That Bird is Singing Us an Invitation to Meet Our Future: Listening to the Call of Sankofa to Develop Memory Practice Methodologies for Performative Practice

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That Bird is Singing Us an Invitation to Meet Our Future: Listening to the Call of *Sankofa* to Develop Memory Practice Methodologies for Performative Practice

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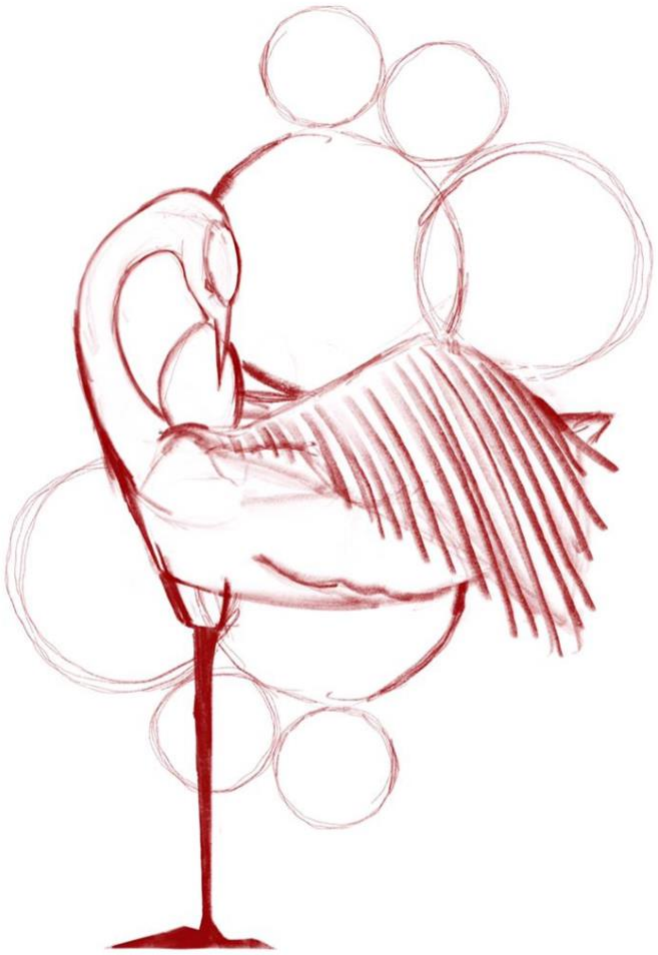

Sankofa Whispers Tattoo Design by Salim Taylor (2019)

Abstract

This thesis explores the potential of the philosophical, and practical, application of the Akan Adinkra principle of *Sankofa*, as a memory practice methodology that offers otherwise readings of remembering for lives omitted from or obscured from archives and official documents of history. The common meaning of *Sankofa* has been defined as get up and go get it" or "go back and get it," in African Diaspora cultural and memorial practices with other meanings that refer to returning to the source to recover the past and it is not taboo to fetch what is at risk of being left behind.

Represented by a pictograph of a bird with its head turned backwards, gently caring for an egg balanced on its back, *Sankofa* has been called on to think about how to reconstruct a "fragmented past" (Temple 2010: 127) This thesis explores *Sankofa* as a memory practice methodology, presenting a reading of the Akan philosophical principle through a black feminist/ decolonial lens. The research considers the potential of *Sankofa* as a guide in developing methodologies for a performative artistic practice that involves collective learning, remembering, storytelling and the development of communities of support, recovery, and transformation. The intent is to bring a perspective to *Sankofa* that thinks about how this wise bird holds and nurtures the egg on its back, caring for it and how the birds innate embodied wisdom can help us "to meet the future, undeterred" (Kayper-Mensah 1978:4).

This research draws on an ongoing artistic projects *Declaration of Independence* and *The Queen and the Black-Eyed Squint*, both of which use methods of remembering to explore and undo memories of the continuing legacies of colonialism and enslavement.

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And of course my family all of them. Those who have left us and those who are to come.

Author's declaration

I declare that all the material contained in this thesis is my own work.

Barby Asante

June 2023

Sankofa Whispers- A Prologue

In an attempt to understand what Sankofa means to me as a reluctant archivist, I look for all the material I can find in the un-constituted archive of my world

I am reluctant because I am not sure I believe in the "Arch" of "archive"

I refuse the formality of it
The records and documents
The requests that need to be made
The supposed objectivity

But what I am interested in is the traces
And fragments
The whispers
And the shouts
That hide in documents
The things in between
The stories that are not told
The layout of the spaces
The why of the cataloguing
And the categorisations

I'm interested in what is not there
Or not allowed in
That which haunts the official stories

The Sankofa bird often whispers to me
Alive amongst the dead records
Telling me to look in places other than the official
For the things, I need to remember
She whispers to me of places to find materials

Of events

And streets

And people

She makes me look at the brickwork

And trees and plants

On market stalls

And in hairdressers

In dance moves

And in poetry

At protests

And in the church or mosque

In libraries and record collections

She makes me look for old rare films posted on YouTube

Or films made by African filmmakers that are only available on DVDs from Swiss film distributors

And problematic colonial clips from Pathé News telling stories of independent African countries, yet still managing to centre the former colony.

My archives are small

Collated from things that most would disregard

Memories, memorabilia

Curios found on eBay

Family photographs and keepsakes

Conversations and fictions.

Sometimes she even makes me look at lies.

She points to noises and smells

And things only felt through touch

emotions and light, breath or thoughts

that can only be captured and recorded in a moment

Things that disappear into archives of air and water

Or blood and skin

Stored in cells and forgotten

She shows me archives that exist in vinyl records and mixtapes

Newspapers, incense mixes, and salt collected from far-away places

Freely distributed on market stalls in Brixton

She shows me plant remedies

And how to see tarot readings

Listen in gospel songs

And feel in dub reggae beats

The memories exist in voices

And Bodies

And Declarations

They are fleeting

Informal

Temporary and

Propositional

And she, Sankofa, she whispers

Extract from *Sankofa Whispers* adapted and recorded for Kapwani Kiwanga's *The Future of the Archive, Sankofa Pavilion.* Created by Kapwani Kiwanga and Sir David Adjaye for *Is This Tomorrow?* Whitechapel Gallery, London, April 2019

Introduction

In April 2019, Whitechapel Gallery Archive Curator Nayia Yiakoumaki invited me to take part in a conversation with artist Canadian artist Kapwani Kiwang in response to the *Sankofa Pavilion* that she had created in collaboration with architect Sir David Adjaye for the exhibition *Is This Tomorrow?* [1] My contribution to the conversation would be recorded into the fibres of the acoustic fabric of the pavilion and stored in a sealed container for future decoding. Kiwanga's intention was to embed within the pavilion structure reflections on the potential of immaterial archives, thinking through possible methods and strategies that could be employed as otherwise propositions to conventional forms of archiving. *Sankofa Whispers* was based on the interests that have been preoccupying my artistic practice in relation to archives and how they do or do not remember. The piece explores how I attempt to create artworks that reflect on memory and remembering through collaboration, writing, creating spaces for dialogue, film, performance, DJ sets, sound works, ritual and re-enactment. In the opening extract from *Sankofa Whispers* I lay out a reluctance to align myself with the proposition of archive, trying through poetry, to think through what both fascinates me and repels me about archives, exploring the *Sankofa* that has been whispering to me as I grapple with how to be with, attend to and reflect on place, identity, belonging and the ever-present legacies of slavery and colonialism. Central to this process is my own biography as a black woman, born of Ghanaian parentage, exploring how I arrived in this world and imagining what came before that arrival. I am thinking from the position of a person of the African Diaspora living

[1] The *Sankofa Pavilion* was designed as a chamber for intimate conversation and debate that also acted as a recording device. The proposition for this exhibition was based on the model of the gallery's 1956 exhibition *This is Tomorrow,* (can give a little more explanation to this) *Is This Tomorrow?* called for experimental propositions that prompted questions about an unclear future.

Yiakoumaki's invitation asked:

What are the potential outcomes, if we think not of reinterpreting the archive, but archiving differently? What would a future archive look like; the same as the current one with new voices, or rather a reimagining of the archive, including its medium? (footnote will need to put the email in my appendix)

in Britain a place where many Africa's meet. How in a place that has been antagonistic to my "being here" can I think about my presence in a place that does not remember that my reason for being in this place is a relational one informed by our shared, fragmented, and contested histories of enslavement and colonialism? "We are here because you were there", (Srilangarajah, 2018) the much-quoted A Sivanandan aphorism, captures so brilliantly the relationship that someone like me has with Britain.

My birth in Britain happened because of the migration of my parents from a former British colony. Their arrival was an invitation by means of a scholarship[2] given to my father after the military coup in Ghana (the former colony) in 1966. Their dream, to return to Ghana with skills and money to support their families back *home*. Their settlement, an inevitability of the harshness of the conditions of arrival in the U.K. where despite the invitations to people from the former colonies to come to the fatherland[3] they found no open arms to embrace the children of the commonwealth, instead they found rejection, racism, grief, and hardship. There are many like me in the world who share similar stories that question our belonging to places like Britain. Our arrivals on slave ships, former passenger liners, aeroplanes, and dinghies. Through tunnels, hidden in cars and lorries, on trains and on foot. Many different ways of arriving at this mythological place[4] that we have all been taught to desire and revere. Some of these people have become my co-researchers, co-conspirators, and collaborators on the many projects that I have instigated and

[2] In Ama Ata Aidoo's *Our Sister Killjoy* she speaks about the post-colonial scholarships given by the former colonist to spy on the former colony.

[3] I use the word *Fatherland* here as a reference to my story *The Arrival: Becoming Beento*, which is a speculative fiction story that explores the heart-breaking implications of arrival, through imagining a future Europe where dissident Africans arrive at a horrific situation where their dreams of a better life are destroyed. I intentionally chose to use the epithet Fatherland as a way to encompass the paternal relationship of Britain to its colonies, while also referring to how this steeped in a patriarchy.

[4] I am thinking here of how the ideas and histories of Britain, America and Europe have been inculcated into African and African diaspora people. I use the word "inculcated" here purposely, as I once visited a school in The Gambia that advertised itself as "inculcating" education and good behaviour into the students.

taken part in that explore questions of memory and remembering in the absence of presence in the cultural archive.[5]

When we come together to make work and question our memories within this archive we ask; How can we account for the voices that are unheard, never been heard, shut down or are missing in the archive? How do we expand the notion of what materially and immaterially constitutes archives? How can our "insurgent memories", (Zegeye and Vambe 2006: 329) and our dissident understandings of archives and archival knowledge disrupt and interrupt the power and authority within them? The spaces for dialogue, the re-enactment, and rituals that I create within my work are the ways in which I attempt to enact the discordant relationship with the history I have been taught and recover the fragments of memories I can gather from the kinds of materials I mention in *Sankofa Whispers*. I am thinking about this as potential means of memory and (re)collection. (Re)collection as remembering or re-calling, but also (re)collection as in gathering, re-collecting, or re-connecting the fragments of the memories of unwritten histories, undocumented journeys, and unheard experiences, to provoke a dialogue about our presence *here* and the presence *here* of people like me. In developing this position I invoke David Scott's idea of "counter-memory" working "against the grain of traditional memory and perhaps the archive itself." (2008:1).

Troubling the Archive

Derrida's book *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression,* originally published in French in 1995, offers a definition of the archive derived from the etymology of the original Greek meaning word *Arkhé*. The Arkhé is the beginning, the origin, the place from

[5] I use the term cultural archive here, drawing on the thinking of Edward Said through Gloria Wekker, to think about an archive that exists as cultural memory. It is an archive that is alive beyond our material understanding of an archive and a physical repository of memory, living in the ways in which legacies of coloniality are present in everyday experiences, in language, on the streets, in the food we eat, in the ways in which we understand and navigate the world. Wekker notes: " *The cultural archive has influenced historical cultural configurations and current dominant and cherished self-representations and culture"* (Wekker, 2016: 2).

which "things *commence*—physical, historical, or ontological principle—but also the principle according to the law, *there* where men and gods *command, there* where authority, social order are exercised, *in this place* from which *order* is given" (1998:1). It is from this position that the archive as a method of recalling and remembering history is positioned as an authority in the making of history. In Derrida's description of the archive; "the functions of unification, of identification, of classification" (1998:3) paired with "the power of *consignation"* (1998:3) is the how of the archival constitution. As Derrida notes:

> By consignation, we do not only mean, in the ordinary sense of the word, the act of assigning residence or of entrusting to put into reserve (to consign, to deposit) in a place on a substrate, but here the act of *consigning* through *gathering together signs* (1998:3).

The signs that Derrida describes are the sign(s)/symbols are the documents and materials that are of some significance to a state, authority or to the remembrance of a person. These signs or documents form a collection under a particular banner, within or without a building called the archive. They have usually been collected in "anticipation of the future" (1998:18), built on the remembering of that past that institutes a collective memory of that state, organisation or person. Building on these ideas Achille Mbembe's essay *The Power of the Archive and its Limits,* (2002) explores and expands on the idea the archive that draws its power from the "entanglement of building and documents" (2002:19). For Mbembe the architecture of the archive is austere, temple like; "a cemetery: a religious space," that instills a set of remembering rituals. Rituals that are "of a quasi-magical nature." He describes the archive as "a cemetery in the sense that fragments of lives and pieces of time are interred there, their shadows and footprints inscribed on paper and preserved like so many relics" (2002:19). For Mbembe this is the "inescapable materiality of the archive" (2002:19) and the way that archives institute an imaginary about the authority to whom the archive belongs.

The rituals that are performed within the archive are secular in nature, but they have authority and religiosity, and as such instil a belief in their narrative of an almighty

truth. Documents are “coded and classified” and “distributed according to chronological, thematic or geographical criteria.” (2002:19-20) to create an order or “judgement” (2002:20) For Mbembe the archive becomes a talisman, an object of the state that represents an alluring past and as such the state's ability to command the future. In its talismanic form, the archive then becomes a commodified repository of collective memory from which anything that is subversive or disturbing can supposedly be removed from that memory.

Both Derrida and Mbembe speak to an archival authority that uses documents and buildings to institute an authoritative remembering for the people. A collective remembering that becomes the basis for the cultural archive. Ann Laura Stoler’s, *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense* (2010), challenges the innate power and authority of the archive by looking at the processes that constitute the colonial archive from the perspective of ethnographic analysis of Dutch Colonial archives. With an emphasis on governance, administration, and the “essence” (2010:4) of the archive and its conventions. Stoler notes that these archives are what she describes as; “Grids of intelligibility” created from an “imperial conceit”, “uncertainty” and colonial “anxieties” (2009:1). Stoler says that written in the margins of the colonial archive and within the documents are: “Accumulations of paper and edifices of stone were both monuments to the asserted know how of rule, artifacts of bureaucratic labor duly performed, artifices of a colonial state declared to be in efficient operation” (2009:2). Stoler reveals that in reading an archive “against their grain”, (2009:47), within the façade of authority, there is also a narrative of “…failed projects delusional imaginings, equivocal explanations of unanticipated outbursts of distrust directed towards the state apparatus on which European comforts would so precariously depend.” (2009:21) Stoler writes:

> Wedged within those folds of truth—claims emerges something else: uncensored turns of phrase, loud asides in the imperative tense, hesitant asides in lotto voce. These register confused assessments, parenthetic doubts about what might count as evidence, the records of eyewitnesses

> with dubious credentials, dismissed rumours laced with pertinent truths, contradictory testimonies called upon quickly and discarded (2009:23).

Stoler's text offers readers a view of colonial archives and archiving processes that reveal some of the problematics that are contained within them as repositories of official histories. She proposes that deep reading of such an archive will always reveal its fallibility, some of which is purposefully created to uphold an illusion of power. As Mbembe has described, this could be seen as the way that the archive has within it the ability to threaten its own existence; being both important to remembering and acknowledging the status of the state, coloniality, the institution or person that the archive references, but also in its ability to recall what has been kept as evidence might not be of service to the memory that the archive is expected to uphold. (2002:23)

Within these readings of the archive then we have both the way in which the archive becomes an authority of remembering and its trouble. In the foreword of the 2015 edition of Michel-Rolph Trouillot's Silencing *the Past: Power and the Production of History,* Hazel Carby states that for Trouillot history is "always material" beginning with the "bodies and artefacts, agents, actors and subjects" (2015:xii). Trouillot's approach to his analysis is also through an examination of the process of history-making and how history works in relation to power. Where Stoler is interested in the misdirection and distortions that inhabit the archive and what this does to a historic narrative, Trouillot is interested in what is not written in a historical narrative. He describes this as silence. "This is a story with a story—so slippery at the edges that one wonders when and where it started and whether it will ever end" (2015:1). Trouillot is speaking about the impossibility of history-making within a context of power, where narratives around who, what, how and why things happened are so unevenly distributed that the mostly anecdotal evidence that others may provide which might imply a different story cannot be corroborated without documentary evidence and thus their version of events did not occur. This then makes history a "social process" (2015:23) produced in a specific "historical context" (2015:22) and cannot be produced without the "narrators" (2015:22) of this history. These

narrators define the terms of history and as such that which is omitted from the telling of history. With history being narrated by the *winners,* some scholars have considered the non-Westerner to be "fundamentally non-historical" (2015:7) as such the silences are often the voices of those considered ahistorical. Trouillot says of this;

> Silences enter the process of historical production at four crucial moments: the moment of fact creation (the making of *sources)*; the moment of fact assembly (the making of *archives*); the moment of fact retrieval (the making of *narratives*); and the moment of retrospective significance (the making of *history* in the first instance) (2015:26).

The conditions of historic memory and its apparatus of remembering, as understood through the archive is saturated with a repressive all-knowing power, that is inherently Western and colonial in origin. This is an archive that evidences and justifies a type of power and an order of things, even if within that order there are limits, and within those limits, there is artifice, delusion, and a silencing of other voices that might tell a story that disrupts, discounts, or runs counter to this given order. How does one who comes from a cultural background that was considered to not have a history retrieve a past "without prior knowledge or memory of what constitutes pastness" (Trouillot, 2015:15)? This presents those of us who's histories have been excluded from, or shrouded within these historic narratives an opportunity to think about how we think about and do the work of remembering that on the one hand challenges the narratives written into the official archives or to present alternative methodologies of memory practice that have at their core an impetus to either remember and/or create archival propositions that provide an opening for different narratives to be heard, experienced and collected.

If we follow Achille Mbembe's description of archives as buildings, documents and storage in public institutions constituted by the state, (Mbembe 2002:19) what does this mean for people that have little representation in the power structures that constitute such archives? Stuart Hall points out in the opening of Constituting an

Archive, all archives have "a "pre-history" prior conditions of existence" (Hall 2001:89). The archives described by Derrida, Mbembe and Stoler, speak to archives with a pre-history of conquest, domination and controlling the narrative. What then of the "pre-history" of those who have been considered to have no history, those of whom there is little or no *account*? What if within the *accounts* are ledgers for the sale of your great-great-grandparents? Or they tell of the looting of your grandparent's village, on account of its uncooperative chief. What if they tell of the murder of your unnamed ancestor thrown overboard on a ship? Or the contemporary records that record your birth, your ethnicity, gender, and your death to account for your presence and your absence. "We are here" and there was a "pre-history" to our arrival that screams in the deafening silences that live between the lines of those documents of *account*. The proposition of this thesis is to develop a memory practice methodology that questions the authority of a given historic narrative, that can read the archive *against the grain*, attend to the silences, and consider the potential of remembering that can attend to that which is fragmented or anecdotal. I am interested in a Black feminist decolonial approach to thinking about memory that may also be as much about recovery and recognition as it is about re-collection and intervening in the given narrative.

The Archive in Practice

My relationship to the archive has not been one that I intentionally looked for, rather it was something that found its way into my vocabulary after doing several projects with people that explored how black communities remember.[6] I had not considered my work to be related to this thing called the archive until I was invited to speak about my work at conferences and seminars on art and archival practices (footnote to note some of these events). As a response to these many invitations and the questions that arose for me in relation to black experiences and the archive, I made a performative and propositional project called the South London Black Music Archive (Peckham Platform/ Tate Modern 2012). This archive was an open

[6] I explore some of these experiences in a more detail in Chapter 2 of this thesis.

temporary archive, presented within an exhibition and project space, located in a very busy public square in Peckham, South London. The public was invited to "listen, share and contribute" to an archive of memory, created by those that contributed for themselves and those that visited the space, the only criteria was that your offering either related to an event, place or experience that happened in South London, or that you were a resident of South London and as such you could bring any materials or memories that you wished to share related to black music. Contributing to this archive was easy. You could bring items that you wanted to add to the temporary collection that would be registered, catalogued, and added to the collection. The space also featured a large map based on the south of the river train and tube map of London, created in dialogue with local people from south London, where memories of record shops, clubs and music venues and other music-related sites were gathered and located on this map. People could add memories to this map by means of sending a text message to an SMS printer located in the gallery and then adding their memory to the map. Each contributor received a copy of Legacy Tunes, a limited-edition vinyl record, made in collaboration with young people from the local Leaders of Tomorrow group who did research amongst their families and friends on their relationships to black music, from which they wrote short pieces about music passed down to them and what they would pass on to others. Their pieces were recorded into a soundscape of their music choices and street sounds of Peckham to make the recording for the vinyl record.

Figure 1:Map from the South London Black Music Archive, Peckham Platform 2012. Photo Peckham Platform

Figure 2: Ephemera from the South London Black Music Archive, Peckham Platform 2012. Photo Peckham Platform

In the introduction to the special edition of Anthurium: A Caribbean Studies Journal, dedicated to the Archaeologies of Black Memory Symposium and Seminar held at the University of Miami in 2007, David Scott presented the proposition of a *counter-memory* living within the documents of an archive. He referred to his own experience as a graduate student working at the Marcus Garvey and the Negro

Improvement Association Papers Project at UCLA. Drawing on this experience and the experience of creating a practice of living archive through his work on the Small Axe Project (footnote) he says that within the everyday practice and constitution of the materiality of this archive lay not just the memory of the happenings that the documents refer to but also a *counter-memory* (2008:1). Scott describes this as a way in which the Garvey archive through its rituals, events, personalities, and correspondences, as developed by Robert Hill, the founder of the Garvey Project, created "an activity of thinking and imagination" (2008:1). He speaks of remembering as always being in the present and as such the recovering of the past always being an exercise of "redescription," a "questioning and re-positioning of the assumptions that are taken to constitute common life" (2008:1). He continues "if criticism is a mode of re-membering, then naturally it will depend upon the assembly and re-assembly of the sources that make memory possible.(reference) My intention with the South London Black Music Archive was to think through something like Scott's *counter-memory.* To enact through my performative art practice an active critique that questions our perceptions of the archive and archival practices, to consider the possibility of collective repositories of everyday memory and to ask questions about how and if it is necessary to make interventions in historic remembering that evidence us in relation to those events and occasions that align with those already deemed to be understood as official histories. I was interested in that which happens in silence as something with its own sonic register, much like that of Black feminist visual theorist Tina Campt describes her practice of not just looking at, but also listening to images of the often dismissed and disregarded photographs of black subjects (Campt, 2017:5). Using popular music and exploring its sonic resonance to memory and the somatic experience of life, has been an approach I explored in previous studies [7]and projects.[8] I am interested in the way in which black music is a sonic container of remembering. A remembering that is not contained solely in the composition of music as a composed or recorded document

[7] During my undergraduate studies I took an extra course in Black Language which explored the way in which there are African retentions in black language, literature, music, and the arts.
[8] I explore some of my previous projects in Chapter 2.

but also as something that lives beyond its materiality. How it has travelled from Africa with enslaved people, even as they were forbidden from playing their songs and singing in their languages. Somehow even the contemporary popular music of black origin carries within its structure the memories of what came before.

In creating the South London Black Music Archive, I thought about intervening in the understanding of the archive with something propositional or fictional. In *The Site of Memory,* a talk given by Toni Morrison, published in the collection *Mouth Full of Blood* (Morrison, 2019) speaks about her practice as a writer of fiction being deeply informed by her own biographical experience. She draws on the slave narrative as the way in which the personal narrative of one's experience shed light on the untold stories and experiences of a race of people not represented in the official narratives of history. As these narratives were often written as evidence for the abolition of the slave trade and as such published by white abolitionists, there were often silences within these narratives that hid much of the horrific violence of enslavement from the reader. Morrison also speaks of these narratives as being factual and revealing very little about the interior life of enslaved people. Morrison states that as a writer her job is one of unveiling that which could not be written within the slave narrative. She says, "First of all I must trust my own recollection. I must also depend on the recollections of others. Thus, memory weighs heavily on what I write, in how I begin and in what I find to be significant" (2019:238). She continues:

> These "memories within" are the subsoil of my work. But these memories and recollections won't give me total access to the unwritten interior life of these people. Only the act of imagination can help me (2019:238).

Morrison describes this process as "a kind of literary archaeology" working with some information and a "little bit of guesswork" (2019:238) she describes this memory work practice as journeying "to a site and see what remains were left behind and to reconstruct the world that these remains imply." (2019:238) For Morrison "fiction is distinct from fact" which then allows space for "imagination" and "invention." (2019:238) Fiction then becomes a site in which to deploy a practice of

freedom in which "nothing needs to be publicly verifiable, although much in it can be verified. As an artist who has often developed work with others using traces of facts, we have often had to use our imaginations to fill in the gaps – to bring speculation to the narration.

This is a space where - if you listen closely - *Sankofa Whispers*

What is Sankofa's Offering?

Sankofa (san-ko-fa) as an Akan[9] principle is symbolized by a pictograph of a standing bird, with its head turned towards an egg that rests on its back. Part of the Akan Àdìńkrá[10] communication system in Ghana, images of *Sankofa* can be found on fabric designs, house paintings, carvings, gold weights and more. More recently we are seeing these pictographs used as a symbolic graphics in North America and Europe, to depict and affirm Afro-centric presence in these diasporic places, a reference to a connection with a remembering of a past connected to Africa, an expression of the importance of historical and cultural recovery. In simplistic terms, *Sankofa* means "go back and get it." The word is made up of three parts: san ("return"), ko ("go back"), and fa ("fetch/retrieve"). (A. Wilson 2009: 587). The turned-back head of the bird in the pictograph represents the idea of returning to get something that is lost, forgotten, or misplaced. As the bird's head turns, it appears to be picking up or taking care of an egg on its back. This is a suggestion that perhaps encoded within the idea of *Sankofa* there is the potential to understand the past, while the birds' feet face forward to consider the potentiality of the future, feet standing steadfastly in the present, as this is the only place where we can attend to that which has passed and how to imagine moving forward from that past.

[9] Akan people are Twi and Fante people living mostly in Ghana and the costal areas of Ivory Coast. They are the largest cultural group in Ghana with over half the population coming from this ethnic group. (Amgborale Blay 2009: 23)

[10] A growing set of pictorial symbology associated to Akan cosmology. I will expand on Àdìńkrá in Chapter One.

This thesis will look at the research I have conducted over many years that considers the transformative potential of *Sankofa* as a strategic feature of contemporary creative practices of black remembering. I am thinking about *Sankofa* as a memory practice methodology that can attend to the ways in which we might be able to account for the silences, omissions, and erasures in the telling of histories connected to coloniality and enslavement. I am exploring how *Sankofa* can not only attend to a collection and collation of material evidence of that which is missing from a narrative of the past but also think about the affect that is left by what has happened in the past still resonates loudly. In this undoing, I'm interested in exploring the spaces where we can change our relationship to these histories in ways that are generative and transformative, not only to the ways in which we view historic narratives but also to the ways we see ourselves and our position in this world. I'm interested in *Sankofa's* potential to unveil and reveal an otherwise (maybe I need to footnote this here) way of seeing the world and the stories that have created it. I am interested in *Sankofa's* potential to disrupt, to make us stop, reflect, and reconsider what we are understanding, seeing and feeling with the hope of carefully guiding us to ways of addressing what has happened with care.

For the purpose of this thesis I explore *Sankofa* through a reflection on my recent artistic practice concentrating on two current and ongoing projects Declaration of Independence and The Queen and the Black-Eyed Squint both of which began in 2017. The extract from *Sankofa Whispers* that begins this work began as musings in my practice journal that has been kept during the time of developing this research and the corresponding projects.[11] I began these writings as a way to understand how I am conceiving my relationship to remembering in my practice. Early in the research, I found very little material written about *Sankofa,* so trying and understanding it through some form of practice felt necessary. My poetry and prose writing became the mode in which to explore and navigate my thoughts in relation to these ideas. I also remembered seeing Haile Gerima's 1993 film *Sankofa* when it

[11] I will be referring to extracts from my Sankofa Whispers writings, and other writings throughout this thesis. I will explain more about how this will work later in the introduction.

came out in the early 1990s so this felt like a good place to begin a deep dive into understanding how *Sankofa* has been operating in our cultural perception and as a resource that supports social, political and historic remembering. Gerima's film has been seminal to our contemporary understanding of the principle of *Sankofa* visualizing a potential meaning of the idea of "go back and get it" or as many scholars have described it the notion of "the return." It offers us a practical understanding of what *Sankofa* might mean in practice. In revisiting the film I began to explore a practical understanding of what *Sankofa* might be and to think about what it might become embodied as practice.

The Thesis

This thesis is an interruption in the narrative structure and conventional understanding of the archive. Although I have been positioned and sometimes position myself as an artist who works with archives or within an archival practice, you can glean from this introduction that I'm not interested in the archive per se but in how it has been upheld as the absolute authority on the validity and provenance of history.[12] Perhaps I am not directly interested in history either. However, it could be said that since I have been in some form of dialogue with the archive in relation to art practice, I am in many ways archive adjacent. I would not fully dismiss it as a mode of enquiry in my practice even if the archival materials I use and refer to are often ignored or discarded and not considered significant materials worthy of archival collection. I am interested in how the archive, as an object, idea, and practice, becomes the perceived legitimate source of historic record, memory and remembering. This practice of the archive has rendered many people's lives illegitimate, disposable, invisible and unintelligible. This is not to say that the archive should be the only place that one should be able to find acknowledgement of lives lived, especially when in many of our cultural systems the materiality of archives is often associated with buildings, that have a certain kind of complex

[12] I am thinking here about the way that Achile Mbembe describes the status of materials in the archive. He describes a validity imbued in the way that materials can be touched, read, and decoded (2002: 20) as validation of its authority and ability to provide proof that something has happened.

infrastructure to contain, care for, and attend to documents that "fulfil the criteria of 'archivability'" (Mbembe 2002:19). These documents are either those of the state or the private papers of people, families, or organisations that are deemed of importance and "worthy of preserving and keeping in a public place" (Mbembe 2002:20).

The interruption I am proposing is not altogether a new one. There are many alternative archives set up by housing coops, workers' unions, activists, artist collectives, small galleries, and other organisations. These organisations collate and collect documents and stories from people and organisations that would not be significantly represented within the "official" archives. They have begun to constitute their archives either through strong community support or through funding such as the Heritage Lottery Fund.[13] Taking these routes to create archiving projects that disrupt the hegemonic understanding of the archive requires a significant amount of labour and commitment from those involved in the work of managing these archives, meaning that they are always at risk of closure or some sort of disruption in their operations. Often such archives devote as much time to exploring creative approaches to how people access and engage with their archives as they do to the actions of collating and maintaining their archives, regularly employing strategies of what Stuart Hall has described as the "living archive" (Hall 2008:89).

As well as "living" archival strategies there are also many other ways people have gotten around the materiality of the archive. Digital technologies have significantly opened up the possibility of archives, with the inherent database, storage, and retrieval quality of these technologies being easily adaptable to developing ways to create archives that not only present challenges to the significance of the archive but offer new opportunities for collaboration, co-creation and connecting archival

[13] The Heritage Lottery Fund is a U.K. based funding organisation that distributes approximately £300 million per year to projects to British heritage projects, including buildings, collections archives and public domain projects. They are a non-governmental body but accountable to the British parliament. https://www.heritagefund.org.uk (Accessed 13 September 2022)

stories in disparate places. It is this "living" or *liveness* that I am interested in expanding, pushing an understanding in my practice. It is an understanding of memory and remembering beyond the walls, the boxes, and the archive. Just as the digital can transcend these spaces, I am interested in the kinds of unruly memories that can even transcend a digital space. If I am finding the fragments of the stories and memories of people like me; those who came before me and those walking with me, in the wind, in *illegitimate* and undefinable spaces, whispering to me in the syncopation of a breakbeat[14] or looking at me from faded family photographs, then, as in Sethe's experiences of *rememory*[15] in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, (1987) I am recalling an echo of remembrance of something forgotten. It is this *living* intangibility, which is in excess of the document, that I believe *Sankofa* is able to attend to. Rather than deploying an authoritarian system of care over memory, *Sankofa's* offering is one that shows us the wisdom of remembering. *Sankofa* helps us to attend to the complexity of memory as not just that which is documented and corroborated but also lives within our cultures, societies, politics, our bodies, and languages[16]. In our triumphs, traumas, emotions, and in our forgetting.[17]

I am thinking about of the use of *Sankofa* as an interpretive methodology, a way of thinking and practising remembering from the position of being a black woman,

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[14] A breakbeat is a repetitive drum pattern often found in hip-hop and some dance music. These drum patterns are usually sampled from jazz or funk records, using drum patterns that happen in the moment of a break in the general flow of the music, usually occurring when the rest of the musicians stop playing and the drums continue to hold the sonic space. (Torres, 2022)

[15] I borrow this term from Toni Morrison's Beloved, the word used by Sethe to describe what she remembers, describing this as not just the things that she remembers or forgets but also things outside that also trigger memories, some memories that might not be her own but are no less significant.

[16] I use the idea of the "cultural archive" (Said/ Wekker) here to think about an archive that not only exists in the buildings we understand as archive but in the wider cultural understanding of a place.). Wekker uses the term "cultural archive" borrowing from Edward Said's concept of "the cultural archive" as "a particular attitude of knowledge and structures of attitude and reference" (Said 1993:52). Wekker pairs this reading with Ann Stoler's understanding of archive as a "repository of memories." (Wekker:39). Her thesis explores the legacies of colonisation in the Netherlands, legacies that that create a way of "looking at the world" (Wekker: 21) an informing of knowledge or cultural memory. Cultural memory is then a metaphoric archive embodied within the fabric of that culture and thus the representations of that culture.

[17] There is also an interpretation of Sankofa that says *It is not taboo to fetch what is at risk of being left behind* (reference probably Encyclopaedia of African Religion) and *The king sees all; one must not be afraid to redeem one's past mistakes; turn back and fetch it*"(Kande, 1993:129)

living in the African diaspora today, with the legacies of colonialism and enslavement continue to live in the daily lives of black and people of colour. In this thesis I will be looking to explore an understanding of how *Sankofa* can be employed as a performative strategy that expresses a mode of remembering living, both in the everyday actions of living life and in the everyday actions of attending to life in what Saidiya Hartman has called the "afterlife of slavery." (2007:6)[18] I will think with *Sankofa* to understand how its ancient wisdom has travelled and lives in the present. I will also consider the way in which *Sankofa* has the potential to show us a different way of attending to and using memory in the service of *living* and undoing historic legacies.

It is with this attention to *living* and *undoing* explored in this thesis through *Sankofa*, that I intend this thesis to be an interruption to the conventional narrative structure and understanding of the archive. I used the phrase "narrative structure" to illuminate that my approach to the structure of this thesis will also interrupt the conventions of how a PhD is formed. To reflect on the *alive-ness/living* memory within the artworks I have included in this research, I will preface each chapter with extracts from my research journals, reflective writings, poems, and performance texts. Like the extract from *Sankofa Whispers* that opens this thesis, this practice of writing is a significant part of both the ways in which I have been exploring my understanding of *Sankofa* as a memory practice and also sharing this practice with others in a ritual of *writing together*.[19] In choosing to format my thesis in this way I hope to evoke the ways in which I have developed performances with others. I see the methodological approach I have used as a practice of call-and-response. Calling and responding is a significant practice in African music, languages, and everyday life. In music this might be a certain drum pattern that is played and answered with

[18] Using this quote in this thesis I am also thinking about the afterlife of colonialism as well as slavery. These afterlives have different qualities but are deeply connected. I do not profess to be an expert at unravelling the legacies that come with theorising these afterlives, but I find the terms useful in thinking about some of what I am attempting to attend to in theorising *Sankofa* as a memory practice.
[19] This is something that I have explored in Declaration of Independence and will expand on in Chapter three.

a different drum pattern or vocally where a call is made by a lead and then either there is a repetition of that call or another kind of response that affirms or acknowledges that call. Similarly in everyday language, there are such patterns and turns of phrases. Even the call to prayer has its response of arriving at the mosque to pray. This approach is the way I invite people into the processes of making together, writing together, and developing scripts for the performances of *Declaration of Independence*. (maybe footnote) Materials of memory; the texts I am reading, the objects I find, family photographs and other ephemera I have been collecting including the materials generated in my ongoing collaborative projects, are the things I use to call. The invitation to others to join the working process and for us to create works together is the response. These responses are not only to the call of these texts, photos and ephemera but also a way of speaking to, with or back to these materials and the narratives, histories, and memories they evoke.

The calling and responding that I am bringing to this thesis is much like the whispering call that to remember that *Sankofa* arouses. I call with my musings, poems and extracts from the creative endeavours that have become my practice and the pieces I create with others. I respond by organising my thoughts in an autoethnographic theoretical reflection. With this approach to structuring my thesis, I am attempting to provide more than a reflective report of my practice by breaking the more formalised and theoretical approach to a thesis structure and looking at the ways in which my practice speaks to the way in which I narrate this research. With calling and responding I want to consider the ways in which *Sankofa* is a circular form of remembering and returning, intentionally weaving fragments of the practice throughout thus bringing an active and performative quality to the thesis that reflects my creative process alongside a theoretical analysis of the thoughts and practices that underpin this work. The extracts become the calls and the chapters that follow become the responses.

Since a significant part of my research enquiry has been about me further expanding my knowledge and understanding of *Sankofa*, it seems necessary to include my findings as part of an extended contextual review rather than me presenting only a

literature review that looks at the context in which I am developing my practice. To attend to this I will present this thesis in two parts. This will include reviewing materials on *Sankofa* including historical readings, films, and contemporary interpretations which may or may not define *Sankofa* as a methodology. I will explore this through theoretical texts, literature and memoir, and my own personal experience of returning to Ghana. I have chosen to present this in this way because *Sankofa* will be new knowledge to some readers and although maybe others know a little about its meaning, there is very little theoretical writing on *Sankofa,* so what I am attempting to do here is to offer a way of thinking about *Sankofa* as a Black feminist living in the diaspora. I am attempting to bring a definition to something that while it is an ancient pre-colonial knowledge system within Akan culture, it is something that is still emerging, becoming, and transforming. At present, what is actually determining our knowledge of *Sankofa* is the ways in which people of the African Diaspora are practising remembering and therefore how this has become interpreted in the creative and interpretive practices of African Diaspora people. Of course, this is potentially a wide subject possibility, being that the transatlantic slave trade has dislocated and scattered African people and therefore their different practices and ways of understanding the world, throughout Europe, the Caribbean, and the Americas. However, *Sankofa* along with other African knowledge and practices has found a way to exist and survive, even as the oppressive regimes of colonisation and enslavement either forbade or suppressed expressions of this knowledge and practices.

The Parts and the Chapters

Each part will consist of two chapters. The first will be the contextual review considering the field in which I am developing my ideas of memory work, both theoretically and practically. This will be a contextual exploration of *Sankofa* drawing on what is known about its emergence as part of the Àdìńkrá symbology. I will also be looking at some of the materials and practices of archiving and remembering that have informed the way I have been thinking about *Sankofa* and the development of my artistic practice.

In the second part of my thesis, I will look at my own artistic practice, focusing my exploration of *Sankofa* in Decolonial/anti-colonial, Black feminist thinking, and practices, reflecting on two of my ongoing artistic projects *Declaration of Independence* and *The Queen and the Black-Eyed Squint* mentioned earlier in this introduction. The ways in which I have developed these projects is informed by the context I will lay out in part one and ongoing conversations that I have had with other Black womxn[20] artists, both through my collaborative engagements in creating work and also in more formal discussions around archive and memory practices. This in part of the thesis defines the practical application of a *Sankofa* memory practice methodology and also reflects on the ways in which I have been thinking about this and approaching this research within my artistic practice.

Chapter one will begin with thinking about *Sankofa* as an African cosmology, coming from the Akan traditions of Ghana. I will look at *Sankofa* within the context of Akan culture and cosmology, as well as in the wider Àdìńkrá communication system. I will explore how this is understood, through my personal relationship with my own Akan heritage moving towards a wider cultural understanding of *Sankofa* as visualized in Gerima's film, concentrating on the experience of two female characters, the main character Mona, also known as Shola, and a supporting character Nunu. Both embody different potential readings of *Sankofa* that may help to understand the strategic potentiality of the principle, for thinking about the role of memory in our present and in potential futures. I am particularly interested in how Mona/ Shola's

[20] I will be slipping between the use of the term womxn, women and saying trans and non-binary people through this thesis. These are the people I mostly work with from my position as a Black feminist. I will explain the use of womxn later in this thesis, but to say for now that this is not always a comfortable or appropriate term as it can be construed as a term that excludes trans women from being included in the category women, as it has been perceived as a more inclusive way to think about and include, genderqueer, non-binary and trans women. Others see the term as a disruption in the idea of wo(men) being connected to men. Gendered terminology is not ideal and can lead to other forms of exclusion and oppression. However as with the way I sometimes capitalise Black as emphasis, and sometimes use the small b when I write black, I will borrow from La Mar Jurelle Bruce who states "because I want to emphasize an improper blackness . . . a blackness that is ever-unfurling rather than rigidly fixed; a blackness that is neither capitalized nor propertized via the protocols of Western grammar; a blackness that centers those who are typically regarded as lesser and lower cases." (2021: 3). I want to borrow this notion of improperness for both blackness and gender as both are categories bestowed upon us that can be as burdensome as they can be liberating.

Sankofa-rization upholds a particular narrative of the black female's role in the struggle for liberation and how she must be in order to be included. Mona, a model in Ghana for a photo shoot on the beaches around Cape Coast Castle is haunted by the spirit of *Sankofa*, who urges her to understand her history. In order to do this, she is transported back to slavery into the body of Shola, where she experiences the brutality of being enslaved, as a way to understand who she is and where she came from.

After looking in detail at the ways in which Gerima has conceived *Sankofa* in the film through the characters of Mona/Shola, I will then look deeper into contemporary readings and examples of *Sankofa* as proposed by Christel Temple who contemplates the possibility of thinking about *Sankofa* as a methodology for her readings of the work of Afro-German women writers in her essay Using "Sankofa as a Literary Paradigm: Radical Reconstructions of "The Return" (2010). To open up this idea of return I will reflect on my own return to Ghana in 1989 when I 18 years old. I will speak of my experience of visiting Cape Coast and Elmina Castles, to explore what it might mean to return to a site so loaded with the legacies of enslavement and coloniality through my own perception and that of the aunt who took me to visit the site. I will consider this experience alongside reflecting on Saidiya Hartman's journey to Ghana in 1996 as discussed in her book *Lose Your Mother: Journey Along The Atlantic Slave Route* (2007) and Dionne Brand's longing to understand her relationship to the legacies of enslavement and coloniality through her memoir *A Map to the Door of No Return: Notes to Belonging. (*2001) I will explore the idea of returning both physical and metaphorically, drawing on the longing to know where you come from and whom your people are, to returning to the land through reflecting on the idea of return as a way to repair and reclaim yourself and your history.

Returning brings up a lot of social and cultural issues as well as personal issues of loss and disappointment, can Sankofa support a way through that will bring us to

imagine a life beyond the vast sea of loss?[21] I will then think about *Sankofa* as a way finder, a guide directing us through a journey back to ourselves. Here I will return to the film to look at the supporting role of the character of Nunu reflecting on how *Sankofa* operates for her within the plot of the film. This is not the foregrounded story, but nevertheless, Nunu offers us some other information about how *Sankofa* could be read, particularly when you consider her role in the film in relation to *Sankofa* within Akan cosmology and the problematics that the idea of return throws up. I will ask whether in reflecting on the character of Nunu we can see within the film the potential for a different reading of *Sankofa* that could resonate with the present and also offer liberatory strategies for thinking about a memory practice methodology in our contemporary times. A memory practice that can make space for incompleteness and as such make space for memories that can connect to a Black feminist praxis of remembering, that considers the multiple black identities, experiences, struggles and concerns.

Chapter two is a contextual review that explores materials, projects and practices of archiving and memory practice. Like Kapwani Kiwanga and I, there are many black artists, writers, filmmakers, academics and who are interested in explorations of the past to reconsider the present and imagine possible futures. In this chapter and throughout the thesis including reflecting on works and projects that explore archiving and memory. From artists, writers, and collectives such as X Marks the Spot a collective of queer Black Feminist Archivists, working to collect and archive the work of black and women of colour artists; M NourbeSe Phillips whose book-length poem Zong! re-tells the story of the Zong Massacre from the perspective of the witness Setay Amadu Boateng. I explore Cheryl Dunye's film Watermelon Woman reimagines the archive of black lesbians by telling the story of a young documentary filmmaker who wants to make a film about a forgotten black lesbian film star and I will also look at the writing practices of many Black feminist writers who have used

[21] At the end of the film Mona sits with other returnees looking out to sea. She is quiet and broken from her experience as an enslaved person. She seems to be traumatised and we are left with not knowing what to do with the trauma. I will further explore what this might mean in Chapter one.

memory as a way to explore working with fragments in the archive, including Toni Morrison and Sadiya Hartman. These artists, writers, archivists, and filmmakers have informed the way I have developed my thinking about *Sankofa* and the way in which this bird has travelled throughout the African diaspora. In this chapter I consider the work of some of these people, with the awareness that this work explores different methods of working with memory and remembering, informed by the experience of reflecting on history as people from the African diaspora, but have not defined this work with terminology based in African cosmologies. This might be because there is little knowledge readily available to draw on and because there is significant scholarship on archives and memory practice, though much of it has been developed and informed by western philosophical concepts. I will consider the way in which I have been informed by my involvement in projects of remembering that have included encountering the ways in which mainstream cultural organisations in the U.K. have blind spots when working with black and people of colour that lead to omissions and erasures of stories and ways of telling them. Many of my projects have been developed in response to this experience and in part two I will explore the ways in which I have developed projects, with ways in which I have been developing an understanding of *Sankofa,* but for now, I will map the way I have conceived Chapter two.

