"The View from Nowhere": US Military Aerial Photography and the Fractured Family Archive

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Eidolon Journal: https://everydayphotography.org/journal/the-view-from-nowhere

May 2026

We are at fifteen thousand feet, losing altitude. I'm looking out the window at the ground as its abstract shapes reveal themselves, moment by moment. The irregular tessellation of land, sea and lakes gives way to the roads, backyards, swimming pools and school sports fields of Puget Sound, and at its centre, Seattle.

The first time I can remember seeing this view, I was seven years old. I have an almost visceral memory of the disorientation; the impossible, fantastical, incomprehensible fact that this configuration of shapes below us was the *ground*, looking the way it did because we were so far *up*. The earth – the real earth on which I was accustomed to walking and moving around – was so very far below and so very small as to look like one of my grandmother's patchwork quilts, or a map in a book.

We were landing, as I am doing now, to visit my mother's family at the uppermost point of the United States' Pacific coast. We took off from London ten hours ago and I am groggy, waiting impatiently for the refreshment cart to come by.

My grandmother, with whom we would go and stay every few summers when money allowed, was a quilter like her mother before her and my mother after her – a piecer-together of scraps and patterns. In her house, which smelled always of coffee brewing, these quilts adorned every bed and chair. If you lay down and looked at them closely, you could see how the almost-

invisible quilting stitches that ran across and all over their surfaces gave each one its own topology: swirling peaks and gulleys over floral prints, a softly undulating landscape.

But of maps, I knew little back then. They are what I think of now, as we make our gradual descent from the sky. My Grandma Jean is long dead, the quilts dispersed. I'm here not for her this time, but for the grandfather I never met. His maps, and his own patchwork view from above.

Our lateral view becomes oblique – technical terms I am learning, for the categorisation of aerial imagery. The impossibly vertical perspective that so disorientated me as a child is slowly tilting, giving way to the diagonal and then the horizontal. It pitches gently sideways as we decline, the vista becoming gradually less like that from the heavens and more the top of a mountain, then a hill, until gravity has claimed us and we are one with the ground.

"You," my Uncle Jerry declares out of the corner of his mouth, grinning around his cigarette, "are a pain in the ass". I laugh, hauling my much-too-large suitcase into the trunk as we rush to get out of the line of cars along the arrivals slipway. He makes a song-and-dance about the traffic and the near-impossibility of getting here on time… but once we make it out onto the freeway headed north-east, the stories begin. We exchange them like offerings. "Did I ever tell you about the time I was in the security line at that airport for *eleven hours*…?" We haven't seen each other for over a decade. I have written to him out of the blue, telling him that it's finally time.

His house is exactly as I remember it, except that somehow everything is on a different scale. The backyard is smaller, the fireplace larger. Before my jetlag sets in, he shows me through to the study in the back, and what I have come here to see.

Jerold Knox, Photographer's Mate First Class, Photographic Squadron 2, US Navy (after whom my uncle is named), made his first flight on the 21st of October 1943. At the Navy's School of Basic Photography in Pensacola, Florida, he studied all phases of basic, ground, and aerial photography for four months, before first being posted to Hawai'i.[1] From there, further out into the South Pacific, which he photographed from above using a stereoscopic aerial camera – a specially adapted time-release version of dual-lens photographic technology that created stereo "pairs": doubled images with minute variations that when viewed together comprised a three-dimensional depiction of the land (and sea) below.

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[1] Mame Warren, 2005, 'Focal Point of the Fleet: U.S. Navy Photographic Activities in World War II', *The Journal of Military History*, vol. 69 no. 4, p.1049.

[figs 1 & 2 here]

Of this grandfather, and the archive of images he left behind, I have been dimly aware for years. I knew that he died when my mother was a still a small child, had been a keen photographer all his life, and was above all impossibly handsome, charming, and charismatic. I see his face now, on Jerry's computer screen. He is shirtless and smiling, surrounded by his buddies in a palm grove, all of them squinting into the sun. And now, posing in his Navy whites – a perfect, square jawline that none of us has inherited, and then here, relaxing in his bunk. There are hundreds of these pictures. Jerry can't hide his pleasure that someone is finally showing an interest in the archive that was his passion project for years. Among them, some type-written pages by my Grandma Jean, setting out for her children what their father did in the war.

"This is only the facts," she begins, "and not all of them are accurate."

