

THE NATURE OF REMEMBERING, A GRAMMAR BOOK¹

— Megan Hoetger

To accept that the atmosphere simply is: a continuous, encompassing presence that records nothing deliberately, but whose physical state can be reconstructed. It surrounded the events, bore witness to them, held the bodies and the violence within its particular meteorological conditions.

The Nature of Remembering begins from this notion of ‘atmospheric witnessing,’ which is conceptualized by initiating artist Lawil Karama. From here, the framework for the exhibition and accompanying context programme brings together long-term and ongoing research projects by twelve artists: Samuel Baidoo; Michèle Boulogne; Maguette Dieng; Laura Fong Prosper and Tin Wilke; Inas Halabi; Lawil Karama; Aram Lee; Komtough Napattaloong; Kaisa Saarinen; Bart Seng Wen Long; and Max Somojono.² The projects all move between interrogation of normative memory politics and co-experimentation with environmental and more-than-human bodies. In their respective research trajectories, each of the artists toggles between epistemological and embodied sensorial frames of knowing. In the process, they defamiliarize learned mnemonic responses to histories and to relations between bodies, as well as to the techniques that organize and inform these responses.³

Such acts of toggling between, ground the artists’ shared commitment to what, at a certain point, we began to call ‘practices of frictioning’—that is, practices of engaging classificatory, surveillance, and extraction-based technologies against their colonial grain; and of lingering in the intertwined conditions of lived experience and knowledge production, as they intersect the affective, ancestral, archival, infrastructural, and forensic coordinates that constitute life.

It is with this impulse toward defamiliarization in mind that the exhibition title emerges, carrying in it two meanings: on the one hand, ‘nature’ is evoked, drawing focus to actants, actors, and animacies beside and beyond the human, who witness, participate in, index, recollect, foretell, and haunt historical time.⁴ In Karama’s work, it is the air itself that becomes witness. In other practices within the exhibition, it is ash that indexes or latex that haunts, meteors that recollect or microbes that participate.

On the other hand, the idiomatic expression ‘the nature of’ is taken up as a provocation, pushing against widely accepted, deeply held, and often unconscious beliefs in essential, unidirectional, anthropocentric practices of remembering and commemorating. Such beliefs themselves have long histories of violent enforcement, which all of the projects address in one way or another through their respective ‘frictionings.’

Collectively, the artists’ research trajectories prompt us to question the entrenched conditioning of how and why memory gets organized in the ways it does. In the process, they also press us to rethink our language of inquiry, proposing a kind of counter-grammar that (re-)asserts a multiplicity of agencies by confounding

overdetermined pronominal conventions across linguistically imposed subject (who) / object (what) divides. In this grammar-in-the-making, the pronoun ‘who’ is radically expanded and detached from the human such that its distinction from the pronoun ‘what’ is rendered irrelevant. The air, ash, avatars, cicadas, fruit, latex, laticifers, meteors, microbes, and museological objects all become ‘who.’

Each of the projects speculates a different syntactical orientation and scale within this counter-grammar, from the comets charted in Boulogne’s *Mining the Sky* or the vastness of the atmosphere tracked in Karama’s *Algorithm of Colour*, to the intimacies of queer, POC identity turned game lore in Baidoo’s *Plum Road Tea Dream* or those felt inside of a full rubber suit anecdotally explored in Seng’s *Field Interviews*.

One of the challenges of the exhibition and context programme lies in the insistence that visitors look below syntactic choices and scales of inquiry, toward the underlying structural logic of a common counter-grammar, which is rooted in embodied experiences of material conditions felt, and remembered, by considerably different kinds of bodies.

This is not to say that such conditions are felt or remembered the same by different bodies, but to remind—and, indeed, to affirm—that (1) feeling takes many forms; (2) all of these forms of sentience carry agencies; and (3) they produce and transmit valuable knowledge when it comes to the politics of memory. This common counter-grammar undoes the illusionary stability of historical time’s construction, as well as the one-way movement of time itself—to witness, participate in, index, recollect, foretell, and haunt suggests that manifold relations and perspectives are operating at once.

The opening up of the ‘who’ and concomitant counter-grammar moves as discussed below, such as the conflation of verbal and nominal forms or the multiplication of the antecedent, instigate a far-reaching ripple effect for the nature of remembering. With these seemingly small shifts in the grammatical horizon of legibility, several recalibrations follow.

