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# 'Portraits of Moments' : Visual and Textual Entanglements in Narrative Research

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## **Abstract**

In this paper I consider questions of coherence and sequence in narrative research and explore their conditions of possibility and their effects. What happens, I ask, when the Aristotelian plot and the coherent self cannot be identified? Who gets excluded and to what effect when narratives are trapped within restrictive models of analysis? In focusing on a quantifiable and divisible model of time that underpins the conception of narratives in terms of linearity, completeness and closure, the paper charts a plane of analysis wherein narratives are taken as 'portraits of moments'—textual and visual traces of eruptions and events. Such an analytical stance draws on Hannah Arendt's philosophy and particularly the connections she has made between life histories and the discourse of History. In this context completion is examined not in terms of narrative closure but as an agential cut in making meaning about 'the lives of others'.

## **'PORTRAITS OF MOMENTS': VISUAL AND TEXTUAL ENTANGLEMENTS IN NARRATIVE RESEARCH**

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**ABSTRACT:** In this paper I consider questions of coherence and sequence in narrative research and explore their conditions of possibility and their effects. What happens, I ask, when the Aristotelian plot and the coherent self cannot be identified? Who gets excluded and to what effect when narratives are trapped within restrictive models of analysis? In focusing on a quantifiable and divisible model of time that underpins the conception of narratives in terms of linearity, completeness and closure, the paper charts a plane of analysis wherein narratives are taken as 'portraits of moments'—textual and visual traces of eruptions and events. Such an analytical stance draws on Hannah Arendt's philosophy and particularly the connections she has made between life histories and the discourse of History. In this context completion is examined not in terms of narrative closure but as an agential cut in making meaning about 'the lives of others'.

*Key words: coherence, moments, portraits*

The theme of this volume revolves around complexities in narrative research: what has been identified as a central question is: what happens to narrative research when the Aristotelian imperative of beginning-middle and end cannot be put to work?

Three narrative concepts emerge here: coherence, sequence and characters that keep the plot together. These three themes were our main concern when two years ago a group of colleagues from Finland, Sweden and the UK thought of bringing together an edited collection so that we could foreground these problems and ask researchers in different fields to address them by reflecting on their own work. (Hyvärinen et al, 2010)

In putting together the different strands that researchers in different areas, including health, politics and art, had worked without or against Aristotle, we delved more into the problem of coherence: what do we mean by that and what are the effects of going beyond it? This, then, is the first theme that I would like to address below.

### **Rethinking coherence**

Against a previous consensus concerning the importance of coherence in narrative sense—a consensus that includes a variety of scholars in different disciplines and traditions that otherwise disagree—dissonant voices have been raised from researchers working with visual and textual documents, as well as with interviews, oral history, and 'naturally occurring narratives' emerging in conversations.

What are the components of coherence? Linearity, completeness and thematic or moral closure.<sup>1</sup> The urgent question that arises here, of course, is what happens when researchers become obsessed with identifying these components? They inevitably suppress or ignore 'narrative phenomena'<sup>2</sup> that do not present the attributes of coherence, and the implications of this stance can be dangerous on many levels: analytically (what we can find), cognitively (what we can know), epistemologically (how do we know what we think we know), but also ethically and politically (who gets excluded, and to what effect, from such an approach).

Coherence in classical narratology is linked to and conditioned by the existence of consistent characters, who carry the sequential order of the narrative. But here again the coherent self emerges as a cultural construction, an effect of classed, gendered and racialised discourses and practices. In this context it has been richly theorized, discussed and deconstructed in feminist and postcolonial critical studies. Critical feminist interventions in narrative studies have shown that there are many different ways of narrating the female self, ways that are always embedded and embodied and often experimental, transgressing the limitations of coherence and closure.<sup>3</sup> For postcolonial critics, hybridity and multiplicity have emerged as catalytic factors in the ways we read, analyse, understand and evaluate 'coherent' narratives. What happens to the desire for textual or temporal coherence when place and location as material coherences par excellence, melt into fluid spatialities, forced displacement and diasporic subjectivities? How can coherence be sustained in narrative texts produced as effects of discourses of colonization? How can 'the coherent self' be located across different national territories, ethnic locations and multicultural places when narratives of return cannot be imagined, let alone expressed or inscribed, when there is no material place of origin or beginning?<sup>4</sup>

