

## Girl, Departed and The Poor-Departed Image

*I knew that I did not want to make stereotypical images of the drugs, violence, and poverty my family faced; but, I also believed my reality had to be unabashedly confronted.*

Latoya Ruby Frazier, *Aperture Interview*

As soon as I internalized my status as a child of an alcoholic, I categorized myself, as did everyone else, as a person who was destined to fail, or, to never make it out alive. When everyday was a desperate attempt at my survival, I believed my life's potential was capped by my dad's addiction in many ways. I was never meant to make it out of that house, or that town, alive. It goes without saying, but attending Carnegie Mellon was also outside the realm of what I believed I deserved or could do. This essay is to acknowledge the dead-selves that I believed I had to amputate, the parts of me that I believed were too ugly and dysfunctional to show anyone, the parts of me that I was told would not fare well in the heat of the high-culture institution. I directed a certain violence at myself in an attempt at degrading my own personhood. I believed this degradation was necessary based on the kind of person who attends a prestigious college. I did not fit that prescription. The dilemma that presented itself in my life was that I could "die of difference, or live-- a myriad of selves."<sup>1</sup> The Lily Bridges you know today, the Lily Bridges who is able to be comfortably received at Carnegie Mellon, is the *mark* or *shroud* left by "the consciousness of death at my shoulder... a mark upon all my life's decisions and actions."<sup>2 3</sup> To

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<sup>1</sup> Lorde, Audre. "Introduction." *The Cancer Journals* (1980), 1-10.

<sup>2</sup> Lorde, *Cancer Journals*.

<sup>3</sup> Butler, Judith. "Torture and the Ethics of Photography." *Environment and Planning: Society and Space*, Vol. 25, (2007), 951-966.

be less offensive, I made changes to my appearance, personality, and speech. If I did not get out of my family home, in a literal, geographical way, I would have surely died. In my mind, if I was not able to survive at CMU, I would not be surviving anywhere. The stakes remained high and I understood what this meant for me. Imposter syndrome plagued me as I felt like I had come to college with a lot less preparation than my peers. The nights in high school spent in screaming matches or going on last-minute staycations when it was decided that it was too dangerous to stay at home did not prepare me to close-read dense texts or write essays. I did not know how to do any of it and I was terrified. The exhibition of wealth and academic rigor was unlike anything I had encountered before. Although it was new, I know what it is like to look at something ginormous and terrifying and still have to go towards it. If there is anything that my life prior to college prepared me for, it was that. Obviously, I am here and writing this but it should be understood that I still feel like I do not belong here. I resent myself for what was stolen from me, for letting it be stolen from me. Moreso, I resent the institutional framework for telling me what I had to do to myself, taking it from me, and then when I got here, telling me that I was not allowed to get it back. They told me that it could not have happened for me to be here. I believed them when they said people like me do not make it here. They tricked me into thinking my life was a fluke and something not worth mentioning. How do I disprove them? I thought that if they took my life from me that meant that I could never see that girl again. I could not see those parts of me anymore; I killed them, never to return. I am left wondering, was it ever real?



Bridges, Lily. *Untitled (inside)*. 2021.

Being a child of an addict, in many ways, is a departure from a standard childhood experience. I am interested in exploring my personal position as a child of an alcoholic, or as a *Girl, Departed*, in relation to photography and the point-and-shoot camera. I will be pointing to ideas presented by Audre Lorde, Judith Butler, The Slits, Hito Steyerl, Olga Ivashkevich, Latoya Ruby Frazier, and Diane Arbus, as well as Nan Goldin's, Latoya Ruby Frazier's, Ava Shieferstein's, and my own photography. I aim to construct a new framework to consider the visuality of the lasting effects of pervasive abuse, violence, and death in order to offer a psychological and photographic toolkit for the negotiation of one's abuse and expansion of one's identity to happen. *Girl, Departed* is referencing the specific gaze of a subject left in a