RECOGNITION

First, it prompts a reconsideration of how and where sentience and, subsequently, value gets recognized. The colonial hierarchy of sentience ranks living beings according to value, producing the divide between the human (the ‘who’) and all other forms of life (the ‘what’), and, further, it positions white European bodies at the top in order to subjugate racialized human “others,” as well as non-human animals, plants, land, water, and entire ecosystems, which are all deemed as lesser than. This ideological system becomes rigidified through language, and those forms of life coded as the ‘what’ are valued insofar as their worth can be extracted.

Boulogne’s *Mining the Sky* addresses this hierarchy directly vis-a-vis the lives of asteroids, meteoroids, and comets, which bridge far-off galactic fields, the planetary atmosphere, and the ground below our feet (where metals and metalloids are deposited); and which

1. The notion of a grammar book here is indebted to the seminal text ‘MAMA’S BABY, PAPA’S MAYBE: An American Grammar Book,’ written by Black feminist scholar Hortense J. Spillers in 1987, which takes up the notion of ‘overdetermined nominative properties,’ showing how the historical weight of this overdetermination strips the subject of agency. The connection here extends out from the Black female (human) subject within the system of chattel slavery and its afterlives vis-a-vis the work of figures like writer and activist Aph Ko, whose *Racism as Zoological Witchcraft* unfolds a colonial system of animality that marks certain bodies across the human/non-human divide as disposable. Bringing the critical insights of Spillers and Ko into conversation, foregrounds the limitations of

language and the stakes of contemporary work happening at the intersections of racial and environmental justice, as well as across indigenous and posthumanist epistemological theory. See Spillers in *Feminisms REDUX: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism*, edited by Robyn Warhol-Down, et al., 443–464 (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2009); and Ko, *Racism as Zoological Witchcraft: A Guide to Getting Out* (New York: Lantern Books, 2019).

2. Of the twelve artists, nine are partaking in the exhibition and three additional artists (Inas Halabi, Maguette Dieng and Max Somojono) join for the context programme. The performances of Dieng and Somojono comprise an evening programme curated by the DARKMATTER Collective under the artistic direction of Edward

Akintola Hubbard in collaboration with Somojono. The work of DARKMATTER begins from an acknowledgement of the invisible matter in the universe that we cannot see, representing artistic practices that fly under the radar and often remain ‘unseen’ within conventional frameworks in the cultural sector.

3. The German *Technik* is taken up in a hybrid German-English form in order to invoke the term’s dual meaning, as both ‘technology’ and ‘technique.’

4. The term ‘actant’ has played a critical role in Karama’s artistic research trajectory, and is derived from the Actor-Network Theory (ANT), developed by Bruno Latour, Michel Callon, and John Law. See Latour, “On Actor-Network Theory: A Few Clarifications,” *Soziale Welt* 47, no. 4 (1996): 369–381. As

Karama has articulated: “ANT treats human and nonhuman entities symmetrically, refusing the subject/object binary that privileges human agency.” At the same time, her notion of ‘atmospheric witnessing’ is also deeply indebted to the work of indigenous scholars such as Robin Wall Kimmerer and Linda Tuhiwai Smith whose work has been pivotal in reclaiming critical space for non-Western epistemological frameworks that have long recognized animacies and agencies in the world beside and beyond the human. See Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants* (London: Penguin Books, 2020); and Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*, Second Edition (London: Zed Books, 2012).

links historical and contemporary processes of land and labor dispossession. Twenty-first century ontological confrontations over the interconnectedness of Earth and “Outer Space,” as Boulogne’s research traces, echo eighteenth and nineteenth century debates over slavery and racism.

Then and now, resources — human and more-than-human, terrestrial and extraterrestrial — are rendered intelligible only through their fungibility, as assets for capital accumulation at the cost of human lives, decency, rights, and ecosystem health. This mentality, Boulogne suggests, re-stages again and again the myth of ‘El Dorado,’ or an imagined place of infinite wealth, transposing an extraction fantasy, initially situated in the Americas and other sites considered to be at the ‘edges’ of empire, to ever more distant spaces.⁵ If proximity is a primary factor in determining who is valued as a life versus who is devalued as lifeless in this framework of ‘the frontier,’ Boulogne’s installation haptically performs such a closeness through its commitments to the handcrafted, rebelliously resignifying the historical etching techniques initially deployed to document these processes of dispossession.

