The Role of Reciprocity

A Priest, His Photographs, and the Perpetration of Sexual Violence

Kevin Lewis O'Neill



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Father David Roney rarely appeared in photographs. Instead, he took them by the thousands.[1] Ordained a Roman Catholic priest in 1945, Roney served the Diocese of New Ulm in Minnesota, largely from behind a viewfinder. A self-professed shutterbug, Roney carried his camera almost

1. I present a comprehensive account of David Roney and his crimes in *Unforgivable: An Abusive Priest and the Church That Sent Him Abroad* (O'Neill 2025). The book includes only a passing reference to his photographs. The analysis here is original. All interviews for this article come from fieldwork conducted in the United States and Guatemala between 2017 and 2023. Those interviewed remain anonymous or are given pseudonyms. In some cases, details insignificant to the analysis have been changed to protect the identities of certain people. Quotations are from recorded interviews or from detailed notes. All translations are my own.

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everywhere he went, from routine social events in the basements of midwestern churches to the cobbled streets of Vatican City. The camera also came with him to the highlands of Guatemala, where he retired in 1994 to live out his days. There, amid active volcanoes and on the banks of a majestic lake, Roney not only ministered to a remote Indigenous town but also became the primary author of its visual history. From his first trip to Guatemala in 1974 until his death there in 2003, Roney was often the only person in the area with a camera. Unbeknownst to most everyone at the time, though now painfully obvious, his images from Guatemala support what lawyers in the United States have since established: Roney sexually abused children throughout his career. He exposed himself to young boys and girls, fondled them under his cassock, and masturbated himself in public. Tragically, he also raped some these children.[2] Near the end of his career, once in Guatemala, he also raised a very young orphan as his own for nearly a decade. Here, for this essay, I call her Justina.[3]

Roney's photographs (as far as I know, as best I can tell) are not pornographic. Nearly all of them feature children from the ages of three to twelve, and this lends his archive an unsettling affect. Anonymized into line art, at the request of Justina, their content is banal: birthday parties, soccer matches, and first holy communions (fig. 1). There are also hundreds of images of Justina, but his crimes never appeared on camera. Instead, Roney took photographs of children with his point-and-shoot, traveled once a month to Guatemala City to have his rolls of film developed, and then gifted his prints to these children and their parents. "I love these old images," Justina told me while flipping through a stack of them. "And others do too." Roney's performative generosity allowed those living in poverty to attain a visual record of their lives, but his gifts—like all gifts—put these people under obligation (Mauss [1925] 1966). Gifting his photographs allowed Roney to build trust with these families, enter their homes, and then gain access to their children.

Assessing the gift as performance and the social life of Roney's photographs in Central America also sheds light on the relationship that his seeming acts of charity posit between photography and violence. Theorists have addressed the relationship between photography and violence in several well-known ways: some scholars argue that images of violence can be predatory (Sontag 1977); others insist that they are voyeuristic (Butler 2009); and still more contend that it is a civic obligation to look at photographs of war and bloodshed (Azoulay 2008). Consistent across this conversation is the idea that photographs are primarily a form of visual representation. Yet this assumption obscures a

2. This essay does not include descriptions of abuse. In the United States, a well-developed vocabulary around clerical abuse has allowed some survivors to speak publicly. In Guatemala, by contrast, survivors often requested not only anonymity but silence about the specific details of their abuse. I have respected these requests. Descriptions of abuse can also retraumatize individuals and alienate readers. It is thus enough, for the purposes of this essay, to know that photographs granted Roney access to children in Guatemala. It is not necessary to know exactly what Roney did with this access.
3. BishopAccountability.org is the largest public library of information on the Catholic clergy abuse crisis. Its vast archive of news reports related to Father David Arthur Roney (1921–2003), many of which are now decades old, helps demonstrate the reach and regularity of Roney's abusive behavior (BishopAccountability.org n.d.).

