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The Garbage Bag Archive: Disposal and Disposability in Family Photo Collections

This article examines everyday acts of disposal in the family photo archive as a mode of curation that I call “memorial housekeeping.” Situating everyday practices of curating family photo collections as an undervalued area of feminized labor, I analyze my mother’s decision to throw out “bad” family photos, as well as the photographs that I found stuffed in a garbage bag. Highlighting the unique vulnerability of family photos and the memories they index, I argue that such acts of disposal disrupt the intergenerational transmission of familial memory, “cleaning up” what gets remembered in the process. It is only by looking closely at what we don’t want to see that we can understand the structuring role of disposal in family photo collections.

Keywords: disposal; family photography; personal archive; memory

Bordered by minimal filigree and boasting the year “1954,” a black and white snapshot photograph depicts a wedding party posing outside in winter (fig. 1). Likely post-ceremony, a bride and bridesmaid stand on either side of a man who, turned dramatically to his right to smile at someone behind him, appears to be the groom. A handful of celebrants stand behind the wedding party as the tulle of the bride’s gown blows in the wind. Upon closer inspection, this candid shot of a happy day reveals a cardboard box bearing the word “KLEENEX” to the right of the bride’s skirt. While the scale and positioning of the arm reaching into the large box proportionally matches the groom’s body, another body to whom the arm belongs quickly becomes apparent. A small unknowing smile on a woman’s

transparent face appears perfectly in between the bride and groom.

Looking at the snapshot for the first time, I was surprised to find that—though I cannot recognize anyone in the dominant wedding photo—it is my own grandmother’s face between the bride’s black shawl and the door of a white car. Shifting my visual orientation, like looking at an optical illusion, I then registered a stack of other cardboard boxes bearing the words “COOKING SCHOOL,” among other small illegible descriptors, on the far-left side of this image. Placing these two images that were accidentally exposed atop one another within their designated historical moment, as well as in semantic relation to one another, some astounding accidental yet telling details arise. While the bride in the more dominant image is smiling, her wedding—supposedly the happiest day of her life—will likely, in 1954, devolve into domestic work, reaching for Kleenex to wipe her nose in an endless autodidactic cooking class.

It is an unconventional wedding photo, to be sure, and certainly not the type of family picture typically displayed upon the mantelpiece, but

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1 Accidental double exposure of a wedding party and two women posing with cardboard boxes, photographer unknown, 1954. Author's personal collection

it nevertheless visualizes the unique feminine labor involved in producing and maintaining a semblance of order in the home, as well as in the family photo archive. It is, as such, fitting that I found this photo among many others in a garbage bag in my parents' basement. When I asked my mother why she was throwing them away, her response was that they were "bad photos" of "people we don't know." Indeed, many of the photos might be described as undesirable: overexposed, underexposed, finger over the lens, eyes closed. These so-called flaws in combination with the fact that my mother could not recognize many of the people pictured in the snapshots not only prevented them from being selected for display, but rendered them unimportant and unusable, better suited to the garbage bin than our family's photo archive.

Just as people routinely clean up messes, take out the trash, and choose what to include and exclude from their homes, they also decide which family photographs to keep or throw away. My mother's attempt to dispose of "bad" photos constituted, for her, an act of housekeeping meant to declutter the family photo archive as well as the home within which it was kept. However, what she viewed as a rote act of cleaning up in fact functioned as an act of curation, epitomizing an intimate if unexpected relationship between family photo archives, domestic labor, and the maintenance of familial memory. Like a curator who selects, collects, catalogues, and preserves the histories that their collections evoke—who organizes objects according to their features, highlights their importance for varying contexts, and might even de-accession them when they

no longer serve their purported purpose—my mother's act, had it been successful, would not only have shaped familial memory but actively re-shaped its interpretation.

When cultural geographer Gillian Rose states that "to be a family photograph, an image has to look like a family photo but also to be treated like one," her emphasis is on the materiality of spectatorial and archival engagements with family photos.¹ Her point takes a curious turn if we consider the obvious but no less jarring fact that some family photos get thrown out. The practice of going through a freshly developed stack of photos and deciding which to keep and which to dispose of was a common enough practice throughout the twentieth century to garner mention in how-to books for amateur photographers and academic histories of vernacular photography alike. The author of *Prescription for Better Home Video Movies* notes that "when you take snapshots, you can go through a freshly processed stack of prints or slides and throw away the bad ones before anyone else can see your mistakes."² Lawrence J. Vale uses this same analogy, evoking the ease of curating photos "where it is the usual practice to throw out bad snapshots," preemptively destroying evidence of unflattering facial expressions, embarrassing situations, or the presence of less than agreeable company.³ That said, this is not the only time that family photos get thrown out.