I begin this chapter with a recent journal entry from *Sankofa Whispers* written when I was in Ghana in August writing up this thesis. I attended a talk at the Foundation for Contemporary Art[22] given by researcher and academic Ebony Coletu and curator and researcher Bianca Manu. This was a wonderful conversation about memory practice methodologies, concentrating on Coletu's research into finding the stories of Ghanaians who had travelled to the U.S in the late 1800s and early 1900s. I was working on my chapter on *Sankofa* at the time and this rich conversation provided great inspiration and insight into how I might conceive of the other works that have

[22] FCA was founded in 2004 and is a network of artists concerned with offering a critical platform for conversations, exhibitions and events that promote the development of contemporary art in Ghana. https://fcaghana.org/about/ (Accessed 14 September 2022)

come to inform the way in which I have been thinking about *Sankofa.* I will then look at how I came to be an artist with an interest in memory and remembering. How walking into the back of a bookshop in Brixton and photographs of mostly black people thrown into a skip helped to inform my way of working. I then look at four ways in which other projects have informed my way of working with memory. Firstly, I consider the idea of archiving otherwise, thinking about materiality, decolonizing approaches to archiving and how to reclaim and revive practices of living in relation to archives and archive materials. The next section looks at Black feminist practices of storytelling that use practices of memory, including thinking about ways in which the feminist practice of putting together anthologies of writing is a form of memory practice that collects materials and testimonies that have been drawn upon by many people trying to locate their own story. Next, I look at performance and memory. I reflect on projects that are purposely live and how they use memory within performance. Although I don't make performances that are particularly theatrical, within the idea of performance and performativity there is much opportunity to explore memory in an embodied bringing an affective register to remembering, which can be both disturbing and liberating. Expanding on the notion of performance I then move to explore works that use ritual approaches to memory and remembering. These projects consider the context of personal and cultural transformation combining indigenous practices of clearing, opening, witnessing and more to evoke a deeper remembering that goes beyond materials and documents, into what we can remember through our bodies and through sensing.

In Chapters three and four, I take a deep dive into *Declaration of Independence* and *The Queen and the Black-Eyed Squint.* In both chapters I explore how the projects came into being, thinking about the contexts they were created in and the materials I draw on to create these projects. One piece I have continually drawn on is *Ama Ata Aidoo's poem As Always, A Painful Declaration of Independence.* (1992) Ama Ata Aidoo's work is very significant for me as she was the first female Ghanaian writer that I read. Her writings have enabled me to better understand the experiences and conditions of my mum and grandmother, both of whom are significant to the

development of both the projects I am exploring in this thesis. Ata Aidoo is from the same village my mum was born in and my grandmother lived in before she moved to Accra for a "better life"[23]. She is a little bit older than my mum, but she writes about things that have happened in my mum's lifetime and her writing has helped me to connect many of the fragments of information that my mum has given me about my family in Ghana, her life before her arrival in the U.K. and what she remembers of my grandmother's life.

These stories and more are embedded in the ways in which I have made these works. *Declaration of Independence* is an ongoing project, that has taken the form of many performances, workshops, video works and podcasts. The project has travelled to many places in the U.K. and Europe and involved over 70 black and womxn of colour from around the world. *The Queen and the Black-Eyed Squint* is a series of films made in different locations that draw inspiration from my desire to consider the role of women in Ghana's Independence. I found a British Pathé Newsreel of Monica Amekoafia, the first Miss Ghana, who won the title in March 1957. The films follow a fictional Queen who is a representation of Amekoafia and other Ghanaian women who I embody as I take journeys to different places. In Chapters three and four, I go into detail about the ways in which these projects are informed by a memory practice methodology of *Sankofa* creating projects that not only remember but also *undo* hegemonic narratives of history, whilst also care-fully making visible stories of black and women of colour. Both projects also explore possibilities for the future, through different practices of collecting and collating. *Declaration of Independence* through the collective writing of scripts that I hope to one day collate into an anthology type publication and *The Queen and the Black-Eyed Squint* through the way that film allow you to weave several stories and timelines together in one document.

[23] Emphasis here is that the belief is that better life migration is always abroad, but intermigrations from villages to the city have a similar desire behind them.

One last thing I would like to mention in this introduction. Throughout this thesis I use “we” and “us”. I want to draw attention to this because this is a very deliberate choice on my part. I use this mode of address to reflect the way in which I have been working with black and womxn of colour, in that they are centred. Their knowledges, and needs are centred. I have thought about this as I have embarked on this research. Who am I writing this thesis for? Who am I making my work for? In the *Declaration of Independence,* I make a very explicit call to the audience watching that this work is for “us”. Those of us in the performance and those that feel connected to us. I have often spoken about this with my friend Black Feminist researcher and curator Nydia A Swaby, usually when I feel some discontent around how my work has been treated or received by some of arts organisations I have been commissioned by or shown the work with, asking why I am doing my work and who is it for? She reminds me, that one day a future Black feminist artist or academic will be searching for memory practice, *Sankofa* or Black feminist performance practice and will come across my work. That who I’m doing it for. I’m doing it for “us”.

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Part One

1. Exploring Sankofa as an African Diaspora Memory Practice

Figure 3: Sankofa bird painted on an electrical box, New Haven, Connecticut. Photo Gail Lewis

The photographs above were sent to me by my friend, Black feminist author and psychotherapist Gail Lewis. This is the *Sankofa* bird painted on some sort of electrics or communication box, in a black neighbourhood in New Haven, Connecticut. Like the Nigerian Yoruba deities, Esu, Oshun, Yemaya, and others that are very much alive in Brazil, Cuba, Trinidad, and New York.[24] Like drums, dances, and the melodic vocal harmonies found in gospel music.[25] Like fufu, plantains, and certain varieties of rice,[26] *Sankofa* travelled on the ships with the

[24] Esu, Oshun, and Yemaya are deities of the Yoruba traditional religion. These deities known collectively as Orisha have travelled through the African diaspora and been cloaked in the syncretic religions of places like Cuba, Haiti, Trinidad, and Brazil. (Ogundayo 2009: 329) (Brandon 2009: 503-506)

[25] In Lawrence W Levine's book, *Black Culture Black Consciousness: African American Thought from Slavery to Freedom* (1978), Levine speaks about gospel music as being "a musical and structural return to Africa" (223) a resistance to "Western hymnology" (ibid)

[26] The Netflix series High on the Hog: How African American Cuisine Transformed America, traces the history of how African foods and food traditions have influenced American food culture. (Netflix and Satterfield 2021)

enslaved, hiding under cover when the slave masters, colonisers, and clergy tried their very best to suppress the knowledge, languages, and religions of African people. *Sankofa* continued to whisper "remember, remember". Her name was not always recalled, but the power of her message remains. We can see and feel this in the many cultures across the world where African people have been taken and landed: the importance of certain African retentions persist, hide, transform, and are remembered again, in music, art, and literature, in our bodies, through dance and other ways our bodies remember, and in the ways in which languages are understood and transformed. This is *Sankofa,* the wise bird that Albert Kayper Mensah (1976: 4) writes about in his book of praise poems, *Sankofa: Adinkra Poems*:

> That bird is wise
> Look.
> It's beak.
> Back turned
> Picks
> For the present,
> What is best from ancient eyes
> Then steps forward
> On ahead
> To meet the future undeterred.

Sankofa is a practice of remembering that has been important in maintaining the souls and spirit of African people to continue to live despite the continuing adversity and oppression inflicted on black people throughout the world.[27]

[27] Started in 2013 by Patrice Cullors, Alicia Garza and Opal Tometi, Black Lives Matter was born out of a response to incidents of police brutality and racially motivated violence in the U.S. As a decentralised organisation seeking to address this violence, racism, racial inequality, and discrimination against black people, it has become a global network with chapters in Brazil, the United Kingdom, France, New Zealand, Denmark, and many other places. https://blacklivesmatter.com (Accessed 12 September 2022)

As already pointed out in my introduction, *Sankofa* is a principle of Akan cosmology belonging to the Àdìńkrá[28] of the system of "communicators" (Temple 2008 130) represented by a bird standing with its feet facing forward and its head turned back towards an egg that is resting on its back. Being of Ghanaian Akan descent, to me, *Sankofa,* or *san-ko-fa*, has an everyday use, in the *san* (go) *ko* (back) *fa* (and get) activities, such as going back and picking up your litter, getting the keys that you left on the table, or buying the cassava flour you forgot while out shopping. These were words I heard often and sometimes they were directed at me when I forgot something, or what I was doing. These were some of the many repeated words I heard in Twi and Fante that connected me to a place I would not come to know until much later in my life. I also grew up hearing only fragments of the stories of my family's life before their arrival in the U.K., due to my limited understanding of the different Ghanaian languages spoken at home. This is how *Sankofa* began to whisper to me – in the everyday occurrences that connect to a desire to know and understand how my arrival in the world is connected to that of my parents - the streets I walk in, and the bodies that meet and converge in this place that I live in and reluctantly call home. This very present forgetting, remembering, and going back to collect what you left behind speaks to me of the collective production of life and the *san ko fa* inscribed in a lived experience, as well as in a way that the past is remembered. This is something I began exploring in my practice: from the moment I entered art school I started going through family albums looking for images to reappropriate. I also collected ethnographic images that I re-enacted and used in films to explore ways of thinking about those fragmented family stories. And through Black feminist literature, I began to get a sense that fiction was a very powerful way to attend to that which was missing from the story. Through these explorations, I

[28] Àdìńkrá is a philosophical system of communication made up of a multitude of pictorial symbols that illustrate proverbs expressing the cultural, spiritual, and ideological understandings of the Akan people of Ghana and Ivory Coast (Kete Asante and Mazama 2009: 9). Àdìńkrá symbols are associated with death, mourning and the celebration of life. They are a symbolic expression of funerary messages, believed to be transmitted to or from a departed one, aiding the transitioning for the living and the dead.

began to think about what David Scott describes in his essay, 'On the Archaeologies of Black Memory', a way to excavate and re-cover a "*counter*-memory": a "remembering against the grain of the history of New World black deracination, subjection and exclusion" (italics in original).

This chapter will look at how *Sankofa* is understood, exploring this understanding beyond my personal experience of *Sankofa*, into the traditional understanding of *Sankofa* as part of the Àdìńkrá communication system and how this sits within wider Akan cosmology. I will then look at Halie Gerima's 1993 film *Sankofa*, which has been a key research document for me while developing this research. Twenty years in the making, Gerima's independently produced and funded film has been an important text for expanding the contemporary understanding of the principle of *Sankofa* in the African diaspora.[29] *Sankofa* was distributed and screened through black community networks, such as community centres and churches, before it received some limited mainstream distribution. I first saw this film at an independently organised screening in Brixton in the early 1990s. Being distributed in this way enabled a different way of accessing the film and the conversations surrounding it, as such enlightening people to the understanding of *Sankofa* as part of African diaspora culture, sparking much more curiosity about Àdìńkrá symbology and how people started to think about remembering in black communities. When I began this research, it was difficult to find a copy of the film. I eventually found a DVD on a Swiss film website and was able to revisit the film for the purpose of this analysis. As of September 2021, *Sankofa* is available on Netflix, meaning that a new generation of viewers can access the film and begin to glean an understanding of *Sankofa* from it. To research the film, Gerima drew on available written narratives from formerly

[29] Although Gerima made several films before *Sankofa,* this is probably his most well-known. In the late 1980s and 1990s, what has been termed the "New Black Cinema" was emerging and African American filmmakers such as Spike Lee, John Singleton and Julie Dash were creating films that were bringing black stories to wider audiences. When *Sankofa* was completed in 1993, mainstream American distributors, who had one eye open to the potential profitability of black film and black audiences, rejected it. The subject of Gerima's film proved too contentious for the distributors to deem it as saleable to white or black audiences, despite the acclaim *Sankofa* had received on the festival circuit (Hamilton-Wray 2016: 245). The reason given for this rejection was that the film was too "black" and had no "white point of entry" (ibid.: 256).

enslaved people to create a fictional story focusing on the traumatic impact of slavery on the Lafayette Plantation, located in one of the southern states of the U.S. My interest lies in the way Gerima has considered *Sankofa* in the film through the experience of the main character Mona, who, on a visit to the dungeons of Cape Coast Castle[30] is transported through the "door of no return" back in time to the Lafayette Plantation to experience the horrors of enslavement as Shola, to remember the past from which she came.

Another way in which *Sankofa* has been understood by African diaspora communities, and that is echoed in Gerima's film, is in the idea of return. This has mostly been centred on the idea of returning to Africa, which has been a recurring theme since the abolition of slavery. This began with the Back to Africa Movement in the late 18th century, which saw formerly enslaved people returned/return to the British Crown settlement of Sierra Leone and the African American colony of Liberia, founded by the Free African Society. These projects were difficult to fund and maintain and, as a result, were largely unsuccessful, meaning they went in and out of favour with newly emancipated black people, many of whom had grown up with no or little recollection of lives in Africa. The most significantly influential movement to return was the Black Star Line. Founded by Marcus Garvey in 1919, the Black Star Line was the first black-owned shipping company formed in the U.S. Grounded in Garvey's powerful rhetoric of self-development, self-organisation, and self-determination for black people around the world, Garvey's speeches and writings focused on the idea that all black people should return to Africa, which should be free of European colonial rule. Like the earlier project by the Free African Society, the Black Star Line was also plagued by financial insecurity, resulting in Marcus Garvey being arrested and imprisoned by the U.S government for fraud.[31] However,

[30] Is one of the 40 or more castles and forts in Ghana. Established by the Portuguese in 1555. http://www.everycastle.com/Cape-Coast-Castle.html (Accessed 12 September 2022)

[31] In 1922 Garvey was arrested for mail fraud. It was claimed that he was attempting to sell shares in his failing Black Star Line company. It was not clear that this was an actual fraud, but Garvey was still convicted. https://www.crf-usa.org/black-history-month/marcus-garvey (Accessed 12 September 2022)

the idea of the Black Star Line persisted through narratives of anti-colonial struggle in Africa. I remember my dad and other friends often evoking the idea of a Black Star Line while I was curiously eavesdropping on their conversations about politics and current affairs in Africa. The Rastafari movement in Jamaica was also very much influenced by the writings and teachings of Marcus Garvey.[32] In September 2018, Ghanaian President Nana Akufo-Addo declared 2019 the "Year of Return", inspiring a new generation of diasporan Africans to consider the possibilities of returning to the continent. Many of the enslaved Africans sent to the Americas and Europe would have been transported through one of 32 forts that line Ghana's coast and many of those captured were captured and sold in slave markets in Ghana, thus part of the impetus for the "Year of Return" was reparative: to unite the peoples of the African diaspora. Another motivation would be economic development: wealthy black people returning to Ghana will not only be able to live well but they would bring with them their culture, knowledge, skills, and money, thereby supporting Ghana's growing economy. This was by no means a new project on the part of African leaders, more a revived one previously explored by Ghana's first president Kwame Nkrumah, who invited African Americans to Ghana in the 1950s and 1960s with a similar motivation. These examples present the possibility of return both physically and metaphorically, with the principle of *Sankofa* being central to the ideology that underpins this idea: returning to Africa to reclaim your history and legacy.

Thinking about the allure of return and how we might consider return from a theoretical perspective, I will explore the way in which Africana Studies Professor Christel N Temple (2008) has conceived an understanding of it as it exists within *Sankofa* (see '*Sankofa*'s Return' section later in this chapter). Temple has been thinking with *Sankofa* to understand literary paradigms within black women's literature. These ideas draw upon the actuality and the imagination of return as written about by women of African and German descent. I will consider these ideas

[32] Bob Marley's 1979 song *Redemption Song* uses the words "Emancipate yourself from mental slavery, none but ourselves can free our mind" from Marcus Garvey's speech published in his Black Man magazine in 1937.

alongside my own personal experience of visiting Cape Coast and Elmina Castle, and Saidiya Hartman's (2008) account of her experience of return as written in her book *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route*. Through these two examples, I will consider how the hope of return is often fraught with grief and disappointment. I will then set out a proposition that the supporting character in Gerima's film *Sankofa,* Nunu, offers us another way to think about *Sankofa*. Upon first viewing, the story in the film is clearly motivated by the idea of remembering the history of the transatlantic slave trade, the brutality of the plantation and the possibility of a return to Africa to recover one's dignity as an African person. However, this misses the clues given by Nunu for another way to read *Sankofa*, beyond the facts of history and the trauma of history. Nunu offers an interpretation of *Sankofa* as imbued with care, comfort, and learning for future generations. Much like the words of Kayper Mensah's poem, Nunu's *Sankofa* guides us towards learning from the past, healing the trauma of the past, and making a proposition for *undoing* [33] the potential adaptation of the way we understand the stories of enslavement and colonisation. Nunu's *Sankofa* proposes another way through the "door of no return": as a "crossing" (Alexander 2008: 289),[34] which remembers with *Sankofa*, rather than expecting *Sankofa* to fly us back to a mythical home where we expect to be received as lost kin, returned to the fold – a place where everything will be right again.

[33] In my practice chapters in the second part of this thesis I explore a notion of undoing, drawing on a poem 'As Always, A Painful Declaration of Independence*'* by Ama Ata Aidoo (1992) and Sadiya Hartman's 2020 Notes of Feminism piece, 'The Plot of Her Undoing'. In drawing on these texts, I am thinking about *undoing* as a process of unravelling or unveiling dominant historical narratives, not just for the sake of telling another story, but also as a way to address the continuing affective legacies of history.

[34] M. Jacqui Alexander redefines the idea of "the crossing" as "*ashé*", a word used in religions seeded in Yoruba cosmologies to speak of an unseen power such as the wind or the spirit of Oya, the deity of the wind. She thinks of these crossings as not only being made in one direction, as in one physical direction, but also through the memory of the water: "Emotional Memory. Bodily Memory. Sacred Memory" (Alexander 2008: 290).

Sankofa, Àdìńkrá and Akan Cosmology

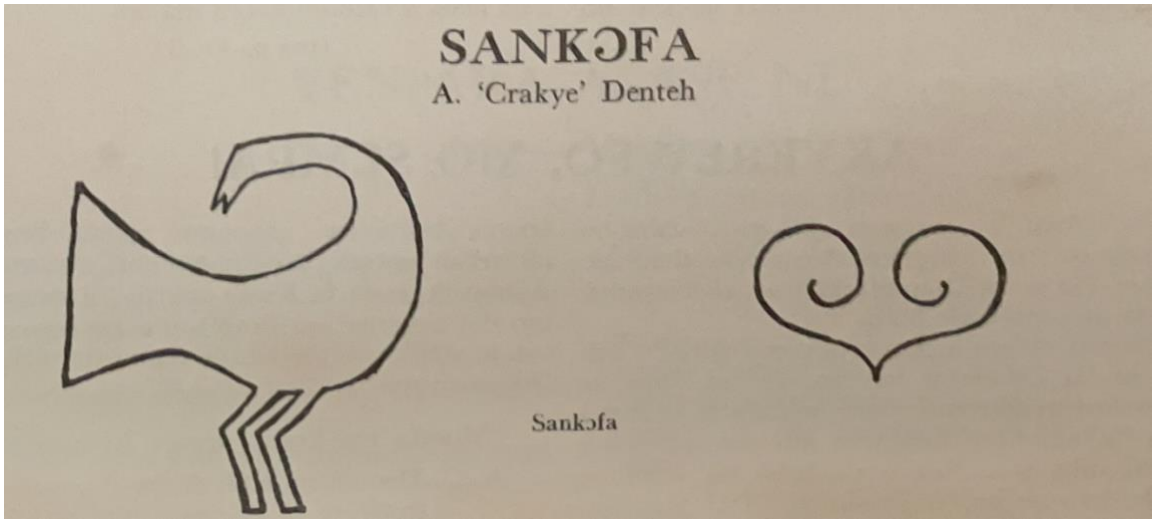

Figure 4: Different Sankofa symbols, Odawuru, Nea Edi Kan 1968

Sankofa's resonance throughout the African diaspora can be heard from Accra to London, Kingston, Jamaica, New Haven, Connecticut, and many, many more places. Wherever Africans have been sent as enslaved people and wherever they have landed as migrants, *Sankofa* has whispered. There is little material in English or written from a Ghanaian perspective on the origins and meanings of *Sankofa*. Here I will present a summary of some of what I have found, that considers the various interpretations of *Sankofa* and how it sits within the wider Àdìńkrá communication system and Akan cosmology and culture. I have previously spoken about the visual symbol of *Sankofa* (see Figure 2) as a bird standing with its feet facing forward and its head turned back towards an egg that is balanced on its back. It is not entirely clear what the bird is doing with the egg, but it is clear that care and attention are being paid to the egg.[35] There are a few different depictions of *Sankofa.* For example, in the image on the left in Figure 2, the bird does not have the egg on its back. Next to it, there is another image of a simple line drawing shaped like a heart. All of these depictions point to the same symbolic meanings: "go back and get it/fetch it", "go back and retrieve it", or "learn from the past" (Asante and Mazama

[35] This egg is something that I will discuss further later in this chapter (see 'Nunu's Offering'), as it is significant to how I am thinking about *Sankofa*.

2009: 587); or the older proverbial readings of "the king sees all; one must not be afraid to redeem one's past mistakes; turn back and fetch it"(Kande 1998: 129), or "it is not taboo to fetch what is at risk of being left behind".[36] The most useful interpretation of these statements I have found comes from the *Encyclopaedia of African Religion* (Asante and Mazama 2009). The entry written by Khonsura A. Wilson (2009: 587) states that there are five categories of meaning for *Sankofa*. These are: valuing reflection on the past; self-conscious reflection before moving forward; reflecting on one's identity, self-definition, and vision for the future; an understanding of the personal role in a collective vocation; and, finally, the repossession or recollecting of something lost or forgotten. Wilson also considers the egg in his entry, suggesting that the egg positions *Sankofa* in the present while holding potential for the future. Reflecting on this within the wider Àdìńkrá symbology, Ghanaian scholars Charles Marfo, Kwame Opoku- Agyeman and Joseph Nsiah consider *Sankofa* to be filled with culturally informed messages, thoughts, proverbs, and knowledge. These symbols hold memory, and perhaps the fact that *Sankofa* has travelled so widely is a key factor in why it maintains such a resonance in the African diaspora.

Àdìńkrá has mostly been associated with funerals, bidding farewell, or saying goodbye to a loved one. When you break down the meaning in Akan languages, Àdìńkrá is actually composed of two words. The first is *di*, meaning "to make use of" or "to employ" (Asante and Mazama 2009: 7), or, as Akan-speaking scholars have defined the word, drawing on the ancient linguistic meaning, to "to eat" or "to discuss" (Marfo, Opoku-Agyeman and Nsiah 2011: 63). All of these definitions point to the first part of the meaning of Àdìńkrá as being something that is to be imbibed, ingested, and considered. The second part is made up of the word *ńkrá*, which means "message" (Marfo, Opoku-Agyeman and Nsiah 2011: 63; Asante and Mazama 2009: 7). Yaba Amgorbarle Blay, who wrote the entry for Àdìńkrá in the *Encyclopaedia of African Religion*, also points to the *krá* at the end of *ńkrá* as

[36] https://www.berea.edu/cgwc/the-power-of-sankofa/ (Accessed: 2 September 2022).

meaning “life force” or “soul”, as such associating Àdìńkrá with the ancient wisdom or the sacred. Put together, this describes Àdìńkrá as a way in which messages about and beliefs of the community and its culture are encoded in the symbology.

There is contention as to the origins of Àdìńkrá, but the general thinking is that the symbology gained its name from Nana Kofi Àdìńkrá, the king of the Gyaaman[37] people, who in the 19th century were located in what is now known as the Ivory Coast. Nana Kofi Àdìńkrá is said to have challenged the authority of the then *Asantehene*[38] Nana Osei Bonsu Payin by making a replica of the Ashanti[39] golden stool. This was seen as a mark of disrespect and a violation of the Ashanti spirituality, sparking a conflict between the Asante and the Gyaaman people in which the Gyaaman were defeated and the Àdìńkrá symbology passed into Asante culture. Àdìńkrá was then used to adorn cloth and later became used on stools, the fronts of houses, furniture, and in other ways that we see to this day. The symbols of Àdìńkrá are representative of Akan cosmology, expressing historical events, proverbs, philosophical and spiritual knowledge, and teaching. The use of them on cloth, furniture, etc., is seen as a way to communicate thoughts, states of mind, virtues, and things to remember. During funeral rites, Àdìńkrá would be worn to honour the dead, express the qualities of the deceased person and transmit farewell messages to the mourners (Marfo, Opoku-Agyeman and Nsiah 2011: 65). With Àdìńkrá being connected to death, *Sankofa* offers a poetic expression of the connection between the dead and the living in contemporary African diasporan everyday life. A contemporary way in which Àdìńkrá has been reinterpreted is through the creation of oracle cards and decks created by artists and wellness practitioners.[40] These are

[37] Gyaaman, also spelt Gyaman or Jamang, was one of the great kingdoms of Akan people, located in the Bono regions of Ghana and the Ivory Coast (Ofosu-Mensah Ababio 2013; Asante and Mazama 2009).

[38] The word *hene* or Ohene means supreme ruler or king https://www.akandictionary.com/2021/04/11/ohene/ (Accessed 12 September 2022).

[39] There is no distinction between Asante and Ashanti. Both names are used to describe this Akan ethnic group.

[40] I have found 3 such decks: Know Thy Self Cards, created by Clinical Psychologist Erica Mauple Mcinnis, intended for use in therapy and conversation; Adinkra Ancestral Guidance Cards, created by the late Simone Bresi Ando as a tool for self-discovery and spiritual growth; and Àdìńkrá Oracle Cards, created by healer and writer Araba Ofori-Acquah. This way of thinking about Àdìńkrá as wisdom for

used as ways to understand the self, the world, and the culture, using Àdìńkrá as guidance, much like it would have been used in the past.[41] Akan cultures are considered to be matrilineal, believing that the feminine side of a person comes from the blood, *mogya*, and that the masculine side of a person comes from the spirit, *sunsum*. This joining of spirit to the physical through blood is the foundational thought that has given rise to the reverence of matrilineal wisdom. However, only a few symbols refer directly to women's lives and contributions to Akan culture and wisdom, and I could not find any specific material written about women's relationship to Àdìńkrá.

Mona Becomes Shola: Sankofarization in Haile Gerima's Sankofa

Sankofa opens with a frenetic drum call. The scene is an image of a buzzard, looking out over the sea by Cape Coast Castle. The voice-over is an invocation calling out to the dead: "Rise up and possess your bird of passage/ Those stolen Africans step out of the ocean from the wounds of the ships and claim your story" (Gerima 1993). We see Mona (Oyafunmike Ogunlano), an African American model being photographed in the shadow of the castle. She is writhing and laughing as a white male photographer with an exaggeratedly long lens takes penetrating shots of her, clearly aroused by her performance to the camera. Mona then wanders around on the beach and the grounds of the castle; a mysterious spirit haunts her. We come to understand this to be the spirit of Sankofa (Guy Warren), the self-appointed keeper of the castle whose drums call across the ocean so that the fishing nets cast every morning will draw the lost spirits back. Sankofa appears to be angry with Mona. She is frightened by him, though she is also intrigued. It is this intrigue that entices Mona to follow tourists into the dungeons of the castle, where she begins to hear whispers and groans. We then see a large group of black people in shackles and chains, reaching out to her for help. She retreats from them, fearful of what she sees before her. She walks back towards the wall of the dungeon, trying to find a way out. Then,

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contemporary life has been explored and created by women. Another such project I discovered in my research was Sandra Berko's book, *Sankofa: Heal, Evolve and Unite in Sistership* (2020).

[41] Many of these projects have been created by women, both in Ghana and in the diaspora.

in a moment of cinematic time travel, Mona finds herself on the Lafayette Plantation in the body of Shola.

We can assume that Shola was an enslaved ancestor of Mona's who lived and died on the Lafayette Plantation, located somewhere in the southern states of America. It is through Shola that audiences witness the physical and psychological violence of the plantation. As soon as Shola arrives through the dungeon portal her body is branded; she witnesses the fatal whipping of a pregnant woman who tried to escape enslavement to save the life of her child; Shola is verbally abused, raped, and brutally beaten. She also experiences the brutality of working in the cane fields in the scorching heat of the sun, constantly threatened by the lash of the whip under the supervision of vicious overseers. While going through this trauma on the plantation, she also learns about the slave's resilience, defiance, and resistance through her relationship with Shango (Mutabaruka), a slave from Jamaica sold to the Lafayette Plantation because he was perceived to be a troublemaker, and Nunu (Alexandra Duah), an elder slave captured as a child from pre-colonial Ghana, who evokes the memory of her home and its stories in her everyday life on the plantation.

By the final scenes of the film, Shola/Mona has witnessed and experienced so much violence and suffering on the plantation that she can no longer bear the pain. We see her troubled in the cane fields. There are whispers of a slave rebellion and fields are burning on nearby plantations. As the overseer who raped her approaches her in the fields, poised and ready to violate her again, Shola raises her cutlass, about to kill him. We are then transported back to the castle. We do not know if Shola has killed or has been killed, but at that moment, Mona emerges out of the dungeon, naked and distressed. She is welcomed back by a local woman shouting with joy "*akwaaba*", a phrase meaning "you have gone and come back, you are welcome".[42] The woman wraps Mona in a white cloth, and she is directed to sit with other people

[42] https://www.akandictionary.com/?s=Akwaaba (Accessed: 2 September 2022).

who have returned listening to Sankofa's drummers looking out to sea, calling others to return.

Mona's return is not voluntary. Mona was lost, spoilt by the west, over-sexualised, voiceless, and playing to the white man's camera. Her return is redemption. It is a judgement on the way she has previously lived her life. She knew nothing of her history and, through her transportation into the body of Shola, she is reprimanded and punished for this lack of knowledge and respect for the past sufferings of her people. As Mona sits amongst the returned, you do not get the feeling of healing and possibility. In fact, what is felt is an overwhelming sense of grief that neither Mona nor the returnees sitting together looking out to sea seem to know how to move forward. Perhaps even the audience that saw the film in the 1990s had no idea how to move forward from the overwhelming trauma that watching this film would have led them to experience.[43] It could be said that grief would be the first step to recovering from this trauma, but Gerima, like many directors from the African continent, presented *Sankofa* without the sentiment or resolve of many western films.[44]

From the point of view of my research thinking about *Sankofa* as a memory practice methodology based in African cosmology, interpreting the film in the African diaspora from a Black feminist perspective, I cannot escape the fact that the human

[43] I locate this response in time because there is much more discussion and recognition today of the traumatic experiences of watching films about slavery or any other traumatic experience of violence enacted on black bodies. In 2005, Joy DeGruy published her book, *Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome: America's Legacy of Enduring Injury and Healing,* which spoke of the legacy of intergenerational psychological trauma that persists because of the brutality of the transatlantic slave trade, plantation life and the many enduring legacies that result from this, including low self-esteem, anger, and internalised anti-blackness. This, coupled with the systematic racism that reproduces injustices such as poverty, poor education and health outcomes, over-policing, and police brutality, have contributed to broader discussions within black communities around issues of trauma recovery, grief, and healing; as a result, many black people today choose to refuse to watch such material.

[44] African filmmakers are known not to shy away from depictions of trauma. In the essay "Film and Trauma: Africa Speaks to Itself Through Truth and Reconciliation Films" (2009) Martin Mhando and Keyan G Tomaselli explore the ways in which African filmmakers address issues of trauma in their films to develop a social and historic consciousness around difficult issues that affect African communities.

body mobilised for this *Sankofa* journey is a woman's body. Throughout the film, we witness the unrelenting violence of the plantation on women's bodies. Kara Keeling (2007: 59) proposes that Gerima's intention to create a film that liberates us by returning us to the violent past of the plantation presents a gendered problematic that sees the role of women in the project of Black liberation as something that should be contained and cleansed of impurities. Particular to this is any reference to her body as sexual or desirable. We see Mona being "penetrated" (ibid.) by the white man's camera in the early scenes of the film, and when Mona emerges from the dungeon naked, her body must be immediately covered and her hair wrapped in white, to indicate the purification process she has been through.[45] There is moral violence inherent in these visions that denies Mona and black women as a whole agency over the possession and representation of their bodies. There is also a possibility that Mona's female body in the collective *Sankofa* experience of watching the film is perhaps not supposed to be an actual physical body but a metaphor for land or nation. And as land, like in the Dogon myth of creation, when the male sky god is set to make love to the female earth, the protruding anthill on her body, her pleasure centre, her sexuality, must be removed in order to control her and to bring the past and the present together in harmonious liberatory union.[46]

If we are to collectively remember what has happened during the middle passage, then perhaps we are also to remember the geographic context and the body of the filmmaker. Gerima is an African man from Ethiopia and, for him, a process of *Sankofa* might also include the memory of the 'rape', pillaging, and dividing up of land in Africa through colonial occupation. Anti-colonial struggles for independence in Africa, the African American fight for civil rights in America, the largely un-tackled history of the transatlantic slave trade, and the legacies of enslavement that

[45] The wearing of white or being dressed in white after a particular life experience or trauma is a common action of purification in African diaspora religious rites, ceremonies, and rituals. In pointing to this I am not proposing this as something that adds to the trauma that Mona has experienced, rather I am pointing to this gesture within Sankofa in relation to the wider gender politics presented in the film.

[46] Alice Walker describes this myth in her 1992 novel Possessing the Secret of Joy, a novel that explores female genital mutilation and its relationship to the control of female sexuality.

continue to haunt black people in America[47] all become interlinked in the telling of this story. This depiction of the consequences of the middle passage then becomes what Hamilton-Wray has described as "a Black point of entry", in which images in the film become "recoded" to refer not only to the past but also to the contemporary legacies that remain. If latent in Gerima's intention within *Sankofa* was to also, through the memory of the sites of the castle/slave fort and the plantation, not only speak to the legacy of the history of slavery in the past but also its present effect on Africa as a continent, then the horror of Mona's experience - and the fact of the subjugation of black female bodies in slavery, colonial occupation and the persisting effects of this kind of violence on the black female body - seems to be secondary to the violence against the land and our duty to return to the land to find ourselves. To *san-ko-fa*. I do not want to underplay the impact of violence against the land but, as a woman viewer, my empathy with Mona's plight at the end of the film lies with everything she has gone through. We are reminded that such violations of women's bodies, particularly black cis and black trans women's bodies, often are not believed, are unreported and, if they are reported, often remain un-investigated. Mona may indeed be perceived by some as overtly sexual. She might not know where she came from or where she was going, but somehow on this journey, all her vibrancy and sexual agency is disallowed. Mona is left alone to deal with the trauma of the violence she has experienced. Her experience of the violence is gendered and seen as something that is "individuated rather than systematic" (Keeling 2007: 65), the idea being that systematic violence only happens to the black male body and this is more concerning.[48] In order for Mona to receive the status of *black* humanity, all about her that is "recognizably female" (ibid.: 66) must be destroyed. It is her responsibility, as played out in her involuntary return, to re-

[47] In an interview with John L. Jackson Jr. for Callaloo, Gerima makes many comments about connecting his African story and self to the experiences and history of his African American colleagues.

[48] Something that Black Lives Matter attempt to address through their work, which makes visible not just the very visible deaths of black men at the hand of law enforcement, but also the deaths and violence against women and especially Trans women. Their guiding principles promote inclusion within what they describe as a global black family, regardless of actual or perceived sexual identity, gender identity, gender expression, economic status, ability, disability, religious beliefs or disbeliefs, immigration status, or location. (Garcia and Davidson 2020)

experience the trauma. She must become resistant, take heed of Shango's[49] teachings and free herself through a de-feminisation to receive her *Sankofa*. In some ways, the fact that Mona's body is de-feminised recalls the way in which Hortense Spillers (1987) theorised a notion of enslaved people, both men and women, as being "ungendered". Normative gender roles were not available to slaves, as women worked in the fields, just as men did, and took on the role of both mother and father, and men's bodies were equally vulnerable to bodily violation. But unlike the offering that Spillers proposes in theorising this ungendered position – where the un-gendering could place those descended from slaves into the ideal position to undo the violent patriarchal systems from which slavery and colonialism have sprung – this presentation, perhaps unintentionally, appears to be destroying the black feminine, in particular anything about her that is associated with her bodily agency and sexuality. The process Mona goes through does not set her up for future possibilities. Either it causes her death or keeps her isolated and traumatised. If the goal of the film *Sankofa* was to incite some form of collective remembering that would enable black communities to go forward powerfully into the future with the knowledge of their history and connections to the great land of 'Africa', what narrative is Gerima trying to convey if the body that is returned is a female one?

Thinking with Keeling's (2007: 4) ideas of an epistemological disruption of "common sense" in representations of Black liberation on the screen, my proposition for *Sankofa* suggests something similar, in order to break down the way of remembering that relies on black life being associated with the past, in which slavery is at the centre of our understanding[50] of what it means to be black and ideas of blackness uphold a gendered positionality, in a continuing cycle that does not liberate us all. I say this not to dismiss slavery as an extremely significant historical event that continues to inform the lives of black people today, but also to think about *Sankofa*

[49] Shango, named after the powerful Yoruba deity of thunder and lighting. Shango is one of Mona's teachers of Sankofa. Shango is a Maroon who, although living on the slave plantation, is portrayed as representing Africans who escaped from slavery and created independent settlements. He schools Mona in resistance, encouraging her to remember her fighting spirit.

as an opening rather than as closure. As the returnees look out to sea, it is enslavement that has determined their being and, while Gerima does not leave us with the sentimental closure of the film that says that despite all this suffering there is a place where you can be relieved and reborn, we are left in a place without much hope. Keeling closes her analysis of *Sankofa* by recalling Fanon's words:

> I am not a prisoner of history. I should not seek there for the meaning of my destiny. I should constantly remind myself that the real leap consists of introducing invention to existence. In a world through which I travel, I am endlessly creating myself. (Fanon, cited in Keeling 2007: 66)

Within *Sankofa*, is there a potential of being able to constantly review what we know of our histories and to embrace the temporality of memory as something that is always in flux, particularly in relation to how we understand gendered experiences, the body, and the fact that personal memory is not always a reliable source of information? In the African diaspora, can *Sankofa* be seen as a generative proposition that permeates beyond the limitations of written or reclaimed history, into spaces of generativity and creativity? Spaces where we, like Fanon, can seek the meaning of our destinies and still allow space to create and recreate ourselves over and over again?

Sankofa's Return

There is an Akan proverb which says that "if one forgets the talking drum of his/her hometown (or background) he/she misses his/her way to his/her village" (Marfo, Opuku-Agyeman and Nsiah 2011: 63).

> *A visit to one of the 32 or more slave forts on the coast of Ghana, is not a visit that is made filled with the glory of a victory or the wonder of the beauty of the site. It is one of mourning, imagining the horror and acknowledging the events that happened on that site.*

Established in 1655 as a trading post, I made my first visits to Cape Coast and Elmina Castle in 1989 at 18 years old. I took with me the vague knowledge that my great grandmother had worked in Elmina Castle, probably as a servant for the British colonial administration. Walking around barely listening to the guide, I took no notice of the now empty spaces of the grand officer's quarters, the bell towers, and the grand dining rooms. Like Mona, I was drawn to the dungeons and like her, I imagined the captured cramped into these spaces, trapped in the darkness awaiting a fate that they could not have imagined. Knowing that my mother's family were Fante and that Fante people had expelled the Portuguese in the 15th century and had served as middlemen for the Dutch and the British in matters of trade with the interior of Ghana, I also imagined my own familial connection to the horror that had unfolded in those dungeons.

Our Fante roots are not directly in Cape Coast or Elmina but about 50 miles away in Saltpond, where the remains of Fort Amsterdam stand, a fort built by the British between 1638 and 1645 and captured by the Dutch in 1665. I tried to grapple with thoughts that my ancestors could have been stolen. Or they could have been stealers or in some form of other services to the slave trade. I tried to imagine that my ancestors may have heard the screams and cries of the captured as they went about their daily business, their proximity being so close and the forts being such a significant feature on the Ghanaian coastline. This haunting seemed very present in the atmosphere of the towns of Cape Coast, Elmina, and the surrounding villages. There are stories on those streets that live in the air that can only be imagined through the whispers of memory that is present there, in the fragments of stories remembered, fragmented oral histories... like those told to me by my mother about my great grandmother or great grandfather who worked for one of the British trading companies. This is not in the boxes of archives, the material evidence of places such as the castles and forts. On my visits, I didn't get the sense that the locals living in the shadow of these castles and forts were grappling with

the same kinds of emotions or imagining as I was, in fact, the nonchalance of my favourite aunt Alice, who accompanied me on this visit, disturbed me.

She grew up in Saltpond, her father a friend to Nkrumah, who regularly visited their home. I remember being really angry at her for her nonchalance, but she saw her duty there as facilitating my learning of the history of Ghana and to be there to take me around to the sites to experience this first-hand. I discovered on our journey that her nonchalance was not one of not caring for my experience of this history and the pain it might evoke in me, but one of holding the space for that emotion and perhaps as someone who had grown up in the shadow of that history and in a home that was once filled with hope for the country, there was an embodied everyday experience of these places, as they were not just places of historical horror and loss, but also spaces that remembered the sweetness of childhood, family, celebration, the walk to school, the sounds of the fishermen and market women. They evoke colours, smells, and the voices of the familiar. To me, this was strange, foreign, and distant but I was also deeply aware of my connection to all of it.

Extract from *Sankofa Whispers*

The above extract from *Sankofa Whispers* speaks of a time during my first ever visit to Ghana. I was a curious 18-year-old, who had grown up in London, a place where many people of African descent converge and make homes because of the interconnected histories of empire, enslavement, and coloniality that made London one of the richest cities in the world. This was a return to a place I had never known but that lived deep in my bones and in my imagination. In many ways, part of me already lived in Ghana because of the language I heard at home, the food we ate, and the way in which our physical presence on the streets of London was defined by our obvious difference, which was pointed out often, in ways that were both outright and subtly aggressive. In the castle, I was returning to find the traces of an intimate relative from another generation that I was distant from not only through time but also proximity. I was there to feel her and remember her. In returning there I also felt the memory of many ancestral moments, both sweet and sour. In the

introduction to *Queer Returns: Essays on Multiculturalism, Diaspora, and Black Studies*, Rinaldo Walcott (2016) uses the idea of return as a methodology to reflect on his previous writings on diaspora, gender, politics, and black life, as a way to contemplate the "scenes of previous engagements in ways that demonstrate, growth, change and doubt" (ibid.: 8). The return here becomes a question through which one can explore the potential of freedom while also leaving open the possibility that freedom might actually be something that will always allude us. This idea of a reflective return, where we can always revisit the site of the event, or the way in which we see or experience something, offers the possibility of viewing *Sankofa* critically, beyond the point of reclaiming something, but also as being something that is reflective and has space for redefinition. In the moments when my parents would use the words *san ko fa* to me, there was some sort of indication that I had lost my way. In those instances, *san ko fa* was a form of course correction: a talking drum that directs a way back to the village (Marfo, Opuku-Agyeman and Nsiah 2011: 63). It was the drum that drew Mona into the dungeon, to return to the plantation to recover the story of her ancestor Shola. It was *Sankofa* whispers to me at 18 years old that led me to find my way to Elmina Castle, to discover the story of my great grandmother who worked there. What I found was not what I expected, but it kept me curious and open to exploring more. Despite experiencing the joy of my aunt and grandparents for my return, I too found grief. I found grief, nonchalance, and everyday living in the shadow of one of the monuments of the largest and most brutal people trafficking operations in the history of the world. My ability to return a fortunate consequence of the privilege of my birth in *aburokyire*,[51] what I found there were more answers to the questions I had about why freedom and belonging are so hard to come by for black people, both in Africa and in the diaspora, and more questions about how to reconcile this. Even as initiatives such as that led by the Ghanaian government (for people in the diaspora to return to Africa) allude to the possibility of recovery, repair and a good life, the actuality of returning can lead us to a path that may or may not return us to the village.

[51] *Aburokyire* means overseas or abroad, typically referring to the U.K., the U.S. or Europe https://learnakandictionary.com/english-twi/overseas/ (Accessed: 2 September 2022).

In the opening of her book, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route*, Saidiya Hartman (2008) speaks of her discomfort upon arriving in Elmina. The local children hail her as "*oburɔnyi*".[52] Hartman describes her feeling about this as looking and feeling "alien" or like an "outsider", "a stranger from across the sea", "…a wandering seed, bereft of the possibility of taking root" (ibid.: 3–4). Hartman's feeling of un-belonging was not a return that was looking for a sense of belonging and recovery, as in the rhetoric of return evoked by the Back to Africa Movement and its different permutations. She was not interested in reclaiming her place in the royal courts of the Asantehene. She was not in search of ancestors. Her return was an intellectual one, in the service of her research on the history of slavery as a Fulbright Scholar affiliated with the National Museum of Ghana. She was interested in finding the "commoners" (ibid.: 3), the traces of those that were captured and sent across the seas to the Americas and Europe. Contrary to popular understanding, she discovered that Africans did not sell their families into slavery unless there was no way to support them, such as in the event of a death of a husband with many wives and children and no brother, or a brother with little means to support the family. The Africans involved in the slave trade sold "strangers" (ibid.: 6): enemies, thieves, and people who wandered by who were not affiliated to the clan or kin to any clan members. Hartman's desire was "to reclaim the dead … to reckon with the lives undone and obliterated in the making of human commodities" (ibid.). In her memoir, *A Map to the Door of No Return,* Dionne Brand (2001: 3) writes of her youthful keenness to know the name of the people that she was descended from. Her grandfather claimed to know, and she pestered him daily to tell her until he told her to stop bothering him. He did not really remember, though it seemed he wanted

[52] This is an everyday word in Fante used to describe usually white foreigners but also anybody of lighter skin and straighter hair than a dark-skinned African. The word *oburɔnyi* is derived from the word *bor*, meaning coming from beyond the horizon, and *nyi*, meaning person or body. I recall my own discomfort at being called "*oburɔnyi obibini*". *Obibini* means black person or African (https://learnakandictionary.com; Accessed: 2 September 2022). The *obibini* was added because there was something in me that could be recognised as being from people who had left Ghana in the not-too-distant past as a recognisable kinship. My distance was acknowledged by my proximity to *aburokyire*, which was assumed to be one, maybe two, generations, through the visible physical relationship to my aunt.

to. Could this be the heartbreak of remembering that you may not have been really considered a member of these communities that you may have wanted to belong to? Brand's understanding of her grandfather's forgetting becomes symbolised by the "door of no return". A place she had read about but never visited that changed the destiny of over 12 million Africans. Marked by signs on the external doors to the sea at both Cape Coast and Elmina Castle, these doors are the geographical point of "rupture": "a rupture in history, a rupture in the quality of being", "a physical rupture" and "a rupture of geography" (ibid.: 5). The "door of no return" was/is a "consciousness" that "casts a haunting spell" (ibid.: 25) on the people of Africa and the diaspora, wherever they find themselves in the world. It is through this same door that Mona entered the dungeon that took her back in time to meet her enslaved ancestor, the same door that Saidiya Hartman entered looking for strangers, the same door I went through looking for my great grandmother, and the same door through which what we understand as an African diaspora begins to take shape. A diaspora born of encounter, loss, displacement, and trauma. Gerima's offering of *Sankofa* to the world and to the people of the African diaspora was given in the spirit of reclamation, liberation, and claiming our African stories. But perhaps because of the immensity of the loss, and the way that the sea obscured the paths back to the village, the returnees looking out to sea could only see the vast water between them and the way home, so the possibility of liberation that could be gained in the return is fraught, and perhaps part of a process of continually returning to the site of the incident to find clues to the way home takes us in directions we never expected to go.

