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Dividing the Light

Personal reflections on anthropological becomings

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ABSTRACT | Images can be powerful – and the choices that go into their making, both revealing and obscuring. In 2019 I undertook to make a stained-glass window, based on a photo I had taken ten years prior at a missionary base in South Sudan. I use reflections on this art project to highlight the idea of memory as *practice*, with a focus on the slippery and sometimes problematic ethics of ethnographic representation as a positioned, porous, and ‘becoming’ subject. Through explaining the context in which the photo was taken, alongside the process of the window’s construction, I reflect critically on discomfort, desire, risk, and imagination, considering the work of the (white) gaze and my own internalised structures of colonial feeling. I evoke ghosts, haunting, and the phantasmal to consider affective connections between (personal and historical) pasts and present, as well as self and other – with acknowledgement that sometimes a past self can also become an other that we must learn to recognise, and dwell with, as part of grappling with the ‘splinters’ of anthropological practice and being.

Keywords: Autoethnography; Art; Memory; Photography; Representation.

When we scrutinise a photo, we aren't looking for an image, but an access.
(French Philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy, paraphrased by anthropologist Cheryl Mattingly 2019a)

Images can be compelling for many reasons – as sites of revelation, or escape; as witness to truth, or a way to transform it. When I first started taking lessons in stained glass art making, it was supposed to be an antidote to over-thinking; an opportunity to step away from intense academic work and the blue light of a screen, and into a space of creative and tactile ‘play’. My teacher’s studio smells of wood-dust, tea, and the eucalyptus tang of the silver nitrate stain. The light is gentle, the windows smiling with saints and crowded with kowhai. For more than six months in 2019, I went there once a week to draw and design, cut and break, grind and polish, paint, etch, and assemble, a colourful window panel – an original design adapted from a photo I had taken ten years prior, in South Sudan. In November that year I soldered the last piece in place. Then I went through the final process of pressing putty into the gaps, scrubbing it down with sand, and blackening my pale hands rubbing graphite over the lines that divided light from light (see Figure 1). But though the window was finished, the thought-work was not, and it took me another 18 months following to find my way back to a more reflexive and critical understanding of what, beyond colour and light, had driven this particular project: what practices of memory were involved.



Figure 1. ‘Yet I Will Not Forget You’. Stained glass window, original design by Susan Wardell. 610 x 550 mm. Completed under the tutelage of Peter Mackenzie, May-November 2019.

Shortly after I finished the window I headed off to Canada, alone, to attend my first AAA conference. Somehow I navigated my way around the imposing Vancouver conference centre and into a panel session on ‘Imagistic Anthropology’, and then another on ‘Multi-Spectral Ethnography’. Sitting in those windowless rooms I had new light shed on the project I’d left tucked safely 12,000km away. These panels offered me a language and a lens through which to consider the phenomenology of image-making, and the unsettling hold of this particular image on me, as well as reflecting more slowly and deeply on my own actions and choices around it. In drafting this piece of writing, the story became less about the window itself, and more about subjectivity, time, and change. This is in large part because I had to go back to a 19-year-old version of myself to find the beginnings of the project. The essay thus uses autoethnographic methods to explore how the ethical principles and representational dilemmas of a professional anthropologist might be rendered in acknowledgement of the porous and ‘becoming’ anthropologist-selves we inhabit. In exploring a personal art project through these lenses – and through acknowledging and unpacking the lenses of my own positionality as a middle class, Christian, Pākehā woman – I join Williams’ (1993) goal ‘to evoke the shadows of representational practice’ and challenge the temporal and professional ‘boundedness’ of the anthropologist as subject. It begins with a turning back, towards the person I was long before I had ever broken a piece of glass on purpose ...

The Memories, the Mothers

I almost squint as I remember, the memories are so bright. Memories of a summer, 13 years ago, that I spent in East Africa. At 19 years old I was earnest, eager, and ready to save the world. My best friend and I boarded a plane in the South Island of Aotearoa New Zealand and spent three weeks backpacking through Jordan, Israel, and Egypt before flying to East Africa, where we had organised to volunteer for two months with a well-known international Christian youth missions organisation, which ran with a mixture of local and international staff. We stayed the first month in South Sudan, and then another month in Northern Uganda, having conversations, sharing food, doing odds jobs when they could be found for us, helping out with whatever events were running, taking excessive photos, and generally getting in the way.

Volunteer tourism (or ‘voluntourism’) is a justifiably critiqued practice, with scholarship suggesting it contributes to undermining the longer-term capacities of local organisations and infrastructure and reducing local autonomy (Smith 2015), as well as raising the potential for conflicts and misunderstandings via the brief and prescribed cross-cultural encounters it generates (Taylor 2020). Young women are the most common demographic to engage in voluntourism (Mostafanezhad 2013). This was certainly not something I realised at the time: being viewed by my middle-class friends and family back home as more than a bit mad for planning this trip, in the wake of abundant news coverage of Sudan’s civil war in the preceding years.

