MEMORY

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To read Mary Steedly's *Hanging without a Rope* and *Rifle Reports* is to enter an atmosphere saturated with pasts that refuse to stay still.[1] "Memory" in Mary's hands is always a mercurial substance: it shifts and slides, sometimes gathering into discernable forms and other times trickling off into shimmering rivulets that go nowhere. Some elements spin out into discrete, scattered droplets, never to rejoin the dominant stream. Memories may momentarily conform to the molds provided by available genres and shared narrative scripts, but they never commit finally to those shapes, they continually overflow their containers, leak or burst out, take on new forms.

In *Hanging without a Rope* and *Rifle Reports*, Karo Batak practices of remembering follow meandering paths that neither lead to neat conclusions nor follow clear arcs; they remain fragmentary and open to uncertain futures. The recollections in these texts yield an intricate tracery spun around the negative spaces of silences and gaps, of stories untold and violence unassimilated. A motley accumulation of irreverent jokes; sentimental song; snippets of dialogue; ghostly apparitions; mundane lists of places and tasks; and sensuous recollections of tastes, smells, and dirt on the hands builds up a "thicket" of memory that is ambiguous, resonant, unruly.[2] Rather than impose coherence, Mary's accounts mimetically conjure how life is lived and recalled: as a palimpsest of only partially and provisionally successful attempts to give shape to—or communicate to others—what has been felt and known, seen and heard.

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[1] Mary Margaret Steedly, *Hanging without a Rope: Narrative Experience in Colonial and Postcolonial Karoland* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993); and Mary Margaret Steedly, *Rifle Reports: A Story of Indonesian Independence* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013).

[2] Steedly, *Hanging without a Rope*, 15.

Memories—those "densely layered, sometimes conflictual negotiations with the passage of time"—do not serve to "complete" or "set straight" a historical record.[3] Mary was not trying to locate authentic, oppositional voices or to excavate evidence by which to contest official historical accounts. She refused a naïve and instrumentalist approach to memory as a source of subaltern truths to be tapped. She argued that events are never received as naked happenings, never spared what she called the "transformative energies of storytelling."[4] Experiences are always already dressed in narratives that anticipate and prefigure them, cast through and against iconic figures and dominant tropes, and reworked in dialogue with other stories and subsequent occurrences. Memories have specific tellers and tellings, but—in a Bakhtinian sense—they never belong, finally, to a single speaker or moment. What matters, then, is "not what really happened … but rather why [something came] to be recalled and retold in one particular way and not another … and what might be at stake" in that particular time and manner of telling.[5]

What always strikes me when reading Mary's ethnographic work is her deep affection and respect for the people she writes about, her sensitivity to their artfulness, her refusal to reduce them and their stories to social positions and types, and her resistance (not only in her writing!) to all forms of solemnization or aggrandizement. She conveyed the often obscure (for a non-Karo reader) poetics of Karo accounts, offering an intimate sense of a people to those of us with no other access to them. Mary's work foregrounded "popular memory": recollections of extraordinary events by ordinary people that tended to be organized around tropes of irony and ignorance more than moral virtue and sacrifice, around mundane objects and routines as much as heroic exploits, around a sense of the past registered as inchoate sensation and longing rather than formulated ideological commitment. In both form and content, popular memory accounts punch irreverent holes in the sacral myths of official nationalism, though they can never be neatly placed outside of them.

I am only beginning to fully recognize the profound impact of Mary's work on my own. My first research in Indonesia began in 1996, when I was still a graduate student. I was working on an oral history project led by my advisor, Ann Laura Stoler, interviewing people who had worked as servants in Dutch households.[6] In asking about former servants' experiences at the close of the colonial era, we were probing into a past that existed on the margins of officially recognized, national "History." The people we interviewed were not practiced storytellers, their accounts had no audience, and they themselves did not imagine that their stories could matter. Their answers to our questions were "uncrafted, rough-hewn, and apparently unrehearsed," we wrote in a subsequent article, because their memories existed "outside the comfort zone" of official history.[7]

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[3] Steedly, *Rifle Reports*, 268.

[4] Steedly, *Rifle Reports*, 265.

[5] Steedly, *Rifle Reports*, 308.

[6] Fellow graduate student Dias Pradadimara and, later, two researchers, Nita Kariani Purwanti and Didi Kwartanada, also worked on this project.

[7] Ann Laura Stoler and Karen Strassler, "Castings for the Colonial: Memory Work in 'New Order' Java," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 42, 1 (January 2000): 4–48.

