

Phantoms of Remembrance  
Archival Violence and the Black British Film Collectives

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This thesis is dedicated to my grandparents: Wiz and Casimir de Rham, better known as Granny and Bop. You couldn't be here to see this happen, but know that your love and support over the years lead to this. You helped me to see the world and the wonderment that it holds and for that I am ever grateful.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This project began during Spring of 2011. Taking Manthia Diawara's course Black European Cinema at Tisch School of the Arts' Cinema Studies Department I found myself confronted with films, filmmakers, voices and histories I hadn't yet encountered. Watching John Akomfrah's 1986 film *Handsworth Songs* when we began to talk about black British film struck me. It disturbed me. The films use of archival materials was violent and yet beautiful at the same time. The work of Sankofa, Ceddo, and especially John's work with BAFC and more recently at Smoking Dog Films Here were films resurrecting the phantoms of the archives. Instilling them with voices. Instilling them with stories. Strengthening them with songs. During several conversations with John Akomfrah, who was an artist-in-residency in The Institute of African American Affairs at NYU, during Manthia's class it forced me to reconsider what I thought about archives and memory as a cinema studies scholar, an archivist, an activist, and a filmmaker. Some of this paper comes out of the final assignment for that class.

This project would not have been possible without the support of my large, rather crazily extended, family. Mom and Tony, Dad and Kim, my siblings: Daniel, Anna, and Rose, thank you for your love, support, and much needed breaks from the archive world.

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## **ABSTRACT**

What is at issue here...is the violence of the archive itself, *as archive, as archival violence*. –Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever*

This thesis looks at the works of black British film collectives and their use of archival material. Focusing specifically on the Black Audio Film Collective and the work of John Akomfrah it explores the collectives' use of the archival usurps the hegemonic control that the national archive holds. They use this material and engage in a practice of forced rupture, violently bringing it into the light, confronting us with the phantoms of the past and forcing us to change our perspectives of how national memory and history is constructed. I compare the violence of this process with the violence of decolonization proposed by Franz Fanon. Finally I argue for the shift of archival institutions into one of active engagement with marginalized communities, a process in which the phantoms and ghosts that haunt the archives can be allowed to have new lives.

## **TABLE OF CONTENTS**

<b>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>ABSTRACT .....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>TABLE OF CONTENTS.....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>INTRODUCTION .....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>POLITICAL VIOLENCE .....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>PHANTOM NARRATIVES: BEING BLACK IN BRITAIN .....</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>THEORETICAL VIOLENCE: THE VIOLENCE OF COLLECTING, AND GHOSTS .....</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>CELLULOID VIOLENCE, THE FIRST FILMS OF THE COLLECTIVES.....</b>	<b>29</b>
<b>CONCLUSION, OR, HOW ACCESS ENABLES COMMUNITIES .....</b>	<b>41</b>
<b>WORKS CITED .....</b>	<b>48</b>

## INTRODUCTION

That is the thing—the Past, the more or less remote Past, of which the prose is clean obliterated by distance—that is the place to get our ghosts from. Indeed we live ourselves, we educated folk of modern times, on the borderland of the Past, in houses looking down on its troubadours' orchards and Greek folks' pillared courtyards; and a legion of ghosts, very vague and changeful, are perpetually to and fro, fetching and carrying for us between it and the Present.

—Vernon Lee *Hauntings* Preface

This is a ghost story. A story of phantoms lost in the stacks, cans and boxes that make up an archive. Those lives captured by lenses alien to them, catalogued and left to the dusty nooks of the archives where they wait silently to be found, wait to be returned, wait to be resurrected. As archivists, instilled with the stewardship of a collection, we are acutely aware of what is missing from our archives, the fragments that have been lost to time, funding cuts, or general human error. However often we are so wrapped up in the purpose of our institution, the purpose of our collection and our mission, we can be blinded to the ghosts that are in the documents, photographs, recordings and reels of film that do still exist. Only by opening our collections to communities in need of them, only by actively engaging in the archival process of acquisition, cataloging, and access, can we be made aware of these specters that haunt our walls.

This paper takes a theoretical look at archives, specifically focusing on the concept of a state archive as a place that documents a nation's story at the same time it is creating it. I look at how the work of the Black Audio Film Collective, and their contemporaries Ceddo and Sankofa, enters into a complex dialogue with elements of a post-colonial, imperial state archive. It is my argument that the

collectives' use of the archival is usurping the hegemonic control that the national archive holds. They use this material and engage in a practice of forced rupture, violently bringing it into the light, confronting us with the phantoms of the past and forcing us to change our perspectives of how national memory and history is constructed. The central theme in this thesis is violence. The political violence that lead to the filming of *Handsworth Songs*, *Passion of Remembrance*, and *The People's Account*; the violence inherent in the archival process and the taxonomy that is necessary for archival order; and finally the violence of dearchivization that the collectives were engaged in.

These issues are critically important to archivists in the current paradigm shift to digital. Cultural output has grown exponentially, as is awareness of the importance of owning your own history. Through my exploration of the collectives' work, and my work with Activist Archivists in dealing with the collection and issues surrounding movements such as Occupy Wall Street, it has lead me to the conclusion that archives actively engage with marginalized communities and peoples, allowing them access and agency over their own history. We can no longer afford to be seen as places that are passively collecting historical documents. As archivists we need to consider not just the origin of documents and how they are ordered and preserved, but how they can be used and reinterpreted.

## POLITICAL VIOLENCE

Handsworth shall stand firm/like Jah rock/fighting back/ We once beggars are now choosers/no intention to be losers/ striving forward with ambition/ and if it takes ammunition/ we rebel in Handsworth revolution.

–Steel Pulse *Handsworth Revolution*

Dem walk up to me and Jim/one a dem 'ole on to Jim/sey 'im teckin 'im in/Jim tell him fi leggo a 'im/fa 'im nah do nutt'n/an 'I'm nah t'ief, not even a but'n/Jim start to riggle/De police start to giggle

– Linton Kwesi Johnson *Sonny's Lettah*

The film collectives were born during a time of unrest in Britain. In order to really understand the provenance of the collective's work we have to understand the socio-political context in which they were working. On May 4, 1979, after a campaign that partially drew on the fears of immigration<sup>1</sup>, Margaret Thatcher became the first female Prime Minister in Britain. As she was stepping into No. 10 Downey Street she was asked how she felt and part of her reply was this:

'Where there is discord, may we bring harmony. Where there is error, may we bring truth. Where there is doubt, may we bring faith. And where there is despair, may we bring hope' ...and to all the British people—howsoever they voted—may I say this. Now that the Election is over, may we get together and strive to serve and strengthen the country of which we're so proud to be a part.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> In an interview marking Thatcher's third anniversary of her becoming the party leader with Gordon Burns of Granada TV on the program *World in Action* Thatcher made a remark about British people fearing that they may be "rather swamped by people with a different culture." The full Granada Transcript can be found here: <http://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/103485>.

<sup>2</sup> Thatcher, Margaret. "Remarks on becoming Prime Minister (St. Francis's Prayer)" May 4, 1979 Transcript can be found here: <http://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/104078>

As grand as the words of St. Francis are, this idea of harmony was not to be. The rise of neo-fascism in the last years of the Labor government before Margaret Thatcher saw racially motivated attacks increase against both Afro-Caribbean and Asian people. Large gatherings of people of color were being portrayed in the press as threatening, turning Carnival into something that should be policed and feared.