The disposal of family photos is also a common practice to evade the elicitation of certain unsavory memories. This, of course, is nothing new. As Julia Hirsch pointed out in 1981, "we do not normally keep photographs that show us disarmed by our children, angry with our spouses, and shamed by our parents... nor do we usually hold onto our wedding pictures after the divorce."⁴ This common evasion of photographs associated with uncomfortable feelings also means that family photo archives are nowhere more vulnerable to disposal than at death. For both material and memorial effects,

the bereaved must opt to keep what is important, dispose of what is not, or push it all out of sight to be dealt with later. Whether it comes down to a long-considered choice, a fatigued whim, or a corporate house clearer's capital-driven decision as to whether someone's family photos contain monetary value, the transmission of family photos in the wake of a death initiates "a potential cycle of retention, reimagining, and disposal," increasing the vulnerability of the family photo collection and its potential futures.⁵

Of course, vulnerability is at the heart of all archival collections—even family archives that have been professionally preserved in archival institutions. Jacques Derrida states that "we archive something to protect it from the destruction that is inevitable and our reason for archiving in the first place."⁶ In terms of amateur family photo archives, the desire to preserve familial memory is simultaneously stimulated by and contradictory to the inevitability of forgetting. And though disposal may seem like the antithesis of archival preservation, my mother's act of disposal actually epitomizes the fundamental incompleteness of all family photo archives. Her act functions as both a catalyst and a conduit for archival absence, not only of the original collection from which the photos were culled but also the resulting collection of those rendered rubbish in the process. Still, the primary characteristic of photos that are rendered disposable—that they're disposed of—means that they no longer exist to be studied.

Having intercepted my mother in her act of disposal before the photos were destroyed, what is now my garbage bag full of snapshots—which I will refer to as my *garbage bag archive*—provides a rare opportunity to reflect on archival absences in familial photo collections through a formal and theoretical analysis of "bad" photos rescued from the brink of disposal. In this article, I examine my mother's act of throwing out family photos as a mode of amateur curation that I call *memorial housekeeping*. If, indeed, the disposal of certain

family photos produces absences in the family photo archive, so too do absences in familial memory render certain family photos disposable. Situating everyday acts of curating and disposing of individual photos or entire family photographic collections as an undervalued area of feminized labor akin to traditional domestic work, I use the term memorial housekeeping to elevate these practices from a largely unspoken responsibility to a critical framework for the study of photo-history.

This framework contributes to research on the relationships between women, domestic labor, and amateur photography to understand everyday acts of disposal in family photo archives as a fundamentally feminine form of labor—regardless of who performs it. Using domestic labor as a conceptual lens, my analysis of the garbage bag archive shows how familial memory is organized, what “dirt” it obscures, and what narratives get “cleaned up” in the process of throwing out family photos. I argue that the curation of personal archives is an act of domestic labor that shifts family narratives and impacts the intergenerational transmission of family memory. Highlighting the fundamental vulnerability of family photo archives, acts of memorial housekeeping tell a new story about the relationship between amateur photography and familial memory that has forgettability and the inutility associated with obsolescence built right in. Just as the quotidian reality of housework is never ending, the family photo archive is perpetually threatened by impending absences. Each meal cooked, each floor swept, each shirt laundered produces, in its wake, another task to be completed: the washing of dishes, the removal of dirt and dust, the folding of garments. So, too, is memorial housekeeping an ongoing responsibility.

Stuffed haphazardly in a white plastic shopping bag from Canadian frozen food chain M&M Meat Shops are 171 snapshot photographs (fig. 2). The vast majority, 107, are black and white snapshots from the 1950s and 1960s, 57 are color

photos from the 1970s, and the rest are a smattering of various photo objects, including photo-booth pictures and real photo postcards. These photos once belonged to my paternal grandmother, Orca Brown, and were inherited by my parents when she passed away in 2005. Most of the photos were taken by Orca and can be characterized as amateur from tip to tail: point-and-shoot snapshots that were developed commercially at photo labs and then tucked into a shoebox for safekeeping. As is often the case with the intergenerational transmission of family photos, I can recognize some faces in the images but the identity of others—even if their names are penned on the back—remain elusive.