At first, I am disappointed. I knew that the materials Jerry had in his possession were mostly digital – hundreds of images that he spent years scanning, all meticulously if somewhat subjectively catalogued on his ageing desktop computer. There are some prints and a handful of documents, but he is insistent that the vast majority of my grandfather's physical archive is now lost, following my grandmother's death – dispersed across time, house moves, and family members.

"Like I said," he repeats, "the hard copies all went with your Mom. After the funeral we packed them up and she took them home to Ireland. You can ask her – they're all there. These digital files are all I have." This, by now, is the stuff of standard family argument. A trans-Atlantic volley of claim and counterclaim over what is true and what is not. We Facetime my parents. My mother swears she did not take the pictures with her, does not have them and never did. In this factual dispute and many others, it turns out, I am to be the arbiter.

On this occasion, though, it is easier than I think. "What if I just have a look in that trunk over there?" I finally ask. He swears it is full of junk. But I clear the piles of papers off the top, lift the lid, and lo and behold, there it all is.

In a 1975 *Artforum* essay about the aerial reconnaissance photography of the First World War, Allan Sekula notes that it is very typical for once highly sensitive, classified, strategically-significant images to end up "in scrap heaps, in military archives, in personal collections of war memorabilia, in institutional collections of military and technological artifacts."[2] He describes

[2] Allan Sekula, 1975, 'The Instrumental Image: Steichen at War', *Artforum*, pp.25-35.

each of these as a "discourse situation" in which the photograph takes on layers of significance that are many and varied. Each one becomes, in fact, "a truth-conferring relic…some of which possess an institutional authority and some of which carry only the authority of anecdotally rendered personal experience."

[figs 3 & 4 here]

The sea of images that I am looking down at, unsure where to begin as I sift and delve and reach into the bottom of the box, pulling out stack after stack, is an archive onto which I will confer a new "discourse situation". I am on some indistinct level, I will admit, looking for "truth-conferring relics". Sekula brings a warning, though: "At this stage in the game, a journalistic myth of primitive, undiscovered value can circulate—the fable of gold in the attic."

The true gold, depending on how you look at it, is not actually here. Unlike those of the First World War, reconnaissance photographs from the Second have remained under national and military control. The actual aerial photographs taken by my grandfather's unit remain preserved in the US National Archives and the Naval History and Heritage Command Photo Archives in Washington DC. Accessible only in person and by appointment, for now, I can only imagine them: a blind spot at the centre of the story.

[figs 5 & 6 here]

Visible or not, however, Sekula points out that the official accounts of such photographs "fail to explain how their meaning relates to the ways they have been used, or how meaning and use have shifted together over time."[3] In my family, "meaning and use" has indeed shifted, drifting into what Donna Haraway calls a "view from nowhere".[4] For me, it is a view displaced across borders and continents. My mother having emigrated to Ireland in her twenties, where she met my father and then had me, my attachment to this history feels distant, tenuous and compelling, stirred up further by the profession in which I have found myself... As a historian of conflict photography, it was inevitable that I would end up back here. And yet I am faced, as ever, with a deep ambivalence about my institutional authority; an academic in a field (documentary photography) in which the camera's objective knowledge is taken to be self-evident, a kind of assumed power epitomised in my grandfather's own elevated perspective. I have spent my career as a teacher extolling the power of the camera while also holding it critically accountable as a weapon, a conquering, distancing, and disembodied seeing-machine. There is, after all, no "view

[3] Sekula, 'The Instrumental Image', 1975, p.26.
[4] Donna Haraway, 'Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective', *Feminist Studies*, Vol. 14, No. 3 (Autumn, 1988), pp. 575-599.

from nowhere". There is no detached power, independent from human desire and agenda – no neutral camera.

When the attack on Pearl Harbour propelled the United States into World War II, the US Navy quickly mobilised, enlisting candidates for its aerial reconnaissance programme in the South Pacific.[5] This was an area so vast, and so sparsely populated with dry land, that neither Japanese nor Allied planes had the range to traverse it without making use of what land mass there was for landing, refuelling and renewal of supplies. So, the race was on to control the many atolls and islands of the region. And if any territory is to be controlled, it first needs to be mapped.