The Brixton riots of 1981, while not the first burst of violence against oppression in the country, lead to a string of disturbances that were co-opted by the media apparatus as part of this new narrative of “a new Black Threat, with new Black, male youth as its archetypal protagonist.”<sup>3</sup> However this narrative had been brewing for some time. Tensions rapidly increased after Thatcher’s election. Class inequality, which is tied in much more to issues of race in Britain than it is here in the United States, was increasing as the country was brought into a neo-conservative economic structure that did away with much of the welfare systems that were in place. 1979 saw not only a large number of Vietnamese refugees arriving, but also the initiation of immigration laws that denied entry to husbands and fiancés of women residing in Britain but born elsewhere. The St. Pauls Riot, April 2, 1980, saw violence in Bristol and 134 people are arrested with 91 being charged for assault. Despite the black and white youths in the crowd, the riot is portrayed as a race riot. 1981 was a turning point in the landscape of race relations, but also in art. Eddie Chambers and Keith Piper organized the exhibition *Black Art an Done* at Wolverhampton, and may be the first time Black Art is used in contemporary art history discourse in Britain. The year began in tragedy though. On

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<sup>3</sup> Fusco, *Young, British and Black* p. 10



January 24, 1981 a fire broke out at a party and 13 youths were killed and 30 were injured. This became known as the New Cross Massacre. The subsequent march to protest the lack of press coverage and the cursory police investigation numbered over 1,500 people and was the largest demonstration of black political power at the time. The police had also been increasingly using the Sus Law (based off of the Vagrancy Act of 1824) to stop and frisk youth, predominantly black youth. Operation Swamp 81 saw ten squads of police officers stop and search over 943 individuals in early April. <sup>4</sup>

April 10-12, 1981. Brixton Riots. This was “the first serious riots of the 20<sup>th</sup> century”<sup>5</sup> according to the Metropolitan police. Official reports show 299 police injured, 65 civilian injuries, 28 bulidings burned, 117 damaged or looted, and 82 arrests were made. Molotov cocktails were also thrown for the first time on mainland Britain.<sup>6</sup> In response to this violence a sociological investigation is launched to look into the conditions of black people in Britain. The Scarman Report, the outcome of the inquiry, showed Sus Laws being disproportionally applied to black youths and that communications had broken down between police and the community they were supposed to be protecting. Changes in training and enforcement were recommended, as was “positive discrimination” in employment for black and Asian youths.<sup>7</sup> The British Nationality Act was also changed in October of 1981. This act restricted the right to live in Britain to British citizens, and split the

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<sup>4</sup> Beauchamp-byrd, Mora, *Transforming the Crown: African, Asian & Caribbean Artists in Britain 1966-1996*. p. 156.

<sup>5</sup> “Brixton Riots” [http://www.met.police.uk/history/brixton\\_riots.htm](http://www.met.police.uk/history/brixton_riots.htm)

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Beauchamp-byrd, p. 156.

classification of citizenship into British Citizenship, British Dependent Territories Citizenship, and British Overseas Citizenship. It also modified the application of jus soli, and a child could now only receive citizenship if one of their parents was a citizen or permanent resident.<sup>8</sup> These changes racialized citizenship, and effectively denied citizenship to children of immigrants from newly independent nations. The writing into law of jus sanguinis made the equation of Whiteness to Britishness easier to make.

In response to these incidents the Ethnic Minorities Committee was created in 1981, which housed within it the Black Arts Division created for the purposes of funding black cultural productions. The Association of Cinematograph Television & Allied Technicians, Britain's film production union, at the same time instituted the Grant-Aided Workshop Production Declaration in 1981.<sup>9</sup> This declaration is essentially a union agreement providing pay scale, conditions, and structures for the workshops it covers. They also had directed efforts into establishing Channel 4 to act as both a commissioner and outlet for British films. Channel 4 started broadcasting in 1982 and was government subsidized but funded from outside sources (including advertising and subscriptions) as well. Weekly programs such as *Black on Black*, produced by Trevor Phillips, and *Eastern Eye*, produced by Samir Shah, are part of the regular lineup and give a more rounded portrayal of blacks in Britain.<sup>10</sup> This also forced a debate into how a nationally funded television system should portray diversity, after all *The Black and White Minstrel Show* had just ceased

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<sup>8</sup> British Nationality Act of 1981, 1981 Chapter 61. <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1981/61>

<sup>9</sup> Romphf, "Invention in the Name of Community" p.1

<sup>10</sup> Beauchamp-byrd, p. 157

broadcasting in 1978, ending a twenty year run on BBC1.<sup>11</sup> Coco Fusco points out, at least at the time of the writing 1988, that the actual airtime given to independent filmmaking sector was exaggerated in other sources and relegated to two one-hour programming blocks during off peak hours.<sup>12</sup> However, these institutions were incredibly important in allowing the workshops to become franchised in the early 1980s and provided a platform for their voice. There were also series being programmed attempting to explore these notions of black film authorship in Britain its relationship to black independent film in North America. For instance the Black Film Festival organized by Jim Pines and Parminder Vir (the supervisor of the Black Arts Division) in 1981 was an attempt to do just this.<sup>13</sup> Another major cultural event taking place in April 1982 was the first International Book Fair of Radical Black and Third World Books, drawing over 3,000 visitors and forging a link between publishers, book sellers, and artists.<sup>14</sup>

In 1984 the Greater London Council declared it to be the Anti-Racist Year, beginning a campaign of billboards and posters devoted to combating racism. However a string of racist attacks against Asians break out. In Tower Hamlets a 14-year old Asian youth is stabbed by 14 white youths. Asian owned shops are fire-bombed in Bradford. In Swindon an Asian family is forced to leave the country after having their home attacked repeatedly. In Stepney gangs terrorize Asian families while police show indifference. An Asian mini-cab driver is murdered near

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<sup>11</sup> Mercer, Kobena "Recoding Narratives of Race and Nation" *ICA Documenta 8: Black Film British Cinema*. Ed. Erica Carter, Kobena Mercer, Lisa Appignanesi London: Institute of Contemporary Arts. 1988. P. 7

<sup>12</sup> Fusco, p. 21-22 n. 7

<sup>13</sup> Givanni, "A Curator's Conundrum" p. 67

<sup>14</sup> Beauchamp-byrd. P. 157

Heathrow Airport. In all 7,000 racially motivated attacks are reported for the Anti-Racist Year. In 1985 there was a string of riots in Handsworth, Tottenham and Broadwater Farm sparked by the death of Cynthia Jarrett, after having a heart attack as police searched her home, and the shooting of Cheryl Groce, who was shot and paralyzed as the police were searching for her son. Over 200,000 racist attacks were reported in 1985.<sup>15</sup>

### **PHANTOM NARRATIVES: BEING BLACK IN BRITAIN**

We Black men of England/Too proud to cry for shame,/Let's cry a sea/Cry publicly,/Expose our very pain,/For Babylon the bandid/Is on our sisters trail,/The bad talk/And the cool walk/Will not keep us out of jail.  
-Benjamin Zephaniah *SOS (Save Our Sons)*

I cannot help feeling that the option of managed decline is one which we should not forget altogether. We must not expend all our limited resources in trying to make water flow uphill.  
- Sir Geoffrey Howe in a letter to Margaret Thatcher on economic help to Toxteth

Judith Wilson writes that unlike in the US where the racial taxonomy Black is defined by African ancestry, in Britain the term black applies to peoples of both African and Asian descent. "Only the "logic" of British colonialism makes sense of this usage. For the development of the transatlantic slave trade and the emergence of the British raj are intimately entwined."<sup>16</sup> In Eva Ulrike Pirker's *Narrative Projections of a Black British History* she takes an historiographical approach to depicting the discursive formation of black British historical culture showing that prior to the 1970s black culture and history in Britain was treated as an extension of African and Caribbean culture and communities. The 1980s and 1990s brought

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid. p. 158

<sup>16</sup> Wilson, Judith "Surfing the 'Black' Diasporic Web: Postcolonial British Art and the Decolonization of US Visual Culture" in *Transforming the Crown*. P. 71

black history into a British framework, but it “remained largely in the hands of a small circle of researchers throughout the 1980s and 1990s.”<sup>17</sup>

Since the mid-1990s negotiation of the black experience in Britain is torn between the idea of black British experience as exactly that: a *British* experience, or as part of the larger diasporic experience mostly depicted as an extension of the idea of a Black Atlantic. Pointing to the domination of the narrative of the Windrush generation, something that Black Audio Film Collective and John Akomfrah’s further work returns to again and again, in this discourse Pirker shows that the influence of a commemorative culture here cannot be ignored.<sup>18</sup> The image of Empire Windrush dominates the idea of this passage, and is an example of the power of the archontic and psychoanalytic search for the origin that I explore in the next section of this thesis. One cannot deny the power of the image: a boat that was a war-prize (taken from Germany) coming into port carrying a large amount of new arrivals from the West Indies, Lord Kirchner crooning *London is the Place for Me*, and the optimism that such transitions can bring. But this optimism is at odds with the reality of their experience in London. Both *Handsworth Songs* and *Nine Muses* point to the cultural, racial, and class alienation these first explorers and their children and grandchildren would face.