The photos are of both special occasions and everyday events. With the exception of such familial specificity as my grandfather’s farm supply store in Barrie, Ontario and the many Boston Terriers my grandmother lovingly bred, the content of the photos in my garbage bag archive are typical snapshot fodder. There is nothing objectively “wrong” with many of the objects in my garbage bag archive. Many images are perfectly legible—even well-composed. Their materiality could be characterized as excellent condition, even if that condition might indicate a corresponding lack of spectatorial engagement. As Annette Kuhn’s modest appraisal of her own family photos goes, if the snapshots in my garbage bag are no more interesting than anyone else’s, that is precisely the point.⁷

There is, however, a distinct subset of photos in the garbage bag that are anything but uninteresting. Formal and technical accidents including partially blocking the lens, underexposure, frame burns, and rips characterize many of the photos. To be sure, the frequency with which such formal and technical accidents occur in amateur photography is not unusual given its central criterion of the non-professional. As the double exposure of the wedding and the cooking class demonstrates, the fascinating if unanticipated compositions of many accidentally pro-



2 The eponymous garbage bag archive, Madison Brown, 2024. Author's personal collection

duced photos might well be described as “happy accidents.” Indeed, many fine-art photographers have been inspired by the formal contingencies, intimacies, and immediacies of amateur photographic practice.⁸ Still, since practices of family photography tend to privilege legibility over formal experimentation, the striking visuality of such accidentally produced photos poses a unique issue for amateur photo curation.

Since family photo archives presumably contain photos as well as the memories they index, disposing of accidentally produced images prevents the transmission of various familial narratives. Well-composed family photos may reinforce positive memories—privileging smiles,

holidays, and precious memorable events—but polished family photos are often not representative of the complex dynamics that characterize family life. Accidentally produced or otherwise imperfect photographs thus provide a unique view onto what Marianne Hirsch describes as “conventional surfaces resistant to deeper scrutiny.”⁹ While the frequent association of family photos with a consciously constructed façade of familial happiness seems almost common knowledge today, ascertaining visual evidence of more complicated undercurrents is notoriously difficult.

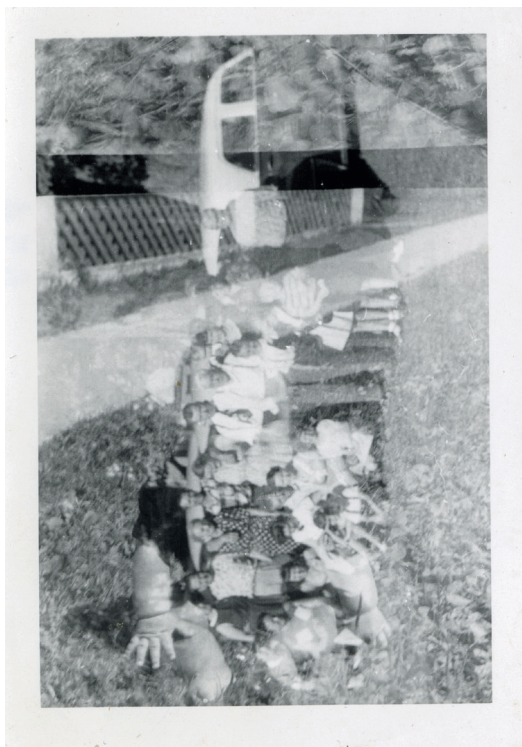
“Bad” family photos can tell us more about family memory than “good” family photos ever



3 A large group poses for a photo in front of three automobiles, photographer unknown, c. 1950s. Author's personal collection

could. Rather than scrutinizing ambivalent visual details, Hirsch emphasizes the importance of the private dynamics which contextualize family photos, suggesting that “only the narratives that take shape in relation to the pictures can provide insight into the actual workings of unconscious optics.”¹⁰ Of course, much more than visual content alone, family photos also evoke the intimacies of familial looking relations and the diverse feelings that different people can have about the same image. “Pictures serve not only to construct the individual subject,” she tells us, “but also to constitute and reconstitute a family unit that is forever in question. Who is in the family? Who is out?”¹¹ Likewise, whose likeness is pictured in the family photo archive and whose memory is better characterized by absence?

Visualizing this question in a very literal way, a black and white photo from my garbage bag features a large group of people posing in front of three automobiles, their arms slung casually around each other's shoulders (fig. 3). Initially, this seems a rather ordinary family photograph, perhaps of a family reunion. However, blurred edges and intermittent streaks of light across the image gesture toward a more complex photographic composition. When the photo is turned 45 degrees counter-clockwise, an astounding double exposure of a baby sitting in the grass becomes legible (fig. 4). This baby photo is another otherwise uninteresting family photo, except that the double exposure renders the baby's face—and most of its body—completely unintelligible. Pudgy little arms and legs poke out at the bottom of the image, but the baby's white



4 A baby sits in the grass, its features obscured by the group photo in Fig. 3, photographer unknown, c. 1950s. Author's personal collection

skin functions as a blank surface onto which the group photo is exposed.

