REVIEW ESSAY

"Metaphors for Life Itself": Historical Photograph Albums, Archives, and the Shape of Experience and Memory

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Galleries of Friendship and Fame: A History of Nineteenth-Century American Photograph Albums
By Elizabeth Siegel. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010. x, 203 pp. Illustrations. Notes. $50.00. ISBN 978-0300154061.

Around the World: The Grand Tour in Photograph Albums
By Barbara Levine and Kirsten M. Jensen. New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2007. 207 pp. Maps. Illustrations. Notes. $55.00. ISBN 978-1568987088.

Snapshot Chronicles: Inventing the American Photo Album
By Barbara Levine and Stephanie Snyder. New York: Princeton Architectural Press; Portland, Ore.: Douglas F. Cooley Memorial Art Gallery, Reed College, 2006. 189 pp. Maps. Illustrations. Notes. $40.00. ISBN 978-1568985572.

Suspended Conversations: The Afterlife of Memory in Photographic Albums
By Martha Langford. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queens University Press, 2008. x, 241 pp. Illustrations. Notes. $39.95. ISBN 978-0773533929.

Historians have been too hesitant in the past to place photographic images at the center of their research. Their reluctance was seemingly rooted in the nineteenth-century origins of the historical profession, which stressed the

reliability of handwritten and printed documents filed in state-produced archives over all other materials. More recently, a "visual turn" has encouraged researchers to explore

> how images work in history . . . , putting visual resources at the center of analysis (as opposed to using them solely for content or illustration); considering how visual materials make history; reflecting on how they engage questions of temporality; and taking into account, and employing in historical work, the ways in which modern visual culture shapes the way we construct historical narratives.[1]

In many ways, historical photograph albums are the most complex and multilayered documents found in archives. One or more individuals (family members, friends, or professional photographers) took pictures over a span of time, typically portraits or records of special events (e.g., a wedding, a birth, a birthday, a graduation, a reunion, an enlistment, or a trip). Someone purchased or constructed a volume to preserve and display the pictures, which were assembled on the album's pages by glue, tape, diagonal slits in the paper, photo corners, or some type of window-and-sleeve arrangement. Images for inclusion were selected at several stages by the photographer when he or she looked through the viewfinder or lens, by someone after examining negatives or positives, and by the maker or makers who created the album. The process of compiling an album involved organizational choices, individual tastes, memory (individual and/or in consultation with others), penning captions or labels, and sometimes censorship, for instance, expunging a husband's first wife, a black-sheep uncle, an errant child, or an unflattering pose.

The emergence of photograph albums as a widespread cultural phenomenon depended upon technological developments as well as societal and economic conditions. The meanings associated with an album hinged on a plethora of social and psychological factors. This review essay discusses four important recent books about historical photograph albums (focusing especially on the period from 1861 to 1935), comments specifically on the perspectives they offer, and points to broader implications for archivists and archival methods.

Galleries of Friendship and Fame: A History of Nineteenth-Century American Photograph Albums

Elizabeth Siegel, associate curator of photography at the Art Institute of Chicago, complains in *Galleries of Friendship and Fame: A History of Nineteenth-*

[1] Sarah Farmer, "Going Visual: Holocaust Representation and Historical Method," *American Historical Review* 115, no. 1 (February 2010): 115–22.

Century American Photograph Albums that early photograph albums, "mass-produced, unauthored, and exceedingly common . . . , have been overlooked or dismissed by most historians of photography" (p. 1). In part, this neglect is related to the cookie-cutter characteristics of many albums from the pre-Kodak era. Factory-made albums whose pages were perforated with slots or windows designed to hold cartes de visite and/or cabinet cards were filled with photographic prints mounted on card stock in uniform sizes. The images themselves consisted primarily of conventional poses staged by professional photographers using studio props.

Siegel conceived the book, which focuses primarily on the years 1861 (U.S. patent awarded to the carte de visite album) to 1888 (advent of the Kodak camera and "snapshots"), as a social and cultural history of American photograph albums, examining their development, purposes, and meanings. Her work is an excellent short introduction. The real importance of early photo albums, she suggests, is their role as "systems of representation," their significance indicated by their "ubiquity." Her research embraces "primary materials long overlooked as marginal or inconsequential and [explores] practices of consumption, reception, and viewing, as well as networks of production" [p. 3]. Questions considered include how albums originated; what kinds of photographic self-representations albums incorporate; how they were marketed to families; how families displayed them in the parlor; and what kinds of stories people related about (or by means of) an album's contents.

