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The Missing of it All:

Archives, Artists, and Absences

The archive is a record of the past at the same time as it points to the future.
— Carolyn Steedman, *Dust*

It is what the archive does not say that troubles me the most […] What do we do with the undocumented, the erased, the redacted, the unrecorded, the disappeared, the crossed out, the burned out, the missing of it all?
— Odai Johnson, "The Size of All That's Missing"

Archives Unbound

As we prepared this Editorial, we had the opportunity to hear our colleagues in the Unbound Collective — Ali Gumillya Baker (Mirning), Faye Rosas Blanch (Mbararam, Yidinyji), Natalie Harkin (Narungga), and Simone Ulalka Tur (Yankunytjatjara) — speak at the Flinders University Museum of Art (FUMA). Speaking about the decade of their remarkable work that had been collected in an exhibition titled *Sovereign Acts | Love Praxis*, the women of the Unbound Collective reflected on the cost of working with and from the archive as First Nations artists. Even the most mundane encounters with the historical record and representations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are fraught with the pain of erasure, deafening with the silence of absence, and marked by the casual violence of forgetting. At the same time, archives are laden with histories both personal and institutional, and full of lives lived under the glare of government control and moments snatched in the shadows, which cannot help but exceed the tidy boundaries of the document. The archive bleeds, the lives it records and rescinds spill onto our white-gloved hands, which may never again be rid of the past.

Or, as Faye Rosas Blanch put it that night,

> The history re-emerges every time.

Figure 1. Unbound Collective, *Sovereign Acts | In the Wake*. Presented as part of Tarnanthi: Festival Contemporary Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art, 2021

One work on display in that exhibition at FUMA was part of *Sovereign Acts | In the Wake*, in which archival records of Aboriginal Australians are projected onto large skirts constructed by the artists (Figure 1). Unbound Collective, writing with Uncle Lewis Yarluburka O'Brien, describe this work as emblematic of their wider praxis:

> We wear well-rounded skirts covered in collated, carefully placed paper archives. Archives of Protection Acts and the Aborigines Protection Boards. Archives of personal family domestic servitude. State Aboriginal Record archives — surveillance and control. South Australian Museum archives — data cards and beating hearts, their cabinets of curiosity. Ledgers quantifying bodies as items to collate, add, subtract and index to erase — the horror, this mathematics of genocide as records that form a trail so long it takes your breath away. Some text is blacked-out. Some text is visible. These difficult records are carefully tended to and thought deeply about. We locate the personal, in the wake. This is our historical and contemporary presence, in the wake. We can make sense of the silences, absence and invisible spaces in these records, and our existence of being black in the wake of colonialism. (Baker et al. 2020, 91)

In collating this special issue of *Performance Paradigm* around the theme of archives, and how artists have responded to the absences within them, we have returned again and again to the work of the Unbound Collective to guide our thinking. This is a role they filled at the 2023 ADSA Conference from which this issue emerges, too, at which Ali Gumillya Baker and Natalie Harkin offered a powerful opening plenary conversation that framed the contributions that make up this volume.

The archive acts as a way of retaining the embodied experiences, artistic choices, and audience reactions to performance that may otherwise vanish. Even then, the tattered remnants of the past both inside and outside the archive might never be enough – whatever our desire to reclaim them, and however powerful the tools we develop. Writing from Wiradjuri and Narungga standpoints, poet-scholars Jeanine Leane and Natalie Harkin describe the archive as "the assemblage of feelings, objects and stories we gather, and all that is unknowingly gathered around us" (2021, 52). While the archive has "a history of preservation so painstakingly maintained", it also carries "a history of loss for all that is discarded and deemed abject, marginal, inferior and irrelevant to future memory" (Leane & Harkin 2021, 52). While these losses are felt most acutely by First Nations peoples, losses on different scales resonate throughout the articles collected here, as our contributors grapple with how absence has animated their work.

Rather than revisiting foundational debates about ephemerality and repertoire, we propose in this issue to consider absences as constitutive — both of the histories we tell, and of the performance practice we produce. Absences and gaps in the archive challenge our work as scholars and practitioners of theatre, drama, dance, and performance studies. Much of our research and creative practice lives in "gaps and empty spaces" (Taubert & Abeliovich 2020, 301), and seeks to fill them with informed speculation. Julian Meyrick offers a powerful characterisation of this speculation as 'retrospective prospection'; in his words, "looking backwards to look forwards again, to explore a moment in all of its possibility states" (2022, 16). Extending Meyrick's provocation, then, we ask how do we enter the past – whether that past is minutes or millennia ago – while remaining sensitive to what has been lost, what has never been remembered, and what was deliberately forgotten?

