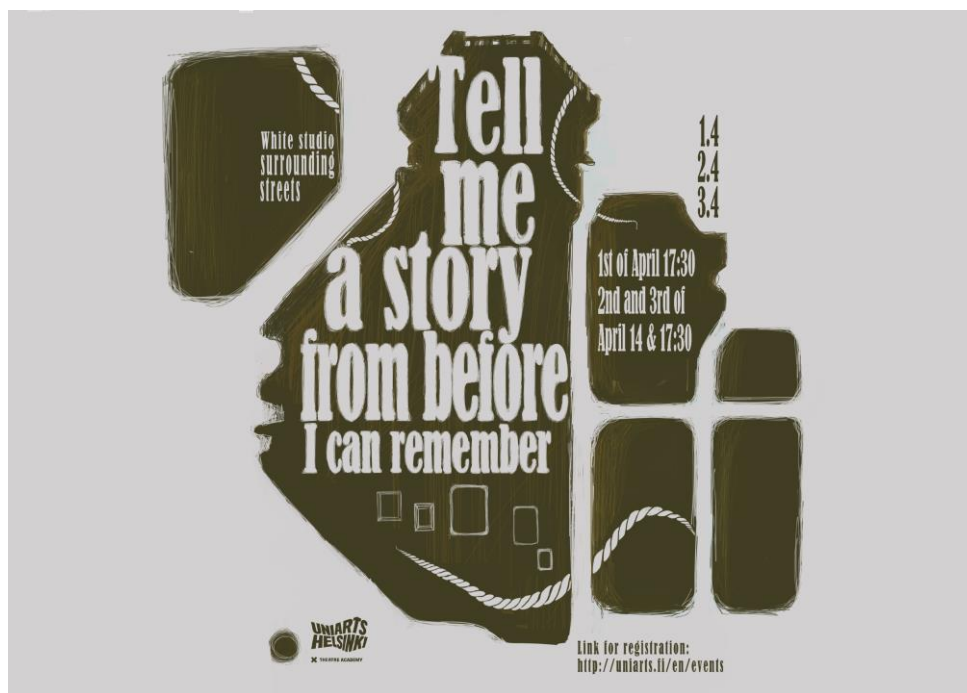


Speculative memory and the architecture of absence

SHAGHAYEGH ANSARI



ABSTRACT

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AUTHOR Shaghayegh Ansari Manouchehrabadi	MASTER'S OR OTHER DEGREE PROGRAMME Live Art and Performance Studies
TITLE OF THE WRITTEN COMPONENT/THESIS Speculative memory and architecture of absence	NUMBER OF PAGES + APPENDICES IN THE WRITTEN COMPONENT E.g. 60 pages
TITLE OF THE ARTISTIC/ ARTISTIC AND PEDAGOGICAL WORK <i>Tell me a Story From Before I can Remember</i> , Director and videographer: Shaghayegh Ansari, Dramaturge: Paula Sasse, Writer: Aref Houshmandnia, Sound Designer: Arash Rafiei, Producer: Frida Gullichsen. The artistic work is produced by the Theatre Academy. <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> The artistic work is not produced by the Theatre Academy (copyright matters have been agreed upon). <input type="checkbox"/> There is no recording available for the artistic work. <input type="checkbox"/>	
<p>This thesis develops memory as a speculative, embodied, and performative method for reframing the city. Moving away from institutional, traditional conceptions of the archive, it suggests an alternative archive, one which is intimate, affective, fragmentary, and carried through the body. This research synthesizes feminist, postcolonial, and site-specific theories on performance, integrating intimate and collective memory, dislocated narrative, and dislocated place into the cityscape through an audio walk tour in my performance entitled <i>Tell Me a Story Before I Can Remember</i>. This walk reframes Helsinki through overlapping memory layers drawn from Tehran, using the audience's bodies as listening and witnessing archives.</p> <p>The thesis argues that walking, most particularly a walking practice involving getting lost, exists as a method for resistance as much as it is an instrument for archival reactivation. Through frictional overlaying between and among sound, gesture, garment, and word, memory exists as a radical means for accessing and inhabiting urban absence, resisting dominant narrative, and speculating on what might have been. The text engages theory from thinkers like Saidiya Hartman, Diana Taylor, Michel de Certeau, and Ruth Hellier-Tinoco, and responds to the work of artists like Janet Cardiff, Sophie Calle, and Ann Hamilton. Its lyric and non-linear form reflects the texture of memory itself, flowing, incomplete, and recursive, demanding presence over proof, sensation over document.</p> <p>Finally, this research encourages a reevaluation of the archive as a live, performative act, one that dissolves distinctions between absence and presence, fact and fiction, here and there.</p>	
KEYWORDS archive, memory, site-specificity, urban space, walking, performance, palimpsest.	

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2. TO SPEAK INTO THE GAPS

This thesis project began with an emotion, with something sliding, something already lost, something I did not know how to grasp. I did not know precisely what I was searching for, only that I needed to understand memory differently; how it is felt, recalled, embodied, and perhaps shared.

I returned again and again in the process of creating this work, both the writing and the performance, to the voices of Black feminist thinkers. To the way they write history, the archive, and the body. To the world they see with such clarity and tenderness. To the writing that contained knowledge that was not abstracted out from the world but lived and situated and responsive to suffering and living on. To the words of Saidiya Hartman, M. Jacqui Alexander, and Audre Lorde that walked with me. They entered how I read. How I thought.

They brought me back to the reality that history is not a neutral space. That the archive is full of silence. That what is kept in remembrance is oftentimes that which is permitted to survive.

And that we can write ourselves back in, insistently but kindly. Our being there, our perception, our speaking, our sharing, is already an act of resistance. That memory is something that is possible to speculate. That the spaces of not knowing are a place that can house knowledge.

Their scholarship enabled me to see the way that personal experience is political. The way that the body is not merely reacting but is a mode of knowing (Lorde 1984). How to write from the body, from sorrow or joy or displacement, is not a an extension of the known. How archival work is not a matter of collection but of relation, by presence, by narrative, by refiguring what was excluded (Hartman 2008; Alexander, 2005).

I carry this with me as a person in between places. An immigrant. A person from the Middle East earning a living in Europe. The spaces that I travel within were not conceived of with me in mind. The archives that I find tend to forget whence I am from. But these writers provided an alternative paradigm; one that starts within refusal, and extends towards invention. I started to ask myself: how do I invent my own archive? One that holds the nuance of being here. One that is affective and fragmented. One that is composed of memory. Of being among others.

This thesis is an effort to construct a sort of archive. It is not an institutional archive, with strict categories, held in controlled environments, determined by the regime of the document. Instead, something closer to the body, something closer to the senses. It is not an assembly of stable facts, but an ongoing trace of what has come to be felt, what has come to be held in the memory, and what has been forgotten along the way. Derrida argues that the archive is a space of both memory and power, shaped by decisions about what is kept and what is excluded. They are interested in what is recordable, catalog able, namable. The rules of memory do not obey these. Memory is fluid. It moves, it fades, it returns involuntarily. It is not just in the word or the document, but in gestures, in wear; in the turn one makes into the corner or the hesitation in one specific street. The archive that I am trying to create, then, attempts to cling to these moments, to let them reverberate once, at least shortly. To restore memory to the breath.

There are numerous theoretical and artistic responses to archives. But the ones resonating with my research are: Jacques Derrida's *Archive Fever* (1996), which deconstructs the powers and origins of the archive; Michel Foucault's *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1972), where the archive is a system that governs what can be said and remembered; Diana Taylor's *The Archive and the Repertoire* (2003), which distinguishes between the archive as written record and the repertoire as embodied memory; and Andreas Huyssen's *Present Pasts* (2003), which reflects on the archive's role in shaping cultural memory and its temporal disjunctions. I do not pretend to address them all in detail. My ambition is not to map out the full landscape of theories, but to travel through an affective and intuitive landscape. What follows is something incomplete. By design. Rather than offering a comprehensive survey of archival theories, I am emphasizing a personal, experiential approach to engaging with archives.

2.1. Toward a living archive

One of the purposes of this thesis is to consider how memory can become an approach to reshaping the city. Not rewriting in the sense of replacing what is there with something else, or offering one alternative narrative to an official one. But rewriting as an act of weaving, a layering of absence and presence, emotion and gesture, into existing textures of the city.

Cities are not stable. They appear rooted in architecture or charted by logic, but there are so many timelines condensed into the pavements, concealed behind the façades, packed into the creases where one does not care to look. They are constructed not just by planners and builders but also by the walkers who construct them, the inhabitants who inhabit them, and the forgetters who forget about them. Their surface may provide official stories about progress, about ownership, about order, but beneath it, or alongside, are others. Things forgotten, covered, quietly eliminated.

To walk through the city with memory, then, is to create an alternative map. It is to map out affective geographies, routes in the form of grief, joy, loss, hope, and exile. Moreover, not my memory alone, but the memory of others as well. In the performance within this thesis project, *Tell Me a Story from before I Can Remember* (April 2025), I brought stories from somewhere else, memories from Tehran and put them into the city streets of Helsinki. This act was not about comparing or equating, but rather inquiring: what do you do when you walk with memories non-local to the site? What kinds of attention does it generate? What does it let you attend to which the city otherwise hides? By superimposing one city with the recollection of the other, there was something of a speculative geography. The city that the audience traversed became inscribed with somewhere else. Oftentimes, the two were in alignment, and sometimes not. The walk was one of reinscription of the city.

