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Untold Narratives

text by Noit Banai

To begin from partiality and paradox:

These reflections emerge from a state of incompleteness and aspire to remain in the borderlands: The partiality of the archive is both a condition for violence and an impulse for hope. We are in the third decade of the twenty-first century, and, despite - or because of - claims that globalization is at a record high, there is a drive by various state and non-state actors and institutions to capture archives and tell mono-dimensional stories; This is a strange and traumatic time when the socio-political, cultural, and material seizure of archives is frequently accompanied by brutality against civilian populations, nonhuman actors, and the natural world. It is a moment not unlike ones that have occurred before, when ideas, histories, memories, and bodies come under suspicion, yet it is also wholly singular in its extreme velocity, intense precarity, and hypermediatization. Rather than celebrating the existence of plural, entangled narratives as a testament to a civil society that engages in dialogue and debate, it seems that silence, (self)censorship, repression, and denial seem to be the order of the day. At the same time, and this is the paradox, the arenas of the post-truth world (or the 'my-truth' bubble) are rife with narratives that are clamouring to gain 'likes' and achieve algorithmic prominence. So much so that we are experiencing a combustible cocktail of voices, images, and information; Countless narratives are being shared from archives far and wide, yet it is ever more difficult to hear or assimilate them, let alone contextualize, analyse, or historicize them. Is it because of capitalism's accelerationist logic and the media's imperative for newer and ever-more-spectacular content? Our transformation into indifferent subjects within an eroded semblance of a social world that has us under constant physical surveillance and sensorial assault? An inability to listen to or empathize with histories, memories, and testimonies that do

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not align with personal identities and politics? And/or a yet-unimagined conceptual framework through which to articulate points of contact-translation-communicability-empathy between diverse archives?

To speak of silences:

Yes, I intend to evoke the archive's multiple meanings, among them: a resource / space / material where knowledge is preserved and awaiting activation; an epistemological /discursive framework that makes ideas thinkable, sayable, and representable at any given historical moment; and a juridical concept that institutionalizes itself as the law sand allows a certain social/political order to be exercised. In all these definitions, an archive does not reveal everything and, in fact, is partially constituted through the making of silences. Paying tribute to Michel-Rolph Trouillot's *Silencing the Past: The Power and Production of History*, a book that remains as vital today as when it was published in 1995, let us remember that: "Silences enter the process of historical production at four crucial moments: the moment of fact creation (the making of sources); the making of fact assembly (the making of archives); the moment of fact retrieval (the making of narratives); and the moment of retrospective significance (the making of history in the final instance)."¹ Trouillot points to the various forces and relations of power that organize the production of history and enable the visibility of certain episodes and the indiscernibility of others. From our present perspective, his diagnosis becomes rendered even more complex via the contributions of theorists and practitioners who, over the last thirty years, have analysed how the processes and structures of modernity/coloniality developed hand in hand. As we are all simultaneously actors, subjects, and narrators of entwined histories of modernity/coloniality as well as their still unfolding aftermaths, lingering phantoms, and persistent primal screams: how do we position ourselves in this constellation of roles while acknowledging our own blind spots as well as the epistemological constraints of our predecessors? In what shape, manner, and form do we communicate stories that go against the grain of the official narratives, canonical accounts, and universalized doxas that have organized experiences of modernity/coloniality in different regional contexts? And, as certain histories will continue to be withheld via various operations of power, how do we mark the limits of the archive and acknowledge its impossibilities?

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To move past the speech/silence binary:

Our multicultural/ethno-nationalist world is very much in need of storytellers, bards, griots, kobzari, dengbêjs, troubadours, kathakars, ashiks, skalds, fabulators, and yet-unnamed-protagonists who will mine the gaps and blind spots of our pasts, presents, and futures. If my notion of untold narratives resonates with a non-hierarchical diffusion of voices, bodies, objects, discourses, spectres, and materials of all kinds, we also need to be attentive to the fact that silencing is not only organized by the regulatory mechanisms of a discursive regime, operations of the vested law, or by other techniques and structures of interpretive coercion; rather, on an individual level, it might also be a survival mechanism developed in response to political formations and personal constraints. People, like archives, want – need – or are forced into various registers of reticence or muteness that are socially and politically constructed². We can, therefore, move past the binary of speech/ silence as active/passive and consider them in tandem as part of an ongoing contestation of powers. Speech/ silence are mutually entangled operations in a broader constellation of performativity, which includes encryption, euphemism, subtext, slips of the tongue, double speak, humour, subterfuge, and communication via other means. The project of untold narratives seeks to articulate how elements of history that have been isolated, marginalized, rendered deviant, overlooked or erased can be vocalized, visualized, performed, embodied, or expressed in novel ways; it acknowledges that certain historical traces have, indeed, been preserved and transmitted via routes and tactics that circumvent (human) enunciation and bureaucratic documentation; and it explores how silence or withdrawal is not equated with apathy or forgetting but might function as a productive force of agency within systems and structures created by the modern/colonial nation state and the contemporary security state.

To 'make live' through alternative nervous systems

The archive's objective is ownership: histories and memories as legal, national, economic, political and moral properties with implications for artistic practices and ramifications extending far - beyond them. If we wish to estrange ourselves from the archive of the nation state and its progeny, the security state, then the time is ripe to imagine a multiplicity of other logics in which notions of belonging and recognition are not ones based on origins, nationality, or citizenship. By reframing the modern/colonial

nation state and its archives as nervous systems rather than logos-centric models, what untold narratives might yet emerge and what artistic language would give them form? And, crucially, is there a potential for a peripatetic or tentacular connectivity between life-forms, communities, and cosmologies³? To make live and revitalize a past that has been obscured or lying dormant would surely include developing modes of communication based on non-human ontologies of time. There are alternate durations available if the nation state is no longer the primary organizational matrix of our present age and if we synched ourselves with the variegated and plural temporality of the planet⁴. How might it be artistically possible to articulate the untold micro- and macro- narratives that are embedded in the biosphere and that intersect along various time scales? And what will those narratives -- authored by humans and non-human actors in a horizontally distributed, non-linear dynamic -- look, sound, taste and perhaps smell like?

To create empathetic reciprocities towards a common future

This essay is an invitation to approach archives as communal resources rather than sole assets, embrace errancy over origins, adopt vulnerability over invincibility, and choose abundance over scarcity. This may be an extremely difficult, painful, and counter-intuitive pathway, especially under the present strictures of the techno-military-capitalist archive, which frames the right to history and memory as a zero-sum game of winners and losers and the right to life as contingent on instrumentality/profitability/security. While we cannot know where an entanglement with alternative nervous systems may take us, it is a small step to take if we are to create empathetic reciprocities between the multiple archives, untold narratives, and planetary ecosystems that constitute our common future.

¹ Michel-Rolph Trouillot. *Silencing the Past: The Power and Production of History*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1995, p. 26.

² Cheryl Glenn. *Unspoken: A Rhetoric of Silence*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2004.

³ Donna J. Haraway. "Tentacular Thinking: Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Chthulucene," in *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2016.

⁴ Wai Chee Dimock. *Through Other Continents: American Literature Across Deep Time* (Princeton University Press, 2006) and *Weak Planet: Literature and Assisted Survival* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020).