Check for updates

MEMORY STUDIES

Article

Memory Studies
2019, Vol. 12(3) 294–306
© The Author(s) 2019
Article reuse guidelines:
sagepub.com/journals-permissions
DOI: 10.1177/1750698019836190
journals.sagepub.com/home/mss

Concerning intent, interpretation, memory and ambiguity in the work of an informal collective working on the Western Sahara conflict

Michael Baers
Independent Scholar, Germany

Abstract

In October 2016 I made my first visit to the refugee camps of Western Sahara's Saharawi people near the Algerian town of Tindouf. This was an opportunity to advance my research on the work of an "informal collective" who work with a collection of photographs belonging to Moroccan soldiers, seized by SPLA (Saharawi People's Liberation Army) over the course of 15 years spent fighting Moroccan forces. In this essay, I conceptualize the relationship between two disparate practices centering around photography—that of the Saharawi's political organization, the Front Polisario, and the work undertaken by this informal collective. The latter's work involves exploring the ontological coordinates of these photographs in a dialogical setting. Besides probing the many resonances between the group's work and the Polisario's treatment of the photographs of Moroccans in their possession, this essay is also concerned with the relationship between the conflict and its medial representation.

Keywords

Western Sahara conflict, image politics, gesture

In the context of African independence movements, Western Sahara presents a special case. It is not a struggle over decolonization so much as a struggle between native forces fighting for independence, Western colonializers and a renascent North African empire. In its present incarnation, the conflict dates back to the early 1970s, when the region's indigenous people, the Saharawi[1] (the collective name for an agglomeration of formerly nomadic tribes of mixed Arabic and Amazigh origin) began agitating for independence—having fought European colonizers earlier in the century—led by a cadre of young, foreign-educated radicals inspired by the general anti-colonial fervor of the period. After founding the Polisario Front (Popular Front for the Liberation of Saguia el-Hamra and Rio d'Oro) in 1973, these nascent freedom fighters quickly found themselves confronting two different opponents. Although facing concerted pressure from the international community, the Spanish were eager to reap a profit from the substantial phosphate deposits discovered during World War II after

Corresponding author:
Michael Baers, Independent Scholar, Grünbergerstraße 60, Berlin 10245, Germany.
Email: michaelbaers@gmail.com

decades spent pouring resources into its unprofitable possession. Saharawi dreams of independence were also threatened by Moroccan ultra-nationalists, who for close to two decades had agitated for the expropriation of a broad swath of territory encompassing parts of Algeria, Mali, and the entirety of Mauritania and Spanish Sahara—land they insisted should be reintegrated into a long moribund and largely notional Moroccan empire. The latter's claims, long ignored by King Hassan II and his father King Mohammed V before him, had finally begun to gain traction with the King, who, weakened by chronic economic mismanagement and two failed coup attempts, had begun to see the value of distracting public attention from Morocco's domestic tumult. King Hassan had taken his claim to the International Court of Justice in 1974: in 1975, the court issued a negative verdict. In the face of continuing agitation by the Polisario, it appeared as if Spain would finally accede to demands for a UN-mandated plebiscite on Western Sahara's final status and the Saharawi would gain independence, but at the tail end of 1975 Morocco and Mauritania began secret negotiations with pro-Moroccan factions of a fragmented Spanish government, in disarray after Francisco Franco's final illness and death. With the tacit agreement of a complaisant United States and France, the two were permitted to invade the Spanish Sahara (concurrent with Hassan II's "Green March," a carefully choreographed demonstration of support for the king's territorial claim in which, despite threats from Algeria and the UN Security Council, approximately 350,000 Moroccan civilians accompanied by 20,000 Royal Moroccan Armed Forces (FAR) soldiers crossed the border into Spanish Sahara on 6 November 1975), prompting 70% of the Saharawi populace to flee to the Algerian Sahara.[2]

So began a war fomented chiefly to shore up domestic support for King Hassan II's troubled regime and, laterally, to improve its balance of trade. For the next 15 years, exiled Saharawi fighters based in refugee camps established near the Algerian desert town of Tindouf fought thousands of Moroccan soldiers, many of them conscripts drafted from Morocco's burgeoning underclass. Another three decades of political deadlock have followed the ceasefire that brought fighting to a close in 1991, with the incommensurable ideological and territorial claims put forward by irredentist Moroccans and nationalist Saharawi remaining foundational to the struggle's intractability, making it, along with the Israeli/Palestinian conflict, a textbook case of conflict irresolution (Zunes and Mundy, 2010). But unlike the latter, the conflict in Western Sahara rarely makes headlines today, and, as Irene Fernández-Molina points out, is no longer even a conflict according to well-known international databases (since it does not produce 1000 battle-related deaths per year). Furthermore, it is even "somewhat" lost in classifications, since these different databases are not in accord as to how to define the extant political situation (Fernández-Molina, 2017: 12–13).[3] Given this obscurity, the Saharawi have lived for many years with the understandable fear that desert exile and/or onerous occupation will become a permanent condition.

