Time Undone Through the Archive

Denise Ryner

This text accompanies the exhibition

Sediment: The Archives as a Fragmentary Base

With the participation of Sandra Brewster, Filipa César, Justine A. Chambers, Louis Henderson, Pamila Matharu and Krista Belle Stewart

Curatored by Denise Ryner

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I realized too late that the breach of the Atlantic could not be remedied by a name and that the routes travelled by strangers were as close to a mother country as I would come.
—Saidiya Hartman[1]

There are more Cape Verdeans living abroad than in the country. The film was used to tell these people that their country existed, that it was independent and that they could go back.
—Sana Na N'Hada, Berlin, November 28, 2012[2]

Diasporas and routes laid through exile create their own geographies and counterflows. The objects and documents collectively assembled and produced by communities throughout exile and migration become

[1] From: Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2007), 9.
[2] Quoted in: Filipa César, Tobias Hering, and Carolina Rito, eds., *Luta Ca Caba Inda: Time Place Matter Voice 1967–2017* (Berlin: Archive Books, 2017), 231.

the basis of archives that are evidence of presence, place, and resilience rather than tools of othering and domination.

As a result, archives not only form the recorded history of a people but become counter-sites, departing from their conventional role of mapping out historical points in linear time and becoming, instead, tools of Black, African, and Indigenous futurity around which anticolonial solidarity can be built and sovereignty reclaimed.

Digitized footage of historic archival film shot by young filmmakers, who were part of the 1960s and '70s independence movements in Guinea-Bissau and Cape Verde, is interspersed with recent footage of those filmmakers, now elders, as they narrate and describe the remaining contents of their film archives to multigenerational audiences across Guinea-Bissau, who gathered around a mobile cinema that had travelled to them (additional screenings were also held in Berlin). Filmmakers, such as Sana Na N'Hada, share their memories to fill in holes in the historical record that are not discernable from the images, which are devoid of sound and have been mostly lost to time and deterioration. Filipa César's multi-iterative project *Spell Reel* (2017) provided support for the restoration of the Guinean national film archives in Berlin, Germany and produced the mobile cinema, which she then documented in its role as a focus point for gatherings and oral transmissions around the archives. The resulting collaborations with the archives' filmmakers and the film itself constitute *Spell Reel.* The filmmakers' narration,

prompted by their restored film documentation, provides intimate perspectives on the Guinean and Cape Verdean armed independence struggles and the early days of nation building that followed. The national film archive itself was established as part of that very nation-building process, prior to being destroyed through neglect following a political coup in the 1980s.

Filmed documentation was undertaken not only to record historic events, battles, and political declarations for the benefit of posterity; indeed, the filmmakers who founded the National Film Institute realized the role of the film archive as reflecting Guinean and Cape Verdean ambitions and thereby creating post-independence citizenship and pan-African solidarity through images of workers engaged in education, healthcare, and agricultural labour. As Na N'Hada recalls, in *Spell Reel*:

> So we created the "Programme of Rural Promotion by Audiovisual Media," which meant that, with cinema, we could make people from there understand people from here. We would contribute to imagining a national space, together with Creole. For example, in Catió, people think it's just human laziness to have an ox pull a plough. The ox is very respected. But in Bafatá, people think it's better if the ox does the job. It is easier to sell an ox in Gabú or Bafatá than to sell one in Catió. In the east of the country an ox is used to help people. While in northern Mansoa,

> Catió, the ox serves to honour the dead. The useful or financial aspect of the ox doesn't matter much.[3]

The filmmakers' mobile cinema tour through Guinean communities in Bissau, Morés, Cacheu, Bafatá, Béli, and Boé reinforced the mission of the archive as essential to post-independence Guinean and Cape Verdean survival and futurity. Such capacities, embedded in the collective archive, are made apparent through its fragmentation and incompleteness, which points to the presence of, and the provision for, the participation of active communities comprised of both those with knowledge of, and those with an interest in, the anti-imperial struggles of the past. Consider this alongside American artist Renée Green's reflections on the inevitability of lacunae, given that archives are sited in the missing testimony of the dead as much as they are dependent upon the contributions of the living. Green speaks of those

