

Alan B. Stone and the Senses of Place

“the past is a country from which we have all emigrated. . . its loss is part of our common humanity.

—Salman Rushdie[i]

The places inside matter as much as the ones outside.

—Rebecca Solnit[ii]

Like many New Yorkers, I was born and raised elsewhere. My hometown was Montreal, where I lived with my family until I was fifteen. That’s when my parents decided that, with me at risk of flunking ninth grade, it was time to send me away to boarding school. After spending more than two years in a tiny New Hampshire town, I decided to attend college in the biggest city I could get to, New York, which is where I have lived ever since. Yet, despite making a life in New York, I never quite stopped thinking of Montreal as “home.”

I begin with this autobiographical account because the nostalgia it implies initially informed my interest in the life and work of little-known Montreal-based photographer Alan B. Stone (1928–1992). In addressing Stone’s work, I am interested in exploring some of the ways in which people experience, use, and am affected by photographs. My encounter with Stone’s work made me aware of the extent to which one knows one’s past through pictures—through looking at and identifying with photographs that relate, however indirectly, to one’s lived experience. In what follows, then, I consider some implications of the familiar fact that photographs provide vivid, albeit mute, testimony to their absent subjects; and that it is precisely that absence that enables photographs to become, in Susan Sontag’s words, “inexhaustible invitations to deduction, speculation and fantasy.”[iii]

I first became aware of Stone’s photographs during a visit to Montreal in July 2001, when an artist friend, himself also a New York-based Montreal expatriate, urged me to see an exhibition of Stone’s pictures at the Ecomusée du fier monde, a local community cultural center now located in a former public bathing facility, the exuberantly Art Deco Bain Génèreux on Amherst Street in the city’s historically working class and francophone east end—a part of Montreal I would never have visited as a child. At that time, my sense of the city and its culture was severely constrained by my family’s reluctance to stray very far from the city’s enclaves of largely English-speaking privilege. Montreal is a city divided by language and ethnicity as well as by class—this being one of the many lasting geopolitical results of the defeat of the French general Louis Joseph de Montcalm by the British general James Wolfe on the Plains of Abraham in Quebec City in 1759.



Figure 1 : Untitled
(rue de la commune) c. 1951



Figure 2 : Untitled
(Port of Montreal), 1952

Stone took skillful black-and-white photographs of Montreal as it looked during the 1950s and '60s, when I was a boy growing up there. Seeing his photographs of downtown Montreal before steel-and-glass towers intruded on its sturdy stock of gray stone buildings, of Old Montreal (fig. 1) and its then bustling port (fig. 2), of suburban neighborhoods where seasonal hockey rinks attracted young people during the long winter months (fig. 3) induced a rush of memories about the place that I left at fifteen, tapping into conflicted emotions rooted deeply in the psychosexual history of my childhood. The cumulative effect of encountering Stone's photographs was jarring—not unlike coming upon a photo album documenting the life I had yet to live.

Adding considerably to photography's capacity to elicit nostalgia is the relationship it establishes between the photographic subject and the viewer. Roland Barthes described that relationship in indexical terms—as the product of light's refractory fusion of there and here,

of then and now, of death and life. The photograph, he writes, is “literally an emanation of the referent. From a real body, which was there, proceed radiations which ultimately touch me, who am here.”[iv] A distinctly photographic “presence” therefore results from the contradictory coexistence of the vividness with which a photograph represents its subject and the knowledge that the instant the shutter snaps, that subject is in every meaningful sense gone. Barthes famously named this paradoxical structure “that-has-been,” which he identified, moreover, as the noeme (the fundamental reality) of the photograph.

The evocative absence at the heart of every photograph inspired photo historian Geoffrey Batchen to describe the over-the-top embellishment of photographs in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as a strategy for overcoming the sense of absence, lack, and loss in pictures of people.[v] I prefer, however, to think of that absence in terms of an affective physics. The absence at the heart of every photograph has a generative effect, one that recalls the theory of narrative according to which a secret or an absence (of narrative information) enables a story to continue to unfold. Once that secret is divulged, once that absence is filled, narrative ceases.[vi] The combination of photography's muteness—the fact that a photograph cannot say what it lets us see—and the present absence of whatever or whomever it pictures creates a vacuum that the viewer's deduction, speculation, fantasy, and emotion rush in to fill. This project provides a case study in such affective physics.