For me, memory then is a means of disrupting the prevailing discourses of space. It is a means to defy the notion that one city is one narrative, one neutral space. Rather, it provides room for multiplicity. For the things that do not fit. For what is on the outside. It reminds us to pay attention to the emotional and historical contents of public space, not what it appears to be, but what it carries. And it invites us to pay attention to what is no longer there but can still be there. In the resonance of the voice. In the light shining through the window. In the body swerving to the side of the sidewalk.

I also wanted to consider how memory could enact small resistances through quiet disturbance. To take the sidewalk with headphones, to listen to the stories of someone else's place, to put on clothing imbued with the gestures of others; this demanded an alternate rhythm, an alternate state of being in public. It altered the frame. The city

became a stage, and the audience and the performers, the strangers and the locals were caught in an instant of shared witnessing.

Through the performance this question came to my mind: Who was watching whom? The individuals promenading with me observed the street as one might watch the stage. We observed people, objects, buildings, and sought out hints of somewhere else there. However, the residents of Helsinki were watching as well. This unusual group taking slow steps, all sporting the same headgear, trailing behind someone who wore clothes with bits of stories. We were on stage without meaning to. And in that interactive looking, the city lost its balance, became stage-like, re-imagined. A space of interruption and possibility.

Another intention of the performance was to test the notion of an alternative to the archive. The archive that resists visibility, or refuses to stabilize. A moveable. A breathing one. One that forgets and remembers simultaneously. I started to consider memory as something as something that arises within moments, beyond the weight of an article of clothing, the repetition of motion, the crack in the voice, or the subject material of a certain phrase spoken through the headphones of walking along a street. These ephemeral details, too ephemeral or too subjective to dismiss, became the locus of how I wished to engage in knowledge and documentation. This is an archive one cannot access through procedures of the institution. It resides otherwise on skin, in the breath, in hesitation.

2.2. Writing otherwise

In order to pursue this idea further, I required an alternative language. An alternative mode of writing. So often, academic writing requires distance, lucidity, an air of authority. However, I found I wanted to remain proximate to the way we remember, its nature, its messiness, its blur, its inconsistency. I wrote the upcoming chapters poetically and in fragments because I did not feel I wanted to dispense with form, but because memory itself resists containment within it. It does not come all at once. It emerges in flashes, or sometimes in images that are unattached to anything else. It is insistent on rhythm rather than on logic. There are moments where it escapes just as you are trying to grasp it and others when it returns, unbidden, in the midst of something else. The fragment permitted me to pursue these rhythms to provide room for interruption, silence, ambiguity. The thesis form, then, is non-linear. It does not construct an argument cumulatively; it travels

between registers sometimes theoretical, sometimes personal, and sometimes performative. It aggregates rather than concludes. This is an aspect of the approach as well. By leaving the writing porous and opening to the leak of outside voices and memory, I hoped to provide room for an archive that is full of contradiction, confusion, or emotion, those things typically excluded by the presumptions of academic knowledge.

In that sense, the writing itself is contained within the archive by how it moves. The pauses. The repetitions. The change of voice when quoting memory, or the way the text of the audio walk interrupts the cut between theories. These were not stylistic devices. They were methods of preserving the material, unfinished, in flux, able to alter its form.

This shape, this other kind of archive, does not set out to prove anything. Rather, it attempts to remain with the richness of remembrance. It accumulates marks without converting them into truths. It listens. It holds the space. It makes what was omitted or unsaid take shape even shortly. Moreover, by doing so, it offers the possibility that an archive can be something worn as clothing, something carried as narrative, something taken for a walk. Something that does not demand to be kept forever, but to be known briefly.

The writing style here is not separate from the ideas; it is part of the argument itself. Form and content are mixed together. I did not want to write about memory or the archive from a distance, like they were fixed things to be analyzed. I wanted to write from within the experience of remembering, letting the language hold on to its messiness, its gaps, and its emotional weight. Annie Ernaux's *The Years* (2008) really made me rethink writing. She does not just tell her life in the usual way. She blends the personal "I" with a collective "we", creating a kind of fluid document where history, memory, and emotion mix and never quite settle into one shape.

This blending of the personal and the collective gave me a way to think about how I could speak from my own memory without claiming it is completely mine. In *The Years*, the space between personal experience and larger historical events disappears, or at least gets very blurry. The gaps, the omissions, the things repeated over and over, these become part of the rhythm of the text. In that rhythm, something else starts to emerge a feeling. It was a turning point for me to realize that writing could hold uncertainty without needing to explain or fix it. It could trace what is missing as much as what is there.

Therefore, if this thesis sometimes feels like a quiet whisper or drifts into something more like poetry, it is not by accident. It is my attempt to stay close to the things I am working with; resisting the urge to smooth over the roughness of memory, or simplify the contradictions of place, voice, or loss. I did not want to wrap everything up in certainty. I did not want to claim I had captured something. Instead, I wanted to follow the moments that slip away, to stay with what cannot be said neatly.

In a sense, the form of the writing turned into an invitation: that academic knowledge might work in a personal, fragmented, intuitive way. That argument might not always have to play itself out linearly and fully in order to make sense. Rather, thoughts might develop gradually, one might get a sense of a landscape as if it is glimpsed from a train in transit, as partial and changeable as there is a break and a recognition in the midst of it. I read this as a way of bringing a different intensity of listening. One that foregrounds listening, relationship, and depth. One that keeps the nature of memory as such: incomplete, embodied, in process.

Such an approach is in keeping with that generally known as Situated Writing, an epistemology allied with feminist and decolonial epistemologies. Situated Writing demands that all knowledge is constructed from a given place, social, cultural, political, embodied, and that this positionality is an integral part of the process. Donna Haraway defined this most famously in her essay on *situated knowledges* as that all vision is partial and that objectivity arises from accountability to one's perspective (Haraway 1988). Situated writing refuses the fantasy of the neutral and accepts an embodied, relational way of knowing and speaking.

In my practice, situated practice means starting from where I am, from the body, from the experience of migration itself, from the unevenness of the past. It means not distinguishing between theory and lived experience. It permitted me to treat memory as a sensory form of knowing that is layered and affective. It permitted room for the fragmented nature of the sensory and the unresolved. It permitted the writing itself to become part of the archive: fluid, intimate, and subjective.

2.3. Map of concepts

The concepts which permeate this thesis “archive, memory, palimpsest, performance” are treated as lenses, as tools through which I analyze the intricate relationship between the personal and the collective, the remembered and the forgotten. These terms are as dynamic structures, which are always in motion, always shifting because of the very act of working through them. I was attracted to these concepts not because they have fixed meaning, but because they create areas of ambiguity, voids, and tension that cannot be easily contained.

The archive, specifically, has long fascinated scholars. Jacques Derrida, in *Archive Fever*, reminds us that the archive is always about authority and power. It is not merely an apolitical place to keep knowledge; it is the site where authority determines what is worthy of preservation and what is to be cast out. As Derrida puts it, “The archive is not only a space of memory and inscription but also a space of power and control” (Derrida 1996, 10). The archive, therefore, is about creating stories about the past, constructing histories, and claiming authority over what is deemed important or valuable.

To me, the archive was always more compelling in what it omits: the silences, the gaps, the things that fall through the cracks before these can be filed and stored. What is left behind by the archive? What is omitted, what is unspoken, what is forgotten? These were the questions I found myself going back to, and these are the questions that made me consider the notion of the archive as much as space of absence and exclusion as space of preservation.

It is here that Saidiya Hartman’s work shifted my understanding most. In her speculative method of critical fabulation, Hartman shows how the archive of the enslaved is formed around absence, and how narrative can work to dwell within those absences, to imagine what might have been, and to center feeling and embodiment as forms of knowledge in their own right (Hartman 2008). Her question, “How does one tell an impossible story?” (2008, 2), stayed with me. It echoed the impossibility of writing a memory that refuses containment, and affirmed for me that to work with the archive is to remain accountable to what is missing.

In this thesis, the archive is not merely the site of storage but one of resistance. The things that are not retained, the things that are lost, are usually the most vibrant, the most dynamic, the most active. These are the gestures, the fragments, and the memories that transcend the strict frames of the archive and that remain in the body, in the landscape, in the performance. Memory is always an embodied one, and the body carries an archive of its own, one that cannot be exhaustively described using the written word or the recorded picture. It is here, then, in the areas of absence, the silences and the gaps, where I believe the potential for new types of knowledge to arise.

M. Jacqui Alexander's writing in *Pedagogies of Crossing* helped me think about these absences as spiritual, ancestral, erotic presences; sources of power that do not operate within linear history, but through sensation, intuition, and ancestral relation (Alexander 2005). She reminds us that knowledge often exceeds what can be named. That the personal, the emotional, the sacred can also be epistemologies. These modes of knowing were central to how I wanted to write and perform this work.

Michel Foucault's *The Archaeology of Knowledge* offers another perspective on understanding this concept of the archive. Foucault's work disrupts the common sense of history and knowledge. For Foucault, the construction of knowledge is not linear and straightforward, but is instead something produced from systems of knowledge and discourse. For Foucault, knowledge is determined by the "discursive formations" that determine what is true, what is important, and what is relevant. The archive, then, is the site where such discourses are produced and regulated. But Foucault is also interested in what is outside these formations, the "subjugated knowledges," the experiences and histories which cannot be understood within the existing discourses of power. In *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, Foucault claims that history is not one long, coherent narrative but rather a series of ruptures, gaps, and discontinuities. These ruptures are not failure or shortcoming of knowledge but are, in fact, critical to understanding how knowledge operates within the functions of power. The archive, then, is not merely a site of preservation but also one of control, where certain stories are valorized and others are relegated to the margins or erased altogether.

