

# Unpacking History: Diasporic Voices and Visions

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## *Abstract*

This essay investigates the different ways memory is articulated by contemporary writing and artworks that emerge from experiences of migration, exile, diaspora, and cultural hybridity. These productions express a creative resistance connected to narration and participation, while proposing alternative ways of opening the archive from the perspective of the voices and visions that are completely absent or pushed to the margins. For example, the encounters with the histories and the bodies evoked by Derek Walcott, as well as the innovative and trans-local languages proposed by the contemporary visual artists and filmmakers considered in this article, question the limits of historiography, multiculturalism, and institutional practices of archiving through lost traces and inappropriate objects.

In reworking the archival material, I am calling attention to the holes, fissures, and fringes of history, and hence to the need of rereading historical events with the omitted, the neglected, the marginalized, the misclassified, or else with the absent, the 'nonevent', and the nonarchived. (Trinh T. Minh-ha, *D-Passage. The Digital Way*)

This essay departs from the need to consider cultural displacements and border crossings as an epistemological challenge with regard to global history and modernity. In particular, this investigation analyses the different ways memory is articulated by contemporary cultural productions linked to migration, exile, diaspora, and transnationality. These subaltern narratives, emerging from a contemporary context of artists and writers who live in the interstices between cultures, give way to a fundamental rethinking of questions of memory and belonging. This is to record the political, historical, and theoretic conjuncture of the diasporic experience, because the emergent space and interpretive frame of the diaspora is rooted not only in earlier imperial settlements and older structures of power, but also in the experiences of minorities, border crossings and cultural displacements. As Stuart Hall suggests, the idea of the diaspora questions the notions of authenticity and the claims made for culturally homogeneous national cultures and identities. Diaspora is where the politics of gender, class, and race

form together a new, powerful and unstable articulation that does not provide easy answers, but raises 'new questions, which proliferate across older frames of thought, social engagement and political activity'.<sup>1</sup>

The voices and visions on/from the margins propose alternative ways of memorializing and archiving the past, evidencing the multiple connections between this past and the contemporary postcolonial configuration of the world. This paper discusses the importance of opening the archive, in other words the rereading of historical documents and records in the light of the memories that are completely absent or put on the margins. This is the need to 'unpack' the library, as Homi Bhabha would say, following a suggestion taken from Walter Benjamin: the invitation to open the library, to participate in the disorder of the books that are not placed on the shelves.<sup>2</sup> Bhabha asks us to take part momentarily in the tension between the poles of order and disorder, inspired by the figure of the *flâneur* and his wandering in the world through the discovery of books and cosmopolitan memories. In this way, we are led to an urgent question: what kind of history is assigned to the order and classification of documents? Indeed, every archive, in its architectural dimension, its organisation and divisions, is always something of a cemetery, of a place where fragments of lives are preserved but also placed in a tomb, concealed and set apart from the visible. Archives rest on the burying of remains, on a sepulchre where, in the words of Achille Mbembe, the historian and the archivist manipulate fragments in 'an intimate relationship with a world alive only by virtue of an initial event that is represented by the act of dying.'<sup>3</sup> Assigning the archives to a consecrated place of burial makes it possible to unveil their undisputed authority because, since no existing archive has the possibility to preserve an entire history, we are always confronted by a selection, an assemblage of pieces that are put together in an illusion of coherence.

### *Opening the Boxes of the Archive*

Forms of the archive have been explored in several critical paradigms engaging with fragmentation and non-neutrality, and with questions of power and selection. In *L'Archéologie du savoir* Michel Foucault states that the archive is neither an accumulation of documents nor a complex of institutions: it cannot be defined in its totality, but only in fragments and levels that reveal why so many realities cannot emerge.<sup>4</sup> The question of the origin of the archive has

<sup>1</sup> Stuart Hall, 'Avtar Brah's Cartographies: Moment, Method, Meaning', *Feminist Review*, 100 (2012), 27–38, p. 30.

<sup>2</sup> Homi Bhabha, 'Unpacking my Library...Again', in *The Post-Colonial Question: Common Skies, Divided Horizons*, ed. by Iain Chambers and Lidia Curti (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), pp. 199–211.