We remained a long distance from those televised conflict zones, but upon landing so far from home, my age and naivete made me vulnerable at an individual level. At a structural level, my social positioning – including my skin colour, relative financial capability, and geographic mobility – made me powerful, while at the same time limiting my capacity to learn about the lives of the people I met. Rather, any knowledge of their culture and lifeworlds was filtered always through

the goals and worldview of the organisation I worked with (Freidus et al 2018). Short term missions, as a close relative of voluntourism, often mask privilege through faith discourses, and can work to re-affirm asymmetrical post-colonial power relations (Berry 2014, Freidus et al 2018). At the time I was aware of my privilege and power in only vague or simplistic ways. I was not there as an anthropologist – just an undergraduate student with an interest in ‘social justice’. I was not yet a mother, either; just a young woman holding other people’s children in my arms. Still, my experiences in East Africa shaped both of these becomings, and while I made little impact there, the experience left both ‘social and material traces’ (Citrin 2011) in my life, as came to light in a suburban New Zealand art studio, ten years later.

Memory is something we *practice* rather than something we possess. A social practice. I have let most of the thousands of photos from that trip become lost in old camera cards and unused hard drives. One or two, though, have haunted me for reasons that are hard to explain, and then become part of my artistic practices in other mediums.



Figure 2. Women gather with their children, at a ‘vaccination day’ at the YWAM (Youth With A Mission) compound in the town of Yei, South Sudan. Photo by the author in December 2008, during a month-long volunteer stint.

I remember the day this photo was taken. The sun was blazing and the missionary base where we were living in Yei was running a vaccination clinic. Leah, a Filipino-American nurse who lived on the base with her American husband and two young boys, was ferrying equipment out from the tiny clinic building we had swept for dust and spiders the day before. Her oldest boy was running around the compound happily. I was taking care of her youngest, still a baby, while she set up her table in the middle of the lawn and checked her needles

and vials. I held him close to my chest; a precious load entrusted to me. I recall that later in the day, when I finally passed him to someone else, my shoulders and arms screamed with pain. My body was not trained to the habitus of motherhood, my aching muscles named me 'other', even when my heart delighted at being allowed to occupy the intimate posture of it for a couple of hours. At our other volunteer location, an orphanage not far down the road, I also revelled in the chance to hold a baby boy who had been abandoned on our doorstep on Christmas eve. I wrote a poem called 'Madonna Waiting', connecting my own intense feelings from that night to God's maternal qualities. But my feelings were not unique or individual. Rather they were artifacts of the expansion of a 'tense and tender' relationship between coloniser and colonised into popular humanitarian projects and practices (Mostafanezhad 2013). As Mostafanezhad (2013) writes, voluntourism and international humanitarianism often rely on public performances of childcare, and Madonna and child iconography endures as one of the core symbols of this. I have tried to imagine what a photograph of myself that day, with that baby in my arms, might have looked like – how identical to these uncomfortable tropes it would be – but the notion is hard to separate from the feeling.

I remember the arrival of the women, on the day of the clinic. The gates of the compound were flung open and they came together, mothers and grandmothers, moving down the long, dusty road deliberately, like a parade. They were dressed beautifully, brightly, and many were carrying colourful parasols. Babies were tied onto their backs with swathes of patterned fabrics. Slowly they assembled on the scrubby patch of grass to patiently wait as Leah moved through their little ones, one by one, checking their records and examining them. I remember being astonished that no one flinched as they received the needle. And after each child's turn, I watched as their mother lifted them into her arms as if they weighed nothing. I moved around the edges of that intimate crowd all the long morning with my camera hanging around my neck. The feeling I associate most with *those* memories is my own awkwardness, my outsider-ness.

A few nights later Leah called me and my friend over to her hut. There was a local woman due to come into the clinic at the base, to give birth, sometime that night, she told us. She wanted to know if we would assist her. I was 19 years old, virginal, completely untrained ... and alight with excitement and terror. I barely slept, turning and turning on my lumpy mattress, waiting for the call. But when morning came we woke to realise the woman had never arrived. I still think of her sometimes and hope she made it through labour safely. I also still remember how bitterly disappointed I was. It felt like I had missed out on some vital glimpse into something real and raw. This reflects something that other scholars have described about young people's expectations of short-term missions: around encountering 'authenticity' and the 'real', amidst the 'stripped back' (impoverished and/or ode-technologized) space of 'elsewhere' (Freidus et al 2018). It was a version of this specific to my own embodied subjectivity as a young woman, and the praxis of birthing and mothering I was familiar with (or rather unfamiliar with), that shaped my longings that night and a long time after. As it transpired, I never saw or attended a birth before I gave birth to my own baby five years later, in a glaringly white hospital room, amidst a host of beeping machines. My hopes and expectations around giving birth were forged long before that day, shaped by actual encounters and missed encounters with the type of (universal, gendered) knowledge I believed I would gain by observing a stranger's birth. There were

quite a few people in the room when my daughter was born, including strangers (the medical staff), the friend I travelled to Uganda with, and my own mother, taking surreptitious pictures from the corner of the room.

