

Transcript

Nations By Artists Ep.3: Archive/Counter-Archive

Mik Migwans [0:00] This podcast was written and recorded in Toronto, on Anishinaabe and Haudenosaunee territory. Today we recognize the survivors of the 60s scoop and of colonial child welfare policies. Under these systems, Indigenous children were (and are) trafficked away from their families, and placed under state care and in non-indigenous homes. As we discuss the place of archives in state-making, we acknowledge the obstacles facing child welfare survivors in accessing the records of their displacement.

[Atmospheric instrumentals by Zoon / Daniel Monkman]

Sarah Robayo Sheridan [0:31] Amidst the louder pieces in the Nations by Artists exhibition you'll find a quiet work whose emotional impact far exceeds its diminutive scale. It's a piece by Majdulin Nasrallah called *1948: Souvenir from Palestine*. It consists of three candles on a plinth, with a poem by Mahmoud Darwish etched onto handmade paper. Look closely and you'll see that the candle bases are shaped like keys. The key is widely used as a symbol for the 700,000 Palestinians displaced from their villages in 1948. It's an emblem of hope that they'll one day return to these homes.

[1:24] Beyond attesting to the violence of exile, Nasrallah's work also asks another question. How do you archive a sense of home? It's often said that "as the land is lost, so is the Palestinian." As a counter-archival gesture, Nasrallah imbues the candles with familiar scents – coffee beans, jasmine flowers, sage and za'atar, connecting displaced Palestinians back to the land they've tended for generations.

[Musical transition]

SRS [2:30] This is Nations By Artists, a podcast where we talk to artists about how they're using the "stuff" of the nation-state as the raw material for their art. I'm Sarah Robayo Sheridan.

MM [2:41] And I'm Mik Migwans. And we're the curators of the exhibition "Nations By Artists," at the Art Museum at the University of Toronto. This podcast builds on the exhibition, by asking artists questions like: What shapes a nation? What fuels it? What can crack it open?

[Music swells]

SRS [3:30] When artists go digging in archives, they'll often find conspicuous omissions. Sometimes the records lead them to linking the personal and the political, to uncovering untold stories, and creating new methods of archiving. In this episode, we look at how archives are mobilized to uphold dominant state narratives. We'll hear from artists Huong Ngo, Sadie Barnette and Jasmina Cibic about how they practice counter-archiving as a way of speaking back to history.

[4:03] But what exactly is counter-archiving? State surveillance and other forms of suppression have often conspired to exclude communities, including women, trans,

queer, indigenous, racialized, disabled, displaced and colonized peoples. Many communities have their own traditional forms of record keeping such as songs, oral tradition, and wampum. In opposition to technologies of control, counter-archiving can be a powerful means of disrupting history and artists interceding into archives can be part of that work.

[Gently distorted rock music]

MM [4:50] The archives of the nation are centuries deep and football fields wide – more paper than anyone could sift through in a lifetime. But what’s contained inside is tiny compared to what’s been cut out: Embodied kinds of knowledge. The intimacies of our relationships. Personal experiences. The mannerisms that a parent passes along to their child. How do you preserve this ‘other’ stuff of history?

[5:12] In her video work *The Voice is An Archive*, the artist Huong Ngo proposes a more porous container for record-keeping: intergenerational memory.

Huong Ngo [5:23] My mom really resists being interviewed. So I often have to secretly record her either when I'm on a phone call with her or she's doing something. And at that moment she was just singing a song, and I just thought it was really nice. So I just recorded her very spontaneously.

Mrs. Ngo *[Singing in Vietnamese]*

HN [5:50] There's a moment where she forgets the lyrics and she has to go find the lyrics that she wrote down. And then, you know, she starts singing again.

Mrs. Ngo *[Singing halting pieces of a song, with Huong echoing]*

HN [6:06] And I love that moment when she forgets, because to me, it kind of speaks to the slipperiness of memory and archives and our personal history.

Mrs. Ngo and family *[Women singing together, interwoven throughout following narration]*

HN [6:24] In the video, you see three different faces: me on the right, my sister on the left, and then my niece in the middle. And we're all kind of singing different versions of the song and trying to repeat as best as we can what my mom is singing.