In November 2017, I was first introduced to the work of an "informal collective" who since 1998 have worked with personal photographs belonging to Moroccan soldiers collected by Western Saharan fighters during the war against Morocco—by some estimates numbering around 70,000 (although the full extent of the collection remains as yet uncertain[4]). These photographs, taken from living and dead soldiers of the Royal Moroccan Army (FAR) or seized in Moroccan command centers overrun by SPLA (Saharawi People's Liberation Army) forces, were among the many items Saharawi fighters collected, sometimes out of necessity and sometimes in the course of intelligence-gathering. But from very early on, these objects—weaponry, boots and uniforms, military communiqués, and other documents—were taken with one eye toward gathering evidence that a war the Moroccan government consistently denied waging was in fact taking place. Regardless of intention—a question I will return to later in this essay—the fact remains that by preserving these many photographs, the Polisario became inadvertent guardians of Moroccan cultural memory, safeguarding a unique photographic record of Moroccan society in a period of profound political and economic disruption, described by Baber Johansen (1971) as a "blocked process of transformation" (p. 398), and referred to retrospectively as the "Years of Lead."[5]

The informal collective allows access to a selection of these images, collected in an elegant, hardbound book entitled *Necessità dei volti* (The Necessity of Faces), in meetings called *encounters*—intimate gatherings organized not out of a "strictly communicative or artistic need" (Collettivo informale, 2011: 3).[6] The first time I saw the book I was immediately struck by the almost palpable tension between the photographs' superficial mundanity and the extraordinary circumstance behind their coalescence. It contained images ranging from government identity portraits to posed family photographs to snapshots and polaroids—fathers, mothers, siblings, children, friends, lovers, fellow soldiers, in traditional garb or modern apparel, posed singly or in groups, caught in everyday situations or posed stiffly before the professional photographer's camera. It was as if their coming-together in and through warfare had suffused these images with an aura discernible even in reproduction, a kind of doubling where peacetime and wartime were superimposed, one atop the other, like the lenticular postcards where one image is concealed inside another. Sometimes this doubling was concrete, as when the occasional bloodstain bleached or cracked a photograph's surface or in the small fraction of images taken by Moroccan soldiers in their leisure hours while stationed in the Sahara.[7] With most it was implicit, a function of their re-contextualization within the collection the Polisario had amassed. Leafing through the book, the dual nature of the tragedy that is the Western Sahara conflict became immediately apparent. Double and double bind, like the Saharawi themselves and the soldiers they fought (many of whom who still agitate for veteran's benefits[8]), these photographs are hostages of the conflict. Thus, through working with these photographs, the collective seeks to foreground the reciprocal relationship between the combatants in all its messy historical contingency.

From the beginning, I suspected that researching this photographic collection would likely raise more questions than it answered. To my knowledge, the photographs have not previously been the subject of objective empirical research, and with nearly three decades having passed since the ceasefire, recollections of witnesses capable of providing firsthand accounts of the battlefield or the origins and subsequent disposition of the collection might well have faded.

And yet, the puzzling facticity of the photographic collection remains, standing as a testament to some motivation on the part of the Saharawi, whether scrutable or inscrutable, deserving further explication. The main question I wish to pose in what follows concerns the nature of the putative relationship the informal collective avers between their work and the Polisario's original act of collecting and preserving photographs belonging to enemy soldiers; images possessing, in the context of a deeply acrimonious conflict, marginal strategic value either as intelligence source or diplomatic bargaining chip. Central to this line of inquiry is the collective's conception of the Polisario's sustained act of collecting as gestural, possessing an unambiguous ethical intent. My findings, although preliminary, thus require an exploration of this gestic continuity and the implications of the gesture as a form of semiosis pointing to the limits of linguistic communicability. A second issue—of special relevance to contemporary debates around cultural memory—concerns the underlying issue the Polisario's photographic collection and the practice of *encounters* both raise with regard to the various roles assigned to photography when it is asked to serve as an instrument, whether affective or juridical, of historical redress.

Necessità dei volti

In a situation where so much remains unclear, even an account of the informal collective and their work presents certain problems of description. They eschew clear disciplinary categorization, their work being neither art, advocacy, or academic research. It is situated instead in a nebulous zone somewhere between knowledge production and art, solidarity work and a species of autonomous philosophical reflection with roots in Italian leftwing discourse of the 1970s. And while preferring

to work anonymously, they do attribute individual authorship in published texts and name individual projects: *Necessità dei volti* is the name their work with the Moroccan photographs goes under, an online clearing house for documentation of Moroccan human rights abuses perpetrated in the occupied territory, taken for the most part on smart phones and consumer cameras, is called *Vedere l'occupazione* (Seeing the Occupation). Over the last two decades, the collective has consisted of a shifting cast of actors, but during the 5 years I have followed their activities it has consisted of the Neapolitan artist and educator Patrizio Esposito, Rome-based Polisario diplomat and activist Fatima Mahfoud, and Yasmine Eid-Sabbagh, an artist of German/Palestinian origin who became involved with the group after meeting Esposito in Beirut, while, independent of each other, both were conducting photography workshops for young Palestinian refugees. Franco-American writer/artist and fervent Saharawi advocate Jean Lamore, a longtime friend of Esposito, was also an intermittent participant. Until recently, when participation in presentations hosted by arts institutions became more frequent, their work has been entirely self-funded, due to suspicions about institutional support and the conditions that often accompany such sources of funding.

