Émile Zola's Family Photography and the Quest for Artistic Legitimacy

Meredith LEHMAN
University of Texas at Austin

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article examine une sélection de photographies de famille prises par Émile Zola et qui montrent l'auteur, Jeanne Rozerot et leurs deux enfants à leur demeure de Verneuil entre 1897 et 1902. Ces portraits idylliques de la famille "illégitime" de Zola, dont certains furent rassemblés dans un album de photographies intitulé "Histoire vraie," mythologisent les thèmes de lignée, succession et unité, et déstabilisent la politique de l'hégémonie de la famille qui prévaut en France au XIXe siècle. En considérant ces portraits de famille et l'album de photographies comme un espace d'interaction entre le sujet photographié, le photographe et le spectateur, il est possible de mieux comprendre l'enjeu de la "véritable histoire" que ces images racontent. Bien que ces photographies n'aient pas été destinées au public, elle nous semblent jouer un rôle crucial dans le processus incessant de la construction de l'identité artistique de l'auteur naturaliste à la fin de sa carrière. Le choix fait par Zola de se présenter devant l'objectif comme le père de sa famille et de ses photographies, fait de la photographie un processus (pro)créateur, qui remet en question les associations établies à l'époque entre le naturalisme et la photographie envisagés comme des formes mimétiques de représentation qui, par leur recherche de la vérité, niaient de façon ostensible toute prétention à une légitimité artistique.

In the summer of 1897, Émile Zola took a series of family portraits of his children, Denise and Jacques, at the family's home in Verneuil. Several of these photographs he arranged and assembled in an album entitled "Denise et Jacques, histoire vraie."[1] Like many family albums in bourgeois homes at the time, Zola's has a leather cover embossed in gold lettering. The precious gold clasp highlights the intimate nature of the album whose pages would be flipped through, held, and gazed upon by present and future family members. A letter, included with the album, from the author to Jeanne Rozerot, Zola's mistress and mother of the children, dedicates it to her as a private gift.[2] Nevertheless, the album title explicitly alludes to a "true story," bringing to mind the "histoire naturelle et sociale" of the *Rougon-Macquart* series and pointing to the naturalist writer's faith in the mimetic realism of photographic representation.

Here, however, the family narrative is told through photography. Indeed, the book-like cover presents the photographs under the guise of verbal representation, an idea further reinforced by the presence of Zola's name that asserts authorship for the photo-album. Keeping in mind that the album was made for Zola's "illegitimate" family (in legal terms in Third-Republic France), and following Pierre

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[1] All images included in this paper are taken from François Émile-Zola and Massin's *Zola Photographe* (Paris: Denoël, 1979). They are reproduced here with the permission of Brigitte Émile-Zola.

[2] The handwritten dedication reads: "À ma bien aimée Jeanne, je dédie cet album des photographies que j'ai faites de nos chers enfants, Denise et Jacques, dans leur jardin de Verneuil, de juin à septembre 1897" (reprinted in François-Zola and Massin 52).

Bourdieu's claim that a primary function of photography is its "*family function*"[3] to secure identities and immortalize the family unit, we can better understand what is at stake in Zola's "true story." The quest for familial legitimacy in these portraits, as I will show, equally demonstrates the writer's attempt to stake out and immortalize his artistic legitimacy at the end of the nineteenth century through photography, a medium whose reproductive and mimetic capacity Zola initially criticizes for diminishing the role of the artist.

Critics examining Zola's photography have remained divided on how to situate the images in relation to the author's literary work. Are they an extension of Zola's naturalist writing or the product of a private hobby at the end of his career?[4] In "Zola en images," a special issue of *Les Cahiers naturalistes* (1992), Alain Buisine and John Lambeth posit that Zola's family photographs capture intimate, celebratory moments of family life so that, as Buisine explains, "Zola photographe n'est nullement l'ombre du Zola romancier."[5] More recently, however, Anna Gural-Migdal's study of a "poétique de l'image" in Zola's naturalism indicates, as she explains, that "l'intérêt de Zola pour la photographie n'est donc en rien négligeable, car il convie le passage à une vision d'écriture interpellée par la cinématographie, confirmant en cela qu'il y a un décloisonnement des médiums dans la pratique artistique zolienne."[6] I will consider Zola's domestic photographs, their composition and the context of their production, from a slightly different angle. Though the intended audience of Zola's novels and photographs differ, photography played a crucial role in the on-going construction of the naturalist author's artistic identity and aesthetics of representation. It is clear in examining a selection of photographs taken by and of Zola and his family, many of which are included in the 1897 family album made for Jeanne, that these idyllic family portraits visualize and mythologize themes of lineage, succession, and fertility, so that Zola's self-fashioning in front of the camera as the father-figure of his family, as well as of the photographs themselves, acknowledges photography as a (pro)creative process. In doing so, Zola calls into question nineteenth-century associations between naturalism and photography as imitative forms of representation whose search for truth ostensibly negated artistic intent.

