A HISTORY OF ASTERISKs

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It’s an old black and white photograph, the kind you might find in a dusty album forgotten in your grandparents’ attic. The hills funnel inward and back, spreading away to meet the sagging line of the hazy horizon. A dusty road cuts through the sloping landscape, disappearing into a thin grey thread. The photograph is barren of life; the only signs that something breathing once entered its frame are the cannonballs studded along the road. Otherwise, it is empty, silent, made eerie by the ghosts of battle.

Roger Fenton’s Valley of the Shadow of Death, depicting a landscape from the Crimean War in 1855, is one of the earliest war photographs ever taken. It may also happen to be one of the first photographs ever posed. Fenton supposedly found this area completely empty; he staged the shot by decorating the road with cannonballs before clicking the shutter button (“Valley”). As a historical photograph lacking historical authenticity, Fenton’s image would defy the expectation that cameras capture moments as they occur. Fenton fools us into thinking that the war raged on here, that cannonballs flew overhead while soldiers stamped down the road, dust rising around their boots. The image evokes a sense of violence and destruction despite the fact that Fenton's landscape was never touched by war. Do we discard the photograph, then, knowing that it lacks historical authenticity? The back-story of Fenton’s image prompts us to wonder what constitutes an authentic representation of history: whether our means of remembering the past can include only fact, or if they can extend past reality with counterfeit details in order to form a fabricated past that somehow, mysteriously, feels more real.

In spite of our efforts to define it as based in fact or proof alone, history will always be somewhat counterfeit, incomplete. As Jamaica Kincaid argues in her essay, “In History,” the cause of this incompleteness lies within our systems of recording history—a fragmented set of disconnected past events which we attempt to reconstruct and make whole. Kincaid identifies the fragments that skew her own history as the mere words used by early explorers in
their attempt to make familiar the new worlds they discovered, including Kincaid’s native country Antigua. Amongst these explorers is Christopher Columbus, who, Kincaid claims, began her history when he stepped onto the shores of America and encountered the “blankness of the newly made, the newly born” (2). The staggering foreignness of the land overwhelmed Columbus, and in order to fill the “blankness,” he named and labeled everything he saw (2). He claimed to be, Kincaid writes, “the person who really can name the thing” (2). He thereby “gives it a life, a reality, that it did not have before” (2). Like a parent naming a child, Columbus “breathed life” into the countries and their inhabitants by assigning them recognizable labels, turning the anonymous into the known, the tangible. For Columbus, only with names do his discovered lands become real.

Yet, Columbus’s names and their familiarity to him dictate a one-sided meaning. He designates Kincaid’s home country “Antigua” after a church he knows, even though “churches are not important originally” to her people (3). Removing all traces of the country’s past pre-Columbus, Antigua now conjures images of Spain and the Christian faith that have nothing to do with the country’s indigenous culture. In fact, throughout her essay, Kincaid never supplies details concerning the narrative of her native culture; she instead repeats that Antigua “had no before,” even though life thrived long before Columbus’s appearance (2). By omitting any reference to this “before,” Kincaid sardonically goes along with the notion that her official history, the one the rest of the world recognizes as true, is not fully her own, but rather one someone forced upon her (2). Columbus’s system of naming consists of words that reveal his past and values, but for Kincaid they are broken and biased, rendering the history of Antigua lopsided and incomplete. As the outsider, Columbus forges “reality” out of “blankness,” making things “familiar” only for himself (2).

Through Kincaid’s eyes, we see the destructive effects of Columbus’s attempt to formulate a history comprehensible to him. By replacing the indigenous words with those from his own language, Columbus “empties the land of these people, and then he empties the people, he just empties the people” (4). Kincaid’s repetition of the verb “empties” calls attention to the apparent disposability of her people, as well as the dangerous simplicity of Columbus’s power—his ability to create and destroy histories by virtue of
language. Kincaid’s sarcastically straightforward style of writing, as seen in her repetition of simple phrases such as “empties” and “make an appearance,” emphasizes her resentful and bitter tone towards this forged making of her past (4). She is forced to accept Columbus’s narrative as it becomes funneled into the pervasive Eurocentric model of representing the past, by which the unfamiliar is made familiar and the seemingly fragmented is forcibly made whole.