Figure 1. (previous page) Three young girls, 1998, Guatemala. (Image computer generated by Kevin Lewis O'Neill based on photo by David Roney)

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series of ethnographic facts that Roney understood all too well. The first is that photographs are not just meant to be seen but also touched, held, and gifted (Campt 2017); and the second is that gifting photographs is itself a performance. What emerges from Roney's archive, then, is an easily overlooked insight. If theorists of photography and visual culture can argue that the invention of the camera inaugurates new ways of seeing violence (Azoulay 2008:22), then it is important to add that the creation, circulation, and exchange of photographs create additional ways of perpetrating it.

Priests and Cameras

David Roney was not the only cleric with a camera, and far from the only American priest in Guatemala. Following independence from Spain in 1821, the Guatemalan government, guided by notions of order and progress, restructured its economy toward the cultivation of coffee. These efforts at liberal reform included large-scale infrastructural projects, such as the construction of roadways and ports, as well as anticlerical programs that carved out a clear division between church and state. The government at the time seized church property, expelled foreign clergy, and abolished religious orders (Hernández Sandoval 2018). By 1870, there were only 94 priests for a country of 2,000,000 people, and 50 years later, there were just 80 (Miller [1956] 1976). At one point, the country's priest-to-parishioner ratio had dropped so sharply that a diplomat from Rome, having toured the countryside, described the state of Catholicism in Guatemala as "deplorable" (Hernández Sandoval 2018:255). The Vatican eventually intervened, with Pope John XXIII (1958–1963) calling on the US Church to send a full 10% of its clergy to Latin America (Garrard-Burnett 1997). Some of those assignments took the form of full ministerial placements, with US priests pastoring Guatemalan parishes, but they also included more informal arrangements, such as mission trips, clerical exchanges, solidarity movements, and, as in the case of David Roney, semiactive retirements. A little more than 20 years after the first US priest landed in Guatemala, the country boasted 530 clerics, with 434 of them foreign-born (Adams 1970).

Most of these men from the United States brought cameras with them to Guatemala, in large part because they already owned them. Prompted by concerns over celibacy and what some described as a rash of loneliness in the American priesthood, bishops across the United States encouraged their clerics to take up such middle-class hobbies as golf and gardening, but photography quickly proved to be the most popular. Its allure had a great deal to do with the spiritual significance of this increasingly affordable technology. Priests began to seek out the presence of God in wide-angled photographs of sunsets, mountain ranges, and lonely city streets, often allowing the wonder of God's creation to reveal itself in dramatic black-and-white images (Karr and Wood 2011). The Trappist monk Thomas Merton (1915–1968), a contemporary of David Roney, became something of a Church-wide ambassador for this practice of contemplative photography (Richter 2006). Taking up the art form late in life, Merton understood his camera as an opportunity to see rather than to look at the world: this meant "being open and receptive to what comes to the eye; your vision total and not targeted" (in Seitz 1993:133–34). Turning the darkroom into a kind of confessional, photography became a way for Merton and his many colleagues in Christ to develop themselves alongside their photographs.

The net effect is that American priests photographed almost every possible element of life in the highlands of Guatemala, from the colors and customs of its Indigenous communities to breathtaking vistas of the country's volcanoes. Roney followed suit, but he also had an obvious eye for the quieter moments of village life. Some of his subjects pose for the camera, obediently standing at attention, but many more seem to be completely unaware that this priest had been watching them. Roney took photographs of children sleeping, children swimming, children playing, children sitting, children eating, children running, children reading, children laughing, children praying, children walking, and children coyly peeking out from behind a tree or an adult's leg. Much like a cartoon adopting the perspective of a child, the kind where adults sound like muted trombones and never appear directly, Roney's vision of rural Guatemala is populated almost entirely by children. Adults can sometimes be found in his images, but they tend to be visible only from the waist down, with their backs turned to the camera, or off to the side and out of focus. In all his images, Roney is the only consistently recurring subject over the age of 12.

