

A More Than Four-Hundred-Year-Long Event

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Abstract

This text functions as a poetic collage, a piecing together of numerous fragments from sources across multiple modes of writing that articulate something of an othered experience in a white hegemonic world. These are fragments from texts that have accompanied me through my aesthetic and theoretical explorations of the contours blackness, womanhood, otherness. It is a sketch and a homage and a weaving together, a search for ways of being by way of leaning into – and hopefully past – the historical violence that has produced human actors as disposable subhuman ‘other’. I pull together words from those theorists who have informed my thinking and the words taken from a script that animates a video piece created in a process of wrestling with a lived experience of being produced as other. At the centre of the video work is the image of a woman traveling across geographies and temporalities over multiple lifetimes. She is both ghost and ancestor, a shape shifter who has seen many different iterations of herself as she is constantly reconstituted by the many places and histories that form her. With her, I consider the formative movements of people in relation to the contemporary socio-political realities that emerged from those migrations. I contest the violence of the erasure of peoples humanity by intervening in those narratives our contemporary is predicated on. The visual and thematic use of the ghostly/multiple/ancestral draws on its transgressive potential as strategy in reclaiming elided narratives in an enactment of a return of things dismembered and denied by the coloniality of enlightenment project.

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a more than four-hundred-year-long event¹

*You who understand the dehumanization of forced removal-relocation-reeducation-redefinition, the humiliation of having to falsify your own reality, your voice you know. And often cannot say it. You try and keep on trying to unsay it, for if you don't, they will not fail to fill in the blanks on your behalf, and you will be said.*²

EXT. DAY. OCEAN SOMEWHERE ON THE AFRICAN ATLANTIC COAST

German

This, my story, has existed long before me. And yet, it lies before me still.

It waits for me there in anticipation of a time that we might become.

INT. DAY. A PALACE IN AN UNMARKED TIME

German

Alzire was the name in which they buried me.

When she spoke that name to me for the first time, her eyes glistened with something between religious affection and lust.

I died on the 22th of May 1751 in Bayreuth. It was a mild day in spring, early summer. At home it would have been about 30°C, hot and humid. While here, the first rays of sun got stronger and warmed the forever cold stone walls of this place they call “palace”.

*I, too, live in the time of slavery, by which I mean I am living in the future created by it.*³

In the video work *After the boats set sail* (2017–2018) I have assembled fragments from an ongoing practice wherein I move through and explore the parameters of a “reality” constituted by the epistemologies of imperial Western knowledge and its historical foundations. I explore questions pertaining to epistemology and ontology through the use of history as material, privileging memory and ancestry in my engagement with conceptions of history and time.

*Is this boat sailing into eternity toward the edges of a nonworld that no ancestor will haunt?*⁴

I articulate the ideas through video works as a means of offering up difference alongside more “traditional” scholarly engagements with the pasts that form us. This performative enactment of difference is integral to this exploration in which the real is understood as being produced through the violent erasure of epistemological difference, the knowledge systems and othered ways of being, from beyond the bounds of what constitutes the real of the dominant epistemology. I work through the idea of elision with reference to knowledges and their enunciations that are produced as marginal through processes of disavowing the legitimacy, value or presence of ways of knowing and being that are “othered”, as they differ from hegemonic norms. I consider how this “real” is constantly encroached upon and troubled by the presence of what it elides, that is, the othered realities it would deny. Elision, however, suggests that the subsumed is always, regardless of its omission, present among and a part of that which is spoken, written and recognised. I engage with the possibilities for speaking from spaces of elision through a conception of ghosts, haunting and ancestors. I am preoccupied with enunciations from spaces beyond epistemic power and the crisis such epistemically disobedient articulations cause to hegemony.

The first fragments were shot in Bahia, Brazil. I was spending time on the island of Itaparica on my first ever journey to the other shores of the Atlantic Ocean, shores that so, so many Africans had encountered before me, and whose encounter with them has come to shape our world so profoundly.

*How do we remember ghostly histories and their traces in our lives and in our ideas when our memories are conspirators, collaborative agents and traitors; when too many important books (in both the literal and metaphoric sense of the term) have been set aside... What does it mean to conceive of oneself as a giver of shape to ghosts?*⁵

Is she to be merely a ghostly presence that haunts the detritus of a colonial enterprise... If we think of post-colonial subjects merely in their spectrality within a hegemonic European discourse, are we not complicit in denying them the full humanity that they possess? Are they mere body, preserved in the aspic of a European master narrative, or do they bring with them histories and traditions of intellection that make them agents rather than insubstantial presences?