In the essay 'Using Sankofa as a Literary Paradigm: Radical Reconstructions of "The Return"', Christel N. Temple (2008: 110) describes how *Sankofa* can convey the "historical and psychological" concerns of descendants of the enslaved and those who have migrated who have been displaced from Africa. Temple suggests that, because of the fragmentation and dislocation, writers from the diaspora are interested in the notion of a return to visualise ideas of recovery and wholeness (ibid.). In thinking about this return, she points to the potential of *Sankofa* to "instruct us to return, reclaim and recover the past" (ibid.). This proposition is not

dissimilar to my proposition for *Sankofa*, only, like Dionne Brand, I am also interested in the potential of having no land to return to (McKittrick 2006: ix), and perhaps in accepting that the going back or return of *Sankofa* is fraught with an expectation and disappointment that is irredeemable. As I have been progressing through my *Sankofa Whispers* writings, I return to the character of Mona and imagine her returning to the castle 20 years after her experience in the dungeon. I imagine the fear of returning to the site of her traumatic experience and, despite the change in direction her life may have taken since that experience, how the memories still haunt her. There is also a potential for critical reflection for Mona in returning to the site, bringing with her the life experiences that she has had since her experience in the dungeon of Cape Coast Castle. Reflection on the site does not always mean physically visiting it. Brand and her grandfather never visited the site of the door, yet they both still experienced a haunting. Her grandfather's haunting is experienced as forgetting, and to some extent as avoidance of remembering, and Brand's is experienced through curiosity and awareness that her arrival in Canada was a journey that started way before she arrived on this earth. The memories are always present in the facts of your presence[53] in a place where your ancestral lineage did not begin. Temple's proposition for *Sankofa* offers several paradigms of return, expanding the notion that returning is only possible by physically taking our body to a specific location or by remembering a location from which our people came and finding it on a map. Using examples from writers from the African diaspora, Temple explores *returns* from enforced physical journeys, alongside journeys of exile that are voluntary and those that are ancestral, as well as those of the mind and spirit. She also proposes that we think of this journeying as useful for developing an understanding of home, place, and belonging, and that the way we travel is not just regional (as in physical), but also metaphorical and temporal (as in time travel): we may travel to the past or maybe into the future, in what Temple describes as a

[53] I evoke presence here as Gail Lewis (2017) does in her piece 'Questions of Presence', as a "complex terrain" where histories and place intersect to produce a space where "identity and otherness" connect, producing both an "invisibility and/or visibility" with which one must navigate how to declare and define a "highly contested" sense of self (ibid.: 2–3).

reflection of an "African globalism" (Temple 2008: 111) that can account for those whose generations are long removed from m/otherlands.[54]

Temple offers six categories of return potentially embodied in a diasporic reading of *Sankofa* (ibid.):

Voluntary return – In relation to the African diaspora, this is the kind of return that reverses the exit out of the "door of no return", making it the "door of return".[55] It is the kind of return that could be seen as a pilgrimage, or one of reclamation or recovery, such as the return I made when I visited Ghana or Hartman made in her search for strangers.

Involuntary return – This is a return that is arbitrary or one which the person being returned resists, much like the return journey made by Mona through the dungeon portal, into the past of the plantation, or the return enforced by an immigration policy.

Supernatural return – This describes any kind of return that involves time travel, magic, or altered states of consciousness. These kinds of returns would include encounters with ancestors, ghosts, or spirits. Supernatural returns are often connected to involuntary returns and the need in the person to restore, redress or recover something left in the past. The return of Dana, the main character in Octavia Butler's (1979) *Kindred*, is a good example of this kind of return.[56]

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[54] In the first *Declaration of Independence* performance presented at the Diaspora Pavilion in Venice in 2017, I wrote in the performance text, "As the distance between becomes more apparent / as we get to 2nd, 3rd & 4th generations / removed from m/otherlands", to think about my own diasporic migrant experience and how a relationship to a place – a "homeland" – becomes something more mythical and fraught with memory-loss as new generations are born and settled somewhere else.
[55] This refers to a visit by President Obama to Goree to initiate repair and reconciliation through the concept of renaming "the door of no return" as "the door of return" (Fisher 2013).
[56] Kindred (1979) by Octavia Butler, tells the story of Dana a black woman living in contemporary Los Angeles, who is returned to a plantation to save a white boy Rufus from drowning. After more returns she discovers that this boy (who later in the book becomes a man) is her great grandfather and the plantation owner. On each return Dana is required to save Rufus before she can return to her own life.

Tragic return – These are the types of returns that take place when something goes wrong or appears to have gone wrong. A return of "misfortune" (Temple 2008: 112). Tragic returns include returns after exile, forced relocations, exclusions, disappointment, death, and disenfranchisement. The return of the "Revolutionary Returnees" or the "Afro's" that returned to Ghana in the 1950s and 1960s, inspired by Nkrumah's Pan-Africanist idea of "Africa for all Africans" (Hartman 2008: 37),[57] could be described as tragic, as theirs was a return of hope – to recover a sense of self and to help build a new nation – but, because of the undoing of the political situation that gave rise to that hope, they instead experienced disappointment and further disenfranchisement.

Spiritual or heritage return – Temple describes this as one that involves some sort of ritual or healing. This could be a return that involves some sort of initiation into a secret order or traditional religion. It could also be a return to a tribe or ethnic group. This would also involve some sort of ritualistic happening or event, like being sent back into the past to learn from it, as Mona was.

Lastly *revolutionary return* - what Temple describes as a "self-consciously political return" (2008: 111), one that is imbued with elements of a radical individual or collective social change, much like that of the "Afro's" in the 1950s and 1960s, or the return of someone like the writer and Black Panther activist, Kwame Ture (formally Stokely Carmichael), who moved to Guinea in 1968 as he became more involved in international anti-colonial and Pan-Africanist politics.

[57] Many African American émigrés went to Ghana in the 1950s and 1960s to escape the racism, Jim Crow, and the draft for the Korean and Vietnam Wars, dreaming of the possibility of a new life as Africans in the newly independent country of Ghana. After the military coup in 1966 that overthrew President Kwame Nkrumah's government, African Americans were accused of being informants for the C.I.A. The C.I.A and the U.S. government are said to have supported those who plotted to overthrow Nkrumah's government (Hersh 1978). As a result, life in Ghana after the coup became very difficult for African Americans, resulting in many leaving Ghana or living lives fraught with loneliness and isolation (Hartman 2008: 37).

In many ways, *Sankofa* is a way-finder, whether it is guiding us to *go back and get it* physically, through our curiosity, in our research and writing, or through our longing to belong. However, a *Sankofa* that is just "going back to get it" might not know what to do with what has been recovered. What do you do with the grief? The rejection? The disappointment? The trauma? The fact that, despite all that you experience, life must and does continue? Sometimes we are seduced by the idea of belonging, of home, of coming from a lineage of African Kings and Queens. What if, like Saidiya Hartman discovered, we are all strangers? Lost strangers trying to find our way back to a mythical village that no longer exists. Is there a place that *Sankofa* can show us to, where we can "meet the future undeterred" (Mensah 1976)? Would there be a point at which we can re-invent ourselves through learning from our history?

Finding Our Way

The speaker and author Bayo Akomalafe often speaks about becoming lost.[58] He describes becoming lost as an opportunity, a way to research and reconfigure what we know, to open us up to other possibilities (Akomalafe 2016). Like Keeling's epistemological break in "common sense" thinking around Black liberation, which makes space for a black femme perspective, or Walcott's *queer* return, which embraces the possibilities of change and growth alongside the discomfort of doubt, *Sankofa*'s return is not that straightforward. I am writing this chapter in Accra and – even as I see and hear progress all around me, drowning out the sounds of the birds and the tree frogs; even as I am returned here for a short break to write my thesis and am enjoying the possibility of this progress, writing in coffee shops where other folks like me dream creative projects, sip cappuccinos, and re-perform our cosmopolitan Euro-American lives on African soils – I am just a 14-minute Uber-ride away from Fort Christiansborg, a significant fort in the Osu area of Accra, built by the Danish in the 1660s.[59] As Fanon (Fanon, cited in Keeling 2007: 66) said, we do not need to be prisoners of history, but perhaps history can imprison us when the monuments of globalisation founded on brutality are all around us. This is just the same for me as walking around the streets of the City of London. Amongst the shops, offices and cafés, the streets have witnessed trade deals being made of people and commodities, and the spoils of those deals are stored in the Bank of England. Even the shining exterior glass of the modern buildings in the area is a legacy of that

[58] *In A Map to the Door of No Return* (2001) Dionne Brand quotes David Turnbull "In order to find our way successfully, it is not enough just to have a map. We need a cognitive schema as well as a practical mastery of wayfinding" In order to find our way successfully…." (2001:16) Akomalafe idea of getting lost is a proposition to find another way of being draws on the African proverb "In order to find your way, you must become lost" he says "'becoming lost' is really about losing the specificity of our boundaries, the intransigence of our anthropocentrism; it is about shapeshifting, colluding with plants and rocks and wind, and becoming fine enough to meet the challenge of a dead-end." (2016) Akomalafe see's our getting lost similarly to Brand as she emphasises the "success" that Turnbull is proposing. There is no possibility of success when the "cognitive schema directs you to the door of no return. (2001:17) in meeting the "dead-end" Akomalafe opens up the possibility of research, enquiry and curiosity.

[59] Osu Castle also known as Christiansborg is located central Accra neighbourhood about 2 miles from the central business district, was built by the Danes and Norwegians in the 1660s. It was initially a trading point for gold and ivory, before it became a slave fort. After the abolition of the slave trade, the castle was sold to the British and later became a psychiatric asylum. https://visitghana.com/attractions/christiansborg-osu-castle/ (Accessed 13 September 2022)

history. In this place, where history denies our comfortable return to the village, perhaps we can look at *Sankofa* differently and forward a proposition for *Sankofa* as a memory practice methodology that remembers beyond the confines of the historic site or event into the affective spaces that colour how we chose to remember or forget. in this section I want to consider some of the other meanings that are not so prevalent in the common understanding of *Sankofa.* These are "learn from the past" (Asante and Mazama 2009: 587), "the king sees all; one must not be afraid to redeem one's past mistakes; turn back and fetch it" and "it is not taboo to fetch what is at risk of being left behind". (Kande 1998: 129) I would also like to consider the potential role of the egg that the bird carries on its back and how this could be something that can open a possibility for something other than a difficult way back to the past that also uses the learning from grief, getting lost and feeling disappointment, to a way of remembering that not only transforms and makes way for a future but allows space to imagine that future otherwise to the ways in which we currently imagine futures that still include deep echoes of oppressive pasts. If the desire of the diaspora is something that depends on an attachment to a place that we may or may not be able to return to, or if we are so generationally removed from it, how can we use practices of remembering, and how can they be employed in ways that enable us to be with our lost-ness and imagine a different way of being in the world? To explore this I am interested in what Nunu (Alexander Duah), one of the supporting characters in *Sankofa*, has to offer through her characterisation, and I discuss this in the next section.

The things I am interested in from other interpretations of *Sankofa* are: the explicit use of the ideas of learning ("learn from the past"), seeing ("the king sees all"), redeeming past mistakes ("one must not be afraid to redeem one's past mistakes") and the idea of taboo ("it is not taboo to fetch what is at risk of being left behind"). All of these hint at a potential for more complex readings of *Sankofa.* Teaching is something that is apparent within any cultural symbology such as Àdìńkrá but learning from those teachings is not always a given. I point to the explicit use of the word "learn" because it asks for more than simply going back and getting the thing that we have lost. Growing up I heard the words *san-ko-fa* so many times that I am

sure my parents did not feel that there was learning in this constant repetition. In the *Map to the Door of No Return*, Dionne Brand (2001: 94) writes: "If we return to the door, it is to retrieve what is left, to look at it—even if it is an old sack, threadbare with time, empty itself of meaning". The learning is within; regardless of what we find, we need to look at it and be curious about it. This brings us to the seeing, and, since Akan cosmology has a deeply spiritual foundation that reveres Nyame[60] as the ultimate creator, the seeing king could be seen as a god. But we could also think about seeing as about our own sovereignty: how we see or allow a seeing of ourselves that allows us to remember and explore about all parts of ourselves, enabling us to be with our past mistakes in ways that can be liberating and restorative. This can be thought of in the collective sense as well as in the individual sense. For example, although I have presented some criticality around the idea of Ghana's "Year of Return", it is still a gesture toward reconciliation for the wider collective of people living in the African diaspora, whether we take up the offer or not. What would also be good within that gesture is to think about how to address the grief, trauma and the question that has often been asked by people who return to Ghana and other places in Africa implicated in the transatlantic slave trade: "Why did you sell us?" (Brand 2001: 13).[61] This brings me to the idea that "it is not taboo to fetch what is at risk of being left behind". Again we can look at this idea of *taboo* in two ways. The first is as it is read in the interpretation: that it is not wrong to, or there is nothing wrong with, returning to get that which is at risk of being left behind. Another way to look at this is to consider the idea of *taboo* as something that is unmentionable or difficult to speak about and that, within this interpretation, there is potential for recovery. Both point to the possibility within *Sankofa* of some form of healing, be that healing that could be part of the invitation to those that were stolen and at risk of losing their way back to the village to return to Ghana, or

[60] Nyame or Onyame is the Akan name for God or supreme being. (Kissi-Dompere2009: 464)
[61] Brand refers to the 1999 3-part documentary series *The Wonders of the African World*, in which historian Henry Louis Gates Jr journeys from Zanzibar to Timbuktu uncovering the history of the great kingdoms of Africa, including the legacy of the slave trade.
https://www.pbs.org/wonders/Episodes/Epi3/slave.htm

the potential for healing the trauma of enslavement and colonisation, both personally and collectively.

Nunu's Offering

The name Nunu is from the Ga people of Ghana, which means Accra[62] or "the deep abyss".[63] The character Nunu in Gerima's film does something other with *Sankofa* that potentially offers within it a way through the lostness of the "deep abyss". In healing circles, a "deep abyss" could be seen as a kind of emotional or spiritual rupture that calls for an exploration of the depth of a soul, and a call to soul work is always filled with the potential for deep transformation. It is the possibility of recovery and the potential for "invention". The motivation for healing and recovery encoded within the characterisation of Nunu offers viewers a way to imagine an otherwise[64] reading of *Sankofa*. Nunu is said to live between the plantation and Africa. This is implied in how peacefully she sleeps even in the conditions of intense brutality and trauma. She remembers and conjures the ancient wisdom of plants, and is seen at different moments in the film tending to the sick or wounded. She also remembers the stories from her childhood back in Africa and shares them with the community of slaves, as entertainment, comfort, hope, and teaching – a teaching that reminds them that they come from somewhere with their own distinct ways of knowing and being in the world. She shares stories of a porcupine girl and her porcupine family, which we learn are representations of Nunu and her mother, father, and siblings back in Africa. The use of representations such as this was widespread in many of the stories and songs enslaved people made up for entertainment, teaching, sharing news and encoding messages.[65] Within the

[62] This I learnt from a Ga woman I met who is also named Nunu, spelt Nunoo. However, the meaning of Accra is said to have been derived from the word *Nkran*, which means ants, because it is said that when the Ga people arrived in what is now known as Accra, they looked like ants. Nkran was said to have been changed by the Danes to Akra (Dr. Y. 2016).

[63] An African meaning from a naming site, submitted by a user from the U.K. https://www.names.org/n/nunu/about (Accessed: 2 September 2022). No other references are available.

[64] 'See 'Projects Developed from Waste and Ordinary' section in Chapter Two for a discussion of my approach to 'reading otherwise')

[65] Lawrence W Levine's book *Black Culture Black Consciousness: Afro-American Thought from Slavery to Freedom* (1977) explores the African retentions encoded in songs, folktales, verbal games and

structure of her storytelling, Nunu develops a technique of cloaking her story within a story that appears to the slave masters as fantastic, fictional, and, therefore, harmless. This cloaking enables her to remember her story along with words from her native language, and to pass these on to others, who in turn pass those stories to others.

Although Nunu lives in captivity, there is an assuredness about her that does not seem phased by her enslavement. She is not oblivious to the horrors of slavery. She is as affected by these horrors as all the slaves are. We learn that she has also endured the violence of the whip and rape as a young child, an attack from which she bore a son, Joe, who was taken from her to be raised in the church and who was taught to believe that his mother was a dangerous witch. Despite the trials of life on the plantation, Nunu managed to preserve a sense of herself and her connection to her past. Her ability to endure and remember would have been very difficult to hold onto when we think about the brutality of Mona's/Shola's story, yet we are told that she has managed to do this. These experiences all contribute to her defiance and fierce resistance to her slavers, defining her as a troublesome slave. No matter what trouble Nunu brought to the plantation, the punishments did not faze her, and, because rumours of her power and resistance had spread, the masters had trouble selling her and, as such, tolerated her on the plantation. Nunu is not just a representation of the enslaved woman's resilience in the sense of carrying on regardless; this is a resilience that acknowledges her own pain and suffering, using her experience as a grounding for her resistance. Nunu expresses a range of emotions, including grief and anger, but she is not so consumed by these emotions that she cannot see creative ways to deal with the oppressive situation she finds herself in. Nunu brings hope and fierce and protective care to the enslaved community on the Lafayette Plantation. Through her practices of rest, plant medicine and storytelling, she also brings the notion of self-care into focus, the kind

language and more. These retentions are some of the ways in which slaves passed on memories of Africa and other information.

of self-care that supports her and enables her to be available for her community[66]. As a friend to Mona, Nunu is a gentle teacher of *Sankofa*, and a revolutionary mother figure,[67] who shares her stories and wisdom with Mona, gently guiding her awakening with the kind of knowledge that might be useful sometime in the future. At the end of the film, there is a painful confrontation between Nunu and her son Joe,[68] which results in the death of both of them. When Mona is returned to the castle in Ghana, we also see Nunu sitting with the returnees looking out to sea. She is the only returnee that is smiling. Nunu's spirit flew home to live her life again in Africa.[69]

This brings me to the potential of the egg that sits on the bird's back. Thinking beyond the notion of return allows us to pay attention to the potential of the egg, to get a deeper perspective of that which is encoded in its symbology. As seen in one of the images in Figure 2, near the beginning of this chapter, the egg is not always pictured in the pictographs of *Sankofa*. Nor are the pictographs of *Sankofa* always figurative. However, in the classic pictograph of *Sankofa,* such as the one painted on

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[66] Self-care in the sense defined by Audre Lorde, in the essay 'The Burst of Light', as "self-preservation" and "an act of political warfare" (Lorde, 1988, 2017: loc 95 of 98).

[67] Although Nunu embodies many archetypal mothering facets, she also expresses others that were probably not considered at the time. In an interview with Alexander Duah who played Nunu, Duah speaks of her desire to play more roles like Nunu. She describes working on a programme of films that have strong messages on the rights of women. She describes a script she was working on that explores the way a woman living with the haunting trauma of rape, fights to shed this trauma to find her life again. (Duah and Ellison 2000: 92). I would like to suggest that Duah brought some of this to her role as Nunu, giving us clues to pathways of healing and transformation.

[68] In the film Nunu has a son Joe (Nick Medley) who was conceived when Nunu as raped by a Catholic priest. He was taken from her by the priest and raised in the church. He was indoctrinated to believe that his mothers African ways were heathen.

[69] African American and Caribbean folklore often refers to flying Africans, who took the magical passage back home to Africa upon death. In the essay ""One of Dese Mornings, Bright and Fair/ Take My Wings and Cleave the Air": The Legend of Flying Africans and Diasporic Consciousness" (1997) Wendy W Walters explores this phenomenological concept. She opens the piece with Robert Hayden's poem O Daedalus, Fly Away Home:

> "Oh fly away home fly away
> Do you remember Africa?
> O cleave the air fly away home
> My gran, he flew back to Africa,
> Just spread his arms and
> flew away home." (Hayden quoted in Walters, 1943, 1997: 3)

the electrics box in New Haven (see Figure 1), the *Sankofa* bird seems to be gently caring for the egg on its back. This could be seen as a gentle caress or a kiss, or it could perhaps indicate grooming. A reading of this indicates care and attention being bestowed upon that egg. In Akan culture, there is a proverb that says, "power is as fragile as an egg; those who hold it too tightly and those who hold it loosely all risk breaking it" (Adjei and Darko 2021). This speaks to the potency and precarity of power when it is not considered carefully. Eggs are also considered to be sacred representatives of the cycle of life, being something life-giving but also easily destroyed. The association with fertility also points to creativity and the possibility of generating something new. Eggs are also used in clearing rituals to alleviate the effects of and release curses. In Akan culture to offer the abosom[70] an egg is to offer it "all that there is and will be" (Ephrim Donkor 2016: 237) The egg must not be already fertilised, as a fertilised egg would already contain life and therefore would already be imbued with its life-giving qualities. Eggs are prayed over and smashed at altars as food for the abosom (ibid) They are also used to mitigate or undo spells, they are used in traditional medicine to relieve psychosis and to rejuvenate a person after grief and sadness. (Ephrim Donkor 2016: 238) This suggests that the egg may be imbued with an overlooked possibility for creativity/invention, psychological healing and imagining a potent future. As such learning from *Sankofa* cannot be limited to just returning to the past, but also undoing the *spells* of the past- guiding us in how we care for ourselves and others, how we find healing from past hurts and traumas, and how we imagine and prepare for our futures.

The egg becomes the guide into the future and a way of imagining beyond the vastness of an open sea- where we once could not see a way out of the ways in which history enacts a certain kind of repetition of the conditions of enslavement and oppression, because it is approached in a way that privileges a form of history-making that is in relationship to the kinds of patriarchal, colonial power that created and benefited from these forms of oppression. Through listening to the deep

[70] In Akan cosmology abosom or obosom are the lesser deities, the children of the Akan creator/supreme being, Nyame. (Kete Asante and Mazama 2009: 3 and 464)

wisdom of *Sankofa* it can show us the way out back to the proverbial village and the ways to *undo* and resist the hegemony of history. Many people from the African diaspora have used memory and remembering as a form of resistance; what I am adding to these propositions is a suggestion that, as we think about the delicate nature of the egg, we consider the circular shape of the body of the *Sankofa* bird and the tenderness it offers to the egg. This tenderness, coupled with the deep learning that *Sankofa* has offered and continues to offer, allows us to "pick for the present/ What is best from ancient eyes … To meet the future undeterred" (Mensah 1976). This is why, in developing this thinking around *Sankofa* as a memory practice methodology, I think of it through my commitment to theory and practice as a Black feminist. Nunu becomes a useful guide in exploring the Black feminist potential imbued in *Sankofa*. She is an embodiment of Black feminist care. She is a supporter of the other women on the plantation, she will also stand by the men, but she also identifies patriarchal problematics, whether that be in being critical of the role of the church in the upholding of the oppression of enslaved people or in the way she refuses to "lie down" with an enslaved overseer, letting him know that she has agency over her body and how she uses it. Nunu is all there is and all that will be. Her ability to recreate herself to join the returnees and be the only one smiling ready to take on life again is holding the possibility of the future. In her body, she knows the pain and suffering of the plantation, and she will use that knowledge in imagining a just life for all. It is in the wake (Sharp 2016) of all that has happened to her that Nunu, the only character in Gerima's film, who returns a little hope to the audience, doing the work of enabling us to grabble with the "past that is not past" (Taylor 2019), witnessing the returnees/ audience as they move through the grief to recovery.

To bring this chapter to a close, I would like to return to Khonsura A. Wilson's (2009: 587) five categories of interpretation for *Sankofa*: Reflection on the past; self-conscious reflection before moving forward; reflecting on one's identity, self-definition, and vision for the future; an understanding of the personal role in a collective vocation; and the repossession or recollecting of something lost or forgotten. This is a useful summary of the ways in which I have explored and

expanded on definitions of *Sankofa* to present a proposition for it as a memory practice methodology. I am thinking about this methodology as not just something that theorises a way of thinking about how to contend with memory in the African diaspora, but also as a practical methodology, evidenced as much in everyday representations of *Sankofa* as in theoretical or artistic representations. My research is grounded in Black feminism, which also has its legacy in the geographies that bring me to the place where my research begins. For me, this means bringing this work together with lesser discussed African feminisms,[71] legacies of anti-colonial struggle and contemporary decolonial thinking and practice, meaning that this work does not look at these things as separate entities, but as interlocking and interdependent forms of thinking and practice. This work is also grounded in academic practice and I will be looking at theoretical and creative ways in which we can think about how a *Sankofa* methodology is deployed; my proposition is that we move beyond the idea of a memory practice as just being about the redressing of history, towards understanding it as something that can also remind us of who we are, through enabling us to remember and learn from the ways in which the past informs the present and inspires the future in the everyday production of black life. I am also interested in how this form of memory practice can undo dominant narratives of history, enabling us to see what has happened otherwise and making space for other ways of doing remembering that also pays attention to the ways in which we can also relieve the affects of continued trauma. The oracle cards mentioned previously (see 'Sankofa, Àdìńkrá and Akan Cosmology' section earlier in this chapter) are a good example of the way in which a *Sankofa* methodology has been applied to learn from and be inspired by Àdìńkrá in the everyday practice of study for personal development and recovery. The ways in which discussions around self-care practices, food, how to set up and run black-led organisations, and movement work

[71] Many have contested whether modern conceptions of feminism are African or whether African women can be feminists. It is important to remember like the Akan many African communities are matrilineal and conceptions of feminism for African women can be considerably different for African women. However notable African feminists include the writer and activist Ama Ata Aidoo (I will expand my relationship to some of her work in Part Two of this thesis) and the writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adiche who penned the popular essay "We Should All Be Feminists" (2014) (Banya 2015).

have been thought about in this contemporary moment also use methods of this expanded idea of *Sankofa,* moving beyond the notion of a *Sankofa* predicated only on the idea of return, or going back and getting it. Opening up to other interpretations of *Sankofa* allows space to attend to that which may be forgotten, either as a strategy to enable you to live in another place, such as the ways in which my parents forgot aspects of their lives in Ghana – or as something that you desire to remember but cannot, as in the way that Dionne Brand's grandfather could not remember the people that they had descended from but insisted that he knew. Somewhere in his mind and in his body, the information was there. This brings me to memories that are much harder to access or sit with, such as trauma, despair, and disappointment around what is found upon returning. Beyond the predominance of returns that attempt to redress history, there is space to explore other ways in which *Sankofa* can be deployed through different practices. There is storytelling, music, and performance; materials can be animated, and therapeutic and healing practices can be remembered and used to find ways to attend to the traumas that still live in our bodies, our environment, our politics, and social structures. I will expand on this a little more in Chapter Two, in which I will think about *Sankofa* in relation to materials and practices that have informed my own. Later in part two of this thesis, I will reflect on how I have considered these notions of Sankofa in my practice as an artist, focusing on recent works that expand the ways in which one can create work with memory, not just as a way of looking at the past but also as something that intervenes and *undoes* dominant ways of thinking about the past. I will look at the contexts that have informed the development of my work, ideas and how I have considered the ways in which *Sankofa* can be mobilised in my work.

2. Finding the Way: Developing A Sankofa Memory Practice

Figure 5: Ebony Coletu, Foundation for Contemporary Art, Ghana, August 2022. Photograph: Barby Asante.

Accra, 5th August 2022

Yesterday I attended a conversation between researcher and writer Ebony Coletu and curator and researcher Bianca Manu at the Foundation for Contemporary Art. The foundation's small, but adaptable, space, situated on the same grounds as the WEB Dubois Memorial Centre for Pan-African Culture, was full of people eager to hear about Ebony's research into the life of the forgotten Ghanaian minister and Pan-African activist Laura Adorkor Kofi, also known as Mama Kofi. Laura Adorkor Kofi was born in 1895 to a royal family from a Ga-speaking village on the outskirts of Accra. She was one of the founders of the African Universal Church, a church with a revolutionary message of Black liberation for all African people. In the early 1920s, she travelled from what was then the Gold Coast to the U.S., inspired by a calling to invite African Americans to return to Africa. While in the U.S., she became known as a speaker who worked closely with Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA). When Garvey was imprisoned for fraud in 1927, Laura Kofi became increasingly popular. People were excited to hear the voice of someone from the continent speaking to them about returning to Africa. This caused some contention in Garvey's organisation, with people questioning her integrity and the truth of her identity, describing her as a fraud who was not really from Africa, but from Atlanta, pretending to be an African. She was considered a threat to Garvey and his message. As a result of these tensions, Mama Kofi was increasingly isolated from the leadership of the UNIA, but she continued with her mission because she was called to do the work of uniting all Africans in Africa. On 8th March, 1928, while Laura Adorkor Kofi was preaching a sermon in Liberty Hall in Miami, she was shot twice in the head. She died instantly. Two associates of the UNIA were arrested for her murder. On 10th July, 1928, the two associates were found not guilty due to there not being enough evidence of their involvement in her murder.

This was a compelling and devastating story. No one was held accountable for her death. And although her three funerals were attended by thousands of followers, the traces of her story in archives in the U.S. upheld the story of Mama Kofi as a fraud. Ebony Coletu was interested in the idea of fraud, how someone is presented as a fraud how this becomes inscribed in their story and how the archival process can be fraudulent when it only contains parts of a person's story. She presented us with a question about how to approach the archive from another place, this other place being Ghana, to see if a different story of Laura Adorkor Kofi could be told. But, in Ghana, archival records and what has been recorded are precariously kept or not entirely accurate, and Ebony presented to the audience her approach to working with the fragments she could find to uncover a more complete story of Mama Kofi. These fragments were found in the incomplete archives in spaces like the University of Ghana in Legon and the WEB Dubois Memorial Centre for Pan-African Culture, but mostly they were found in walks around the areas of Jamestown and La in Accra. Here, Ebony found out more of Laura Adorkor Kofi's story, through exploration of streets and buildings, and through speaking to elders. Ebony allowed herself to get lost.

Ebony also told the story of returning Bessie Graham Abokuma Taylor's remains to her family in Cape Coast. Like Mama Kofi, Bessie had left the Gold Coast to do missionary work. Like Mama Kofi, Bessie died in the U.S. She wasn't murdered, but she was buried in an unmarked pauper's grave. As part of the funeral, Ebony had commissioned a gravestone. She wanted to make sure that the dates of Bessie's birth and death were correct on the stone, but the records she found had different dates for her birth. The day had come to tell the people who were to do the lettering on the gravestone what was to be engraved on it. But still no date. So Ebony asked Bessie. She asked Bessie to tell her by 3 pm what the date of her birth was. Again Ebony took to the streets, this time driving around Cape Coast with a friend. They decided to visit the Wesleyan Church on the off-chance that someone there might be able to see if Bessie might have been christened there. The person looking

after the church was at first not very helpful, sending Ebony and her friend away, saying they had the records, but she would have to see. They left a number with her, expecting that they would never be called. 15 minutes after they had left, the woman called them and asked them to come back because she had found a record of Bessie's birth. When they returned, the woman showed them the entry in one of the christenings logbooks confirming Bessie's birthdate in 1897. She had marked the date in the ancient book with a ballpoint pen.

Ebony's telling prompted a wonderful conversation about different approaches to memory practice. Most of the people in the room were either from or connected to Ghana in some way, and many spoke of the intervention of spirits or ancestors that helped them to piece together the fragments of a person's story. They spoke of intuition and happenstance. There were two lecturers from the theatre department at the University of Ghana, Sarah Dorgbadzi and Ekua Ekumah, who were looking for an image of a man that they were doing a performance seminar about. They didn't find one in the archives, and they too had asked that they might be directed to one. By chance, the spilling of some liquid insect repellent during one of the sessions they had set up to discuss the project revealed an image of a profile of a face that was so clear that they photographed it and used it in the publicity for the event. We were all stunned when we saw the image of the profile they shared with us. I shared a little about my work with Sankofa *in relation to memory and artistic practice: how I was thinking about this as something that was whispering to us and how I was thinking about how this travelled through the African Diaspora as memory practice. This prompted a conversation about critical fabulation and fiction and whether moments like those Ebony, Sarah, and Ekua described were the result of imagination at work or something completely different that was methodologically difficult to quantify, but definitely something many had experienced.*

At the end of the conversation, as we gathered for the group photo (the usual way that the organisers of the events at the Foundation for Contemporary Art closed an event), I felt so moved to be in community with this group of people also grappling with what it means to remember for people of the African Diaspora.

Extract from *Sankofa Whispers*

History has been created in such a way that what is sanctioned to be remembered is often that which is in service to the powerful. In the foreword to the 2015 re-publication of Michel Trouillot's book *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*, Hazel Carby (2015) points to how Trouillot's contemplation on history begins with a definition of materiality, the body, the artefacts, and those who speak to the artefacts, all producing that which we have termed to be historic. Trouillot is interested in how history works. He is interested in the process and sites of production; the academy, the media, the state, the archive, the museum; the narration and narrators of history and how the popular telling of history becomes the dominant narrative; how history works and how history is told (Trouillot 2015: xii). Between how history is told and how history works, Trouillot identifies silences. and it is within those silences that the potential for the contestation of the dominant narrative lives. Trouillot's offering presents us with the view that, even with very little evidence, through taking different positionalities and viewpoints, we can open up new possibilities for the reading of history. I cannot deny the significant influence of history on the development of my practice and how I am approaching this research. Since beginning my studies in art school back in 1992, I wanted to see beyond what history is telling us, especially since the walls of most of the galleries I entered at that time did not present images of people who looked like me, or work by people who looked like me, yet part of the study I was undertaking was an engagement with art history. Like many young people of colour fulfilling the dreams of our parents, I entered the university and was starkly confronted by the illusions and omissions of history. However, as much as this was an isolating experience, it was an empowering one, and being in a fine art department, where each student's

individual enquiry was encouraged through studio practice, I was able to engage with questions of history through imagery.[72]

Employing a different way of being with, sensing, and feeling the material, while also breaking out of the boundaries and *limits* of the archive (Mbembe 2002),[73]*,* I am making a proposition for practices of remembering that live between the history that is told and the ways in which history has become a working production of supposed truth-telling. How do we demystify the limits that history has placed on us, to find different ways of telling? What are the physical bodies and the ethereal bodies that can speak to and through the silences telling us? And what do the artefacts that did not make the cut for preservation in the museum or archive need to say? What about the objects that did make the cut for museum entry: do they really want us to learn? How do these silent stories be-come legible?[74] And what can the routes and roads we have travelled show us about how to move forward? History is perhaps too limited a space for this telling. Nor is it open enough to do the work of allowing us to

[72] While I was at university in the early 1990s, I began working with ethnographic images I found in the periodical *The Living Races of Mankind.* I found these at a car boot sale. I reappropriated these images in films and performances, to create works that I described as "rescuing"*,* as in rescuing these images and the people within them from the fate and the falsity presented in these books, also having an awareness that these portrayals also played a role in the perceptions of contemporary people of colour. I have only recently seen that this was a practice of remembering and the beginning of questioning dominant narratives. I wrote about this in a short piece published in *Photography and Culture* (Asante 2022).

[73] In 'The Power of the Archive and its Limits', Achille Mbembe (2002: 19) describes the archive as a "symbolic public institution" usually constituted by and in service of the state. These institutions are usually housed in state-sanctioned buildings where the documents are stored. For Mbembe, this is where much of the power and the limits of the archive lie. Power also lies in the production of the archive, and, much like Trouillot argues in relation to power and history, the state or the narrators of the archive make editorial judgements and classify what documents are kept in the archive and, sometimes, decide who may use them. The problem that Ebony Coletu and others who need to research archives in places like Ghana face is that the archives were once in the control of colonial administrations that selected to preserve and document what they needed to tell their story. The ways in which those archives would have been used and maintained in post-colonial times, after Independence, in Ghana would have been significantly different to the way the colonial administrators saw the archives, as it would have been after the coup in 1966 and subsequent coups in the 1970s and 1980s. This, along with the lack of resources, both financially and in skills, has left Ghana's archives in a precarious position. The limits, then, become not just those that are ascribed to the state-sanctioned story, but also the limit of the archive, and the practices of archiving as set up by colonial administrators, to be maintained and, as such, to be able to contain the full story of an emergent state such as Ghana. This points to what Peter Wafula-Wekesa (2010:58) describes as "memory work that can never be total and complete".

[74] I am thinking about the becoming as becoming seen, becoming present.

get lost finding our way back to the village. Ebony Coletu wanted to challenge the dominant narrative that spoke of Laura Adorkor Kofi as a fraud, so she went to Ghana. She did not find what she was looking for in the under-resourced archives, so she took to the streets and found where Mama Kofi was born. She could not find the date of Bessie's birth, so she asked Bessie to tell her. She had to break the conventions of academic archival[75] research to explore another way to uncover the story. Coletu (2019: 150) describes this as "descendant epistemology". This methodological approach comes from the position of connection and relatedness, inviting answers from the people and places evidenced in fragments of the story. I use the above particular extract of *Sankofa Whispers* to open this chapter to point to the collective work that produces *Sankofa* that is happening as part of a wider practice of remembering that I will attempt to map in this chapter. In the chapters that follow, I will elaborate on how this happens in my practice, but for now I am also speaking to a collectivity that, through being in a critical practice of remembering, is uncovering many words that have never been spoken and stories that have never been told. Through those words and stories, different knowledges are being produced and configured that are enabling different ways of using memory to imagine our future.

This chapter is a review of the context in which my research and practice has developed. My research spans the last four years of doing a PhD, and my artistic practice for the last 30 years, not forgetting the pre-history, in which the formation of me as an artist and researcher was developing but not named in the conventional career categories and ways of contributing to society that we are taught to aspire to as part of our culture and identity. Through this chapter, I will reference some of the

[75] As part of this PhD process, I have explored the work of many key theorists who explore archives and memory practices, including Jacques Derrida (*Archive Fever*,1996) Michel Foucault, (*The Archeology of Knowledge*, 1969) Halbwachs (On *Collective Memory* 1925) and others. I have looked at colonial archives considering the work of Ann Stoler, (*Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense*, 2010) and memory studies (*Memory and Methodology* ed Susannah Radstone, 2000). These have all been very useful in developing an understanding of archives and memory practices. However, these works do not attend to what it means to work with archives and memory from the position of the African diaspora, which is what I want to centre in this research.

moments of encounter and inspiration that have informed my practice, as well as some of the methods, materials, and projects with which my research and practice are in conversation. I will begin with a short personal introduction to my thinking, sharing some moments that have informed this work, beginning with my first experience with an archive, and mapping out some of the ways that this encounter has informed the trajectory of my practice. I consider how these moments have informed my conceptual framework. The materials that I will look at in this review are broad, books, productions art works, performances I have been involved in and people I have been in conversation with. First, I will look at projects working with materials; this includes creating archives and archiving projects, such as alternative, activist, and community archives centred around collecting, collating, and activating materials. Then I will consider Black feminist practices of sharing and writing stories, including works that use fragments from archival research, both formal and informal, to reflect on and contest histories and modes of storytelling, such as the use of fabulation and fiction, and the collation of stories, as in anthology practices that bring together collections of stories, testimonies, theory, and poetry to map experiences of black and brown womxn.[76] Performance and performativity: writing and artistic projects that perform a form of memory practice to engage in a critical enquiry of history, archives, and memory studies that is embodied have been important to the development of my work, I will look at some of the projects and works that have been significant in developing my own practice. Lastly, closely aligned with the performance practice, I will look at the role of ritual in developing an approach to remembering that uses the body to explore a liminal space of memory. This connects to all of the other categories in the way that being in a space of quiet acceptance, of not knowing, can animate materials and create, enhance, or reveal a story, just as Ebony Coletu's (2019) descendant epistemology does, using

[76] I use this spelling to open the category, so the term has a wider frame of reference than just the heteronormative, cis definition that is usually inscribed in 'woman'. This is by no means an ideal term as it has been contested by trans women as not accepting trans women as women (Kelleher 2021). I have also used the term to include non-binary people, particularly when I have been inviting people to work with me. I am grappling with what is the ideal terminology.

the silence to enhance the transformational quality of the in-between space to inform and teach us in ways other than our conventional ways of knowing.

Projects Developed from Waste and Ordinary[77]

In an earlier draft of this chapter, I opened with two different entries from *Sankofa Whispers*. They spoke of my first encounter with an archive. This was in the late 1990s, around 1996–97, in the back of a bookshop in Brixton. I was a young mum who would wander around my neighbourhood looking for interesting things to do with a small child. The archive in question would later become the Black Cultural Archives.[78] It was nothing like the archives I have since visited, with their ways of gaining access, entrance protocols, protocols of preservation, record keeping, and indexing. This was a local intimate space, selling books of interest to the local black community in the front and sharing documents and other ephemera in the back. The materials were accessible to anyone who cared to ask. The archivist, Sam, was a storyteller, using the material to animate the stories he told and was told. The way that Sam narrated the materials was about creating an inviting space for an experience made in dialogue and community. Being in this archive was like being in what Stuart Hall (2001: 90) has described as "a living archive of the diaspora". The archive was alive/living through engagements with the materials that were "present, on-going, continuing, unfinished open-ended" (ibid.). My experience in the archive was governed by whatever took my eye at the time I entered the space. There was no requirement that I knew what I was looking for. Like consulting an oracle, I would enter the space with an open question, find the things that excited me at that time, take in the information I could glean and then ask Sam to tell me more. He would perhaps connect the document to another and another, elaborating on the

[77] The title for this section came out of conversations with my friends and collaborators Gail Lewis and Foluke Taylor.

[78] The Black Cultural Archives is the only nationally recognised heritage centre in Britain dedicated to collecting and preserving materials related to African Caribbean communities in Britain. Founded in 1981 by a number of community activists, including poet, educationalist, and historian Len Garrison, who was key to compiling the collection. The Black Cultural Archives began its journey to becoming a nationally recognised (state-sanctioned) archive in the early 2000s and moved into a permanent purpose-built building on Windrush Square in Brixton in 2014 (Ishmael 2017).

information given by the document. As the story unfolded, I would stay and listen until my child got bored or it got too close to dinner time, and we had to leave.

Figure 6: Photo of couple from Harry Jacobs' studio, the early 1970s.

The second entry was from my experience of being a researcher on an exhibition project called the *Brixton Studio*,[79] instigated by the Photographers' Gallery, in collaboration with a photographer called Paul Ellis. The core of the project was the work of studio photographer Harry Jacobs who had a commercial photography studio in Landor Road, in Brixton, from the late 1950s to the late 1990s. During that

[79] This exhibition was on display at the gallery from 4th October to 22nd November 2002. https://thephotographersgallery.org.uk/photography-culture/brixton-studio-harry-jacobs-jitka-hanzlova-nikki-s-lee-eileen-perrier-jimmy (Accessed: 2 September 2022).

time, Jacobs photographed many members of the local African Caribbean community, in the studio and at weddings, funerals, and birthday parties. He amassed thousands of negatives and many uncollected photographs, which once adorned the window and walls of the studio. These were thrown into a skip when the shop closed in the early 1990s. My role as a researcher was to find people who had been photographed by Jacobs so that they could fill in the necessary release form that was needed in order for the images to be displayed in the gallery. The distinct quality I brought with me as a researcher on this project was my knowledge of the area in which Harry Jacobs' studio was once based. I was born close-by, lived in the area as a child, and returned to live there in early adulthood. In fact, members of my own family had also been photographed in that studio. I had the kind of kinship and relatedness that can be ascribed to Coletu's (2019) description of descendant epistemology. Because of this relatedness, I instinctively knew how to find people, beginning with friends and family, and I knew where to put ads and notices, branching out into the different places in the area and attending different events. It was at one such event, The Lambeth Country Show,[80] that I set up a stall with the book of images that we had put together, using this as a way to trigger people's memories about who might be in the photographs. The first person to visit the stall that day was a woman who curiously turned the pages of that book only to find an image of herself, dressed in her London Transport uniform. She was so excited. She told me that she had gone to the studio in her uniform to get a photo taken to send home to her mum in Jamaica and then asked me to mark the page as she was going to get her daughter and grandchild to come and see it.

Many more people I met told me about the stories behind their photographs. Many no longer had copies of the original photographs, as often, just like with the woman I met at the Country Show, these photographs were taken to send back to families at home. Others had been lost in moving homes, or in the event of a divorce or a fire or flood or another such situation. The people I met used the photographs to tell their

[80] An annual community event that takes place at Brockwell Park in South London in July that celebrates the local multicultural community and Lambeth's agricultural past.

stories; just as Sam used the materials in the archive in the back of the bookshop to tell stories, the photographs would be the contextual backdrop to many of the personal stories I was hearing from the people I met. I mentioned what I was learning to the curators at the Photographers' Gallery, but within the bounds of the project and exhibition, there was no space to include the stories or voices of the sitters. Nor was there much incentive to stretch the budget beyond a 'special' opening for the people I found. It was through seeing that the gallery was only able to deal with the materiality of the photographs and the curiosity that they produced, but unable to find space within the project for the stories of the sitters, that I began to widen my interest in practices of remembering that also attempted to attend to the life, the loss, and the exclusion of people from the telling of their stories.

This research has changed and shifted over time, as I have developed a clearer understanding of what a *Sankofa* memory practice methodology might be, but the memory that part of my motivation to develop such a practice began with what was considered waste and the ordinary everyday, in which memory and story is created, continues to resonate. My motivation came from being in a situation of relatedness while recognising the ways in which certain stories had to vie for space to be seen or heard and witnessing that these stories could be so brutally discarded or side-lined. It was through this relatedness, which involved attending with care to the people, memories, and materials that I worked with so they were available for creative intervention and future contemplation, that my practice began to form. The *wastes* represent that which has been discarded and seen as not valuable, as in the uncollected images thrown in a skip, or the pamphlets, papers, books, and more that were not considered worthy of being collected for official records that Sam and others collated and shared in the back of the bookshop. The *ordinary* is the everyday lived experiences that have not been documented, the fragments and anecdotes of black life that get shared in passing conversations in the bookshop or at the Country Show. The *ordinary* could also be what Toni Morrison (2019: 238) describes in *The Site of Memory* as an "interior life": a life that includes the stories, emotional connections, and relationships with others that bring us into proximity in a space where our stories meet and break the silence of the history of colonialism, post-war

migration, and arrival to the U.K., in which we often appear as a footnote to a bigger and 'more important historic narrative. Just as Ebony Coletu had to look in a different place to find the stories of the women she was looking for, I had to find different ways within my practice to make space for the stories that were not being told in the exhibition at the Photographers' Gallery.[81] I had to find ways that told stories about the people I wanted to work with – to find that connection and opportunity for intimacy and dialogue with materials that Sam offered in the back of the bookshop. Materials that were discarded and considered not important enough to be considered history, just as Laura Adorkor Kofi's life was never accounted for or considered properly.