> [F]amily albums acquired meaning in the context of a reciprocal relationship between the public, commercial sphere and the private, domestic one. The domestic parlor was commonly portrayed as an oasis in Victorian America, insulated from the world of business. In looking closely at family albums and period literature, however, it becomes apparent that the spheres were anything but separate. On the contrary, domestic practices were profoundly shaped by commercial concerns, and the personal habits of consumers could in turn have a tremendous effect on commerce. The many functions of photograph albums—family record, parlor entertainment, social register, national portrait gallery, or advertisement for photography itself—cannot be understood without taking into account this striking reciprocity. [p. 2]

The popularity of the photograph album in America was sparked by the onset of the Civil War, when photographic portraits provided a new opportunity for preserving the memory of men who left home to face peril, engendering "particular meanings for a nation that was . . . physically and socially mobile, and riven by war" (pp. 3–4). Around the same time, the photo album largely supplanted the family Bible as a record of family names and dates. Its advantages over the genealogies inscribed on flyleaves in a Bible included the ability to

trace physical changes in faces over time, compare one face to another, and have a visible record of hereditary connections (p. 7).

Chapter 1, "The Currency of the Carte de Visite" (pp. 16–65) details the "carte craze" that seized American imagination in the 1860s. "Distributing one's own photograph and accumulating other people's for display in the parlor marked the sitter's or collector's place within a social network" (p. 8). Images conveyed more than physical features and clothing. They announced that the sitter could afford to have a picture taken and was sufficiently confident to exhibit it. The commingling of family pictures with celebrity pictures in the same album conflated "two different kinds of looking—one connected to recalling family stories, the other associated with emulating heroes and producing national histories" (p. 8).

Chapter 2, "Albums on the Market" (pp. 69–111) discusses ways in which the photographic industry shaped family recordkeeping practices and how the transformation of those practices in turn affected the business of photography. Photographic trade magazines and advertisements in the popular press marketed albums "by appealing to some very basic—and emotional—themes: sentiment and loss, the importance of family, fashion and assimilation, and even nationhood and patriotism" (p. 9).

Chapter 3, "Albums in the Parlor," explores the photograph album's origins in family Bibles and genealogical lists, the transformation of genealogical records from textual to visual presentation, the conventions that developed around collections of images and their display in the parlor, the narratives "occasioned" by albums, and the role of albums in the creation of personal memories as well as national histories or myths. Photographs replaced memory in some ways, but required it in others (pp. 10–11, 113–55).

Chapter 4, "The Demise of the Card Album, the Rise of the Snapshot Album," an epilogue to the book's principal focus, discusses changes wrought by the Kodak camera after its appearance in 1888, which made photography relatively simple ("You push the button, we do the rest"), inexpensive, and available to the masses. Cameras were loaded in the factory with rolls containing enough film for one hundred exposures. After taking one hundred "shots," customers mailed the whole apparatus (camera and film) back to the factory for processing, receiving by return mail their prints and the same camera, reloaded and ready for use. Women everywhere could capture and preserve family activities in an individualized visual format (pp. 157–67).

> These casual snapshots were more intimate and spontaneous than card portraits; taken more frequently than studio portraits, they also showed the subject in a variety of situations or events, becoming more rooted in time and place. . . . Their contents varied much more than those of the carte de visite album, and owners had the freedom to collage, juxtapose, annotate,

> and manipulate—in other words, to create a narrative, and often a separate identity. [p. 11]

Siegel's thorough research embraces popular press and professional trade magazines, advertisements, patents, guides providing advice about how to pose, sales catalogs, manuals for agents (outlining successful sales techniques), and household account books, in addition to numerous photograph albums. One of the book's chief accomplishments is the redefinition of the family album in Victorian America as a representation of much more than the family itself. Family albums could and often did incorporate mass-produced portraits of presidents, generals, and other figures of national importance photographed by the studios of Mathew Brady and other entrepreneurs (p. 7). Participation in the "rituals" of album keeping "may have allowed Americans to envision themselves" as members of a national "community" in which people who never meet are nevertheless aware of the existence and values of myriad others (pp. 6–7), a phenomenon referred to by historian Benedict Anderson as "imagined community."[2]