In the mid- and late-nineteenth century, photography served as both a model and counter-model for writers and artists, shaping their artistic strategies and identities in relation to the camera. As Victorian scholar Nancy Armstrong explains, authors needed to "confirm, adjust, criticize, or update" their writing in a world largely "overdetermined by images."[7] Literary critics and authors alike compared the realist and naturalist novel to photography, often presenting the medium as a source of anxiety over the respectable boundaries between the disciplines by labeling works "photographic" to signal their opposition to the ideals of Art.[8] Emulating the camera and its so-called cataloguing and copying of surface realities, these literary techniques denied the personal and subjective realm of the imagination, mirroring instead a mechanical process that required no artistry. "As realism moved into a more demanding position in artistic

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[3] Pierre Bourdieu, *Photography: A Middle Brow Art* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990) 19.

[4] Whereas Alain Buisine and John Lambeth distinguish between *Zola photographe* and *Zola romancier*, Alfred Cohenoff argues that his photographs share similar themes and qualities to his writing. See his article "Zola et la photographie: amateur, reporter, ou artiste," *Les Cahiers naturalistes* 66 (1992): 285-301.

[5] Alain Buisine, "Les chambres noires du roman," *Les Cahiers naturalistes* 66 (1992): 250.

[6] Anna Gural-Migdal, *L'Écrit-Écran des Rougon-Macquart: Conceptions iconiques et filmiques du roman chez Zola* (Villeneuve d'Ascq: Presses Universitaires du Septentrion, 2012) 256. In her conclusion, Gural-Migdal discusses the modernist sensibility in Zola's photographs that, like his writing, reveals a cinematic quality that transcends the limits of photographic framing.

[7] Nancy Armstrong, *Fiction in the Age of Photography: The Legacy of British Realism* (Cambridge, US: Harvard University Press, 1999) 3.

[8] For more on the pejorative use of the term "photographic" as it was used by critics in nineteenth-century France, see Jill Kelly, "Photographic Reality and French Literary Realism: Nineteenth-Century Synchronism and Symbiosis," *The French Review* 65.2 (1991): 195-205.

considerations," Jill Kelly explains, "photography and the realist novel found themselves allied on the wrong side of the realist/idealist debate. The use of photographic comparisons when speaking of a novel lies at the heart of a fundamental clash in values and mirrored the threat that critics felt realism posed to aesthetics."[9] The referential qualities of photography and the camera's alleged guarantee of objectivity problematized what Pierre Bourdieu terms the medium's "cultural legitimacy," or its place within hierarchal systems of representation. Charles Baudelaire, for example, famously laments photography's rising prestige in "Le Public moderne et la photographie," observing that "le peintre devient de plus en plus enclin à peindre, non pas ce qu'il rêve, mais ce qu'il voit."[10] Baudelaire's outspoken criticism of the new industry suggests that photography encroaches upon the other more reputable visual arts, forcing artists to compromise their vision by trading in their eyes (and, more importantly, the mind's eye of the imagination) for the camera and its aesthetic of imitation.

Yet the longstanding emphasis on the rivalry between literature and photography obscures the symbiotic intersections between the disciplines and ignores the fact that many writers and photographers collaborated and deliberately traversed the boundaries of genre. Writers like Émile Zola self-identified as a photographer and employed narrative strategies such as framing to emulate a photographic language. For Zola, photography served as a trope for defining his literary project because it promoted the value of art that was "true-to-life" and focused outward on social realities; yet his engagement with photography has less to do with documentation and more to do with the narrative and aesthetic potential of images. While Zola's writing about his photographs is limited to journal entries and correspondence that describe when and where he took pictures, his theoretical writing and art criticism provide insight into how photography shaped his artistic identity and narrative strategies.