complex-post-traumatic state due to pervasive abuse in developmental stages. This state of departure permanently affects *Girl, Departed*'s photographic subjectivity and sensibilities. Therefore, her photography is emblematic of her reality, or her "own real conditions of existence".<sup>4</sup> I am positing that when a victim of prolonged abuse has the ability to turn the camera's gaze on herself (the space of disjuncture of "*me* and *not me*"), as well as her surroundings (the space of disjuncture of *mine* and *not mine*), she is able to see these images and access an expanded consideration of her humanity.<sup>5</sup> She is able to "negotiate and contest images of [her] badness and the impossibility of being good": a narrative that has been instilled in her via abuse.<sup>6</sup> Photography gives her the ability to reclaim the viscosity of her life and therefore expand what her life's possibilities are. She has been stripped of such humanity in order to survive and is left with a narrow definition of what it means to be *her*; her abuse has left her identity under a shroud of despair and shame. Audre Lorde states "I have found that battling despair... means, for me, recognizing the enemy outside and the enemy within," and Judith Butler, in the context of the Abu Ghraib torture pictures, asserts that when the torture is "done for the camera" it is "to show the ability to effect a nearly complete degradation of the putative enemy."<sup>7</sup> <sup>8</sup> By considering these ideas of the *enemy* in tandem, and in relation to *Girl, Departed*'s images, I aim to highlight and acknowledge the necessary violence of transformation that she has enacted on herself (the complete degradation of the enemy within) in order to survive in the face of the enemy outside (her abusers and high-culture institution). There is no survival in despair,

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<sup>4</sup> Steyerl, Hito. "In Defense of the Poor Image." e-flux, 2009.  
<https://www.e-flux.com/journal/10/61362/in-defense-of-the-poor-image/>.

<sup>5</sup> Ivashkevich, Olga. "Performing Disidentifications: Girls "in Trouble" Experiment with Digital Narratives to Remake Self-Representations." *Studies in Art Education* 54, no. 4 (Summer, 2013): 321-334,  
<https://search-proquest-com.proxy.library.cmu.edu/scholarly-journals/performing-disidentifications-girls-trouble/docview/1426317068/se-2?accountid=9902> (accessed December 16, 2020).

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Lorde, Audre. "Introduction." *The Cancer Journals* (1980), 1-10.

<sup>8</sup> Butler, Judith. "Torture and the Ethics of Photography." *Environment and Planning: Society and Space*, Vol. 25, (2007), 951-966.

there is survival in action. She has committed multiple suicides in this attempt at survival over the years; each one further mutilating her personhood to make herself less offensive to the world outside, making herself small to be easily received. So, she is on a mission to decipher messages from her departed-selves, prior-versions of her that she believed made it impossible for her body to survive. Her other-than-conscious-mind visually realizes a deeply ingrained impression of the sites of these suicides and is able to access the viscosity of these moments. These paranormal messages guide her in this journey in the form of photographic and archival impulses. Her photographic documents have the capacity to act as a catalyst for her to access a certain psychology. This access, and the subsequent negotiation, is what allows the *Girl, Departed* to discontinue the violence done to her. My notion of discontinuation must be considered in relation to Butler's assertion of continuation in the context of the American military torture the victims in the Abu Ghraib photos endured. Butler states, "the photograph is a kind of promise that the event will continue... producing an equivocation at the level of the temporality of the event...it allows the event to continue to happen, and I would suggest that, because of the photo, the event has not stopped happening."<sup>9</sup> My question to Butler is: if the event that an image is continuing is an event of a rupture-in-onself that ultimately provides the individual clarity to understand how their personhood is not dictated by their torture, is that still a continuation of their torture? Or, is it rather an event of *ceasing* the torture done to them? To say the image documenting the event of torture, or viscosity of torture and violence, can *only* continue the torture and violence on to the victim would imply that the victim is never getting out of it alive, never to escape the torture; it would mean that they are destined to live in this perpetual cycle of punishment and anguish. I am hopeful that this is not the only way a photograph functions in terms of torture and violence. It is pertinent to understand that I am not implying these acts of military torture are the same as

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<sup>9</sup> Butler. "Torture and the Ethics of Photography. (959-961)

pervasive domestic abuse. Further, I do not wish to oppose Butler's reasoning of how the torture is continued through images but rather use Butler's logic of continuation to re-situate the camera's gaze relative to the tortured subject and explore the implications of this positioning and the agency it affords the victim. I believe that when the gaze is reclaimed by the surviving victims, and they construct a photographic world that they can function in, is when the torture victim can make it stop acting on them.

