Are Images the Real Stories? Materialising Memory and Problems with Archiving

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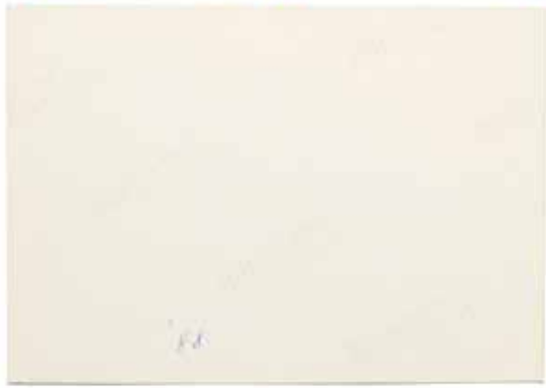

Memory and photography are kinds of archival media, considered to represent past events authentically. Both record images, albeit in different forms, in order to recall the past. Memory, having no material or physical form as photographs, can be considered a form of mediation, which is shaped by present times, essentially free from space-time continuum. This essay attempts to question and explore memory and photographs as reliable representatives of personal history, taking cue from a personal childhood memory of a place once lived in, which turned out to be false.

Dylan Trigg quoting Augustine, "In the memory [...] everything is preserved separately, according to its category. Each is admitted through its own special entrance (1961, 214),"[1] emphasises that all of us have a series of memories that can resurface at a specific place and time with varying intensities.[2] More importantly, memories comprise the *act* of remembering and its *content*, i.e. the remembered. This *act* of remembering is then concerned with the mode through which the past is recollected.[3] Narrating a memory, for example, is subject to the context in which one narrates it. The memory can then have various descriptions, each reliant on how, where, and under what interests we express them.

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My father was in the army and after every two years, we were transferred to a new location. Change was something very familiar to me. If it were not my family going through this change, it would be our neighbours and close friends. Schools, friends, and homes were never a constant. One of the places I lived in was the Mangla cantonment, near Mangla dam in Jhelum district of Pakistan. The town of Mangla and Mangla dam are located across the Jhelum river in Azad Kashmir.

Mangla, 1995:

I am 10 years old and standing in the backyard of my house. There is a big tree in the middle of the garden where the grass never grew because of its shade. I am digging into fresh mud, creating a pit to bury some toys that are arranged on the ground. I can't remember them exactly but in this memory they are small and made of plastic and wood.

I had recently learned of archaeology in school, and understood it as a way of discovering places and people who lived before us and uncovering objects, such as stone tools and utensils, houses and civilisations buried under the soil. That day when I came back home from school I wanted to be an archaeologist.

Some days go by and I am pretending to have forgotten about my "lost" toys. I am in the backyard, walking under the same tree looking for them. It's a game. There is a red plastic shovel in my hand with which I extract my toys. I still can't remember them but I can definitely feel their weight in my hands and the layer of dirt on them. There they were, less exciting than discovering a ten thousand year old fossil but just as incredible.

There was something transient and temporal about Mangla and because people were constantly posted in and out, none of the town's original inhabitants remained there. As people moved in and out of each other's homes, traces of past lives began to surface. Each room was a palimpsest of feelings, i.e. what previous residents thought of themselves. One was able to see this in the old broken toys people left behind, torn bits of paper, books, materials used for covering damages, dents, scratches, and marks.

To remember something, now gone, yet was once there, is the simplest way to understand how memory functions. How one experiences such memories would then largely depend on the dynamics of "meaningful involvement established at the outset."[4] Trigg explains this by suggesting that in the case of memory of a place, there is a division of remembering, i.e. the context on which memories hang and the very texture of the specific content. Additionally, our understanding of places is determined as we compare them with other places. Therefore, it would be disingenuous to overlook the distance disjoining the present and the place I am remembering in the past, least because a tactic residue of fragmentation seeps through all of time's polarities.[5] In trying to remember a place, which I am no longer a part of, I am reduced to the outsider of my memory. And in this return to a place once occupied, "I" am partly dispersed in time and yet absorbed in that place but never actually "there".[6]

The following memory of Mangla is more factual and has yet to recede into a spiritual past. It is more suggestive of Mangla's physical and material attributes.