[6:45] Our voices start to collect, you know, they start very individual and then they collect for a moment. And I was thinking about the voices collecting as a way to add strength to one another.

[7:11] Me and my sister, we grew up with Vietnamese and we have different levels of Vietnamese. But my niece, what's interesting is that she grew up with very little Vietnamese, but she grew up speaking Mandarin, and she picks up on certain sounds and then she replicates them in their own way, so they have a certain translation to them. They have a bit more of a Mandarin sound at times.

Niece *[Singing alone in Vietnamese]*

HN [7:51] Identity is so much linked to your fluency in a language, and that's something that can be very hurtful and harmful to people who don't have that for one reason or another. Whether it's because that was discouraged when they were young, whether it was because they didn't have access to some of the resources or, in my case, not having access to my parents all the time. My parents worked the second shift. And so a lot of times they just weren't at home.

[8:22] So, you know, trying to change, turn that around, and to search for authenticity in your identity - through imperfection has been, for me, a really important process of reclaiming an identity and a cultural ownership or heritage.

[8:45] Vietnamese, is like many other languages, where over time there has developed a more official pronunciation or writing orthography. But my Vietnamese is coming from my mom's Vietnamese, which is coming from the time when she was living in Vietnam. So it's kind of like this time capsule and when I speak it or when my family speaks it, we kind of - people talk about how it sounds *que* or like, 'country.' Even though my mom grew up in Hanoi.

[9:22] In Vietnam, there are so many different dialects and pronunciations. The use and history of those pronunciations and dialects are being lost. So for me, it's like a time capsule or like a smuggling of that accent outside of the country.

[Many voices singing together]

Niece [9:50] Okay, how do you stop the recording? Like that?

HN [9:53] Press that button again. This one. Uh, this one.

Niece [9:59] Okay.

HN [10:00] And then press the top button.

Jasmina Cibic [10:06] Whenever I enter an archive, most of the times, I'm not quite sure exactly what I'm going to find. Because these are mostly archives that, you know, are disappearing, or there are issues with time, how much space and time of course I have for the research, because they're kind of quite large proposals for research and should really be PhDs. So, you know, you kind of have to pull the plug on the research itself at some point, which is the hardest thing to do.

[10:33] Also, because a lot of the times the archives were so lacking was that I use the holes. A lot of the times actually I use the gaps that I find. So for example, we would find three pages of a document, but not the additional three. And with this lack, I actually then try to do something creative that shifts the register. Or it actually questions why these three pages are missing. And so I really, really make a point of my research being different to that of a historian.

[Relaxed, distorted music]

SRS [11:06] Jasmina Cibic has been combing through archives looking for examples of how diplomatic gifts of culture have been mobilized in moments of crisis throughout the 20th century. This research led her to the League of Nations, which was founded as a framework for international cooperation in the wake of the first World War.

[11:25] The Palace of Nations in Geneva was planned to be its headquarters. But the building never got that life. Just as construction was completed, the second World War broke out, and it never opened. Today, the building houses the archives of that failed political project. When Cibic went digging in there, she was most attracted to the artistic artifacts of those unrealized dreams. For example, potential flag designs that were never adopted, and an unfinished anthem...

JC [11:56] What I found so amazing was that these were all propositions made by amateur artists. So these were not designers, architects that would be commissioned. But amateur designers, amateur artists that just wanted to make a donation in a kind of quite symbolic, sort of tokenistic way. Just paying homage to this entity that was supposed to prevent the next world conflict.

[Snare drums]

SRS [12:35] These discoveries led her to create *All That Power Melts into Noise*, an installation of marching drums suspended on the wall.

JC [12:42] So they're snare drums, which are painted over. So on top of their, let's say, drum heads, they have different symbols. They're very colorful, but in fact, they are all proposals for the flag of the League of Nations.

Eddie Izzard clip [13:06] We stole countries! That's how you build an empire. We stole countries with a cunning use of flags.

JC [13:12] There's a very funny, there's a very funny British comedy sketch where a British explorer comes to an island and goes, "Do you have a flag? Do you have a song? We have a song. We have a flag. Therefore, we will take your island."

