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**Phantasmagoria of Positivity: Palestine and the Question of Archives in Anthropology**

**Toward an Alternative Archival Ontology**

“Historical narratives are a result of a set of silences that happen in four moments: silencing in the making of sources; silencing in the making of archives; silencing in the making of narratives; and lastly silencing in the making of history.”

Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Present,* p.26

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**Introduction**

This essay seeks to think the question of archives in anthropology and to look critically at the ways in which anthropologists —in particular those associated with archival methods— make use of archival materials in their research, when it’s rooted in settler colonial contexts. I ask whether Palestine —suffering from continuous settler colonial practices, ongoing dispossession, and erosion of identity[[1]](#footnote-1)— can provide us with critical purchase on the assumption —spread throughout anthropology and adopted by many anthropologists— that archives are merely sites of positive knowledge, [[2]](#footnote-2) and on the idea that the world can be studied in all its conditions.

I look first at Israel’s alarming obsession with archives, resulted in a large investment in establishing very detailed archives, asking puzzlingly, how comes and why is that, perpetrators of violence, own tremendous, impressively detailed archives. Alongside, I also call attention to Israel’s aggressive and continuous demolition and destruction of any possible Palestinian archive. Pointing out the epistemological problem of the dramatic lack of balance in power and narrative, I suggest that archives are there mainly to conceal, not to reveal. Then, drawing on Yael Navaro’s ‘negative methodology’ approach,[[3]](#footnote-3) as well as Gil Hochberg’s work on the temporality of the archive,[[4]](#footnote-4) I attempt to offer an *alternative archival ontology*, arguing that anthropology —the discipline devoted to understanding humans lives— better question the actual act of digging in archives as if it provides us with positive, neutral and evidentiary knowledge, and as if the past is, or should be, our starting point.

Having this understanding, I argue, allows and enables anthropologists to reread colonial archives “against their grains”,[[5]](#footnote-5) as Ann Stoler puts it, and instead of normalizing the archive in a way that maintains the status quo, anthropologists can make use of it in a way the archive becomes a site of resistance, allowing change over time, and joining ongoing scholarly efforts to establish a counter-postcolonial and decolonial archives.[[6]](#footnote-6)

**The Establishment of Israeli Archives and Palestinian Archives’ Demolition and Deconstruction**

Since its establishment in 1948, Israel has been increasingly very preoccupied with creating and developing its archives, storing thousands of files, including —files of police stations in Palestinian villages, files of force’s Special Branches, intelligence files, interrogation files, files of the Regional Committees on Palestinian affairs, among many others.[[7]](#footnote-7) In fact, Israel known by its national very impressive specialty with creating very much elaborated archives, such as the archeological and architecture archives,[[8]](#footnote-8) and by its national library, dedicated to collecting the cultural treasures of Israel and Jewish heritage, it holds more than four million books, three million photographs, among thousands of newspapers and maps.[[9]](#footnote-9) Israel is also known by its military archives. The Israel Defense Forces and Defense Establishment Archive,[[10]](#footnote-10) for example, is the main historical archive of the Israel Defense Forces (IDF), established in 1948, serving the IDF and Israel’s Defense Ministry in their daily work.

Even before Israel’s establishment in 1948, Zionist organizations were occupied with archiving and gathering information. The 1940 Village Files project, for example, constitute of military intelligence documents with vast detailed information on every village in Mandatory Palestine, gathered by Shai,[[11]](#footnote-11) it was the basis of Haganah’s and Palmah’s operations, the main Zionist paramilitary organization of the Jewish population in Mandatory Palestine, and later on it became of the core of the IDF.

Israel’s approach to archives, its long-building national elaborated archives, its policies, regulations and decisions regarding the release or lack of release of materials, seems puzzling, perhaps even suspicious. Why perpetrators of violence are so busy constantly documenting and creating archives? Why colonial archives, echoing fascist archives, tend to be very detailed archives? What might be the explanation of that tendency to restore and archive in this capacity? Why Israel government is keeping many of the state’s archival documents classified, censored and out of the reach? The other way around, why Israel sometimes actually decides to release information that is sensitive, such as its torture method? After all, if it’s supposed to be secret, it shouldn’t have been documented in the first place, or at the very least, it should not have access.

