

The archive who breathes

Hannah Dawn Henderson

I. Elsewhere

I have never set foot on the island where my mother was born, let alone her first (and perhaps only) home, but it has surely visited me: a malleable site enclosed by four walls — a terrain that adjusts its layout depending on what’s needed in the moment, wombing the humdrum ordinances of one day to the next. In the morning, it entertains a pot of cerassie tea — always accompanied by sliced bammy and labrish. It then shudders to sonic ricochets and exclamations — the mechanised clatter of a Singer sewing machine. Once the sun retires and the horizon resembles a field of lavender, a set of mattresses span its entire floor. The quiet rhythm of shallow yet ever-returning breath both footnotes the day just elapsed and forewords the dawn to come — a sacred punctuation that bridges wakeful life and that place we pass through when we sleep, daydream, dissociate — that place that is not *here*.

There, in that one-room dwelling, Christine, Julia, Eugene and Junior meet me in our slumber.

The pleasure of excavating and excursioning through dreamscapes is the way that they allow for a disentanglement from the limits of temporal and financial feasibility. For all their fleetingness, these sojourns are far more sustainable than a transglobal flight.

There is a particular account, relayed to me a couple of decades ago, that I sense will always remain salient in my memory — an anecdote detailing one October afternoon, when a hurricane ripped the roof off my mother's house. This incident seemingly stirred little fear in my mother, a child at the time, but instead awe and curiosity as she witnessed that panel of corrugated metal — as much embalmed as devoured by rust — ascend and ripple through the air with a yielding grace more befitting of silk. I would like to imagine my mother slept that night beneath a blanket of constellations, exposed to the night sky — but, truthfully, I'm doubtful that the hurricane ever left. I have never seen one myself, but I surely know their seasons — always prefaced by the urge to take cover, to brace oneself, to reconcile that one's house may very well implode in on itself. Nothing that stands is beyond collapsing.

In Jungian dream analysis, a house is understood as an allegorical projection of one's psyche, with each room signifying a distinct facet of the mind. Jung recounts one such dream, which sees him descend from the uppermost level of a house into its cave-like cellar. The salon on the first floor is fashioned with rococo details — evocative of the grand, neoclassical houses of late

19th century Switzerland — whereas the ground floor presents a sparse and medieval character, and the cellar is as an archaeological site, strewn with fragments of Roman pottery and two decomposing skulls:

Consciousness was represented by the salon. It had an inhabited atmosphere, in spite of its antiquated style. The ground floor stood for the first level of the unconscious. The deeper I went, the more alien and the darker the scene became. In the cave, I discovered remains of a primitive culture, that is, the world of the primitive man within myself – a world which can scarcely be reached or illuminated by consciousness. [...] I had grown up in the intensely historical atmosphere of Basel [...] When I thought about dreams and the contents of the unconscious, I never did so without making historical comparisons; I was especially familiar with the writers of the eighteenth and early nineteenth century. Theirs was the world which had formed the atmosphere of my first-story salon.¹

As Jung projects this psychological mapping onto domestic architecture, he simultaneously cartographies the cultural realms that formulate the sensibilities of his perceptions. These are the worlds, images and stories that he internalised and carried within him — an archive, or *arkheion*²,

¹ Jung, C.G., Jaffé, A. (ed.) (1965) *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*. Translated by Richard and Clara Winston. New York: Random House Books. pp. 160 - 161

² '...initially a house, a domicile, an address, the residence of the superior magistrates, the archons, those who commands. [...] On account of their publicly recognised authority, it is at their home, in that place which is their house (private house, family house, or employee's house), that official documents are filed.' Derrida, J. (1996) *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*. Translated by Eric Prenowitz. Chicago, London: The University of Chicago Press. p.2

sheltered amongst his organs, sinews and tissue.

I have to wander and wonder. How would Jung's analyses have differed had he spent his formative years not in Basel but Elsewhere, where elaborate, multi-story houses are few and far between. No upper of lower level, but rather a single room that hosts a multitude of overlapping scenes. A room that is a palimpsest, where conversations collide, compete and collage with mundane interjections — the sewing machine, the whistle of the kettle, a neighbour passing by the open window to pick up sugar and gossip.