The notion of the archive as site of control and site of omission is essential to an understanding of memory and performance in this thesis. While the archive dictates what

is retained, performance, particularly site-specific, embodied performance, provides the potential to access what is omitted, what is forgotten, or what cannot be caught in fixed form. Performance is the means to render evident the things the archive cannot contain: what remains alive in the body, in gesture, in the fleeting moments of human existence. It is in the body and in performance, that memory can be accessed in its full, embodied complexity. The body, as living archive, retains memory and gesture that are not accommodated by traditional forms of knowledge. These embodied recollections cannot be categorized and are fluid, shifting, and alive. Through performance, these recollections are brought into being and re-played, inviting the audience to feel them in the moment, as communal experience.

Diana Taylor's concept of *the archive and the repertoire* further illuminates this relationship between memory, performance, and the archive. In her book *The Archive and the Repertoire*, Taylor distinguishes between two forms of knowledge: the archive, which is the written, recorded, and institutionalized knowledge stored in books, documents, and physical objects, and the repertoire, which is the embodied knowledge of movement, gesture, and performance. The archive, according to Taylor, is limited to what can be recorded and stored in physical forms, while the repertoire is a living, embodied archive that is passed down through action and performance. The repertoire includes the gestures, sounds, and movements that are part of cultural memory but are not always captured in the written word. Taylor writes, "The repertoire is made up of performance, of embodied memory, which can be accessed only through the body, through action" (Taylor 2003, 20). This concept of the repertoire challenges traditional ideas of memory and knowledge, suggesting that there are forms of knowing that exist outside the archive, in the lived experiences of people and communities. The repertoire, unlike the archive, is not static, it is continuously created and recreated through performance. It is a kind of living memory, one that is passed down through embodied action.

In this thesis, the concepts of memory and the archive are understood as interconnected, yet distinct. The archive represents the official, institutionalized forms of knowledge, while the repertoire represents the living, embodied memory that resists capture. Both are necessary for understanding how knowledge and memory function in society, but they are not always in alignment. The archive shapes what is remembered and what is forgotten, while the repertoire holds onto what cannot be contained within the archive.

Performance, then, becomes a site where these two forms of knowledge come into tension and dialogue. It is through performance that the gaps in the archive are made visible, and it is through the embodied experience of memory that new understandings of the past can emerge.

Ultimately, the archive, memory, palimpsest, and performance are not simply academic concepts; they are tools that allow me to explore the complexities of human experience. The archive is not just a place of preservation, it is a place of power, control, and exclusion. Memory is not just a personal experience, it is collective, embodied, and always in flux. Performance is not just an artistic practice, it is a way of engaging with the world and with the past, a way of making visible what cannot be captured in static forms. Together, these concepts offer a framework for understanding how memory, history, and knowledge are constructed, erased, and reimagined. By examining the tensions between these concepts, this thesis seeks to explore the potential for new kinds of knowledge to emerge, knowledge that is fragmented, embodied, and alive.

Maurice Halbwachs' work on *collective memory*, and Paul Ricoeur's writings on *forgetting and fragmentation*, offered ways of thinking about memory not only as an individual act but as something inherently social, spatial, and layered (Halbwachs 1992; Ricoeur 2004). Halbwachs reminded us that memory is never formed in isolation. It arises within a social framework, shaped by the people around us, by shared rituals, spaces, and narratives. Ricoeur added complexity to this by insisting that memory and forgetting are not opposites, but entangled processes. Forgetting does not simply mean absence; it is also a kind of distortion, a folding-over, a silencing that still leaves traces. From both thinkers, I understood memory not as a stable record, but as something constantly rewritten, anchored in space, fractured in form, and marked by the presence (and absence) of others.

It was Ruth Hellier-Tinoco's work, however, that gave me a language for how this might feel in the body. In *Performing Palimpsest Bodies*, she proposes the notion of the palimpsest not just as a metaphor for layered texts or historical residues, but as something *lived*. A palimpsest body is one that carries political and historical inscriptions across time, inscriptions that may be partially erased, but never fully removed. Scars, gestures, postures, habits, silences. The traces remain, even if faint, even if overwritten. Her writing

helped me imagine the body as an unstable archive, one that resists clear reading, yet insists on presence.

This image of the palimpsest, a surface repeatedly written upon, partially erased, then written over again, became a way for me to think about both memory and place. What if the city itself could be understood as a kind of palimpsest? Its streets layered with histories that are no longer visible, but still there in the cracks of the pavement, in the names of buildings, in the routes people no longer take. Like the body, the city holds what has happened in overlapping fragments. Some stories rise to the surface while others are buried underneath, waiting to be felt more than seen.

In this framework, memory becomes spatial. It maps itself onto bodies and cities alike. Both are surfaces shaped by time, trauma, repetition, resistance. Both refuse to be fully erased. Hellier-Tinoco's work helped me think through how memory lives on not only in storytelling, but in how we move, where we gather, what we avoid. The city, like the body, becomes a text that is constantly being revised, and never completely rewritten. There is always a remainder. Always a trace.

This understanding was especially important for my performance work. When I walked through the city with memories, I was not trying to restore a lost past, I was trying to let those memories coexist with the present. To allow their layers to overlap without resolution. I was not looking for clarity. I was walking through palimpsests, bodies and buildings that hold things they do not always reveal. In this way, the city was not just a stage for performance; it was itself a performer, echoing back-stories that had been written, forgotten, rewritten. A living archive of gestures, absences, and returns.

2.4. Walking through the layers

The chapters that follow enter into memory, space, and archive along diverse paths, opening up repetition, contradiction, and interruption into their form.

The first chapter sets the theoretical groundwork. It tracks threads of thought regarding memory, archive, and site-specificity. They appear here as developing, situated, affective practices. I am drawing on thinkers such as Jacques Derrida, Diana Taylor, Paul Ricoeur, Saidiya Hartman, Ruth Hellier-Tinoco, and more, all of whom complicate what an

archive is or could be. The concept of the alternative archive: embodied, speculative, affective, is what comes into being here. So too does the awareness that memory is not fixed, not whole, not all our own. It flickers. It vanishes and reemerges. It is kept not only in institutions but in bodies, gestures, spaces.

The second chapter looks towards the city. To surfaces. To layering, erasure, and resistance. Building on the work of Ruth Hellier-Tinoco on palimpsest bodies, I wonder how a city might similarly perform as a palimpsest, a constantly rewritten site of movement, desire, displacement, and absence. I consider how walking is a method of reading and rewriting the space, drawing on the thoughts of Michel de Certeau, Guy Debord, Rebecca Solnit, Phil Smith, and others that see drifting, disorientation, and the everyday as methods of knowledge production. The city is used as a memory machine: as a fluidly changing, affective archive. I question what sorts of stories go unwritten in official maps, and how walking, listening, and getting lost might make alternative pathways possible in the most dominant narratives of the city.

The third chapter is the one in which these thoughts intersect with my practice. It is focused on *Tell Me a Story from Before I Can Remember*, an audio walk and participatory installation that took place across the city of Helsinki. It brought a group of participants slowly walking in public space and listening to stories from somewhere else, fragments of memory, all told in my voice. These memories had not told of Helsinki. They originated from a different geography, an earlier time.

Again and again in this thesis, moments of that audio walk resurface. They lie interspersed throughout the text, breaking up the written word without warning. They happen by surprise, as reminiscence has a way of doing. They are not used as evidence, nor as a way of backing an argument per se. They appear in this work as part of a different type of logic, one informed by the poetics of the archive that I am attempting to construct. They remind me of the performance, and of the process. They represent the way that I recollect.

None of these chapters are complete in themselves. Together, they form a constellation of thoughts and practices toward something that might resemble an archive, or a memory, or a trace.

3. ARCHIVE, MEMORY AND SITE-SPECIFICITY

3.1. Alternative archive: absence, feeling, refusal

There was always someone deciding what would be remembered.

It was not her. Not them. Not us.

It was the men in suits with stamps, with drawers that clicked shut, with labels that did not speak our languages.

The archive stood tall, official, monumental.

It guarded the past like a secret.

Later, I read the words of a man who said that the archive begins with authority.

That it is a place where power dwells. “The house of the archon”, who holds not just the documents, but the authority to decide what counts as history, what may be entered, what is allowed to remain (Derrida 1996, 2).

That to archive something is not to keep it safe, but to transform it into something else.

What is remembered is always reconfigured.

What is forgotten may never have had a chance.

This felt true.

They had known it without knowing.

Because the memories they carried were not whole, not protected, not official.

They lived in hesitation, in the pause before speaking, in rituals no longer explained, in objects whose meanings had already begun to fade.

They lived in gestures, in recipes passed from touch to touch, in songs that survived only because someone kept singing.

These memories had no file numbers.

They were not entered into systems.

They refused the rules of the archive.

Foucault’s writing on the archive revealed that it is not simply a place or a storage system, it is a structure of knowledge, a regime of statements, a field of what can be said (Foucault 1972).

The archive, for him, shapes not just what is preserved, but what is possible to think.

It is a limit, and it is a technology of control.

The archive, then, is not neutral.

It is an instrument that arranges the conditions under which certain narratives become sayable, while others vanish before they are even formed.

And yet, what happens to the knowledge that slips beneath that threshold?

What about those expressions that never conform to a system of statements?

What of feeling, intuition, contradiction?

That was where the question turned.

If the archive is a container shaped by power, then what might lie outside it or beside it?

And what kind of knowledge lives there?

Diana Taylor offered another way to think she distinguishes between the archive and the repertoire; between the documents, texts, and artifacts that can be stored and re-read, and the embodied practices that are ephemeral, repeatable, but not always recordable (Taylor 2003).

She does not set them against one another. She insists that memory lives just as much in the body as it does in the document.

A gesture, a ritual, a performance. These do not always remain in recognizable form, but they continue to transmit meaning.