As they describe it and I myself witnessed, the goal of *encounters* is to discuss the predicament of the Saharawi without negating the historical trauma of Moroccan conscripts, the Saharawi's opponents in the field of war. But this simple objective belies a complex dialogism encompassing even the manner in which *encounters* are physically arranged. Organizers and participants are seated in a circle at the chosen meeting site (which might be a private home, guest house, library, construction site or derelict building), designating a provisional community or *communitas*, after which a group member begins by presenting an account of the conflict and its medial afterlife. This introduction can be lengthy, with a good deal of time elapsing before participants actually look at the book itself. This dilatory strategy was designed to counter an engrained tendency in the West to "consume" images, "to relate to something visual," as Yasmine Eid-Sabbagh noted. The group refrains from "giving people images immediately to drink or to swallow … really trying to put them in another type of attention and disposition of listening and talking, etc."[9] In fact, rarely is an explicit offer proffered to take the book in hand—it is left to the volition of individual participants to open it. This tying of volition to the gaze is of some significance. It is a horizontal gaze *encounters* construct, stressing the situational, corporeality of vision. The gaze so constructed becomes nearly a devotional act—head bowed, book held in the viewer's lap. *Encounters* set up the place for a look to take place, setting a look in place: "the convergence [*convenance*] of the coming and the presence of the subject, a welcoming and a gathering in order for it to come into the world" (Nancy, 2006: 245).

While explicitly concerned with the particular situation of the Western Sahara conflict, the conversations these images provoke range far afield, eliciting reflections about other historical conflicts as well as the nature of photography as such. These conversations also present a conundrum in being organized around documents that while offering powerful testimony to the human cost of war have deliberately been restricted from wider circulation—an ethical constraint for the group stemming from the fact that the substitution *encounters* enact involves representations of actual people whose image has been used without their knowledge or consent,[10] extended to create an ethics of "looking"[11] opposed to the contemporary moment's hyper-saturated visual field. "We have grown accustomed to images passing seamlessly before us," the group writes in a pamphlet produced for the 2011 art exhibition *Image in the Aftermath* at the Beirut Art Center,

> subduing our vision while numbing and depleting our … responsiveness, leaving our eyes open but our minds sightless. These collections [sic] of photographs seize and disrupt that flow, demanding us to reconsider what it means not only to look but to see. (Collettivo informale, 2011: 3)

The use of a collection of photographs to discuss a concrete historical situation which they refer to only obliquely raises many questions. *Encounters* call into question the nature of the photograph itself as an authoritative carrier of meaning and information. Photographs—or "photographies," to borrow John Tagg's appellation—appear to belong to the same undifferentiated category of objective, analogically precise images. Yet they are always divided between a putative objectivity stemming from their apparent analogical perfection and a social instrumentality arising from their use as an indispensable tool of governance operating within a given society's "regime of truth," "that circular relation which truth has to the systems of power that produce and sustain it, and to the effects of power which it induces and which redirects it" (Tagg, 1993: 94). Thus when one considers the limited role photography played in Spain's administration of its Saharan territory (interference in native affairs being kept to a minimum until close to the end of colonial rule, when economic exigencies prompted a radical policy reversal), a particular irony arises in the informal collective's "productive borrowing" of these Moroccan photographs. Unlike in the Spanish Sahara, photography played a substantial role in the French colonial project in North Africa, where it served as an apparatus[12] in the twinned project of power/knowledge (subjugation/administration), "creating meaning and signification through the everyday, repeated and systematic practices of picture taking by the French" (Slyomovics, 2013: 128). Indeed, within the pages of the *Necessità dei volti* one finds many instances of the formal typologies that continue (or appropriate) the orientalist tropes of Morocco's former colonizers[13] alongside photographs testifying to post-independence Morocco's perpetuation of the photo ID system first introduced during the colonial era. In total they constitute a mixed legacy, where what Gayatri Spivak terms colonialism's "epistemic violence" co-exists uneasily with the postcolonial imperative to create a "legible people" (quoted in Scott, 1998: 65). In the Polisario's collection these different uses of photography have been separated from their various individual histories and institutional functions and indiscriminately jumbled together, offering a stochastic view of Moroccan society perhaps all the more acute for its disorganization; an archive not in the Foucauldian sense of possible statements, but of possible representations. However, the informal collective's interest in the photographs is not sociological. Rather, as in other projects dealing with historical iniquity, they skew toward a concern with how these images might affect a process of reconciliation: a just image or just an image, to paraphrase Jean-Luc Godard.

The transitory guardians

The artist and pro-Saharawi activist Patrizio Esposito first came across the photographs at the Saharawi War Museum (now the Saharawi Museum of National Resistance) in May 1991. By that point Esposito had been engaged in activist work on behalf of the Saharawi cause for over a decade, founding, together with a group of friends, the organization Terre del Fuoco (Land of Fire), which collected clothing, medicines, and imperishable goods to send to the camps. Joining the group's second aid shipment from Naples, he accompanied the convoy of trucks carrying donations to the refugee camps. One day he visited the Saharawi War Museum in the company of Jean Lamore. Then little more than an open courtyard enclosing a collection of captured Moroccan military equipment,[14] the museum had been founded to show visiting journalists and dignitaries that hostilities were indeed occurring, despite Morocco's persistent denials. It was here that Esposito first came across the photographs, stored in five wooden munition crates sitting exposed to the elements. Esposito described this first encounter this way:

