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ROUNDTABLE

Giving Intentionally Silenced People(s) a Voice

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In the following conversation, historian Theo Di Castri and researcher/curator Rabia Abba Omar reflect on how questions of silence and voice are at play in their respective work. After challenging the very idea of 'giving' an archival voice to intentionally silenced people(s) and considering some alternative approaches, the conversation moved on to consider how artists, activists, and scholars working in other disciplines stand to expand and enrich our ability to respond to these recurring quandaries.

Theo Di Castri

The idea of *giving* anybody a voice sits uneasily with me. I prefer to think about practices of listening and lines of inquiry that can open up the history of science to a wider range of voices. To this end, I'll limit my remarks to considering some potential directions of travel that might bring us closer to such an ideal.

In his article 'Sciences and the global', Sujit Sivasundaram cautions us against taking an overly dichotomous view of knowledge, in which 'colonial knowledge' is identifiable and separable from 'colonized knowledge'.[1] In a similar sense, I think we should avoid setting up an overly dichotomous picture of 'those who can speak' and 'those who are silenced'. Reflecting on how silence factors into my present research on the recent history of the social science of drug prevention in the Americas, I find myself distinguishing between instances when certain historical actors, for example:

- have been *intentionally* silenced;
- have *intentionally* remained silent;
- have *inadvertently* failed to create formal archival traces for themselves due to a lack of funding, institutional infrastructure, and/or having different priorities but who are otherwise still traceable and willing to give oral history interviews;
- appear as 'silent' only from the standpoint of certain geographical-linguistic positions (e.g. from the vantage point of English-language historiography, but

[1]Sujit Sivasundaram, 'Sciences and the global: on methods, questions and theory', *Isis*, 101 (2010), pp. 146–58, at p. 154.

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not necessarily from the vantage point of Latin American, Spanish-language historiography).

I view cross-contextualization as one method within an expanding *methodological* repertoire that is helping me navigate this differentiated field of silences.[2] I am also finding it helpful to revisit and remain engaged with *theoretical* scholarship that draws out the kinds of silences that are at play within our histories.[3] In my own research, for example, William Booth's recent work on the Latin American Cold War has shed valuable light on the multiple layers of violences and silences that operate within the contexts I am studying.[4] Engaging the theoretical work on variegation that has come out of geography over the past couple of decades has also proved fruitful in developing a more nuanced understanding of how spatially differentiated forms of silence are produced and sustained.[5] Taken together, such theoretical scholarship is shaping not only my selection and analysis of sources, but also my reflections on the positionality of my own historical voice within these layered landscapes of silence. All this to say, 'cross-contextualization' might be best understood as one tool within a broader constellation of methodological and theoretical approaches for confronting the multiple forms of silence we encounter as global historians of science.

In his article, Sivasundaram also calls on us to radically extend the categories of practices we consider when identifying sources for global histories of science. He invites us to look beyond traditional textual sources and to treat singing, performance, monument-building, and navigational practices as equally valid sources. In a similar spirit, I propose a radical extension of our own historical practices if we are serious about recovering, repairing, or even adding new threads to that larger and richer tapestry that Sivasundaram invites us to read. That is, in addition to thinking about how we can identify and read sources in creative and cross-contextualized ways, we might also commit ourselves to, for example:

- building relationships of trust and reciprocity with those we write with or about (or, at least with their descendants);
- participating in, learning from, and finding ways to make our histories useful to the social movements of those who are already fighting for their voices to be heard;
- finding creative ways to divert the funds and cultural capital that we have access to as academics to make more room for those on whose behalf we might otherwise be speaking about or for;

[2]E.g. Laura J. Mitchell, 'Archival patchwork: stitching social relations in colonial South Africa', *History in Africa*, 52 (2025), pp. 38–55.

[3]For example, by revisiting Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the past: power and the production of history* (Boston, MA, 2015).

[4]William Booth, 'Rethinking Latin America's Cold War', *Historical Journal*, 64 (2021), pp. 1128–50.

[5]E.g. Jamie Peck, *Variegated economies* (Oxford, 2023); Sarah A. Radcliffe and Isabella M. Radhuber, 'The political geographies of D/decolonization: variegation and decolonial challenges of/in geography', *Political Geography*, 78 (2020), Article 102128.

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- working with activists, artists, and members of marginalized communities to learn from and redress the silences of the past by building new kinds of archives in the here and now;
- joining our unions and advocating for the institutional and material conditions that need to be in place for any/all of the above to take place in more ethical, sustainable ways.