In practice, people often tell or write stories that are fragmented, disorganized; on other occasions the telling or the writing of the story is much more important than what it is told or written: in such cases the story emerges as 'an agential cut'<sup>5</sup> an active intervention upon the narrative phenomena we are all part of. As I have discussed elsewhere in detail (Tamboukou 2010c), we need to be more attentive to the space/time/matter entanglements, the material and discursive conditions of the 'narrative phenomena' we are working with. In this light we become conscious of the fact that we can't possibly be independent or autonomous researchers working with separate and well defined units of analysis: the story, the teller, the interviewer, the writer, the plot, the narrative, its content and its form. What I have therefore argued is that we are all entangled within storyworlds that are both discursively and

<sup>1</sup> See Hyvärinen et al. 2010 for an extended discussion of coherence.

<sup>2</sup> 'narrative phenomena' is a notion I have used to refer to specific narrative situations within which the narrative researcher deploys methodological strategies that will consequently have an effect on how meaning emerges. See Tamboukou 2010c.

<sup>3</sup> See Smith and Watson, 1998, for an excellent review of this literature.

<sup>4</sup> See amongst others, Bhabha 1986, Gillroy 1993, 2000, Hall 1990, Spivak 1987.

<sup>5</sup> The notion of 'agential cut' comes from Karen Barad's (2007) influential work, which I have discussed elsewhere in detail; in my work it denotes the researcher's intervention in the conditions of the narrative phenomenon s/he looks into. See also Tamboukou, 2010c.

materially constituted; rather than being pre-defined, they emerge through their *intra-actions*<sup>6</sup> within the phenomena they are part of. As physicist Niels Bohr has famously declared: 'we are part of this nature we seek to understand.' (cited in Barad 2007, 26) Following Bohr through feminist theorist Karen Barad (2007), I have therefore suggested that we are part of the storyworlds we seek to understand.

Returning to Aristotle, in his defense we have to say that the famous tripartite narrative framework of beginning-middle-end was conceived in his *Poetics*, as the form of tragedy: Aristotle and many narratologists after him were never interested in real life stories. And yet their preoccupations have passed into the field of life histories, both oral and written, since in trying to make sense of the chaos of our lives we do rely on the temporal structures of narrative, an idea that Paul Ricoeur (1981) has richly developed. I will give an example here drawing on Jens Brockmeier's (2001) notion of 'retrospective teleology', particularly referring to autobiographical narratives. When we tell or write our story, Brockmeier notes, we actually narrate it from the end to the beginning and not the other way round, even when we conventionally start from the usual: 'I was born and grew up, etc, etc...'

Now a story that is being practically narrated retrospectively, in relation to the time of the telling, is very easily coherent: the narrator looks back and creates causalities and consequentialities since 'the events' and the 'characters' of the plot are already there: things have happened anyway and thus creating a plot of events that have already occurred is a piece of cake that can fit into many genres: the epic and the heroic, the romantic, the tragic, the coming-out genre and so on and so forth. Corinne Squire (2004) has eloquently theorised the many genres that people employ to make the plots of their stories.

How more difficult is it however to tell coherent stories of moments or events that you do not know what they will become —when you write or tell a story to the moment or of the moment. In my research it is the moment when you write a letter that I was interested in unpacking, what I have theorized and discussed as 'the narrative event'.<sup>7</sup> But such 'narrative events' also emerge when people tell stories from a moment in time when all certainties around life and values have been shaken, 'raw stories' as I call them, that seem to just erupt.

As the contributors to the edited collection *Beyond Narrative Coherence* (Hyvärinen et al. 2010) have shown, these are, for example, stories by people who have experienced political traumas (Andrews 2010), people who are mentally or bodily disabled (Medved and Brockmeier 2010) or finally, people like artists, who grasp the moment to intervene aesthetically and ethically upon it, to create and invent new forms of art but also new forms of life. (Sandino 2010) This is how I am led to my own work: what it means to narrate the moment/the event, to tell stories whose end you do not know but which you actively want to re-imagine, and hence the title of this paper: 'portraits of moments', which I will take up in the next section.