Scholarship on the intersection of violence and photography would have trouble making sense of Roney's images. Current conversations focus almost exclusively on how we should look at photographs, with the most provocative approaches insisting that it is an ethically and politically necessary act *to see* the people featured in troubling images (Linfield 2010). Ariella Azoulay even calls it a "civic skill" (2008:14). The viewer, she argues, bears responsibility "toward what is visible" (130). Azoulay proposes that these images, rather than merely evoking empathy, shame, or compassion, should compel viewers to act. Her political optimism is why she laments the near invisibility of sexual violence outside of pornography. Azoulay reviews thousands of pictures throughout the course of her research but rarely finds images of such crimes, prompting her to ask at one point whether anyone has ever seen a photograph of a rape (217–87). Her concern is whether it is possible to fight against sexual violence if it "isn't accessible to the gaze" (218). But Azoulay's interest in optics risks overshadowing other ways in which a photograph can act. Roney's own images are as imbricated in sexual violence as a photograph of a rape would be, and maybe more so, even though his abuse never appears directly on camera. It isn't obviously accessible to the gaze.

Rather than understanding photographic violence only as something seen, as mediated primarily through visual frames, it is also important to understand photography as a performance and the photograph as a prop to be touched, displayed, and handed from one person to the next (Pinney 1998). To foreground a photograph's theatrical capacity instead of its burdens of representation (Tagg 1993) is to begin to gain some conceptual hold on Roney's practice of gifting his photographs to poor Indigenous families as a way of loading them with an impossible set of obligations. Seemingly lifted from the writings of Marcel Mauss ([1925] 1966) and then infused with the work of Erving Goffman (1959), Roney's own presentation of self in everyday life centered on the creation of a social expectation to reciprocate. Roney never expected anything material in return: most of these families lived in houses made of cornstalks. But he graciously accepted whatever they could offer, which tended to be their warmth and trust, friendship and effervescence, openness and intimacy. Roney then leveraged their generosity of spirit to gain access to their children. The truly brutal aspect of it all is that Roney's acts of violence left almost no visual trace in the photographs he gifted, as if they never happened. Tragically, they did.

Give

"He always had his camera with him," Justina told me. "It had a leather strap, and he wore it around his neck." We spoke outside the one-bedroom house where Roney had raised her. This skinny and somewhat handsome priest had retired to the highlands of Guatemala at 73 years of age to evade growing suspicions in the United States. Some of the young girls whom Roney had abused in central Minnesota had become young women, and they had decided to write their bishop about what Roney had done to them on playgrounds, in cafeterias, and at the rectory. They also described long summer days at the lake. "God has a special job for you," Roney told one of them as he inched across a blanket (Doe 2006).[4] "We really didn't know what we were touching," one woman explained. "We didn't like doing it and it scared us" (Anonymous 1987).

Once in Guatemala, Roney spent his days courting the attention of as many young children as he could. Even to this day, people's strongest memory of this man is of him roving the outskirts of town with a gaggle of kids, camera in tow and pockets full of candy. But Roney's camera was more of a curiosity than the candy. Over 90% Indigenous, with illiteracy rates once nearly as high, the town lacked regular access to electricity, phone service, and a post office at the time of his first visit in 1974. From early in the morning until well past sunset, the men and women of this town would labor on their farms or, more commonly, work for scandalously low wages on someone else's property.

4. This quotation comes from a testimonial document obtained by the law firm Jeff Anderson & Associates through the process of discovery and shared with the author. Other primary sources, including a letter from an anonymous parishioner to Roney's bishop and documents related to Roney's psychiatric treatment, were obtained in a similar fashion.