The late 1990s brought not only the fiftieth anniversary of Empire Windrush but also a broader more systematic exploration of black British history. First focusing on post-war migration, and then on both the recent history of racial tension in Britain as well as the role of black individuals and communities in Britain’s

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<sup>17</sup> Pirker, Eva Ulrike. *Narrative Projections of a Black British History* New York: Routledge. 2011 p. 5

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. p. 1-4

colonial past including the slave trade. These narratives point to both the trauma inherent in the violence of the past as well as the triumphs of individuals and collectives. Pirker points to two factors in the rise of popularity of black history: the dying off of the Windrush generation, and the increased global desire for knowledge of things past. The increase of museums, digital technology, and the rise of the nostalgia industry all point to this as well. Preservation, in terms of maintaining provenance of work in the face of data manipulation or loss, has become an issue *en vogue*. Factoring into this is the British heritage culture, and heritage productions, which romanticize out-of-date class systems, an imperial past, and “perpetuate the equation “Britishness = whiteness.”<sup>19</sup> The work of mining the archive for ghosts of black lives is a way to subvert this equation. Works such as Imtiaz Habib’s *Black Lives in the English Archives, 1500-1677: Imprints of the Invisible* and Gretchen Holbrook Gerzina’s *Black Victorians, Black Victoriana* both do what Paul Voss and Marta Werner describe as reading the archive’s “minimum signs with maximum energy.”<sup>20</sup>

This shift of interest and attempt to define what it means to be black in the historical sense mirrors the interest and narrative thrust of black artists in Britain as well. Stuart Hall writes that the 80s, and the artists that emerged from it, could be thought of “as the first, genuinely “postcolonial” moment in black artistic practice. It witnessed an explosion of creative work by artists from places historically

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid. p. 15

<sup>20</sup> Voss, Paul and Marta Werner “Towards a Poetics of the Archive: Introduction” *Studies in the Literary Imagination* 32 no 1, p. ii. Spring 1999.

marginalized from the centers of power and authority.”<sup>21</sup> Hall points out that this is a global, trans-Atlantic movement that marks a shift from the anti-colonial to the post-colonial and was not only due to influence of cultural theory. “This is, to put it mildly, a simplification. What it ignores or ruthlessly foreshortens is the fact that, in this period, the whole fulcrum of the political world as we knew it shifted fundamentally.”<sup>22</sup> Race and racism had been brought to bear against a fully formed black consciousness that was forming their own anti-racist political movement that included radical and powerful grassroots mobilization along with the visibility of both these movements and racist police (and therefore government) harassment. The peoples of this movement were “identified by the single, collective signifier *black*—a generic term, a composite political identity, which deliberately eschewed any distinctions between Afro-Caribbeans, Asians, and Africans.”<sup>23</sup> This antiracist movement, which as a postcolonial movement was constituted by issues of culture and identity (as an affirmation of an alternative to the experience of the colonized), allowed the political struggle to acquire a cultural dimension, which helped to reshape critical debates, political activism, and through this art as cultural production. Kobena Mercers shows that film production was part of this shift:

Like other expressive and artistic practices that have developed in the midst of that peculiar collision of cultures and histories that constitutes ‘black Britain’ black independent film is part of a shift

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<sup>21</sup> Hall, Stuart. “Assembling the 1980s: The Delluge-And After” in *Shades of Black: Assembling Black Arts in 1980s Britain* ed. David A. Baily, Ian Baucom and Sonia Boyce. Durham: Duke University Press. 2005. P. 2

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.* p. 9

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.* p. 10

registering a new phase in what Hall describes as the 'politics of representation.' As an element in this general process of cultural relativisation, black film-making not only critiques traditional conceptions of Britishness, which have depended on the subordination of 'other' ethnic identities, but calls the very concept of a coherent national identity into question by asserting instead what Colin MacCabe describes as a 'culture of difference'.<sup>24</sup>

Filmmakers of Asian, African, and Caribbean descent have been working within the black arts community in Britain since the 60s, and Mercer points that their invisibility before the 60s points to what he calls 'structural conditions of marginality'. The films of Lionel Ngakane and Lloyd Reckord may have been the first films by black filmmakers in Britain but Horace Ove's 1974 feature film *Pressure* was not only the first black feature film, but also the first film by a black director to be financed by the British Film Institute. 1975's *A Private Enterprise* (set in Britain's Asian community) and the brilliant 1981 Menelik Shabazz feature *Burning and Illusion* (placing a young black woman in the main role) both followed *Pressure* as BFI funded films.<sup>25</sup> The BFI itself had undergone a change from a colonial past, to a supporter, at least for a time, of minority voices.

As Caroline Frick writes shows her book *Saving Cinema: The Politics of Preservation* a report published in 1932 by the British Institute of Adult Education, *The Film in National Life*, proposed the formation of a film institute in order to promote film and the uses it had in education, culture, and to the nation itself. This

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<sup>24</sup> Mercer, "Recoding Narratives of Race and Nation". P. 5

<sup>25</sup> Ibid. p. 6



need applied to the domestic audience as well as “the backwards races within the empire.”<sup>26</sup> This would take the form of films created to educate the colonized to British culture and values.<sup>27</sup> For example the Bantu Educational Kinema Experiment (BEKE for short) was one outcome, who produced 35 feature films and exhibited them in Tanganyika, Nyasaland, Northern Rhodesia, Kenya and Uganda. The topics covered often took a binary approach of colonial progress versus the African method, and ranged from films on taxes and the post office, to agricultural educational films. Even the cinematic language used within these films was simplified (longer shots, no extraneous motion, no pans or zooms, less edits) in order to cater to what the British saw as people with entirely different cognitive abilities, a method that was promoted by William Sellers who was serving as a medical officer to the Nigerian government.<sup>28</sup> The films, and those like them distributed in the colonies, were a clear example of the power of moving image in political indoctrination and propoganda. Agricultural education films not only served to introduce new farming techniques to the colonies, but to increase the revenue from their agricultural output for Britain. We have looked at both the socio-political history, as well as the artistic and historical reasons, for the film collectives existence. However, before I begin my discussion of their works I want to define the theoretical framework in which I viewed them.

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<sup>26</sup> British Institute of Adult Education, Commission on Educational and Cultural Films, *The Film in National Life* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1932, p. 140 quoted by Frick.

<sup>27</sup> Frick, Caroline. *Saving Cinema : The Politics of Preservation*. Oxford University Press. p. 89

<sup>28</sup> Rice, Tom. “BEKEFILM” <http://www.colonialfilm.org.uk/production-company/bekefilm> 2010.

## THEORETICAL VIOLENCE: THE VIOLENCE OF COLLECTING, AND GHOSTS

No, the technical structure of the *archiving* archive also determines the structure of the *archivable* content even in its very coming into existence and in its relationship to the future. The archivization produces as much as it records the event.

-Jacques Derrida *Archive Fever*

For our duration is not merely one instant replacing another; if it were, there would never be anything but the present- no prolonging of the past into the actual, no evolution, no concrete duration. Duration is the continuous progress of the past which gnaws into the future and which swells as it advances. And as the past grows without ceasing, so also there is no limit to its preservation.

