

# How We Recount

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## On Amnesia

Amnesia conditions public memory and the possibilities around how to recount lost lives. The entwinement of amnesia and public memory devalues, renders disposable, and forgets the very colonized bodies that have built and continue to build the grounds of empire. Under multiculturalism, disposability produces value. The conditions of identity are such that being minoritarian and vulnerable to power means that one can momentarily gain access and legibility to the world. One gains value in the world although one is not per se doing something of value for the world. Further, because of amnesia, a tenuous relation to the past enables weaker public empathic connections to otherness; we become numb, removed from the urgency and sense of pain arising from being devalued. As a necropolitical perspective reveals, dead bodies are often worth more than when they were alive. Black Lives Matter and movements in support of Standing Rock have directed us to this problematic, whereby the protests to remember the many lost lives signal how these deaths only gain “social” (certainly not interpersonal) value upon their loss. C. Riley Snorton and Jin Haritaworn describe this dynamic for trans-of-color deaths, whose loss is usually flattened for larger deracialized and neoliberalized understandings of transgenerence.<sup>1</sup> With the amnesiac effects from multicultural accounts of history, publics don’t fully feel the pain of loss, only a numb form of momentary responsibility.

With such a national condition, how is a critical left project to work against amnesia and to decolonize public memory? Do we merely try to place value in, recuperate, and remember these forgotten histories and bodies? Or is there a reparative approach that might forge other means for and engagements with those devalued? How should we recount? Asked differently, is the point to replicate a process of multiculturally educating broader publics of the histories of dispossession so that they can feel just a little bit more for a few more people?

To attempt to engage these questions, let's turn to amnesia itself. Amnesia is a disability of losing or having little memory that arises from trauma, brain damage, and other causes. There are many types and causes of amnesia. Amnesia even arises as a side effect of therapeutic interventions like electroconvulsive therapy to deal with depression. The medical approach to amnesia approaches it through diagnosis, management, and cure. If the goal of the medical-industrial complex is to reverse the effects of amnesia and to have as close to "full" memory and capacity as possible, is that the model we should have for political action today to remedy public amnesia—full repair and recuperation? Or is there a way to think about amnesia differently as perhaps offering some direction on a way to contend with public amnesia around minoritarian others?

Disability activism and theory remind us that *not everything needs to be fully clear* in order to exist.<sup>2</sup> Many among us function through other means. How else might we survive the forms of devaluation that enter experience in the here and now? Perhaps the incompleteness of amnesia is itself a way to deal with public amnesia. For some subjects, amnesia may be more helpful than a liberal model of repair and recuperation.

There are many kinds of amnesias. But perhaps the ones most applicable to thinking about politics today are those dealing with how people cope with trauma. Dissociative amnesia does not arise from physical damage of the hippocampus (which is believed to be the part of the brain that deals with memory, emotions, and the autonomic nervous system). Rather, dissociative amnesia arises through the repression of traumatic events. Amnesia offers a way to cope that does not rely on amnesia's eradication; instead, amnesia offers comfort and survival. This is not to fetishize amnesia as the antidote to cure late capitalism's accelerationist tendencies. However, these different functions for amnesia offer ways to exist that help us imagine a world through partiality rather than privileging full clarity and remembrance.

Alfian Sa'at's book of poetry *History of Amnesia* is a helpful reminder. Sa'at is a Muslim Singaporean of Malay descent. He's been critical of the Singaporean state for its censorship and racist treatment of Malays and other minority populations on the island. In *History of Amnesia*, the poet begins by diagnosing "the patient, born in 1965," as suffering from amnesia with an uncertain "prognosis."<sup>3</sup> The poet directs us to both the patient as individual and the patient as the nation of Singapore (becoming a sovereign nation in 1965 following Japanese and British colonizations). The poet documents not only state violence and erasures but also the minor forms of survival that being under the radar and forgotten about has provided. Amnesia offers not only a critique of state violence but also a mode of survival for those repeatedly subject to state violence. Every poem resonates with a sense of unplanned resilience. In his first poem, "Autobi-



Figure 1. Candice Lin, *Birth of a Nation*, 2008. Watercolor on paper, 44 × 54 in.  
Courtesy of the artist and Ghebaly Gallery, Los Angeles

ography,” he ruminates on growing up working class in Singapore, where his lack of things and objects during his childhood signals an absence that constitutes his understanding of love:

When I awoke I was twenty, being asked  
If I had a happy childhood. Yes, the one  
We all have: filled to the brim  
With the love of absent things.<sup>4</sup>

Rather than comparing his childhood to others who grew up with more, he takes absence and forgetting as his way to constitute his sense of being.