From January 1942, the Navy began adding to their specialist training programme almost daily, allocating rank based on photographic experience. Having heard about the programme, Jerold saw his chance to pursue his interest in photography while contributing to the war effort. But he was turned away by his local recruiting office on account of the severe stammer he had had for the whole of his life, which recruiters felt would be too much of an impediment in using a radio. He had better luck at the office the next city over, however, and by the summer, was on his way to basic training. Later that year, the first cohort of photoreconnaissance and interpretation personnel was deployed to Honolulu with the aim of mapping specific islands across the region in advance of troop invasion. By the end of the war, it was estimated that 80 to 85 percent of US military intelligence came from photography.[6]

My grandparents married, in the hasty manner of many pre-deployment wartime weddings, at the Monticello Hotel in Norfolk, Viginia in December 1943. Earlier that year, they had vacationed together near the photo training lab HQ in Pensacola – all of it well document by his camera. Here the two of them are, smiling, holding hands in the surf. My grandmother lying on her back squinting up at him, her eyes, unlike his, so familiar to me even in her youth. He kneels before her on the sand in another image that she must have taken herself, his military dog-tags glinting in the Florida sun.

[fig 7 & 8 here]

According to the hand-written Aviator's Flight Logbook that is the most prized item in my uncle's collection, Jerold flew first over Hawai'i: Ni'ihau, Maui, Kauai, Molokai, Oahu, and the Waip'o Penninsula. Then further afield to the Marshall Islands: Arno, Maloelap, Namu, Ailinglapalap, Arno, Jaluit, Kili, Mili, Ebon, and the capital, Majuro, where his base was located

[5] Warren, 'Focal Point of the Fleet', 2005, p.1055.
[6] Warren, 'Focal Point of the Fleet', 2005, p.1049.

for the largest part of the war. Then, the Gilbert islands: Nonuti, Beru, Tabiteaeua and the southernmost Arorae.

On the tabled pages of the logbook, his handwriting becomes stiff and angular as he takes care to write down these unfamiliar place names one after another, sometimes spelling them incorrectly. By the final page, dated August 1945, he has racked up more than 380 flight hours, predominantly in, according to the abbreviations in his notes, JF2 "Duck" and TBM-3P "Avenger" aircraft.

[figs 9, 10, 11 & 12 here]

In November 1943, US Marines had suffered huge casualties as a result of misjudging the height of coral reefs while attempting an amphibious invasion of the atoll of Tawara. "The compression of a topologically varied surface into a single-plane image," Sekula explains, "led to obvious confusions between depression and elevation," and in the case of Tawara, this confusion proved deadly. It was clear that reconnaissance from above was needed, and single-lens photography, commanders now understood, was not enough. In order to judge the terrain in three dimensions, and to never make such a perceptual mistake again, the camera needed two eyes.

Jerold's unit used stereoscopic technology and approaches that had been pioneered in the previous World War by the internationally famous photographer Edward Steichen. Steichen's innovations in aerial reconnaissance informed the Navy's understanding of the medium's potential into the next war, and by 1943 had reached their full expression. There were two differing methods for creating stereoscopic aerial photographs during this period. The first used two cameras, one mounted on the underside of each of a plane's wings. The second used one single camera, held in the plane's gun mount in place of a weapon, which made two exposures in quick succession as the plane moved.[7] Pictures of Jerold on training exercise show him holding a huge, black, barrel-like apparatus – an 8.25-inch Fairchild F-56 camera – which indicates that his unit employed the latter of these two methods.

[figs 13 & 14 here]

"I think I have it somewhere up here", Jerry says from above my head. I am sitting on the floor, close to the chair which he has pulled over to stand on, leaning as far as he can into the back of the uppermost closet shelf. With some effort, he finds what he is looking for – the bright yellow-

[7] IOP Institute of Physics; Historical Association, 'Aerial Reconnaissance Photographic Intelligence', *RAF 100* resource, raf100schools.org.uk

and-red box marked "Kodaslide Stereo Viewer II" ("For life-like pictures in 3 dimensions"), but it's empty. "Dammit", he says, not for the first time that afternoon.

Perhaps having got a taste for it during the war, Jerold took to using a stereo camera for the hundreds of family pictures he went on to take, and which I have now spread out around me. Of these "stereo pairs", only one half (the right) has typically been saved. Originally, they were to be held and viewed through this plastic, hand-held viewing device, long since lost.

[fig 15 here]

But even if I could hold the viewer in my hand, it would do me no good. At the age of two or three I was diagnosed with amblyopia, more commonly known as "lazy eye", meaning that, like my mother before me, I have a fault in my brain that overrides the signals coming from my left eye. I am, effectively, monocular: a disability that causes me to see a little bit like a (single-lens) camera. One of the consequences of this is that the three-dimensional relief effect of stereoscopic pictures is lost on me. Instead of depth, I see only disjointed flatness.

