BORDER AESTHETICS:
THE PHOTOGRAPH AS FICTIONALIZED DOCUMENT
IN NORMA CANTÚ’S CANÍCULA, ART SPIEGELMAN’S MAUS, AND REA TAJIRI’S HISTORY AND MEMORY

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ABSTRACT

In this paper I will analyze how three American autobiographers negotiate the contradiction between photographic fact and autobiographical fiction. In Norma Elia Cantú's *Canícula*, in Art Spiegelman's *MAUS*, and in Rea Tajiri's *History and Memory* photographs are used to document past lives. While they present the photographs as factual evidence of the past, each crafts an aesthetic to emphasize the fictional, constructed nature of their photographs: Cantú develops an aesthetic of the border, Spiegelman an aesthetic of postmemory, and Tajiri an aesthetic of absence to emphasize the subjective world of emotions and fantasies as an important part of memory, autobiography, and photography. All three of these works operate with a complex understanding that their family photos are fictionalized yet also retain their documentary force.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

"We should use photos to ask questions rather than try to show facts"

Jo Spence

There seems to be something magically true about photographs. We use them as evidence in trials, as documentation for news stories, as a way to save fleeting moments forever on paper. We can look at our own photos as windows on the past – as if they could tell us the truth about our history. We see a “good” picture of ourselves, and we hope that is how we “really” look. Photographs have been traditionally seen as traces of the past recorded through an objective mechanical process. Because of the photograph’s indexical status, the close physical relationship between the photographic image and the actual objects being photographed can be difficult to recognize. In his book Camera Lucida Roland Barthes claims that a “specific photograph, in effect, is never distinguished from its referent (from what it represents)” (5). These claims to referentiality, accuracy, and truth give the photograph its power; it fictions to “document” the real.
Yet this fantasy of photographic truth is easily torn apart. We know that photos can be doctored and staged to mislead – that photos do lie. The world of the photograph is two-dimensional, frozen, silent, and miniaturized unlike the world we live in. Common practices show we clearly understand that there is nothing objective about taking pictures. We choose our photographers carefully for important moments, we calculatedly pose for photos, and we often make complex decisions about what should or should not be “in the picture.” All these choices reflect the subjective and constructed nature of photographs. As Susan Sontag argues “the photographic image, even to the extent that it is a trace […] cannot be simply a transparency of something that happened. It is always the image that someone chose; to photograph is to frame, and to frame is to exclude” (Regarding 46). The decision of what to photograph and how to photograph it is deeply tied to ideologies and cultural contexts. How a photograph is read and interpreted after printing is also dependent on those contexts. Photographs can reveal more about our fantasies than our realities.

Despite the fact that photographs have been carefully theorized and their objectivity thoroughly challenged in a variety of contexts, a deeply rooted faith in their referentiality persists. “Apparently no amount of appealing to logic about the obvious distortions of photographs can quite sway viewers from the popular idea that there is something especially authentic or accurate about photographic likenesses” (Adams, Light Writing 4). In Camera Lucida Roland Barthes describes the photograph as “an emanation of the referent. From a real body, which was there, proceed radiations which
ultimately touch me, who am here” (80). Barthes, well aware of the multitude of critiques on the referentiality of photography, insists on its evidentiary power, its ability to connect the viewer with a real past. Faith in the truth of the photograph remains.

A similar kind of faith in referentiality has traditionally been associated with autobiography. It has been viewed as a nonfictional representation based on the accurate memory of the author. The autobiographical text was considered a direct reflection of the life of the author. However, theorists have challenged the referential truth status of autobiography. With postmodern understandings of the constructed nature of subjectivity, comes a challenge to the autobiographical subject. As the self is a constructed fiction, so are the autobiographical narratives that define it. Studies of the inaccuracies of memory have also contributed to a greater understanding of autobiography as fiction. Recent studies of autobiography have focused on treating the texts as fiction. The three texts I have chosen as my focus use the ambiguous status of autobiography and fiction as a creative space to develop stories at a boundary between fact and fiction.

In this paper I will analyze how three American autobiographers negotiate the contradiction between photographic fact and fiction. In Norma Elia Cantú’s Canícula, in Art Spiegelman’s MAUS, and in Rea Tajiri’s History and Memory photographs are used to document past lives. While the photographs are presented as factual evidence of the past, each of these works crafts an aesthetic to display the fictional, constructed nature of their photographs. I define their techniques as aesthetics because I see them as stylistic choices based on new principles of taste. These new principles of taste develop partly from a theoretically complex understanding of photography and autobiography as both
documentary and fictional projects. I also use aesthetics in order to emphasize the creative, artistic nature of the works. The philosophy of aesthetics developed in opposition to a focus on reason: “aesthetics arose as an attempt to provide a positive account of the role played by feelings and emotions in human thinking” (Townsend 2). While these texts attempt a reasonable and accurate portrayal of the past, they are also very interested in the subjective world of emotions and fantasies as an important part of memory, autobiography, and photography. All three of these works operate with a complex understanding that their family photos are fictionalized yet also retain their documentary force.

I will argue that Cantú develops an aesthetic of the border in her text Canícula: Snapshots of a Girlhood en la Frontera, which situates her family photos at a contested borderland between memory and its narrative retelling. Her text tells the story of her life as a girl in the borderland between Mexico and the United States through photographs and short stories about those photographs. Cantú cites as her inspiration Roland Barthes’ Camera Lucida, and Barthes’ text provides an important tool to understand Cantú’s treatment of her photographs. Throughout the text Cantú manages a complex balance between fiction and truth claims. She admits in the Introduction that her text is fictional, but then calls it “truer than true,” for example (xi). In Canícula she uses a borderland aesthetic to portray her photographs as a border between fact and fiction, the past and the present, the present and the future, the living and the dead. The contradictions of the photographic borderland fit well with the contested cultural experience of living between
two nations. This borderland aesthetic allows her to hold on to the documentary force of her photos while interrogating them as subjective sites layered by retellings and the creativity of memory.

In his text *MAUS*, Art Spiegelman cultivates an aesthetic of postmemory to retell his father's story of surviving the Holocaust as a Jew in Poland. Spiegelman relates the story through comic drawings of his human characters as animals mixed with a few family photographs. Postmemory, a concept developed by Marianne Hirsch, refers to the memories of the children of survivors of major cultural trauma. She argues that although the children have not experienced the trauma themselves, the stories and images relayed to them by their parents could be powerful enough to create a secondary kind of memory (“Projected” 8). The postmemorial aesthetic is an effort to identify with the past trauma of an older generation while resisting appropriating their story (9). Postmemory is by its very nature a fantastic re-creation rather than an accurate reflection. Spiegelman's complex use of the photos in his text as both documentary evidence and fantastic constructions is an example of this aesthetic of postmemory. He uses a variety of distancing techniques to resist incorporating his parents' stories. He even creates a CDROM version of his text that includes many of the actual interviews with his father that he used to create his *MAUS* books. By allowing his readers to hear the original interviews with his father, Spiegelman gives his father his own voice with the public and avoids appropriating his narrative. Through his drawings and his use of the family photographs, Spiegelman manages to maintain his claims to truth while also calling his
father’s memories into question. The postmemorial treatment of his photos presents them as both accurate depictions of the past and constructed fantasies of how his characters want to see the past.

In her film *History and Memory* Rea Tajiri crafts an aesthetic of absence to create an image missing from her family’s history. As Japanese-Americans, her mother and other members of Tajiri’s family were interned during World War II. Because internees were not permitted to have cameras and because her mother’s memory of the years in the camp is mostly forgotten, Tajiri is left with few images and memories of the camps. While she creates the film to answer that absence, the image she creates displays its own incompleteness through an aesthetic of absence. The film is replete with blank screens, missing images, and interrogations of a few, mostly government-created images. Tajiri’s film treats her photographs as important evidence of the past, while pointing out their inadequacies and falsities as well. Her aesthetic of absence allows her to interrogate her own constructed vision of the past as well as the public narratives of World War II.

The three works, by Cantú, Spiegelman, and Tajiri, deal with the past in photographs within three distinct media language, comics, and film. They are all life narratives focused on the power and problems associated with using photographs to tell one’s life story. All three find similar ways in their individual aesthetics to acknowledge and deal with the fact and the fictions of photographic images. While the three works tell vastly different stories they deal with many similar themes.

All three works focus on death and loss. Cantú make explicit the connection between death and photography by reprinting Susan Sontag’s famous lines from *On Photography*, “All photographs are *memento mori*.” Cantú, like Barthes, uses her
photographs to make connections with family members who have died and sees her own photographs as markers of the impending doom of her own approaching death. Spiegelman also connects photography with death. Photographs or the lack of photographs are all that remain of so many members of his parents’ families. All three of the photographs in his text display the dead members of his family. Art alone survives from the people in the published family photographs, but I read the final pages of *MAUS II* as a symbolic death for Art as well. While Tarji’s film is less explicitly focused on death than the others, she begins her film by identifying with her dead grandfather’s role as a ghost witness of her family. Her grandfather represents the missing voices of the dead, whose memories we can only access through imagination. Tajiri displays photographs of her grandparents, but she cannot give us their voices because they are dead. Death and the loss and fantasies associated with it are major themes in all three of these works.

The loss of death also becomes a loss of memory in each of the texts. The transmission of intergenerational traumatic memories forms another central theme for the works. In *Canícula* the narrator describes the process of gathering the memories for her text as collective. Her grandmothers’ and mother’s memories heavily influence the book. She discusses the displacement of various generations of her family as they are forced to cross the Mexican-U.S. border repeatedly, as political crises demand. In *MAUS* Spiegelman portrays the difficulties of dealing with his own parents’ traumatic memories of the Holocaust. Spiegelman investigates his own and his father’s efforts to fictionalize the past through memory and its representation. Tajiri also takes as her focus an effort in documenting her parents’ traumatic memories. She is most interested in what her mother
cannot remember and retell about her past as an internee during World War II. Cantú, Spiegelman, and Tajiri must not only travel the temporal and imaginative distance into their own memories of the past but also negotiate the distance between their own memories and those of the generations before them.

These generations of memory also contribute to a complex treatment of time and chronology in each of the texts. Cantú’s text focuses on a particular time period of her girlhood, but the text refuses to stay strictly within that focus. She includes information as far into the past as her parents’ and grandparents’ youths and as far into the future as the imagined future demise of the narrator. Her text is made up of fragments given without any clear sense of order or chronology. Multiple pasts, presents, and futures are clearly “juxtaposed and bleeding” (Cantú xii). While Spiegelman chooses to tell his father’s story of his experiences in World War II Poland in chronological order, his text is also punctuated by multiple tenses. Interspersed with the story of his father in the Holocaust, Spiegelman portrays his own childhood memories, episodes of his interviews with his father while working on MAUS, and frames discussing his reaction to his father’s death and the publication of MAUS. This complex treatment of time emphasizes the reinterpretation the past is constantly undergoing. Tajiri also creates a complex sense of tense in her film. She includes documentary footage from a variety of time periods. She uses movie clips from the 1940s, 50s and 80s. She juxtaposes footage taken at the time of the internment in World War II with contemporary footage she takes of the dilapidated ruins of the internment camp locations. These complicated treatments of temporality reflect the authors’ understandings of photographs as informed by present views as much as past realities.
My investigation of these three works has led me to recognize many similarities in the way these texts deal with the photographs included in each. Their treatment of the photographs and their autobiographical projects reflect a similar blurring of boundaries between truth and fiction, past and present, and self and others. These blurred borders reflect the development of a new aesthetical space for looking at the past in the present. This space in between the traditional view of photography, referentiality and autobiography allows these authors to use their photographs as documentary evidence while retaining their constructed nature. Rather than denying the fictionality of photographs, these authors use the fictionality as creative inspirations in the development of new aesthetics for representing the past. This in-between space of photography proves a powerful creative simulus.
CHAPTER 2

CANÍCULA: AN AESTHETIC OF THE BORDER

Norma Elia Cantú’s book Canícula: Snapshots of a Girlhood en la Frontera tells the story of a girl growing up in a land “between two countries – Mexico and the United States” (1). The book was published in 1995 and won the Premio Aztlán that same year. The story centers on issues of the border, the land Gloria Anzaldúa calls, “my home, this thin edge of barbed wire” (25). The story is set in Laredo, Texas, in the 1940s, 50s, and early 60s. Cantú’s book is not a traditional autobiography: the text is made up of eighty-five short “narratives” or “episodes” that are usually inspired by an actual or imagined photograph but defy any clear sense of chronology or order. Some of the photographs are printed with the episodes, but many are only described in the text.

Cantú uses an aesthetic of the border to interrogate the photographs she uses in her text. The photographs offer both documentary evidence of the narrator’s past, and false performances that at times contradict the narrator’s memories in the written text. The photographs are the borderland where fact and fantasy about the past meet. Cantú’s borders are areas of separation but also of communicating and crossing. As an inhabitant of the land between or on the “barbed wire,” for Cantú the borders represent places where two sides both blur and separate. Cantú’s photographs provide a medium to explore
those permeable borders, and her aesthetic of complex borders between fact and fiction challenges the referentiality of the photographs she uses.

Cantú begins her Prologue by referring to Roland Barthes’ death and the publishing of *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*. This connection between death and photography proves an appropriate way to introduce *Camera Lucida* and *Canícula*. Barthes theorizes that the essence of photography is an attempt to freeze life by stopping time and capturing a moment in the photographic frame. This freezing of life is also the stillness of death. Ironically, our photographic effort to capture and hold onto the living is a kind of murder. Barthes argues that a photograph shows us “what has been” in the past, and by focusing reality on the past it “suggests that it is already dead” (79). Through photographs we view what is already past – what is dead. We can see people who are now dead by viewing their photographs. In *Camera Lucida* Barthes attempts to connect with his dead mother through looking at her pictures. The photographs represent a permeable border between the dead and the living – they allow us to connect to “what has been.”

Like Barthes, Cantú uses photography to cross the border between the living and the dead. As Barthes connects with his mother, Cantú and her family seek to hold on to Tino, her dead brother by framing his picture and hanging it on the wall: “when the purple heart and the other medals come with Tino’s things, [their father] has them framed, hangs them next to the faded photo of an Army uniformed seventeen-year-old” (117). The narrator also connects through photographs with Tío Mase after his death: “still living in the old house where the walls are full of photographs, remembering the young Mase in high school… When I see the blurred photo of a smiling Tío Mase in the
obituary section of the *Laredo Morning Times*, I hear his throaty laugh, his mango sweet voice” (51). Mase’s voice returns and lives on for the family through the viewing of his photograph. Throughout her text Cantú represents her photos as a border where the living can recapture something of the dead.