At the same time Israel has been producing its own archives, however, it has been very busy destroying any possible Palestinian archive.[[12]](#footnote-12) First, the destroying of the Palestine Liberation Organization’s (PLO) archives in Beirut during the invasion of 1982,[[13]](#footnote-13) raiding offices of the Palestine Research Center (PRC) in Beirut —established in 1965 to gather, conserve and analyze books and materials relating to Palestine,— and confiscating its archives.[[14]](#footnote-14)

During the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon, however, not only the PRC was looted and seized by the IDF, but also the Palestinian Cinema Institute (PCI), including its professional film archive,[[15]](#footnote-15) an event considered one of the biggest plunders done by Israel’s forces. Currently, the films are managed under the IDF’s colonial control, which conceals many of the information about their origins.[[16]](#footnote-16) Some of these materials, however, were recently uncovered, while some photos remain in private collections, with some preserved and published by research organizations such as the Institute of Palestine Studies.[[17]](#footnote-17)

Furthermore, some research also show that when the PLO was forced out of Beirut in 1982, it moved to Tunisia where a cultural department was established to continue producing Palestinian materials, and the archive, again, was also looted.[[18]](#footnote-18) Later on these materials were returned in the wake of the Oslo accords, a pair of agreements between Israel and the PLO, considered to be for many one of the biggest agreements in history.

Also, during the 1948 and 1967 wars, Israel was responsible on the looting of many private valuable Palestinian materials, including private Palestinian collected books and manuscripts. These materials that were collected during the 1948 and later on during the 1967 belong now to the Israel national library in Jerusalem. It is not something new that through history, books and libraries have been destroyed or seized as part of the destruction or appropriation of cultural heritage. However, The Great Book Robbery, [[19]](#footnote-19) a documentary film brings to light something that, nevertheless, is still shocking. The National Library in Jerusalem, according to the movie, holds approximately a total of 70,000 books from private Palestinian libraries, half of them from Jerusalem only,[[20]](#footnote-20) and the rest from all Palestine. Moreover, 6,000 books in Arabic marked now as ‘AP’ for ‘Abandoned Property’. These books were private belongings of Palestinians who fled or forced out of their homes in 1948. The Great Book Robbery traces what happened to these books, asking whether the appropriation of Palestinian books and manuscripts in 1948 was a case of cultural theft or cultural preservation. By trying to understand why thousands of books appropriated from Palestinian homes are still in the Israeli National Library vault, and why they have not been returned to their owners, the movie interweaves various story lines into a structure, showing a story of a robbery, rather than a story of a cultural preservation.

 In recent years, the academic interest in archives, their politics, and the context in which they were built or destroyed is increasing, bringing a series of publications on the matter. This interest, among other things, is also related to the continuous attempts have been done in recent years to build alternative Palestinian archives, mainly but not exclusively, through oral history.[[21]](#footnote-21) Rona Sela’s work, for example, trace the genealogy of the colonial plunder and erasure in the context of the Israeli control over Palestine. While colonial museums and archives holding colonial history have been discussed, Sela’s work is the first to discuss colonial archives holding plundered materials, providing a deeper understanding of colonial mechanism of looting and truth production. By focusing on two archives plundered by Israel in Beirut in 1980s, and mentioned above —The PRC and the PCI,—she traces, in her 2018 article, the ways in which Israel, as a colonial state, loots the colonized Palestinian archives and controls them in its colonial archives.[[22]](#footnote-22) Sela’s article shows how Palestinian archives were erased from the public space using repressive means, including censorships and various restrictions. She traces the ways in which Israel restricted the exposure and the use of Palestinian looted materials, altered their original identity, regulated their contents and subjugates them to its laws and terminology.