While the family photo pictures multiple generations, visually representing the history of the family, the baby photo visually represents the family's future. Still, neither of the images in this double exposure visually asserts dominance over the other, posing a conceptual question about what constitutes a family photo in the first place: does the history of the family constitute the baby's identity, or is familial identity constituted through the affiliative figure of the infant? Put differently, do the idiosyncrasies of the family's past shape its future, or does the family's futurity reconfigure how its past is understood? Rhetorical though they may be, the questions raised by this striking double exposure reflect an ethical

issue at the heart of the intergenerational transmission of family photo collections.

The question of "who is in the family" and "who is out" is predicated on who is doing the memorial housekeeping, and like domestic labor more broadly, the politics of memorial housekeeping are determined by who performs the labor, and for whom. In contrast to acts of memorial housekeeping that allow families to self-determine what gets remembered about themselves, the precarity of having someone else govern representations of your identity and memory can easily lead to appropriation and misrepresentation. Any barriers to intergenerational inheritance accelerate anonymity in family photo collections and exacerbate the potential of family photos getting thrown out. To be sure, barriers to inheritance threaten everyone's family archive, but the fact that everyone will stop being able to recognize the people in their own intergenerational family photo collections demonstrates the vulnerability of inheritance as a practice, and of inheritors as playing a critical role in the process of memorial housekeeping.

The inevitability of unrecognition in family photo collections significantly influences what does and does not get preserved. And, to be sure, in an age of photographic oversaturation, having a wealth of physical photographs can pose a considerable burden. Susan Sontag's quip that "the inventory started in 1839 and since then just about everything has been photographed" may be sarcastic, but between the commercial introduction of snapshot cameras at the turn of the twentieth century and the resulting potential for more than a century's worth of photographic inheritance, the unwieldy accumulation of family photos does, in fact, often require a certain pruning.¹² This is not unique to family photo archives, however, as Ulrich Baer states "archives always collect a bit too much: they must include things the value and meaning of which is not entirely known at the time of their archiving."¹³ Nevertheless, by pruning our personal photo archive,

my mother's seemingly simple act of throwing out snapshots elucidates the unique implications of curating familial memory.

Whether choosing favorite photographs and placing them in frames, creating photo albums and scrapbooks by combining images and ephemera, or throwing photos into the garbage, amateur curators frequently exhibit, organize, and de-accession materials in the family photo archive. Like historians, museum curators, and archivists, everyday people curate their photo archives—and their memories—for posterity, constituting a distinct form of domestic and photo-historical labor. To be sure, this housekeeping is not only physical. As anyone who has performed housekeeping knows, the labor is also psychological and emotional. And when housekeeping involves photographic media and the mediation of memories is predicated on those mediated images, housekeeping is also a form of memorialization.

Understanding the housekeeper as curator, and vice versa, shifts our orientation to both traditional domestic labor and the labor involved in maintaining family photo collections. Within the framework of memorial housekeeping, the largely devalued work of domestic labor is recast as structuring what gets remembered, what gets forgotten, and how. Everyday acts of keeping house are not merely cleaning up but are also the preservation of domestic collections. This connection between the curator and the housekeeper is a useful theoretical tool, but the work involved in maintaining familial media archives also resembles the embodied labor of housekeeping in a very literal way. Collecting pertinent objects, storing them, and retrieving those objects when required is as apt a description of housekeeping as it is for curation. Additionally, just as the unpaid labor of housekeeping for one's own family has historically (and erroneously) been distinguished in dominant discourse from "real work" as a natural outpouring of maternal compassion, so too is the maintenance of family photo col-

lections shrouded by assumptions that it will be done out of the goodness of one's heart.

The fact that curating one's own family photo collection constitutes unpaid labor is almost so common sense as to be ignored. Following arguments by second-wave feminists for the recognition of domestic labor as central to the function of domestic economies and everyday life, however, we must view the curation of family photos as a form of photo-historical labor.¹⁴ The belief that the family archive will be preserved and organized, that it will accurately represent the family, is rooted in similar assumptions about women maintaining entire cultural traditions—in addition to their own households. My mother's decisions about what was important enough to keep and what should be disposed of take on two different characters in domestic and memorial contexts. In the domestic context, her act of tidying up and making space was a routine act of housekeeping. Leaning into her perpetual desire to declutter, minimize, and organize, this act of disposal was meant to tidy up the familial photo archive as well as the home.

Beyond her orientation to domestic upkeep, this act also characterizes my mother's orientation to memorialization: one of order, polish, and positivity. Critical as it is to the survival of familial memory, memorial housekeeping is often related to the character of the amateur archivist who performs it. Maintaining aesthetic cohesion and a rosy view of familial histories despite (or perhaps because of) interpersonal conflict and family trauma is a significant element of curating familial media archives. Removing ugly, embarrassing, or otherwise negative imagery from the family photo archive is a common practice not only to limit these images' effect on familial memory, but also to avoid the transference of the unsavory content of the familial media archive onto the photographer, photographic subject, or curator that cares for it.