In addition to working 'cross-contextually' at the level of our sources, these other practices will bring us closer to creating more truly polyvocal global histories of science. Tellingly though, none of these practices were ever taught to me as part of my formal education as a historian. And although I consider them an integral part of my own historical practice, I find it all too easy to begin thinking of them as 'extracurricular' or 'side projects' in the face of the institutional and market pressures of present-day academia.

As a step towards countering this situation, perhaps we could listen to feminist calls for 'slow science', or to the growing chorus of archivists, scholars, and artists who are creating 'slow archives'.[6] If we were to slow down the global history of science, could we create enough time not only to learn these other practices, but to actually *practise* and hone them? Perhaps we shouldn't be in too much of a rush to move 'beyond the global history of science' just yet. Perhaps we're only still arriving.

Finally, we might also pay more attention to those who are working in/on regions and topics where archival silences are not just distant historical puzzles to be solved, but rather present-day matters of life and death. On this front, there are important lessons to be learned from the artists, activists, and scholars who are developing an arsenal of critical, creative, and often collective practices to confront the silencing forces that continue to shape the present. And here I'll pass it over to Rabia who will share an example of what such work can look like in practice.

Rabia Abba Omar

To guide my essay, I'm going to use two iterations of the *Elegy* performances by Gabrielle Goliath to respond to the prompt of 'giving intentionally silenced people(s) an archival voice'. *Elegy* is a body of performances which Goliath began staging from 2015 to the present and are described as 'an ongoing labor of remembrance, repair and black feminist love'.[7] Using Goliath's *Elegy*, I am looking at how cross-contextualization as a method brings together the more 'plentiful and traditional' sources of the archive with the mode of performance, and more generally artworks, that build from and question the history produced by these sources. And then, how this contributes towards the work of producing new knowledge that values the relationship between different materials, makers, and places.

Gabrielle Goliath is a South African artist whose work interrogates the reverberations of colonial and apartheid violence, specifically gendered, racialized, and

[6] E.g. Isabelle Stengers, *Another science is possible: a manifesto for slow science*, trans. Stephen Muecke (Cambridge, 2018); Sven Spieker, 'Manifesto for a slow archive', *ARTMargins ONline* (2016), https://artmargins.com/manifesto-for-a-slow-archive/; Kimberly Christen and Jane Anderson, 'Toward slow archives', *Archival Science*, 19 (2019), pp. 87–116.

[7] www.gabriellegoliath.com/elegy-2015-.

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sexualized violences from the past to the present within the continuing crisis of gender-based violence in South Africa. In more recent years, her work has turned to look at gender-based violence across the globe. *Elegy*, like much of Goliath's other work, is an act of ongoing mourning. In this work, each performance is a ritual of lament of remembering, an hour-long durational performance staged to commemorate the life of a woman or a queer person whose life was taken in an act of violence.

In each iteration of *Elegy*, several female operatic vocal performers dressed in all black, in a darkened room with only a spotlight shining on the platform they stand on, take turns to sing a B-natural note. The note is chosen for its ability to be sustained for a long time, and without mechanical amplification, and one by one, the performers step up and hold the note for as long as their breath can sustain. As they descend, another performer begins to step up behind them, continuing the long, mourning lament.

Throughout the live performance, you are never made to feel comfortable – sometimes there are few seats, and you are left to either sit or stand in the darkness but sit and stand collectively. For both the live performances and the recorded ones, you are encouraged to slow down for the hour, to stay and to be uncomfortable in the process of recalling and honouring the past, and those lost, collectively. During a performance of *Elegy*, we witness the singers tire as they perform the taxing work of singing for the hour, and as it takes its toll on them, we watch as they carry the pain of the stories that they are trying to evoke/invoke.

Accompanying each iteration of the work is a tribute written by a loved one which is meant to bring to life the memory of the person commemorated by the mourning ritual that is unfolding before and around the audience.

The first *Elegy* I want to look at is the *Elegy – Louisa van de Caab* (2018), first performed with the opening night of the 'Undercover of Darkness: Tracing Stories of Women in Servitude under Colonialism' (2018) exhibition curated by Dr Carine Zaayman. It opened at the Iziko Museum's Slave Lodge in Cape Town, South Africa, and unlike most other *Elegy* performances, this work was accompanied by a text written by the historian Dr Saarah Jappie, rather than a friend or a family member.[8]

Louisa van de Caab was murdered by her romantic partner Ceres van Madagascar, both enslaved under Oltham Ahlers, on a farm near Tygerberg, South Africa.[9] Accused by another of Ahlers's slaves of being unfaithful to Ceres, Louisa was murdered by Ceres in February 1768. One evening as she was preparing tea for Ahlers's children, Ceres entered the kitchen, greeted Louisa with a smile and took her by the hand outside. Ceres confronted Louisa, hitting and stabbing her and then fleeing the scene. He was found a few days later, put on trial and executed.