> moments or circumstances in which despite the availability of some records of a past event there exist gaps or holes which in all instances it is assumed that only the dead are able to fill. The impossibility lies in the fact that this will never happen. Those who survived in order to tell or witness are not really capable of

[3] *Spell Reel*, directed by Filipa César (Rennes, France: Spectre Productions, 2017), 96 min.

filling in these holes, because they have survived. They cannot know across the limit of death.[4]

However, if one thinks of the archive as a ritual or conversation between the living, the survivors, and the dead, as is done in Black and Indigenous traditions, then temporal linearity and the limits of death, and therefore the function of the archive as limited to the realm of the past, can be bypassed by accessing the space of the wake and haunting.[5] To refer again to Sana Na N'Hada, regarding the status of the ox in the eastern versus the northern villages of Guinea-Bissau, the ox can both honour the dead and undertake the future-building task of preparing the field whereupon anticolonial empathy and conversation are facilitated.

Anthony Bogues turns to African-derived epistemologies to provide an alternative to the dominant forms of historical study. He asks: "What would happen if we were to shift our archives? Instead of focusing on standard forms of historical production, what would happen if we were to study the interpretations of the Caribbean that have originated from the 'inner plantation' and ask whether there are historical questions posed in *this* archive?"[6] As a response, Bogues

[4] Renée Green, "Survival: Ruminations on Archival Lacunae" (2001), chap. 27 in *Other Planes of There: Selected Writings* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), 272.
[5] George Lamming's 1960 introduction to his essay collection *The Pleasures of Exile* describes and compares a Haitian Vodou ritual, the Ceremony of the Souls, to the role of the Caribbean writer, exiled to England or elsewhere: to converse across the divide, to the reaches of the Black and Caribbean diaspora as well as the home country. George Lamming, *The Pleasures of Exile* (London: Allison & Busby, 1984).
[6] Anthony Bogues, *Black Heretics, Black Prophets: Radical Political Intellectuals* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 178.

turns to "dread history," *dread* being a polysemic term in Rastafari culture. Dread history employs a specific historical lens, derived from the transatlantic slave trade and the Afro-Caribbean experience in the wake of the trauma of enslavement and including Rastafarian beliefs of redemption and utopia, that "collapses standard historical time to understand patterns of oppression and speaks to the silences in the dominant productions of historical knowledge."[7]

Dread history is bound up with Jamaican and Afro-Caribbean experiences but can also engage the production of history and memory within the cultures of those who have collectively been dispossessed of place, language, culture, or status as human beings. Pointing toward a broader definition of dread, Bogues explains: "Finally, Dread history is a profound radical ontological claim at two levels. The first level is what Martin Heidegger calls the *whoness*—the claim of *who am I*. The second level is the claim about historical knowledge—the conditions under which we construct the past, and how narrative and collective memory function."[8]

In addition to dread history, Denise Ferreira da Silva's definition of "cosmic time" is useful for thinking through the fragmented, or the haunted, in the production of counter-archives. In her latest publication, *Unpayable Debt*, Ferreira da Silva describes the conditions of the "quantic moment" and cosmic time, wherein separability is

[7] Ibid., 179
[8] Ibid.

impossible and sense perception is undermined, thereby invalidating the certainty of apprehension of elemental phenomena: "What the cosmic and the quantic moments do is not so much add other dimensions or levels to knowledge—this is not a matter of scale—but undermine the very bases of post-Enlightenment thinking, its pillars of separability, determinacy, and sequentiality, which transform events and existents into Nature or *world*."[9]

This collapse of historical time and world, alongside singular apprehension, into a beyond-human, inseparable, collective memory emerges when we shift our attention to the archival presence of Haitian revolutionary leader Toussaint Louverture in British filmmaker Louis Henderson's *Bring Breath to the Death of Rocks* (2018). The film begins in France's National Archives, where Parisian-based Haitian actor and artist Jephthé Carmil views documents that include the final letters Louverture wrote from his exile in the Château de Joux, located in France's Jura Mountains. The emergence of the Négritude movement, whose central figures often revisited the ideals of Louverture and the Haitian revolution, is referenced through images of Carmil leafing through a play on Louverture by Édouard Glissant, which we also hear as a voice-over alongside whispered excerpts from Aimé Césaire's *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land*. Given the scenes of Carmil walking through the prison cells of the Château while a voice reads Césaire's writing on Louverture's imprisonment