That said, such anodyne approaches to the curation of family photo collections can only be



5 Group shot where only the first third of the image is properly exposed due to frame burn, photographer unknown, c. 1950s. Author's personal collection

understood in relation to their inverse. Describing this mutually constitutive system of value, Mary Douglas suggests that dirt, rubbish, and other contaminating material organize the potential value of the clean, acceptable objects that get rescued from mess.¹⁵ As a covert category of objects that society would rather not see and goes to great lengths to conceal, “bad” photos—like rubbish—only take on a negative connotation in relation to the good family photos that they threaten to contaminate. In this way, my

mother’s disposal of “bad” snapshots ultimately increased the value of the “good” ones she opted to keep.

Take, for instance, a photo from my garbage bag archive of which only the first third of the image is properly exposed (fig. 5). We see two women—one standing, one sitting, both wearing fringe—in front of a large vehicle. There are words emblazoned on the side of the vehicle, but, interrupted by the image’s quick dissolution into whiteness, none of them are discernible. A result

of bare light striking the film, this frame burn likely occurred when the camera's film compartment was opened and the last exposure on the roll was only partially wound into the camera, exposing the rest of the frame to the light of day.

In some ways, it's quite obvious why this snapshot was disposed of: where there should be something, there is nothing. Existing in a liminal space between visibility and invisibility, this photographic ambivalence emphasizes the oft-forgotten materiality of the photograph itself. Though a large part of its image was wiped clean off the negative, this object evokes the multi-stage photographic process. Whereas Roland Barthes reminds us that "a photograph is always invisible; it is not it that we see," this photo promises a narrative, points towards discernable figures attending an actual event in history, but ultimately withholds information.¹⁶ Perhaps the absentmindedness of forgetting to sufficiently advance the film could be attributed to the excitement of the day, the demands of day-to-day life, or the irony of being too busy with the memorial housekeeping of chronicling memory to get the snapshots that structure it quite right.

In any case, this frame burn demonstrates how the labor associated with producing and maintaining family photo archives begins long before amateur photographers hold the finished products in their hands. In her history of household technologies throughout the twentieth century, Ruth Schwartz Cowan points out that developments in tools such as dishwashers, clothes washing machines, and ovens sometimes ameliorated the work involved in housekeeping, and yet more often required additional labor and know-how.¹⁷ Just as the labor required of housekeepers changed and often increased in direct relation to the technology used, so too is the labor of curating family photo archives predicated on the technologies used to produce the photos in the first place. And the roll film and camera body are only the first tools to set limits on the memorial housekeeper's work.

The curation of family photo archives relies on an intergenerational series of decisions, and photographic processing is likewise privy to multiple discrete influences. For the majority of amateur photographers, the darkroom labor was performed by film lab technicians, introducing another layer of contingency into the production of "bad" photos. In fact, the processing stage not only has the power to proverbially make or break one photograph, but it can also ruin an entire roll of film. This moment in the production of photographic objects, like the baking of a cake or the ironing of a clean blouse, is as critical to the success of producing "good" family photos as it is precarious. Just as a cake is easily burnt or a crisp white shirt is quickly scorched under the iron, a high degree of photographic vulnerability during the processing stage makes Kodak's collaborative "We Do the Rest" sound more like a threat than a promise.¹⁸

Another "bad" photo in the garbage bag archive shows my father on his first birthday (fig. 6). At first glance, the image appears slightly blurry. Sitting in a highchair with a cake in front of him, my father holds a small knife to enact the tradition of making the first cut. My grandmother stands next to him, her head cut off by dint of the photographer's effort to more accurately frame the birthday boy. In concert with my father's developing motor skills, a taper candle much larger than a typical birthday candle sticks out of the iced cake, posing an impediment to his task. The visual quality of my father's figure might best be characterized by a lack of sharpness, perhaps due to a sudden movement at the moment of exposure. Visualizing the scene's dynamism, the blur bespeaks an infant's excitement and the limited capacity of the camera to register that. Here, the blur is not merely a visual and accidental feature of the photo but a necessary condition for memorial engagement. Rather than posing an obstacle to memory, it is because of the blur that I have access to the cutting of my father's first birthday cake.



