

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Luciano Floridi, *The Fourth Revolution: How the Infosphere Is Reshaping Human Reality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

<sup>2</sup> F. Gerald Ham, "Archival Strategies for the Post-Custodial Era," *The American Archivist* 44 (Summer 1981): 207–216.

## Archiving the Unspeakable: Silence, Memory, and the Photographic Record in Cambodia

By Michelle Caswell. *Critical Human Rights* series. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2014. 246 pp. Softcover. \$29.95. ISBN 978-0-299-29754-1.

The Khmer Rouge photographed prisoners at Tuol Sleng prison before executing them. These mug shots mutely attest to human rights crimes by the former Cambodian regime. As Michelle Caswell deftly examines the archival evidence of genocide, these photographs witness atrocities that are at once both "unspeakable" in their horror and also unspoken, due to the silence of the 5,109 killed at Tuol Sleng. Taking a "records-centered approach" to this topic, Caswell both explores the contributions archival theory can make to "the ongoing discussion about evidence, power, and historical production" and challenges archivists to "embrace their own power to counter the silences embedded in records, particularly those that document human rights abuse" (p. 7).

Written for archivists and nonarchivists alike, *Archiving the Unspeakable* contributes a vital perspective on social justice. It is essential reading for anyone interested in the ongoing discourse on archives and society. Carefully grounded in both historical and archival theory, this volume presents a nuanced case study of the mug-shot photographs with which the Khmer Rouge identified and controlled their victims. These images capture only a portion of those murdered at one of many extermination camps. Among the estimated 1.7 million victims of execution, starvation, or disease under the Khmer Rouge regime (one-quarter of the nation's population), the dead of Tuol Sleng represent only a sliver of a sliver of those silenced during the four years from 1975 to 1979.

Caswell frames her analysis according to Michel-Rolph Trouillot's concept of four key moments in which power relationships embed silences in historical analysis.<sup>1</sup> The first chapter, "The Making of Records," echoes Trouillot's "moment of fact creation (the making of *sources*)." The Khmer Rouge's "systematic prison bureaucracy," Caswell argues, "hinged on documentation" (p. 29). The photographs at the center of her analysis represent only one of many forms of records created by the regime. Placing these records in context, Caswell effectively traces these mug shots to earlier French colonial police photography and

the Bertillon system for identifying and indexing criminals. In light of Hannah Arendt's "banality of evil,"<sup>2</sup> these bureaucratic records routinized genocidal procedures and isolated the "desk murderers" from their "administrative massacres" (p. 53).

Chapter 2, "The Making of Archives," mirrors Trouillot's "moment of fact assembly (the making of *archives*)." Since Trouillot argues that archives perform "an active act of production that prepares facts for historical intelligibility" (p. 61), this chapter is especially important for archivists and those who use archives. Caswell states that the political and historical factors that shaped the archival record of the Tuol Sleng mug shots demonstrate how archives gather "facts" and thereby establish political power. After the Vietnamese Army captured Phnom Penh and overthrew the Khmer Rouge in 1979, they discovered the prison camp photographs. The Vietnamese established the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum to publicize Khmer Rouge atrocities. Subsequent American efforts to document these mass murders sought to establish both legal and historical accountability to bring the perpetrators to justice. Preservation librarians from Cornell University traveled to Cambodia to undertake a massive program of preservation microfilming for prison documents and prisoner confession statements. By 1994, the Documentation Center of Cambodia (DC-Cam), initially established at Yale University and now based in Cambodia, undertook a more comprehensive effort to create an archival record for accountability purposes. This has resulted in extensive preservation and digitization initiatives, a large oral history project, numerous publications, and teacher education programs, among other DC-Cam activities. This is not a neutral or apolitical role for archivists. Echoing Verne Harris, Caswell states that "the process of transforming the Tuol Sleng mug shots into archives is inherently and inescapably political" (p. 95).

Trouillot's concern for the silences embedded in the "moment of fact retrieval (the making of *narratives*)" frames Caswell's third chapter, "The Making of Narratives." As the mug shots engender stories of atrocity, they become "active agents in the performance of human rights in Cambodia" (p. 98), but these stories that are told omit other potential stories. The records not archived and the victims not documented create further silences in the archives. One form of narrative based on these records is their use as legal evidence in trials of former Khmer Rouge leaders. This transforms them "from records of oppression to records of accountability" (p. 106). As the basis for several documentary films, the mug shots also revive memories of the victims, enabling "narratives of redemption" (p. 109) and justice. Exhibits, books, and other publications displaying these haunting images likewise create a "secondary layer of witnessing" (p. 130) in which viewers become advocates for justice and accountability.