Reacting to the idealized, and therefore "flawed," aesthetics of romanticism that privileged individuality and interiority, naturalism valorized an empirical and positivist method as an essential component of the scientific novel, finding a fitting metaphor in the camera. Based largely on the writings of philosopher Auguste Comte, physiologist Claude Bernard, and critic Hippolyte Taine, Zola's "Le Roman expérimental" (1880) defines the naturalist writer as "le photographe des phénomènes,"[11] drawing a parallel between the novelist's pen and the mechanisms of the camera. Zola also alludes to photography in his art criticism, evoking the language of transparency and immediacy to describe the importance of photographic forms of observation in painting. For Zola, by venturing outside of the studio and placing subjects under the light of the sun, impressionism shared a common vision with naturalism. He expresses appreciation for those artists who aspire "sans doute, avant tout à transmettre l'impression exacte […] à la saisir et à la transmettre immédiatement."[12] Though representation is necessarily mediated through the artist, as Zola concedes, "l'écran réaliste" is nonetheless as transparent and impartial as a photographic glass plate: "L'Écran réaliste est un simple verre à vitre, très mince, très clair, et qui a la prétention d'être si parfaitement transparent que les images le traversent et se reproduisent ensuite dans leur réalité" (*OC* I 74). The trope of the camera therefore characterized and legitimized the conventions of naturalist aesthetics, suggesting that modern authors and painters could likewise eliminate the

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[9] Kelly 199.

[10] Charles Baudelaire, "Le Public moderne et la photographie," *Salon de 1859*. *Études Photographiques* 6 (1999): 25.

[11] Émile Zola, *Œuvres complètes*, éd. Henri Mitterand, 15 vols. (Paris: Cercle du Livre Précieux, 1966-1970) X 1178. Further references will be abbreviated *OC* and noted parenthetically in the text with the volume and page number.

[12] Émile Zola, *Mon Salon* (Paris: Gallimard, 1970) 278. Zola's defense of Impressionism's ability to paint using the experimental method was also met with skepticism over the ability of artists to transpose the "realness" of nature onto the canvas. In 1879, Zola criticized Manet's technical shortcomings that he attributed to the fact that "sa main n'égale pas son œil" (363). Again in 1884, Zola observes that "les doigts n'obéissaient pas toujours aux yeux" (320). We can see here how the camera might offer a fitting solution.

inconsistencies of human vision, at least in theory, by representing life with the same attention to observing subjects as the mechanical apparatus.

Though Zola initially sets up a parallel between naturalism and photography, he also complicates the analogy between these modes of representation in order to assert the novel's autonomy: "Un reproche bête qu'on nous fait, à nous autres écrivains naturalistes, c'est de vouloir être uniquement des photographes" (*OC X* 1180). Here, Zola points to the potential shortcomings of photography as lacking room for experimentation and originality on the part of the artist. For Zola, a work of art is comprised of two elements: "l'élément réel, qui est la nature, et l'élément individuel, qui est l'homme."[13] While the natural world is an observable fixed reality, the individuality of the artist produces a work of art that is mutable. Without the temperament of the artist, as he explains, "tous les tableaux devraient être forcément de simples photographies."[14] If Zola elsewhere suggests that photography models the unmediated observation essential to the experimental method, he nevertheless proposes that photography is inherently limited because it does not allow room for experimentation, which he defines in terms of artistic intervention on the part of the artist. In this formulation, artistic agency is not possible in photomechanical processes and thus a photograph does not achieve the status of an art. Be that as it may, Zola's early ambivalence and inconsistent views on photography could simply be theoretical posturing − a desire to privilege verbal representation in the face of new and potentially more real forms of visual representation. By acknowledging the similarities while insisting on the differences, Zola responds to myriad contemporary critics who dismissively compared realism and naturalism to photography.

This certainly seems plausible given that Zola did not actually begin taking his own photographs until 1894, after the publication of "Le Roman expérimental" and the completion of the *Rougon-Macquart* series, and less than ten years before his unexpected death. Zola was, however, already very familiar with the medium; his close group of friends included famed photographers such as Nadar, Étienne Carjat, and Pierre Petit, and he was one of the most photographed authors of the nineteenth century. In this short time, Zola became a prolific amateur photographer, taking roughly six-thousand photographs. Most of the images feature everyday scenes from his surrounding milieu, including, for example, his family at home and on vacation, trains near his home in Médan, his exile in Britain from 1898-1899, and the 1897 and 1900 *Exposition Universelle* in Paris. While the photographs show individuals engaged in their daily life and record events in both his family's and France's history, these images prove photography was more than a bourgeois-household hobby. Instead it offered the author the opportunity to experiment with new conceptual and material aspects of representing himself and his world, demonstrating Zola's lifelong interest in new forms of representation, technology, and image-making.