> [N]ational consciousness emerges with the rise of print-capitalism, as the reader of the newspaper or a popular novel recognizes a community of other readers simultaneously engaging in the same activity. A parallel can be seen most clearly in the case of celebrity cartes de visite, which were reproduced and circulated in such large numbers that they entered the home on a national scale; the shared experience of viewing the same photographs in the same way linked album owners as members of a national community. [pp. 6–7]

Around the World: The Grand Tour in Photograph Albums

From about 1860 to about 1920, most middle- and upper-class homes boasted a stereoscope and an assortment of commercially produced stereographs, nearly identical views taken from slightly different angles by a binocular camera and mounted side by side on card stock. When properly adjusted in the viewer, the paired images combine for an impressive, three-dimensional effect, bringing the "wonders of the world . . . into [the] living room" (p. 9). Those who could afford it began to travel in increasing numbers in the mid-nineteenth century,[3] their urge to travel influenced not only by stereo cards, but also by alluring advertisements. "In these early days of leisure travel it was common for

[2] See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, rev. ed. (New York and London: Verso, 2006).

[3] On the development of travel and tourism, see Piers Brendon, *Thomas Cook: 150 Years of Popular Tourism* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1991); and Edward Chaney, *The Evolution of the Grand Tour* (London: Routledge, 2000).

tourists to buy fancy gilded albums already full of gorgeous photographs of the most popular sites, or a leather-bound diary or scrapbook in which to write descriptions of their experiences and paste in their individually purchased souvenir views" (p. 10).

As Barbara Levine and Kirsten Jenson explain in *Around the World: The Grand Tour in Photograph Albums*, before the invention of photography in 1839, visualization of distant corners of the world was based mostly on tales told or published by explorers, sea captains, missionaries, or traveling merchants, sometimes illustrated by fanciful woodcuts or engravings.

> Not many people had ventured into the unknown; we were forced to place our trust in their credibility, memories, and reporting skills. With the advent of the camera, more reliable and detailed pictures became available. Intrepid professional photographers made pilgrimages to new continents and countries, wrestling with cumbersome photographic equipment and handling messy chemicals to bring back astonishing images. Suddenly we could see for ourselves what life, people, and landscape looked like in different parts of the world . . . . [p. 9]

Around the World explores "how the modern travel album evolved as an outgrowth of the culture of tourism, and, more specifically, the many ways in which changes to photographic technology over time were employed by album authors—travelers, tourists—to tell stories of their journeys" (p. 18). The study is limited to travel albums created between about 1880 and about 1930, a period characterized by a dramatic increase in tourism, revolutions in transportation and communication, and the triumph of the personal camera. Such developments made travel and the documentation thereof more "immediate, visual, and personal than had been previously possible . . ." (p. 18).

Many of the people who compiled travel albums carried guidebooks describing sites they intended to visit. These guides instructed travelers about what was worth seeing and how it should be viewed (pp. 18–21). Guidebooks published by firms like Baedeker, John Murray, and Thomas Cook and Son reassured tourists that they would miss nothing of importance if they followed the expert advice offered within their pages. Some prescribed daily regimes of sightseeing (complete with maps, catalogs of museum galleries, etc.), offered historical notes about monuments and other sights, recommended scenic views, and proposed sundry other advice. The 1916 *Artistical Guide to Florence and District* was organized around an eight-day visit: Visitors, the book asserted, who "follow our instructions, will have seen everything in Florence that is worthy of notice" (pp. 19–21).

Modern travel albums developed as a by-product of the tourist industry and its souvenir views, guidebooks, and travel narratives, often revealing the

structured approach to traveling that guidebook and travelogue authors typically employed:

> Frequently this structure was replicated in the arrangement of the albums. . . . [But as] leisure travel, tourism, and the technologies associated with them—particularly photography—increased, so did the impulse to personalize the experience, to document one's journeys in travel albums that preserved their creator's spirit of adventure and recounted their exploits. [pp. 21–22]

In 1883, a couple identified only as Mr. and Mrs. Duggan embarked on a trip to Ireland, Scotland, England, and France on the White Star Line's steamship *Republic*. They did not take a camera. The album they brought back was filled with souvenir photographs and engraved or etched prints purchased abroad, supplemented by menus, passenger lists, and hotel receipts.[4] Clara Whitcomb of Chicago traveled to Egypt and other points in the Near East in 1898, apparently without her own camera. Her preparatory purchases included the Egyptian installment of *Baedeker*, about which she wrote that

