

STORYTELLING AS FEMINIST EPISTEMOLOGY
AND ETHIC OF RESPONSE-ABILITY TO
THE PLURAL PAST

Ruben Hordijk, images by Theo Ilichenko

In *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism* (2019), Ariella Aïsha Azoulay challenges the “pursuit of the new” that drives academic research, placing scholars into the role of “discoverers” or “experts.” Through this role, scholars continue to operate through the imperial modality of time, i.e., the timeline that is based on the closure of the past and an implicit or explicit notion of progress. Azoulay warns against the move of critique to go “beyond” progress, which gets re-inscribed in a chronolinearity premised on the imperial closure of the past. Instead, she proposes an “unlearning with [dead and alive] companions [as] a withdrawal from the quest for the new that drives academic disciplines [...] Unlearning means not engaging with those relegated to the ‘past’ as ‘primary sources’ but rather as potential companions” (Azoulay 2019, 16). In “Decolonising Critique” (2016), Sara C. Motta presents the “storyteller” as an alternative figuration that displaces the scholar-subject as discoverer/expert. It functions as “a metaphor that exceeds the coloniality of knowing-subjectivity,” emphasizing the role of community and listening inherent to the storytelling praxis (39). This shifting of methodological and epistemological root metaphors from discovery to storying displaces knowledge-production in favor of a nexus of *knowledge/memory*. The storyteller does not *produce or represent* knowledge, but they are a responsive *addressee* of a communal event. This displacing of the imperial timeline calls into question “presence” through the category of “precedence” (Chavez/Vázquez 2017). The decolonial notion of precedence, which seeks to displace the paradigm of immanence/transcendence, “comes from listening to the notions of time prevalent in the first nations of *Abya Yala*, in which the past is understood as what is always ahead of us” (Vázquez 2017, 87). The past is not what has happened and is closed when time is understood as the “whole of relations” (Al-Saji 2018), which continuously changes in every present that creates a different constellation between the past and present, opening to different possible futures from the ever-changing constellation of past-present (Al-Saji 2018).

Knowingly or unknowingly, it is the past as the “whole of relations” that one responds to and is responding through. This

implies an ethical injunction of response-ability to the past as “a task before/ahead/in front of us”: “Inheritance is never a given, it is always a *task*” (Derrida 2012, 67). Ethics as response-ability to the plural past interpellates us as inheritors, as in/voluntarily response-able for the relations that have constituted and enabled us: This “spectral inheritance” (Hordijk 2021) implies a feminist ethic of response-ability, in which pastness enables responsiveness: the non-closed relation to pastness is what ensures an openness to plural relational worlding in difference. This relation to pastness is not fully open as our responses to it are structurally debilitated through the imperial timeline, but storytelling continues to keep that relation “half-open” (Al-Saji 2018).

→ Fig. 1
Snapshots on queer family-making,
2017–2021, image by Theo Ilichenko.



Storytelling as feminist praxis recasts representational academic writing as a genre as part of an aesthetic transformation of “multiple storytelling in which story and life merge” (Trinh 1989, 144) based on communal response-ability. The nexus of telling, listening and being an addressee, envisions a communal and critical praxis of spectral inheritance that acknowledges the precedence of those who come before, which enables us to be responsive and response-able. Such an ethics of response-ability is a mode of inheritance, which does not take tradition as the property (object) to legitimate heirs (subject), but as a praxis of replenishing the enabling antecedent relationality through which we (re-)establish connections with the living and the dead creatively, critically and communally as an open-ended project of pluriversal worlding. I wish to bring together a few teachers who use and reflect on storytelling as a project of unlearning the subject-position of the scholar and the imperial timeline, with reference to Fumi Okiji’s taking up of Walter Benjamin, Gloria Anzaldúa’s shamanic aesthetics, and Trinh T. Minh-Hà’s listening and retelling of her grandma’s story. Then, with the help of Silvia Posocco, I wish to emphasize the *impurity* of inheritance that places the storyteller/addressee in a position of impossible but necessary response-ability. These references are not a survey of the theory of the storyteller. Not only would that be impossible, but storying also ques-

tions canonization and reference. There is no master-discourse of the storyteller, of storying. Storytelling is always plural, belonging to the many overlapping and enmeshed written and unwritten traditions that we do not own but nevertheless belong to.