Figure 2. The rickety ferris wheel, 1999, Guatemala. (Image computer generated by Kevin Lewis O'Neill based on photo by David Roney)

This absence of opportunity is why the Diocese of New Ulm in Minnesota first founded its mission in Guatemala in 1962, in the town where Roney would later retire. The Diocese's intention from the very beginning was both to fulfill the Vatican's request to staff Latin America with priests and to improve the life chances of the Guatemalan people. Priests from Minnesota built a hospital, elementary school, and orphanage, but the mission's signature program was land redistribution, an effort that helped thousands of families acquire three acres of property, on which they produced corn and beans to eat and coffee to sell. The bishop of New Ulm at the time of Roney's retirement espoused what some liberation theologians called a "preferential option for the poor," or the idea that the Bible advocates treating the poor favorably (Gutiérrez 1971). Yet amid this poverty—especially during the country's genocidal civil war that began in 1960 and only ended with peace accords in 1996 (REMHI 1998; CEH 1999)—these American priests did not necessarily live in poverty, and thus the middle-class goods that these men owned often appeared extravagant to their neighbors. Roney's camera, in particular, was nothing short of a marvel of modern technology. From Justina's perspective as a young child, "it was miraculous."

Given the poverty and the wartime violence, on top of the country's natural beauty and vast array of Indigenous cultures, Roney could have played the part of humanitarian photographer or war correspondent. He could have even imagined himself as a freelance photographer for *National Geographic*. Instead, Roney spent his days photographing a fantasy. Amid a people overwhelmed by some of the worst levels of income inequality in the world, Roney conjured an image of American middle-class leisure. One photograph features Justina on a rickety Ferris wheel (fig. 2). She is about four years old and sits in between two older girls. Justina anxiously holds the guardrail while the others laugh with excitement. Another image includes a young girl, maybe six years old, wearing a blindfold and holding a stick. She happily swings at a piñata while other children patiently wait



Figure 3. "Justina" is among the children in a photo of the mission's elementary school playground, 2002, Guatemala. (Image computer generated by Kevin Lewis O'Neill based on photo by David Roney)

their turn. Roney had obviously imported this aesthetic from Minnesota. His photographs from America present much of the same, in large part because his parishioners in the United States expected snapshots of pony rides and birthday cakes. In Guatemala, however, these families didn't expect anything from anyone and thus considered themselves blessed to have access to any images at all. They were also tickled that these photographs evoked a comfortable kind of upward mobility, even if their immediate lives often continued in poverty.

Many of those Guatemalans also appreciated the added attention that Roney's camera created: they enjoyed not only the photographs themselves, but also the theatrical event of photography (Azoulay 2010:12). "Even just being photographed was fun," Justina once mentioned. "It was exciting." In a town relatively starved of visual history, without much access to images, Roney never once hinted that there might be limits to his supplies of film. He constantly snapped pictures—often hundreds of them in a single day—while at the same time insisting to his many subjects that they didn't need to get any of it right. They could relax in front of the camera, smile, and maybe even laugh. The children of this small town quickly took to the performance, and this yielded a trove of "vernacular photographs" (Batchen 2000) saturated with memories and emotions. One such picture from the mission's elementary school shows no less than 50 children, running and laughing in the Central American sun; three have stopped to have their picture taken (fig. 3). Justina is one of them. She is five years old and proudly holds a bottle of orange soda. The others make goofy faces. "It was always fun to pose for the camera," Justina later recalled. "To be singled out. To be special."

Developing these events into photographs demanded David Roney's generosity. As the people of this town knew well, if only because Roney would gently remind them from time to time, he traveled to Guatemala City once a month to have his many rolls of film developed. A four- to five-hour car trip, with its share of switchbacks and stretches of unpaved road, sheer drops and



Figure 4. "Rigoberta's" family portrait, 1994, Guatemala. (Image computer generated by Kevin Lewis O'Neill based on photo by David Roney)

hairpin turns, the journey cost him considerable amounts of time and money, but he persevered because it yielded thick stacks of crisp, shiny photographs. "They were so beautiful," Justina remembers, "and we were all so afraid to touch them." People would even wash their hands, at times with great ceremony, before holding his newest prints. No one wanted to get them dirty, of course, but these ablutions also seemed to confirm what Marcel Mauss had always known to be true about the gift. "The thing given is not inert," Mauss wrote. "It is alive" ([1925] 1966:10). At every step of the process, from taking the photograph to developing it and then most importantly gifting it, the photograph accrued power and affect—a visceral significance—that would deliver the recipient of Roney's gifts an unbearable burden.

