

A Photographic Memory: The Power of Photography and Identity Making after Genocide

Time: 50-90 minutes (the lesson that follows is designed for use in either a 50- or 90-minute class; see “Supplemental Resources” at the end of the lesson for suggestions on how to expand)

Audience: 9th – 12th grades. May be adapted for 8th grade.

Student Outcomes

By the end of this lesson, students will be able to...

- Understand the role photos play in preserving history
- Recognize the challenges genocide survivors face after surviving atrocities
- Connect a concept (genocide) with a lived experience (survivor story)
- Link the role photos play in identity making

Aligned Standards (California Common Core)

- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.1
Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources.
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.2
Determine the central ideas of a source and provide an accurate summary.
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.6
Compare the perspectives of different historical actors.
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.1
Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis.
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.WHST.9-10.2
Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey ideas.
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.WHST.9-10.9
Draw evidence from informational texts to support analysis.
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.WHST.11-12.2
Write informative/explanatory texts with detailed analysis.
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1
Initiate and participate effectively in collaborative discussions.
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.4
Present information clearly and logically.
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.11-12.1
Engage effectively in collaborative discussions with diverse partners.
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.L.9-10.4
Determine the meaning of unknown words and phrases.

- CCSS.VA.Pr4
Develop and apply criteria to evaluate and curate visual materials, considering purpose, audience, and historical context.
- CCSS.VA.Pr6
Analyze how visual presentations and curated collections communicate cultural, historical, and ethical narratives.
- CCSS.VA.Re7.1
Interpret visual images as reflections of human experience, connecting personal photographs to identity, memory, and historical context.
- CCSS.VA.Re7.2
Analyze how visual elements and cultural context influence meaning, emotional response, and interpretation.
- CCSS.VA.Re9
Evaluate visual sources using multiple criteria, including historical significance, perspective, and purpose.
- CCSS.VA.Cn11
Analyze how understanding time, place, and cultural context shapes the meaning and significance of visual materials.
- CCSS.MA.Re7
Analyze how meaning and message are constructed in media, including photographs and video.
- CCSS.MA.Re8
Interpret media by examining intent, form, and context, using evidence to support conclusions.
- CCSS.MA.Re9
Evaluate media sources for effectiveness, purpose, and audience, considering historical and cultural context.

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The Cambodian Genocide Resource Center is incredibly grateful to Dr. Seang M. Seng for granting us permission to share excerpts from his memoir, Starving Season: One Person’s Story (Lulu Publishing: 2017).

Overview: The Cambodian Genocide (1975-1979) was carried out by the Khmer Rouge, a radical communist regime that sought to eliminate individuality in favor of enforcing a rigid collective identity. Under this system, personal possessions—including family photographs—were banned. In

practice, this meant that family pictures, school photos, identification cards, and images of everyday life from before the Khmer Rouge takeover were destroyed.

To the perpetrators of the genocide, reminders of personal history and individuality posed a threat to state control. As a result, family photographs were destroyed both by victims attempting to survive and avoid punishment, and by perpetrators seeking to erase identity and enforce obedience and conformity.

In the lesson that follows, students will examine the significance of photographs as historical and personal artifacts. Students will analyze the role photos play in fortifying identity, preserving history, and telling stories across generations. To do so, students are asked to reflect on their own relationships with photographs. Using photos as a bridge between their lives and the experiences of genocide victims, students will learn from Dr. Seang M. Seng, a survivor of the Cambodian Genocide who risked his life to save a single photograph of his father. In this lesson, students will have the opportunity to appreciate how photographs foster individuality, build community, and preserve historical memory.

Context: This lesson plan is inspired by Dr. Seang M. Seng’s powerful memoir, *Starving Season: One Person’s Story* (Lulu Publishing, 2017). Dr. Seng began writing his memoir 44 years ago while living in the Khao I Dang refugee camp in Thailand shortly after surviving the Cambodian Genocide (1975–1979), also commonly referred to as the Starving Season. By the time he completed the memoir 35 years later, he had become a U.S. citizen, a father of three, and a successful physician. In the intervening decades, Dr. Seng was reluctant to tell his story. “Whenever I try to tell someone about my misfortune and tragedy,” he writes, “I always fear he or she won’t believe me” (Seng 2017, xi). He worried that others might question his survival or doubt the severity of the genocide itself. As he explains it, they might reason: “If ‘the starving season’ was that severe, how could I survive? If the killings were so widespread and targeted to intellectuals, then how is it that I, a Phnom Penh medical student, was missed?” (Seng 2017, xi).