Sentience, fantasy, and myth seem bound to one another as well in the Southeast Asian contexts investigated by Saarinen, Seng, and Napattaloong. Their overlapping research trajectories are rooted in rubber, extending from its histories of cash crop production into realms of desire and lore. For Saarinen and Seng, rubber dreams in the verbal sense (eg. “rubber dreams of...”), and there exist many rubber dreams in the nominal sense (eg. rubberists have rubber dreams). This slippage between the verbal and nominal forms becomes an entry point into thinking about the value supply chains that link production and desire. As Saarinen has written:

*Rubber is a perfect example of the commodity fetish: we consume it every day, but are mostly unaware of the social, historical, and environmental conditions of its production. Rubber is also a fetish commodity: it has inspired spiritual and sexual obsession in both ancient and modern times. It is the only material in the world that could serve as the joint poster child for both phenomena.*⁶

In tandem with this discursive observation, Seng’s *Field Interviews* play back and enliven this chiasmatic situation, situating it within the specificity of particular bodies. Each video portrait features a rubberist who ruminates on the simultaneous historical and alchemical bases of their pleasure. The ensuing reciprocity and duality unravels the binary built into a Marxist analysis of use and exchange value, showing the erotics always already infused in the dialectical embrace of frames of valuation.

In Napattaloong’s *Lady White Blood: Excerpts*, focus shifts to the space of myth through the figure of Lady White Blood whose spirit enlivens the land (and, reciprocally, whose spirit is enlivened by the land) in Southern Thailand since at least the seventeenth century. The rubber farm operates here as a lens onto geopolitical, technological, and personal frameworks of representation within the region. If the broader exhibition looks at ‘the nature of remembering’ as an action or set of actions, the filmmaker’s contribution keys into ‘the nature of history’ as a contested space where local traditions of recollecting the past collide with Western academic historiographic methods.⁷

In Napattaloong’s work-in-process, the animacies and agency of the land and of the camera itself merge with the lore of murky ancestral histories, criss-crossing chronologies of Thailand’s nationalizing project, Cold War era anti-communist purges, and family migration routes — the resulting ‘post-documentary’ sequences set aside Truth, ruminating instead on the conflicting and multiple truths that organize lived lives, including the artist’s own.

RECALL

Such collisions key us into a second implication of the opening of the ‘who,’ which has to do with storytelling mechanisms. Across projects, the artists invert and subvert conventional approaches to practices of data collection and the evidentiary that are grounded in Aristotelian narrative tendencies, which underwrite the modern(izing) practice of historical representation.⁸ Such tendencies have often been disastrously conscripted into the teleological service of state ideologies, their moralizing aims, and their objective of maintaining power.

This is the case in Karama’s *Algorithm of Colour*, which, like Napattaloong’s film, starts from the artist’s own ancestral histories. In her immersive multimedia installation, Karama turns attention to the actants cast out of the representational regime of Ugandan history during and since the rule of Idi Amin (1971–1979). Who is considered the actor and who gets unintendedly documented as part of the action plays a significant role in the artist’s reconfiguration of the gaze, which shifts away from the imaging of human bodies and toward the atmospheric bodies — the air particles themselves — that were also witness to the elaborate system of execution spectacle which marked Amin’s reign.

Using contemporary technologies aimed at forecasting (weather) futures, Karama’s self-written computational code circumvents these predictive principles, turning the gaze of the script onto a highly controlled past. In so doing, her project refuses attempts to fill the human-made archival gaps with more human (or human-like) bodies. Instead, through its algorithmic visualization, it tests the capacities of the sky’s meteorological conditions to act, to hold bodies, to bear witness, and, perhaps most importantly, to offer sites of (im)material memorial.

