‘Like Pebbles Stuck in a Sieve’: Reading Romushas in the Second-Generation Photography of Southeast Asian Captivity

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Western depictions of captivity across Southeast Asia during the Second World War are dominated by the images of military prisoners of war who were captured by Japanese forces following the fall of Singapore in February 1942. Much less widely known are the histories of romushas: forced labourers from Java who were recruited in their millions and suffered extreme deprivation and ill-treatment through systems of hard labour and corporal punishment. This article explores how the second-generation work of Dutch photographer Jan Banning retraces the rare stories of some of these romushas, and how — with a lack of public places of remembrance — the boundaries between survival and memorial are blurred through the layered functions of Banning’s portraits.

KEYWORDS romushas, prisoners of war, Second World War, Southeast Asia, Jan Banning, photography, postmemory

Introduction

During the Second World War, Japan recruited labourers from across Southeast Asia as part of its long-term vision to create a Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere: a bloc of Asian nations, led by Japan, and free from Western influence. As the war in the Far East progressed and increasing demands were placed upon Japan’s economy, a chronic shortage of labour supply prompted the military administration to look to its occupied territories to support the war effort. Along with the forced labour of thousands of Malays, Tamils, and Koreans, the island of Java was identified as a source of a plentiful — and cheap — workforce. Javanese workers were known as romushas (the Japanese translation for the colonial term ‘coolie’) and put to

work on Java, its neighbouring islands and across Southeast Asia. They experienced unsanitary living conditions, brutal labour regimes, corporal punishment, and the provision of little-to-no medical care (Kratoska, 2005).

Between 1942 and 1945, millions of romushas were recruited on Java. Due to haphazard record-keeping by the Japanese, the fact that any extant records were destroyed upon surrender in August 1945, and that families were generally not informed of a romusha's death — the precise numbers of individuals involved are unknown. Some research suggests that as many as 10 million romushas were recruited, although these were not all employed for long periods of forced hard labour (Raben, 2005: 197). It is however generally accepted that more than 300 000 romushas were transported outside of Java for labour purposes and, due to the appalling conditions in which they existed, only about 77 000 — 26 per cent — survived (Hovinga, 2005: 216). Conditions for romushas on large railway construction projects were especially harsh. On the Sumatra railway — a forced labour project similar to the railway constructed between Thailand and Burma by Allied prisoners of war (POWs) and native forced labourers — 80 per cent of the 100 000-strong romusha workforce are believed to have perished. A similar number of romushas died on the Thailand-Burma railway (Hovinga, 2010: 304). No data remain for the numbers of romushas who died across Indonesia itself: when the war ended, many of the survivors returned to Java and the 'uncounted dead namelessly remained behind' (Hovinga, 2005: 214).

The story of Asian labourers across Southeast Asia during the Second World War is one 'of death and dislocation of holocaust proportions' (Kratoska, 2005: xv). Until recently it had received relatively little critical attention in the many histories told of the Pacific War, the Japanese occupation of Southeast Asia, or in the narratives of military prisoners who were forced to labour under the Japanese (Hovinga, 2005: 214). Likewise, popular Western cultural representations of Far Eastern captivity are dominated by the image of white military POWs labouring on the Thailand-Burma railway, or incarcerated in Changi on Singapore (for example Lomax, 1996; Clavell, 2006). The experiences of Asian labourers across the Far East, coerced into work and who suffered harsher conditions and much higher death rates than POWs, are barely represented. Hundreds of thousands of romushas died, yet the stories of those deaths remain on the edges of Western cultural depictions of the Japanese occupation. Across Indonesia itself, depictions of romushas were banned in the 1970s as the country gained independence and its first president attempted to distance himself from his own role in their recruitment (Sukarno and Adams, 1965).

This paper shows that such a lack of cultural and critical attention creates a profound challenge to younger generations in uncovering the stories of romushas. It goes on to explore how the work of a second-generation photographer, Jan Banning, whose father and grandfather were both held captive by the Japanese, enables a reading of the bodies of survivors that also locates a narrative for those whose deaths went unrecorded. To borrow the words of historians Esther

Captain and Henk Hovinga the bodies of the men that Banning photographed become memorials: ‘their experiences are etched’ into the skin, ‘these are small monuments, not made of stone, but of images and words’ (2005: 20).