<sup>3</sup> Achille Mbembe, 'The Power of the Archive and its Limits', in *Refiguring the Archive*, ed. by Carolyn Hamilton and others (Dordrecht and Boston: Kluwer, 2002), pp. 19–27 (p. 25).

<sup>4</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Archeology of Knowledge* (London: Routledge, 1969).

also been investigated by Jacques Derrida, who insists on the irrepressible human drive for the archive, the interminable search for the origin, for a past to preserve. In *Mal d'archive* (archive fever or illness) the Algerian philosopher investigates the meaning of the word 'archive', coming from the Greek *arkheion* that indicates the house of the archons, the superior magistrates who represented the law and stored the official documents.<sup>5</sup> The logic of the interpretation and selection of the historical documents is necessary for a possible comprehension of the archive, even if, according to Derrida, nothing is more troubling than the concept contained in the word 'archive'. Moreover, in the obsessive and rigorous attempt to find the origin, psychoanalysis augments the control and the oppression of the archive, the 'place of consignment', the division between an inside and an outside. The drive to chase after the archive — the compulsive and nostalgic desire for the place of absolute beginning — seems to be an inescapable modality that prevents any reconfiguration. Consequently, how can we outline any critical frame that re-imagines the paralysing pattern of the archive to include unauthorised voices? How can the colonising force of the archive be diverted from the preservation of only certain past memories and how can we begin to concentrate on the imagination of a future archive, on the elaboration of archives yet to come?

The focus, here, is on the cultural conjuncture of diaspora and its relation to creative practices, not so much to be read and interpreted as the objects of a political and social analysis, but rather as the sites where previous statements are unsettled. Keith Piper, a multi-media British artist, curator, researcher and academic, born in 1960 to Caribbean parents, aesthetically develops the condition of living in the interstices.<sup>6</sup> His work appears in the historical and cultural conjuncture of the diasporic experience, and calls into question the notions of cultural authenticity and a stable national identity. It is Birmingham, the city where Piper was brought up, that comes to be re-framed in the motif of the journey, in the incessant movements between departure and return, separation and belonging, that contribute to the constitution of transnational global spaces. Moreover, it is the Birmingham Central Library, the place chosen by Piper for a residency, that allows him to develop his interest in institutionalised collections, in particular in the narratives of the archive, its physical architecture and categorising mechanisms. In 2005 he produced the short video *Ghosting the Archive*, as part of a bigger Arts Council project called *Necessary Journeys*. He physically opened the boxes of the Birmingham City Archive and developed a new work practice that reacts to the material he finds, reactivating the traces of the stories that lie in the collection. In particular, he unpacked the boxes housed in the so-called Dyche Collection, that consists of more than ten thousand images, mostly unidentified, both proof prints and negatives, from the studios of

<sup>5</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

<sup>6</sup> Keith Piper, *Relocating the Remains* (London: Institute of International Visual Arts, 1997).

Ernest Dyche (1887–1973), a commercial portrait photographer who operated in the suburbs of the inner area of Birmingham and became very popular within the communities of migrants arriving from the Indian subcontinent, African countries and Caribbean islands from the 1950s to 1970s.<sup>7</sup>

Until its closure, the Dyche Studio provided a significant repository of British history during a complicated phase of the creation of black Britain. In particular, it produced countless portraits of members of those communities that were circulated both in the United Kingdom and in the former colonies: images that Piper found without names or other identifying elements. As Gen Doy points out, these images took part in what could be called a ‘reverse immigration’: they were indeed sent back to the Caribbean, India or Pakistan, to family members, friends or for marriage arrangements and were also ‘lightened’, if necessary, in order to move toward an ideal whiteness.<sup>8</sup> In *Ghosting the Archive* the negative plates, held by Piper in a white-gloved hand, are reframed one after the other in the contemporary space of the Birmingham City Archive by a digital camera. Each shutter click presents a different negative plate that, bearing a ghostly presence, slowly morphs into something else: family groups, women with newly born children, men seated on the chairs provided at Dyche Studio wearing elegant outfits or work uniforms, new coats or borrowed ones. In other words, the whole digital image of the Birmingham Central Library gradually morphs into a negative one, while the negative plate in the centre of the frame progressively changes: the light areas of the image on film become dark, while dark areas give way to the light areas of the photograph. In this way, the original subjects of the picture emerge from obscurity and have the chance to appear again within the contemporary time-space.