Fascinated by the process as well as the product, Zola experimented with developing negatives in the three darkrooms in his homes. He used different developing papers to test aesthetic effects, as well as innovative camera angles and sizing formats, even the unusual 3.5x12 inches, all of which points to an interest in framing and perspective. His celebrated photographs taken from the stairs of the Eiffel Tower, for example, demonstrate a modernist sensibility, using high-angle shots that prefigure the work of later avant-garde photographers, like Henri Cartier-Bresson and André Kértesz. In one photograph (fig. 1) of the Champs de Mars, Zola incorporates the beams of the iron structure to compose a de-centered frame within the space of the already-framed image, capturing visually his definition of a work of art as "un coin de la création *vu* à travers un tempérament" (emphasis mine, *OC* X 20).[15] In

[13] Zola, *Mon Salon* 60.
[14] Zola, *Mon Salon* 60.
[15] All images included in this paper are taken from François Émile-Zola and Massin's *Zola Photographe* (Paris: Denoël, 1979) are reprinted with the permission of Brigitte Émile-Zola.

keeping with his naturalist concern for "le moment" and impressionism's interest in the effects of light, Zola also photographed in all seasons and weather conditions and even took several rare night-time photographs of the 1900 *Exposition Universelle*.

Fig. 1. Émile Zola, View of the Château d'Eau and the Palace of Electricity from the Eiffel Tower, 1900, Paris.

The principal subject of Zola's photographs, in terms of quantity of images, is his family. Recent theories on family photography and albums from the work of Geoffrey Batchen, Marianne Hirsch, and Yeon-Soo Kim have shown that domestic photography and the genre of the photo-album are performative spaces that often belie reality, presenting an ideal and idealized means of reconstructing subjectivity.[16] Family photographs and albums are mnemonic objects aimed at the future, as Batchen posits, and therefore "are not really about remembering; they are instead dedicated to the fear of forgetting or of being forgotten."[17] The images included in albums are therefore *selected*, curated, and arranged to create a narrative, highlighting and perhaps even erasing moments, and shaping the viewer's means of self-knowledge through familial relations.[18] This makes the family album a dialectical space of interaction, like portraiture, between the photographed subject, the photographer, and the viewer. If we consider these photographic portraits in light of what Richard Brilliant terms "the artist's collusive involvement in the fabrication of an identity for the subject,"[19] then Zola's photographs of and with his family at home reveal as much about Zola the artist as they do about his private life, providing us a more complex view of the author as a photographer and nuancing our understanding of the role that photography played in construction of his artistic identity at the end of his lengthy career.

At first glance, none of the portraits in the family album appear to be retouched at the level of the print. That is to say, Zola does not manipulate the negative or the image once it has been developed. Nevertheless, several of these images reveal artistic intervention through staging. In one photograph

[16] For discussion of family albums, see Geoffrey Batchen, *Forget Me Not* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2004); Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames*: *Photography, Narrative and Postmemory* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997); Yeon-Soo Kim, *The Family Album: Histories, Subjectivities, and Immigration in Contemporary Spanish Culture* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2005).

[17] Batchen 47.

[18] Hirsch 21.

[19] Richard Brilliant, *Portraiture* (Cambridge, US: Harvard University Press, 1991) 90.

(fig. 2) of Denise and Jacques, the children are pictured running towards the camera while holding hands. The scene conveys a sense of childhood bliss and naturalness, emphasizing movement and spontaneity unlike the formality of a posed portrait. Upon closer examination, however, the viewer can notice that Zola has placed markers on the ground to time the moment of aperture. The presence of the marker within the frame thus indicates Zola's manipulation of the scene from behind the camera. Recall for a moment Zola's complaint in "Le Roman expérimental" that the photographer merely played the role of observer, unable to intervene *directly* in a scene. However, in this image, a composition that is repeated in at least four photographs, it is easy to imagine that he experimented with the placement of the marker to achieve the desired effect of a snapshot. As such, these portraits reveal a re-enactment or performance of daily life rather than a record of it, thereby exposing these seemingly candid and informal shots as the product of artistic framing and composition.

Fig. 2. Émile Zola, Denise and Jacques running towards the camera, June-September 1897.