But in reading Banning’s work, *Traces of War*, I find that the bodies of the living maintain a complex relationship with the dead. It does so through a series of portraits and testimonies that portray the vitality of survival, whilst continually reminding viewers/readers of those who did not come home. The relationship that Banning has as a second-generation artist to the traumatic pasts of his forbears — a relationship that cultural theorist Hirsch terms as ‘postmemory’ (2012) — teaches us that the transmission of violent histories between generations is grounded in the quite literal embodiment of the past in the present. Death is inescapable in tracing the histories of romushas — indeed, this paper finds that the deaths of others were embodied for younger generations in the skeletal forms of surviving romushas. As I will explore through my reading of Banning’s photography, with a lack of public memorials and spaces of remembrance, the second generation turns to the living in order to memorialize the lost communities of wartime dead.

Background

Despite its slogan ‘Asia for Asians’, the treatment of Japanese imperial forces during the Second World War towards many of those who populated Southeast Asia did little to instil long-term support across the region for the basic tenets of its ‘Greater East Asia’ ideology. The Japanese occupation created high levels of unemployment across a region that had previously relied economically upon exporting its products — the rubber, rice, tin, and coal of which Southeast Asia was rich, and for which it was so valuable to Japan (Kratoska, 2005). But with its expanding territory, the Japanese requirement for cheap mass labour increased rapidly, particularly with the implementation, in diverse locations, of large railway construction projects from 1942 onwards (Thailand, Burma, Sulawesi, Sumatra, and Java). To assist with this labour supply, romushas were taken from Java — and the neighbouring islands that made up the former Netherlands East Indies (today’s Indonesia) — and joined local labourers forced together from across the region. Although in this paper I focus on the experiences of romushas transported to railway construction projects outside of Java, the majority of romushas were put to work on the island itself (or nearby islands) in agriculture or manufacturing as ‘economic soldiers’ — a propaganda term coined by the Japanese in an attempt to instil the sense that such work was in some way ‘heroic’ (Sato, 2005: 129).

But if the work was painted by the Japanese as ‘heroic’, the conditions in which some of that work was undertaken belied the romance of their picture. The experiences of romushas outside of Java were harsh and unrelenting. Those removed from Java were transported into challenging environments — jungle, swamp, mountain range — and provided very basic accommodation with no sanitation and no official or regular rations on offer. Medical treatment was sparse or not available at all: a

significant factor influencing their high mortality, because romushas were exposed to tropical diseases such as dysentery, malaria, and the dreaded cholera, to which there was no immunity. Consequently, such diseases became endemic and devastated the entire population (Kratoska, 2005: xx).

Where ‘coolie hospitals’ were created along the Thailand-Burma railway (e.g. at Kanburi, Banpong, and Wang Yai) these were staffed to some extent by Allied Medical Officers who were also being held captive along the line. However, the care that these trained medics were able to provide was negligible. Medical Officers tended to be put in charge of administrative duties by the Japanese, or were employed in manual labour, rather than being permitted to help the barely trained romusha ‘Dressers’ or orderlies to care for the sick. Treatment was so inadequate that the dysentery ward in ‘Number 2 Coolie Hospital’ at Kanburi was named by the romushas as ‘the Death House’ (Benson, 1946: 137–41). The rations in ‘coolie hospitals’ were reported to be much poorer than in nearby POW camps (Benson, 1945: 128–9), and no supply of clean drinking water was made available to romushas. Despite Japanese personnel receiving a ‘very liberal supply’ of water, romushas in the hospital camp who were caught drinking from the river or begging for water from the Allied cookhouse were beaten (Benson, 1946: 142). Other punishments included being stripped and forced to stand for hours under the tropical sun holding a log above the head (Young, n.d.: 148). Through the lack of nourishment, withholding of water or medical expertise, the bodies of romushas were brutalized habitually, continually, and apparently without regard.¹

Some Medical Officers were sent to ‘coolie camps’ and their reports provide a significant record and eyewitness account of the conditions experienced by romushas along the railway track.