EI [13:23] ...there's 500 million of us! But do you have a flag? *[Audience laughter]*

JC [13:31] So if you start a nation state, you need an anthem. When the nation state dies and it goes to war, it needs a march. And the marching drum seems to be the really right medium to connect the two. So I guess this whole installation really kind of brings together the archive, but kind of manifests it in a physical way, but also it enacts it for the first time, because these marches and these anthems and these flags were never performed. They were lying inside a dusty archive, never problematized.

[14:05] And effectively, why was this? Because the League of Nations never wanted to choose an actual flag or an actual song for the fear of nationalism. They were so afraid of choosing any artistic practice, any architect that would be tied to national belonging, that they just didn't do it. So with the designs, there are some very esoteric presentations, but you really see individual nationalist styles within the project.

SRS

[14:38] Some show the whole globe, others look more like Russian constructivist paintings. One of them hauntingly bears a swastika. This is a new world order envisioned through the eyes of common people imagining the future of nations and a permanent end to war – a situation that has yet to come to pass.

[14:58] The resting drums resonate with another element she found in the archives: a proposed anthem which was never finished.

JC

[15:04] So one that we found was an orchestral arrangement by Franz Brabes – a composer nobody ever heard of, he's nowhere to be found. So there was this amazing march, then amongst the orchestral composition, it had six lines that were empty.

[15:20] So when you have individual lines where each instrument has a line, there were then six lines that were empty. And then sort of three or four pages into the composition, within those six empty lines there is this very tentatively hand-sketched melody that appears, without any note on what is this voice or the instrument or the rhythm. There's just this tentative little melody.

[15:47] So I worked with a composer and artist Barbara Kinga Majewska. A Polish, an amazing Polish artist and composer. And taking this melody which belonged to no one. We called it our little ghost voice...

[Melody sung by three sopranos]

JC

[16:10] It was this fantastic starting point to reinscribe this missing female voice from all history of nation-building into a new performative piece, which we then developed as a composition for three soprano voices that are then enacted within installations.

[16:31] I do think that artists, when they use research, they can also do a lot of damage. And I have been, in the past, actually quoted by historians, which was very problematic because they were effectively quoting a proposition which is departing from archives. But it is creating a theatre, and even more so it's creating an absurdist theatre.

[16:53] If we are looking at institutionalized art, and that connection, we are looking at fiction models. You know, it would be really a lot to say that we as artists and cultural producers are actually, effectively creating actual change. Otherwise we would go and do something else. And a lot of artists and a lot of curators and a lot of you know, people are activists as well. But I personally think that, you know, political activism happens outside of the museum. Yes, you can make people think, but it's still a fictitious moment.

[17:26] When then the ground shakes, when reality bites back, then this is the question: What do we do? Within our fictional models, commenting on reality – How do we react?

[Gently distorted rock music]

**Sadie
Barnette**

[17:59] So it's two photographs. And in the first photograph, my father is standing in a living room, kind of parlor setting. He is wearing an army uniform. He looks so young, a bit innocent, and he has been drafted and will soon be sent to Vietnam. In the next photograph there is definitely a sort of seriousness and worldliness in his eyes, and he's

wearing what we think of as a typical Panther uniform. A leather jacket, a couple of political pins on his lapel and the leather beret, you know, slanted to the side.

[18:50] Both of these photographs are family snapshots, so they are Polaroids that would normally be about four by five inches. But I've scanned them at high resolution so that I could blow them up to almost life-size scale and make them a bit larger than life.

[Relaxed music]

SRS [19:20] That's Oakland-based artist Sadie Barnette describing her artwork *Untitled (Dad, 1966 and 1968)*. Her diptych plays on expectations of the two uniforms, inviting viewers to wrestle with the question, what constitutes a state hero versus a state threat? What courage is lauded and what bravery is feared?

SB [19:44] It's really about this process that happens after every war, basically in the history of our country, where a generation of black and brown at that time, men, you know, come home from war and realize that they weren't actually fighting for their own rights and their own dignity, and they were treated with just as much racism as they were before they left. He felt like he was still in war in Compton, California, because of the military-style raids that police were doing in the black neighborhoods.