Receive

"This is our most valuable object," explained a woman whom I will call Rigoberta (fig. 4). A few years older than Justina, she spoke with me inside her home, a modest structure made of cinder blocks and corrugated metal. A small flock of chickens raised a ruckus just beyond an open window as we slowly worked through multiple albums, each one filled with photographs taken by David Roney. "We've had this photograph for 30 years," Rigoberta explained. The image is of her father, mother, three sisters, and younger brother. They all sit together in two rows, with the youngest three up front and on the floor. The parents bookend the top row, sitting on either side of their two oldest daughters. It is a beautiful photograph; an effortless execution of middle-class family portraiture softened with a heartwarming degree of informality (Rose 2010). While the father stares straight into the camera without smiling, the youngest children at his feet break frame, laughing alongside each other. The mother, top right, has also cracked a bit of a smile that might soon trip into laughter.

"My mother died a few months after Father David took this photograph," Rigoberta explained. "It happened very fast," she said. "We think it was cancer."

David Roney spent much of his time in the rural highlands of Guatemala completing the sacramental labor he was sent there to do. This included morning masses, baptisms, first holy communions, marriages, last rites, and funerals. The people of this small town came to him for these acts of God, regularly seeking him out at the mission, but in between the church services and the confessions, the weddings and last rites, Roney took his photos. Given his appetites, such as they were, this was not a democratic pursuit. The visual history that he authored never aspired toward balanced coverage. He clearly had a type, and his archive evidences as much. Back in Minnesota, the therapists to whom Roney was sent following allegations of sexual abuse wrote confidential reports to his bishop about "patterns of exhibitionism and pedophilia" (NUDRB 1993) while the diocese's Review Board for Sexual Misconduct gathered evidence on how Roney comported himself in Guatemala: "Fr. Roney likes to have children around him," one report reads: "He prefers younger girls to boys. [...And] his focus has been on children of the poor and widowed" (Burke 1993). To put a slightly finer point on it: Roney tended to prey upon poor young girls who had at least one absent parent.

To track down Roney's photographs two decades after his death is to quietly map the history of his abuse, block by block, house by house, with each image pinpointing a likely site of his transgressions. One cannot imagine the feeling of relief that washes over the ethnographer when the members of a given family reply that they only have an image or two of his. It is the clearest evidence that this abusive priest passed over their house and their children. The opposite is also true. It is heartbreaking to enter a home, as I have, and see hundreds of his images taped onto walls and carefully stacked inside boxes, with the most cherished of them tucked into family bibles. This excess of images can make even the warmest home feel like a museum to clerical sexual abuse. "Father David was my godfather [*padrino*]," explained one woman, her wall postered with a thicket of his photographs. I counted more than 150 of them. "He was also the godfather to my three sisters." The images on her wall were simple snapshots of her and her sisters playing tag, marching in a band, and opening some Christmas presents that Roney himself had delivered on the morning of the 25th decades earlier.[5]

"This is the only image we have of our mother," Rigoberta explained. We once again sat in her house. The same chickens clucked within earshot. Rigoberta held the treasured object in her hands, careful not to get her fingerprints on the photograph. "We wouldn't know what our mother looked like without it," she said, adding that she and her sisters can't even distinguish their memories of their mother from this image of her. When they think about their mother, dream of her, or even pray to her, she looks like the woman in this photograph. She is relaxed, matronly, and always about to laugh. "I'm so grateful to Father David for this photograph," Rigoberta's father later added. He is now an old man with a back permanently hunched from years of working in the fields. Thirty years earlier, however, he was a relatively young widower with five children and no clear sense as to how to raise them. He would leave early in the morning for work and then not come back until late at night. Roney, it turns out, was generous enough to watch his children when he was in the fields. "I am just so grateful," he kept saying.

