

The Dermal Document: An Autotheoretical Synthesis of Photography, Assamese Fatalism, and the Ethics of Identity

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I dedicate this paper to the unidentified one, who kept my faith intact even when beliefs were broken, my mother, my father, my sister, and also that treasured photograph.

Abstract: *This paper employs an autotheoretical methodology to investigate the ontological and ethical dimensions of photography. By situating personal narratives- specifically the metaphors of the "invisible tattoo" and the "already coloured canvas"- within the frameworks of Roland Barthes's temporal noeme, Susan Sontag's critique of appropriation, and Assamese folk wisdom (fokora jujona), this study explores how the camera acts as a prosthetic eye for self-revelation. It argues that the digital image is not merely a record but a site of "dermal diagnosis" and fatalistic encounter, where the "unidentified" origins of identity are perpetually renegotiated.*

Keywords: Photograph, Assamese, fatalism, existentialism, love, identity

1. Introduction

The Archive of the 'Present Past'

The photographic act is fundamentally an exercise in temporal displacement. As noted in personal reflections, a photograph is a "present past"- once the shutter clicks, the moment is no longer a living "present" but an immobile artifact.¹ This observation aligns with Roland Barthes's characterization of the photograph's *noeme* as "that-has-been" (*ça-a-été*).³ The photograph serves as a "certificate of presence," an indexical trace that proves the subject was indeed there, even as it marks their absence from the current timeline.⁴

This paper adopts the framework of **autotheory**—a hybrid mode that blends theoretical analysis with personal narrative. This methodology allows for the production of knowledge that is affective, embodied, and emotionally textured by using the researcher's own experiences as a "lived methodology".

1) Dermal Diagnosis: The Camera as a Prosthetic Eye

A central paradox in contemporary identity is the "invisible tattoo" of faith.² Traditional tattoo scholarship often views the "human canvas" as a means to illustrate a personal story or a fitness indicator. However, when an ink represents a conviction—like "faith"—that the subject cannot physically see without the mediation of a camera, the technology shifts from a tool of documentation to an instrument of **revelation**.

The camera here acts as a "prosthetic eye," revealing truths of the spirit that are "invisible to the eye or obscured by time". This echoes the 19th-century tradition of "spirit photography," where the camera was conscripted to capture non-visible beings and psychic forces. In this context, the photograph provides a "dermal diagnosis"—a window into the psyche where the ink and the image become one with the subject's essence.

2) The Fatalistic Gaze: Assamese Wisdom and Inevitability

The ontological uncertainty of the photographic moment is best

expressed through the Assamese proverb (*fokora jujona*): "Birth, death and marriage are known by none".² These proverbs are part of a rich repository of oral traditions, often identified as *daakor boson*, which impart wisdom about everyday reality. By applying this proverb to photography, we recognize the "accidental" nature of the capture- to be born "healthy" in an image or to have a "happy marriage" recorded is a matter of "sheer luck".

This fatalism challenges the Western "tourist gaze" which seeks to categorize and control places as "sights".⁶ Instead, the Assamese lens suggests that the "inevability of death" is always present in the frame.² As Barthes noted, the *punctum* of time reminds us that the subject in the photo "is going to die," transforming every portrait into a *memento mori*.³ This contributes to the "loss of significance" of a physical site once it has been "consumed" and captured by the camera.⁶

3) The 'Already Coloured Canvas': Ethics and Consent

The ethics of capture become fraught when dealing with the "familial gaze".¹⁰ Childhood photographs- such as those taken during a bath- are often "fond and warm," yet they frequently lack the subject's "consent or will".¹⁰ Susan Sontag argued that "to photograph is to appropriate the thing photographed," putting the photographer in a relation of power over the subject.¹¹

The metaphor of the "**already coloured canvas**" provides an ethical imperative: one should not "project their colours" (imagination or interpretation) onto the vulnerability of another.² While family photography creates an "American family romance" based on cohesion, it can also act as an "act of non-intervention" that denies the subject's agency.¹⁴ This is particularly relevant in the digital age, where legal theorists advocate for a "Right to Deletion" for adult children of influencer families to reclaim control over their own likeness.¹⁶

4) The Unidentified Creator and the Mask of Identity

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Identity is not a static state but a process of **evolution**.² The author suggests that changing identity involves "stripping off previous beliefs" and "installing a new random access memory".² This digital-native view of the self contrasts with the "biological and relational determinism" often associated with the Wordsworthian principle that "the child is the father of the man".