In addition to amnesia offering a model of simultaneous critique and survival, the condition has been taken up as a decolonial aesthetic: a sensibility that is premised on the condition of forgetting without being fully limited by it. Candice Lin’s 2008 “Birth of a Nation” (fig. 1) is a watercolor-and-ink piece that directs us to a (not the) moment of conquest. Set in a nonidentifiable and almost forgettable space, ambiguously racialized nude bodies are rendered with hues of darker pigment. The bodies are littered with such details as pubic hair, exuberant gestures, and facial expressions. However, the land itself is curiously drawn with much less nuance. The land is almost forgotten. One could certainly take

this omission of land as a way to highlight the violence placed upon colonized bodies, since the bodies themselves brightly vibrate against the dull browns, greens, and grays of nature. However, we might also view the lack of landscape as that which hails the viewers to fill, or perhaps flesh, out the land's contours. Lin's forgetting of the land asks us to remember it—to fill in the details, to care about and to reimagine its existence. Rather than doing this for us, she asks us to try.

Land is the critical locus to remind ourselves of the settler colonial logics that ask the nation and all of us to forget. Rather than primarily reclaiming the land and asking us to remember its fraught histories, Lin takes the condition of amnesia as a way to ask us to try to remember, even if partially. Lin's turn to thinking about the birth of a(ny) nation is not a move that ignores the differential effects of colonization and rape against certain populations. Rather, she points us to another form of partial communication that operates at the level of flickers and transmission rather than full repair. In addition, the ambiguous racialization of those being disposed of and colonized is not to direct us to a colorblind ideology. Instead, she directs us to a global condition that requires that we attend to the details needed to render the land vibrant.

Critique cannot be fully invested in clarity and repair.

Some forms of kinship and civic life change relations of memory and forgetting. They are forms of power transfer in which the protagonists may not be human, legible, liberal, clear, smart, funny, or anything else that can be instrumentalized. To see this, we must visit other times and places (if we can remember them!) to see what kinds of thinking lie beyond the horizons of formulaic critique. We could go to, say, the Roman Forum in the period of the republic, to see how public space configured forgetting and belonging, how its holding capacity encoded particular logics of citizenship and permanence.

Between the second century BCE and the first century AD a round masonry tower, called the Umbilicus, stood in the forum. It represented the geographic center of Rome and was central to all infrastructure, in that the republic's system for measuring distance always began with the Umbilicus. It was the Cartesian zero of Rome as a physical space.

But the Umbilicus was more than a point where lines converge. It was also the focus of rituals of citizenship. It was customary, upon becoming Roman citizens, for individuals to cast a handful of earth from their native land into the center of the Umbilicus. In this ritual of casting earth, earth became a protagonist. It is the earth you cast into the center of Roman soil that made you a Roman. We think of the gesture of throwing a handful of earth as a ritual of funerals. The Umbilicus gives us another way of thinking about this gesture, understanding it as a way of saying, I live here now. I belong. The Umbilicus, in short, was an ancient work of

popular performance art. As part of daily life, accruing a fecund amalgam of earthy sacrifices, it produced an image of the republic's sovereign citizenry that prefigured the expansive inclusiveness of the Roman Empire. But it was also, irreversibly, a crypt, a tomb in which past affiliations were preserved.

Now, we could think of the relations among memory, forgetting, and the Umbilicus extractively. We could imagine a European Union research proposal written by archaeologists, soil biologists, and ecologists. Working across the disciplines, their application might claim how they will use their grant to take core samples of the earth below the ruins of the Umbilicus and to analyze that striated earth. From this surgical extraction, they might hope to gain a sense of the different regions from which new Roman citizens were drawn, at different times.

Or, alternately, we could look at the Umbilicus as a structure for thinking about the ways that belonging always requires some form of ritual amnesia. To leave a place forever, to cast a piece of one's native earth away, is an act of deliberate forgetting. One forgets one's birth and joins another motherland. But in the Roman Forum, this act of joining and intermingling, finding a new civic kin, was only ever a partial forgetting. It didn't require the illusion of natural ties, the way that a US adoption still to this day involves the destruction of a child's original birth certificate and the issuing of a new one—at once legal and false. The relationship between citizen and republic that the Umbilicus staged had nothing to do with reproduction. We might even call it an open adoption; new citizens of Rome, having cast in their handfuls of earth, now always knew with certainty where a piece of their motherland lay.

