

Vi som blev vi, nu

becoming community through an artistic practice

Table of Contents

<i>Intro</i>	3
<i>What is a community here? – an introspection of two works</i>	6
Translating without knowing how to read or write (2018 -)	7
Vi som blev vi, nu (2021).....	11
<i>Outro</i>	13
<i>Bibliography</i>	15

Intro

This essay works around the concept of what a legitimate language is and how community functions in my practice. The choice of writing in English as opposed to Swedish comes from wanting to be in dialogue with those peers who might not have my specific experiences of language. While the expressions in my art works attempt to be very specific –this text allows me to broaden the discourse. Therefore I choose it despite the imperial implications this language has.

My work departs from questions around language and the nation state. The work practices and tries living through the question of what language is, if we practice it as a specific experience rather than language as a property of the nation state. The title of this essay and one of my written pieces *Vi som blev vi, nu* places us in the question of what community is, and addresses a community as “those of us who became us, now” which the title in Swedish translates to. In my practice this looks like formulating a set of conditions an imagined community may have experienced, like having been subject to the mother tongue classes in Sweden between a certain time period. Children, with at least one parent having origin outside the borders of Sweden, have been subject to a specific political decision and the ideology of the state has been implemented onto them. In this context it is that language belongs to the nation state, which therefore ignores the very complex way that language functions. Someone from a country does not acquire language in the way nation states impose on people.¹ Norwegian is not natural to Norway as there are many other languages within the territory – but its name suggests Norwegian as more legitimate than, for example, Sami or Romani.² The nation state’s survival depends on people performing and conforming to its way of insisting borders – and language is one of the tools it uses.³ This is beautifully portrayed in Larissa Sansour’s film *In Vitro*(2019)⁴.. The film “(...)is set in the aftermath of an eco-disaster. An abandoned nuclear reactor under the biblical town of Bethlehem has been converted into an enormous orchard. Using heirloom seeds collected in the final days before the apocalypse, a group of scientists are preparing to replant the soil above.”⁵So, what if a community is addressed based on experiences, such as having been enrolled in the mother tongue class scheme between the 60s and now in a rural town in Sweden? What if the addressed community resist the notion of a legitimate language? What if they instead view themselves as containers of an acquired language specific to the circumstances that created the

¹ “Hemspråk.” Diskriminerings Retorik: En Studie Av Svenska Valrörelser 1988-2002: Rapport, by Kristina Boréus, Fritzes, 2006.

² inkluderingsdepartementet, Arbeids- og. “Minoritetsspråkpakten.” Regjeringen.no, 13 Jan. 2022, <https://www.regjeringen.no/no/tema/urfolk-og-minoriteter/nasjonale-minoriteter/midtspalte/minoritetsprakpakta/id86936/>.

³ Anderson, Benedict R. O’G. *Imagined Communities - Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. VERSO London, 1982.

⁴ *In Vitro*, 2-channel film, 28’, Larissa Sansour/Søren Lind, 2019

⁵ “*In Vitro* (2019).” Larissa Sansour, <https://larissasansour.com/In-Vitro-2019>.

conditions of them acquiring their language? Ofelia García has coined the pedagogical method of *Translanguaging* where children are encouraged to use their entire language in the classroom – she argues that multilingualism is part of the same entity when it inhabits an individual. She describes it as breaking the hegemony in one’s language repertoire. I have used this to understand how language lives within us. It is a tool I use to deal with the shame the current linguistic hegemony imprisons people in.



Picture 1: Sansour's film goes into direct dialogue with Benedict Anderson's and many others writings. A notion dismantling the nation state as a construction with specific interests.

In this paper I will look into two of my recent works through the lens of breaking the hegemony in one’s language repertoire by using addressing specific components in what shaped ones language. Components could be shame, political decisions, family constellations, time and the imperial hegemony of languages. I address a community that may or may not have seen themselves as a community. What does it mean to be addressed as such? Is this a power trip, merely imitating the nation states tools?(A question provoked by Claire Bishops *Artificial Hells*⁶) Or can art create community transcending nationalism?

