

Chapter 19

Me and My Mom's Camera: Family Archives and Collaborative Memory Work

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ABSTRACT

*This chapter considers a collection of 35mm slides taken by the author's mother, Gerry Neely, a keen photographer, who although wanting to study photography formally, was never able to. The evening class offered at the local university, called 'Me and My Camera', never had enough enrolments to justify running the class. This chapter will offer an account of the process of digitising the slides and sharing them with family over the last few years. Informed by what Annette Kuhn describes in her book *Family Secrets* as a kind of 'memory work', the author's analysis will present a collaborative form of memory work developed from discussions with the author's mom during the pandemic about their individual interpretations and memories of the images contained within the slides, as well as her own thoughts on the process of taking, selecting, and presenting them.*

INTRODUCTION

My mom's grey and black camera bag sits on top of an old pine wardrobe. It's December 2021, and although I'd hoped to return to the States to see family, the new Omicron variant and the compromised immune system I was left with following a splenectomy in my teenage years, means it's not advisable. It's now been two and half years since I've seen my family there: my mom and my dad, my brother and my sister and their families. Like many, I am immensely grateful for the technology that enables us to stay in touch - for the shared texts and photographs and, of course, the video calls. My dad likes to remind me of how, when I first came over to Scotland in 1995 as an exchange student, he'd ring me on the pay phone in the corridor of my student halls and we'd talk in minutes for nearly the equivalent of what it would cost in dollars, sometimes more. Calls were therefore kept to a minimum. When the

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pandemic first started, I spoke to my parents most days. Although communication is now less frequent, we usually catch-up one or two times a week.

When I first talk to my mom about the camera, neither of us are sure when it was purchased, but it is likely to be from when she first took a real interest in photography, when we were living in Morgantown, West Virginia in the late 1970s. She wanted to take an evening class at the University, called 'Me and My Camera', but they never had enough enrolments to justify running the class. So she learned on her own through a process of experimentation and studying the limited manuals and books she had to hand. Her passion for photography continued throughout much of my childhood. As my mom became skilled at taking pictures, us kids - my sister, in particular - became adept at hiding from the camera.

In the early 80s, when we moved to Columbia, Missouri, another university town, my mom found a photography store that she liked, called Columbia Photo. Today she recalls how a visit to the store had induced similar feelings to those experienced when she went into the local fabric store, a place she visited regularly to meet local quilters, until the shop closed down just before the pandemic. Similar to her quilting experiences, it was the process she enjoyed: taking the film in to be developed, picking up the pictures, seeing new cameras, and talking to employees who might give advice on how to improve her technique.

My mom gave me her camera when I left for Scotland. She felt I would need a good camera to take pictures of the places I went. It has served us both well. Although these days it spends most of its time on top of my wardrobe, it is still in good working order. The cube-shaped grey polyester bag it is held in has many zips and pockets, containing lenses, an instruction manual, a flash, some lens wipes, as well as several boxes of my mom's 35mm slides.

This chapter will offer an account of my mom's slides and the process of digitising them and sharing them with family over the last few years, using the account as a point of departure for reflecting more broadly on the nature of slides, particularly in relation to personal and family collections. Informed by what Annette Kuhn describes in her book *Family Secrets* as a kind of 'memory work', a process requiring 'working backwards - searching for clues, deciphering signs and traces, making deductions, patching together reconstructions out of fragments of evidence' (1995, p. 4), my analysis will present a collaborative form of memory work developed from discussions with my mom during the pandemic, about our individual interpretations and memories of the images contained within the slides, as well as her own thoughts on the process of taking, selecting and presenting them.

My reasons for undertaking this kind of memory work was, admittedly, partly motivated by a desire to connect with my mom in a meaningful way at a time when we were unable to see each other in person. The memory work in this respect was cast in a very particular light since the memories and past events we are reflecting on were part of a material and tactile experience of family life that was temporarily unavailable to us. But I am also motivated as a feminist scholar of visual culture, whose research has primarily centred on bringing to light the work of women artists and filmmakers who were historically marginalised, often because their work was produced outside of traditional production contexts, within domestic spheres, and as a consequence was dismissed as amateur (Neely, 2009, 2014a; 2014b). Memory work itself was historically developed as a methodology used by feminist researchers who sought to make visible the aspects of women's lived experience that dominant theories and accounts failed to acknowledge (Haug, 2000, p. 156).

Almost all of filmmakers I have researched are from Scotland or have lived and worked in Scotland. It wasn't until I began digitising my mom's collection of slides while I was simultaneously in the process of digitising the personal slides of the Scottish filmmaker and poet, Margaret Tait, that it occurred

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