Figure 3 : Untitled
(Hockey) c. 1953

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Figure 4 : Untitled (Newsstands) 1951

One group of Stone's Montreal photographs generated an especially powerful shock of recognition. The pictures in question—daytime shots of newsstands (fig. 4)—are in many ways unremarkable, and yet their effect on me was profound. Stone shot eighteen photographs of newsstands in and around the center of the city in December 1951, a few months after returning to Montreal from New York, where he had enrolled in courses at the now forgotten, commercially oriented School of Modern Photography on East 57th Street. Unlike American masters such as Walker Evans, who in shooting similar subjects focused more or less frontally on the visual cacophony of the printed matter on display, Stone pictured the dilapidated sidewalk structures and their displays from a discreet distance, surveying the customers and passersby and capturing the long, crisp shadows cast by the low, raking winter sun.



Figure 5 : Untitled
(Mike by Mark One) 1962

Nobody knows for certain why Stone engaged in this, his sole foray into typological photography. But given the pertinence that such structures would have to the business he would open two years later, Stone's interest in newsstands seems merely logical. Neither an art photographer nor an amateur snapshotter, Stone was a talented, resourceful, working photographer who practiced a variety of photographic genres, one of which came to dominate the rest: physique photography—sometimes campy pictures of variously lithe or beefy young men who posed for the camera flexing their muscles in next to nothing, and sometimes in nothing at all, indoors and out (fig. 5). Stone shot and sold such beefcake under the name Mark One Studio, a small, briefly thriving business he opened in 1953 while living with his mother, Edith, his older sister, Ann, and sometimes their aunt Flo in Notre-Dame-de-Grace—a middle-class neighborhood (commonly called N.D.G.) in the island-city's largely Anglo-dominated west end. From 1962 until his death in 1992, Stone continued to run Mark One out of the basement of the modest,

split-level home he shared with his mother in the postwar suburb of Pointe-Claire. Bentley Stone, Alan's father, was an insurance salesman who died in 1945 when his son was fifteen.

Mark One dates from the golden age of beefcake, when purveyors of such material could be found in cities throughout North America. In those years, Montreal occupied a special place within the bodybuilding world because of the presence there of the brothers Joe and Ben Weider—founding fathers of amateur and professional bodybuilding who made the city a center for the burgeoning sport. Bodybuilding would arguably have had special appeal to French-Canadian youths as members of Quebec's then politically and economically disenfranchised francophone majority for whom it provided a means of achieving and displaying strength and vitality. Stone

found many of his most popular models among such working-class French-Canadians at local gyms throughout the city.

The golden age of physique photography extended from the early 1950s through the mid-'60s. Inasmuch as that period predates the Stonewall Uprising and the modern movement for gay and lesbian rights,[vii] it also corresponds with the postwar demonization of sexual “deviants.” Physique magazines provided their principal consumers—closeted gay men and boys—with a dime-thin veneer of deniability that stemmed from the publications’ claims to athleticism and/or art. Before Stonewall, necessity was the mother of gay subcultural invention, giving rise to such distinctive forms as camp, as well as to beefcake’s homoerotic subterfuge. As the gay rights movement gathered momentum during the 1970s, beefcake lost ground to the more brazen charms of full-frontal gay porn—one example of how the rise of the mass movement for gay rights, and its incremental gains, corresponded with the decline of gay subcultural forms whose invention had enabled homosexuals to consolidate a sense of group identity and to find and gather with others like themselves, more or less safely.[viii]



Mark One Studio distributed beefcake in two different but related ways. Customers could order discreetly wrapped bundles of black-and-white or color prints (3 x 5” or 8 x 10”) by sending a check to the post office boxes that Stone maintained in Montreal and in Champlain, New York, just south of the Quebec-U.S. border. Prospective customers would have found alluring ads for such pictures on the end pages of *Physique Illustrated*, *Face and Physique*, *Crew*, and *Ahoy*, magazines that all bore the Mark One imprint. In a shrewd marketing ploy, the ads frequently implied that customers were ordering pictures directly from the models they desired.