On this occasion, I am standing outside my house next to the low wooden gate. There are no cement walls in Mangla and instead small trimmed hedges are used to demarcate homes, parks and other spaces. Somewhere in the distance, I see my house and a tree I often climb. My sister is with me and we are waiting for friends to arrive so we can go to the movies—it must be a Thursday because that is when we go to the cinema to catch Chinese Kung Fu movies. I don't understand this movie because it is entirely in Chinese or the subtitles are changing much too fast. So I walk out of the cinema to get some snacks from the only popcorn machine in town. There is one of everything in Mangla—one popcorn and ice cream machine, one cinema, one tailor and so on.

The first time I revisited my memory of Mangla was a few years ago. I was in my college library in London, going through a book of photographs titled *After the Floods* by Robert Polidori.[7] In this book he documented mainly houses and their interiors, which were destroyed by floods and were uninhabited. The interiors were drenched, debris sprawled everywhere, and encrusted mud and decay created new topographies. The immaculate attention to detail in these photographs is not visible to the naked human eye. The images of these skeletal remains are, perhaps, what triggered my memory of Mangla dam and the villages that were drowned for it.

> *I am now on a raft with lots of families for a picnic. The air is moist and we are somewhere in the middle of the river. Somebody is pointing towards an eel they've just spotted. Seated close to the edge I am looking closely at the water. I see small fish but I am waiting to get a glimpse of a drowned city I hear stories about. I am trying to figure out a way to make the water disappear so I can see what is hidden below. As a self-proclaimed backyard archaeologist, the thought of an unknown underwater city is not sitting well with me. After all, I didn't flood the city myself, did I?*

Then there was a memory when I saw a minaret or what was left of it.

> *I am near the water again. But this time sitting in a car and crossing the dam to get to my school, which was located in a nearby town called New Mirpur. It is a clear day and ours is the only car on the road. I can't quite tell who is sitting next to me but the space seems cramped and I turn my gaze towards the blue water beyond which are blue hills. Today the water doesn't seem alive and is lower than usual. I can see the outline along the wall where it originally reached. Something in the distance suddenly catches my eye: a slender structure rising above the level of the water, silhouetted against the setting sun—a minaret of a mosque that was once part of the drowned city.*

Despite my attachment to this memory, my recollections vary in description and intensity. At times, my focus on remembering a particular thing is displaced with the more generalised sense of simply being there. It is vital to consider here that memories present themselves, at least initially, as an appearance of our past. Therefore, according to Trigg, memory is not solely confined to our minds, as it were, but it is in fact the interaction between people and surroundings that provide the source for remembering.[8] It is conversations, places, emotions, and thoughts that suit the content of memory and as we address these memories verbally or in writing, we contextualise them, paving way for narration, which then takes over and alters memory to suit the needs of the time. An example of this could be the following excerpt from my initial writings about Mangla in 2009:

> *The tide is low, and the dam is less intimidating and more inviting. As I observe the water, my eyes are distracted by something out of the ordinary. In the centre of the dam, the dome of a minaret stands out.*

Here the focus is more on the detail of the minaret, and not on the time of day or a sense of the ambiance. This could possibly be because I was in London at the time and my description of a minaret submerged in water to a foreign audience seemed more "exotic" as a story.

* * *

Memories are malleable, and they overlap, encircle one another—some falling into less present zones than others. The act of *remembering* plays an important role in what defines memories, and is often influenced by the context in which this remembering takes place. In other words, the reason of remembering something formulates a memory. In case, what is being remembered is a frail or confused memory, imagination creeps in to fill the void or create what is missing. Can we then assume that Polidori's photographs also provided my memory with a kind of visual reference? And if memory is compelled to negotiate with an image that allows the past to be articulated, can the relationship between memory and its image be trusted?

