

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

LOOKING A GIFT  
HORSE IN THE  
MOUTH:  
GENEROSITY  
AND THE  
DIGITAL EXCHANGE  
OF FAMILY  
PHOTOGRAPHS

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How many times might you have heard the expression “don’t look a gift horse in the mouth”?<sup>1</sup> Let’s picture the scene of an ungrateful recipient looking at an unwanted gift, finding fault with something that has cost them nothing. Or a gift considered not in terms of the generosity or kindness of the donor but of its monetary value. Now add some details to the scene: replace the image of the ungrateful recipient with that of an artist. The gift horse is a digital file of an analogue family photograph. The artist has no personal connection to the family in the photograph, in the literal familial sense. The giver, the donor, of the digital file may not even think they are giving the artist a gift. If we are going to find fault, perhaps this contribution is about to make an issue when there isn’t one. After all, is the digital copy of a family photograph really a gift? It is not the small physical artefact whose negative was lost long ago, that we might now hold in our hands and turn over to look for names, dates: there might even be evidence that it was torn from a page of a family album.

This description suggests something more precious, in which case the donor would be really giving up something unique – not only the actual photograph but also severing the connections with its original home. The analogue family snap also summons up



FIG 1: Double page spread, *Question for Seller*, 2006.

its contemporary and ubiquitous digital replacement; for example the ones we take by phone and upload to Facebook. These are made for, and looked at on, the screen, and circulated to an online community of friends, relations and even strangers.<sup>2</sup>

Such digital family snaps are not the subject of this chapter: the relationship that I want to address here is the analogue family photograph and its digital copy. This is in part because the analogue family photograph has been central to my practice, working in the field of “found” photography. Two examples are *Question for Seller* (2006) (Figure 1) and *Gay Interest Beefcake* (2008), which were both realised as unique albums, created from original yet unwanted family



community.<sup>4</sup> These are prompted during an art process in which the family photograph clearly plays a key role that in turn becomes part of an artwork, and consequently, public exhibition. In this situation, the family photograph brings with it the collaborator's voice in visual, textual or oral form. It also raises questions that perhaps come into sharper focus, if we begin to consider the digital file as a form of "gift" – a notion that has been investigated across the disciplines of anthropology and material culture. In art criticism, this has been applied specifically in relation to "participatory" art practices.<sup>5</sup> This chapter will attempt to map out the territory that lies between the analogue family photograph and its digital duplicate, as it moves from the hands of the collaborator to that of the artist. Therefore, whether organised into an album in the traditional sense, or stored more casually in an original Kodak wallet, or biscuit tin, the analogue family photograph is still tied to living subjects and particular family contexts. Such photographs aren't the casualties of house clearances, car boot sales and eBay, where we might assume the original context and named identity has been lost. Those examples are firmly in the realm of found photography which provides what Marina Warner has called a "nostalgic frisson" for artists to work with.<sup>6</sup>

Yet Martha Langford problematises this productive space of “nostalgic frisson”. She describes critically the effect of separating the photographic album from its community as casting “...it into an unnatural silence”.<sup>7</sup> Langford is writing about the album’s move from private to public, from the domestic setting to the museum collection. Her words, however, can be extended to all family photographs that have become “found”. Therefore Langford’s consideration of the silenced family album, and the importance of “voice” require further elaboration as she asserts “...there is no such thing as a family album, but only personal albums concerned with, or situated within, a particular configuration of family and community.”<sup>8</sup>

Langford also observes how “the album’s removal from the private sphere to the public collection tips the balance to inscription by cutting the performative cord”.<sup>9</sup> By inscription she lists our cultural habits such as methods of classification, identification, making lists, keywords and so on. Langford argues that the album is “a mnemonic device for story telling” with “roots in oral tradition.”<sup>10</sup> She points to the importance of the purpose of revisiting situations, retelling memorable and accessible stories. These narratives are not fixed, and depend on the relationship between storyteller and listener.<sup>11</sup> Langford states:

*The past must be viable in the present, for the purpose of story telling is to keep the community alive. What this means for the album is a shift from absolute solidarity of material culture to a state of the in-between, fully realizable only in performance. The album is a meeting place, not an encyclopedia.*<sup>12</sup>

