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Strangers in Text, Image and Life

By Marina Babigian

An essay written as part of the Writing Programs

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Strangers in Text, Image and Life

Robert Bergman's images in *A Kind of Rapture* are presented to readers in the same way that strangers are presented on a daily basis: without context. After reading Toni Morrison's "Strangers," the introduction to Bergman's book, readers analyze Bergman's photographs in an entirely different way. Morrison's narrative encourages readers to look critically at their responses to Bergman's images, requiring them to reexamine the prescriptions they place on the subjects of the images. Rather than analyze the photographs themselves, readers have the chance to examine their own reactions critically. The mutually illuminative nature of the combination of the text and image emphasizes the lack of caption on each image and, therefore, a lack of evidence for the viewers' preconceived notions.

Through "Strangers," Morrison highlights her notions of the role of the Mother Something, a fisherwoman, in her life. Morrison doesn't care about Mother Something outside of her projected relationship. For example, by neglecting to include Mother Something's name, she highlights its lack of importance. Morrison proceeds to state, "I imagine a friendship, casual, effortless, delightful" (76). Morrison prescribes a relationship on Mother Something with no regard for the woman's name, let alone her desires or the rest of her life, which doesn't intersect with Morrison's. In addition, on the second page of the narrative, she states that the fisherwoman "had implied promises of female camaraderie, of opportunities for me to be generous, of protection and protecting" (77). Morrison's readers have only her conception of how the relationship will unfold, yet neither Morrison nor the reader takes Mother Something's interests into account.

When Morrison states that Mother Something does not fulfill the roles that she placed on her and begins to question the validity of their entire conversation, she removes the feeling of familiarity that she creates among readers in Mother Something's introduction. She states, "My instant embrace of an outrageously dressed fisherwoman was due in part to an image on which my representation of her was based. I immediately sentimentalized and appropriated her" (78). Consumers of Morrison and Bergman's projects do this every day with the strangers they meet. Not only do they decide what a stranger's role in their lives will be, but also they predict who the person is without evidence. Due to the lack of context given to Mother Something, any person a reader interacts with from afar can function as Mother Something in their life.

The lack of caption on Bergman's individual photographs emphasizes the sense of unknowing that Morrison seems to create. Morrison tells her readers that language, image, and experience allow humans to "access" each other, explaining that language encourages the "breach of distance" between them, while image shapes and contaminates knowledge (78). As readers have no experience with the subjects of Bergman's photographs, they are allowed the opportunity to create one. If Bergman gave a caption to each photograph, readers might believe that they have enough evidence to determine the strangers' identities. Like Morrison's experience with the fisherwoman, these predictions would likely be incorrect.

For instance, one of Bergman's images depicts a woman wearing a handkerchief over her head and carrying a bag of what seems to be groceries (see Fig. 1). Without Morrison's forward to the book, one might begin to make assumptions about the woman's identity. One might begin to identify her as kind due to her almost-smile, genuine-looking facial expression and eye contact with the camera. One might say she looks "normal" based on the groceries and based on the purse, of substantial economic standing. One might even comment on the handkerchief itself: it depicts the pattern of an American flag. Many natural citizens of the United States likely might not be so proud of their country; however, many immigrants are more likely to be so proud of their citizenship that they might wear such a handkerchief. She must be an immigrant and, therefore, must have been through difficult times, which accounts for the wrinkles and the genuine almost-smile.



Fig. 1 Bergman, Robert. *A Kind of Rapture*

Having read "Strangers," readers have the opportunity to catch themselves projecting identities upon others. Mother Something is not who or what Morrison originally described her to be. Similarly, this unnamed figure might not be what we expect. She may not, in fact, be kind, genuine, or an immigrant at all. If Bergman had

given a caption to this photo, it might provide the reader with sufficient evidence to satisfy any curiosity the image brings forth. It might provide an anchor for those claims and allow the reader to go on with his or her comfortable enjoyment of the book. Instead, Bergman actively decides to leave the photographs without captions. In readers, this creates discomfort because they have no evidence to support what clues they find in the images Bergman provides. While they may not have noticed this lack of evidence prior to reading “Strangers,” it is impossible not to notice as the narrative and images are “read” in conjunction.

Bergman uses this photograph (see Fig. 2) for the same purpose as the photograph above, to create a sense of familiarity. In the image itself, he uses a horizon line that creates a feeling of likeness with its subject. The photograph is colorful and descriptive, placing its viewer inside of the situation. The warm tones suggest an invitation into the subject’s life.

Through the photograph, Bergman creates the same familiarity in his images that Morrison does in

“Strangers.” He removes that comfort through a lack of caption, similar to how Morrison does through her confession that the fisherwoman is not who or what she thought.

Functioning as a sort of caption for the project, “Strangers” highlights this lack of evidence. Without evidence, readers are left only with the image and the idea of unknowing that Toni Morrison creates. Together, the lack of context given to Mother



Fig. 2 Bergman, Robert. *A Kind of Rapture*

Something and the lack of caption for each photograph contribute to the idea that any of the people in the photos could be Mother Something. Furthermore, anyone in the photos can be any of the strangers readers meet on a daily basis, functioning as a “Mother Something” by simply being different from what readers expect. Like Mother Something, people are a blank slate to us, and similar to Morrison we use this blankness to project our ideas of whom they should be onto them. Together, Morrison and Bergman are telling society as a whole to reexamine the way we predetermine who strangers are without evidence to properly support those claims.

Works Cited

Bergman, Robert. *A Kind of Rapture*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1998. Print.

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