[20:17] When I was growing up, my father rarely talked about being in the Panthers, and he almost never would speak about his experience in Vietnam and the war. And I think it was mostly because there were just so many painful memories throughout both of those experiences. And honestly, it wasn't until we filed the Freedom of Information Act request. And after about five years of going back and forth. But receiving those files and really just seeing, in black and white, you know, my father's history, his everyday movements and how targeted he was by the FBI, by COINTELPRO. I think it really just made it feel that talking about it would be much bigger than just my father and bigger than just our family story. But it could shine light on this moment in history.

[21:10] And then I was able to start combing through some of these images. And it was actually his niece – who I call my “auntie cousin” because technically she’s my cousin, but because of our age difference, she kind of, you know, helped raise me up, and feels like an auntie. Anyway, she took these photographs probably in her mother’s living room. So they really are these family moments, you know, I imagine her being younger than him and kind of looking up to him – both as he's going off to war, being worried for his safety, and also, as he's, you know, donning this Panther uniform, of pride and dignity – her snapping these photographs.

[21:49] There wasn't a huge multitude of photographs that I could choose from. And so, in a way, this diptych almost made itself. But at the same time, it's so perfect, that if I were just to have a few photographs, these two would be them. Because it says so much to have these two photographs next to each other.

[22:10] And I guess that I should also say that they hang on a wallpaper which is entitled *Special Agents*. And this wallpaper is composed of stamps, handwritten signatures, margin notes, date and time stamps, from within the actual FBI file. And some of the stamps read: “Racial Int. Sect.” which is an abbreviation for the “Racial Intelligence

Section.” So just thinking about how blatant this racial profiling was that there would be a stamp on hundreds of FBI desks all across the country.

[Dreamy music]

SB [23:08] I can't say exactly why in 2011, after all these years, he finally said, you know, I want to write the letter and start this process of requesting these documents. But it might have been the fact that it was coming up on the 50th anniversary of a lot of this history. And this is the history of our country. But I think on a personal level, it was really him wondering what his engagements with informants had been. And of course, once you actually receive the documents, so much of the information about informants and agent provocateurs is redacted. But I think for him, he was looking for, you know, some proof and some validation that what he experienced and knew to be true was actually true.

[23:58] I think he just felt like, “If there's information on me, it's my right. I should have it.” And, you know, perhaps thought maybe he would get ten or twenty pages that would come back. But to see this five-hundred-page document I think really put into perspective how intense the surveillance was.

[24:20] We also found out that my father was fired from his job at the post office, and the reason that was cited was, living with a woman he wasn't married to. Which... In all of these 500 pages of really intense surveillance, the worst thing that they could find my father doing was living with the mother of his newborn child and working at the United States Post Office. Because it was a government job, it was sort of twisted into this executive order that had been put on the books by Truman about behavior unbecoming a government employee. And this executive order was often used to target gay folks in government jobs. But ironically, in this case, it was used to target my dad for living out of wedlock in 1968.

[25:15] It has also, you know, speaking about the way that people talked about my father, you read these really sweet personal comments that people say, about how he was always on time and dressed nice. And it's just even more chilling when you feel these really personal moments come through this, really... weaponized bureaucracy, is always how I think about J. Edgar Hoover's FBI. But you still get these little moments of life that come through, and that contrast is really quite stark.

Huey P. Newton clip [25:49] When we first started, we had a police alert patrol. And we would patrol a community and if we saw the police brutalizing anyone we put an end to it. Usually the police wouldn't brutalize anyone if we were on hand, because we were armed. And if the police arrested the individual we would follow them to the jail and bail the individual out. Now, whether he was a Panther or not. And we would then gain recruits like this. And so the community started to say well, these people are really concerned about our welfare.

SB [26:17] The way that the Black Panther has been sort of, kind of, in some ways, lauded, in some ways criticized, but oftentimes flattened. You know, the leather jacket and the guns. And that, kind of, is all that is seen or known or talked about. And while I do think that there are important aspects to the style – I think the Panthers were very aware of aesthetics and what it meant to kind of, you know, paint this picture of protectors...