To receive a gift as affect-laden as a photograph is to become interdependent with someone, obligated to one day reciprocate with a different gift of approximately the same value. This is a consistent element of most every theory of gift exchange from Marcel Mauss ([1925] 1966) to Claude Lévi-Strauss ([1950] 1987) to Pierre Bourdieu (1977). The working assumption, however, is that the significance of a gift remains stable, neither sharply rising nor suddenly falling in value. Yet Roney's photograph of Rigoberta's mother was different in this regard, immediately accruing

5. The mapping of David Roney's sexual violence through the process of locating his photographs in the homes of his victims takes inspiration from the work of Eyal Weizman, who synchronized multiple video feeds to assess Israeli drone strikes in Pakistan and Gaza (Weizman 2017).

an unanticipated level of significance after her death.[6] Often the only community member with a camera, Roney did not usually print multiples; neither did he gift negatives. The photograph, an edition of one, consequently amassed ever more meaning year after year, as this simple snapshot became a family heirloom. "We used to put the photograph on display," Rigoberta explained, "but now we keep it in an album." It also did not help that Rigoberta and her sisters, after their mother died, suddenly fit the very profile that Roney had sought throughout his ministerial career. "After my mother died," Rigoberta confirmed, "Father David started giving us lots of photographs." Amid a veritable avalanche of images, the obligation to reciprocate began to feel like debt, which quickly turned into a form of emotional bankruptcy. "Did you ever try to reciprocate?" I once asked Rigoberta's father. "How could I?" he asked.

Reciprocate

David Roney first traveled to Guatemala in 1974 with a gaggle of nervous parishioners, driving from the country's international airport to the mission through the kind of mountain ridges that must have seemed unimaginable to those born and raised on the Great Plains of Minnesota. Many of those on that first trip ended up balking at the experience, complaining about bugs and the food, but David Roney did not. "I fell in love immediately with the people and with the mission program," he would later write while in treatment for sexual disorders. "The next year I went down with another group; then another" (Roney 1987). He was hooked. "I have never let as much as a year go by between visits. It was my vacation, and now, it is my work" (Roney 1987). He diligently and at times compulsively took photographs every time he traveled to the mission, and it was in this context that his practice of gifting photographs—initially, to his parishioners back home—took shape. Those in Minnesota would marvel at the lush landscapes that they saw in his images, politely commenting from time to time that their priest had a good eye, and then they would reciprocate with baked goods and bottles of scotch. It was, to reference Mauss one last time, "total service" ([1925] 1966)—that is, a fully functioning gift economy in which the capacity to perform the acts of giving and receiving allowed neighbors to achieve equilibrium through reciprocity.

Years later, back at the mission, Rigoberta's father did not own an oven to bake a cake, and he could not afford a bottle of scotch. Total service in goods would not have been possible for him, and Roney knew it, tactically plying this empty-handed widower with ever more photographs and thus burdening him with an increasingly impossible set of obligations. "Father David gave me more than I could ever have given him," Rigoberta's father once told me with a lilt of exasperation, his shoulders slumping in quiet defeat. Even the thought of his unmet obligations to David Roney seemed to exhaust this man, and Jacques Derrida (1992) would have understood why. In direct response to Mauss's functionalism, Derrida understands gift exchange as impossible. It generates not simply the obligation to reciprocate but, more profoundly, a debt that must be repaid. To escape this financial logic, for the gift to truly be a gift, Derrida argues that the giver must somehow be unaware that the gift is a gift, and the recipient must also somehow be oblivious of the giver's identity. None of those conditions were possible in Guatemala. No one could have pulled off that act, and thus Roney leveraged the impossibility of his gifts until people found themselves bound to him without any chance of escape.

