Photography, Truth and Reconciliation

MELISSA MILES

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Conclusion

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Conclusion

The notion that photographs are the products of biases and hidden agendas is nothing new. Photographs have presented Argentina's *Proceso* as a source of peace and stability, Canada's residential schools as agents of successful assimilation and the ECCC as an unimpeachable force for justice. To continue to decry the supposed lies and false promises of photographs and insist upon the misplaced hope that photographs should activate social change is to remain caught in a dead-end street. As Susie Linfield writes: 'Antipathy to the photograph now takes us only so far.'[1] However, the ways that this knowledge has been interpreted, adapted and applied – strategically and personally – in contexts of truth and reconciliation has created new ways of understanding photographs and how they are used to negotiate the place of the past in contemporary politics, identities and justice.

Processes of truth and reconciliation create very particular conditions for looking at past human rights violations, making sense of them in the present, and ideally moving into safer and more productive futures. Photography has proven a valuable partner in these endeavours. Photographs provide evocative visual, temporal and material links to the past that allow them to be used as evidence, affirmations of different types of truth, political critique, and individual and shared historical narratives. Through the meeting of photography, truth and reconciliation, relationships between photography and history may be stretched, teased out and given new shape.

These processes have profound implications that extend far beyond the individuals and communities directly affected by the events in question. Although it is crucial to respect the specific local conditions of human rights violations and remain sensitive to their impacts on individuals, viewing photographs in a manner that recognizes only what they say about those who experienced the violations first hand is problematic for several reasons. Such an approach obscures the web of local, national and transnational forces that helped to create the conditions for these violations, allows states and individuals to distance themselves morally and politically from these acts, and neglects the transnational qualities of photographic production, consumption

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and discourse. This narrow perspective also ignores the common concerns and strategies that connect different photographic responses to processes of truth and reconciliation locally and internationally, and the lessons that may be learned from these commonalities.

Among the interests and tactics that recur throughout these case studies is the practice of delving into legal, medical, historical and media archives, and using their photographs to reimagine contemporary connections to the past. The desire to re-view the past in these contexts gives archival photographs new cultural currency and meaning. In the 'Bringing Them Home' report, archival photographs taken in church-run 'half-caste' homes of obedient Aboriginal Australian children are repositioned in a contemporary national narrative of tragedy, shame and reconciliation. Archival photographs also helped Carl Beam in Canada and Brenda Croft in Australia to explore their own biographies and family histories in relation to colonialist interventions in family life. Meanwhile, South African artist Sue Williamson mined her own newspaper archive for images illustrating high profile stories of Apartheid's confronting abuses. These artists and official bodies did not simply appropriate existing images to reveal the arbitrariness of the historical archive or to produce a revisionist history to replace an old oppressive one. Rather, they capitalized on the photograph's status as a frozen moment and marker of presence to highlight how the past is integral to contemporary lived experience.

The use of photographs of family members – whether they are sourced in public archives as in Croft's *shut/mouth/scream* or in family albums as in Gustavo Germano's '*Ausencias*' and Lucila Quieto's '*Arqueologías de la ausencia*' – attest to the personal stakes in this process. In these works, photographs, presence and the past are inseparable from issues of identity and belonging. This interconnection of personal, historical and political issues raises some important points about the ethics of photographic reproduction and analysis in contexts of truth and reconciliation. Such ethical issues lie at the forefront of Australian reconciliation. Australia's history of appropriating Aboriginal material culture, the historical misuse of photographs of Aboriginal people, and contemporary recognition of the critical importance of Aboriginal cultural self-determination means that it would be highly inappropriate for a non-Indigenous artist to use photographs of Aboriginal people or photographs that tell Aboriginal stories without consultation and/or collaboration with their owners. These conventions underscore why attempts to consider the wider historiographical and political implications of photographs must never completely overshadow respect for the fact that these photographs also represent the loved ones, struggles, hopes and identities of others.