### *Writing and Filming on/from the Borders*

Driven by the desire to interrupt the linearity of historiography, we are led to the following questions: what happens to the act of archiving when the theoretical composition includes the communities and the memories that have been marginalised by a tradition that is primarily white and Euro-centric? What is produced when conservative practices of archiving come to be unsettled by interlaced and minor narratives generated within the shared social, cultural and political complexity of the contemporary world? Arjun Appadurai intervenes in the debate on the creative forms of acquisition of the other/subaltern subjectivities. He evokes a possible reconfiguration of the archive by the generations produced by globalisation and the transcultural experiences of diaspora, hybridity and exile. The challenge lies in the imagination of an archiving

<sup>7</sup> This archive has also been extensively discussed in Tina M. Campt, *Image Matters: Archive, Photography and the African Diaspora in Europe* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012).

<sup>8</sup> Gen Doy, *Black Visual Culture: Modernity and Postmodernity* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2000), p. 131.

practice that, instead of looking back at the institutional sacredness of the past, welcomes personal memoirs and libraries, family photos and recordings, and all other records that are part of everyday life. This leads to the idea of the archive as a project, an intervention, an anticipation of intentional collective memory, an aspiration rather than a recollection.<sup>9</sup> For migrants the archive is a ‘map’, an on-going research tool (and not a pre-ordained place), a space where collective memory offers an ethical basis for the construction of cultural identities in the often unfavourable conditions of a new society. In the spirit of Michel Foucault, Appadurai’s proposal offers us the opportunity to view the archive less as a container and more as a socially produced project producing forms of everyday intervention: ‘conscious sites of debate and desire’. In this sense, artistic practices — documentaries, videos, audio-visual installations — play a crucial role in the creation of new digital archives of migration. As an alternative, or in proximity to official sites entrusted with preserving the past, their perspective critically visualises unconventional appropriations of storage places and collections.

We are thus forced to identify other buildings, other dwellings, where a compelling challenge takes place, as happens in Ribka Sibhatu’s work and life. She is a poet in flight from Eritrea as a political refugee, first to Ethiopia, where she finishes school, then to France and Italy, where she studies at the University of Rome; her poems, called *auló*, written both in Italian and Tigrinya, describe the sad experiences of women she met while imprisoned in Eritrea.<sup>10</sup> Her work further expands concepts of transnationalism and translanguaging in postcolonial literature, since her plurilingual writing develops her wish to cross cultural and geographical borders. The *auló*, as oral poetry, is a means used by Eritrean poets to adapt traditions to new socio-political contexts and different modes of narration. Ribka manipulates the traditional literary genre of her own culture and translates it into Italian, setting up a bridge between the history of her country and that of contemporary Italy, the former coloniser of her people, and currently her home.

Finally, Ribka takes part in a collaborative project that includes the documentary *Auló: Roma Postcoloniale* (2012), by Simone Brioni, Graziano Chiscuzzu and Ermanno Guida, which presents Ribka’s physical presence on the screen. At the centre of this visual narrative there are her body and her oral poems, which have a specific focus on the current situation of migration and colonial memory in Italy, and which expose the falseness of the idea that colonialism was a positive experience. This is achieved through the emergence of silenced stories, a revisitation of history, and a work on the toponym of Rome, in order to express a new perspective of identity and cultural belonging. The narrative is composed of fragments that follow Ribka’s steps in different areas of Rome. Throughout the documentary she narrates her story, characterised by war,

<sup>9</sup> Arjun Appadurai, ‘Archive and Aspiration’, in *Information Is Alive: Art and Theory on Archiving and Retrieving Data*, ed. by Joke Brouwer and Arjen Mulder (Rotterdam: NAI, 2003), pp. 14–25 (p. 16).

