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Time Bias Poem No. 3
in memorium / device for falling into the rift between history and memory

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your voice from first to last held me rocking with the waves of the dark sea
a gull cry returning from the faraway birth of whispering sleep
full with my name drummed by the horsemen wind
was it an hour or more the flight delayed they said the storm they said
and the waiting crowd filled the square, grew restless
soldiers smoking, watching the cortege, the polished black anthem of war

your voice from first to last at the table, in the kitchen running water
over the garden squash, over the sores of flesh

making the sweetness of milk into fish and flower and forgetful night

they once stopped you in the street, in the 50s, said you reminded them of
tropical fish but the sea is now dead they say
in the box are its bones and their flag buries your memory with its boots on.

Notes on Time Bias Poem No. 3 / In memoriam: device for falling into the rift between history and memory

The exhibition *Stirred: Memories and Dreams* gave me the opportunity to investigate a question of crucial importance to both egalitarian decolonizing cultural politics and intermedia research which turns on a strange but intimate paradox. Both memories and dreams play a significant role in politics, as has been extensively noted and discussed in recent years. Nationalism, for example, is impossible without the ritualization of memory and its monumentalization. In quite another era, seemingly so far from us now, but one which now so uncannily resonates with ours, Walter Benjamin described such memory work as the aestheticization of politics and indeed this is why all nationalisms are always in danger of drifting into fascism, as we see now almost everywhere in the world. What people often call identity politics also shares this danger but that is not the whole story. In both cases, memories are set loose in history and it is through memories that people tend to go in search for history. This is why some people either confuse memory for history or want to substitute the former for the latter. But the two are not the same because some memories are not only forgotten but also buried, banished, burned while others are monumentalized and canonized. History is not memory but this politics of memory.

Now here is the paradox. It is well known that you cannot plan to remember, and again it was Walter Benjamin who reminded us of this, that you need to forget in order to remember (contrary to what people say, computers do not use memory). Not only that but it is the pure contingency of one's material situation that make memories possible. A photograph lets me look, say, at something of an afternoon in August twenty-seven years ago but I may or may not remember anything about it (and I will never actually get around to watching any of those videos from back then) whereas a chance dress, a phrase, a timbre of voice, the scent of a blossom, a crack in a sink somewhere sets alight nothing less than a stupefying revolution in my boredom and my hurry. These enchantments, like Proust's madeleines, are a deeper, more powerful kind of chance than the toss of a coin probability theory deals with, insofar as they are not themselves meaningless occurrences but reach out through the world of meaning as though someone from the past grabs you by the collar to give you a good shake. In this regard, memories are not ghosts but something of a tremor, an earthquake, that fractures narrative, make it run in a different direction, toward unforeseen places, indeed turns it into a riddle. And so it is that without narrative, without this umbilicus to the world of meaning, our memories would engulf us in another silence; other than the vivid and clear silence they plunge us into; and other than that deep inescapable silence we face the past with, as well, and

that our memories seek to liberate us from. So it is that my memories are singularly different from your memories, even if we were together then and there. But, strangely and inexplicably, they do not come from me, are not my memories even when they are my memories and not yours. Rather they come across some rift in history, some place between history and memory, some displacement of history from itself. And this is what might bring us together in wonder and delight how many years from now who knows? Such a displacement of history from itself, as if there were a secret passageway between past and future, as if it somehow managed to outmaneuver or bypass the present, is in this way a displacement of history from the direction that the powerful have set for it. Egalitarian decolonizing cultural politics ignores its intimacy with the sea change and the anonymity this passageway promises at its peril.

This rift in history, this “in between” memory and history, is precisely the kind of problem or situation that intermedia research seeks to investigate by conjuring the powers of our media ecology since this rift belongs to this ecology. Moreover, what I have been calling *time bias poems* are particularly well suited to investigate this rift. I take the concept of time bias from the work of Harold A. Innis, a Canadian economic historian and communication theorist. Innis’ “bias of communication” thesis proposes a theory of media ecology wherein time and space are two different dimensions through which any given medium of communication affects our media ecology overall. While discussions of media bias typically concern themselves with issues of opinions, perspective and interests, in Innis’ idiosyncratic usage, the metaphor of bias is taken from the work of electrical engineers and the field of telegraphy in particular, where bias refers to the use of a direct current to establish a reference point, a bias, enabling an alternating current to amplify a signal (indeed as “cutting on the bias” in tailoring creates a special property of the cloth cut). For Innis, the metaphor of bias then enables the elaboration of both a normative vision and a critical historical diagnosis. Innis proposes for his normative ideal a media ecology that enables the projection of power over time and across space in balance. Empires with media ecologies that balance the contingencies of space and time endure, Innis suggests, unlike the British Empire that Innis’s theorizing is ultimately concerned with and which, at the time, was facing open revolt on all fronts and in full collapse. This normative vision then enables a denunciation of the decidedly unbalanced “present mindedness” and “space bias” of the modern world, the roots of which he traces through a historical analysis of the modern dominance of “industrialized communication based on the eye.” The enduring importance of Innis’ communication theory for decolonizing cultural politics then is this historically, socially and politically contextualized and media ecological theorization of information which takes us far beyond the reifications of the standard cybernetic and mathematical definitions. Not only this, his “plea for time” suggests a strategy of culture for critically intervening in a world environment where information (reports, ads, indices, stats, soundbytes, capta, prices, etc.) mediates the feedback loops between the accumulation of capital and the accumulation of power. For the bias of time, in such a situation, opens onto that subalternized dimension of our contemporary media ecology and returns us to the histories of colonial enclosure that our world environment has repressed in order to constitute the present as the future. Time bias poems then are probes (as McLuhan called such

experiments) that recalibrate our contemporary media ecology in order to bear witness through the politics of memory to the sacrificial ground (or, more precisely, to *subaltern counter-environments*, to appropriate another McLuhanism) over which the powerful establish their official and authorized histories of the present. When global urbanization reaches its terminal and convergent crisis point of planetary environmental climate change and mass dispossession, we seek inside this internet of things for the poetry of the materials of history.

Here, mourning as a kind of memory, has a special status in probing the counter-environmental displacement of history from itself, as mourning, whether public or private is a procession of the biographical through the rift. Intermedia research, as always, attempts to represent (especially when it fails) social contradictions which are embodied, lived, and unfold in time. This time bias poem is thus a probe that seeks to represent contradictions of the private and the public through contradictions of memory and history. Racism and sexism are aesthetic politics as much as they are politics of state, class and nation. In an era of aestheticized politics, this time bias poem of contingent materials and situations responds by remembering.

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