[9] Denise Ferreira da Silva, *Unpayable Debt* (London: Sternberg Press, 2022), 262.

and vision for Haiti, there is the suggestion of possession by Louverture. This makes it conceivable why Bogues invokes Heidegger's *whoness t*o address his questions regarding the possibility of the sovereignty of other archives, beyond standard historical production. Henderson overlaps French and Haitian terrain through transitions between the rocky elevations of the Jura and the forested edges of the Saut d'Eau waterfall in Haiti. These images move toward representations of cosmic time or alternate space-time through guttural, sonic expressions and digital colour fields that evoke the shifting, otherworldly geological core (and inform the title of this exhibition). The presence of the Haitian revolution in France's archives and history is expanded to propose the haunting, by the Black abolitionist revolt and revolutionary epoch, of the French historical consciousness (although the Château de Joux—the "other" fort—is absent from general narratives of revolutionary French history, which centre on the symbolism of the storming of the Bastille).

Continuing the engagement of counter-images and -archives in relation to state or dominant narratives of history, Syilx Nation artist Krista Belle Stewart's video installation *Seraphine, Seraphine* (2014) alternates between two sets of archived footage: the first, a docudrama produced by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) in 1967, which follows the artist's mother, Seraphine Stewart (née Ned), as a young student undertaking the professional training with which she would eventually become the first Indigenous public health nurse and one of the first Indigenous registered nurses to work

in British Columbia. Titled *Seraphine: Her Own Story Told by Seraphine Ned*, the CBC documentary film stock is black and white, and mostly features Seraphine either in conversation or reflection, accompanied by an instrumental soundtrack of jazz flute. A second frame features Seraphine many years later, as a septuagenarian, giving her testimony for the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada's inquiry into the legacy of the residential school system. She shares her recollections of the isolation, humiliation, and fear she experienced as a young girl in the Kamloops Indian Residential School. The camera is cropped and trained around her head and shoulders. As we listen to her speak, Seraphine occasionally responds to prompts from an unseen questioner.

The CBC and National Film Board of Canada (NFB) film and video archives are replete with documentary footage such as that *Seraphine: Her Own Story Told by Seraphine Ned*, footage ostensibly intended to reflect a nation to itself and, in so doing, to reaffirm a universalized settler-colonial national identity that accommodates the aesthetics of a pluralistic and modern society.

In the same year that the CBC aired *Seraphine: Her Own Story Told by Seraphine Ned*, the NFB, dedicated to the production and archiving of Canadian film, began working with Abenaki filmmaker Alanis Obomsawin on Indigenous documentary production initiatives. Quoting film theorist Michelle Stewart in a recent collection of essays on Obomsawin's film work, Karrmen Crey writes: "Filmmaking,

specifically documentary-making, could be used as a platform for the voices of the marginalized, thereby supporting dialogue between "government and the governed, as well as between dominant and marginalized social groups.""[10]

Stewart's juxtaposition of Seraphine's testimony in 1967 and in the early 2000s invokes circular or cosmic time, which complicates the attempt by the two federal institutions to represent Seraphine's experiences and testimony as part of a linear progression or conclusion. In the series of edited clips, she pairs Seraphine's recollections of her years in nursing school, recorded during the Commission's inquiry, with another conversation, filmed with a classmate in her nursing school, wherein she shares a few brief details of the impact of her time in residential school: one version of Seraphine experiencing the other's past and future in a loop. The film's inclusion of Seraphine's anecdotes about traditional lifeways at her home territory at Douglas Lake, spoken to a government inquiry process intended to erase and undermine such traditions, also references the importance of oral, intergenerational transmission to Indigenous archival or knowledge-keeping practices and futurity.

