I was privileged with the very stimulating and challenging task to engage with the Friday session titled ‘narratives’ from the position of witness/rapporteur/commentator. The afternoon took us on a formidable journey through a variety of approaches and material traces relating to archives and the performance of archives, to art and activism: The presentations discussed new contexts for collections of letters and life memorabilia and engaged with counternarratives solicited from anti-gentrification activist campaigns and their misrepresentation in the records of the city of Vancouver. We contemplated the archival strategies of the Moravian Church, the historiographic approach of digging where we stand/dancing where we dig and the reactivation of obscured narratives and traumas relating to Manchester’s Gay Village. Also topics relating to present day slavery and pathologized narratives of mental institutions were on the table. Most radically, it took us into ourselves in the closing session which provoked a contemplation of the extent to which each one of us were willing to disclose shameful personal secrets in a format that could become part of a public archive.

Liz Stanley, in her opening talk as scena setter, centred on the narratives enabled through the reading life documents, in particular letters of South African writer and social theorist Olive Shreiner, positioning these relative to narratives produced by contemporary Boer women glossing over the atrocities of genocide on women and children. Stanley’s presentation underlined the situatedness of archival traces, the knowledge they produce, and made a call for the untidy—the unsettled, troubled, and even misleading archive— that which produces the quirks whereby contextual information may be revealed that would otherwise remain concealed: That which makes us realise that “The Mr. Browns have been written out of in this case both the apartheid and the post-apartheid narratives.

Pointing to the importance of deconstructing archival assemblages—and the practices that have produced them, Liz Stanley’s work seems an exemplary case of what Danish historian Dorte Gert Simonsen names ‘radical historicity’.1

I have singled out a few key ideas to serve as nodal points for the discussion.

1. the performative dimension of memory work drawing on archives

2. the recomposition of archives from one overarching narrative to the canvassing of multiple voices

3. considerations of the temporalities involved

Re. 1: In both an artistic and academic sense I come from the performing arts, yet there has also always been a strong archival streak to my work. Currently my research centres on the use of performance in contested spaces so far encompassing case studies of site specific performances in a dried out riverbed in Central Australia and on the border between Finland and Russia. The latest case relates to performatic memorialisation practices in District Six Museum relating to the legacy of forced removals in Cape Town. Underlying the study is an interest in the competing logics of the archive as an ordering device and the embodied archive termed repertoires by Diana Taylor. Or differently phrased, in the tension between the framing of history in archival institutions such as art museums and the de-containing potential of public acts of memorialization. Performatics, another term coined by Taylor, relies on memory that is similarly grounded in the corporeal rather than the textual and discursive practices.

In terms of yesterday’s presentations, I found the performatic dimension most vividly addressed in Jason Bowman’s account of a recent artistic work with obscured narratives. His exhumation of material traces in the shape of legal documents and publicised records relating to a court case against a group of gay men in Manchester in 1936 – and the subsequent re-enactment of the court case by a group of gay men in present-day Manchester, invoked what he termed a culture of shame that has been perpetuated over decades if not centuries. Moreover his account drew attention to the queered archive as a site of trauma, violence and inspection.

2: The law underlying the practices of several of the official archives discussed in the presentations seemed to be that of forging a unified and settled strand – rather than one that interweaved multiple voices – not necessarily in agreement with one another.

From a phenomenological standpoint (ref. Ricoeur) narrative is conceived as a competence that mediates between language [an archive, a technology] and the world - so that it can be understood within a certain temporal structure. In the discipline of Theatre and Performance Studies, the sequencing of events in order to make meaning from them is closely related to the practice of dramaturgy. Both have to do with the structuring of experience in time and is closely related to the notion of emplotment. As such narrative is considered one among several dimensions of dramaturgy. Dramaturgy, the function of which is to operationalize the ideas and materials that are brought together in a more encompassing sense, is thus a

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tool with which narratives and other communicative strategies may be scrutinized as part of a larger context.

Speaking about The trading faces, Rahila Gupta referenced a notion borrowed from Angela Davis pointing to the online exhibition’s unsettling of the ‘enactment of historical closure’ of slavery. Contemplating the afternoon as a whole it struck me how many of the presentations spoke from a similar position of contesting official narratives that claimed some sort of remedial closure separating the past from the present: i.e. delineating a separation between Apartheid and post Apartheid or an end to slavery with the end of the Trans Atlantic slave trade - thus excluding from the discourse contemporary forms of slavery such as trafficking. Or, as witnessed in the presentation by Anna Sexton and Dolly Sen in reference to the narratives of recovery from pathological diagnosis found in the archives of psychiatric institutions. Yet another example was Sue Pell’s account of counternarratives relating to official narratives of gentrification as ‘neighborhood revitalisation’. In this, as in several of the other instances, the activist and democratic imperative involved in providing a different context to the archive were instrumental in creating space for narratives shaped by a multitude of voices rather than that one overarching narrative sustaining the political interests of the municipal government.

In the late 1970s Swedish historian Svend Lindquist articulated the idea of history writing from below as a collective endeavour and a critical method. Looking into his writing and widely disseminated ideas, Astrid von Rosen and Andrew Flinn introduced their project aiming to re-examine, re-envigorate and re-actualize the notions of participatory strategies in history making and archiving.

3. Lastly I wish to make a note on the manner in which the temporal structures underlying the discussed practices are constitutive to shaping not only our understanding of knowledge production but also of our experience. Inscribed in the master narrative of remedial closure is a sense of time that is tied to a diachronic notion of progress through providing the possibility of new beginnings. Alda Terraciano touched upon the fact that a sensibility to time may be differently organized in mentioning the notion of ‘orature’ with reference principles of composition that privilege synchronic rather than diachronic perspectives.

I recently found the question of temporality in relation to memory work and activism addressed in a very succinct manner by scholar and human rights advocate Yazier Henry. Speaking at a conference in the District Six Museum in Cape Town, he said:

“And I would ask, when is it necessary for individuals and groups to go out onto the streets and the pavements to remember yesterday? When is it necessary? In our case I would say when yesterday is under direct threat of being excised, elided from the history of today When your tomorrow has already
been written and your today has not changed much in relation to the continued existence of that traumatic experience that is being remembered officially […] this is when, I would argue, the practice of memory is historical to the extent that it carries potency and agency … This is when memory work transcend heritage to become political. This is at the point when memory is not only embodied in the monument, the memorial marker, the collection or the archive, when the memory held is in the struggle for survival every day.”

The lines, spoken at a conference in the District Six Museum reflecting on a campaign for restitution of ex-residents to the land from which they were forcibly evicted during Apartheid, underline that the life stories of persons who belong to subordinate groups tend to be constructed by repetition rather than linearity and that resistance may become a matter of ‘survival’.

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3 Yazier Henry, director the Direct Action Centre for Peace and Memory. (2007 Conference Proceedings: Reflecting on the Hands on District Six Campaign)