

# The Borrowed Archive.

## Collaborative Practices of the Kashmir Photo Collective

### Part I

July 2019: I am at home in South Carolina with Radi. My parents are making their first trip to Round O to visit us from Bombay. We are nervous. They are too. A black family and a brown family are about to merge.

A day or two after they arrived, Radi took out some family photographs given to him by his father, Munongo Clytus Furiko (Uncle), who passed away in 2016.<sup>1</sup> The prints, mostly black and white and dating from the early 1900s, capture domestic scenes from Malone, Texas, to San Francisco, California. With almost every photograph, we find handwritten notes identifying generations of family members. I am amazed to see that Uncle has left details clearly meant for Radi not just to know his ancestors by face, but also for him to know what Uncle thought of each of his relatives. It is a highly choreographed affair.

We read the words “your great-grandfather” on a slip of paper that has been clipped to a portrait of John Clytus. At once, the meaning of that picture changes. Uncle has not only given a photograph of his grandfather to his son, he is also constructing a narrative about his conflicted role as the family’s paterfamilias. This pensive young man in a jauntily cocked fedora confirmed what Radi had told me about

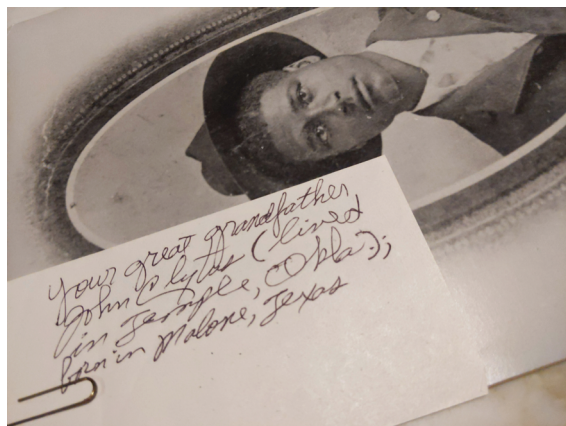


Fig. 42

the class ambivalence surrounding his father’s relationship to his paternal lineage. While many of the images from the Clytus

<sup>1</sup> On 14 September 1977, Radi’s father successfully petitioned the Circuit and Country Courts of Dade County, Florida, to change

his given name from John Clytus to Munongo Clytus Furiko.

Fig. 42-43 Photo © Alisha Sett.

family archive evince their prosperity under *de jure* segregation, photographs of Uncle's less privileged maternal kin take us into gatherings that are more relaxed and impromptu. Seen together, the dignified portraits of John Clytus and his wife and sons project an austerity that almost seems to rebuke the casual manner in which the Lewises, Wellses, and Owenses chose to represent themselves.

More proof of this conflict is found in the photographs of Uncle's mother, Ruth Lewis Wells, and maternal grandmother, Jane Lewis

Owens. Unlike the Clytuses' images, they are contextualized through unsettlingly blunt notation. Reading the lines "grandmother raised me" I wondered: Why would Uncle want Radi to remember her role in his life as opposed to that of his mother? And what exactly was Radi to understand about his grandmother Ruth, considering Uncle's unflattering characterization of her as an "overprotective" and "sentimental woman" who was also "a romanticist without knowing such a word"? Was Uncle's frank commentary a part of his paternal duty as he saw it, or an attempt to set the record straight? Radi had told me that Uncle was a militant socialist for the better part of his life and had rejected his bourgeois inheritance for the sake of wanderlust and revolution. Although he died alone and contrite in an exclusive retirement community, he remained unrepentant when questioned about his long-standing feud with both sides of his family. Because he was so decisive about constructing Radi's relationship to the past, it did not immediately seem that these images required more excavation. But there is a more complicated backstory to Uncle's brutal inscriptions that only Radi's mother, Gertrude Tucker (Aunty), had knowledge of. While Uncle challenged the conventions of family photographs as fond remembrances, Aunty's contrary testimonies suggested that memory tied to a photographic past could be deeply flawed. If in such an intimate scenario, such as the one I was a part of that summer, the image, image-text, and image con-text all put together, could not even begin to reveal the many histories of those photographs, what, if anything, can we accomplish through preserving family photographs? How does the process of inscribing them add to what we know? And why do families with whom I have no formal kinship, or sometimes even ethnic or religious commonality, choose to partake in this same process?