The final chapter, "The Making of Commodities," follows less closely than the others what Trouillot terms "the moment of retrospective significance (the

making of *history* in the final instance).” Caswell acknowledges that Trouillot’s framework does not fit her analysis of the mug shots, since the Cambodians “are still grappling with historical production” (p. 10). In its place, she substitutes the growing use of survivor memoirs, tourist photos posed with survivors, and other souvenirs of the killing fields. The snapshots of tourists posing incongruously with survivors of genocide make the tourists not just “secondary witnesses to past human rights violations” but also “primary witnesses to the current poverty of the survivors” (p. 140). This links genocide to current economic injustice. Since the survivors initiate these posed snapshots with tourists, Caswell argues, “the survivors are taking control of the Tuol Sleng narrative” (p. 156).

In her conclusion, Caswell explores “The Archival Performance of Human Rights and the Ethics of Looking.” The Tuol Sleng mug shots and other records of oppression, she states, “were not neutral by-products of activity (as classical Western archival theory would posit) but an integral part of that activity; they made the incarceration, torture, and murder possible” (p. 158). As stakeholders in the “community of records” surrounding the mug shots, these victims—as well as their descendants, archivists, and museum professionals, and those who look at the images and repurpose them—all form part of the provenance of the records. Reflecting on the role of archivists, Caswell concludes: “The creation of archives documenting violence in a transitional society is intimately linked to human rights activism and is inherently an expression of political power” (p. 159). Archivists thus participate in performing human rights. All who view the mug shots of genocide victims must consider the ethical implications of their participation.

In presenting this multilayered analysis of the Cambodian photographic record, Caswell writes with the passion and commitment of a participant in the experiences she describes. This is engaged argument at its best. Her first visit to Tuol Sleng as a tourist in 2005 transformed both Caswell’s personal commitment to human rights and her career as an archivist. Subsequent research trips to Cambodia shaped her doctoral dissertation and this book. Although she presents most of her account of these records in a professional analytical voice, at times she also employs the first-person “I was there” perspective. Far from detracting from the neutral academic distancing, this personal testimony both adds layers of emotion to her story and illustrates the impossibility of maintaining neutrality in the face of unspeakable horror.

In the conclusion, Caswell addresses an important anomaly suggested in her introduction, which describes several alternative models for structuring her analysis. These include the records continuum model, the social life of records, and the concept of societal provenance. After framing the book using Trouillot’s model, she discusses only briefly its limitations. His model is firmly linear and sequential, with records serving as the “static raw material

for historical struggle.” The continuum model shows that records and history “are always in the process of becoming” and that archives are “always already sites of intense mediation” (p. 161). However, Trouillot’s model offers attention to “power, silencing, and marginalization” (p. 161). This explains her use of an inexact model, which better suits her purpose.

What sets Caswell apart from others who have written about Cambodia, however, is her archival studies analysis of the mug-shot images. “When we see them as records first and foremost,” she states, we focus on “the act of creation” and on the victims and their descendants” (p. 77). This records-centered approach “forces us to connect them to the violation of human rights that occurred in their creation and the performance of human rights that occurs in their use” (p. 162).

Caswell embraces the archives and social justice perspective pioneered by Verne Harris. She cites many of the authors who have developed and articulated concerns about colonized peoples, marginalized social groups, silenced voices, collective memory, identity formation, and related issues. One surprising omission is the transformative work of Terry Cook and Brien Brothman, who introduced archivists to postmodern theory. That said, Caswell herself advances the discourse significantly, providing the first book-length case study of the power of archives in support of accountability, social justice, and memory.

*Archiving the Unspeakable* presents a compelling and multilayered account of recordkeeping, memory, power, and archival silences. Its perspective needs to be heard, evaluated, and debated by archivists in all parts of the world. It doesn’t explain *how* to carry out archival functions, but it does address the more fundamental questions of *why* archives exist and *how* archivists contribute to our knowledge of society and the human beings with whom we share this fragile planet.

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<sup>1</sup> Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1997). This work outlines the “four key moments” and provides a framework for Caswell’s work.

<sup>2</sup> Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (London: Faber and Faber, 1963).