Chandni Desai and Rula Shahwan’s recent article, [[23]](#footnote-23) is another example of work reflects the increasing interest in the politics of Israeli colonial archive. In this article, they focus on visual archives seeking to tell their story in the post-Oslo period. Desai’s and Shahwan’s article posits that “the displacement, loss, and seizure of Palestinian visual archives did not result from the perceived threat they posed to Zionism alone”. Instead, their article suggests that “the politics surrounding archives are imbricated in the broader social relations of settler colonialism, neoliberalism, and the neoliberal agendas that bourgeois national interests have produced in Palestine, as well as in the ideological differences between Palestinian political factions”. Doing so, they point out the ways in which archival violence maintains Israeli hegemony by erasing the Palestinian historiography to produce its settler ideologies.

Similarly, telling the story of the PLO Research Center archive from creation to loss, Hana Sleiman,[[24]](#footnote-24) describes in details the silencing that Israel inflicted. Although described in details, Sleiman’s article goes far beyond the Israeli Seizure of the Archive, to discuss other powers that tried to silent the archive and change its narrative, such as the PLO leaderships. Sleiman’s article shows how Israeli soldiers systematically looted the contents of the library and pursued the center’s workers around the city, an event, according to Sleiman, “was not an anomaly but part of a broader Israeli imperative to seize documents from PLO offices during raids in the south of Lebanon.”[[25]](#footnote-25) Furthermore, Sleiman brings different examples to show how the looted documents were used by Israeli research institutions, including Israeli historian. One of the examples described in Sleiman’s article is an example of a historian at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, who has access to the looted documents, selecting and curated the documents to fulfill a narrative that was rather familiar in the context of the Cold War, presenting the PLO as a “terrorist organization at the nexus of international rogue actors, emphasizing its connection to the Eastern bloc, Arab and Islamic counties, and other countries that allow subversive groups to operate, like many countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America.[[26]](#footnote-26)” Sleiman points out the irony behind Israel’s claim that its narrative is authentic, because it is based on the PLO’s own documents and record. Israel’s claims to be fully faithful to the documents’ hidden script, Sleiman argues, is actually putting into words the truth that the archive is demanding.

More works published by Palestinian scholars have been published in recent years, some of them written in Arabic, questioning the neutrality of Israeli archives and their politics, tracing the ways in which the Palestinian story has been re-narrating. Similar to Sleiman, in her article,[[27]](#footnote-27) Ottman, a Palestinian scholar, looks at the ways in which Palestinians were portrayed and presented during the war. According to her, while Palestinians were portrayed as giving up their spiritual possessions, the staff of Israel National Library were depicted as risking their lives for these books and properties. According to Ottman, this image came to highlight the abyss between the oriental, indifferent to its culture, and the Western Zionist who is always able to overcome all this. Supporting her argument, Ottman brings as an illustration a quote of Shlomo Shunami (1897-1984) who carried out a campaign collecting Palestinian books in “large whets sacks,” using Ottman’s words. He says, “During the war of independence, Israel’s National Library organized an extensive operation to save books from damage in deserted Arab neighborhoods”. Ottman traces the process these books went thought, a process she calls “Easternization,” though which Zionism “went thought struggles over the right to represent the Eastern, allowing it to determine who has the right to speak and represent the Eastern, and who will remain silent, without a voice or possibility to represent themselves.[[28]](#footnote-28)” That is, Ottman argues, how the moralistic-heroic Israeli narrative of the 1948 war was constructed.

The case of Palestine, then, offers a retrospective view that allows us to learn about the violence of the archive, its politics, and its influences. Palestine challenges the idea of archive as it was an essential arena than can provide us with reliable information about the past. It calls us to pay attention to the role of archives in shaping historiography and historical-based writing and research.