A photographer needs a sense of both sensitivity and urgency (Stevenson 2019). I carried my camera on me at all times throughout that first trip to East Africa. Photography can be a way to take possession of a space in which you feel insecure – a way to put yourself ‘into a certain relation to the world that feels like knowledge – and, therefore, like power’ (Sontag 1977: 4, 9). Indeed the only time I felt useful was when light was flowing into me through the lens. I was ready to record images not just for myself, but to tell stories that wouldn’t otherwise be told; to capture the lives of these historically exploited and ignored others, and to carry them home like a treasure. Or like a bomb: from my own assumed superior position, I imagined letting them detonate in the midst of my comfortable middle-class Pākehā community. In this way my photography took on the ‘heroic inflection’ of the journalist, or artist, muddling humanism with self-aggrandizement (Sontag 1977:30). It is easy to see *now* how a sense of self-importance, and a drive to be the bearer of stories, has stuck with me and can be traced onto many different parts of my life, many different interests and projects. If it wasn’t this that took me into anthropology, I don’t know what was. Yet it was also anthropology that has taught me how dangerous this drive can be. Barely an adult and not yet an anthropologist, I was aware of *some* of the world’s blind spots, and yet not my own, as I so freely *took* the images of the Sudanese women and children in front of me.

Photography can rip the subject from itself in a moment (Zani 2019). It is a technological extension of the gaze. Interdisciplinary studies of the gaze – from the male gaze, to the colonial gaze, to the medical gaze – share a focus on applying a critical lens to understand it as a form of control, oppression, subjectification (Hughes 1999: 162). They have variously linked visualization and aesthetics to processes of power to do with eroticisation or fetishization, commodification, and consumption, in ways specific to gendered or racialized bodies, and the meanings they are encoded with. Specific modes of visually constructing black and brown bodies speak to a ‘white’ or colonial gaze ‘tied to systematic structures and ideologies of racism’ (Ellis 2018: 224).

When I returned home to my undergraduate classes and my job at the student magazine, I shared very little about my trip in the public sphere. And as my life kept moving on, history kept moving on too. The LRA army came and went from the jungle near Yei. Political conflict surged and settled, surged and settled, and Sudan became two countries. The gated-and-guarded base we stayed at was raided, burned, closed, and re-established – as we received news of via email. All the while, my thousands of photos and hours of video gathered dust. So as I jumped into this art project a full ten years later, I had to ask myself why now, and why this particular image, in this particular medium?

The Project, the People

I’d been taking stained glass classes for about 6 months before I started this window and was already in love with the medium. My first (much-smaller) window depicted a naked woman looking out over a barren landscape. Her body

is translucent, and she holds the moon – a gift for myself, for my 30th birthday. After I completed it, I thought carefully about what I wanted to make next.

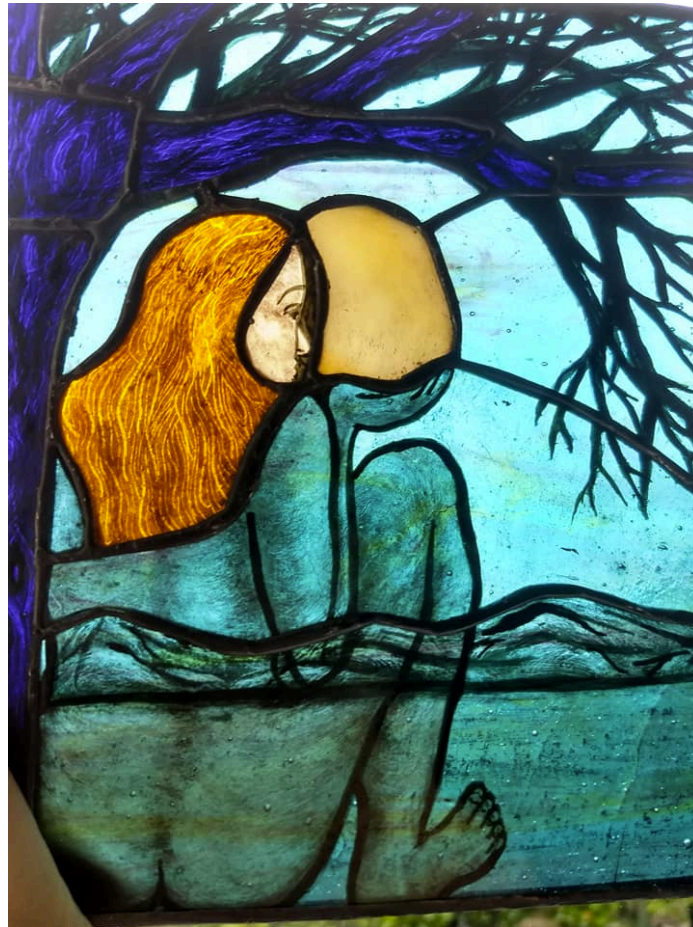


Figure 3. 'Being'. Stained glass window, original design by Susan Wardell. 610 x 550 mm . Completed under the tutelage of Peter Mackenzie, February-April 2019.

I had been reading a bit about the history of stained glass. It is a history entangled with the history of Europe itself: craft and class, exploration and trade, religion and power (Kurmann-Schwarz and Pastan 2019). In medieval Europe, stained glass was among the highest of artforms – literally, pulleyed aloft into expensive cathedrals. Yet it was also an artform tailored for the masses, using arrangement or light to tell stories to everyday people who couldn't (or weren't allowed to) read directly from Holy scripts. In the theocratic kingship system of medieval England, the imagery of stained glass represented an ideology that was political as well as religious; the eyes a vehicle through which to be interpellated into the ontological, social, and political power formations of the Church and the monarchy with it. Today in a different world – though no less power-laden – these windows look down on much more diverse populations in the pews and streets, and yet the gods, prophets, saints, and heroes continue to shine so pale. When I searched the internet for examples of stained-glass windows featuring black African people or cultures, unsurprisingly I found very little. In Addis Ababa, in 'Africa Hall' there is a stained-glass window by Afewerk Téklé, which features

dark-skinned faces, but also features the UN personified in the armour of a medieval (European) knight. In Soweto, Johannesburg, the Regina Munda Church has a striking modern window with Nelson Mandela at its centre. His skin is bronze and amber, and he wears a grey suit and a blue tie.