For this negotiation and expansion to happen, it is necessary that the images are born from *Girl, Departed*'s personal subjectivity and viscosity. That is to say the image must be taken by her, of her, for her. Her images are her reality that she exists in, survived through, and simultaneously, the conditions that caused her to kill parts of herself, or *depart*. Latoya Ruby Frazier recounts her impulse to photograph at an early age: "I just knew I wanted pictures... because we survived through high school."<sup>10</sup> Nan Goldin also primarily took photos to remember. When one can affirm, with a visual document of how they ended up alive, they can begin to understand their resilience, strength, and endurance. Through this understanding of the self, there is a certain humanity that acts on a level similar to an act of self-pleasure. An image (or the viscosity) of one's reality has the capacity to bring someone an orgasmic burst of pride and validation, where shame and guilt are released, even if just momentarily. In a single image, one can "negotiate and contest" every facet of their personhood.<sup>11</sup> Specifically, when *Girl, Departed* takes a photograph of *herself*, there is a secondary process also at work to bring her to this psychological release: she takes pleasure in the act of self-harm associated with turning the camera onto herself. This implicates her as a perpetrator of a two-fold violence by employing the

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<sup>10</sup> Bey, Dawoud, and Latoya Ruby Frazier. "Latoya Ruby Frazier and Dawoud Bey: A Conversation (The Notion of Family, 2014)." *Aperture Conversations: 1985 to Present* (May 1, 2018), 152-158.

<sup>11</sup> Ivashkevich, Olga. "Performing Disidentifications: Girls in Trouble".

inherently violent gaze of the camera onto her own likeness: resulting in an image of an identity constructed out of similar violent processes. Assuming that the theoretical violence the camera, or how it is capable of acting on her, is not at the forefront of her consciousness, she still has a sense of it and knows that this violence is familiar and welcomed. Because of this familiarity with the violence, the camera and its gaze become sites where she finds footing in this world. The camera's gaze is one of the only things that she has run into that acts in accordance with the traumatic and dysfunctional logic that she has been taught and relies on: violence and fear. When she begins to experiment with a camera, she uncovers one of the only viewpoints that tells her she is not wrong or crazy; the camera offers her a world where violence can be her answer, a world that she can function in, a world of photographs built for her. She attaches her visual subjectivity to the camera's gaze. Her gaze and the camera's gaze become inextricably tied, interchangeable, one in the same.

No one teaches girls. So, she does not learn the camera, but rather, she develops alongside it; they are constantly informing each other. She doesn't make the *correct* photograph; she does it all wrong but she is never doing it for you. Her images that result from her gaze are inherently an aesthetic departure from the worshipped image, the rich image, the male image, the standard image, the beautiful image. Her images belong to the territory of the sub-standard, abject, and rejected. Her images are not welcome nor warranted in the high culture present in art institutions. Her accounts of her lived-experiences are met with abjection by others. What she has been exposed to has infected her with an incurable disease that makes others sick. They do not want to look at her. She is left feeling ugly, hardened, and thrown-away. What she garnered from her developmental stages never prepared her to compete in high-brow arenas. She is unable

to operate in a space where violence is not the answer. *Girl, Departed*'s images are unorganized, disembodied, and misunderstood by the high-brow elitists. I am claiming this to be a by-product of her amateuristic approach to the camera, and that this approach is heavily influenced by the socio-development of the young girl. Again, no one teaches girls.

To elaborate, I turn to The Slits. At the height of political unrest in Europe, The Slits were the first-recorded all-female punk rock band from London in the late 70's to early 80's. The drummer and founder of the band, Palmolive, defined the band's unique sound by her "virgin-mind" approach to the drums.<sup>12</sup> As described by Bruce Smith, Palmolive's drumming would "*kind of fall apart and get back up again... you had to sort of pay attention. And if you were just there for the sort of rock and roll and the beer, then you weren't going to like it.*"<sup>13</sup> Because of Palmolive's limited knowledge of the instrument, she was able to reject the rules by not knowing the rules in the first place. It was never supposed to be easy for people to hear; they were not doing it for people to *enjoy*. Guitarist Viv Albertine said "we consciously thought about getting girl rhythms into music and concluded that female rhythms were probably not as steady, structured, or as contained as male rhythms."<sup>14</sup> Ari-Up, another member of The Slits, points to there being a "very systematic pattern to boys' music... when you hear girls' stuff it is like... the tide coming in and out... so, I don't want to sound like I'm trying to categorize us being emotional and the boys are logical. I just mean that in musical approach, they are ruled by rules more than we are."<sup>15</sup> Unitarily, The Slits were pointing to something inherent in the feminine experience at some prior developmental stage that dictates these guiding cannons of experimentation, amateurism, aggression, and deconstruction. Girls know they have to figure it