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<sup>6</sup> Drawing on quantum physics, Barad (2007) has talked about intra-actions rather than interactions to denote the fact that while interactions occur between already established and separate entities, intra-actions occur as relations between components; entities—both human and non-human—actually emerge as an effect of these intra-actions, without having stable points or positions

<sup>7</sup> See Tamboukou 2010a, b, c.

### 'Portraits of moments'

The phrase comes from Hannah Arendt's biography of Rahel Varnhagen: the story of a Jewish woman. The book was first published in 1957 when Arendt was already living in the States but it was actually her second doctoral thesis, the *habilitation* that would give her the right to teach at University in the German academic system. Arendt's supervisor was Karl Jaspers, and following his idea of problematizing what it means to be German, Arendt wanted to problematize Jewish identity and particularly the problem of Jewish acculturation. She, thus, studied Rahel Varnhagen's letters and diaries and then wrote her story, interweaving disparate moments and events into a drawing that had a meaning.

But is it possible, Adriana Cavarero (2000) has asked, to tell a story that has a meaning? This was my challenge in writing a genealogy of the constitution of the female self in art, where I mostly drew on women artists' letters and diaries which I conceived, theorized and analysed as 'portraits of moments' linking to another significant proposition, what Arendt has called: 'writing from within', which I will now explicate.

In her approach to life writing Arendt is not concerned with the narratologists' obsession on sequence, particularly temporal sequence; she actually thinks that stories should reveal what sequence often covers: 'the story reveals the meaning of what otherwise would remain the unbearable sequence of sheer happenings.' (Arendt 1995, 104) Rather than following the imperative of the beginning, middle and end of the Aristotelian *Poetics*, Arendt's interest lies with the importance of narrative agency and closure in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*. As Julia Kristeva pithily notes in this philosophical text, 'the art of narrative resides in the ability to condense the action into an exemplary moment, to extract it from the continuous flow of time, and reveal a *who*.' (2001, 16) This interest in freezing the exemplary moment wherein human beings reveal themselves to the world through action and speech also differs from Ricoeur's theories that focus on the interrelation between temporality and narrativity.<sup>8</sup> While Arendt's interest lies in the moment of action and speech, Ricoeur emphasizes the importance of the plot in the formation of narrative identity and dismisses the 'now' as concealing the 'true constitution of time.' (Ricoeur 1981, 166)

Although Arendt highlights the importance of stories in creating meaning, she makes a decisive distinction between revealing meaning and defining it, thus pointing to the impossibility of pinning down what stories are about or what subjects should be or do. 'It is true', she notes 'that storytelling reveals meaning without committing the error of defining it.' (1995, 105) It has to be noted here, however, that as an existential concept 'meaning' remains rather elusive in Arendt's work. As Lewis and Sandra Hinchman have pithily noted, meaning for Arendt 'became a jigsaw puzzle, whose pieces are distributed among actors in the public realm, spectators, poets, historians and philosophers.' (1994, 164)

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<sup>8</sup>As Ricoeur notes on this interrelation: 'I take temporality to be the structure of existence that reaches language in narrativity and narrativity to be the language structure that has temporality as its ultimate referent.' (1981, 165)

Still, who is this 'evasive' meaning addressed to? Who is the audience of these stories? Sheldon Wolin has commented that for Arendt 'audience is a metaphor for the political community whose nature is to be a community of remembrance.' (1977, 97) In this light it is important to remember that closure refers here to the power of stories to reveal the meaning of actions and thus complete them; it does not refer to the closure of the story itself, the Aristotelian *telos*, the end of the plot.

Liliane Weissberg has commented that for Arendt, 'biography reflects on an individual life, but this life becomes public for history.' (2000, 18) But how can this be done? What does it mean to write from within, while you also write for history? Arendt's approach is controversial in that she attempts to write about *inner lives* keeping a distance from what Foucault (2000) has famously criticized as the 'sciences of man'. As Weissberg notes, 'instead of a psychological analysis, [Arendt] proposes a turn outward, to the mimetic gesture ... she addresses the notion of action and speaks of the public self in terms of performance ... speech as action defines the public man.' (2000, 19) Thus, the public realm is not necessarily the space of outside for Arendt. The public space is any space where action and speech meet together and human beings expose and reveal themselves to others: 'the political realm rises directly out of acting together, the "sharing of words and deeds" ... action and speech create a space between the participants which can find its proper location almost any time and anywhere.' (Arendt 1998, 198) In this light a literary salon can be a public space and it was actually the stage for: *Rahel Varnhagen: The Life of a Jewess*.