Langford goes on to demonstrate how an oral framework can “restore agency” to the compiler of a specific album *Margery Paterson Snapshot Album, 1925-1945*, in the McCord Museum of Canadian History. The new “remembrance environment” she creates brings the album into direct contact with five women, of varying ages, in specific family positions, who have no previous connection with the album. Langford interviews the women as they interact with the album, and also includes herself within the “remembrance environment” she has constructed.<sup>13</sup>

Despite the fact the album Langford analyses has been gifted to the museum, she is not concerned with the album-as-gift *per se*. Yet Langford’s work helps raise critical questions for contemporary artists working with family photographs: what cords are cut when the family photograph, found or otherwise, is moved into an exhibited artwork? What “performative cords” come with digital versions of

analogue photographs, which are also in “a state of the in-between” in terms of materiality? And what are the connotations of gifting? In order to examine these questions further, I will now return to the process of photographic production in the specific context of *Beneath the surface/Hidden Place*.

The notion of the album, and by extension the family photograph, as a meeting place, has particular resonance with *Beneath the Surface/Hidden Place*. Albums and other less formally organised collections of family photographs were initially props for talking and reminiscence, but led to new photography. This became an approach that worked whether the community remained intact or had become more dispersed, or even displaced. What all the collaborators had in common was the experience of a personal history and its physical erasure from the landscape – caused either by the decline of mining industry or regeneration of social housing.

To demonstrate this and the performative cord within a photographic process, it is time to go on location. Doon Valley, East Ayrshire in Scotland, is an area with an extensive mining past: coal spoils are reclaimed by nature, miners’ lamps and helmets are displayed in the local museum’s glass cabinets, local people talk of its “lost villages”. The Doon Valley





**FIG 3:** Contact sheet, Doon Valley, East Ayrshire, 2008.

Museum is small, friendly and informal, used to welcoming both strangers tracing family ancestors and locals who regularly drop in for tea and chat. To an outsider's eye it has an eclectic archive: collections of mining maps, boxes of photographs covering local industry, family and community. The museum's Visitor Information Assistant is Elaine. The job title doesn't do her justice: she has lived and worked in Doon Valley for 30 years, and is an oracle of knowledge. When I first contacted her about the project, Elaine had three local people in mind: Ann, Drew and Mary. The museum was a natural meeting place, where each brought along their photographs; Ann included a hand-written list of dates and locations; Drew presented a packed album and Mary's photos were in an envelope. I was struck by the way materials from the archive were quickly in dialogue with their



**FIG 4:** Craigmark, Doon Valley, East Ayrshire, 2008.

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personal photographs, which together create a backdrop to stories, narratives of change.<sup>14</sup> The next stage was the walks, small journeys to particular spots where a family photograph was originally taken. In Drew's case it was to the street where he lived; the first frames of a contact sheet show his home, and then another house, two doors down: the place where he was born. The final frames were in a location at the bottom of the street, still known by the name of the miners' row of cottages that were once on this site. The contact sheet evidences the matter-of-factness of the shoot: an SLR digital camera on a tripod, use of raw file, bracketing, maximum depth of field, and coping with bad weather (Figures 3 and 4).

The landscape of bracken is an example of how, under the collaborator's direction, I re-photographed a place as it stands today. The importance of their

memory, knowledge and experience, when looking at a location where all previous reference points have gone, was paramount. Sometimes the collaborator could orientate themselves through remnants – a drying post, the foundations of a house – at other times the direction would simply be “yes, it was here” with (seemingly) no physical evidence at all. In this particular case, the collaborator was drawing not just on his memory, but also on an older sister’s memory and her instructions on where to take the new photograph. A retired miner, Drew described what the landscape used to look like as well as a story about a dispute between a family member with his mining landlord about keeping pigeons, which cost the man his job in the pit. He also spoke of how the ashes of older siblings were often returned to the sites of such lost villages. Back at the museum, on the laptop, we then worked together to place the family photograph inside the new one. Again the collaborator would determine its positioning to create the final digital montage, sometimes using a detail within the original, at other times relying on intuition. Figure 5 is one example of 24 digital montages that became the basis for the touring show.<sup>15</sup> It is also a very specific example of how a digital duplicate of a photograph, still located in its original album, moves from the private



**FIG 5:** Nicky Bird & Drew Johnstone: *Craigmark, Dalmellington, Murphy's Pigeon Loft, 1924/Craigmark, 2008.*

and local sphere to the public domain.