Steichen, a giant of twentieth-century humanist documentary vision, led a wartime project driven by the ultimate desire for knowledge-power: mastery from above, armoured eyes in the sky.[8] This was a desire to see, hold, know and dominate a landscape from a location so elevated, so detached from embodied, grounded reality, as to be untouchable. Haraway writes of this kind of knowing – this patriarchal vision-ideology that dominates modern scientific thinking and by extension the modern Western worldview – as a dangerous fallacy. Its perceived objectivity comes from the fact that it seemingly hovers, metaphorically or not, in a nowhere space, neutral, pure, untouched by bias, human fallibility or desire. It is, problematically, "unsituated".

With the invention of linear perspective in the fifteenth century, a new kind of self was created: a self who existed, above all else, in relation to what it could see, and from where. This new system of picture-making – organised, rational, hierarchical and fixed – had inherent within it an ideal spectator: imaginary yet universal; neutral yet endowed with highly specific forms of power.[9] The photographic camera has been, since its invention, a linear perspective machine, fully mechanising this system of horizon line, orthogonals and vanishing point to the extent that they are taken as natural, a kind of visual truth: transparent, neutral and universal. Stereoscopic

[8] See Christopher Phillips, 1981, *Steichen at War: Naval Aviation in the Pacific*, Abrams, Inc.
[9] Martin Jay, 1994, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth Century French Thought,* University of California press, p.52. See also Robert Romanyshyn, 1989, *Technology as Symptom and Dream,* Routledge, p.35.

photography can, by extension, be read as the ultimate triumph: untouchable mastery, all-seeing power, *doubled*.

We stitch together the pieces, Jerry and I. He at the desk, spent cigarettes piling up in the ashtray beside him, and me cross-legged on the floor. We reach back further in time than either of us anticipated, such that it is difficult to know where the edges are. My back starts to ache and I take a break to walk down the lane past his house, into the edge of the pine forest where we used to play as kids, my brothers, my cousins, and I. Passing the signs warning of coyotes, as I walk I make voice notes, trying to gather my thoughts. A few feet from the path, the ground falls away dangerously towards a creek, still dry despite it being mid-winter.

Jerry is, like all of us, a storyteller. The stories are endless. They pile up on one another, a compendium of tall tales, conflicting narratives and intrigue. The master, however, it is understood by all, was my great-grandmother, Clara. Jerry has a recording of her voice, which he has digitised onto a series of CDs, and plays for me back at the house. I listen as she tells the improbable story of an aristocratic English ancestor, disinherited for having an affair with a maid (a story that, however improbable, in fact turns out to be true). Her voice, shaky and frail but authoritative, is the kind of voice that can hold court and silence a room, ready to cut down naysayers without a pause.

Clara was born on the trail, during what became known as the Oklahoma land rush ("they fired a gun at noon and you just went"). It is a story that I already know, because I have heard various versions of it for years: how they came from east to west, from New York via Kansas and then on to settle in Oklahoma, along the same route as so many hundreds of others, in search of land. A place in the world. A favourite re-told family tale is that of the birth of my great-great-uncle Ezra. In the days after his arrival, he was attended, it seems, by the local "Indians", who crossed the prairie and surrounded the family's sod hut, drawn by curiosity, "to look at the white baby". This is Jerry's version. My grandmother's was that the Cherokee stood guard, protecting the newborn from attack by their own peers.

[fig 16, 17 & 18 here]

"The task with Clara," Jerry says, "was always to try to separate the truth from the bullshit." I am on the couch, now, while he is laying a fire. He stacks and re-stacks the wood, taking it all very seriously, before settling on the huge leather armchair opposite me. The smell of spice-rubbed

ribs drifts through from his barrel-smoker in the backyard. "But why would you want to do that," I hear myself reply, "when the bullshit is the best bit?"

In Oklahoma, you could see for eight miles. So flat was the terrain that, unlike the skyline of New York, the land was like the sea. Like seeing the horizon on the deck of a ship.

I decide to ask the real question that I've come here to investigate. The one that is there behind the military history and the photographs and the archival research. "Am I right, do you think…" I search for the words, "that our family is just particularly prone to these tall tales, mythologies – to *bullshit,* than others? Or is that really just *all* families?"

His short answer to my question is yes – I am right ("I've included all the facts," my grandmother attested after all, "even the ones that aren't true"). The longer answer is murkier, wider, deeper. It has to do, he explains, with that journey across the Midwestern plains, expanses so wide that there was no way to situate yourself except by means of a story. Terrain so unknown and dangerous, holding so much to be afraid of, that a person needed a system of mythology to make sense of things, even if it wasn't entirely real.