When a coolie became too ill to fend for himself he was carted to a tent kept for the purpose and allowed to die. He was then buried in a communal pit ... with shortage of food amounting to semi-starvation, hard work under difficult climatic conditions, complete absence of any attempts at hygiene or sanitation, and no skilled medical attention of any kind ... Coolies died like flies. (Young, n.d.: 149)

In the reports of the medics, we find a recurring theme of ‘coolies’ reduced to the state of the animal, or the insect. Sick romushas are ‘carted’ to a tent. In death, their bodies are ‘like flies’. Later, in one of the rare literary depictions of romushas James Clavell would refer to the sight of Chinese ‘worker-ants’ outside Changi camp in Singapore (Clavell, 2006: 281). In archival documents and literary representation from white former colonizers, the local labourers are dehumanized, reduced to a miniscule size even though the scale of the Asian labour population under the Japanese far outnumbered that of Allied POWs (of which there were in the region of 120 000). And despite their number, the bodies of romushas — in working-to-death and in death itself — became anonymous. They were placed in a ‘communal pit’ without a burial ceremony or the provision of grave markings.

In comparison, the memoirs of Allied POWs recount the ‘ritual of the funeral service’ for individual men. This was often a simple burial ceremony attended by campmates, with the sound of the Last Post on the bugle. In some camps, military prisoners were put to work as cemetery keepers and grave-diggers to maintain the grounds and even place flower arrangements within them (see as an example for POW burials, Baynes, 2013: 74, 123). Furthermore, Commonwealth War Graves cemeteries and memorials commemorate those Allied troops who died in captivity (for example in Jakarta on Java, or Kranji on Singapore), with lines of named headstones or lists of individual names carved onto memorials. Yet very few sites of remembrance exist for romushas. Where they have been erected, these sites are communal like the pits in which romushas were buried: memorials on Sumatra at Pakanbaroe and in Kanchanburi, Thailand mark the sites of mass graves rather than those of individuals. Just as there was no coherent administration of individual romushas during their forced labour, their few memorials remain anonymous too. This loss of individual names, particularly through acts of violence, can — according to William Booth — create a ‘rupture’ within a community, as a part of the biography of a people and their place is lost with those names (Booth, 2006: 77). Where individuals have ‘disappeared in death’, then ‘words and images must serve as their tomb’ (Booth, 2006: 99). The work of second-generation artists and writers, then, becomes an attempt to reconcile those ruptures.

Immediate post-war responses

On post-war Java, the uncounted and nameless dead of the romushas became untold stories and repressed histories. One of the major barriers to early tellings of their experiences was that the first president of an independent Indonesia, Sukarno, had played a key role in assisting the Japanese recruitment of romushas. During the latter years of Dutch colonial rule, Sukarno had been the leader of the nationalist movement fighting for Indonesian independence, and had been imprisoned for a decade prior to Japan’s occupation. He was a useful ally for the Japanese: in return for the proliferation of nationalist, anti-Allied ideas by the Japanese, Sukarno lobbied to gain local support for the occupying forces (Gouda, 2014: 123). Sukarno’s collusion with the Japanese creates tension with Dutch historical representations of this period, although Sukarno tends to emerge as an ‘icon of memory’. This image offers a ‘simple binary’: Sukarno and Indonesian nationalists portrayed as ‘evil perpetrators’, whilst white Europeans are ‘innocent victims’ (Gouda, 2014: 107). In such a narrative, the experiences of Indonesian-born Dutch subjects are obscured.²

Whether ‘evil perpetrator’ or not, Sukarno’s encouragement of romusha recruitment was, he later acknowledged, made in full awareness of the appalling conditions and risk of death that they faced.