Rigoberta's father tried to reciprocate Roney's generosity of photographs with the only resources that he had: an open heart and an equally open home. But rather than set his family free from the obligation to reciprocate for the photos, these attempts just ended up further ensnaring them. "Father David was with us almost every Sunday," Rigoberta remembered, and he seemed to love every moment. Roney would tell the children fantastic stories, lead them in song, and even play along with their silly games, at times running around like a child himself. Roney would also hold

6. It is worth noting that a photograph of Roland Barthes's deceased mother structures many of his reflections on photography in *Camera Lucida* (1981).

private church services just for them. He would bring his bible, chalice, and stole and consecrate the Eucharist right then and there inside their house. "Those were really beautiful moments," Rigoberta said while browsing a stack of photographs from those long afternoons. And when Roney stayed for dinner, which was often, he would let the kids use his camera, effectively allowing Rigoberta and her siblings to turn the gaze onto Roney in a temporary reversal of roles. "We would each fight to use his camera," Rigoberta remembered, "and my dad would just keep telling us to be patient." Roney would then gift those photographs to the family.

Curiously, the sheer number of photographs that Roney gifted Rigoberta's family eventually began to undercut the value of each additional image. That original photograph of the family, the one with their mother cracking a wry smile, remained priceless to them, of course, profoundly infused with affect, but there quickly formed a growing stack of castoffs marred by red eyes and excessive backlight, photographs that failed to either tell a story or spark a memory. "We kept those in a separate box," Rigoberta later explained. Otherwise, she and her siblings did not know what to do with them. "There were just so many," she said. Eventually, it became clear to the family that many of Roney's pictures had lost nearly all value: both aesthetic, given the poor quality of some of these images, and affective, given Roney's tendency to gift them in such excessive numbers. In fact, what value they did have largely seemed to accrue through their performative gifting, which provided this priest with an increasingly weak pretense to visit the family for an afternoon. "He never visited our home without a photograph," Rigoberta remembered.

Roney's final sleight of hand extended the logic of reciprocity. After Roney had spent several Sunday afternoons drinking this family's soda and eating their tortillas, he then insisted that the children spend some time with him during the week while their father worked in the fields. It was only right, he reasoned. Rigoberta's father had so generously opened his home to him, and now Roney apparently felt obligated to do the same. While Rigoberta had never asked David Roney for a single photograph and neither had her father, and while the two of them had felt somewhat pressed to welcome this man into their lives, Roney's ever-iterating manipulation of the photograph as gift provided this American priest not only with a foot in the door and a place at the table but also enough goodwill with Rigoberta's father to host his four children at his own home. It was diabolical. And it was also only the start. Unbeknownst to any of them, until the four children arrived for the first of what would become several visits, Roney had been running the same scheme with several families in town. His house was full of children.

Touch

There is at least one photograph in which both Rigoberta and Justina appear (fig. 5). They are in Roney's living room. This was a properly middle-class space outfitted with a couch, a large television set, and a videocassette recorder (VCR). There were stuffed animals, toys, and games strewn about as well as a dozen videotapes of such Disney classics as *Cinderella* (1950) and *Sleeping Beauty* (1959). Justina is nine years old in the image and wears a knitted blouse over a bikini top. Rigoberta is slightly older and appears only on the edge of the frame. They are both surrounded by a half-dozen other children. Some of them are clowning around for the camera; others are too busy eating snacks to notice anything, while one very young boy sheepishly hides behind a young girl who is herself trying to hide behind Justina. They seem intimidated or maybe just unsettled by the camera. Of course, they could not have known how important a role this camera played in facilitating this priest's abuse. Roney was a serial perpetrator, compelled to curate the world that he desperately desired. His gifts and the burden they placed on families gained him access to their homes, where he could abuse their children. He perpetrated all this violence with photography, and yet none of his abuse appears on camera.

Theorists of violence and photography have long focused on the capacity of images to elicit an ethical response from the spectator. In *Frames of War*, Judith Butler states that "our capacity to respond with outrage, opposition, and critique will depend in part on how the differential norm of the human is communicated through visual and discursive frames" (2009:77). Teju Cole, writing



Figure 5. "Justina" and "Rigoberta" can both be seen in a photo of snacktime, 2001, Guatemala. (Image computer generated by Kevin Lewis O'Neill based on photo by David Roney)

for a more general audience, echoes these arguments about visibility when he asks what it might mean to look at photographs of atrocity and torment. Putting Susan Sontag in conversation with Susie Linfield and Tina Campt, Cole also suggests that photographs of violence can be politically transformative. While he seems to wring his hands along the way, Cole ends his discussion on an optimistic note:

> In their grief, in their shock, even in their irritation at the presence of a photographer, the hope for those who are photographed in the midst of their suffering is that what is happening to them will go out into the world, and possibly, by being seen, will help bring them relief. (Cole 2008)

Both Butler and Cole, in their own way, echo Azoulay, who concludes that "the invention of photography added a new way of regarding the visible" (2008:96).