"Yes, but isn't it also about the performative power of being the best storyteller with the best story? The hyperbole and exaggeration?" I ask. This was country that made you so small you had to be the biggest somehow. Jerry agrees. And being the biggest storyteller was a good a strategy as any. ("No one could tell his stories just the way he could," continues Grandma Jean's account. "Some of them were true, some partially true, and some of them pure fiction. But the telling was the secret…")

And so continued the lineage of unreliable narration.

I am making notes endlessly. Beside a faded nineteenth century photograph re-captured on my phone, I have written, *the guy on the left is a great uncle of ours who claimed to have lost an arm in the battle of Gettysburg. But if you look closely, you can see it is tucked inside his jacket. There is another picture of the same man on his farm some years later, both arms intact.*

I try to convey all of this to my girlfriend back home. She has been receiving an endless stream of WhatsApp updates since my arrival. They combine to form a fragmented narrative that seems more and more like farce:

I've been telling people my whole life that my family is from Texas because my grandfather always used to wear cowboy boots everywhere he went, had the nickname Tex in the Navy, and had 'born Amarillo, TX' on his gravestone. But it turns out Jerry says he was actually born in Dodge City, Kansas. He told everyone he was Texan because he "just liked it"? I don't know what's true anymore.

Stereoscopic images consist of two slightly different views of the same thing. This is how they work. They make sense without one another, of course: as standalone images they remain perfectly legible. But together, they create the depth that is needed to really see. The gap between the two – the space that corresponds roughly to the distance between two eyes and which is the basis of the three-dimensional illusion – is called the parallax. This gap is the glitch, the dissonance, the imperfect key. By means of this gap, we avoid the hazards that can come with oversimplification.

I board another plane, south from Seattle to Los Angeles. I need to speak to Marki – Jerry' sister and the oldest of Jerold's three children – to get a slightly different view of the same thing. I have filled the empty Kodak stereo-viewer box with prints, and packed as many more as I can fit into my suitcase. I believe that my aunt has more materials in her attic that she can show me, but really, I have come for the stories. To talk and to listen.

Shortly after my arrival, we are walking on the beach. We will do a lot of walking on the beach in the five days I am here. On this first day, the wind is blowing and the usually blue California sky is a wintery white. My aunt's eyes, like the whole of her, shine as she speaks, radiating a quality much, much younger than her almost eighty years. She is even shorter in stature than I am but has always been a giant to me. A retired gynaecological surgeon and still a formidable activist for LGBT+ rights, she has for as long as I can remember been a truth-teller, unafraid to speak right into the heart of things. But when the truth is combined with fire and irrepressible creativity, as hers always is, the bare facts of a story tend to feel less and less like the most important part. Already, Jerry's accounting of things and hers are beginning to fray and diverge. Jerold was, she insists for a start, born in Amarillo, Texas. She is adamant about this. (I make a note to look it up once and for all. How hard can it be?)

[figs 19, 20 & 21 here]

Of his death, too, and what followed, Marki's narrative is different. The grief of losing his father when he was fourteen years old hit Jerry hard. He speaks of him with great love and tenderness, and of the lessons he learned from him about fatherhood, loss, and love. Being a few years older,

Marki's memories are less idealised. He was a good father, yes, but also an alcoholic, persistently absent, often sleeping on the couch. He had at least one affair, and while he was not a bad man, she maintains, his death was perhaps the best thing that could have happened to their mother. (Despite being financially ruined by her widowhood, Jean went on to have a career that she would never otherwise have had; fulfilling relationships; a happy second marriage to the man I would later call Grandpa. Shortly after her first husband's death, she procured herself, Marki takes particular delight in telling me, a white Chevy Malibu. "And lovers. Plenty of lovers.")

Alongside us as we walk south into the wind, the ocean churns. The stories are beginning to weigh on me – their unspoken layers, their sadness, even the beauty of their telling – and the Pacific wind streaks tears, now, across my face, inland towards the fire-scorched hills. I am thinking, in this moment, of my own mother, her place in this story indistinct, so near to me and yet so far away. She was a ten-year old girl when her father died. "She just refused to believe it", Marki says, looking out at the sea.

A couple of surfers are out making the most of the conditions. We watch one of them catch a wave and then crash out, invisible for a long moment. He is lost in same the ocean over which my grandfather flew, traversing so many hundreds of islands, some so small that on the map they are hardly visible.