As such, my practice has been developed in this spirit, building on and in dialogue with the work of Sam and many others I have been in personal, artistic, academic, and material conversations with. This chapter will explore some of the projects, artworks, literature, and other materials that have informed my research, building on, and developing the theoretical framework outlined in the previous chapter to further consider the contexts, lineages, and dialogues that this research has been developed through. Just like Hall's proposition for the "living archive of the

[81] After working on the *Brixton Studio* project, I created four projects that explored black life in Britain through music. For *Barby's Karaoke*, I worked with an elders' group I met while working on *Brixton Studio*, to explore their memories through music. I used music because recordings were available and other materials were not available. https://www.studiovoltaire.org/whats-on/barbys-karaoke-barby-asante/ (Accessed: 2 September 2022).
Bamboo Memories took me to Bristol to uncover the story of the Bamboo Club, Bristol's first black music night club. Again, there was very little material on the club except a few living members and regulars to the club that I interviewed and a few photographs, posters, and flyers. I worked with the people I interviewed to create an event that would bring together over 70 people who went to the club. I also worked with young people from a theatre collective to re-enact and film scenes from the club. This was brought together with documentation from the event to make a two-channel video work. http://www.picture-this.org.uk/worksprojects/works/by-date/2009/bamboo-memories (Accessed: 2 September 2022).
The South London Black Music Archive was an archival proposition that invited people to create a temporary archive of black music in South London. The archive collected items donated by the public to map a story of black music in Britain and its contribution to the cultural story of Britain. https://www.barbyasante.com/work/south-london-black-music-archive (Accessed: 2 September 2022).
Anchor and Magnet was a collaboration with artist Katie Beinart and cultural producer Kate Theophilus that explored migration, place, and identity in Brixton in the context of the changing urban environment caused by gentrification. https://www.anchorandmagnet.org (Accessed: 2 September 2022).

diaspora", this is an open-ended and ongoing live exploration that, as with the extract from *Sankofa Whispers* that opens this chapter, is happening daily in my encounters with people, places, and things, and in how my practice and biography intersects with these things. *Sankofa* has been the guide that has taken me into the silences and the places where there is no space for the story. *Sankofa* finds a way, whether in the back of a bookshop, or out of a skip and into a gallery space. *Sankofa* has been the way my work connects to that of Ebony Coletu and the others I will refer to. *Sankofa* has been whispering and asking us to "rise up" and "claim your story" (Gerima 1992). *San-ko-fa*[82] has been informed by an interest in history, archives, and remembering, and also by the ways in which I can be with and imagine otherwise possibilities with others through this remembering. I evoke the term *otherwise* here to think with the many Black feminist thinkers I have read, listened to, spoken with, and worked with. In this Black feminist thinking and practice, the *otherwise* is potential and possibility otherwise is potential and possibility in this Black feminist thinking and practice. A generative space to evoke, explore, and imagine alternative ways of being, doing, and actioning, to undo, disrupt, or re-address the dominant voices of the archive, be that the archives that contain materials for exploration and study or the wider cultural archives of the arts or academia. I draw on my experience of otherwise in approaches to artistic practice and research with a commitment to practice and politics that challenge how we engage with art and art practice. Here I cite my experience of working with Utrecht-based arts organisation, BAK, basis voor actuele kunstVoor, who describe their work of "instituting otherwise" as "the actualization of the collective alternative imaginings of the 'not-yet'".[83] The otherwise is an opportunity for something propositional that imagines and implements something for the future – much like Karen Salt's proposition presented to the Creating Interference Research Network at

[82] I write *san-ko-fa* this way here to connect this practice to the way in which I heard *Sankofa* as a child and to connect this to a practice of enquiry and learning that is not limited by the bounds of research in the academic sense but is also connected to my childhood and the lineages of teaching and learning from *Sankofa* that comes from that line and continues through into my artistic practice.
[83] https://www.bakonline.org/program-item/trainings-for-the-not-yet/training-program-trainings-for-the-not-yet/propositions-10-instituting-otherwise/ (Accessed: 2 September 2022).

a Symposium held at the University of Westminster in 2018. She asked, "Can we engender new futures from the totalizing impulses of old frames?".[84] This would mean reflecting on those old frames and proposing new possibilities, as the Combahee River Collective did in 1977[85] when they put out their visionary statement that continues to inspire young Black feminists today, and as the many African and other post-colonial revolutionaries did and, to some extent, imagining a world without colonisation. Of course, this is not easy, as those totalising frames are relentless in upholding their dominance and proficient in their adaptation. But just as *Sankofa* has cloaked itself, hidden and re-emerged, again and again, each obstacle and limitation provide space for invention and reinvention.

Archiving Otherwise: Materiality, Decolonising, and Reclaiming Lost Ones in the Archive

The conditions of historic memory and its apparatus of remembering, as understood through the archive, are saturated with a repressive all-knowing power that is inherently western and colonial in origin. This is an archive where evidence justifies a type of power and an order of things, even if, within that order, there are limits, and, within those limits, there is artifice, delusion, and silencing of voices that might tell a story that disrupts, discounts, or runs counter to this given order. How does one who comes from a cultural background that was considered to not have a history retrieve a past "without prior knowledge or memory of what constitutes pastness?" (Trouillot 2015: 15). This presents those of us whose histories have been excluded from or shrouded within these historic narratives an opportunity to think about how we imagine and do archival work that, on the one hand, challenges the narratives written into the official archives or, on the other, present alternative methodologies

[84] UKRI Deputy Director and co-founder of the Centre for Race and Rights at Nottingham University, asked this question as part of her keynote speech for Creating Interference: making art, developing methods, re-imagining histories/memories (Creating Interference, CREAM and University of Westminster 2018)

[85] The Combahee River Collective Statement was a revolutionary statement first published in 1977. It is the first piece of writing to acknowledge the idea of intersecting oppressions and set out a principle of movement work that aspires to a notion of liberation for all from the position of if the black lesbian woman is free then we can all be free. This statement continues to inspire Black feminists with the statement being republished in *How we Get Free: Black Feminism and the Combahee River Collective* edited by Keeanga Yamahtta Taylor (2012). The book also reflects on the impact of the statement.

of memory practice that have at their core an impetus to either remember and/or create archival propositions that provide an opening for different narratives to be heard, experienced, and collected. There are many projects that do work similar to the work that the Black Cultural Archives was doing in the back of the bookshop, working with materials to create and constitute archives and archiving projects, that evidence alternative histories, movements, and interior lives of individuals and communities. Much of this work is centred on collecting, collating, and activating materials. However, these projects trouble the official archives, by contesting the methodologies of archival practice, while they propose and create new archives, modes of archiving, and critical remembering. These propositions bring imagination and affective registers to the archive, and they rethink the language of the archive, the purpose of the archive, and how to create approaches to the archive that are compatible with the communities that the archives make legible and serve. In this section, I will present a variety of different projects and materials that I have been looking at, which work with the materiality of the archive to challenge the dominant narratives of the archive and, in many ways, contribute to Stuart Hall's (2001: 90) proposition for the creation of a "living archive of diaspora".

As well as the Black Cultural Archives, there are a number of archives and archive projects that have been set up by black cultural activists to collect materials that speak to the lives and experiences of black people in Britain. Many follow the form of archival constitution that draws on practices and protocols developed by state and official archives, in terms of how to log, collate, and preserve the materials, but often lack the resources to maintain these protocols in the archives. Archives are labour intensive and resource heavy, especially archives that wish to continue collecting or preserving the work that they do. Even as the incentive to create more alternative remembering projects has been encouraged through the Heritage Lottery Fund,[86] this fund provides project grants, meaning that, just as with the archives in post-

[86] The Heritage Lottery Fund is a U.K. based funding organisation that distributes approximately £300 million per year to projects to British heritage projects, including buildings, collections archives and public domain projects. They are a non-governmental body but accountable to the British parliament. https://www.heritagefund.org.uk (Accessed 13 September 2022)

colonial countries such as Ghana, these archives live in a state of precarity, often needing the support of willing volunteers and patrons to support their day-to-day functioning. Other lesser-known archives than the Black Cultural Archives doing similar work in Britain include The George Padmore Institute,[87] an archive and educational resource founded in 1991 by political activist and poet John La Rose; The Nottingham Black Archive,[88] a community initiative dedicated to collecting materials related to African Caribbean communities in Nottingham, founded in 2009; The Huntley Collections,[89] a collection of the papers of Erica and Jessica Huntley, publishers and founders of the Bogle L'Overture Bookshop, housed at the London Metropolitan Archives[90] and supported by the Friends of the Huntley Archives at London Metropolitan Archives (FHALMA); the rukus! Black LGBT Archive,[91] founded by Ajamu X and Topher Campbell, which aims to collect materials related to black lesbian, gay, bisexual, and trans communities in the U.K.; and June Givanni's Pan African Cinema Archive,[92] a personal collection of film and film materials from the African diaspora, gathered during Givanni's time as a film programmer, in the process of being made more accessible for public use.

In order to legitimise the stories that they contain, many of these archives, although developing collections that sit outside of the story of European hegemony

[87] An archive and educational resource, based in North London, that holds events, readings, and other cultural events. The archive holds materials related to "the black community of Caribbean, African and Asian descent in Britain and continental Europe". https://www.georgepadmoreinstitute.org/ (Accessed: 30 August 2022).
[88] The collection holds documents relating to the Black community in Nottingham, including a growing collection of oral histories. http://nottinghamblackarchive.org/ (Accessed: 30 August 2022).
[89] This archive holding contains the personal records of Erica and Jessica Huntley, Guyanese-born political activists, community workers, and educators, and is activated through events and community programmes by the Friends of the Huntley Archives at the London Metropolitan Archives https://fhalma.org/ (Access: 30 August 2022).
[90] Huntley Archives at LMA catalogue: https://search.lma.gov.uk/scripts/mwimain.dll/144/LMA_OPAC/web_detail/REFD+LMA~2F4463?SESSIONSEARCH (Accessed: 30 August 2022).
[91] The ruckus! materials are also held at the London Metropolitan Archives. This is a growing archive that is still collecting. ruckus! collects materials devoted to the culture, heritage, and experiences of black LGBT people in the U.K. https://www.communityarchives.org.uk/content/organisation/london-lgbt-archive-rukus (Accessed: 30 August 2022).
[92] Currently in residence at the Mayday Rooms in London. http://www.junegivannifilmarchive.com/ (Accessed: 30 August 2022).

corroborated by mainstream archives, often have to conform to the kinds of archival protocols and practices of collecting that sometimes are in conflict with the ways in which they were developed. Speaking about his involvement with the FHALMA,[93] the sociologist, filmmaker, and archives curator Colin Prescod (2017: 76) described his practice as being informed by a concept of "reparative" history-making.[94] Prescod writes about this as approaching the archive from the perspective of "Blackness", a position that he describes as being voiced from "… the Black experience in Britain across the twentieth and twenty-first centuries", informed by a "rebellious rage" to reframe "the radical histories of resistance to White supremacy, locally and globally" (ibid.: 77). This "rebellious rage" and call for history-making from a black perspective has been one that challenges the colonial legacy of the practice of archiving, foregrounding the growing conversation on what it would mean to decolonise the archive. J.J. Ghaddar and Michelle Caswell (2019) make a proposition for a "decolonial archival praxis" that radically transforms archiving and archival practice. They describe this praxis as lying "within a radical tradition beyond liberal normative understandings of diversity and social justice as inclusion, representation or recognition towards more critical theories and practices that seek remedies necessitating social transformation rather than accommodation or incorporation" (ibid.: 72). For Ghaddar and Caswell, employing such an approach to archiving would generate an archival research practice "that reflects on and is transparent about the assumptions and positionalities of those producing and disseminating knowledge; and that is committed to dismantling structures and systems of oppression and domination" (ibid.). This would be a call for an "openness to epistemic diversity", to reshape the archive and explore the potential of repatriation, reclamation, and reparation (ibid.: 80). Much like the practices of Prescod, who brings the affective register of rage to the archive, or Ghaddar and Caswell's decolonising proposition of

[93] Friends of the Huntley Archives at London Metropolitan Archives https://fhalma.org/ (Accessed: 30 August 2022).

[94] For his description of this context, Prescod draws on the work of Cathy Bergin and Anita Rupprecht (2017, 77), and their concerns around reparative histories, which are to unravel "the complex interconnections between past and present in the context of contemporary resistances to racism and the legacies of colonialism".

reclamation and reparation, practices centred around the archive make propositions and presentations of archival practice that attempt to challenge the conventional logic of archives and archiving. Projects such as my own *South London Black Music Archive*[95] use materials to make propositions for other ways of working with archives. These projects are often individual or collective projects that draw on material but are not wedded to collecting and collating material in ways that demand significant labour or resources to keep them going. They play with temporality, performativity, and other ways of activating the archive. This thinking with archives does not sit comfortably in the discipline of archives and in fact develops a critical memory practice that attempts to work with and reveal what is hidden to think about the relevance of materiality.

The Remembering Olive Collective was a black womxn's art and archives research collective that came together in 2007. The collective members were involved in putting together a collection dedicated to black British community activist Olive Morris, through a project called *Remembering Olive Morris*,[96] which is now housed at the Lambeth Archives. Besides collecting material associated with Olive Morris, they put together an extensive number of community events, call outs and other

[95] I made this as a propositional archive to explore black presence and contributions to British society. It was a temporary/pop-up archive which invited people to co-create an archive of black music memories and memorabilia. Beginning with a group of young people from Peckham, with whom I made a vinyl record, with testimonies from them around musical memories from their families. Based on the BBC's Inheritance Tracks the *Legacy Tunes* vinyl was created as a keepsake for contributors to the temporary archive. The soundscape consisted of familiar sounds from Peckham, with the sound of the young people's voices and their chosen music drifting in and out throughout the piece. http://www.peckhamplatform.com/whats-on/exhibitions/south-london-black-music-archive (Accessed: 2 September 2022).

[96] This collective was founded in 2007 through its involvement with the Lambeth Women's Project (Burin and Ahaiwe Sowinski 2014: 113). They refer to themselves as an ad hoc group working together to pull together an archive of material related to political activist Olive Morris. https://olivemorris.org/ (Accessed: 30 August 2022); https://rememberolivemorris.wordpress.com/ (Accessed: 30 August 2022). In 2011, they became X Marks the Spot, and in 2012, X Marks the Spot did a project around Jo Spence's photographs https://www.studiovoltaire.org/resources/2012-jo-spence-radio-broadcast/ (Accessed: 30 August 2022). They have also been involved in putting together *Human Endeavour: A Creative Finding Guide for the Women of Colour Index*, with Rita Keegan and the Women's Art Library (X Marks the Spot, Anim-Addo and Greenan 2015), as described by archivist and X Marks the Spot founding member Ego Ahaiwe Sowinski in a recent conversation, part of the *Hot Moment* exhibition at Auto Italia South East (this was recorded by Not Nowhere but the recording is not yet logged in their archive). http://autoitaliasoutheast.org/project/hot-moment/ (Accessed: 30 August 2022).

opportunities for people to come together to remember Morris as a friend and also as a driving force in anti-racist and housing organising in Brixton and surrounding areas. They were also involved in the campaign to save Olive Morris House, a local council building that dealt with benefits and housing issues. The scope of this collective's work stretches beyond collecting and remembering into the realms of community organising, influencing what is remembered in the public consciousness and how this remembering is mobilised to affect the future of the communities and organisations they work with. Collective member, community organiser, and archivist Ego Ahaiwe Sowinski and Black feminist activist Yula Burin (2014: 112) wrote about their work as being developed in what they described as a black British feminist archival consciousness that "uses reflection as a basis for change" (Burin and Ahaiwe Sowinski 2014: 112). In a conversation with Taylor Le Melle and Ingrid Pollard on 2nd February 2020 reflecting on the documentation, preservation, and representation of black women's and QTIPOC[97] creativity in London since the 1980s, Ahaiwe Sowinski referred to the proposition she wrote with Burin, speaking of the importance of friendship and kinship to bringing an informal dialogic process to the archival activation process.

Creating projects in kinship and friendship is also important to Decolonise the Archive (DTA)[98] a collective consisting of archivists, artists, musicians, and writers, dedicated to "Black Memory" and "African Futures", whose projects include performances, publications, and radio broadcasts that draw on materials in official archives, un-constituted archives, archives of the airwaves and of the ephemeral. Founded by archivist, researcher, and educator Etienne Joseph[99] and memory work and theatre director Connie Bell, DTA's archival interventionist practice is premised

[97] QTIPOC stands for queer, trans, intersex, people of colour. (Smith 2018)
[98] A collective thinking about what archives might look like from a Black/Pan-Africanist perspective, asking questions about what this might look like from our own cultural perspectives. https://www.decolonisingthearchive.com/ (Accessed: 30 August 2022).
[99] Ego Ahaiwe Sowinski and Etienne Joseph are both trained archivists who came to the practice through community organising. They are both members of We are TRANSMISSION, a collective of archivists and historians of African heritage working to support and build archives and heritage in and with African diaspora communities. https://wearetransmission.space (Accessed: 30 August 2022). Although both have undertaken this training, they combine their work of community organising with archiving.

on developing an "African/diasporan archival science" that draws on "African/diasporan ways of knowing" (Joseph and Bell 2020: 520). Their interdisciplinary approach to archival practice does not limit them to only entering the doors of official archives to interrupt and reconfigure archival production; rather, they consider the archive for people of African descent as a holistic project in which "everything is everything" (ibid.). For them, this is the underlying unity of everything material and immaterial, meaning that the archive does not exist only in documents or what can be evidenced in documents. Quoting Manning Marable, they develop the idea of "everything is everything" as a methodological approach to remembering beyond the document "towards embodiment, living testimony, and spirituality" (Marable, cited in Joseph and Bell 2020: 520). They are interested in creating projects that attend to the things that the *European archive* cannot contain or offers no "resting place for" (Joseph and Bell 2020: 521). Their ongoing project, DTA live,[100] a weekly radio show, broadcast and archived on Mixcloud, not only refers to and develops from materials kept in formal archives, but also engages with materials that may never be archived or are impossible to contain, such as a conversation, dance moves, or the effect of live music events. They use the Mixcloud platform to reformat the space of the archive, and the internet airwaves for creating a different approach to accessibility, sharing, and the transmission of memory and learning.

Adjoa Armah describes herself as an archivist, anthropologist, and artist. Based between London and Accra, her ongoing project Saman Archive is a repository for photographic negatives collected from studio photographers and itinerant photographers from Ghana. Armah's process began with collecting negatives, in 2015. She has made that which would normally decay or be discarded into not just a repository of over 100,000 negatives, but also a form of research that informs her artistic practice. On the project website, Armah describes the Saman Archive as

> … a place for slow work in honour of many lives and lifetimes. It is an archive that resists the hegemonic functions of its kind. An archive of

[100] https://www.decolonisingthearchive.com/radio (Accessed: 30 August 2022).

> indeterminate boundaries. We are for teaching and learning differently, listening deeply, and committing to honouring what is heard, for reconciling the irreconcilable.[101]

Saman Archive is an invitation by Armah to ask questions about remembering through the photographic image. Like with my own work, Armah is interested in developing her working process and methodology through her personal relationship with Ghana and what she describes as "Akan temporalities and West African technologies of social and historic mediation".[102] Like the Remembering Olive Collective and Decolonising the Archive, Adjoa Armah has set out to challenge the boundaries of the archive and its reliance on documents to corroborate and write history. These examples also show that recent historic materials related to black life are precarious and it takes a certain type of commitment and invention to make these materials live and accessible to a wide range of people. As much as these practitioners are engaged in the practice and study of the archive,[103] they are also developing a critique of European archival practice, experimenting with the archive, making propositions for otherwise approaches to archiving, and opening up to the possibility that the body and the minds of people related to the archive and its material offer a different way to understand the idea of the archive as a repository of memory.

Other Stories: Black Feminist Memory in Storytelling

In the essay 'Remembering This Bridge Called My Back, Remembering Ourselves', from her 2005 book *Pedagogies of Crossing: Mediations on Feminism, Sexual Politics, Memory and the Sacred*, M. Jacqui Alexander reflects on the importance of the

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[101] https://www.samanarchive.com/about (Accessed: 30 August 2022).
[102] https://www.samanarchive.com/about (Accessed: 30 August 2022).
[103] Both Ego Ahaiwe Sowinski and Etienne Joseph are trained archivists who came to the practice through community organising. They are both members of We Are TRANSMISSION, a collective of archivists and historians of African heritage working to support and build archives and heritage in and with African diaspora communities. https://wearetransmission.space (Accessed: 30 August 2022). Although both have undertaken this training, they combine their work of community organising with archiving, building on the concept of the "living archive of the diaspora" (Hall 2001: 90) to not only collect, collate and prepare materials for archiving.

anthology as a practice of remembering. First published in 1981, *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (Moraga and Anzaldúa 1983) brought together the writings of women from multiple identities to reflect on their life experiences, challenging the perception of white feminists who spoke of sisterhood but neglected to see their own racialised bias. Alexander remembers moments of sisterhood that cannot and would not be documented in an archive. The moments of friendship and kinship, thinking, organising, and imagining together. The anthology became a way of gathering materials that came from these moments. Stories, testimonies, poetry, and commentary were gathered together by collectives of women who used writing as a way to document and share experiences of their lives and the lives of women that came before them: their mothers, grandmothers, and foremothers of the movements they were forming. This was also a way of recording the many gatherings, political campaigns, tributes to friends and allies lost, and also the day-to-day activities of navigating a world that did not have much space for the stories and narratives of black womxn and womxn of colour. In the essay 'Situated Voices: Black Women's Experience and Social Work', Gail Lewis (1996: 25)[104] speaks about the experience of writing in this way: "Embedded within many of these was a notion of claiming a 'voice': a position from which to speak. This 'speaking' was necessary if the specificity of 'black women's experience' was to be articulated and a claim to a self-defined womanhood made". Lewis also speaks about how this practice of sharing experiences was not just about kinship, friendship, and imagining together, but was also about a personal and collective motivation to address historic inequalities and to affect political and social change.

Like *This Bridge Called My Back*, many of these anthologies have been republished. *The Black Woman: An Anthology*, edited by Toni Cade Bambara (1970), was republished in 2005; *The Heart of the Race: Black Women's Lives is Britain*, edited by Beverley Bryan, Stella Dadzie and Susan Scafe (1985), was republished in 2018;

[104] In 1988, Gail Lewis was part of the editorial team, together with Shabnam Grewal, Jackie Kay, Liliane Landor, and Pratibha Parmar, that put together *Charting the Journey: Writings by Black and Third World Women*.

Daughters of Africa, edited by Margaret Busby (1992), was republished and represented as the *New Daughters of Africa: An International Anthology of Writing by Women of African Descent* in 2019. Many of these books were published by small feminist publishers and, as such, many are now difficult to find, and command incredibly high prices in the second-hand book market.[105] These books became not only repositories of memory, information, and experience, but have become invaluable to many Black and womxn of colour feminists developing their thinking and practices today. In fact the practice of collecting and compiling black and womxn of colour writing is such a potent and collective way of archiving stories, lives, narratives, experiences, and activist work, that many young black womxn and womxn of colour seek out print books and campaign to get such books republished,[106] also creating new collections through more accessible publishing platforms, self-publishing,[107] and smaller publishing houses.[108]

Writing, for black womxn, is such a potent practice to make our memories, practices, and experiences legible and it has become a key practice in addressing the ways in which black women are remembered, remember, and imagine ourselves. To follow on from the previous section, I want to start this section by considering some of the ways in which black women have approached the archive, using writing and

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[105] On 18 August 2022, for example, *Charting the Journey* (Grewal, Kay, Landor, Lewis and Parmar 1988), was available online at Abebooks for £92.84, and *Passion: Discourses on Blackwomen's Creativity* (Sulter 1990) was available on Amazon Marketplace for £190.00.

[106] This is currently happening with a group of black people and people of colour artists, who have come together to work on republishing *Passion: Discourses on Blackwomen's Creativity*, edited by Maud Sulter.

[107] Such as the work of Co-Conspirator Press, from the Women's Centre for Creative Work in Los Angeles, which publish a variety of small print-run books, including *The Creative Black Women's Playbook* by Veronica C. Ratliff (2019) and *Experiments in Joy: A Workbook*, compiled by Gabrielle Civil (2020), and *The Black Feminist Study Theory Atlas: The Church of Black Feminist Thought*, by Ra Malika Imhotep and Miyuki Baker (2019). https://co-conspirator.press/ (Accessed: 31 August 2022).

[108] These publishers usually have a more radical and political agenda and are often run by women. These include Kore Press, which published *Letters to the Future: Black Women/Radical Writing* (Hunt and Martin 2018) (https://korepress.org/; Accessed: 31 August 2022), Verso (https://www.versobooks.com/; Accessed: 31 August 2022), which republished *The Heart of the Race* (Bryan, Dadzie and Scafe 2018[1985]), and AK Press (https://www.akpress.org/; Accessed 31 August 2022), which has been publishing books such as *Pleasure Activism: The Politics of Feeling Good* (Brown 2019) and *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds* (Brown 2019), compiled by Adrienne Maree Brown, that feature writings from BIPOC womxn.

storytelling to contest the authority of the archival story. In *Dispossessed Lives: Enslaved Women, Violence, and the Archive*, Marisa J. Fuentes (2016) attempts to give voice to enslaved women who appear in fragments in the colonial archives of Bridgetown, Barbados. Fuentes does this to question the nature of history, in order to map the construction of race, gender, and power in slavery and in the British colonial Caribbean (ibid.: 2). Fuentes, an historian, wanted to challenge the discipline of historiography and, as such, she brings a Black feminist epistemology to the practice of history, "opening up possibilities for historicizing, mourning, remembering and listening to the condition of enslaved women" (ibid.: 1). Her approach attempts to destabilise the discourse within the archive, in order to "'recover' knowledge about how enslaved women made meaning from their lives" and how they "enacted their personhood despite their experiences of dehumanization and commodification" (ibid.: 2–3).

In *Venus in Two Acts* (2008), Saidiya Hartman evokes Venus as the fragmented trace of two dead enslaved girls mentioned in a legal document, minor characters in a story of sexual abuse and physical violence in the "archive of slavery" (ibid.: 1). Hartman uses the traces and fragments of the story that she found in the archive and elaborates on it as a representation of the many unaccounted-for women who would have experienced similar violent acts and death at the hands of the various actors in the business of slavery. The first act attends to Venus's memory and the memory of what was done to her. With an awareness that, within the archive, violence and exploitation of black women's bodies continue through to our present, the second act brings life to these two young women and their experience. Through a storytelling methodology she describes as "critical fabulation", combining archival research, critical theory, and fiction, Hartman attempts to recover Venus, and to understand her own personal relationship to history and how this history is affecting the present (ibid.: 4). Hers is a practice of reading the document "against the grain" (Hartman 1997: 10), with an awareness of the limitations of such a reading yet looking for the glimpses of life that can be heard amongst the silence. In her most recent book, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval* (2019), Hartman expands her use of this methodology to consider the

wayward as an otherwise way of living and imagining the world (ibid.: xv). She takes traces of stories of young black women living in American cities at the turn of the 20th century from the case files of prison officers, social workers, psychiatrists, and others in the business of judgement, research, and classification to tell a story of radical imagination and personal and sexual freedom. The "wayward" then becomes a space of imagination and possibility, and, through recovering these stories, Hartman reminds those of us who are trying to live and imagine otherwise that there were those who came before us and those who will follow.

The development of stories and narratives in Black feminist memory practice has also developed in film and other practices, such as performance, which I will return to in the next section of this chapter. Cheryl Dunye's 1996 film, *The Watermelon Woman*, brings to life black lesbian actors in early Hollywood films and "race films" of the 1940s and 1950s. Playing herself as an aspiring filmmaker working part-time in a video store, while also exploring the world of relationships, the film also attempts to make visible her own exuberant and rebellious life as a young black lesbian woman in Philadelphia, as she searches for the "Watermelon Woman", Fae Richards, a fictional black lesbian actress with whom Dunye becomes obsessed. Dunye, perhaps a descendant of the women that Hartman brings to life in her book, searches for Fae in her mother's basement, the streets and neighbourhoods of Philadelphia, the shelves of the video store in which she works, the derelict buildings that used to be the hot venues of Philadelphia's queer nightlife. She is eventually invited into the homes of people who knew Fae and the messy and un-constituted C.L.I.T. (Centre for Lesbian Info and Technology) archives in New York. With Dunye's clever positioning of her own personal navigation of becoming an out and proud black lesbian and filmmaker, Dunye refers to the archive but does not rely on it to evidence her or people like her. The story lies in what she learns from others, the elders in her community, and through her own becoming. Although using fiction and docudrama as core strategies in the presentation of this work, Dunye approaches remembering in a similar way to Hartman, except Dunye's fragments are anecdotes, hearsay, and traces left in buildings on the streets of Philadelphia. In order to attend

with care to telling stories of black womxn's lives, Dunye, like many others, turns to fiction as a method. Like Hartman bringing into vision, not just the suffering and the legacy of that suffering, but the ways in which black women – young, poor, lesbian, perceived as deviant or mentally ill – are creative, brilliant, and inventive, and continue to create new forms of living in remembrance of those that came before them.

I want to close this section by mentioning the work of Alexis Pauline Gumbs, who describes herself as a "Queer Black Troublemaker and Black Feminist Love Evangelist and an aspirational cousin to all sentient beings".[109] Gumbs (2011: 18) has developed her writing practice in reverence to those who came before, drawing on the "writing, teaching, correspondence, and activism of Black feminist literary figures" to bring together projects that facilitate collective experiences of reflection on their work, such as the *Mobile Homecoming Project*,[110] "an intergenerational experiential archive project to amplify generations of Black LGBTQ brilliance" and the *Eternal Summer of the Black Feminist Mind,*[111] a multi-mediated community school based in Durham, North Carolina, and active in 143 countries around the world. These projects bring a live and collective experience to the practice of remembering, through activating materials of Black feminist practice with others: sharing stories, reading together, writing, and remembering the creative work of black women and queer men through her ongoing projects and workshops. Her recent trilogy of prose poetry books *Spill: Scenes of Black Feminist Fugitivity* (2017), *M Archive: After the End of the World* (2018) and *Dub: Finding Ceremony* (2020) take inspiration from the work of black women theorists Hortense Spillers, M. Jacqui Alexander, and Sylvia Winter. Gumbs took on a daily practice of experimental writing with the work of these women to explore black women's conceptions of freedom (Gumbs 2017) and Black feminism after the end of the world, in the form of a future archivist compiling an archive after the conditions of late capitalism, anti-blackness, and environmental

[109] https://www.alexispauline.com/about (Accessed: 31 August 2022).
[110] https://www.mobilehomecoming.org/ (Accessed: 31 August 2022).
[111] https://blackfeministmind.wordpress.com/about/ (Accessed: 31 August 2022).

crisis have destroyed the world (Gumbs 2018). In her most recent book, *Undrowned: Black Feminist Lessons from Marine Mammals*, Gumbs (2020) brings us a guidebook for societal transformation, building on her study of Black feminist thinking and practice and pairing this with the wisdom of marine mammals. She imagines a relationship between Africans lost at sea during the transatlantic slave trade, no longer drowned but living with and as sea mammals. When presenting this work in talks and readings, Gumbs often uses her books as an oracle, asking people in the audience to think of a question they would like answered.[112] She then asks them to choose a book and a page number, reading out the reflection that she has written in answer to that question. Gumbs' practice is a continuum of the shared experience of Black feminist memory practice and storytelling that offers modes of remembering, healing, and imagining living otherwise (ibid.).

Performing Presence: Performance and Performativity as Memory Practice

I was recently in a conversation on the subject of performance and archives[113] with fellow artists Nathalie Anguezumo Mba Bikoro and Ra Malika Imhotep, chaired by the Black feminist researcher, writer, and curator Nydia A Swaby, in which I described my relationship to performance as memory practice as a way of holding space for something to occur. I also mentioned that since the presentation of my work can also take the form of workshops, teach-ins, reading groups, publications, and more, I was not rigidly wedded to the structural concepts of performance, but I do think about performance in relation to my racialised and gendered body as bringing a certain kind of performative presence to the work and the ways in which it interfaces with the audiences' own embodied memory. Thinking about bringing life to remembering or bringing memory to life, performance and performativity are productive and generative practices in which memory can be researched,

[112] I experienced asking Gumbs a question and her answering it from her book *Spill* at the Sensing the Planet: Black Atlantic Symposium, organised by the Serpentine Gallery and the Dartington Trust. https://www.dartington.org/whats-on/archive/sensing-the-planet/ (Accessed: 31 August 2022).
[113] Archival Disorientation was presented on October 21st 2021, as part of Itinerant Imaginaries a programme of talks and screenings organized by the Creating Interference Network in collaboration with the British Art Network. https://britishartnetwork.org.uk/event/itinerant-imaginaries-ii-archival-disorientation/ (Accessed 13 September 2022)

experimented with, and embodied. Opening up performance to the potential of this kind of performativity, the sites and possibilities for performance practice open up, meaning that this is not limited to the usual sites of performance, such as the stage or, in the case of visual art practice, the art gallery. Nor does this limit performance to the usual physical gestures of performance, such as acting, singing, or dancing. I am not saying that these elements of the practice of performance are rejected rather, with performance and performativity being explored together in a memory practice, engagements with objects or sites of memory such as the archive, museum, the streets, or the airwaves allow for a visceral and embodied experience of remembering that presents different ways of attending to the silences present in dominant narratives of history. In the introduction to *Black Performance on the Outskirts of the Left: A History of the Impossible*, Malik Gaines (2017) describes the performative qualities of blackness that operate at the borders of history, the self, the performer, and the sites and spaces in which the work is presented. He speaks about the idea of re-enactment, not just as the remembering and re-performing of an event, but also as something that signifies that which is encoded within the bodily schema and cultural perceptions of race and gender. As such, some of the motivation towards performance is to command and occupy this space not just with the material of the performance, but also through the somatic experience of embodied remembering.

In 2018, I was invited by Swedish academic and researcher in theatre and gender studies Anna Lundberg to see Josette Bushell-Mingo's production of *Nina: A Story About Me and Nina Simone* at Riksteatern in Stockholm. Bushell-Mingo is a British-born actor and theatre director of Guyanese descent who has lived and worked in Sweden for many years. The show was essentially Bushell-Mingo's memoir, reflecting on her formative years as a black child growing up in London, the loss of her mother, and her experience of race and racism in London, Sweden, and the current situation in the wider world. Central to the presentation of Bushell-Mingo's story was her relationship with Nina Simone, which was present throughout the personal dialogue with the audience and her performance of some of Nina Simone's music. The audience of Swedish people was mostly white and mostly came to the

show to see a re-enactment of Nina Simone's songs as performed by Bushell-Mingo. But as Monica Miller writes in 'The Grain of Her Voice: Nina Simone, Josette Bushell-Mingo and the Intersections Between Art, Politics and Race' (Adjeni, Asante, Lundberg and Miller 2020), "Josette Bushell-Mingo and Nina Simone are not the same person, even in this performance. Josette does and does not play Nina Simone on stage". Miller goes on to say that whenever she goes to the theatre, especially when the performer or the playwright is a black woman, she asks herself who the piece is written for. Bushell-Mingo played with this notion of whom this work is for, shifting and playing with performative registers of a concert, being in direct conversation with the audience, and shifting between herself and the character that is the performer performing Nina. The majority of the audience believed in the performance as a re-enactment or tribute to Nina Simone. However, this was not Bushell-Mingo's intention. In my contribution to the article, I wrote:

> *The audience in Stockholm that night was much the same, if not whiter than I was used to seeing in London. They felt full of excitement for the nostalgia of Nina Simone, but unnervingly distant from any Black experience. Acutely aware of her audience, Josette's presence brings to the stage all the experience and training she gained from treading the boards of stages of London where white bodies and critique dominate.*
>
> *Quickly she cuts through the celebratory Black joy, a joy we know many white folks enjoy, to say out loud the names of Black men and women killed in police custody and racist murders. In doing this she acknowledges the practices of "saying their names". Drawing a breath from the rituals of activists groups such as Black Lives Matter, Sisters Uncut and Justice for Grenfell, who invoke the names of the dead as a way of giving presence to those souls that lost their lives to state, oppressive and systemic violence to presence and conspiring with—as in, in solidarity with or aligned with, also in breathing with or being with—the traditions of African and indigenous peoples, calling our ancestors to be with us, to witness us to guide us. And to do this Josette doesn't just break the fourth wall, she smashes it, presenting the audience*

> *with both her own and Nina's anger, the anger that still lives in Nina's music and the archive footage we have of her performances. To make sense—and I use* sense *here to mean to literally "make" sense, to make sense palatable—Josette takes the risky path of polarising the audience into those who are Black and those who are white, viscerally introducing the audience to the differences in our lives and experience. Her anger is so powerfully destructive, her call to violence echoing that of the native described by Frantz Fanon in his essay "Concerning Violence". Josette presents to us a living anger. A RAGE so palatable in the theatre, that you could feel the fearful energy physically as a cold and as thick fog rising around us all, taking away our ability to breathe. The white folks in the theatre smelling their own imminent death and us or maybe me or we, fearing the brutality in which this Black woman, our sister will be killed, maimed, or demonised for even attempting to play with this theatrical tactic of unapologetic presence. And as this happens, we feel it and we wait…*
>
> *We wait to see what happens as a horrifically violent and fearful silence takes over the theatre.* (Adjeni, Asante, Lundberg and Miller 2020)

In the silence of that waiting, the remembering bodies in the theatre made a personal physical reference to what they knew or believed to be true in the memory of their own racialised and gendered experience. Uri McMillan (2015: 14) writes about "malleable bodies and flexible methodologies", reflecting on the "critical moments where black performance art, objecthood, and avatars meet challenges foundational (and often fetishized) notions of "truth" and accuracy are thought to reside in more typical forms of evidence". In relation to this, Bushell-Mingo's performance plays with the notion of history on many levels. Bringing into the present time of the performance space, the memories of racial and gendered oppression as a historical continuum not just present in the moment of confrontation. This also happens in the way Bushell Mingo evokes the notion of separation through fear in the audience, relating to how she makes explicit the ways in which constructions of racial identity (that which lives in all our bodies) create very different embodied experiences of a situation. She reverses the position of comfort.

But our comfort as black people only last a moment. Monica Miller and I held onto each other as this confrontation unfolded, fearful of the violence that could have been enacted on Josette[114]. Then there is the context of the theatre and our understanding of the theatrical construction of a mise en scene that presents us with a familiar scene of a concert recalling and re-enacting Nina Simone, yet what it is supposed to be doing/offering us is much more critical.[115]

Drawing on the Memories of Our Foremothers: Performance and Ritual

The role of ritual is closely aligned to performance. Rituals are as much about holding space for transformation as they are about holding space for remembering. Writer and African spiritual teacher Malidoma Somé was born into a community of Dagara people, in Dano, Burkina Faso in 1956. The everyday life of his community was premised on rituals of remembrance: from rituals to honour births, deaths, and marriages, to rituals for harvests and in remembrance and gratitude for the earth and the gifts that it gives to humans to enable them to live. These rituals would be the responsibility of the whole community and would be performed individually, in family units and as a whole community (Somé 1997). In his book, *Power, Healing and Community: The African Teachings of the Dagara*, Somé (ibid.) describes ritual as the way in which Dagara people measure their connection with the unseen world: the way in which they maintain a connection to the ancestors and the way the ancestors bring knowledge to the living. Ritual is an essential part of living in the present and making way for the future. Somé sees ritual as "anti-machine" (ibid.: 19), a practice that is innately political but deeply spiritual and incompatible with modern industrial life. Drawing on ancestral and indigenous traditions such as that described by Somè, many black artists and artists of colour, particularly those working in performance and performative practice, are considering the role of ritual in their practice as a way

[114] I use Josette here as Monica and I have both known her for a long-time and want to evoke that connection here. The fear of hearing about another violent act on a black/ brown person in such a situation is something that is often distant yet so intimate.

[115] I'm using critical here both in terms of what the piece offers in terms of an analytic of history, culture, and race and critical as in urgent as Bushell Mingo's piece pays attention to the contemporary experience of grief and anger over black death.

to remember, explore ways to find out things that are not known, and consider other ways of being and imagining the future.

The founder of the *Arrivals Legacy Project*, theatre director, and dramaturge, Diane Roberts, encourages indigenous ways of knowing and expressing in her work with people, inviting them to experience their relationship with their ancestors through movement and ritual.[116] The project has been developed as a five-day transformational process aimed at artists and people working in any form of change or transformational process. The work is centred around exploring ancestry, ceremony, and root practices developed from Roberts' knowledge of performance and theatre, coupled with African diasporan performance and ritual traditions, acknowledging loss and reviving stories of recovery and return.[117] In the video of the workshop, Roberts shares that the *Arrivals* project is an acknowledgement that we understand each other through ancestry. She explores the idea that we carry in our bones, breath, bodies, and voices a deep awareness of our ancestors and that, through getting in touch with this awareness, we can imagine and create beyond the limits of our conventional understanding. Roberts describes this as "thinking under each other's borders", being with your body and getting in touch with a different kind of knowing and navigating from where that knowing arrives.[118] Through this work, Roberts invites people to explore the stories that live in the body, a gesture, a feeling, and a way of moving that enables the participant to embody an ancestor and in that liminal space become in touch with memories, intuition, and imagination. Much like Ebony Coletu's (2019) descendant epistemology, Roberts encourages participants to find a different way to find answers through a relatedness they find in their bodies.

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[116] Diane Roberts introduced CREAM PhD researchers to her process during an online workshop on decolonial practice in 2020?

[117] 'Navigating Loss, Reviving Stories of Recovery and Return' was the subtitle of Roberts' workshop, presented as a part of the Taking Liberty Conference in Toronto in October 2019, convened to discuss performance, decolonisation, and social movements between 1968 and 1988. https://sites.google.com/view/emancipatingnow (Accessed: 31 August 2022).(Accessed: 13 September 2022)

[118] The Arrivals Legacy Project https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZX1p_w14MgU

M. NourbeSe Philip's (2008) extended poem *Zong!* has been described as a "haunting lifeline between archive and memory, law and poetry".[119] Philips describes this project as in defence of the dead (ibid.: 25). *Zong!* attempts to resurrect and give voice to the story of the 130 Africans who, in 1781, were ordered to be murdered by the Captain of the slave ship Zong, so that the owners of the ship could collect insurance money for lost cargo. Philip drew on the legal decision of Gregson vs Gilbert (1783), which is the only public document that records such a massacre, though many other such incidents have happened and were not recorded. Since publishing the book in 2008, Phillip has organised performances and readings around the 29th of November, the date the massacre happened. Often inviting collaborators to join the performances and readings, these events become much more than performances. They are rituals evoking the memory of the Africans that were sacrificed for the sake of the insurance payment, allowing space for acknowledgement of the murderous tragedy and the mourning of the loss of their lives. The dead speak through the silences within the documents and in the echoes, moans, chants, ululations, and shouts that are generated during the performances. Philip says, of the process of working with the Gregson vs Gilbert document, that writing the poem felt like writing in "code" (Saunders 2008: 71). She looked in the text for places where she could "fuck with" and "destroy language" (ibid.). Philip brings to the page and to audiences what has been described as "an anti-narrative" (Masone 2017: 58) in order to remember the lives of those lost. This *anti-narrative* becomes seen and felt viscerally in the experience of seeing and performing *Zong!*[120] You become immersed in something other that is encoded in the document and released through the close attention that Philip has paid to the text. It is as if she has opened up every word and freed the souls of Ade, Wale, Obe, and Sade (Philip 2008: 130). In November 2020, while in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic, Philip organised the most ambitious and technical reading. *Zong! Global 2020* was not just

[119] https://www.nourbese.com/poetry/zong-3/ (Accessed: 31 August 2022).
[120] I organised one of the readings for Philip with readers in the U.K., Canada, and the Netherlands, involving myself, Nydia Swaby, Jessica Horn, Ronnie Mcgrath, Hakim Taylor, Foluke Taylor, Gail Lewis, Imani Robinson, Femi Oriogun Williams, Vanessa Richards, and Amal Alhaag.

an inventive way to approach the remembering of the fatal events that happened in November 1781, but also a response to the way in which the global pandemic had shone a harsh light on the massive health inequalities in countries in the global north – where a disproportionate number of black, brown, and indigenous people died from COVID-19, which reacted severely with the underlying health conditions many were living with – and to the death of George Floyd on 25th May 2020 at the hands of law enforcement officer Derek Chauvin. Like many incidents such as this, captured on video and phone cameras since the brutal beating of Rodney King in 1991, this murder was broadcast around the world, In 2020, however, with so many people around the world staying home to curb the spread of the virus, working from home on their personal computers and finding ways to entertain themselves on their phones, the spread of the footage of George Floyd's murder brought a new understanding to the meaning of viral videos. Following the way in which videos, communication, knowledge, and information was travelling via the internet, *Zong! Global* was presented in more than 60 live and recorded readings of *Zong!* over 10 days, from 30th November to 9th December 2020.

When One Door Closes Another One Opens

In the final chapter of *Pedagogies of Crossing: Meditations on Feminism, Sexual Politics, Memory, and the Sacred*, M. Jacqui Alexander (2005: 287) explores what she describes as a "pedagogy of the sacred", a learning that she received while researching the memory of Mojuba. Mojuba is ancestral prayer that gives reverence to those who came before and calls spirit through the heart of the person who calls. Alexander describes the Mojuba as "an expansive memory refusing to be housed in any single place, bound by limits of time, enclosed within the outlines of a map encased in the physicality of body or imprisoned as an exhibit in a museum. A refusal that takes its inheritance from the crossing" (ibid.: 288). Crossing are many things. The crossing is the space of the sea, the space between the "door of no return" and the new world that enslaved Africans found themselves in. It is also the space of migrations, moving from former colonies into the places and spaces of those that colonised. Crossings are the moves we make from our comfortable worlds into the academy or any other institution that holds a certain power. Crossings are the ways

in which we connect and relate to each other. My parents often used the statement "when one door closes another one opens". Used to attempt to comfort me at the loss of something, or when I did not get the role in the school play, or the job, that statement annoyed me. Why could the room I had entered not give me all the answers? I grew up in a home where such proverbial wisdom was the invitation to reflect on your life and what was happening in it. It was an approach to living that invited possibility and curiosity, even as adversity and loss might hit you in the face time and time again. Each time you closed the door you made a crossing and the key to being in the crossing was to be open and inventive in the way you approached the next door.