⁶ Bishop, Claire. *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*. Verso Books, 2012.



Picture 2: Longing for the past, in my case a language never fully acquired - translating gives meaning to what's here, us as containers of what has happened, it is not restoration or resurrection but rather building community and existing in relation to each other.

My bachelor thesis title was “The separation of the nation state and language through my artistic practice”. The paper problematized the current state of the world as it is now – and I think this is a continuation of that thought process. What happens after we problematize a phenomena? What do I wish to create – how do I see my work functioning as a critical tool to deconstruct how language is used to legitimize nation states and reify already existing power relations? Can story telling be used to address a community and what happens after? What are the implications and how can that togetherness continue?

What is a community here? – an introspection of two works

“I would have loved to have been part of an identity group. I wish I could have been able to say that I belong to “my community.” But there is no community to which I truly belong. Here is my proof.

I own many objects and artifacts and some works of art. None of these, even those I inherited from my parents or received as gifts from family and friends, were handed to me as a recognition of my belonging. I have not a thing from Oran, Algeria, where my father and his ancestors were born and lived until the late 1940s. I have nothing from Spain, from where my mothers’ ancestors were expelled in 1492. I do not even have their immaterial belongings, like Ladino, the language Jews spoke in Spain and passed down to their children for generations. Ladino did not become mine because my mother, who had been born in Palestine, was turned from a Palestinian Jew into an “Israeli” at the age of nineteen. She was induced by the newly constituted state to forget all languages except Hebrew. My mother did not talk with me in her mother tongue, nor did my father in his. I was born “Israeli” by default and was raised to be a member of the state’s Jewish community. This nation-state project of becoming naturally born Israeli was meant to replace prior imperial visions of belonging and unbelonging to communities destroyed or shaped with violence, while being projected on and through my body.”⁷

This text is from Ariella Azoulay’s book *Potential History* and illustrates community belonging as often constructed with the nation state’s interests. This is the problem that precedes my decision to work with language and the nation state. The subjects in the works I will deal with from here on illuminate the complexity of how language happens without accrediting it to a nation-state. In my texts and installations, I address communities or situate them into a specific context. Firstly, I’d need to understand the not yet situated ones – the people who never came together in a *physical* space, but only in the art work, by linking together their stories and contextualizing them through my own poetics. But let’s begin with the community that becomes addressed in a spatial matter through the translation sessions I host.

⁷ Azoulay, Ariella. “Preface.” *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism*, Verso Books, London, 2019, p. 17.

Translating without knowing how to read or write (2018 -)

Restoring the past is not possible, this is also suggested by Julietta Singh in her book *No archive will restore you*.⁸ In the poetic constellations of life and relations I find entry points to questions I like to explore in my art. I have a text on my refrigerator that says “The cure for apathy is memory.”⁹ These two notions, the space between remembering, or retrieving memory and wanting to move forward is where my work is situated.

In relation to *Institute for Incongruous Translation Archives*, Natascha Sadr Haghghian writes “An incongruous translation starts not from the centre of meaning, but from the margins of association”.¹⁰ This takes us to the practice of translating without knowing how to read or write in a language.

Throughout most of our interactions we present ourselves with our affiliation to a nation-state. Either through commenting on an accent or by stating where you are from. That is of course not unique for any context. It is done in the art world, exhibitions, artist presentations, texts and reviews. I argue that this illustrates what an extreme grip the nation-state has on how we describe ourselves and each other. So, I look at art as a space to explore what could be if we acknowledge forces of oppression and work towards alternatives. My current work attempts to weaken the link between the nation-state and language through using my own acquirement of the language Tigrinya as point of departure.

