

Archiving the Unspeakable: Silence, Memory, and the Photographic Record in Cambodia. By Michelle Caswell. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2014. 246 pp. Bibliography, index, notes. Softcover. \$29.95.

Archiving the Unspeakable, a recent addition to the University of Wisconsin's *Critical Human Rights Series*, is a multidimensional exploration of the so-called mug shots taken at the Tuol Sleng prison in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, by the Khmer Rouge's secret police in the late 1970s. Pol Pot's henchmen meticulously documented all orders issued by the Khmer Rouge; kept logbooks detailing interrogations, which relied on torture; transcribed coerced confessions of alleged crimes against the state; and maintained extensive photographic files of prisoners staring into a camera lens during prison registration. Michelle Caswell's provocative study probes the implications of such disturbing photographic records through "the lens of archival studies" (p. 7).

After the fall of the Khmer Rouge in 1979, the Tuol Sleng mug shots that had not been destroyed after evacuation of the prison migrated to various types of repositories, including archives, art museums, and websites. The images have been widely distributed in print and digital formats. Many are displayed at the Tuol Sleng Museum of Genocide, which occupies the buildings formerly used by the prison. Much of the research upon which Caswell based her book was conducted at the Documentation Center of Cambodia (DC Cam); the National Archives of Cambodia; and Bophana Audiovisual Resource Center. She describes her intentions and methodology as follows:

Through a records-centered approach, I hope to both introduce scholars from other fields to the potential contributions of archival theory [regarding] the on-going discussion about evidence, power, and historical production and challenge archivists to embrace their own power to counter the silences embedded in records, particularly records that document human rights abuse. (p. 7)

The Khmer Rouge murdered nearly all of the people depicted in the mug shots. Only 202 victims survived their imprisonment, and the 5,190 surviving mug shots are the last tangible traces of executed victims. The book describes how friends and relatives of the victims are reminiscing, expressing feelings, recording facts, and constructing narratives around the mug shots, narratives intended to provide a voice for those silenced. Such projects to date have included interviews by documentary filmmakers and scholars; legal testimonies; published articles; and missing person notices. Survivors of the prison have also used the mug shots as a mnemonic device for their own memoirs. The pictures serve as touchstones for stimulating memory, bearing witness to abuse, and galvanizing resolve to resist future tyranny and injustice. Newly collected stories about the Khmer Rouge and its victims have become integral components of the archival record, supplementing and enriching other layers of documentation, "inscribing and creating memory by providing a space where the voices of survivors can be heard, the names and photos of victims can be recorded [and] Cambodians can be educated" (p. 99).

The notion that the stifled voices of the oppressed can be restored or reconstructed by others, however well intentioned, begs further scrutiny. We may infer uncertainty,

bravery, fear, or stalwart resolve in the photographed faces of victims forced to pose before being tortured and killed; our own values, expectations, and agendas inevitably mediate what we discern. Attempts to restore lost voices are ultimately suspect, a reality acknowledged by the journalist who wrote that a “truth about all photographic portraits, including the Cambodian pictures, is that they are mute. We can never be sure what their expression means.”¹ Caswell’s rejoinder to such objections is that even if the Tuol Sleng mug shots are silent, they compel “surviving family members . . . to speak . . . , breaking the silence of the images with the voices of those left behind to witness” (p. 132).

The book’s perspectives are in large part inspired by the writings of historian Michel-Rolph Trouillet, in whose view: “Archives assemble. Their assembly work is not limited to a more or less passive act of collecting. Rather, it is an active act of production that prepares facts for historical intelligibility. . . . [Archives] are the institutionalized sites of mediation between the sociohistorical process and the narrative about that process.”² Trouillet’s point is well taken, but many archivists, going further, would eliminate his distinction between archivists as record assemblers and archival users as narrative creators on the grounds that archival functions by their nature involve the construction of narratives.³ Such narratives are embedded (sometimes subtly, sometimes not) in tasks such as accessioning, culling, arranging, and constructing finding aids and metadata.

