CREATIVE ENCOUNTERS

Photography as Archive

The Self and Other in Isolation

An Interview with Saiful Huq Omi

Yousif M. Qasmiyeh with Saiful Huq Omi

■ **ABSTRACT:** In this interview, Yousif M. Qasmiyeh enters into conversation with Saiful Huq Omi, an award-winning photographer and filmmaker and founder of *Counter Foto-A Centre for Visual Arts* in Dhaka, Bangladesh, on issues spanning from photography in the era of COVID and what it means, in this situation of stasis and containment worldwide, to continue photographing; to the intimate as revealed by the photograph; photographing (across) different geographies and national borders; on Rohingya refugees as both the photographed and the unphotographed; the archive and the afterlives of photography; and, finally, how to envision an equitable future between the photographer and the photographed.

■ **KEYWORDS:** archive, borders, COVID-19, displacement, photography, representations, Rohingya refugees, story

Yousif M. Qasmiyeh (YMQ): These are extraordinary times: a pandemic is ravaging the world, and stasis and containment have become the norm in this ever-expanding state of abnormality. Bearing this new status quo in mind, what do, or can, photographers capture in and under such conditions? Can photography, for instance, photograph itself? Can it, at least, return to its innate interiority when exteriority (in light of these far-reaching lockdowns) is no longer permissible?

Saiful Huq Omi (SHO): This is a fascinating question—thank you. I think that we need to talk about what we know of photography first, especially when photography often concerns those who are familiar with the technical aspects of this art, but also about how photography itself relates to those who consume it (in its various facets and influences) every day in their life, even if they do not open a photobook, attend an exhibition, or willingly look for the work of a “professional” photographer. These individuals still live in a world where other fora and media are available: newspapers, TV, or alternative tools such as the internet, which, as we all know, facilitate, to a large degree, people’s interaction with outside sources.

Photographers make work for others, but also mostly on and about others. So, what happens to photographers during this pandemic? For many, they could no longer do this work. In many contexts, it has become a time when no one was to be photographed. In this sense and for the first time since photography was invented, the camera had to change its angle: instead of seeing others in front of the lens, it turned 180 degrees, focusing on the imagemaker instead.

Now, if one were to research the performance of photography during this time, they would see that, in such a short period, the vast amount of work that has been produced is deeply self-reflective, bearing the story of the storyteller as an individual. Examining the shift that is taking place, would be a fascinating research venture for someone to pursue in the hope of coming to terms with these extraordinary times and their impact on producers of art like photographers.

YMQ: In what ways do you perceive this as a new state of being that is worthy of another critical reading, especially in photography?

SHO: For me, as is the case for other photographers who view the function of the lens critically, the notion of working on “others” is problematic. Most of the time, we claim that we understand the “other.” We assume that it is “our right” to be invasive. This time, from the beginning of 2020 onward, I feel that we have been forced to think differently. We can no longer go out. Or it is no longer us who decides when to go out. To put it simply, we cannot access the outside world (much) anymore.

Now photographers have become much more aware—at least that is what I hope—about the fact that they have photographed their “subjects” too many times already. During this time, however, photographers becoming “subjects” themselves must be a highly contemplative and critical transition. Photographers are photographing their own spaces, instead: their own rooms, their own children, their own mothers, their own backyards . . . This in itself must be a new photographing journey altogether. One must investigate, deeply and passionately, the impact of such times on the photographer’s mind. How they, at this very precise moment, see the world around them, with or without their regular “subjects,” and how they feel about making someone, who is not part of their own family and therefore not part of their social and cultural circle, part of a photograph, the way most photographers do.

YMQ: Since my first encounter with your photographs, I have felt that photography is there—out there, bare, in the open and yet multiply textural—to lend us a third eye to see with you, and not to lament the photographed—be it an individual or a space—and overwhelm them with superfluous empathy. As your photographs appear to me, to my eye, I cannot but feel inside without being coerced into their insideness; how, when photographing the intimate, the spatial, and the “vulnerable,” are you able, at times with penetrative precision, to maintain such an equitable and ethical portrayal of the subjects at work?

SHO: It heartens me to know that my photographs have made you feel this way. And I am happy to know that you felt that I *can* photograph the intimate moments with a degree of equitability between the photographer and the photographed in mind—thank you.

I think, as an artist, my main goal is to *get close, to bring myself closer to the individual and the thing that I am about to photograph*. To put it differently, to get close to life (their life), to what is considered a reality of some sort, to existence, and also get close to the physicality of the moment. So, closeness for me is not always, and hardly ever, the overcoming of the physical distance *only*. If you are part of the story, somehow, anyhow, then, only then, an audience, or

those who are willing to look at photography sensitively, can sense that the photographer has become part of the story. That is crucial, and if you are able to achieve such balance, the work you produce will be worthy of seeing and being seen. One question I would like to ask myself out loud is: how can such a thing be achieved in these pressing circumstances?