Okiji cross-reads Walter Benjamin's essay on the storyteller and jazz as aesthetics of the radical black tradition. Okiji calls the story a "plural event" that has no beginning and always remains open-ended: "Storytelling [is] understood as a shared, reiterative undertaking (an endless, boundless rehearsal) involving a collective of disparate participants, both living and deceased" (Okiji 2018, 68). The retelling contains „die Spur des Erzählenden wie die Spur der Töpferhand an der Tonschale“ (Benjamin 1991, 447). Each retelling contains the trace and idiosyncrasy of the teller; this trace holds the multi-temporal layeredness of the preceding retellings that enable and overflow the current retelling.

Reflecting on her writing praxis, Gloria Anzaldúa describes it as a taking up of a shamanic legacy that aims at change the level of the unconscious: "I realize that I was trying to practice the oldest 'calling' in the world—shamanism—and that I was practicing it in a new way" (Anzaldúa 2009, 121). The role of the shaman is to "mediate between the cultural heritage of the past and the present everyday situations people find themselves in. In retrospect I see that this was an unconscious intention on my part in writing *Borderlands/La Frontera*" (Anzaldúa 2009, 121). Through metaphor, images and myths, Anzaldúa reinvents and embodies a shamanic practice aimed at individual and collective healing and connections between different bodies and consciousnesses. In this way, metaphors and stories can become part of the processes of individual and collective self-healing. This shamanic temporality—mediating between collective pasts and present concerns—is instructive for the temporality of the metaphors used: they become ways of affirming one's inheritance in their inventive, creative re-articulation in the present, not as a reference to the authority of an *arche*, but as enabling *an-archival* relation and resource. The shamanic temporality of Anzaldúa's writing is a gathering place for the co-existence of multiple temporalities, which resists the closure of the past and reshuffles the coordinates of past-present-future. The shamanic temporality, mediating between the already-there and present concerns, is an aesthetic practice involving a reorganization of all the senses: it exceeds the naming of the present or capturing the contemporary moment. Through imaginative invention, it enacts the past in its configuring and refiguring of the present. "Shaman aesthetics" place the power of healing in the active and selective embodiment of the multiple pasts, exercising response-ability to the plural past as futuring praxis.

Trinh T. Minh-Hà's writing on listening to and inheriting her grandma's story as a sensory transgenerational transmission that undermines the temporal logic that divides the modern from the traditional; she does not position herself as a legitimate heir of a proper lineage, in which the story bestows her with a substantive identity, as *some-one* (subject) who inherits/possesses *something* (object). Listening as a sensory experience places Trinh as

an *addressee* of a story that speaks of and to her being, without her possessing anything. It is in the listening that she becomes joyful and response-able:

→ Fig. 2
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The story is me, neither me nor mine. It does not really belong to me, and while I feel greatly responsible for it, I also enjoy the irresponsibility of the pleasure obtained through the process of transferring. (...) My story, no doubt, is me, but it is also, no doubt, older than me (...) it exceeds all attempts at humanizing. (Trinh 1989, 122–123; emphasis added)

This alternate and multiple way of listening as sensing, as an aesthetic praxis, is an inheritance not of the sameness of a past-present, but maintains a response-enabling difference in its retelling and enactment: “To (re-)tell the story as she thinks it should be told; in other words, to maintain the difference that allows (her) truth to live on” (Trinh 1989, 150). Trinh captures the contradictions of fidelity (indebtedness, gratitude) and infidelity (appropriation, retelling from one’s own experience) in the structure of inheritance. Instead of the possessive identitarian subject there is a relational, plural subjectivity that can only be through the relation to what is “older than me”. To be an addressee is being enabled in the situated present by this “older than me.” To stay truthful to the listening to what precedes, one has to alter it and stay truthful to one’s own situation and experience. This means an act of (re-)creation: “To listen carefully is to preserve. But to preserve is to burn, for understanding means creating” (Trinh 1989, 121). The authority of the story is not patri-archal (deriving from the Father’s authoritative voice as origin/*arche*), but an-archical (lacking in origin, pertaining to a trace of a plural past): it is that that which enables her to trust her own experience, judgments, thought and creativity. This response-enabling story she receives makes her a witness to and a participant in a transgenerational communal event of the living and the dead, a participatory witness. This communal event has no beginning (origin), no end (telos); there are no rightful claims by legitimate heirs, but only

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spectral heirs who creatively respond, re-weave, re-create and re-define their response-enabling spectral inheritance.