One of Stone’s former models, Marcel Raymond (aka Martin Reid), once speculated that while taking photography courses in New York during the spring of 1951, Stone became keenly aware of beefcake publications, and that he met Avery Willard—a prolific photographer for the theater as well as a publisher of beefcake and, during the ’70s, of racier gay porn (under the names Willard and Champion). Raymond wondered if it was from Willard that Stone learned the rudiments of the business he would enter two years after returning to Montreal, thereby realizing the School of Modern Photography’s ambition that its students be able to earn a living as cameramen.[ix] Perhaps it was in anticipation of selling such magazines that Stone shot the newsstand pictures. Then again, as a guardedly gay man at a time when homoerotic imagery was scarce, Stone would anyway have been drawn to such kiosks and the publications they displayed.



Figure 6 : Untitled
(Welder) c.1965

My understanding of Stone's newsstand pictures results in large part from projection—specifically, from the fact that as a repressed queer kid growing up in a conservative Jewish family, newsstands were objects of obsessive fascination for me. Looking at Stone's newsstand pictures brings to mind another winter's day when, at the age of thirteen or so, I boarded the #124 bus downtown and got off at the corner of Peel and Ste. Catherine Streets. On a previous visit downtown with my mother, I had spotted what would become my destination: a ramshackle hut just south of that bustling intersection with an impressive array of little magazines. Collar turned up less against the bitter cold than against the terrifying prospect of being spotted by anyone who might have recognized me, I approached the shack, pointed to the magazine I wanted, and in one trembling motion paid for, grabbed, and stuffed it inside my coat. There it remained until I was safely locked inside my bathroom on the top floor of my family's home, from which—queer Portnoy that I was—I probably didn't emerge for a very long time. There are other such stories: me fleeing a tobacconist's shop I had wandered into that displayed a particularly rich trove of beefcake. Reaching up to look through one such magazine, I was halted in mid-reach by the voice of the proprietor barking from behind me, "Those are not for you!" I fled the premises, terrified at having been caught looking, and empty handed.

I identify with Stone's somewhat distanced point of view, which I read as cautious—indicative of a fearful desire to remain unnoticed amid the welter of dangerous situations that then threatened queers with exposure. In addition to Stone's interest in beautiful young men, it is his photographic point of view that bridges the gap between his



Figure 7 : Untitled, c. 1950

life and mine, lending support to my feeling that, although we never met, our paths crossed. I'll never know if the little magazine I bought as a frightened boy was one of Stone's. Two years after buying it, just before leaving home to attend school and, as it turned out, ultimately to make a life in the States, I destroyed all such incriminating evidence of my queer sexual desires.

Stone's practiced distance extends well beyond the newsstand pictures to encompass many of his photographic studies of Montreal during the 1950s and '60s. It is present in many of the pictures he took at the city's port on the St. Lawrence River. There, he frequently sought the protective safety of dark shed interiors to shoot pictures of burly longshoremen, merchant seamen, and other blue-collar types at work in broad daylight (see fig. 6). It is apparent as well in the nighttime pictures he shot of an

ultramodern Steinberg's—Montreal's now defunct but then dominant postwar chain of supermarkets.

Stone's surreptitiousness is poignantly present in a picture he took looking down a nondescript downtown street during what appears to be late afternoon (fig. 7). The right-hand third of the picture shows the low-slung, two-story steel frame of a building under construction. Elegant though that skeletal structure may be in its stark contrast to the dark mass of the stone building on the left, this formal juxtaposition does not move me. It corresponds with what Roland Barthes referred to as the *studium* of the picture—its general, expository contents. What does move me—what pricks my soul (here, Barthes's *punctum*)—is the extremely subtle presence of two men in overcoats and fedoras in close conversation under a lamppost adjacent to that stone building. The men stand at some distance from the photographer, who, to judge from the picture he took, had to crouch, perhaps even leaning his shoulder against the building for support in order to hold his view camera mere inches above the sidewalk.