First, I think that it is vital to photograph the *story* (through the photographed) that speaks to your heart. That is basic. In other ways, photographing should be governed by the *right* choices. (Only the photographer knows what such a thing means). I would say: Never work on something that you are not sufficiently close to. This applies in particular to one's major body of work. It is acceptable to be commissioned for work and thus "produce" contractually since, as we all know, in one way or another, we have to find a way to pay our bills. But when it comes to working on long-term projects, which embody a longer practical and emotional link with the subject matter, perhaps a project that would evolve into something like a book, something that condenses all these times and hopes, you have to be honest with yourself.

I would like to think that so far I have made the right choices.

YMQ: Your work spans multiple geographies and diverse peoples, from places with national borders to refugee camps or places of transit, from factory workers in Bangladesh to Rohingya refugees within but also on the border with Bangladesh. What conditions govern your perception of what is out there to be photographed? In other words, do you (actively) look for the unphotographed or the hardly captured and therefore unarchived, so to speak, in what you are about to photograph?

SHO: I do not photograph people; I photograph stories that people are part of. It is the story of the person that is important after all. Not the country, where the story is normally located. Borders, for me, are irrelevant. People suffer everywhere. And stories are universal. Whether they convey love, hate, wars, genocides . . . , which themselves are determined by cultural elements and politics. One might say that those two poles are in charge of everything.

Sometimes, you photograph a story no one has ever cared to photograph. Say the Rohingya story, for example. Why? Politics. There are no commissions, no money, as Rohingyas did not (and still do not) matter to the global elites and powers. They were not "important"—or maybe not "important enough"—to justify being photographed. Now, as the world has suddenly realized that the Rohingyas are Muslim, in an ultra-nationalist setting and facing a modern-day genocide and could fight back, in the process unbalancing the status quo, and eventually harming the interests of some of the global players, the world is paying more attention to their plight. Enough attention to justify their inclusion in photographs or having them photographed in light of the ever-increasing, and yet mainly seasonal, commissions.

YMQ: Discerning your photographs, in particular those capturing the Rohingya refugees and their communities in still and in motion, has pushed me to want to know what kind of discussions or introductions you have as a photographer and as a witness with people who are escaping wars and violence, are forcefully uprooted from their homes and places, and are in constant fear for their lives? What kind of speech takes place, if any, before photography commences?

SHO: The discussions are sometimes long. At times, laborious and extremely long. It happens for months, sometimes for years. And most of the time it happens in the absence of the camera. I do not always carry my camera with me. We talk about things in life; we talk about our mutual dreams. I hardly interview people in the traditional way. I talk about my personal worries in this

world. The fact of how badly I miss my daughter when I am traveling. I talk, laugh, and at times people would also respond and do the same. We open up to each other's narratives . . .

Sometimes, I hardly talk. I see, look into their eyes for consent, I receive it in gesture or in words, and I photograph. I walk out silently from the scene. In a way, like a silent cat, who has stolen part of the life of a living soul. It is cruel at times, but this is how it is.

YMQ: Your photographs have been exhibited worldwide to international critical acclaim. If we were to raise the question of the archive in photography and query, if possible, the afterlives of such photographs, in what ways, in your opinion, do these photographs counter and respond to the erasure, or at least the demotion of these people's narratives, in the mass media and people's imaginations?

SHO: Is your work present enough to evoke feelings? Emotions? Can it create memories? If it does, then your work has an afterlife. Once it is exhibited, once it is seen and perceived, if it can take the audience beyond what is offered for the eye to see, if it intrigues people's imagination, only then I can think of creating my own narrative vis-à-vis the story I am photographing.

I think that one need not think too much as photographing happens. You simply cannot out-play what these photographs are in reality. You are simply a slave of your own political identity—you are what and who you are. So, when you photograph, you photograph yourself. It is always the way you see the world and the same is reflected in how you see part of history unravelling in front of you.

Your photographs are who you are.

My work in a sense is my way of looking into the multiple histories of communities, of nations, of genocides, of love and relationships and so on. If it opposes (in photography) the ongoing media narrative, then I have managed to a degree to survive and see beyond what is happening around us. If not, then I have failed. The photograph is the judge.

YMQ: Finally, how can such responses in photography, from your perspective, open up new possibilities for those involved on either side of the lens and envision a new equitable future for both the photographed and the photographer?