According to Trigg, "as remembering agents we are inclined to speak by way of having a 'picture' of things as the content of memory."[9] Sometimes I will say, "I can still see the minaret in the water." On another day, I may recall the memory by focusing on the weather or the colour of the water. In essence, therefore, images and sensations always persist. A kind of reminiscing also exists at this point, which, perhaps, was also present during the formation of my memory while reviewing Polidori's photographs. Trigg undermines the autonomy of memory by suggesting that the reception of memory is dependent on an invisible agency that acts between memory and imagination, and if the past is preserved, it is at the expense of scraping out its original content.[10] This kind of image-making or memory formation (through the act of remembering and now reminiscing) creates a discontinuity between present thought and its original version and thus has no actual engagement with the past. For this reason, memory's engagement with the past has blurred the distinction between history and fiction, making it difficult to determine where memory stops and imagination begins.

Often imagination occurs at a time when memories are contextualised either through oral or written narrative. Whatever form narration might take, we end up aestheticising memory, which requires imagination and therein we never really get to "experience an image directly."[11] For Trigg this involvement of imagination may seem to gradually decay the image of a memory itself, but could also keep it alive.[12] Therefore, with time, as our memories are reworked, reconstituted, and reconfigured to suit our continuously changing selves, it is the tension between the act

of remembering and the work of imagination, which points toward our need to preserve memories. In other words, our need to secure experiences from slipping our mind, heightens the role of imagination as a preserver of the past. More specifically, Trigg suggests that in the case of memory of a place, the imagination orients itself fundamentally towards the future. Here, "imagination shows itself to be an act of place-making for the future, a resistance against time, in which the preparation for the loss of place is established."[13] He suggests that this impetus for rediscovering places through imagination comes from dissatisfaction with existing information or experience of place. While imagination can be an attempt to broaden the memory-narrative, more importantly its formation is often influenced by *reason* on which the *remembering* takes place. In essence, while we may never experience an image directly because it keeps altering through creative imagination—it would also be worth considering that our present self largely guides this imagination. Consequently, if image-making is our preference in order to imagine what there was in reality, would something more visible, such as photographs, help us reflect the past more accurately? Can we remember better through pictorial references? Did the invention of camera help preserve memories, or did it create new memories?

The following section analyses our need to preserve experiences and images by focusing on photographs and oral tradition, and their manifestation on memory.

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Before photographic documentation, people relied heavily on memory and oral tradition to preserve a record of the past; visible things were then often brought together through words, speech, storytelling, and imagination. Subsequently, the invention of the photographic-image was perceived as tangible evidence of our experiences and memories. It is in them that we look for a kind of reassurance and guarantee of our past. Roland Barthes positions the role of a photograph by articulating that in front of a photograph, one's consciousness does not merely take the path of nostalgia, but for every photograph existing in the world, the path of certainty.[14] There is a superimposition here of reality and the past where the photograph's primary role lies in the supreme power of authentication. According to Barthes, "Photography never lies: or rather it can lie as to the meaning of the thing, being by nature *tendentious* but never as to its existence."[15] While this may be true, it is important to consider that photographs, although proofs of our past experiences, do not tell stories. Freund and Thomson reiterate this by quoting Philip Gourevitch that photographs, "[…] can only provide evidence of stories, evidence is mute; it demands investigation and interpretation […] a photograph can best be understood not as an answer or an end to inquiry, but as an invitation to look more closely, and to ask questions."[16] I would like to consider this specifically through and within *domestic photography*, which includes taking pictures for nonprofessional purposes. Sarvas and Frohlich explain that this particular genre of photography is not considered a hobby as such, but is fixated in other activities where mostly members of the family or acquaintances capture experiences of big and

small events such as holidays, festivals, parties, and casual interactions.[17] Hence, the purpose of these snapshots is not that of aesthetics but to construct an optimistic representation of domestic life, and while they trigger emotions which are personal and private, the pictures themselves often remain banal and insignificant without a direct connection to the people or the context captured in the photographs. Additionally, it is only when these photographs are curated in family albums that narratives of past events may be constructed. However, what we tend to overlook is that the "active selection process in the creation of these albums can make the truthfulness of their narratives questionable."[18]