-Henri Bergson *Creative Evolution*

In order to begin my study I sought to build my theoretical framework on archives. What are they? How is power centered in them? Is dearchivization even possible? Like almost every recent archive theory paper I started with Derrida's *Archive Fever*. I wanted to understand the Archive, capital A and wholly theoretical, before unpacking the collective's work. Jacques Derrida posits a rather lucid (for Derrida) point in the introduction to his seminal *Archive Fever* "there is no political power without control of the archive, if not of memory. Effective democratization can always be measured by this essential criterion: the participation in and the access to the archive, its constitution and its interpretation."<sup>29</sup> Derrida begins his exploration of the archive with an etymology:

*Arkhe*, we recall, names at once the *commencement* and *commandment*. This name apparently coordinates two principles in one: the principle according to nature or history, *there* where things *commence*— physical, historical, or ontological principle— but also

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<sup>29</sup> Derrida, *Archive Fever* p. 4 n.1

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 give—nomological principle.<sup>30</sup>

Derrida places the archive as the site of commencement (that there is a there where things take place) and commandment (that there is a there where things are ordered with authority). The authority of the archive is located in the *arkheion*, the house or building where the records are held, and in the *archons*, those that have power of command as they are invested with both stewardship and hermeneutic power over these documents. This Archontic power “which also gathers the functions of unification, of identification, of classification, must be paired with what we will call the power of *consignation*.”<sup>31</sup> Consignation here means not only the act of depositing but also the gathering of signs. As Derrida puts it:

*Consignation* aims to coordinate a single corpus, in a system or a synchrony in which all the elements articulate the unity of an ideal configuration. In an archive there should not be any absolute dissociation, any heterogeneity or *secret*, which could separate (*secernere*), or partition, in an absolute manner.<sup>32</sup>

This archontic power is at once unification, identification, and classification wielded with the goal to create a single corpus of work that holds a unity of signs, an ideal configuration, or in my use of it, a national narrative. The titular fever is both the drive for preservation and origins, both at the hands of the archivist and the

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<sup>30</sup> *ibid.* p. 1

<sup>31</sup> *ibid.*, p. 3

<sup>32</sup> *ibid.*, p. 3

archive as an institution, but also the assertion of this idea of consignment, the assertion of a system of coding and ordering over others. To Derrida both the archive and psychoanalysis attempt to create a narrative of and to excavate the truth of human existence and experience. Freudian psychoanalysis finds this truth in the examination of the inner workings of the psyche through outward appearing symptoms. The archive finds this truth in the preservation of the public records of the collective experience. In both cases, however, this truth is unattainable. In psychoanalysis the attempt to make the unintelligible intelligible is driven by the death drive. So too is the archive's obsession and compulsion with returning to the origin, and in attempting to keep memories which can never truly be held or categorized and end up as specters.

[The Death Drive] not only incites forgetfulness, amnesia, the annihilation of memory, as *mneme* or *anamnesis*, but also commands the radical effacement, in truth the eradication, of that which can never be reduced to *mneme* or to *anamnesis*, that is, the archive, consignment, the documentary or monumental apparatus as *hypomnema*...because the archive, if this word or this figure can be stabilized so as to take on a signification, will never be either memory or anamnesis as spontaneous, alive and internal experience. On the contrary: the archive takes place at the place of originary and structural breakdown of the said memory.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> *ibid.* p. 11

Like the scribbling on Freud's Mystical Pad the archive merely collects the traces of the original inscription, as no material can encompass the totality of the past. I also should note that while Derrida is concerned with a classic archive, one filled with documents and papers, while the archive that the collectives are wrestling with is on a different conceptual level. The film archive collects material that is reproducible, and sometimes necessarily so. Negatives are turned to positive prints, nitrate films are transferred and stored onto polyester safety stock, and increasingly larger archives are scanning their collections leading to a far easier reproduction.<sup>34</sup> This is of course costly and in need of highly trained experts, but the very reproducibility of the print caused Benjamin, at least early on, to mourn the loss of the auratic in art. Particularly poignant for the archive is Benjamin's assertion that "Even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be. This unique existence of the work of art determined the history to which it was subject throughout the time of its existence."<sup>35</sup>

The violence of archontic consignment is the moment that the collective's use of the archival is revolting against. John Elsner and Roger Cardinal in their introduction to *The Cultures of Collecting* suggest that classification precedes collecting and the very act of collecting is the human desire for taxonomy manifested.<sup>36</sup> When dealing with British archives, and indeed the archives of most of

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<sup>34</sup> For best practices in an archive you would generally have your original item, preservation Master, Mezzanine format and access formats. This would hold true in the digital domain as well: preservation codec, mezzanine codec and access codec. Usually the digital forms are also doubled in order to provide redundancy in case of technical failure.

<sup>35</sup> Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" p. 733

<sup>36</sup> Elsner and Cardinal, *The Cultures of Collecting* p. 1-6

the west, this taxonomy is married to imperialism. Taxonomy in the archival narrative, especially in the world of the ethnographic, is the naming and classification of the Other. In Baudrillardian terms then, once the film is in the archive it is divested of its ontological function as a film and is forced to submit to the abstract archival narrative that the consignment of the archon demands. They cannot partition from the whole, the films of the archive become part of the apparatus of the archive, part of the will of the collector. They become part of a system of subjugation in which the film becomes part of the discourse of the nation. The archive by placing it within the context of their collection defines the signifiers of the film within the context of the shelves, with the signified being the national narrative.<sup>37</sup> The archive therefore is merely an extension of a nation's imperialism. It is creating the nation as it archives it. The modern concept of archives is a British concept coming out of a Victorian era need to chronicle in an orderly manner the vast reaches of the British Empire. Thomas Richards writes extensively on the Victorian utopic ideal that The Archive would be a space of comprehensive knowledge.

Though in theory, as Michel Foucault has written , 'the archive cannot be described in its totality,' in nineteenth-century British practice the archive was often figured as a fixed place, as a discreet institutions, even as a single person. The ordering of the world and its knowledges into a unified field was located explicitly in the register of

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<sup>37</sup> Baudrillard, "The System of Collecting"

representation, where, most successfully of all, the archive often took the imagined form of a utopian state.<sup>38</sup>

This is tied into the nation-building triumvirate of Census, Maps, and Museums that Benedict Anderson writes on in *Imagined Communities*. Mechanical reproduction and collecting allowed for a “sort of pictorial census of the state’s patrimony” to become “available, even if at high cost to the state’s subjects”<sup>39</sup> and that the power and ubiquitousness of these artifacts and facts became part of everyday life is a testament to the states (and archives) power. I have already mentioned the BFI’s propagandistic use of film, and it is clear that in the modern era this visual imperialism is the primary mode of cultural capitalism in play today. The strength of Hollywood not only in selling America to the world, but also as a political player in international trade and copyright agreements is a testament to this.

History and memory have become part of an international nostalgia industry. The rise of digital technology and the popularity of things like genealogy services can be seen as an outcome of this. It is fashionable, and necessary in order to create your own identity, to know your own History. As Jean Fisher points out though:

History is a peculiarly Western form of narrative that might be argued to have its origins in the European struggles for national identity as they coincided with colonial expansionism; history is the story of the evolution of this identity as it condensed around the privileged white male subject.... Since art, as cultural investment and heritage, is one of the West’s primary historical narratives, it is hardly surprising that

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<sup>38</sup> Richards, Thomas *The Imperial Archive: Knowledge and Fantasy of Empire* New York: Verso. P. 11

<sup>39</sup> Anderson, Benedict *Imagined Communities* p. 182

the work of its institutions should not simply to be to conserve its own myths...but to suppress any historical position outside this agenda.<sup>40</sup>

The film collectives, especially Sankofa and Black Audio, were hyperaware of these ideas. After all Sankofa's founding members were largely arts and communication theory majors, and Black Audio came from sociology studies, specifically the theory branch in the British schools.<sup>41</sup> I feel that given their work draws so extensively from Homi Bhabha, Stuart Hall, and Paul Gilroy they would also be aware of these psychoanalytic and post-structuralist views of the archive. The film collectives wielded film as a weapon. Black Audio writes:

Our task was to find a structure and a form which would allow us the space to deconstruct the hegemonic voice of the British TV newsreels. That was absolutely crucial if we were to succeed in articulating those special and temporal states of belonging and displacement differently. In order to bring emotions, uncertainties and anxieties alive we had to poeticize that which was captured through the lenses of the BBC and other newsreel units—by poeticizing every image we were able to succeed in recasting the binary of myth and history, of imagination and experiential states of occasional violence.<sup>42</sup>