Similarly, in another photograph of Zola and his two children (fig. 3) at tea in their garden at Verneuil, we can identify the use of a *déclencheur*, a remote-controlled shutter release system that Zola designed and perfected to capture discreetly a self-portrait, signaling an interest in positionality and self-reflection. In this photograph, Zola looks away from the camera, absorbed in the jovial and intimate moment. Denise and Jacques are also turned away from the camera, presumably unaware of its presence. Here, the interaction between father and children, and, by extension, the interaction between camera and its subjects, appears unplanned. Yet the *déclencheur* in Zola's left hand exposes the photograph's means of production and his role in its realization. He is both the producer of the image and the photographed subject, underscoring that the camera foremost captures *his* artistic interpretation. So while Zola's photographic subjects are taken from "life, life as it is,"[20] as Pierre Harmant explains, more importantly, these images show the *desire* to show life as it is. Far from accepting photography's alleged negation of human authorship, Zola's efforts to capture seemingly unprompted moments exhibit the medium's ability to manipulate the "real" via the camera's operator. In other words, what is pictured within the frame is a stylized image so that, contrary to what he suggests in his earlier theoretical writing

[20] Pierre Harmant "Émile Zola: chasseur d'images," *Le photographe* 52 (1962): 540.

and art criticism, the photograph is here a product of experimentation rather than artless documentation, and bears the unmistakable imprint of the hand of the artist.

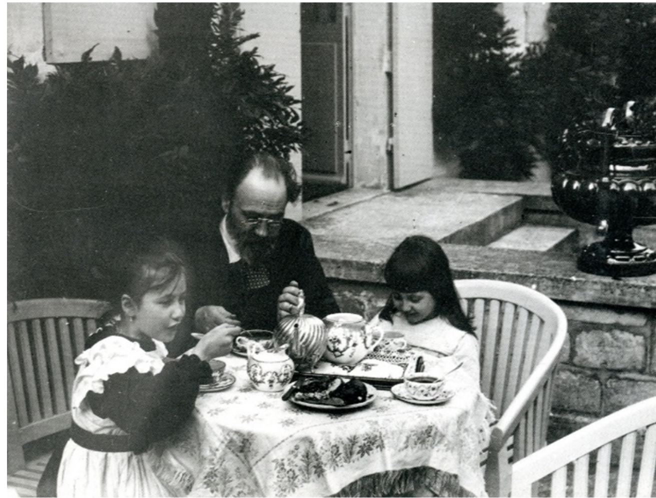

Fig. 3. Émile Zola, Tea-time in the garden, June-September 1897.

For the most part, the family portraits Zola took do not rely on the conventions of studio photography. Not only did he photograph outdoors rather than in a studio, but his compositions forgo the use of props common at the time, such as benches or handrails. Still, stuffed animals, dolls, and swings function within these portraits as symbolic accessories to construct scenes emblematic of family. Both Denise and Jacques are photographed in the garden (fig. 4, fig. 5) encircled by toys that have been gathered, arranged, and seated in chairs, much like the children. These commonplace accessories take on a greater significance, as Graham Clarke reminds us, because they situate the photographed subject within a field of meaning that identifies and validates the subject through his/her belongings.[21] They also indicate the rise of commodity culture and the role objects played in constructing one's personal, social, and cultural lineage.[22] Amidst the nineteenth-century's unease over inheritance rights and social paternity, these objects become status symbols, calling attention to themes of ancestry and inheritance legal succession. Indeed, shifting views on family and family values, prompted by the enactment of the Napoleonic *Code Civil* in 1804 and later the *Loi Naquet* in 1894, led to growing uncertainty over individual and social inheritance. The *Code Civil*, in an effort to do away effectively with illegitimacy, ended the act of primogeniture and assigned legal paternity to the husband to ensure that property would pass down his line. The legal system's codification of inheritance laws, however, led to disquiet over potentially unfaithful women and their illegitimate offspring as both Nicholas White and Andrew Counter have shown.[23] In Zola's fiction, the troubling question of heredity is dramatized through the transfer of

[21] Graham Clarke, *The Photograph* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997) 3.
[22] Julia Ballerini, "Recasting Ancestry: Statuettes as Imaged by Three Inventors of Photography," in *The Object as Subject*, ed. Anne W. Lowenthal (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996) 44.
[23] For more on family politics in nineteenth-century France, see Nicholas White, *The Family in Crisis in Late Nineteenth-Century French Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999) and Andrew Counter, *Inheritance in Nineteenth-Century French Culture: Wealth, Knowledge and the Family* (Oxford: Legenda, 2010).

property and wealth, as well as through the often cynical depictions of bourgeois marriage and familial relations.[24]

To return to the photographs of Denise and Jacques, the life-size dolls juxtapose real and unreal families in ways that reflect heredity through composition. Bringing together different concepts of family within the "legitimizing" space of the photograph, the children figure another kind of possession – that of Zola. By staging romanticized childhood moments at home, these family photographs reveal a tension between everydayness and the performativity of selfhood in which these images, as Marianne Hirsch observes, "locate themselves precisely in the space of contradiction between the myth of the ideal family and the lived reality of family life."[25] The use of props is indeed telling of Zola's fixation with enacting scenes that affirm the importance of home, family, and inheritance.