I have a memory of a class trip to an art gallery when I was in primary school. We were shown an old painting of some people sitting in a farmyard. I don't recall the artist or the painting title, but I remember being asked: why was this painting so special at the time? No one knew. They were just tired, placid people after all – anyone's relatives, with added chickens. But it was that which made the painting special, we were told. It was because they were ordinary people, peasants in fact, being attended to with the artists special eye and immortalised in a manner that been reserved for famous or wealthy people before then. Many tours of churches can point to famous or wealthy people in the windows – either *in memorium*, or as models for Saints and angels. But I wanted instead to make a window focussed on people who would live and die without their names ever being sung by the media or added to history books. I wanted to acknowledge that *I had seen them*. But this impulse was founded on a view of the world centred on the importance of my gaze, my *white* gaze, as bestowing meaning and significance. As bringing something into being. There was an aesthetic logic behind my choice as well, of course. I knew the riotous colours were sure to make for visual interest, and that the patterns of the African textiles (rarely represented in stained glass) would provide a challenge and a chance to learn new surface-working techniques with glass. But the fact remains that in wanting to 'stick it' to the exclusivities of European art by placing someone else at the centre of their stories, I failed to recognise my reliance on the same (constantly reforming) imperial power (Smith 1999/2012), the same colonial gaze, to selectively elevate or obscure.

The Paint, the Power

A hundred rainbows are shelved in my teacher's glass studio. There are countless different colours of glass; German, French, English, and Italian in origin. They are the best quality, both vintage last-of-their-kinds and new custom mixes, imported by my teacher to bring our designs to life. But there are only two tones of glass that are designated for skin. Both are a dull beige, one light and one darker. I had already drawn out my design when I discovered this, and I felt immediately perturbed. My choice was small and distinct now. Overly simple. I chose the darker shade but felt a wriggling, diffuse sort of un-ease. The lack of brown 'skin' colours unavoidably transferred responsibility to me as the artist, putting extra weight on the material processes I would use to work the surface from here onwards. My discomfort swirled around like poorly mixed paint sediment. After carefully scoring the buff-coloured glass, I positioned it under the grozing pliers, and pressed, listening for the satisfying crack of molecular surrender. Break by break I wrought it into the rough shapes of arms, hands and legs, and the one head that the image would feature. I ground the sharp edges of these down on a loud machine, peering through a magnifying panel as the corners softened and smoothed. Then it was time to paint.



Figure 4. The in-progress window, laid out on the light-box. One black palette and one brown palette of paint are ready beside it

There are several different types of paint pigment that we commonly use in the studio. There is a vitreous black for the main outlines, and a brown, for depth, for soft folds of fabric, or the warmth and the roundness of bodies. I made each up from a soft powdered pigment and a portion of arnica gum, mixed on a heavy glass palette. I added water and used a pestle to grind and mix a paste. Then, with my pale hand, I took the pale brush, and dragged it through the brown mix, before laying a thin and cautious layer on my glass.

When you paint glass, you lay the paint on wet and then wait for it to dry. Then you take a dry brush, a sharpened wooden stylus, or a fine metal tool, and etch it back. You must be both confident and careful, paying attention to the texture and direction of your strokes, as well as the overall form you are creating. Everything left behind will read, to the eye, as shadow, and everything you remove is light. It had to be dark enough, I worried to myself as I worked – terrified of white-washing the figures. But it also had to be smooth enough not to look mottled, or dirty. I desperately wanted to capture the personal dignity of these women, so dressed up for the clinic day, as an important social outing.



Figure 5. Susan poised with a dry brush, for working the surface of a freshly painted hand, set on the lightbox

Such a lot of layers of paint can go onto each piece. Five? Eight? Ten? I lost count. Since I visited the studio just once a week, for me each one was a separate week's work that marked time in layers of paint like the rings of a tree. Each layer was fired in the kiln to meld the pigment into the glass itself and make it permanent. I revisited the same worries each week as I returned to the studio. It was an unsettling experience to layer on a stranger's skin, like some kind of slow, reverse autopsy, clothing and cloaking. It felt ghoulish, at times – at once familiar and invasive. Had I chosen to paint one of the friends I have retained from this and later visits, this may have been different. 'Best practice' for social anthropology is arguably grounded in relational ethics – in not just consent but in long-term connections, feedback, editorial rights, or direct collaboration. But representing those we meet only fleetingly is different, with its own difficulties. Ten years later I had to recognise a sort of retrospective power that I still had over the people in this image, and yet they remained strangers in a very real sense, and I had no option to consult them about how they would like to be represented.