In that article, Ann and I cited Mary just once, acknowledging her account of the New Order regime's control of the past through the cultivation of fear.[8] Yet, in retrospect, I believe that *Hanging without a Rope* was my most important guide in that first foray into "ethnographic history."[9] More than anyone else, it was Mary who taught me to think critically about "subaltern" accounts of the past, who modeled for me how to listen for the unsaid and the too-often repeated. It was she who taught me not to expect coherence from the unscripted recollections of those whose memories had not been accorded value within official narratives. *Hanging without a Rope* demonstrated how to approach these memories with respect for their form, how to resist the temptation to tame and claim them.

It embarrasses me now that I did not see this then. But I think it is the nature of a book like *Hanging without a Rope*, which does not so much announce its theorizing as enact it, that it could thoroughly shape the way I approached both ethnographic practice and memory accounts, and yet leave me unaware of its influence. Mary's book worked on me. It became part of my very make-up as an anthropologist. Such debts elude the normal practices of academic citation.

I recall visiting Gadjah Mada University in 1996 to seek the counsel of Indonesian historians in my search for former servants of the Dutch. I remember their bafflement at my interest in this subject, and their attempts to reorient me to the more "important" aspects of colonial history. I recall, too, an impressive wall of bookcases full of cassette-tape recordings of oral histories of *pejuang* (revolutionary fighters). These were object lessons: the material artifacts of the legions of students, armed with tape recorders on a mission to preserve revolutionary history, whose journeys into urban *kampung* (neighborhoods) and rural *desa* (villages) made clear whose stories, and which pasts, counted. Yet in *Rifle Reports*, Mary stepped right into that over-trodden, over-determined, enshrined revolutionary past. With the irreverent and fragmentary stories of Karo women who had experienced the revolution from the outskirts, she put chaos, uncertainty, violence, and humor in the place where sanctity had been.

Rereading *Rifle Reports* after Mary's death, I was struck by the term "memory artist," which she used to describe Sinek, a singer whose recorded song about her harrowing experiences as an evacuee during the revolution Mary explored in depth in a published essay and then again in *Rifle Reports*.[10] The memory artist, Mary wrote, creates a "collective history" out of "singular testimony."[11] A figure of modernity, the memory artist emerges at precisely the moment that earlier ways of transmitting the past—myth and ritual, epic and custom—have lost their grip; she centers her narrative on individual biography and experiences of rupture rather than continuity. "[T]hose persons that I call 'memory artists,'" Mary wrote, drawing inspiration from Walter Benjamin's meditation on the storyteller, "transmute the materials of personal experiences into the story of a community … the memory artist renders the experience

[8] Stoler and Strassler, "Castings for the Colonial," 14.

[9] Mary Margaret Steedly, "Author's Response: Mary Margaret Steedly," in "Reviewed Work(s): *Rifle Reports: A Story of Indonesian Independence*, by Mary Margaret Steedly," in *Sojourn* 30, 3 (November 2015): 870.

[10] Mary Margaret Steedly, "Modernity and the Memory Artist," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 42, 4 (October 2000): 811–46.

[11] Steedly, "Modernity and the Memory Artist," 814.

of loss in graspable, personal form, to a primary audience of those who were there too. The memory artist incites in her audience the desire to remember and gives them something to recall."[12]

Mary's conceptualization of the memory artist resonates for me now because of my own recent writing on a body of work by a Chinese Indonesian visual artist, FX Harsono.[13] Harsono's artworks address the chaotic and violent period of the revolution described in *Rifle Reports*, but from the vantage point of ethnic Chinese in Java. They bring into public view memories of massacres of ethnic Chinese at the hands of nationalist militias. Like Mary's memory artist, Harsono seeks an audience for stories excluded from the grand narratives of national history. In staging "public dramatizations of personal experience," Harsono's art provides "both pattern and stimuli for popular imagination" of a collective past.[14]

Unlike Sinek, Mary's exemplary memory artist, Harsono is not an immediate survivor of the violence (he was born shortly afterward and grew up in its shadow). In his series of works on the revolutionary-era massacres in Java, Harsono draws on an album of photographs taken by his father that were placed on a shelf in the family home, alongside their family albums. In 1951, Harsono's father, who owned a photography studio, was commissioned by a national ethnic Chinese organization (Chung Hua Tsung Hui, Central Chinese Association) to document the exhumation and reburial of 191 Chinese victims of a massacre that had taken place on the outskirts of Blitar three years earlier.