In this space, where there is little allowance for privacy, where does the unconscious dwell? In the corners, withdrawn but in plain sight? Or does it intervene from the outside? After all, the threshold that distinguishes interior from exterior can be rather narrow — as thin as the epidermis even. For the body whose movements through the world straddle those seams and fault lines where peripheries meet, it is not uncommon to find that while one leg may have found footing on the inside, the remainder of one's body is still very much located on the Outside. Perhaps the unconscious is the hurricane that comes and goes with its season, but is never truly absent — for waiting is a mindful labour, and so too is the effort of reconstructing all that which lies in a heap.

The archeological excavation of Jung's dream cellar — how would that appear had he lived in a land where few such artefacts remain? A land where the remnants of its original inhabitants have been exported to the depots of distant museums and private collectors, leaving behind only cavities in as much the earth's sediment as the world's

memory. What if, no matter how deeply and frantically you claw away at the dirt, there is no crypt to be uncovered — for here is not where your ancestors lie? They perished along the latitude of a No-Where you don't know where.

What then is this land, grasped in fistfuls, to you?

II. House

Homes and archives alike are commonly envisioned as fixed, robust structures — sites that securely encircle and guard their vulnerable contents from the hazards of Outside. Writing of *archontic* authority — that is, the combined abode and operating principle of the archive's guardian, traditionally a legal administrator — Jacques Derrida elaborates:

It does not only require that the archive be deposited somewhere, on a stable substrate, and at the disposition of a legitimate hermeneutic authority. The archontic power, which also gathers the functions of unification, of classification, must be paired with what we will call the power of consignation [...] In an archive, there should not be any absolute dissociation, any heterogeneity or secret which could separate (secernere) or partition in an absolute manner.³

This taxonomic nature of the archive, as conceptualised through this ontological lens, can be understood as both the *product* but also the *producer* of the performative,

³ *Ibid.* pp. 2-3

legalising⁴ operations of our language.⁵ These are operations that confine and relegate us to think, imagine, perceive and act in terms of dualities, binaries, compartments, neat lines and one-directional chronologies. This propensity is what Édouard Glissant terms as Western thought's 'requirement for transparency',⁶ which inevitably imposes a compression of complexities — a process of *reduction*. Per western Europe's exercise of global colonialism — not only in regards to militarised occupations and historical land-grabs, but also in terms of contemporary economic, academic, and cultural colonialism — this paradigm of reduction has been exported and embedded well beyond the occidental world:

*...whole populations have had to assert their identity in opposition to the processes of identification or annihilation [...]
Decolonization will have done its real work when it goes beyond this limit.⁷*

This emphasis on transparency, homogeneity and absolute unification provokes in me a question: How and where in the archive does one house *trauma* — that is to say, fractures, dissociations, elisions? How does the archive preserve that which cannot be readily named or identified? Where in the archival structure do they who are undocumented reside? Where is the nervous system to be found —

exhausted synaptic relays, an overworked amygdala, inflamed intestines — amidst the many tributaries of the archive's taxonomy?

When seeking such narratives in the historical canon, one is likely to suffer what Saidiya Hartman described as '*the pain experienced in [her] encounter with the scraps of the archive*'.⁸ This is the violent amnesia of the archive — violent, for it forsakes the legacies of realities lived Outside, lived Elsewhere. These are not only legacies of conflict, turmoil and injustice, but also of kinship, desire and resilience. This amnesia not only renders our understanding of the past malnourished, it further instigates a persisting orthodoxy that sees contemporary institutions — the inheritors of the archive's language and canon— perpetuate this *absencing* of that which has and continues to remain estranged from transparency.

Knowledge construction, as formulated through this paradigm of transparency, echoes the archive's internal organisation — namely, its taxonomic handling of its contents. This results in a hyper-fixation on the *noun* — a unit of information that not only can be named (and thus assigned a locality – in other words, *categorised*) but that can also be assumed to be static and therefore readily legible. The noun is an identity, a hashtag, a declaration that potentially dons the appearance and vocabulary of a *process* yet has already

⁴ I refer to the hypothesised etymology of *legal*, thought to be derived from the Greek *legein* (λέγειν), denoting the act of utterance, as well as counting, selecting, arranging and gathering.