They live not because they are preserved, but because they are carried.

And so, the archive is not the only place where memory resides.

There are other ways of knowing.

Other forms of continuity.

Other modes of survival.

In these spaces, those that resist classification, those that live in repetition, those that speak without evidence. I began to sense something like an alternative archive.

Not a rejection of memory, but a different practice of it.

Not a refusal of history, but a different kind of witnessing.

An archive that does not gather and preserve, but listens and holds.

Saidiya Hartman's work offered a way to deepen that understanding.

In her writing, she insists on the incompleteness of the archive, especially when it comes to Black life, to enslaved women, to those whose voices were never meant to survive.

She speaks of the impossibility of telling the whole story, and yet tells it anyway.

Speculatively. Tenderly. With care.

She describes this as "critical fabulation", a way of writing with and against the archive, filling in the gaps without pretending to close them (Hartman 2008).

The point is not to fabricate history, but to acknowledge that absence itself has a shape.

That silence speaks.

That sometimes to imagine is to remain faithful.

This approach felt essential.

To engage with what is missing not by restoring it, but by making space for it.

By acknowledging, that what survives does so unevenly, painfully, partially.

Hartman also speaks of care as a method.

Not as sentimentality, but as an ethics of attention.

This was where the archive opened up again.

If the institutional archive organizes and defines, then the alternative archive may hesitate.

It may wait.

It may ask how to carry something without enclosing it.

It may refuse to claim authority.

And this refusal felt like an answer.

Audre Lorde gave language to that feeling.

emotions themselves are political (Lorde 1984, 38).

She refuses the binary between feeling and knowing.

She insists that our anger, our grief, our pleasure, our fear, these are forms of knowledge in their own right.

If the archive I imagined has any material, it is made from this.

From emotion as evidence.

From vulnerability as method.

From feeling as a form of remembering.

This other archive is not always visible.

It does not declare itself.

It cannot be held in the hand.

But it moves.

It whispers.

It is stitched into fabric.

It is carried in the way someone turns their head.

It exists in the tension between remembering and forgetting, between what was and what could have been.

They began to realize: the archive is not just a place.

It is a gesture.

It is a trembling.

It can be carried.

It can be worn.

It can be given.

It can be overheard.

This was why they called it alternative.

Because it operated otherwise.

Because it refused the logic of evidence.

Because it did not ask for permission to exist.

And so they turned away from the archive that silenced them.

And turned toward the one that spoke in breath and thread and repetition.

A woman remembering her mother's hands.

A stranger inheriting someone else's street.

A history imagined sideways.

A voice that returns without form.

A memory that is not whole, but insists on being held anyway.

Not because it holds the truth,

but because it dares to remember at all.

3.2. What returns without being remembered

Memory did not come back in the way they expected.

Not as a scene. Not as a photograph.

It returned through the body. In small ways. A tightening of the jaw. A gesture before sitting down.

A rhythm in the voice that had not been heard in years.

It returned through something inherited.

Something passed on in silence.

In glances. In gaps. In gestures that made no sense unless you knew the history, they refused to speak.

It was never linear. Never clean.

I read of this, in a book that spoke of bodies like layered pages.

Palimpsests, texts written over other texts, never fully erased, always haunted (Hellier-Tinoco 2023, 12).

The body as archive. The performance as remembrance.

The stage as a surface where past and present rub against each other.

This was the kind of memory I worked with.

Not history. Not documentation.

But postmemory, a term that held grief handed down, stories half-known, pain that seeped through generations (Hellier-Tinoco 2023, 16).

Memory that did not belong to her, but lived through her all the same.

Not through information, but through sensation.

Through gesture, intuition, resonance.

It arrived in pieces.

It moved sideways.

It whispered.

Postmemory, as defined by Marianne Hirsch, describes the relationship the second generation bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before.

A memory so deeply felt it might as well have been lived, though it was never directly experienced.

I never used the term. But I lived inside it.

I felt the weight of stories I could never tell fully.

I felt them in the room. In my own hands. In the way I reached for things without knowing why.

Paul Ricoeur writes that memory is never pure. That it is entangled with forgetting from the very beginning.

He speaks of memory as a form of refiguration, always already transformed by narrative, by the present moment in which it is recalled (Ricoeur 2004, 55).

There is no return to the origin.

There is only return through reimagining.

He calls this *re-membering*, a process that is not about accuracy, but about making sense through fragments.

And with this came a kind of permission: to let the memory arrive in gestures.

To allow its form to be uncertain, to be speculative.

To accept forgetting as part of the practice.

I began to wonder if what I was doing was not remembering, but *making memory possible again*.

Not recovering something intact, but holding space for what lingered.

And so I stopped chasing complete stories.

I began to listen to half-formed ones.

To let the repetition of a movement say what language could not.

Memory did not speak in clear timelines.

It emerged in the folds of performance, in the repetition of a movement, in a garment worn again and again until it held something it did not when it was new.

Hellier-Tinoco called these palimpsest bodies, performers who carried histories across skin, across breath, across time.

She wrote of how “traces of past presence remain, even after the body has gone,” and how performance could invite those traces back into the room (Hellier-Tinoco 2023, 20).

The performer was not just a vessel.
She was a site of return.
She did not speak the past. She moved it.

And memory, then, was not about accuracy.
It was about presence.
A feeling shared. A heaviness felt in silence.
The way a room holds something just after someone leaves.

This is why the archive could never be just papers. Just names.
It had to be performed.
It had to live again, through trembling hands, through misremembered stories, through
the body that forgets and remembers at once.

I did not seek to document memory.
I sought to embody it.
To let it move through others.
To offer it, unfinished.
To invite someone to walk inside someone else's wound,
not to understand it, but simply to feel its temperature.

And this wound did not end at the edge of the skin.
It stretched backward, across generations, across geographies.

M. Jacqui Alexander writes of memory as sacred, as political, as a site of crossing,
across time, across bloodlines, across the metaphysical.
For her, memory cannot be contained in history alone; it requires spirit, it requires
ritual, it requires a return to what has been denied through colonial time (Alexander
2005, 281).

She speaks of the kind of knowledge that lives in the body before it can be written.
Of memory as something carried through ceremony, through dreams, through silence.
And so memory becomes more than what happened.
It becomes what continues to echo, what continues to ask for recognition.

Her approach to memory, like Hartman's, does not attempt to resolve the past.

It does not seek to master it.

It stays with it.

It crosses with it.

It carries it.

And this crossing is not always legible.

Sometimes it shows up as the body flinching when nothing is visibly wrong.

Sometimes it emerges in repetition, in stories told again and again without conclusion.

Sometimes it arrives through someone else's story, and yet feels like your own.

And perhaps that is what memory is:

not a return to what was,

but the movement of something that insists on being felt, even when it cannot be named.

3.3. The city was a sentence we walked

They walked to remember.

To leave traces.

The city was not something they looked at, it was something they moved through, rubbed against, breathed in.

It changed depending on who walked it.

Depending on who was allowed to linger.

Whose memory the walls permitted.

Whose footsteps the pavement kept.

They did not follow maps.

They followed scent.

Weather.

Instinct.

They walked with stories whispered in their ears, stories from another city, another body, another time.

They performed someone else's memory as if it were their own.

And in that act, the city changed.

The city became porous.
 An archive without walls.
 A space rewritten by walking.

They had read this too, walking as writing.
 Michel de Certeau had said it first: “The act of walking is to the urban system what the speech act is to language” (de Certeau 1984, 97).
 Each step a word.
 Each deviation a new sentence.
 To walk was to resist the planned city.
 To stray from the logic of grids.
 To speak back, softly but insistently.

Walking was articulation.
 Just as a sentence is never neutral, shaped by grammar, time, and tone, so too the path taken across a street spoke of power, of possibility, of refusal.
 To walk was to speak spatially.
 To say: I am here.
 I carry this with me.
 I refuse to disappear.

Speech, like walking, is shaped by absence as much as by presence.
 By the pauses, the detours, the repetitions.
 A voice cracks; a foot falters.
 Meaning emerges not from the straight line but from interruption.
 From what is skipped, from what is skipped over.
 They began to think of walking not as route, but as syntax.
 A poetics of disobedience.

And this is where Guy Debord entered.
 He spoke of the *dérive*, the drift, the aimless wandering that refused the utility of capitalist time (Debord, 1956).
 To walk without purpose was already resistance.
 To let desire guide the route.
 To be seduced by a shadow, a sound, a color, a smell.

Psychogeography, he called it.

A method of being undone by the city and making something out of the undoing.

A way to crack open space and let memory leak through.

This was never about leisure.

It was about presence.

About walking until the city revealed its hidden layers,

its neglected corners,

its palimpsests.

They remembered the way some cities felt like palimpsests,

old wounds under fresh paint.

The past never fully erased.

Just covered.

Shifted.

In Solnit's words, "walking articulates both physical and mental freedom" (Solnit 2000, 13).

In walking, they claimed the right to remember otherwise.

To connect spaces that official narratives had cut apart.

To imagine a different cartography, one made of grief, resistance, laughter, longing.

Each performance became a kind of counter-map.

They led others down streets where no plaques had been placed.

They listened to stories that had no proof.

They stood still in places that memory had hollowed out.

They did not need monuments.

They had movement.

And this was site-specificity,

not as decoration, not as setting.

But as co-author.

The site spoke.

It shifted the story.

It held its own memory.

They did not impose something on the space; they let the space seep in.

A broken sidewalk became a border.

A bench became a mother's lap.

A bus stop became a site of disappearance.

The city was no longer background,
it was body.

And maybe this was the real archive:

The city as memory machine.

Replaying histories through feet.