The photographic border between life and death also foregrounds the death of Cantú’s narrator. In her discussion of a childhood photograph of herself, Nena writes, “What will happen to the photo once I am gone, who will remember the sad child?” (54). The relationship between the photos and death is not limited to those who are already dead, but also forces Nena to contemplate her own future demise. While photos “freeze” life, they also perform death by reducing the human subjects of the images to silence. By eulogizing the future loss of memory coming with her own death, Nena recognizes the inability of her photographs to speak. The photos can only recover voices when viewed by someone who remembers the voice that goes along with the body published in the photograph. Without the memories of that voice the photograph is indifferent.

Photography’s ability to bring those who are dead to the present parallels its ability to bring the past to the present. For Cantú photography is not only a border between life and death, but between past and present. The photographs in her text capture a culture of a specific time and place that no longer exists. Photography is “about place, disappeared places, and it allows those places to coexist with the places we inhabit now” (Rugg 238). Cantú’s photographs include details about houses the family used to live in (4, 6, 24, 36, 75, 105). And her text is rich with images of the family traditions and practices of a specific time and place.
Cantú’s own publications and research show her interest in recording the shifting cultural practices of her community in Laredo, Texas. Barthes argues that photographs yield “up those ‘details’ which constitute the very raw material of ethnological knowledge” (28). As a folklorist and ethnographer, Cantú seeks to record through her photographs and texts the cultural practices of a region undergoing a profound change as the process of Americanization marches forward. The recognition of the loss of the past is most notable in Cantú’s episode entitled “Treeky-Treat” when she returns to her family graves for the Day of the Dead and discovers how Americanized the holiday has become. She discusses how they celebrated the holiday in “the old days,” and on her return trip so many years later she says, “Everywhere I turned I saw changes” (74). In her photos Cantú publishes ethnographic knowledge about her culture. This border between past and present also reflects a need to document a changing and in some senses disappearing culture. The aesthetic of the border illustrates the clash of times and cultures. As time passes the people in her photos have changed as well.

In her segment titled “Elisa” Cantú describes photos of her cousin as a young adult: “In the photos of that trip to Matamoros, she’s carefree and happy, laughing her movie star laughter, a smile that would burst into howls...” (78). This image of her contrasts sharply with a more updated version of Elisa. When the narrator visits Elisa later in her life, she bursts into tears because of “Elisa’s life, her reality,” which includes an unplanned pregnancy, being disowned by her family, a grueling work schedule, and a complete lack of association with her son (76). By remembering the past “care-free” photos Nena recognizes the difficult life that has brought about changes in her cousin.
When she juxtaposes the past photographic image of Elisa with the current, more somber view, Cantú creates a border that reveals to her something important about her cousin.

The multiple images of Elisa are few compared with the many photos of the narrator that appear in the text. The identity of Cantú’s narrator is extremely complex. It is difficult to tell how closely the narrator is connected to the author Norma Elia Cantú, who claims that the text is at least somewhat autobiographical. Is the narrator a fictional character Nena, or Azucena, both names that appear in the text to refer to the narrator? Or are the names just nicknames for the same individual, as Timothy Dow Adams suggests, “‘Nena’ is a name often given the oldest girl child as well as a nickname for Azucena” (“Heightened by Life” 62)? These are questions deliberately unclear in the text, and Adams correctly analyzes them as attempts to keep “the reader off balance” and emphasize the fictionality of the text (62). However, further investigation of Cantú’s narrator also reveals a complex depiction of the narrator in her photographs.

The numerous photographs of the narrator add to the multiple representations of the narrator’s identity. As Linda Haverty Rugg argues: “… photographs, which can display many views and variant versions of the same person, simply supply a visual metaphor for the divided and multiple (‘decentered’) self” (1). Cantú prints sixteen different photos that include the narrator in her book. The narrator ranges in age from a tiny infant to a young adult. Cantú’s narrator displays through her variety of names and images a complex and multiple self.
The photographs of the narrator are so divergent that the reader is unable to form a clear idea of what she looks like. The reader cannot identify her in several of the group photos in the book, even with the aid of the text that seems to point her out. For example, the last photograph of the book presents a group of students in the Martin High School cafeteria (See Figure 2.1).

Figure 2.1. Martin High (130)

The description of the narrator is given in detail, "my pink headband holds back a sixties flip, matches the pink dress I’ve made for the posada, appears white, as white as the hand-knit sweater, Mami’s Christmas gift from the year before. A rare photo where I smile unconsciously showing teeth, the broken tooth – the reason I never smile for photos
— unnoticeable...” (130-131). Despite the multitude of details, which should make it easy to identify the narrator in the small group photo, none of the girls in the photo matches all the elements of the description. While the many discrepancies between the photos and the text are a “strategy to blur reality and fiction” (Adams, “Heightened by Life” 68), the discrepancies also highlight the unidentifiable or shifting identity of the narrating “I.”

Figure 2.2. Cowgirl (33)

Figure 2.3. China Poblana One (38)
The many photographs of the narrator emphasize the borders within the multiple self. The photos show the narrator performing both Mexican and American identities: she wears a stereotypical American “cowgirl” costume in one photo of a school performance followed almost immediately by a “Mexican” costume in her “China Poblana” photo (See Figures 2.2 and 2.3). Both photos represent literal and performed identities of the narrator who is both Mexican and American. Like most of the text the photos are both false and true. The multiple images illustrate the complex borders the author has negotiated throughout her life. Just as the narrator is not identifiable in the photos, her whole or entire identity cannot be found in the photos, in the text, in the book, or even in language(s). By representing her narrator’s identity as both true and false, Cantú reinforces the contested border aesthetic with her Cowgirl and China Poblana photographs. She displays the contradictions of the photograph as a site of documentation of her narrator’s ethnicity as well as a place to question its stereotypical performance through clearly fake costumes and poses.

Cantú illustrates a further complexity of her Mexican-American identity and her treatment of photographs in her use of government documents in Canícula. She includes both her official U.S. immigration papers with a photograph of herself as an infant and the document that identifies her as a Mexican citizen with a photo taken as teenager (See Figure 2.4 and 2.5). The two documents serve to display the hybrid Mexican and American identities that form the “frontera” or life on the political border between the United States and Mexico. It also illustrates the complexity of the narrator’s identity.
To further complicate constructions of her identity, her “color” is described as “blanco” or white on the U.S. immigration papers, but is described as “moreno” or brown on her Mexican citizen document (21, 22). The narrator’s identity is different depending on which country identifies her. The use of the political documents shows a particular tension of life in the borderlands, which also foregrounds the constructed nature of identity, and how those identifications are intimately related to systems of power. While the documents claim essential differences in their subject, Cantú’s text remarks on their unity: “the eyes are the same” (21). While such identification photographs are usually seen as objective and easily read, Cantú emphasizes her aesthetics of the border by reproducing these photographs read so divergently by the governments of Mexico and the
United States. She calls into question the objective, factual nature of these government photographs by showing how, within the context of a particular culture, a person can be labeled a variety of colors.

Her multiple photographs also form a complex self by illustrating the shifting boundary between the public and private self. The photographs display the narrator in a variety of settings both public and private: predominantly at home, but also at school, in a photo studio, on official government documents, and visiting family members. The predominantly private photos question the validity of printing family photos for a public audience. In *Camera Lucida* Barthes withholds printing the famous “Winter Garden” photograph that allows him to see his dead mother, and only describes it verbally. Barthes explains the omission: “I cannot reproduce the Winter Garden Photograph. It exists only for me. For you, it would be nothing but an indifferent picture” (73). For Barthes this family photograph is a personal image that cannot be understood outside of his subjective experience of it. It is as if Barthes cannot bear to see his beloved mother looked at with the indifference of an outsider. In a way the Winter Garden Photo would lie to us by its ordinariness. How can one share private family photographs with the public who does not have access to the memories or experiences that give them their context and meanings? If the readers do not share the key to understanding the photographs their reading will be false.

Like Barthes, Cantú describes many of her pictures rather than reproducing their image. The majority of her episodes contain descriptions of photos in texts without a copy of the actual photo. The photographic image lends itself to misinterpretation because it does have such evidentiary force, but it can also hide important information
that Cantú seeks to recreate with her text. In her first episode “Las Piscas” Cantú does not display an actual photograph but describes the photo along with its deficiencies, “In the photo, smiles belie tired, aching feet and backs; smiles on serious faces, stiff bodies posed for life” (3). For Cantú the photo produces exactly the opposite image she describes in the text – the photo shows happy, frozen bodies, while she describes “serious,” “tired,” “aching,” bodies in action as they harvest the cotton. Although the photograph allows the narrator to remember a specific experience of working in the fields, the posed, fake photograph will not give the reader the scene Cantú seeks to portray; therefore, the photograph is not included in the book. Many of Cantú’s other “missing” photographs proved similar examples of photographs that seem to misrepresent memory. This border between the false photograph and the true memory appears repeatedly in Cantú’s book, forcing the reader to question both the photographs and the text. The photographs are not containers of objective fact, but posed and fictional. This conflict between the photos and the text creates an aesthetic of borders and tension.

By printing multiple photographs of herself, Cantú constructs a self in the text that is fragmented and multiple. Gloria Anzaldúa argues that fragmentation is unavoidable in the creative process: “The art of composition, whether you are composing a work of fiction or your life, or whether you are composing reality, always means pulling off fragmented pieces and putting them together into a whole that makes sense” (238). Anzaldúa does not separate the composing of life from that of fiction – they are equally constructed from fragments. Cantú works with a similar metaphor as she constructs the self in her text from a mosaic of small episodes that form complex borders.
The text also calls into question the idea of the autonomous self as a separate or bordered individual. *Canícula* is both an autobiography and autoethnography, but strictly speaking, it is neither. Much of the text is narrated in the first person singular, but there are parts in the first person plural. She even refers to herself in the third person and allows other voices space in her text. The Prologue makes clear that the text is a collection of stories gleaned from conversations with many members of her family (2). She tells us, “the stories of her girlhood in that land in-between, la frontera, are shared; her story and the stories of the people who lived that life with her is one” (2). This sentence reflects a tension among multiple people who can claim a single story. Throughout the text she tells stories through the voices of others and tells “memories” that she could not possibly have experienced. Cantú emphasizes the telling of others’ stories along with her own. As Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson observed, “…the writing and theorizing of women’s lives has often occurred in texts that place an emphasis on collective processes while questioning the sovereignty and universality of the solitary self” (*Women*, 5). Cantú’s text portrays the borderland between the self and the group by posing questions that fall into a tradition of women’s life writing. Cantú’s text, like other women’s life writing, emphasizes the collective contribution of her family and neighbors while questioning the validity of an isolated self.

Cantú’s photos reflect the tension between the borders of the solitary self and the ethnographic group. She prints eight photos of the narrator alone, but adds an equal number of group photos that include the narrator, as well as seven photos in which she does not appear. The photos emphasize her individuality as well as place her as a member of many groups: an immediate family, an extended family, a school class, a
newspaper staff, the nation of Mexico, and as a resident of the U.S. The tension between
the self and the group serves to question the essentialist notion of a unified and separate
self. The group photos tell the story of a group as well as an individual. She cannot tell
her story without the story of others and groups entering her narrative. She cannot
identify herself without citing her membership in a multitude of groups, even if that
membership does not constitute her entire identity. The variety of single and group
photos shows the significance of the borders within the self and the groups. Cantú’s
photographs emphasize the importance of membership in a variety of groups for the
formation of her narrator’s identity.

The tension between self and group illustrates the border between autobiography
and ethnography. Cantú calls her text “fictional autobioethnography” a blend of genres
that reflects her treatment of borders in the text (xi). The text is an autobiography – it
tells the story of Cantú’s life in her own words, as well as an autoethnography – it tells
the story of a group, a particular culture: Mexican-American girls occupying Cantú’s
similar geographical and temporal spaces. But the text is also fictional, which contradicts
the traditional claims of both autobiography and autoethnography.

Autobiography is often viewed as more authoritative because it is written by its
own subject. Autoethnography has similarly claimed authority by implying the author’s
extensive knowledge of the group to be described because the author is a member of that
group, and thereby satisfies at least some of the critiques of traditional ethnographies and
their “tendency to objectify people and to exoticize their cultural practices” (Goldman
xxiii). One of the key tools in the objectification of another’s cultural practices has been
photography. Ethnography has traditional been produced by those outside of the culture
to be studied, and the photographs taken and circulated as part of the ethnographic work have necessarily shown the gaze of the outsider. Rather than objective photographs, the images exploited and exoticized the people being displayed.

Cantú counteracts the tendency to exoticize and objectify with her subjective text. While she ethnographically describes and displays photographs of local practices and traditions, she does so in a highly personal text with no claims to objectivity. Her photographs and narrative show the gaze of an insider rather than an exploitative gaze. She also questions the authority of her ethnographic narrative by labeling it fiction. She makes no effort to claim that her narratives and photographs tell the truth. This serves to question the force of both the autobiographical and ethnographic tendencies in her text.

Cantú’s uses both genres, but also contradicts them by claiming that her work is fictional. If autobiography “celebrates the autonomous individual and the universalizing life story” (Smith and Watson, Reading, 3), then by including ethnographic elements and fragmenting her story Cantú has successfully challenged the genre of autobiography. By explicitly calling her work fiction and by employing both autobiographical and autoethnographic genres she explores the limits and borders of both kinds of writing. She recognizes writing and photography as unable to access “truth” in any naïve way. Both her autobiography and her autoethnography are unapologetically fictionalized thereby critiquing the notion that any autobiography or ethnography could be factually true.

The group photos in Cantú’s book represent the narrator’s membership in an “ethnographic” group; however, these photos also represent the fragmented nature of that membership. Much of the book illustrates the narrator’s close relationship with her family, while none of the photos displays a complete family. Only the narrator’s older
siblings are described in detail in the text, and the younger children never appear in the photos. Considering Susan Sontag's argument that the popularity of the family photo coincided with the decline of the traditional and extended family in modern practice (On Photography 6), this omission of a family photo seems especially significant. Marianne Hirsch similarly states, "photographs can more easily show us what we wish our family to be, and therefore what, most frequently, it is not" (8). Cantú could be leaving this complete family photo out because her text illustrates the closeness of her extended family that does not need to be performed by a posed family photo.

On the other hand, Cantú's text is punctuated by the loss of her brother Tino in Vietnam, the absence of her father for extended periods when he traveled away to find work, and sometimes the difficulty of connecting with family on the other side of the U.S./Mexico border. It is possible that such a complete photo of the family does not exist, or that the absence of the photo displays the fragmentation of the family that the narrator experienced.

Even more likely, Cantú omits the photo to illustrate the fractured nature of the autobiographical effort, which can only convey a distorted piece of her past life rather than a whole or complete story. Photography proves an effective tool for illustrating this fragmentary autobiographical effort as it enables representing a fractured relationship to time - it only attempts to capture a single moment rather than the flow of time.