*Does the post-colonial theorist dare to theorise the post-colonial subject with the resources of her history and the texture of her thought.*⁶

*Were gaps and silences and empty rooms the substance of my history?*⁷

*some ancient ritual we remembered from nowhere and no one.*⁸

One evening I sat on the veranda of our house overlooking this beach while I was reading a book I had found in the library there; one telling the story of a young girl, from her life in West Africa through to her arrival and life in Brazil. The text was particularly affecting, reading it in that place, overlooking the Bay of All Saints, where shipload upon shipload of people arrived to be flung into a new life, a different paradigm of existence in which they were no longer to be human.

Our gods were in the holding cells.

*They stood when we entered, happy to see us.*⁹

Hundreds of years ago, on a slave ship named the Zong! On

*29 November, at 8.00 pm, fiftyfour sic women and children were thrown overboard "singly through the Cabin windows." The time seems to have been chosen to coincide with the changing of the watch when the maximum number of crewmembers would be available. On 1 December a further forty-two male slaves were thrown overboard from the quarterdeck.*¹⁰

I came away from my time in Bahia with a feeling of being haunted. I had opened myself up to and spent time with stories and memories that were not mine, but that have had a profound effect on the experiences of myself and other racially marked people in their aftermath. After reading and looking up over (one of) the bays where this event took place, where people who looked like me were no longer human, who had horrors waiting for them, endured them, were marked by them: through them, I have also come to be marked by them in the wake of their experience. While it had always been a lived experience, I continued on from that point with the conciseness of how these events live and are carried on my skin.

Phenomenology, after all, examines meaningful reality as constituted by consciousness wherein consciousness is understood in its intentional form as always having to be of something. The consciousnesses that manifest themselves in double consciousness are (1) consciousness of how mainstream... sees itself (dominant "reality") and (2) consciousness of its contradictions (black reality).¹¹

Yet in the rooms the guide was irrelevant, the gods woke up and we felt pity for them, and affection and love; they felt happy for us, we were still alive. Yes, we are still alive we said. And we had returned to thank them. You are still alive, they said. Yes we are still alive. They looked at us like violet; like violet teas they drank us. We said here we are. They said, you are still alive. We said, yes, yes we are still alive. How lemon, they said, how blue like fortune. We took the bottle of rum from our veins, we washed their faces. We were pilgrims, they were gods. We sewed the rim of their skins with cotton. This is what we had.

They said with wonder and admiration, you are still alive, like hydrogen, like oxygen.

We all stood there for some infinite time. We did weep, but that is nothing in comparison.¹²

As I write, precisely because of the haunting that has produced a "something-to-be-done"¹³, those denied pasts come into existence, becoming as I write. I am in the process of writing those elided histories and narratives in collaboration with the ancestors that haunt me, and, in doing so, I might become in a form that is no longer determined for me by Histories that relegate me to a space of lack.

EXT. GARDEN. A EUROPEAN SUMMER

German

Amsterdam was cold in winter, wet, no sunshine. A rich place. And there, as I did here, I met this man again. He is much the same man; they are as white as their teacups, and after any girl in reach.

Back home, walking on that warm earth through the shade of the trees and speaking love in my language, at home, that name they called would have been Abenna.

It was December, we had brought a bottle of rum, some ancient ritual we remembered from nowhere and no one.¹⁴

The things that happened in the past that I am interested in are not the pasts that are accessible in History books. According to such History books the histories and narratives of the marginalised people I'm preoccupied with do not exist. I turn to the story of Margaret Garner and Toni Morrison as illustration. Through Morrison the story of what would necessitate the killing of one's own child to protect them shares the centre of the stage alongside the return of the dead child. "I started out wanting to write a story about... the clipping about Margaret Garner stuck in my head. I had to deal with this nurturing instinct that expressed itself in murder."¹⁵

why one woman killed her child and another was haunted by the event.¹⁶

Morrison, who is haunted by the story of Margaret Garner, writes a story that History could not articulate as she writes through imaginative recall informed by the experience of being a black woman in a United States shaped by slavery.

*In the Akan language, knowledge was constituted anew with each retelling; elasticity of silence as important as authority of sound.*¹⁷

*She had “traveled a long distance, holding a memory the waters did not drown. How bad is the scar?... A woman walked out of the water thirsty and breathing hard having traveled a long distance looking for a face. Nobody counted on her walking out of the water, but when she did, she reminded them of things they had forgotten or hadn’t even got around to remembering yet. How bad is the scar? A woman walked out of the water thirsty and breathing hard having traveled a long distance looking for a face. Nobody counted on her walking out of the water. Nobody counted her until she forced an accounting.”*¹⁸