Holding stories in cracks and corners
and the silence between steps.

4. THE CITY AS MEMORY MACHINE

4.1. To get lost is to begin remembering

The city does not forget.

It resists forgetting in strange ways, quietly, with uneven breath, like someone sleeping next to grief.

It keeps its old stories under new names.

It leaves the outlines of vanished walls embedded in fresh concrete.

It swallows one kind of architecture with another, but the shape remains.

A shadow. A fold. A misalignment. A ghost.

Ruth Hellier-Tinoco writes of palimpsest bodies, bodies that carry multiple layers of memory, trauma, desire, survival.

They are not clean surfaces. They are overwritten.

They hold histories that are visible only in certain light, certain movement, certain cracks in the surface (Hellier-Tinoco 2023, 14).

What if the city is a body?

What if the city, too, is a palimpsest?

A site written over by regimes, languages, textures of daily life.

By migration. By absence. By hope.

Every city contains more than one city.

The official one: mapped, maintained, surveilled.

And the unofficial one: imagined, remembered, longed for.

The one that lives in gestures and smells.

The one people carry with them across borders.

The one that resurfaces when someone says, "This reminds me of..."

"I remember this city through the roar of motorbikes... The pink sky... I left that pink sky. Helsinki was brown for me. It is grey now."

The palimpsest city is not only layered.

It is in tension.

It resists being read easily.

In her work on postmemory theatre, Hellier-Tinoco describes how performance “activates and reveals” these layers, how it allows what has been repressed to momentarily rise to the surface (Hellier-Tinoco 2023, 19).

She is speaking of the body, but it holds true for the city as well.

A performance in the street is not simply placed into the city.

It activates the memory of the city.

To walk with someone else’s story through a city that does not know it is to draw a new line on an old map.

To speak of Tehran while standing on a bridge in Helsinki is to create friction between spatial memory and personal memory.

The surface resists.

But it also remembers.

Erasure never fully succeeds.

As Hellier-Tinoco reminds us, “traces remain, even when bodies are absent” (Hellier-Tinoco 2023, 21).

So the city is full of these absences. What was there, what was removed, what never arrived.

They become part of the atmosphere.

They become the under-layer of daily life.

Some memories are visible in movements.

In walking.

In speaking aloud what was supposed to remain silent.

In remembering what was never given a monument.

This is resistance.

To walk with memory is to refuse erasure.

To insist that something was here, even if there is no trace.

Even if the buildings have changed. Even if the names are different now.

Even if the people who remember it are no longer around to say so.

To walk with memory is to speak against disappearance, with presence.

It is to inhabit absence, deliberately.

To say: this silence is not empty.

To speak a foreign memory into a local space is to fracture certainty.

To undo the illusion that space is fixed, that it belongs only to those who currently map it, name it, control it.

To speak of another city, another time, another grief, while standing in this place, is to open a seam.

It is to show that the boundaries of place are permeable, that memory travels, clings, returns in unexpected corners.

A sentence whispered in Farsi while crossing a Helsinki bridge does not disappear into the air.

It hovers.

It asks: who gets to speak here?

Whose past is allowed to be visible?

To place a fragment from another city onto this one is to reveal the instability of all spatial narratives.

It is to admit that every place is haunted by other places.

That every street corner is layered.

What looks like a simple intersection might, for someone else, feel like a border.

A memory. A rupture. A return.

It is to accept that the city is not singular.

That the official version, the one on the map, is never the only one.

There are maps drawn in footsteps. In departures. In dreams.

A crack in the pavement might mean nothing to one person.

To another, it is the very site of remembering.

Memory is spatial.

It clings to the surface of things, but also moves beneath them.

It sediments. It resurfaces. It flickers in and out.

To walk with memory is to disturb the smoothness of the present.

It is to mark the street with the presence of something that should have been forgotten,
but was not.

Something that remains.

This is not a return.

It is a layering.

A quiet insistence that space is never neutral.

That every act of walking is also an act of rewriting.

That to remember while walking is to become part of the city's texture, not just its
witness,

but its author.

A city is never just itself.

It is always the cities beneath it.

And beside it.

And carried within the people moving through it.

Getting lost was not a flaw. It was a method.

The city revealed nothing to those who knew where they were going.

But to those who wandered, it began to whisper.

Not through monuments, but through shadows.

Not through landmarks, but through hesitation.

The walk was never about arrival.

It was about losing track.

Of streets. Of time. Of oneself.

Of what was meant to be remembered.

"I missed the bus stop again. It's not supposed to be complicated... but here we are."

There is a kind of knowledge that only becomes visible in drift.

A submerged logic that only rises when you stop trying to follow the map.

Michel Foucault called this the *archaeology of knowledge*; not digging through layers of truth, but through the constructed sediments of meaning, the discourses that shape what we know, and what we are allowed to remember (Foucault 1972).

Walking, then, becomes a kind of archaeological tool.
 Each step brushes dust off a forgotten sentence.
 Each wrong turn uncovers the edge of an invisible structure.

Guy Debord called it the *derive*: the drift.
 A movement through urban space guided not by utility, but by affect and intuition.
 To drift was to resist. To get lost on purpose was to refuse the logic of the planned city (Debord 1956).

De Certeau wrote it as an act of speech.
 A way of rewriting the city through footsteps, of “making do” with what one has.
 The pedestrian, he wrote, is a kind of urban poet, improvising a new reading on the surface of imposed order (De Certeau 1984, 97).

And if the city is a palimpsest, as we’ve already seen,
 then walking is what reactivates the buried text.
 Each detour a flicker of someone else’s story.
 Each moment of disorientation a portal into a different narrative.

“I turned the corner and suddenly remembered a story I never lived.”

There are memories that cannot be accessed by standing still.
 They require movement.
 Circulation.
 A re-mapping of self across unfamiliar coordinates.

Walking becomes a form of temporal entanglement.
 You do not just move through the present, you bump into the past.
 Yours.
 Someone else’s.
 Or no one’s at all.

Some memories are entirely fictional.

Some are speculative.

Some are borrowed.

And in the cracks between them, something real.

Phil Smith calls this *mythogeography*. A way of reading place not through data, but through stories, fictions, rituals, fragments.

A map made of sensation.

A knowledge made of wonder.

To walk without direction is to allow the terrain to speak.

It is to let the forgotten rise.

As trace.

Lucy Lippard describes this as “the lure of the local”, not because the local is pure, but because it’s layered, emotional, full of tension between memory and place (Lippard 1997).

The local is never only what is there.

It is also, what was there.

What should have been there.

What someone still remembers being there.

“I’m tired of my music... They all sound the same now... I walk barefoot... My father’s voice in the distance... I think I missed the turn.”

To get lost is to fall out of the dominant story.

To step away from the straight line, from the logic of progress, from the prescribed routes that tell us where to go and how to behave once we arrive.

The dominant story is tidy. It has a beginning, middle, and end. It knows its landmarks.

It rarely hesitates.

It moves with direction, forward, always forward.

But getting lost interrupts that.

It is a refusal to arrive on time, to follow the script, to agree with what has been written before.

To get lost is to wander off the page.

To step sideways into the margins.

It is to slip out of the grid and into the unresolved.

It is a method.

A way of making space for something else to appear.

And when you do reenter, it is not through the main entrance.

It is through a side door, or a back alley, or a crack in the foundation.

You come in quietly, carrying a different perspective.

You carry stories that were not invited into the official version.

You walk differently.

You see what others miss.

This is not nostalgia.

It is not about longing for a past that was never whole to begin with.

It is about refusing the present as it has been packaged.

Refusing the version of space that excludes, polices, erases.

It is resistance.

Subtle, maybe.

But steady.

To get lost on purpose is to make room for memory that does not follow directions.

To open yourself to what is uncertain, discontinuous, felt.

It is to remember in a way that does not ask for validation.

To make your own story quietly, on foot, off the map.

As Doreen Massey reminds us, space is always political, always produced through interaction, tension, relation (Massey 2005).

To walk is to participate in that production.

To get lost is to undo its borders.

Deirdre Heddon and Cathy Turner write of walking as a feminist methodology.

One that makes room for slowness. For embodiment. For narratives that do not begin or end neatly (Heddon & Turner 2010, 22).

Not stories that resolve, but ones that unfold in relation.

On foot.

Through breath.

Through pause.

This made sense to me.

I did not want the kind of walk that led to understanding.

I wanted the kind that asked people to stay with what they did not yet know.

The walk I created moved slowly.

It did not explain itself.

It allowed things to emerge in fragments:

a phrase spoken in another language,

a memory that did not match the setting,

a silence that lasted longer than expected.

There was no conclusion.

There was no “now you see”.

There was only:

keep walking.

Keep listening.

Stay close to what does not fit.

Participants did not follow a single narrative.

They carried many.

They walked beside one another, headphones in, hearing something no one else in the city could hear.

They moved not toward a destination,

but toward an atmosphere.

This was the method.

Feminist because of how it held space.

Because of its pace.

Because it trusted softness and ambiguity over structure and proof.

And so, to walk is to listen.

To the city.

To its ghosts.

To the ones who walked here before you.

And to the stories that rise only when you forget where you were going.

4.2. Tell me a story from before I can remember

There was a time when I could not find my way through the city.

I would forget the corners, confuse the bus stops.

It was not the map that was the problem, it was memory.

There was no memory of these places in my body yet. No anchors.

First I borrowed memory.

I let others guide me through their streets.

Not the city's official streets, the streets drawn by grief, love, boredom, protest, ice cream.

We walked, and I listened, and I began to build a new map.

One made not of directions, but of feeling.

"Have you ever been lost in Helsinki? On purpose or by accident?"