Largely unaddressed by this otherwise thick and increasingly thorough conversation is the photograph's capacity to facilitate sexual abuse, even and especially as it renders the abuse itself largely invisible. The issue is critically important for those concerned about clerical sexual abuse, especially as a growing number of North American clerics in Latin America land on stateside lists of credibly accused priests. David Roney is no outlier. In dioceses as thinly staffed as those in central Minnesota, Roney prowled about the prairie alongside more than a dozen other sexually abusive priests who also owned cameras, gifted their photographs, and traveled to the mission in Guatemala.[7] But the issue also seems imperative to address for those on the forefront of art criticism and performance theory, and especially for those interested in photography's relationship to violence. The social life of David Roney's images presses us to reconsider the sinister side of photographs as gifts, the obligations that such performances generate, and ultimately the afterlife of these images. Rigoberta and

7. The Diocese of New Ulm and the Law Offices of Anderson & Associates released a joint statement on 29 March 2016. The statement discloses the names of 16 men they mutually identified as being credibly accused of sexual abuse of a minor while they were assigned as priests (BishopAccountability.org 2016). More than a dozen new names have since been added to the list.

her family would never give up that photograph of their mother. They have had it in their family for 30 years. But what about the image in which both Justina and Rigoberta appear? Can this photograph of childhood innocence ever be dissociated from the violence in which it was complicit?

There are no obvious answers, especially since so much of the conversation today about photography and violence has thus far focused on optics rather than theatrics, on the photograph's visual qualities rather than its social life, but Justina has certainly had to wrestle with this specific issue. Over the years, she has come to learn in cascading fashion that her adoptive father not only set her apart to make her feel special but did the same to many more children in town. She has also learned that his systematic manipulation of them followed decades of nearly identical behavior in Minnesota. Among the many consequences of this implosion of personal history was the emergence of a complex question: What to do with all her photographs? Her own answers have been rather practical. She first offered them up as evidence to a team of lawyers. They sought a financial settlement with Roney's diocese in the United States for knowingly trafficking a sexual predator across international borders to protect American children at the expense of Guatemalan children. Upon reviewing the photographs, the lawyers concluded that they did not provide evidence of sexual abuse, with their forensic gaze seemingly reproducing the limitations of the art critics' gaze. There was nothing to see.

Justina's subsequent work to process her trauma, with first a therapist and then an Indigenous spiritual leader, offers a more performance-centered approach. Amid a mix of talk therapy and cleansing ceremonies, the matter of her photographs eventually came up in conversation. For much of her adult life, and certainly since the death of David Roney in 2003, Justina had kept these images in a box, out of sight, and under her bed, but her therapist and spiritual leader both suggested that she remove the photographs from her home. "So you don't look at them?" I asked. "No," Justina replied. "So they are not near me." Sliding between competing cosmologies, from the Jungian to the Mayan, consensus settled around the felt idea that the energy of these objects—their affective abundance, magical potential, raw power—is violent and that Justina's proximity to them could be toxic. While the logic does not align with the work of Roland Barthes or Tina Campt, let alone Ariella Azoulay or Judith Butler, it does provide a much-needed provocation to them all about the capacity of photographs to perpetrate violence not only as objects seen but also as things touched, held, and gifted. For it was their theatrical gifting—their embeddedness in a relational network of performance and reception—that enabled David Roney's access to Justina and others, and it is still the felt echoes of those gift exchanges that has convinced Justina to store her photographs not simply out of her sight but more profoundly beyond her touch.

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