> The size and contents seem almost discouraging when I think of trying to master the subject. It has been my custom when . . . visiting a country to do so as thoroughly as possible in history, customs, geographical location, physical conditions; also to take especial notice of the little details that one so seldom finds in books. [p. 17]

Mass-produced souvenir photographs and picture postcards filled Clara's album; its particular interest derives from the personal handwritten narrative, linked to images, of what she saw and did. Her notes include ideas for book titles, perhaps in contemplation of publishing her own travelogue: "In the Mysterious Land of the Sphinx," "Notes on the Nile," "Egypt as It Is," and "As I Saw the Nile" (p. 44). Her album reveals an always enthusiastic but often culturally uninformed "stranger in a strange land." Intense curiosity is apparent, but ingrained prejudices about different peoples and non-Western customs are also much in evidence. The album reflects her as well as the native peoples she encountered and the places she saw, a "personalized account" that could not be found in guides like *Baedeker* (p. 17).

> Clara's album is also a collective, social document because it represents an act of communication, and it is a form of communication that is continually renewable. Personal memories and histories change over time to reflect current beliefs, experiences, and social status; they locate our own story within the collective human experience. This suggests that authors of travel albums . . . would themselves view their memories differently over time. It also suggests that our [re-creation] of those memories when viewing travel albums in

[4] On professional photographers and the trade in collectible exotic images, see H. C. Adam and J. Fabian, *Masters of Early Travel Photography* (New York: Vendome Press, 1983).

> the present is inextricably colored by our own individual experiences, beliefs, and status. [p. 18]

Some travel albums featured in the book include "eyewitness to history" snapshots and commentary, such as one traveler's notes and photographs depicting the faithful in Vatican Square as they anxiously anticipated the white smoke that would signal a new pope's election by the papal conclave in 1922 (p. 127). Another tourist puts together a visual and written account of the removal by Howard Carter of ancient artifacts in 1926 from King Tut's tomb (p. 151). Other albums excerpted in the book document a 1929 "Grand Tour" by seven Canadian co-eds and their chaperones; the voyage in the 1920s of an extended family through the Caribbean and the Panama Canal; and an American flapper's adventurous excursion around the world in 1924. The flapper, Vera Talbot, pasted "everything imaginable" into her album, including photographs of a beheading in Bangkok. She kept the latter tastefully screened from view in an envelope (pp. 11–12) stamped "Rising Sun Photo Studio," on which she wrote: "Priests dance themselves into a frenzy before chopping off head of victim or prisoner" (p. 11).

Olive Jubb's 1929 cruise ship distributed to passengers a humorous glossary (which she pasted in her album). "The Liner's Lexicon" encapsulates an assortment of class attitudes while purporting to define useful terms: "Boots: You will know at the end of the voyage who has been cleaning these"; "Chief Steward: The controller of the dining-saloon and, as such, a man to have on your side"; "Steamer acquaintances: Passengers who have been admitted to a certain degree of intimacy, but whom there is no reason to continue to know, or more than barely acknowledge, on land" (p. 175).

One intriguing episode in the book reproduces selected pages from a 1921 album documenting a ten-day trip through the Sahara Desert on camelback. An unidentified English woman assembled and annotated the album. Her traveling companions included Arab guides, an Arab cook, and a dashing younger man named Ernest Tilburg, who had been a motorcycle courier during World War I. Ernest took the "snaps" and sometimes appears as a shadowy presence in the slanting desert sun, holding the camera to his eye while composing a photograph. Many pictorial details might go unnoticed without the astute lady's observant commentary. She notes beneath one image that an Arab funeral is in progress and that the men assembled are chanting the Koran. Another caption reads, "Breakfast in the Sahara just after sunrise. Mohammed (wearing the turban) has just brought our coffee and eggs . . ." The white travelers sit at a folding table near tents, Arab attendants standing at attention nearby (pp. 110–13). Somewhere in the album she refers to a book entitled *The Garden of Allah*, which

recounts the fictional adventures of an English woman traveling alone in the Sahara.[5] Did the novel inspire the trip documented by the album?