I knew they’d travel in airless boxcars packed in thousands at a time. I knew they were down to skin and bone ... It was I — Sukarno — who sent them to work ... I shipped them to their deaths. (Sukarno & Adams, 1965: 192)

Tight restrictions on historical research and debate had been imposed during the rule of Sukarno and his successor Suharto between 1959 and 1998, thus further increasing the challenge of recovering the stories of romushas (de Baets, 2002). Many books and works of scholarship that conflicted with official Indonesian accounts, or that included histories of human-rights abuses, were censored or banned outright (see de Baets, 2002: 278–89 for examples). In relation to the histories of the romushas specifically, and following pressure from the Japanese government as part of expanding trade relations between the two countries, in 1973 the film *Romusha* (depicting the experience of hard-labour under the Japanese) was banned from national circulation by the Indonesian Department of Information (de Baets, 2002: 281).

Yet in Western depictions of Far Eastern captivity, the portrayal of romushas has been equally as conspicuous in its absence. Pierre Boulle's *The Bridge on the River Kwai* (first published in English translation in 1954), James Clavell's *King Rat* (1962) and Eric Lomax's *The Railway Man* (1995) have offered three key moments in Western tellings of Far Eastern captivity during the Second World War. All three are based, to some extent, on each author's experiences of captivity in the Far East; and all began as written narratives and later became high profile films. Loosely informed by Boulle's experiences of captivity in Saigon under the Vichy French, *The Bridge on the River Kwai* tells the story of the fictional Colonel Nicholson, commander of a British POW contingent on the Thailand-Burma railway, who collaborates with the Japanese to ensure the construction of a solid, well-engineered bridge by a POW workforce (Boulle, 2002). Neither the film nor the book makes any reference to romushas carrying out hard labour on the railway — with local communities appearing only in scenes of young women bathing in the river, offering crass fantasy in tropical sunshine rather than an acknowledgement that women and children were also forced to labour during the Japanese occupation. In protest of its extreme sanitization of historical events, the film prompted the later publication of several memoirs from former POWs (Houghton, 2014).

Like Pierre Boulle, James Clavell wrote a novel having been a POW during the Second World War. Clavell was held captive by the Japanese initially on Java and then in Changi on Singapore. It is in the latter that the film version of *King Rat* is situated, approximately eighteen months following the completion of the Thailand-Burma railway. Clavell interweaves significant sub-plots from Java into his novel but crucially, these stories were removed for the film. Clavell references the workforce of forced labourers once, when the protagonist of his novel — Peter Marlowe — spends his lunch break watching 'thousands of Chinese coolies' working south of an airfield, like 'worker-ants', tiny, distant, and dehumanized (Clavell, 2006: 281).

The third key text was published to coincide with the 50th anniversary of Far Eastern POW liberation in 1995. Eric Lomax's *The Railway Man* has since produced the film of the same name, directed by Jonathan Teplitzky (2013). *The Railway Man* relates events that occurred during the construction of the Thailand-

Burma railway — namely Lomax's torture by the Kempeitai (Japanese military police) for the maintenance of a secret radio — and Lomax's post-war struggle to come to terms with his experiences. Lomax makes a single reference to the romushas.

A flood, a tide of unhappy men, and sometimes even women and children, streaming towards the... most distant camps on the railway route... They were individuals, or families, with no structure or chain of command. It was possible then ... to guess that these pathetic labourers would die in enormous numbers and be the biggest victims of the railway. (120–21)

Those 'biggest victims' are given no further part in Lomax's narrative — despite the 'flood' of people that he references, he does not write of them again. The flood is sent to the 'most distant camps' — out of the frame of Lomax's writing, despite archival records and memoirs of POWs confirming the presence of romushas in the same areas as military POWs. Teplitzky's film does try to amend Lomax's depiction to some extent, but the romushas that appear on screen remain silent in the background, given no story of their own. Appearing far too healthy and well-nourished, any impact of their condition on a viewer is limited severely for what they tell about the experiences of labourers who were not military personnel.