* * *

I cannot see Kensington Gardens as I saw it as a child because I saw it only two days ago.
—Virginia Woolf

Stone's stealthy vantage point suggests surveillance, pictures taken on the sly, as if collecting evidence of some unidentified crime. He identified the nature of that offense in the early 1950s when he took a picture of a metal sign bolted to the trunk of a tree in suburban Lachine Park (fig. 8). In French and English, the sign on the tree reads: "Persons of Good Education and Morals Are Invited to This Park." Stone repeatedly took his camera to shoot the nineteenth-century Lachine Canal and its environs—its system of locks and grain silos, and the surreal sight of giant cargo ships easing through the mostly narrow waterway en route to or from the Great Lakes. During the all-too-brief, warm summer months, Stone also captured the young men and boys who congregated there to sunbathe, swim in the canal's polluted waters, and watch the ships (fig. 9). Stone shot all this just before the St. Lawrence Seaway opened in 1959, thus rendering obsolete the canal on which the city's economy as an inland port had relied for so long.



Figure 8 : Untitled
(Lachine Park) c. 1953

As the admonitory sign on the tree suggests, it took considerable courage to run a business like Mark One in Montreal during the 1950s and '60s. Historians refer to the immediately postwar period in Quebec as *les années noires* (the dark years), for the dismal economic and political circumstances of French Canadians, and the cultural paralysis that also corresponded with the seemingly interminable administration of the autocratic and corrupt provincial premier, Maurice Duplessis (1936–39, 1944–59). Duplessis maintained strategic alliances with the then powerful Roman Catholic Church as well as with Anglo and American captains of industry with the effect of perpetuating Québécois disenfranchisement.



Figure 9 : Untitled
(Lachine Canal, summer) 1953

During the latter part of the Duplessis era (1954–57), Montreal’s mayor was the crime-fighting and deeply homophobic Jean Drapeau, who would later usher Montreal into its mid-century modernist apotheosis with Expo 67. Throughout the period of modernization and reform—from 1960 to 1966, Premier Jean Lesage led Quebec through sweeping reforms dubbed *La Revolution tranquille* (the quiet revolution)—and into the early 1970s, Drapeau’s morality squads regularly raided commercial establishments and public parks where gay men gathered, especially in the run-ups to events such as Expo 67 and the Olympic Games in 1976. The police regularly rounded up suspected homosexuals in raids that made sensational headlines in local tabloids. With an added touch of malice that exemplifies postwar anti-queer bigotry, journalists often named the accused in print—sometimes with lethal consequences. When it did not lead to violent arrest, conviction, fines, and/or imprisonment, exposure as a homosexual meant disgrace, personal ruin, and sometimes suicide.[x] Homosexual acts remained illegal in Quebec and throughout the rest of Canada until Prime Minister Pierre-Elliot Trudeau passed the Omnibus

Bill of 1969, the passage of which Trudeau had advocated by stating with eloquent simplicity that there is no room for the State in the bedrooms of the nation’s consenting adults—enlightened legislation that did not, however, stop the harassment of Canadian gay men and lesbians well into the 1970s.

Adding poignancy to Alan B. Stone’s enterprise is the fact that this devotee of youthful male beauty and strength was himself a bent-over, stocky man who depended on canes and the assistance of friends to get around—this, as a result of having been stricken with a virulent form of arthritis (possibly ankylosis arthritis) by the time he was barely twenty. During the 1960s, Stone convinced friends, including models who became his friends, to take the wheel of his beloved camper and escort him on road trips to picturesque destinations in western Canada. In Anahim, British Columbia, for example, Stone shot unforgettable pictures of a small, regional rodeo (fig. 10)—further proof of his appreciation for archetypal embodiments of rugged masculinity. One such model/friend/chauffeur, Billy Hill, became indirectly involved in a brush with the law that threatened both Stone and his livelihood.