How, then, should we, as anthropologists, think —both methodologically and theoretically— about archives that constitute a history, when our research rooted in ongoing settler-colonial context, such as the case of Palestine? How should anthropology, as a discipline, think about the rich historical archives that indigenous communities have produced which have been subjected to displacement, theft, destruction, captivity, and neglect? How should we think about the power of archives to create narratives that can either legitimize certain narratives or threaten the legitimacy of others? The Palestinian case shows how political actors, perpetrators of violence, destroy historical narratives that undermine their legitimacy, narratives, discourses, and political interests. Which kind of efforts anthropology should do in order to overcome the absences, erasures, silences, and “black holes”, using Yael Navaro’s words (2020, p. 161)?

Having set forth these questions, I turn now to Yael Navaro’s concept of negative anthropology and to Gil Hochberg’s work on the temporality of the archive to develop an alternative ontology of archival research, which I later argue, would allow researcher to use archives in a way that it works “against their grains”. This proposed ontology consists of two shifts in the ways archrivals’’ repositories are perceived. I suggest, first, looking for archrivals’’ absences, not only for archrivals’’ presences, Second, I suggest considering archives as a break from history, not only as a history’s repository, that is, to rather than being only past-oriented, I suggest that anthropologists should also pay attention to future imagination.

**Toward an Alternative Ontology: Negative Methodology and the Temporality of the Archive**

In recent years, some scholars —anthropologists included— have been busy addressing the question of history and archives in academic research and in the production of knowledge processes, suggesting new ways to think about it, using it, and instrumentalize it (E.g., Bargu 2016, Mbembe 2019, Navaro 2020). This question becomes extremely important in anthropology not only due to the increasing extensive incorporation of primary historical records in anthropological research and its analysis, known as “the historical turn”, but also due to the importance of such questions when we have at stake settler colonial contexts, erasure of histories and narratives, cultural demolitions, and aggressive dispossessions. When archival gatekeepers are still there to control, narrate, charge with new meanings, benefiting and strengthening their own agenda. This section brings some critical perspectives into discussion, to ask later, how anthropologists can nevertheless instrumentalize archives in a way that does not sin the main task of anthropology —understanding people’s lives and narratives. To do so, I turn to Yael Navaro’s and Gil Hochberg’s work to suggest an alternative ontology, one that goes beyond the imagination of those who are still assuming evidentiary knowledge and those whose focus are still past-oriented.

*Beyond Evidentiary Knowledge: From Presences to Absences*

In her article, Yael Navaro (2020) problematizes the idea of methods in anthropology, when at stake is the study of the aftermath of mass violence, arguing against the possibilities of research— “when the witnesses have been exterminated and are not there to bear testimony, when the material remains the sites of atrocity haven been manipulated or washed over by perpetrator regimes and their citizens, and when denialist states place barriers before the study of their culpability” (p. 162). Calling to take seriously the “black holes” emerge in the study of mass violence, she brings into discussion the concept of “negative methodology,” challenging the idea of methods, the availability and the presence of evidence, the existence and the tangibility of materials. Navaro’s negative methodology assumes absences, erasures, denials and misappropriations. Not presences, accessibilities and positivism. By referring to sites of extermination and atrocity, dispossession and annihilation,[[29]](#footnote-29) she challenges the set of assumptions historical research carries when it perceives archives and the evidences it contains as a source of knowledge, providing us with positive materials and information.

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*Beyond History’s Repository: From Past-Oriented to Future’s Imagination*

In her recent book *Becoming Palestine: Toward an Archival Imagination of the Future* (2021),[[30]](#footnote-30) Gil Z. Hochberg examines the ways in which Palestinian artists— such as filmmakers and dancers — as well as Palestinian activists use archives in radical and creative ways to imagine Palestine. Referring to a series of contemporary Palestinian artists’ works, she shows how they reimagine the archive, approaching it not through the desire to uearth hidden knowledge, but to sever the identification of the archive with the past. Hochberg points out the ways in which these artists make use of archeology, musical traditions archival films and cinematic footage. These ways of imagination, she argues, allows artists to imagine Palestinian future unbounded from colonial space and time, and not controlled by it. That is, Hochberg presents a fundamental reconceptualization of the archive by urging readers to think about it “as a break from history rather than as history’s repository”.