From this account of the project, where meeting place and photographic process form “a performative cord”, we can now begin to list the things “gifted” by the collaborator: memory, knowledge, experience, time and, with permission, the digital duplicate of an analogue photograph. And, to this, the artist brings: knowledge, experience, time and shared authorship. Hence my proposition: that the digital duplicate of an analogue photograph is a form of gift.

The gift – both giving and receiving – is not always a straightforward, benevolent act. For instance, the seminal 1923 anthropological essay by Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*,<sup>16</sup> has been taken up, dissected, extended and

contested in a multitude of ways<sup>17</sup>. In her 1990 foreword to a new English translation of the book, Mary Douglas explains that the gift for Mauss “is about politics and economics. After the survey of evidence come the political and moral implications.”<sup>18</sup> These words set the scene for the book and the analysis that follows. The evidence for Mauss is from anthropological fieldwork in Polynesia, Melanesia and the American Northwest. He observes that certain gift “exchanges are acts of politeness” which have the appearance of the voluntary “although in the final analysis they are strictly compulsory.”<sup>19</sup>

The insights of particular anthropologists, which are shaped by fieldwork and observation, offer useful parallels to the methods of *Beneath the Surface/Hidden Place*. Keeping the analogue family photograph in mind, let’s begin with the connection of the object with the spirit of the giver and Mauss’ discussion of Maori *hau*, which inhabits a gifted object, as a kind of spirit, soul that operates through an extended family network. Mauss states, “even when it is abandoned by the giver, it still possesses something of him. Through it the giver has a hold of the beneficiary...”<sup>20</sup> Mauss identifies the religious, magical hold over the receiver within a “tribal” exchange of gifts. While later revaluations of his work address economic and

symbolic values of gift exchange, it is pertinent to bring in another anthropologist, Maurice Godelier, who returns to matters of the sacred.<sup>21</sup> He observes how in certain cultures the religious object is circulated for the authorial power associated with it. Godelier explains that “Gifts retain the personhood of their primary owner; thus it is not the object but the owner’s identity that drives the object to be returned. Such objects speak in one voice only.”<sup>22</sup> The issues of identity and authorial power connote knowledge. This usefully invokes our own cultural practices of sharing digital duplicates of analogue family photographs, typically circulated through the family network, usually motivated by the desire to build and share knowledge of a family history. Significantly for Godelier, the objects of his analysis “speak in one voice” until they become “...gifts caught between gods, heirlooms and kinship markers... things exchanged for profit... Gifts are thus double voiced, speaking now in the voices of ancestors or divine beings and now in the neutral tone of mere merchandise.”<sup>23</sup>

With their obvious connection as kinship markers, “found” family photographs – as objects with a contemporary *hau* – now at the mercy of the market place, demand attention. The issue of lost context means any claim for their gift status will be, at best,



**FIG 6:** Question for Seller, 2004-2006: Winning Bid: \$8.70, History: 1 Bid. Location: Newport News, USA.

tenuous, particularly if they have been exchanged in an apparently straightforward contract between seller and buyer. Returning to my first purchase of family photographs found on eBay, which led to the artwork *Question for Seller*, a closer look at this eBay seller's statement that accompanied these photographs is revealing (Figure 6):

*The town I live in is predominantly black – about 75%. A friend had them for about 15 years in an old breadbox. I helped him move and he gave me the breadbox – that's where I found the photos. His mother had passed about 20 years ago. He*

*does not know who they are, because his mother was – well, let’s say she was not a saint “active” in the community and they could be some of friends. Newport News is somewhat of a military town – army. And that’s all I know about the photos.*<sup>24</sup>

This evidences how a story of a woman’s life emerges from an ambiguous gift exchange between friends, in which one of them finds the photographs. These narratives are embedded within an eBay transaction – a contemporary example of Godelier’s notion of “double-voice.”<sup>25</sup> This leads more explicitly to the gift and the connotations of the contract. Yet what of its relevance to the digital duplicate, still a kinship marker connected to a living subject that is donated to the artist, a relative stranger?