Figure 10 : Untitled
(Rodeo)

In 1961, following a three-week investigation by Lieutenant Jacques Saulnier of the Montreal Morality Squad, the police raided the Caruso Physical Culture Studio—a gym and photo studio run by one Jimmy Caruso. Caruso, who also shot pictures of Billy Hill, was charged with possessing “obscene photographs of males” and conspiring with other, unnamed persons to distribute them nationally and internationally. According to reports in the local press, police seized six thousand photographs, including bundles packed and ready for shipment. Worst of all, they seized Caruso’s mailing list. The police also secured a warrant to search Stone’s suburban home in Pointe Claire, where they found nothing incriminating

enough to bring charges. The experience was sobering, to put it mildly. The exposure of Caruso's customers had a chilling effect on Stone's business as well, leading him to conclude many years later that as a result his business went "down the tubes."

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Figure 11 : Untitled
(Scout demonstrates life saving technique) 1952

Stone's experience at New York's School of Modern Photography may have enhanced his skills while consolidating his commercial mind-set. But he first learned to take pictures as a boy scout at summer camp, where he earned a photography merit badge. The Boy Scouts of Canada recognized Stone's proficiency. From the late 1940s and well into the '50s, the Scouts commissioned him to shoot pictures ranging from conventional headshots of individual cub scouts to sequences showing older scouts engaging in various, mostly water-related, sports. He also covered the World Boy Scout Jamborees at typical Canadian locales such as Niagara-on-the-Lake in Ontario and the Tamaracouta Scout Reserve on Lake Tamaracouta in Quebec's Laurentian Mountains. Later in the 1950s, having run Mark One for a number of years, and having gained a degree of professionalism in concert with a certain loss of innocence, Stone took his gear to Camp Samac on the bucolic shores of Lake Samac in Oshawa, Ontario. There, he took some of his most subtly homoerotic and formally elegant pictures showing scouts camping, swimming, diving, and demonstrating water safety and lifesaving techniques. Not incidentally, this enabled him to

shoot handsome youths in period Jantzen and Speedo trunks, sometimes performing mouth-to-mouth resuscitation (see fig. 11).

Seeing Stone's pictures of scouts at camps evoked memories of Camp Modin, the Jewish (kosher), lakeside summer camp just off Route 2 between Canaan and Skowhegan, Maine, where my siblings, cousins, and I spent summers together between the ages of six and fourteen or so. Immersed in Stone's photograph of a shirtless blonde scout painting a rowboat, his ribs mirroring those of the boat he paints (fig. 12), I can feel something of the excitement that I felt in being physically as close to such a boy, or to one of the young men who were our counselors, as Stone then was when he took this picture. Summer camp was where I first felt homesick, but it was also the crucible in which my queer sexual longings were forged. Confronted by such pictures, the senses of the place I think of as "home" dilate to encompass not one but three geographical coordinates: Montreal, of course; summers in Maine; and New York City, where my dad worked, where my family often went on holidays in the 1950s. One day during his stay in New York in April 1951, Stone took his camera to the southeast corner of Central Park, where he shot the towers lining the east side of Fifth Avenue between 59th and 61st Streets, with a lone figure seated by a pond in the foreground. That skyline then was dominated by the majestic mass of the Savoy Plaza Hotel (1927, designed by McKim Meade and White), where my family and I stayed several times during the '50s.