Dr. Seng’s survival is a statistical anomaly. Seang Seng was a 24-year-old, fourth year medical student, working in Cambodia’s capital when the Khmer Rouge overtook the city on April 17, 1975, and launched their genocidal agenda. In addition to targeting national, ethnic, racial, and religious groups for genocide, the perpetrators also set out to eliminate anyone they viewed as anti-communist and/or influenced by the global west. In the topsy turvy logic of the perpetrators, the highly educated fell within this category. By the time the genocide concluded three years, eight months, and twenty days later, some 2 million people had died, meaning that in less than four years the Khmer Rouge’s violent policies resulted in the death of up to one quarter of Cambodia’s total population.

Survival rates among physicians were even more stark. Physicians, considered part of an educated elite, were among those intentionally targeted for annihilation by the perpetrators. By the end of the genocide, of the 530 practicing doctors in pre-genocide Cambodia, only 32 (6 percent) survived. Of

the estimated 3,400 health-care students (which includes medicine, pharmacy, and dentistry), 728 students (21 percent) remained (Santini, 2002: 57).

Dr. Seng's fear of not being believed may not have changed over the years, but his purpose for writing his memoir evolved. Over time, painful realities fade from collective memory, and the Cambodian Genocide is no exception. "Regrettably the memory of the Cambodian Holocaust," as he describes it, "has begun to fade from our collective memory" (Seng 2017, xi). Publishing his memoir, however, did not resolve another concern voiced in the preface. "Usually," he explains, "I don't share my story with people I don't know well, because I'm not sure they will take it to heart" (Seng 2017, xi).

What does it mean to take a personal story of genocide "to heart"? Perhaps the answer lies in the final words of his memoir's preface: "All that matters about *my* personal story is that I lost everyone in my family. In 1975, our family of 24 persons was trucked into the countryside and trudged into the killing fields: mother and father, my five sisters and me, my grandparents, my uncles' family, my mother's siblings, and my sister's family. Four years later, I hiked out of the killing fields alone" (Seng 2017, xii). This lesson plan, like *Starving Season*, seeks to honor a story that is rarely told by survivors and educators, and as such, is being forgotten. When history is forgotten, victims are no longer honored. This lesson plan seeks to correct that.

In sharing his experiences of loss, survival, and revival during and after the Cambodian Genocide, Dr. Seng's memoir offers a dynamic reflection on belonging, identity, family, hope, and love. To help make this difficult subject matter more approachable for young learners who may have never heard of Cambodia, let alone genocide, this lesson plan focuses on one central topic: photos and identity making.

In the early days of the genocide, Seng credits his decision to leave his family albums behind as having contributed to his survival. After seizing the capital, the Khmer Rouge ordered the city's 2 million residents to evacuate. In Dr. Seng's mad dash to leave the city, he luckily chose to leave his family photo album behind. "Though I love family pictures, I didn't take any albums with me for fear they'd be ruined. This could have been the best decision I ever made," Seng reflected. "Any picture that depicted me as a medical student would most likely have meant my death" (Seng 2017, 16). Also, on that day, he chose to wear a checkered krama, a scarf often worn by the working class and a traditional symbol of Cambodian identity. "It made me look like I was a peasant from the countryside—except that my skin wasn't dark enough" (Seng 2017, 17). This decision, along with his choice to not bring the photo album, helped him escape the early purges of those the regime viewed as intellectuals.

Finally, after four years, the genocide ended and he returned to his family home in the capital, the lone survivor. "The house stood empty...no one lived in it now...I dashed first to my room to look for my photo albums. What I had hoped was to find my pictures, the ones I'd left behind when my

family was forced out. I missed those pictures so much.... Nothing was left. All my childhood pictures were gone” (Seng 2017, 117).