A further complexity was this: the photo I took was not part of an ethnographic research project. In the same way, the artistic project I undertook later, to rework it with my hands and my eyes, in glass and lead, was not something I considered ‘anthropological’ practice. Rather it was a personal project, undertaken on Saturday evenings, with a personal photograph as reference. But what really marked the difference, when I sat in a room just a few kilometres from the office where I sat and ‘did’ anthropology by day? It sounds like the start of a bad joke: when is an anthropologist not an anthropologist? Is the answer ‘before they become an anthropologist’ or ‘when they are not doing anthropology’ or something else entirely? As a whole and porous anthropologist-self, I am a product of the post-modern and reflexive turns in our decades; of decades of debate on the politics of representation in the wake of our origins in (and ongoing attachments to) colonial science (Williams 1993). This followed me into the door of the studio, as I began to lay brown paint on glass, and the questions that emerged were simple and repetitive. Did I have the right to represent this culture, these people? (Then? Now? Ever? In my photos? In my writing? In my window?) Did I have the right to shape them from light and shadow and give them skin? Even in a personal register, the right to possess the image of an ‘other’, and the point at which a story (a travel story, a personal memory, a brief encounter) becomes ‘mine’ verses someone else’s, felt slippery. Every one of my choices seemed to echo the actions of my anthropological forebears, making the same journeys back and forth to the ‘dark continent’ to make their photos, paintings, maps, artefacts and reports. All their damage, in constructing the racialized systems of knowledge that justified violent expansions of empire for centuries to follow.

The white subjectivity that drives these authoritative representational forms – including the colonial ‘travellers tale’ (Smith 1999/2012: 3) – is visually itself absent in the photo I selected, mainly because I, as the photographer, am absent from its frame. Many of the other photos from my trip do include me, of course. Me smiling by a well where barefoot women lend their muscly limbs to the task of survival; me crouched, half-smiling, half-flinching as a dozen little black children crowd around to touch my hair. As all images are related to other images (Cole 2016: 126), with undeniable echoes of both colonial photography and the neo-colonial outworkings of ‘development pornography’ (Mostafanezhad 2013). Looking at them like that makes my skin flush red, making me doubly aware of my whiteness.

It was easier to paint in my own naked body in my first project than to contemplate the exact shade of an African woman’s legs in the noonday sun ... but bringing both into the same picture would have been even harder and made the truth too stark – the truth that I couldn’t be present outside of these historical pre-sets. Still, in the glass studio I had the power to visually include and exclude, to select and frame, leaving my own problematic whiteness out entirely if I wished. My ability to control if and how I was represented proved Trouillot’s point that ‘the ultimate mark of power may be its invisibility’ (1995: xxiii).



Figure 6. A photo of the author taken in Kotomor IDP camp, in Northern Uganda, in January 2009 (just a couple of weeks after the photo of the Yei clinic day was taken). In the background is Regina, a former Sudanese refugee and dear friend to today, who was leading the trip. (Photo credit: Hana Cadzow)

As part of reflecting on the ethics of representing strangers, I was tasked by a reviewer of this article to picture myself walking back along the street in Yei, and looking up from the market to discover a stained-glass window that some local woman had made, with *me* at the centre. It is a strange thought, and yet it isn't fairly comparative – the discomfort of one versus the other is marked by power differentials. A more interesting thought experiment is to wonder what photograph or what artform these women might have made to represent their own experiences of this day. Teju Cole notes that when Africans are taking photographs of one another, instead of being pinned under the 19th century 'anthropological gaze of the European', you can see it in 'the way they look at the camera, in the poses, the attitude' (2016:129). In literal and metaphorical senses both, processes of the 'natives' 'gazing back' from within anthropology have been reconfiguring thought and practice within the field (Jacobs-Huey 2002) in powerful and appropriately discomfiting ways.

The Girl, the Ghosts

'Our discipline is haunted by the anthropological past' Sonya Pritzker asserted in the AAA/CASCA panel about multi-spectral ethnography (2019). Our field sites can haunt us both as specific places and as 'the field site' – an imagined place layered with the collective disciplinary memories of ambition, transgression, and shame. For many of us, these are places that we leave and return, leave and return, both physically and in our minds. As I stood around at the clinic day in Sudan, I

was shoulder to shoulder with the Dinka, the Nuer, the Zande, after all – names layered with history and significance for social anthropologists, their associated ‘forefathers’ floating in and out of our classrooms from day one, as pale and sometimes troubling reminders of the discipline’s history. The past presses into the present. Jacques Derrida wrote about the power of ‘being with spectres’ as an ethical act (in Desjarlais 2019b). Derrida’s work on ethics emphasised the affirmation of self through affirmation of others. When he spoke about being with spectres, he was speaking about making space for the uncertain politics of memory, inheritance, and generations (in Desjarlais 2019b). This can perhaps apply to academic disciplines, as well as individual lives.

Photographs, like spectres, work through a relationship with the past that is defined by ‘residue’ (Cole 2016). The ‘phantasmal force’ of a photograph, Desjarlais argued (2019a), comes from an entanglement of image, affect, and association; of wishes fears and anxieties; of complex interpersonal dynamics and affective moments; of time and memory. This is why encountering an old photograph can induce a sense of vertigo, he said. There is a fear of falling into another time. As a different sort of visual technology, stained glass is also marked by a reference to the past that has phantasmal qualities, in its illusory nature, its ability to conjure 3D worlds from a flat surface. Glass can freeze a story and suspend it across hundreds of years. Yet the figures still glow with life; their faces human and alight. Some of these images glance off the surface of our minds, pretty and unmemorable. But then ‘there are images that take possession of us, like a restless spirit’ said Nick Bartlett (2019). At the conference in Vancouver, I sat among a crowd who acted as confessors, as one-by-one the panellists shared stories of photos they had taken ten, twenty, thirty years ago but which had continued to haunt them. We take a photo, and then are taken by it.