Commentaries found in travel albums range from offhand remarks to erudite observations:

> While one traveler would comment on the weather or meals, others would . . . compile a repository of information and recount historical facts, taking great care to note in every detail what they were seeing, smelling, and thinking. . . . (p. 12) Always, the album-makers' expressive style—their humor and sensitivities, their opinion of the trip arrangements and the people they encountered—are revealed on the pages of the album . . . what they chose to photograph and what they elected to include or exclude in compiling the album. How they juxtaposed the images, what they chose to write about or explain, and how they began and ended the album are all clues. . . . [p. 10]

Travel albums featured in *Around the World* are "partially re-created," that is, not reproduced in their entirety (p. 27). But the truncated selections are nevertheless replete with visual appeal and humor, offering vicarious adventures, vivid glimpses of a time and place, and insights into the creators of albums as well as the people depicted. Travel albums filled with personal photographs may "replicate scenes from a collective cultural consciousness," such as a familiar vantage point showing the Grand Canal or the Eiffel Tower, but "what is remarkable for many of them is how that collective consciousness was itself altered by the ability to put one's self in the picture, and in so doing, to shape the way in which a particular place existed for a specific person at a particular moment in time" (p. 27).

Levine and Jensen suggest that "Anyone who opens an album's cover—no matter where or when—is on a voyage and can relive the experience long after the original 'real' excursion was taken" (p. 15). An off-putting characteristic of their book is its unconvincing assertion that people can have an authentic travel experience by leafing through another person's album. Do the authors believe that this is true, or are they merely exercising their unbridled imaginations?

Snapshot Chronicles: Inventing the American Photo Album

A notable difference between family photograph albums and travel albums is that the latter cover a specific time, a trip, with a clearly defined beginning and end. Family photograph albums "depicting domestic and daily life" may "unfold" over many years (*Around the World*, p. 15). Family albums were typically added to over time, compilers as well as pictures spanning generations. More

[5] Robert Smythe Hichens, *The Garden of Allah* (Leipzig: Bernard Tauchnitz, 1904). The novel was staged as play of the same title, circa 1920.

often than not the creators were women. The "material antecedents of the vernacular photo album were clearly feminine, emerging out of the traditions of the Victorian scrapbook, folk art, and home craft" (*Snapshot Chronicles*, p. 27).

Snapshot albums, as suggested by Stephanie Snyder, co-author of *Snapshot Chronicles: Inventing the American Photo Album*, are an "unprecedented cultural phenomenon. . ." that grew into a new form of folk artistry that is largely unappreciated (p. 25). Barbara Levine, co-author (and curator of the exhibit upon which the book is based) explains why she finds such albums so intriguing:

> I [look] for examples where the voice of the maker is palpable. I look for albums that contain compelling photographs and interesting subject matter. . . . But what is most important is what the person did *with* the photographs. . . . I'm interested in where the maker put the pictures and . . . sequenced them on the page and on the pages thereafter. [p. 19]

The book, which analyzes photograph albums produced in the first half-century of the snapshot era, 1888 to about 1935, presents highlights from a seventy-album 2005 exhibit at Reed College's Douglas F. Cooley Memorial Art Gallery. It does not contain the exhibit's full contents, nor does it afford the fuller experience (available to exhibit goers) of leafing through facsimiles of whole albums. Words stamped or embossed on album covers at the factory (e.g., "My Memory Book," "Album of Photographs," and "Pictures Tell the Story") suggest how commercially manufactured, ready-to-use albums were marketed (pp. 33, 110-1–11). One owner reinforced this message with an individual touch, inscribing her album with the words, "This album is intended to bring back memories" (p. 125).

Levine's introductory essay, "Collecting Photo Albums—Musings On," focuses on her special relationship with albums from a collector's perspective. Snyder (director of the Cooley Gallery) discusses "The Vernacular Photo Album: Its Origins and Genius," written from an "art historical perspective informed by gender studies and the history of domestic home craft." Other essays, by invited scholars, include Matthew Stadler, "A Pose between Stillness and Motion," addressing ways in which photographs "carry agency in the work of Marcel Proust"; and Terry Toedtemeier (curator of photography at the Portland Art Museum), "Photography's Love Child: Origins of the Snapshot," analyzing the historical conditions under which snapshots and the vernacular photograph album came into being.

Several nineteenth-century inventors (e.g., Herbert Kellogg and Leon Warnerke) had earlier experimented with roll film for more efficient photography, but George Eastman was the first to exploit the idea to its mass-market potential (pp. 184–87).