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*“Against their Grains”: Archives as a Vivid Space to do Ethnography*

In her *Along the Archival Grain*, [[31]](#footnote-31) Ann Stoler offers a pioneering methodological and analytic contribution to our understanding of the effective registers of imperial governance and the political content of archival forms. Rejecting the perception that archives are merely extractive enterprise, Stoler offers a different perception of the archive, one that sees archival production as a field of force with violent effect, as a “consequential act of governance,” and most importantly, “as a vivid space to do ethnography”.

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**Conclusion**

I opened this essay with Michel-Rolph Trouillot’s quote from his *In Silencing the Past*. There, Trouillot outlines how silences infiltrate historical production’s processes through the making of sources, archives, narrative, and history (Trouillot 2015, p. 26).[[32]](#footnote-32) Zooming in on Trouillot’s archival component, this essay starts with the promise that archives are inevitably political, even though it very often purports to be apolitical. The history of the establishments of archives, the ways in which archival materials were collected and organized, and the decisions regarding their accessibility or lack of accessibility to the public, affect the ways in which research is carried out. It also affects the ways in which knowledge is being produced and circulated.

Anthropology as a discipline, turns very often to history and historical methods, seeking, rightfully, to historically locate its objects of research. Hundreds of anthropological monographs were written, incorporating extensive historical records from archives —including colonial archives—, as a primary resource for analysis. This essay seeks to problematize the seemingly neutrality of these archives, their role and the extent of their credibility and integrity. It discusses archival politics and influences, especially when it’s rooted in settler colonial context.

Taking the case of Palestine as a pragmatic case, strongly illustrates the importance of uplifting counter-narratives and adopting decolonial approaches in our ethnographic and research, I argue that archives, particularly those rooted in conflict zones, mass violence, and settler colonialism, are there, mainly, to conceal, not to reveal.

I don’t call to the dismantling of the archives. Rather, I call to using it “against its grains,” using Ann Stoler’s words. To do so, I argue, we first need to question the actual act of digging in archives as if it provides us with evidences and positive knowledge about the past. That is, instead of looking at presences, I call to look at the absences. In addition, I call to shift our perception of archives as a history’s repository, and instead of approaching it when we are past-oriented, I suggest approaching it when we are future-oriented. The expected outcome is to better instumentalizing archives in ethnographic research, in a way that pushes the discipline forward with more holistic and useful insights.

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A crucial note I want to end with. Writing this essay, I couldn’t help but think about the discussion we had, just last month, in our method class. We had a lecture followed by a seminar discussion about archival research, where we received an introduction about archival methods and various practical aspects of doing primary research with archival resources and historical records and materials held by formal institutions. Here is how these formal institutions’ goals were described in our syllabus: “having an explicit goal of making their holdings available to scholars.” The case of Palestine, discussed in this essay, challenges this seemingly innocent goal our syllabus attributed to formal institutions. It shows that the goal is not merely doing jesta for researchers by making information available. In the same class, I was also concerned about un-addressing decolonial perspectives or considerations, and this despite having some fundamental works about the matter within our department, and to some I refer in this paper.

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9. See: https://www.nli.org.il/he [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. See: <https://archives.mod.gov.il/sites/English/About/Pages/The_IDF_and_Security_Establishment_archive.aspx>. According to the website, The Archive of the IDF and the Defense Establishment stores over 11 million files, 2.7 million photographs, 46,000 maps and aerial photographs, 96,000 audio recording, and 2,000 posters and proclamations. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. “The Shai (Information Service), established in 1940, was the intelligence and counter-espionage arm of the Haganah and forebear of the Military Intelligence Directorate in Mandate Palestine.” See: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shai\_(Haganah\_unit)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shai_%28Haganah_unit%29). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
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28. https://www.7iber.com/politics-economics/jrayed-our-stolen-history [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Examples she refer to: Armenian genocide, transatlantic slavery, indigeneity vis-à-vis settler colonialism, refugees on Greek islands, Mexican migrants in the United States, the Bosnian war, the partition of India, the Palestinian Nakba, and the Holocaust. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
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