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<sup>12</sup> Raha, Maria. "Number One Enemy: The Slits." Essay. In *Cinderella's Big Score: Women of The Punk and Indie Underground*, 79–85. Emeryville: Seal Press, 2005.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Raha, "Number One Enemy: The Slits." 79–85.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

out themselves because everyone is too busy teaching Boys the rules. This philosophy of their music parallels one of the core photographic principles that I am bringing forward to explain *Girl, Departed*'s affected visuality. I consider The Slits' unique sound as a departure. It is a departure from the *male rhythm*, or the patriarchal-institutional rules that systemically rule, evident in the misuse of a creative tool. I employ these gendered terms to reference and acknowledge the patriarchal structure as it is rules society still, The Slits' original ideas, and my personal position as a woman, but it should be understood that the use of *male* and *girl* are mainly to refer to the Standard and the Departure from the Standard, respectively. It is less about literal gender identification as it is understood and more so about the experiential of the feminine and how the feminine manifests in creative processes.

To expand on this further and transition to the realm of photography, I draw a comparison between Nan Goldin's and William Eggleston's photos. Eggleston's emphasis on photographic formalities articulates *male rhythm* in the way that he relates to a photograph, and prompts his audience to relate to a photograph, through a set of rules of what makes a good image.<sup>16</sup> Eggleston sacrifices a certain aspect of intimacy in his photos by following the prescribed beautiful structure. These rules are in place so that certain people do not and will not ever have access to it. I mean this in terms of who is looking, as in people who are not privy to the formalities of photography, and more generally, as in there are rules and laws in place in general for the sole purpose of gatekeeping based on socio-economic status, race, gender (apply to a broad array of systems and it is usually true). He and his photographs are upholding and are upheld by the rules. The Other finds very few access points into the emotionality of an Eggleston

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<sup>16</sup> Hagen, Charles, and William Eggleston. "An Interview with William Eggleston: New Southern Photography Between Myth and Reality, Summer 1989." *Aperture Conversations: 1985 to Present* (May 1, 2018), 132-137.



Eggleston, William. *Untitled*. 1984.

scene. Further, following my earlier logic, Eggleston's images are also emblematic of his  
 visuality of his reality. So, the emotionality and depth one gets in a Goldin image was possibly  
 absent from the beginning and all that he wishes to present is something beautiful and shallow.  
 Goldin's approach to photography is much less concerned with formalities. It is necessary that  
 the camera lives with her in a specific way and the ideal display of her massive collection of  
 photos (700-800 at a time) is a forty-five minute slideshow. This dense archive was delivered in  
 a time-based manner to force viewers to experience the unfolding of narrative and reject, or  
 depart from, the sensationalized art-museum form of viewing. Her images themselves are also a  
 rejection of the "correct" or worshipped image. She said that she does not "worship photographs