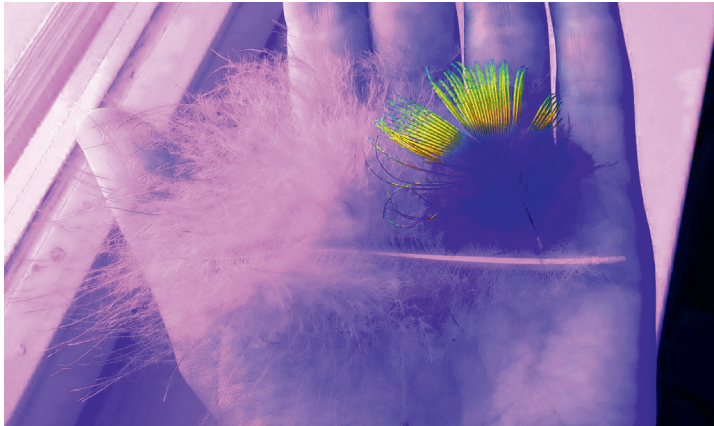


The “story as multiple event” and the figure of the storyteller evoke the relationality of knowledge/memory: before giving, there is receiving. Before responding, they have been responded to. Before speaking, there is listening. The relation between listening and speaking is examined by decolonial queer scholar and activist Silvia Posocco’s cross-reading of Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui and Jacques Derrida in “Decolonizing the Ear of the Other: Subjectivity, Ethics and Politics in Question” (2016). The question driving the essay is the possibility of a queer decolonial ethics and politics in the face of having to inhabit the structures of appropriation and extractivism. Posocco begins with Rivera Cusicanqui’s critique of the appropriation of decoloniality by scholars from ivy league universities who turn decoloniality into a general theory or epistemology, which claims to challenge existing epistemologies without challenging the political economy of the institutional power of American universities. Scholars (usually male) pay lip-service to yet continue to extract from the margins. “If ‘decolonial theory’ neutralizes a range of situated decolonial practices, how, then, in the light of such an indictment, can a (queer) decolonial analysis—one that is attuned to, *inter alia*, the critical unpacking of the workings of settler colonialism—proceed?” (Posocco 2016, 252) Posocco attempts a response by turning to Derrida’s text on “otobiography”: a pun that substitutes the ‘auto’ of autobiography for *oto*, that means “ear”, suggesting that every self-presentation has to travel first to the ear of the other in order to be heard. It is not the author that signs their text, but “it is the ear of the other that signs.” This allows Posocco to critically use and navigate decolonial theory from the question: “what kind of listening did it take for Rivera Cusicanqui’s contributions to be heard in a way that returned her ideas all knotted up?” (Posocco 2016, 256) Placing the response-ability for “signing” the other’s texts on the listener, Posocco continues to ask: “How did the other sign Rivera Cusicanqui’s text, and how did they construct the

text? How are we signing their texts in coloniality? [...] How is the testamentary structure of the signature marked by coloniality?” (Posocco 2016, 256) The framework of the storyteller/addressee as opposed to the scholar-expert poses the question to us, of “what kind of listening”: as tellers we are listeners, bearing the response-ability of signing the other’s text even under the response-debilitating modern/colonial structures of knowledge-production.

To listen to someone’s story means to be addressed: to be (come) response-able, to learn about one’s always-already implication in the web of relations, even when this listening happens within (and is made possible *through and despite*) response-debilitating structures and conditions. The response-ability of listening, being addressed and storying is the impure labor of bridge-work. Audre Lorde uses the metaphor of bridge-work to speak about connecting and respecting differences without erasure or suppression: the bridge respects the difference that it bridges (Lorde 2007). Differences must always be translated, which does not mean forcing it into a transparency or equivalence, but as an impure process of response: The opacity of difference necessitates impure bridge-work as relearning to become response-able heirs in a relational web that exceeds our knowledge and control. The entanglement in this relational web is inevitable, which is why there cannot be a strong border between an identitarian self and the other. Cultivating ethical, social, individual and collective transformation and response-ability is simultaneously an unlearning of our investment in the fragmented response-debilitating structures, and fuels our political commitment to a more response-enabling politics for the flourishing of all.