I began to realize:

Memory does not just belong to one place.

A sidewalk in Helsinki can hold the echo of a sidewalk in Isfahan.

A parking lot under a bridge can suddenly remember the smell of tangerines.

In this walk, memory was speculative, overlapping, disobedient.

It asked what might have been.

What still echoed.

What was never allowed to enter the archive, but lingered just outside it.

They walked through Helsinki while listening to voices from somewhere else.

The sounds did not match the streets.

A description of heat while snow was falling.

A memory of motorbikes where there were only trams.

A pink sky spoken aloud beneath a grey one.

These were not mistakes.

They were intentional frictions.

By speaking one place into another, they fractured the smooth narrative of location.

They let memory spill out of bounds.

Disoriented space.

Loosened the grip of the “real.”

There were no dates.

No historical references.

Only sensations.

Only gestures.

Sometimes, the voice in your ear is more than narration.

It becomes a ghost. A guide.

It turns the city into a stage, part memory, part cinema, part hallucination.

Janet Cardiff’s *The Missing Voice (Case Study B)* (1999) whispered a similar logic.

A woman’s voice guided listeners through London, blending fiction and memory, present and past.

Not every street matched. Not every word fit.

But that was the point.

The dissonance opened something.

It allowed memory to be speculative.

Cardiff and Miller’s later work, *walks series*, unfolded this even further,

a story whispered into your ear while you walked a route at night, headphones on.

Reality and fiction blurred.

Like in my own walk, where memories from Iran drifted across Helsinki bridges.

They showed that sound can rewrite space.

That the body, in motion, becomes a site of entanglement between memory, fiction, and architecture.

What matters is not accuracy.

What matters is presence.

The listening body is both stage and archive.

“I remember standing on this bridge. No, not this one. But it feels the same. I think I was holding someone’s hand.”

I never said who.

I never said when.

But the feeling was clear.

This is what Saidiya Hartman names as *critical fabulation*, a refusal to accept the silence of the archive as final.

A willingness to imagine around it.

To invent as a method of care (Hartman 2008, 11).

To say: something happened here, or could have, or should have.

And that matters.

That changes how we walk through the world.

In the walk, this looked like layering:

placing the sound of Tehran over Helsinki,

letting one city speak through another.

It looked like trusting the voice in the headphones even when the street did not align.

It looked like garments that held memories no one could verify.

A gesture sewn into fabric.

A note from a stranger.

A jacket that knew something you did not.

Speculative memory does not try to restore the past.

It lives in the maybe, the almost, the imagined.

It speaks softly into spaces that have been closed off.

It offers another way of knowing, one that values emotion over evidence, relationship over resolution.

This is how they walked.

To stay close to possibility.

To the edge of what could be remembered.

Even if it never really happened.
 Even if it belonged to someone else.
 Even if it was just a flicker in the air between buildings.
 A pause in the snow.
 A sentence interrupted.

I carried my archive on my body.
 A jacket with hooks. Garments swung from it, written on, worn, touched.
 A wearable memory machine. A fragmentary archive. Each garment held someone's story,
 A gesture remembered, a moment paused in time.
 They followed me through the city with headphones.
 But soon, the city itself became a stage.
 Not a metaphor. A real stage.

People stared as the group passed, synchronized in silence, following a guide who wore a costume made of memory.
 Strangers became actors in their story.
 And they, in turn, became actors for those strangers.

Who was witnessing whom?

"I am staring at the window for a long time. I see myself... I don't see myself. I'm longing. For what, for whom, I don't know..."

The boundary between audience and performer blurred.
 The city itself blurred.
 Each stop on the walk opened a memory, layered. Projected. Recalled. Felt.

"A naked girl stands beside the car. She climbs onto the hood... I think of climbing up and hugging her..."

"I remember the bridge... my mother and I used to walk there every evening..."

This walk was not only about my memory.
 It was about what happens when memory moves.
 When it becomes collective. Or shared. Or carried.

“I promise I’ll be back in summer, and we’ll walk through every street... We will go wherever you want.”

Ruth Hellier-Tinoco speaks of the body as a palimpsest.

The city, too, was a palimpsest.

It had its own memory, its own repetitions.

But now it was inhabited by another story, frictional, unfamiliar, welcomed in.

Rebecca Solnit calls walking a mode of remembering of dreaming while moving forward (Solnit 2000, 5).

And the walk was not linear.

It looped. It folded. It stumbled.

It listened.

Some memories refused to settle.

Some came back wrong.

Some were invented entirely.

Some memories are too sharp to hold as they are.

They must be reworked.

Taken apart.

Laid out again.

Mike Kelley’s performances often returned to childhood,
to disrupt it.

To interrogate what had been made normal.

To complicate nostalgia.

In his work, memory was never innocent.

It was a material to be cut open.

To be questioned.

To be stitched back with critique.

This stayed with me.

Examining what I carried.

Rearranging it.

Letting others write into it.

Like Kelley, I saw memory not as something to be preserved,
but as something to be wrestled with.

Turned over.

Examined for what it hides.

His influence allowed me to approach memory not just as emotional material,
but as political material.

To be honest about its distortions.

To let memory be uncertain, even conflicted.

“Books are going to fall on my head. No... dolphins... Ride your dolphin and come find me. Just make sure to make the sky pink on your way.”

It was not a historical archive. It was a haunted one.

An aspirational one.

As Arjun Appadurai writes, archives often reach toward what never was but should have been (Appadurai 2003, 18).

In 1996, Sophie Calle asked people from both Israeli and Palestinian communities in Jerusalem to take her to public spaces that had become part of their private life.

She did not ask for maps. She asked for memories.

Her work *Erouv de Jérusalem* blurred religious, emotional, and architectural lines.

Inspired by the concept of *eruv*, where a wire transforms a public space into a private one,

Calle made visible how ritual and memory draw new borders over cities.

Not borders of control.

But of care.

Of intimacy.

In my walk, too, the borders blurred.

A garment trailing behind me.

A phrase whispered in Farsi while crossing a Finnish bridge.

A public space, momentarily turned into a space of mourning. Or of longing.

We did not ask for permission.

We re-mapped the city with gesture.

Like Calle, I wondered:

What if remembering can redraw the territory?

What if a street can be reclassified,
through presence?



Image of the performance *Tell me a Story From Before I can Remember* by Elis Hannikainen

And then there was the installation in White Gallery.

The walk ended, but the archive continued.

Garments that were carried through the city, returned. Straps stretched across the ceiling like constellations.

Blurry videos flickered on walls and on fabric, images of Helsinki, colored by memory.

Green buses. Yellow metro. Pink sky.

Blurred, as all memories are.



Image of the performance *Tell me a Story From Before I can Remember* by Elis Hannikainen

There were four mirrors.

On each, the structure of the work was written.

They stood there, silent, reflective, absorbing the light of the room and the shadows of the bodies that passed.

To read what was written, one had to come close.

One had to look.

One had to see themselves.

The mirrors brought back the idea that the body is not a blank surface.

That it carries, unseen, unspoken, the gestures passed down without instruction, the repetitions inherited from others, from before.

Gestures that belonged to no one and everyone. The turning of a wrist, the tilt of a head, the way a shoulder pulls back when remembering.

These movements lived in the body before they were ever named.

Personal memory settling on top of collective memory, like transparent layers that never fully erase what came before.

They wrote about palimpsest bodies, but it was already known. Everyone felt it, standing there, reading through their own reflection.

The structure was not separate from the viewer.

It asked them to position themselves, to see themselves implicated. The text did not sit on a wall, at a distance. It came with the viewer's face, their posture, their hesitation. A reading that could not happen without the body.

No one could read the work without seeing themselves.

That was the point.

That was the condition.

The mirror made it unavoidable.

Memory was not told to them. It was returned to them, through the mirror, through the angle of the light, through the quiet way someone else's presence shifted their own.

"This is a space to tell about blurriness... Borrow, fake and speculate about something that was never there but should have been."

In the end, the walk was not about arriving.

It was about remembering otherwise.

About being lost.

About being watched.

About letting memory be collective, speculative, tender.

The city became:

A stage.

A memory.

An archive.

A witness.

And always, it asked:

Who is witnessing whom?

The walk ended, but the memory did not.

They stepped out of the city and into the gallery

not quite as audience,

not quite as performers,

still suspended in the rhythm of walking.

The garments that once moved with the wind were now still,
 hanging from the ceiling,
 dangling like sentences never finished.
 An archive that no longer walked but hovered.

The space was white,
 but it was far from empty.



Image of the performance *Tell me a Story From Before I can Remember* by Elis Hannikainen

Straps stretched from wall to wall,
 a tangled web of written fragments.
 Each one carried a memory: a diary line, a song lyric, a hand-drawn childhood sketch.
 They intersected like streets in a city that had never been built
 a speculative geography.

“What if this room is a map? An evolving archive of everydayness... Navigating the urban outside through the architecture of memory...”

Some memories were loud. Others whispered.

A hoodie. A bus stop. A fight. A puddle.

Each garment became a gesture.

Hungry in a store.

Waiting for a friend.

Taking pictures of the sky.

Chanting slogans.

Each gesture a prompt.

The audience could read them, wear them, write their own stories onto them.

They became part of the fabric.

“Reflection in a window... Sitting in a taxi... Getting lost... Holding hands... Police sirens...”

These were not props.

They were memory-objects.

They did not point to a single past, but to the multiplicity of living through space.

As Paul Ricoeur writes, “memory is never solitary; it is bound up in the act of sharing” (Ricoeur 2004, 132).

Here, memory was not shared by telling, it was shared by writing, touching, wearing, moving.

Ann Hamilton’s work taught me to look again,

at fabric, at repetition, at the quiet labor of memory.