Artists Sandra Brewster and Justine A. Chambers work with themes of home and the embodied archives of communities borne along well-worn routes of exile and migration, from the Caribbean

[10] Karrmen Crey, "In Situ: Indigenous Media Landscapes in Canada," in *Alanis Obomsawin: Lifework*, Richard William Hill and Hila Peleg, eds. (Munich: Prestel, 2022), 54.

through the American South and toward northern urban centres. Although their works are not limited to photographic representations, Brewster's and Chambers' engagement of vernacular image, dance, and sound evoke image theorist Tina Campt's proposition that, when one retains the capacity to attune to the quieter sonic frequencies or to the counter-register of images as "quotidian practices," such images may offer spaces of refusal and operate as alternate archives.[11] Campt builds on the importance of sound and music to Paul Gilroy's framework, or methodology, of the Black Atlantic: "Taking inspiration from Gilroy, it is through sound that I seek a deeper engagement with the forgotten histories and suppressed forms of diasporic memory that these images transmit. I theorize sound as an inherently embodied process that registers at multiple levels of the human sensorium."[12]

A selection of large-scale photo prints from Brewster's series *Tokens* (2019) makes monumental the small objects of everyday use. These "tokens"—a weaved mat, a bottle filled with herbs, a handkerchief, and a dictionary—were offered by their owners to the artist as photo subjects because they evoked elements of personal or familial life in connection with Toronto's Caribbean diaspora. A related installation, *Token Reflections* (2018), situated in the gallery vestibule, features an audio compilation of each owner describing their token, alongside brief contextualization from their personal memories. Through this storytelling, it becomes clear that these objects,

[11] Tina M. Campt, *Listening to Images* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017), 5.
[12] Ibid., 6.

repositories of cultural knowledge and connections to particular time-spaces, are revived through their domestic and everyday use rather than through conventional, archival preservation.

Justine A. Chambers' performance piece *Heirloom* (2023) will continue this exhibition's explorations of the alternate ways that familial and diasporic knowledge are archived, preserved, and disseminated outside the archival institutions of state or dominant culture. Chambers proposes Black American sartorial expressions and vernacular dances—such as the Electric Slide, which she associates with her maternal grandmother's family gatherings in Chicago—as embodied heirlooms that undergird community cohesion and presence, even during past and present dispersions of Black settlements and diasporas due to racial oppression, labour, and affordability crises, or urban gentrification.

Also taking up the idea of the ephemeral and the domestic as counter-archive, Pamila Matharu's video work *INDEX (SOME OF ALL PARTS)* (2022) features the artist's personal archive of found objects connected to Canada's South Asian diaspora, British colonialism, and Indian political and social histories, as well as image documentation of Matharu's earlier works and objects the artist salvaged from the discards of Canadian art institutions. Matharu's archive was featured as an art installation in her 2019 solo exhibition *One of These Things Is Not Like the Other*, at A Space Gallery in Toronto. In the video, the artist reworks photos of their archive into a steady drip of clippings

from print media, photos, book covers, and flyers. Each archival object is presented without commentary, context, or any hierarchical ordering between the objects: from Black Lives Matter handouts or flyers for free English lessons featuring drawings of othered and racialized faces, pulled from public bulletin boards and lampposts; to framed clippings of Canadian Press photos of the two Sikh men who carried out the 1985 Air India bombing, benignly labelled as "activists" and purchased "as is" from eBay; or saved magazine clippings of tourism industry ads exoticizing Indian culture, and celebrity interview spreads featuring Monika Deol, one of the first Indo-Canadian television personalities to attain broad visibility in Canadian mainstream media in the 1990s. Each archived image or object is specific to Matharu's online, sidewalk, and magazine-rack flâneurism, but also problematizes assumptions about a monolithic South Asian diaspora.

In *Vistas of Modernity*, Ronaldo Vázquez speaks of decoloniality as a reorientation toward "those worlds," and other ways of worlding.[13] The exhibition *Sediment: The Archive as a Fragmentary Base* proposes that by invoking dread history and cosmic time, collective memory and haunting, the fragmentary base of the archive operates, and has operated, as one possible site for radical reorientation toward future worlds.

[13] Rolando Vázquez, *Vistas of Modernity: Decolonial Aesthesis and the End of the Contemporary* (Amsterdam: Mondriaan Fund, 2020), 8.