‘October 3, 2013. A ship filled with 500 African migrants caught fire, capsized, and sank one half-mile off the coast of the Italian island of Lampedusa. Like the Zong, which was built to carry at most 200 people but was packed with over 440 captive Africans, this unnamed ship was meant to hold fewer than half the number of people on it. Over 300 of the men, women, and children on board were killed. ‘Deep sea divers “unpacked a wall of people” from the hull of a smuggler’s trawler on the seafloor near this Italian island on Monday, gingerly untangling the dead would-be migrants in the latest and most painstaking phase of a recovery operation following the ship’s fiery capsizing,’ a staggering loss of life and a ‘human cargo’ that, we learn, for the smugglers was ‘worth almost €500,000.’ Two hundred thirty years after the crew on board the slave ship Zong threw overboard those living Africans, that word cargo repeats.’¹⁹

Over 200 years later the echoes reverberate and the ripples of the wake continue to trouble the waters.

*what remains constant is that there was that throwing overboard... The event, which is to say, one version of one part of a more than four-hundred-year-long event.*²⁰

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EXT. DAY. A COURTYARD IN AN OLD FORTRESS SURROUNDED BY HOLDING CELLS

German

I did not know it back then, when I first saw this man whose white skin had turned red, not to let myself be seen.

Back there in the dungeon, before the water, and the death and more death and more water I looked straight up at him surveying us from his balcony. It was the last time I was to be washed, before the sales block. And that first white gown, white as their teacups, that they dressed me in.

EXT. DAY. OCEAN – A WIDE OPEN OCEAN. YAWNING. EXPANSIVE

Twi (Akan)/Português

They were the same those places, you cannot breathe.

There was a time in between, when the world in the ships bowels rocked, and threw, and beat and broke you at the will of the waves outside and the will of the skinless men above.

The unbreathable air was mixed with salt and piss and vomit. With blood and death and rot and the ages of humanity have never seen such a thing as this.

They were the same those places on either side of the waters.

I did not know it then, not to look them back in the eye.

*The story depends upon every one of us to come into being. It needs us all, needs our remembering, understanding, and creating what we have heard together to keep on coming into being.*²¹

*thus Beloved the ghost's double voice speaks not only of Sethe's dead child but also of an unnamed African girl lost at sea, not yet become an African American... the ghost that is haunting them is haunted herself. She is the image of a ghost who is herself haunted, who carries with her the memory of those who did not make it, of the deaths that happened alongside her. A ghost that returns and brings with her memories of personal and collective trauma, memories that are hers and not hers but that haunter her all the same, of things drowned that return with her to force a reckoning.*²²

EXT. DAY. OCEAN SOMEWHERE ON THE AFRICAN ATLANTIC COAST

Twi (Akan)

Once, I sat under the baobab tree next to a house in my father's compound. The harmattan left my lips so dry that my lips would chap and the sneezes would not stop, with my nostrils irritated from the dust. If I sat very still the hairs on my legs would lump up from the dust they would catch.

It was our favourite game, when we would seek a few moments away from the gaze of my father's household. That boy who spoke love to me in my mother's young, would trace off my legs the dust that I'd let catch the harmattan.

If "the to-and-fro movement between the written woman and the writing woman is an endless one"²³ then the haunted writing woman's text might open a space for those that haunt her to enact their agency. We, together, enunciate what was elided from "History".

The Mediterranean has a long history in relation to slavery. "What we are facing today is a new declination of an old and repressed issue that haunts and composes the European project and modernity itself: the 'black Mediterranean' is a constituent unit of analysis for understanding

contemporary forms of policing Europe's borders.”²⁴

What has been done cannot be undone, but the ghost might re-figure the real this “four-hundred-year-long event” has produced, marking the absences, the gaping holes where humans have been negated, presencing the othered realities that call into question the real we occupy.

Any presence even though it is ignored of a particular culture, even a silent one, is an active relay in Relation.²⁵

What is real to me may not be real to you, and what is insubstantial presence to another, is my great, great, great grandmother's spirit come to show me the way home.

To participate in a socio-cultural world where ancestors play an active role in the lives of the living. This is the postcolonial theorists' texture of thought wrought from epistemologies weaning itself off from the master's toolset.

EXT. DAY. RUSHING THROUGH A SCATTERING OF TREES IS AN ARID LANDSCAPE

Twi (Akan)

I went walking in the desert alone. After thirty days and thirty nights, delirious with sleep, I saw my grandmother's spirit come to show me the way home.

I speak to speak them as they are already present within me. I may be haunted, but it is simply living in a present where all their pasts have accumulated to produce the existence we navigate now.

And they all had their own hauntings.

... the clipping about Margaret Garner stuck in my head.²⁶

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EXT. DAY. FOREST CANOPY

Portugues

The night of the fire we left. The red of that night is all I can recall. The red that was mine and the blood of others. The red heat of the burning plantation as we flew to the wet dark dense universe of the jungle outside the bounds of the white man's red burning world.