[26:50] I guess what I think is a useful way of looking at the work of the Panthers is as this family project, which is less about like this, you know, machismo, gunslinging young man, and more about a community of people working together to provide what families need at a time (much like now) when the government was not providing those things. So if you actually look at the Panthers' services from, you know, free breakfast program to ambulance programs, education, schools, protecting elderly folks from getting evicted from their house. To me, all of those projects are very much about care.

[27:29] And J. Edgar Hoover famously said that the most dangerous element of the Black Panthers was the free breakfast program. Because of the "inherent criminality in black people" becoming enchanted and, you know, hearts and minds, believing in something other than the repression that we are supposed to just be happy with and accept.

[27:57] So to me as a daughter looking at my young father, I see this as a family project, and so it makes sense to me to reframe this conversation with the love that I have for my father and the love that I saw my father have for the community. To really talk about the Panthers and the Black Power movement in general through that lens.

[28:20] There's an element of the work that proposes that maybe love and protection and taking care of each other might be the actual antidote to this repression. And sometimes those gestures are blowing up a photograph and elevating our own history. Or in the work that I'm making now, where I'm actually drawing pages of the FBI file with powdered graphite and colored pencil. You know. That process of actually making it with my own hands and trying to transmute this material into something else, through making, through spending time, through meditating, through willing love and some type of healing into these works. And not thinking that that's going to just happen overnight or to put a pretty bow on the history and think that now everything is fine. But just to spend time with that process of trying to claim love and claim healing and work on it as like a long journey, not as a destination, but really as a mode for engaging with history.

[29:29] To think that COINTELPRO was the end of government overreach would obviously be a huge mistake. And with the digital technologies that are available today, young activists are scrutinized to a degree that is almost unfathomable. But I hope that people, you know, can connect the story of COINTELPRO to what's happening now and continue to think about accountability and what that looks like and what actually makes us safe, which, you know, in my humble opinion, would be equality and people having enough.

[Jesse Davidson spoken word piece over Zoon's distorted guitar music]

*This is my attempt to reveal our truth in your language
Several times while travelling to the sun
I was faced by the ghosts of my ancestors
They spoke of the ghosts of your ancestors
They explain it is them who saw me born into so much pain
Pain that I now attempt to hide from your people
I understand that pain now, I know it is strength
Strength of oneself, strength in numbers*

*Strength to protect my people and our future
From the pain your ancestors cut into our DNA
With one last journey into the sun let the fire be the ritual
Cleanse my spirit from this underserving pain*

[Atmospheric music throughout narration]

MM [32:32] This episode revealed some of the ways that artists raid the archives for signs of life. Sadie Barnette reaches into an FBI file and finds the potential for reconnecting with family around painful events, decades after they happened. She transforms the classified document into a model for collective healing, extending a fixed moment in state history into a lineage of Black resistance that continues into the present.

[32:57] Jasmina Cibic reaches into a transnational archive and picks up where the paper trail ends – assembling the pieces and inventing new histories where others were cut off or left unrealized. The drums installed on the gallery wall express the condition of an archival remnant caught in a holding pattern, waiting to be activated. Huong Ngo archives a set of vocal tendencies passed on between generations of women. It’s a record of continuity, but also change. And a notion of culture that’s less about a fixed identity than something alive that tells a new story with each repetition.

[33:33] While voice recordings are often found in conventional archives, Huong’s archive is so tied to shared memories and cultural contexts. Hers is an archive that *we* can’t access. But as we witness these women connecting, in moments falling out of sync and coming back together, we are reminded that even the seemingly more permanent materials of traditional archive are unstable, shifting in meaning and form with the passage of time.

[Relaxed music]

MM [34:07] This podcast is written and hosted by me (Mik Migwans), and Sarah Robayo Sheridan. Aliya Pabani is our producer. We especially thank Zana Kozomora for researching and conducting **the interview** with Jasmina Cibic.

[34:23] Marianne Rellin does our communications and social media, Hana Nikcevic handles public programs and outreach. Sanniah Jabeen and Zana Kozomora are the researchers on this podcast series. The music on this episode is by Zoongidewin, or Zoon, including a spoken word piece featuring Jessie Davidson.

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Visit artmuseum.utoronto.ca for more information.