In her last segment, titled "Martin High," the narrator describes her graduating class as they prepare to leave high school (See Figure 2.1). She names nineteen individuals but also specifically notes that the class included four hundred fifty-five
students (131). She lists an almost encyclopedic collection of what become her classmates:

Lawyers, drug dealers, architects, doctors, teachers, wheelers and dealers, employers, unemployed, employees, managers, secretaries, receptionists, linemen and women, mail carriers, office clerks, housewives, telephone operators, ranchers, vaqueros, cooks, principals, counselors, professors, social workers, army lifers, nurses, bankers, morticians police officers. (131)

The text seems to demand a full class photo of the numerous people she describes. Instead, Cantú illustrates the section with a small photo at a class party that includes only six people, and one of those is unidentifiable, as a large bar obscures her face (See figure 2.1). By including only this photo of a small group while emphasizing the vast diversity of her class in her text, Cantú illustrates the inability of her photos and text to capture the entire group. Her photos tell the story of groups, but they are small, limited groups rather than total groups. The deliberate incompleteness of her photos demonstrates the inability of any text to capture a group in its totality. Both in her omission of an entire class and the lack of a family photo Cantú resists the totalizing force of the ethnographic narrative by refusing to even pretend completeness in her text.

The narrator’s absence in many of her photos is also important as it outlines places where she has been excluded – where the borders have been erected more strongly. The photo of Nena’s parents at Lola’s Wedding represents a moment that Nena is not allowed to participate in: her parents are members of the wedding party who “walk in carrying the cushions where the bride and groom will kneel” (48). Nena, on the other hand, has been excluded from the wedding party to her obvious annoyance: “Tati… is a flower girl… a month younger than I, but because she’s in the wedding party is acting older” (47). The narrator’s photo of Tía Piedad also relates to her exclusion. She only
knows Piedad from the photo and family stories: “because I lived in the United States I was spared the fate of my older cousins… who each were recruited to spend time with [Aunt Piedad] and learn to be proper señoritas” (84). The narrator’s location on the northern side of the political border excludes her from Tía Piedad’s training. While most of Canícula’s borders are permeable and interactive, borders also separate and exclude.

The photos that do not include the narrator represent exclusions as well as important influences on her life. The pictures of her family members, such as her sister, brother, and parents figure largely in her narrative as they surround her in her life. Barthes describes how his family photographs reveal to him “the truth of lineage” by showing him some “fragment of oneself or of a relative which comes from some ancestor” (103). Photographs for Barthes tell him new truths about himself that he could not discover anywhere else. While Barthes sees parts of his ancestors’ faces in his own image, Tía Piedad’s photo reminds Nena of their genetic connection. The same photo of her aunt, notable for its exclusion of the narrator, claims a connection between them as well. Tía Piedad, who teaches the young women of the family fashion and etiquette, is noted for her “hundreds of shoes, of all different colors imaginable from all over the world” (Cantú 85). The narrator continues by describing her own “shoe fetish; I owned more shoes than clothes, amassing red, purple, and even green shoes of all styles” (86). She justifies her own collection by saying, “It may have been a genetic impulse, so I guess I can forgive my excesses in the footwear department; Tía Piedad would’ve been proud” (86). The photo and discussion of Tía Piedad form a connection to the narrator through their genes and similar obsession with shoes. Although the photo is of Tía Piedad, not the narrator, it allows the narrator to discuss a particular aspect of her own
personality in the context of her family connections. The border between the self and her extended family is creatively blurred, and the photograph is seen as a tool to teach Barthes’ “truth of lineage.”

Cantú’s narrator is fragmented and multiple, but the text is further fragmented by its foregrounding of problems of memory and access to the past. Photographs in Cantú’s text represent a border between the past and constructions of the past in the present. Memory, like photographs, represents past reality. Questions regarding how present memories and photographs relate to a past reality are central to Cantú’s text. Can memory or photographs give us evidence of a real past; can they refer to an actual past, or do they only construct it? Cantú’s use of photography as memory is not naïve. She insists on the constructed fiction of her narrative from the beginning; she says of her works, “they originate in real people and events, and become fictionalized” (xi). In this statement she both separates from and connects her story with the actual lived past by calling it “fictionalized” and originating in “real people and events.” She insists, like Barthes in a real past from which the photographs emanate. Barthes describes a photograph as “an emanation of the referent. From a real body, which was there, proceed radiations which ultimately touch me” (80). However both Barthes and Cantú understand that the meaning of the photographs is highly subjective and easily fictionalized. For Cantú the real and the fictionalized meet in the photographic frame. This reflects Cantú’s aesthetic of borders throughout her text.

The camera has traditionally been connected with the visual images of memory stored in our brains (Rugg 23). By capturing the past and freezing images on paper photography mimics the idea of memory, which also captures moments in the past.
Cantú continues in this tradition: she writes of herself as a child, “And I... watching it all go by, freezing images in time, like a camera” (37). Her memory is like a camera taking photographs of the world around her and saving them to be viewed later. Susan Sontag describes photographs as pieces of the world, “miniatures of reality” (*On Photography* 4). These miniatures connect photographs with memory as a record of the past reality – a record that has been miniaturized or simplified for the sake of saving it on film or in our brains.

Like memory, photographs prove problematic: subject to gaps and errors. “Photography acquires the power to supplant memory, and our images of the mental process of remembering then comes to resemble photography” (Rugg 23). This clearly takes place in Cantú’s text when she makes the following statement: “My memory for everything but the stroller is like the photo, black and white” (45). One of the main problems emphasized by the differences between the photos and the texts Cantú gives to describe them is the lack of color in the black and white photos. Her texts are generally full of a plethora of colorful details to fill out what is missing from the colorless photos. These colors also draw attention to what is lost in the photographic images – what memory must recreate and correct for photographs. In this way Cantú seems to disagree firmly with Barthes, who sees color as a distasteful “artifice, a cosmetic” which he feels tarnishes the “original truth of the black-and-white photograph” (81). For Cantú’s narrator her memory as text attempts to correct the lack of color in the photos.

But in Nena’s mental record of her childhood moment in the stroller, her memory fails, and she can only remember it in black and white. Barthes argues that a photograph is not a memory, “but it actually blocks memory, quickly becomes a counter-memory.”
He describes the violence of photographs as the filling of “sight by force [...] because in [photographs] nothing can be refused or transformed” (91). It is as if Nena’s vision of her stroller has been colonized or filled by force by the photograph. The photograph has replaced her memory. She cannot refute the truth claims of the black and white photo showing how her stroller “really” appeared. As Linda Haverty Rugg argues, “Inevitably, the line between memory and photography blurs, with photographic-era children uncertain as to whether their memories of childhood are memories of events they witnessed or photographs they have seen” (23). Nena’s recall has been impoverished by the photograph. It seems the photograph has replaced Nena’s memory of the event. The line between memory and photography is another of aspect of Cantú’s border aesthetic.

Problems of memory form the focus of Cantú’s text. She makes statements like: “Things are never as nice as we remember” (25), and in her Prologue she emphasizes how her own family’s memories do not always coincide, “the younger ones not remembering stories, only images, brief descriptions... the mother filling in gaps for the daughter, of before, of the times before and during that she has forgotten, or changed in her mind... some they both experienced yet remember differently” (2). Even further complicating the problems with memory is the death of those people who hold the memories. When discussing her grandmother’s memories Cantú writes, “For Bueli the move brought back memories, mental photographs gone now, except for the stories she told” (5). The only access she has to her grandmother’s memories are filtered through, not only her grandmother’s memory and story telling, but her own efforts to remember her grandmother’s voice.
Throughout the text there are many examples of photographs described but not printed. The lack of photographs is identified as a loss of memory. In describing her relationship with her father the narrator says, “So many times he held me. For some of these there are not photographs” (37). At another point she tells us, “There is no photo to remind me, but in my mind’s eye…” (43). Sometimes she cannot find the photos that were taken: “I’ve lost the photo, I don’t even know where it is… It remains crisp and clear in my mind” (55). Cantú must re-create the photos that are missing from memory or create images that were never photographed from her own memory. The gaps in the photographic record parallel the incompleteness of memory in accessing the past. Sometimes memory can fill in the gaps left by the missing photos, and sometimes photographs aid memory in recreating certain aspects of the past and inciting memory. In the blurring of memory and photography Cantú reinterprets the past powerfully. Because both memory and photography are imperfect records, the hybrid text resulting from their interplay is creatively fragmentary and incomplete. The “disorganized” chronology and the fragmented nature of the episodes in the book replay the fractured way memory accesses the past as it is jogged by memorabilia such as photographs.

Cantú not only illustrates the gaps in photography and memory, but their deliberate fictionality. In his article, “’Heightened by Life’ vs. ‘Paralyzed by fact’: Photography and Autobiography in Norma Cantú’s *Canícula*,” Timothy Dow Adams has pointed out some of the multitude of discrepancies between Cantú’s photographs and the text that seems to describe them. He points out the false performance of Mexican identity as the narrator’s mother, who was born and lived mostly in the U.S. without even learning Spanish, poses for a very fake China Poblana photo (68). Most interesting is his
noting that Cantú has replaced the names on her immigration documents to reflect the fictionalized name “Azucena” that she uses as her narrator (Figures 2.4 and 2.5). Dow sees this “blurring of fact and fiction” as an effort to “keep the readers off balance” (67, 69). The photographs and their lack of correspondence with the text emphasize Cantú’s insistence on the fiction of her text. It also emphasizes the fictionality of photographs in general.

The discrepancies in Cantú’s text are clearly deliberate and important in blurring the border between fact and fiction, but they also blur the border between memory and its representation as a written text. Dow quotes Cantú in his article as writing the following, “my book is about memory and photos are one way of ‘freezing’ memories, just like words are one way of ‘freezing’ thoughts – and yet both are tenuous and fleeting. We remember differently from what the photo ‘freezes’ and our words often don’t quite express what we think/feel” (66). Photos, then, capture memories in the same way that words capture thoughts – incompletely and inaccurately.

In her introduction Cantú writes, “the stories mirror how we live life in our memories, with our past and our present juxtaposed and bleeding, seeping back and forth in a recursive dance” (xii). Cantú’s project is not as concerned with finding the “truth” about her past, which cannot be accessed, but in exploring the recreation of the past through memories and photographs. She is interested not in reporting a factual representation of her girlhood, but in looking at how “we live life in our memories” – clearly distinct from, if still related to, an actual lived past. Cantú’s book is less a blurring of fact and fiction than a blurring of two fictions – memory itself, as it exists in the mind of an individual remembering, and the recreation of those memories through
stories and photographs. The life she attempts to capture is not the past life as it was lived, but “how we lived in our memories” a different, fictionalized life. She celebrates the creative process of reorganizing and retelling memories in her text.

Cantu. uses the image of a ripped seam to describe this seeping border of memories and their representations. In her Prologue she writes, “The woman Nena begins to shape her story, drawing it out as carefully as when she ripped a seam for her mother, slowly and patiently so the cloth could be resewn without a trace of the original seam” (2). As Nena listens to the memories of her family she must pull them apart as she rips open the seam. Nena uses the memories in both a deconstruction (a ripping apart of the seam) and a reconstruction (resewing). She listens to their memories and then takes them out of their particular context and refashions or “resews” them into a collage of text that becomes Canicula. As she says in the introduction, “although it may appear that these stories are my family’s, they are not precisely, and yet they are,” and she claims, speaking of the photographs in the text, “in all cases, the result is entirely of my doing” (xi).

By transferring the primarily oral stories shared in a private setting into a public written text and placing their photos within that constructed text, Cantú calls attention to the multiple levels of creative mediation that have contributed to her book. While emphasizing the collaborative nature of the text she also highlights her own manipulations or “ripping off” of those memories by representing them in her text. What is lost is the original seam, and Cantú’s text does not try to recover it. She has recreated the memories in an entirely new format and context. The original seam or story could only be understood in a private, oral context between her relatives whose experiences
would anchor their families to their own narratives. Instead, Cantú has created a
borderland or new seam where memories and their creative representations are explored
in new contexts. The contradictions and fictions of the representations are self-
consciously and productively manipulated.

For this reason many of the explanations of her photos blur the borders between
past, present, and future. Again Cantú’s treatment of her photographs relates to Barthes’
similar discussion of blurring of tenses through a photograph. Barthes introduces a
photograph of the road to Bethlehem near Jerusalem taken in 1850 and writes “three
tenses dizzy my consciousness: my present, the time of Jesus, and that of the
photographer, all this under the instance of ‘reality’” (97). The three tenses of Barthes’
reality meet in the photograph and cause a kind of confusion that Cantú seeks to
manipulate. If memory is “our past and our present juxtaposed and bleeding, seeping
back and forth, one to the other in a recursive dance” (xii), then Cantú’s description of
her photos clearly represents this bleeding of tenses and creative “dance.”

The first sentence of the narrative proper begins with the sentence “On a hot, hot,
hot August day, the chicharras’ drone forces me to the present” (3). The reader is left
wondering, “Which present?” Does the “present” refer to the moment when the photo
was taken in the fields harvesting the cotton, or to the present for the narrator as she
writes the text, or to the present of the reader as he or she experiences the text? The
question is further complicated by the explanation of the title *Canícula* given in the
introduction:
The *Canícula* of the title refers both to the time when I wrote the bulk of the material – the dog days of 1993 – and to the idea of a particularly intense part of the summer when most of the cotton is harvested in South Texas; at that time because of the intense heat, it is said, not even dogs venture out. Canícula: the time between July 14 and August 24, according to my father. In my childhood scheme of things, it is a miniseason that falls between summer and fall. (xi-xii)

In light of this explanation, the “hot, hot, hot August day” described is even less orienting. Is this the hot August day of the harvest described in the photograph, or of Cantú writing in 1993? The text is deliberately unclear, because it portrays an effort to recapture memory – the moment where all of these pasts and presents coincide and bleed together to create something altogether new. The past of Cantú’s photographs is only accessed through the lens of all that has happened since they were taken. Like the in-between season of Canícula itself, Cantú’s text is in-between any simple category of time. This moment of mixture between past and present is an intensely productive one - ripe for a harvest of stories and their complex interplay. The borderland of time produces the rich product of Cantú’s text where the contradictions of mixing borders are celebrated rather than clarified.

Repeatedly throughout the text her descriptions focus on not only the subject being photographed at the moment when the photo was taken, but also the future in store for that subject. For example, in her episode titled “Tino,” Cantú describes a photo of herself and three other siblings, including her brother Tino who was killed in Vietnam (See Figure 2.6). In the photograph one of the boys, presumably Tino, is holding his hand toward the camera in a mock action of shooting. Cantú writes, “he’s playing, even in the picture, at being a soldier. Only ten years later 1968, he is a soldier, and it’s not a game” (14).
The narrator continues with a description of Tino’s funeral. Tino’s mock soldering in the photo labeled “Easter 1952” is clearly interpreted as an ominous precursor to his death in 1968. Although the tragedy of 1968 was not known and could not have influenced the photograph of 1952, the photograph is clearly read differently in Cantú’s text because of what happened to Tino later.