In writing Varnhagen's a life *from the inside*, Arendt did not discuss external facts, unless they were absolutely necessary, but she did not write within the biographical discourse of introspection either. She was interested in the life and actions of the mind, not of the soul or the psyche: 'It is inherent in the nature of the method I have selected that certain psychological observations which appear to thrust themselves forward are scarcely mentioned and not commented at all.' (Arendt, 2000, 83) The biographer, she has further argued, has to respect the life she is writing about and should refrain from investing the biographical subject with meanings she might neither recognize, nor understand. In writing a biography, there is always the risk of becoming indiscreet and this is what Arendt wanted to avoid in writing Varnhagen's biography:

... the point was not to assume to know more than Rahel herself knew, not to impose upon her a fictional destiny derived from observations presumed to be superior to those she consciously had. That is to say, I have deliberately avoided that modern form of indiscretion in which the writer attempts to penetrate his subject's tricks and aspires to know more than the subject knew about himself or was willing to reveal; what I would call the pseudoscientific apparatuses of depth-psychology, psychoanalysis, graphology, etc., fall into this category of curiosity-seeking. (83)

How to keep psychology or psychoanalysis at bay while at the same time writing about the subject's inner life—Arendt's suggestion of what life writing should be about—has been of course a difficult and risky endeavour, but still an exciting path to follow in life writing, the idea of 'writing from within.' (Weissberg 2000, 5)

Arendt never wrote an autobiography. However *Rahel Varnhagen* has been considered and discussed as coming very close to an intellectual autobiography; in

writing Varnhagen's biography, Arendt looks at the shape of a life that has been completed and responds to it with intellectual rigour and unbounded passion: as her biographical subject, Varnhagen would ultimately become for Arendt, 'my closest friend, though she has been dead for some hundred years.' (in Weissberg 2000, 5) Apart from unfolding Arendt's philosophical ideas and concerns, what is autobiographical in Varnhagen's biographical text however?

As Weissberg has pithily commented, Arendt's inner biography was only possible if staged as an autobiography, 'as a fictitious act seemingly necessary if one wants to come close to a life.' (6) To do that, Arendt had to imagine herself as participating in Varnhagen's life, following the public life of her salon, reading, transcribing and rewriting her letters and her diary entries, discussing the dreams Varnhagen had jotted down, not as interpretations of repressed thoughts or emotions, but as questions that entered the realm of the day, and ultimately became 'narratives of the day.' (6) Weissberg therefore observes that writing a story *from the inside* requires the author to retreat and allow the biographical subject to take the lead. This of course does not mean that the authorial intention is completely erased; it rather unfolds in parallel with the voice of the biographical subject, challenging as Weissberg has noted, the power of the author.

Arendt wrote Varnhagen's biography very much drawing on her correspondence, which she studied in the Staatsbibliothek in Berlin.<sup>9</sup> Varnhagen's life was thus written in letters, conceived as 'portraits of moments' in the order of Varnhagen's epistolary discourse: I want a letter to be the portrait of a moment: that in which it is written'. (in Weissberg 2000, 11). It is also interesting to note here that in her preface to Varnhagen's biography, Arendt uses the notion of 'the portrait' to denote her biographical work: 'My portrait therefore follows as closely as possible Rahel's own reflections upon herself, although it is naturally couched in different language and does not consist solely on variations upon quotations.' (Arendt 2000, 82)

Having done this theoretical visit<sup>10</sup> to the little phrase, 'portraits of moments', I will now turn to the articles of this volume to trace narrative moments that their authors have put together in grappling with narratives in search for meaning and threads of the lost plot. The range of the articles show that 'losing the plot' can take many forms in a variety of narrative milieus including migrants' folktales (Yekenkurul), family albums and family secrets (Schutt and Berry), queer life histories (Vicars), literary texts of magical realism (Langdon) and postmodern novels (Prendergast). There is an assemblage of genres and a blending of fictional and non-fictional narrative modes and tropes that problematize coherence from a multiplicity of perspectives.