A lack of awareness of the history of the romushas cannot, however, be attributed solely to political and economic pressures, or the discriminate, dominant themes of cultural narratives. Personal and familial pressures were present too. In the immediate aftermath of war, Indonesia was overrun by a new conflict — that for independence — and families, already suffering from extreme hardship, did not necessarily need or indeed wish to speak of the past when the present offered challenges enough (Banning, 2005: 8). Furthermore, the romushas who survived were left with little in the way of official support. At the time of the Japanese capitulation in August 1945 there were few liberating forces in the region — and whilst military troops remained in the camps until liberators arrived, romushas were released immediately into a region that was suffering badly from the ravages of war: poverty, devastation, and — across their homeland Java — severe famine (Hovinga, 2005: 217). In Singapore in 1945, liberated former POWs found the 'walking cadavers' of romushas searching for food (Hovinga, 2005: 217) and upon eventual repatriation to Indonesia, the conditions of these 'living dead' were not much improved.

When British and Dutch liberating troops entered Southeast Asia, they focused initially on repatriating military POWs and civilian internees. The repatriation and care of romushas who had been transported outside of Indonesia eventually was overseen by the Dutch Indies government — but in some areas of Malaya, former romushas were not registered until March 1946 and repatriated more than one year later. The last official transport ship arrived in Indonesia in July 1947 (Hovinga, 2005). Arrival back on Java was no guarantee of survival, either. With little resource available to them, 'living corpses' would be seen walking in the streets, some 'laying down beside the road, at the markets, in ... movie theatres to

wait for death. Rats feasted on the fly-covered corpses' (Malaka qtd. in Hovinga, 2005: 232–33). For the romushas who were 'shipped to their deaths', who died among jungle vegetation, by the side of railway tracks, and in abandoned camps, there was no burial ceremony. The graves — where they existed — were left largely unmarked.

Bridging past and present: second-generation photography

As surviving romushas were often illiterate, desperate, and separated from their homeland, the recording of their experiences — where it has taken place — has been a slow and relatively recent process. With the lack of coherent administration of romushas by the Japanese, non-existent death records and the scarcity of memorials, the dead have become almost irretrievable to second- and third-generation communities. Thus the few survivors that have been identified and have been willing to speak on record create a literally vital link to those dead.³ Even in the work of The Indo Project, any references to former romushas are hard to locate (<https://theindoproject.org>). The work of Jan Banning has therefore been crucial in communicating the history and stories of romushas to audiences in Europe.

Banning is a Dutch photographer who has focused throughout his career on the long-term personal consequences of armed conflict. Before working on his study of Allied POWs and romushas during the Japanese occupation, he photographed veterans of the Spanish Civil War, the physical consequences of Agent Orange in Vietnam, Vietnamese veterans being treated in psychiatric institutions, and Cambodian landmine victims (Banning, 2005: 6). But this drive to photograph the aftermath of conflict shrouded the familial narrative through which Banning had lived as a young child. He knew that his Indonesian-born parents living in the Netherlands were 'from somewhere else'; was conversant in a small number of Malay words 'that lost their meaning' outside of the family home; and watched as the collection of books referencing the former Dutch East Indies continued to grow (2005: 6–7). Where conversations about the past had once been muted and coded, it was in reading those books that Banning found a means through which he could approach his parents with more direct questions about their wartime experiences.

Born in 1954, Banning was the son and grandson of former captives — his father was drafted into the colonial army and became a POW labouring on the Sumatra railway. His grandfather was a romusha on the Thailand-Burma railway. It is therefore of no coincidence that Banning chose these two railways as the geographical context for his exhibition and book project, *Traces of War* (2005). In addition, Banning's mother had survived captivity in the civilian internment camps on Sumatra. A history of wartime incarceration was thus an indelible influence on his upbringing.

Cultural theorist Hirsch has written extensively on the relationship that the second generation bears to the traumas that have been experienced by the one before — a phenomenon that she has termed 'postmemory' (2012). Although her work has focused specifically on second-generation writers and artists of the

Holocaust, the concept of postmemory is ‘equally applicable’ to the families of those incarcerated in the Far East (Oliver, 2014). Although related to a different geographical and experiential context, familial reactions to the aftermath of the camps across Southeast Asia were — and still are — occurring in the same temporal space as those following the liberation of the concentration camps of Europe and their memorialization.