In *Camera Lucida* Barthes describes the shock of seeing a photograph of a man taken just before he was executed. He writes, “*he is going to die. I read at the same time: This will be and this has been;* I observe with horror an anterior future of which death is at stake […] the photograph tells me death in the future.” For Barthes every photograph is the “catastrophe” of “death in the future” (96). Photographs represent a future death. For Nena pictures of Tino will always be the catastrophe of his death. Tino’s prophetic action of shooting foreshadows his own future violent death, but it also parallels the
photographer "shooting" the picture of Tino. A photographic shot which for Nena captures the catastrophe of Tino’s death. In this single frame photography and memory bleed past and present forming a borderland aesthetic, a theme that occurs again and again in Cantú’s text.

Even beyond the past and the present, Cantú’s book blurs the past, present, and future together through her photos and her discussion of them. In her narrative “Nena of Three” the narrator describes a photo of herself as a young girl including the details of her dress and who she was looking at as the photo was taken. Then she continues:

My eyes are sad though. As if I were thinking of the pain, the loss, the burdens that are to come. Funny how some sadness seeps in the look, la mirada, even on my three-year-old face. The feelings of future loneliness creeps in – oh, what a strange look for a three-year-old. Does one know what is to come, even at three? All those brothers and sisters, all the work and worry. What will happen to the photo once I’m gone, who will remember the sad child? No child will think fondly of it as its mother’s photo. The photo, a montage of one cool January day when I was three. (54)

The description gives us details of the past moment the photo was taken, reinterprets it in view of the child’s future as the past of the narrator, and even looks forward to the future of the narrator’s death. The photo is a site of the narrator remembering a specific moment in the past when it was taken, and her entire history from that point on, as well as speculations about her future. It is a “montage” of memory and a blurring of time. It also illustrates the evocative or creative power of the photograph to allow one image to imagine or create the past, the present, and the future as they seep into each other through the photographic frame.

Nena’s anxieties about her future find their echo in Barthes’ text as well. He worries about what will happen to his beloved photographs after his death. He, like
Nena, is childless and afraid that no one will take care of his photos. He describes the slow deterioration of photographs by the elements as a kind of death (93). He wonders what it is that is lost with the disposal of photographs, and he concludes that it is “love” (94). He has a photograph of his parents that he agonizes over. Barthes argues that “for once I am gone, no one will any longer be able to testify to [his parents’ love for each other]: nothing will remain but an indifferent Nature” (94). In a way Canícula itself can be seen as an answer to Barthes’ fears. It is clear that Nena has similar fears of being forgotten, but she insulates her family against oblivion in a small way by publishing her stories and photographs. Barthes also hopes that the memory of his mother will at least live as long as his own fame. By writing about her he has tried to keep her memory alive beyond his own existence.

In her introduction Cantú writes, “the story emerges from photographs, photographs through which, as Roland Barthes claimed, the dead return” (xii). The dead may return through her photos, but they are not fully resurrected: the return is always complex and partial and blurred by the present and future. The photos are a borderland ripe for Canícula’s harvest of snapshots interpreted through memory. The border of the photographs, like all of Cantú’s borders, is not clean-cut. Instead, in the words of Gloria Anzaldúa quoted by Cantú in her opening pages, the border is “una herida abierta” or “an open wound” where the sides “bleed” into one another. This wound where at least two cultures meet proves a productive site of mixing blood and worldviews. As Anzaldúa claims, “people who inhabit both realities are forced to live in the interface between the two, forced to become adept as switching modes. Such is the case with the indígena and the mestiza” (59). Photographs provided an important site for this interface of two worlds in
Cantú’s text. Through her photographs Cantú creates an aesthetic of the border that emphasizes and challenges both the fact and fictionality of her family photographs. The view of other worlds through the photograph, like our memory, is human, flawed, and incomplete. Significantly, the last words of Canícula remind us of those flaws, “some of us forget” (132). Cantú uses a mixture of media to produce her borderland aesthetic emphasizing both fact and fiction. In his MAUS texts, Art Spiegelman also mixes media: he uses both photographs and comics.
CHAPTER 3

MAUS: AN AESTHETIC OF POSTMEMORY

In his books MAUS I and MAUS II, Art Spiegelman tells the story of his father Vladek’s memories of the Holocaust in comic books where the Jews are drawn as mice and the Germans, cats. The texts simultaneously tell the story of Art’s difficult relationship with his father, and how Vladek’s traumatic past affects their lives still. Spiegelman has made a career out of testing the boundaries of the genre of the comic. In his MAUS texts he stretches the genre, not only in trying to depict an event as difficult and serious as the Holocaust, but also in his use of a variety of material not traditionally found in a comic book. He includes photographs, redraws maps and diagrams, and, in his CDROM version of the texts, adds a variety of audio and visual source documents that helped him in his research. These multiple medias balance the unrealistic nature of the comic drawings with documentary truth claims. The frames of the comic are constantly cutting across multiple levels of narrative time and space as it tells the stories of Art’s father in World War II Poland, Art’s relationship with his aging father as he retells his memories from his New York home, and Art’s effort to draw the comics after his father’s death.

The first volume, MAUS I, was published in 1986, although excerpts and earlier versions of parts of the text had appeared in print as early as 1973. The first book tells the story of Art’s father Vladek from before the war in the mid-1930s up to his arrival in
Auschwitz as a prisoner in winter 1944. Vladek tells how he met and married his wife Anja. Together they have a son Richieu who dies as a toddler as a result of the Holocaust. Vladek tells the story of the ever more stringent deprivations his family faced as Jews in World War II Poland. In the first book Spiegelman also includes a few pages from an older comic where he explains his pain in dealing with his mother Anja's suicide in 1968. At the end of the first book Vladek admits to Art that he destroyed Anja's diaries in a fit of depression after her suicide.

The second volume, *MAUS II*, published in 1991, begins with Art's parents' arrival in Auschwitz and ends with their reunion after the War is over. Vladek describes the horrors of Auschwitz and the mix of luck and ingenuity that allowed him to survive. Art also discusses the huge success of the first book and depicts sessions with his therapist about the ethics of creating a book about Auschwitz. The story comes to an end with Vladek's death as an old man with Art by his bedside.

As Spiegelman discusses in his interviews on *The Complete MAUS*, there is a clear difference between what he calls "the authorial voice" of the narrator and the character of "Art" or "Artie" as he is drawn in the *MAUS* stories. Both of these voices or characters are distinct from the embodied artist Art Spiegelman. In this paper I will refer to the narrating voice as "Spiegelman" and the character drawn in the stories as "Art."

Despite the seeming inappropriateness of a comic book about the Holocaust, the texts have been widely acclaimed and accepted into the canon of Holocaust literature. The confusion around the text does not seem to have centered on their quality, but their classification. *The New York Times* originally placed *MAUS* on its fiction list until Spiegelman wrote to question that decision. *The Times* moved *MAUS* to the non-fiction
list in response to his letter. Spiegelman won a special Pulitzer Prize in 1992 as well as a Guggenheim fellowship for his MAUS volumes. His books have been translated into numerous languages. In MAUS II, Art discusses the pressures to commercialize brought on by the massive success of his books (See Figure 3.2).

His comic books include three actual photographs of his family members which interrupt the artistic comic drawings of animals with photographed human faces as documentary evidence of the history Spiegelman intends to recapture. Elsewhere they are drawn as mice, but in the three photographs we see the faces of Anja (Art’s mother, Art, Vladek (Art’s Father), and Richieu (Art’s older brother who dies during the Holocaust). However, Spiegelman also calls the reliability of photographs as windows to the past into question. He uses a variety of techniques Marianne Hirsch has labeled the “postmemorial aesthetic” to distance his readers from his stories and characters. Spiegelman does not allow his readers to over-identify with the photos and the individuals they depict by employing these distancing techniques.

Spiegelman’s photographs exemplify Marianne Hirsch’s postmemorial aesthetic, a technique built on her notion of postmemory:

I use the term postmemory to describe the relationship of children of survivors of cultural or collective trauma to the experience of their parents, experiences that they ‘remember’ only as the stories and images with which they grew up, but that are so powerful, so monumental, as to constitute memories in their own right. The term is meant to convey its temporal and qualitative difference from survivor memory, its secondary or second-generation memory quality, its basis in displacement, its belatedness. Postmemory is a powerful form of memory precisely because its connection to its object or source is mediated not through recollection but through projection, investment, and creation. (“Projected” 8)
MAUS itself is a creation of postmemory – the second-generation projection and creation based on Spiegelman’s reworking of his parents’ memories. Spiegelman has no direct experience of the Holocaust as he was born after his parents had already survived it. He has no recollection of the Holocaust. However, according to Hirsch he can have a kind of memory of the Holocaust made up of stories and images shared with him repeatedly as he grew up in the presence of survivors. Spiegelman related in an interview conducted by Gary Groth his secondary understanding of the Holocaust: “My notions [of the Holocaust] are born of a few scores of photographs and a couple of movies” (190). His notion of the Holocaust is removed from survivor recollections but infused with the fantasy of movies and photographic representation of the event. Spiegelman’s postmemory of the Holocaust is cut through with his own imaginative creations of what it might have been like based on a variety of images and his relationship with his parents.

Hirsch claims that the balancing act of the postmemorial aesthetic is to discover “how [...] identification can resist appropriation and incorporation, resist annihilating the distance between self and other, the otherness of the other” (“Projected” 9). The first element of the postmemorial aesthetic is identification. Spiegelman creates MAUS, at least in part, because he feels his father’s story is important to remember. While Art’s father Vladek is not a completely sympathetic character, the story of the Holocaust is clearly told from his, the victim’s, perspective. It is written in a way that allows limited identification with Vladek. In the case of MAUS, Spiegelman tries to tease an accurate representation of the past out of his multiple research methods including detailed interviews with his father, trips to Poland to see the places his father described, and searching out historical documents of the period. His research shows that he feels it is
important to tell the story accurately – as truthfully as possible. There is an effort to create a kind of identification with the victims of the Holocaust – to remember their stories and sympathize with them. Even if he is drawn as a mouse, Vladek is above all, human with many flaws and some virtues.

However, the postmemorial aesthetic also demands that Spiegelman recognize and emphasize in his text the difference between the depiction of his own postmemory and his parents’ first-hand recall of the Holocaust. His text must be marked as a site of postmemory, so that he does not appropriate his father’s narrative. To appropriate the narrative would be to claim it as his memory – to erase the distance between self and other, which in this case is the distance between father and son. To incorporate Vladek’s story would be to invest his telling of the story with a kind of authority a belated postmemory cannot support.

Spiegelman’s text manages to allow his readers to identify with his characters to a point, but he undercuts that identification with moments where the fictionality of the narrative is emphasized or the characters become so unsympathetic that it interrupts any easy identification. Spiegelman’s family photographs leave his characters open for identification – they appear as human and sympathetic figures. But Spiegelman also emphasizes the staged quality and the fantasies associated with each of those photographs. By displaying the fictional nature of these photographs Spiegelman avoids over-identifying with his characters. This undercutting of identification and truth claims is the distancing technique of the postmemorial aesthetic. Spiegelman emphasizes the lies and fantasies built into his text in order to call attention to its postmemorial quality of re-creation rather than recall. He shows how his representation of the past is not
generated from the first person recall of a Holocaust survivor but from a postmemorial
distance of a generation and cut through with his personal investments with his family
members.

While I intend to focus my study on Spiegelman’s treatment of his family
photographs in his texts, it is important to understand the borders between genres that
Spiegelman blurs by including photographs. The flexibility of the comic book genre
gives Spiegelman many advantages in portraying his father’s Holocaust narrative. For
example, it allows Spiegelman to depict the unspeakable crimes of the Holocaust while
avoiding the voyeuristic exploitation of a more realistic mode of visual representation.
Spiegelman also was able to include a multiplicity of graphic material such as maps,
diagrams, and photographs that stretch the limits of the comic book genre. Spiegelman
constantly crosses borders between a variety of genres, which serves to question the
arbitrariness of the genres themselves, and the truth claims often made by fidelity to the
genres. Autobiography, for example, has been traditionally understood as a truthful
representation of one’s life. Spiegelman intrerrupts the truth claims of the genre of
autobiography with his self-consciously fictionalized comic book characters.

*MAUS I* and *II* challenge any simple assignment of genre. Alan Berger claims, “It
is simultaneously an autobiography, a biography, a comic book for adults, a
documentary, a novel, and psychosocial history” (260). Clearly the text does portray Art
Spiegelman as the biographer retelling his father Vladek’s story of survival through the
Holocaust, but it also details the difficult relationship between Vladek and his son and
pursues how the trauma of the parents’ has translated into trauma for the son.
Spiegelman’s books allow a multiplicity of voices to come through in his texts rather than
a single genre position. It is an effective mix of genres to deal with the complexity of Spiegelman’s subject – memory of the Holocaust and its transmission to a second generation. The mix of genres makes multiple claims to truth and accuracy which allows Spiegelman to retain a claim to referentiality while maintaining the fictionality of his work.

The drawings in the book seem to point towards the fictionality of the text. There is a contradictory balance between the truth of Vladek’s remembered testimony and the artistic, creative mode Spiegelman uses to represent those memories. “MAUS alternatively presents itself as a transparent vehicle for representing the past, replete with diagrams of hideouts and detailed sketches of barracks and bunkers, on the one hand, and as self consciously contrived artifice, with self-referential depictions of Art in the act of drawing, on the other hand” (Horowitz 276). This balance between historical truth and mediated artifice illustrates Spiegelman’s complex understanding of history and memory. Spiegelman feels a need to represent and identify with the past, but in doing so recognizes the elements of fantasy and projection inherent in memory work. Spiegelman understands his work as neither true or false, but a postmemorial creation relying on both fact and fiction. As Andreas Huyssen explains, “Spiegelman accepts that the past is visually not accessible through realistic representation: whatever strategy he might choose, it is bound to be ‘inauthentic’” (“Of Mice” 35). Memory itself has been often understood as a mixture of fact and fiction, but in the case of a postmemory the distance to the event is even greater – the need to recognize the fictionality of the story even more significant.
In his letter protesting *The New York Times Book Review*'s classification of *MAUS* as fiction, Spiegelman wrote, “to the extent that ‘fiction’ indicates that a work isn’t factual, I feel a bit queasy” (“Problems” 3). He is at pains in the text to emphasize the accuracy of his work in portraying his father’s memories and his own research. Spiegelman even includes the transcript of his interviews with his father and many of his research photographs and films in the CDROM version of his text *The Complete MAUS*, which seem to point to the authenticity or factuality of his text. In light of the reality of Holocaust deniers, the truth claims of the texts are particularly important. Spiegelman forces his readers to face the fact that art can be truthful and deal with history in a documentary fashion.