## On Encryption

The condition of amnesia that obscures the atrocities for the disposed and dispossessed has led to our contemporary multicultural understandings of otherness. We feel little for those who have been devalued, yet we learn just enough about them to become good liberal subjects (without investing in any institutional change for such others). Put another way: the liberal encounter with the devalued subject is a matter of *déjà vu*, a memory in the present tense that gets in the way of (what would this look like?) an authentic encounter. We cannot know one another's histories without losing the forest for the trees. However, what political modes can possibly arise from what we can call an amnesiac multiculturalism—a multiculturalism, that is to say, premised on an amnesiac forgetting of the real traumatic difference of the other? If the goal of full communication sounds either universalizing or terroristic, what other ways might exist beyond clarity? Here we seek to learn from the nonstandard learners who

have been labeled, scrutinized, warehoused, and stigmatized as learning disabled.

In an era when we constantly demand clarity and transparency from one another and the state (“Trump—Show us your taxes!” or “After seeing my therapist (or going to yoga), I realize that I need to be really clear about my intentions and needs”), how might we think through opacity and the refusal to be fully clear with the state (and perhaps one another)? Must we always be transparent with one another? I’m exhausted from being transparent to everyone, every time, everywhere. Rather than simply defaulting into always hiding, perhaps we might find some direction in negotiating communication in more complex ways beyond complete transparency or refusal. How might processes surrounding encryption and coding (from not only new media but also older forms) provide other ways of understanding not only how we communicate with one another but also how we shape the political demands we make of one another and power?

Communicability is what makes things connect, what makes content transmissible, and therefore what makes content the same as connection, and connection a form of content. The universal or at least general communicability of mental states, of aesthetic judgment, of taste, of affect, of sense, of perception, even—is this not the condition of possibility of communicative capitalism? The general intellect is therefore claimed to be the means of production that is ours—ours!—to take back from the thieving corporate entities, which have built their own authorized personhoods on our dividual emissions.

Yes, it’s true, all true. And if it isn’t, it might as well be, for the sake of the political program. But within the smooth spaces of communicability that are made, remade, out of the cosmopolitan worlds of art and culture, lifestyle, consumerist pleasures, self-care, queer and trans aesthetics, media socialities, philosophy and humanistic learning, and the ethical sciences, which they also make—the new global capitalist Enlightenment—crypts abound. Nothing in there will be legible; nothing will compute. Still we try. Sometimes we say the codes of everyday life lie beneath the threshold of communicability, and then we translate, bring them into discussion, point to their subalternity, maybe provide new vocabulary. We are such relentless coding machines.

How we recount does not need to be transmitted smoothly or transparently. What other forms of coding, encryption, and recounting might offer directives to contend with the then and now, the there and here?

Candice Lin, discussed earlier, began collaborating with artist Patrick Staff in 2010. In one of their more recent works, *Lesbian Gulls, Dead Zones, Sweat, and T.* (2017), Lin and Staff hacked a fog machine to distribute clouds of hormones. From licorice and black cohosh, they

extracted natural anti-androgens that suppress the production of testosterone (“T”). This piece brings up ethical questions around communication and transparency. Does one need to be completely transparent to an audience that they are inhibiting their testosterone production? On one hand, the piece directs us to moral panics surrounding masculinity. On the other, however, those taking testosterone might feel a countereffect to their own testosterone regimens. How does one deal with this queering of fog and smoke? Both of these positions rely on a full commitment to ideas of masculinity. Those bodies who feel less committed to a binary or strong relation to a singular gender might be less troubled by this inhibition of testosterone. The ethical questions surrounding the transmission and ingestion of hormones offer a space to query molecular encryption across bodies. Transparency would rely on a commitment to dominant notions of masculinity. However, an ethics of partial communication directs us to less committed understandings of gender.