At the centre of the image that has haunted me is a girl. A child lost in a sea of skirts, and yet looking at me, like a lonely ghost. Unlike spectres, ghosts are typically tied to individual personhood, individual agencies. They are an intimate thing, as anthropologist Sonya Pritzker said (2019). But while the participants in her research on family constellation therapy in China engaged with ghosts who were their kin, for this project I have returned to sit with the ghost of a stranger. This choice was made in spite of the fact that, across three separate visits, I built some genuine and lasting relationships with people in South Sudan and Uganda, keeping in touch, returning to visit, and having the pleasure of hosting some of them in New Zealand too. These friendships represent living links between myself and East Africa. So why not *their* faces in my art? Danish artist Maria Speyer spoke about the process of drawing her fieldwork participants as a sort of ‘lunging towards’ (2019). She has worked with medical anthropologist Cheryl Mattingly, and others, to use drawings to depict experiences of aging, personhood, and self in relation to dementia. For her, creating an image is a way of grappling with the presence of others in the world. Her images are enormous, tangled, and dark, featuring netted figures and sleeping faces. I imagine her straddling those huge sheets of paper, covered in dark charcoal dust – a messy and intimate process. For me, the stained-glass process also generated an intimate (though deeply asymmetrical) relationship with this girl, as I held her face between my fingers for hours as I created the window. Every week I positioned it over the lightbox, leaning close, and holding tight to the corners of her head.

Perhaps more effort was required to draw close to, to lunge towards, this stranger, than it would have been to 'reach' the faces of friends? But was it ever possible to reach her this way?



Figure 7. The window laid out on the lightbox, with some of the pieces of the figures in the foreground, that have been painted but not yet etched back

Photographs present a surface, and an invitation to feel or intuit what is beyond it (Sontag 1977:23). Stained glass is similarly about working a surface, and then inviting investitures of light and imagination. But our imagination, our understanding, has limitations (Sontag 2003, p111), and in considering this project, I have had to grapple with the relationships between experience, imagination, and image. This girl in this photo was born in the lull between conflicts in an NGO town. She had survived an infancy of relative poverty and was attending a vaccination clinic run by missionaries. How much of her story, or of her lifeworld, is visible in the photograph I took? Binyavanga Wainaina's brilliant and biting piece on 'How to Write about Africa' (2005) discusses the insistence of white writers on the African as a subject who can 'have no history, no past'. This is an issue with images as well, in their static, singular, frozen form. Similarly my window represents a single moment, close-cropped, with none of the context of colonization, civil war, foreign intervention, militant guerrilla armies, withdrawing foreign development agencies, visible, and little of her own

community, culture, frames of kinship or care visible either. In fact the crop and framing of the image means all other figures have been decapitated. Only this little girl has a face, only she truly exists. While the other children are held aloft by their carers, this one stands on her own small legs, her eyes fixed beyond the crowd, her gaze implacable.

Part of the painting process is the scratching-back of paint on the sections you want to leave transparent. So each week, with each new layer of paint the girl's face would glaze and dull, and I had to take a stick and scrape out her eyes. Scratch, scratch, scratch, and her vision cleared again. There was both an intimacy and a violence to the methods of her rendering. Force was required, but also an *allowing* of her gaze to work upon me as I worked upon her. In photographs, people can gaze at us forever, unwavering. Certainly, the girl's gaze is a central part of this image. What did she want or need, in that moment in Yei, as she stared at me? More than likely, nothing. There was little of value I could possibly have offered her in that brief sojourn in her community. Perhaps she was only briefly distracted by my pale presence wafting around the edge of the gathering. Perhaps she was disturbed by the unblinking eye of my lens. But if I was, very fleetingly, a strange apparition in her world, it seems unlikely I have persisted in her life or memory in any way. What is more realistic to examine is the effect of her gaze upon me now, in pixels or paint. In East Africa I experienced being *looked at* as a moment of subjectification into my positionality as a white person, in a way I never had before. To be looked at is to 'feel the play of power on the surface of the body', and the shock of becoming so visible belied 19 years of privilege in the 'ex-nominated' ethnic majority of Aotearoa New Zealand. My skin suddenly carried a weight beyond myself, and I hated the way that others' gazes hung both truths and inaccuracies upon me – assuming me to be rich, or important, or in charge of whatever group I was with. Yet this too was evidence of imperialism as a persistent 'discursive field of knowledge' (Smith 1999/2012: 22) in which I too was located, and bound. Is this what her gaze means to me?

Of course I am not examining her real and embodied gaze, but only an echo of it, with thin exercises in imagination drawn across it. The truth is I never spoke to this little girl. I don't know who she is, I don't know her name, or what became of her. 'So much of life is imagined' Cheryl Mattingly said (2019b). Yet she argued that this is every reason to include an anthropology of the phantasmal in our discipline. Her call offers us a chance to acknowledge our individual and collective ghosts, even if we can't name them. Can an image do this for us, invested as it is (as Desjarlais said) with so much personal emotion and context? Can art do this for us, in its visible and invisible processes of construction, occlusion and revelation? How to put into words, all the things that overflow from the basket of the literal and the real?