In an essay called "Our Sea of Islands", Epeli Hau'ofa problematises the idea of the Pacific as empty, mappable space, made up of land masses so tiny as to be insignificant. For him, and the community in which he lives and works, it is rather a complex, connected world defined by indigenous, relational, spatial understanding that directly counters this colonial view.

Rather than "empty ocean", the Pacific is for Hau'ofa a space in which the location of identity is not in fact the scattered land at all, but the sea itself. "There is a world of difference", he explains, "between viewing the Pacific as 'islands in a far sea' and as 'a sea of islands'."[10]

Beyond the limits of a dominant, secular perspective, concepts of space and scale differ radically, too. If we look, writes Hau'ofa, to "the myths, legends, and oral traditions, and the cosmologies of the peoples of Oceania, it becomes evident that they did not conceive of their world in such microscopic proportions. Their universe comprised not only land surfaces, but the surrounding ocean as far as they could traverse and exploit it, the underworld with its fire-controlling and earth-shaking denizens, and the heavens above with their hierarchies of powerful gods and

[10] Epeli Hau'ofa, 'Our Sea of Islands'**,** *The Contemporary Pacific*, SPRING 1994, Vol. 6, No. 1, pp.152-3.

named stars and constellations that people could count on to guide their ways across the seas. Their world was anything but tiny."[11]

It would be easy to presume a simple dichotomy between cultures that value such a rich mythic, spiritual and cosmological worldview, and the purely secular humanism of the Euro-American military-industrial complex. To see one as rational and the other not, one as secular and the other fantastical, however, elides the fact that we routinely describe photographs such as my grandfather's as a "God's-eye view". The colonial mindset is just as rooted in founding myth and supernatural validation as the indigenous cultures which it attempts to subsume. In Haraway's words, "all seems not just mythically about the god trick of seeing everything from nowhere, but to have put the myth into ordinary practice. And like the god trick, this eye fucks the world to make techno-monsters."[12]

Hau'ofa's challenge to the mapping and controlling logic of photographic aerial reconnaissance chimes with other indigenous and Pacific Island thinkers such as Teresia Teaiwa and Thonhchai Winichakul, in favour of broader "sacred topographies"[13], resisting the "militourism" of colonial and Western visualisation practices.[14] Haraway sounds a warning, however, that "to see from below is neither easily learned nor unproblematic." There is a danger of romanticising and appropriating "the vantage points of the subjugated", and "claiming to see from their positions."[15] This becomes, if we are not careful, just another of the racialised norms of seeing which Nicholas Mirzoeff has together labelled "white sight". [16] In his book of the same name, Mirzoeff traces the way in which linear perspective itself provided the "means" for white sight, not only by virtue of whose point of view it elided or implied, but also actively as "part of the transition to Atlantic world racial capitalism, enabled by slavery and colonialism."[17] Perspective is, Mirzoeff writes, "one of a set of artificial machines", perfectly coded to create "white seeing in white space."[18]

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[11] Ibid., p.152.
[12] Haraway, 'Situated Knowledges', 1988, p.581.
[13] Thongchai Winichakul, 1994, *Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo-Body of a Nation*, Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, p.28.
[14] Teaiwa, Teresia, "Reading Gauguin's Noa Noa with Hau'Ofa's Nederends: 'Militourism,' Feminism, and the 'Polynesian' Body," in *Inside Out: Literature, Cultural Politics, and Identity in the New Pacific*, ed. Vilsoni Hereniko and Rob Wilson, 1999, Landham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield.
[15] Haraway, 'Situated Knowledges', 1988, pp.583-4.
[16] Nicholas Mirzoeff, 2023, *White Sight: Visual Politics and Practices of Whiteness* MIT Press, p.3.
[17] Ibid., p.7.
[18] Ibid., p.31. Ariella Aisha Azoulay, too, associates photography with an imperial way of seeing and a regime of spectatorship in which the privilege to see and commodify is taken for granted as a result of the camera's framing: 2019, *Potential Histories,* London: Verso.