Throughout a series of sessions, I attempt to follow and practice how I look at language as a specific experience, rather than a property of the nation-state. I do this using a method of translating poetry I have been developing as part of my art practice that doesn't require the language practitioner to be able to read or write in the language they translate from. An invitation to such a session could look like this:

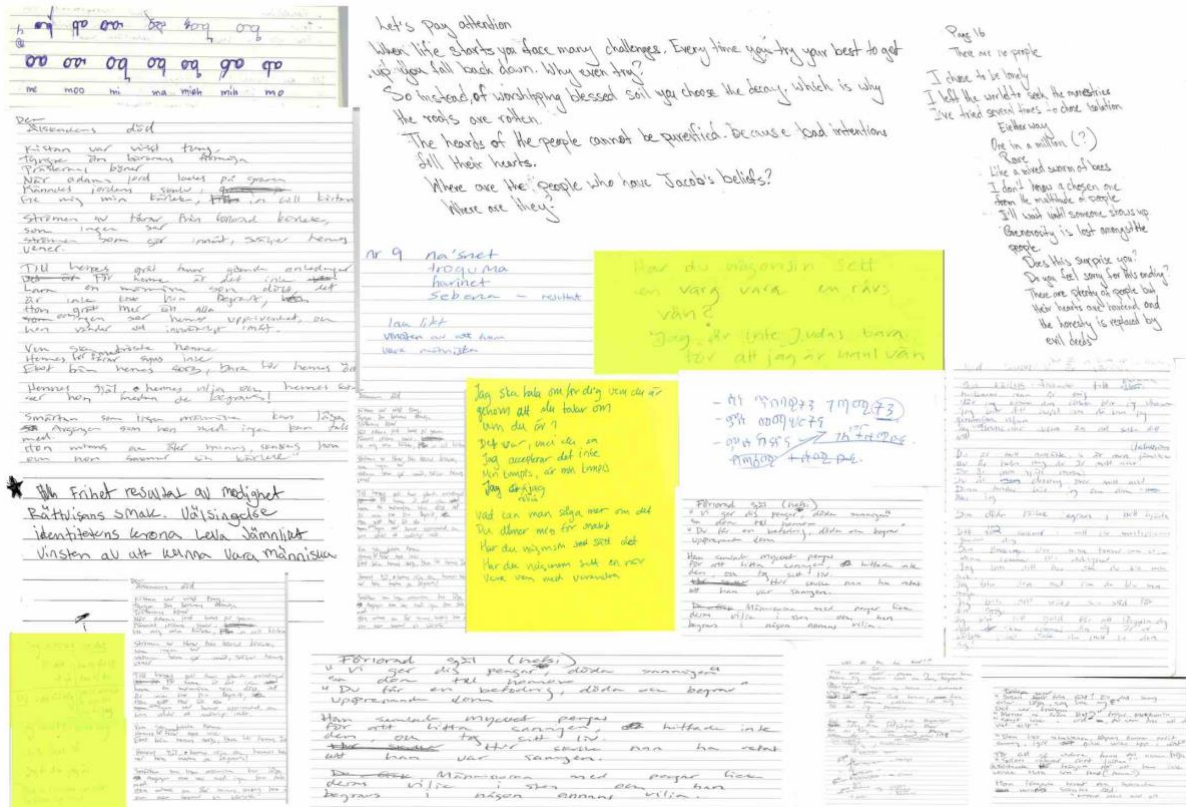
Do you have a relationship with Tigrinya? Are you multilingual, semi-linguistic, home taught, speechless, or do you only have the memory of a language melody from childhood? Are you longing for a context where you can explore and develop your textual relationship with Tigrinya? Then this is for you! Maybe you avoided speaking Tigrinya when you were young or did not have anyone to talk to? Or do you feel comfortable with the language but still want to learn more? This session and invitation is aimed at you with diaspora experience and interest in exploring ways to approach the language together with others. There are no requirements to be able to read or write Tigrinya. Your main language can be English, any Scandinavian language, or Tigrinya. Based on the practice of translation, and with Tigrinya as the source language or target language, we will during the sessions read, listen, write and discuss issues that come up in the materials and in our own texts.”