In the commemorative text, Jappie asks questions of the archival record yet she writes that 'the Official Record spat back only facts. Dates, names, times. The trajectory of the knife as it cut through you and took your life – a life of which we will only ever know one brutal, last moment.'

[8]https://undercoverofdarkness.co.za/elegy-performance/; https://www.gabriellegoliath.com/elegy-2015-.

[9]Nigel Worden and Gerald Groenewald, *Trials of slavery: selected documents concerning slaves from the criminal records of the Council of Justice at the Cape of Good Hope, 1705–1794* (Cape Town, 2005), pp. 520–5.

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Within the archive of this event and Louisa's life, our only record of Louisa is that of her death – the moment she was silenced. So, my question then is: how can artists engage with the silence within the archive, perhaps not giving a voice but to create a space to remember? And how does this voice, or this sound created, reverberate across centuries and countries, connecting experiences of gendered, racialized, and sexualized violences?

In this body of work, mourning becomes an act of a political and social work, it becomes a way to recuperate a voice that has been intentionally silenced. As we question who has a voice in the archive, and how we give those a voice to those who have been silenced, we should also question who is remembered and how we re-member them.

The second *Elegy* I want to look at today is *Elegy: for two ancestors* (2024), performed at the 2024 Venice Biennale. As with *Elegy: Louisa van de Caab*, Gabrielle Goliath invited a scholar to contribute the commemorative text. This time, Zoé Samudzi was invited to write a speculative reflection which invokes the silences and absences, through their presence in the archive, of two Nama women who were displaced and killed in the Ovaherrero and Nama genocide in Namibia.[10]

The two unnamed women within the photographic collection of Dresden's Museum für Völkerkunde are commemorated by this iteration of *Elegy*. In the first text, we are introduced to the photographs. These are accompanied by labels that reduce the women to racial and ethnic identifiers, becoming, as Samudzi writes, 'the absent identities comprise of an archive in themselves, part of a near endless repository of gendered violation'. As Jappie challenges the archival record by asking it questions, Samudzi refuses to let their namelessness and the captured moment be what silences them. Instead, she searches for the tiny details and by doing so, the photographs are the way that the two women assert their liveliness and thus their personhood. They existed – they were here beyond what the photograph and its label project.

In the second text, Samudzi presents our sacred tasks, our responsibility towards our ancestors, to our dead, even those whose names we cannot easily recall. This task of mourning becomes our refusal to let them disappear further into the void of violent history and intentional silence.

What draws me to Gabrielle Goliath's *Elegy* is that it requires us to move outside of the document. In both iterations, we move outside of an archival record. In the case of Louisa van de Caab, we move outside of the courtroom with its own system and structure imposed as a logic of sense-making by and for those who enslaved her. Similarly, for the two unnamed women, we move outside of the photograph and the moments of capture – photographically, physically, and within the archive. The collective labour and the affective witnessing of *Elegy* connect us in a space to reckon with the past and present, to mourn, and gives us a sound for (our) loss.

In thinking about cross-contextualization, as we read beyond a location, a genre, a discipline, and a period of time, works like *Elegy* create a new archive, one where we perform the sacred task of honouring the dead, re-membering and mourning those

[10] www.gabriellegoliath.com/for-two-ancestors.

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whom we cannot name but know existed, across the many borders that can separate us. Here, we name the absences and create a sound for the loss. Additionally, *Elegy* becomes what Laura Mitchell describes as an 'archival patchwork',[11] where pieces of evidence are brought together from different collections across the world and from different periods and stitched together. Goliath, with the written pieces by Jappie and Samudzi, reconstruct and stitch together the lives of the three women in colonial South Africa and colonial Namibia, drawing attention to the mechanics of the archival document and its silences and challenging us to consider beyond it. Thus, they offer us both a visibility and a sonic reckoning with our past.

These silences exist purposefully, and we can never bestow or give a voice to those who have been silenced but we can let the lamenting cry reverberate between us and the past, reminding us to honour those who were denied life.

Discussion

Di Castri

Can we think about the artistic practices that you presented here as a form of archive-building for future historians? In what ways – if at all – can you imagine them being accessed and understood by historians, say, two hundred years from now?