If these racialised and colonial modes of seeing are "written on the ground", in the words of Achille Mbembe, they are even more easily entrenched from the sky. Within what Eyal Weisman has called the "politics of verticality"[19], and Mbembe refers to as "vertical sovereignty", the volume of territory can, in the first instance, be exponentially increased in the sudden transition from two dimensions into three. "Under conditions of vertical sovereignty…Occupation of the skies therefore acquires a critical importance," he says, recalling Haraway's "techno-monsters", which for him include "sensors aboard unmanned air vehicles (UAVs), aerial reconnaissance jets, early warning Hawkeye planes, assault helicopters, an Earth-observation satellite..."[20]

Where this leaves us, according to Haraway, is with a profound need to resist the technocratic ideology of photographic "realism", especially when it is seemingly disembodied through vertiginous elevated distance, instead beginning to "learn in our bodies, endowed with primate colour and *stereoscopic vision.*" This will allow us, among other things, "to name where we are and are not, in dimensions of mental and physical space we hardly know how to name."[21]

As the US becomes mired in another war that destabilises its place in the global body politic, the kind of uncertainty of vision that I experience in my own body and see in my grandfather's partial archive, becomes something bigger. Researching the history of the US Navy online, its present pushes through in the form of breaking news across my screen: "Destroyer" warships are advancing on the Strait of Hormuz, the latest attempt to control the flow of oil by controlling the ocean.

Marki voices a despair I have heard quietly spoken everywhere I've been in the States so far… "I dream about them," she says, "those men in Washington". Violent dreams. Bloody dreams. A certain kind of disorientation, a fall from power, from grace, is taking place within the American military machine, which is by turns indistinguishable from the American self. That sense of self seems on the brink, not in terms of its material wealth or power but of its influence. (Its "standing.")

My grandfather flew, his camera-eye surveying and conquering from above. His perspective translated into "intelligence" that progressed the military and geopolitical aims of the USA while securing its place within its own narrative of the war effort, without which the Allies would surely have foundered. Being in the Navy, he was of course technically not an airman but a sailor: a "Photographer's Mate", so striking in his Navy blues and whites complete with the cap

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[19] Eyal Weizman, 2004, 'The Politics of Verticality,' *OpenDemocracy* (www.openDemocracy.net).
[20] Achille Mbembe, 'Necropolitics,' *Public Culture* vol. 15, no. 1 (Winter 2003), p.29.
[21] Haraway, 'Situated Knowledges', 1988, p.582, emphasis mine.

that Marki still has in a box in the attic. Newly arrived amidst the ranks of seafarers who depended for millennia upon the horizon for navigation, he made images that obliterated it; vertical views in which there was no horizon at all.

But the ever-present counterpoint of flying is falling.

[fig 22 here]

On the commemorative programme of Jerold's graduation from the Naval Training School (Class of 11/1943), a cartoon figure seemingly styled on one of Disney's seven dwarfs is falling out of the sky. In one hand, he grips the F-56 camera through which he is still peering. In the other, a cable release? A lens? An eye? Though clearly intended as light relief, a charming kind of joke, it is a baffling image. What is he doing, and why, above all, has the parachute attached to his back seemingly failed? Why is he *falling*?

Hito Steyerl writes of falling as "a freedom that is terrifying, utterly deterritorializing, and always already unknown."[22] As you fall, she says, "your sense of orientation may start to play additional tricks on you. The horizon quivers in a maze of collapsing lines and you may lose any sense of above and below, of before and after, of yourself and your boundaries. Pilots have even reported that free fall can trigger a feeling of confusion between the self and the aircraft…Traditional modes of seeing and feeling are shattered. Any sense of balance is disrupted. Perspectives are twisted and multiplied. New types of visuality arise."[23]

Across the prairie you could see for eight miles. Like looking at the horizon on the deck of a ship. It was, I can almost imagine, so disorientating that we needed stories, not only to assure us that we were safe, but that we were special. Not just standing firm but standing out, lest we fall into oblivion. This includes the stories we tell about the land we occupied, the people we displaced, our complicity in the myth of a wilderness that was never empty, never ours.

In the ambivalent search for my own American self, I have sought to understand the desire for power in the great project of photographic aerial reconnaissance mapping. But this is also about the desire of a family to make sense of itself, across shifting ground. I came here in search of one generation – tentatively, perhaps, two – but the story keeps creeping both backwards and forwards. Backwards into the nineteenth century, to Kansas and Texas and Oklahoma…but also

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[22] Hito Steyerl, 2011, 'In Free Fall: A Thought Experiment on Vertical Perspective', *e-flux Journal,* Issue #24. (https://www.e-flux.com/journal/24/67860/in-free-fall-a-thought-experiment-on-vertical-perspective)
[23] Ibid. One of Steyerl's central examples is JWM Turner's 1840 seascape painting *The Slave Ship*, in which, she says, "at the sight of the effects of colonialism and slavery, linear perspective – the central viewpoint, the position of mastery, control, and subjecthood – is abandoned and starts tumbling and tilting.".

forwards, towards me. The traumas of past loss reverberate, at times obscure, at others wilfully unseen.