⁸ Singh, Julietta. *No Archive Will Restore You*. Punctum Books, 2018, Monoskop, Accessed 16 Jan. 2022.

⁹ Waheed, Nayyirah. *Nejma*. Nayyirah Waheed, 2014.

¹⁰ Haghghian, Natascha Sadr, and Ashkan Sepahvand. “Institute for Incongruous Translation Archives.” *Possest*, 2010, <https://possest.de/category/institute-for-incongruous-translation/>.

By using the translation sessions in an art space, a genuine space is carved out where people can practice their specific language constellations without it being aligned, compared or corrected into the idea of language that the nation state has.



Picture 3: A collage of notes from a translation session (2019)

In conducting this task, I need to ask the question – what is a community? What is a community when it comes together physically versus the ones not yet spatialised? Why am I interested in these? I think of the sequences from Larissa Sansours film *In Vitro* (2019) where the loss of a “what’s lost” is grieved but also pushes something else forward. This “something else” is situated in thinking of time as something that has happened but that also continues to happen. The challenge is not understanding this – it is what to do with it. In a series of micro-stories I have collected and written, a form of poetic around the relationship between art and community reveals itself to me. When it encloses the individual.

A man told about the birth of his firstborn child during the pandemic.

He was not allowed to go into the delivery room so he sat outside and heard her ache. But he was not sitting alone - there was also another man with exactly the same fate. He also listened to his partner's torments - two strangers listened to mixed anguish and could no longer discern whose pain was who's. Two strangers who did not have to exchange any words fell into each other's arms, in the middle of a pandemic.

Here, a form of a micro community is portrayed on the basis of “From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs”¹¹ - much like in the translation sessions where each participants ability and needs differs due to the different ways they may have acquired the language.

A doctor told of the first time she experienced care. She had been in the woods and played as a child among twigs and branches. She cut open her forearm on a branch she had not seen. She ran home to her grandmother and cried - her grandmother complained that she had not been more careful, took cotton, alcohol, bandages and kisses from a cupboard and bathed the wound and put it on. The grandmother embraced the child and the wound healed after a few weeks. The doctor told me she had never had a grandmother. That this had never happened. But that a readiness that is based on love, makes the child run home to be embraced. Regardless of whether this never happened, it was the basis for an ideal health system that motivated her to become a doctor.

A desire, or a lack of presence formulates itself here as a possibility. The grandmother caresses the child in the text, and accommodates for a need of care. What we do not have, or have not acquired, is often what we eagerly want to give to others. In the context of the translation sessions this is what flows between the translators when struggling to understand a word or concept.

We were standing outside a gallery when a drunk man approached the group. He started screaming that we were all whores and pussies. We ask him to distance himself. We look at each other. He's looking at us. We all calculate the risks. One says that she worked at a bar before and can handle the situation. Another is trying to talk Somali to him. Another intervenes when the man raises his hand to hit one of us. Another shakes in fear, another leads the other away, helping them to breath in a square. The drunk man jokingly pulls out a chili from one of his pockets and throws it on the group and leaves. I could not stop myself from laughing. We exhale. No one called the police.

This story portrays the complex and sometimes silent decision making a community agrees on. Agreements like, in this group we do not let the state's monopoly on violence dominate. In the translation sessions, there is always a risk of violence. Someone might laugh at someone's pronunciation – but there is also always someone who will pick that up because they know what that violence does to the tongue – it shrinks it and banishes the voice. Being together, with a multitude of experiences, and coming together to deal with shame around not knowing a language, deals with this in the most delicate way. It holds us all responsible for each other.

