



# What Do You Remember From A Photo?

## A Reflection Essay On Memory Ethnography And Visual Anthropology

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In this essay, I will discuss how memories and collected photographs from fieldwork are utilised separately and together in producing ethnography. I will argue that aside from illustrating what happens in the field and the formulation of anthropological theories, photographs play a role in the ethnographer's attempts to remember fieldwork experiences. Following this, I will share an incident based on memories and recollections from fieldwork experiences during my Master's program in Manila, Philippines. This is an incident that I have no written documentation of except photographs which have guided my writing. I will then reflect on what might be the influence of memory and photographs on ethnographic writing. In the conclusion, I will discuss some ethical and practical issues of incorporating memory and visual techniques in fieldwork and writing.

**Keywords:** ethnography, fieldwork, memory, photograph, visual methods

### Introduction

The use of memory in writing an ethnography was demonstrated by Srinivas (1976) in *The Remembered Village*. The main objective of the book was to document everyday life in an Indian village and especially its caste relations. Interestingly, the publication of the book triggered different debates about producing ethnography that relies on memory. Srinivas claimed that this book was written based on memories because the processed fieldnotes were burned in fire while he

was in Stanford University. Beals (1978) contrasted Srinivas' 'memory ethnography' against 'methodical ethnography' which he claimed was conventionally followed by anthropologists. Beals recognises that the act of remembering is also found in methodical ethnography but this only supplements the facts documented through "assembled quotations, photographs, censuses, or elaborate computer analysis" (1978: 109). Questions surrounding the reliability of just the memory itself was then put on the table.

A more recent example of memory ethnography that I found is Vinay Kumar Srivastava's *On Sanitation: A Memory Ethnography* (2014). This work recounts the author's observations of toilets and lavatories during his teenage years. It starts with his comparison of toilets in his and his elite classmates' houses. The descriptions of latrines in Old Delhi, the concepts of impurity related to the left hand and the latrine mug, and the dichotomies between clean and unclean water are all included in Srivastava's work. The most interesting recollections for me are about the family of lavatory cleaners: the Anaro (widow woman), Dhammo (her son/s), and Dhammo's wife. Srivastava recalled how he learned about the sociology of the caste system and the naming systems of each caste. The gendered analysis in the work is also seen in the way he narrated how the oldest woman of the house, his maternal grandmother, supervised the cleaning of their latrine every day. He also recounted the relationships of women in the neighbourhood, from the collection of waste to the collection of roti and other leftover food. Towards the end, Srivastava

posed a critique on the romanticism of scavenging and proposed ways to improve the constructions and maintenance of latrines. Srivastava's work is an example of memory ethnography which could not have been done methodically. This is due to the fact that the memories were drawn from his teenage life and not as an aspiring ethnographer. I find this retrospective process meaningful in doing memory ethnography because the experiences of an individual in a place and community where s/he lived and grew up in is far richer and more embedded compared to that of an ethnographer. Additionally, the collective memory of Srinivasta's neighbours or extended relatives can be used in providing more details to the ethnography.

Looking back at the history of visual anthropology, cameras are considered as scientific tools used for gathering objective data and for generating anthropological theories (Harper, 2003). The work *Balinese Character: A Photographic Analysis* by Bateson and Mead (1942) is composed of 759 selected photos (out of 25,000) from their three years of fieldwork and is considered as one of the classics in the said field. They documented their respective research projects: Mead undertook research on child development while Bateson studied the influences of personality and culture to extend his analysis of the Iatmul tribe in New Guinea. Together, they used the photos to "illustrate a general theoretical interpretation of Bali" (Jacknis, 1988: 170). The use of photography was advocated by Mead in her other works, but it took almost four decades before the camera was used once again as a scientific tool. *The Death Rituals of Rural Greece* (1982) is a collaborative work produced by cultural anthropologist Loring Danforth and photojournalist Alexander Tsiaras. The general aim of the book is to provide a description of processes that allow individuals to cope with death but Danforth also aimed "to communicate both an intellectual and emotional response to the death rituals of rural Greece" (1982: 7). The photos include corpses in coffins, women holding the skulls of their husbands, and visits to the cemetery. The theory of death rituals as rites of passage and the laments as mourning rituals argue for the transition stages for the bereaved and the deceased to remain connected to each other before parting per-