The Forgetting, the Feeling

Robert Desjarlais (2019a) says that photos and text are entangled, and can work together to say something new. I didn't decide on the words that would frame this image till I had nearly finished with the main scene. In the end, the words I picked are a call to remember. They come from Isaiah 49:15 (in the ESV translation) which says: 'Can a woman forget her nursing child, that she should have no compassion on the son of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget

you.’ The choice to use a reference to the Christian Bible functioned to reach back into the religious context of stained glass as a medium, to frame the contents of this scene (literally and more) with religious and moral meaning that was my own. But there are additional ambiguities as to how this verse can be read that I was able to unpack only later.



Figure 8. The picture laid out, with text, the layers of paint only partially complete, and not yet leaded

On a simple level, the words fitted with my subject matter because they are about mothers, children; words of care, reaching out across distance and hardship. In Biblical context they represent God as a mother, and are a promise that God will not forget their people. When attached to my image from Sudan they are a promise that this little girl, left on the ground amidst a busy crowd and living in a land broken by a colonisation and war, is seen and known by God. Yet claiming this ascribes my own gaze a God-like power, as I have already discussed. For me the words were also tied to a promise I had made to myself during zealous teenage years, and referencing a song I was listening to at the time by New Zealand singer-songwriter Brooke Fraser, a young Christian woman like myself. In 2006 after travelling to Rwanda as a World Vision advocate, she released an album called ‘Albertine’. In the titular song, referring to a little girl she met who had been orphaned by genocide, she says ‘Now that I have seen, I am responsible/ I will not forget you, Albertine’. When I took photos in Sudan, I also wanted not to forget. I wanted my lens to swallow it all up and let it become part of me. I also wanted my photos to do what Fraser’s songs did – to witness, in the modern way Sontag describes, through combining credentials of objectivity with an element of POV or personal testimony (2003: 21). The point of view I selected was the caring, the maternal, the compassionate. Yet a lens of compassion or sympathy often risks obscuring relations of power (Sontag 2003: 89). This is revealed clearly in what

Stoler (2002) also writes about as ‘sentimental colonialism’ – a structure of feeling that has been central to a politic of empire and expansion. By reframing the Yei clinic day around my own feelings of care (and a desire to dwell in and preserve these memories and feelings), I evidenced a ‘White Saviour Industrial Complex’, in which responses to social issues or atrocities focus on the emotional experiences and sentimental needs of white people (Cole 2016). Indeed I had been part of the ‘Invisible Children’/Kony2012 campaign that Cole was writing about when he explained this, when it came to a city near my own.

When I was in East Africa, I wanted to remember it all, but today I often think I would like to forget some of my teenage adventures with volunteering, travel, and social justice – to distance myself from the person I was when I made those first promises. I now have a different relationship to my faith, to the idea of missionary work, and development projects. Yet there I was in the studio, putting a mythologised version of Yei back together 10 years later. Was the stained-glass process taking me backwards, or forwards? Backwards to the gaze of a 19-year-old who thought she could save the world, and herself, by inserting herself into a war-torn country for the summer? Or forward to an academic who could lay out the pieces of her world, and others’ worlds, in a more careful and purposeful way (and yet still have them break under her clumsy fingers).

The Self, the Splinters

When the studio is quiet, the sound of glass breaking can be heard across the room. I was assembling the completed pieces for my window, cutting and laying lead as I went, when it happened. Assembly is a fiddly process; moving and replacing nails while trying to hold everything snugly in place. I was about a third of the way through when I put too much pressure on a large piece in the centre, and felt it shatter. The whole room heard the crack. I looked down to find the prettiest and most laboriously worked piece – a product of several layers of acid etching and paint and silver nitrate stain, on two-layered glass – splintered into four sharp pieces. I wanted to cry or curse and instead I got suddenly hot and red and silent. ‘Everything ok?’ one of my classmates called out. My teacher reassured me that it wouldn’t matter. That I could repair it with foil and it wouldn’t detract from the image. He said the eye wanted to see the whole, could piece it together without even realising. ‘There’s a crack in everything/ That’s where the light gets in’ Leonard Cohen famously sang. I had no choice but to take a breath and start the process of repair, but as I did, I tried to resist the idea that the break was some sort of life lesson. With stained glass it is too easy for everything to become a metaphor. It is a poetic medium, despite the way it cuts, and a romantic approach risks obscuring the real material (and metaphorical) limitations.

It still felt personal. I didn’t want to be a person who broke her own precious work in a thoughtless moment. I didn’t want to have to make mistakes to learn, and I resented the extra time I then had to spend dealing with the sharp, beautiful shards. At the time I had quite forgotten that the final chapter of my doctoral thesis, completed in 2015, is headed with a quote from Clifford Geertz (2000: 221): ‘In a splintered world, we must address the splinters’ I had typed earnestly. A large part of my thesis was based on the research I did when I returned to East Africa a second and third time; four and five years after that original trip. On those subsequent visits I went back to Uganda but didn’t cross the border to South Sudan again. Although my purpose and presence changed greatly in those



Figure 9. The broken skirt-piece, once repaired with copper foil and solder



Figure 10. The window, halfway assembled, with the broken section back in place

later trips, some things persisted. In my PhD thesis, I talked very little about the sense of uselessness or uncertainty or discomfort that threaded through all of my visits. My honesty was limited and tidy, tailored to the process of argument and theory. I don't think I really did address the splinters. After all, it is a risky thing to do; painful and time-consuming.