Abba Omar

I think there is a particular kind of resonance or echo that gets hollowed into us when we see performances like this live. The genre of performance allows for ephemeral moments to become embodied – to be felt and sensed in different ways, allowing us to feel differently through our connection to the past/present/future and the archive. However, for the historian writing in the year 2225, while video recordings do not allow for the same sensorial connections, they allow for mourning rituals like this to be re-enacted again and again, reminding us that these lives are not lost within the archive or to history and connecting the long histories of gendered violence together.

I'm curious to hear which artists or writers you've come across in Mexico or elsewhere in Latin America who are rethinking the archive and listening/looking for voices that might otherwise be silenced or go unheard in similarly creative ways?

Di Castri

First and foremost, there are the creative practices of memorialization, archive-building, and accountability being developed by those living and fighting for justice on the frontlines of Mexico's war on drugs.[12] Then there are more artistic explorations of these themes, like Anne Huffschmid and Pablo Martinez-Zárate's *Forensic landscape's* web documentary or Valeria Luiselli, Ricardo Giraldo, and Leonardo

[11]Mitchell, 'Archival patchwork'.

[12]E.g. https://www.facebook.com/groups/165450924086034; https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=61555458753120; https://memoriamndm.org/; Shaylih Muehlmann, *Call the mothers: searching for Mexico's disappeared in the war on drugs* (Berkeley, CA, 2024); Olof Ohlson, 'The political afterlives of Mexico's disappeared', *Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Anthropology*, 24 (2019), pp. 672–89.

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Heiblum's recent 24-hour sound art project exploring the silences and violences of the US–Mexico borderlands.[13] Someone like Cristina Rivera Garza also comes to mind.[14] Through both fiction and non-fiction, she offers up a vocabulary that gives voice to the pain, grief, and anger that emanate from the silences created by Mexico's war on drugs. Or we could even think of the work of the architects and technologists behind Forensic Architecture who are developing a whole host of technical tools to read the built environment for evidence of state violence.[15] They're doing this not only in Mexico but in Gaza, in the Mediterranean, all around the world, and they're finding creative and engaging ways to both display and archive that evidence in very public ways. Working in a different context, the anthropologist Laura Ogden also puts forward some really creative methodological possibilities for grappling with Chile's settler colonial past and present by reading landscapes and other non-conventional sources.[16]

Abba Omar

I think there are many exciting possibilities for bringing more of these creative practices and practitioners into contact with academia. I think they can feed well into one another, artists can interpret historical sources in different media, moving the academic project outside of a lecture hall or archive, and into more public spaces, making the past feel more tangible. In the same way, historians can advise on sources and ways to patchwork together marginalized histories. But I think we can think and act even more collaboratively and reciprocally.

Conclusion

We both agree that we cannot *give* voice to intentionally silenced people/s within the archive. Rather, we have explored how we might better attune ourselves (and our wider disciplines) to the multiplicity of voices that have always-already been speaking up within variegated landscapes of silences and silencing forces. This, we've proposed, might be achieved by embracing a series of slow(er) practices of looking, listening, feeling, relating, organizing, creating.

Cross-contextualization was initially proposed as a method for reading historical sources from different geographies against one another in order to destabilize any clear distinction between 'colonial' and 'colonized' knowledges. Throughout this dialogue, however, we have been exploring whether and how such a method could be extended to our present contexts of practice. Our contention is that by fostering greater interchange between historians, geographers, anthropologists, artists, fiction writers, activists, etc., we can further destabilize the disciplinary

[13]https://forensiclandscapes.com/; https://docubase.mit.edu/project/forensic-landscapes/; Valeria Luiselli, Ricardo Giraldo, and Leonardo Heiblum, *Echoes from the borderlands: study one; call you when I get home* (New York, NY, 2025).

[14]Cristina Rivera Garza, *El invencible verano de Liliana* (Sabadell, 2021); Cristina Rivera Garza, *Dolerse: textos desde un país herido* (Mexico City, 2015); Cristina Rivera Garza, *La muerte me da* (Mexico City, 2007).

[15]https://forensic-architecture.org/.

[16]Laura A. Ogden, *Loss and wonder at the world's end* (Durham, NC, 2021).

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norms and institutional inertias that continue to exclude certain voices and practices from the history of science. If cross-contextualization at the level of historical sources has allowed us to attend to a greater range of knowledge-making practices *in the past*, our hope is that a similar move at the level of our institutional/disciplinary/geographical contexts can open historians of science to a greater repertoire of knowledge-making practices *in the present*. In turn, such an opening can pave the way to more collective, multi-sensorial, and ultimately polyvocal approaches to the history of science.

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