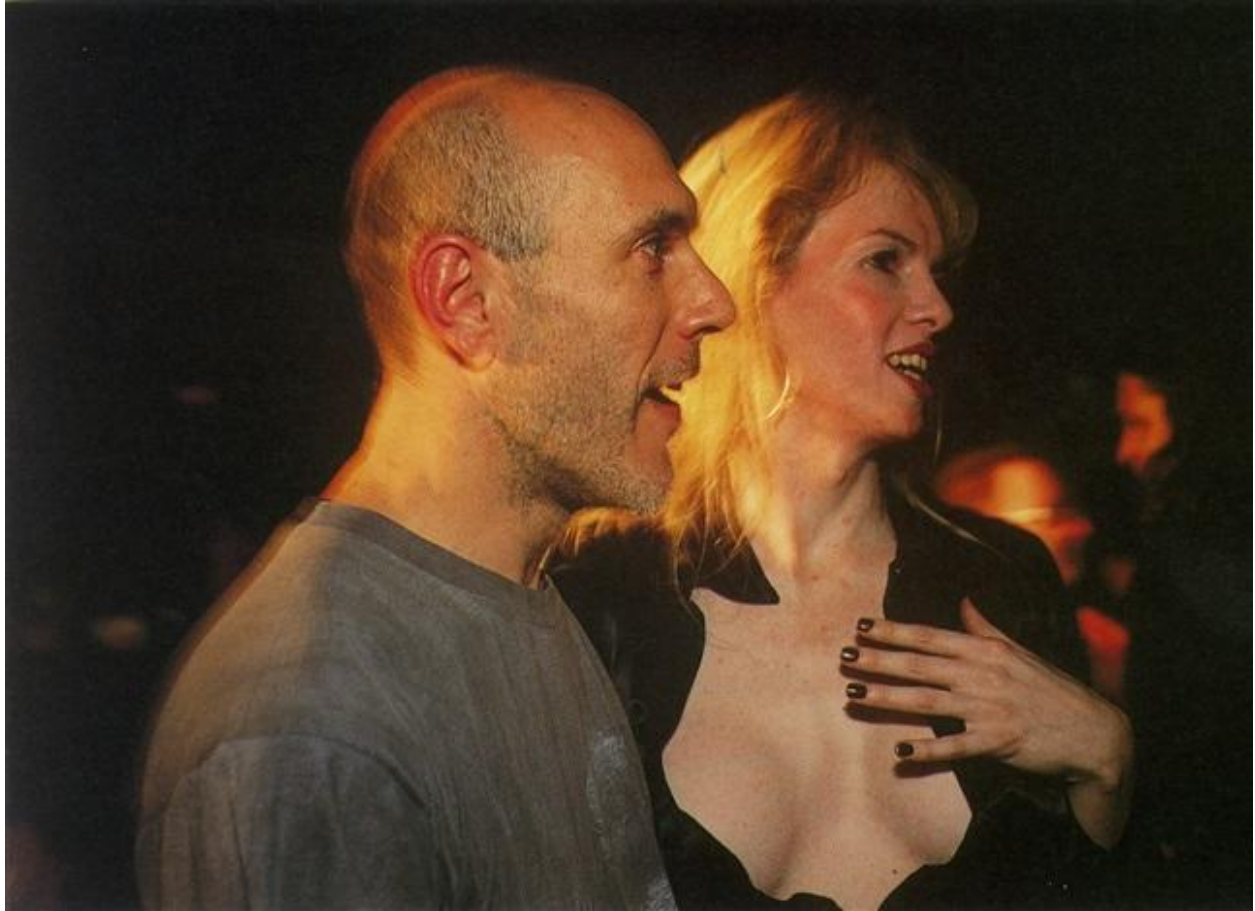
as objects. I am interested in the content.”<sup>17</sup> When an image is compositionally unstable, there is a breakdown of structure, an acknowledged abandonment of rules. This results in the viewer easily slipping into a transgressive space that brings them closer to the emotional depth, truth, and reality of Goldin and her life. Goldin disrupts, and departs from the understanding of value and preciousness of an image by its technical merit; she replaces the technicality with the intimate. Therefore, she is heightening the experience of relating to her photos. Her photographic approach heavily shares sentiments with The Slits’ approach to punk-rock music and leads me to conclude that she is an example of *girl rhythm*. Between her lived-experiences as a drug addict and a woman and the fact that her photos depart from the *male image*, I consider Goldin as *Girl, Departed*.



Goldin, Nan. *Nan One Month after Being Battered*. 1984.

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<sup>17</sup> Holborn, Mark, and Nan Goldin. "Nan Goldin's *Ballad of Sexual Dependency*: Fiction and Metaphor, Summer 1986 " *Aperture Conversations: 1985 to Present* (May 1, 2018), 192-197.



Goldin, Nan. *Joey and Guido watching the drag show*. 1997.

Sometimes you cannot help what you learn, or do not learn, and “there’s a point between what you want people to know about you and what you can’t help people knowing about you.”<sup>18</sup> In Goldin’s *Nan One Month After Being Battered* (1984), she turns the camera on herself to document the bruising on her face, supposedly, one month after the violent event took place. She returns the gaze with a blood-shot eye and red lipstick on. This bruising exists on Goldin’s face, visually, at the surface level: a level at which we also recognize the makeup on her face. In this way, I am framing Goldin’s bruises as a sign of the larger violence of transformation that I am pointing to. This is a specific version of Nan Goldin: a version of herself among the myriad of

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<sup>18</sup> Arbus, Diane. “Diane Arbus: An Aperture Monograph” Aperture.