The materials, projects, and propositions described in this chapter take us on a journey through the silences of history, into the limits of the archive, to attend to the lives of African peoples mentioned in the documents. It takes us into the back of the bookshop, walking the streets of Jamestown, and rummaging in skips, where we recover our lost documents and begin developing strategies of archival and memory practice in "undisciplined" (Sharp 2016: 13) and "wayward" (Hartman 2019) ways. We want to invite the whole community into the archive, into the conversations about people that we want to remember, creating ways to share memories and histories through a relatedness that does not just come from people being together, but through also asking the ones we lost to share with us, through the knowing that lives in the body. We want to write these histories through picking up the fragments and piecing them together, through a different way of understanding and experiencing. Through fictionalising and using our imaginations to make meaning and invent processes of attending to memory that allow the silent ones to speak, and to imagine lives lived that can inspire a budding filmmaker, giving her a voice in which she can speak about the presence of people like her existing, creating, and making life in the world. To borrow words from M. Jacqui Alexander (2005: 264), these projects become evidence of "different cartographies of feminist struggles" with the archive and with remembering ourselves, drawing out "multiple histories and events, multiple geographies, multiple identifications": what Alexander has

described as the “fire” of our memory (ibid.: 265). Alexander asks “Why do we need to remember?” (ibid.: 275). She continues:

> What brings us back to remembrance is both individual and collective, both intentional and an act of surrender, both remembering desire and how it works. Daring to recognize each other again in a context that seems bent on making strangers of us all. (ibid.: 278)

In remembering *This Bridge Called My Back,* in reflecting on her own transnational pedagogic crossings, Alexander (ibid.: 269) offers us a way of thinking about remembering that is about making ourselves, addressing our yearning, bringing us home to our own ways of knowing as “we direct our social, cultural, psychic and spiritually marked attention on each other”. This is the repair, the reclamation, the healing that the act of remembering offers. This is what *Sankofa* offers in asking us to return, to reflect, and to understand that learning from this remembering can help us create the world otherwise. The college archivist Holly A. Smith describes her practice as being a “memory worker” (Frank and Swaby 2020: 19). This is what I along with all the materials, projects, and practices I have mentioned in this chapter are doing. Working with memory in a generative way, which is not just commemoration or filling in the gaps of history with alternative stories or viewpoints, the memory work I have pointed to here is challenging the conventions of memorial, while considering and creating liberatory ways of understanding and doing akin to what I have described in chapter one, which describes *Sankofa* in depth. Now that I have given context to my rationale for exploring my practice through *Sankofa* and explored materials, projects, and practices that connect to and are related to this practice, in the following chapters, which form the second part of this thesis, I will go deeper into how *Sankofa* has been working in my artistic practice, by looking at two of my projects: *Declaration of Independence* and *The Queen and the Black-Eyed Squint.* Both projects began in 2017 and are ongoing explorations in how to approach, history, archives, and memory in the present.

Part Two

3. The Women. They Were Plotting Too: Declaring our Independence in the Spirit of *Sankofa*

Figure 7: Conjure: Affirming our Existence, WE ARE HERE, 2nd Roma Biennale, Berlin Phase 5 #existence Poster campaign, October 2021

As Always, A Painful Declaration of Independence

-For Me

THE PROBLEM

dear friend
dear comrade,
is not that

I am a woman and
you are a man
-or at least not only that.

Or that you come from a different quarter of
the village
the town
the district
the region
the country
the continent
the earth

The problem was never that
I am black and you are white
-or not only that.

And as much as I wish
I had two whole legs
like you, plus a half,

and given my life

I could even have done
with an extra arm,
a third eye that saw
not just into me but you
and others and things.

I could have loaned you
a little fat too:
to help through,

those cold mornings as harmattan
and the even more colder nights
of your winter.

Friend,
height
was not missed much
except when

I needed to reach the
upper shelves of my existence
from where I would want
-occasionally-
to bring down
my forgotten
hopes
aspirations,
plans and projects
to be dusted….

When I would wish, fondly,
that I had one such as you

around
with the long arm that
could elegantly reach for
the tree-tops to
pick
the ripest and most
succulent
successes from the
skies….

Oh My Brother
the decision to
sever and separate
was not based on the knowledge of me
as a forever dreamer
unable and incapable of handling
the clear world of
take and
take and
take

while
you could comprehend the
motions of survival and

move with the speed of
a hare in burning grassland….

I am cutting loose, my dear,
for only one reason:

I do not know

where else you go
whom else you meet
when we part.

I have had to learn that
these other associations
live:

the connections are
there and tight
the commitments are real
the allegiances binding.
And the reverberations from them
have a way of
coming at me
shaking my foundations
affecting me
negatively.

I have nightmared of
different gatherings
-after we had parted-
where too
you sit at centre-stage

where they call up
names to censure
characters to assassinate
plot our on-doings

And

you do not say anything.

you do not own up to

knowing me well or
our comradeship and
what I thought
was our -mutual-
understanding

So my dear, my love,
I am gone.
I am through.
I cannot show up for
the meeting tonight or
any other night
anywhere
ever again.

No
My Dear, my friend,

I cannot show up tonight.

I won't be there.

I am gone.

Ama Ata Aidoo (1992: 7–11)

On-Doing Undoing

I have opened this chapter with Ama Ata Aidoo's poem 'As Always, A Painful Declaration of Independence', from her collection *An Angry Letter in January* (Ata Aidoo 1992). In the poem, dedicated to herself, Ata Aidoo declares independence, not only from colonisers but also from the racial and gender-based repressions that persist as a legacy of coloniality, mapping a trajectory of *on-doing*[121] that resonates with the notion of *undoing* expressed in Saidiya Hartman's (2020) 'The Plot of Her Undoing'.[122] Hartman's poetic piece reveals a repetition of a plot with many beginnings and continuations impacting the lives of black women to this day. She weaves a story of violence and domination steeped in the deep and enduring legacies of slavery, colonialism, and white supremacy. Both Ata Aidoo's poem and Hartman's text begin somewhere in the 15th century, with ships, encounters, and "a philosopher at his desk, pen in hand, as he sorts the world into categories of genus and species", (Hartman 2020: 1) the imagined scene set for many of the persistent and contested ideas and categories around race and gender we are still attempting to undo today. Ata Aidoo does not tell her story as explicitly as Hartman, but the same enduring legacies lurk between the lines of 'As Always, a Painful Declaration of Independence', very much alive in the effect they have on the perception of who she has been. This is what she defines as the problem.

Ama Ata Aidoo's approach to writing this poem is one of declarative address and personal testimony, letting us know that she knows this plot intimately and it is affecting the core of her being. The *on-doing of the plot* for Ama[123] happens with

[121] In 'As Always, A Painful Declaration of Independence', Ama Ata Aidoo spells "undoing" as "on-doing". This is spelt phonetically as English is spoken by someone whose mother tongue is Fanté.
[122] An essay written for the *Notes on Feminisms* series commissioned by the Feminist Art Coalition (FAC). FAC is a collaborative platform created by a number of arts institutions based in the U.S., committed to developing projects that address social justice and structural change from a feminist perspective. It was conceived by Aspara DiQuinzio, who, in 2017, in response to the election of Donald Trump in 2016 and the ways in which women came together to organise through women's marches, reached out to colleagues in the field to begin to conceptualise the project. https://feministartcoalition.org/about (Accessed: 3 September 2022).
[123] I use Ama's first name here as a gesture of affection and intimacy with this poetic work. I also use it performatively to echo the opening I use at the beginning of each *Declaration of Independence* performance. Each begins by referring to Ama (Ata Aidoo) writing 'As Always, A Painful Declaration of Independence' for herself.

recognition of the *problem*. Directing her words to the coloniser/the philosopher/the supposed benefactor – a lover, a brother and maybe a comrade – the piece alludes to a disappointing love affair. A love affair that is not based on recognition of her humanity or their mutual reciprocity, but rather an *encounter/affair* that limited her ability to thrive. An *encounter/affair* so steeped in betrayal that the connection and intimacy of their relationship is fervently denied. She knows that she and those that came before her have been taken in. They once trusted their relationship with this man that came to Saltpond,[124] Cape Coast, and Elmina[125] in his ships, with his bible, guns, cowries, and *pacotille*. He built forts and castles for his own profit and protection. Ama knows that this relationship was a series of betrayals that led to the extractive trading of gold, and people, that began in her home country in the 1480s. First, the man was Portuguese, followed closely by some British ones, a Dutch one, a Swede, some Danes, some Germans, and then more British ones, who in 1847 established control over the territory in which she lived and called it the Gold Coast. She thought that being in a relationship with him might be beneficial to her development, but the trade in gold and people made the European men wealthy and left Africans bereft and wanting.[126] There have been several attempts by Africans at *undoing the plot* of colonisation, but the European possession of her land has not been so easily surrendered. Still, the people reimagined their country as Ghana, evoking the spirit of a new African personality linked intellectually and spiritually to the ancient and powerful kingdom of Ghana.[127] The independence of her country

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[124] Saltpond is significant here because it is the place where my mum and Ama Ata Aidoo were born. It is also the place where Fort Amsterdam was built between 1632 and 1645. Originally built by the British as a slave fort, named Fort Cormantin or Courmantyne, it was captured and renamed by the Dutch in 1665 (Anquandah 1999).

[125] Three towns in close proximity with European forts. There are 32 in total along the coastline of Ghana. Ama Ata Aidoo was born in Saltpond near Fort Amsterdam.

[126] There is also the implication, just as in Gerima's *Sankofa*, that the woman Ama for whom the poem is written could also be representative of the land.

[127] *Ghana* means warrior or war chief (Page and Hunt Davis Jr 2005: 85–87). Records of the ancient kingdom of Ghana were written over 1,000 years ago by Arab geographers and travellers (Dei Anang 1964: 32). Known as the land of gold and as a seat of culture and learning (ibid.: 37), it was located a little further north than its modern location, which is thought to have been situated in what we now know as modern-day Mali (Page and Hunt Davis Jr 2005: 85–87). Although the geographic borders of ancient Ghana and modern Ghana did not intersect, Ghana was the name evoked and taken on by those campaigning for independence in Ghana, who believed themselves to be descendants of ancient Ghanaians, desiring to recover the memory of the once great kingdom (Dei Anang 1964: 42).

was fought for, negotiated, and granted by the British men in 1957,[128] but it did not yield the self-determination and liberation that was hoped for. This independence and separation from colonial rule could not attend to the deep societal and cultural fissures left within African communities as a result of hundreds of years of occupation, slave trading, gold extraction, and colonisation. Ama tells that also present in this *on-doing* is a precarious instability that has continued since independence. There have been broken commitments and allegiances, character assassinations, and actual assassinations.[129] There is no way to recover all that was lost, all that was taken. The wounds of colonialism are deep and persistent. There is no way back to before the encounter. Before the forts were built. Before the gold and people were taken.

Hartman describes *undoing* as the point at which "When life approaches extinction, when no one will be spared, when nothing is all that is left, when she is all that is left" (Hartman 2020: 5). Once again, we are looking out to sea, facing our past and all that is lost. But Ama, when there is nothing left, chooses herself because this is all she has. She severs all links to the painful and tempestuous relationship that has taken away all possibility of a self-determined life. Ama does not know where this separation will take her, she just knows that she can no longer show up. She once saw the potential for love, friendship, comradeship, and solidarity, but the ways that the characters have and continue to use their power, privilege, and notions of difference always seem to trump this possibility, leaving her bereft, exhausted, and no longer wanting to engage. She does not know where this will take her, but she is leaving. She is refusing. She will no longer show up.

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[128] Ghana became an independent country on 6th March 1957. (Dei Anang 1965)

[129] There have been several coups in Ghana, the first being the one that deposed Kwame Nkrumah's government in 1966 led by Joseph Arthur Ankrah. This coup is said to have been funded by the CIA. (Quist Adade, 2021) Following that there was a coup in 1972 led by Col. Ignatius Kutu Acheampong, (Tony 2018). This was due to continued economic instability after the last coup and change of government in 1966. Subsequent coups happened for similar reasons, corruption and dissatisfaction at the ways in which the country was being run has been cited. Two coups in 1979 and 1981 were led by Jerry Rawlings, who was elected president of Ghana twice. He held the presidency from 1993-2001.

'As Always, A Painful Declaration of Independence' has been a core text in helping me find my way as I developed my ongoing iterative performance project *Declaration of Independence* (hereafter referred to as *DOI*). The poem has been shared with every womxn who has contributed to this project since its genesis in 2017. It is the core text of the *DOI* project; my way of thinking through how we might imagine the project of *undoing*. It is a work that attempts to evidence the ways in which black womxn and womxn of colour are navigating "the clear world of / take and / take / and / take" (Ata Aidoo 1992). It attempts to present a performance in which, between the words of our declaration, we can contemplate how the legacies of enslavement and colonisation continue to impact our lives. It is in the space of not knowing, lostness, and the acceptance of this place that the possibility to imagine otherwise opens up. At the time of writing this,[130] we are still living in the shadow of a global pandemic. Energy prices are rising. There are conflicts in Ethiopia, Palestine, Ukraine, Jerusalem, and the West Bank. People are seeking refuge in the west, crossing seas in small boats hoping for a better life, free from poverty and persecution. And then there is the persistent continuing legacy of racism, in particular anti-black racism, witnessed in the moments when so many people around the world were ,stuck at home due to the lockdown conditions of the pandemic, watched George Floyd dying at the hands of the police. Our earth is in crisis and yet our governments are more concerned with how to continue to grow the economy rather than with averting the pending ecological disaster, which is actually already happening. Just like Ama, we know that we need something else.

To return for a moment to Hartman's notion of *undoing,* there is a point in her text where she moves the focus of the piece from revealing the *plot* that *un-does* us, to plotting a trajectory for the *plot's undoing*. She suggests that the *undoing* "proceeds by stealth" (Hartman 2020: 5). It is an *undoing* that "is almost never recognized as anything at all and certainly never as significant" (Hartman 2019: 5). This "undoing is not for your entertainment, even if it is for your benefit" (Hartman 2019: 5). She

[130] It is Friday 26th August 2022.

closes her essay with "the pledges of love that propel struggle, with the vision that *this bitter earth may not be what it seems*" (Hartman 2019: 5, italics in original). Through the *DOI* performances, the action of *Sankofa* becomes both a remembering of history and a practice of care – for us, our ancestors, and the future. It is a project that makes space for black womxn and womxn of colour to presence themselves, be witnessed, seen, and tell their stories in an attempt to hold a space for feelings of discontent and disappointment. For the promises not fulfilled. The promises of a better life, self-governance, and self-determination, education for our children, jobs for us, healthcare, and streets paved with gold. It is an attempt to remember ourselves in the presence of the continuing silencing of history as it repeats itself in the favour of the powerful. Through private moments of study and connection, through to public rituals of performance that have taken place at the Venice Biennale and a number of large public art institutions in the U.K., the Netherlands, and Norway, the work considers the role of black womxn and womxn of colour in the history of a world still living with the impact of the legacies of enslavement and colonisation. Making this work with groups of black and brown cis women, trans women and non-binary folk and presenting them in artistic contexts and, in some cases, collaborating with institutions to create the work, is my way of proceeding by *stealth*, using these artistic platforms as more than a space to present artwork, but also as a space in which we can explore the contexts of our present and the effect this has on our lives, while also envisioning other ways of being "on this bitter earth"[131] and imagining our world.

This chapter brings together how I have been conceiving *Sankofa* as memory practice and its relationship with my artistic practice. It considers aspects of *DOI* and how it has developed as a performance project. *DOI* is grounded in a transcultural Black feminist ethics of care that is also rooted in the West African Akan cosmology

[131] I would also like to add here the idea of a "bitter earth" as sung by Dinah Washington. This song written by Clyde Loven Otis and made famous by Washington is full of sadness and resignation that the world is a very difficult and unjust place to live in. I assume that Sadiya Hartman is thinking about this song when she uses this phrase. https://kathmanduk2.wordpress.com/2012/01/03/black-women-in-america-dinah-washington-this-bitter-earth/ (Accessed: 13 September 2022)

of *Sankofa*. To set the context for the creation of *DOI*, I will begin by laying out the way I am thinking about this project as a part of wider practices of care informed by Black feminist praxis and how they are connected to how I have been thinking about *Sankofa*. These practices of care are key to *doing undoing*, not just as an act of changing the political and social order of things, but also as a way of creating community and doing things for ourselves that reflect our interests. I also consider this practice of care within an institutional artistic context in which the project is created, as this is very much informed by the conditions of the afterlife of slavery and colonialism, as much as many contemporary arts organisations see themselves as part of an enlightened liberal project doing work to address inequality and contemporary social issues. I will think about these things as part of the context in which *DOI* begins its process of *undoing* – by challenging the ways in which arts institutions identify, understand, and enact *the problem* – and I consider how this project is a continuation of the questioning of institutional relationships to black and people of colour communities that I began with the *Brixton Studio* project. I will then explore the beginnings of the project, including some of the events and situations that have informed the project and how I have conceived it.

I will also explore some of the materials and other influences that have informed the development of the project. I will then look at the way the project has been formed and structured as a performance piece, including the ways in which I have invited contributors into the project, my approach to developing a connection between the contributors, how we develop the texts that form the script of the performances, and how this performance is also a ritual and resource for the contributors, beyond the production of an artwork. I call this the dramaturgy of the project. In doing so, I draw on the work of Georgelou, Protopapa, and Theodoriou's (2017), who look at dramaturgy in a field that is wider than its theatrical roots but is somehow aligned to dramaturgical practice by the way intentional action is used and reflected on. More aligned to visual art practices, they look at not only performance practices but also practices that involve working with people, collaboration, and work that opens up social and political perspectives within its making and production. In *DOI,* this is grounded in the development of a collective research process grounded in a social

art practice that draws on ideas of *study,* as imagined in Fred Moten and Stefano Harney's (2013) *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study*.[132] Put simply, study is "what you do with other people;" (Moten and Shukatis 2013) the ways in which you create and generate knowledge, both formally and informally. I will look at how the project is perhaps more than a social art project, in the institutional sense becoming something that is more about us, those that take part and contribute to the project. Finally, connected to the idea of the dramaturgy of the project, I will look at how the project is created as a circle process, drawing on the idea of community building based on indigenous practices of gathering together in community to connect with each other, witness each other, and solve problems (Pranis 2005: 3). Both ritual and resource, circle processes have been drawn on by women's groups, activists, community organisers, and others as a way to think about conflict resolution, community building, healing, and transformation. *DOI* has been created with the idea of a circle central to its rationale. The circle of the project extends beyond the creation of a group of people that create a performance together, beyond the performance and that which surrounds the performance, to form a wider circle that connects it all across time and space. As such, the circle of *DOI* is a gathering of memory and remembering that is drawn together through what I have been exploring as *Sankofa*. It is the way in which we remember, reflect, and create.

For this chapter, I will not be concentrating on any particular iteration of *DOI*. So far there have been nine performances, in the U.K, the Netherlands, Norway, and online; there have also been two associated installations and a video work that,

[132] Study, as defined by Fred Moten and Stefano Harney in The Undercommons: Fugative Planning and Black Study (2013) is something that I have started to think about in relation to my approach to making work with people. I find this more useful than terms such as 'socially engaged practice', or 'social practice', firstly because of the relational aspects of my work – how the work is formed in connection, mostly through friendship and kinship, but also in the ways in which we connect through our work (community, activist, academic, and creative) – and how I have made a conscious choice to make work in this way. I also find the notion of study useful for the way that it captures the desire to explore and think about different histories, ways of knowing, and understanding, and the way that it enables us to imagine other ways of being and doing things in the world that account for our connections and indebtedness to each other.

although made to be presented as part of one of the installations, has been shown in an exhibition of feminist artworks as a standalone piece. This connects to the way that this project has been created in a circle process, with each piece referencing and building on the last and, as such, widening the circle of the project. In order to explore how this is working in relation to the proposition that I am presenting for *Sankofa*, it would be impossible to identify one single performance as doing that work when they all do, in what Deputy Director of Culture and Environment at Evidence Base, Karen Salt,[133] described, based on her experience of seeing the performance, as a process of "spiralling". In a conversation with me after a performance of *DOI* that was presented as part of the Live Art Development Agency's Library of Performing Rights, she said, "As an individual performer spoke their words, these words echoed through time and space, circling the performance space, creating a spiral of energy". Drawing on the concept of spiralism as theorised by Haitian writers René Philoctète, Jean-Claude Fignolé, and Frankétienne, Salt describes witnessing something that is ritualised both in a spiritual sense but also as a strategy of survival, relating this to how Frankétienne describes spiralism in the opening of his 1968 novel *A Burst of Light* as a "…definition of life at the level of relations (colors, odours, sounds, signs, words) and historical connections (positionings in space and time)" (Glover 2014: 7). According to Frankétienne, spiralism connects art, literature, and life in a way in which "…novelistic description, poetic breath, theatrical effect, narratives, stories, autobiographical sketches, and fiction all coexists harmoniously…." (ibid.: 7). Salt saw this living, spiralling energy in the performance as a form of knowledge that is both generative and remembered. An interruption of a performance space where we are simultaneously visible/vulnerable and held. *DOI* then becomes a place to remember ourselves and a refusal of the notion of independence. It is a declaration of our interdependence and the interconnectedness of our stories across time and our need for each other's

[133] Evidence Base is an organisation "established to promote and execute a systems-based approach to problems of equality, diversity and inclusion in STEM [science, technology, engineering and mathematics]" . At the time of seeing the performance at Live Art Development Agency's Library of Performing Rights, Karen Salt was a consultant and founder and co-director of the Centre for Race and Rights at the University of Nottingham. She is also a friend.

support in *undoing of the plot* and instigating the actions that bring about the transformation we want to see in our worlds. As such, the individual performances, installations, and other moments of engagement with audiences in an artistic context, become stopping points in a wider spiralling journey. These moments, listed below, are part of an ever-evolving whole where we have stopped, taken a breath, shared ourselves, and been witnessed.

Intimacy and Distance, Diaspora Pavilion, Venice
10th May – 27th November 2017
Opening Performance
9th May 2017

Body Politics, Tropenmuseum, Amsterdam
10th November 2017

Library of Performing Rights, Live Art Development Agency, London
3rd June 2018

Tricksters Brewing Futures II, curated by Chandra Frank and 198 Contemporary Arts and Learning, Tate Exchange, London
23rd June 2018

Relating Narratives: A Common World of Women, Horse Hospital, London
23rd September 2018

BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Arts, Gateshead
23rd February – 26th May 2019
Performance presented as part of Art 50
24th February 2019

Still I Rise: Feminisms Gender and Resistance – Act 3, Arnolfini, Bristol
Video work

14th September 2019 – 15th December 2019

Bergen Kunsthall, Bergen

Performance

18th January 2020

Podcasts produced in January 2021

Brent Biennial

Online Performance

12th December 2020

WE ARE HERE, 2nd Roma Biennale, Berlin

Phase 5 #existence Poster campaign

October 2021

Instituting Care as a Declaration of Independence

In Chapter One, I described *Sankofa* as a methodology that takes on the role of a way-finder. It takes us through the *problem*, whispering and asking us to go back and look differently. It not only takes us into historic events, to places, or to people, but also into what was left in terms of effect and affect, and the ways in which we might attend to what is left. This attention is the way I think about the care that is deeply encoded in *Sankofa*. This connects to an ethics of care that has been key to the development of Black feminist praxis. Through political work and organising, theorising, writing, art-making and more, Black feminism centres on practices of care as a way to undo the lasting legacies of racialised and gender-based oppression. Care is practised through sharing personal experiences and turning these experiences into propositions that not only reflect on continuing racialised and gendered inequalities but also on the development of community and kinship building, on what M. Jacqui Alexander (2005: 259) has described as a "pan-cultural radical feminist politics". Through these practices, this mostly undocumented "archive of sisterhood" developed ways in which black women and women of colour could be seen, reflecting on the histories that have brought them together, exploring their journeys, and developing ways of knowing and being that practised "again and again the ways in which we want to be well" (ibid.: 278). *Sankofa* is also imbued with an ethics of care. The symbology of the pictograph suggests that the egg on the bird's back is attended to with a tenderness that considers the potential and power of that which is contained in the egg as well as pays attention to the fragility of the shell. This fragility could also be seen as the uncertain space that Ama and many other women have found themselves in. Firstly, as someone who is attempting to navigate the conditions of the world that limit her potential because of her gender and racial identity, and then as someone who chooses to refuse and leave that space. *DOI* operates in that space, reflecting on and building on that *archive of sisterhood*,[134]

[134] I want to also add and reiterate here that in this section I have used the term 'women' instead of 'womxn'. As I write in Chapter Two, I have used the word womxn to attempt to speak to the make-up of the groups of people that I work with, with womxn being a word that can sometimes attend to the complexity of gender identities, including trans women and those identifying as non-binary. As mentioned before, womxn is contentious and its underlying meaning may not be inclusive of trans

exploring our potential and power in the spaces of precarity that we find ourselves in.

In a time of increased attention and discourse around the development of more diverse art spaces, fuelled by an increased awareness of injustice and institutional inequity driven by the clarion call for decolonisation and abolition, *DOI* strives to *undo* the prevailing injustices of slavery, colonisation, and white supremacy veiled unsuccessfully within the guise of neoliberalism and free market capitalism that is deeply embedded in the supposedly 'free' arenas of the arts.[135] In calling *DOI* an ongoing performative work, I use the notion of performance loosely to describe not only the engagements that take place in the presence of audiences but also to think about the ways in which I create and hold space for the people I work with as they navigate the world and the institutional spaces the work is often presented in as racialised and gendered bodies. These bodies are often objectified and tokenised in these spaces, in line with the historic legacies in which museums and art galleries are formed. As such, the notion of performance becomes a disruption of the hegemonic arrangements of these spaces. My role as an artist builds on my experience of working in the arts in various capacities, from my role as a researcher on the *Brixton Studio* project,[136] attempting to advocate for an underrepresented community, to working as an artist educator, to working as a curator in black and people of colour - led organisations.[137] I have drawn on all these experiences to develop this work, not only to explore a practice of memory and remembering but also to consider my role as an artist-researcher, of African descent, who is also a Black feminist and, as such,

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women, as it may imply that trans women are not women. However, in this section, I use the term 'women' to reflect the trajectory of Black and woman of colour feminist praxis that began in the 1970s and 1980s, when the category of woman/women was used and lesbian women were opening up and challenging how the category of woman explored in feminism seemed to denote white, straight women. This was another example of giving voice to something otherwise and creating space in the discussion around feminism at that time.

[135] Projects and campaigns such as Decolonise this Place, Cancel the Damn Art Galleries, and The White Pube are highlighting this on an institutional level.

[136] See 'Projects Developed from Waste and Ordinary' in Chapter Two.

[137] I have worked in the curatorial team as an assistant at iniva (Institute of International Visual Arts) (1999-2001) and as an associate curator at 198 Contemporary Arts and Learning (2008-2019). Both are significant British arts organisations, begun and led by people of colour. I am currently on the management board of 198.

is part of many communities who, as Ama Ata Aidoo's poem suggests, have been continually excluded from or limited by such institutions. I question what it means to take up space in these spaces, even as you know that your belonging in these spaces is a forever question informed by whether or not such institutions are willing to engage in questions beyond your representative presence. Since I have been 'let in' and have worked in the arts for many years, I see my role as working to "bridge the gap" (Rushin 2015 (1983): xxxvii),[138] not just as a facilitator,[139] but also as someone who questions, disrupts, and hopefully affects a change in the ways in which arts institutions engage with black, people of colour, and queer audiences, subjects, political, social, and cultural experiences, and the ways in which visibility is often foregrounded over critical engagement, especially a critical engagement with their own histories, social positionalities, and contribution to upholding dominant narratives. Within the arts organisations and other artistic platforms I have engaged with since 2017, *DOI* is seen as a project that visibly represents the kind of 'diversity' that such spaces wish to present as an antidote to their implication and complicity in these legacies. These spaces make this invitation for the work to be presented as part of their 'diverse' arts programming, but within the framework of the project there is a clear articulation that *DOI* is for *us.* It is an attempt at an *undoing* of the plot/s that bring us to the places that we have arrived at and where we have not been considered, heard, or seen. It acknowledges our interconnected pasts and the realities of our present. Over 70 black womxn and womxn of colour have taken part in the project since 2017. We are the "mothers, lovers, sisters, cousins, daughters, comrades, co-conspirators"[140]. Our presence in these spaces is as much about the visibility that these 'diversity' initiatives offer, as it is about our refusal of the

[138] I use this phrase here to evoke the essence of bridging that is expressed in Kate Rushin's *The Bridge Poem* in *This Bridge Called my Back: Writings from Radical Women of Color* (Moraga and Anzaldúa 2015[1983]). Rushin's poem speaks of being sick of being the bridge to different worlds, refusing to be that bridge and becoming a bridge to her true self. On reflecting on the work done back in 2002 on the *Brixton Studio* project, I can see that I, like Rushin, was being asked to bridge cultures, something I would also refuse today.

[139] Many of my engagements with arts organisations have been predicated on the idea that as a black woman artist I am able to facilitate other black and brown folk experiences of certain art institutions, much like I did in the *Brixton Studio* project.

[140] Quote from the DOI opening call recited by me for each performance.

tokenistic gesture toward historical reconciliation. We come together in a powerful and emotive presentation of ourselves, in the context of performance work, bringing with us our anger, our grief, and our celebration in a ritual circle that is as much a resource for us as it is an artwork.

> *This is our process,*
>
> *it is not about changing others,*
>
> *but rather an invitation for us to change our relationship to ourselves, to our communities.*
>
> *And to the wider world.*
>
> Extract from the opening of *Declaration of Independence,* all performances, 2017–2020

The Beginnings

We: In Honour of Those Who Have Endured With Me as We Attempt to Navigate Our Way Through a Rough Sea Without a Map[141]

Intimacy and Distance was presented at the *Diaspora Pavilion*[142] in Venice in 2017. At the time I was really struck by the way that Gender Studies Professor Katherine McKittrick (2006) had theorised a black woman's geography in her book *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle*. Her proposition explored a black women's geographic experience that, even without guides or maps, was

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[141] This title is taken from an extract of the response I wrote to Katherine McKittrick's (2021) *Dear Science and Other Stories*. My response was published as part of an extended review in *Society and Space* (Asante 2021).

[142] The *Diaspora Pavilion* opened in Venice at the time of the 57th Venice Biennale on 10th May 2017. Curated by David A. Bailey MBE and Jessica Taylor of the International Curators Forum, the *Diaspora Pavilion* was a collateral event of the biennale, meaning that it existed outside of the main spaces and programmes of the biennale. The *Diaspora Pavilion* proposed itself to be an intervention that attempted to contest the dominance of nationhood within the fabric of the biennale, presenting a *Diaspora Pavilion* as a challenge to the idea of a national pavilion. https://www.internationalcuratorsforum.org/diaspora-platform/ (Accessed 4 September 2022). It was part of a wider project funded by the Arts Council of England that aimed to give emerging BAME (Black, Asian, Minority Ethic) artists and curators visibility, support, and access to a major international artistic platform (Hutchingson 2016).

something that was very much alive, possible, and imaginable. As the map attempts to fix ideas of place, land, and territory, the presence of black women troubles these geographic arrangements regardless of the fact that black women have been "rendered ungeographic" (ibid.: x). Bringing together archival materials, testimonies, fiction, poetry, and physical sites into close examination, McKittrick suggests that even in the dire circumstances of enslavement, where the conditions of ownership gave them no agency over their own bodies, black women found ways to find their way, have agency over their bodies, and imagine freedom. I thought about the way that Gerima had represented Mona/Shola and other women's bodies in *Sankofa* and how the only possibility of freedom was to somehow disappear or restrain the female body, making it passive and without agency. Mona had to escape her body rather than live with it. I was particularly struck by the way McKittrick described Dionne Brand's (1997) book of poetry *No Land to Light On* as a map that did not "easily follow existing cartographic rules, borders, and lines" (McKittrick 2006: ix), creating the possibility of thinking about the ways in which black women live in and navigate the world as otherwise. Of Brand's project, McKittrick writes:

> She not only refuses a comfortable belonging to nation, or country, or a local street, she alters them by demonstrating that geography, the material world, is infused with sensations and distinct ways of knowing: rooms full of weeping, exhausted countries, a house that is only as safe as flesh. (ibid.)

McKittrick gives the example of Linda Brent/Harriet Jacobs, who spent seven years living in a garret in the home of her grandmother, hiding from her slave owner, who continually sexually harassed her. From this small, restricted space with barely any light, Jacobs was able to plan her escape from captivity while also watching the day-to-day happenings of the plantation, including watching her children grow. McKittrick describes this as "the last place they thought of" (ibid.: 43). No one would have considered looking for Jacobs right under their noses as she had *run away* and, as a fugitive slave, she was surely somewhere else. At points in her hiding, Jacobs managed to get correspondence sent to her master from different places in the north, telling of sightings of her. The space that Jacobs occupied for those seven

years was painfully restricting and her body would bare traces of this restriction for the rest of her life. McKittrick examines the complexity of this situation because, while hiding in the garret, Jacobs was also protected from the constant sexual advances of her master. The space limits her movement. Her body has to contort to find comfort. Yet it is from this space of limitation that she imagines and plans her freedom.

At the time of exploring McKittrick' work, I was one of 12 artists selected to create a new work for the *Diaspora Pavilion*, which was to open in Venice at the time of the 57th Venice Biennale. Venice is a place significant to the development of cartography[143] because of the need for maps to navigate the seas for the purpose of trading. I was interested in how the unruly spatial arrangements of diasporas, particularly those related to colonialism, are intimately connected to Venice as a floating city known for its maritime power and its centrality to the historic development of global trade that lead to colonialism and slavery. I wanted to question our idea of diaspora as it relates to our post-colonial identities, our migrations, our political, social, and cultural agency, and the daily things we do to undo the continuing legacies of coloniality. I also wanted to scrutinise the position of the *Diaspora Pavilion* as a pavilion adjacent to the Venice Biennale. One of the things that occurred in Venice during the time that we (the artists) were preparing for the exhibition that troubled many of us was the death of Gambian migrant Pateh Sabally. A video went viral of him drowning in the Grand Canal while onlookers shouted racial slurs and insults at him (Associated Press 2017). To me, this incident spoke to the ways in which black people were seen as a disruption to the order of things and the kinds of daily violence black bodies have to navigate even as our bodies are in quite obvious danger. The response of the onlookers was not to find

[143] Pietro Vesconte has been written about as the first professional Venetian cartographer (Cosgrove 1992: 66). Since the 16th century, Venetian cartography has been significant in the history of European mapping, due to its (what Cosgrove has described as) "sophisticated geographic culture", coupled with it being a place of significant literary artistic and scientific culture. Venice was also significant for maritime trade and, as such, had particular political and commercial significance in Europe; with the largest fleet of merchants in the whole of Europe at that time, Venetian traders needed accurate maps to navigate areas of global trade (ibid.: 67).

ways to save Sabally's life but to make sure that as he died, he knew that his life was worthless. I was aware that our presence in Venice at the time was *Disruptive*. The *Diaspora Pavilion*'s offering was supposed to question the politics of statehood in the light of the continuing legacies of coloniality. Our proposition presented a geographic position that disturbed the biennale order, which centred on the idea of the presentation of an exceptional artist or group of artists representing a nation. If people wanted to come and see our work, the position of the pavilion would require visitors to venture outside of the spaces allocated for the biennale. The Palazzo Pisana Santa Maria, which housed the *Diaspora Pavilion*, had a legacy of being a space for exhibitions that questioned the hegemony of nation. This historic gothic palace was a domestic space, rented out through AirBnB, rather than a purpose-built pavilion or a space reappropriated for the service of displaying art. In 2008 it was also home to the first Roma Pavilion, a community of people also affected by exclusion and geographic dispersal.[144] The British art establishment's excitement at presenting us in the Venice Biennale was less about the possibility of critically engaging with its relationship to our presence and the post-colonial diasporas that the artists expressed and represented in their work; rather, it was interested in what we represented and what this said about the multicultural/diversity project in Britain. I was interested in the possibility this disruption could offer to my work. How our bodies in such places refuse the "comfortable belonging" (McKittrick 2006: ix) that was to be represented as our presence at the biennale. I wanted to question our spatial arrangements. Our position outside of the main spaces of representation. Outside of nation. I wanted to especially think about the space of black women in the world and at the biennale:[145] how black women and women were at the

[144] Paradise Lost was curated by Timea Junghaus and supported by the Open Society and the European Cultural Foundation. It was described by the then president of the Open Society, Aryeh Neier, as "the first truly European Pavilion". He said, "The Roma Pavilion marks the arrival of contemporary Roma culture on the international stage and sends an important message of inclusion: the Roma have a vital role to play in the cultural and political landscape of Europe" (Junghaus and Szëkley 2009: 13).

[145] I am writing this in August 2022, the year of the 59th Venice Biennale. This year saw two black women acknowledged with Golden Lion Awards. Britain won the award for Best National Participation with a pavilion created by Sonia Boyce. To produce *Feeling Her Way* (2022), Boyce worked collaboratively with black women and women of colour to create a work that attempted to unpack silent stories. According to *Ocula Magazine*, Boyce's contribution was praised for its use of "a very

forefront of social justice movements and demanding change in the order of things, not just for us but for everyone.[146]

contemporary language" that allowed the audience to piece together fragments, and for raising "important questions of rehearsal as opposed to the perfect attuned" (Gaskin 2022). American artist Simone Leigh's piece *Brick House* won Best Contribution to the Biennale's International Exhibition, *Milk of Dreams* (ibid.). Leigh will also be hosting *A Loophole of a Retreat* in Venice. Taking its title from the way in which Harriet Jacobs described her space in the garret, this event will consider the ways in which black women have enacted practices of freedom. https://simoneleighvenice2022.org/loophole-of-retreat/ (Accessed 4 September 2022).

[146] Black women and women of colour have been on the forefront of organising not just for their own liberation but for liberation for all. In 1977, Barbara Smith, Beverly Smith, and Demita Frazier wrote in the Combahee River Collective Statement:

> The most general statement of our politics at the present time would be that we are actively committed to struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression, and see as our particular task the development of integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking. The synthesis of these oppressions creates the conditions of our lives. As Black women we see Black feminism as the logical political movement to combat the manifold and simultaneous oppressions that all women of color face. (Combahee River Collective 1977 quoted by Yamahtta Taylor 1977 2017: 15)

Murri activist, artist, and academic Lilla Watson is often quoted by black women and women of colour activists. She famously said, at the United Nations Decade of Women's Conference in Nairobi in 1985: "If you have come here to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together". https://www.un.org/en/conferences/women/nairobi1985 (Accessed: 4 September 2022).

Figure 8: A composite of images from Intimacy and Distance at the Diaspora Pavilion, Venice 2017. Images by Francesco Allegretto

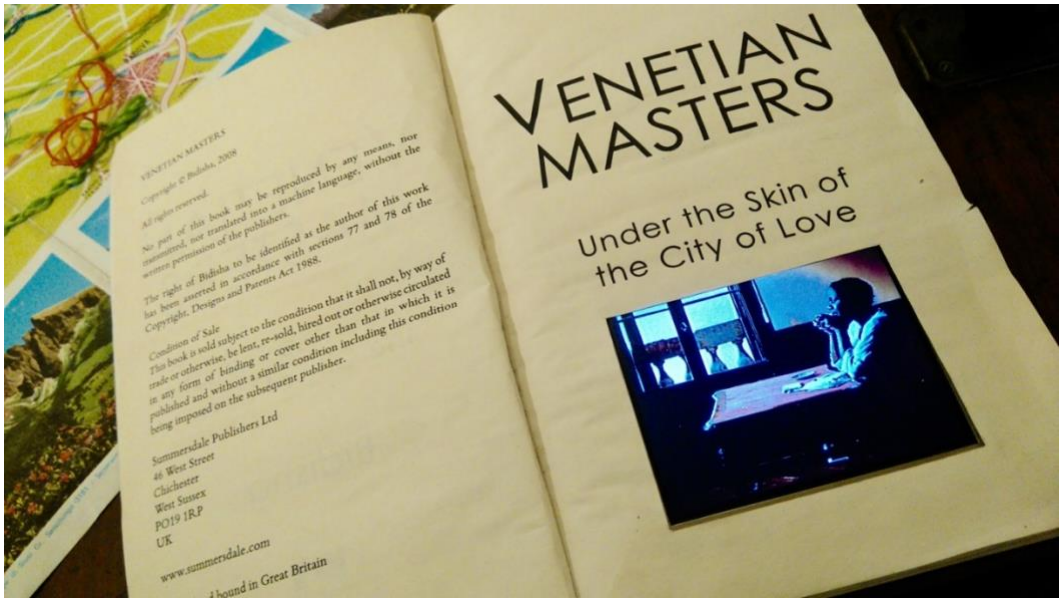

Figure 9: Intimacy and Distance, Diaspora Pavilion, Venice 2017. Photograph: Francesco Allegretto.

Figure 10: Declaration of Independence, Diaspora Pavilion, Venice 2017. Photograph: Francesco Allegretto.

Intimacy and Distance

Intimacy and Distance was an intervention into the *palazzo*, creating what I saw as a spatial composition that weaved narratives and stories from womxn of colour into a fragmented composition, to explore our historical relationships to diasporas and their displacements. In the spirit in which I had been developing my ideas and practice, I wanted to share the experience of showing my work in Venice as a significant international platform for the visual arts with my friends and collaborators. With a very small budget given for the commission, I invited some of my "loose collective of intergenerational artists, writers, curators, psychotherapists, academics, activists, community organisers, healers, Black feminists, abolitionists, revolutionary mothers, queer rabble-rousers, and Debbie downers"[147] to contribute to a work that explored our intimacy as friends and collaborators and the things that we navigate that are distant from us, including our dispersed geographies,[148] the legacies of histories that we were trying to understand, and the futures that we were trying to imagine. The invitation was for them to contribute their thoughts, words, and voices to the work through recorded Skype conversations based around Ama Ata Aidoo's 'As Always, A Painful Declaration of Independence' and 'Poem for Aba'[149], a poem I wrote for my grandmother at the time of her death, responding to Ama's *declaration*. I also asked that each contributor give me instructions for rituals that I would perform and film myself doing, on their behalf, in and around the *palazzo*, and for suggestions for books and other materials that they felt had informed our conversation.

The response to the poems were surprising. I did not expect to be presented with beautiful, poetic responses/*declarations* in the midst of our conversations. These contributions became part of the compositions, made in collaboration with

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[147] I am quoting here from my response to Katherine McKittrick's (2021) *Dear Science and Other Stories*. My response is about creating work in a spirit of friendship (Asante 2021).
[148] Contributors were from a variety of backgrounds, including Somali, Algerian, South African, Mexican, and more, and were located in a variety of places, including the Netherlands, Switzerland, Martinique, London, and the Maldives.
[149] I will further explore my working relationship with my grandmother and Poem for Aba in Chapter four.

electronic musician G-Marie, played on small speakers hidden and dispersed throughout the *palazzo*. These fragmented compositions used edited extracts from the recorded Skype conversations, enabling the contributors to speak their voices into the spaces of the *palazzo*, whispering, screaming, and uttering their presence and absence in the space. Accompanying these sound interventions were subtle interruptions in the form of staged interventions/installations into the domestic space of the *palazzo*. A bedspread made with a large photographic print reappropriated an ethnographic image of a Fanté woman,[150] and small video screens embedded into books and boxes showed me performing the rituals given to me by the contributors in different spaces in the *palazzo*. Votive ritual candles that represented each of the contributors lined the staircase to the main space. In the Solotino space, shared with fellow artist Khadijah Saye,[151] I put books and photographs shared with me in the conversations, amongst books on Venetian history and classic Italian literature and poetry. As well as *Demonic Grounds*, there was also *Sister Outsider* by Audre Lorde (1984, 2007), *When Rain Clouds Gather & Maru* by Bessie Head (1968, 2013), *Our Sister Killjoy* by Ama Ata Aidoo (1977), *The End of the Alphabet* by Claudia Rankine (1998), *No Land to Light* On by Dionne Brand (1997), *Borderlands Lands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* by Gloria Anzaldúa (1987, 2012), and many others. Each of the books chosen spoke either to notions of intimacy or some notion of geographic dissonance or displacement. The *palazzo* space became a geographic metaphor: one that was not only about the geographic dissonance of Venice and its historic relationship to coloniality, nor just about this in relation to the concept of diaspora as a disruption to the idea of the nation in the biennale. For me, it also became about navigating the space of the international art world as a black woman artist who wanted to bring to the domestic space of the Palazzo Pisana Santa Marina (appropriated for use as a collateral pavilion) ideas about how black women and women of colour navigate space and, despite some of

[150] The image was originally from *The Living Races of Mankind* (Hutchinson 1889).
[151] Khadija Saye (1992–2017) showed a series of nine tintypes entitled *Dwelling: In This Space We Breathe*. These were self-portraits exploring her relationship to remembering and rituals based in her Gambian heritage.

the limits of geography and history, to reflect on how we are continuing to *undo* the legacies of coloniality and enslavement and generating practices of liberation.

Figure 11: Declaration of Independence, Library of Performing Rights, Live Art Development Agency, 2018 Image by Jess Harrington

"This is a Declaration of Independence"

I walked barefoot, at the opening of the Diaspora Pavilion with a basket full of candles with these words from Angela Yvonne Davis
handwritten on them

"Freedom is a constant struggle" –

The Palazzo filled with those privileged to make it to opening week of the Venice Biennale and us the artists with our sister Khadija

We declared
Independence as not a nation
We declared
Autonomy over our bodies, our words, our histories

her- stories

Our traces elevated to objects of ritual remembering
An archaeology of black memory,
Sankofa
Extract from *DOI,* Feminist Emergency, Birkbeck University of London, Saturday 24th June 2017, also published in *Documents of Contemporary Art: Translation* (Williams 2019)

A few of the contributors to *Intimacy and Distance* decided to come to Venice for the opening. I asked them if they would join me in a performance that I described as a "Declaration of Independence", my thought being that this would be a way to think about the *Diaspora Pavilion* space as its own spatial entity and drawing from Ama Ata Aidoo's poem and the idea of *undoing* the conditions of history, a refusal to conform to expected limitations that are written into the poem. We presented this first *DOI* as an opening ritual. I walked around the pavilion barefoot, giving out cloves for clarity, protection, and love, and candles with the words "Freedom is a constant struggle – Angela Yvonne Davis" written on them. I then gathered all the contributors who agreed to be in the performance together and we recited our *declaration*, drawing on the contributions that they had all offered to the *Intimacy and Distance* work.

Our declaration was an interruption to the opening festivities.
A moment of reflection before the opening turned into one of the infamous biennale parties.
We brought our stories live into the space and we asked that they were heard and witnessed.
Extract from *Sankofa Whispers*

Six weeks after the opening of the Diaspora Pavilion I stood before an audience in a lecture theatre at the Feminist Emergency Conference at Birkbeck University of London. I was invited to this conference to deliver a performative presentation on a panel on Feminism, Racism and Anti-Racism, with Professor of sociology, gender,

and diaspora Avtah Brah, and psychologist and academic Ann Phoenix, chaired by Black feminist researcher, writer, and curator Nydia Swaby. Ten days before this presentation, on the 14th June 2017, I awoke to a call from Libita Clayton, another artist showing in the *Diaspora Pavilion*. She alerted me to messages of distress from Khadija Saye in our shared WhatsApp group. I later discovered that Khadija, along with 71 other people, were declared missing after a deadly fire that engulfed Grenfell Tower, a 24-storey social housing block in North Kensington, London.[152] Eight days before this presentation, we (the artists showing in the *Diaspora Pavilion*) got confirmation that she had died trying to escape from the burning tower. This was a day before this confirmation was reported in the papers. That week while we[153] tried to understand what had happened and console each other's grief and anger, my colleagues and I drafted a letter demanding that Metropolitan Police Commissioner Cressida Dick conduct a criminal investigation into the disaster that led to the deaths of 72 people (Achiampong *et al*. 2017). As well as a promising artist, there were students and school children; "[t]here were taxi drivers and teachers, football fans and churchgoers, devout Muslims, big families and working singletons. People whose lives were complicated by health issues or love or both. Neighbours on nodding terms, and friends for life from the flat next door" (Rice-Oxley 2018).[154] Many were working class, black/people of colour, migrants to the U.K., mostly from former colonies, or those whose arrival to the U.K. was a result of war or famine and need of refuge.