How can one prepare for a future when no trace of their past remains? How do you build a new tomorrow when the foundation of yesterday is cracked? These are the questions survivors of genocide face. This was the case for Dr. Seng. And just as he has no tangible record of his past, he is concerned that young people today will forget their global past, too. How much of our identity is bound to the past as well as the present? How does that inform/shape our future?

Fortunately, photos are not the only way to preserve history and thanks to educators like you, Dr. Seng is no longer the only one tasked with keeping this story alive. The Cambodian Genocide Resource Center wants to thank you for sharing Seng’s story with your students.

Differentiation:

English Learners (ELs)

- Pre-teach key vocabulary by handing out the “Glossary” prior to class for review.
- Provide sentence frames for discussion and written responses (e.g., “This photo is important because...”, “I think Seng chose... because...”)
- Use think-pair-share to support language development before whole-class discussion
- Allow use of native language for initial brainstorming when appropriate

Advanced Learners

- Encourage deeper analysis through extension questions (e.g., compare this genocide to another historical case)
- Assign optional independent research on another survivor narrative or genocide
- Ask students to evaluate the role of memory and historical preservation in modern society

Assessment

- This lesson plan asks students to complete three handouts. Depending on your classroom practices, you can have students turn in all three handouts at the end of class for review.
- The class concludes with a final reflection question. You can have students write out their answer and turn it in as an Exit Ticket.

Disclaimer: Please note, due to the challenging themes of war, violence, and genocide, it is recommended that you give students a trigger warning about the challenging nature of the subject,

frame the lesson as a continuing conversation, and remind students of their options if they feel they need to take a break. Ultimately, you know your students best and what they can handle, so please take that into consideration.

Materials:

- [Handout 1](#): Self-Identity
- [Handout 2](#): Photos, Identity, and History
- [Handout 3](#): A Single Photo
- [Google Slides](#)

Additional Resources for Educator

- [Glossary](#)
- [Cambodian Genocide, Historical Overview](#)

Lesson/Activity:

1. Introduction To Context: Reflection Activity on Identity and Photography (20 minutes)

- Lesson Framing (1 minutes)
 - Start class by explaining that today we will look at the connection between photographs and identity making.

Optional: If you have more time, ask students how many photos they think they have saved on their phones? Why do they take so many pictures? Record their answers on the board and review the list together.

- Individual and Group Reflection (15 minutes)
 - (5-7 minutes) “Handout 1: Self-Identity”: Pass out “Handout 1: Self-Identity” and have students fill it out.

Optional: If you would prefer to not print out this handout, you can instruct students to make their own Bubble Map: Ask students to draw a large circle and in the center write “Self-Identity”. Around it, draw smaller bubbles connected to the center. In each bubble, list things that shape identity. There are no wrong answers. Some possible examples include family or culture, interests and hobbies, personality traits, talents or skills, values or beliefs, friendships, experiences, language, goals or dreams, community, etc.

Optional: If you have more time, ask students to share one to two bubbles with a partner or small group. You can also ask them to discuss as a class, or as a group, (1) Which parts of your identity feel most important to you right now and why? (2)

Would you answer this question differently a year ago, or three years ago? Which parts of identity change over time?

- (2-3 minutes) Show “Slide 2”: Share the American Psychology Association definitions for “self-perception” and “social identity”

Optional: Ask “With these definitions in mind, which bubbles on your map show how we see ourselves?”

- (7-10 minutes) Pass out “Handout 2: Photos, Identity, History”: Give students 5-8 minutes to fill it out.
 1. Think of a photo that is important to you (on your phone, social media, or at home). Who or what is in the photo? Why is it meaningful to you?
 2. What do photos help you remember about your life that you might forget without them?
 3. How do photos help show who you are (your interests, relationships, culture, or experiences)?
 4. Imagine that all personal photos from your life were destroyed. What parts of your identity or history would be the hardest to explain to someone else?