Goldin, Nan. *Honeymoon Suite, Berlin*. 1994.

selves through which she lived, a version born from a violent event, and visually *marked* as such. We understand that the bruising was not always there, it will not always remain, and that it was put there with intention. This photo is a document of a temporary Her, or another Her, taken by her (creating a space of “*me and not me*”). She employs the camera (which is inextricably tied to her own gaze) to show herself a version of her that she would want to see: a functional Her in a world meant for her. In Goldin’s photographic world that she has constructed, the bruise is not a sign of dysfunction, but rather a sign of how she functions perfectly within her reality. *Girl*, *Departed*’s images are emblematic of her reality, which includes a reality where violence is the answer. To have a bruise on her face means to her that she is in accordance with her learned

expectations of reality: if someone hits you, you know you are real and that they love you. She finally has something (a visual document, something that is hers) to tell her these things are true and real. She knows that she is hurting but she is doing it all right and does not know another way to exist. Somehow, she was alive and that is good enough. However, this feeling is temporary. As time has gone by, Goldin gains distance and she can more easily adopt the viewpoint of a stranger. The cognitive-dissonance gained by time allows an atomic moment of perception of, but not immediate identification with, a departed-self. To the stranger, the bruise is an indicator of the social and psychological space Goldin occupied and what she learned during her occupation there. Goldin could not help that she learned violence was a form of care at some prior time in her life. A stranger easily finds empathy and compassion for Goldin through this image. It is explosive and crumbling to understand an empathy and understanding of yourself that you have only ever known for another person. The violent nature of this rupture between the self and not-self disintegrates prior notions of the self. The Self is prompted to completely let go of and rebuild these previously conceived ideas of The Self. Along with thinking of photographic impulses as a way that the departed-selves channel messages to her, this moment functions similarly for the departed-selves paranormal activity. Similar to how Lorde calls on Seboulista ma, *Girl, Departed* calls on her departed-selves to “help [her] remember what [she has] paid so much to learn.”<sup>19</sup> Her departed-selves show her lessons learned and accomplishments forgotten; they show her the strength, magnitude, hurt, and pain that was required to get to where she is today. This viscosity of her past and present reality expands her ideas of herself. Consequently, the way the violence she endured and how it continued to psychologically affect her has ceased. She now has the toolkit to negotiate the negative beliefs she holds about herself and the world and she can begin to restructure.

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<sup>19</sup> Lorde, *The Cancer Journals*.

The poor image has *girl rhythm*. The poor image is a departed image but a departed image is not necessarily the poor image. I am interested in Steyerl's conclusion that due to the nature of the poor image, it is "no longer about the real thing—the originary original. Instead, it is about its own real conditions of existence... In short: it is about reality."<sup>20</sup> It is emblematic of our societal shortcomings and systemic failures; if that was not the reality, the poor image would cease to exist. We can look at the poor image to understand the broader societal implications that it is pointing to. They are artifacts but do not require time-gone-by to qualify them as such; poor images are artifactual responses to conditions and limitations that span from past into the present. Similar to how Goldin's photography gives a viewer a deep sense of the memory in an image due to the slippage in a less-contained or less-structured composition, Steyerl is saying the poor image "diminishes the distinctions between author and audience and merges life and art" because "its visuality is resolutely compromised: blurred, amateurish, and full of artifacts."<sup>21</sup> I would consider Goldin's and Frazier's photos departed images, but never poor ones since they are not resolutely compromised. The poor image inherently departs on many fronts from the visually-dominant standard, high-resolution, worshipped, rich image, but I will be focusing specifically on the departure of low-resolution and how that categorizes both the poor and departed image as sub-standard and abject: the poor-departed image.

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<sup>20</sup> Steyerl, "In Defense of the Poor Image."

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.



Frazier, Latoya Ruby. *Aunt Midgie and Grandma Ruby*. 2007.



Frazier, Latoya Ruby. *Grandma Ruby and J.C. in Her Kitchen*. 2006.