But the linguistic bias that Kincaid points out as inherent to recorded historical accounts is not the only way in which the past is distorted and exaggerated; a camera also highlights and leaves out certain moments in time. In her essay, Regarding the Pain of Others, Susan Sontag presents photography as a flawed method of recording history. Photographs are always “image[s] that someone chose; to photograph is to frame, and to frame is to exclude” (46). The camera manipulates; it has the ability to emphasize certain moments while completely shutting out others. The confining character of the photograph, the rectangular boundaries that remove a part from its whole, tell us, “This is what is important. Look here.” Even so, the camera’s unique ability to freeze a live moment caused Civil War photographer Mathew Brady to claim that “the camera is the eye of history,” suggesting that history should consist of fact as raw and true as a plain sight in front of us, even though this eye, the lens of the camera, controls what we see (qtd. in Sontag 52). History is recorded by writers and photographers, witnesses who have chosen which details to report. In each choice, Sontag writes, there are countless possibilities that go unchosen. Although both language and photography can attempt to represent a reality, this reality—seen through the eyes of those given the power to record it—is incomplete.

In spite of the inherent exclusivity of photography and language, Sontag asserts that we have no other choice but to use these methods of recording history as “evidence, albeit of an impure kind” (57). The incomplete nature of history derives from its “impure” foundation. Grounded in bias and exclusion, it lacks factual truth. But what other alternatives exist when attempting to remember and record the past? When words themselves are inherently one-sided, and photographs always remove parts from the whole, our choices are limited. Seemingly powerless to change the existing media, we accept our systems of recording history as they are, imperfect and biased. But by
knowing that there are pieces missing, we remain in constant pursuit of more, of accounts of the past with which to fill the gaps in historical narratives. Kincaid and Sontag both focus on the incomplete nature of “the document” and on the exclusion of forgotten narratives as primary flaws in our official records of history, but they pay inadequate attention to what truth can be drawn from the emotions present in the stories we remember. These emotions enhance history, providing another authentic lens through which to view the past.

In a segment of NPR’s podcast *Radiolab*, hosts Jad Abumrad and Robert Krulwich interview documentary film director Errol Morris, a man whom Abumrad lauds as a “truth fascist,” a man “always trying to get to the bottom of things” (“Valley” *et seq.*). Morris describes his experience stumbling upon Fenton’s *Valley in the Shadow of Death*, and the question of whether or not the picture is staged immediately intrigues him. Morris also refers to Sontag’s *Regarding the Pain of Others*, and takes issue with her claim that it is “obvious” that Fenton’s photograph is staged. Morris goes on to “get to the truth” himself, eventually traveling to Crimea to study the site where the photograph was taken. In consulting the optical engineer Dennis Purcell, Morris eventually reaches a conclusion on the authenticity of the photograph that leaves him satisfied. However, in looking back at his own life, Morris realizes that there will always be answers lurking out of reach, no matter how far he stretches to find them. Morris recalls his father—who died when Morris was an infant—as a man who is “central to [his] life” but whom he “never will know.” As someone who refutes baseless acceptance of the “obvious,” who supposedly values “absolute truth” and unbending fact above all else, Morris reminds us that he constantly lives with a piece missing from his own history, a nagging pang of the unknown, or maybe the unknowable. Through this closing note of doubt, Morris asks us to consider the goal of “absolute truth” as impossible, something unattainable despite our efforts to include every detail and every story. It is in this state of “endless question[ing]” that we can attain something that transcends the incompleteness of fact and propels us toward the authenticity of emotion.

Despite the staged nature of Fenton’s photograph, its sensation of war in the absence of fact evokes what Purcell calls an “emotional truth,” allowing us to “feel the reality of that scene in a way that [we] would not have felt
otherwise” (“Valley”). The addition of cannonballs heightens the emotions of war; one can imagine the spheres of iron-cast bronze firing and soaring through the air, even though Fenton invented this feeling rather than encapsulating it as it was. Because of this added sensation, in a way, Purcell claims that the staged photograph is more authentic than the original one. The cold silence of war after the rage of battle adds a new perspective to the representation of history, despite the seeming inauthenticity of that representation. The element of emotional truth, although it derives from means not grounded in empirical truth, permits us “a brief trespass into something that [we] thought was lost,” bringing us into a fabricated past that still feels real, allowing us to travel momentarily to a new world. But even in the wake of the emotions such representations of history arouse, there is still something lacking in our search for certainty, and we return once more to doubt. Emotional truth, perhaps, cannot always compensate for the reduction of fact. With missing pieces, we remain uncertain.

However, the inherent incompleteness and uncertainty of our methods for documenting the past are themselves an authentic part of history. Morris proves that there will always be things we “never will know.” It is through this uncertainty that we allow ourselves, like Purcell, to accept emotional truth as a viable means of validating the past. In Kincaid’s redacted version of her history, her biting tone comes through to reveal a new lens through which to see her past. Throughout her essay, Kincaid reveals anger, demanding how there has come to be “a system of naming that even I am forced to use?” and pain, comparing her history to “an open wound” (7). Yes, as Kincaid claims, her history has been destroyed, a great part of her identity lost, but through our access to her raw feeling we can understand her loss in a new way, experiencing a “brief trespass” into this story we didn’t know existed (“Valley”).