The inquiry into the "unidentified one" who created Adam and Eve reflects a search for a "maskless being".¹⁷ In photography, the "mask" is the **pose**—the moment a subject becomes an object before the lens.³ The "unidentified one" represents the invisible "Operator" (the photographer) who remains unidentified while defining the identity of others.⁴ This theological turn suggests that photography is a form of "primitive theater" that mediates between the "Real" and the "Fictional".³

2. Conclusion: Toward a 'Heard Gaze'

In conclusion, the photograph as a "present past" is not a neutral reflection but a value-laden form of perception.¹ By integrating the "invisible tattoo" of faith and the fatalism of Assamese proverbs, we can develop what has been called a **"heard gaze"**—a vision in which the past, present, and future are fused, and the subject becomes an object of understanding.¹⁹

Photography remains both "poison and cure," an instrument of power that can either alienate the subject or provide a "revelation" of their most deeply held truths. Ultimately, the choice remains with the human to "evolve" with their past beliefs, ensuring that the "inks" of memory remain vibrant even as the "reasons" behind them fade across time.²

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Raw theories:



PHOTOGRAPHY for me is...

PHOTOGRAPHY HAS LONG BEEN IMPRINTED IN ME, LIKE, THE FIRST PHOTOGRAPH OF ME WHEN I FIRST STOOD ON MY OWN FEET, WHEN I WAS JUST A TODDLER. AGAIN THE PHOTOGRAPH OF ME, WHEN MY FATHER WAS GIVING ME A BATH, YET AGAIN, WHEN I WAS JUST TWO OR THREE YEARS OLD. THOSE PHOTOGRAPHS WERE NOT TAKEN WITH MY CONSENT OR WILL, WHICH THIS BOOK BY THE LEGENDARY PHOTOGRAPHER SUSAN SONTAG SPEAKS OF. YET, I FIND THOSE PHOTOGRAPHS OF MINE FOND, WARMTH, AND FULL OF LOVE. ANYWAYS, APART FROM THAT, I TOO CLICK PHOTOGRAPHS, MINIMALIST FREE STYLE, STREET, IS WHAT THEY, THE MOST OF THE PEOPLE TERM. BUT I SIMPLY WANT TO TERM IT AS. PERSPECTIVE. FOR ME PHOTOGRAPHS ARE LIKE TATTOOS. ONE INK, ONE REASON, SELF AS WELL AS TO SOME EXTENT OTHER'S CONSENT (AT LEAST FROM WHERE I COME FROM), BUT DIFFERENT INTERPRETATIONS.