A mother nostalgically tells of her own mother who asked her to put her baby tooth under the pillow when she was six years old so that the gods would put coins under the pillow on the morning after – she tells how she longed for her own daughter to one day get to experience the same. One morning in Oslo, the daughter drops her tooth and excitedly puts the tooth in a glass of water and places the invitation on the bedside table as she had been told in school. It was a busy morning and her mother did not see the invitation. The daughter wakes up and finds nothing under the pillow. Her older sister sees how the magic is slowly about to cease and runs to her little purse, finds three coins and comforts her sister at the edge of the bed while she carefully slides her hand under the pillow and asks the sister to check again, maybe she did not look properly?

¹¹ Marx, Karl, and Friedrich Engels. Critique of the Gotha Programme: A Contribution to the Critique of the Social-Democratic Draft Programme of 1891. Foreign Language Pub. House, 1959.

This story will end this section of reasoning around what community is and how it functions in my work. The sister – maybe having heard both the mother’s relationship to the tooth fairy tale and the sister’s inhalation of what it looks like, saves the magic. It continues because someone in the setting understood where the expectations were coming from – in both parties. In the same way, the grief around not knowing a language does not necessarily have to turn into disappointment in parents who did not put in enough effort, or in migration politics. We can understand that these were the conditions, and the power in being together is that we can multiply and combine to function together instead of operating in the world as fully equipped entities with every tool acquired. We need each other.

(I) The subaltern can speak, but is only invited to speak her/our pain. Drawing from bell hooks’ (1990) observation that the academy fetishizes stories of the violated, we note that what passes for subaltern “voice” in research is a commodified pain narrative: “No need to hear your voice. Only tell me about your pain. I want to know your story.” (p. 343)

(II) There are some forms of knowledge that the academy doesn’t deserve. This axiom is the crux of refusal. The university is not universal; rather, it is a colonial collector of knowledge as another form of territory. There are stories and experiences that already have their own place, and placing them in the academy is removal, not respect.

(III) Research may not be the intervention that is needed. This axiom challenges the latent theory of change that research—more academic knowing—will somehow innately contribute to the improvement of tribes, communities, youth, schools, etc.¹²

Translating together, sharing each other’s languages turns the pain from violence into action – it responds to what has been lost instead of formulating why it is important in relation to how subjects usually are addressed – “speak of your pain”. But this gives no access to an observer to fetishize the act, it rather encloses and holds the specific experienced loss and utilizes the community much like the way community is described in the micro-communities above.

¹² Tuck, Eve, and K. Wayne Yang. “Chapter 12: R-Words: Refusing Research.” Sage Research Methods, <https://methods.sagepub.com/book/humanizing-research-decolonizing-qualitative-inquiry-with-youth-communities/i798.xml>.

Vi som blev vi, nu (2021)

1974

Kudo¹³, our teacher
he walked just like my father
and he described how words were not enough,
that the body must be involved,
that food should be eaten loudly,
He knew so much and he was so patient,
with me and my brother.

I wish I had loved it more
that I have given more
that someone told me that father tongue is difficult to
devour

Once a year, on New Year's Eve, we had a ritual.
The phone between ear and shoulder.
Dad calls my name,
I sit on his lap,
so that I could hear the wishes for good luck,
and nod as if the people on the other side of the phone
could see me.

Our apartment became a landmass here,
and the body became an extension of that place -
a far too large space for a body.

You rinsed your nose with water,
and seasoned the food in a way that did not match
with what I thought was part of your home,
until I understood
that you had lived in far more places
than where you were a child
and where you became a father.

2011

Zukhra¹⁴ extended the yellow brick walls,
took us home and cooked food and language.
We had to be five to have her in the afternoons,
and in the end it was just me.
But she stayed with me,
and carved out a place for meals, language, and
motherhood
and me,
until I could choose from several words
to describe a home.