At the same time, the obviously mediated production of the artwork points to the constructed nature of any memory or history that tells the story of the past. The inclusion of the transcripts and recordings of Vladek’s interviews also show how Spiegelman manipulated them in order to fit the needs of his narrative. Spiegelman describes the difficulty of fitting all the text he needed to tell the story within small dialog bubbles. Spiegelman portrays a balance between authenticity and performance. He is forced to edit his father’s recollection to fit the needs of his drawings. By restoring his father a voice through his interviews in the CDROM version, Spiegelman reveals his own mediation in his father’s memory. This is precisely the balance Hirsch calls for in the postmemorial aesthetic – a recognition that his representation is a projection, but also somehow based on very real events and memories.

Spiegelman backs up his father’s testimony with his own research and historically accurate diagrams that seem to break out of the comic book genre (See Figure 3.1).
MAUS includes a careful layout of the entire Auschwitz/Birkenau complex as well as a variety of accurate diagrams explaining how the gas chambers, crematoria, and other camp systems worked. These drawings cannot be called cartoons and are too accurate and careful to be invented from memory. They are personalized copies of historical documents of the building of the camps. These apparently historically accurate diagrams play against the artificial drawings of the characters as unindividualized animals. For Spiegelman creative cartoons and documentary diagrams are not so easily separated: they are both potentially accurate and mediated.

Figure 3.1. Diagram of the Crematoria (MAUS II 70)
The comic book format allows Spiegelman to juxtapose the documentary diagrams with the fictionalized animalistic drawings; but it also allows him to overlay the multiple present tenses of the text in the 1980s New York where Art listens to Vladek tell his stories of a 1940s World War II Europe. The representations of past and present do not differ in many ways as they might in photographic representation or even more realistic drawings. For example, Vladek does not appear noticeably older in the frames portraying him in the 1980’s than in the 1930’s. This blurring of multiple chronologies fits well with the use of photographs as present artifacts of past realities.

However, Spiegelman does visually make small distinctions between what he calls the present and the “supra-present” layers of his story. He calls the “present” the moments when Vladek is telling Art his story and labels “supra-present” the episodes in that occur after Vladek’s death when Art is dealing with the pressures of his success with MAUS I and works on creating MAUS II (The Complete MAUS). The frames occurring in the “supra-present” show Art in a human form wearing a mouse mask and the words on the page appear in upper and lower case lettering rather than all upper case as in most of the rest of the book (See Figure 3.2) (The Complete MAUS).

Often the events of the Holocaust are placed in the context of 1980s New York: as when Spiegelman draws himself at his drafting table with piles of Holocaust victim’s bodies at his feet (See Figure 3.2). The drawings are obviously not historically accurate: Art Spiegelman could not have had such a pile of bodies in his studio in New York. But the drawing is accurate in depicting the effect of Vladek’s memories on his son. These Holocaust images bleed into Art’s work and reality in 1980’s New York.
Figure 3.2. Art in the "supra-present" (MAUS II 41)
Art’s postmemories of the Holocaust figure into his depression as he investigates his guilt with becoming an economic success built on the horrific history of his father’s experiences. He lists his success – his wife is expecting a new baby, his book has well received, and there have been offers to make a movie based on *MAUS*. But these successes seem insignificant in the face of the death of his father and the slaughtered victims of the Holocaust, which he also lists. Art cannot escape his father’s past.

The comic book format seems especially useful for depicting the immediacy of the past in Art’s “supra-present.” As Gillian Banner argues: “comic-books and their close relations, cartoons, are most frequently used to represent the present or the future; they are less often used to depict the past” (132). The immediacy of the format brings the past into the present. The past and the present in Spiegelman’s text are simultaneous, making his photographs of the past important in his present text. This blurring of the borders of chronology echoes the fact that the actual lived past is lost, but that its constructed memory is continually affecting the present. While Art’s family photographs cannot speak to him, his memories and fantasies about those photographs continue to affect him. As a child of Holocaust survivors, the depiction of his life represents how the trauma of the past is still deforming his present. The visual elements and the complex verbal stories play with notions of genre and blur the boundaries between past/present, autobiography/biography, fiction/history, comics/diagrams, and drawings/photographs.

The multiplicity of genres and the blurring of past and present in *MAUS* are not simply contradictory techniques interested in challenging genre assumptions. They are part of the postmemorial aesthetic that seeks to remember the experiences of the survivors while recognizing our inability to fully understand or retrieve those memories.
A simple genre category of biography, for example, would seem to represent a simple access to past events. Instead, Spiegelman chooses a truly postmodern mix of genres to represent the complexity and self-consciousness of his dealing with the past.

The three photographs further blur the genre distinctions by interrupting Spiegelman’s drawings with these realistic photographic images from the past. “[The photographs] provide an eerie shadow ground in signaling the ways the traumatic past always intrudes on the present” (Liss 55). Marianne Hirsch and Susan Rubin Suleiman outline the complex distinctions blurred by *MAUS*:

Despite the numerous distancing devices that shape Spiegelman’s book—the graphic medium and comix form, the adaptation of the animal fable, and an insistent emphasis on meta-narrative commentary—there is an equally strong reliance on documentary connections to the real. Maps, precise descriptions of places and people, taped interviews […], the rendering of the father’s foreign accent, and especially three photographs that jump out of the graphic visual field and suddenly provide concrete, indexical images of the mother, father, and dead brother all testify to the pull of such material connections. (88)

Spiegelman’s photographs further blur the boundaries of past and present by showing us these present artifacts of past lives. The photographs also demand that the text be accepted as nonfiction: the characters depicted as mice are also given real, human faces.

Spiegelman’s first photo, included in *MAUS I*, is of Art and his mother (See Figure 3.3). While the other pages of the texts are made up of cartoon characters drawn as animals, the photograph is found in reproduced pages of an earlier comic entitled “Prisoner on the Hell Planet” that Spiegelman created to deal with his mother’s suicide. The characters are portrayed as humans rather than mice and the style is noticeably darker and set apart from the rest of *MAUS I*, most noticeably by a black border
surrounding the pages. This interruption makes the picture even more shocking and reflects the unexpected nature of Anja Spiegelman’s sudden and inexplicable suicide – with no note.

Figure 3.3. Art and Anja (MAUS I 100)

The stylistic differences between these pages and the rest of the text also illustrate the vibrance and accessibility of Art’s pain at losing his mother. While much of MAUS I and MAUS II describe equally horrific suffering, it is made distant by the unemotional animal drawings. Spiegelman calls the pages a “chilly surface” (The Complete MAUS) because the appalling story is told and depicted with a kind of matter of fact lack of detail or emotion. He is able to retain a certain postmemorial distance from Vladek’s memories represented by the dehumanized cartoons and the lack of sentimentality conveyed in their frames. However, when illustrating his own traumatic memories, Spiegelman does not take the same distanced approach – instead the pages are seething with melodramatic
agony and the human suffering of an alienated teenager. These pages filled with his own vibrant suffering throw the distanced suffering of his parents in the Holocaust into relief—notable by its contrast. In depicting his own self-absorbed suffering Art shows his inability to understand his mother’s pain that must have motivated her suicide.

The pages dealing with her suicide begin with the photograph of Anja with the caption “Trojan Lake, N.Y. 1958” (sic) (See figure 3.3). The photograph shows the mother and son in a field on vacation. Anja wears a bathing suit and stands above her crouching son at her side. She rests her hand on his head. The happy domesticity of the photo is mitigated by the second frame of the page in which the narrator says, “In 1968, when I was 20, my mother killed herself” (100). Art depicts his mother’s needy efforts to connect with her troubled son who had just been released from a three-month stay in a mental hospital (100). He resents her efforts to “tighten the umbilical cord” (103). The horrible story of the mother’s suffocating love for her son and her subsequent suicide interrupts the story the photo seems to be telling of a happy, sunny relationship. The photo’s depiction of happier times appears cruelly ironic in the context of the story of the son’s guilt and agony over his mother’s loss.

The only photographic image of Art’s mother is reproduced in a section clearly about Art and his pain. There is no effort to understand Anja’s pain or motives for her suicide; instead, it relates only Art’s anger as he accuses his mother of murdering him (103). The photograph does not speak, and, despite the fact that Spiegelman dedicates the book to his mother, she is silenced throughout the text. Spiegelman seeks to find her side of the Holocaust story, but Vladek had already destroyed her notebooks and diaries. Both father and son manage to silence Anja. This silencing reproduced in the silent
photograph is central to the texts. Anja’s missing story forms a counterbalance for the stories told by both Vladek and Art, and her silence seems more like a scream.

Anja’s muteness in MAUS is triply enforced: by her suicide, by the experiential and emotional gulf separating her from her son while she is alive, and by the posthumous destruction of her journal notebooks. Alongside Vladek’s apparently open and unimpeded testimony is Anja’s absent narrative. Anja’s radical muteness underlies Vladek’s loquacious verbosity, reminding the reader that for every survivor story this is spoken and heard, another remains unvoiced, forever lost. (Horowitz 280)

The inability to make Anja’s photograph speak and tell the story that would fill in Vladek’s gaps and possibly correct his mistakes or self-flattering exaggerations creates the distancing required in the postmemorial aesthetic. We see Anja, but we never hear her voice, her story. Barbie Zelizer argues that “how memories are erased, forgotten, or willed absent has come to be seen as equally important to the ways in which memories are set in place” (220). Anja’s forced absence by her own hand in suicide, her husband’s hand in destroying her manuscripts, and her son’s hand in not listening to her when she was alive all create important plot lines in the books. The balance between Anja’s erased memories and Vladek’s present stories form a central tension in MAUS. Both Vladek’s distortions and Anja’s silence contribute to the inaccuracies of Spiegelman’s postmemorial reworking of the past. The loss of Anja’s story creates the distance that forces us to see the incompleteness of any Holocaust archive. Whenever Vladek speaks, Anja answers with silence – the silence of millions of victims of the Holocaust who did not survive or died later without telling their stories.

MAUS also takes up the notion of who has the power to tell the story. Vladek asserts that he destroyed Anja’s diaries willfully (MAUS I 159). Art does not listen to his mother during her life in order to record her stories in his memory. She does not have the
power to protect and convey her story. As Hirsch argues, Spiegelman’s texts "[...]
do not disguise the violence and destruction that occur within the family itself, the power of
the father to silence the mother’s voice, the power of the son to rewrite the father’s
words" (Family 13). These power relationships force us to recognize the unequal status
of Anja’s story, and the incompleteness and possible inaccuracies of Vladek’s version as
interpreted by Spiegelman’s pen. Why would Vladek destroy Anja’s story except to gain
control of the family story? This battle for control is so violent that Art actually calls
Vladek’s destruction of Anja’s diaries murder (MAUS I 159). Vladek’s violence to
Anja’s memory forces the reader to question his character and story. This questioning is
also a form of distance required by the postmemorial aesthetic. There is no easy
identification with the story as presented. Whenever Vladek speaks, we are left
wondering how Anja might have answered him.

Anja’s story, however silenced, does have the power to call Vladek’s into
question. She is a presence in the text – though her voice is extremely mediated. Her
image has survived despite the Holocaust, her suicide, and her husband’s confused efforts
to destroy her story. “[Spiegelman’s] inclusion of family photographs demonstrates both
their power and their silence: there is nothing in the pictures themselves that reveals the
complicated history of loss and destruction to which they testify… And yet, within the
Spiegelman’s larger narrative, they become eloquent witnesses of an unspeakable history,
in themselves stubborn survivors of cultural genocide” (Hirsch, Family 13). Anja’s
unspeakable story is acknowledged through her silent photograph. By including her
image so early in the texts and pointing to the absence of her story, Spiegelman manages
to emphasize her importance and the limits of his own text. This balance between the
presence of Anja’s image and her missing stories illustrates Spiegelman’s effort to allow her memories some space in the text, even if that space remains empty. He maintains a distance and respect for his mother’s irretrievable memories through the postmemorial aesthetic.

Figure 3.4. Vladek Spiegelman (MAUS II 134)

Spiegelman’s counterpart to his mother’s photo is the picture of his father that appears at the end of MAUS II (See Figure 3.4). It is a picture of Vladek in a striped prisoner’s uniform. He is healthy and his uniform is clean and starched (134). At first glance the photo seems to stand as documentary evidence of Vladek’s days in Auschwitz. The close up on his face reveals a clear sense of determination and strength that may have resulted from years of survival under the Nazi death machine. When looking at the picture it is easy to fantasize about Vladek’s triumphant thoughts as he was liberated from the Nazi camps. At this point in the book we know much about his story and can identify with this triumph. This portrait of Vladek is open for identification because we have been given so much of his story.
However, the text immediately creates a postmemorial distancing effect: Spiegelman calls the authenticity of the photo into question with Vladek’s explanation of its creation. Vladek says, “I passed once a photo place what had a camp uniform – a new and clean one – to make souvenir photos” (134). He mails the photo to Anja as evidence that he is still alive, and the photo becomes very significant to Anja as her first contact with Vladek after the war. Despite the photo’s apparent openness to identification and fantasy about Vladek’s liberation, Spiegelman’s text creates a distancing effect by exposing the staged, fake quality of the photo. This is not the photo of the prisoner as he leaves the death camp, but one taken much later in a costume. The photo does have documentary value in showing his survival, but it also misrepresents his experience. Although Vladek is clearly an Auschwitz survivor, the photograph is not documentary evidence of his time spent there. In fact, it falsifies the filthy conditions of the concentration camp with a cleansed image of a neat, fitted uniform and a healthy plump inmate. The reader must quickly balance the aspects of posed performance and documentary evidence in Vladek’s photo.

Vladek’s efforts to document his survival with a carefully staged photograph of a clean uniform reflects his editing of his stories as well. From the beginning of MAUS I Spiegelman constantly draws attention to the exaggeration and gaps in Vladek’s story. For example, in the first chapter Vladek repetitively reminds Art how handsome and desirable Vladek was to the women in his hometown. He even claims, “people always told me I looked just like Rudolph Valentino” (13). Spiegelman parodies him by calling chapter one “The Sheik” and drawing Vladek on the front piece like a sexy star in a
Spiegelman portrays Vladek as obsessed with cleanliness; he even manages to bathe regularly in the German POW camp. While Vladek’s hygiene is important to his survival and, therefore, the plot of his story, his effort to cleanse himself extends to his narrative choices. One early example appears when Vladek relates the story of Richieu’s birth. Art quickly realizes Richieu was born less than nine months after Vladek and Anja’s marriage. Art asks innocently if Richieu was premature, and Vladek quickly agrees that he was, “a little” (28). However, the frame above indicates that Richieu was a big baby, and Vladek already admitted to having a sexual relationship with a woman named Lucia before his marriage to Anja. The text clearly suggests that Vladek might not be telling the truth about Richieu’s birth, but Art does not question him further. Vladek and Art’s version of the story serves propriety rather than accuracy. Knowing Vladek’s love of cleanliness, it does not seem surprising that he might clean up both his story and his photographs. While memory is by nature inaccurate and incomplete, Vladek’s stories seem deliberately manipulated. Moments of exaggeration, gaps, and lies punctuate the text and call Vladek’s stories into question in much the same way that his cleansed photo calls photographs as documentary evidence into question.