6 A blurry, candid image of a baby with a birthday cake, photographer unknown, 1954. Author's personal collection

Upon closer inspection, however, this blurry effect exposes itself as a printing mistake. The image extends over the left edge of the frame by about a millimeter, suggesting the negative was moved while being processed, and the easily discernible duplication of my grandmother's leaf pendant on her light-colored blouse seems to confirm this. This effect is itself a sort of double exposure: instead of indexing two separate moments within the same photographic image, it has indexed the same moment twice. An arresting and, to be frank, tough image to feel warm about, this unique double exposure nevertheless visually renders the multiple hands and multiple perspectives through which the snapshot must pass throughout its life. Epitomizing the unique intergenerational transmission of family photo archives, this unintentional double exposure evokes the simultaneity of different influences in the curation of familial memory – including

those involved in the commercial development of family photos.

The irony of this photo in the garbage bag archive is that the selfsame negative that slipped in the darkroom, producing a “bad” photo in the process, could have also been the cure—if the negative had been retained. Negatives, despite their fundamental role in the production of photographs, earned a somewhat ambiguous reputation among amateur photographers. When consumers received their prints from the photolab, the negatives which accompanied them were critical for reprints, enlargements, and general recordkeeping. Best understood as photography's raw material, Geoffrey Batchen notes that negatives “exist in the present as utilitarian tools, redolent with potential, remaining incomplete entities until and unless their tones are reversed through a process of printing.”¹⁹ And while the negative's materiality is the very condition of the

positive photo's possibility, its transparency and tonal inversion often made it a less desirable candidate for preservation.

Amid all the snapshots in the garbage bag, one object of a distinct materiality stands out (fig. 7). Smaller than most of the snapshots, this glossy object measures about 3.5×2.5 inches and, at first, the image on its surface did not easily resolve into a picture. This, I soon realized, is because the object is transparent: a negative. Perfectly clear along its border, with darker and lighter areas playing through the rest of it, this was not the strip of roll-film negatives that are more common in my family photo archive. It is not connected to other images, nor is it on a contact sheet. This negative's singularity has all the presence and legibility of a positive print, but slid neatly between the snapshots in the bag, its flimsy, glossy materiality does not betray its image easily.

Unlike clothing, knickknacks, and other personal effects, the deceased may themselves be pictured in family photos. "Physically absent but representationally present," the negative shows Orca smiling proudly with three men I can't identify.²⁰ Her hair is wrapped in a scarf, and, in line with her Canadian military service during the Second World War, her fellow servicemen are dressed in the uniform of the Canadian Armed Forces. Behind them, the negative's inversion of bare branches against a brightly lit sky appears as tangled white veins on a black backdrop. The style of houses to either side of the image suggest that the image was taken near her home in Southern Ontario, but there is no indication whether the photo was taken before or after their respective deployments. I wonder, naively, whether I could glean such contextual information from their facial expressions in a positive print.

This negative, however, is unaccompanied by its positive print. Barthes describes the materiality of the positive print—the negative's exposure onto photosensitive paper—as "two leaves [that]



7 Negative image of a woman and three Canadian servicemen, photographer unknown, c. 1940s. Author's personal collection

cannot be separated without destroying them both.”²¹ Much like the men in this negative who I cannot identify, the negative's ontological identity, too, is partial. Separated from its material other, as well as its intimate context, this negative embodies a fundamental incompleteness that can be attributed to all the images in my garbage bag archive: incomplete images requiring another step in the process of development, be it technical or affective.

Batchen's description of our engagement with negatives—how we “hold them (to the light, in order to see them the better), and then use them to make something else”—likewise invokes the imaginative labor involved in engaging, recontextualizing, and even disposing of snapshot



8 A blurry image of a rural gravesite, photographer unknown, c. 1950s. Author's personal collection

photographs.²² This imaginative labor is central to engaging with family photos of people we don't know. My mother disposed of the objects—positive and negative—in my garbage bag archive in part because she could not recognize the people in them. Having inherited them from her mother-in-law, this misrecognition is not entirely unimaginable. Still, if she could not recognize them, they no longer constituted family or, indeed, family photos. However, this unrecognition is something of an inevitability. Even if photos are notated with names, dates, and other pertinent information, the photos will signify differently for subsequent generations.

Addressing this inevitability across intergenerational inheritance, Hirsch's notion of post-memory "is distinguished from memory by generational distance and from history by deep personal connection... not through recollection but through an imaginative investment and creation."²³ This imaginative investment across generational lines is epitomized by a snapshot

of a rural gravesite (fig. 8). In the foreground of this black and white snapshot is a massive arrangement of flowers in a large grassy area, the plot marked out by rough wooden stakes. Behind the flowers are two white headstones; behind the headstones, two modest single-family homes and utility poles line the road. The black and white film makes it difficult to identify the flowers on the grave—sunflowers, maybe marigolds—but an inorganic sheen throughout suggests the cellophane and ribbons characteristic of funereal pomp. The freshness of the flowers suggests a recent burial, literally covering over the sorrows of a freshly filled grave, but a mound of dirt piled off to the right bears no such disguise. This is a photo of death, but not a death that we can identify.

