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Archiving the “Difficult to Picture”

EMIKO STOCK

Abstract

Fathers who are not exactly yours but may well have been, lost best friends playing sisters, ancestors crashing the event of history. Sometimes, among some Cambodian Cham Muslims, the family photographic album becomes more than a collection of stills layering family frames. The pages situate lost images of long gone relatives in telling absences; the spreading of stills on the floor ties uncertain genealogies with glimpses of what could have been; the picture-perfect moment of yesterday becomes potential for a better yet-to-come. In conversation with family portraits from “before the war(s)” era (1950s–1960s), what those words and images might be asking each other is this: can we really get the “difficult to picture”?

*Let me tell you this: it all goes back to history.
Our history.*

Tell me.

Silence
Head to the floor.
Down.
Deep down.

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I can't.

...

it's too difficult to explain.

Silence as an answer.
 A refusal to the ethnographer.
 Maybe.
 A certain not-knowing.
 Possibly.
 And erasure as the writing tool for history.
 Surely.

It goes like this:
 (Cham) history "cannot be told, cannot be read, cannot be written."

For a while I tried to be told, to read and write:

Grand-Pa, they tell me you know quite a lot about this,
 can you explain to me?

I can't.

....

Centuries ago...

and still....

I feel too sad for our dead | bodies | ghosts.

*You see, the roads.... They were strewn by our ancestors. By them dead | bodies
 | ghosts.*

That road right there.

You can see it.

But you won't see it.

Again and again...

Back then, now...

My great-grandmother, she was on the road.

A tiny little kid.

She saw.

Her father, he put his hands over her eyes so she couldn't see.

That's how she saw.

It was just too difficult to see.

Roads you could see but won't show.
 History that cannot be watched but is felt.
 Stories that cannot be handled but hold you back.
 Something of the "difficult to picture".

There are other stories of history like that.
 Stories all filled with difference.

No, not that. It's about that other deportation. You don't get it, it's another one.

Ok then, tell me.

Pause.

Face leaning away, history leaving a | way.

They are bringing the sweets, you must be hungry, they are going to say we don't feed you.

I can't move.

*I told you, this cannot be told. It's ... difficult, you know ... You can't handle it.
 No one can.*

Who could?

On her way to historiography, the ethnographer looks for traces.

Read me the manuscript she asks,
 but it's burnt she hears.

Show me the sword she knows,
 but it is buried she takes.

Let's see this picture she wishes,
 but it is lost she is told.

A history that has to be buried burnt and lost so to be.

A history that has to be silenced to be heard.

Stories filled with deference.

History deferring, constantly.

Different stories that all feel the same.

They feel | the same.

A history long gone that still hangs out with us, haunting presence,
hanging there, thick, in the air.

Why is it that this image of history constantly holds on to us, like
photographs that we hold on to dearly, photographs that hold us too dearly?

* * *

An Eid day.

Another one.

All over again, yet again.

Visitors from all around and beyond,

food all over and more,

and rides somewhere not sure, we'll see,

who is on the road, who is at home, and which ancestors can be
encountered,

for those sure have to be counted in.

Dressing up, driving away,

posing in, selfies out.

Respects paid to the tomb,

that of multiple stories,

one that launches history and then, stop:
again.

History cannot be told, cannot be written, cannot be seen.

We leave.

More visits.

Here, there, them, us.

And then finally, the house of Auntie.

The floor sliding under the archives she brings in:

photos and photos and photos.

Some from now,

a few from back then,

and the usual too many in between.



Auntie is excited.
Always.

She is jumping around,
making coffee,
no tea,
no wait is uncle coming by too?
Back to tea.
No, coffee it was.
Snack: now; photos: later.
Or now.
Or both.

An auntie on steroids.
The ethnographer at loss.
Trying to follow.
Barely.
Trying to flip through the pictures as they pass by the many busy
hands of Auntie.
Dates.

A few.
Scattered.
Shattered.
Explanations.
Blur.
Blugh...
And captions.
Layered.
Erased.
Still.
Like a stain that won't wash off.

And then:
the washed-out photograph.



Overexposed.

I ask Auntie: what, when, who, how.

She moves.

She comes back.

Moves again, comes back again.

What when who how I ask.

She moves her eyes.

On to another photograph.

That one: this is what when who how she says.

No, not that one I say, that one I ask.

She moves.

Her head.

It's going to rain, don't you think?

No, Auntie ... The photo: what, when, who, how.

Pause.

Overexposed.

A sob.

And then hectic, trembling, non-stopping:

It's not my fault if he left me. I swear. One day I came home, and he was gone. With another. Another who was better | better off than me. I just couldn't do anything you know. Here I am and look at what I have left. That much time in Malaysia and this little I have. And no more husband.

The dog-eared cliché has settled in Auntie's hands.

She whispers now:

Everyone talked back then. About me, about us. And they'll continue to talk, I'm telling you that.

Seizing my eyes, straight, not going nowhere:

You know they warned me not to marry him, not to marry one that wasn't one of us.