In her installations, everyday objects, spools of thread, a piece of cloth, breath, dust, are not symbolic.

They are alive.

They respond.

They hold.

Her works do not shout.

They hum.

The garments in my installation carried gestures:

“reaching toward the sky,”

“sitting in a taxi,”

“hiding under the table.”

They were memory-objects.

Like Hamilton’s cloths that remember being touched,
mine carried what had been written, worn, passed on.

The archive hung in the room in folds.

It whispered through fabric.

Through the weight of collective memory sewn into each thread.

The mirrors were watching too.

Four of them stood inside the room, inscribed with the logic of the installation.

But you could not read them without seeing yourself.

You looked.

You read.

You looked again.

And suddenly, you were part of it.

As a continuation.

Not a viewer, but a page in the archive.

You thought you were watching,

but you were being inscribed.

Each glance, each breath, each hesitation became part of the record.

You were not only encountering memory.

You were generating it.

Adding to it.

Extending it.

You were becoming the archive even as you moved through it.

The act of reading became a form of writing.

The act of touching a garment became a gesture of preservation.

Every interaction left a trace.

This was not a passive installation.

It watched back.

It absorbed.

It remembered you.

To participate was not to step outside history,

but to step into its folds,

to become both the keeper and the kept.

The one who holds and the one being held.

And this is what makes the archive alive:

It does not exist apart from the people who move through it.

It expands with each presence.

It shifts with each interpretation.

It forgets and remembers in the same breath.

You did not leave it untouched.

And it did not leave you the same.

“Describe something that almost fades away. Or something already forgotten that returns...”

The videos flickered across the walls

some from Helsinki, some from Tehran.

All blurred.

All deconstructed.

The city became a ghost of itself.

This was not documentation.

This was how memory feels.

As Hito Steyerl might say, this was a “poor image”: low-res, shaky, vulnerable, yet overflowing with affect (Steyerl 2009).

An image that offered intimacy.

Each video had a color.

Yellow for the metro.

Green for the bus.

Pink for the sky left behind.

The colors were emotional.
They were not chosen to represent how things looked,
but how they felt.

When I edited the footage,
I did search for mood.
For atmosphere.
For resonance.

I asked myself:
What did this place feel like in my body?
What stayed with me after I left?
What color does memory turn when it is not clear anymore?

And so the metro became yellow.
The bus became green, the kind of green that arrives just before longing.

The color was an archive of feeling.
An overlay.
An echo.

This, too, was part of the speculative archive:
to give memory a tint,
to mark it with what it meant.

And perhaps it was more honest this way.
Because memory is always colored by emotion.
And what remains is rarely sharp.
It blurs.
It bleeds at the edges.
And sometimes, it glows.

As Mark Fisher writes, the present is haunted by what no longer fits (2014, 22).
In the performance, what no longer fits were the memories brought in from elsewhere,
stories that did not belong to this city,
but refused to be quiet.

It was the smell of tangerines recalled beside a grey Helsinki bridge.
The sound of someone else's mother's voice,
folded into the fabric of a shirt.

It was the mismatch between what the space expected,
and what the archive insisted on offering.

A jacket that did not protect from the cold.
A video that did not show anything clearly.
A gesture that did not resolve into meaning.

These were the pieces that slipped through the grid.
That pressed against the present
without asking for belonging.

They did not fit.
They were the haunting.
The remainder.
The stubborn pulse of something that could not be explained,
but also could not be erased.
The performance was about what persisted.
What echoed.
What was rewritten again and again.

Sound curled through the space.
Sometimes atmospheric. Sometimes specific: street noise, quiet voices, a crowded cafe.
The garments rustled.
Someone wrote something.
Someone else read it.

Time folded.

This was not the end of the performance.
This was the memory of the memory.
The afterimage of walking.

And maybe, here, the question returned:

Who was witnessing whom?

You looked into the mirrors to read the instructions and saw yourself.

But maybe you also saw the person who wore the garment before you.

The one who would wear it after.

The one whose story got tangled in yours.

You stayed as long as you wanted.

You left with something that was not quite yours.

You left with something that was not quite yours.

Maybe it was a sentence that stayed in your ear longer than expected.

Maybe it was the weight of a garment you did not wear,

but touched briefly,

as if by accident.

Maybe it was the sound of someone else's memory

beating faintly against your own.

You did not know the names.

You did not always understand the context.

But something followed you out.

Something clung.

It was not a souvenir.

It was not clear enough to describe.

But it moved with you.

A rhythm.

A warmth.

A disorientation.

You left with a piece of the archive folded quietly into your pocket.

A gesture. A texture. A residue.

And even if you forgot the details,

the color of the projection,

the words written on the sleeve,
the exact turn in the audio,
you remembered something else:
the feeling of being inside someone else's time.
Someone else's absence.
Someone else's longing.

That is what it meant to leave with something not quite yours.
It did not belong to you.
But it trusted you enough to be carried.

That is how this archive works.
It passes through.
It alters you in quiet ways.
And then, maybe, it waits,
to be remembered again
by someone else.

5. TRACES LEFT BEHIND

To live in a city with memory is to traverse space mindful of what is no longer seen. What has been silenced, covered up, or forgotten. It is to view not merely what is before us, but what lingers at the borders of sight. Memory is no longer merely recollection, but is instead a means both of navigating and perceiving, and of quietly subverting. The city is no longer an abstract topography, but one alive with presence and absence, formed by what is seen and what is actively suppressed.

City-walking is not linear with memory. It is a movement in levels, like reading from a palimpsest, where every step touches against residues of the past. That which appears firm, monuments, street signs, buildings are usually unreliable, underwritten by unwritten or dispersed histories. A statue commemorates pride, but to elevate it what is pushed aside? A street has a name, but whom did they precede there? The city is not a completed text but is always a site of ongoing negotiation.

Urban infrastructure such as buildings, transit routes, and habits of movement are full of power, forgetting, and selective vision. They have a tendency of erasing colonizing, migrating, and resisting histories. They give the impression of being neutral, space as blank, unmarked, open, to the extent that the narratives that don't conform remain quietly erased. In most cities, even in this one, the record of those people brought in by force of arms or by choice remains unremembered, their existence barely inscribed into the surfaces that increasingly structure daily life.

In articulating this thesis, and in the performance that it arose from, I looked for how to designate these absences. Or how to sense them. To move among them. To allow them to emerge, not as proof of the archive's lack, but as an existence. This was not a process of rectifying the archive, of mending what is lost. It was a process of creating space for what remains in silence. It was a process of filling the spaces not with knowing, but with body. The empty spaces of the archive are not empty, rather they're full of emotion, of legacy, of speculative memory. I needed them to be seen.

Memories return in fragments through movement, smell, or the configuration of space. It is bodily and affective, not always made visible. Remembrance through space provides an affect to lead us along and allows the places to speak in silence.

This thesis has been informed by such recognitions. It winds its way through fragments and ambiguity, lingering with minor resistances and accumulated meanings. It does not have a conclusion, like memory open-ended and in flux. Because the city is not something to conclude but something which we always reshape through movement, language, and the memories we bring.

To traverse a city with memory is to have a double presence: to perceive both what is and what has been. Memory is drawn across the official cartography, inscribing an emotional cartography, which may never appear in records but persists in gesture, deviances, and feeling. The city is a living palimpsest where writing is never complete and nothing is erased. To live in the city with memory is not merely to recall, but to keep ourselves attuned to what the city continues to remember through us.

This thesis has traced memory as practice; something embodied, enacted, and lived, not abstractly addressed as something to be examined. Memory was practiced as a working method. How to move through space, to listen otherwise, to take notice of what lingers. Memory was not outside of the practice, instead, it influenced the form, the decisions, the silences. It created the lens through which I saw the city. Urban space was no longer merely the background of action; it became alive, reactive, responding with traces of what was borne within it.

I was interested in the tension between here and there. What is it like to traverse familiar streets carrying another's story, spoken in a language not native to there, with images from another geography altogether. This gesture of walking-with, of co-occupancy with an odd memory, was never about relocation, only about disturbance, about letting the borders of the current city momentarily get remade by the intrusion of something alien and ephemeral. When we bear one's memory through a space not its origin, the memory acquires different textures. It does not repeat the past flickers, interrupts, and reconstructions the current instant.

I became fascinated with how memory works spatially through all of this work. It does not always come to rest where we want it to. It does not comply with maps or chronology. It clings to corners, to gesture, to passing encounters. A sentence from the past will come back to you differently depending on the street you say it on. A piece of clothing will appear to belong to another era altogether, but put it in public view and it changes the

composition. Memory is something that lingers, neither stable nor entirely ethereal. It clings, releases, and sometimes vanishes, to reappear unexpectedly.

The goal was not to pull memory out and implant it in a different site, as one might set something out on display. It was the process of movement, the moral act of carrying, and the gesture of being changed through listening and moving. Each narrative included in the audio walk fit less into conveying information about the space, and more into opening up a doorway, something fleeting, precarious, incomplete. These were not fixed histories. They were gifts. And in the gift, something changed. That city around us, constructed from habit and routine, felt slightly changed. A familiar path was made uncertain. A known square grew to have unfamiliar weight.

This quiet destabilization provided space for notice for another type of presence. The memories that came to Helsinki during the performance did not insist upon permanence. They did not insist to remain in one place. Rather, they floated lightly through the streets, attaching where they might, leaving behind pale impressions. These traces may well remain invisible to others. Yet for the ones who walked, listened, and observed the faint dissonance in what they saw and what they heard, the city became momentarily re-authored. Present became intertwined with elsewhere.