It is worth mentioning that I have no documentation of the minaret or the drowned city mentioned earlier. There are, in fact, just a few private photographs left from my time in Mangla, which I recently revisited. This could be because the concept of documenting every moment of our lives was not as much of a priority as it is today, and because we moved across the country so often that these photographs were probably misplaced and even forgotten. The pictures include mostly portraits of my family, birthday parties, a few picnic gatherings, group shots of people I do not recognise, and more often than not, the dam itself sits insignificantly in the background. Such snapshots are considered relics of the past and take us back in time so we can take note of things that we overlooked when/if we were there. We can also assert that most old family photographs lack information, which ultimately makes them unsatisfying, as they often need to be explained through stories. Therefore, we can consider family albums as sites of oral tradition, where images are mostly accompanied with spoken narratives.[19] In a similar sense, while my images of Mangla claim the past, none of them are able to demonstrate how I remember the place. There is a consistent failure in their very nature to represent what I really want to see and confirm about the past. Experiences may be remembered in the form of images, but not necessarily in the way they are represented in family photographs, where they often contradict the narrative. Could this be because my parents took these photographs? Alternatively, could we then presume that these images are representations of their interactions with the place, and how they wanted to remember it?

We can also deduce that what appears in my photographs of Mangla is a peripheral view dictated by convention and by a lack of connection between known/familiar reality and social formalities of picture taking. It is also important to reflect that at the time roll films had to be installed in cameras, which would allow one to take between 24 to 36 pictures and another few days to get them developed. Therefore, it is only obvious that many people would have been selective about when and what to photograph, and that perhaps our individual understanding of place determined this choice of image preference. The photographs of Mangla then become fragmented glimpses, only capable of suggesting my parents' past and unable to display my own relationship with the place. Time also plays a role in our association with these images. For instance, having not seen these photographs for several years, would I remember Mangla

differently if I were constantly in contact with these pictures? Would these images then dictate my memory? If I were taking photographs of Mangla myself, would they adhere to my memory of the place as it is now? Or would they generate a different narrative?

While questioning the reliability of photographs as agents of truth, Susan Sontag explains that a photograph is not just the result of an encounter between an event and a photographer. "Picture-taking is an event in itself, and one with even more peremptory rights—to interfere with, to invade, or to ignore whatever is going on [….]."[20] When taking a photograph, one not only selects the subject but also the details within the focus of the image. In regards to domestic photography, this attention to detail involves framing (consciously and unconsciously) our interest or subject and excluding what is unneeded. Although, photographs claim to *tell it like it is out there*, the information reinforced by the image is through a specific viewpoint, which could potentially alter how we look at or even remember events and places photographed. Sontag goes as far in asserting that searching for reality in photographs can create estrangement from, rather than union with, our memories.[21] She further states that the need to preserve bygone events has led to the habit of *photographic seeing*, where we "look at reality as an array of potential photographs", creating a somewhat dissociative seeing and hence doubting real experiences.[22]

Photographs then are inadequate means to fill the void of memory. However, while they have the ability to be deceptive—especially since the advancement of digital technology with their unlimited capacity for visual manipulation—we still rely heavily on them to remember the past and confirm its continued existence. This polarity in photographs is common knowledge and has been explained by Karen Cross and Julian Peck, where on the one hand photographs are considered to improve memory of experiences (details otherwise forgotten), enabling us to expand our thoughts on subjects and mechanically arrange our view of things. On the other hand, photographs filter and mediate what is preserved and can control the way we remember the past—a process that is considered to result in the destruction of memory.[23] Sometimes our memory of an event or place is so convincing that we can't believe a confrontation by our own printed past. At other instances, we know the pictures first-hand and remember clearly where those stories took place. There are also moments where we falsely recognise pictures and incidents we were never a part of.

On their own, photographs do not narrate experiences as individuals can, and stories in photographs only come to life orally. In this sense, we can consider photographs not only as visual records, but also, as stated earlier, forms of oral history. Elizabeth Edwards argues that emotions in photographs can be articulated through forms of vocalisation.[24] Photographs and voice are then integral to the performance of one another, connecting, extending, and incorporating diverse ways of telling stories. Here orality does not simply suggest verbalising an image *(this is where we went for a picnic)* "but the processes and styles in which photographs have dynamic and shifting stories woven around and through them imprinting themselves and being played back repeatedly through different telling."[25] As performative objects if photographs are able to construct the frames for patterns of telling or reinforcing memory through the structure of repetition (of perhaps images of a place/scene) could they also create false memory? And, if photographs alongside oral history can reconstruct memory, is it in light of their exceedingly detailed imitation of real life or the power of storytelling?