Crucially for this collection of papers, postmemory works to acknowledge and represent the apparently insurmountable silences, absences, memories of the dead and acts of mourning that linger in the present through personal, familial connections with a violent and turbulent past. The challenge for the postmemorial artist comes, according to Hirsch, in being able to ‘define an aesthetic’ that can ‘include the transmission of the bodily memory of trauma’ but that does not instigate a ‘self-wounding’ or repetition of that trauma within the next generation (2012: 86). Thus Banning’s work, in photographing and collating the testimony of survivors, is a powerful example of the postmemory of Southeast Asian captivity in second-generation Dutch-Indonesian narratives. It also creates a photographic archive for this postmemory, with the place of romushas — and their uncounted deaths — carefully and purposefully framed within it. For Banning there was a sense of ‘justice’ in including the stories of romushas specifically, a compelling need to ensure that their stories were no longer ‘namelessly left behind’ but were instead a part of the archives that he created through his project (2005: 9).

Traces of War was produced as both an exhibition and book and comprises a series of twenty-four photographic portraits of individual men who were held as POWs or romushas by the Japanese on the Thailand-Burma and Sumatra railways. Eight of the 24 portraits are of former romushas.⁴ In the book, the portraits are presented separately from the personal narratives, which are printed in the second half in the same order as the portraits (in the exhibition, the text is presented alongside the portrait). In making the decision to curate the book in such a way, Banning forces his readers to focus on the images first, to look directly at the men themselves and encounter literal embodiments of the history that they will later go on to read.

This is opposite to the process Banning adopting during the work itself: first he would record an interview with each man, the conversations lasting up to six hours at a time, and then the portrait would be taken (Banning, 2005: 11). Banning has since explained that connecting with his subjects as survivor and second-generation was fundamental to the project. ‘Your choice of subjects’, Banning said, ‘starts from the heart and from there you work on with your mind’ (Banning, 2010). In *Traces of War*, by presenting his portraiture first — the eyes, facial expressions and hard-worn hands of his subjects, Banning asks his readers to start with their ‘hearts’ too — with the instinctive affective reactions of one person to the image of another — and allow their ‘minds’ to ‘work on’ with the stories that follow. In the workings of postmemory, members of the second generation confront the physical connection with their parents first, the work of the

mind in receiving and retransmitting their histories comes later. What is displayed so powerfully through Banning's portraits is that it is the body that is the initial site of familial memory, connection, and transmission.

Banning's postmemory of Southeast Asian captivity is presented neatly in the layering of his project's title. The 'traces of war' on the bodies of the men are a means for him to create postmemorial 'monuments' through which he can identify and communicate the 'traces of war' in his own upbringing. Likewise, his own connections to the histories of Southeast Asian incarceration are traced throughout the book. The second portrait to appear is of Banning's father, Frans Banning, and Frans' words are transcribed too in the section containing the interview scripts. The stories that Banning's father told him about his time as a POW influenced what he wanted each portrait to reveal: the creation of what Hirsch calls the 'points of memory' that are preserved, and communicated, within a photographic image (2012: 61–63). These 'points of memory' are the specific details observed in an image and that enable second- or third-generation viewers to 'create an opening in the present to something in the past' (2012: 74). Whilst Hirsch examines archival images for these 'points of memory', Banning creates them for himself.

Postmemorial portraits

Banning's portraits in *Traces of War* all share the same aesthetic. Each man stares directly into the camera and out from the page. He is stripped to the waist as he would have been as he worked. To capture the dazzling tropical sunlight beneath which romushas worked, lived, and died in the jungle the subjects for Banning's project were photographed underneath silver umbrellas (Banning, 2010). It is also a light under which every detail of their skin, changes in pigmentation, scars, the outline of the ribs, veins running along their arms and hands are clearly visible. They all stand in front of a burlap background, recalling the rough materials that they worked with and that scratched their skin, creating suppurating wounds and forming ulcers. Their portraits are presented on the right hand side of the page, the left remaining blank apart from a transcription of each man's name. This leaves large white spaces where the portraits of nameless others remain absent. In Banning's choice of a neutral background the bodies of survivors become part of a narrative of nameless spaces and the people left behind. The surviving romushas (and POWs) gaze intently out of the page, imploring a reader to carry with them, as a book in their hands, the story that they tell.