2006

My mother was a tailor,
sewed clothes together
turned them into masterpieces.
She made us feel beautiful,
made GEA¹⁵ a showroom,
made Bökön¹⁶ feel like ours.
We used to get lost among tulle,
and her studio met us in earnest.
It let us dream among cloth, threads and needles,
and taught us about materiality and hands.

She was also a teacher,
or she was standing in front of the board,
and taught us home,
I do not know how she succeeded,
but she pulled the meal out of her body,
and gave us mother,
inside the yellow
brick walls.
Maybe the absolute closest you can get
a mother tongue class.¹⁷

¹³ Kudo was the teacher in Japanese in Emmaboda

¹⁴ Zukhra is the teacher in Bosnian in Emmaboda

¹⁵ GEA is a now discontinued perfumery in Emmaboda

¹⁶ The local folk museum part of a larger movement initiated as a protest against industrialism in the beginning of the 1900's. This specific site was established as such in 1936 with buildings from the 18th century. Norin, Olov. "Historia." Hembygd, 25 Mar. 2018, <https://www.hembygd.se/shf/historia>.



Picture 4: The perfumery in Emmaboda. Photo: Freddy Johansson



Picture 5: Image of children dancing around a Christmas tree in the neighbourhood portrayed in the text. Photo: private

Vi som blev vi, nu (2021) is a poetic portrayal based on interviews with people who received mother tongue language classes between 1968-2021 in the municipality of Emmaboda, Småland in Sweden.¹⁸ The legislation on who was given the right to receive these classes changed in the 1990s, which meant that it was necessary to have at least five children with the same needs in the municipality.¹⁹ It does not take long to understand that many children in Sweden's rural areas were affected negatively. I myself am a child of this time. Language is constituted in relations, but the nation state is happy to try to take the right of definition over what a correct language is - which unit is being referred to when talking about a language? The text will be printed in 2022 in the magazine *Fronesis* issue on the rural and periphery. Excerpts has been translated for this essay originally written in Swedish.

This situates people who exist in the same files and later come together through being addressed in an art work. I consult a friend of mine on this phenomena and he directs me to phenomenology and I read the following:

"The German word for experiencing (verb), Erleben, simply means to be alive when something is grasped (Gadamer, 2004). The experienced (noun), das Erlebte, refers to what lasts once the experiencing is done: "This content is like a yield or result that achieves permanence, weight, and significance from out of the transience of experiencing" (Gadamer, 2004, p. 53). Lived experience, Erlebnis, fuses these two meanings; the immediacy of experiencing provides the raw material to be shaped through interpretation, reinterpretation, and communication into its lasting form, the experienced (Gadamer, 2004), what Weick (1995) calls the sensemaking process in organizational studies. A lived experience is not only something that is experienced, "its being experienced makes a special impression that gives it lasting importance" (Gadamer, 2004, p. 53). This hermeneutic conceptualization of lived experience shows the centrality of the meaning attributed to the experience. An account of lived experience is incomplete if it remains purely descriptive; it must contain an interpretation of significance for the person. Ricoeur

¹⁸ Emmaboda is a municipality in the middle of southeastern Sweden with exactly 57 kilometres to the three residential cities Kalmar, Växjö and Karlskrona. The population in 1970 was 11,787 people and in 2020 9,360 people. 20.6 percent of the inhabitants were born abroad.

¹⁹ "Hemspråk." Diskrimineringens Retorik: En Studie Av Svenska Valrörelser 1988-2002: Rapport, by Kristina Boréus, Fritzes, 2006.

(1981) argues that a person's life story has two dimensions that contribute to its forward movement or directedness: (1) a chronological sequence of episodes and (2) a construction of "meaningful totalities out of scattered events" (p. 240).²⁰

"A lived experience is not only something that is experienced, its being experienced makes a special impression that gives it lasting importance". If we apply this reasoning on *Vi som blev vi, nu (2021)* – the experience of being part of something is not where "it" happens but rather in the moment it becomes important to those addressed. My friend and I continue.