<sup>10</sup> Ribka Sibhatu, *Auló! Auló! Auló! Poesie di nostalgia, d’esilio e d’amore* (Rome: Kimerafilm, 2012).



reception. The encounters with bodies, histories and voices crossing the Atlantic or the Mediterranean show that there are other ways of being in a multiple modernity. Here, the status of borders is continually interrupted by migration and an emerging sense of belonging that is irreducible to the terms of existing citizenship. However, a perspective from the sea is not merely a metaphorical caprice, rather it is a central modality of thinking about modernity. The sea, considered as a site of stratification, human and cultural connections, reconfigures the ways in which global history is framed. In this regard, we could refer to the above-mentioned Chambers' maritime criticism, according to which a 'critical mourning' is necessary for the lives submerged under the waves of the sea, from the Black Atlantic to today's Black Mediterranean. Furthermore, this means interrupting consolidated considerations of the sea as an extension of terrestrial imperatives by proposing its centrality in the formation of planetary modernity since 1500. This leads to a 'new thalassology', a cultural-historical framework based on the idea that all bodies of water not only sustained trans-national systems of trade, but also transformed human connections and the histories of their surrounding shores, as highlighted by the two historians Peregrine Horden and Nicholas Purcell.<sup>14</sup> This is to record a traumatic history characterised by diaspora, that more interestingly produces not so much a counter-narrative of revenge and remorse, but rather a creative form of acquisition that deals with a brutal past, while simultaneously looking forward the future.

These questions contain an enormous lesson about the importance of the sea, a lesson that is not one of emptiness or insignificance, compared to the land. Rather, the sea has something stronger to say and makes the progressive and linear direction of history absurd: with the sea, we can travel the horizon in multiple directions, without proceeding from one point to the other.<sup>15</sup> Similarly, the sea proposes an alternative sense of the archive, one that is not based on the commemoration of the ruins, a dead tyrant or a hero in the form of decay. For example, in the multi-screen work *WESTERN UNION: Small Boats* (2007) by the Black British artist Isaac Julien, the materiality of the images emerges through the bodies of the immigrants who cross the Mediterranean: bodies that traverse the fluid space of the sea in search of a better life. This is a postcolonial cartography that rethinks cultural places such as the Mediterranean and takes a heterogeneous modernity into account. *WESTERN UNION: Small Boats* proposes, indeed, a disturbing geography of the intermediary space of the Mediterranean, crossed by the flux of human beings. The *mare nostrum* comes to be a burial site that resonates with the Atlantic middle passage: traumatic memories common to men and women and traces of the daily experiences of migrants disorient the spectators' expectations. Furthermore, in the five screens that comprise Julien's installation, the sea is not only a surface that

<sup>14</sup> Peregrine Horden and Nicholas Purcell, 'The Mediterranean and "the New Thalassology"', *American Historical Review*, 111.3 (2006), 722–40.

<sup>15</sup> Walcott, *Conversations with Derek Walcott*, ed. by William Baer (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1996).

permits movement and migration, but becomes a sea of memories that recalls the ‘intertwined histories and overlapping territories’ proposed by Edward W. Said in his seminal work *Culture and Imperialism*.<sup>16</sup>

The disturbing geography expressed by Julien’s installation is a meditation on migration, certainly inspired by Paul Gilroy’s *The Black Atlantic* (1993), in particular by the notion of ‘translocation’, the idea of continuous movements that contaminate each other. Julien, the son of Caribbean immigrants in London, conveys this chain of transits in his work and insists on the influential experiences of geographic and political displacements, through the articulation of heterogeneous spaces. Similarly, Roshini Kempadoo, born in Britain from Guyanese parents, adopts a multidisciplinary perspective, working on photography, digital installations, and writing all at the same time, in the specificity of her position as a black woman.<sup>17</sup> In her work, the traces of the colonial past become in the present both the objects of a pragmatic and symbolic work and the conditions in which these practices trigger hybrid forms of life, politics, culture and modernity. Her research, which has always been engaged with experimentation, including technological experimentation, puts into crisis every fixed categorisation. The limits of historiography, multiculturalism and institutional practices of archiving are registered through lost traces and inappropriate objects, in order to develop the themes of the historical legacy of slavery and migration.

