EMANATION AND RETURN:
ARCHIVE AS LIBERATOR

The origin of the word *archive* is located in the public domain and possesses a secular significance, most often referring to documents sequestered in a particular repository, the Greek *arkheion*. In a lecture delivered in London on June 5, 1994, that father of the deconstruction revolution, Jacques Derrida, identified archives as shelters for memory—historiographically, arks that house documents that will pass from the private to the public realm.[1] The artist's book, *Feast: Christy Johnson and 33 Confessors* (2007), functions as a shelter for a fraction of the more than three-hundred First Communion commemorative photographs collected by the artist Christy Johnson. These are private images made public through her act of archiving and are joined by a textual archive.

In a rite of secular remembrance, Johnson transcribed over one hundred and seventy-five pages of taped dialogue between herself and thirty-three women on the subject of their communion pictures. With the help of Victoria Millar of Bloomsbury Press, Johnson edited the transcriptions and they audiotaped the dialogues together so as to reclaim the conversational quality of the discourse while minimizing the intervention of the interrogator. They did not rewrite or remove anything from the responses except for the occasional "hmm" or pause for breath. No one put words into anyone's mouth … except each interviewee who entered the photograph by way of a subversive dialectic structure, thus sanctioning the real experience of the silent subject in the image. Strangers to one another, the interviewee and the pictured communicant unwittingly conspired to create an authentic fictional state through the fusion of a factual document with a true story. Johnson assembled these two distinct archives into the artist's book *Feast*—a communion of sorts.

The sacred status of the ritual to which these archived photographs attend liberates them from their worldly, chemical substantiality. The photographs become revelations of the soul, literally "emanations of the referent" that touch us through their "carnal medium," light.[2] Johnson enables this release by allowing the images to commune together within the pages of the book. Avicenna, the Persian philosopher, describes the release of the soul in his *Treatise of the Bird* (*Risâlat at-Tair*).[3] His fable recounts the ordeal of a flock of doves that, when ensnared by hunters, grow weak and facile in captivity until a few determined birds succeed in escaping the net and soon thereafter those remaining seek to follow. The story is an allegory for the containment of the soul (the spiritual world) in the body (the material world). It is the remembrance of the protected park (heaven) that invests the bird with the longing to ascend and eschew captivity. Avicenna states that the gain of metaphysical knowledge reminds the soul of its origin and longing, signalling its desire to return to the Divine. This early Islamic idea differs radically from the Christian Doctrine of Original Sin that was generated from the famed consumption of fruit from the Tree of Knowledge. Guilt is not associated with the ingestion of knowledge, according to Avicenna. It is in the abuse of intelligence that Avicenna finds fault. *Feast* is an ark for the secularized documentation of a

I remember one weird thing from my sister's Communion. They took a photo of her and she was standing in front of this tree and in the photo there's this glow from behind her. It's really strange. She's wearing white and she's got a white veil and she was just glowing. It looks like there was some kind of big light, like a sense of God or something.

sacred event. The project provides a protected park within which the photographic emanations might be safe.

According to Roland Barthes, "in photography, the presence of the thing (at a certain past moment) is *never* metaphoric"[4] (emphasis added). Barthes used that dangerous, inflexible word *never* in order to bar the allegorical fixity inherent when one assigns symbolic status to a photographic image. For Barthes, a photograph was a register of representation, not a substitution of one material object for another. The common iconographic terrain occupied by these communicants, captured by light, momentarily divests them of their corporeality. They are representations of spirit not symbols for it; they are not trapped. The young women in Johnson's photographs perform a shared meta-concentration on the separation of blood from flesh that symbolizes the sacrifice of the man-god of which they have recently partaken. We witness the normally hidden formation of a belief system within these females dressed in white. And, if the inward contemplation on the matter at hand cannot be detected in their eyes, we observe that the direction of the girl-child's gaze is oriented externally toward the surveillant authorities, the photographer and/or God. Some of the adolescents appear dwarfed by the event while others command the space they occupy, staking out an identity apart from authority and ritual. These confident subjects are triumphant in their newly attained status as emergent sexual beings and they become representations of resistance, willing to risk leaving Avicenna's protected park. However, many shrink from exposure, willing to hide behind the staged drapery, false scenery of a gothic church, or the spindly legs of a Victorian table—afraid to apply their knowledge.

Individually, these photographs perform as archives of time and place. A few of the photographs are framed by botanical matter or cut-paper borders. These margins operate as indices of origin, as do the costumes worn by the supplicants. Still, the vegetal-like edgings might also be understood as devices for enclosure, protecting the doves within the divine park. Geoffrey Batchen makes much of this type of surround in relation to portraits of the dead and the preservation of memory in his eloquent text, *Forget Me Not: Photography and Remembrance* (2004).[5] Pine branches and newly formed cones encircle one photograph, presumably of Northern European origin and found within Johnson's *Feast*. They surround an awkwardly posed girl who wields a long, phallic candle in her right hand and a missal and rosary in the other.[6] In addition, she is guarded by two angels on the table. This child is ensconced in an artificial space fabricated by a studio photographer, yet, the sense of a rarefied place, conjured artifice, is sustained by her stare and tight hold on the instruments of knowledge.

By combining the archive of commemorative images with one of text shaped by her interviews with the thirty-three invisible communicants, Johnson invents a fictive location of experience and memory—a buffered space that shields the girls and the women from social, religious, and familial forces. Although the referents may not be physically tangible, this archive project is mystically objective. Their experience of spiritual emanation returns in the form of a luminous residue.

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NOTES ***1****. Jacques Derrida, "Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression," Eric Prenowitz, trans.,* Diacritics, *Vol. 25, no. 2 (Summer 1995), 9–10.* ***2****. Roland Barthes,* Camera Lucida, *Richard Howard, trans. (New York: Noonday Press, 1981), 80–81.* ***3****. Abu Ali al-Husain ibn Abdallah ibn Sina (973–1037), one of the leading philosophers of the golden age of Islamic tradition, was born in present day Uzbekistan and died in his adopted Persia (Iran). His influence on intellectual thought was immense, from Thomas Aquinas to Spinoza. He was a master of mathematics, physics, and medical science.* ***4****. Barthes, 78.* ***5****. Geoffrey Batchen,* Forget Me Not: Photography and Remembrance *(New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2004).* ***6****. Christy Johnson,* Feast: Christy Johnson and 33 Confessors *(London: UCCA Press, 2007), 149.*

Oh my cake was beautiful, because she got the best lady known to decorate it. In Colombia we have a cake that only very few people here know how to make. It's called the wedding cake. It's not even called cake, it's called ponque. It's brown and it has a lot of raisins and, I don't know, it's almost like a fruit cake. They have to leave the raisins and – what do you call those little green fruits? You know, those things they have in Christmas cakes? – they put them in wine for many, many, many days.
Soaked, marinated.
Oh my God, when they make that cake they pour dry vermouth, they soak it every night for like a week or two before they decorate it. So it's a very rich cake. It's used for weddings, first communions, baptisms, you know, very special occasions. So, she made me that cake and then she made a birdhouse out of sugar, and we saved it until we had to leave Colombia. It looked like lace, the little birdhouse. And it had little doves going in and out.
Like a real birdhouse, but in sugar?
Oh yeah. A complete birdhouse, because you're receiving a form of the Holy Spirit when you do your First Communion. Everything with religion for me is like the white bird, you know: peaceful, pure, white.

ALL IMAGES
Page from *Feast: Christy Johnson and 33 Confessors* (2007)