From the clouds of hormonal smoke to the digital clouds of data, other models of recounting emerge. Jacolby Satterwhite’s videos and performances demonstrate modes of black encryption that are premised on two senses of the phrase: obscured information and data, and forms of racialization. His works produce worlds, drawing from the language and forms of new media. His videos are abstract and produce unknown worlds, where bodies morph, spew, and extend beyond their own contours. Meanwhile, the artist draws heavily from codes and gestures from racialized, classed, and gendered performances like vogue culture. Satterwhite draws from blackness as not only racialization but also encryption. Satterwhite refuses to clearly and smoothly recount his blackness. His mode of encryption against multicultural demands to partake as a good liberal subject forces us to think beyond our dominant modes of political critique and minoritarian discourses.

Translating, coding, and performing as little agents of the general intellect—is that what it means to be part of the multitude? Not a mass but a mess of particles whose physics we ourselves do not yet grasp (yet still it operates)? What higher intelligence is already working through this seeming mess? Is this not the question that finance capital asks constantly, looking for the laws or the rule sets that will allow more capturings of futures, more fixes, more value?

If the content communicated—shared, transmitted, translated, circulated—is inseparable from the media through which it lives and breathes, expressing the milieu through which it comes into being as much as “itself,” then we are coding only insofar as the media, including us, will allow. Maybe not only, but predominantly. Because smoothness rules. So we will do our best to make things communicable or to serve as good nodes for communicability to occur. No one pays or praises us to

jam the lines, although that is one of the key tactics of war. You do not just ambush the messenger; you take down the telegraph lines. That's what Filipino guerrillas did constantly in the Ilocos region to resist US colonial occupation after the Spanish-American War.

Unless we think we are in a time of war, we will keep coding to broaden communications. That's what everyone thinks is required of political movements, as if we were still stuck in the era of broadcast, when publics out there awaited our emissions, which we only have to make accessible for our politics to expand. Like capital.

Meanwhile (as a master cognitive cartographer likes to say), the crypts abound. Do they proliferate? Maybe. Hard to say. We hardly even know where they are. Black holes are not black boxes. What we encrypt for security is content that would otherwise be communicable. But the forms of communicability best accommodated to capitalist media, the media of broadest reach, are themselves forms of securitization with deadly consequences. The crypts are littered everywhere, among the live media in these networks even within them.

Universal communicability does not merely kill. It buries whole sense worlds and their humans and nonhumans alive. This is one lesson of cryptonomy as a reformulated theory of the unconscious and, in particular, for the chain transmission of unclaimed experienced from one generation to another (not necessarily through direct contact or family romance).

No bare bones there.

Jamming the lines will go only so far. The Filipino guerrillas lost. The US soldiers were better marksmen (they had a lot of experience with guns wherever they came from, a lot from Texas, and many were recent veterans of US wars against Native Americans and Cubans, as well as the Spanish). And they had bigger guns. Their win paved the way for regional and global domination.

A hundred years later, as the United States was bombing Iraq and POTUS Bush was upholding Philippine democracy as a model for the regime change (declaring the genocidal US colonizing war against the Philippines, which formally ended in 1903, a political success), Filipino workers were put to work in reconstruction and cleanup in Iraq in 2003. They were already in the region, the channels for their regular conveyance long in place. Those channels were the outcome of a century of expansion of imperial communicability through war, always war.

From the first trans-Pacific submarine telegraph cables laid down in 1903, stretching from San Francisco to Hawaii to Guam to the Philippines, to "Faster," the latest major undersea Internet cable connecting Oregon in the United States to Chiba and Mie prefectures in Japan in 2016, funded by Google and the biggest global networking and IT com-

panies from Japan and China, deadly imperial wars have been the media and the message transforming the landscapes of survival, the place-times of our possible being and the routes of our becoming. All else that cannot be communicated will be consigned to death.

*I am writing this to you now, not knowing how to find my dead and dying. I write in the time I have between the work I do to exist in the everyday—the tasks that help me sustain most of my life earnings to be called my own, and those tasks that allow me to sustain employment, the corporate place of knowledge (the academic industry) that I devote more and more time maintaining and servicing.*

These are the conditions from which we attempt to decolonize, recount, and communicate.

## Notes

This essay was written collaboratively as part of a book sprint. See “How This Text Was Written” (in this issue) for more information on the process.

1. Snorton and Haritaworn, “Trans Necropolitics.”
2. Chen, “Brain Fog.”
3. Sa’at, *History of Amnesia*, 7.
4. *Ibid.*, 10.

## References

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