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## Part II

The Kashmir Photo Collective (KPC) began in 2014 with two photographers, Nathaniel Brunt and I, working in the Kashmir Valley, frustrated by our own photographs, enraged by the reinforcement of traumatizing and tantalizing tropes of the Valley in the press, and enraptured by the images we were encountering in people's homes. The floods that had devastated the Valley that year provided the impetus for an idea to become a necessity, and that necessity has become a photographic archive, a digital resource that hopes to outlive its founders and members by many years.

Our methods are simple. We, KPC, approach people in the Valley to contribute their collections of photographs and related historical materials to our digital archive. Sometimes the process of gaining their trust takes months or years. We follow a chain of relationships and work through introductions. We try to focus on those families who have been in the Valley for more than thirty

to forty years in order to gain a diverse perspective that predates the conflict. Then, once the relationship has been built, we bring our scanner to their home and usually locate ourselves in the living room, on the floor. In the first hour, after a round of tea and biscuits and juice, or a hefty lunch, frames are taken off walls and tables and put down on the carpet, plastic bags of loose printed images appear, the occasional envelope of undeveloped film, albums of course, some lush and leathery, others plastic, paper, flimsy and sticky. To pry open these fraying wooden and cardboard backs, release the dust, wipe off the patina of dirt, and then to place those photographs in a machine that turns them into so many pixels, a handful of data, is not a casual act. These hours are heavy and



Fig. 44

key to the afterlives of the scanned images. The conversations that take place with the people in the room, usually family and friends of the person who has brought us through the door, allow us to understand and learn what is crucial in each collection of images.

Building an archive of family photographs is like watching a banyan tree grow. The seed needs to find a crack or crevice in a

neighboring tree in which to nestle. The branches extend downward, creating innumerable inverted root systems, with the possibility of a single seed living and growing in concentric circles for hundreds of years. For us, the seed is a single photograph, from which an archival forest of memories begins to emerge. Once the images have been scanned, we return with them, all of them, printed on the simplest A4 sheets, the kind we all feed into our printers and use in local Xerox shops. We then go over each image with the family and write as they speak. This collection of pages, handwritten, recording the facts and fictions revealed in the moment of archiving, is then attached to the scanned collection, for the two to remain tied together for the future. While Kashmiri hospitality knows no bounds, there is a careful line between talk and testimony. The presence of any recording device here – even a scanner and pen – automatically transforms a space that is already loaded with the never-ending, ever-present backdrop of violence and beauty coexisting in each home. We have found that visibility, being able to see us at work, is essential for all the seeds to nestle deeply.



Fig. 45

Pandit Tarachand Mattoo

circa 1870 - when the photo was taken.

He died around 1890.

He was a revenue minister in the Dogra court.  
~~He was a revenue minister in the Dogra court.~~  
~~Tarachand Mattoo~~

His son died around 1908.

Mr. Mattoo's great grandfather.

There

The earliest ancestor of the family is Mahesh Mattoo.  
 These photos are from the time, or after the time the  
 family had established itself in Rainawari.

During this archival time, for the family members to be able to witness the making of raw material for new histories is quite magical. The choice of a pen, while painstaking, allows them to read over our shoulders, to clarify or change or add to what has been written in that moment. That it all happens in their home, a place of deep familiarity and also oftentimes the place where many of the images were made, and if not made then usually the place where the images have resided for a few decades; this intimacy is somehow embedded into the archive.

We believe our civil contract is similar to that made by many people working in the documentary genre or the newer and more rare form of digital archives imagined for the public, such as the Nepal Picture Library or Indian Memory Project, to name a few inspiring examples. These are civil archives, or, as we like to think of ours, borrowed archives, with the express goal of reversing and challenging the traditionally alienating role that archives have played. Our contract makes room for vulnerability and has a flexible collaborative architecture that necessitates integrity before, during and after the archival act. Because every collection is co-owned by KPC and the individual or family in question, and the material remains with them, they are free to withdraw permission for use or circulation at any point of time.

### Part III

Perhaps you know nothing about Kashmir and are wondering why KPC is necessary. I have avoided this 'background' purposefully but to delve into the images themselves requires some grasp of where they were made.