The poor-departed image does not rely on circulation, nor is it necessarily low-resolution because it was compressed for the purpose of circulation. It is necessarily low-resolution due to the technological capabilities of early 2000's consumerist cameras and the amateuristic understanding of cameras, files, and optimization strategies common among consumers. The point-and-shoot is designed to lack the specs to create a RAW file: a technological and financial limitation that keeps these images and photographers at bay from the serious-photo realm. Latoya Ruby Frazier's black and white photography of her and her family, and the conditions

that affect them, is a nod to documentary photographers Lewis Hine and Gordon Parks.<sup>22</sup> She documented her family, herself, and their everyday life, for *The Notions of Family*, with the aim to understand and “unabashedly confront” the socio-economic-environmental violences of living in Braddock, Pennsylvania and the lasting effects on her family. Frazier’s stylistic decision is a call-back to the history of documentary photography. Therefore, her postmodern approach to documentary photography is in inextricable dialogue with Kline and Parks and defines a visual lineage of political activism and change. In a similar way to Frazier, I am thinking of the point-and-shoot camera as a call-back to the visual culture of the early 2000’s in order to be in dialogue with my memories. The visuality at the sites of *Girl, Departed*’s past suicides are deeply embedded in her psyche. Memories of the surrounding visual and popular culture at the time of her departure are subconsciously accessed and expressed through the aesthetics of her photographs. I am specifically interested in the presence of the point-and-shoot camera and visual language of the early 2000’s due to the fact it was my surrounding visual environment at the time of my departures. With a point-and-shoot, I can only make poor images. I can only make 300dpi JPGS; this does not meet the institutional standard for archival printing or collections. Like Goldin’s slideshows, this pixel limitation disrupts the value of an image, thus is a further departure of the institutional standard. The quality of my images do not qualify a position in high-culture because of this limitation. *Girl, Departed* and her images are left in the realm of the unrecognized as “real” by the institution, which in turn, means that her reality is unrecognizable as “real” in the context of the institution. My reality is reflected in the pixel confusion that occurs when I take a picture of something too bright for the auto settings to catch up with. My reality is abject to viewers who only want to see something good. My hope is found

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<sup>22</sup> Editorial, Artsy, and Latoya Ruby Frazier. “LaToya Ruby Frazier’s Photographs Tell the Stories of Forgotten Americans.” Artsy, January 18, 2018. <https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-latoya-ruby-fraziers-photographs-stories-forgotten-americans>.

in the subtle blue-purple glow that dissipates from a bright light caught on my Sony Cybershot. I travel unassumingly because the size of the camera allows me visual accessibility into spaces that I would not have access to if I were dawning a DSLR or large format film camera. My explanation for why the camera's gaze and *Girl, Departed's* gaze are inseparably linked due to similarity in our "own real conditions of existence". Her and her camera compliment, overlap, and affirm each other's existence with every deployment. They become one and the images made are emblematic of their shared existence. Her world that is built up by these documents of her visuality is a reclamitory space of *mine*. The world outside denies her anything of her own: a space of *not mine*. I feel as though when I photograph my surroundings now, that I can stake my claim in anything I desire. I go out with a shopping list of what I need to get back for myself. My departed-selves remind me of what I have lost and the camera shows me where I can find it. I go to take a photo of how the light comes through the trees because it reminds me of going to the Philadelphia Zoo when I was eight. I go to take a picture of a totaled car because that could have been me. I take a picture of the pilots with flash because it is more important for me to remember this than their comfort, and the pilots do not say anything to me. I am just a girl with a camera; there is no way I would be doing anything exceptional with a picture of them. When I look at my photos, I feel as though I "look directly at my life and my death." If I can look at these images of my reality, that serve as a symbols of the abuse I have endured (just as Goldin's bruises serve to reference her abuse she endured), "without flinching," then the event of torture stops acting on me in the way it always has. "I know there is nothing they can do to me again" if I have what is *mine*.<sup>23</sup> These images give me the chance to take it back and know that I am real.

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<sup>23</sup> Lorde, *The Cancer Journals*.



Bridges, Lily. *Untitled (Pilots)*. 2021.



Bridges, Lily. *Untitled (UPS)*. 2021.

Ava Shieferstein, a close friend of mine and talented photographer, also works with point-and-shoot cameras. She is another person who I look to as an example of *Girl, Departed* and her images as poor-departed images. The resolution is relatively low and she decisively aims the camera at her subjects, unapologetically, as if they cannot see her. And sometimes, she decisively aims the camera's gaze at what seems like nothing; she sees the things that are normally unseen. Her images do not take themselves seriously but do not sacrifice complexity to show a viewer the small things we miss. The visuality she creates offers a way of seeing the unseen; at first it is spectacular that she was able to capture the moment of synchronicity and humor, and then a feeling of loneliness sets in. She was the only one around to see it happen. She claims the unseen as *mine*. Her photos beg you to pay attention to what is hers: "the rare, the obvious, and the unbelievable."<sup>24</sup> She demands that a viewer consider those things when looking at her photographic hierarchy. Her insistence on the value of the unseen, and her visual codification of such demand, perhaps points to the site where she departed from and the state of departure she has been in since. Her reality is unseen, and because of these documents, she knows that the unseen is real.