> It was May 17th, 1991. On January 17 of the same year, the first military aggression in Iraq began. In the news, the broadcasts from the war in Iraq, the faces and bodies of the victims, those killed, were absent. When I opened for the first time the lid of one of the wooden crates stored in the open courtyard of the museum, it was as if the faces and the bodies that had been erased the previous January had emerged there. … It was as if the faces in that box had a relation with something universal. All the conflicts in the world were in that box, not only the Western Sahara conflict: all the conflicts were there.[15]

In the years that followed, he made inquiries into the origins of this puzzling photographic collection with the help of Fatima Mahfoud, a young Saharawi diplomat stationed in Rome. Initially, whatever tactical reasons the Polisario had for keeping the photographs belonging to Moroccan soldiers was unclear. The photographs might have divulged whether Moroccan colonists had established studios in the occupied territory (identifiable by the stamp on the back of each print), or provided data about the composition of the Moroccan army, its soldiers' region of origin and education level.[16] It could be that the decision to keep the photographs was influenced by the presence of approximately 2155 Moroccan prisoners of war (POWs), interned in 5 prisons situated around the camps.[17] Whatever the case, intelligence collection was a big enough concern for the Polisario that attached to every SPLA platoon was a *commisario politico*, an intelligence officer charged with relaying documents seized in raids—battle plans, Moroccan communications, medical records, and letters and photographs sent by soldiers' families to the front lines and often left undistributed, apparently to prevent memories of civilian life from sapping the soldiers' morale—back to military headquarters in the camps.

Esposito came to believe the SPLA's collecting had at some point ceased serving as a means of gathering intelligence and had become "something else, a sort of involuntary collecting. The Polisario … made themselves the transitory guardians of the pictures."[18] In this narrative arc, the Polisario's decision to keep the photographs grew out of a dawning understanding of the similarity between themselves and the Moroccan lumpenproletariat who made up the majority of FAR soldiery. For Esposito, it was this presumption of care and consideration directed toward Moroccan POWs that bestowed upon the collection its ethical charge.[19]

After a protracted period of discussion with friends and colleagues and a two-year negotiation with the Polisario leadership—aided in great part by Mahfoud—Esposito succeeded in borrowing a selection of 483 photographs from the collection, staging his first *encounters* as a series of private meetings held under the auspices of the Volterra International Theater Festival. An apposite beginning perhaps, being that from my experience of *encounters* and interviews with group members I developed the impression they function as a sort of theatrical space *performing* a work of remembrance.

However, if *encounters* enact remembering, this is mediated and ultimately complicated by the photographs themselves, which literally place the Saharawi outside their frame—evidence of the informal collective's propensity for forms of absence or masking. This strategy is intended, in the first instance, to refer to the relative invisibility of the Western Sahara conflict in the mass media. On a more complex register, it references Jean-Luc Nancy's idea of portraiture as a form collective mnemonic invigilation. The group's penchant for ways of making absence visible also reflects a habit of representation Esposito first noted in pro-Saharawi materials, where "something … remains both within the visible and the invisible." He recounted during one of our initial interviews how the first time he "saw" a Saharawi was as a drawing gracing the cover of a pro-Polisario Spanish publication distributed by the FRAP (Frente Revolucionario Antifascista y Patriota), featuring "a Saharawi guerrilla fighter wearing a turban, their face veiled so you could identify it as a person, but without a face."[20]

Esposito elaborated further on this liminal space of the not-strictly-represented in a published conversation between himself and Italian author Fabrizia Ramondino, taking as an example a

photograph from the collection where a man's head has been neatly excised with a razor, creating an absence that drew one's attention to the mutilated figure all the more. For Esposito, a homologous logic of allusion was at work in both the Polisario graphic and the mutilated Moroccan photograph. Each refers to an elusive presence, indicated by absence or, in the latter case, excision. This notional in-between space came to guide his understanding of how the strategic disadvantage of obscurity on the world stage had been turned by the Polisario into an aesthetic approach, a category of images that *figures* the Saharawi condition—"put aside, cut out of history, but nevertheless capable of appearing in that empty space" (Collettivo informale, 2011: 13)—prompting the group's decision to stage *encounters* using habits of representation employed by the Polisario themselves. In *encounters*, the Saharawi are quite literally veiled by the Moroccans depicted in the photographs: their presence must be teased out through commentary.

Media critique and allegorical practice

To confront these images, then, in the *encounters* at which they are shown, is also to confront their ontological ground: what they show, what they don't show, and what they show by not showing. That is, their imbrication within a specific mode of discourse and dissemination also serves as an exercise in explicating the laws of visibility and invisibility that shape our mediated and mediatized understanding of the world, a conception dictated by the geopolitical interests of powerful nations—interests the Moroccan state, as an important client state of western powers, has demonstrated great adroitness in manipulating.[21] Esposito calls this process of suppression "imperial information"—"the hegemony exercised by the media, [based on] a mechanism that sometimes makes visible and sometimes … negates or hinders vision … that allows us to see and that also hides."[22]

Wrapped up as it is in a broader project of analyzing the uses and abuses of photography as an instrument of media hegemony, as a project *encounters* are also discursively constructed out of the types of connections and associations participants bring to *encounters*. (For instance, in one interview Esposito recounted a meeting held in northern Italy where attendees returned after a break bearing photographs depicting World War II resistance fighters who had hid themselves in the nearby forest.) In this, *encounters* could be described as an allegorical practice, if we understand allegory not simply as a literary device but, following Walter Benjamin, a kind of experience; an intuition, and apprehension about the nature of the world and the irretrievable past. Equally formal device and procedure, allegory transforms things into signs. This, as Bainard Cowan (1981) writes, "is both what allegory does—its technique—and what it is about—its content" (p. 110). Allegory relates presence with absence and the visible with the invisible; or rather, it causes the invisible to speak through another figure, a quality evident in Esposito's description of his initial encounter with the photographs.