→ Fig. 4
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The emphasis on storying might seem anthropocentric but need not be. There is an “inhuman” aspect (not in the Euromodern sense of immorality but in a vitalist sense; Lykke 2022) connected to the story. The story “exceeds all attempts at humanizing” (Trinh 1989) and is a multi-temporal vehicle for inheriting preceding, current and future relations: it is a human way of inheriting and cultivating relations with the human and the non-human alike. More-than-humans are part of the relational web of

storying, as (making) kin (Gumbs 2020; Haraway 2016), as ancestors (Ismailova 2022), as relearning to relate to environment (Ghosh 2021; Wildcat 2005), and otherwise, as an injunction to collectively “inherit thickly” (Haraway in Thiele 2021). Storying is inheriting the open-ended web of non-anthropocentric modes of relationality. The relegation of story to the anthropocentric imagination might indeed be a modern, Kantian legacy of separating fact from fiction: “Perhaps the story has become *just* a story when I have become adept at consuming truth as fact” (Trinh 1989, 125). Only then does the story become a product of the isolated human imagination—the wings of the imagination “clipped”—that needs to be regulated for it not to stray in the fanciful and erroneous (Moten 2018). The inheriting of stories also exceeds transmission from “mouth to ear”, but also partakes in a haptic web of relations, from “tongue to face,” for example, as Donna Haraway reminds us, retelling the story of the more-than-human historical web of colonial relations that connect Australian shepherds, Navajo-Churro sheep culture, the gold rush and the murder and displacement of Navajo in the nineteenth century: “like it or not, flesh-to-flesh and face-to-face, I have inherited these histories through touch with my dogs, and my obligations in the world are different because of that fact” (Haraway 2008, 97). Whether we like it or not, we are inheritors, always-already entangled in a historical web of relations that simultaneously enable and debilitate. Learning to be an addressee and a story(re)teller is an acknowledging and thanking for this in/voluntary structure of inheritance that necessitates response and response-ability, although the content of this response-ability will not be an “external directive” or have a defined programmatic content, but inescapably needs to be taken up and interpreted creatively and critically. “That’s why I have to tell these stories—to tease out the personal and collective response required now, not centuries ago. Companion species cannot afford evolutionary, personal, or historical amnesia” (Haraway 2008, 98). The response-ability for the signature is with the addressee, listener, (re)teller. But the position from which we speak is always institutionally and psychically a position within the order of power that we wish to disengage from and undo. Even though we may wish to resist the “logic of purity” (Lugones 2003), the impure pluralism of a shared ongoing relational event of something that precedes us and that we are participating in as futural world-making, is always-already inscribed by the modern/colonial logic of fragmentation and purity. The impurity of the story–addressee, speaker, relation, mediation past and future—is always an *impure impurity*, i.e., ‘contaminated’ by the logic of purity and fragmentation of our institutional and psychic structures. But the (Anzaldúan, Trinhian, Okijian, Benjaminian, Lugonesian, Derridean, Posoccoian, Harawayan, ...) lessons seem to be that precisely in this impurity lies our response-ability to listen carefully, to let ourselves be addressed, and re-tell response-ably. The retelling might be an *appropriation*, but the figure of the response-able storyteller makes us addressees without ‘property’, so that we are accountable for our responsive theft, as a thanking to what has preceded us, so that

our story can be stolen and received, remembered and forgotten, for a pluriverse that is never mine nor yours, but to which we nevertheless belong.

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I am grateful and thrilled that the text is accompanied by Theo Ilichenko's beautiful images. Their work on queer care and mourning practices emerges from a very different socio-political and epistemic space than my own, but we nevertheless found many mutual resonances in our work. This unexpected collaboration suggests the spectral relationality, community and world-making/weaving capacities across differences that storying, spectral kinship (Ilichenko)/spectral inheritance (Hordijk), affective witnessing (Ilichenko)/participatory witnessing (Hordijk), enable. Encountering their visual and textual work, as well as our conversations, forced (i.e., requiring a response) and enabled me to reconsider the text in a very different light, and allowed the text to become-*other*, disclose opaque relational entanglements, and generate other relational becomings.

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