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, my *Intimacy and Distance* intervention shared the Solotino space in the *palazzo* with Saye's series of tintype photographs *Dwelling: In This Space We Breathe* (2017). We began a dialogue about how our work touched on similar themes of remembering, ritual, healing, and care and vowed that on our

[152] 72 people died in the Grenfell Tower fire.
[153] I use 'we' here to talk about the artists who were showing in the Diaspora Pavilion. They were Larry Achiampong, Libita Clayton, Kimathi Donkor, Michael Forbes, Susan Pui San Lok, Paul Maheke, Erika Tan, Barbara Walker, and Abbas Zahedi.
[154] Rice -Oxley's (2018) article in *The Guardian*, published a month before the first anniversary of the Grenfell Tower fire, attempts to map the lives of the 72 victims.

return to London we would connect to explore our ideas further. Days before the fire we had been communicating by text message trying to arrange a date to meet. The presentation at Feminist Emergency became the second iteration of *DOI*, dedicated to Khadija Saye, her mother Mary Mende, and the others that died in the fire. In this declaration I wanted to map the connections between what happened to Khadija, her mother, and her neighbours, our disruptive diaspora presence at the Venice Biennale and the continuing legacies of death, violence, and displacement for black people and people of colour. I wanted to think about how you create and imagine in these conditions and how we needed to draw on ancestral remembrances to help us to navigate these conditions while continuing to imagine otherwise. It was after the presentation for Feminist Emergency, in the dialogue that followed the panellists' presentations, that I saw the potential that *DOI* had to be developed further.

Figure 12: Composite of Images from Declaration of Independence, BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Arts, 2019. Image by Colin Jones

This is Our Process: Making A Declaration

Expanding Notions of Dramaturgy

Since its beginnings in 2017, *DOI* has become established as an iterative performance. It has been developed and performed in a variety of different venues and contexts and, as I mentioned earlier in this chapter, over 70 people have been involved in the project. Each context has informed the process, adding to the memory of the project through the ways in which each new contributor builds on the declaration that Ama made for herself, the ones that I have made, the ones that came out of *Intimacy and Distance*, and on it goes. I have imagined *DOI* as a transient generative space, which is both a forum and a circle. I draw on the notion of a forum to recognise the politics and FORM-ality of our coming together, and also to consider this as a space to reflect on the kinds of historic and geographic agreements that affect our lives' pasts, present/presence, and futures. These are the ones formally made and those we have agreed to unconsciously. It is also a circle in the sense that it is a space that supports our own personal process of *undoing* as much as it is a space of creative output and expression. I will go more into the circle process later in this chapter (see 'The Major Zone: This is Our Circle'), but for now, I want to mention it as part of what I am describing as the dramaturgy of the project. Traditionally, dramaturgy is understood as the theory and practice of dramatic composition, associated with the production of work within a theatre or theatrical context. I consider dramaturgy as a useful practice, which can be a way of understanding what I am making, the processes that I am employing to make the work, and the ways in which I am connected to the people I am working with, the contexts we are working in, and the wider issues we are dealing with. It is the way in which I can embed a reflective process into the fabric of the work, thinking beyond the production and into the life/living arrangement[155] of those involved in the project, both contributors and audience.

[155] In thinking about this idea of living arrangements, I am drawing from personal ideas of how we intimately arrange our living, wider questions of living and creating life and living together, as well as the idea of living, which I have been engaging with in this thesis, as something that animates – what Stuart Hall (2001: 90) described as "a living archive of the diaspora". One influence in thinking about this comes from my practice through *sorryyoufeeluncomfortable*, another durational performance

I am drawing on a notion of dramaturgy that "is to be found in everything" (Georgelou, Protopapa and Theodoriou 2017: 12). This approach is proposed by Belgian dramaturge and critic Marianne Van Kerkhoven, who suggests that the production of a performance has a minor zone: "that structural circle, which lies in and around a production". This is the production. It encompasses the arrangements towards the production, including the formal arrangements of creating the production, the time that the production happens, and the space in which the production happens. These arrangements are the form and formalities within which the performance happens. Van Kekhoven also speaks of a "major zone", which is in relation to audiences. She speaks of the importance of the context of the theatre/space and its position, within its city and within the world. Van Kerkoven describes how the "walls that link all these circles together are made of skin, they have pores, they breathe". (Van Kerkhoven, cited in Georgelou, Protopapa and Theodoriou 2017: pages) I would describe this major zone as wider than the

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project that I created with a collective of young artists, activists, and thinkers. We shared an open "study" of James Baldwin's 1968 speech at the West Indian Student Centre in London, captured by Horace Ove in his film *Baldwin's Nigger* (1969). In the speech, Baldwin speaks of how political and social arrangements weave through and interconnect with all of our living arrangements and, as such, what we do or do not affects them Baldwin says:

> We are concerned with power, nothing more than that
> and most unluckily for the western world has consolidated its power,
> on the backs of people who are now going to die
> rather than be used
> any longer.
> In short,
> the economic arrangements of the Western world
> prove to be too expensive
> for most of the world,
> and the Western world will change these arrangements,
> or these arrangements will be changed for them.

He closes the speech by reminding us of our interconnectedness – that we are in this life/living together:

> Everyone knows that the questions in everybody's lap,
> from Washington to London
> to bond.
> Everybody knows it.
> They're trying to figure out what to do.
> We should figure out what to do.

audience. It is everything surrounding the performance that is in excess of the production. Thinking with Etienne Joseph and Connie Bell (2020: 520) from Decolonising the Archive, this is the zone of *everything* being *everything*. In this *everything,* the performance becomes the document that we extend beyond into our *living* testimony and embodiment (Marable, cited in Joseph and Bell 2020: 520).

I describe myself as a reluctant performer. The work I have been making maybe lacks much of the rigorous rehearsal of some more theatrical performance works. While I appreciate the idea of rehearsal as a mode of honing your practice, I was not trained in these skills. The notion of rehearsal that I employ in my work does include some of the rigour of rehearsal, or at least asking contributors to understand the frameworks and contexts in which the work is being made, but I am also interested in rehearsal as something other. I want to give space to witness the forever unfolding rehearsal of lived experience, as improvisation. Something that responds to the contexts and conditions of the moment. Something that can allow space for something *live*, such as grief or joy, to make itself present and be held in the space of production. As such, *DOI* is not about entertaining the audience or inviting the audience into a drama that they are once removed from. It does not make a distinct separation between the audience and the performer. In fact, many of the contributors have very little experience with performance or public speaking, so part of the process is to make sure that the understanding of performance is a broad one, so nobody gets stuck on the things they can or cannot do. The point is to be in a process where we are witnessed and heard, and where what we generate is of as much benefit to us as it is to the audiences. I am interested in doing this because we are involved in a project of *undoing* the continuing legacies of colonial history, as it lives in our everyday experiences. There is a repetition of the ways in which this continuing coloniality resonates in the ways we are living and producing life in the present, even as we attempt to distance ourselves from and resist the effects it has on us. , In the light of all this DOI is a project formed for remembering ourselves and our desire for liberation. We are drawing on the legacies of those that are here and that came before us, be they our grandmothers, mothers, those who inspired thinking and movements, those such as Harriet Jacobs who showed us how to imagine freedom in

restricted conditions, or those we have lost and remember for their beauty and enthusiasm for life. We are allowing ourselves and our audiences to get lost in the production, blurring the boundaries, and giving insight into a creative process beyond the making and performing of a piece. This is a collective experience that happens in the present that also attends to the past and makes space for imagining the future. This is the *Sankofa* within the work: a reflective practice that pays attention, learns, imagines, and cares in excess of what is seen as artistic production.

Figure 13: Composite of Images from Declaration of Independence, Bergen Kunsthall, 2019/20. Image by Nayara Leite

Lay Down Our Burdens: Creating a Space for Study

Now that I can add researcher to my artistic biography, I want to think about the research that is inherent in my practice and moved me through the bookshop, the *Brixton Studio*, Venice, and many other places. Many people who have witnessed, written about or commissioned my work have described my work as socially engaged. I have found this to be a reductive way to describe what I do, particularly in relation to the ways in which British arts organisations have come to see the work of artists engaged in social processes to create work. Aligned with the stipulations of public funding that require arts organisations to fulfil certain social obligations,[156] British arts institutions often see the work of artists such as myself as able to fulfil these criteria. Added to this, I am a black woman artist and I bring with me black folk, people of colour, queer, non-binary and trans kin and supporters. Although *DOI* has been performed in many British arts organisations and has been supported by some,[157] the underlying intention is to be an expression of refusal of the conditions that created the need for such criteria and to imagine something other. In thinking about the wider field in which my work is and has been made – how *DOI* is as much connected to my engagement with the people who had their photos taken by Harry Jacobs, as it is with the context of the *Diaspora Pavilion*, the Grenfell Tower Fire, and much more, including everything that each of the contributors brings with them and

[156] When I began this research, the Arts Council of England (ACE) was championing an initiative called the *Creative Case for Diversity.* Designed to "enrich" engagement in the arts on various levels, including audiences, participation, and staffing, organisations funded by ACE are expected to evidence the ways in which they are engaged with and work with diverse artists and communities. https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/diversity/creative-case-diversity (Accessed: 6 September 2022). Its new programme, *Let's Create*, launched in 2021, aims to "transform villages, towns and cities with creativity and culture". The aim is to create "[a] country transformed by culture. Bringing us together, happier, healthier. To excite, inspire, delight. To enrich our lives". https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/letscreate (Accessed: 6 September 2022). To deliver *Let's Create*, funded individuals and organisations must deliver on the ACE investment principles: ambition and quality, dynamism, environmental responsibility, and inclusivity and relevance. ACE believes this will be a way to deliver excellence and make arts organisations and funded individuals continually assess their impact and improve their performance, while also having a significant social impact.

[157] This includes funding from ACE. *DOI* has received approximately £27,000 in support from ACE for developing the workshops, materials, and production of performances. Part of that money also supported contributors' travel, accommodation, sustenance, and fees for performances at BALTIC, Live Art Development Agency, Hospital Rooms, and Tate Exchange. Funding also supported connecting with women of colour in Newcastle and inviting these women to BALTIC to take part in a *DOI* workshop.

wants to share in the process of creating the production – I find the notion of *study* to be a useful way to describe the way I am thinking about the dramaturgy of *DOI*. I use s*tudy* here to mean learning and research, but I also use this term in the way that the African American spiritual, *Down by the Riverside,* speaks of no longer being in the *study* of war.[158] *Study* here is learning. Not just intellectual learning but active learning of practice. We will no longer live in, create, or accept the conditions of war. There is also learning inherent in the way I have been considering *Sankofa.* Learning from the past, learning from mistakes, learning from things that are difficult. I also draw on the idea of *study* as a mode of collective research, being, and living, described by Moten and Harney (2013) as the things we do together to resist the confines of enclosure;[159] the ways in which we organise to *undo* the systems that limit our freedom and remember that the debts owed to society are the ones "we owe each other" (ibid.: 18). Using metaphors of black study that are informed by the fugitive ways in which enslaved people navigated, strategised, and imagined freedom, Moten and Harney theorise a way of navigating the university that is also useful for thinking about how we find a way to do the work we do in any institutional framework, including in publicly funded arts organisations. They theorise the multiple ways in which we live and refuse capture to create other possibilities of living and being together. I have found this thinking useful in navigating the arts in a British context, particularly in relation to the insistence of art institutions in continuing to perform some sort of social (justice) work[160] while often failing to

[158] This is drawn from a biblical verse in the *Book of Isaiah*, Chapter 2, Verse 4: "nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore". The spiritual is said to have dated back to the American Civil War, referring both to the war and the potential of emancipation for enslaved people. This spiritual also became a much-referenced anti-war song (Katz 2003: 155).

[159] Moten and Harney use the metaphor of enclosure as geographic space that has been settled, contained, and enclosed, and also as politics, history, and institutional space.

[160] When referring to this I am thinking about something like the anti-racist statements, statements of solidarity, and pledges to do better through unconscious bias and equality, diversity, and inclusion training, that were written and distributed after the murder of George Floyd. There have been many incidents after the publication of these statements when organisations have been exposed as not being as aligned with these statements as they say. An example of this is when Ifeanyi Awachie, a former curator at the Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA), London, tweeted about how the then director had referred to and claimed for the ICA an initiative that Awachie had instigated outside of her ICA role to address some of the issues of racism within the organisation. https://twitter.com/ifeanyiawachie/status/1272503482633895937?lang=en (Accessed: 6 September 2022).

acknowledge how they are complicit in the creation of the conditions that mean that certain injustices continue to exist.

The Minor Zone: Making A Declaration

As *DOI* is formed within layers of many difficult contexts, particular attention is paid to the ways in which we come together. As with *Intimacy and Distance,* most contributors to the project have been invited by me to join. I have mostly found contributors through my friendships and through my work, by meeting people who have shown interest in the project. Sometimes I have invited someone I have had a brief conversation with who instinctively feels like they may have a resonance with the project. In most cases, I have been able to create what might be seen as a workshop situation, where I can get contributors together, to meet each other, connect, and share themselves and ideas. These situations are brought together with the formal intention of creating a performance, but also with the intention of creating community. I will expand on this in the next section of the chapter, where I consider the process of creating a circle as part of the dramaturgy of the project. Here I will look at the way in which we make the performance.

To begin any *DOI* process, I draw on Ama Ata Aidoo's poem, and any other materials of *study* that have come to us to expand the ways in which we are imagining the project, such as *The Undercommons* (Moten and Harney 2013), *Demonic Grounds* (McKittrick 2006), manifestos, and documents of declaration as diverse as the American *Declaration of Independence* to the *Charter of Feminist Principles for African Feminists*.[161,162] I invite people to explore these materials before and during the process of developing any new iteration of *DOI*. We also draw on previous declarations, by reflecting on pieces written by other contributors, including the pieces written for *Intimacy and Distance*. This is either done through sharing

[161] The *Charter of Feminist Principles for African Feminists* was put together in 2007 by a working group part of the African Feminist Forum, an independent platform supported by the African Women's Development Fund. The charter resulted from a forum in Ghana, 15–19th November 2006, to help guide their analysis, support their practice, and define and affirm their commitment to feminist principles.

[162] For a while before the pandemic, those involved in the project contributed resources and reading lists to a shared Google drive.

previous scripts or watching videos of previous performances. These pieces act as a call that invites new contributors to respond. This call, although enacted by me, both performatively – as in the way that I open the performance (see the next section) – and in instigating the project, is also the call of many who came before us and our presence in life is the ever-spiralling[163] response. This is the way in which we begin writing together to create individual contributions to the upcoming declaration, using these materials as prompts to develop dialogue and as inspiration for our declarations. I have developed this way of writing together with my friend and long-time collaborator, writer, and psychotherapist Foluke Taylor, who has been involved in the project since 2018. One of the ways we have used these prompts in writing exercises to develop declarations is to select quotes and phrases from materials. Drawing on the ways in which Alexis Pauline Gumbs uses the pages of her books as an oracle. (mentioned in chapter two) Each quote or phrase is given a number. The quotes selected by number by the contributors then act as a writing prompt that calls, is built on, and inspires.[164] The individual declarations that come from these exercises are brought together to make a whole, which is then worked into a script for the performance. Pieces will either be read by the writer or shared between multiple voices in the group. Pieces become songs, mantras, shouts, echoes. They become annotated by songs, quotes, and dance moves. In many ways, the project is a live Black feminist citational practice[165] that does not only rely on conventional forms of citation but also considers how feminist genealogies are established, especially how the knowledge practices of black women, non-binary, and trans folx are often overlooked or appropriated (Williams 2022: 199). We also think about how many of the practices and ways of thinking and doing are not considered to be

[163] See 'On-Doing Undoing' section at the start of this chapter for a discussion of how Karen Salt used this term.

[164] We used this exercise in Bergen and for the Brent Biennale performances.

[165] Cite Black Women is a campaign founded by Black feminist anthropologist and social justice advocate Christen A Smith that promotes the acknowledgement of black women's work both inside and outside of the academy. Their praxis is guided by 5 principles: "read Black women's work", "integrate Black women into the CORE of your syllabus (in life and in the classroom)", "acknowledge Black women's intellectual production", "make space for Black women to speak", and "give Black women space and time to breathe". https://www.citeblackwomencollective.org (Accessed: 7 September 2022).

making knowledge, and inherent in the project is the idea of making visible our knowledge practices, to reflect on our contributions and the ones of those who came before us, acknowledging our contributions to the continuing *undoing* and our commitment to imagining a better life for ourselves and others. This is aligned with what Aja D. Reynolds, Ree Bots and Farima Pour-Khorshid (2021) have described as "Critical Sisterhood Praxis", which also calls for a way of working that puts the wellness and healing of women of colour at the centre of radical feminist scholarship. We cannot list the countless materials and experiences that we draw on in every public performance, but it lives between the lines of what we write together, what we practice together, and what we present to audiences.

Figure 14: Declaration of Independence, BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Arts, 2019. Image by Colin Jones

The Major Zone: This is Our Circle

DOI does not merely function as a spectral opportunity for the mostly white audiences of the arts organisations in which the work has been presented to see black womxn and womxn of colour speak their truths. It is deeply grounded in the idea of forum, community, and circle as a virtual space that is created to hold us together. The circle is not an open one and the forum is not open for comments,

although during the performance there is an unspoken invitation for other black womxn and womxn of colour to join. It is unspoken in that is not explicitly articulated, but the invitation is in the words we speak. It is in the ways in which we hold them in our gaze when we speak our words and how we move towards them and invite them to dance with us in the closing act of the performance. This circle has been strengthened and fortified by our togetherness and its connection to the work of other womxn who have come before us and previous iterations of the project, building on what has come before to support us now. The words we write and speak are our living collective narratives, spoken into reality. These words are the words of our ancestors reborn through the documents that are our bodies.

I draw on my experience of circle processes from sister and healing circles as well as from the kinds held in activist spaces to facilitate difficult and transformative situations. Circle processes have been used by African communities for centuries, for disputes, peace-making, initiation, rituals, and more. Forming the circle for *DOI* has been an important process to enable us to be of service to whatever comes up within the space. This is what I describe as the holding of the space of the project. Along with the elements *study*, the protective holding of the circle feeds into the collective writing process of developing performance scripts for the moments when the project is public-facing. It is the deep spiralling abyss and possibility of the project. It is me holding the intention and knowledge of what is possible with *DOI* and sharing it as a story to imagine the possibility of freedom, just as Nunu does when she shares her story in Gerima's *Sankofa*. It is also me and the other collaborators that join me in creating the conditions for *DOI* creating an atmosphere of safety, where people can be themselves, share themselves, and present their declarations from where they are, allowing someone to show up as their whole self, let their guard down, and have someone else hold and witness them. I allow myself to become the container for their expression. I am the facilitator, the dramaturge, the master of ceremonies, and the host of the space, making sure that the experience is a comforting and nurturing one. For example, for the performance at the Live Art Development Agency's Library of Performing Rights in London in 2018, I planned how the performance would unfold in a process of togetherness. This

included where we would be together and how we would nourish this togetherness with food and other activities before we began to devise the performance. This included us doing somatic bodywork,[166] clearing rituals, collective reading, a sound bath, dancing together, laughing together, and crying together. The importance of such a holding also became explicitly clear when contributors to *DOI* and long-time collaborator Foluke Taylor and I opened the space for the development of a performance hosted by Bergen Kunsthall in Norway. The expansion of air in the gallery that was sectioned off to be our working space as the womxn shared their stories and recognised themselves in each other was palatable. For many of them, this was the first time that they could speak freely about their life experiences as migrants and people born to migrants in Norway. The connections made during this declaration process in Bergen resulted in the womxn feeling much more confident to speak out about their experiences in Norway.

The circle is evoked in the performance as we open the space for us and for our audiences. The circle is opened as a ritual with words that set the parameters of the circle and the ways in which audiences are invited to be with us in the circle. I set the scene as a circle in my opening call:

[166] My experience of practising somatic bodywork began around 2015, when I was introduced to qigong and tensegrity, both mindful body practices that use the breath and movement to listen to the body. My understanding deepened when I was attuned to Reiki by Professor and Director of the Institute for Gender, Race, Sexuality, and Social Justice at the University of British Columbia Denise Ferreira Da Silva and dancer Valentina Desideri in a Sensing Salon at The Showroom, London, in 2016. I have also worked closely with artist and embodiment educator Camile Sapara Barton, who collaborated with me to develop the somatic bodywork exercises I have used in *DOI* workshops. In 2020, we worked with dancer and pleasure activist Anna Gayle, who is the founder of the Black Venus Sanctuary, an initiative she started during the pandemic lockdown to create opportunities for black women, women of colour, trans and non-binary folx to experience their bodies in somatic dance practice.

This is our Declaration of Independence.
This is our circle

Our Circle (repeated together)

Today
We witness each other Care for each other Speak to each other Listen to each other Protect each other Defend each other.
Extract from the opening call of *DOI*, 2017–present

I also do this to evoke the sacredness of the work. I do this to remind us that it is not just for entertainment, but also for the very deep work of transformation, something that happens in the wider context of the performance for those who are contributing, with the hope that, like the spiral, its energy will resonate outwards. The circle is the creation of community and resources. It facilitates the collective work that continues outside of the space of the circle. It is also the space that allows us to call in, reflect, and remember. One gesture we have often performed to open workshops is inviting ancestors, people we want to remember, people whose energy and inspiration we want to draw on, and people we would have liked to invite into the experience with us into the space by saying their names and inviting their energy or presence into our process.

Figure 15: from Declaration of Independence, Installation. BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Arts, 2019. Image by Colin Jones

In 2019, *DOI* was presented at the BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art in Gateshead in the U.K.. This invitation presented the possibility of not just a one-off performance but also of thinking about *DOI* in the context of exhibition space. This was an opportunity to create a space that would be manifested as a physical circle space or forum that could become the sort of space that others could use to develop their own work.[167] Drawing on the thinking behind *Intimacy and Distance* in the *Diaspora Pavilion*, I wanted to create an installation that alluded to our presence in the space (as in the contributors to *DOI* who would be in the show and the wider circle of the project) that also invited the viewer into the centre of that experience, evoking as much as possible the kind of atmospheric conditions generated in a live

[167] We also arranged with BALTIC for established and new groups and collectives to be invited to use this space to develop their own declarations, manifestos, or policies. This was discussed with the curatorial team but was not followed through. When a group working with women who had experienced domestic violence found out that this was an opportunity they could have taken up, I worked with Hannabiel Saunders and Yilis Carmen Suriel (two local musicians), Paula Pinho Martens Nacif (who was in the *DOI* circle and also working on production for the BALTIC project), and Foluke to facilitate their use of the space. Over 30 women and their children came and we took over the space for music, dancing, and rituals.

performance. Working with black Dutch architect Afaina De Jong and producer Jess Harrington, we created a space that would house a one-off performance and a looping video work, drawing our references from texts from previous performances, alongside archival materials depicting spaces created for conferences and forums – such as the Bandung Conference, the first large scale meeting of African and Asian states in 1955, and the subsequent first Non Aligned Movement Summit in Belgrade in 1961 – convened to promote African and Asian alliances for economic and cultural cooperation and to oppose colonialism and neo-colonialism. Because our space was to centre black womxn and womxn of colour feminist experience, we also referenced the Conference for Women in Africa and the Diaspora, organised by the Ghana women's movement, Becoming Visible, the first black lesbian conference held in the women's building in San Francisco in 1980, and other such women's conferences. We looked at the spaces, logos, and other graphic materials not just around conferences, but also protest and movement building that was anti-colonial and womxn-centred. The resulting space took the form of a theatrical space of the round, imbued with a spirit of these FORM-alities. Central to this was what we described as a "logo not logo" of circles in bright and pastel colours moving in and out, projecting light out and into themselves, and two circular benches that filled the space. The brightness and informality of this furniture was an invitation for viewers to sit and watch the declaration that unfolded on three screens, organised as if it was a live broadcast beaming into the space, created for the time of the exhibition and projected into the future through the video work that performatively invoked a virtual *DOI*. We had no idea that a virtual *DOI* would become a reality in 2020.

Figure 16: Declaration of Independence, Brent Biennale. 2020. Zoom Screenshot

Holding Our Togetherness

Ask me again,

Where

I

Come

From

Everywhere

Yes, I declare

Everywhere

we grow, we bloom,

we abound.

Extract from piece by Moira Salt, *DOI,* Brent Biennale, December 2020

In 2020, I was due to create a new performance of *DOI*, but the COVID-19 pandemic took over the world, making it impossible for us to create a work that would be presented live. We were in a lockdown and there was an overly optimistic hope that

it would all be over by the summer. This was not the case and so I had to imagine a *DOI* that would happen virtually. Aware that many of the elements that had made *DOI* what is was relied upon physical presence I had to reimagine how we could generate a sense of togetherness, care, and community in three-hour Zoom calls. I drew on the support of Foluke Taylor, who had been part of the project since 2018 and joined me in Bergen, and Gail Lewis, who was involved since the BALTIC iteration in 2019, to help me create the space, as collaborators and keepers of the spirit of previous declarations. I also drew on the work of Anna Gayle, a friend who had been interested in the project but had never taken part. Anna runs an occasional movement rituals space for black womxn and womxn of colour called the Black Venus Sanctuary. Using her experience as a 5Rhythms teacher, energy and body worker, self-pleasure coach, and theatre practitioner, Anna created a powerful virtual somatic ritual of togetherness that called us together despite our separateness. This experience brought release in the form of tears, laughter, and the connection needed to bring a sense of being in community. It brought words to add to the words that Foluke had pulled out of previous performance scripts, to be reflected on, and used as prompts for new writing. Gail brought memories of being a young activist supporting the women on the picket line at the Grunwick Film Processing Lab[168] between 1976 and 1978, bringing a spirit of endurance and continued Black feminist and anti-capitalist resistance that resonated with what we were feeling and what we all felt needed to shift in this moment, remembering the womxn who came before and nourished by the fact that we could still create despite the conditions.

This is where the circle also becomes something that resources us. When it came to the day of the performance, we all gathered in our separate spaces, hoping that the OBS software (which professes to make online performances appear smooth and professional) would not disappoint us. Predictably, it failed us. But we endured and the broadcast happened, 50 minutes later than billed, but it happened, without a

[168] During the Grunwick dispute, which took place between August 1976 and July 1978, South Asian women led a strike for better working conditions and pay.

single grumble from anybody about the technology – not from the contributors nor the audience members who waited 50 minutes for us to sort out the technology. This could be in part to do with the fact that we were in a place in our lives, in the history of the world, where a certain kind of striving progress had been stunted and our experience of time had slowed down. We had nowhere to go, and we needed to see things and be involved in things that resourced us and gave us the possibility to envision something otherwise outside of the conditions that we had become accustomed to.[169]

To close this chapter, I want to return to *Sankofa,* and the five categories of interpretation offered by Khonsura A. Wilson (2009: 587). These are: reflection on the past; self-conscious reflection before moving forward; reflecting on one's identity, self-definition, and vision for the future; an understanding of the personal role in a collective vocation; and, finally, the repossession or recollecting of something lost or forgotten. *DOI* has been created in this spirit. Drawing on the poem by Ama Ata Aidoo, reading between the lines to unveil the conditions of history that still persist and need *undoing* in order to imagine another way of living. Sharing our experiences as useful material on how to understand the world and the conditions of the world, as a Black feminist praxis of knowledge production, acknowledging, and imagining. In fact, so much is contained in the circle of the project, in its *study* materials and in the moments of performance. It is like a *Sankofa* bird, whispering, questioning, holding space for the future. Within the project we reflect on ourselves, our contributions, what we would like to change, what hurts us, and what gives us joy. We recover ourselves and the fragments of story that will lead us back to the village, understanding that the return we are generating is a return to ourselves. We declare ourselves and claim ourselves as Ama does.

[169] Outside of our usual expectations for life and the ways in which we consume culture.

4. Reviving Our Distinct Ways of Knowing Through *Sankofa*: Reflections on Our Place in the World with a Discerning Black-Eyed Squint

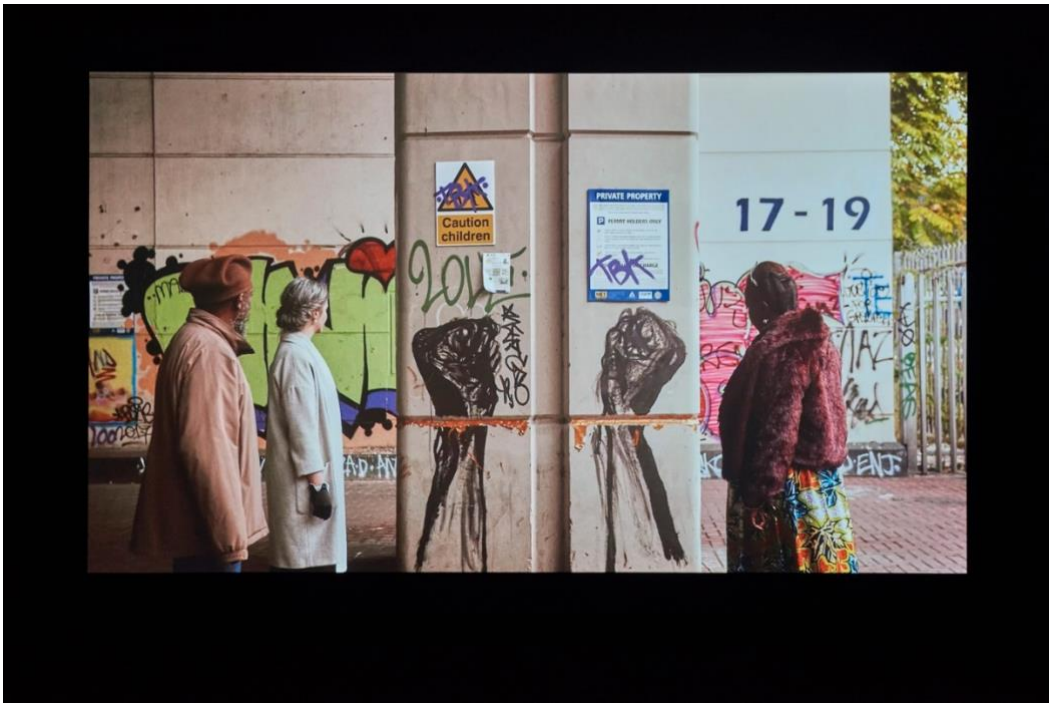

Figure 17: The Queen and the Black-Eyed Squint, North Kensington, Installation, Starless Midnight, BALTIC, Gateshead. Photo: John McKenzie, 2017.

A Poem for Aba

When an old man dies

A library burnt

What about an old woman

What of her library?

On 25th June 2016

Dina Kwansema Edwin Baiden

Left this world joyfully singing songs of praise

102 years of living

She was joyfully taken to the other side

She took her songs with her

Along with her stories

Her recipes

Her jokes

Her grooming techniques

Knowledge of the before before

Before the men started plotting the downfall of the British

They didn't know that

The Women

They were plotting too

Those plots

Those plans went with her

Along with her tips for making the best bread in Asylum Down[170]

And her knowledge of herbs and plants

Herbs that heal anything from menstrual cramps to a fever

Herbs to turn a baby in breach

And to settle a violent sickness

And she took with her knowledge of what those plants looked like and where to find them

How do you excavate an archive of intimacy and distance

An unknown grandmother

My grandmother

Who lived 102 years on this earth

Going to market

Rearing children

Seeing changes

Hearing gunfire

Listening to speeches

Baking bread

---

[170] The area in Accra where my grandparents lived until the mid 2000s.

Praising the Lord

Walking

Talking

Laughing

Crying

Holding

How do you recover the traces of her conversations

The things she has seen

How do you feel the touch that has never been touched

Photographs lost in internal migrations or floods

A journey home

Or is it my home

A place spoke of in languages I could understand

But I did not speak

Maybe I refused to speak

Because in the place where English is spoken/ broken

And my small dark brown body stands out

Amongst a sea of whiteness

And the Afro puff hairstyle worn by my sister and I

Seemed to invite the hands of white women to touch

Stroking like cats fur

An invitation not given by me

Why would I want to draw any more attention to myself

By speaking another language

By giving myself away as foreign

Not from here

Of course this is where I was born so I must be from here

And not there

And as such I must hide any markers of that identity

That foreignness

Accept my obvious visibility

I remember this on the journey there
And as I sit there/ here
With all that is familiar and unfamiliar
Family
Cousins
Uncles
Aunts
My sister
My brother
My mother

For the first time in Ghana together
And I feel the limitation of my movement
Or my ability to move
And my desperate need to go to the sea
And the desperate plea of my Grandmother
Who prayed for us all
Every day
Naming everyone
Every child
Every grandchild
Every great-grandchild
Alive or dead

She Prayed
For me to stay
To be
To witness to record

Tradition

Traditions

Forgotten

Confused

Contested

Translations

Transitions

Transformations

And then

In this moment the distant intimacy

That has brought us together

No borders

Sea crossings

No flights across land

Ocean or desert

Just moments where we are all there

Moments of dissonance

Confusion

Connection

And Distance

But we're there

As she wanted us to be

As she asked for in her prayers

Barby Asante

August 2016

Figure 18: For Ama. For Aba. For Charlotte and Adjoa. Barby Asante, Dolph Projects London 2017. Photo: Dolph Projects. Quote from Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle (McKittrick 2006).

I opened this chapter on the *Queen and the Black-Eyed Squint* (2017- ongoing) with *A Poem for Aba*, a piece I wrote in 2016 for a performance lecture for *We Are All The Other*, curated by the CERA PROJECT.[171] For the 40 min presentation I pulled together various materials I had been collecting and collating related to a project I wanted to explore that considered the impact of the lives of Ghanaian women, based on the imagined life of my grandmother. As the poem states, I did not know my grandmother well. In fact, I first met her in 1989 when I was 18 years old when I made an independent trip to Ghana. My parents were never in a financial position to take us all back to Ghana for a holiday to meet our families. They would send

[171] Founded in 2016 by curator Inès Valle the CERA PROJECT is an itinerant contemporary art platform programming and supporting work of artists and critical conversations on global issues. They are interested in creating events and exhibitions around contemporary art that falls outside of Western and Eurocentric narratives, fostering an interdisciplinary dialogue around the work.

money for my brother's education or any other familial needs. If something urgent occurred like the death of a relative my mum would take a trip to help organise, take money, and attend the funeral. No trip was ever made with the sole desire of connecting and being together for the sheer pleasure and comfort of family. At 18 I received a significant compensation payment for an accident I had when I was ten and this meant I was able to afford to pay for the trip myself. I knew that Ghana was part of me, and I wanted to know it. I wanted to feel it, smell the air, touch the soil, hear the languages spoken daily and be in the presence of people like me. I wanted to know about the family that had been left behind, so I could better understand and root myself. Meeting my grandmother, Aba Kwansema Edwin Baiden, for the first time was a very powerful and loving experience. The place in Asylum Down where she lived in with my grandfather, my aunt's children/ my cousins King, Evelyn, Della, Kwabena, my uncle Joseph and other relatives, was a number of small rooms in a building shared with other families. In the cluttered room that doubled as a bedroom and a family room, my grandmother pulled me to her and sat my large 18-year-old self on her lap. She held me like a small child and spoke to me tenderly in Fanté. I could only answer with yes or no or simple phrases that were translated for her by my cousins. I was so close to my grandmother with whom I shared *mogya*[172] but yet we were separated by language, continents, and the massive differences in our life experiences. After that first visit, I saw her a few more times on two subsequent visits. Once when I visited Ghana with a friend in the early 1990s and the next time in 2006 when I took my child, Ewuraba, to Ghana, and they met their great-grandmother for the first and last time. On meeting my child, their great-grandmother, Aba Kwansema, pulled the tall eleven-year-old to her and placed them on her lap, holding them close and speaking to them in Fanté. This time the understanding between them was even more removed because my child knew very little Fanté, as they had not grown up with the language. It was a distanced remembering, removed from them by a mother that was close to the language through understanding but not speaking. Yet Ewuraba and their great-grandmother

[172] I mention the Akan thinking around the idea of *mogya* in chapter one this describes the matrilineal side of a person coming from their blood.

shared an intimate and beautiful time together, sharing their love and family connection, knowing that this might be the only time they would ever meet.

The next time I returned to Ghana ten years later was for my grandmother's funeral. She was 102 and I knew very little of her life, but I knew the pain of the loss of that connection. At the time, I had also begun researching Ghana's independence for a project that I was discussing with a curator in Amsterdam. 6th March 2017 was the 50th anniversary of Ghana as it was named when the nation was granted independence in 1957. The CERA PROJECT invitation was a brilliant opportunity to share and test out some of the ideas I was working with. While I was researching women in the Independence movement, and I found Ama Ata Aidoo's poem *As Always, a Painful Declaration of Independence*. I also spoke to my mum about her experience and memory of independence. She was a young child and had only sketchy memories of the independence celebrations in Accra. She also recalled polishing the floor and preparing tea in a blue and white tea service[173] in her uncle's house with her cousin in preparation for visits from important men, one of which she vaguely remembered might have been Kwame Nkrumah, the man who was to become the first President of Ghana. As mentioned in the previous chapter on *Declaration of Independence*, Ama Ata Aidoo's poem has become a text that I have been in a practice of deep study with so at the time I called the piece presented at CERA PROJECTS *As Always, a Painful Declaration of Independence: For Ama, For Aba, For Charlotte and Adjoa.* I imagined this work as a way to explore the stories of many women, not just those who may have directly impacted the independence negotiations. I appropriated the title of the poem adding the dedication to the title, for Ama Ata Aidoo, my grandmother Aba Kwansema, Charlotte Dada,[174] a female

[173] Tea is a significant motif in The Queen and the Black-Eyed Squint films. This refers to a memory of the sweet tea drunk by Ghanaians that I used to enjoy as a child, this memory my mum shared of the preparation of tea also connects to my first solo exhibition at the Showroom in 2002 where I questioned coloniality through an exploration of our everyday relationship with tea.

[174] I inherited a collection of High Life 7" records from my dad, which included a very rare recording of Charlotte Dada singing with a band called Stan's Experimental Chorus. Having heard very few High Life records featuring women's voices, I began to research her and found that she had made a very haunting version of the Beatles' song *Don't Let Me Down*. (recorded by the Beatles in 1969 and by Dada in 1971). I used this version of *Don't Let Me Down* for the presentation at CERA Projects. I also

highlife singer whose music I discovered in 2012 when doing the *South London Black Music Archive*, and my mother Elizabeth Ampah Baiden, also known as Adjoa[175]. I wanted to explore how to remember the everyday impact that they had to keep the energy and spirit of freedom from coloniality alive, in the often-unacknowledged ways that are the everyday fundamentals of keeping us all alive. The commission I was speaking about with the Dutch curator never happened and I moved on to making *Intimacy and Distance* for the *Diaspora Pavilion*.

Figure 19: Composite of images from For Ama. For Aba. For Charlotte and Adjoa. Barby Asante, Dolph Projects London 2017. Photo: Dolph Projects.

For a while, all that I had researched for the independence project remained on the back burner until I revisited the material in a small exhibition *For Ama. For Aba. For*

sampled the opening percussive intro in the compositions for *Intimacy and Distance*. One of the contributors to *Declaration of Independence*, Buki Bayode performed the song based on Charlotte Dada's version in the performance at the *Diaspora Pavilion*.

[175] Adjoa is my mum's Ghanaian name. it means girl born on Monday.

Charlotte and Adjoa at DOLPH Projects[176] in London in May 2017, just after the *Diaspora Pavilion* opened. I presented some of the research materials that I had been working with. Family photos, books, quotes, videos and previous works were presented in the space, where I also hosted a dinner and two conversations. One of the pieces of research material that was much discussed during the dinner and conversations was a video of a short British Pathé newsreel clip called *Miss Ghana Comes to Town*, which told the story of the visit to Britain of the first Miss Ghana Monica Amekoafia.

Figure 20: Monica Amekoafia and other contestants, Accra Community Centre, Accra 1957. Source: Opera News.

[176] Founded by Paul Cole and Natasha Kahn, DOLPH aimed to invite artists, audiences and the local community into a dialogue that explored the "vagaries and complexities" of contemporary art practice. The brief to artists says. "The artist's objective is to frame an exhibition that contextualises the interests and concerns driving their practice. Their task is to tell the story of what makes them tick. To share their inspirations and influences, and present them in an intriguing, cohesive exhibition. How the artist does this is up to them. They set their own terms. They are their own curators. Their aim is to create an exhibition that is both revealing and challenging. To conceive a show that offers a rare insight into their creative process and affords the opportunity for greater understanding of their practice." http://www.dolphprojects.com/WhoisDOLPH.html.

Figure 21: Screenshot from Miss Ghana Comes to Town, British Pathé, 1957.

Miss Ghana Comes to Town

On the 4th March 1957, contestant number nine, Monica Amekoafia, was crowned the first Miss Ghana. Monica was 22 years old and the mother of two children. She was a reluctant contestant, the queen mother of her town Alavanyo having encouraged her to enter the contest to represent the Volta region.[177] That day in March, at the Accra community centre she was surprised when the judges announced that she had won. The audience in the centre chanted "number nine, number nine."[178] Monica's prize was a 12-day visit to the United Kingdom. Part of this visit is captured in the *Miss Ghana Comes to Town* newsreel. The 1 minute 9 second newsreel shows her arrival at London Airport. She wears her crown and sash, with a traditional Kente cloth skirt and cardigan. She is greeted with flowers presented by an airline representative. We see her smile cordially for the camera as

[177] One of Ghana's 16 administrative regions in the east of the country. People from the Volta Region are mostly from the Ewe ethnic group also found in Togo and Benin.
[178] Number 9 has subsequently become a nickname for people from the Volta Region http://www.faapa.info/blog/preserving-the-heroines-and-heroes-of-ghana/

she is led toward the terminal. In the next scene, we see her arriving in the city in a 1957 Standard Vanguard[179], met by photographers and the then Miss Great Britain, Iris Waller. Still wearing her crown and sash she is driven to shops to look at furs and diamonds. In the final scene, we see her promenading outside Buckingham Palace with Miss Great Britain. 'The voiceover speaks of Monica Amekoafia, the "charming representative of a brand-new country"[180] as the 'Kingmaker', referring to the meaning of her surname and commenting that her's is "a very appropriate name for a beauty queen", as she is shown smiling for the camera as the shop assistant puts a diamond bracelet on her. Watching this footage in a contemporary context there is a subtle irony in this gesture as the narrator says, "and now for a call at Asprey's, where diamonds sparkle all the world over and when jewellers display their wares so invitingly, they know what they are doing." There is a tone of authority and self-assuredness in his voice that this is something so wonderful that she could never experience in her home country. There is no self-consciousness reflection on the fact that Monica is a representative of a former colony. Neither is there reflection on the fact that diamonds and furs are commodities acquired due to a legacy of global trade and plunder, which her "new country" was trying to *undo* in becoming independent. In fact, a small feature in a Ghanaian newspaper[181], dated 4th April 1957 when Amekoafia said of Amekoafia's visit: "On arrival at London Airport this morning she is expected to be met by representatives of companies which have trade links with Ghana."[182] Perhaps this was part of her original reticence to enter the Miss Ghana competition?

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[179] I mention the model of the car as researchers at Glasgow Museums were able to locate one of the three Standard Vanguard's still in use in the U.K. in Scotland. The car was featured in one of *The Tour* one of the Glasgow films.

[180]From the British Pathé Newsreel.

[181] The newspaper, The Daily Graphic, is a state-owned newspaper that was founded in 1950. It was established alongside by Cecil King of the Daily Mirror Group

[182] One of the companies she visited was Bournville in Birmingham, a company that traded in coco from Ghana to make its chocolate. She was one of many African visitors to the Selly Oak Village where Bournville was based. A recent photography exhibition at Selly Museum displayed photographs of African visitors from their archives, including images of Amekoafia's visit. The headline on the Ghanian feature was "Miss Ghana" Leaves.

Monica's visit to London as Miss Ghana was not that different to any winner of a beauty contest. Winners were often expected to represent their countries as national dignitaries. The irony of this was that her visit was to the country of the former colonial masters. She was to visit places significant to a continuing trade with Ghana and she was to represent the country and play the role of a neutral non-threatening representative, a bridge between the countries. Watching the clip over and over with visitors to DOPLH, I became more and more intrigued by what this experience must have been like for her. How would she have seen the country she had learned so much about as a child? The country that was their ruler and supposed benefactor. The country of the colonisers, occupiers, and traders of people. What did she really feel as she walked the streets of London and saw the contradiction of wealth and the contrasting everyday experience of this country? I remembered Ama Ata Aidoo's 1977 novel *Our Sister Killjoy* also known as *Reflections from a Black-Eyed Squint*. The book follows Sissie, a young Ghanaian woman who is selected to take a state-sponsored trip to Germany and England. Monica's bridging visit was arranged to do this good work. To show the British public and the world that relations between Britain and its former colonies remained convivial. Sissie suspects that this might be the reason for her invitation. Ata Aidoo (1977: 8) writes:

> "Her journey must have had something to do with a people's efforts
> 'to make good again'
> Because right from the beginning, the embassy had shown a lot of interest."

'To make good again,' to show the world that despite everything we are still friends. Just like *As Always, A Painful Declaration of Independence*, *Our Sister Killjoy,* is a commentary on the relationship between Europe and Africa as a result of the continuing legacies of enslavement, colonialism and the ways in which white supremacy and anti-blackness have affected how African[183] people see and experience themselves in the world. Sissie notices that all that glitters is not gold, or

[183] My use of African here is pointing to Africans but also, I am thinking about this as the black subject of the African diaspora.

diamonds and fur. She questions why people are so drawn to the West. She bemoans the weather and the cramped conditions that people are living in, the food and the dullness of the clothing that African women wear, all this on a backdrop of a stinging analysis of the conditions of a world coming out of colonial domination into a different kind of world order, a neo-colonial one where the legacies of coloniality persist, but apparently, Africans and others are now included, yet they seemed to still be in a position of subordination to the European.