⁵ 'The archive is first the law of what can be said, the system that governs the appearance of statements as unique events. [...] it is that which, at the very root of the statement-event, and in that which embodies it, defines at the outset the system of its enunciability.' Foucault, M. (1972) *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language*. Translated by A. M. Sheridan Smith. New York: Pantheon Books. p.129

⁶ Glissant, É. (1997). *Poetics of Relation*. Translated by Betsy Wing. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press. p.190

⁷ Ibid. p.17

⁸ Hartmen, S. 2008, 'Venus in Two Acts'. *Small axe: a journal of criticism*. Vol. 12. No. 2. pp.1-14. p.4

resigned itself to a crystallised, self-predicting form. Transparent knowledge does not (and I would go as far to say cannot) produce new, reformed understanding — as the mechanics of its taxonomic functioning essentially serve as an unending ratification of itself. That which poses as a potentially destabilising element — an element that is dissonant to canonical truth — is exiled; that is, if it was even invited *in* to begin with.

In contrast to the *noun*, transparent knowledge struggles to grapple with that which *verbs*: that which is potentially moving so rapidly and unpredictably — perhaps trembling, hyperventilating, or writhing around in an effort to shed its skin — it forgoes any legibility, let alone a single fixed name. That it cannot be categorised does not negate that it is surely *known* and *knowable* — after all, such experiencing is certainly registered within the various faculties that comprise one’s cognitive processing. Further, it is not merely the case that one does not know the applicable name, but rather that there exists no name — no name that does not serve to only further pathologise, compromise or corner oneself⁹ — a corner that one is not the architect of but with which one is surely well-familiar, for it is an architecture that dictates a relentless negotiation.¹⁰

Sometimes the proof is never committed to the archive—it is not considered important

enough to record, or if it is, not important enough to preserve. Sometimes there is a deliberate act of destruction [...] What gets left behind? Gaps where people never see themselves or find information about themselves. Holes that make it impossible to give oneself a context. Crevices people fall into. Impenetrable silence.¹¹

A corner, a crevice, a space so narrow one must necessarily belittle oneself in order to just about fit — and even then, one never quite does. Much still remains on the Outside.

III. Body

It is perhaps jarring to consider that while archives in their origin are, quite literally, *housebound*, they are evidently (per their lack of evidence, paradoxically enough) lacking in hospitality. Archives, it would seem, do not make for kind hosts. Then again, the covid-19 pandemic has surely made it apparent that a mere week of quarantining will readily supplant the otherwise soothing embrace of domestic placidity with a near-asphyxiating atmosphere — monotony, isolation and listlessness.

While the pandemic has made such claustrophobia common knowledge, it has conversely been long familiar to many that one’s abode can be a site of unease at best, violence and helplessness at worst. This is

⁹ ‘As much as identity terms must be used, as much as ‘outness’ is to be affirmed, these same notions must become subject to a critique of the exclusionary operations of their own production: for whom is outness an historically available and affordable option.’ Butler, J. 1993, ‘Critically Queer’. *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, Vol. 1. pp.17-32. p. 18

¹⁰ ‘The West, therefore, is where this movement becomes fixed and nations declare themselves in preparation for their repercussions in the world. [...] it spread through the world. The model came in handy. Most of the nations that gained freedom from colonization have tended to form around an idea of power — totalitarian drive of a single, unique root — rather than around a fundamental relationship with the Other. [...] Western nations were established on the basis of linguistic intransigence, and the exile readily admits that he suffers most from the impossibility of communicating in his language. The root is monolingual.’ Glissant, É. (1997). *Poetics of Relation*. Translated by Betsy Wing. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press. pp.14-15

¹¹ Machado, C.M. (2019). *In the Dream House: a memoir*. Minneapolis: Graywolf Press. pp.2-3

understood by the body who struggles with the deadweight fatigue of burnout, by the body who only ever creeps along the perimeter of rooms so as to avoid further bruises, by the mind who must necessarily dislocate itself from its corporeal vessel in order to manage another day. For an unseen, silent multitude, this knowledge was never an epiphany ushered in by social distancing mandates — the *new normal* — but rather the lived definition of everyday reality.

Observing reactions to the pandemic in my immediate environments, I am reminded of the words of Johanna Hedva during their 2015 lecture, titled *My Body Is a Prison of Pain so I Want to Leave It Like a Mystic But I Also Love It & Want it to Matter Politically*:

*Everywhere in our discourse on illness, trauma, grieving, and pain, is the notion of moving on and getting over it. Getting back to work is what keeps the capitalist patriarchy going, so silence, denial, and erasure are necessary.*¹²

More than ever in recent history, talk of illness, infection rates, and symptoms has become a fixture of common discussion. Yet, for all the commentaries dissecting new regulations, for all our attempts to maintain communication via an array of virtual interfaces, we seem to yet still refrain from openly and plainly acknowledging that we are undergoing a collective trauma. This comes as no surprise: in much the manner that trauma has never been permitted in the archive, we have suppressed the possibility of allowing for a vocabulary with which to speak of and through trauma — and, by extension, with which to *respond* rather than simply *react* to it.¹³