This was part of an almost anarchic or activist archeology of the archive. As Eshun puts it their work “entailed the creation of a poetics for the undoing of the colonial

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<sup>40</sup> Fisher, Jean “Editorial” *Third Text* 8/9 Autumn/ Winter, p 3-4

<sup>41</sup> Fusco, p. 11

<sup>42</sup> “*Handsworth Songs: Some Background Notes.*” Unpublished paper by the Black Audio Film Collective, quoted by Fusco, pg. 19.



archive that could evoke the phantasmic landscape of the postcolonial aftermath.”<sup>43</sup> He writes specifically on Black Audio, but I feel that this is a cogent statement that could apply to the works of the other collectives I have seen. This evocation of the phantasmic reminds one of Zizek’s phantom, a specter which exists to “ ‘decenter’ the subject, undermining from within his consistency and self control.”<sup>44</sup> This phantom exists not only as an apparition or specter but also as something to bring transparency so as to represent aspects or details of the subject that are otherwise hidden. Ghosts decenter time as well as according to Bliss Cua Lim they “call our calendars into question. The temporality of haunting—the return of the dead, the recurrence of events—refuses the linear progression of modern time consciousness, flouting the limits of mortality and historical time.”<sup>45</sup>

Lim, working from a Bergsonian visual-ontological concept of time weaves in the teleological narrative of time the colonialism necessitates in order to define its own existence, shows that ghosts exists constantly alongside the present as a reminder for the (as Deleuze puts it) “radical plurality of durations.”<sup>46</sup> Bergson’s ghosts show that time cannot be quantifiably measured. These specters, like Zizek’s, return to rupture the present narrative with violence. Here specifically with the vast phantom army of repressed memories that colonialism engenders. These ruptures help to articulate the injustice of colonial repression; the return of the repressed violently disrupts the forced amnesia of Other narratives. These disruptions exist in

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<sup>43</sup> Eshun “Untimely Meditations: Reflections on the Black Audio Film Collective” p. 3

<sup>44</sup> Zizek, Slavoj. *Enjoy Your Symptom! Jacques Lacan in Hollywood and Out*, p. 129

<sup>45</sup> Lim, Bliss Cua *Translating Time: Cinema, the Fantastic, And Temporal Critique*. Durham: Duke University Press. 2009 p. 149

<sup>46</sup> Lim quoting from Deleuze, Gilles *Bergsonism*, Trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam. NY: Zone Books, 1991 p. 76-78

both time and space. The return of the phantoms, forgotten stories of the past, disrupts not only our concept of narrative linearity but also the cartography of modernity. A ghost, divested of the burden of signification and corporeality, sees us (The Viewer both filmic and in terms of time-experience) as frozen in the present, burdened by experience. To Lim ghosts serve as allegorical palimpsests whose spatio-temporal experience is all-inclusive: the past they existed in, the present, and the future exists at once. The collectives were wielding the archive to expose these absences within the national archival narrative, to rupture the spaces that consignment rendered invisible.

Stephen Heath, using Jean-Paul Oudart's combination of psychoanalytic suture and film spectator theory, divides the film into space in frame and out of frame, with the former being constituted as space defined by the narrative and allows the spectator to read the film. This space is predicated on classic Hollywood editing (shot/reverse shot, 180 degree rule) as well as the act of suture. This act is the relation of the spectator to the chain of signification and this is the relation that the cinematic image needs in order to articulate this signification. Without the audience, the film is a meaningless series of signs. However there are moments where, in the sliding chain of meaning making, the spectator becomes aware of the form of the film, rupturing the identity creation.<sup>47</sup> If the audience is sutured into their narrative, the moments of using the archive ruptures not only the official narrative but also the audience's belief in the truth of what the film is saying. The ruptures are violent yes, but they also expose the ideology and the phantoms behind

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<sup>47</sup> Heath, Stephen "Notes on Suture"

their own images. The archons act of consignation is equivalent to the act of suture then; both could be seen as attempts to enclose the subject (the viewer or the user of the archive/the nation dependent on the archive for democracy) within a closed system of meaning making. The ruptures expose the false boundaries of this cartography.

The violence of consignation and the violence of rupture is equal in my mind to the violence of the physical use of archival within these films. To paraphrase Fanon in its bare reality, dearchivization reeks of hot splice cement and emulsion covered blades. The violence of the splice is theoretical on one hand:

The closing of the gap in space between viewer and viewed, and between the representation in one shot and another, is a basic repressive illusionist device. The implication of an unseen splice to integrate two shots also elides the function of editing, the function of producing, from material segments, a new complex relation. Instead, there is a seeming natural flow established, which suppresses all procedures of the editing stages. The concept of integration rather than disruption is predicated on a repression of the material relations specific to the film process...<sup>48</sup>

This falls within the structuralist argument inherent in suture. The invisibility of the splice allows for the segments of the film, the sequences of the narrative, to hold steady within the chain of signification. Often the ruptures to this chain of identity

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<sup>48</sup> Gidal, Peter "Theory & Definition of Structural/Materialist Film" p. 157

making/unmaking/making come when the film calls attention to the cinematic grammar that it is made of.

On the other hand the violence of the edit is also a direct physical attack on the celluloid. The splicing machine is made up of essentially four sections. The first consists of two sets of blades (right/left and upper/lower), which cut the films edges during the cement stage. The lower blades have pilot pins that insert into the perforation holes to keep the film steady as it is spliced together. The second section to the machine is the locking mechanisms, one on each upper blade and a vertical lever on the right lower blade. The third is the scraper, the blade held by a spring used to remove the emulsion off of part of the film held on the left. It scrapes the image and the soundtrack away, leaving only the base. The last piece of the machine is the heating element, which speeds the drying of the cement that binds the two pieces of film together. Usually in splicing you use the “splicing to the nearest frame” technique. In this technique you cut through the middle of the frame, in a sense stopping the films narration from moving forward. You put the filmstrips on both sides of the machine, locked in place. You then scrape the emulsion off of the left strip doing away completely with the image. The image that was once there is gone becoming debris to be removed by the editor and is primed to be replaced with the next sequence in the film. Cement is applied and the two strips are quickly and violently forced together. The image and flow of the sequence on one filmstrip is being violently replaced with another. In many ways the editor is the Absent One from suture theory, manipulating the images to bring them within the system of the film as a whole. I see this as a suturing of the subject of the archive, the phantoms

that exist within the fragments of the film, into the narrative of reappropriation that the collectives were engaged in. In using the archival, and purposely calling attention to the structure of the edit, the manipulation of the image, and the manipulation of the signs held by the image, the collectives were actively engaged in the language of rupture.

If the archive is seen as a colonial force, then this act of dearchivization must be seen as equal to decolonization. “Decolonization never goes unnoticed,” Frantz Fanon writes, “for it focuses on and fundamentally alters being, and transforms the spectator crushed to a nonessential state into a privileged actor, captured in a virtually grandiose fashion by the spotlight of History. It infuses a new rhythm, specific to a new generation of men, with a new language and a new humanity.”<sup>49</sup> This violence of creation, of cataloging, of categorization, of editing, of the splice comes from the same desire of the violence of revolution that Fanon discusses. The violence of order (consignation) imposed by the colonial, must be fought against by the violence of decolonization. The togetherness that the colonized find in Fanon’s violence is liberating and transformative for not only the colonized by the colonist as well. The tools, the blades, that the colonized use to incite this revolution are the same as the tools used by the editor for the same purposes.

By exploding the former colonial reality the struggle uncovers unknown facets, brings to light new meanings and underlines contradictions which were camouflaged by this reality. The people in arms, the people whose struggle enacts this new reality, the people

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<sup>49</sup> Fanon, p. 2

who live it, march on, freed from colonialism and forewarned against any attempt at mystification or glorification of the nation. Violence alone, perpetrated by the people, violence organized and guided by the leadership, provides the key for the masses to decipher social reality.<sup>50</sup>

The collectives were actively engaged in the language of rupture. They took the images and stories, the colonial detritus that littered the archives, and gave them new life, forcing them from the past into the present to bear witness to the social injustice that was occurring. The images of migration, the statues and monuments to imperial pasts, and the images of the current violence were used to rupture the chains of signification that the cartography of the nation needs to sustain itself. These ruptures force the viewer to confront the underlying structural meaning of both the archive and the narrative that it represents.