Fig. 4. Émile Zola, Denise and her toys, June-September 1897.

Fig. 5. Émile Zola, Jacques and his toys, June-September 1897.

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[24] Kate Griffiths explores Zola's preoccupation with the theme of inheritance in *Émile Zola and the Artistry of Adaptation* (Oxford: Legenda, 2009). In her chapter on *La Terre*, for example, she situates representations of inheritance in relation to the text's own origins in Shakespeare's *King Lear* and its later progeny in André Antoine's cinematic adaptation.

[25] Hirsch 8.

Taken as a whole, Zola's family album establishes a mythos that negotiates and contests concepts of family and legitimacy in nineteenth-century France. In fact, four years before the album's completion, Zola writes in a letter to Jeanne of his desire to recognize publicly his "second family" and his frustrations over his inability to do so. As he writes:

> Je te raconte cela, ma grande Jeanne, parce qu'en ce moment, j'ai songé à vous. Oui, il y avait, dans un petit coin de France, trois êtres qui me sont bien chers, et, s'ils étaient dans l'ombre, ils ne partageaient pas moins ma gloire. Je veux que toi et mes deux mignons en aient leur part. Un jour, il faudra bien qu'ils soient mes enfants pour tout le monde […]. Je veux qu'ils partagent le nom de leur père.[26]

His photographic portraits thus move Denise and Jacques from the shadows, rendering their lives visible within the conventions of family frames and affirming their subjecthood through a space coded within the traditions and ideals of family life. Using an instrument of ideology to resist it, "the same process that constructs the idea of family," as Kim observes, "can transform the unfamilial into the familial."[27] Moreover, underpinning Zola's letter concerning his socially marginalized children is the anxious desire for the so-called "père du naturalisme" to be remembered publicly as a father-figure. The certainty of his paternity is figured forth in the genre itself through the photograph's indissoluble connection to its referent that could not, in the words of Julia Ballerini, "produce bastards."[28]

Much like the symbolically charged space of the family album, the setting of the photographs authorizes the children's identity so that to be "at home" symbolizes the physical location of the family as a space of legitimacy. It is also a private space emblematic of unity and reproduction that opposes the decadence and illegitimacy commonly associated with the public sphere. The home therefore establishes a spatial division that takes part in what Nicholas White terms a "paranoid patriarchal imagination"[29] that worked to closet the family away from the infidelity associated with public space. In one image (fig. 6), the house at Verneuil is arguably the subject of the photograph. In it, Denise and Jacques stand within the frame of the first-floor window, their bodies dwarfed in comparison to the house that provides a shield around them. By enclosing Denise and Jacques within its borders, the house places them inside, to avoid repeating visual structures of belonging, in which the framed window, like the framed image, secures identities. Keeping in mind that the album would be passed down from generation to generation, Zola positions the children's bodies in the home, indicating his desire to establish a "continuity of line" and a record of family life that, as Bourdieu observes, serves as a "physical trace of succession"[30] mirrored formally in the reproducibility of the photographic image.

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[26] Francois-Zola and Massin 43. In 1907, five years after the death of Émile Zola, Alexandrine Zola reconciled with Jeanne Rozerot and allowed their children legally to take the name of the author. It was also this same year that a law was passed in France that legitimized children born outside of marriage by the subsequent marriage of their parents.
[27] Kim 22.
[28] Ballerini 54.
[29] White 9.
[30] Bourdieu 31.

Fig. 6. Émile Zola, Denise and Jacques at the house in Verneuil, June-September 1897.

More conventional portraits of the family emphasize the biological connection between Zola and his children. In them, all members of the family sit or stand with their arms touching, crystallizing an image of family unity, or what Hirsch calls an "imaginary cohesion."[31] In one (fig. 7), the author and Jeanne sit in between their two children to evoke ideas of succession by positioning Denise and Jacques as the product of their union. The photograph offers an alternative model of kinship outside of marriage and, in doing so, re-writes the value assigned to legal rights of legitimacy and inheritance with a morality of biological connections. Though the family members' hands are unified, it is an uneasy union, an idea highlighted in Zola's and Jeanne's divergent gazes. The interlocking of arms hints at genealogy or family lineage, but it is an image that contrasts with the renowned family tree drawn by Zola for the *Rougon-Macquart* series. In this familiar diagram, tree branches that splinter to form legitimate and illegitimate lines illustrate the breakdown of the bourgeois family and allegorize the history of Second-Empire France. The unmistakable parallel between family and nation is figured forth in the forked branches which suggest disunion, significantly rooted in 1788, when Adélaïde Fouque loses her husband and the following year takes a lover with whom she has two illegitimate children. The novels' enactment of the history of the national family signals the unstable and arbitrary distinction between legitimate and illegitimate. In other words, if the political and cultural institutions defining the limits of legitimacy are also shown to be illegitimate, their authority to assign value and meaning to these concepts is undermined.