In their lecture, Hedva presents an early iteration of their *Sick Woman Theory*. Drawing on their experience of chronic illness and its impact on mobility, making it physically impossible for Hedva to enter public spaces and participate in protest demonstrations, the theory speaks of an embodied, internalised protest and '*insists that the body and mind are sensitive and reactive to regimes of oppression, particularly our current regime of neoliberal,*

¹² Hedva, J. 2015, *My Body Is a Prison of Pain so I Want to Leave It Like a Mystic But I Also Love It & Want it to Matter Politically*. [online] 7th October, Women's Center for Creative Work, Los Angeles. Available at: <https://vimeo.com/144782433>

¹³ Reactivity can perhaps be understood as comparable to the patellar reflex — commonly known as the knee-jerk reaction — or, alternatively, the gag reflex. It is a gesturing that occurs impulsively, sans any self-observation prior to the enactment of the gesture. Here, 'self-observation' refers to a prefatory, introspective review of the gesture's motive, its intention, the organisation of its execution, the breadth of both its reach and risk, and its potential consequences.

To react, as opposed to respond, arises from habitual framings of one's self and the surrounding situation. What one is reacting to is not necessarily the situation, but rather to familiar, fixed narratives and archetypes that — out of unconscious compulsion — one has superimposed onto the present moment. As such, it is a mechanism of escapism — an attempt to circumvent unfamiliar circumstances by relying on predictable choreographies.

In contrast, behavioural responsibility entails sensing and addressing the conditions of the situation as it actually presents itself, without any additional embellishment of presumed intentions, risks and outcomes. It is to approach the situation afresh, integrating oneself into it as an active participant capable of expressing agency. To respond is to behave from considered observation (of oneself, of the situation at hand), rather than solely impulse.

*white supremacist, imperial-capitalist, cisheteropatriarchy. That our bodies and minds carry the historical trauma of this. That it is the world itself that is making and keeping us sick.*¹⁴

Hedva's theory eschews the modern clinical gaze that configures a division between not only mind and body, but that further segments anatomy through the scrutiny of localised pathology.¹⁵ This gaze, which echoes the compartmentalising operations of the archive, is limited in its ability to recognise the ripples and resonances of one area of the body radiating towards another — how, for example, recurrent stomach aches, arising from prolonged financial precarity, may trigger the release of stress hormones, which in turn may manifest insomnia, acne, and appetite loss. Further, the gaze's hyper-fixation on locality truncates its urgency to critique wider sociological frameworks — that is to say, our economic ideals, our labour norms, our educational curriculum — that erode bodily and psychological functioning.

In contrast, Hedva's holistic conception of not only the mind within the body (and vice versa), but also the body of the individual within society at large, offers more than only a re-imagining of the act of protest — it further proposes a re-imagining of the archive's prognosis. What if the archive were to be understood as a body who bears chronic sickness? After all, surely no other experiencing of illness could be more apt for an archive. What if the archive were a

body who has survived ideological regimes, both past and current — but whose immune system has been so over-stimulated it has become hostile to the very stories for which it was supposed to serve as a host. Hostile yet host, wounded yet persisting:

*I want to make a case now for the callous as an analogy for trauma, not the scar [...] The scar is a mark on the surface that shows that something happened beneath it but is now passed and is over. A callous is something that builds up to protect the part of the body being used, and then it continues to be used. It's not over, it doesn't end. [...] I want to propose the callous when thinking about sickness and trauma because it means that instead of rejecting these experiences, moving on, and getting over them, silencing them, and of thinking of them as something that will and ought to end, instead we envelop them into our daily, lived, accumulating and embodying experience.*¹⁶

IV. Breath

Gaps, holes, crevices. These are the words with which Carmen Maria Machado, author of *The Dream House*, describes the landscape of the archive. *The Dream House* brings together a series of episodic vignettes, forming a memoir of a relationship in which Machado's lover

¹⁴ Hedva, J. 2015, My Body Is a Prison of Pain so I Want to Leave It Like a Mystic But I Also Love It & Want it to Matter Politically. [online] 7th October, Women's Center for Creative Work, Los Angeles. Available at: <https://vimeo.com/144782433>