Mauss asks, “what force impels one to reciprocate the thing received, and generally enter into real contracts.”<sup>26</sup> It is important to ask, what does the artist-as-recipient “return” to the collaborator-as-giver? The issue of contract is significant even if it remains implicit, informal (a tacit agreement between photographer and collaborator) or appears to be explicit, formal (a signed gallery permissions form). The phrase “informed consent” could be seen to resolve potential tensions that may arise from personal



materials of others becoming public artwork. This brings us to ethics, risk and ambiguity of the gift.<sup>27</sup>

In his useful introduction to *The Question of the Gift* (2002), Mark Osteen also outlines sociological discussions of the gift. These divide into two camps, what he describes as “moral cement” versus “the exercise of power”.<sup>28</sup> In these debates Osteen observes “gifts can generate exploitation, manipulation, and a battle for control”.<sup>29</sup> The definition of the gift is also expanded beyond the material object to gifts of sympathy and conversation often to strangers.<sup>30</sup> Osteen observes, “Givers feel rewarded by the very act of giving, whether or not they receive something tangible back. Moreover, gifts may involve spontaneous moments during part of the process of procuring and giving.”<sup>31</sup>

This helps us to understand the ambiguity of the digital duplicate as a gift, as it is passed to a relative stranger (the artist), and one that carries the voluntary impulses of gift giving. The issues of motivation may not be clear, and even real contracts might not capture what Jacques Godbout & Allain Caille have identified as implicit rules, or account for “active and conscious refusal of explicitness on both sides” during a gift transaction.<sup>32</sup> This may of course benefit the artist more than collaborator. The consideration of the photographic art process as a process of

“procuring and giving” leads to critical attention to the gift within contemporary art practice.

In her reading of works by artists such as Felix Gonzalez-Torres, to which spectator participation is central, Miwon Kwon observes how certain artists apparently give to the audience, “as if a gift, his or her authority of creative authorship.”<sup>33</sup> Drawing upon Mauss, Godelier and also Pierre Bourdieu, Kwon asks for a greater scrutiny of what this means, “...if we accept this act of relinquishing the privileged right or ownership of artistic authorship as indeed an act of critical generosity even as an effort to democratize art [...] then we have to attend to full extent of the paradoxical condition that this act actualizes.”<sup>34</sup> She continues, to point to how the gift of sharing the authorial role of the artist signals a desire for solidarity, and equality, with the audience while at the same time reaffirming the artist’s superior role.<sup>35</sup> “Abdication of one’s authority asserts one’s superiority. This is a point many critics, especially those that champion “interactive” and participatory art generally..., continue to miss.”<sup>36</sup> Drawing on the anthropologist Annette Weiner’s notion of inalienable possession – giving while keeping – Kwon argues that authorship becomes a form of inalienable possession. She goes on to discuss how the artist’s gift of creative



FIG 7: Family Photograph, Drew Johnstone.

authorship within participatory practices reinforces “hierarchical power relations” as well what happens when the artist’s gift is rejected or even trashed by the audience. Although we need to be careful not to slide the audience participant role into that of the collaborator during the art process, Kwon’s analysis does bring forth some crucial issues about “giving whilst keeping.” Returning to *Beneath the Surface/Hidden Place* the implications are that, on the collaborator’s part, the digital duplicate allows the analogue family photograph to remain in their possession; on the artist’s part offering shared authorship gives a license to appropriate the collaborator’s material, labour and family history, for works that ultimately are in the artist’s complete control (Figures 7 and 8).

So to return to the phrase *looking a gift horse in the mouth*: a closer look at the exchange of the digital



**FIG 8:** Nicky Bird & Drew Johnstone: *Dalmellington, 59 Burnton, 1936?/2008*.

copy of an analogue family photograph is not to cast doubt on the value of the exchange. It does, however, acknowledge a debt the artist has, in a scanned image, which we might take entirely for granted. Langford's "performative cord" with the album points to the dangers of unnatural silence, but by elaborating on a contemporary photographic process, the possibilities of creating "new remembrance environments" have been revealed. This has also made explicit the levels of gifting within the generosity of the collaborator, in terms of stories, time, and materials. In turn, the exchange compels a gift of shared authorship between artist and collaborator, revealing both visually and textually a form of "double-voice" to an artwork. The exchange, therefore, also raises