## **CELLULOID VIOLENCE, THE FIRST FILMS OF THE COLLECTIVES**

There are no stories in the riots, only the ghost of other stories.  
-*Handsworth Songs*

In 1986, Black Audio Film Collective's *Handsworth Songs* and Sankofa Film/Video Collective's *The Passion of Remembrance* both opened in London's Metro Cinema. They were the first theatrical screenings for black film collectives, and served as a warning shot across the British independent landscape that things were about to change.<sup>51</sup> Ceddo Film and Video Workshop was also poised to release *The*

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid. p. 96

<sup>51</sup> Fusco, *Coco Young British and Black* p. 7

*People's Account* at the same time on Channel 4. Not only are they early films in the collectives' careers, but their thematic link and shared source material (archival footage of the riots) allows me to explore how these three collectives<sup>52</sup> used the archival to frame their own arguments. While all three films are largely a reaction to the riots that erupted in Britain in the early 80s, and the differences in how they are portrayed reflect the interests of each group, Ceddo's film was the most directly a work of agitprop. This caused the Independent Broadcasting Authority to object to the portrayal of the police and the reforming of the Broadwater Farm *riot* as an *uprising* and therefore a legitimate self-defense maneuver by the people of Broadwater Farm.<sup>53</sup> The Independent Broadcasting Authority insisted on a balancing program to air around *The People's Account* and the right to cancel both airings if they did not approve.<sup>54</sup> However, Ceddo refused to censor their film and *The People's Account* was never shown on British Television.<sup>55</sup> Sandra Eccleston framed it in this way: "The struggle to transmit *The People's Account* is a contest of truth over control. The truthful representation and interpretation of black people's experience is just one part of it; there are many other truths which need to be told."<sup>56</sup>

The particular phrases that the IBA declared must be deleted before the film was shown were the depiction of Cherry Groce as 'a victim of police racism', which Cecil Gutzmore responded to in a letter to David Glencross, the director of television

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<sup>52</sup> Other collectives at the time included Cardiff, Macro, Star, and Retake. However, access issues have forced me to focus on Ceddo, Sankofa and Black Audio.

<sup>53</sup> <http://www.screenonline.org.uk/people/id/569785/>

<sup>54</sup> Fusco, p. 21 n. 4

<sup>55</sup> <http://www.screenonline.org.uk/people/id/569785/>

<sup>56</sup> Eccleston, Sara. Ceddo: *The People's Account*: Our Right to Make Valid Critical Comment in *Black Film British Cinema* p. 58.

IBA. "You may well be among those who take the view (based on a particular stipulation of the meaning of racism) that, since British police forces are self-evidently not racist, there can be no victims of their racism."<sup>57</sup> Gutzmore also points out that people say police cannot be racist because the police had also recently shot a five year old boy, a pregnant woman, and Stephen Waldorf, all white. The phrase 'police terror raids continue' also came under fire. Gutzmore continues to lambast Glencross asking that if no rule exists that "the word 'terror' can never be used in respect of any conceivable action by British police forces"<sup>58</sup> then the accuracy of the phrase becomes the problem. The residents of Broadwater Farm who have testified to being terrorized by police raids, however, define this accuracy. The third phrase was framing the Broadwater Farm disturbance as 'a classic example of self-defence by a community'. Gutzmore proposes that *The People's Account* framed it as a justified response of people who were threatened by illegal physical force (calling into question the death of Cynthia Jarrett) and that the police sent riot squads to stop a march which lead to the real tragedies of the Broadwater Farm situation "which include the death of police constable Keith Blakelock, no less than the mishandling of those charged with his murder from start to finish, and the terrorizing effects of the extended police follow-up operation."<sup>59</sup>

Ceddo's *The People's Account* is by far the most direct cry of anger of the three films that I'm concerned with here. Ceddo was concerned with giving the black community in Britain a voice, and exploring the social movements and culture that

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<sup>57</sup> Gutzmore, Cecil. Letter to David Glencross printed in *Black Film British Cinema* p. 58

<sup>58</sup> Ibid. p. 59

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.



were taking place around them. Their concern for the Now formed them as a sort of guerrilla news crew. They put film crews directly in the riots at Handsworth, Brixton and Tottenham. Documenting not only the social unrest and its causes, but the reactions of the police as well.<sup>60</sup> This placed the camera not behind the police as the media was doing, which puts the viewer on the side of the police facing a violent black horde further propagating the myth of the Black Threat, but rather the camera was in with the rioters. From this side of the demarcation line the riots were recontextualized as uprisings, and the violence inherent especially in the Broadwater Farm incident was labeled justified defense against police terror. The archive here is antithetical to the truth, or at least the truth according to Ceddo. The archive is set up to destroy itself. For example there is a sequence in the film where the interview of Bernie Grant, a Council leader during the Broadwater Farm incident, is intercut with newspaper clippings dubbing him “Mad Bernie” and “Barmy Bernie.” Grant was widely quoted as saying “What the police got was a bloody good hiding” in response to the Broadwater Farm riots. The film portrays this quote in context of the larger narrative of police brutality and racism. The media at the time spun this into an example of anti-establishment feelings, and in poor taste given the death of PC Keith Blakelock during the riot.<sup>61</sup>

PC Blakelock was killed violently during the riots, having nearly been decapitated by knives and machetes. In *The People's Account* he is referred to as

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<sup>60</sup> <http://www.screenonline.org.uk/people/id/569785/>

<sup>61</sup> Interestingly in terms of the language of Fanon, Blakelock did become one of the statues that pen the colonized in. His memorial was not placed where he had fallen, most likely for fear of defacement, but in Muswell Hill. Of course Colin Roach, Cynthia Jarret and Cheryl Groce, or the others murdered by the police, do not have memorials that become part of the normative city landscape.

being killed during the violent defense of Broadwater Farms, much in the same manner as the mainstream news media depicts citizen casualties during war as collateral damage. In the mainstream press the attack was portrayed as brutal, savage and animalistic.<sup>62</sup> However, the film is not concerned with the semantics of the attack, it is using the archive to show the lies of the government and to suture the audience into their argument. Perhaps the most interesting use of the archive in *The People's Account* is during the segment on John Fernandez who was fired from the police academy for making public racist essays written by police cadets. The image on the screen is a white cop, as evidenced by the skin color on his neck and his bobby hat, whose face is torn out exposing an essay underneath. This is the archival rupturing itself. The large quotation marks frame the figure of the police officer, giving the impression that all police think like this, that this essay exposes the internal monologue of the British police state. A voice over reads as the essay scrolls: "Blacks in Britain are a pest. They come over here from some tinpot banana country, were [spelling mistake on the original author] they lived in huts and worked the fields for cultivating rice and bananas and coconuts and tobacco and take up residence in our already overcrowded island..." The essay devolves from its already nonsensical syntax into racist epitaphs and an argument that immigrants should go back to where they came from, the racist and ignorant leitmotif consistent across many countries.