¹⁵ 'The space of configuration of the disease and the space of localization of the illness in the body have been superimposed, in medical experience, for only a relatively short period of time—the period that coincides with nineteenth-century medicine and the privileges accorded to pathological anatomy.' Foucault, M. (1973) *The Birth of the Clinic: An Archaeology of Medical Perception*. Translated by A.M Sheridan. London: Routledge. pp.3-4

¹⁶ Hedva, J. 2015, My Body Is a Prison of Pain so I Want to Leave It Like a Mystic But I Also Love It & Want it to Matter Politically. [online] 7th October, Women's Center for Creative Work, Los Angeles. Available at: <https://vimeo.com/144782433>

designates her as the primary recipient of furious jealousy and bouts of rage. Whether the lover's behaviour is a conscious exercise of precise and purposeful torment or is rather the explosive regurgitation of unreconciled pain is unanswerable. As the relationship ensues, Machado's estrangement is only further exasperated by the absence of other comparable narratives within the context of queer relationships.

That no such history has been gathered should not be mistaken as a confirmation that such situations possess no historical preface; all it confirms is that we do not today have at our disposal a language with which to address such experiences. Such mutism can be traced back to the wider absence of queer-stories within canonically accepted histories of sexuality, romance and community. On this point, I must return to a question posed earlier — *how and where in the archive does one house trauma?* — and expand it to include *why should an archive house trauma?* It strikes me that there is a correlation to be drawn here: a link between the lack of exosomatic memory — *archival utterances* — recounting the trauma that is often bound up in the experience of inhabiting and being inscribed with a queer identity in a socio-political environment dominated by heteronormative ideology, and the seeming aphasia that inhibits one from identifying destructive interpersonal transactions within a queer relationship. How can we possibly begin to interrogate such transactions — which typically emerge as a desperate externalising of prolonged alienation and unaddressed suffering — when we do not have words, stories, documents with which to retrace and contextualise one's *primordial wounds*? That is to say: the silences that extend across

generations, that hover over and permeate our intimacies, existing in social consciousness only as gaps, holes, crevices — prompting the often unwitting perpetuation of mechanisms of dismissal, trivialisation, and erasure.

Primordial wounds are much like spectres that live both within and amongst us. It is the mood fluctuations that I inherited from my mother, ever anticipating the return of the hurricane. It is the self-doubt your father bequeathed you — an echo of how he questioned his own right to be, to breathe, to occupy the space of existence that was his own life. It is the heart palpitations and hyper-vigilance we share with those whose lives long predated our own but whose bodies were inscribed with the same identities as us — those who knew too well this precarious negotiation of inside and Outside, here and Elsewhere.

By producing language, images, narratives with which to speak of and through trauma — to be an interlocutor with these ghosts — we not only acknowledge and soothe the primordial wound, thereby integrating it within social consciousness, but also to the other ruptures and fractures that are often borne of it. This task begins with articulating the gap — that is, writing from within the space of that which is absent. One must inhale the silence, deeply and attentively, in order to propel the words with which one will authorise histories in the now.

The architecture of this archive will not be fixed. Rather it is ephemeral, fragile, wandering. It will not catalogue its contents in a chronological fashion, but rather shall unfurl along the prosody of *meandering, code-switching, associative conversations* —

even if such conversations be with oneself — readily shifting between temporalities and geographies in a single sentence.

This archive declares: *'As far as my identity is concerned, I will take care of it myself. That is, I shall not allow it to become cornered in any essence'*¹⁷ Embracing its illegibilities, it rejects the dogma of transparency and reduction. It may stutter, dawdle, panic, go on and on and on — all the while forgoing the niceties of punctuation in favour of urgency. Sometimes it simply sighs, and, in doing so, it testifies to the courage of allowing one's breath to escape, in spite of the risk of it not necessarily returning.

This is an archive woven of opacities, inviting its listeners, its readers, to dwell *'on the texture of the weave and not on the nature of its components'*,¹⁸ for it has retired itself of that *'old obsession with discovering what lies at the bottom of natures.'*¹⁹ It makes no apologies or disclaimers for having its secrets — in-jokes, oblique references, love notes and initialed dedications.

This is the embodied archive — the archive ever circulating within you, for which you are both the abode and the custodian. It exists there, along the tide of your breath, cradled by your ribs, always present and animated — confirming that amongst the ghosts, there is surely life.

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¹⁷ Glissant, É. (1997). *Poetics of Relation*. Translated by Betsy Wing. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press. p.192

¹⁸ *Ibid.* p.190

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

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