On the other hand, for Anja the photograph of Vladek was documentary evidence of his survival and apparent health. In this context we can identify with Anja’s thrill at receiving this photo of her still living husband. The photo serves to both allow us to identify with the story and force us to question it, forming an example of the postmemorial aesthetic.
The final photo I will discuss forms the opening page of *MAUS II*. It is a beautiful portrait of Richieu, to whom Spiegelman dedicates the volume (See Figure 3.5). The photo of the angelic child opens the second book even though his death has already been related in the first. He was poisoned by a relative of the Spiegelmans, who felt it was better that they should die on their own terms than be captured by the Nazis. This photograph seems the most open to fantasy of any of the photos. As Marianne Hirsch and others have noted, the Holocaust pictures of children are especially effective in producing identification, as children are a site of almost universal fantasy and motivate the viewers to protective reactions ("Projected," 12-13). Richieu’s life was too short to be recorded by more than a photograph. His story is, like his mother’s, one of silence and
absence. His parents even search for him after the war because they cannot accept the story of his death. The photo of Richieu communicates extreme loss and sadness. How could the Nazis have caused the death of such an innocent, young person?

Art in particular fantasizes about this photograph and about Richieu. He never met Richieu because Art was born after the war. Art calls Richieu his “ghost-brother” and discusses competing with his photograph: “the photo never threw tantrums or got in any kind of trouble... It was an ideal kid, and I was a pain in the ass. I couldn’t compete. They didn’t talk about Richieu, but that photo was kind of a reproach. He’d have become a doctor, and married a wealthy Jewish girl... the creep [...] It’s spooky having sibling rivalry with a snapshot” (MAUS II 15). Art fantasizes about Richieu as the ideal child because Richieu’s future was cut off – an unknown. Art is jealous of Richieu’s unending innocence because of his death. “Richieu dead was always potentially more valuable than Art alive, or at least, that was what the child Art understood. This perception, that aliveness represents a particular kind of inadequacy, reflects another constant theme in survivor testimony, the view that ‘the best all died’” (Banner 155). For Spiegelman, Richieu, as an innocent child with untold potential, clearly represents “the best” that died. His photograph is a location for Art’s survivor guilt. This guilt causes in Art a kind of aggression towards his angelic ghost brother. He feels challenged by Richieu.

Richieu’s photo becomes a site upon which Art can project his anger caused by his own feelings of inadequacy and failure to live up to his father’s expectations. Projection is one of the key elements Marianne Hirsch includes in her concept of postmemory. Art acts out his anger toward Richieu by creating a less than flattering image of Richieu in his comic text. Richieu screams when Vladek picks him up after
returning from the POW camp at the beginning of the war (MAUS I 66), and he misbehaves by dumping his food at a family dinner in another scene (75). Spiegelman seeks to counteract the perfect innocence of Richieu’s portrait by presenting an imperfect image of Richieu in his text.

While these two images of Richieu do balance each other in a kind of postmemorial distancing and identification technique, they are both fantasies motivated by Spiegelman’s anxieties about Richieu rather than any kind of authentic portrait of Richieu. Art explicitly references his own need to project his anger motivated by sibling rivalry at his brother’s photo. Art’s knowledge about Richieu seems to be limited to his angelic photo, but Art imagines all sorts of annoying perfections for him anyway.

Richieu’s presence is so vague that it is actually replaced by Art. When Art talks to his wife Françoise about Richieu’s photo, Françoise comments, “I thought that was a picture of you, though it didn’t look like you” (15). This is the start of the confusion between Art and Richieu. Anja and Vladek reunite after the war and have another son to replace the loss of their first. Art is a “memorial candle” for dead children lost in the Holocaust (Sicher 49). He feels the weight of Richieu’s loss as an unbearable responsibility he must try to live up to.

Even Vladek illustrates this theme of replacement with his final words in MAUS II. He addresses Art as Richieu saying, “I’m tired from talking, Richieu, and it’s enough stories for now” (See Figure 3.6). This complex moment, like so many others in the books, blurs past and present and calls into question Vladek’s credibility as a narrator. One is left wondering how coherent can Vladek be if he cannot recognize Art. Also the reader can wonder how much of the story is based on Vladek’s fantasies about the past,
such as this fantasy of his dead child alive again. Vladek’s misrecognition of his son sheds light on their complex relationship – in the end there is a kind of tenderness as Art tucks his father into bed as if he were a child. Art is finally there for Vladek instead of fleeing from his requests for attention. But there is also a failure to understand each other, Vladek seems to finally see the “good son” who stays by his father’s side, and he names him Richieu. Further, the moment silences Richieu by making him irrelevant, replaced, and incorporated into Vladek’s fantasy rather than a reality.

Richieu, more than any other character of the book, is silenced. Richieu’s voice is, of course, silenced by his death in the Holocaust, but Art’s incorporation or replacement of Richieu at the end of MAUS II performs another kind of silencing. By self-consciously pointing out Art and Vladek’s fantasies about Richieu, Spiegelman allows the reader to identify them as fantasy rather than reality. The construction of Richieu based on Spiegelman’s fantasy points to the absence of Richieu’s memories lost with his life and also to the constructed nature of Spiegelman’s story. Despite the photograph’s claim to documentation of a real Richieu’s life, the reader is left with only self-conscious fantasies about him. This calls into question the validity of the photograph and makes the loss of his life even more heartbreaking as we have no access to his story at all. Even his death is a kind of mystery without living witnesses. Like Anja, Richieu’s story is one of absence and loss.

Richieu’s beautiful photograph, which is open for viewer identification, is balanced by Art’s emphasis on the fantastic constructions he makes up about his brother. The reader cannot completely identify with the fantasies about Richieu because Spiegelman is so clear in marking them as fantasies. The reader is left only with absence
and loss rather than easy identification with Richieu. How can readers create their fantasies when Spiegelman has been so careful to interrogate his own? The postmemorial aesthetic is clearly at work in both the balance of identification with the child photograph and the distancing in Spiegelman’s analysis of his own fantastic identifications with the child. In fact, Art identifies so deeply with Richieu that he replaces, and becomes an inadequate version of, him. This kind of incorporation is portrayed for the reader as a kind of mental illness that the reader does not want to reproduce.

In the final moments of the text where Vladek identifies Art by Richieu’s name, Vladek fulfills Art’s dreams about Richieu. Art becomes his angel brother, at least for a moment in his father’s eyes. This fulfills Art’s fantasies with death as well. Repeatedly in the book Art says he wishes he could have experienced the Holocaust first hand with the rest of his family. He claims, “I know this is insane, but I somehow wish I had been in Auschwitz with my parents so I could really know what they lived through!” (emphasis in original, 16). Art’s fantasy of family togetherness centers on dying with the rest of them. And Vladek seems to bring about the death of both himself and his son with his last words in the book. After he calls Art “Richieu,” the text finishes with a drawing of the Spiegelmans’ headstone. Under the large “Spiegelman” name we see Vladek and Anja’s names and dates, but just below these appears “Art Spiegelman 1978-1991” (See Figure 3.6).
While Art Spiegelman’s name could be read as a final signature marking the end of his work, it appears as though Art’s name has been added to the family headstone. In the end he appears buried with his parents. In death they are finally together. While this offers a kind of closure to the text, it also reveals the dangerous, suicidal vein in Art’s fantasies and the continuing trauma of the Holocaust for the second generation. The violence of the Spiegelman family drama results in Art’s survivor guilt and related death wish. Art’s fantasies about Richieu’s photo and the Holocaust lead to a dark end. Art’s obsession with becoming the ghost brother he never knew appears disturbingly successful.

This mournful ending contrasts deeply with the “happily ever after” ending suggested by Vladek and Anja’s reunion at the end of the war. Vladek says, “More I don’t need to tell you. We were both very happy, and lived happy, happy ever after”
Yet, we know they end up quite unhappy and dead. While it is easy to be carried away by the happy reunion of the couple and by the beautiful picture-perfect photo of Richieu, Spiegelman will not allow his readers easy, sentimental satisfaction. He balances the Hollywood movie style reuniting of Anja and Vladek with the narrative of Anja’s suicide and Vladek’s unhappiness and eventual death. And finally, he performs a symbolic death of Art to answer his tendency to fantasize about Richieu’s perfection. To idealize the dead is to demonize the living, just as Art’s idealized portrait of Richieu allowed him to over-emphasize his own flaws and fantasize about his own death.

While giving his readers the beautiful image of Richieu as a real boy in his photograph, Spiegelman shows how very dangerous fantasizing about that photograph can be. The photograph documents Richieu’s existence, but also tells us very little about him. His image is only an idealized version easily incorporated in a variety of beautiful narratives he could have lived. By showing the danger of those fantasies through the character of Art, Spiegelman calls into question the use of children’s photographs. Spiegelman uses the postmemorial aesthetic to allow the readers and his characters to identify with Richieu’s photo, but also to expose the complications and inaccuracies of such a move. In the end Richieu is an almost complete unknown, and his photograph offers us no access to his personality. He represents what is irretrievably lost.

Spiegelman’s photos display the humanity of the Spiegelman family and open them up for a kind of identification that the animal cartoons disallow. However, the photographs are also sites of distancing that force the reader to recognize the otherness of the family, particularly in the context of Spiegelman’s complex text. Perhaps most difficult is the loss the photographs represent. As Vladek shows Art a box of photos of
Anja’s family, he repeats over and over again how they have died in the Holocaust. He finally concludes, “All what is left, it’s the photos” (MAUS II 115). In the context of the almost total annihilation of Anja’s family, the photos are indeed a poor remainder. The photos represent silence and death along with the life of past events. This duality of identification with their lives and the distancing of their loss illustrates the postmemorial aesthetic.

In the next page Art asks Vladek, “What about your side of the family?” (116). Vladek answers that the fate of most of his relatives ended in places like Auschwitz. He concludes, “So only my little brother Pinek, came out from the war alive... from the rest of my family, it’s nothing left, not even a snapshot” (116). For Vladek’s family there are no photos to identify with. The nothingness of their annihilation is only balanced by Vladek’s presence. “Vladek, deploring the absent photos of his own side of the family, sadly stands in for them, filling up an entire page with his own body” (Hirsch, Family 29). The distancing of the loss and lack of photos is unequally balanced by identification with Vladek’s large presence visually on this page, but also verbally in the texts. His story and images must stand in for that of his family because his family is annihilated and silenced. And Spiegelman emphasizes throughout the text the problems and distortions inherent in giving Vladek so much power to tell the only story available.

Spiegelman’s complex text seeks to balance the readers’ identification with a myriad of distancing techniques. While this balance is often uneven and weighted to show the loss caused by the catastrophic events of the Holocaust, the text does tell a story with which one can identify and empathize. The postmemorial aesthetic inspires both memory and mourning. We are left mourning the loss of Art’s family as we remember
them through viewing their photographs, which give us some connection to those that are
dead. However, we are also aware that the photographs do not tell the whole story. The
story cannot be told: it can only be alluded to because memory is inaccurate and
photographs, in the end, can tell us very little about the lives of their subjects. The
silence of photographic images calls into question their documentary force.

Questioning the documentary force of photographs is particularly risky when
discussing the Holocaust. The photographs taken at the death camps after their liberation
are often used to argue against Holocaust deniers. By questioning their documentary
value, Spiegelman could have lent his text to the arguments of Holocaust deniers.
However, Spiegelman does insist pointedly on the truth of his text and the value of his
research. While he questions the objectivity of photographs, he does not argue that they
are completely false. Instead, he seeks to find a balance between the fact and fiction of
photographs. He absolutely defends that the Holocaust is a historical reality. Rea Tajiri
faces a similar challenge in attempting to represent her parents’ stories of a traumatic
World War II history. There seems to be a trend to forget or deny the past that she is
trying to recapture.
CHAPTER 4

HISTORY AND MEMORY: AN AESTHETIC OF ABSENCE

In 1991 Rea Tajiri made her 36 minute autobiographical film *History and Memory* about her family’s memories of the Japanese-American internment camps during World War II. The film won several awards in film festivals around the country, and Tajiri has continued to make films dealing with human rights and Asian American families. As a third generation Japanese-American living in Chicago, Tajiri sought to make a film to deal with a history her family and society did not often discuss – the internment of over 100,000 Japanese-Americans after the attack on Pearl Harbor. Tajiri’s narrator, whom I will refer to as Rea, seeks to recapture her own history from the oblivion of forgetfulness and lack of images.

In her effort to create an image of what had been long forgotten, Tajiri includes a surprising variety of images. The film opens with text floating across an otherwise blank, silent screen. The images that follow are as diverse as newsreel and Hollywood movie clips depicting Pearl Harbor and patriotic musicals, interviews with her family, and video of her research trips to the camps where her mother was interned. She includes a few existing family photographs of the times spent in the camps. She also adds close up shots on objects like tar paper from a barrack, government documents issued to her family members, a small carved bird made by her grandmother in camp, and a model of the house stolen from her grandfather while his family was interned. Tajiri displays and
writes over the top of government propaganda films depicting and justifying the internment. She also manages to find some illegally produced footage made by internees in the camps using a smuggled camera. These are just some of the many images Tajiri unites in her film, but perhaps most striking are the black empty screens depicting absence.

Absent images form the central aesthetic through which Tajiri attempts to connect with her history, her family’s internment as Japanese American’s during World War II. Her family’s lack of photographs and willed forgetting leads Tajiri to create an image of their past as full of gaps. The cultural and political landscape of America during and after the War made remembering the internment unpleasant if not impossible for Tajiri’s family. The lack of memory in her own family is paralleled and in some ways caused by an absence of images of Japanese-Americans in American popular films and history.

Her film uses an aesthetic of absence to bridge the gap between her effort to commemorate her family’s experience of the camps and the mediated, partial access she has to that past. Her effort to reclaim a presence in the history of World War II for Japanese-Americans leads Tajiri to resist the popular narratives of American moral superiority in the War. Tajiri challenges this narrative by making the internment camps visible as a kind of narrative repair and intervention of personal memory against popular history. I will analyze how Tajiri uses the photographs of her parents’ generation to create an image out of absence, using an aesthetic of absence that creates an image and emphasizes the incompleteness of that image. Tajiri’s photographs are important documentary evidence of the past, but they are also apt to conceal or tell a distorted story about the past.
Tajiri creates an aesthetic of absence through techniques that emphasize absence in her film. She shows absence by often using black screens and silence without any images or sounds. She describes how historically Japanese-American have been absent from Hollywood films and popular history, and shows several Hollywood films which visually do not include Japanese-Americans. Tajiri shows there is an absence of photographic evidence to document the camps because internees were not allowed to take pictures. Tajiri’s film emphasizes the absence of the speakers and narrators in the film’s visuals. We often hear voices, but rarely see speakers. Tajiri focuses on an absence of memory by stressing all her mother has forgotten and the loss of her grandfather’s testimony with his death. Many of the landscapes in her film are literally empty of people – producing an effect of absence. The places in her film are literally absent: her grandfather’s home has disappeared, for example. All these representations form Tajiri’s aesthetic of absence.