Other ethical issues arise when evidentiary photographs are given a cultural afterlife, as seen in Colin Richards' use of Steve Biko's autopsy photographs in *Veil VI* and *Veil VII*. Australian legal scholar Katherine Biber is critical of the cultural reinterpretation and reuse of criminal evidence when it decontextualizes the crime or objectifies and dehumanizes the victim. However, Biber argues that when done in a manner that is sensitive to the potential for such harms, 'cultural interventions upon criminal evidence' can help to expose the limits or flaws of photographic evidence in the courts. Approaching evidence 'culturally might disclose how narrow and contested are law's fact-finding processes, and how vulnerable these might be when situated outside the protective ambit of evidentiary rules.'[2] Whereas the goal of criminal justice proceedings is to reach a definitive verdict – guilty or not guilty – transitional justice affords more open, nuanced and at times contradictory conclusions. Despite this added complexity, the limits of a TRC's mandate and procedures may be similarly critiqued and challenged by giving evidentiary photographs a cultural afterlife. Photographs can help to expose the limits of a TRC and the historical silences that it creates, and promote other ways of conceiving justice, bearing witness and history. This was the case with Richards' work, which drew attention to the shortcoming of photographic evidence in the inquest into Biko's death and the failings of the judicial system for which the photographs were produced, to propose a more conflicted model of truth in the era of the TRC. Yet as Richards points out after describing how he abstracted the autopsy photographs from Biko's identity as an 'act of violence', the line between critique and objectification of the victim 'is thin indeed'.[3]

Various examples in this book also highlight some of the many ways that photographs position their subjects and viewers within matrices of power, space and time. Roland Barthes's conception of cameras as 'clocks for seeing' takes on new meaning in this book.[4] The photographs examined here do not simply freeze a moment in time for later viewing; they draw attention to the politics of time, and highlight the plasticity of historical and photographic temporality. I argued in Chapter 2 that the popular absence/presence dialectic in photography theory is underpinned by a chronological approach to time as a succession of divisible moments. By seemingly isolating moments from the flow of time, photographs are adept at translating this temporal logic into visual form. When conceived as illustrations or indices of moments past, photographs may reinforce historicism's objective view of the past as different to and separate from the present. In transitional justice, such philosophies of time also have a political dimension by supporting the interests of governments that wish to dissociate themselves from past human rights abuses. Governments in Argentina, South Africa, Canada, Australia and Cambodia have all sought to draw a line between past human rights abuses and the present at one time or another by using strategies as diverse as suppression, denial, legislation, show trials, memorial activities and amnesty.

However, the examples discussed in this book affirm that photographs and photographic practices can also challenge these philosophies of time, the sense of historical distance that they engender and the political positions that they support. The temporal qualities of photographic presence – the way photographs draw attention to the time between the moment that the photograph was taken and the present in which it is viewed – encode in photographs the potential for a certain amount of flexibility. Acknowledging this flexibility of photographic and historical temporality involves pushing historical time beyond questions of the distance or proximity of the past in relation to the present, to consider how temporalities are enmeshed in media, power, processes of making and viewing photographs, and divergent experiences of time.

Marcelo Brodsky's photobook *Tiempo de Arbol/Tree Time* presents the experience of time in the wake of a loved one's forced disappearance as an enfolding of the past, present and future. By encouraging non-sequential readings of the photographs in his book and allowing some smaller pages to emerge from others, Brodsky layers and compresses the time of families, trees, love, loss and public memorialization. Conversely, Australian photographer Ricky Maynard visualizes a sense of history as a cumulative process grounded in place. His *Portrait of a Distant Land* juxtaposes his own contemporary photographs of significant sites in Tasmania with excerpts of oral histories and historical documents. The resultant representation of the lived experience of time in place challenges triumphalist, colonialist narratives of white Australian progress championed by conservatives. Other approaches to time were evident in Chapter 4, where Beam's and Adrian Stimson's assemblages and installations featuring their own photographs alongside archival images foregrounded the exclusive politics of the 'now' in history and photography, and suggested ways of decolonizing time. Collectively, these and other photographic practices discussed in the case studies emphasize the importance of understanding the polytemporal qualities of photography and history, and the ways that the meaning of time has historically served certain interests and marginalized others. Polytemporality is not simply a buzzword for acknowledging that different cultures have different philosophies of time. These examples confirm that multiple temporalities exist within cultures at any given time, that they may be manifested in photographs using a range of visual, linguistic, conceptual and material devices, and that they are the products of local as well as global forces.