It was October 2019 when this text was first written to be delivered as a lecture; it is now January 2020 that a version is being sent to be embedded into print, and Internet has still not been restored to the Valley. For those of you who may have been following the news, my silence on the present conditions of people living there, or to the many histories of oppression present in this region may seem especially egregious, given that the information blockade being imposed by the Indian state is now hitting the six-month mark. But there is no way of writing or speaking about the abrogation of Article 370 without descending into the nation-state dominated narrative within which Kashmir has been embroiled for decades. And while I realize this is not a South Asian audience, as someone who has gotten used to being in environments, visual or textual, where Western history is the unsaid-thing-to-be-known, I will choose to put you temporarily at the same (dis)advantage.

Maybe I can tell you this much: Kashmir is more than a place. It is an act of imagination performed by millions and the mythology of its beauty has been global for centuries. Cashmere: a delicate wool, spun, now torn, each of its four ends stretched, pulled beyond the strength of its warp and weft. Though it occupies a fragment of the South Asian subcontinent, if measured in dreams, nightmares and metaphors, Kashmir has occupied more than one universe over time. What I can give you is a quick overview of the visual history of the Valley and its lack of archives. As I have written elsewhere, the unfortunate truth is that:

“The Valley has been depopulated in the popular imagination because of its particular photographic history. Beginning with the poetic elevation of its landscape in the colonial era by the likes of Samuel Bourne, wherein Kashmiris were made minute against many a mountainous backdrop, the pristine vision promoted by travelers intensified as Kashmir became the most photographed destination in South Asia in the 19th century ... These time-worn touristic tropes have ricocheted continuously against the repressive representation of over three decades of militancy and war in the public sphere; a persistently pernicious type of photojournalism that has reduced Kashmiris to bodies caught between barbed wire and bare life since the late 1980s.”<sup>2</sup>

Even with this legacy of obsessive visual attention, Kashmiri history remains poorly written and even more poorly understood. Like many other regions of the subcontinent during the colonial era, Kashmir was a princely state with a relationship of relative autonomy from the East India Company. Therefore, unlike the obsessive records one can find in the India Office Library in London for states in which there was direct rule, the Dogra rulers – the last kings of Kashmir – did not preserve or for that matter meticulously document what was taking place; what did remain was not organized in catalogues that are readily decipherable. And of course, as is par for the course with royal records, material that reflected on the oppression meted out to the populace, or any controversial actions, were usually not documented at all. To quote Idrees Kanth, a Kashmiri historian who has written about exactly this problem:

“The repositories, both in Delhi, [and] at the National Archives of India (NAI), and in Srinagar in Kashmir Valley, are either scanty [...] or unwilling to give access to anything related to

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<sup>2</sup> Alisha Sett, “A Familial Kashmir”, in: pp. 88–95, here p. 89. The Indian Quarterly, July/September 2019,

the subject, owing to ‘security concerns’. In Kashmir especially, much of the material is missing from the archives and the press and information department, and whatever very little is available is unprocessed [...]. At the National Archives of India, the 30-year declassification rule does not apply to regions like Kashmir and no access is given to any documents beyond 1924. But why 1924 is chosen as the cut-off date defies explanation [...]. Many libraries have been burnt and many important records displaced as the state has even more consciously sought to withhold information and to appropriate popular narratives.”<sup>3</sup>

He goes on to say:

“[...] what would certainly help the ‘not so famous home-grown researchers’ is when the local families open up their private archives and allow access to their rich collections and priceless resources. That would certainly be a great service towards promoting Kashmir history and empowering the young historians of Kashmir.”<sup>4</sup>

But even with those private archives made somewhat accessible,



Fig. 46

many hurdles remain. Because the situation on the ground keeps changing, what information is safe to circulate, and what isn't, is constantly in flux. For example, this photograph<sup>5</sup> preserved by Professor A<sup>6</sup> and KPC is one I may never be able to display in Kashmir in my lifetime, like many in our collections. I could have chosen an image that is more local, but I think the significance of

this particular image will be understood easily here in the West. Professor A is a semi-retired and much beloved teacher of literature, still invited back to the University of Kashmir from time to time but living for most of the year in Bombay. Here we see him with Salman Rushdie and a group of other professors teaching in Srinagar, all of whom were present on this day when Rushdie

**3** Idrees Kanth, “Writing Histories in Conflict Zones”, in: *Economic and Political Weekly* 46, Nos 26/27, 2011, pp. 30–32, here p. 31.

**4** *Ibid.*, p. 32.

**5** The image has been obscured for the protection and privacy of those in the

image, it was shown during the lecture.