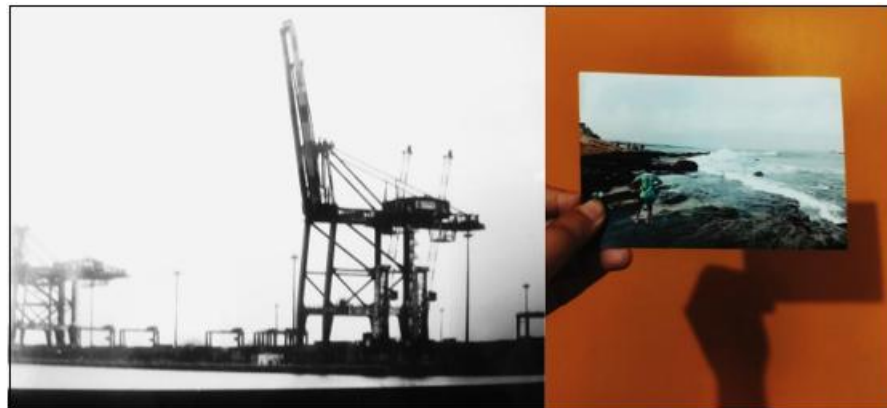
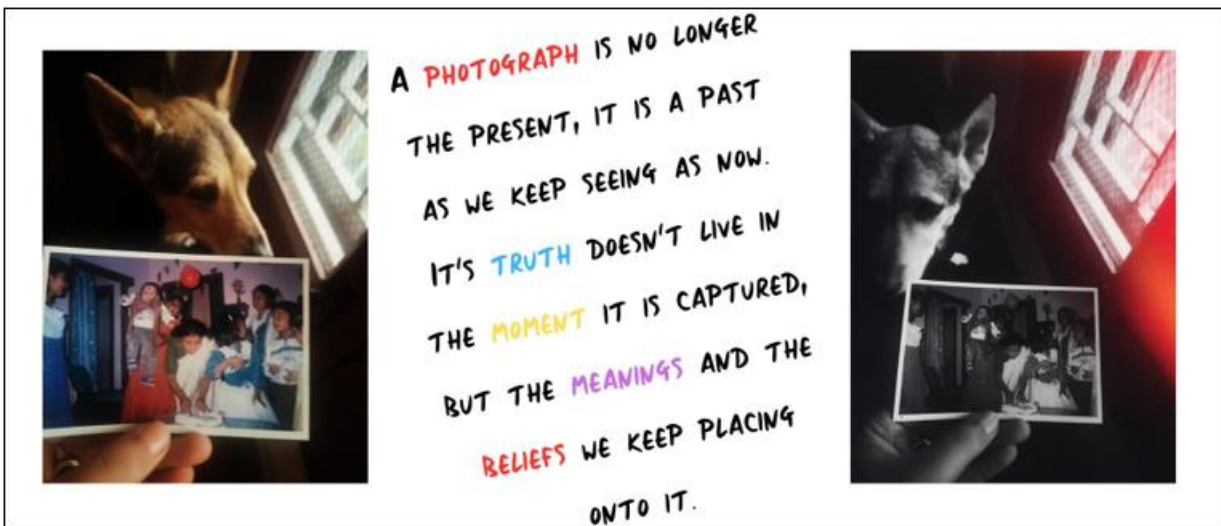
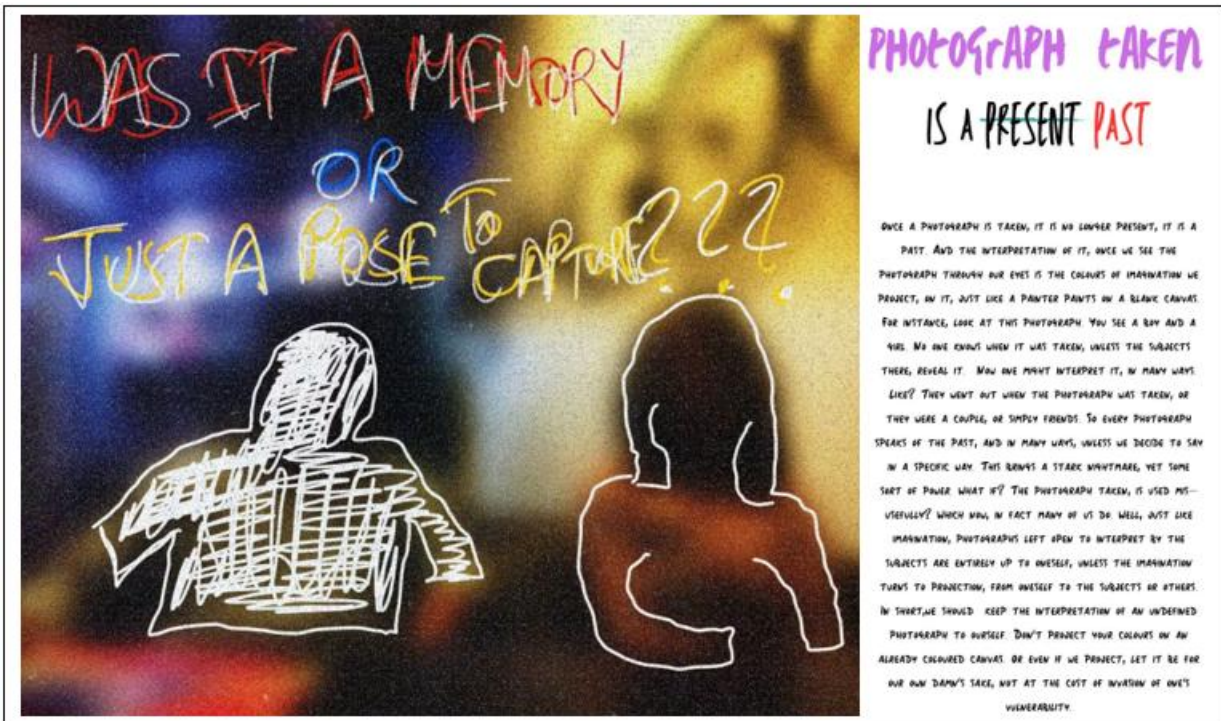