petually. Unlike the work of Bateson and Mead who took their own photographs, Danforth analysed photographs captured by Tsiaras. The methodologies are different but both types of scholarship attest to the analytical role of photographs in anthropological research. Nevertheless, I emphasise here that most of the ethnographies today rely on photographs to illustrate the researcher's experience(s) during fieldwork. Photographs are rarely used to formulate anthropological and sociological theories.

In a different light, I will attempt to illustrate the roles that photographs play in the ethnographer's remembering process. I suggest that remembering influences the production of ethnography or an ethnographic piece about a specific incident. If fieldwork experience is part of the memory first before it becomes a text (Hastrup, 1992) and the process of writing is analogous to an act of exorcism for the ethnographer (Crapanzano, 1977), I posit that photographs play a triggering role like a candle to the exorcist.

### Looking back: Tondo Manila, November 2014 – May 2015



View from the office: Old and dilapidated cow slaughterhouse

I cannot remember when exactly the above photo was taken. I do know that it was during my fieldwork for my Master's thesis in Tondo, Manila, between November 2014 to May 2015. This view is taken from the office of SAMAKANA which stands for *Samahan ng Maralitang Kababaihang Nagkakaisa* or

Organisation of United Urban Poor Women. SAMAKANA was the organisation that assisted my study on teenage pregnancy and youth perceptions on sexuality. The office is located at the rooftop of a four-storey building. It is divided into two main areas: the education/meeting area in the outer part and office/bedroom area in the inner part of the office space. The office is convertible to one common bedroom for long-term volunteers staying in the community. There is also a small area for the sink adjacent to the toilet.

I met Arianne in the same office. She stayed there around three to four times a week, with her bag of clothes and a small pouch of toiletries. In the first few months of my fieldwork, I often arrived at the office to find Arianne having her morning coffee while browsing her notebook, which included her plans for the day. I remembered seeing my name in that notebook several times: "Introduce Nikki to young people," "Accompany Nikki to other buildings," and "Have lunch with Nikki." Part of her volunteer work was to make sure that I would be able to finish the interviews for the day and that I would not go hungry while I was with the community. Before I knew that she was in her 40s, I was under the impression that she was a decade older. She was quite thin and stood a little taller than me - probably 150 centimetre. She wore t-shirts and shorts everyday. Most of her t-shirts were purple because it was the shirt colour given to volunteers during events and programs.

Arianne was interested in my thesis for various reasons. During one conversation while we were in the office, she told me that she was a teenage mother herself. She had her first daughter when she was 16 and her second daughter when she was 18. During our exchange, she shared that both her daughters also became mothers at an early age. She had three grandchildren from her eldest and another from her second daughter. Arianne mentioned that she wanted me to meet her daughters because "they might get inspired by you," as I was the same age (23) as her eldest. Unfortunately, both her daughters were working as domestic helpers in another city and I was not able to meet them during my fieldwork. I was however able to meet all of Arianne's grandchildren. Danjo,

her eldest grandchild was 7 years old at that time. I met him when he was running towards the office door while shouting. The exchange was loud, quick, and remarkable:

*Lola, Lola, uwi ka na daw sabi ni Lolo*  
(Grandma, Grandma, please go home said Grandpa)

*Ayoko! Bahala siya sa buhay niya!*  
(No! He is on his own now!)

*Bibili ka daw niyang ice cream! Tara na!*  
(He said he will buy you ice cream! Let's go!)