EXT. DAY. THICK DENSE JUNGLE UNDERGROWTH

Layers (of different languages)

I went walking in the desert alone. After thirty days and thirty nights, delirious with sleep, I saw my grandmothers spirit come to show me the way home.

We went fleeing through the jungle alone. After thirty days and thirty nights, delirious with sleep, we were joined by others, and my grandmother's spirit come to show us the way home.

*To begin might be difficult; to end, impossible. For no matter how strenuously we might forget what was begun, or wish to call an end to it, what-has-been is, cannot be undone, cannot cease to alter all the future-presents that flow out of it. Time does not pass or progress, it accumulates.*²⁷

*Against this reductive transparency, a force of opacity is at work... another, considerate of all the threatened and delicious things joining one another (without conjoining, that is, without merging) in the expanse of Relation. Thus, that which protects diversity we call opacity.*²⁸

EXT. DAY. ROLLING WINDSWEPT NORDIC LANDSCAPE. FRIGID

Zulu

The cold is different here, it hangs about you like a fog, damp and creeping. Where I was before, the winter was sharp, alert. With a clear sky so immense you'd think it had never held a cloud.

It was during those cold nights with the heavens enveloping all the world that I would sit next to the baobab with its roots reaching for the stars.

It was as far as I'd dared to go the edge of my home, my world, my universe. But the cold here, as its cold hangs about my skin is a thing far beyond the bounds of that universe.

I engage memory as a vehicle through which to connect the personal experiential with broader historical narratives while at the same time disrupting the historicised canon of histories that were shaped over centuries on the Atlantic and have come to sit so firmly on my skin.

The stories are mine and not mine, ours and each other's. In this gesture towards an un-making and re-membering of narratives that erase or dismember I conjure pictures of ghosts, particularly that of an enslaved woman embodying her own subjugation as well as those parts of other people who have been suppressed in the wake of her experience. She moves suspended as both singular and plural in different times, places and realities of people that her experience is implicated in.

*Following ghosts is about making a contact that changes you and refashions the social relations in which you are located. It is about putting life back in where only a vague memory or bare trace was visible to those who bothered to look. It is sometimes about writing ghost stories, stories that not only repair representational mistakes, but also strive to understand the conditions under which a memory was produced in the first place, towards a counter memory, for the future.*²⁹

*The story depends upon every one of us to come into being. It needs us all, needs our remembering, understanding, and creating what we have heard together to keep on coming into being. The story of a people. Of us, peoples.*³⁰

EXT. DAY

We went fleeing though the jungle alone.

Over thirty days and thirty nights, we were joined by others. Delirious with sleep, I saw my grandmother's spirit come to show me the way home.

*I dwell in them, they dwell in me, and we dwell in each other, more guest than owner. My story, no doubt, is me, but it is also, no doubt, older than me... no end, no middle, no beginning; no start, no stop, no progression; neither backwards not forward, only a stream that flows into another stream, an open sea.*³¹

Footnotes

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4. Glissant, Eduardo. *Poetics of Relation*, Translated by Betsy Wing. Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press. 1997. p. 7.
5. Gordon, Avery. "Making Pictures of Ghosts: The Art of Gary Simmons". *Social Identities*. Vol. 5. No. 1. March 1999. p. 93.
6. Menon, Dilip M. Personal correspondence. 2015.
7. Hartman, *Lose your Mother*, p. 82.
8. Brand, Dionne. *The Blue Clerk. Ars Poetica in 59 versos*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press. 2018. p. 223.
9. *Ibid.*
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12. Brand, *The Blue Clerk*, pp. 223-224.
13. Gordon, Avery. *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*. Minneapolis, MI: The University of Minnesota Press. 2008.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 223.

15. Gordon, Avery. *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*. Minneapolis, MI: The University of Minnesota Press. 2008, p.142.
16. *Ibid.*
17. Oforiatta-Ayim, Nana. "Feature(s) of Cohabitation". *Manifesta Journal*. No. 17. 2013. p. 68.
18. Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, p.170.
19. Sharpe, *In the wake*, p. 53-55.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 37.
21. Minh-Ha, *Woman Native Other*, p. 119.
22. Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, p. 140.
23. Minh-Ha, *Woman Native Other*, p. 30.
24. Sharpe, *In the wake*, p.58.
25. Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, p. 177.
26. Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, p.142.
27. Baucom, Ian. *Specters of the Atlantic: Finance Capital, Slavery, and the Philosophy of History*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press. 2005. p. 331.
28. Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, p. 62.
29. Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, p. 22.
30. Minh-Ha, *Woman Native Other*, p. 119.
31. *Ibid.*, p. 123.