highlighting that critical traumatic memories can be inter-generationally transferred into post-memories as the past is brought into the present through discussion and reflection.

INTRODUCTION

In this chapter I seek to find new possibilities of examining diasporic identity and in doing so highlight an otherwise hidden history. Specifically, the focus of the chapter looks at how diasporic identity is mediated through family photography. Drawing from one case study that uses photo-elicitation as research method, I consider the mnemonic value of photographs, or what can be described as the ‘affect’ of the image in evoking critical memories. Furthermore, I contemplate how a sense of belonging, grief and loss are navigated amidst this process. To shape this theory, I recount the interview with Jan and her family, who discuss the importance of Jan’s family photographs in locating their diasporic Anglo-Turkish identity.¹ To give a critical context to the research, relevant interdisciplinary socio-cultural literature is drawn on. In doing this I aim to deepen the argument and strengthen the claim that photo-elicitation of family photography is a relevant and effective method through which diasporic identity can be navigated.

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Identity Politics

It is important that I position myself in relation to the research in order to situate my research findings. I am an artist, academic and writer, trained in both anthropology and photography. The research for this chapter is located in north London. Although I am a long-term local resident of north London, I am an outsider to the Anglo-Turkish community. This means in relation to the research; I concurrently oscillate between an insider to the geographical locale and outsider to the local Anglo-Turkish community. My interest is driven by a desire to better understand the community and with-it the different cultural practices around me. As I will go on and discuss, there are specific advantages and challenges when positing oneself as an insider and as an outsider within the research process, which are not easy to navigate. As an insider to the local area, I can spend time in the area and in doing so pay attention to the different practices in the neighbourhood. As an outsider to the community I am conscious that I may misunderstand or even misinterpret local practices. Motivated by these concerns, I am cautious in my approach to the research process and use photography as familiar tool to pivot the research process. During the research process I listen carefully to Jan and her family as they narrate their family photographs with words and gestures. As I will discuss, through this process the photographs are given meaning - they are animated and become audible. This chapter is drawn to conclusion by focusing on one family portrait that sits on the mantelpiece the main living area of Jan's home. Through the biographical narrative that accompanies this portrait, a traumatic family narrative is revealed. This personal narrative becomes collectively owned by Jan's family and then turns into a cultural narrative of migration, within a socio-global context.

Background: Critical Context

Accessing the stories that narrate these photographs is crucial to unlocking their significance. One can ponder over what makes other people's family photographs so fascinating. They are the most ubiquitous sort of photography, which even when the subjects are unknown to us are intriguing to engage with. I am curious about how seemingly generic family photographs, once animated, enable Jan and her family to reflect on their experience of migration and belonging to a diasporic Anglo-Turkish community in London. To elicit crucial narratives from Jan's photographs a mnemonic framework is needed. This framework draws from a robust interdisciplinary tradition of doing memory work with photographs. For example, the primary text of photo-historian Martha Langford (2001) is helpful in understanding how to work with family photographs. Langford advises that it is the narration of photographs, what she calls the 'oral performance', that gives meaning to them and thus gives them value. Within this context, the photographs have potential to become what Geoffrey Batchen (2004) describes as an 'aide-de-mémoire'. Annette Kuhn (2007) builds on this framework, by suggesting that photographs as objects of discussion are in fact 'memory texts'. That is to say, she describes 'memory texts' as acts of memory which are performed with family photographs and albums. She writes:

Personal and family photographs figure importantly in cultural memory, and memory work with photographs offers a particularly productive route to understanding the social and cultural uses and instrumentalities of memory. (Kuhn 2007 p. 283)

She goes on to write that memory work is not necessarily evidence of a 'truth' but can be seen as material to be mined for possibilities, adding that memory texts typically elicit a vignette of memories, anecdotes, fragments and feelings which are often not anchored to specific times. Furthermore, it is helpful to consider more recent writing on photography and memory such as Margaret Olin (2012) and Tina

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