Danjo went home on his own because Arianne said she still needed to finish some work. The next day, I went to the office and Arianne was not there. I asked the other volunteers if Arianne would be coming that week. They said that she went back home and was again at peace with her alcoholic husband. This was followed with a comment, "She will come back because he will hurt her again." This was the first time I got a glimpse of the domestic violence that Arianne was experiencing at home. The following days, Arianne was back in the office, with other volunteers teasing her, "Just stay here, we will buy you ice cream too!"

When I asked her how she had been, she gave me a deep sigh and started to narrate how her husband would beat her up whenever he was drunk and when he was unable to find food at home. She explained that she prioritised the food for the grandchildren; most of the time, it was not enough for everyone. That was why there was no food on the table whenever her husband arrived from his garbage collecting work. I asked about her daughters and how they helped the family financially. Arianne said that both her daughters sent money but not regularly. She also saved some of the money for her grandchildren. I cannot remember how our chat ended, but certainly, it was not part of her plan to report her husband to the police or to leave him on his own.

Whenever I see photos of my fieldwork days in Tondo, from the stairs leading to the rooftop, the graffiti on walls, and to the small sundry shops in other buildings, I remember Arianne and her story. I remember the office where we shared cups of coffee and

packed lunches. It is also the same office where her other grandchildren would sometimes spend the night because they got beaten up by their grandfather too.

### On memories, photographs, and writing up

It has been five years since I took the photo of the view from SAMAKANA office. Yet, I still remember the details of Arianne's life. The age at which she had her children were easy to note because of my interest in the topic on teenage pregnancy. I memorised the age at which my interviewees gave birth to their children. Not surprisingly, I am able to remember other details such as the way Arianne dressed, the features that made her look older, and the "ice-cream" remark by her grandson and by the other volunteers, whenever I return to the photographs in my laptop's "MA thesis" folder. I can almost imagine being in the Tondo office again, sitting next to her.

Looking back at my fieldwork photos, here are few questions that I asked myself: Where am I standing when I took this? Who was I with when I took this? Why is this important for me during that time? If I am in the photo, who took it then? I cannot ask about the dates they were taken because my filing system is not organised and the dates of the saved images changed as I transferred them from my old to a new laptop. In answering these questions, I refer to Pierre Bourdieu's archive of photographs that he took in Algeria between 1958 and 1961. He used the photographs to make visual fieldnotes when the country was still colonised. There are stolen shots but there were also instances when individuals asked him to take a photo of them. When he was interviewed about this, Bourdieu explained that "photography was a way of relating to people and of being welcome" (Schultheis and Bourdieu, 2003). I could not agree more. During my fieldwork experience, I would know if people were comfortable to talk to me when they started to pose for the camera I was holding. Sometimes, even when I had no intention of taking a photo at that particular point in time, I would remember doing so because it connected me to the people and

the community. In analysing Bourdieu's archive, Back (2009) suggests that Bourdieu's photographs show his attentiveness, curiosity, and his own sociological imagination. Bourdieu's interest in using photographs to understand societies is also evident in another of his work which focuses on the use of cameras by peasants (Bourdieu and Bourdieu, 2004).

Going back to Arianne, writing about the incident was never my intention. It was only in this paper that I took a "step out time" (Madden, 2010) to look back at the photographs, to recall the memories, and to write in detail. I attempted to write up what could have been in the notebook if I had chosen to take notes while the incident was happening or on the same day after it happened. This includes the structures or environment in the office and the behaviours of Arianne, her grandson, and the other volunteers. In narrating, I employed Emerson et al.'s (1995) *organizational strategy* and wrote a few episodes about my encounters with Arianne. The episodes were triggered by the photos I looked at as I tried to recall my fieldwork experience. My notes recounted the actions and movements in time and space to narrate a slice of life in Tondo, Manila. Using this strategy, I aim to orient the reader to shift in time, place, and person, for readers to be able to follow me as I narrate the story. The focus was on Arianne, the central character, while the rest were peripheral, even nameless. This is also because in my memory, I could not find details of other volunteers' activities or the clothes they wore during our exchange about Arianne's alcoholic husband.