The social practices linking photography, archives, and museums have come to the attention of anthropologists in recent decades. Ethnographic studies have located the meaning of photographs not only in their content but also in patterns of ownership, reproduction, consumption, distribution, and accessioning in a museum or archival repository. Archivists and the users of archives need to consider the social expectations brought to photographs; the circumstances of how they were produced and acquired by a museum or archives; and how description, arrangement, and labeling may have affected their interpretation and use.⁴ Gaps in communication or understanding separating the perceptions of archivists and researchers, sufficiently prevalent to merit the nickname the “archival divide,” could be lessened by collaboration among archivists, curators, and researchers. The parameters of traditional archival activities such as appraisal and description could well be expanded. All parties involved in the administration and use of historical materials could, for example, join forces to produce “interactive finding aids based on specific historical interests.”⁵

Ideas about what constitutes (or should constitute) archives and how the activities of archivists and users interact (or should interact) have often piqued the interest of theorists in the archival community as well as historians and other scholars. The “records continuum model” in archival studies considers archives not as immutable reservoirs of facts but rather as shifting processes of context and recontextualization whereby activities and interactions transform documents into records that can be used for a variety of purposes over time.⁶ In this sense, records are dynamic objects whose functions change as personal memories and accrued evidence are shared—a record’s meaning mutates and flows beyond the boundaries of particular times, places, and contexts. Caswell effectively applies this model to the myriad uses and shifting meanings of the Tuol Sleng mug shots and the interviews, memoirs, and testimonies engendered or encouraged by them.

One interesting sidelight in the book relates to political philosopher Hannah Arendt's controversial suggestion that obsessive documentation by totalitarian regimes facilitates mass murder by insulating decision makers from the hideous consequences of their decisions.⁷ In a similar vein, Caswell argues that although the immediately apparent function of the Khmer Rouge's complicated records "was to document prisoners [and] administer specific acts of violence, the purpose . . . was to transform arrestees into criminal subjects [and] further alienate bureaucrats from knowledge of and responsibility for mass murder" (p. 57). In ways "unimaginable to those who created the original sources and subversive of their aims" (p. 12), Tuol Sleng photography is now being used as a magnet for bringing together dispersed information about crimes and as a catalyst for narratives that hold perpetrators accountable while memorializing victims.

Caswell's main point addresses the ethics of looking at images of people forced to pose for pictures under extreme duress. What are our ethical obligations to the victims of suffering and injustice? Caswell urges that scholars, archivists, and other concerned parties have an "ethical imperative" (p. 163) to confront the images of violent coercion in appropriate contexts. How we see injustice and react to inhumanity inevitably affects our sense of ourselves and our place in the world. *Archiving the Unspeakable* argues that archivists have a responsibility to "activate" (p. 165) troubling records like the Tuol Sleng photographs to ensure that records of past abuses are preserved and made available responsibly and sensitively. Archival work, as the book convincingly argues, "is central to the ethical viewing of these images" (p. 163). Depictions of suffering and injustice are not easy to look at and even harder to contemplate. But doing so facilitates the individual and collective memory of past wrongs and stands as a signpost for the informed guidance of future generations.

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NOTES

1. Michael Kimmelman, "Hypnotized by Mug Shots that Stare Back: Are They Windows or Mirrors?," *New York Times*, August 27, 1997, C9.
2. Michel-Rolph Trouillet, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), 52.
3. Wendy Duff and Verne Harris, "Stories and Names: Archival Description as Narrating Records and Constructing Meanings," *Archival Science* 2 (2002): 276.
4. Of particular interest are two self-reflexive investigations of museum history and practice: Elizabeth Edwards, *Raw Histories: Photographs, Anthropology, and Museums* (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2001); and *Photographs, Museums, Collections: Between Art and Information*, ed. Elizabeth Edwards and Christopher Morton (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2015).
5. See Francis X. Blouin and William Rosenberg, *Processing the Past: Contesting Authority in History and the Archives* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011). Blouin is an archivist and Rosenberg is a historian.

6. Sue McKemmish, "Placing Records Continuum Theory and Practice," *Archival Science* 1 (2001): 336.
7. See Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Penguin, 2006). Her controversial "reports" from the Eichmann trial were originally published in a five-part series in the *New Yorker* in 1963. Layers of bureaucracy and attempts at obfuscation do not, of course, exonerate anyone involved in torture, mass murder, or other crimes against humanity.