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<sup>24</sup> Steyerl, "In Defense of the Poor Image"



Shieferstein, Ava. *Untitled* in "COVID Stream". 2021.



Shieferstein, Ava. *Untitled* in “COVID Stream”. 2021.



Shieferstein, Ava. *Untitled* in "LibCity". 2021.



Shieferstein, Ava. *Untitled* in “Beach Photography”. 2020.

These poor-departed images define a specific gap in photographic and visual hierarchies. Considering the proximity to the era when point-and-shoots were the popular consumerist camera and the psychological attachment one has to the visual culture surrounding them during their developmental stages, there is an aesthetic-cultural rise in this kind of image. It is a different image than the images that were actually made in the early 2000’s because of the influence of the internet in late-capitalism on our current-visibility. It is an attempt at working retrospectively to understand and offer up the visibility of violence that we experienced, one that we never understood as violence before; it is the violence in the subliminal. A digital photograph has shapeshifting abilities. Unlike an analog photograph, one can zoom into a digital photograph

and see the pixel-mosaic that makes it up. One can see exactly where the pixels have warped or collapsed. One can zoom in and see where something went wrong, but that something beautiful also happened because of it. This phenomenon of the pixel combined with the immediacy of a digital photograph causes the timeline between the moment when the document is created and the moment of rupture (between the self and not-self, or the mine and not-mine) to shrink, making the poor-departed image an artifact of the present, and the past. It is a document that comes out of a present moment but has the information to tell *Girl, Departed* exactly where something in her life went wrong; with a digital photograph, she can zoom in on the viscosity of her departure. It is possible that one can zoom in on a RAW file, but there is a more narrow chance of the necessary distortion. A DSLR camera constricts and controls pixels to a point where her reality cannot break through. There is no beautiful moment of slippage. The way that both *Girl, Departed* and the camera inform each other in this photographic process results in a new viscosity of violence. The signs that she excavates and claims for her world she has already had codified as violence through abuse. The sun breaking down through the trees is not just a beautiful day, it triggers fear because the last time she saw that was when the sky fell down. The poor-departed image is an artifact of the viscosity of institutional brutality on women and the psychology of children who were caught in the crossfire of domestic violence specific to the time we are living in now. This new viscosity is possible because it is the surviving *Girl, Departed's* gaze capturing it. This resituating of the gaze on to one's personal signs of violence and abuse makes so that the viscosity of such causes the intense rupture of one's selfhood, ultimately setting them free from prior notions of themselves. I conclude that the lasting effects of abuse can be discontinued by the deconstruction caused by the rupture between *me* and *not me* because a photograph can continue the violence of this rupture. The continuation of this rupture allows for

the opportunity at rebuilding one's personhood and reexamining prior notions of the self. This rupture occurs at the site of the *marks* or signs (codified by *Girl, Departed's* gaze); it occurs at the level of the bruises on Goldin's face and at the level of the unseen in Sheiferstein's work. These signs are loosely caught among the low-resolution digital web of pixels and begin to function as a graphic document that reads in this new language of violence. These signs and documents offer access points into an arsenal of weapons spiritually informed by violence and portals into an arena that is seemingly inhabitable and unseen, but she walks down the same street as you. She makes you question yourself before you question her, and you are scared of her before she is scared of you. *Girl, Departed's* photographic sensitivities depart from institutional, aesthetic, and emotional expectations by unapologetically forcing her own on the viewer, giving them no other choice but to "unabashedly confront" her reality<sup>25</sup>. A viewer is forced to then see the violence in the signs as she does. *Girl, Departed* irreverently recodifies visual signs, bending their semiotic dimensions to the logic of violence in her reality. She forces a viewer to regard her reality as real and challenges them to unlearn conventional denotations of violence and abuse, and the feminine.

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<sup>25</sup> Bey, Dawoud, and Latoya Ruby Frazier. "Latoya Ruby Frazier and Dawoud Bey: A Conversation."



Bridges, Lily. *Untitled (Sun breaking down)*. 2021.

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