Optional: For those with more time, ask students to share their answers to all or some of the questions (1 and 4 in particular) in small groups or as a class.

2. Introduction to Seang M. Seng and what photos mean to him (1 minute)

- Show Slide 3: Explain that photos are very important to Dr. Seang M. Seng, pictured here alongside pictures of children, father, and wife. He came to the US as a refugee in 1980 with very little to his name, including photos.
- Show Slide 4: Explain that this is a photo of him as a teenager, likely the same age as your students. This is the only photo he has of him as a teenager because during the Cambodian Genocide, nearly every photo of him and his family, were destroyed. To help you understand why, we now turn to a short video overview of the genocide.

3. Introduce students to the history of the Cambodian Genocide (7 minutes)

- Show Slide 5: The Ted-Ed six-minute video “Ugly History: The Khmer Rouge Murders” (6:32) offers a tidy summary with animated graphics. For eighth graders, we recommend the educator pre-views to determine whether it is appropriate for their students.

4. Activity: Risking Everything for Single Photo (25 minutes)

- Show Slide 6: Explain that Seang M Seng was a 24-year-old medical student when the Cambodian Genocide began in April 1975. When the Khmer Rouge invaded the capital, he was among those forced out of his home. He could only take what he could carry, and he remembers pausing when it came to grabbing family photo albums. Read quote on slide:

“Though I love family pictures, I didn’t take any albums with me for fear they’d be ruined. This could have been the best decision I ever made. Any picture that depicted me as a medical student would most likely have meant my death” (Seng 2017, 17).

- Distribute “Hand Out 3: Everything for a Single Photo”. Give students 20 minutes to read the excerpt from Seng’s memoir and answer the 4 questions on the handout:
 1. Why did Acha Po say people should not keep photos or reminders of their families? What did the Khmer Rouge want people to forget or give up?
 2. Why do you think Seng chose to take his father’s photo but leave his medical school ID behind? What does this choice tell us about what he valued most?
 3. How do photos help people remember who they are or where they came from?
 4. At the end, Seng says that losing his family photos meant “losing my past.” What do you think he means by this? Do you agree or disagree? Why?

5. Bringing it all together (10 minutes)

- Show Slide 7: When the killing ended in 1979, Seng returned to his family home alone. Navigating the capital was no easy task as it had been largely destroyed.

“The house stood empty...no one lived in it now...I dashed first to my room to look for my photo albums. What I had hoped was to find my pictures, the ones I’d left behind when my family was forced out. I missed those pictures so much.... Nothing was left. All my childhood pictures were gone” (Seng 2017, 117).

- Show Slide 8: And explain that he and his wife came to the US as refugees in 1980 and for Seng, part of rebuilding his life meant creating a photographic record of it. Read quote:

“We were poor back then, but in time I managed to save enough money to buy a camera, something I’d been dreaming of for a long time. The first thing I did was take lots and lots of pictures. As soon as I printed a roll, I organized the photos in albums. I had lost nearly everything from my previous life in Cambodia, and old family photos were some of the things I missed most. I was determined not to allow this to happen to our children” (Seng 2017, 148-49).

- Show Slide 9: Share the 2-minute video from Dr. Seng, in which he thanks students for learning about Cambodia and his story.

5. Conclusion/Exit Activity: Story Tellers (5 minutes)

- Show Slide 10: “Because many images of the Cambodian Genocide have been lost, how can we make sure this history is remembered? Which stories, voices, or perspectives are most important to share? What experiences or truths are often missing, but must not be forgotten?”

Depending on your timing, have students answer these questions in small groups, independently as exit assignments, or for homework.

Supplemental Resources

- To help create a safe space for challenging topics and conversations, you may want to issue a **trigger warning**—a warning to students to help them safely engage in potentially traumatizing content—before teaching this lesson. Trauma-informed pedagogy in the classroom can take many forms, with a verbal warning being just one. The Ohio State University Teaching and Learning Resource Center has some excellent ideas of [how to use content warnings in your course](#).
- The [Cambodian Genocide Resource Center's website](#) offer additional information on the Cambodian Genocide, including detailed maps and a historical overview of the genocide.

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