**FIG 9:** Drew Johnstone, Stills, Edinburgh, 2008 (unidentified photographer).

questions of authorship, in practical, aesthetic and philosophical senses, which cannot simply be signed off in a consent form. It is the discourses surrounding the gift that help tease these out. By considering the digital duplicate as a form of gift, and looking at it *in the mouth*, we find this gift carries ethical and therefore political responsibilities for the artist that are directly connected to a living subject and family memory, shaped by shifting economic and social structures, which continue to haunt the British landscape.<sup>37</sup> It is also in the artist's gift to create artworks that speak at once to the collaborator's immediate family and community, and to an audience that is far from the family photograph's original home.<sup>38</sup>

**“I was struck by the way materials from the archive were quickly in dialogue with their personal photographs, which together created a backdrop to narratives of change.”**

**– NICKY BIRD**

## NOTES

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- 1 This chapter is a development from the paper 'Looking a gift horse....: Generosity and the Digital Exchange of Family Photographs' presented at the conference Family Ties: Recollection and Representation, University of London, March 8-9, 2012. This emerged from leading a discursive workshop in the research symposium, Connecting the Dots: Virtuality, Technology & Feminism in the Museum, Smithsonian Institution, Washington DC, September 23-24, 2010.
- 2 For further discussion of behaviours with digital photography and social media, see Daniel Rubinstein & Katrina Sluis, 'A Life More Photographic,' *Photographies*, 1:1, (2008): 9-28. Also David Bate, 'The Emancipating Machine,' keynote paper for The Versatile Image: Photography in the Era of Web 2.0, University of Sunderland, June 24-26, 2011.
- 3 More information about the development, exhibition and creation for the albums can be found on my website: 'Question for Seller, 2004-2006,' Nicky Bird, accessed January 27, 2012, <http://nickybird.com/bookworks/question-for-seller-2/>; 'Gay Interest Beefcake, 2008,' accessed January 27, 2012, <http://nickybird.com/bookworks/gay-interest-beefcake/>
- 4 For an elaboration on the issue of narratives, prompted by absence in the landscape during the latter stages of the project, see Nicky Bird, 'Returning Home: Coming back with Questions,' paper at the conference Framing Time & Place: Repeats & Returns in Photography, University of Plymouth, Plymouth, April 15-17, 2009; 'Artist at the Listening Post,' paper at the conference Transmission: Hospitality, Sheffield Hallam University dates, July 1-3, 2010; see online publication

- of Transmission papers, accessed January 27, 2012, <http://extra.shu.ac.uk/transmission/papers/BIRD%20Nicky.pdf>
- 5 This field is therefore enormous including Marcel Mauss, Claude Levi-Strauss, Jacques Derrida, Lewis Hyde, Louise Purbrick, Miwon Kwon, et al. I will return to specific authors, and their contributions later in the chapter.
  - 6 Marina Warner, 'Parlour Made,' in *Creative Camera: 30 years of Writing*, ed. David Brittain. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), 220. Warner's description is made in an examination of a series of Victorian albums held in the Victoria and Albert Collection, predominantly compiled by women. Within this essay, Warner references contemporary photographic practices, specifically Christian Boltanski.
  - 7 Martha Langford, 'Speaking the Album: An Application of Oral-Photographic Framework,' in *Locating Memory: Photographic Acts*, eds. Annette Kuhn & Kirsten Emiko McAllister. (New York: Berghahn Books, 2006), 223-246: 224.
  - 8 Langford, 'Speaking the Album,' 242.
  - 9 Langford, 'Speaking the Album,' 227.
  - 10 Langford, 'Speaking the Album,' 228.
  - 11 Langford, 'Speaking the Album,' 225.
  - 12 Langford, 'Speaking the Album,' 226.
  - 13 Langford, 'Speaking the Album,' 243.
  - 14 For a succinct but evocative set of observations, see Elaine Mackie, in Bird, 'Beneath the Surface,' 27.
  - 15 The exhibition *Beneath the Surface/Hidden Place* was launched at Stills, Edinburgh (May 10-July 6, 2008), and then toured to the areas



where the collaborators were from; Ninewells Hospital, Dundee (February 27-August 27, 2009); Dick Institute, Kilmarnock, (26 September-19 December, 2009); Doon Valley Museum (September 26-October 1, 2009-2010), and Prestongrange Museum & Morrison's Haven, East Lothian (Site Specific, permanent public works installed May 2010).