Let us now contemplate that photographs have the ability to create false stories and distort memory. This would apply less to current digital photography where one is aware of the potentials in digital manipulation through use of Photoshop and Instagram filters. It would instead be applicable in the case of old childhood snapshots. At times, in order to make sense of a photograph from our past, we draw heavily on memory, which could possibly trigger false recollections. Since photographs are a powerful source for perceptual information, they may act as a stimulant, making it easier for people to generate images of false experiences. Here the notion of, *to see or remember things the way we want to, rather than the way they were* comes into play. However, as suggested by Edwards, "If the tactile qualities of photographs, with their smooth surfaces and delicate paper bases, are secondary to visual, they are nonetheless highly significant in the transmission of shared values and memories"[26] —and can be responsible for creating false memories. To understand false memories, it is critical to refer to *postmemory* and its relation to instruments such as photographs and narratives.

Marianne Hirsch introduced the term postmemory in 1992. It was then used primarily to refer to the relationship between the children of Holocaust survivors and memories of their parents. It has since expanded to describe experiences later generations sense only through means of stories, images, and behaviours. Postmemory is therefore the transmission of memory from one generation through another. According to Hirsch, "Postmemory describes the relationship of the second generation to powerful, often traumatic, experiences that preceded their births but that were nevertheless transmitted to them so deeply as to seem to constitute memories in their own right."[27] Hence, unlike memory, postmemory's connection to the past is not established by recall but by imaginative investment, projection, and creation. Hirsch mentions that the photographic image is central to the medium of postmemory. It plays an important role in the transmission of memory-image not just because of the technology of photography and the belief it engenders—which is responsible for connecting generations—but also because photographs hold symbolic and affirmative power, offering direct access to past and unimaginable events.[28] In postmemory-inducing pictures, the distance between the past and present, self and other, seems to disappear or rather appears to merge. The illogicality and the two dimensional flatness of the photographic image makes space for narrative, elaboration, and symbolisation. For this reason then, every time we look at photographs from the past world, "we look not only for

information or confirmation, but for an intimate material and affective connection."
The following concluding section of this essay, argues that the workings of postmemory can also be mediated through narration and more affirmatively through storytelling.

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At the outset, I specified my memory as being false. My memory of the minaret rising above the water was a memory conjured up in my mind after I heard about it. My mother told us many times that she saw the minaret long before I was born. Evidence or lack thereof suggests that the minaret in all likelihood gave way to decades of decay and finally collapsed, and it was never seen in the later years, even when the tide in the dam was low. On my own investigation, I discovered that the sightings of the minaret were never documented, and that my memory of it was based on eyewitness accounts, and, the power of storytelling. Although little has been said about postmemory in relation to storytelling, I would like to analyse here how stories communicated orally, transfer experiences, which can also be recognised as postmemory.

According to Garry and Gerrie, "photos alone are powerful enough to elicit false memories on their own but that they are not necessarily more powerful than narratives [...] photographs do make it easier for people to imagine—and then come to believe—the false event depicted."[30] Some photographs (without any supporting narrative) provide such concrete visual depiction that it may get difficult then to construct information—whereas in the case of narratives and stories, one is able to generate their own details[31]

Storytelling should be understood here as being distinct from mainstream narrative writing and oral tradition. It is not an impersonal myth or a personal fiction but in fact an act of speech. Therefore, stories that have power on our memories are not simply just a form of oral tradition but are narratives with great amplitude. Here the storyteller has the ability to describe experiences (his/her own and of others) and makes it the experiences of those listening to him/her. In such forms of storytelling then, the use of orality is able to give vision to our memory's eye especially if the oral expressions are considered through emotions or paralinguistic vocalisations such as, crying, shouting, and laughing.[32] In such, this vision when further amalgamated with imagination could create or alter memories. It is important to reinstate here that the process of these creations starts when, for example, family stories are disjointed and histories are fragmented.