The ethics of this practice, however, are located elsewhere, in that consistently deployed trope in the collective's work—the nowhere of the unrepresented. Apart from figuring the Saharawi through their absence in the Moroccan soldiers' photographs, or choosing not to disseminate the images in their possession save within *encounters* (due to the self-imposed ethical constraint mentioned previously), the group also eschew photographing or otherwise documenting the *encounters* they stage. All they have to show for their 19 years of practice, in fact, are the immaterial, fleeting memories of those who participated, and a few photographs of empty chairs in anonymous rooms.

Gesturality and mediality

As intricate as the theoretical web the informal collective has built in homologizing its work with the Polisario's act of photographic preservation is, the question I wished to explore when in 2016 I was

able to visit the Saharawi refugee camps in the company of the informal collective—thanks to a grant from the Berlin art institution Neue Gesellschaft für Bildende Kunst—was more empirical: could the Polisario's ethical intent be verified, and if so, to what extent? Being that a central contention the informal collective holds is that behind the Polisario's decisions runs a conciliatory intention—"counter information" or "a gesture for the future" (both phrases appear in my notebook, notes written during our meeting with Ibrahim Grigou, the minister of information/security)—bestowing what were in the beginning military and strategic acts with an ethics where they become, retrospectively, deliberative and moral, how and when did this transformation occur? Is it possible to identify the precise point when the Polisario's collecting shifted from the tactical to the commemorative?

In the first instance, this question involves a lexical problem. Since the collective describes the various acts of collecting, sorting and relocation through which the Polisario built up their photographic collection as a "gesture," how might we come to understand Polisario policy itself *as* gestural? Second, how to factor the ambiguity of gesturality into our understanding? And third, how might we incorporate a notion of the temporality of the gesture as extending beyond the immediacy of a given social context or historical moment into our understanding so that its affect is understood as durational?

Giorgio Agamben offers some considerations on the nature of gesture useful to these queries. In his well-known essay, "Notes on Gesture," Agamben refers to the Roman philologist Varro, who inscribed gesture within the sphere of action while also setting it apart from both acting (*agere*) and making (*facere*). For Varro gesture exists somewhere between physical embodiment and temporal duration, a distinction he explains by referring to the similarity between *agere* and *gerere* (to carry on): while a person can *facere* something but not *agere* it, as a poet "makes" a play he or she does not perform in, a general is said to *gerere*, to carry on affairs, neither making nor acting but supporting others, "that is … a meaning transferred from those who *gerunt* 'carry' burdens, because they support them" (quoted in Agamben, 2000: 56–57). Varro places gesture within this third category of action, which, neither wholly productive nor communicative, falls somewhere in between, being the exhibition of a mediality that makes means visible as such, conveying not the dimension of ends-in-themselves, but the sphere of a "pure and endless mediality" (p. 59).

In this, gesture breaks with what Agamben (2000) calls the "false alternative" between means and ends that "paralyzes morality" by presenting means that, "*as such*, evade the orbit of mediality without becoming, for this reason, ends" (p. 57), conveying the inability to figure something out in language—the constitutive block against linguistic auto-referentiality that forecloses referring to language *as* language. Whatever else it conveys, the durative *carrying on* of an activity such as collecting and storing photographs at the scale undertaken by the Polisario resembles Agamben's claim that gesture conveys linguistic inability, suggesting a deferral of the sort of judgment that would turn such a repetitive act merely into an end. The strategic imperative behind the collection's generation, while unsupported by the "intelligence" these photographs contain, does not eliminate the possibility that some other strategic or ethical rationale was latent in this gesture, betraying some aspect of the Saharawi's ambivalent relationship with their northern neighbor at work in the systematic and durative dimension of policy.

Encounters also register gestic incommunicability on a discursive level—since the question "why" is inevitably raised when the photographs' origin story is recounted—as well as on the medial level of photography itself. As Ariella Azoulay (2010) has noted, when the photograph is regarded merely in terms of signifying relations between itself and the event, circumstance or condition recorded "it is easy to dismiss the photograph as partial, false, incidental and biased. … But these signifying relations accompanying one's gaze at the photograph are but one use of it, which cannot answer questions about what photography or a photograph are" (p. 9). In practice *encounters* seek to pose this ontological question in terms similar to Azoulay, who describes the photograph as

constitutively "always … excessive with regard to any sovereign representation" (p. 10), being that potentially any photograph can break out of or work against a viewer's ingrained tendency to regard them as allochronic—sealed depictions of events separate and apart from photographer, archivist or spectator. Aïm Deüelle Lüski describes this tendency as photography's "vertical view," a notion consonant with the informal collective's critique of the distancing effect engendered by computer screens and the norms of museological display,[23] countered in their work by privileging the horizontality of the book form. By opening the "sealed" verticality of the photographic medium, *encounters* attempt *to be with* the photographs in all their messy historical contingency, rehearsing a millenarian project where the ultimate destination of these images becomes an open question rather than a foregone conclusion.