Rendering this anonymous photo of death even less desirable, this snapshot includes traces of two figures just outside of the frame. A blurry white stripe covering the left edge of the snapshot is evidence of the photographer, their fin-

gertip partially covering the lens. A figure standing next to the photographer is also inscribed in the image through its shadow in the bottom left corner. The shape of the figure's hat and sloped shoulders dapple the grass beside the grave, a posture held, perhaps, only for a moment, but memorialized in an indexical image of mourning. This gravesite photo thus pictures both the deceased and the bereaved once removed, rendering them all archetypes of inevitable unrecognition in the family photo archive.

When the individuals pictured in family photos become unrecognizable across generational divides, names and images may circulate but the intimacy of firsthand recognition often does not. Patricia Holland refers to the inimitable relationship one has to their own family's photographs as "restricted code" that can only be cracked with personal knowledge of the photos' who, what, where, and perhaps most importantly, why.²⁴ But as this grave photo demonstrates, Holland's conceptualization concerning how family photographs do and do not signify outside of one's own family photo archive misses a critical element of intergenerational circulation: codes can be restricted, and narratives restrictive, even within the family unit that produced the photographs.

As the family photo archive is curated to accommodate new perspectives on family memory, an absence of contextual knowledge may lead the photos preserved by one person to become rubbish for another, producing archival absences in the process. However, just how, when, or why this may happen is unpredictable. It is impossible to know when a family photo will become useful for some family member in the future; if it will acquire personal, familial, or even broader cultural significance. Likewise, we cannot know whether new familial dynamics—a divorce, a death, a long-kept secret—will one day turn a much beloved photo into a memorial contaminate for the entire photo collection. But one thing is certainly knowable: if the "bad" snap-

shots that seem unlikely to constitute value or be recuperated from the bottom of the garbage bag photo archive should ever signify differently, the garbage bag has to have been kept by someone in the first place.

"In even the most diligently designed and strictly maintained archive," Ulrich Baer tells us, "there must be room for contingency, for those things that may acquire a significance retroactively, alongside the flotsam of life and the hidden collections that may never fit within anyone's research agenda, official history, or private version of the world."²⁵ By this definition, the family photo archive too is a living archive, a collection of memorabilia whose nature is changing, ongoing, and dynamic. Perhaps counterintuitively, my mother's attempted act of disposal prompted the future of the family archive and potential acts of future disposal, as well. Making room for new experiences, new objects, and new memories, her act of disposal functioned like so many acts of housekeeping: my mother cleaned up the archive because she knew that, inevitably, it would get messy again and again. But such acts of memorial housekeeping also continually postpone the question of when a family photo archive can be understood as complete.

The messiness of such family archives—of the objects that structure, sustain, and sometimes challenge familial memory—is a phenomenon which is not in fact unique to family photography. Foucault suggests that "history clutters up and occupies our memory"; Barbara Taylor notes that "history... is littered with half-remembered hopes, with dreams that have failed."²⁶ My mother's unintentional contribution to this conversation is a demonstration of the housekeeping labor involved in cleaning up family memory: it is only by clearing out the mess that the value of certain histories can be discerned, and by throwing things out that what is saved can be valued.

There is, however, one significant caveat to this curatorial quagmire: many contemporary family photo archives are no longer producing

or collecting material objects. Most amateur photographs today are born digital, existing only on digital platforms, cell phones, hard drives, or the cloud. And to be sure, disposability as a theme in photo-history did not cease with the shift from analog to digital. Digital photography has introduced an entirely new scale of photographic accumulation, and with it, an increased responsibility to curate vast amounts of images in a seemingly endless immaterial realm. This shift has also introduced a newfangled anxiety around the curation of analog family photo archives. The switch to amateur digital imaging technologies has almost entirely forestalled the creation of analog family photos, intensifying the importance of preserving the materiality of extant photo archives, as well as the memorial implications of throwing out family photos—"bad" or otherwise.

Though digital photos are not disposed of materially, the cameras, memory cards, and personal computing technologies used to access them are—and that's not even accounting for the significant material and chemical waste created by their manufacture.²⁷ And although disposing of electronic waste introduces environmental themes to this discussion, the notion of obsolescence associated with e-waste adds a useful term to conceptualizing disposal of family photos as a curatorial act. As Jonathan Sterne puts it, "obsolescence is a nice word for disposability and waste."²⁸ Interestingly, this nice word was introduced into common usage with reference to modern household appliances replacing old ones in the early part of the twentieth century.²⁹ Like the photographic misfits in my garbage bag archive, seemingly unrelated but sharing a character based on their mutual selection, the simultaneous inauguration of snapshot photography and the notion of obsolescence in American consciousness constitutes a significant relation unto itself.