In this Issue

In "Speak your Right Words", Nicola Hyland (Te Āti Haunui-a-Pāpārangi, Ngāti Hauiti) begins the issue with a personal look into embodiment of the archive, with each generation of Māori becoming the custodian of knowledge and whakapapa. Hyland explores how Māori storytelling functions as both an ancestral tool and a means of resistance against colonial narratives. She argues that storytelling is a critical method for Indigenous identity, memory, and cultural survival, and notes that "stories are [her] critical and creative methodology", and that she will no longer "apologise for telling stories anymore". Hyland challenges Western perceptions of storytelling as passive or mythological, emphasising the active role it plays in Māori epistemology. She examines the concept of rongo, the Māori term for sensory perception, which encompasses not just sight and sound but also emotions, intuition, and spiritual awareness. This extra-sensory experience makes storytelling an embodied practice that connects the teller, the audience, and the ancestors. The article also discusses decolonisation through performance, particularly in Māori theatre and digital spaces. Hyland reflects on her involvement in *The Wiri Project*, where Māori actors used pūrākau (traditional stories) to shape emotional expressions in motion-capture performances, as well as introducing a new performance framework that replaces Western models with Māori-based

storytelling approaches. Like the work of the Unbound Collective, Hyland's ideas here framed the intellectual work of the conference through her keynote address.

Alexandra Tálamo's "Dancing in the Mexican Sun: Attention Work as Postmemorial Re-Timing" continues this idea of the physical embodiment of the archive, utilising Marianne Hirsch's notion of postmemory through her performance *Dancing in the Mexican Sun*. Tálamo notes that she finds herself "the custodian of an archive that [she] was not present to record" – the Argentine dictatorship from 1974 to 1983 – and through performance, this inherited memory is explored and re-learned in the tangible present. Tálamo's article demonstrates how performance can produce a unique form of postmemorial spectatorship, one which attends to the internal, unconscious, and choreographic ways that postmemory is transferred across bodies, and offering a new understanding of repertoire as archival.

Davina Wright and Meredith Rogers' article "Archive as Chamber of Infinite Recession" posits how artists, creators, and performers contribute to a living archive. Through Wright and Rogers' experience as queer feminist writers and theatre makers they explore how artists engage with a living archive of trauma, grief, and memory. Wright and Rogers guide the reader through reclamation, reframing, and resistance of the images the archive has given them — images of women in distress, bodies left behind. Through site-specific performance, where queer and female bodies are haunted by real violence and the trauma of the past. Yet, in this haunting, there is also an insistence on presence, on reworking the archive rather than being consumed by it.

Missy Mooney's article "Life and Death, Presence and Absence" brings the issue into both historical and personal applications of archival material, as a tool to create documentary theatre, specifically posthumous documentary theatre. Mooney's paper examines examples of letters, diaries and other documents used to bring deceased individuals back into public memory, such as *Gross Indecency: The Three Trials of Oscar Wilde* (1997) and *My Name is Rachel Corrie* (2005). Mooney details her own experience working with archival materials in her play *What Remains*, which reanimates the letters and lives of Vita Sackville-West and Harold Nicolson. Mooney contends that posthumous documentary theatre offers a unique form of remembrance, bridging the gap between history and performance to ensure that "the missing of it all can live once more, if only for a night".

Jo Palazuelos-Krukowski, in her article "Radio Performance as Spectral Theatre: Synchretic Storytelling in the Home and the Nation", investigates radio as a form of "spectral theatre", where disembodied voices unsettle listeners and transform their familiar spaces. Utilising Derridean hauntology, Freud's concept of the uncanny, and Chion's notion of synchresis, Palazuelos-Krukowski explores how radio creates a "performance radius wide enough to envelop the individual, the family, the home, and the nation". Palazuelos-Krukowski digs into sound archives and notes the historical lineage of radio's theatricality, as well as detailing her own experience with Darkfield, a contemporary theatre company that specialises in immersive binaural audio experiences to blur reality and fiction. Using examples including *SÉANCE* and *VISITORS*,

she argues that radio and audio theatre manipulate perception through sound, making listeners question what is real. Ultimately, she asserts that “Radio is theatre which is map-making and world-building”, shaping collective consciousness through sonic storytelling.

The issue then moves towards historical perspectives with Sue-Anne Wallace’s resurfacing of the wives of Walter Bentley, in her article “Absent Voices”. Wallace’s article examines the overlooked contributions of four actresses — May Brooklyn, Florence Grant, Minnie Brandon, and Melba Watt — who played key roles in the career and life of Walter Bentley, Wallace’s grandfather. Wallace’s article argues that while Bentley’s career depended on the talent and dedication of these women, they also benefited from his patronage before forging independent paths. By ‘making visible’ these women, Wallace uses the archive to give a voice to those who were previously lost to history.

Izabella Nantsou’s article “Political Theatre in the Climate of Fear” examines the impact of Jeff Kennett’s neoliberal policies in 1990s Victoria, and the suppression of dissenting voices in the arts. The article focuses on *The Essentials* (1997), a play written by Stefo Nantsou and Steve Payne, which critiqued the privatisation of public services and the erosion of workers’ rights. Developed with the community in which it was set, the play explored workplace restructuring and domestic abuse as parallel forms of disempowerment. Despite securing funding and institutional backing, *The Essentials* was ultimately censored over concerns of defamation, due to an alleged parallel between a character and Premier Kennett. *The Essentials* itself acts as an archive of Kennett’s Victoria, and Izabella Nantsou’s article uses archival material to dig deeper into the climate of fear, and self-censorship that was prevalent under Kennett’s Premiership.