I had all this in mind when curator Laurence Sillars came to my studio for a visit and invited me to make a new work for an exhibition that he was curating with American artist Edgar Arceneaux. Presented as part of Newcastle's Freedom City 2017 programme, a programme put together to commemorate the 50th anniversary of Martin Luther King Jr receiving an honorary degree from Newcastle University, *Starless Midnight* (BALTIC 2019) took its title from a line in the speech that King gave on acceptance of the Nobel Peace Prize in 1964. He said, "I refuse to accept the view that mankind is so tragically bound to the *starless midnight*[184] of racism and war that the bright daybreak of peace and brotherhood can never become a reality." Arceneaux and Sillars's proposition for the exhibition drew on this speech and the speech he gave at Newcastle University, where King identified three urgent problems "the problem of racism, the problem of poverty and the problem of war."[185] Explored through the work of nine contemporary artists,[186] *Starless Midnight* was an exhibition that considered this legacy of King, and how his words still ring true as these problems persist despite the idea that much was achieved by the civil rights movement. The first two films in a series *The Queen and the Black-Eyed Squint* were created for this exhibition.

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[184] My emphasis

[185] A transcript of this speech is available from Newcastle University https://www.ncl.ac.uk/media/wwwnclacuk/congregations/files/Tmyranscript%20of%20Dr%20Martin%20Luther%20King%20Jr%20speech%2013th%20November%201967.pdf (Accessed 10th September 2022)

[186] Season Butler, Louis Cameron, Karon Davis, Charles Gaines, Michol Hebron, Kenyatta A C Hinkle, Ashley Holmes, Cauleen Smith and me.

Imagining the Queen

The Queen and the Black-Eyed Squint begins at the moment that I presented the poem and collection of other materials in the performance lecture. As with my intention with *As Always, A Painful Declaration of Independence: For Ama. For Aba. For Charlotte and Adjoa,* Continuing the practice of *undoing* explored in Chapter three, *The Queen and the Black-Eyed Squint* brings together the stories of different Ghanaian women and their relationship to Europe, in what Black feminist writer and curator Nydia Swaby has described as a "speculative biography."[187] The central character is a beauty queen, played by me and based on Monica Amekoafia's story of visiting Britain as part of her prize for winning the Miss Ghana competition. Accompanied by Miss Great Britain, the queen visits different sites around the U.K. while considering the contentious relationship between the U.K and her home country. Layered in the stories are the experiences of intimacy and distance with my grandmother, how she was excited by the fact that her daughter and her children lived in Aburokyire,[188] what my mum shared with me about her arrival in the U.K., and what I have witnessed and experienced of my mum's life and my own from the 1970s to the present day. Also within the story are the silences of an interconnected history hidden between the lines spoken by the narrator of the Pathé newsreel, within the photographs that show Monica's visit to Bourneville, and the histories, contemporary events and experiences that live in the streets and buildings of the places she visits. Along with the stinging analysis of Sissie's black-eyed squint, these biographies are interwoven to reimagine the 12-day visit and how the queen might have experienced it.

Since the project began in 2017, I have made five films in London, Newcastle and Glasgow. My intention is to make a series of 12 to reflect the 12 days of her visit. In

[187] Swaby described the work as speculative biography in a conversation with me at 198 Contemporary Arts and Learning on the 6th March 2022. She was drawing the ways in which the project fictionalises the story of Monica Ameokoafia to reimagine her biography. Also embedded in the character of the Queen are the biographies of several different women.

[188] Aburokyire means overseas or abroad, typically referring to the United Kingdom, The United States or Europe https://learnakandictionary.com/english-twi/overseas

this chapter, I will be concentrating on the three most recent films made in Glasgow but will begin by giving a brief background to the first two films that were made in Newcastle and London. I will then move into a deeper exploration of the three Glasgow films, looking closely at how each one continues the project of *undoing* through remembering and reflecting on the interconnected relationship of black and other post-colonial people to Britain. These films were conceived, developed, and made in a long and ongoing dialogue with Glasgow Museum of Modern Art (GOMA) curator Katie Bruce. The commitment was such that the work was commissioned and purchased by Glasgow Museums.[189] This was a different experience of working with someone in an institution committed to an engagement with the work and the challenges that it presented to that institution. I will explore how the films involve the work of remembering and *undoing*, examining what the films do conceptually and the ways in which they play with imagination and speculation to present and question the continuing legacies of slavery and colonisation. I will also consider how they explore the affective legacies of slavery and colonialism, including love, hope and disappointment. Lastly, I will reflect on how these works relate to how I have been thinking about *Sankofa.*

[189] The commission and purchase were supported by Art Fund a national fundraising charity for the arts in the United Kingdom that supports galleries and museums to enhance their collections https://www.artfund.org

Figure 22: The Queen and the Black-Eyed Squint, Newcastle, Installation, BALTIC, Starless Midnight, BALTIC, Gateshead. Photo: John McKenzie, 2017.

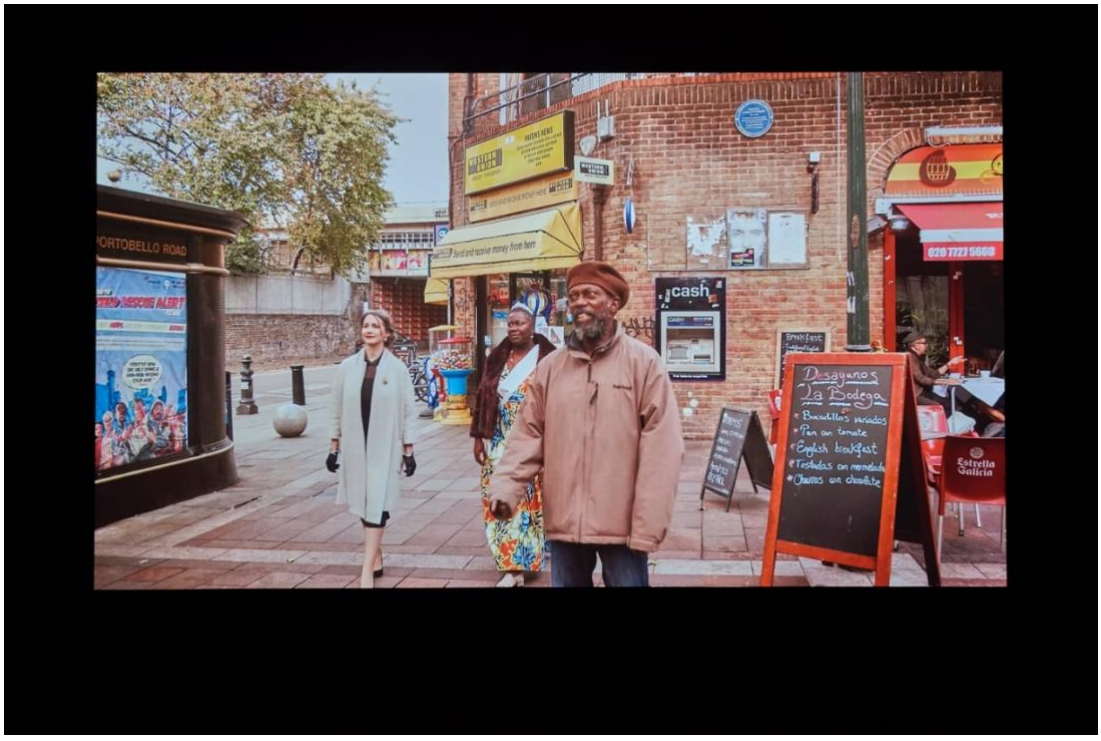

Figure 23: The Queen and the Black-Eyed Squint, North Kensington, Installation, Starless Midnight, BALTIC, Gateshead. Photo: John McKenzie, 2017.

The Queen Visits Newcastle and North Kensington

The first two films made for *Starless Midnight* set out a way of working with the different stories through the idea of the tour of sites in Newcastle and North Kensington in London. Working with a very small budget and a team of one camera person, Jessica Harrington, who also acted as a production assistant and my friend artist Harriet Fleuriot, who played Miss Great Britain, we set out to make these films in late September 2017. Thinking about the notion of transcription and re-enactment, the idea was to draw on the stylistic elements of the Pathé newsreel of 'Miss Ghana Comes to Town', to imagine present-day Newcastle and North Kensington as stops on the reimagined 12-day tour of Miss Ghana to Britain. The idea was to visit sites in the cities to explore and question the ways in which the legacies of colonialism linger on our streets and in our lives today.

In Newcastle, I mapped the route of the tour in dialogue with curator Laurence Sillars and others in the team at BALTIC. The first site that the queen would visit would be Newcastle University to remember and reflect on Martin Luther King jr. receiving his honorary degree in 1967. He was nominated for the honorary degree in Civil Law by Lord Wynne Jones, a Labour peer and professor of Chemistry at the university. Lord Wynne said of King "I recommend him for his outstanding leadership of the coloured peoples of America in a period of grave anxiety and possibilities of racial strife".[190] The invitation to King was part of a university strategy to use honorary degrees to publicise the universities mission to engage in social issues of the time. We visited Kings Hall, where the award was given and sat in the chairs he may have sat in while the formalities for the honorary degree were being conducted. While there I remembered the only other time I had visited Newcastle University. It was in 2015 and I was invited by the NUS Racial Equalities Officer, Safiya Robinson, to be in on a panel with Professor Brian Ward, youth worker Tina Simbo, and rapper and activist Akala. The panel explored the role of the arts and music in Black liberation and was programmed as part of an initiative to support

[190] [Lord] Wynne-Jones, letter to E.M. Bettenson, 2 October 1966 (University Archives, NUA/00-7621/4/30 from Newcastle University Special Collections https://speccollstories.ncl.ac.uk/Martin-Luther-King-at-Newcastle-University/ (Accessed 10th September 2022)

black students and students of colour at the university. The number of black and students of colour at Newcastle University was nominal at this time and many were struggling with isolation and, as on many British university campuses, these students were challenging the legacies of coloniality in the education system. I wanted to evoke the connections between my last visit to the university, the Queen's visit as an imagined dignitary representing the dreams of many Ghanaian women, a new country dreaming itself into being, and King's dreams of freedom, racial justice and equality. What was also present for us in the empty spaces where we filmed the scenes in the university was the fact that as the city was celebrating the idea of freedom evoked by Martin Luther King Jr, hate crime in the U.K was surging due to the nationalist rhetoric of Brexit.[191] Donald Trump had been sworn in as president of the United States earlier that year with a promise to "make America great again", adopting a rhetoric of racial hatred and threat that targeted at Mexican immigrants and Muslims particularly, while incidences of the deaths of black men and women at the hands of American law enforcement were increasing.

I also was interested in how Newcastle and the surrounding areas saw their relationship to Britain's colonial legacies and communities of "diverse" people that were making Britain their home. I was told that there was very little diversity in the city and very little colonial history. Most cities in the U.K have been developed through some connection to colonisation, so it was not hard to find sites to visit that spoke to the connections that the city in fact had to colonialism. As well as visiting the university, the film shows the queen and Miss Great Britain visiting Newcastle Cathedral,[192] which dates back to the 15th century, with its stained-glass windows depicting St. George slaying the dragon, memorials to the Northumberland Fusiliers

[191] Especially in the north of England. In the northeast, overall there was an undisputed vote to exit the EU. Newcastle was split with remain just getting the majority vote and Gateshead where BALTIC is located voted to leave. In the northeast, there was an increase in Islamophobic hate crimes in 2016. The population of Black and minority ethnic people in the northeast is around 4% with the overall population being around 14% (Hopkins, Clayton, Tell Mama 2020).

[192] Also known as the Cathedral Church of St Nicholas. There has been a church at this site since 1091. The current building dates back to 1350 and was established as a cathedral by royal charter in 1882. https://newcastlecathedral.org.uk/whats-in-a-name/

who fell in colonial wars including the Indian Mutiny, the Boer war and the first world war. We also visited a 41-metre-high monument in the city centre dedicated to Earl Grey,[193] who was the prime minister who oversaw the 1832 Great Reform Act.[194] This Act reformed the electoral system in the United Kingdom, abolishing tiny districts and giving the vote to small landowners, tenant farmers, shopkeepers and others previously excluded from the right to vote. In addition, his government enacted the Slavery Abolition Act of 1833 [195]and developed a plan to settle a new colony in South Australia. It is also said that Earl Grey tea may have been named after him. Finally, we visited the Literary and Philosophical Society of Newcastle Upon Tyne. This independent library was established in 1793[196] as a hub of learning and "enlightenment" before the city had universities. Holding over 170,000 books from the 16th century to the present day, it began as a society of men who would get together to discuss the issues of the day. We walked along the mezzanine floor taking in the books on poetry, music, ethnography, botany and more. In the film, the queen's face is full of wonder as she takes in the city with Miss Great Britain. She marvels at the detail on the stained-glass windows and runs her fingers along the hard white marble of statues. They make regular stops to look at the camera for a photographic moment, to show how much the Queen is enjoying her visit and the conviviality and rapport between her and Miss Great Britain. In contrast to the opulence and conviviality displayed in the image, the narration takes extracts from *Our Sister Killjoy* that speak of Sissie's experience of visiting the United Kingdom. She speaks of the death of an African taxi driver, a mother writing to her son to come home, a doctor who is experimenting with the transplantation of a pig's heart into a man. She speaks of scholarships given to African students, of sadness and disappointment, and people who would tell what she calls "beento" stories, of the good life in Britain. A good life she could not see.

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[193] Charles Grey was from Northumberland and was Prime Minister of the United Kingdom from 1830-1834

[194] https://www.parliament.uk/about/living-heritage/evolutionofparliament/houseofcommons/reformacts/overview/reformact1832/

[195] https://resources.saylor.org/wwwresources/archived/site/wp-content/uploads/2011/05/Slavery-Abolition-Act-1833.pdf

[196] The actual building opened in 1825

There was very little of the grandiosity of Newcastle in the London visit to North Kensington. I wanted to make this visit in honour of Khadija Saye, her mother Mary Mende and the other 70 victims of the Grenfell Tower Fire. I wanted to pair this with Newcastle, not only because it was something significant that happened in 2017 but also to visit a place of significant black presence in Britain, in contrast to a place with very little diversity. Whereas in Newcastle there were grand and opulent buildings on a tour that took in the city centre, in North Kensington we were in a residential area. In the area that was once known as the stomping ground of the notorious slum landlord Peter Rachman[197] were the streets that once a year held a carnival that is important within the long memory of carnivals through which the Black British community have continually revived and restyled festivities from the Caribbean. Over the years the demographic has significantly changed, and the once derelict large houses are now much sort-after luxury residences. These streets also held a monthly silent walk and vigil for the victims of the Grenfell Tower Fire[198]. Walking these streets with the long-time resident, cultural activist, and chair of the Institute of Race Relations Colin Prescod as our guide, we visit sites of incidents remembered with unofficial blue plaques[199], organised by community activists. We visit the house of Jamaican Pan-African activist Amy Ashwood Garvey,[200] a friend to Prescod's late mother, the Caribbean/British actor, singer and activist Pearl Prescod. Garvey's home was the place where Prescod spent his first night on arrival to the U.K as his mother was on stage at the Royal Court that evening. We stood opposite

[197] Peter Rachman was a Polish born landlord that operated in Notting Hill and surrounding areas in the 1950s and 60s (Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea, 1998-2006)

[198] At the time that the film was made in 2017 silent walks were held on the 14th of each month. Covid 19 restrictions changed this with walks being held yearly.

[199] The London blue plaques scheme run by English Heritage have only recently started to acknowledge black history so most of the plaques in the Notting Hill and Ladbrooke Grove are of North Kensington have been supported by the Nubian Jak Community Trust (a commemorative plaque and sculpture scheme set up to focus on memorialising historic contributions of people and events of black and minority ethnic people in Britain) and the Octavia Foundation (a local charity working with people effected by unemployment, isolation and ill health).

[200] The plaque placed on the house at 1 Basset Road, W11 minutes from Ladbrooke Grove tube station remembers the life and achievements of Amy Ashwood Garvey

Trellick Tower[201] at the Grove Inn on Goldborne Road, while Prescod told us about the Notting Hill riots in 1958[202] and the murder of Kelso Cochrane in 1959.[203] We walk past the street where Frank Crichlow's Mangrove Restaurant[204] once stood, and onwards to the area where residents gathered on the night of the fire, where the queen reads testimonies written on the walls that tell of the horror of the night of the Grenfell Tower Fire. Unlike in Newcastle, there is little conviviality and rapport going on between the Queen and Miss Great Britain. The Queen listens to her guide attentively as Miss Great Britain walks tentatively on the streets, in a much quieter demure and reserved disposition. The only time in this film that the Queen faces the camera is at the end of the film after reading some of the testimonies on the people's memorial wall. Her face is full of grief and anger as she faces the camera in silence.

Although there are a lot of stories to be told on the streets on North Kensington and our guide Colin Prescod told us a lot about the area and his experiences, I chose not to record his telling of the story for the film. Instead, I read As *Always, A Painful Declaration of Independence*. I wanted to use a narration that connected the work I had begun to make in *Diaspora Pavilion* with this work as they were both about the *undoing* of the narrative of coloniality. However, in this instance the Queen was undoing coloniality through layers of remembering, through people and places, exploring what is not written in history books, the things that change and get

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[201] A grade 2 listed tower block designed by Hungarian architect and furniture designer Ernõ Goldfinger. Opened in 1972 to replace the outdated social housing stock, it has subsequently become an icon of brutalist architecture and a much sort after place to live with flats selling for record amounts.

[202] These racially motivated riots took place between August 29th and 5th September 1958. The riots were believed to have begun after Swedish woman Majbritt Morrison was seen arguing with her Jamaican husband. The next day a group of youths shouted racial slurs at her and threw bottles at her. Majbritt wrote about the riots in her memoir *Jungle West 11* (1964)

[203] Kelso Cochrane was a 32-year-old man from Antigua who was beaten and stabbed on the corner of Goldborne Road and Southam Street by a gang of white youths on the 17th May 1959

[204] Opened in 1968 by Trinidadian activist and restaurateur Frank Crichlow, The Mangrove Restaurant was located on All Saint's Road. From the moment it opened the restaurant was a target for police raids and harassment. A protest against the police harassment became violent resulting in nine people including Crichlow, British Black Panthers Darcus Howe and Althiea Jones LeCointe being charged with conspiracy to incite rioting. The story of the case was adapted for television by artist and filmmaker Steve McQueen in 2020 as part of the BBC's Small Axe series.

forgotten by subsequent generations who might inhabit the neighbourhood. I wanted to concentrate on what is seen and not seen and bring to the films an emotive narrative that extended beyond the place I was visiting, or the subjects in the film. I wanted to entice the viewer to see, wonder and perhaps think differently about the place, should they ever take a walk in the area. I wanted them to be curious, to question, to consider what was not being said. When the work was exhibited at BALTIC, I showed the two films with a life-sized image of my mum and two friends standing in front of a map of the world. (see fig) This was taken from a series of photographs I have of family members and friends posing in front of maps. The images seem staged, in that choosing to pose in front of a map, my mum, dad and their friends, newly arrived in Britain, were representing their worldliness and hope for the future. My mum told me that these photos were taken at events where young Ghanaian people living in London would get together, speak about the issues of the day, and socialise. They were imagining their lives and being in the world. The image placed strategically at the opening of that gallery space spoke of hope and possibility. Visitors would weave their way through the galleries experiencing the works of the other artists in the exhibition that brought to light different conditions and propositions connected to Dr King's legacy. When visitors got to the final room of the galleries, they were confronted with the two *Black-Eyed Squint* films.

Figure 24: The Queen and the Black-Eyed Squint, Starless Midnight, BALTIC, Gateshead, 2017. Photo: John McKenzie.

The Queen and the Black-Eyed Squint – Glasgow

Conversations about making *The Queen and the Black-Eyed Squint* in Glasgow began in 2018. Many circumstances and events prevented the work from being realised in 2020 as we had planned, including funding and the Covid 19 global pandemic. This allowed more time for research and development of the project. It also gave me time to reflect on what the project was doing and where I would like to locate it. The many conversations I had with the GoMA curator Katie Bruce, along with the visits I made to Glasgow before the pandemic enabled me to imagine this series of *The Queen and the Black-Eyed Squint* beyond the biographies of the women and the speculative idea of these women's possible relationships to the places I was exploring. Those few years saw many global social, and cultural issues arise that pointed to more pressing questions about how the legacies of coloniality were beginning to become more visible as in the *undoing* people could see that these legacies are effecting the lives of more and more people, not just those who are of colour, indigenous or living in former colonial countries. People were beginning to see that many complex issues are connected to the historic legacies of coloniality

and enslavement: Brexit, the election of Donald Trump, increasing poverty and inequality, including vast accumulations of corporate wealth, environmental crisis, the refugee crisis, racialised and gender violence, and the perilous conditions of indigenous communities opposing the destruction of land and rainforests, not to mention the injustices and suffering that unfolded with the covid pandemic. Some of these issues are beginning to be discussed in more mainstream contexts, albeit still cloaked in denial of the West's responsibility. Yet how do you attend to this past when those in power, who promote the rhetoric of growth and progress, see the horrors of coloniality as "in the past" and view it as irrelevant to present conditions? As I have mentioned in Chapter three, I was also interested in how questions such as these related to arts and cultural institutions. Their legacy and relatedness to coloniality and the ways in which they perceived themselves to be organisations imbued with progressive thinking and practices.[205] On most of my visits before the pandemic, we visited the Glasgow Museum's Resource Centre (GMRC) as I was interested in the ways in which museums have accumulated objects and how such an archive becomes an authority on the telling of histories. Opened in 2005 by the City of Glasgow and managed by Glasgow Life, a charity that delivers cultural, sporting and learning activities on behalf of the City Council, these 17 purpose-built environmentally controlled pods are home to Glasgow Museums'[206] 1.4 million objects, of which only 2% are ever on display in the museums. The GMRC space is accessible to the public and is part of an ongoing commitment by Glasgow Museums to make their collections and collecting processes more transparent to the public. The museum service has also been having conversations about the repatriation of

[205] Laura Racovich's book *Culture Strike: Art and Museums in an Age of Protest*, (2021) examines contemporary museums and arts institutions, unpacking the ways in which despite the claims of progressive thinking, many still uphold conservative capitalist values.

[206] Glasgow Museums manage Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum, Riverside Museum, The Burrell Collection, The Gallery of Modern Art (GoMA), People's Palace, The Glasgow Museums Resource Centre (GMRC), Kelvin Hall, St Mungo Museum of Religious Life and Art, Provands Lordship and Scotland Street Museum. They also run an initiative called the Open Museum which takes museum objects and programmes out to communities who find it difficult to visit the museum.

several objects. On the 19th August 2022 Glasgow museums hosted a transfer of ownership ceremony for the repatriation of several objects to India.[207]

Having more time to develop the project, the slowness and quiet reflective opportunity of the pandemic also allowed Bruce to raise the funds to enable us to be more ambitious with our desires for the project, while Katie managed to secure enough money for the production and purchasing these works for the Glasgow Museums collection. The money enabled us to pay more attention to key elements of the projects such as locations, costuming, props etc, and also how we would film the work, enabling us to have more people involved in the production. There are three films in the *Queen and the Black-Eyed Squint – Glasgow* series. *The Arrival, The Tour,* and *The Dream*. Each builds on the ideas explored in the Newcastle and London films, presenting more questions, propositions and reflections on the project of *undoing,* through looking at the past in the present. Layers of disparate yet deeply related moments in time, connections to places, and reflections on the materiality of time and history are compressed into the frames of each film's structure. What follows is a look at each film individually to consider how they speak to these issues mentioned above, and how I used the form of performative filmmaking. For me, this was a new approach to working, considering my approaches to developing projects with others that I have defined as performance. In describing The Queen and the Black-Eyed Squint films as a performative filmmaking process, I want to evoke the approaches to dramaturgy I explored in Chapter three, to think about how this project also has a minor and a major zone. Although made in the context of all that makes a film happen, the film is the minor zone of the project. The major zone is all that the film draws on to make it happen. My research, the production team, the histories, the places we visit, the people we engage with and more. I see this as the expanded site of the performance, which also includes how I embody the story of Monica Amekoafia and the other women

[207] Glasgow Museums have been thinking about repatriating objects since 1998 and are also in conversations with Nigerian authorities around the return of Benin Bronzes and a Lakota Sacred Ghost Dance shirt to the Wounded Knee Survivors Association.

who's stories I am evoking. The fact of encasing all this in a film format, is a bit like creating a container for connected and disconnected memories. The films are the ways in which my thoughts and ideas about the material cohere continuing that opportunity of *undoing* I had begun to explore in *Declaration of Independence*,

The Arrival

Set on the train between London and Glasgow, *The Arrival* tells the story of a dissident couple's journey from a fictitious African country called Mfansteland.[208] They leave because they are expecting a child and felt that it is no longer tenable for them to live in their homeland anymore because of environmental crisis and a corrupt government that favours wealthy Afro-politians[209] and makes life difficult for rural communities or those without means. They decide to go to join the "beentos"[210] in the *Fatherland.* Making the long and treacherous journey through undersea tunnels to Europe where with the help of the Resistance they are able to take the train from Paris Centrale to Capital, the main city of the *Fatherland*.[211] But all is not well as she goes into labour on the train. As she goes through labour on the train helped by a kindly doula, she is filled with excitement and hope for the future. Her husband on the other hand feels that something terrible is about to happen. When the child is born and swiftly taken away by the authorities, they quickly find out that the "beentos" had lied about the possibility of a wonderful life in the *Fatherland.* There's was about to start with grief and loss.

This story is narrated while the queen passes the time on the train. She looks out of the window to see the "green and pleasant land" of England, drops in and out of sleep, watches the dramatic weather changes and watches while passengers board

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[208] Mfantse is another way to describe the Akan Fante dialect.

[209] Coined from the word Africa and the Greek *politis* meaning citizen, the word has been used to describe the relationship between Africa and its diasporan citizens. It has been associated to the author Taye Selasi in the essay "Bye Bye, Bar Bar",(2005) as a critique of the elitist and classist outlook of some diasporan returnees to Africa. Achile Mbembe extends the idea in his essay "Afropolitanism" (2007) as an African way of being, which includes an active critique of Africa's relationship to the world. I am appropriating the term here to think about the complexity of this relationship to Africa and how it has embedded within it an association with an intellectual elitism connected with a certain level of wealth and privilege. I break the word down to emphasise the idea of this particular kind African citizenship.

[210] This is a reference to the idea of beento's as explored by Ama Ata Aidoo in *Our Sister Killjoy* (1977)

[211] I use Fatherland rather than Motherland firstly to point to the fact that for many people of the African diaspora. *Motherland* means Africa, this is the idea of the caring nurturing space from which all Africans and the world begins (also thinking that one of the first recorded incidences of human remains found was a woman in East Africa). (Pallab Ghosh, 2015) The use of *Fatherland* for me points to the paternal, patriarchal nature of coloniality and the continued impact of patriarchy on contemporary life.

the Flying Scotsman. At moments in the soundtrack, you can hear a faint voice singing Hubert Parry's hymn Jerusalem[212] based on William Blake's poem "And Did Those Feet in Ancient Times." At the end of the narrative when the child is born and the queen arrives at Glasgow Central Station, the lamenting voice of a woman interned in a witch camp in Ghana sings "I am a Beggar for a Home"[213] a haunting song of longing.

The idea for *The Arrival* began with a speculative fiction story, *The Arrival: Becoming Beeto* written in a workshop with the novelist Leone Ross and poet and performer Dorothea Smartt, in the summer of 2019. In the story, I tried to reimagine the conditions of immigration, migration and refugeeism in a future world where the effects of climate change have changed the ways in which we are able to move around the world. Nationalist parochialism is rife around the world. The benefit and protection of the wealthy, wherever they are in the world is the priority for all nationalist governments. Slavery has returned in the form of work camps, where poor people, immigrants and refugees are interned and labour to keep the everyday systems of the West running smoothly. This is a world where the beauty and sanctity of wealthy white women are protected as it was on plantations, and they are as much seen as possessions and commodities. Anti-blackness is still rife, and the climate is controlled by governments and corporations. I wanted to draw on the history of colonialism and enslavement as well as post-war migration, contemporary conditions of migrant labour and the ways in which neo-colonialism is impacting our

[212] I chose this song firstly because I had learned it in primary school and was fascinated by its rousing patriotic chorus and also because it has many associations with British patriotism from the suffragettes to the British Labour and Conservative Parties. With the words taken from William Blake's 1804 poem *And Did Those Feet in Ancient Times*. The hymn expresses a utopian vision of a 'Great Britain', however Blake's poem was a critique of the "dark satanic mills" and the ways in which these were a mechanism of enslavement for those who laboured in them. Blake also saw these mills as something that destroyed nature (Rowland 2007).

[213] *I am a Beggar for a Home* is a track on an album of field recordings of songs and rhythms of women interned in witch camps in Northern Ghana. The women are sent to these camps are where women who are accused of witchcraft can find safety. They are often women suffering illness or mental health issues. Some have lost their husbands and have been shunned by their communities. *Witch Camp Ghana, I've forgotten now who I used to be.* (2021) Produced by Italian- Rwandan filmmaker and writer Milena Umuhoza Delli and her music producer husband Ian Brennan (Tinariwen, Zomba Prison Project) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J9QHVFmidyg

lives. For example, in between the lines of my story is a commentary on the British Windrush scandal which found commonwealth immigrants who had lived and worked in Britain for much of their lives, suddenly being detained, deported or being unable to return to the place that they had called home. The narrative references the ways in which independent governments were brought down in military coups often funded by western governments.[214] The film also comments on how the climate change agenda often evades the ways in which colonialism has impacted the world in terms of carbon emissions and environmental damage.[215] I wanted to layer ideas of utopia as imagined through the idea of self-governance through independence or in the search for a "better life" through migration and immigration with the dystopic realities of global capital, climate crisis and racism. Within the story, the queen is travelling to Glasgow as a representative of hope and the possibility of some form of convivial colonial continuity. As an independent African woman travelling the world, she also symbolises the hope of the new country she is representing. She is the hope of my grandmother, and that of other women whose continued day-to-day activities support life in Ghana as the country emerges free from colonial rule. She is the hope of my mum arriving in Britain to live, work and create a better life for herself, her family back home and her children. As much as she is a representative of hope, the underlying story of loss and disappointment lingers as the ghostly voice sings of *Jerusalem* being built on England's green and pleasant land, at the time of the first world war. The loss and disappointment lingers as the woman interned in a witch camp in Ghana sings for a home, as a child is taken away from its parents so they can labour for the benefit of the *Fatherland.* In this film, the queen does not yet see with the black-eyed squint, yet it is there following her on the journey to Glasgow and will reveal itself as the journey continues.

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[214] In 1966 there was a military coup in Ghana which saw Kwame Nkrumah's Convention Peoples Party overthrown by the CIA-supported National Liberation Council. The coup was organised by the Ghana Armed Services, Police Services, and the Civil Service. It was said that those that plotted this coup all had links to the British Government, then led by Harold Wilson and the U.S government led by Lyndon B Johnson. This new government implemented financial policies and arrangements recommended by the International Monetary Fund. (Quist Abade, 2021)

[215] The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has added the word "colonialism" to describe the causes of the climate crisis to its sixth report published on the 28th March 2022 after 30 years of reporting on the impacts of climate change (Funes, 2022).

Figure 25: The Queen and the Black-Eyed Squint, Glasgow, The Tour production shot. Photo: Tiu Makkonen.

The Tour

On arrival in Glasgow, the Queen meets Miss Great Britain. They drive around the city in a red MK3 Standard Vanguard.[216] They drive to the Kelvingrove Museum and Art Gallery where the queen marvels at the size and opulence of the building. She both marvels and is disturbed by what she sees in the museum. The high ceilings of the great hall with its magnificent organ, the cases full of dead animals, the grand staircase, and the paintings of important people. She sees medieval armour, weapons and spoils of war, including an Ashanti stool looted by Brigadier General Sir Archibald Alison in a battle on the 4th February 1874.[217]

[216] This is the same model of car that Miss Ghana was driven around in on her visit to London. The car was sourced by the Glasgow Museums Curator of Transport and Technology, Neil Johnson Symington and driven by its owner John Smith.

[217] This stool once belonged to Queen Mother Afua Kobi I, the 9th Asantehemaa who held the position from 1857 -1883. These stools are thought to contain the soul of the owner and would be passed from generation to generation. This particular stool is known as a Mma' gwa or women's stool (Allan, Glasgow Museums, 2021).

In the ethnographic gallery, she sees images and objects related to indigenous communities. She sees a remarkable dress made from Kente cloth[218], instantly recognisable and yet intriguing as it looked nothing like the traditional Kente Kaba and Slit[219] styles she knew. As she wanders around in a gallery full of marble statues and busts, she spots one with haunting empty eyes that she examines closely. This bust of Surjit Singh Chhokar,[220] is much newer than the others and looks a little out of place next to Queen Victoria and the Scottish dignitaries honoured in stone. Miss Great Britain and the Queen then visit the extravagant Glasgow City Chambers. With its grand marble staircase, the building is said to contain more marble than the Vatican. Opened in 1888 and costing over half a million pounds to build, the city chambers are home to Glasgow City Council. There the Queen and Miss Great Britain have tea and cake with Councillor Sue Aiken, the leader of the Glasgow City Council. The cakes have an image of Miss Ghana on them.[221] Tea is served in a reproduction of a popular Wedgewood tea service dating from around 1750, which depicts a young couple being served tea by a slave[222]. The tea is cordial as the Cllr Aiken, Miss Great Britain and the Queen make small talk.

The Queen and Miss Great Britain's next stop is the GMRC, where they visit some of a storage pod filled with items of ethnographic interest. The queen sees items that

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[218] This dress was made by fashion designer Nana Densua Tordzro. She called the dress *Obaa Sima* meaning virtuous woman. Speaking to her she described this virtuousness as a double-edged sword blunt on one side and sharp on the other. For Densua Tordzo both are needed for virtuosity

[219] Kaba and slit is the name given to the western influenced traditional top and skirt worn by Ghanaian women

[220] Surjit Singh Chhokar was the victim of a racist attack by three men in Overtown, North Lanarkshire on the 4th November 1998. The investigation and prosecution of the suspects of the case has parallels with the Stephen Lawrence case as there were two unsuccessful attempts to prosecute his murderers, raising concerns about institutional racism in the Scottish police and judicial system. (Seenan, 2000)

[221] The image reproduced for the decoration of the cakes was taken from an archival image of a plaque with a portrait of Miss Ghana, made in marzipan and chocolate by Miss Ellen Parker, a member of the Experimentation Department staff at Bournville, in November 1957. The plaque was a wedding gift in honour of her marriage to Mr. Henry Marrah. a Ghanian diplomat and liaison officer for the Cocoa Marketing Board.

[222] Glasgow Museums have an original of this teapot in their collection. We made a reproduction for the purpose of this film. The leader of the council knew the contentiousness of the reproduction of this object for this purpose and had no objection to being filmed having tea from it.

she recognises. A fantasy coffin in the shape of a fish.[223] Fetish sculptures not dissimilar to those she has seen at home in Ghana. Drums and other musical instruments. Ashanti gold weights and a gold filagree necklace not too dissimilar to the one she is wearing.[224] The Queen becomes disturbed by the number of items in the store that clearly come from other cultures. She wonders where all these objects have come from and shows concern that they no longer have the spiritual life and significance they would have once had as maybe they were stolen, like the Ashanti stool. She hangs back from the curator (Martin Craig) and Miss Great Britain as she looks at a number of spears stored neatly on a wall. The next stop is the pod filled with taxidermy where the queen seems exasperated by the scale and number of dead stuffed animals in the space. Her face begins to sour, and she feels physically sick. Unable to stand being in the hypocrisy of the tour, the Queen wanders off on her own. She is secretly let into the GMRC isolation room[225] where she sees a pile of protest banners saying things like, "Black Lives Matter" and "Slavery Built Glasgow." Her face is sombre as she sees these urgent and angry statements written on scrappy bits of cardboard, kept in this isolation room.

In the final scenes of *The Tour,* the Queen meets some local young activists at Glasgow Green, the site where the banners were left after the summer 2020 solidarity protests after the killing of George Floyd. The protests were also an opportunity for people to address racism in Scotland, Glasgow's history of slavery and colonialism and remember people like Shekou Bayou who died after being restrained by police in Kilcady on the 3rd May 2015. The Queen is no longer naïve to the darker side of the city she is visiting and the wider context of her relationship as

[223] Fantasy coffins such as these are a Ga tradition that represents the belief that life continues after one has died. The coffins are usually made to represent the deceased's profession or something else significant about them. The Ga people are from the southern regions of Ghana in and around Accra. These coffins were first seen in the west in 1989 in the controversial exhibition of non-western art Magiciens de la terre, held at the Pompidou Centre in Paris.

[224] The necklace the queen wears was my mum's. Designed in a traditional Ghanaian filagree style patten, this was a valuable and fashionable item in the 1960s. My mum wore it on the occasion of her traditional Ghanaian wedding in 1966.

[225] The room where items are stored and checked before being added to the collection.

an African woman to Scotland. In the final scene, we see her standing in solidarity with the activists holding protest banners.

In contrast to the tours that took place in Newcastle and London, *The Tour* in Glasgow pays attention to the colonial relationship to objects, possession and wealth accumulated through violence and plunder. To write the narrative I drew inspiration from the 1953 essay film *Statues Also Die* (Cloquet, Marker, Resnais), *Our Sister Killjoy* and borrow from Ama Ata Aidoo's poems *Speaking of Hurricanes,* (1992: 26-29) and *In Salute to an Enemy of Sorts* (1992:73-78). I also quote reports about trading commodities such as gold and cocoa in Ghana and whispers about independence from *African World Journals* from 1953.[226] The narration weaves between what the Queen is actually experiencing on her tour to various events in the past, the present and some that are timeless as they are expressions of the ways in which the continuing legacies of coloniality enact a repetition of similar circumstances and similar events. As the Queen begins to experience the dark side of her host country, her awareness opens and by the time she is standing with the activists at the end of the film her view on her relationship with Glasgow has changed.

[226] I found these on eBay amongst a number of other materials including programmes for the Independence of Ghana. *African World* describes itself as "The only journal that covers political, social and economic developments in the African Territories".

Figure 26: The Queen and the Black-Eyed Squint, Glasgow, The Tour production shot. Photo: Tiu Makkonen.

The Dream

In the final film of *The Queen and The Black-Eyed Squint – Glasgow* is a dream. The Queen is seen entering the doors of the empty hall of Kelvingrove Museum and Art Gallery. She walks slowly into the hall wearing a ball gown made of an Ankara [227]print fabric. An echoing voice scats as she enters the hall:

Do ba do ba do do do
Do ba da ba do be da
If I die from a man's love
I am nothing but a man's slave

The scatting voice that accompanies the Queen as she walks into the hall introduces Julie Okine and the Modern Rockets singing *Nothing But a Man's Slave*, the highlife

[227] The African name for the colourful patterned printed fabric associated with west African traditional dress. These prints are also known as Dutch Wax.

song that the Queen and the President dance to.[228] The song tells the story of a young woman meeting a man and going for a drink with him. In her mind she is protective of herself and her heart, not wanting to fall for the man and lose her freedom. Said to be the first Ghanaian "feminist" highlife recording the use of this piece of music also connects to the way that Ama Ata Aidoo considers gender relationships in *As Always, A Painful Declaration of Independence*. This also connects this work to the first performance of *Declaration of Independence* in the *Diaspora Pavilion*, when one of the contributors, Buki Bayode, sang *Don't Let Me Down* (Lennon, 1969) based on the version by Charlotte Dada, another female highlife singer, who's story is yet to be told. As the scratches of a 78 record soundtrack crackles and pops, we see the President walking towards the Queen as they meet in a dream and dance together.

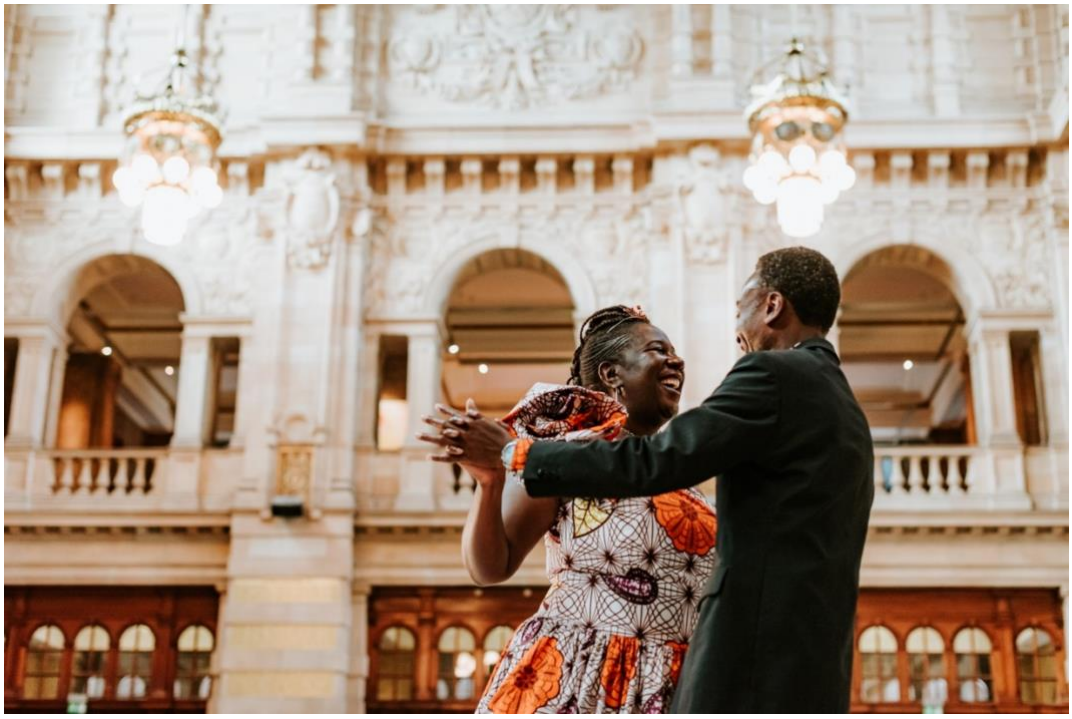

Figure 27: The Queen and the Black-Eyed Squint, Glasgow, The Dream production shot. Photo: Tiu Makkonen.

[228] In researching this piece of music, the version that is well known is sung by Julie Okine and E.T. Mensah and his Tempo's Band. The version used for *The Dream* with the Modern Rockets was from a very rare 78" record, from the collection of musician and highlife record collector Richmond Kessie who also played the President in *The Dream.*

For *The Dream,* I wanted to explore themes of hope and disappointment through a reimagining of President Nkrumah dancing with Queen Elizabeth II on her visit to Ghana in 1961, after Ghana agreed on a new constitution that replaced the ruling monarch with a president, limiting the powers that Britain had over Ghana as a Commonwealth country. Captured in another British Pathé newsreel, Queen Elizabeth II and President Kwame Nkrumah danced to highlife in a crowded ballroom. It was said that the purpose of the visit was to try to prevent Ghana from leaving the Commonwealth after the implementation of the new constitution. (Ghanaweb, 2022) It is also believed that this symbolic dance was the way in which Queen Elizabeth II showed that she was not racist (Royston, Newsweek, 2021), especially since at the time there was much unrest in the U.S over black voter registration and western leaders wanted to show that they were not in support of the brutality that was associated with preventing black Americans from being able to vote. This dance was also reimagined by the makers of the Netflix series *The Crown*[229] only in this depiction of this historical dance Queen Elizabeth II (Clare Foy) and President Kwame Nkrumah (Danny Sapani) dance the foxtrot on an empty dancefloor rather than to highlife.

In contrast to *The Arrival* and *The Tour,* this film is joyful, while still holding space for the possibility of *undoing* the authority of history. I wanted to reclaim the dance for Monica, for Ama, for my mum, for my grandma. The reclamation of the image of the dance is a reclamation of an independent country and the women's role in imagining what this country could be. It's reclaiming the sound of that dance as highlife, the hope-filled popular music of Ghana. As the President (Richmond Kessie) and the Queen dance in the hall of Kelvingrove, archive footage from a documentary film called Huete Ghana (New Ghana) filmed in 1960 by East German film company DEFA[230] shows footage of everyday activities in 1960s Ghana. People are going to

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[230] DEFA stands for *Deutsche Film Aktiengesellschaft*. Started in 1946 DEFA was a state-run film company.

work, children play, and market women sell their wares. We see images of the streets of Accra as they would have been in the 1950s and 1960s, a vibrant city with an energy of excitement for its future. *The Dream* then is a layering of hopes and dreams. It speaks to the potential of hurt and disappointment. The hopes and dreams of an independent country, the hopes and dreams of women, and the hopes and dreams of the president.

Sankofa and the Story of the Queen

To close this chapter I want to think about the ways in which *Sankofa* whispers within the processes of creating *The Queen and the Black-Eyed Squint- Glasgow* films. I named this chapter *Reviving Our Distinct Ways of Knowing Through Sankofa: Reflections on Our Place in the World with a Discerning Black-Eyed Squint*. *Sankofa* is here for that revival to remind us to *go back and get* what we left behind. It has travelled with African diaspora people on ships, aeroplanes, trains, cars and foot, whispering to us to remember. For me, the task to remember that which I could not share with my grandmother. Allowing space for my mother to remember her dreams of a 'better life' abroad. To remember Monica Amekoafia's experience of visiting Britain, which may have been scary, confusing, and not always as friendly and hospitable as the reports might like us to believe. To remember Sissie, who even as a fictional character speaks the truths that Ama Ata Aidoo has experienced and explored in her poems and other writings. They are the memories of Julie Okine as she stood on stage singing the first feminist highlife sone with E.T Mensah and his Tempos band at the Zenith Hall[231] in Accra. They might not be their exact memories, but as Ebony Coletu has explored with descendent epistemology, it's the way in which you ask questions of descendants and allow that relatedness to guide you. (Coletu, 2019) My grandmother's talking drum may no longer be guiding my way back to her village,[232] but her guidance has been revealing another story that is connected to her own that wants to be told. Thinking with *Sankofa* enables the

[231] One of Accra's old dancehalls where highlife bands played.

[232] I am returning here to the proverb quoted in chapter one 'if one forgets the talking drum of his/her hometown (or background) he/she misses his/her way to his/her village' (Marfo, Opuku-Agyeman and Nsiah 2011:63).

possibility of revealing this story to help us to reflect on and review the ways in which we see history, making space for the lives of those that have not been able to tell their stories. Seeing with Sissie's black-eyed squint may also potentially be another side of *Sankofa.* A way of returning and fetching what we left behind and looking at it, even if it is difficult or it's an "old sack" (Brand 2001:). Perhaps there is also scope in the *Sankofa* interpretation "it is not taboo to fetch what is at risk of being left behind" (Kande 1998:129) in which *taboo* may not just be about paying attention to the difficult things that happened to a person or a community, but also might be about revealing things that others are fearful of paying attention to, for the collective purpose of working towards an *undoing* of the conditions that are legacies of coloniality that affect us all.