Back to the picture:

They stopped talking to me for years when I took him, a non-Saeth. My mother, she didn't care much, she was ok, but the rest of the family ... Your Uncle ... Only now we are back to talking. It's always the same with us, with us all. If they don't come after us, we hurt all the same.

It's just...

It's difficult.

A certain calm
after one too many what-when-who-how.

Auntie takes the photograph:
she puts on a caption, see how it fits:
the grandmother of the husband, circa mid-'80s.

That's right when Uncle who so wanted to be out of war and into
modernity, started to try out leftover Soviet cameras and expired
rolls of films, see how that too could fit.



He came to take the picture,
they left talking.

From this instant, we could go on and write pages of ethnography:
up to you, there is quite a lot we can choose from:

- ✓ the announcement of a war ending.
One that will actually take another 15 years to find a certain end.
- ✓ the social structure of Cham society
with special attention to the ways and rules of the Saeths.
- ✓ A theory of kinship and marriage,
Elementary Structures may hit back knocking us down.
- ✓ A report to a good funding agency on gender relations in Cambodia,
women being left down, men taking off, that's it, done.
- ✓ An article on those always on the go to
other places, other moments, other aspirations:
Thailand, Malaysia, Korea, the Emirates,
and somehow, Iran or California.

We could say all that and probably even more.
With a lot of words.
Just like I did.

But rather than looking at the picture itself, *at* the story within the
picture, the history of the picture, we may want to look away,
to better look *with* it.

The photograph here has more to tell. It whispers to us in a silence
that we can barely hear.

It is to its margins that we need to tend.
Away from the picture that we need to think:
an image-thought is offered to us here.
An image that sticks with us beyond mere representation,
something that holds on to us,
perhaps with little or no information.

In the hands of Auntie, stays the archetype of a grandmother.

There was the war,
there was the river,
there was the marriage.

Auntie had to leave her family for this other side.
No more friends,
no more parents,
no more mother, and no more grandmother on this side.

So Auntie holds on to this ideal grandmother she hardly knew.
For, after all, it could have been hers.
It looks just like hers now doesn't it?

The story is familiar in Cambodia:
Pre-war pictures from before the '70s had to be discarded. The soldiers were
in charge of making sure of that. But they too, sometimes, were held by
those images. They couldn't quite leave them, and so they left them to rest,
protecting some of those pictures, if not their owners. Something telling us
that there might be more to those photographs than just mere photographs.

Here, someone:



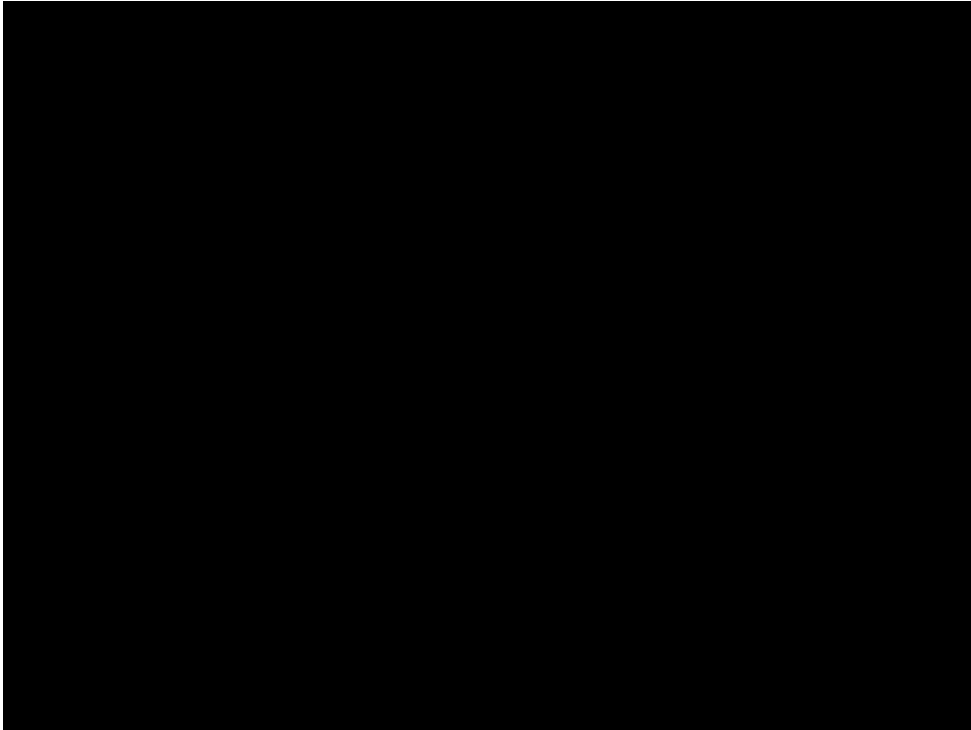
*My uncle, he was ... you know ... fighting I guess. He didn't have a lot of power,
but still, we were better off. So we kept the pictures.*

There, someone else:



My neighbor, he was one of them. A nice kid that boy. They didn't want us to keep anything, they made sure you know. So when he saw my pictures he told me to go hide them.