It has been over twenty years since Arjun Appadurai described the translocal and transnational production of identities, communities and cultures as 'deterritorialized'. The 'flows' that Appaduari argued underlie deterritorialization involve the movement of capital, political interests and images around the world.[5] One way that I have sought to deterritorialize the national case studies in this book is by acknowledging how the events that the photographs address are bound to major international forces and interests like colonization, the Cold War, the international human rights movement and neoliberalism. It can also be argued that photography has always been a tool of deterritorialization. The medium has long been employed to capture images of foreign lands, to create imagined worlds, and to facilitate and promote travel. The international traffic in photographs in the form of postcards, souvenirs, exhibitions and publications – along with the sharing of ideas about photography – likewise precede these case studies by well over a century.

Contemporary patterns of international photography education, exhibition, theorization and publication (including online) reaffirm the critical necessity of bringing a deterritorialized perspective to national case studies. Exemplified by repeated references to Barthes's description of photographs as absent presences in Argentine photography theory,[6] the translation and international circulation of key texts highlights the international dynamics that shape local photographic understanding. The transnational flow of ideas, skills and images may foster or delimit approaches to national photographic practices and histories. Maynard's skills as a photographer – applied so effectively to produce a localized Aboriginal visual history in *Portrait of a Distant Land* – were developed during his years training at New York's International Centre of Photography under renowned US documentary photographer Mary Ellen Mark. Exhibition is another important mode of transnational engagement. Some of the problems that may arise with the international exhibition and circulation of photographs addressing traumatic pasts were examined in the previous chapter. Although the market for art about genocide brought the work of Cambodian practitioners to an international audience, it also risks re-victimizing Cambodian artists and marginalizing the work of contemporary practitioners who wish to respond to their own lived experience in other ways. These examples reflect some of the ebbs and flows of reterritorialization and deterritorialization that pervade these contexts of truth and reconciliation. While the investigation of specific human rights violations and processes of national reconciliation may demand a local focus, they remain intimately connected to global forces and conditions.

Much more work remains to be done towards understanding the intricate connections between the local, national and transnational in contexts of truth and reconciliation. There are striking similarities between some of the human rights abuses examined in these case studies, such as Australian and Canadian colonial practices of assimilating Indigenous people by removing children from their families and communities and placing them in government- or church-run institutions. Comparable practises were also evident in the US and in Sami Boarding Schools in Norway. As well as analysing the similarities and differences between these practices in different parts of the world, fully understanding how these abuses reoccurred will involve mapping the international movement of values, discourses, documents and people who helped to disseminate these practices globally, considering how and why they were reinterpreted in different contexts, and the role that photographs played in these processes.

The transnational spread of strategies of resistance is another important aspect of this story that demands more attention. The Mothers and Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo, for example, have inspired other groups far from Argentina, including the Mothers Front in Sri Lanka. These Sri Lankan mothers similarly march in protest while holding photographs of their children who have disappeared at the hands of government forces since the 1980s. The potency of images of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo and their international circulation in the press and on television were integral to the translation of their strategies in Sri Lanka. With this translation of photographic practices in new political and geographic contexts also comes changes to those practices, different results, and distinctive political and personal implications. Tracking these dynamic flows is central to developing a fuller picture of the possibilities and limits of photography and human rights.