> [Eastman captured] the interests of the public at large: those who wished to create their own images but had little if any interest in photographic processing. Effectively reaching this market was less a problem of providing cameras than of providing support services. When Eastman registered the trademark name "Kodak" on September 4, 1888, he not only introduced a new camera but an entirely new service industry, one that could provide photo processing worldwide. The Kodak was a camera that virtually anyone could operate and that was supported by an industry dedicated to processing and printing the negatives it produced. [p. 187]

Through advertising and a monthly publication titled *Kodakery*, Eastman's company suggested to consumers how pictures should be taken and displayed (p. 19). Many "snap shooters," however, preferred unconventional expressions of creativity instead, sometimes drawing over images or tearing them into unique configurations. One album of pictures at the beach contains snapshots torn into jagged shapes representing rocks. The maker of another album obliterated negative space by overlapping (taping, gluing, and sewing) photos together to cover entire pages (p. 32). Humorous or telling captions were commonly written under pictures, typically in white ink against the black paper normally used for leaves: A photograph of a little girl hugging a doll is underscored by the caption, "Love me, love my doll." A woman in an early twentieth-century swim suit is identified as "A Bathing Beauty." The caption, "A trial spin," adds humor to a snapshot of a small boy learning to ride a tricycle. A three-year-old boy and girl huddle close together on a stoop: "First love," announces the caption (pp. 150–57). Farm photos show scenes from the life of a chicken, including the ribbons she won, which are fixed to the album's pages (pp. 150–57).

The vernacular photo album came of age amid profound changes shaping turn-of-the-century American life. Within these albums—crafted primarily by women—one encounters war, industrialization, immigration, family life, and public rituals (such as world's fairs and tourism) interwoven into idiosyncratic narratives that are highly personal yet reflect and embody the culture (p. 25).

Snapshot Chronicles places unwarranted emphasis on the innovative creativity of the snapshot era, as expressed by album owners who felt free to scribble or draw on the surface of photographs. But much earlier examples from the "carte craze" period of album making are not difficult to find. For example, an 1860s album at the Massachusetts Historical Society features altered cartes de visite of Confederate officers and politicians. The Union officer who compiled the album drew a bright red noose around Jefferson Davis's neck and added headsman's axes and the like to other portraits.[6]

[6] Theodore Lyman, Civil War officers, carte de visite albums [ca. 1861–1865], Phot. Coll. 94, Massachusetts Historical Society. Lt. Col. Lyman also inscribed the words "Candidates for the Tarpeian Rock" beneath the portraits, referring to the ancient Roman practice of executing traitors by hurling them from a high cliff onto the rocks below.

Suspended Conversations: The Afterlife of Memory in Photographic Albums

No discussion of recent research and thinking about historical photograph albums would be complete without some mention of Martha Langford's provocative but puzzling treatment of the subject in *Suspended Conversations: The Afterlife of Memory in Photographic Albums*, originally published in 2001 and (fortunately) reissued as a paperback in 2008. Langford is a professor of art history at Concordia University in Canada.[7] *Suspended Conversations* is based on her ten-year investigation into the "oral" aspects of amateur photograph albums at the Notman Photographic Archives at the McCord Museum of Canadian History in Montreal.

Langford's fascination with personal and family photograph albums stems from her initial encounter with an eloquent but unidentified album at the McCord. She perused its contents without success in an effort to find the name of the creator(s) or compiler(s). The photographs contained in the album had, in a domestic context, been so familiar to the family that there was no perceived need to annotate images or furnish identifications. In the museum, the pictures and the album itself were anonymous; no one connected with its creation had survived or could serve as a resource to re-animate the album by supplying personal names, place names, dates, stories, or genealogies.[8]

Langford was struck by the entangled feelings of intimacy and loss engendered by historical photograph albums and seeks some way of reactivating their contents. Drawing upon the work of Walter J. Ong,[9] she hypothesizes that photographic albums provide the platform for a private historical act, that is, an "oral-photographic performance" (pp. 122–57, passim). In this sense, storytelling is the inspiration and the *raison d'être* for photograph albums. She describes the "shock" that opened a pathway for the possible re-animation of dormant albums:

> Ong's work naturally recommended itself to an interdisciplinary project involving classification, memory, and oral presentation, but its relevance to

[7] Langford's other books include an edited collection, *Image and Imagination* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queens University Press, 2005); and *Scissors, Paper, Stone: Expressions of Memory in Contemporary Photographic Art* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queens University Press, 2007).

[8] Novelist Cormac McCarthy thoughtfully describes a fictional character's encounter with a neglected album as follows: "The old musty album with its foxed and crumbling paper seemed to breathe a reek of the vault, turning up one by one these dead faces with their wan and loveless gaze out toward the spinning world, masks of incertitude before the cold glass eye of the camera. . . ." See McCarthy, *Suttree* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992), 129.