"Its focus is on *Geschichtlichkeit* (historicity or historical-ity), a term that has been used in the works of Husserl, Dilthey, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty and Ricoeur. The question is not What is history? or How do we know history? but rather What is it to be historical? What is it like to exist historically? What does it mean to be historical? Dilthey wrote that "we are historical beings first, before we are observers [Betrachter] of history, and only because we are the former do we become the latter [...]. The historical world is always there, and the individual not only observes it from the outside but is intertwined with it [in sie verwebt]." Phenomenologists want to know what it means to be a "historical being," in Dilthey's sense, and in what sense we are intertwined with history. They want to know how history is encountered, how it enters our lives, and in what forms of consciousness and experience it does so."²¹

We have a conversation of historicity and the artists, scholars, poets and writers are telling me that we are what we are and what is being narrated is something else – therefore it is of great importance that we narrate what cannot be narrated by anyone else. Ariella Azoulay argues that people looking into archives are very much part of the archive itself, although the archive portrays itself as a neutral and objective storyteller. She says – "the people is the archive."²²In some ways I think the works I have exemplified throughout this essay practices just that.

Outro

"Since the 1990s, participatory art has often asserted a connection between user-generated content and democracy, but the frequent predictability of its results seem to be the consequence of lacking *both* a social *and* an artistic target; in other words, participatory art today stands without a relation to an existing political project (only to a loosely defined anti-capitalism) and presents itself as oppositional to visual art by trying to side-step the question of visibility. As a consequence, these artists have internalised a huge amount of pressure to bear the burden of devising new models of social and political organisation – a task that they are not always best equipped to undertake."²³

²⁰ Frechette, Julie, et al. "Capturing Lived Experience: Methodological Considerations for Interpretive Phenomenological Inquiry." SAGE Journals , 1 Jan. 2020, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1609406920907254>.

²¹ Carr, David. "Phenomenology of Historical Time ." Diva Portal, 2005, <https://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:217457/FULLTEXT01.pdf>.

²² Azoulay, Ariella. "Preface." Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism, Verso Books, London, 2019, p. 278-279.

²³ Bishop, Claire. Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship. Verso Books, 2012.

Bishop's critique is relevant to my practice but her claims separates art from society, the art from the political – as if they do not mirror each other. In the case of the works that has been discussed in this paper – my own participation and experience has been a condition for the work to happen. I do not know how to read or write in Tigrinya – which is a tool to let others know, I am here to be with you and art can be a context and method to create that space. The space allows non-dominant language acquisition as being - in some ways - a resistance to the nation-state. We are now in a time where people are refusing fetishization or begging to be heard and in that context, I read Bishop's work as important as a way to examine one's intentions and outcomes, but it is not sufficient to undermine its importance.

My position as a participant is albeit different because the conditions of how we gather is set by me. But the conditions are also formulated and adjusted in accordance to what is needed. I will not know the constellations of language that will be present in a session before we start. Much like the sister that runs to her little purse when she observes that there has been a misunderstanding between her little sister and their mother – the sessions also works with attention toward each other. Having attention toward one another creates the basis for community in my findings. In the interviews I made for *Vi som blev vi, nu (2021)* we discover that we have been part of something similar and when speaking of it, we become together in the conversation and later in the text. I believe it is not possible to fully grasp what the togetherness does. But one thing that has been common from all of these observations is that it holds stories in a similar way that Azoulay describes people as archives.²⁴ It happens in a way that is not very beneficial to the preservation of the nation state. Because it allows a multitude of narratives to co-exist, whereas the nation-state seeks to form a feeling of togetherness based on having experienced history, events, language and culture in a binary way – extinguishing and creating shame within those who falls out of the binary. Refusing the binary requires creating togetherness on other premises – and I hope this text successfully exemplified how this can be done through an artistic practice.

²⁴ Azoulay, Ariella. "Preface." *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism*, Verso Books, London, 2019, p. 278-279.

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