<sup>9</sup> It has to be noted here that Arendt first read Varnhagen's letters through the chopped and censored edition her husband circulated, shortly after her death in 1833 and which was then published as a three volumes memoir. (See Weissberg 2000, 13) The correspondence is now housed at the Library in Kraków, Poland.

<sup>10</sup> The notion of visit is not accidental here but derives from Arendt's conceptual vocabulary around critical thinking that although solitary as an activity is in communication with other minds and perspectives, in the realm of the Kantian notion of enlarged mentality: 'to think with an enlarged mentality means that one trains one's imagination to go visiting' she notes in her lectures on Kant. (1982, 43)



Senem Yekenkural looks for meaning in the broken narrative of the *Angel*, an Arab Turkish folktale passed to her through two generations of women, her mother and her grandmother: it is a rich folktale in the Sahrazat tradition with beautiful angels and a romantic prince, gardens, love and marriage, but also separation and pain, huge birds that can eat human flesh, prison cells and tears. When things become critical and we need to know whether the angel will follow her prince away from her homeland, the narrative fails, since the narrator, a Turkish immigrant herself has forgotten how it ends. And yet this broken narrative initiates memory journeys for the author of the paper and opens up paths in the quest of meaning about her mother, her grandmother and ultimately herself. Closure is annihilated when the possibility of return is ambiguous. Can there ever be a return of sorts for the migrant woman? The narrator does not know and neither do we. And yet this broken and inconclusive folktale reveals 'the whoness'<sup>11</sup> of the immigrant, illuminates moments of her existence in the world. In the reciprocal scene of story-telling the author receives the gift of her mother's story and by writing it for us it makes the story part of the Australian Turkish immigrants' history. The story does not have an end, but it makes the author and the narrator complete, which is what really matters.

'The haunted photograph' is a narrative assemblage of family histories, photographs and tissues of narratives by the authors brought together as 'portraits of moments', both literally and metaphorically. Stefan Schutt and Marsha Berry follow Walter Benjamin's 'thesis on the philosophy of history' (1999) working with the fragments and ruins of post-war European families in Germany and Russia. As we literally look at 'portraits of moments' in the histories of their families we feel moving, like Benjamin's 'angel of history': the force of time is throwing us into the future, while our gaze is still fixed into the ruins of the past, trying in vain to discern the Hegelian end of history:

This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress. (Benjamin 1999, 249)

We also call this storm coherence and continuity and we often downplay or ignore the importance of narrative force in revealing meaning.<sup>12</sup> Our gaze is fixed in the photographs taken by the authors depicting the ruins of what used to be a house, a church, a community; these ruins of spaces are unavoidably linked to the wrinkled photograph, taken in Leningrand in 1921, that the author's father carried with him, as a portrait of his mother but also of a very uneasy moment in his and his country's history. Like Benjamin's angel we can't look away from these pictures but the force

<sup>11</sup> In her study on Arendt, narratives and political theory, Olivia Guaraldo (2001, 27) has made the distinction between 'the whoness of the doer' and the 'whatness of being' in Arendt's philosophical take on narratives. For an extended discussion of the importance of 'who are you' in Arendt and Cavarero, see Tamboukou, 2010b.

<sup>12</sup> I have discussed the notion of narrative force at length in my work with Gwen John's letters. See Tamboukou 2008, 2010a.

of the narrative that the authors are creating pushes us into the future anyway. Still, photographs and stories remain in the private and public archives, and as Arendt has argued, they become the preconditions of history.