Given the colonial past and the decolonization that has taken place, this concept of going back home takes on a new impossibility. This dilemma of identity is

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<sup>62</sup> Even recently, the language in <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/1473203/They-butchered-Keith-Blakelock-and-they-wanted-to-butcher-me.html> is much the same.

exactly what these film collectives are trying to navigate. Here the use of the archival equates these attacks to the very system supposed to be protecting the people. Frantz Fanon succinctly states: “The colonized world is a world divided in two. The dividing line, the border, is represented by the barracks and the police stations. In the colonies, the official, legitimate agent, the spokesperson for the colonizer and the regime of oppression, is the police officer or the soldier.”<sup>63</sup> Immediately after this rupture in the official account, the film cuts to a police official dismissing the claims as horrible and coming from ignorant youths. This is shown by the film to be an empty platitude by showing that 99% of these cadets were accepted into the police force while showing the police marching in a manner that evokes fascist troops. Then immediately the killing blow, a *Police Magazine* clipping with the following quote by Sir Kenneth Newman: “In the Jamaicans, you have a people who are constitutionally disorderly...It’s simply in their make-up. They’re constitutionally disposed to be anti-authority.” Ceddo became an archive of resistance. Their *mal d’archive* was to chronicle their community and events, bringing it into their system of resistance. Their footage was the phantom to the news archive, exposing the hidden details. They wield both the archive and the camera as weapons in their struggle to expose the normative society’s apparatus. This dedication to their political ideology is to their detriment, as this sort of direct political propaganda works both ways. Both Sankofa’s *The Passion of Remembrance* and Black Audio’s *Handsworth Songs* use significant portions of Ceddo’s activist archive but toward much different goals.

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<sup>63</sup> Fanon, Frantz *The Wretched of the Earth* p. 3.

*The Passion of Remembrance* follows a complex inter-generational narrative tracking the Baptiste family as they navigate through questions about Black identity. Much more concerned with aesthetics, as well as sexual politics, than *The People's Account* the archival is edited together as part of the framework of the Black Experience in Britain. The images of protest and riots here come as Maggie Baptiste (Tania Morgan) presents her own montage of protests to the class. We see her face as light from the screen flickers on it before we cut to the montage. There is a pop soundtrack playing over images of solidarity and protest. Here these images are largely devoid of larger political context, the concern is the aesthetics of solidarity, and the images are forced into each other through rapid editing and video effects. Unlike Ceddo, whose main concern was largely with the Afro-Caribbean community, queer protest is given equal diegetic space. The montage itself is a form of editing that pushes forward narrative time, and the same holds true here. In this initial framing of the riots there is youthful hope that these protests, this swelling of bodies, this mass of people holding hands in solidarity are pushing Britain forward. The stripping of the archival's aural aspect and the replacement of the pop song helps this reading too. The sequence ends again on Maggie's face. Much as Ceddo uses the archival to rupture the national narrative, here Sankofa is using it to rupture the protest narrative. The footage spirals into a debate on sexual politics, and the fact that these movements have been co-opted by a black masculine heterosexuality that precludes other groups from participating in the same struggle. Of course Maggie's gaze frames us here. It is under her understanding we first

encounter this footage and it is filtered through her experience as a young black British woman.

Much later in the film we follow two queers of color, going home from a night at a club, who witness policemen letting a group of white teenagers go after they were caught harassing immigrant families. The younger policeman questions his superior on the decision on the basis that these are people who they are supposed to be protecting. His superior brushes it off with a “boys will be boys” attitude, laying bare the normalization of institutional racism. The replaying of the protests here is joined by images of fire and the pop soundtrack is gone. Instead the aural landscape here is ominous and threatening. The two men who witnessed the crime understand protest as potentially violent and deadly, and face not only the struggle to integrate into normative society, but into the protest culture as well. In both cases the archival acts as moments of rupture within the narrative. Not only do they inject moments of reality into a fiction film, the visual manipulation that they’ve been subjected to calls the viewer’s gaze to the form of the film.<sup>64</sup>

The film calls the archival to task for the specter of *anamnesis*, which the actual image cannot hope to carry. Instead the various factions whom the characters represent must fight over which remembrance is correct. As Gary looks at his friend’s coffin, he wonders in voice-over “The media may choose to forget while we do not.” Even within the narrative structure of the film this remembrance is gendered. As Maggie and her friends view the images of protests and finally Tommie

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<sup>64</sup> Although here the line between fictive and non-fictive is tenuous and strained. It brings to mind Grierson’s oft quoted theory of documentary as “the creative treatment of actuality” not only in terms of the aesthetic manipulation of the archival but also the use of the archival as a hammer to shape the argument and the world around it.

Smith and John Carlos' raised fist in Mexico City they attempt to deconstruct the false remembrance's we attribute to images. Maggie's male friend claims its important for everyone in the struggle and begins to name male leaders including Huey P. Maggie not to be out done responds "its for all the sisters *man*." Out of the three collectives and films I am discussing, Black Audio's remarkable *Handsworth Songs* is the most in step with this attempt to forge a new social reality, a new history out of the archive.

*Handsworth Songs* fairs far better the seas of time than the other two films. Less concerned with identity politics that traps *The Passion of Remembrance* in a cage of isms, less concerned with the immediacy of the social revolution and debate of the riots than *The People's Account*, *Handsworth Songs* supplements both debates with its exploration of the large narrative of memory. The most written about line "There are no stories in the riots, only the ghosts of other stories" is also fitting for this discussion of the archive. The film takes the form of manufactured anamnesis and questions what part of society or history controls this. The archival footage in this film is largely the same as the other two films. However the gaze of the camera frames the footage here. Cynthia Jarret's funeral here isn't just portrayed as a reason for the Broadwater Farm riot, it is a scathing analysis of the culture of suffering and truth manufacturing that the press perpetuates. Everything that takes place in the footage of the uprisings, of protest, is linked to the press, usually white males, filming the events. During the funeral sequence the press stumble and scramble to get good angles to capture the suffering of the people and in a moment of brilliant signification their cameras are made equal to those of the police CCTV. The sequence

of the meeting about the riots, where the press cameramen are complaining that it is too dark in the hall. Dark here is confused by the cameraman to mean that there aren't enough white people in attendance, when in fact the controller was talking about the light levels, when in fact it is the same thing. Our camera, our eye, has no problem reading the black skin on display. There is also a sequence where two women and their children hurry away from a camera that is following them through largely unpopulated streets. The soundtrack has the aural feel of a horror film, a slow menacing wind plays over the landscape, tinted blue to make the camera seem like its viewing something completely alien and almost apocalyptic. The camera is predatory, seeking answers to questions that it, as an arm of the official archive, has manufactured. Out here away from the monuments of imperialism and colonial mythology that the city writes large upon the masses, the camera seeks to create these women as Other, as alien. Until in a moment of violence the woman bats away the camera with her bag and the scene changes.

Consistently throughout the film the cameras are stand-ins for the manufacturing arm of the national archival narrative. These newsreels will manufacture a story, creating a normative, hetero-white male version of the events to be sold and packaged to the masses. The use of archival here is revolutionary, breaking the images out of their bonds and giving them new life, a new manufactured identity. Through editing, and the art of the suture, these phantoms are violently freed from the archive and thrust into this new narrative. A new consignment in which their original meanings don't matter, as *Handsworth Songs* is about the impossibility of anamnesis in an archive. The images are not treated

'truthfully' as they would be in a conventional narrative. Even in *The People's Account* the archival is treated with some veracity. Here that veracity is viciously attacked, deconstructed, and reborn into something new. This is what Rushdie so famously attacked in his review. "Next time let's start telling those ghost-stories. If we know why the caged bird sings, let's listen to her song."<sup>65</sup> These ghost-stories that Rushdie wants to hear, in a review that really attacked the idea of the film rather than talking about anything that was in the film, are impossible. The film is about the phantoms of the archive. Bringing them out of their obscurity and wielding them as tools. To Baudrillard an object could either be utilized, or collected. *Handsworth Songs* utilizes these objects, giving them new function. It may be divested from its original body, but it was even further removed when it was haunting the archive.