Memory of the other: intention, volition, and historical veracity

While following the informal collective's activities, I frequently found myself asking what it was that impelled me to look for a precise, univocal intention behind the Saharawi's photographic collecting. Of course, it is the researcher's task to verify historical claims, but sometimes rationale is lost to history, reduced to rumor or myth. To wit: during my time in the camps, it was never unambiguously stated that a conciliatory intent lay behind the Polisario's photograph collecting. Ibrahim Grigou stated during our initial interview that while the act of collecting was spontaneous and the photographs were not at first considered to be of great importance, they have since become a part of the memory of the war and the link with Morocco. When asked why the personal photographs of Moroccan soldiers were preserved, Khatri Addouh, speaker of the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) parliament, said, "We thought we had to preserve the Moroccans' things as we did not have the possibility to write history … the idea was to preserve something to *help* [my italics] in the future."[24] The majority of the Moroccan prisoners, Addouh added, had the same nature as the Moroccans who participated in the Green March, villagers with little political sophistication, susceptible to the blandishments of King Hassan's propaganda machine.[25] In his analysis, the soldiers were not really the Polisario's enemy; they were, like the Saharawi, Hassan II's unwitting victims, and fought merely to defend themselves. It was this lack of culpability which rendered them worthy of consideration. In an early interview Fatima Mahfoud recalled "listening to the old men in the camps [as a child], who would utter a sentence in Arabic when they saw the prisoners of war going by: they would always say, 'May god save us from humanity's humiliation.'"[26]

Yet, within this overall discussion of intention, volition and historical certitude, neither the firsthand experiences of individual SPLA soldiers nor the rationale of the Polisario command is precisely the point. Social scientists must learn to factor latent, unconscious or even irrational motivations into their analyses. "In many cases," Esposito related during one of our first interviews, "the answer to the question, 'Why do you have these pictures, why didn't you destroy them?' asked of the people in the museum or elsewhere … was: 'Because they are similar to us, they look like us. Because they are as poor as us. … Poverty sends you to death.'" Esposito also encountered more severe answers which imposed an irremediable distance between "us and them": "'They are enemies, they came to kill us and to steal our land.'"[27] (Throughout my visit to the camps, I regularly encountered this ambivalent attitude. My notebook contains Saharawi aphorisms expressing empathy toward Moroccan POWs—"the [Moroccan] father is a victim of the war and he has been orphaned"; "the king sent his soldiers to die but [the Saharawi] did not treat the pictures as enemies"—as well as skepticism: "the enemy will not turn into a friend until tar turns into milk.") The Polisario, it could be argued, did not deliberately pursue a policy of preserving the memory of soldiers from the army opposing them but, nonetheless, this goal was present in latent form—the germ of an intention gestating in the Polisario's gesture, growing with the passing of the

years and the expansion of the collection in spite of the Saharawi's deep-seated ambivalence toward the Moroccans they fought (or because of it: ambivalence being, according to Freud, *the* motive force in the mechanism of deferral).

Until now, I have described the Polisario's actions and the group's work as if each were autonomous developments. Another interpretation exists—that of a lateral, reciprocal, and dialectical influence between the informal collective and the SADR leadership. By their interest in the photographs and through an ongoing dialogue with this leadership, the collective impressed upon Saharawi leaders the fact that the photographs possessed not only an intrinsic, historical value but could also, potentially, contribute directly to a process of reconciliation with the Moroccan people. While this matter may be remote from the daily exigencies facing the SADR administration, the Polisario now state as a matter of policy that they intend, following the conflict's end, to return these photographs to the families of Moroccan soldiers—without the involvement, it is always emphasized, of the monarchy.

The collective's work has affected the SADR's attitude toward the photographs in its possession in another less direct, albeit highly suggestive, way. Over time, the Saharawi Museum of National Resistance constructed a series of galleries ringing the original courtyard—today empty save for the remains of a downed Moroccan fighter jet—in which are displayed historical photographs, captured military equipment, weaponry, and ordinance. The last gallery contains information and material relating to Moroccan POWs. Today, taking photographs is no longer allowed in this room, a policy change strongly suggestive of the collective's influence. On the day we toured the museum, none of the personal photographs the group uses in encounters were on display (as was the case in the past), although near the door a glass-fronted wooden cabinet housed bundles of documents and photographs wrapped in cellophane, with here and there a photograph peeking out. And while our inquiries to the SADR's Minister of Information concerning the present location of the photographs Patrizio Esposito sorted through back in 1998 were never fully answered, we were assured the photographs were safe and today are regarded not as the detritus of war but an important part of Saharawi heritage. For if one thing can be said with any certainty, it is this: the Polisario's intention in collecting was from the first related to the necessity of proving, to protect for the benefit of a future possibility some memory of the war and what had befallen them. What they had on hand to preserve were some fragments of the memory of the other, the enemy.