And this, from a family album of sorts:



See, that family here, in the picture, they knew they were going down....

Eyes look up.

They were about to be 'thrown away'. So they left their photographs with me. We were in the same relocation village. That's all. I never knew of them before. And the next thing you know, they were gone. I just hold on to the pictures. I am not sure why...

The why may lie in picturing alternative forms of relatedness,
in portraits touching us beyond their content,
in moving images moving beyond an archive of loss
and remains.

Here, a potential father.



*Oh no that's not my dad. My dad, I don't think he ever had his picture taken.
I never even met him.*

Fingers passing over the photograph,
a care caressing the image:

He sure looks like a good dad don't you think?

A history to be told,
one that requires silence for sure,
and image-ination maybe.

A grand-daughter:



*Oh, look how beautiful grand-ma looked! She looks like ... She looks like ...
You know what ... She looks like ... Cham princess.*

A Cham princess?

Yes, any Cham princess.
Or maybe ... you know ...
THE princess.

Now almost to herself:

They hurt her so bad. She suffered so much at the time...
They hurt us all.
All the time.

The ethnographer is left with that.
 The imprint of history leaving its traces in the margins of photographs,
 sometimes but almost never to be pieced together.

Not even surely with other leftovers:
 in stories that an auntie wouldn't tell,
 and yet slips over:
 that of the harm to a Cham/Saeth princess
 that started it all,
 that of the murder of whom she loved
 that ended it all,
 that of the massacre of them all,
 of their separations,
 of their deportations,
 of those constant repetitions.

That of Cham rebellions against the royal palace,
 that of trusted princes as oppressors,
 of your own kings for traitors,
 that of returns:
 of the 15th century, the 16th, the 18th, the 19th and,
 who knows,
 could be,
 that of the long, very long, 1970s.
 All that, over and over again.
 Repetitively, none of that on trial.
 Complexity cannot stand trials.

Those notes and something of a conclusion perhaps:
 archiving (Cham) history has to be done in the mode of uncertainty.
 It has to embrace this notion of image-thought, of third meaning where
 we depart from the information we can hold on to,
 to let-in images holding on to us.

*Images as a way to capture uncertainty and contradiction without having
 to resolve anything.*

In this sense, images are closer to life.

Not as it has often been understood by both anthropology and history:
 as real life on display, a showcase of facts from afar enlightened by
 the right key-light.
 To the contrary.

Images get closer to life because they are themselves moving images:
 they move from one hand to another as Chams move along lines and roads
 of history;
 they move in and out of the frames we assign to them,
 but maybe even more,
 they are moving images because they move us.
 Images moving and holding at the same time.

It is not about how looking *at* images can bring anthropological or
 historical knowledge,
 but how looking *with* images can bring us to touch history as much as
 she touches us.

Looking requires an attention, an affection that can be very demanding,
 and should be: *for being fully attentive is to give up something of oneself.*

Maybe Chams/Saeths, women and men of and in Cambodia, and some of
 those images in and out of the pictures pave the way to a method:
 it could be in this attention to the blank,
 the absence and the unseen that we can re-examine the *relation between
 seeing/thinking/knowing.*

Knowledge made as we live, look and therefore think.

An anthropology that would get what “difficult to picture” actually means,
 an archive that would not fill in silences but feel them in.

For,
after all,
isn't everything we really do know well,
always only known
“by heart”?¹

BIOGRAPHY

Emiko Stock teaches Digital Media Production in the Asian Studies Program at Hamilton College. She is currently working on two projects, a film and a book, both theorizing in experimental ways an affective and haptic approach to history. Both projects result from long-term ethnographic involvement in Cambodia and Iran, conducted as a videographer and historiographer of sorts. She received her PhD in anthropology from Cornell University, and was trained in Khmer Studies and Anthropology in Paris at the National Institute of Oriental Languages and Civilizations and at Nanterre University, and in Phnom Penh at the Royal University of Fine Arts. Email: exstock@hamilton.edu

NOTES

- * This paper was first written for a talk at the Anthropological Society of Iran, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Tehran, in 2016. It was reformulated and rewritten for the SEAP Annual Graduate Students Conference at Cornell University, followed by the SEAGASE PhD Dissertation Workshop on Southeast Asian Studies, organized by McGill University & Université de Montréal, and finally *Reframing the Archive: The Reuse of Film and Photographic Images in Post-colonial Southeast Asia* symposium at SOAS, London, all in 2017. I am grateful to the positive reception and encouragement of the various audiences, and thankful for their feedback.
- ¹ Done under the influence of Benjamin 1968; Barthes 1981; Hirsch 1997; MacDougall 2006 (invoked in italics); Spyer & Steedly 2013; Thompson 2013; Stevenson 2014 (invoked in italics).

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