[9] Walter J. Ong's principal works are *The Presence of the Word: Some Prolegomena for Cultural and Religious History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967); *Interfaces of the Word: Studies in the Evolution of Consciousness and Culture* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1977); and *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (London: Methuen, 1982).

> the photographic album exceeded normal expectations. His description of the oral condition—his "psychodynamics of orality"—elicited in me what can only be described as a shock of recognition . . . Ong's framework, as applied to the organization of an album, helped to clarify the desires of individual compilers. Their "illogical" procedures began to make sense. A vague notion that orality and photography were related seemed suddenly verifiable, and more interesting still, it could be shown that the older mentality was still driving the new. Discovering structures of oral tradition embedded in a snapshot album put claims of the Kodak revolution in perspective and cast the photographic industry and its customers in a more sensible light. "The camera as storyteller" had touched a chord that was already there. [pp. 124–25]

Ong elaborates upon his research in psychology and mnemonic systems "to explain the content and structure of oral composition in terms of human consciousness" (p. 124). His writings generally discount the importance of visual literacy in favor of aural and oral studies, so Langford's extended application of Ong's model to visual materials is somewhat surprising. She explains her methodology as follows:

> For an art historian, the performative model is extremely instructive, even if the principal actors can no longer be assembled. Something like the compiler's performance must take place if the album is to be unlocked. . . . Mnemonic structures that serve oral recitation are put to use as the scaffolding of the pictorial *aide-mémoire*. We cannot see them, of course. Oral scaffolding is by nature impermanent. The album is what remains. . . . Our mimetic *photographic memories* need a mnemonic framework to keep them accessible and alive. The album reflects that need and preserves its evanescent conditions. To *speak* the photographic album is to hear and *see* its roots in orality. [p. 21]

Archivists and oral history interviewers have long known that photographs and photo albums can be used as *aide-mémoires* to prime the pump for oral histories or other forms of memory-based historical research. Sharing a photograph album is an act closely related to oral traditions. Langford's work is replete with deep speculation based on careful observation. Her approach to re-animating historical photograph albums contains a fascinating wealth of detail and allusion, but the implication that researchers (however astute) can stand in for the creator(s) of an album and supply essential meanings where they are missing is more than a little dubious. Nevertheless, her analysis adds welcome theoretical insight, embedding photography in the conversation about how we remember ourselves, package our stories, and position our pasts for the future.

Conclusion

Philosopher Roland Barthes believed that cameras are "clocks for seeing" that could prove the passage of time.[10] Art historian Thierry de Duve was also intrigued by photographic time, pointing to some inherent paradoxes: the photograph can be seen as the "live witness . . . of a vanished past" or as a "deadening artifact." If "live," it signifies the "suspension of time." If not, it serves as a monument to irretrievable aspects of a past buried in oblivion.[11] Film theorist André Bazin, struggling to grasp the essential qualities (or ontology) of photographs, meditated on the physical relationship between the object photographed and the photographic image of it. The photograph, he writes, "is the object itself . . . freed from the conditions of time and space that govern it," analogous to a "fingerprint," an impression that captures and preserves a form of reality, a pictorial record made by the thing depicted.[12]

"As I turn the pages [of a photograph album]," ruminates Barbara Levine, "I am activating a story. The pages . . . show the progression of time; they are not just about a single moment but rather are about the accumulation of time. A narrative is building, faces are aging . . ." (*Snapshot Chronicles,* p. 17). Albums, Elizabeth Siegel suggests, are "metaphors for life itself." With each addition to an album, "it grew richer, and each time it was opened and shared with others they were enriched as well" (*Galleries of Friendship and Fame*, pp. 12–13).

The ways in which people live their lives are entangled with the ways whereby their lives are represented (*Snapshot Chronicles*, p. 26). The gestation, evolution, and meaning(s) of albums are complex:

> The parlor album functioned as a link to the past and to the future, a display of status and social connections, a family genealogy, and a national history. Its history was written in the factory, the photographer's studio, and the domestic parlor; it was produced by album manufacturers, photographers, and entrepreneurs, as well as by the young women participating in a fashionable craze and heads of families recording family images for posterity. This complexity is fitting. By understanding the myriad roles and purposes of the nineteenth-century photograph album we begin to understand how the advent of photography has affected who we think we are, and how we show ourselves to others. [*Snapshot Chronicles*, p. 13]

[10] Roland Barthes, *Camera Obscura: Reflections on Photography* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 93–94. Expanding on this point, Barthes claims that a photograph represents a duality, something that is (the scene, object, or person "has been absolutely, irrefutably present") as well as something that is no more.