In some cases, however, the feelings of doubt and uncertainty concerning a story’s factuality are ironically the only validating elements of a story’s truth. In his essay, “How to Tell a True War Story,” Tim O’Brien uses confusing and contradictory language in order to capture the soldiers’ disconcerting and incoherent experiences in the Vietnam War. O’Brien retells the story of his fellow soldier’s death three different times, admittedly changing details and facts but maintaining the feelings of shock and grief that he experiences. O’Brien writes, “in war you lose your sense of the definite, hence
your sense of truth itself, and therefore it’s safe to say that in a true war story nothing is ever absolutely true” (78). The conflicting language and cloudy stories impart sensations of war that O’Brien is trying to recapture. War is hectic and overwhelming; therefore the stories must also confuse and startle. O’Brien’s essay conveys that, paradoxically, the less his readers understand a war story, and the more unsettled and confused they become, the more they understand the Vietnam experience. By focusing on how the soldiers felt, rather than describing events that took place, O’Brien’s approach to relaying human experience demonstrates the power of emotional truth over the rote recounting of events.

While O’Brien uses reduction of fact and event as a means of expressing the confusion and haziness that constitute the emotional truth of war, Kincaid questions whether emotional truth justifies such reduction. In order to emphasize the personal severity of Columbus’s destruction of her history while simultaneously highlighting its widespread acceptance, Kincaid reduces her history to systems of naming, such as those used by botanists to label plants. Comparing Columbus to the botanist, she writes,

> the botanists are like that man who sailed on the ships in a way, too: they emptied the worlds of things animal, mineral, and vegetable of their names, and replaced these names with names pleasing to them. (3)

Here, she bitinglly acknowledges that the reduction of her history means nothing to those who controlled it; they are simply playing a game of claiming and naming. Kincaid’s pain, stemming from the perceived triviality of her loss, becomes a new lens through which to view her past. But to what end? Kincaid’s history has been stolen from her, and perhaps not even human emotion can bring it back.

But even her rage at this theft can deepen our understanding of the past. It is because of the utter incompleteness of Kincaid’s history that we are in need of emotional truth. The vague recognition of what the Vietnam War may have felt like, the aggravation that Kincaid and her people live with—these feelings all allow us an intimate understanding of someone else’s history. Personal accounts transform the dense words of a textbook into less tangible, but more accessible emotion. After reading accounts of historical
events, Kincaid writes, “there is always a moment when I feel like placing an asterisk somewhere in its text, and at the end of this official story place my own addition” (6). Despite the accepted version of history, there are infinitely more untold stories. Our history books show us that one voice prevails over the others, but Kincaid proclaims that the unofficial narratives, these asterisks, hold just as much importance as the official ones. If Columbus can write her entire history “as a footnote to someone just passing by,” Kincaid deserves the right to add her own footnotes as well (3). The inherent incompleteness of history calls for additional perspectives; the voices outside the margins strengthen and necessarily complicate the “official” version, adding depth and richness to the printed text. Each individual perspective, each new story acts as an asterisk. There is Errol Morris, who places one after Fenton’s photograph when he tells us about his father’s death, painfully accepting that certainty often eludes us. There is Tim O’Brien, who looks at the textbook’s key figures and battles of the Vietnam War, and adds an asterisk by allowing his readers access to the depths of a soldier’s chaos. And there is Jamaica Kincaid, stamping an asterisk on her clipped and detached prose, revealing her fury at the loss of her past. These asterisks allow history’s one-sided nature to expand, rounding out the rough edges with more details and emotions, providing us—its interpreters—with a greater sense of understanding.

So what if the photograph is a fake? Fenton staged the cannonballs, placing them along the road one by one. Each cannonball, then, is a reminder of the photograph’s fraudulence, placed by the hands of the photographer rather than launched from the belly of a cannon. Yet the overall image shows something different. It shows a glimpse of authentic history, even if by factually inauthentic means. We hear the explosion of cannons, the cry of soldiers, the eventual thud or crack as metal hits ground or bone. We see the reality of the situation that the posed elements of the photograph let us see. The coexistence of fact and fabrication is inseparable. Only our uncertainty is certain; the posing of truth can in fact reveal a closer truth. We cannot remove the cannonballs, nor can we pretend they really shot through the air. The entanglement of fact and fiction continues and we’re caught in the middle. All we can do is look at this photograph, the charcoal shaded hills, the absence of life, and add our own asterisk.