Notes

1. Although it departs from common lexical usage, "Saharawi" is the English spelling now preferred by the SADR (Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic—the official name of the government in exile) and Polisario Front.
2. On the way enduring harassment from Moroccan forces who indiscriminately attacked refugees and nomads, poisoned wells, destroyed herds, and undertook bombing campaigns using conventional ordinance, white phosphorus and napalm. Please see, Lippert (1987).
3. The Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP)/Peace Research Institute in Oslo (PRIO) Armed Conflict Database considers the Western Sahara conflict "an internal armed conflict" running from 1975 to 1989, while Correlates of War defines it as "extra-state war" of an "imperial" rather than "colonial" nature.
4. I have debated, in fact, whether to describe these photographs as a "collection" or "archive," in the end choosing to employ the former. In point of fact, these photographs betray aspects of both, being housed under the purview of the SADR government while also lacking key archival features, such as a dedicated facility or index. The most precise description would be this: the photographs are one collection within a larger group of historical materials housed within various ministry buildings in and around the central administration camp of Rabbouni, all falling under the purview of the SADR ministry of information.
5. Over the years, the Polisario themselves have engaged in a sustained work of photographic commemoration. The Saharawi Museum of National Resistance, the archive of the Ministry of Information, and

the museum at Bir Lahlou all house commemorative displays of fallen soldiers and other martyrs, and similar displays can also be found on the walls of ministry offices.

6. Since 2011, the group has also distributed copies of *Necessità dei volti* to so-called "guardians," public figures who have demonstrated a past commitment to publicizing the predicament of the Saharawi people. A special edition of the book was donated to the Bibliothèque Kandinsky (Center Georges-Pompidou) in 2013 and the Saharawi Museum of National Resistance in 2016.
7. In which another sort of doubling is sometimes visible, as in photographs where Moroccan soldiers pose next to improvised windbreaks decorated with family photographs.
8. Please see, Karam (2012).
9. Yasmine Eid-Sabbagh in discussion with the author, 10 September 2013.
10. A matter complicated by Morocco's animus to any public questioning of its legitimate sovereignty in Western Sahara, a policy extending to its denial of the war's existence, and hence, its human cost to Moroccans themselves. Yet another manifestation of invisibility, this time cloaking those who in most nationalist contexts would be honored as patriots.
11. Following Jean-Luc Nancy, the group prefer verbs that invoke looking's ethical dimension over those referring to the faculty of sight as such: "'Sight' belongs to the domain of objects. The look, by contrast, brings the subject to the fore. To 'look at' means … *to look out for* or *to look after*, to ward or *warten*, to watch or guard over. To be concerned with or to care for" the person depicted, who is, Nancy (2006) emphasizes, physically absent (pp. 242–243).
12. Giorgio Agamben (2009) defines "apparatus" as a set of far-reaching discourses and practices with a concrete strategic function appearing "at the intersection of power relations and relations of knowledge" (p. 3). His definition concords with Slyomovics' description of French governance techniques in colonial-era Algeria:

    French laws governing identification cards as well as the family passbook formed part of French bureaucratic controls established over the population. This apparatus of French state control over an individual was preceded historically by registration controls for the French family, embodied in the family passbook … Algeria was subjected to a nineteenth-century European "culture of identification" in which the personal name is the essential component of the modern state system of identification. (Slyomovics, 2013: 134)

13. Readily apparent in the studio portraits found in the Polisario's collection, where the appearance of tribal dress and other orientalist trappings occur commonly enough to hazard the guess that these were a standard trope for Moroccan studio photographers in the period after independence.
14. It is worth noting that the scale of Moroccan arms procurement in the 1970s and 1980s occurred at a time when the country's foreign debt had ballooned in inverse proportion to its balance of trade, while the variety of countries selling these weapons—as illustrated by the scope of the museum's collection—is testimony to King Hassan II's adroitness in playing off opposing sides of the Cold War to his benefit. Please see Lawless and Monahan (1987), Appendix 1: Moroccan armed forces, 1984, David Seddon, Morocco at war (pp. 129–134).
15. Esposito in discussion with the author, 4 March 2013.
16. In a population with a high rate of adult illiteracy, it was not uncommon for Moroccan soldiers to practice their hand-writing on the backs of photographs.
17. As an altruistic "gesture" meant to smooth the way for peace negotiations, the last 404 Moroccan prisoners of war (POWs) held in the desert were repatriated in 2005, facilitated by the US State Department. The gesture was not reciprocated. Please see, *BBC News* (2005) and Zunes and Mundy (2010: 241).
18. Esposito in discussion with the author, 4 March 2013.
19. The record on the Polisario's treatment of Moroccan POWs is unclear. During our visit to the camps, Polisario officials spoke of their cooperation with the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and their policy of transparency where POWs were concerned. However, the Polisario suspended ICRC visits between 1976 and 1984 as a protest against Morocco's denying Red Cross access to Saharawi POWs. The Polisario insist they scrupulously following Geneva Convention guidelines and, in addition,

provided Moroccan prisoners with literacy classes and gave jobs to those wishing a diversion from the tedium of imprisonment. They allowed prisoners to send letters, conducted interviews with Moroccan internees, publishing these in the party organ, *Polisario Libre*, and initiated a radio program (archived in the Ministry of Information's collection) where prisoners could communicate with their families and relay information about casualties. For more on conditions of POWs held by the Saharawi and the difficulties of access and evaluation, please see Human Rights Watch (1995).