Similar modes of representational refusal are foundational for Lee’s *350,000 Leaks (Griefs)* as well, which denies viewers access to the visibility of pillaged objects, working, instead, through sonic infrastructural means. Bringing our attention to politics of perception, the artist’s project collages together the spoken narrative of two grandmothers and a granddaughter (visualized as subtitles) sitting in the museum depot freezer with a soundscape assembled through field recordings from inside the museum’s plumbing system. As Lee has written:

*The pipes enable passage of air and water, which sustain the museum’s hegemony. But we can also see them as the bellows to the museum’s vocal chords, allowing the museum to speak. The water contains the bodies and species of territories. It is manifold, it carries millions of beings, it deconstructs categories. It leaks and flows bodies and knowledge.*⁹

The water materially and metaphorically manifests the accumulated grief of the colonial collection. Its transcorporeal, porous relation, which unfolds across generations and territories, asks viewers to ‘see’ the memories of microbes, (museum) climate systems, grandmothers, and artifacts, as equally active participants in reconfiguring relations, shaping realities, and creating conditions of possibility for reconciliation.

Sound also plays a central role in the context programme contributions of Inas Halabi in *All That Remains (The Right of Return)*, and Maguette Dieng and Max Somojiono (Amanah) in *Sapodilla*. Alongside screenings, readings, talks, and performative activations of works within the exhibition, the two listening sessions tune us into the voices of human, more-than-human, and environmental bodies.

In Halabi’s intimate gathering, we will be presented with field recordings and foraged leaves, which index the land and persistence

5. The collaged grey etching prints in Boulogne’s installation draw imagery from the archives of the Musée du Quai Branly — Jacques Chirac, which include materials from French colonial mines, or those mines ‘under French rule.’ Many of the sites she is looking at were within present-day Mexico and Guyana, but some also come

from present-day Vietnam, specifically from zinc exploitation of the Bac Kan Province.

6. Kaisa Saarinen, “A very short history of rubber,” published on occasion of the installation *These Laticifers Keep Bleeding...* for *Ghost 2568: Wish We Were Here* (Bangkok, 2025).

7. During our conversations,

Napattaloong cited the work of historian Lorraine Gesick as a critical reference point for his research. See *Gesick, In the Land of Lady White Blood: Southern Thailand and the Meaning of History* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995).

8. See *Hayden White, The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse*

and *Historical Representation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990).

9. Aram Lee in “Translucent Transcorporeality: A Conversation between Aram Lee & Lotte Arndt on Lee’s Experimental Film *X-hale*,” in *Troubles dans les collections* (Paris, 2024) and reprinted in *ARAM LEE (2020–2025)*, 2025.

of indigenous (plant) life where Palestinian villages once stood. Drawn from the artist's ongoing research toward her film *The Right of Return*, listening here is an act against erasure.¹⁰ In the Sapodilla programme, which takes its name from a fruit native to the tropical Americas, Dieng and Amanah trace diasporic lines of flight and courses of cultural transformation through a night of down temp dub sets that connect to topics addressed throughout the exhibition.

Storytelling mechanisms take another, more digitally attuned turn in works like Baidoo's *Plum Road Tea Dream* video game complex or Fong Prosper and Wilke's *Memorial Matter* sculptural installation. Echoing something of the reversal written into Karama's script, both projects take up coding contra its current conceptual enclosures. Baidoo's sanctuary worlds and the seven avatars that inhabit them dial back the competitive, speed-based logics of gaming. Upon release of the work as a video game, one player reflected:

I didn't just finish a game. Instead, I felt like I was saying goodbye to a distant friend after quite a long conversation. I don't think the game is a typical 'game' either. I'd rather call it a journey, a conversation, or a self-reflection. [...] Actually, I haven't experienced any other game like this; it felt like an autobiographical recollection and also a quiet act of love for the people whose stories might otherwise be forgotten by history, like those names on the circled empty chairs.¹¹

Slowed down, the virtual environments of *Plum Road Tea Dream* place emphasis on the journey rather than 'the win,' inviting us into Baidoo's interior psychic world vis-a-vis the avatar 'S.' and, in turn, into the potentials for our own healing work. Moving through the worlds, players meet a range of figures who invite us in: tablets reminiscent of runes, futuristic machines that gradually build up animistic gods, a restorative fountain, and a reflective journal. Through the 'open programming' of such encounters, the artist and their collaborators re-code the simulated spaces of gaming as interactive sites for rituals of mourning and repair. As in Karama's *Algorithm of Colour*, Baidoo's video game and the arcade-like sculptural installation in which it manifests in *The Nature of Remembering* offer spatial propositions for what a site of commemoration—or a 'monument' to those who 'might otherwise be forgotten by history'—could be.