Mark Vicars' 'Inauthentic Tales' brings together dissonant voices that trouble the coherence of master narratives around 'the normal'. The stories of gay men meeting twice a month for almost a year, constitute the narrative fabric of the research. What Vicars has staged is a collective story-telling event, where gay men appear to the world through their stories, in the frame of an Arendtian political action par excellence, which the author has taken the responsibility to record and transform into a story. Unlike Homer, much celebrated in Arendt's analyses, Vicars is not recounting heroic actions. But heroes and glorious acts have been largely misunderstood and misinterpreted in the Arendtian scholarship.<sup>13</sup> Two Arendtian themes come forward from the entangled stories—both semantically and visually—of gay men: uniqueness and plurality. All stories reveal an unrepeatable identity and experience of coming of age as a gay man and yet they are inextricably related by showing that 'the whatness of being'—gay man, working class, British, young and so forth and so on—can explain nothing about 'the whoness of the doer' in his possibility of re-inserting himself in the world through his story and thus initiating new beginnings. As Arendt has poetically put it: 'With word and deed we insert ourselves into the human world, and this insertion is like a second birth'. (1998, 176) Moreover, these narratives that have been visually crammed in one page also show that stories have multiple tellers and yet not a tangible author since as Julia Kristeva notes, given that stories keep on unfolding, the revealed *who* is subsequently dismantled, 'dispersed into "strangenesses" within the infinity of narrations.' (2001, 27)

In 'Magical Realism and Experiences of Extremity' Jo Langdon makes an interesting proposition vis-à-vis the possibilities of literary texts to convey experiences of trauma and fear. The author shows that literary texts of magical realism create conditions of possibility for destabilizing the past and historical 'truths' around it, but they also do more than that: they open up spaces for the extraordinary and the outrageous to be expressed in what Arendt's mentor Karl Jaspers would call 'border situations', moments when subjects become conscious of their existence. Indeed, incoherence Landon argues, strengthens rather than weakens the force of the traumatic narrative if it is seen through the literary strategies of magical realism that create 'portraits of extreme moments of being'. The author carefully maps such strategies as recurring interruptions, dual and 'untrustworthy' narrators, defiance of moral principles, elusive truths, real-and-imagined displacements and fantastic occurrences. What forcefully emerges according to the author is the heterogeneity of experience, literary conveyed as a collage of moments both for the protagonists and actors of the story, as well as its readers. Indeed Langdon's paper forcefully shows that narrative research has a lot to learn from literary narratology and such transdisciplinary connections can create more pluralistic frameworks allowing for differences to enrich rather than constrain the emergence of narrative sense from extreme positions or marginalized subjects.

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<sup>13</sup> See Dish (1994) for an excellent overview of misinterpretations of Arendt's take on narratives in the field of political theory.

In reflecting upon the writing of a postmodern novel Julia Prendergast takes up questions of difference in a plane of consistency, where Derrida's notion of alterity and particularly the trace of otherness becomes her theoretical lens of exploring polysemy in narrative. As Prendergast simultaneously inhabits the position of the author and that of the narrative theorist she is continually challenging and interrogating her own narrative strategies: why is it that many fragmented, inconsistent and often dissonant voices become the only way that her story can be told? Prendergast grapples with the Bakhtinian counter-argument: polyglossia and hybridity. However Bakhtin's notion of the significance of the authorial intention cannot account for what she perceives as the need for the narrative to be splintered, to be literally torn apart. Bakhtin's authorial intention is juxtaposed by desire in what Prendergast delineates as 'experiential representation', a narrative plane wherein the activity of memory and the activity of narration are intertwined in a non-causal way: what you remember and what you narrate need not correspond to external reality, they become existential modes of expression. What do these splintering narrative technologies achieve? Quite simply they reveal what she calls the 'trace dance', relations between luminosity and darkness, the seen and the unseen. Moving away from Arendt's phenomenological take on narrative Prendergast's intervention highlights the importance of absence, posing the argument that it is not in moments of illumination that meaning can be enacted but rather in the Nietzschean twilight, spaces between illumination and darkness.

Either following trails of Arendt's thought or deliberately moving away from them what the five contributors of this volume achieve is to create a compelling case against the dogma of narrative coherence from a multiplicity of perspectives, methodological, theoretical and epistemological traditions as well as a plurality of narrative genres both fictional and non-fictional. Although unique and unrepeatable the essays act in concert in confirming one of Arendt's most powerful statements: 'the world is full of stories, of events and occurrences and strange happenings, which wait only to be told, and the reason why they usually remain untold is [...] lack of imagination' (1995, 97).

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