As he strips the body bare and re-creates the sunlight, Banning deliberately adds 'points of memory' to his images. His black-and-white portraits capture the men as they would have been — near-naked, sinewy; their toughened skin ridged with small peaks and valleys of bone; strong muscles developed through hard, manual work. These are aspects of the captive experience — burning, ravaged skin under harsh sunlight — that Banning had learned from his family. In his images, they become aesthetic references that recall the transmission of history between a father and his son. He captures the very physicality of captivity — Hirsch's 'bodily memory of

trauma' — and foregrounds his own knowledge of that history in the staging and framing of his portraits. In doing so, Banning communicates both the experiences of romushas, as well as the postmemorial connection between himself and the history that he is telling. 'What I want to do is about bridging past and present' explained Banning (2010). Like the work of Hirsch, this is not an attempt by Banning to fill the spaces, or explain the absences and silences that he lived with as a child. Instead, the photographs that he presents are the attempt of a second-generation artist to create a 'bridge', across which younger generations can traverse the silences left by the past.

Notably, although he portrays the bodies of victims of war, Banning does not show the destruction of those bodies. This is not an 'iconography of suffering' for which much war-related photography has been critically examined (Sontag, 2003; Prosser, et al. 2012). Banning instead refers to a suffering that came before, that he cannot reveal and that inevitably remains out of the frame, in the 'mind' of his reader, his subject, and himself. Hirsch reminds us that in photographs 'the truth about the past always seem to lie ... just beyond the frame':

[Although they are] powerful conduits between what was then and what is now, as performative vehicles of affect carried across generations, the photographs can at most gesture toward that elsewhere. (Hirsch, 2012: 67)

In *Traces of War*, 'elsewhere' is contained in the blind spots beyond the frame of the photograph and lies in the 'communal pits'; a mass of unspoken, unphotographed lives 'tossed together into a hole' — a hole that Banning does not fill but leaves as blank pages, echoing with an 'intense death's scream' that he cannot transcribe (Banning, 2005: 108).

The blurring of survival and death

The body can remain a site of fear and isolation among former captives. Many resisted sharing their stories between generations for fear of the impact it may have on younger family members. Such fears could be deeply-rooted in the acutely physical aspects of captivity and its aftermath. For example Wilhelm Wilde-man, describes how his body represented to him the diseases that he had experienced in captivity: 'For 10 or 15 years at least I still felt death lurking here' he says. The bodily reminders were so strong that he refused to kiss his three-year old granddaughter, frightened that he would pass to her the tropical diseases that he suffered whilst incarcerated. 'I've got so many nasty diseases in me, I just don't want to expose the little girl to even the slightest risk' of infection (Banning, 2005: 108). Similarly for postmemorial generations, communicating histories of violence becomes intimately concerned with the need to mitigate the risk of communicating suffering through the telling of those histories (Hirsch, 2012: 86).

Banning's confrontation with his own family's past and how he attempts to read, connect with, and understand that past is identifiable in the choices he makes to mediate that history. Although Banning's project is a photographic one, the interviews

he transcribed are of equal significance. The words of former POWs and romushas contextualize the images that Banning presents, aiding a reader to create that bridge between past and present. And in both the framing of the portraits and his editorial decisions when transcribing the conversations he had with survivors, Banning highlights a drive to reflect not just the history of his forbears, but also the aspects of that history with which he has connected as a member of the second generation.

In the testimonies in the second half of the book, the figure of the romusha is prominent. Their treatment is reported by Banning's subjects — just as it was in other narratives — as more befitting livestock than humans. Former romusha Sardi recounts that he was a teenager when he was taken by Japanese troops from a rice field on Java. He was then shipped with thousands of others to the neighbouring island of Sumatra. Once on Sumatra Sardi was sent to labour on the railway construction — a 200 kilometre line that ran from the northeastern port of Pekanbaroe through to an existing railway line that began at Moeara. As part of his work, Sardi was ordered to bury the dead. One of the bodies was that of his friend, sick but still alive. Despite his friend affirming 'I'm not dead yet,' Sardi was forced to continue with the burial.