Among various types of obsolescence for any appliance or technology, earlier products are

made outdated by more innovative equipment and marketing initiatives in which product styles are changed to appeal to consumers with newer, flashier models. The most recent type of obsolescence, however, is planned obsolescence. Incorporating both technological and psychological elements, planned obsolescence is marked by its guarantee of product failure. Rather than keeping abreast of domestic objects and their natural wear and tear—of darning socks or oiling door hinges—planned obsolescence "artificially limits the durability of a manufactured good."³⁰ It is the notion of artificiality within obsolescence that interests me regarding family photos.

If obsolescence means that an object doesn't do what it was produced to do anymore, and in some cases is engineered to stop doing what it was originally meant to do, then in addition to photographic technologies themselves, we can also understand the family photos they make as undergoing a process of obsolescence. Beyond the obsolescence consciously manufactured into older models, many products become obsolete "because people decide not to maintain them anymore."³¹ When my mother deemed each photo that ended up in the garbage bag archive as undeserving of maintenance, the photos themselves did not become obsolete but—for her—misrecognition rendered them useless; my paternal grandmother's photos had run their course and stopped functioning as they were meant to.

When I rescued the garbage bag full of photos from the brink of disposal, my act was fundamentally recuperative. My choice to preserve these photographs in the context in which I found them, however, altered their function altogether. While I still think of the objects in the garbage bag archive as family photos, they have also taken on the quality and designation of found photos. On a literal level, I found these photos in my parents' basement, meant as they were to be thrown out. However, the new context that they acquired in the process—a unique photo collection picturing "bad" family photos

of “people we don’t know”—renders them a new archive unto themselves. Karen Cross suggests that collectors who actively seek out family photos circulating in secondary markets, including flea markets and thrift stores, are “testimony to the process of snapshots becoming trash.” In the case of my garbage bag archive, the collection is testimony to the process of trash regaining personal currency.³²

As a child, I was always a bit apprehensive about Orca. Instead of the knitting, soft-spoken, grandmotherly figure of popular imagination, Orca’s sometimes gruff comportment was something of an enigma. I was unequipped to grasp the influence that her memory would have on me before I, like Orca herself, could appreciate the simple pleasures of a cigarette, a glass of rye, and a dirty joke shared over a game of cards. After spending time with the photos in the garbage bag, I understand her better—her own orientation to memorial housekeeping better—than I did from the “good” photos that my mother opted to preserve alone. Rather than pictures characterized by performative and aesthetic veneers of cohesive family history, Orca always kept the “bad” photos, speaking to a family history itself composed of bits and bobs, of a life cobbled together by a young widow, of making do and making memories in the process.

Had I not foiled my mother’s attempt to tidy up the family archive, my own impression of our family history would have been altered without me even knowing it. The disposal of those photos would not merely have been a destruction of family history; it would also be a creation of a new family history that does not include them. While my discovery of the garbage bag reimbued the photos with significance, moving them out of the literal and rhetorical trash and back into the realm of viable family photos, this is not always the case when it comes to disposal. Most of the time, when family photos get thrown out, they stay that way. For many, family memory is confined to extant photos or, when entire archives

are destroyed, the memory of those photographs through their absence.

Far from a methodological shortcoming, many theories of mediated memory agree that lack and imagination structure memory as much as, if not more than, what we can corroborate visually. Barthes states that “I may know better a photo I remember than a photo I am looking at, as if direct vision oriented its language wrongly.” Kuhn notes that “narratives of identity are shaped as much by what is left out of the account—whether forgotten or repressed—as by what is actually told.” And Margaret Rose Olin suggests that, “while the details may diminish, the representation viewed distractedly may impart an enhanced sense of presence.”³³ Indeed, the imaginative investment that maintains affective ties through the intergenerational transmission of family photos may be even stronger in cases where the photos no longer exist. Nevertheless, we will never know what photos have been thrown out, and thus what stunning accidental compositions might have been irreparably destroyed or what powerful—even life-altering—stories might have been disposed of when the family photos they evoked were discarded.

I have become my family’s designated photo archivist. I keep the garbage bag full of “bad” photos in the same box as Orca’s photos that my mother opted to keep. I do not want to erase her curatorial act of setting these particular photographs apart, signaling as it does the inevitability of shifts in family photo archives: additions, deletions, and attempted suppressions spurred by the intergenerational transmission of stuff. And when I go, having no children of my own, my family’s photo archive may itself be disposed of to circulate again, someone else cleaning up what gets remembered and extending notions of what is disposable once more.

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Photo Credits: 1–8 photographs from author's personal collection.