One of the main issues of her film is the lack of photographs and memories depicting her mother’s experience in the internment camps. This absence of Japanese-Americans from the photographic record parallels their absence in popular culture of the period. Early in the film History and Memory Rea models a kind of intervention against absence by telling the story of her sister’s collection of photos. She tells of her sister poring over a box of photographs of Hollywood stars from the 1950s, a collection she inherited from her aunt. As the pictures of movie stars flip across the screen, Rea observes that she realized only later that “all the pictures were of white people.”

This photographic record shows more than just the absence of Asian Americans in Hollywood movies. Tajiri chooses to focus on two photographs in her Aunt’s collection.
The first is of Rock Hudson and Dorothy Malone driving in a car in Douglass Sirk’s film *Written on the Wind* (See figure 4.1). She immediately follows with a photo of President John F. Kennedy and Jackie Kennedy also in a car (See figure 4.2).

Figure 4.1. Rock Hudson and Dorothy Malone driving a car

Figure 4.2. John F. Kennedy and Jacqueline Kennedy in a car.
While the Kennedy’s are clearly celebrities much like movie stars, they represent a power structure other than the media or Hollywood. Japanese-Americans are not just absent from Hollywood, but are underrepresented and silenced in the American government. These photos depict individuals driving, a symbol of power, control, and American identity. Tajiri’s constant mixing of Hollywood movies and historical newsreels, and her insisting that Hollywood movies form as much of our history or collective memory as the news media forms a central part of her argument. Here she underlines this argument by mixing the photos of white movie celebrities with white government celebrities.

These photos, like so many of Tajiri’s photos conceal as much as they tell. The images of the white celebrities conceal a more diverse or inclusive version of America, but these particular photographs also conceal the truth about their subjects. Figure 4.1 depicts Rock Hudson in his usual heterosexual, sex symbol role in a 1950s melodrama. Hudson’s homosexuality was carefully concealed for decades as he assumed these roles, and images like this one added to the deception. Figure 4.2 shows the Kennedys together as Jackie happily waves to the public. But this photograph was taken in Dallas on November 22, 1963 shortly before the President was shot. This seemingly peaceful photo actually represents the violence that is to come. The specter of the Secret Service man behind the former President reminds us of the danger and foreshadows the future death of the President. The visual of a smiling Jackie conceals the realities she is about to face. The few images of Asians in American media have historically stereotyped and concealed their role in American culture.
The Japanese-Americans are concealed from the photographic archive of Hollywood and American government, so Tajiri’s sister decides to perform a kind of resistance by creating her own photograph of a Japanese-American boy on whom she has a crush. She follows him home, and in a rather awkward scene takes the reluctant subject’s picture. Rea tells us, “somehow his photo became enshrined with the others.” This insertion of the image of a local Japanese boy amongst all those professional photographs of white stars speaks to the absence of Japanese faces in American media and attempts to insert the missing image. The photo seeks to reclaim the possibility for a Japanese-American to become an object of desire instead of a racist caricature.

Tajiri begins her film with the sister’s childish effort to create an image in the face of absence, an absence she inherits from the image archive of an older generation. Possibly the woman of a later generation is able to recognize the absence of the Asian faces in the archive in a way that her older Aunt could not. Because of the change in the social landscape the sister has increased agency and can assume the role of image creator as well as consumer. Even though the sister seems awkward and uncomfortable in her role as photographer, she does have enough agency to take the photo, to intervene and attempt to correct the marginalization displayed in her Aunt’s photo archive.

This effort to create an image, of course, parallels Tajiri’s own project to create an image out of the absence of images and lack of memory in her own family’s archive. Although this family archive is not the same as a collection of photographs of national stars, Tajiri’s film also collects film sources from national archives and in publishing her film Tajiri speaks to a national and even international audience.
Tajiri seeks to do what Hilde Lindemann Nelson would call “narrative repair” but through the creation of images rather than texts. Nelson argues that “because identities are narratively constructed and narratively damaged, they can be narratively repaired. The morally pernicious stories that construct the identity according to the requirements of an abusive power system can be at least partially dislodged and replaced by identity-constituting counterstories that portray group members as fully developed moral agents” (xii). Tajiri’s film History and Memory works as a counterstory seeking to repair the identity of Japanese-Americans. The U.S. government as an “abusive power system” constructed the identity of Japanese-Americans as untrustworthy and dangerous during the war. Most importantly, the current trend is to see the United States as the hero or moral authority in World War II, which hides the realities of the cruel and racist treatment of the Japanese-Americans during the War by ignoring the story of the internment. By making the internment visible Tajiri inserts a powerful counterstory about American racism and Japanese-American presence during World War II.

Although her move towards narrative repair does portray the Japanese-Americans as “fully developed moral agents” who have been wronged, Tajiri’s repairs are never whole. Tajiri’s small independent film is far from dislodging the beloved and popular narratives of America as a war hero; however, she has made a small intervention toward a greater role for Japanese-Americans similar to her sister’s awkward and unprofessional photograph of a Japanese-American American boy amongst the Hollywood studio portraits. Although their repairs are small and inadequate compared to the power structures they face, they reclaim a certain amount of agency for Japanese-Americans.
Rea describes the Japanese-American role in history as "presence through absence." She creates an image for her family’s internment in World War II through partial images and an aesthetic of absence because the photographic record is lacking and over determined by popular narratives of the War. Of course, no photographic record could ever tell the true or whole story of the War, but the role of Japanese-Americans has been systematically absent and silenced because of racial hysteria.

Throughout the film Tajiri emphasizes the lack of photographs of the internment. Marita Sturken describes the internment of Japanese-Americans during the war as “a historical event that has spoken its presence through its absent representation” (34). This lack of representation in media complicates Tajiri’s efforts to “render the internment visible” (Sturken 34) and contributes to her aesthetic of absence. Tajiri narrates the film saying, “there are only a few photographs from camp that my family owns since cameras were forbidden.” This narration is illustrated with three images her family has from the camps. The first is a picture of three women, which Tajiri labels as “Mother with Friends, Poston 2, 1942” (See figure 4.3). The next image is a pencil or charcoal drawing of an extremely muscular, idealized man lounging beautifully on a cot labeled, “Uncle’s Drawing of brother Jim in Poston” (See figure 4.4). The final image is of three women again, this time each holding a small child. The last photo Tajiri calls, “Grandma with visitors, Poston 2, 194?” (See figure 4.5 ).
Figure 4.3. Mother with Friends

Figure 4.4. Uncle's Drawing of Brother Jim

Figure 4.5. Grandma with Visitors
Clearly the drawing, so unlike the two other photographs in its subject and unrealistic artfulness, literally illustrates the absences inherent in the photographic record. Her uncle, like Tajiri herself, attempted to artistically create an image where he was not allowed to take photographs. This artistic image speaks to the absence of other images and to the necessity to create images where none exist. The drawing also portrays the Asian body as an object of desire, a kind of intervention against racism and desexualized stereotypes of the Asian male in American culture. The figure of the brother seems hypermasculine and powerful. The drawing can be seen as a kind of visual resistance against the prison camp where his power and agency was denied.

The two photographs Tajiri shows (Figures 4.3 and 4.5) portray women and children in contrast to the uncle’s drawing. The photographs of the camps illustrate an absence of masculinity. In fact, it appears most of the men in Rea’s family volunteered to fight in the American military rather than stay in the camps. The photographs show the absence of the Tajiri men who like so many of the interned families have left to fight in the War.

The most striking absence in the film is the absence of speakers. Rea herself never appears in the film despite narrating much of the action. Her voice and the voices of her mother, father, aunts, niece, and nephew are heard as disembodied, with only a caption on a blank screen with a small label to identify them (See Figure 4.6 ).
Figure 4.6. Father's Voice

Her uncle's voice is not even recorded. He left the United States after the war because he was so disillusioned with the government's failure to adhere to its own constitution in the case of the Japanese-American internment. Tajiri reads his letter telling his story, and he never appears in the film. In the case of her father we are given an old photograph of him as a soldier in World War II, but we almost never see the family on film as they would appear at the time the film was made. Instead, Tajiri films empty spaces, like the deserted barracks of the camp in Poston or the fair grounds in Salinas where her mother's family was first interned. The absence of the speakers in photographs and films adds to the aesthetic of absence Tajiri seeks to emphasize. Even the sign identifying the town of Poston is missing letters (See Figure 4.7).
The absence of the central letter ‘S’ in the sign reflects how the inhabitants of Poston are trying to forget a part of their history – the history of the internment camp built close to the town. Tajiri does not include in her film any interviews with the inhabitants of Poston, but she describes their discomfort with her visit. They do not appreciate her efforts to make that history visible. One is left wondering if the absence of interviewees in Poston is Tajiri’s choice or a refusal by the inhabitants to participate in her memory work.

One of the primary images of absence centers around her grandfather’s house which was stolen while he was in the camps. One of the first photos she shows is a photograph of her father’s family in front of the house before the war. The photo labeled, “194?, Family at Couton Street house,” shows a narrowly cropped shot focusing on the family with white planks behind them, presumably belonging to the house (See Figure 4.8).
Figure 4.8. Family in front of stolen house

However, the home is not identifiable in the picture – the white planks could have belonged to some other kind of backdrop. The picture is centered in a black screen and surrounded by a thick white border that cuts out the surrounding image of the house. Tajiri later displays a small three-dimensional model of the house in order to give us an image of the house, which does not appear recognizably in any of the photographs.

Her father describes how the U.S. government took over the house for the Navy, and how he and his sister were denied permission to go to the house. He relates, “what happened eventually was that the house all the sudden disappeared. And whether it was stolen or destroyed or whatever, we’ll never know because all of a sudden the house wasn’t there anymore.” As he relates this story of loss the screen image fades from the family photo in front of the house to black absence. The loss of the house is illustrated by an aesthetic of absence – incomplete photographs and black screens.
While Rea’s father describes the loss of the house as a sudden and unexplainable disappearance, Tajiri creates her own text to imaginatively solve the mystery. She again places her words as scrolling text over a black screen (See Figure 4.9) in order to emphasize the lack of images. The text tells the story of a group of people coming to the house and using hydraulic jacks to lift the house from its foundations. She imagines they come back the next day with a truck and drive the house away.

Figure 4.9. The Last Screen of the Stolen House Narrative

She creates this text to counteract the lack of explanation and images provided by her father’s narrative. In Tajiri’s text there is at least an anonymous someone to blame. Instead of describing the house as disappeared, Tajiri performs a kind of narrative repair by identifying a crime committed against her family by someone, rather than just a mysterious disappearance. The house does not just disappear but is stolen. Her text attempts to create an image and restore a history that is absent from her father’s telling and cannot be documented.
She maintains, however, the aesthetic of absence and the recognition of the fantasy of her image by using only words floating across a black screen rather than creating a reenactment or false photograph. Visualizing words as objects becomes for Tajiri a way of rewriting history and making an imaginative image rather than a displayed one. Through words she is able to create word pictures that announce their unreality — their imaginative rather than documentary nature. She makes no attempt to research what actually did happen to the house, but imagines what must have happened. While Tajiri attempts to reclaim the history of the missing family house, her telling is still full of the gaps characteristic of her aesthetic of absence.

The lack of images depicting the camps punctuates Tajiri’s film with multiple blank spaces and silences. She describes the need to recreate missing images in her film:

There are things which have happened in the world while there were cameras watching, things we have images for. There are other things which have happened while there were no cameras watching, which we restage in front of cameras to have images of.

Tajiri recognizes the need to recreate images in order to rectify the gaps in history and popular film. As Barthes claims, photography “decrees notable whatever it photographs” (34). While the story of the Japanese internment has been declared unimportant by the lack of images depicting it, Tajiri works against this trend of forgetting by forcing the internment into view as an absence on display. Tajiri actively works to restage some events in order to have images that the cameras did not record; for example, she narrates the theft of the family house.

However, her film emphasizes the staged rather than realistic quality of those images by self-consciously announcing their performance: the representation of the stolen house is through texts across the screen and obviously fake miniatures, rather than more
realistic media. Tajiri here shows that our access to the images of her family’s past is through a variety of inaccurate media and imaginative rather than documentary sources: photographs and films taken at the historical moment and the fictional films and staged photographs created to reenact those historical moments. Tajiri represents the many ways in which her experience of the past is mediated and subjective, which serves to question the validity of other evidence of the past.

Beyond the lack of images recorded in historical and fictional films or photographs about the internment, Tajiri laments the loss of memory of the witnesses of the events. There are the lost images of those who have forgotten and those who have died and can no longer tell her their story:

There are things which have happened for which the only images that exist are in the minds of the observers, present at the time, while there are things which have happened for which there have been no observers, except the spirits of the dead.

The representative of the spirits of the dead in Tajiri’s film is the spirit of her grandfather. She opens the film with a scene she imagines her grandfather witnessing from above, and several of her other images reproduce this gaze from the sky of the ghost witness. Her grandfather’s spirit is also said to witness the theft of his house as Tajiri writes it. Her grandfather’s spiritual witness creatively allows her to include the dead in her catalog of rememberers. The grandfather never speaks out directly or creates images, but he is present in his absence. Because he cannot tell his story, Tajiri imagines it into her film. He is part of her aesthetic of absence – an absent witness whose voices and images provide gaps in the film. The greatest absence of the film, however, is the mother’s lack of memory. She is a witness to the story of the internment but cannot access her memories.
While Tajiri’s father gives his testimony of the events surrounding the internment, he did not spend much time in the camps that Tajiri wishes to document. He served in the military while his wife and family lived in the camps. Rea repeatedly attempts to find out about the camps by asking her mother; however, her mother’s memory seems to be nearly wiped clean of her experiences in the camps. Rea plays for the audience and her mother silent government footage taken at the Salinas detention center canteen, and plays her mother’s voice as the narration. Her mother says she does not remember a canteen at all in Salinas. Throughout the film her voice is one of negation of memory; she constantly repeats, “I don’t remember.” The photographs and videos that depict the camps do not aid her in regaining her memory. Her amnesia seems complete.

Tajiri only has one image that her mother has given her of the camps, a vague description of her mother filling a canteen with cold water in the hot sun (See Figure 4.10).

Figure 4.7. Woman Filling Canteen
The figure or “fragment” as imagined by Rea recurs again and again in the film, and it is her need to fill in the absent stories for this unexplained image that motivates Rea. “This image is not a memory in the usual sense in which previous experiences of the self lodge as residue in the mind. Here the experience belongs in fact to Tajiri’s mother, who has banished it from recall. It has been deposited instead as shards in the consciousness of the daughter who now must find a way to make the pieces fit together” (Sternburg 180). As Janet Sternburg argues, the image is a fragmented postmemory for Rea of her mother’s traumatic past. The mother’s exiled memory forms the splintered foundation on which Rea begins to build her image of absence. Traumatic experiences are precisely those which are difficult to assimilate into one’s consciousness and memory. The shards of this image of the woman with a canteen reflect the difficulty of dealing with the trauma of the internment.