This was the most difficult thing I've ever had to do in this world. He was buried the way you would a water buffalo, that's what we call that on Java. If you bury a human being then you put him into a coffin or you wrap him in a shroud. (Banning, 2005: 131)

Romushas were considered dead even whilst still alive. Just like those 'carted' to their deaths in the reports of Medical Officers, Sardi speaks of bodies being handled 'the way you would a water buffalo'. Another former romusha, Damin, also talks of sick romushas being buried alive: 'I saw with my own eyes how seven people, still groaning, were tossed into a hole' (2005: 117). Unable to write letters to inform his family of his whereabouts at the end of the war, Damin remained on Sumatra. 'All those people who died', Damin said, 'are like pebbles that got stuck in a sieve. I am a grain of sand that slipped through' (Banning, 2005: 118).

Other former romushas in Banning's book tell of running away, and 'those who stayed behind simply said that we'd died'. Since the deaths of romushas were not officially recorded, even without the presence of corpses for verification a small number of additional missing romushas would not have been noticed: 'so many of us died after all' (2005: 126). In running away, running for their lives, romushas gave themselves up as dead. Indeed the former military POWs of Dutch-Indonesian descent who Banning includes in his project recall the discovery of bodies left to rot in the jungle. They speak of being frightened when foraging for jungle vegetables by 'all those skulls of romushas just abandoned there'; the bodies of romushas left unburied by guards because 'tigers will eat' them (Banning, 2005: 29); and the thousands of romushas who were unable to swim when their transport ship was torpedoed and 'stayed on board' as the ship sank, an 'intense death's scream' coming from the deck (100; 108).

In these narratives of witness, the boundaries between the lives and deaths of romushas become blurred. Romushas were buried whilst alive, screams of death are described as emanating from the mouths of those still breathing; the survivors of captivity were depicted as ‘walking cadavers’ and ‘living corpses’. Thus in turn, for a second-generation photographer, the living bodies of survivors came to function as ‘points of memory’, signifiers for the absent dead and the ruptures that are created among communities through atrocity and loss. Although Banning’s portraits are images of survivors, they also become a memorial to the dead.

Banning’s portraits thus do extraordinarily profound yet contradictory work in supplementing the words of the historians and eyewitnesses that he brings together through his project. In confronting the very-much-alive images of the muscle and skin of the survivors’ bodies, his reader is also confronted with the bodies that are *not* there, the romushas who did not return, and the memories and stories that do not share the page. Banning’s portraits are not pictures of atrocity, yet they *are* images of ‘what war *does*’ (Sontag, 2003: 7): it leaves behind bodies, those living bodies that are called to stand — in front of burlap, underneath silver umbrellas — for the dead. In photographing the living, Banning brings life to the countless dead. He creates a vital but necessarily incomplete map with which younger generations can begin to create a bridge between their own stories and those of the past.

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Notes

- 1 Death was the result, rather than the apparent aim, of such treatment. Indeed the brutality shown towards romushas on Japanese military work was not always evident elsewhere, such as during civilian projects on Java itself (Sato, 2004).
- 2 Subsequently there has been a surge of interest in raising awareness of the heritage of Dutch Indonesians in recent years. One of the longest established examples is the The Indo Project, set up in 2009 by a group of second-generation Indo-Europeans to raise awareness of Dutch-Indonesian heritage, particularly among those forcibly removed from Indonesia during the independence movement. See: <https://theindoproject.org/>.
- 3 Aside from Banning’s work, examples of the testimonies of former romushas can be found in Poeze (2009); and Baird & Marzuki (2015). These draw on archival documentation related to War Crimes Trials.
- 4 All of Banning’s portraits can also be viewed as a ‘photo story’ at: <http://www.panos.co.uk/stories/2-13-1194-1700/Jan-Banning/Traces-of-War/#>.

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