Matthew Bapty’s article “Written Into Nonbeing” explores the liminal space occupied by queer artistic identity, focusing on Kester Berwick’s experimental theatre in the early twentieth century. Bapty argues that Berwick’s plays, *Judgement Day* (1933), *Ladder Game* (1934), and *Archway Motif* (1935), encode queer themes through ambiguity, symbolic language, and subverted gender norms. Bapty interprets Berwick’s work as a form of queer archival presence, where queerness exists in gestures and silences rather than explicit representation. Berwick’s work therefore demonstrates “a queer self-effacement”, constrained by societal norms yet rich with queer potential. Berwick’s work ultimately transcends temporal boundaries, gapping past and present with its presentation of queerness.

Asher Warren digs deep into the physical archive beneath the Annexe Theatre at the University of Tasmania, which has accumulated decades worth of theatrical remnants. “A Theatre Full of Junk: Haunted by an Unruly Archive” sees his efforts to clean and catalogue the space, revealing a layered history of performances and cultural identities. Warren reflects on the emotional impact of these objects, but also the frustration of a lack of true process for saving the work of the theatre. He explores how forgotten props, costumes, and scripts embody a form of institutional memory, and how the university’s

theatre programme was caught in a "temporal trap", one which is "oriented toward the future, but imagining that future as a continuation of the past". Warren theorises his cleaning task through haunting and materiality, ultimately arguing that archives are more than a mere amassing of objects; they are repositories of memory and institutional struggles.

The issue finishes with a conversation between Tiffany Knight, Nescha Jelk, Fleur Kilpatrick, Kirste Vandergiessen, and Sarah Peters. Entitled "The Artist's Archive: The Traces of Independent and Community Theatre", the participants discuss the role of archives, memory, and community in independent and youth theatre, highlighting and detailing the history and creative work of Riverland Youth Theatre (RYT), ActNow Theatre, and Rumpus. A central theme of the conversation is how theatre companies evolve, and act as cultural hubs. These companies have not always been allowed to thrive, due to lack of funding or partnership, but their legacy lives on through those who have been surrounded by their work. Within the conversation, the role of the archive is reimagined beyond traditional documentation. Kilpatrick sees artists themselves as living archives noting:

> One of the best living archives of RYT, for instance, is Alysha Herrmann, who first came to the company twenty years ago as a teen mum to be involved in a project called *Random Girls*. And you can point to her and say "this is the legacy of a production twenty years ago". […] They are the living archive of and living documentation of the worth of what a company like this does well.

Tiffany Knight notes how exciting this can be, stating:

> You think of archives as something that are locked away, and it's only the academics that go to read them. But to think of an archive as a living document, an interactive document, is a really novel approach. And I have no doubt that funding bodies would be absolutely refreshed to look at something like [a blog of activities with photos, drawings and poems] instead of spreadsheets.

The discussion closes with reflections on balancing artistry with leadership, the importance of grieving lost projects, and how theatre's impact extends beyond individual productions.

What's Still Missing

As will be familiar to many readers, this volume acts as a documentary record of a conference. Like many such records, it is in part making good on a condition of funding, in part extending the impact of the conference, and in part revisiting and expanding the ideas that animated our time together in person. Like many such records, it is incomplete and in closing we want to acknowledge the many colleagues whose work enriched our conference and continues to animate the conversations in these pages, but which is not

published here. There is a kind of irony here: in seeking the partiality and symbolic violence of documentation, we have enacted our own form of elision. In a field that has wrestled with the place and status of creative practice research, too, we can still struggle to offer meaningful outlets for its publication — a challenge, it must be noted, to which *Performance Paradigm* aspires to rise. As intellectually stimulating as we hope readers find it, this volume is an imperfect substitute for the warmth and invigoration of the conference that inspired it.

And so again we are left to wonder about the affective dimension of the archive, and how theatre, drama, dance and performance studies might engage with it. While the field of history has an emerging interest in the emotional encounters precipitated by the archive, much of it by women and scholars of colour — Emily Robinson reveals the intensity of the archival encounter (2010), Katie Barclay writes movingly of falling in love with the dead (2018), and Lynette Russell balances the trauma and grief of the archive with its delights (2018) — our own disciplines have been slower to extend the affective encounter of live performance into our engagements with the archive. Across this volume, our contributors offer sketches towards a more fully realised future engagement with these ideas. Who knows, one day they might even inspire a conference of their own.

One Last Note on Absence

The editors would like to note one more particular absence in the Australasian theatre community: our contributor and friend Dr Sue-Anne Wallace AM (1946—2024). We are grateful to Sue-Anne's family, who allowed us to publish her article, and proud to continue the legacy of kindness and curiosity that her work and her life embodied.

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