- 16 Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies* (London: Routledge, 1990). Translated by W.D. Halls.
- 17 Influential figures such as Levi-Strauss and Derrida lead us into structural anthropology and deconstruction. Authors as diverse as Lewis Hyde and Louise Purbrick move into other territories: for the positive view that art has a gift economy, see Lewis Hyde, *The Gift: how the creative spirit transforms the world*, (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2006); for a close analysis of correspondants' descriptions of wedding presents that "quite gently, questions the wisdom of academic theory with their own [...] understanding of the practical logic of giving a gift." 41-49, see Louise Purbrick, *The Wedding Present: Domestic life beyond Consumption*, (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007). On the subject of art and participation, Miwon Kwon takes gift theory into analysis of such practices to ask what lies under the cover of the artist's gift giving, see Miwon Kwon, 'Exchange rate: on obligation and reciprocity in some art of the 1960s and after', in *The 'do-it-yourself' artwork: participation from Fluxus to new media*, ed. Anna Dezeuze. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010), 229-240. Also see Dezeuze's introduction, 13-16.
- 18 Mary Douglas, foreword to *The Gift*, by Marcel Mauss, (London: Routledge, 1990), xiv.

- 19 Mauss, *The Gift*, 7.
- 20 Mauss, *The Gift*, 11-14.
- 21 An overview of key shifts within gift theory is provided by Mark Osteen, 'Introduction: Questions of the Gift' *The Question of the Gift: essays across disciplines*, edited by Mark Osteen. (London: Routledge, 2002). 1-42.
- 22 Maurice Godelier, cited by Osteen, *The Question of the Gift*: "In certain rituals – the Kula among them – an object may be possessed by different hands but it is never relinquished by the original owner; indeed the more temporary possession an object has, the greater its value for that first owner." 8-9. See also Purbrick's observations, drawn from her respondents, that the wedding present reveals "giving as a process of embodiment can invest objects with such significance that they must be kept for a long time." In Purbrick, *The Wedding Present*, 47.
- 23 Godelier, cited in Osteen, *The Question of the Gift*, 9.
- 24 eBay Seller's online reply to the author, December 2002.
- 25 The seller was asked "how did you come across the photos and what, if any, information do you have about them?" Within *Question for Seller* the viewer also saw the cost of the purchase, location before the photographs, followed by the seller's statement. I only bid on photographs that nobody else wanted: hence the bid number of 1 in the caption.
- 26 "Lives are mingled together, and this is how among persons and things so intermingled, each emerges from their own sphere and mixes together. This is precisely what contract and exchange are." Maus, *The Gift*, 20.

- 27 Osteen, *The Question of the Gift*, 13-22. This includes an account of Derrida's position that the gift is impossible, and requires a form of forgetting: "...once the donor recognizes that he or she has given the gift [...] he or she immediately pays him – or – herself with a symbolic recognition to praise himself..." 15.
- 28 Osteen, *The Question of the Gift*, 17.
- 29 Osteen, *The Question of the Gift*, 19-20.
- 30 These are what Jaques Godbout and Alain Caillé have called "the gift to strangers" such as Alcoholics Anonymous and other kinds of anonymous giving. Osteen, *The Question of the Gift*, 22.
- 31 Osteen, *The Question of the Gift*, 23.
- 32 Osteen, *The Question of the Gift*, 23.
- 33 Kwon, 'Exchange rate,' 233.
- 34 Kwon, 'Exchange rate,' 233.
- 35 Kwon, 'Exchange rate,' 233-234.
- 36 Kwon, 'Exchange rate,' 235.
- 37 Liz Wells, *Land Matters: Landscape Photography, Culture and Identity*. London: I.B Tauris, 2011. See the chapter Pastoral Heritage: Britain Viewed through a Critical Lens, 161-208.
- 38 A final note: at the time of writing, a relation of Drew Johnstone contacted me via my website. They had not seen the family photographs that featured in the project, and asked if I would email copies to them. There was a sad PS in which I learned that Drew had passed away a few days before. This chapter is written in his memory.

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