Freund and Thomson explain that in many instances, these stories and false recollections, possibly through the act of repetition, become "stuck" in our brain and told as part of our personal life story.[33] There is always something about these stories that hits a nerve, makes them linger in our mind, and "ability to hold the image over time, a process described as 'working memory', is ultimately the basis of extended consciousness."[34] Here narratives create images that are monumental and potent than the storyteller. In essence, our memories are replete with other people's memories. They are stronger, more vivid and real in any sense, but they are not ours. This is not to say that one person's lived memory can transfer into another person's memory in the same way. In fact, we do not have literal memories of other's experiences and our relationship to their past events is based on different semiotic principles.[35] Nevertheless, we can still say that postmemory has some accuracy. It seeks to do justice to other's memories by capturing the emotional content of their experiences and therefore aims to sustain the truthfulness of the original experience. What cannot be in our control, however, is to know how accurately the narrator (other person) remembers and to what extent these memories have already been altered.

Memory is always selective, and even if the impulse of correspondence attempts to keep memory true to what actually happened, it is the intention, which ensures that the emerging story fits in with the need of the present-self.

Notes

1. Dylan Trigg, T*he Memory of Place: A Phenomenology of the Uncanny* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2012), p. 45.
2. Ibid., p. 15.
3. Ibid., p. 45.
4. Ibid., p. 59.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
7. Robert Polidori, *After the Flood* (Göttingen: Steidl, 2006). Polidori is a Canadian–American photographer known for his large-scale colour images of architecture, urban environment, and interiors.
8. Trigg, ibid., p. 47.
9. Ibid., p. 46.
10. Ibid., p. 66.
11. Ibid., p. 67.
12. Ibid.
13. Ibid., p. 173.
14. Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (London: Vintage, 2000), p.85.
15. Ibid., p. 87.
16. Alexander Freund and Alistair Thomson, eds., *Oral History and Photography* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011). Web. Qtd. Phillip Gourevitch, p. 1.
17. Risto Sarvas and David M. Frohlich, *From Snapshots to Social Media: The Changing Picture of Domestic Photography* (London: Springer, 2011), p. 7.
18. Sarvas and Frohlich, *From Snapshots to Social Media*, p. 7.
19. Ibid., p. 60. Web. Qtd. Deborah Chambers, p. 99.
20. Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (London: Penguin, 1977), p. 8.

21. Ibid., p. 75.
22. Ibid.
23. Karen Cross and Julia Peck, "Editorial: Special Issue on Photography, Archive and Memory." *Photographies* 3:2 (2010): 127–38. Accessed 10 March 2017, doi: 10.1080/17540763.2010.499631, p. 2.
24. Elizabeth Edwards, "Photographs, Orality and History," in *Visual Sense: A Cultural Reader*, eds. Elizabeth Edwards and Kaushik Bhaumik (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2008), p. 241.
25. Ibid., p. 241.
26. Ibid., p. 245.
27. Marianne Hirsch, "The Generation of Postmemory," *Poetics Today* 29:1 (Spring 2008): 103–128, doi: 10.1215/03335372-2007-019, p. 1.
28. Ibid, p. 5.
29. Ibid., p. 14.
30. Maryanne Garry and Matthew P. Gerrie, "When Photographs Create False Memories," *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 14:6 (2005): 321–325, doi: 10.1111/j.0963-7214.2005.00390.x, p. 322.
31. Ibid., p. 323.
32. Edwards, "Photographs, Orality and History," p. 242.
33. Freund and Thomson, *Oral History and Photography*, p. 134.
34. Freund and Thomson, ibid., p. 135.
35. Marianne Hirsch, "Projected Memory: Holocaust Photographs in Personal and Public Fantasy," in *Acts of Memory: Cultural Recall in the Present*, edited by Mieke Bal, Jonathan V. Crewe, and Leo Spitzer (Hanover and London: University Press of New England, 1999), p.15.

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