The image of her mother filling a canteen is an image of survival. The mother is seeking to collect one of the basic necessities of life. The fact that she must go outside to into the hot sun and dusty conditions to get that water reflects the deprivations the internees experienced. But Tajiri also chooses this image because water is a central theme in her film. Rea explains in the film that the reason the Japanese were particularly unpopular in places like California was there special ability to bring water to the land. They brought water to the dry land and made it grow. Their successful farms proved too competitive for the white farmers who conspired to have them interned in order to steal their farms. This reassigning of the reasons for internment is part of Tajiri’s work of narrative repair.
Rea discusses how the internees again brought water to the land at the camps and made it grow. She shows pictures of the irrigation projects built by the internees and the date palms planted by internees that still grow in Poston. The photographs document the work done by the internees to reclaim the land from the desert. The date palms stand as witnesses for a history, a history of the internees' work, that others have attempted to forget or erase. By citing this tradition of bringing water to the land, Rea's image of her mother filling her canteen takes on a special significance. Bringing water to the land is a kind of triumph for the internees. Rea's mother does not explain the context of the image, but Rea's own research and imagination creates a greater story in which this image can sit.

The absence of coherent stories about and memories of the internment litters Tajiri's narrative. "Tajiri's experience of history had been one of untold stories" (Sturken 43). Both her parents suppressed their telling of the internment story, but Rea's mother is unable to reclaim it. Rea's project is an effort to find the history her mother cannot tell her: "I began searching for a history, my own history because I had known all along that the stories I had heard were not true and parts had been left out" (History and Memory). Tajiri is motivated by a sense of incompleteness in her own history and in the national memory.

The lack of memory is Rea's main motivation and struggle. The central tension of the text is the struggle of memory – the struggle "between what might be reclaimed, mended, and perhaps redeemed, and what is unrecoverable" (Sternburg 179). Tajiri uses the levels of mediation and missing images of her struggle for memory as a creative force in her film. Tajiri seems to echo Andreas Huyssen's argument: "The fissure that opens
up between experiencing an event and remembering it in representation is unavoidable. Rather than lamenting or ignoring it, this split should be understood as a powerful stimulant for cultural and artistic creativity” (3). Tajiri exploits the fissure between her experience and memory as well as the postmemorial gap between her memory and those of her older family members. She uses the gap as a stimulant for her aesthetic of absence. The blank screens, lack of images, and the mother’s continued confessions of forgetfulness are the features of Tajiri’s aesthetic of absence, an aesthetic creating a self-consciously constructed image out of a lack of memories.

The only photograph noticeably altered in the film is a photograph of a Japanese woman that seems to be Tajiri’s mother, or at least to represent her. The photograph appears twice in the film, and on both occasions the topic of the narration is the mother’s willed forgetfulness of her camp experiences (See Figure 4.8). The photograph is altered so that the image appears as a negative and is then washed over with a reddish filter.

Figure 4.8. Altered Photograph of Japanese Woman
The reversal of the image from positive to negative reflects the reversal in the mother’s identity formed by her amnesia. She is defined not by her memories, but by her lack of memories; just as the image in the negative is defined by blackness instead of light. The narration at both points of the film where this negative image is shown also emphasizes the powerful forces behind her mother’s forgetting. The red wash of color represents these powerful forces creating her amnesia. Just before the image appears, Tajiri scrolls text about her mother over the screen: “She tells the story of what she does not remember, but remembers one thing: why she forgot to remember.” As the negative image appears we hear her mother’s voice describing how she knew if she questioned the internment or tried to figure out why it was happening she “could go out of [her] mind.” Rea’s mother describes seeing a “beautiful woman who lost her mind,” so the mother’s forgetting seems part of an attempt to keep her sanity.

Tajiri follows her mother’s story with more text from a letter sent to “selected members of the Japanese community post Pearl harbor” including her mother. The letter, an artifact that Tajiri uses as evidence of the government’s hand in her mother’s amnesia reads, “Certain Japanese persons are being considered for repatriation to Japan. You and those members of your family listed above are being so considered.” It is clear that fear of deportation also motivated Tajiri’s mother to keep quiet and forget about her experiences as an internee. The powerful force of the government literally created the mother’s silence and forgetting.

Later in the film when the negative image appears again, Tajiri’s mother is talking about how she cannot remember the ride on the train to Poston. She claims, “I don’t even remember how we got there.” But then she follows with the statement, “the blinds were
down.” Her captors did not allow her to see and form memories of her train ride to Poston. They controlled the images by keeping the blinds down – not allowing their prisoners to see. This parallels the effort to control the use of cameras in the camp. Again powerful forces control Rea’s mother’s opportunities to create image memories. She cannot take pictures or even see where she is being taken.

According to Susan Brison, “As a society, we live with the unbearable by pressuring those who have been traumatized to forget and by rejecting the testimonies of those who are forced by fate to remember” (49). The memories of the internment have been deemed unbearable and, therefore, unmemorable because they interfere with popular notions of American identity – particularly the narratives of America’s moral authority in World War II and fiction of democratic equity. Rea’s mother is under immense pressure to forget. She understood that attempts to contemplate, understand, and remember the internment could lead to insanity and deportation. It is a memory her government and society have tried hard to suppress.

Lawrence Kirmayer outlines a spatial metaphor for memory that he calls “the culturally constructed landscape of memory” and defines as “the metaphoric terrain that shapes the distance and effort required to remember affectively charged and socially defined events that initially may be vague, impressionistic, or simply absent from memory” (175). Kirmayer argues that some memories are harder to access because there is no acceptable space for them in the socially constructed landscape of memory. His argument is that memory for an individual is linked to the social costs of remembering in
a group. Clearly Rea’s mother understood the social costs of her memories. She had no space to tell them, and so they were forgotten. One can see Tajiri’s project as part of an effort to create a new cultural terrain where these memories are available.

At the end of the film Rea returns to Poston and films the view as it might have appeared from the train in the 1940s. This is the view her mother was not permitted to see as she rode the train to Poston as an internee. Rea returns to film these spaces and give her mother an image she did not have access to before. Rea is literally giving her mother a new landscape from which to re-remember the internment. Rea creatively fashions a new image to combat the absence of one in her mother’s memories. At the end of the film Rea says she can forgive her mother “her lack of memory.” Through her research that has shown her the many ways the story of the internment has been suppressed, Rea has begun to understand the cultural landscape that produced her mother’s amnesia.

Part of the cultural terrain producing her mother’s forgetting is the multiple images of World War II that promote particular kinds of memories. The government films documenting the camps tell the story of a voluntary relocation justified by military necessity, rather than an unjustified imprisonment based on racial hysteria and greed. While Tajiri’s film is punctuated with missing images and absent speakers, she does manage to find many images taken from World War II and the camps. However, these images do not tell her mother’s story. The images screen out her mother’s experience and hide other stories.
Early in *History and Memory* Tajiri includes a group of clips from a wide variety of sources: newsreels, Hollywood movies, and even Japanese film footage, that all depict the attack on Pearl Harbor. It is clear this event is one Americans are encouraged to remember; yet, this is also the event that led to the war hysteria responsible for the internment. Tajiri labels these films "History" by typing the word right over the top of the film images. These films are part of the accepted narrative of American identity that is remembered publicly. These images screen out and seek to justify the images of the Japanese-American internment.

The images of the internment that do exist also help to obliterate the memories of the internees. In the government films of the camps the internment is justified as a military necessity, and the camps are portrayed as happy sites of peaceful recreation. Instead of the images that show the barbed wire and forced relocation, the government pictures show bird carving classes and smiling internees at canteen. It is not surprising when Rea’s mother views the footage of the camps she answers, “I don’t remember this.” The images from the government films do not correspond with her memories filled with fear and restriction. Tajiri writes over the top of one of these government films, “Who chose what story to tell?” in order to emphasize the power structures behind these films which erase her family’s memories. She includes the government propaganda but attempts to make it tell another story, by showing how it silenced her family’s memory. The government films and photographs emphasize the absence of the Japanese-American voice by reducing them to passive guests on vacation at a summer camp.

Because the few images that survive from her family’s internment are often tainted with the motives of government propaganda, Tajiri is left with little documentary
evidence to tell her story. She creates an image filled with absence and lying images – images used in government propaganda to portray the camps as benign and necessary. Tajiri must turn to the small, personal stories rather than the large historical ones that have been falsified. She cannot go to the camps and see the conditions as they were in the 1940s. She cannot take her own films of the internees in the camps from a different perspective because they are lost to the past. She only has ruins of the camps, personal photographs, and ideologically over-determined government images. Tajiri exposes the inadequacies of her raw material – the image archive.

Tajiri must enrich this archive by creating her image from imagination and fantasy rather than from the evidence available. Janet Sternburg argues:

> Instead of telling history through conventional documentary means in which the narrative is structured from verifiable sources, these makers are creating poetic interpretations, associatively linking ‘evidence’ drawn as well from personal experience, memories, dreams, and imagination. In so doing, they are implicitly proposing an alternative understanding of historical narrative in which the primacy of truths claimed by facticity yields to the equally pressing claims of interior life. (178)

Tajiri’s creative aesthetic of absence calls into question the truth claims of the documentary approach, especially the government produced documentaries of the camps. The style of the documentary approach is an attempt to show an objective truth by not stylizing the images, but showing “real people” doing “real things” rather than actors performing. However by questioning the truth of the government documentaries she questions the authority given to this documentary style. As we have seen the objectivity of photos challenged, Tajri challenges the objectivity of filmic documentaries. Instead of an objective depersonalized truth, Tajiri creates a dissenting documentary based on local and familial memory. She does not shun imagination and fantasy and prefer more factual
images, but considers creativity a useful way of reworking the past and an important part of her documentary. She is forcing into the landscape of memory a small space where the internment can be remembered in new ways – ways which challenge the traditional American memories of World War II.

Tajiri’s creative reinterpretation of the past seeks to make her parent’s memories and those of other Japanese-American internees part of the national memory and the national archive of images. But this is not simply a task of recording what they remember; instead, Tajiri records through words and images what they do not remember, the pictures they do not have, the films they never made. This absence in history is like a scar Tajiri attempts to expose. We will never understand completely the moment of wounding because the perpetrators have engineered the victim’s amnesia, but Tajiri will not let us forget that the still painful scar, the absence, exists. By refusing to see the injury perpetrated against the internees and their families, the national memory inflicts further pain on the internees and the next generation. Tajiri efforts to amend and reinterpret the photographic images of the past create a new image promoting new awareness of an almost forgotten history.
CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

The three works *Canícula, MAUS* and *History and Memory* all focus on the difficulties of accessing the past through the photographic frame. For Cantú, Spiegelman and Tajiri an image is never an objective window on the past. These three authors succeed in dealing with both the inherent truth claims of their photographs and an awareness of the subjectivity and fictionality of the photographs. They manage these distinctions by constantly calling the truth of their photographs into question. Each of their individual aesthetics – of the border, postmemory, and absence – seek to call attention to the subjectivity of memory and photography.

The paper moves from Cantú’s fictionalized autobiography, to Spiegelman’s historical comic, to Tajiri’s imaginative documentary. While each of these works deal with photography in the past they do so in different media. I opened with Cantú because it allowed me to deal first with the written word and photographs then to move to the comic book with Spiegelman, and finally to Tajiri’s insertion of photographs into a film. Cantú also proved a useful place to start because it allowed me to introduce explicitly and smoothly the complexities of Barthes’ ideas on photography with my first investigation.
Cantú focuses on Barthes’ theories throughout her text, and my discussion of Cantú was largely in debt to Barthes’ *Camera Lucida*. Barthes’ ideas also heavily influenced the theoretical considerations in the chapters that followed.

Finally, I viewed the progression from Cantú to Tajiri as a move from the personal to the national. While all of these texts could be read as focusing on both the personal and the national, Cantú’s text seems more focused on a local, personal narrative. Spiegelman’s story is also focused on a personal story between a father and son, but does interact with issues of Holocaust representation in large scale media. Tajiri, on the other hand, explicitly seeks to insert her retelling of history into the national narratives of World War II. She is interested in her mother’s particular experience, but she is even more interested in national memories of the War and the absence of the internment in those narratives.

Cantú negotiates the truth and fictionality of her photos and narratives through an aesthetic of the border. Her photographs are complex sites of multiple border crossings between a variety of time periods, generations, and worldviews. Cantú uses her text and its relationship to Roland Barthes’ *Camera Lucida* to creatively interrogate the traditional truth claim of her photographs. Her book made up of photographs and text becomes a creative space to explore the limits of photographic truth, autobiography as a genre, and the subjectivity of memory.

Similarly, Spiegelman creates an aesthetic of postmemory to illustrate the borders of intergenerational memory. In *MAUS* the representations and memories of the past are not objective reflections of realities but full of fantasies and subjective interpretations. Spiegelman maintains that his narrative tells an accurate, truthful representation of his
father's past but also represents the inaccuracies inherent in a postmemorial project. Through his postmemorial aesthetic, Spiegelman encourages identification with his characters while simultaneously discouraging his readers from over-identification. Spiegelman's family photographs are both examples of documentary evidence and sites of fantastic constructions about the past.

Tajiri constructs a vision of the past based on an aesthetic of absence that underlines the gaps in collective memory and image archives of the past. The multiple absences of her film speak to the fictions of history forced to fit into the dominant ideology. Tajiri uses a subjective and imaginative method to attempt to refashion images absent from the historical record and from her own family's memories. Her treatment of her photographs speaks to the force of images to obliterate memories as well as inspire them. She uses photographs to document her family's past, but also to emphasize what is missing from the photographs.

Each of these authors use their photographs as a kind of documentation of the past, but they always create a context for those photos that also emphasizes their fictionality. They insist that the documentary is also creative: the very act of photographing involves framing choices and is loaded with the ideologies of a particular context. By doing this they reclaim the artistic or aesthetic as a space that can capture the past at least as well as attempts at objective recording. This aesthetic space also seems more honest in its partial rather than total truth claims compared to a documentary or traditional autobiographical style. This is why Canícula can be both autobiographical and fictional, why MAUS tells a well-researched "true" story through the artistic media of comics, why History and Memory uses documentary footage alongside fantasies. These
authors have become adept at switching modes between the documentary and fictional and blurring the borders that separate them. Their complex understanding of how we remember our pasts through photographs requires a complicated negotiation of multiple genres. Their texts make claims to both fact and fiction. Our understanding of the past through their works is richer because their reality is multi-dimensional – where personal fantasy is as important as documentary history.
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