With invested personal interest, Zola was outspoken about the issue of fertility, publicly defending the value of reproduction, even in cases of sexual transgression. Not only was he a member of the *Alliance pour l'Accroissement de la population française*, a populationist organization founded in 1896, he also supported groups such as *Alliance nationale pour le relèvement de la population française* and the *Société maternelle parisienne*, and wrote several pronatalist articles in which he criticized the economic, social, and political ramifications of the declining birth rate. An advocate of nationalist discourse that feared the perceived stagnating population, Zola declared in an article published in *La Revue blanche* (1 March 1902) that "Le mariage n'est qu'un mot prononcé par le code […] c'est

[31] Hirsch 7.

de l'union qu'il s'agit."[32] Undoubtedly, these issues held personal significance for the author in ways that connect his personal family history to the unstable family politics at this time. His fictional treatise on fertility, *Fécondité* (1899), published during the author's exile, re-writes the breakdown of the family and national family, insisting in its title on a triumph over absence. As Buisine has equally observed, Zola's family photos share with *Fécondité* the celebration of family life and reproduction. Whereas for Buisine, Zola's photographs and references to photography in *Fécondité*, in contrast with his earlier writing, present "clichés" as "si profondément innocents, si cathartiques même puisqu'ils retrouvent sans cesse une fraîcheur, quasiment une virginité du réel, comme purifiés de toutes mauvaises intentions par le geste photographique qui rend une nouvelle jeunesse à tout ce qu'il reproduit," I find more at stake in these idyllic images.[33]

Fig. 7. Émile Zola and his family hand-in-hand. Date unknown.

Indeed, if the reinstatement of divorce in 1884, with the passing of the *Loi Naquet*, further signaled the "fragility of state-sponsored idealism about the indestructibility of the married couple,"[34] Zola's family portraits contrast with the broken nation-as-family tree, exhibiting togetherness and the validity of his "second" family. They also project an image of Zola as a protective father-figure (fig. 8), an idea illustrated in one photograph by the placement of his arms that provide a boundary or shield around Denise and Jacques, equally signifying succession. While the Rougon-Macquart family's illegitimacy, and by extension that of the Second Empire, is marked by the absent father, in this portrait, Zola occupies a central position. Denise and Jacques are pictured here as continuations of his body, incorporated into his identity by the spatial proximity that blurs the boundaries between legitimate and illegitimate. Their oneness leaves little room between these categories, stressing a biological relationship in which the children are *his*

[32] This article gathered responses from intellectuals and public figures including Zola to discuss Tolstoy's puritanical views on celibacy. See "Enquête sur Tolstoy et la Question sexuelle," *La Revue blanche*, 1 March 1902: 381-82. Leonard Koos provides a thorough account of this perceived population decline in "'To be or not to be': Politics of Depopulation in Émile Zola's *Fécondité*." *Excavatio* 20 (2005): 206-28. Koos demonstrates that, in comparison to other European countries at the time, the population in France was, in fact, not in decline, but only perceived to be.
[33] Buisine 252.
[34] White 5.

family, their rights and identities inherited through the father rather than sanctioned by legal customs governing legitimacy. In other words, if the portraits revise notions about the traditional family, they nevertheless do so through the rhetoric of patriarchy, perpetuating a conservative ideology while also working against it in ways that valorize the virility of Zola's paternity.