In paintings such as *Preserving Life, Terminating Life I* and *Preserving Life, Terminating Life II*, Harsono juxtaposes his own family photographs with images from the exhumation showing the unearthing of skeletal remains. The uniting of these photographs within the frame of the painting insists that they be read with and against each other, suggesting the spectral violence that haunts the banal ordinariness of everyday life and refiguring the predictable milestones of family life as quietly heroic attempts to persist and imagine a future in the face of threat. In other works in his series on the revolutionary-era massacres, Harsono draws on interviews with survivors, rubbings of graves, and mundane objects like radios, wheelchairs, and domestic altars at which ethnic Chinese Indonesians pray to the dead. These assembled materials allow him to make viscerally present a past that has thus far only been remembered in hushed and fragmented family stories, embodied rituals, and mute artifacts.

It is the convening of a public that defines the work of the memory artist for Mary. "By publicly telling her own personal history," the memory artist "opens the work of imagination as collective cultural practice."[15] Both Harsono and Sinek reframe personal memories of communal trauma in aesthetic media that draw attention and affective response. Sinek's primary audience, Mary tells us, was fellow survivors who lived their own versions of the experiences she narrated, whereas Harsono addresses

[12] Steedly, *Rifle Reports*, 283.

[13] Karen Strassler, "Zones of Refuge: Fugitive Memories of Violence in the Work of FX Harsono," *History of the Present* 8, 2 (Fall 2018): 177–208.

[14] Steedly, *Rifle Reports*, 279.

[15] Steedly, "Modernity and the Memory Artist," 815.

contemporary Indonesian and international art publics who may know little of the past his art recalls. Crucially, though, Sinek's song was recorded, and this gave it the potential to speak beyond her original audience. It could, after all, be found by an American anthropologist rummaging in a dusty music shop in Medan. Through its reproduction, Sinek's song extends out to an open-ended public, including the readers of Mary's book. Reframing his father's photographs for new audiences and new purposes, Harsono's work also depends on the possibilities for soliciting new publics that technologies of reproduction afford.

It occurred to me as I thought about it further that Harsono in some ways has more in common with Mary (who found Sinek's cassette in a dark, neglected corner of a shop) than he does with Sinek. Like Mary, Harsono is not a direct witness, but a collector and artful compiler of marginal stories and obscure artifacts. Harsono and Mary both draw on these discarded traces to probe the excessive violence of the Indonesian revolution. Sinek's song, recorded in the 1950s, in fact elides the violence inflicted by Indonesians on Indonesians; it is Mary who points us to the silences that Sinek, in her bid to include Karo Batak experiences within the national story of the revolution, imposed. Mary's account, like Harsono's artwork, is oriented to the present and the future as it makes a place—or at least exposes the lack of place—for disavowed scenes of violence within the nation's origin story.

These resonances between Harsono's and Mary's work on the Indonesian revolution prompted me to recognize Mary herself as a kind of memory artist. Always attentive to what she called the "social production of ephemerality," especially when it came to women's narratives, her acts of listening generated a profoundly political sounding of history, one that insisted on hearing the "traces, textures, and tones" of a past that might otherwise be registered ever so faintly and fleetingly.[16] Through writing, she turned her own acts of listening into a practice of making audible. Mary's accounts registered otherwise fragile memories as marks that might stay with us.

A couple of months before she died, I asked Mary about her unfinished book on the Citadel, the South Carolina military academy that was her childhood home and where her father worked as a teacher. Was it possible that the manuscript—or parts of it—could be published as is? Could any of her beloved students or colleagues prepare it for publication on her behalf? Her answer was a decisive "No."

Mary had an exacting ear and a precise vision. Those who enjoyed conversation with her or witnessed her extemporaneous comments at conferences and talks know what a lively mind and a quick wit she possessed. But she worked slowly, giving her writing time to take shape. She could not imagine putting that book out into the world before it had fully assumed its form, nor could she accept anyone else doing that work for her. For Sinek, for Harsono, for Mary—memory-work lies in the artful honing of stories, in their poetic crafting. It was a great sadness to her, and is a loss to all of us, that the book most shaped by her own personal memories remained unfinished, for perhaps it was here that Mary would most fully have come into her own as a memory artist.

[16] Steedly, *Hanging without a Rope*, 29; and Steedly, *Rifle Reports*, 34.