[11] Thierry de Duve, "Time Exposure and Snapshot: The Photograph as Paradox," in *Photography Theory*, ed. James Elkins (London and New York: Routledge, 2007), 109–24.

[12] As cited in Richard Howells, *Visual Culture* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2003), 166–67.

Albums, individual photos, and other documents are packed with potential meanings, involving the physical presence of the object as well as interpretations of its intellectual content. Photograph albums should always be maintained intact if possible.[13] If they need to be unbound as a preservation measure, they should be digitally scanned or microfilmed *in toto* as a record of original organization and condition. Metadata should link each component (such as unbound pages, displaced prints, and digital surrogates) back to the original, which must be adequately described in all related cataloging records.

Historical photograph albums embrace individual lives, but, more broadly and significantly, they elicit and illuminate ways of living, feeling, and thinking in earlier eras. They illustrate "connections among collecting, identity, and everyday objects, on both a personal and national scale"; suggest how "family and nation were defined"; point to "the interconnectedness of the public and private spheres"; and show "how visual images and collections . . . help people understand [themselves] . . ." (*Galleries of Friendship and Fame*, p. 7). Photograph albums help shape memories and perceptions of history.[14]

Art historian David Freedberg notes that images are more likely than written texts to engage us in ways that produce a visceral reaction: We identify with them; our emotions are triggered; and dispassionate objectivity is harder to maintain or affect.[15] Collections in archives (and museums, historical societies, or private homes) have meanings that are personal, but that also transcend the personal. The power of images and material objects to evoke resides in the ways they are confronted and understood by each individual and each new generation that takes an interest. Albums are closely linked to stories told about a family, a trip, or an individual life. The "act of remembering" cannot be separated from "the act of communicating."[16] But the original "orality" of an album vanished when it strayed from the custody of creators, compilers, and family members, that is, its original context (*Around the World*, pp. 18, 27). This missing element of interpretation poses challenges for historians as well as archivists.

Recent writing about intersections between archival practices and historical research explores and expands concepts related to "authenticity." How

[13] For discussion of issues pertaining to the physical handling of historical photograph albums, see Mary Lynn Ritzenthaler et al., *Photographs: Archival Care and Management* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2006); and Bertrand Lavédrine, *A Guide to the Preventive Conservation of Photograph Collections* (Los Angeles: Getty Conservation Institute, 2003).

[14] See Marlene Kadar, Jeanne Perreault, and Linda Warley, eds., *Photographs, Histories, Meanings* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); and Joan M. Schwartz and Terry Cook, "Archives, Records, and Power: The Making of Modern Memory," *Archival Science* 2 (2002): 2.

[15] David Freedberg, *The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), xiv–xxv.

[16] William Hirst and David Manier, "Remembering as Communication: A Family Recounts Its Past," in *Remembering Our Past: Studies in Autobiographical History*, ed. David C. Rubin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 271–90.

authentic is this or that document for this or that purpose? Where in the scheme of things do historians, and archivists, fit? Questions abound, concerning

> . . . how the past itself has and will be processed in the archives and how as a consequence historical knowledge has and will be shaped. . . . If society and culture are . . . central prisms of historical understanding, does not the archive itself also reflect certain social and cultural processes? . . . What is identified and processed as being of "historical interest" in the archives, and how do these materials get there? By what sociocultural and sociopolitical constructs are "authentic" records assembled, and how do they give certain historical narratives particular kinds of authenticity? Indeed, what kind of "authority" is itself embedded in records deemed "historical" and how does this validate particular kinds of historical understanding? These questions (and others) have moved archives from a place of inquiry to a subject of inquiry, from a place of research to an object of research.[17]

Historical photograph albums will continue to answer some questions and raise others about the lives with which they are infused as long as they (and/or well-reproduced access copies) are preserved, adequately cataloged, and made available for use. Albums and other complex documents housed in archives should never cease to pique our interest and stimulate our thoughts about the multifaceted relationship between historical collections and historical insight.

[17] Francis X. Blouin and William G. Rosenberg, *Processing the Past: Contesting Authorities in History and the Archives* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 7–9.