Fig. 8. Émile Zola and his children. c. 1902

Tellingly, in a copy of *Le Docteur Pascal* (1893) given to Jeanne Rozerot, a hand-written dedication reads: "À ma bien aimée Jeanne, − à ma Clotilde, qui m'a donné le royal festin de sa jeunesse et qui m'a rendu mes trente ans, en me faisant le cadeau de ma Denise et de mon Jacques, les deux chers enfants pour qui j'ai écrit ce livre […]."[35] The dedication illustrates the link, for Zola, between his family life and representations of family in both his writing and photography. In *Le Docteur Pascal*, the last novel in the *Rougon-Macquart* series, the eponymous character, often viewed as a reflection of the author in his obsession with genetic theories, limits the family's exposure to potential threats of infidelity − and thus illegitimacy − outside of the home. Pascal's incestuous relationship with his niece, Clotilde, contains desire within a domestic space, securing the paternal order by offering both "sexual and intellectual *connaissance* of the family's history," as Nicholas White explains.[36] While Pascal and Clotilde's relationship implodes the lines of the family tree, their son symbolizes its future progress and naturalizes the otherwise transgressive act of incest of their fruitful union. In ways that replace the opposition between legitimacy and illegitimacy with sterility and fertility, by referring to Jeanne as Clotilde in this dedication, as Nicholas White proposes, Zola equates his adulterous relationship with incest and the ideology of (re)production.[37]

If Zola's body of literary texts and family photographs respond to the politics of social and familial legitimacy, they also gesture towards a crisis of male artistic identity at the turn of the century. Naturalism's often touted reliance on laws of genetics and dedication to mimetic representation

[35] This letter is quoted in White 102.
[36] White 100.
[37] See White 101-03. It is also worth adding that Jeanne was employed as the seamstress for the family so that from the beginning their relationship could be coded as "incestuous," contained as it was within a domestic space.

limited authorial agency in the eyes of contemporary critics.[38] Equally, because a photograph's representational "legitimacy as evidence was unquestioned,"[39] the camera consequently questioned the artistry of the photographer. To be accused of being mere photographers was therefore to align naturalism with impotence; however, to re-frame photography with fertility could affirm the role of the naturalist author-as-artist. Zola's family photography and the genre of the photo album confront these issues. The writer-photographer's artistic and paternal presence in front of the camera work against the diminished agency that disturbs the creative enterprise in the mechanical age.

The family album and family portraits thus speak to the charge against naturalist writers of copying reality rather than creating it, showing that photographic images are not solely the product of nature, coded historically as feminine, but rather are the union of both a technical and creative process.[40] If we recall that the photo album cover stresses Zola's authorship, his ability to create a family history is arguably closely tied to his ability to create as an artist, gesturing towards a crisis of artistic masculinity all the while affirming it. For Zola to recognize his children through photography therefore affirms his reproductive prowess on a personal level and at the level of representation. Although for John Lambeth "la question valeur artistique" did not factor into Zola's domestic photography because the images were not published, the "activité personnelle, voire même intime, fortement liée à sa vie de famille" is nonetheless inextricably linked to the construction of Zola's artistic selfhood.[41] By putting himself into the picture, these images bring together not only Zola's family life and his artistic activity, and thus the convergence of his public and private image, but more specifically, Zola the writer and Zola the photographer.

These portraits of the writer-photographer with his family thus serve as a meeting point between performed identities, setting up an intersubjective reflection on Zola's artistic identity through photography. In doing so, Zola recasts photography as an aesthetic process in which photographic images, like the writing of fiction, share a rhetorical potential with social, political, and artistic implications. What is at stake in Zola's "true story" thus extends beyond the illegitimacy of his family to larger questions of (self)-representation and the construction of artistic identity around gender and genre. This concept of a "true story" told through photography complicates the novelist's reputation as beholden to the positivist and materialist spirit of the nineteenth century. It equally complicates the idea that the "truthfulness" of photographic images is located in their surface realities. Zola's photography therefore reminds us that a true story is one in which the artist fashions and redefines the "real" through his or her vision of the world. Desires and fantasies are shown in Zola's family photographs to shape even the most "documentary" forms of representation, illustrating the author's continued investigation into the nature of representation and the ways in which his naturalism is always shaped, inevitably, by the romantic pursuit of an ideal vision of the world.

[38] See White 121-22.
[39] Ballerini 54.
[40] The idea that a photograph served as a physical trace or copy of reality and was therefore not the product of the (male) intellect brings to mind the myth of Dibutades, a Corinthian maid who traces the shadow of her lover's face on the wall in order to preserve the likeness of his image during his absence. Sharing many qualities with photographic forms of representation (etymologically, photography comes from the Greek roots meaning "drawing with light"), images of Dibutades in poetry and painting from the *Ancien Régime* through post-Revolutionary France, locate the origins of the visual arts, specifically portraiture, in the feminine. For more on the ways in which representations of Dibutades signaled issues of gender and genre within the cultural field, see Alexandra Wettlaufer's "Dibutades and Her Daughters," *Nineteenth-Century French Studies* 18 (2004): 9-38.
[41] John Lambeth, "Zola et la photographie naturaliste," *Les Cahiers naturalistes* 66 (1992): 279.