Contemporary photographers are also deterritorializing their responses to human rights abuses by forging connections between different historical events across time and space. Germano's '*Ausencias*' has had four manifestations to date, all using the same visual strategies discussed in Chapter 2, to represent people who were forcibly disappeared in Argentina, Brazil, Columbia and Uruguay. Similarly, Germano's ongoing project on systematic baby stealing in military dictatorships has so far encompassed Argentina and Franco's Spain, with plans to extend the project to other nations.[7] Brodsky's *Nexus, The Camps* (2001) draws connections between events that occurred decades and thousands of miles apart. *The Camps I* centres on a memorial installed by the Human Rights League of Germany and the City of Berlin-Schöneberg in 1967 near the Wittenbergplatz train station and a busy shopping district in West Berlin. In the form of a sign, the memorial lists the names of twelve Nazi concentration camps under the heading 'Places of Terror We Must Never Forget'. Its pair in Brodsky's *Nexus*, *The Camps II*, is a public installation outside of ESMA in Buenos Aires that uses an identical style of signage to list clandestine detention centres that operated as torture and execution facilities. The escape of Nazi's to Argentina after the Second World War, the persecution of Jews by military forces during the *Proceso*, and commonalities in memorial practices in Argentina and Germany are amongst the interconnections between the Shoah and Argentina's military dictatorship alluded to in Brodsky's project.[8]

These kinds of transnational photographic projects have the potential to build productive spatial, political, historical and temporal relationships between national histories. Although such works describe distinct histories with a shared visual grammar, it is important that they do not claim equivalence between these histories or reduce them to universalist clichés about 'man's ongoing inhumanity to man'. Rather than suggesting equivalence, these photography projects may be better understood as promoting inter-cultural historical dialogues. The key aspect of dialogue is that expression always involves the promise of a response from the subject that is addressed. This process of expression and response shapes the contributions of both parties; participating in a dialogue therefore necessarily involves transformation. Brodsky's *Nexus, The Camps* accordingly widens the history of Nazi Germany to Latin America by linking the Shoah to the *Proceso* via a brutal global history of anti-Semitism. This project also affects the history of the *Proceso* by extending responsibility for its crimes beyond the actions of the handful of individual military leaders who have been tried to larger international patterns of persecution.

As well as being transnational, these practices are increasingly transinstitutional. The rising significance attributed to testimonial practices in contemporary culture – including but extending well beyond TRCs – has led to important changes in the institutional dynamics of art that warrant deeper investigation. Creative photography projects like those addressed in this book may be developed and encountered in any number of forums, including diplomatic events, academic conferences, the exhibitions and publications of NGOs, memorial events and museums, outdoor public spaces, community centres, the online news media, blogs, political magazines, as well as more conventional spaces for art like art museums, biennales, galleries, books and journals. As these forums for testimonial art have expanded and diversified, there have been changes in the way that the social value of art is understood and articulated in public culture, as well as in the scope and audiences of contemporary art.

The international interest in family photographs and memorials have no doubt informed the eager reception of Germano's work nationally and internationally in art galleries, NGOs, universities and by government bodies alike. These include an exhibition organized jointly by the Permanent Mission of Argentina to the Organization of American States (OAS) and the Argentine Embassy in Washington, DC at the headquarters of the OAS in 2014. There is a marked contrast between the framing of Germano's work in this international diplomatic context and in its local reception in Argentina. At the OAS exhibition, Ambassador Cecilia Nahón brought the photographs in line with official efforts to distance Argentina's past from its present and future, claiming that the exhibition 'shows that Argentina, the region and the world say "never again" to human rights violations like those that took place in our country'.[9] Conversely, popular and scholarly responses to this work in Argentina have challenged the politics underpinning such perspectives by emphasising the photographs' personal and emotional qualities, as well as the ongoing effects of these events in Argentina today.[10] Rather than being delimited by the fashion for memory, witness and affect in the international art world, the movement of this type of art across divergent spaces means that it is more likely to foster a wide range of interpretations, commentaries and debates in public culture.

The photographs and photographic practices addressed in this book highlight how the nexus of photography, truth and reconciliation in contemporary culture has not only affected the types of stories that are being told about the past, it is changing the ways that people relate to it. These practices encourage us to think about how bearing witness through photography involves an amalgam of indexical and narrative qualities, always measured in slightly different quantities and interspersed with distinct experiences, discourses and histories. Despite the hopes commonly expressed in TRCs, bearing witness cannot ensure that gross human rights violations will never happen again, or that survivors will be healed of the effects of lingering traumas. But photographs can tell us something very valuable about how we approach the past and live with it, however uncomfortably, in the present.