In my work as an anthropologist I have encountered 'The possibilities of abjection that permeate the conditions of anthropology's existence'" (Williams 1993). Abjection, Williams writes, is above all about ambiguity, uncertainty, instability, and disintegration relative to 'the symbolic structure that has constructed human subjectivity' (1993:67). Over the years as I engaged reflexively with critical scholarship and decolonizing literature, I experienced many layers of instability and risk around my white subjectivity, and my Christian subjectivity. I have often felt hot and red, often felt silent with shame. I haven't always wanted to address the splinters, and I have sometimes resented having to learn from mistakes. 'Everything is not ok' I have wanted to reply, as if somebody had asked.

It is tempting (and would be easier) to simply lay ontological boundaries between my past and present self, by way of ethical defence for all the times I 'cracked' my own best intentions or highest values. At very least I am better than I was, I wish to say. But it is not that simple, and attention to colonisation only in the 'stubborn past tense' as Jackson writes, is dangerous (2020: 134). Structures of feeling point to the social nature of what we otherwise might take as personal or idiosyncratic: giving notice to 'the texture and skin of the *this, here, now, alive, active*' aspects of the past (Gordon 2008: 199). My own feelings and impulses, including those that drove the photograph *and* the stained-glass project, are evidence of colonialism as 'a social experience that is still in *process*' (Williams 1977: 132, in Gordon 2008: 199). Time will not carry me away from it. I will have to struggle more actively, 'peeling away coloniality like a close-fitting skin' (Mercier 2020: 42), adding action to the reflexive (re)thinking and remembering.

Conclusion

Scholars like Ruth Behar (1996) have fought for a visible, vulnerable, and embodied fieldworker at the centre of ethnographic practices. In this vein, one of my goals in this piece is to remind us that the anthropologist does not come into existence as a person at the same time they come into existence as an anthropologist. We too have pasts, histories, memories, material traces that remain from lives before we became who are, learned to see how we see. As part of reflexively grappling with this, we sometimes need to allow for the presences of 'others' – including that of our past selves as 'other' – in our life and work. Photographs as just one thing that can allow us to be in conversation with those presences (Stevenson 2019). When I look at the image in this window, I find myself in conversation not with the Sudanese girl at its centre, but with the ghost of my past self. It is *her* spectral presence that moves into my body through my eyes in a most familiar kind of haunting.

There is one final confession to make. When I *finished* the window, I had no place set aside to install it, nor have I, in the two years since, had it framed or mounted in any way. It remains wrapped in a single layer of bubble wrap, leaning unceremoniously behind a door in the corner of my bedroom, where it can't be broken ... or be seen. I needed time, I think, to write this essay, and then re-write

it. I have the privilege of ‘standing back and thinking’ (Sontag 2003: 104). Both remembering and forgetting are situated ethical practices; both looking and choosing not to look, but in her 2003 book Sontag revised her earlier insistence that choosing not to look was a way of shirking ethical responsibilities. Reconciling ourselves to the past necessarily involves memory that is faulty or limited, she suggests – leaving space in which to continue to live one’s life.



Figure 11. The window laid out completely with lead. The tools visible are those used for leading, and the gloves to prevent too much exposure to the lead

The passage of time has closed some possibilities for my response-ability to this girl and this image, but it has opened up others; new things I have gained and stand to lose, including my identity as ‘an anthropologist’. I won’t be making another window like this, but I also felt that I couldn’t leave it shelved forever. In the studio, the glow of the lightbox was artificial, a fixed brightness, and it didn’t truly show me all the different versions of the image that I might witness under shifting daylight. Now every time I hold it up to the sun, this nuance of representation slips out of my control. The moment we release a work (or art, or ethnography) into the world is the same moment we become truly accountable for it. Yet in that same moment we also lose control of the light in which it is seen. Because of this my choice to bring reflections on this personal project into the academic/professional sphere, feels risky. But it is a choice to challenge the tendency I have observed in myself to tuck away that which is uncomfortable or dissonant. It is a resistance to the social construction of the ‘bounded’ professional

self, and an offering towards ongoing conversations about responsibility, ethics, and positionality, particularly for the white anthropologist, amidst the contemporary outworkings of colonial thought and feeling. All of this is done in the vein of questions, rather than answers, and vulnerability rather than authority – and all through the ‘access’ of an art project I completed in the small corners of my week, two years ago. French philosopher Georges Didi-Huberman (2008) said that we ask both too much, and too little, of images. I have approached the image of that clinic day in Sudan from an aesthetic perspective too often in the past, looking only for colour and light. Now I have perhaps swung too far in the other direction, asking it to stand for a whole set of processes and experiences in my life – my encounters with ‘others’, with anthropology, with privilege, and with my (becoming) self. Neither, and both, are true ways to understand the artistic rendering of a small girl staring at a stranger, into glass. Either way I must own my choices about how to divide the light.

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