Memory here disclosed itself as quiet acts of activism: a rewriting of space in soft resistance against erasure, against the smoothness of official narratives. In the act of following along with narratives not of the city itself, possibilities for viewing arose. And within the small changes, the potential to be with space differently more attentively, more vulnerably began to materialize.

5.1. To write, to walk, to remain

In my performance *Tell Me a Story from Before I Can Remember*, this methodology became an audio walk. A participatory act of listening and bodily navigation within the city. People slowly wandered along Merihaka area in Helsinki while voices from elsewhere were played through their headphones: bits of memory, spoken in another language, from another geography. These memories offered neither orientation nor guidance. They were neither guides nor histories. They emerged as textures, interruptions, whispers entangled among the noise of the now. At times, the story coincided with the

environment: a window, a park, an aerial view in the distance. Other times, it clashed with the space altogether. This dissonance was not to be resolved. It became part of the experience. A layering making the city flash back and forth from what it was to what it may hold for now.

The walk encouraged a different vision. It highlighted the normally overlooked: the shadows at the corners, the softness of footfalls, the silent decisions directing our movement. Pacing was slow, intentional. Each person was nonetheless individually connected to the voice in their ears. The headphones produced both connection and disconnection, binding the group to each other even as they isolated themselves from the city surrounding them. This produced a curious kind of awareness. A mutual stare back occurred: walkers gazed out at the city with the memories, which are not belong to the city, while the passer-byes, shop owners, tourists glanced at the walkers. Hanging from my (performer's) jacket was a flowing garment, pulled through the streets like a trail or bond. The garments fluttered with movement, caught the breeze, caressed buildings. They were not costume, they shifted perception. They announced something outside, something hovering between street life and performance. The garments bore written gestures, inscriptions of memory linked to particular acts of the body: "sweeping the floor," "hiding under the table," "reaching toward the sky." This language did not elucidate. It hovered. It was provided as opening.

The city was both actor and audience. Each passerby was observed. Each bystander became part of the tableau. The performance spilled beyond the frame of the actors, beyond even the frame of will. A stranger sitting on the bench became one of the actors in the unfolding drama. A person lingering to gaze became an accidental spectator. Boundaries became blurred, then blurred again. Who was acting? Who was watching? Did it even concern us? The walk performed an ongoing exchange of visibility and gaze, an unstable shift within roles. The city itself appeared to take notice. It adjusted slightly. It listened differently.

Participants were then ushered into a gallery space, White Studio in Mylly/Fine Art Academy building, with the street's resonance. Shirts, sweaters, dresses, those carried during the walk were hung in the space, no longer undulating with bodies, but still retaining the scars of travel. They were surrounded by shard-like moments of video

flickering: Helsinki scenes reduced to blurs, glimpses of the walk, broken, repeated gestures. There were shattered mirrors, drifting sounds. And there was the invitation: to write a memory. Each person was asked to select one of the gestures inscribed onto one of the clothes, and to write one of their memories, no matter how small, no matter how broken. Their memories joined the growing, shifting archive in the space.

This act of writing, of offering up a private memory, shifting role of the audiences as listeners to a more active participatory role, prolonged the logic of the performance. It opened up another movement, this one through space and interiority. A gesture inscribed onto cloth, which was once made through the city, now summoned up somebody else's memory. The circuit persisted. Memory shifted. The city, like the gallery, became a space of overlapping, where memories from various bodies, various locations, various moments might ensue without resolving. By means of one layer after another walk, clothes, writing, watching, *Tell Me a Story from Before I Can Remember* became itself an unfolding palimpsest. A performance which did not take its start, nor its finish, at any specific instant. A means of maintaining memory in process, and of making the city one surface upon which that process might appear fleetingly.

This is where the archive comes in. The archive to which I was drawn, one that does not reflect the impulse of the institution to collect, to preserve, to stabilize. This does not depend on completeness, nor does it aspire to objectivity. It does not have fixed categories, no folders to consult in the future. This archive that informed this thesis is one tending toward the unstable, the provisional, the overlooked. It is one made not of things but of traces: the warmth of recollected hand, the ghost of gesture, the echo of footstep crossing into pavement.

This thesis itself became part of that archival act. It was never a preservation project in the usual sense. Writing here was not intended to enclose memory, to keep it still. Rather, I wondered what would happen if memory was left to re-emerge; to reappear, differently, through writing. Each sentence became a gesture of listening. The form of the thesis is kept loose, permeable. There are divagations, interruptions, things that remain unresolved. Memory does not travel straight. It stalls, loops, dissolves, and re-emerges with fresh edges. It is formed by feeling, by distance, by time. I wanted the writing to

move along its curve to replicate memory's rhythms more than to bring to it some imposed order.

Audre Lorde's words that "our emotions are also political" (Lorde 1984), changed something within me. To me, it placed emotion as a form of knowing. A form of structure. A form of resistance. To feel, therefore, became a method of knowing. Being able to remember. Being able to connect. It changed the way that I understood memory. It questioned how forms of archives might be built using affect. Using sensation. Using the body.

this is where the alternative archive started to emerge for me. It is a phrase for a way of working that is not about the visual, the textual, the institutional. It is a model for containing what is bodily, spatial, emotional. It is an archive that does not make conventional traces. It does not become a catalogue. It is not sorted into categories, referenced, filed. It piles up otherwise. In encounters. Through gesture. Through the way the repetition of a walk with someone else's history happens quietly. A street crossed carrying a shard of remembrance. A thread of fabric passed between strangers. A sentence spoken into the current. These are archival acts, even though they never declare themselves as such. It provided a model for thinking about an archive, which is not textual or visual but is emotional, spatial, and bodily. This type of archive will not leave traces behind. It will never materialize in a catalogue. It accumulates. It accumulates through experiences and gesture; in the manner we travel through space and with what we bring about us. A street navigated while carrying somebody's story such acts are archival, even if they do not announce themselves.

The alternative archive evades definition. It does not posit itself in facts or records. It appears in unnamable sensations: the feeling of a specific shadow being familiar, or the feeling of the smell recalling somebody. It may appear in the silent repetition of gesture passed between kin, or in the flash of strangers setting out to move en masse, headphones on, memory playing within their ears. It may change what we can feel.

In this regard, the clothes traveled through the city as more than costume or visual sign part of this alternative logic of the archive. Each one of them contained a gesture, written by hand and not fixed. As they traveled through space, they contained and embodied memory. They welcomed a manner of existing alongside memory as tactile, partial, and

animate. In the museum, when viewers responded to these gestures with memories of their own, they participated in an accumulation of impressions. Those additions did not define the meaning of the initial memory, nor did they attempt to explain it. Rather, they prolonged it. They folded in new experience to the archive, so it could unfold.

This conceptualizing of the archive: mutable, affective, and responsive, invites us to relinquish the presumption that memory must always remain intact. Often it is more potent when we are willing to let it shift form. This imagined archiving is created in moments of resonance, emotional crossings, in the still recognition of something's staying within you without your even noticing. And so in this manner, it continues to expand by creating space for what is vulnerable, what has been lost, and what remains possible.

5.2. A residue, alive

Writing in a poetic, fragmentary style arose out of the requirements of the material, which was made quietly. Memory does not come to us in full scenes, nor does it unfold along lines of logic. It arrives in fragments: a smell, a line of dialogue, a gesture recalled for the way it made something feel. It drifts. It hesitates. It recurs unexpectedly. The poetic style, with its potential for pause and allusive reference, provided one means of being attuned to that texture. Fragmentation, similarly, was about being attuned to the manner in which memory refuses to be contained in one piece.

The form of this thesis leans into fragmentation. It does not try to bring the dispersed together into one, unified narrative. Rather, it traces the outlines. It lingers in the gaps. It follows what vanishes, what blurs, what nearly evades language. The writing gives room for silence, for the kind of knowing that does not come by way of explanation, but by intuition, association, resonance. This is not even a thesis that concludes and clarifies so much as one which attempts to linger, to stay with what is not resolved. Because such is the nature of memory. It flares for moments with clarity and then lapses into distortion. It is repetitive, sometimes faithful, sometimes in disguise. And to write from within memory is to let the form adapt to its rhythm.

Living the city with memory entails another mode of perception: one of layering attention. It entails walking along streets carrying along with your others' times, others' voices, others' bodies alongside your own. It is not always perceptible. More than likely, it is an

interior act. It reconfigures how the city is felt. The surface of the city; its buildings, its signage, its traffic becomes porous, less fixed. The present is still there but always accompanied. The recalled gesture, the narrative borne in silence, the landscapes evoked by the voice in your ear, you see them layering the visible, like transparent pages floated across the built environment.

This habitation of space is not about permanence. It is not attempting to embed memory into the city as something fixed or memorial. It lets memory linger and fade away, appear and dissipate, alter a street corner for an instant and retreat. The traces left behind may well be slight, a difference in the gait of someone, the instantaneous recognition of a smell, the sensation of having witnessed something while everyone near you has not. The traces may be hard to articulate. They tend to slip away from documentation. They inscribe the city in slight ways. They deposit a kind of residue: emotional, invisible, alive.

To walk with memory is to bring presence to absence. It is to leave space for what no longer belongs. In such a manner, the city itself is made to become something to rewrite through the very act of looking. What lingers is not always substance. It may be no louder than the voice of a ghost or the flash of recognition in the eye of one passing by. Yet something lingers. A feeling. A shift. A trace.

And perhaps the trace is sufficient. Perhaps sufficient is it that memory traverses space again, that it is borne along, that it is heard again by others. Perhaps the work is not to fix memory in its position, but to create space for its return; no matter how incomplete, no matter how fleeting. This is another type of archive. And it is perhaps the only one memory will permit.

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