SHO: The possibilities are endless, and there are times when there are no possibilities at all. The photographed would always remain part of the same group, the same people, with their own and constant stories to be told. Now it depends on who is willing, when these people are under political and existential siege, to carry (or transmit) these stories for them. If it is carried by a photographer, who manages to be part of the story, if their human politics allows and helps them to be part of it, then magic happens. By not "snatching" and "running away" with the photograph, the photographer would actively "contribute" to the story . . . Only then does the work become (more) collaborative, when both the photographed and the photographer collapse into the same entity. They complement each other in a manner that helps each party understand the other. Will the photographer ever ask their "subjects" about the manner in which they would like to be photographed? Such an offer scarcely materializes because it is not in their practice, for a variety of reasons, mostly because they might think that they have the "right" and required "knowledge" of the situation they are in. Just for once, if a photographer realizes how revolutionary the process is in making the "subject" part of the creative process of making a picture, neither charitably nor coercively, change would happen *in* and *beyond* the picture.

■ **YOUSIF M. QASMIYEH** was born and educated in Baddawi refugee camp in North Lebanon and is Creative Encounters Editor of the *Migration and Society* journal, Writer-in-Residence of the AHRC-ESRC-funded *Refugee Hosts* research project (grant AH/P005438/1), and Joint Lead of the AHRC-funded *Imagining Futures* Baddawi Camp Lab (grant AH/T008199/1). He is currently completing a DPhil on containment and the archive in “refugee writing” at the University of Oxford’s English Faculty. Time, the body, and ruination inform his poetry and prose, and his poetry and translations have appeared in journals and magazines including *Modern Poetry in Translation*, *Stand*, *Critical Quarterly*, *GeoHumanities*, *Humanities*, and *Cambridge Literary Review*. Yousif’s collection, *Writing the Camp* (Broken Sleep Books, 2021), is the Poetry Book Society’s Recommendation for Spring 2021. Email: yousif.qasmiyeh@ell.ox.ac.uk

■ **SAIFUL HUQ OMI** is a photographer, filmmaker, educator, and activist. His photography, films and writing focus on human rights, politics of identity, and displacement. His first book on the rise of political Islam in Bangladesh was banned by the government. He has published over half a dozen books and has been working on and archiving the Rohingya crisis through photography for over a decade. His photographs and films have been exhibited and shown in more than 20 countries to huge critical acclaim. He has taught photography across the world. In 2012, he founded *Counter Foto-A Centre for Visual Arts* in Dhaka, Bangladesh—the first photography institute in the country approved by the government—which provides world-class photography education with a specialization in human rights and social justice. Email: saifulhuq88@gmail.com

Figure 1. “My home is not far from here, you just cross the river Naaf and there is my home by the riverside. From here it is just two miles, but for me it is like a two million mile, which I will never be able to cross.” – My Rohingya guide, Abul Kalam, pointing toward the other side of the river when we were coming back home after a long day of work. © Saiful Huq Omi.

The Human that Is Lacking

Yousif M. Qasmiyeh

■ **ABSTRACT:** In the form of poetic fragments, “The Human that is Lacking” offers a response to Saiful Huq Omi’s photograph reproduced in these pages, in an attempt to “co-see” the image with the photographer. The image and its response sit alongside Yousif M. Qasmiyeh’s interview with the award-winning photographer and film-maker himself (also in this issue).

■ **KEYWORDS:** arrival, co-seeing, departure, photography, seeing through

Never to privilege seeing but to prod the blindness that is.

Co-seeing, if it were to happen, happens in the destruction that will be.

The seen, or what is presumed as such, has intact eyes but those who claim to see, and therefore have allegedly seen, have almost-eyes.

Apart from the silhouette and those who are not in the frame, the picture’s center is inconspicuous. In black and white, at first glance, the picture appears trapped in the expansiveness of its stasis, easing the entrapment of all things scattered across its folds and their remains.

Everything inside the picture looks motionless, stranded: a silhouette pointing toward something. Toward a place, a thing, or people? To trace or guide those in the background? Or to feign movement, in a sighting where the human is visibly lacking and almost non-present.

Three fishing boats, elongated, two of almost similar length. The one in the middle, slightly shorter to the naked eye, is capsized, practically bridging the void between the other two boats. Those who may have boarded them appear out of the frame, but their footsteps, likely of bare feet, are still discernible in the undulated layers of mud. Could it be an arrival? A departure? Or could it be an unintended outing?

An arrival susceptible to its own arrival? A departure for an only alternative? Could those people, young, old, newborn, likely steeped in suppressed cries, have escaped a presence to seek another somewhere else? Textured mud, the clouds and one capacious cloud, punctured by an escaping ray of light, overshadowing all else and what digressionally can be seen as the inner. All alibis for an existence.

In pointing toward something—in all likelihood a thing that is known to those involved—space is, as it appears, divided into two unequal lots: what is in front of the outstretched arm and what is behind it or thereabouts. This thing of relevance that is definitely somewhere is exactly what

the picture seems to allude to: the sense of sensing what may never be grasped and yet, for its sake, continues to live on in all things . . .

It is in the breathlessness detected in the loneliness of the pictured, that the picture outlives life and in so doing becoming its own archive.