### Ethical and practical issues

Responses to Beals' criticism of 'memory ethnography' can be found in several works. According to Gallinat (2010), personal memories can play an integral part in the reading and writing of ethnography, but the insights should be subjected to rigorous testing. This test can be done by double checking the facts that were remembered and if possible, going back to the place and talking to the people who were part of the memory. Gallinat shows this in her work in Germany where her 1994 experience in attending *ostalgie*

(nostalgia) parties were complemented by her formal fieldwork in 2001. In a more detailed account in relation to his re-entry to his field site in Sweden and participation in a research team project in England, Coleman discusses themes such as the importance of remembering and forgetting, of moving from outsider to insider memory, disadvantages of 'lone' fieldwork and benefits of collective memory building, and of lateral recall, or "appreciating the methodological, theoretical, and biographical links" (2010: 224) between various field sites.

The works by Gallinat, Coleman, and Srivastava indicate that 'memory ethnography,' despite criticisms, is continuously being recognised and applied by scholars. Memories that link experiences from different decades and multiple field sites are then maximised to produce an ethnography. Perhaps researchers should continue to reflect on how the remembered and the forgotten details show their own positionalities in the fieldwork. In doing so, we can also clarify how we came up with decisions of including or excluding certain parts of our fieldwork in our final research output. For instance, my memory of Arianne coincides with my identification as a feminist. I understood that she was struggling as she volunteered for the women's organisation before returning home to an abusive husband. She told me that her husband continued to work for the family and to pay the house rent. Because of this, she insisted that she would stay with him and their grandchildren. She shared her story because she knew that it was not part of the research on teenage pregnancy that I would write about – and she was right. As I continued with my thesis writing, I reviewed my research questions and identified relevant themes on romantic relationships, sexuality, and motherhood. Arianne's story remains only in my memory until now.

With regard to the triggering role of photographs for remembering stories from fieldwork, I would like to return to Bourdieu's photographs from Algeria. His photographs were not shared publicly until forty years later. Moreover, Bourdieu discussed his fieldwork experience decades after he took the photographs. Yet, he could still describe what was happening in the photos and why he was there at that time (for an elaborate

discussion, see Back, 2009; Schultheis and Bourdieu, 2003). The question that I would like to ask now is this: What should ethnographers do with the hundreds, sometimes even thousands of photos that they collect from fieldwork? Is it just for the cover of one's book or for aesthetic purposes, to be used during conference presentations? The latter question was similarly posed by Ruby (1973) in his work about anthropologists as picture-takers. In the almost 300 photos that I have for my fieldwork in Tondo, most are photos of children and their teenage mothers. Arianne and I have our own photos together, and in some instances, Arianne took photos of me and my interlocutors.

Two things however to keep in mind in answering my question here is that first, the identity of the teenage mothers should not be revealed due to ethical consideration. That is why I kept the photos only for my own supervisor and thesis panel to see. On a more practical level, if I were to share these photos for a discussion on the social or economic conditions of the community (which can be seen in the photos), I believe that I should have the time and commitment to produce sociological contributions to present to those who will be interested. As for now, the photographs will continue to be a tool for me whenever I think about exorcising my experiences in fieldwork.

## Conclusion

The utilisation of memories and photographs evinces various ethical and practical issues. However, I assert here that combining the two can also produce an ethnography with descriptions, dialogues, and characterisations. This is also in recognition that fieldwork is not an easy task – it is messy and multidimensional. There will certainly be moments in the field when one cannot write down the details on their notepads easily. The memory and the camera should then be maximised – and if the ethnographer chooses to do this, it is important to do a thematic organisation of photographs and other visual materials (Madden, 2010). This thematisation will make the writing up of the ethnographic project easier and more organised. As for the memories that involuntarily remain in our

minds, I believe that in some ways, it reflects the issues we prioritise in the field, the kind of relationships we have built with the community, and the kind of research we are going to craft in the subsequent years.

## Notes

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