Marki and I pull out of the beach car park towards home. She checks in. "How am I?" I laugh, "I feel like my skin is inside out, but apart from that I'm fine." What I mean is that the stories all feel very close to the surface. I feel in my body the contradictions they carry, as well as the violence to which this family archive unmistakably attests. (It has been a point of some pacifist pride and satisfaction to me that my grandfather flew not as a fighter but as an image-maker; the pursuit of a creative passion that sustained him through troubled years both before and after the war; that his camera was placed – symbolically, I felt – in the gun mount where a weapon used to be. But the truth is, of course, that it was no less of a weapon.)

The story of my family matters precisely because it is not special. It is not unusual or heroic. It does not, after all, stand out. It is the story of many families – many dusty wartime archives in basements, many family trees entwined with the genocide of "manifest destiny". Sometimes, things are worth looking at because they are ordinary. Because they are so ubiquitous that they shape a nation.

Haraway's proposed antidote to the danger of supposedly "unsituated" power-knowledge is compelling to me as someone whose vision is imperfect and whose perspective is – both anatomically and archivally – partial. "It is precisely in the politics and epistemology of partial perspectives," she assures me, seeming to speak directly to my own affliction, "that the possibility of sustained, rational, objective inquiry rests."[24] It is "doubt", in other words, the opening up of certainties to question, that can reveal "stories unimaginable from the vantage point of the cyclopean, self-satiated eye of the master subject."[25]

It is possible that I, however, by definition a cyclops – a one-eyed monster – can claim this imperfect and partial seeing as a way of navigating the truths and half-truths of the family archive and therefore the much bigger apparatus in which it sits: that military seeing-machine that still, now as then, claims its knowledge as suspiciously absolute.

Haraway repeatedly emphasises, it must be said, that her discussion of vision remains always a *metaphor*… She is talking about epistemological seeing-as-knowing; about partial perspective not

[24] Haraway, 'Situated Knowledges', 1988, p.584.
[25] Ibid., p.586.

in terms of actual one-eyed beings (such as myself), but rather as a collective, as a system and a discourse. But I cannot, of course, view it in only this way. For me, it is embodied. And for my grandfather (whose own embodied limitation, not in his vision but his speech – the stammer that plagued him – almost kept him from taking off at all), it could not be more literal.

My body, with its faulty, monocular vision, protests against the idea of coherent truth or a view from nowhere. It protests simply by being unable to see, strategically, properly, the stereoscopic images that constituted military-industrial intelligence. This aerial image-making operates, of course, by denying the body completely: those of its soldier-makers, and also those who might occupy the ground as its inadvertent, collateral subjects. The islands of the South Pacific were, to its elevated eye, categorically (cartographically?), as unpeopled and unbodied as the American "wilderness" of the nineteenth century. Here, as on the Cherokee Strip claimed unquestioningly by my own ancestors, any stray human subject became too small to see, and therefore immaterial.

"The knowing self is partial in all its guises," Haraway writes, "never finished, whole, simply there and original; it is always constructed and stitched together imperfectly, and therefore able to join with another, to see together".[26] The interpretation of stereoscopic reconnaissance imagery was an important part of a two-stage process. These double images would be sent back to base to be "stitched", like the pieces of a patchwork quilt, in order for their topological intelligence to be revealed: a highly skilled form of seeing that required as much training as the photography itself.

I am not a stereoscopic image interpreter, and can never be. But this does not stop me trying to put the pieces together. In fact, I will allow myself to believe, it might enable me to see beyond the apparatus, to be a "knowing self", all too aware of the imperfection of my stitching, and therefore, my need to join together with others in order to see anything at all.

How high, how far above and outside of the body can we get? This is the question posed by aerial seeing. The only boundary to this omnipotent height is the boundary of our vision itself. At a certain point, we rise too high to see anything useful. After that point, we reach pure space, and then the disembodiment is complete, collapsing back on itself. (This is the point at which astronauts wax lyrical about their connectedness to all humanity, faced with the small blue dot

[26] Haraway, 'Situated Knowledges', 1988, p.586.

that is the Earth from Space.) "I am arguing for the view from a body," writes Haraway – complex, contradictory, flawed and falling – "Only the god trick is forbidden."[27]

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