IDENTITY is... PRIVILEGE

IDENTITY IS A PRIVILEGE. THE TATTOO YOU SEE IN THIS PHOTOGRAPH, IS THE ONLY TATTOO I FIND BEAUTIFUL AT PRESENT. THE OTHERS? WELL, THE BEAUTY OF THOSE INKS REMAINED, AS WELL AS THE INTERPRETATION. BUT, THE REASON? WELL, IT IS SLOWLY STARTING TO FADE WHILE WALKING THE ROAD OF TIME. BUT THIS FINAL TATTOO, IS THE MOST ADORED INK. IT REPRESENTS FAITH. AND IN REAL LIFE, I CAN NEVER SEE IT. IT NEEDS A CAMERA TO CAPTURE ITS BEAUTY. JUST LIKE FAITH. IN ASSAMESE THERE'S A SAYING. BIRTH, DEATH AND MARRIAGE IS KNOWN BY NONE. LIKE, TO GIVE A LIFE, TO BE BORN HEALTHY, IS SHEER LUCK. MISBARRIAGE HAPPENS EVERY TIME. OR EVEN IF YOU MAKE LOVE A HUNDRED TIMES, TO YOUR PARTNER, SOMETIMES IT IS NOT ENOUGH. AND SOMETIMES ONE OR TWO TIMES, IS ENOUGH. THAT IS BIRTH FOR YOU.

DEATH, WELL EVERYONE KNOWS ABOUT THIS. PREVENTION IS BETTER THAN CURE, EVERYONE KNOWS, YET IT CAN'T STOP THE INEVITABILITY OF DEATH, BUT ONLY CAN BE PROLONGED. TODAY YOU ARE HERE, TOMORROW YOU ARE NOT, BOOM!

MARRIAGE MY DEAR, IS ALSO ONE OF THE UNKNOWN. YOU CAN GUESS OR DECIDE, WHO YOU ARE GOING TO BE WITH, FOR THE REST OF YOUR LIFE, BUT NO ONE KNOWS. BECAUSE ON THE WEDDING DAY, GOD FORBID! DEATH MIGHT GIVE HIM/HER/THEM A KISS. OR THE ONE HAPPY MARRIAGE YOU THOUGHT, MIGHT END IN A DIVORCE. SO, NO ONE KNOWS.





Photograph and Identity

A PHOTOGRAPH IS A PAST NO DOUBT. BUT IT HAS A GREAT DEAL THAT SHAPES OUR IDENTITY, BECAUSE OF THE MEANING AND BELIEFS WE PLACE ON IT. FOR INSTANCE, MY GENDER IDENTIFIES AS MALE. WHICH YOU CAN'T SEE IN THIS PHOTOGRAPH, BUT TAKE OFF THAT EMOJI, AND YOU'LL SEE THROUGH EVERYTHING, UNLESS YOU STRIP OFF THE MEANING AND RELIEF BEHIND THIS PHOTOGRAPH. THE SAME GOES FOR THE OTHER GENDER, FEMALE, AS WELL. CHANGING ONE'S IDENTITY MEANS: STRIPPING OFF PREVIOUS BELIEFS AND IMPOSING NEW BELIEFS. NO HARM IN DOING THAT. THE CHOICE AS A HUMAN IS OURS, WHETHER WE WANT TO EVOLVE WITH PAST BELIEFS AND MEANINGS, OR FORMAT THE WHOLE BELIEF SYSTEM OF OURS AND INSTALL A NEW RANDOM A(E)XCESS MEMORY. BUT AS FAR AS I AM CONCERNED, I AS A HUMAN WILL ALWAYS CONSIDER TO EVOLVE, RATHER THAN CHANGING MY WHOLE IDENTITY.



IF I STARTED, A NEW LIFE TOMORROW? WHAT PART OF ME WOULD STILL SHOW UP UNINVITED?
Ans. THE FIRST WARM TOUCHES ON MY SKIN, THE FIRST VOICE I HEAR, THE FIRST THING I SEE, THE FIRST THING I FEED ON, SCIENTIFICALLY AND PHILOSOPHICALLY. ORIGIN, AND LINGUISTICALLY AND CULTURALLY THE WORD: MAA.
 WHOEVER WROTE ADAM AND EVE, THEY JUST HAD TO WRITE THAT THE UNIDENTIFIED ONE CREATED ADAM FIRST, AND THEN EVE FROM HIS RIB BONES? THEN WHO WAS THE UNIDENTIFIED ONE? WITHOUT ANY IDENTITY? A MASKLESS BEING? OR ONE WITH A MASK? AND THAT'S WHERE LITERATURE FAILS? OR A NEW BEGINNING BEGINS?
 TO BE CONTINUED...