In works such as *Sweetness and Light* (1995), *Ghosting* (2004) and *endless prospects* (2004/5), digital technology becomes a tool to negotiate meanings: photographs are manipulated and assembled to set up a visual map of suppressed memories and ghostly presences from the former Caribbean colonies of the British empire. The present resonates with the past, to highlight the fragmented and diasporic experiences of Caribbean, African, Indian, and Black British women and men. As Kempadoo states in an interview, her parents belong to the so-called Windrush Generation, which refers to the name of the cruise ship remembered for bringing a large group of post-war West Indian immigrants to the United Kingdom in 1948. In her work she registers the limits of realism and the endless possibility of manipulating the images with the computer:

Moving out of the dark room and into digital photography I explored sampling and layering images. Working with new technology meant I could open up meanings, and create multiple and complex, directed meanings. The computer complemented a documentary convention in being able to manipulate the image.<sup>18</sup>

It is, however, her multiscreen installation *Arrival* (2010), presented at ‘Photography and the Representation of African Migration’ at Point Sud,

<sup>16</sup> Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Vintage, 1994).

<sup>17</sup> Manuela Esposito, ‘Tales of Transit: “Crossing” in Andrea Levy, Roshini Kempadoo and Julie Otsuka’, *Anglistica*, 17.1 (2013), 53–67.

<sup>18</sup> Nalini Mohabir, ‘An Interview with Roshini Kempadoo’, *Ex Plus Ultra*, 2 (2010), <<http://explusultra.wun.ac.uk/index.php/extra/test/13>> [accessed September 2015].

Bamako, in Mali in February 2011, that directly explores the experience of crossing by showing the interconnections between colonialism, slavery and diaspora. Here, as an alternative to the mainstream media, the artist imagines the experiences of migrants who cross the sea between the North-African coast and Spain, in a desperate attempt to reach the fortress Europe. Footprints on the beach, female faces, and African children overlap with images of modern buildings and urban sceneries. Furthermore, past memories of crossings across the Black Atlantic resonate with contemporary sea journeys of migrants looking for a better life. As Bhabha insists, it is impossible to separate that past from the present. They are not disconnected: the former is not a mere predecessor of the latter. On the contrary, the past presents itself as a contingent, interstitial and intermediate space that intervenes in the present, bringing newness with it. Remembering cannot be a quiet and introspective recollection: 'It is a painful re-membering, a putting together of the dismembered past to make sense of the trauma of the present.'<sup>19</sup>

Memory, here, becomes a search for the traces left by old and new imperialist strategies. This is particularly evident if we consider the experience of colonialism and slavery not as a concluded chapter in global history, but as an intrinsic and indelible part of the contemporary world. Although the great Empires of the past have ended officially, Europe can be observed through a postcolonial lens that unveils tensions and uneasy answers. Migratory movements and transcultural differences continually interrogate issues such as cultural heritage and national identity. People who have come from ex-colonies in search of a better life perform a perpetual and concrete re-membering of the deep interconnection between the former metropolitan centres of power and their disseminated peripheries.

### *Final Remarks*

A postcolonial poetics acknowledges multiple, often untranslatable, voices and visions. It evokes, through the dissipation of a narrative reading of content, a plurality of discourses and involves the reader/spectator in the formation of meaning. The examples explored in this essay articulate a critical relationship between the cultural representations and the sense of heritage and belonging, offering the opportunity of a more problematic and stimulating vision of the preservation of the European arts and history. The innovative languages of the trans-local artworks realised by Piper, Julien and Kempadoo, as well as the encounters with the histories and the bodies evoked by Walcott and Ribka, provoke a different configuration of modernity, a liquid one, based on the centrality of transits and the trauma of migration. Liquid modernity, the present condition of the world, involves both the unmaking of Europe as a space of

<sup>19</sup> Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), pp. xi-xii.

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exemplarity, exception and privilege and the remaking of Europe as a space of trans-cultural ferment, movements and transits. Challenging the consecrated reverence of institutionalised archival practices and historical accounts, the variety of works explored in this essay reminds us of the multiple diasporic formations that inhabit the world and produce actual conditions of mutation and circulation. Based on experiences of migration and dislocation, the critical voices and visions highlighted here consider the role of creative resistance connected with narration and participation, which may produce a wider and more flexible sense of one's own sense of belonging.