REFERENTS

Fong Prosper and Wilke's project turns its sights on the automation of the archive and the mounting contradictions between, on the one hand, the rapidly expanding capacities of algorithmic synthesis to amass data inputs and, on the other hand, the ever-shrinking possibilities for visualizing their outputs. The duo's installation begins from a digitized 16mm industrial film archive from which they have aggregated frames intended to celebrate resource mining as a sign of socialist progress.¹²

In an ironic twist, frames of extraction themselves get extracted and taken as inputs for experimentation with alternative digestive capacities of the neural networks. Objects generated through ash compression and potato starch printing propose bio-materialities and/ as analog forms in an attempt to (re-)extend the possibilities of digital visualization beyond the delimited AI envisionings policed by Silicon Valley. This produces a dizzying back and forth movement between technologies and technological imaginaries.

Here we encounter a third implication of the opening out of the 'who,' which we might think of as a laying bare of the capacious, shifting position of an antecedent within this counter-grammar-in-the-making. If a pronoun is meant to refer back to a noun

(its antecedent), then, in Fong Prosper and Wilke's work, this connection gets disrupted, reestablished, disrupted, and so on. *Memorial Matter* thematizes the looping logics of the digital and analog through its engagement with the notion of 'progress' then and now. Moreover, it also points to something else—to a certain kind of spatial-temporal spiraling movement that takes hold of the 'who' when diverse frames of knowing and multiple agencies are embraced as equally valuable. In other words, the antecedent becomes a field of antecedents.

Such a spiraling threads through several of the projects in the exhibition that also depart from histories of extraction: in *Mining the Sky*, Boulogne starts from meteoroids and comets, which, in turn, recollect the violated rights of the land itself in cases of colonial land theft since the fifteenth century; of enslaved peoples and their descendants since the Transatlantic Slave Trade, and of the planets and other cosmic bodies since the Cold War Space Race all the way up through today's visions of lunar settlements. In Lee's *350,000 Leaks (Griefs)* multiple nouns participate in the agential process(es) of leakage: the water, the microbes, the climate systems (both in the museum and in the environments of the lands looted), the grandmothers, the granddaughter, the comb, the dress, and the other 349,998 artefacts in the museum's collection.

And, finally, Napattaloong, Saarinen, and Seng's overlapping investigations in *Lady White Blood*, *Field Notes*, and *Field Interviews* all start from latex, and, with each, different nouns come to haunt that 'who'—the seeds, the laticifers, the lore, the land, the cash crops, the plantations, the anti-communist purges, the Agent Orange, the rubberists. Saarinen's *Field Notes* make this especially explicit, juxtaposing the languages of the British colonial military regime and the Malaya Communist Party in their mode of addressing the 'who' of the rubber trees.

Across these projects, such spirals epistemologically ricochet through capitalist and socialist, colonial and postcolonial histories, demanding that we also take into account the material conditions of economic imaginaries that hold human, more-than-human, and environmental bodies together; and which, in turn, hold these bodies within the ideologically prescribed and politically inflected mnemonic cues referenced at the start of this text—cues that organize lives and our very understanding of life itself.

The Nature of Remembering reminds us of this, as it reminds us that reparative modes of recognition (value) and recall (storytelling) are, in part, located within the (counter-)grammar of our address. Who decides how and from which perspectives stories get told? Who remembers, who commemorates, and who forgets?

10. Since 1948, around 550 Palestinian villages have been demolished by the Israeli occupation. Halabi's film project focuses on 70 of these villages, all of which were razed in '48 and have subsequently been turned into Israeli National Parks through the planting of non-indigenous pine trees. The parks project was initiated in the mid-1950s by the "Jewish"

National Fund, a Zionist body in the United States.

11. Anonymous quote shared on the Instagram page for Plum Road Tea Dream, 11 August 2026. The empty chairs referenced are in the sanctuary world Sunrise Monument, which is being presented as part of the installation for W139.

12. Industrial films constitute a genre of filmmaking prevalent throughout

the first half of the twentieth century (and still active today), which documents industrial facilities and manufacturing processes, as well as, in some cases, the products being made. While the genre is conventionally understood to be non-theatrical because the films are created outside of a studio system, they, in fact, stage industry in highly

particular ways—through montage, camera position, and narration—that glorify systems of mechanization and their resulting outputs. As such, these films often serve as a frontline of propaganda across all political ideologies reliant on exploitation of nature as a foundational principle for a vision of 'progress.'