**6** The name has been withheld for the protection of the person concerned.

Fig. 46 This image has been obscured to protect the identity of those present that day. © Professor A's Collection/Kashmir Photo Collective.



Fig. 47

Fig. 47 Names in this document, as well as faces in the scanned images, have been obscured to protect the identity of those present that day. © Professor A's Collection/ Kashmir Photo Collective.



came to participate in a conference on *Midnight's Children*. What does the inadvertent presence of the novel in this image mean? How does the invisible inscription of this novel and the more visible presence of the novelist transform the nature of the photograph entirely from an innocent recollection of a memorable day to a dangerous presence in our archive? Where do we go from here? The period in which this photograph was taken is perhaps part of the final few years in which such an event could be imagined. These were the years before the Valley itself tipped headlong, full-fledged, into the minefield of sectarian politics and armed militancy, combined with a form of settler colonialism practiced by the Indian state, whose repercussions we are continuing to witness today.

What if we go back into the image itself, instead of outward from it? Rushdie's tie to Kashmir is also familial, ancestral, and as it turns out, *Midnight's Children* itself is born from a family photograph. To quote:

"An old photograph in a cheap frame hangs on a wall of the room where I work. It's a picture, dating from 1946, of a house into which, at the time of its taking, I had not yet been born. The house is rather peculiar [...] the photograph [...] it reminds me that it's my present that is foreign, and that the past is home, albeit a lost home in a lost city in the mists of lost time [...] A few years ago I revisited Bombay, which is my lost city, after an absence of something like half my life [...] I went to visit the house in the photograph and stood outside it, neither daring nor wishing to announce myself to its new owners [...] I was overwhelmed. The photograph had naturally been taken in black and white; and my memory, feeding on such images as this, had begun to see my childhood in the same way, monochromatically. The colours of my history had seeped out of my mind's eye [...] It is probably not too romantic to say that that was when my novel *Midnight's Children* was really born: when I realised how much I wanted to restore the past to myself, not in the faded greys of old family-album snapshots, but whole, in Cinemascope and glorious Technicolor [...] I, too, had a city and a history to reclaim."

These words are taken from *Imaginary Homelands*, an essay by Rushdie published in the *London Review of Books* in 1982. And they have haunted me because we aim towards the creation of a repository of real and symbolic lost homelands, or in simpler terms an archive of millions of borrowed memories hinting at

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7 Salman Rushdie, "Imaginary Homelands", in: *The London Review of Books* 4, No. 18,

1982, [www.lrb.co.uk](http://www.lrb.co.uk) (last accessed 3 February 2020).

lost possibilities. That specific image of a man standing outside a house, fearing its new owners, is so terrifyingly real in the Valley, that Rushdie's prescience is truly uncanny. For someone like me, who went to the Valley as a photographer and returned as an archivist, the idea of the family photograph as that portal, as the trigger for the creation of a story as extraordinary as that woven by Rushdie that then reappears in front of me in this new form is almost unbelievable. But this is also why the archive is a banyan tree: There are many in this image who I can speak to about that day, I have written down their names and connections to this time, and through those conversations I will have created not one new branch but so many that connect a part-Kashmiri like Rushdie to a shared universe of modern lovers of literature teaching at colleges in the Valley in the mid to late 20th century. This photograph also helps me explain why our archive is a borrowed archive, purposefully toying with pre-existing notions of a place that documents only enter and never exit. Our collections are borrowed in many ways – we digitize, we do not displace the image itself. We do not have sole ownership of the digital copy – it is co-owned by the family, who are given their own digital copies. There is no exclusive bond – they are free to sell, re-archive, pass on the image to other scholars, grandchildren, whomever. But the title is also meant to be hopeful, for it begs the question: Can we borrow memories? I think so. Rushdie does. I think we all do.

Because to borrow is also to lend. Radi lent me Uncle's archive as a gesture. Even though we have known each other for so many years, it is that we are going to be married soon, about to become a part of each other's families, that allowed him to share his father's legacy. That day, we were partaking in a very old ritual at a crucial moment in our relationship, when the nature of how we will negotiate our future is about to extend and transform beyond the both of us, into the very frames of our pasts.

What type of unwritten archival contract is required for so many Kashmiri families to share this familial bond with us to the point of inscription? Perhaps it is because we try and give every family collection in our hands that same sense of kinship that I felt that afternoon. As long as we can hold on to that, we will survive.