Figure 12 : Untitled (Scout painting boat)

The nostalgia that overtakes me in looking at Stone's photographs corresponds only in part with current dictionary definitions of that historically mutable term. Merriam-Webster Online defines nostalgia as "1: the state of being homesick 2: a wistful or excessively sentimental yearning for return to some past period or irrecoverable condition." Setting aside the modifiers "wistful or excessively sentimental," which reek of patriarchal cultural prejudices,[xi] I identify with the "yearning for return to some past period or irrecoverable condition"—"irrecoverable" being indispensable to that recognition. The alternative to such reflective nostalgia, which Svetlana Boym calls "restorative," presupposes access to the truth about the past and is therefore instrumental in perpetuating the toxic myths of various nationalisms.[xii] The place of childhood is irrecoverable in ways that go beyond even the subjective transformations that remove one's present from one's past sense of self. For example, since the 1950s Montreal has been not only physically but also politically and socially transformed as a result of the attenuated process of reform and decolonization throughout Quebec, which extends throughout my life.

Furthermore, as Shira Segal writes, the home of childhood exists "mostly as a place in the imagination." [xiii] It therefore follows that only in the imagination can one hope to experience in some limited yet no less profound sense the return for which the nostalgic longs. After all, as Rebecca Solnit asserts, "the places inside matter as much as the ones outside." [xiv] Encountering the right body of photographs can prompt just such a return. Neither spatial nor temporal, this affective return affords a sense of emotional connection with the past, which in every other way remains remote. As a means of reflecting on past life, nostalgia can respond to what Roberta Rubenstein identifies as the "universal inevitability of separation of loss," a lack of subjective wholeness that arguably is the "existential condition of adulthood." [xv] The imaginary return consoles as it also helps to restore at least some sense of subjective wholeness to the adult, such returns contributing as well to the fact that I, for one, feel a greater sense of wholeness in middle age than ever in childhood.

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NOTES

[i] Salman Rushdie, "Imaginary Homelands," in *Imaginary Homelands* (London, Granta Books/Viking Penguin, 1991), p. 12.

[ii] Rebecca Solnit, *A Field Guide to Getting Lost* (New York, Viking, 2005), p. 118.

[iii] Susan Sontag, "In Plato's Cave," *On Photography* (New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977), p. 23.

[iv] Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, trans. Richard Howard, (New York, Hill and Wang, 1981), p. 80

[v] See Geoffrey Batchen, *Forget Me Not* (New York, Princeton Architectural Press, 2004).

[vi] Tzvetan Todorov, "The Secret of Narrative," in Todorov, *The Poetics of Prose*, trans. Richard Howard (Ithaca, NY, The Cornell University Press, 1977), pp. 143-178.

[vii] Riots at New York City's Stonewall Inn June 27-28, 1969, are widely identified with the inception of the Gay Liberation Movement. See Martin Duberman, *Stonewall* (New York, Penguin, 1991).

[viii] See Daniel Harris, *The Rise and Fall of Gay Culture* (New York, Hyperion, 1997).

[ix] Interview between Marcel Raymond and the author, November 9, 2002. In an interview with queer historians Thomas Waugh and Ross Higgins, Alan Stone remembers meeting Lou Elson, a publisher whose imprint, Acme, appears on the contents pages of many Mark One publications. Unpublished transcript in the collection of Les Archives gaies du Québec, where Stone's negatives and other materials and reside.

[x] In January 1955, Dr Horst Kohl, a German national employed by Montreal's Royal Victoria Hospital was arrested for taking a room for himself and a man he had picked up at a downtown tavern. Rather than appear in a court hearing, Kohl overdosed on barbiturates rather than endure further humiliation and possible imprisonment. His frozen body was found in Mount Royal Park—a historically notorious gay cruising ground—on January 23, 1956, my 7th birthday.

[xi] On the sexism and homophobia that are endemic to the prejudice against the sentimental, which dates back to the dawn of modernist culture, see: Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *The Epistemology of the Closet* (Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1990), esp. pp. 91-130.

[xii] Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York, Basic Books, 2001).

[xiii] Shira Segal, “From the Private to the Public: Photography, Film, and the Transmission of Cultural Memory in Hollis Frampton’s (nostalgia),” in *Text, Practice, Performance*, VI, (2005), p. 35.

[xiv] Solnit, p. 118.

[xv] Roberta Rubenstein quoted in Segal, p. 35.