Through embodying the Queen, I create a character that holds within her questions about the memories and experiences of a number of women. This contains both the artifice of performance and the kind of embodiment that might occur during a ritual when a spirit enters the body of a living being to reveal information to them that is vital for the living, their own lives, and the lives of others. As *Sankofa* whispers to the Queen on her journey to "make good", she is reminded of all that remains that is not good and won't be made good by her visit, her arrival, or her presence. What does "making good" mean for the Queen? How can the story/stories of her lives be made good? And in this "making good what is there for her? Her femininity and beauty are seen as something passive and non-threatening. She is invited precisely because of this. Because the expectation is that she will be polite and convivial and will probably know very little about politics. The veneer of her beauty fades quickly revealing the darkness underneath the facades of wealth and respectability. *Sankofa* invites her to be curious, and to keep questioning the *connections.* To keep looking for a way through it all. Look for ways to learn from the past in order to imagine and bring forward that which is best for her future.

Ata Aidoo writes in *As Always, A Painful Declaration of Independence*

I have had to learn that

these other associations
live:

the connections are
there and tight
the commitments are real
the allegiances binding.
And the reverberations from them
have a way of
coming at me
shaking my foundations
affecting me
negatively.

(1992:9)

In revealing these connections, the Queen can no longer be naïve to the relationship she has with her hosts, and she can allow herself the grief and the anger, generations before may not have had the opportunity to feel and talk about.

Figure 28: The Queen and the Black-Eyed Squint, Glasgow, The Tour production shot. Photo: Tiu Makkonen.

Finally, I want to think about how working with Sankofa has worked with the idea of materiality, particularly in relation to the fact that this work draws much more information from documents and objects than *Declaration of Independence*. These objects and documents are all still somewhat fragmented as they are pieces that live in the museum collection, like the Wedgewood teapot, or the newspaper cutting about the chocolate plaque made for Miss Ghana's wedding gift, or the Pathé newsreels from which I draw information for the character of the Queen and the idea of reclaiming the dance for her from the documentation of the dance between Kwame Nkrumah and Queen Elizabeth II. As each chosen reference has its own story it is a fragment and the work of *Sankofa* is to bring these together, to explore the interconnectedness of our stories and continue the practice of learning from the past. My motivation is to breathe life into the objects and documents, to allow them to speak beyond the past and the storage devices and spaces they are stored in. Bringing them into a relationship with each other so they can be in dialogue about what needs to be *undone*. Making work that creates some form of material trace, such as a film, is something quite new to me. Film presents a different kind of

possibility beyond documentation. I am trying to imagine this work as some sort of epistemic intervention, informed by my relationship to my grandmother.

When Black feminist writer, teacher and activist, M Jacqui Alexander was looking for her ancestor Kitsimba[233] she felt unable to rely on conventional western academic approaches to understand her life. In the essay 'Pedagogies of the Sacred: Making the Invisible Tangible', Alexander takes a spiritual approach to explore Kitsimba's life, describing how Kitsimba emerged for her through practices of ancestral reverence, learnt through joining a community involved in the Orisha and Voodun spiritual practices. (2008:239). She describes the spiritual as a form of epistemology that allowed her to go beyond dominant understanding, enabling her to access memories that "refused to be cluttered beneath an array of documents" (2008: 294). I feel similar about the relationship to the documents and objects I explore in Glasgow films. I also feel guided by the stories of the women whose stories I am remembering and honouring through the Queen. Small fragments of their stories live within each frame. This way the work is a layered biography that also includes the biography of places, objects, events, and the interconnectedness between them. Also, my own biography is impacted by this work, especially in how this work that comments on the practices and processes of Glasgow Museum's results in *The Queen and the Black-Eyed Squint* being collected by the very same museum service that the films critique. As such my name becomes associated with the museum and it is my hope that the work becomes a contribution to *undoing* the hegemony of coloniality in the museum. What I hope I also leave within the collection is the silent memory of my grandmother who's loss inspired this journey of enquiry. I also hope that the work inspires curiosity in others to think about the layers of history in a place and how that place may have come into being in a way that limited the life possibilities of other people in the world.

[233] An enslaved woman she was researching who was captured in Kongo around 1780 and brought to Trinidad via Martinique (Alexander 2008).

Conclusion

I speak in the tongues of my mother and my grandmother and my grandmothers before her
Although I do not know the words
My very being is the evidence of those languages.
It is in these words I will speak
It is in these words that I will create
It is in these words that I will question.
I question this place, a Diaspora place
as an ideal or narrative
Of my relationship to my internal migratory ROOTS
As the distance between us becomes more apparent as we get to 2nd, 3rd & 4th generations removed from "motherlands"
How do I map myself in this place?
my family, the people that left and arrived
and continue to arrive,
even though they make borders, make checkpoints.
They build walls.
The process of making
Is enacting my presence
The hard navigation of presences, absences, visibility, and invisibility.
Navigating/ finding routes, ROOTS Arranging traces of memory
From archives that will never be constituted Entering spaces without invitation
Or spaces that have antagonistic or conditional invitations
Time-limited invitations,
Invitations by special arrangement.

Presence as a performance of a certain kind of sociability
That explains a connection,
but keeps you outside,
always arriving,

Never settled.

The need becomes urgent

Utterances become words, sounds, whispers, shouts

The need to collect, assemble, and activate the stories the narratives

Undo the given knowledge.

Extract from Sankofa Whispers (2016-Ongoing)

The above extract from my *Sankofa Whispers* reflects some of the thoughts and experiences that have been present during the time of this research. I began to write this particular piece in 2016, just before going to Ghana to bury my grandmother and have revisited it, reflected on it, and re-written it many times since then. The fact that it was begun in 2016 precedes me naming my journal writings as *Sankofa Whispers,* but it conveys some of the ongoing concerns and questions I have had during the period of this concentrated time of research that considers my memory work practice in relation to *Sankofa*. Many questions repeat. Such as how do we remember that which has been obscured, fragmented, or disappeared? And how do we connect to places that are in some ways a home but in many ways distant from us, both in time and location? How do I recover and tell the stories of Ghanaian women like my mother, grandmother, Dina Kwansema Edwin Baiden, Monica Amekoafia and others, women whose life stories don't get told? How do understand who they were and what they endured so I might better understand myself and my arrival here? How do I share my practice with others so they might also find ways to tell their stories and navigate their arrival? These others are my collaborators and kin, the audiences that see and experience the work and organisations that show, commission and more recently purchase my work. How do I do this all while still foregrounding the idea of *undoing* the legacies of coloniality and enslavement that are still influencing the world today and impacting the lives of so many people?

The extract is an exploration of how I arrived at becoming an artist and now a researcher, through a desire to answer the questions I outline above. Finding and learning the tongues of my mother, grandmothers, and grandmothers before her is

the way in which like Ebony Coletu, I attempt to find what she has described as a descendent epistemology (referred to in Chapter Two). My interest in understanding *Sankofa* has been the way in which I have refined my curiosity and placed myself in my current position as an artist and researcher, exploring how to use this enquiry, this desire to know these fragmented and lost languages as a way to think about my roots and the routes of arrival to where my collaborators and I are today. *Sankofa* is part of this language that has found its way to where I am through the spoken language of my parents and the way in which I have found it here, where I am amongst other people of African descent. We were dispersed, yet in culture, food, music, and other languages we find the memory of *Sankofa*. She kept showing us the way back to enable us to move forward. Maps were never drafted and as I have written in Chapter One of this thesis and other *Sankofa Whispers* texts, returning is never easy. These maps connect to other maps that are also undrawn. These maps are made up of fragmented and obscured memories, and the many feelings, objects and connections left behind. As descendants of these journeys, my collaborators and I have all looked for ways to return, to recover through our being together, practising together and making together. If we find a way back to the exact place where our mothers, grandmothers and grandmothers were born and lived, the nostalgic expectations of a welcome return are often met with the stark reality that the legacies of coloniality and enslavement have left us disconnected, even as we are connected by the supposed intimacy of ancestral linage. The official documents that are the evidence of these connections often tell a painful story of capture and forced relocation, or they were lost or destroyed in floods or internal migrations or fleeing war or famine. And if you find the connections and manage to understand your different languages, the people that remember, only remember fragments as everyday living in the afterlife of colonialism and independence often means living in and with the painful echoes of the past resonating in the crash of the waves on the fortified walls of the castle that stands on the beach where the fishermen prepare their nets. And the becoming that *independence* promised seems like a distant impossibility until we can all attend to what has been left by these legacies.

My practice is a process of making, presencing, becoming and becoming again. In this process of becoming I have found new kin through books, conversations, rituals, and other practices. New mothers, grandmothers, and siblings make the journey not seem so lonely and arduous. Toni Morrison, Ama Ata Aidoo, Julie Okine, Monica Amekoafia, M NourbeSe Phillip, Foluke Taylor, Gail Lewis, Nydia Swaby and many more people whose work and ideas I have engaged with or whom I have met and worked with along the way. *Sankofa* has connected us to navigate those routes to routes, turning lost paths, crossroads, bridges, sea crossings and airways, into materials that we can use to move forward. They become signs and symbols that help us to find our way in lieu of physical spaces and places that institute our presence in statues and mausoleum-type buildings. Do we even need to be memorialised in this way? A way so removed from the memory that is alive in the everyday languages of gesture, breath, and movement. In the food, music, the making life together. Even though we do not know the languages, we find a way by calling and waiting for responses. These languages are very much alive because they are not limited to words or symbols. They are not limited to a certain kind of vocality, they are in the air, music, dance moves, gestures, colours, in our imagination. Our ability to imagine helps us to burrow and tunnel[234] or fly to other places, both real and imaginary, in the now, in the past and in the future, to attend to that which has not been remembered that we might find this work, with it and bring something new or different into being for the ones who will come after.

I am thinking about the young Black feminist artist or academic I write about in my introduction. How will they be navigating the spaces in which they develop and present their research and practices? Will this work be something that provides a way to navigate different relationships with their place? Will their relationship to the places where they are 3rd, 4th 6th 7th generations removed from (m)otherlands, be more settled? Will the processes of *undoing* and adding to our understanding that

[234] I wanted to use the words "burrow" and "tunnel" rather than "extract" to evoke a connection with our fugitive, maroon, quilombo ancestors thinking about how they might have hidden and how to connect to finding them.

artists, writers, academics, and others are doing now, enable them to be-come and presence themselves in this world differently? Will they find ways to attend to the histories and legacies of slavery and colonialism that transform the loss and intergenerational trauma left by these legacies, into new ways of living and being alive? Will they be able to pick from the past, to do as Albert Kayper Mensah say's in his poem for *Sankofa*, to step forward "On ahead/ To meet the future undeterred"? (1978:4)

This is where the whispers of *Sankofa* become heard, to invite me into the project of *doing undoing* that has been developing in my artistic practice.

Navigating the Continuing Legacies

The day that Queen Elizabeth II died I was in my studio in Brixton completing my PhD write-up. I took a walk to get away from my computer and get some air and noticed that all the shops in Brixton were closed or closing. I asked the shopkeepers who were standing outside their shops why this was happening. They did not know and assumed that it was because there were reports that Queen Elizabeth II was dying. It was only when I saw people outside TK Maxx taking photographs of a notice that they had in their window did all become clear. The notice said: "TK MAXX BRIXTON IS CLOSED UNTIL THE 9TH SEPT 9 AM DUE TO THE POTENTIAL OF CIVIL UNREST IN THE AREA WE APOLOGISE FOR THE INCONVENIENCE."

Three days earlier on the 5th of September, Chris Kaba a 24-year-old unarmed black man was shot and killed about a mile up the road by a police officer.[235] A vigil was organised outside Brixton Police Station on that evening, the 8th of September. The organisers were supporters of his family along with campaigners and activists from INQUEST, and The United Friends and Families Campaign.[236] The closure of the

[235] https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2022/oct/04/chris-kaba-was-followed-by-police-before-being-fatally-shot-hears-inquest

[236] INQUEST is a U.K.-based charity that provides legal advice and supports families and bereaved people who have experienced state-related deaths. https://www.inquest.org.uk/about-us The United

shops in Brixton was fuelled by an expectation that there would be rioting, an expectation predicated on the remembrance of all the times that a black person has been harassed, injured, or killed and black communities took to the streets in grief and anger. Black people took to the streets of Brixton in April 1981 angry over the continuing police harassment enabled through the archaic SUS laws, stop and search laws based on the 1824 vagrancy act and the unsatisfactory investigation of the fire at a house party in New Cross, where 13 young black people between the ages of 14 and 22 lost their lives in what was believed to be a racist attack.[237] They took to the streets in September 1985 when the police shot Cherry Groce in her home in Brixton while trying to pursue her son for a suspected robbery.[238] They took to the streets in August 2011, when anger over the police shooting and killing of Mark Duggan.[239] This also points to the fact that according to the authorities, within the cultural archive[240] of Britain, London, Brixton, the memory of black pain, anger, loss, and trauma needs to be contained and managed, lest it spills out onto the streets in this most disorderly manner. Within the memory of these uprisings[241] is the memory of many slave rebellions, independence struggles, and anger over the dehumanisation and the racism that lives and is very much alive despite claims that we are past this.

The sign in the window of TK Maxx revealed the why of the closure of the store, but also with the majority of the staff of the store being black and people of colour, between the lines of the notice there is also frustration about the narrative of unrest

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Friends and Families Campaign or UFFC is a coalition of families affected by state-related deaths, that campaign together and support each other. https://uffcampaign.org

[237] April 2021 was 40 years since the first Brixton Riots. There were a number of projects and articles that commemorated and reflected on the impact and continuing legacy of the riots including 81 Acts of Exuberant Defiance an arts-based initiative developed by local people https://81actsofexuberantdefiance.com
and this Guardian Newspaper piece https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/apr/11/brixton-riots-40-years-on-a-watershed-moment-for-race-relations

[238] https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2014/jul/10/dorothy-cherry-groce-inquest-police-failures-contributed-death

[239] https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2014/jan/08/mark-duggan-death-london-riots

[240] Recalling the use of the idea of the cultural archive being in the fabric of society borrowed from Gloria Wekker's description of Dutch society as mentioned in my introduction.

[241] This is often the word used by black communities to describe the riots, connecting them to other moments of resistance while also recognising the anger and frustration and not reducing these actions to a violent civil disorder.

that means that their day at work is disrupted. They cannot live as "good citizens" without being haunted by the legacies of their "unruly" cousins.[242] How do you attend to the complex contradictions and frustrations that these memories bring up?

In the end, the vigil was small and of course, there was no rioting, yet it was as if the only way that the authorities could imagine black people mourning the death of a black man at the hands of an authority was through violence. On Saturday 10th September there was a protest in London concerning the shooting of Chris Kaba and the many other pending investigations of police misconduct towards black people. As the protest made its way through the centre of London from Parliament Square to Scotland Yard through Whitehall, Sky News reported that the protesters were crowds of people out in London heading to Buckingham Palace to mourn the Queen, erasing any possibility for an opening up of another way of seeing what had been going on in the world. This is a good example of the ways in which the dominant narrative of coloniality persists and obscures anything that is not in line with that which continues to affirm the position and importance of the powerful. The death of Queen Elizabeth II is, of course, world news, but we can also remember that in 2020 when the world was still and unable to continue its everyday normal due to the global COVID-19 lockdowns, we all saw the death of a black man at the hands of law enforcement captured by mobile phone and beamed everywhere via social media. With this event, there was the possibility of seeing another way that life is being lived and it is far from the opulence of royalty or the wonder of the powerful. We remember the 25th of May 2020 when George Floyd uttered the words "I can't breathe" while Police Officer Derek Chauvin knelt on his neck and back for 9 minutes and 29 seconds. People all over the world shared their outrage at the horror of this death by taking to the streets. Within the global expression of outrage at this death and the beginnings of an understanding of why Black Lives Mattered, of the ways in

[242] It's important to remember and acknowledge that many black and people of colour would like to live without being implicated in the issues that the continuing legacies of coloniality and slavery bring. This is wrapped up in the dream of a better life and the difficulty of living with constant reminders of intergenerational historic and everyday trauma.

which police brutality resembled the brutality of overseers on the slave plantation and other such repressive brutalities around the world. For a moment between the lines of these protests, the legacies of coloniality and slavery became globally visible and for a moment a portal for transformation opened up in the world.

Could this have been a way that *Sankofa* whispered to us to seize this moment and to think about the transformative possibility of remembering? A remembering that is not just about remembering the lives and triumphs of the powerful but also a remembering of those that don't have access to power, or whose ancestral legacies and contributions are not so clearly visible. Could this have been a moment that we were all asked to remember so that we could resist, recover, and imagine the world otherwise? Imagine a world of justice.

On-doing Undoing

> *I'm creating a new Declaration of Independence while in a global pandemic. We are confined to our homes and separated from our families, friends and loved ones. While we watch as the virus disproportionately kills people like us, because of the underlying conditions we have. The conditions are more than health conditions. The conditions of the afterlives of hundreds of years of enslavement, coloniality, oppression and racism.*
>
> *I need the comfort of my Sista's as we attempt to witness and weather this time that is not a new normal or a not yet, because there was never a normal and we cannot wait for the not yet!*
>
> *This is A Painful Declaration of Our Interdependence- this separation hurts... There are statements being posted everywhere that our lives suddenly matter because while most people in the world were confined to their homes, they saw the public lynching of a black man and the shock woke them up.*
>
> *Just for a little while.*

For many in the educational and cultural arenas, they woke up for just about enough time to write spurious statements of solidarity and intent.
Black Lives apparently matter now.
But what does this really look like?
Is this a call to engage with personal and systematic racism?
To address the histories, narratives and privileges afforded to those that live in white skin?

What does it mean to be in a practice of listening?

Listening to black womxn
Listening to Indigenous womxn
Listening to womxn of colour
Listening to those who refuse gender norms Listening to each other...
What does it mean to be in a practice of listening?
And not being seduced by the current trend of diversity, inclusion, of Black Lives Matter-ing (but only until this all boils over)

(Extract From Sankofa Whispers presented at BAK Propositions #13 Mobilization and Invisibility and subsequently Published in *Toward the Not Yet: Art as Public Practice* in 2021[243])

I recently saw Chris Kaba's father, Prosper, speaking at an event organised by INQUEST.[244] Deeply broken by what happened to his son. He told all of us gathered together to speak about the case of his son and many others who had died at the

[243] https://www.bakonline.org/program-item/propositions-13-mobilization-and-invisibility/ (Accessed 14 September 2022). The collection of writings and propositions in *Toward the Not Yet: Art as Public Practice* eds Jeanne Van Heeswijk, Maria Hlavajova and Rachael Rakes, brings together a number of presentations and responses presented as part of the Mobilization and Invisibility programme presented at BAK basis voor actuele kunst

[244] A panel conversation that was part of Souls INQUEST a collaborative exhibition that used photography and narrative to give an insight into the experiences of family's personal experiences with state violence, grief, and their quest for justice. https://www.inquest.org.uk/souls-inquest

hands of the authorities, that he wanted Chris to be the last. He wanted Chris's death to be remembered as the time when we no longer had to take to the streets in grief and anger at the death of a black man or anyone at the hands of the police or any other state authority. He asked us to support his family in their campaign to get justice for Chris and others who had lost their lives in this way. Prosper Kaba was asking us to join him in doing the work of *undoing*. This is not only the *undoing* that means that what happened to Chris and others would never happen again, but by remembering what happened, reflecting on it, and imagining the world otherwise, where such an incident would not happen. He suggested that through supporting the campaigns and the families we could start to *undo* the conditions in which incidents like the loss of his son are considered normal. I'm sure that Prosper Kaba was not the first father to share this sentiment and at the moment the possibility of something like this never happening again may seem very slim, but he is asking us to imagine with him.

I have often questioned how my practice relates to imaginings such as this, where the call to *undo* such massive injustices seems possible at one moment and overwhelming at others. The overwhelm comes from the imagining the scale of the task at hand. Often when I present the first seminar in my *How We Get Free: How to be an artist working in decolonial practice,*[245] presenting 2nd year BA Fine Art students with the principles of why decoloniality and the ways in which coloniality persists, the palatable silences, the looks of shock and sheer overwhelm give way to a deep sense of the scale of the project and how the students might not be so well equipped to deal with this. This is when I draw on the Emergent Strategy ideas of Adrienne Maree Brown, who describes making activist projects that are an inch wide and a mile deep, focusing on what you can do and deepening your engagement with that rather than trying to solve many issues at once. Small actions can be just as impactful and have a powerful ripple outwards into wider society.[246] My work lives

[245] A course I teach as part of the Goldsmiths BA Fine Art Critical studies programme.
[246] In her book Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds, Adrienne Maree Brown introduces us to the principle of fractals as a never-ending, complex pattern that starts small and ripples out as an analogy for organising (Brown 2018: p51-66)

within and through all these contexts. As I said in the opening extract from *Sankofa Whispers* I will use the languages and understanding I have to question and create in this diaspora place, finding ways through that may reveal other possibilities of being, living and imagining. This could be being the person who is present in an organisation to hear the stories of the people who had their photographs taken by Harry Jacobs, and to advocate for them as more than just people in the images, more than just the person whose signature is needed in order for the photographs to be seen in an art gallery. Following up with these some of these people and working with them to create projects like *Barby's Karaoke* and *Bamboo Memories*.[247] *Declaration of Independence* became what it is after the deaths of Khadija Saye and her mother Mary Mende in the Grenfell Tower Fire. After presenting a *Declaration* in honour of Khadija and her mother at Feminist Emergencies[248] it felt important to develop the project further and to invite other people into the process as a way for me to deal with the grief of Khadija's death, and also as this was something that spoke to such a profound collective loss, to do this work with others. It was as important while developing *The Queen and the Black-Eyed Squint* that the Queen would visit sites in and around Notting Hill that were significant to the history of black presence in Britain as it was to visit a museum store filled with items that may have been obtained through colonial plunder. In a keynote address given at a conference programmed by the Creating Interference Research Network,[249] Dr Karen Salt asked us to contemplate the questions:

Can we engender new futures from totalising impulses of old frames?

And where and how can we hold open the future potential that this re-visioning offers as we move, migrate and grapple with the many presences, invisibilities and hyper-visibilities that meander through our worlds?

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[247] I mention these projects in Chapter Two of this thesis.
[248] The Feminist Emergencies Conference took place at Birkbeck, University of London in June 2017. I talk about this in Chapter Three of this thesis.
[249] Video of Dr Karen Salt's Keynote https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5VmDjjvlS3I

What does it mean to do criticality - and remain whole- in unjust space?

These questions presented to us by Dr. Salt are a clear articulation of what the project of *undoing* entails. Imagining, acting and in some way implementing ways of working that bring forward the potentiality of new futures from the old frameworks in which we have lived and worked and most importantly is the question about how we do this and remain whole in unjust space. When we reflect on the information that is given through the pictographic embodiment of *Sankofa,* the way her strong upright stance, feet facing forwards, holds her body as her head turns back towards the egg on her back. How the egg is a container for the future and the arrangement of her body gestures towards care for this future potentiality. With this in mind could a reflection on *Sankofa* could be a guide for us through the *undoing* of the plot?[250]

These questions remain alive in my bringing together of this research into this thesis. But somehow *Sankofa* has shown me a way to be with these questions and to create work that answers these questions while still being curious and deepening my enquiry into its message. To bring a Black feminist lens to *Sankofa,* and to read it from the position of someone living in the diaspora, with all that the journey to a diaspora place brings. In many ways, *Sankofa* has shown me a way to develop my practice in a way that I could not have imagined when I walked into the Black Cultural Archive shop front space and was met with materials of black memory in Britain. *Sankofa* moved me to know what to do when I met the people who had had their photos taken by Harry Jacobs and realised that the planned project was not able to hold space for all that came with finding the people in the photographs. Today as I know more about what has been omitted and erased from the cultural archive and how that impacts how people are seen, seen themselves and are able to imagine otherwise, I would no longer call this an excess, but rather this to me would

[250] I am returning to the refence of the undoing of the plot as imagined by Sadiya Hartman in her piece *The Plot of Her Undoing* for the Feminist Art Coalition's Notes on Feminism series mentioned in Chapter Three of this thesis.

be an expression of the lives and the that the archive cannot contain and limit within its documents and infrastructure. This is the material and ephemera that interests me, and each new project is deepening the ways in which I can attend to the memories, to that which cannot be contained and has sometimes spilt out onto the streets in an unruly manner. Mostly what comes with this overflowing need for expression that started my exploration into memory was grief. Grief for all that is not said and what could not be said. Greif for what was lost and left behind. Grief that you came to be part of a rebuild somewhere that you had dreamed about all your life. Greif at finding out you don't really belong and grief at remembering that the story of your connection to this place is a long one, that has moved your ancestors and taken a lot away from them. Grief that this is not in the history books. Grief in remembering that these omissions and erasures exist, and even as they are contested, the practice of omitting and erasing continues.

Finding a Way With Sankofa

As I have stated in Chapter One of this thesis, Sankofa comes to me by way of my Akan heritage. I heard the words used in everyday language. To get up (*San*), go(*ko*), fetch/ get (*fa*). *Mi san ko fa* (I am going to get) prefaced many an expedition to the market or to the shops or a drive to the airport. I later learned about *Sankofa* as a way to think about the little-told history of enslavement through Haile Gerima's film, not realising that this remembering was also happening in my family through the way that family photographs would generate conversations and memories of Ghana. *Sankofa* was present in the novels of Toni Morrison, Ama Ata Aidoo and others that accompanied me through my early 20's towards an artistic practice of working with memory. But it's only as I have embarked on this research have, I thought more about what Sankofa is offering us. What is its wisdom and offering and if what it has to offer is more than the sum of remembering in the ways in which we have been taught to believe remembering should happen, with documents and evidence? This is why exploring *Sankofa* through writing has been so important for my practice. The writing as whispers and whispering offers a reflective way to practice curiosity and enquiry about what we remember and how we remember with fragments of memory. Is it really necessary to have the whole story? Are there

other ways of knowing what happened? Can we also remember how to be with each other and care for each other in a place where the loss of memory has occurred? Through this writing and creating projects with others I have been in touch with *Sankofa*. It has been a descendent epistemology, a guide, it has helped me to read the sign and connections and to use these in the works I have been creating.

I intentionally chose to close this thesis by reflecting on this research and my practice by looking at *Sankofa* through my continuing writing practice, the ways in which memory impacts the ways that major events are portrayed in the wider public telling and how they are experienced on a personal and community level. Moving through to how this has been something that has impacted my approach to making work. To close this thesis, I want to take to reflect on my research in light of the five categories of meaning that Khonsura A Wilson presented in his entry on *Sankofa* for the Encyclopaedia of African Religion. (2009) These categories have given me an opportunity to think about a framework for understanding *Sankofa*. They are by no means definitive of how I want to explore and expand an understanding of *Sankofa,* but I am riffing off of these categories and bringing a perspective to them that queers them, thinking beyond the way in which Wilson has explained them and into my practice. Throughout this thesis, I have thought about how I have developed my thinking from a Black feminist/diaspora perspective, drawing on the work of writers and artists I have been in dialogue with through either reading or following their work or through our collaborations and friendship. I also want to reflect on these categories at the moment we are in now, to amend and update this perspective on *Sankofa* to begin to define it as a memory practice methodology that supports us in moving through, undoing, and imagining other ways of being and living. The whispering I describe, I'm sure is not just my gift from *Sankofa*. Many Black feminist writers, artists, and theorists have found generative ways to think about how we remember and how these practices of remembering somehow kept us rooted, even as we might not remember the fullness of the meaning of what we are remembering or the offering these memories are making. In concluding with these categories I also remember that in many ways just like our maroon, quilombo and fugitive kin, *Sankofa* evades the complete capture of definition, thus

this invitation to this kind of memory work is an invitation to expand our knowledge and relationship to *Sankofa*'s offerings without the expectation that she will give us all the answers. Like all Akan proverbial wisdom, *Sankofa* is tricky, it leaves space for us to work out the meanings of the signs. Like Nunu, she travels across time as an oracle for our liberation through our remembering. But this liberation is not without pain and loss. It is through these pains and losses that we return to a practice of remembering and recovering through listening to the whispering we are invited into an enquiry about the past, that remembering that which might be considered taboo or difficult might lead to a revelation that would enable us to imagine a time when things will be different.

Reflection on the Past

This research has been a deep reflection on many pasts. How they have connected and intersected. Pasts that have been allowed to be spoken of and those that have not. These have included my family's personal past and how this has connected to the wider historical past of the country we originate from. In both *Declaration of Independence* and *The Queen and the Black-Eyed Squint,* the ways in which I have chosen to reflect on the past reveal complex interrelations and interconnectedness. With *The Queen and the Black-Eyed Squint,* I take the story of Monica Amekoafia and merge it with the fictional story of Sissie from Ama Aidoo's Our Sister Killjoy and the fragments of my mum's story of arrival and feeling of confusion and non-belonging. I take the character of The Queen on many journeys, where the complexity of our interconnected stories is unveiled, and her supposed innocence and naivety is disrupted as she realises that our interconnected stories reveal a story of continued violence and dehumanisation. The Queen's memory is opened up as she walks the streets of Newcastle, and Glasgow and sees the wealth of these two cities, both built from the legacies of colonisation and enslavement. As she visits the museum store and sees the abundance of objects and taxidermy animals from everywhere in the world, she contemplates death. And in North Kensington, she visits the site where the victims of the Grenfell Tower Fire created a sanctuary under the Westway, where they could reflect on what happened and write their testimonies on the walls of that space. *Sankofa*'s offering of reflection on the past opens the possibility to open pathways to more unveiling, more unravelling, more *undoing*. These reflections enable a different view of the stories of these places and spaces. Now that *The Queen and the Black-Eyed Squint*-

Glasgow films are now in the collection at Glasgow Museums means that a document of my engagement and questioning of the history of Glasgow and its museum collections will be within that collection for posterity or until they dismantle and abandon the practice of collecting.

For me, this work has become a way of reflecting on my relationship to my family routes/ roots and the fragmentation of their stories of arrival in an attempt to understand how I arrived in a place through my lineage. The hope is that in this work's reflection on the past the questions about the difficult ways in which we are interconnected become through this visualisation a way in which others will be invited into communion with *Sankofa* to reflect on the past.

Self-conscious Reflection Before Moving Forward

Being in the considered and contained space of PhD research has given me space for considered reflection on the ways in which I have been working with memory in my practice. The writing practice I have developed that is *Sankofa Whispers* has given space for me to write and share my musings on how I see processes of remembering operating in the world. This has offered me a way of questioning the ways in which a history written by those in power is a continuing form of oppression. By inviting others into a process of reflection and writing together to produce *Declaration of Independence*, these writings get expanded upon. The invitation to black and of colour women and non-binary folx to share in this writing practice, through study, circle and performance, the project holds space for the possibility of self-conscious reflection with others. The space held within the project is a resource and a re-sourcing, in that we reflect on our lived experiences remembering events happenings, stories and more. Through this process, I have created a space that allows contributors to be seen and heard and have their experiences mirrored back to them through others who recognise and sometimes experienced similar things. This brings together a sense of community and interconnectedness, which is the underlying premise of the *Declaration of Independence*. Drawing from the research I have done on Black feminist organising and in particular how creative work has been part of this political and social endeavour, personal experience being a driver for much of their political organisational work. This was something that has been significantly present in the making of this project, particularly in Bergen, where the group of

people that came together really needed to find spaces to reflect on their experiences as before the project many had felt isolated as Norwegian culture is very local and made up of small family and friendship groups. Through being involved in *Declaration of Independence*, their encounter with *Sankofa* through self-conscious reflection offered them the opportunity to develop friendships, collaborations, and ways to organise together, giving them a way to move forward with their lives in Norway, where perhaps they were a little less isolated and more connected with others than they had been before the project.

Reflecting On One's Identity, Self-definition, and Vision for the Future

Both *The Queen and the Black-Eyed Squint* and *Declaration of Independence* have offered me a way to reflect on my identity as an artist, working from a Black feminist, diaspora position. I have asked myself why I work in a way that is durational and involves significant negotiation with the organisations and institutions I work with, deep and considered research, sustained engagements with others and a lot of imagination. My approach is labour-intensive and resource heavy meaning that I need to generate a lot of support and money to make this work happen. But the possibility and potency of the future as represented by the egg is something that I am learning to take care of. In reflecting on my work and the ways I have been approaching this work, *Sankofa* has guided me towards refining my ways of working. The questions that I will ask and the requests that I will make when working with institutions have become something that I am clearer about. I recognise and remind the people I work with within these institutions, of the ways in which artists such as myself who are able to work with groups in particular groups who are black and of colour, in order to create a meaningful exchange must attend to their own and their institutions desire to tokenise and instrumentalise our work, for the benefit of their decolonising or equality, diversity and inclusion agenda. This is a growing generative response to the experience of working with people on the Harry Jacobs project many years ago, the experience of seeing how arts institutions responded to Khadija's death, not being able to speak about the circumstances of her death only the fact of her being an up and coming artist or even the ways in which statements where written and promises were made in 2020 that these institutions were in solidarity with Black Lives Matter and that they were going to reflect on their practices to bring about more equity in their workforce and they ways they work. It seems that *Sankofa* also visited these institutions pointing towards the opportunity for reflection on their identity and how they might want to move forward into the future. This is not something that I can implement, but for my own working process, I am

seeing the ways in which I reflect on my working processes, through actions like leaving traces of my working process in collections[251], creating books, and working with others in a way that supports and questions their visions and ways of working, leaves something in the world for the future Black feminist researcher to build on as she develops her own practice. I think of this as learning from *Sankofa* as how to be a good ancestor.

Understanding of Personal Destiny and a Collective Vocation

The three previous meanings come together in this category of meaning. It is represented through what I have been doing with my practice, especially in what I have been doing in communion with others in *Declaration of Independence*. As the project has grown and developed, we have found ways of being together, producing together and imagining the world we would like to see together. Friendships and collaborations have been developed. In Bergen, the group who took part in the project have been organising film screenings, reading groups and meet-ups when they join a protest or an action against racism. When one of the contributors involved in the project since 2018 went missing in Somalia, we pooled resources and contacts to find her and bring her back home. What we created from our work together continues to resource and support everyone that has been involved. I also see this as the way in which *Sankofa* guides us in our being together. As our lives and work intersect collective vocations become revealed as evidenced in the examples above. As I have continued to develop this work and my relationship with *Sankofa* I also see its role in what I have been describing in this thesis as *doing undoing.* Through reflecting on the past, self-conscious reflection before moving forward, and reflecting on one's identity, self-definition, and vision for the future, *Sankofa* has brought me to a place of understanding less my destiny and more my personal vocation to expand the understanding of this Akan principle through my artistic practice. It has invited me to consider what indigenous African knowledges have to offer us in thinking through and enacting our collective endeavours of liberation and creating a more just world for us all. Although I sometimes wonder what art has to offer to what seems like this all-encompassing project, I am reminded of what Sadiya Hartman writes in the *Plot of Her*

[251] I have also included with the films collected by Glasgow Museums, the rushes from filming, photographs and some of my research material.

Undoing, when the plot moves from her *undoing* to the *undoing* of the plot. She reminds us of the fact that the *undoing* of the plot "proceeds by stealth" (2020:5). It is surreptitious and, in this surreptitiousness, art becomes a way in which we can do the work of *undoing* that does not look like the kind of action of black anger and grief that is expected of us. I am thinking about the expectation of riots, of black anger as being unruly and destructive. Through working with *Sankofa* and hearing her whispers I have found ways to make work that contributes to the *undoing* of the plot. It does not negate the anger, nor the grief that is felt and experienced through living with these continuing legacies of coloniality and slavery, but what this way of working has provided for me is an otherwise way to approach these issues. Ways in which I can hold space for the grief and anger, visualise the grief and anger. Taking care of it as the bird takes care of the egg on her back. Working through this memory practice to imagine and create possibilities for the future, through the process of making.

Repossession or Recollecting of Something Lost or Forgotten.

Firstly I repossess and re-collect *Sankofa.* I claim it for me and for others from our place in the African diaspora, knowing that through her whispering she has kept us connected to the wisdom even if we never return to get it. The wisdom is in the remembering and calling of her name. Our response is the ways in which we recall what we have lost and forgotten. In the ways in which we use this memory to reflect, imagine and move forward. I think one thing that I can identify as a strong methodology that has become part of my understanding of *Sankofa* is storytelling. The way in which Akan and other African cultures have shared memory is through storytelling and this has become an important part of my practice. Working with fragments of information and story to create new ones as in *The Queen and the Black-Eyed Squint.* Or facilitating the opportunity for sharing and writing our stories in *Declaration of Independence*. The use of story is how I have been re-collecting that which has been lost or forgotten. I draw on the power of storytelling from black and of colour feminists who have used the power of story as a way to reveal stories of black and women of colour that are excluded from archives. Like Toni Morrison, Sadiya Hartman, M Nourbese Phillip I take fragments and work with them, reimagine them, and reclaim them, doing what artist Nathalie Anguezomo Mba Bikoro described in a conversation I had with her, Black feminist writer, artist and archivist Nydia Swaby and artist Ra Malika Imhotep, as archiving as

a verb.[252] Archiving as a practice of reclamation, or redefining archive for us and by us. This means not outright rejecting the idea of archiving but rethinking it from the position of those who have been excluded or obscured from the telling of history. Thinking about archives as existing in many different places. I have made this proposition for the knowledge of *Sankofa* as showing us a way to do this.

Both works I have spoken about in this thesis do some work of archiving. The films that I have made in *The Queen and the Black-Eyed Squint* series are films but also archival objects, in the fact of being collected, but also in the way in which I have put them together as a re-collecting of a number of stories. Within the frames materials such as Ama Aidoo's writing and the places The Queen visits recalling and re-collecting the significance of those places. The re-making of objects that re-call Monica Amekoafia's visit to the U.K. and even referring to the Windrush scandal and anti-colonial struggle in my speculative fiction story, *The Arrival*,[253] that is used as a narration for one of the Glasgow films is a re-collecting in the vain of a meaning of *Sankofa* that is a repossession and recollecting of something that is lost or forgotten. *Declaration of Independence* repossesses and re-collects in the way in which we come together to write our stories together. Re-collecting Ama Ata Aidoo's poem *As Always, A Painful Declaration of Independence*, writing with it and to it, calling and responding, while building a new way of archiving it through continuing the process of writing and responding as the project grows.

As I conclude this reflection on the research that I have been doing to explore *Sankofa* over these last four years, I realise that the work of *undoing* might not get any easier. In fact, we might be in a time when it is actually going to get harder as the fallout and the legacy of the Covid 19 pandemic revealed so much to us, but the rush to get back to some semblance of "normality" is calling for an order in which, that which was revealed while we all were still in our homes, might just be obscured and forgotten again. As a memory practice, *Sankofa* is a liberatory process freeing us from the limited constraints of a history that is incapable of telling our stories. *Sankofa* guides us to

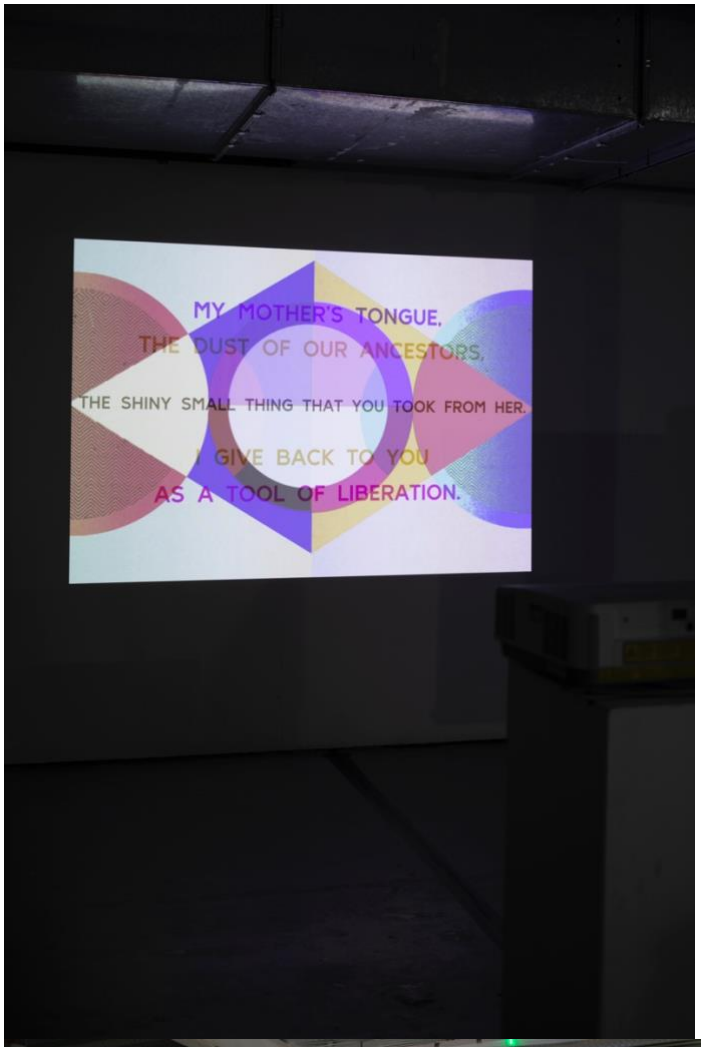
[252] Itinerant Imaginaries. https://britishartnetwork.org.uk/activity/seminar-series/itinerant-imaginaries-university-of-westminster/
[253] See appendix for the story

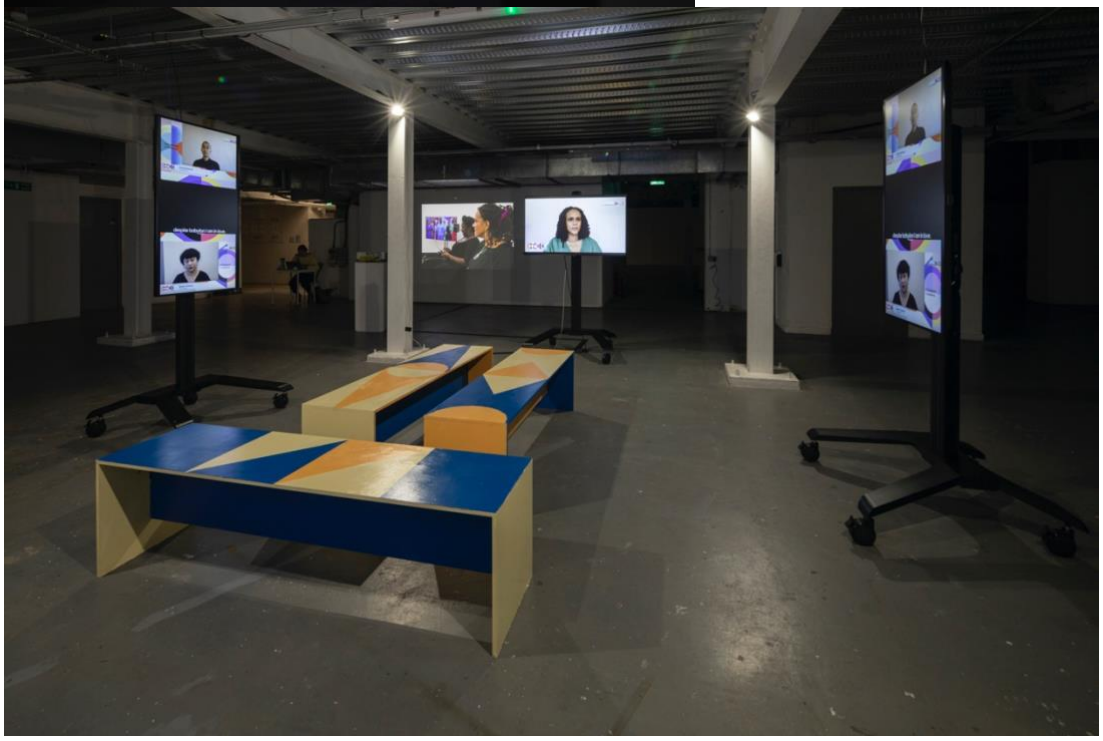
other ways of attending to these omissions by showing us ways to care about our memories by tending to the grief and incompleteness, through listening to her guidance and whispers. *Sankofa* makes memory audible and the silences visible giving insight as to ways to move forward. *Sankofa* as a memory practice reveals, unveils, brings us to the present, while helping us to time travel and make sense of things from the past. *Sankofa* is a circle of remembering, returning and re-collecting, that we don't have to do materially, as the metaphor of doing this is equally as powerful as materialising it. *Sankofa* is a process rooted in remembering from the perspective of how we approach loss and trauma, rooted in the language and culture of my family, and my diaspora experience of thinking through the routes and legacies that bring us together in this place and how to map oneself in the corners and crevices of marginalisation – through history, racism, and inequality. How do you make yourself new in this space so that others might see other possibilities for the future? Returning to the past or to places we have been connected to in the past has its difficulties. With the use of *Sankofa* as a guiding principle in the development of my practice, I have travelled with the people I have worked with in many different places and possibilities, using the materials and stories I have found to also speculate on other ways to understand and *undo* the ways in which we understand memory and the archive. And as a memory practice that is helping us with the process of *undoing* *Sankofa* might be able to show us ways to a more productive and liberated future.

Images from *On-doing Undoing.* Viva Exhibition, Ambika P3 November 2022

Figure 29: The Queen and the Black-Eyed Squint, research image. On-doing Undoing, Ambika P3. Photo: David Freeman

Figure 30: The Queen and the Black-Eyed Squint, Glasgow: The Arrival Still, On-doing Undoing, Ambika P3. Photo: David Freeman


MY MOTHER'S TONGUE,
THE DUST OF OUR ANCESTORS,
THE SHINY SMALL THING THAT YOU TOOK FROM HER.
I GIVE BACK TO YOU
AS A TOOL OF LIBERATION.



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Appendix

Links to Films and Performances

Declaration of Independence

Library of Performing Rights, Live Art Development Agency, June 3, 2018

https://vimeo.com/449250450/8f8f600f52?share=copy

Performance, BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art, February 24, 2019

https://vimeo.com/451564567/a02688d7a9?share=copy

Installation, BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art, February 24, 2019

Entrance Scroll https://vimeo.com/451548090/64cebbcf53?share=copy

Landscape Screen https://vimeo.com/451200396/bc157d1447?share=copy

Portrait Screen https://vimeo.com/451209204/2e640bcd95?share=copy

Online Performance, Brent Biennale, December 12, 2020

https://vimeo.com/451209204/2e640bcd95?share=copy

The Queen and the Black-Eyed Squint

Newcastle and North Kensington Films

https://vimeo.com/453419263/250538f483?share=copy

Glasgow – The Arrival

https://vimeo.com/453419263/250538f483?share=copy

Glasgow – The Tour

https://vimeo.com/706320668/9876c5c48d?share=copy

Glasgow – The Dream

https://vimeo.com/706303451/1dc5c3401a?share=copy

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https://www.barbyasante.com