20. Esposito in discussion with the author, 6 March 2013.
21. Since the cessation of active fighting in 1991, Morocco has continued its war for control of Western Sahara upon this medial battlefield. Besides maintaining a roster of media commentators and actively countering public statements by United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO) and in the UN, the Moroccan government also maintains a healthy online propaganda presence, countering Polisario/SADR claims on a variety of websites, including http://polisario-confidential.org/, http://polisario-thinktwice.org/, http://www.sahara-developpement.com/, http://www.corcas.com/, and https://www.moroccoworldnews.com.
22. Esposito in discussion with the author, 5 March 2013. Jacob Mundy (2017) argues that Western Sahara's very obscurity—evident in its commonly being referred to as a "forgotten," "frozen," or "invisible" conflict—is, in fact, part of a project of reimagining practices of American dominance in the aftermath of the televised debacle of America's defeat in Vietnam, a project involving the "increased outsourcing of the labours of hegemony to proxies such as Morocco and … the related militarization of those proxies, and thus the militarization of entire regions" (p. 55).
23. Please see, Azoulay (2013).
24. Khatri Addouh (speaker of the SADR parliament) in discussion with the author, 2016.
25. Although the marchers included wealthy businessmen and two royal princes, the vast majority were members of the urban and rural poor, who regarded the question of Western Saharan sovereignty with a patriotism born of economic desperation.
26. F Mahfoud in discussion with the author, 4 April 2013.
27. P Esposito in discussion with the author, 5 March 2013.

References

Agamben G (2000) *Means without End: Notes on Politics*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

Agamben G (2009) *What is an Apparatus? And Other Essay*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Azoulay A (2010) What is a photograph? What is photography? *Philosophy of Photography* 1(1): 9–13.

Azoulay A (2013) *Aïm Deüele Lüski and Horizontal Photography*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

BBC News (2005) Last Moroccan war prisoners freed. *BBC News*, 18 August. Available at: http://newsvote.bbc.co.uk/mpapps/pagetools/print/news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/4162790.stm (accessed 12 December 2017).

Collettivo informale (2011) Sahara Occidentale, con poche immagini. In: *The occasion of the exhibition Image in the Aftermath*. Beirut, Lebanon, 17 May–16 July.

Cowan B (1981) Walter Benjamin's theory of allegory. *New German Critique* 22: 109–122.

Fernández-Molina I (2017) Introduction: towards a multilevel analysis of the Western Sahara conflict and the effects of its protractedness. In: Ojeda-Garcia R, Fernández-Molina I and Veguilla V (eds) *Global, Regional and Local Dimensions of Western Sahara's Protracted Decolonization: When a Conflict Gets Old*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Human Rights Watch (1995) *Keeping It Secret: The United Nations Operation in the Western Sahara*, vol. 7, no. 7. Report, Human Rights Watch, October. Available at: https://www.hrw.org/reports/1995/Wsahara.htm (accessed 18 October 2017).

Johansen B (1971) Die feindlichen Städte: Marokkos blockierter Transformationsprozeß. *Das Argument* 65: 394–432.

Karam S (2012) Moroccan army promised better deal after protests. *Reuters*, 7 February. Available at: https://www.reuters.com/article/us-morocco-army-protests/moroccan-army-promised-better-deal-after-protests-idUSTRE8162BD20120207 (accessed 18 September 2017).

Lawless R and Monahan L (eds) (1987) *War and Refugees: The Western Sahara Conflict*. London: Pinter Publishers.
Lippert A (1987) The Saharawi refugees: origins and organization, 1975–85. In: Lawless R and Monahan L (eds) *War and Refugees: The Western Sahara Conflict*. London: Pinter Publishers, pp. 150–166.
Mundy J (2017) The geopolitical functions of the Western Sahara conflict: US hegemony, Moroccan stability and Sahrawi strategies of resistance. In: Ojeda-Garcia R, Fernández-Molina I and Veguilla V (eds) *Global, Regional and Local Dimensions of Western Sahara's Protracted Decolonization: When a Conflict Gets Old*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 53–78.
Nancy JL (2006) The look of the portrait. In: Hamacher W (ed.) *The Muses II*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, pp. 220–270.
Scott J (1998) *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
Slyomovics S (2013) Visual ethnography, stereotypes, and photographing Algeria. In: Netton IR (ed.) *Orientalism Revisited: Art, Land and Voyage*. London: Routledge, pp. 128–150.
Tagg J (1993) *The Burden of Representation: Essays on Photographies and Histories*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
Zunes S and Mundy J (2010) *Western Sahara: War, Nationalism, and Conflict Irresolution*. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press.

Author biography

Michael Baers is an American artist, writer, and researcher based in Berlin. His work has appeared in many exhibitions, and he has contributed essays and graphic works to a variety of journals and print initiatives. In 2012, the Haus der Kulturen der Welt commissioned him to make a graphic novel based on his research on the *Picasso in Palestine* project from 2011. Besides serving as part of his PhD dissertation, the resulting work, *An Oral History of Picasso in Palestine*, is among the most comprehensive accounts of the *Picasso in Palestine* project to date. He commenced his research on the Western Saharan conflict in 2013.