John Akomfrah's latest film, *The Nine Muses* (2010), represents in my view the aesthetic pinnacle of this engagement with the archive. As part of the Made in England initiative, Akomfrah was given unparalleled access to the television, sound and film archives of the BBC. Mixing high definition footage of snow covered landscapes with images of the Windrush migration into the Midlands, over a haunting soundscape that quotes from a large literary canon, the film is the culmination of the ideas that Akomfrah has been dealing with since *Expeditions* (the slide show that includes both *Signs of Empire* and *Images of Nationality*). The film manages to be both a specific mediation on the alienation that post-World War II immigrants faced in Britain, as well as a universal film about cultural alienation and

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<sup>65</sup> Rushdie, Salman "Songs Doesn't Know the Score" p. 10



mourning the loss of identity. The film is mesmerizing, each section of it named after one of the nine muses of Greek mythology. As people in colorful parkas traverse snowy spaces, shots of newly arrived immigrants and archival shots of snowy England, give the impression of a vast, cold, impenetrable whiteness was what greeted new arrivals to England. This narrative was also present in Akomfrah's work with Meklit Hadero that was completed during their residency at the Institute of African American Affairs. Using photographs from the Smithsonian collection, the work talks of the Great Migrations that saw black people move from the rural south into cities throughout the United States following both World Wars. Both works are not only visual excavations, but aural as well. Calling into question not only the absences of our visual history, but the voices that are repressed as well. Jean Fisher writes:

History is always a "living archive" insofar as our understanding of the present is inflected through experiences of the past. And yet there has been a tragic aporia between History understood as a selective and national discourse of power orchestrated by a hegemonic elite and the histories of communities and individuals subjected to its effects, between History as a linear written text and history as the polyvocal, multivalenced oral and local transmission of lived and shared experience.<sup>66</sup>

This brings us to the Catch-22 of dearchivization: in order to write a counter narrative, to create a counter archive, you need access to resources: archives of

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<sup>66</sup> Fischer, Jean. "Dialogues" in *Shades of Black* p. 169

documentation and funding. It is the need of access, and the need of the archive to provide it, that I will discuss in my conclusion.

## **CONCLUSION, OR, HOW ACCESS ENABLES COMMUNITIES**

The open character of history is secured by the innumerable ways according to which mythical cells, or explanatory cells which were originally mythical, can be arranged and rearranged. It shows us that by using the same material, because it is a kind of common inheritance or common patrimony of all groups, of all clans, or of all lineages, one can nevertheless succeed in building up an original account for each of them.

-Claude Levi-Strauss *Myth and Meaning*

The film collectives are an example of a community who wishes to take control of their own history, even if it is to reinterpret it by giving the archival voices that they never had. In a world that expects information to be instantaneously available digitally, and increasingly in an open format, this concern is ever growing. The access to the past is how communities and cultures define themselves in the present and how they define their trajectories for the future. Post-colonial subjects, and indigenous cultures have an even harder time, as often the records that document their interaction with their colonizers (even if it is from the colonizers point of view) are taken out of the country and back into the colonial archives. These records can serve as evidence, and legitimization, for land claims and documentation of traditions that were repressed or lost. So how does a community construct a history, or a collective memory, in the face of this lack? This is a process that Jeannette Bastian explores in depth in her book *Owning Memory: How A Caribbean Community Lost Its Archives and Found Its History*. The book charts the efforts of Virgin Islanders to retrieve their history from both United States and

Denmark in the form of the records in the archives that were removed from the islands following their sale to the United States in 1917. More importantly her work charts the efforts of a community to construct their history and collective memory in the face of this lack.

To Bastian records serve as witnesses in an evidentiary sense of both the process of record making and keeping as well as bearing witness to the lives of the subjects of those records. These records are often the only way for these phantom lives to find voices. And in her argument archivists serve an imperative function in helping these voices through the profession's ethical ties to provenance. Provenance must be reconfigured, by necessity, in order to embrace both concern with the process in which records are created as well as the societal contexts in which it was created.

Collective memory, which similarly coalesces around the contexts created by people, events, locales, processes, and societal movements, also becomes a factor in the provenance considerations that archivists confront. In this definition, the records of a community become the products of a multitiered process of creation that begins with the individual creator but can be fully realized only within the expanse of this creator's entire society. The records of individuals become part of an entire community of records.<sup>67</sup>

This idea that records create both a community of records, and community memory is important as archivists serve a fundamental role in this as their

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<sup>67</sup> Bastian, Jeanette. *Owning Memory* Wesport: Libraries Limited. 2003. p. 3.

stewardship. This gives archivists a central role in this as facilitators of this memory. However you cannot assume that collective memory is invested in a single institution, the disparate narratives that the Black Audio Film Collective and the others were shows that divergent (and competing) views that institutions can hold in their collections. When these records are lacking, other methods of dialogue become necessary. Bastian states, correctly, that archival custody (which is fundamental to the construction of archival practice since the 19<sup>th</sup> century) has not only become more complex due to the rapid paradigm shift that digital formats has brought (what is the original if something can be endlessly copied and distributed?) but also the groups that have traditionally been left out of the archival practice “increasingly recognize that possessing memory requires owning access to historical records, the facilitators of memory.”<sup>68</sup> Without access, or without records themselves, these groups are at the mercy of archontic consignment, which only reimagines and reinforces the colonial power structure in which the records were first created. “Without access to all the evidence it is difficult for the community to authenticate evaluate, sift, and distill a memory on which it can rely.”<sup>69</sup>

In a serendipitous coincidence Bastian concludes her book by linking her idea of archival stewardship being linked to community memory building to Sankofa. The Akan people’s proverb “se wo were fin a wosan kofa a yenki” or “it is not taboo to go back and fetch what you forgot”<sup>70</sup> Not only the source for the name of one of the collectives, this idea of Sankofa is a refiguring of archival access which

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid. p. 13

<sup>69</sup> Ibid. p. 47

<sup>70</sup> Ibid. p. 75

allows for the retrieval of a forgotten past, and a space for a dialogue between marginalized voices of the past and the narrative of the colonial archive. Most importantly it instills an agency and ownership of the past that resonates with communities in the present. It is a powerful thing to know where you came from, to know the ghosts of those that came before you. Our role as archivists, a role as Bastian points out that is defined by adherence to principles of record creation, provenance and custody, is to serve these communities in order to enable them to go back and fetch it.

That this examination of collective's use of archival material led me to the concept of community archiving is not unusual. The social zeitgeist is very similar to what the collectives were facing in Thatcher's England. Across the world communities are banding together and taking control of information, of their own political and social agency, and most importantly their own records and history. Digital technology has given new tools to people who wish to document their own story and social reality. It has also lead to a change in how archives handle archivization of material. In my work with the Activist Archivists, we have been working with institutions in order to help them collect the digital output of the Occupy Wall Street movement. Archives are realizing that they must take an active role in the collection and documentation of the movement that at the same time distrusts institutions, and is wary about how their history will be portrayed.

Of course this paper used the term Archive generally, and was meant to stand for the concept of a state archive. The reality is that many archivists, even at state institutions are acutely aware of how their methodology of collecting affects their

archive and the narrative it tells. Archivists and archives, of course, cannot save everythings, and we must deaccession, or reject collections that do not fit within our institution's missions or budget parameters. Archives are now, as John Ridener shows in *From Polders to Postmodernism: A Concise History of Archival Theory*, working largely in what he calls the Questioning Paradigm. This paradigm is both self-conscious and historically aware, not only of the history of their collection, but the history of how it was collected. Archival theory is now a theory of communication where "the transmission of information from archival document to user, from *fonds* to archivist, from record creator to an active document"<sup>71</sup> are all lines of communication. The need to document the decisions of the archive is something that is apparent. Activists want to know how their output will be assessed, preserved, cataloged and accessed. The political power in each of these steps is something that cannot be taken lightly any longer.

The idea of community archives has been around for a long time, even if the community did not call them archives. Indigenous cultures, and marginalized groups who have been denied access or a place in major archives have had to find their own ways to define their history. This "endeavour by individuals and social groups to document their history, particularly if that history has been generally subordinated or marginalized, is political and subversive. These 'recast' histories and their making challenge and seek to undermine both the distortions and omissions of orthodox historical narratives, as well as the archive and heritage collections that sustain

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<sup>71</sup> Ridener, John. *From Polders to Postmodernism: A Concise History of Archival Theory*. Duluth: Litwin Books. 2009. p. 117

them.”<sup>72</sup> Andrew Flinn and Mary Stevens looked at several British independent and community archives and how they were formed for their paper “It is noh mistri, wi mekin histri.” They look to George Padmore Institute, founded in 1991 by John L Rose, Sarah White and others from New Beacon Books, follows the interest of Padmore in Marxism, anti-racism, anti-imperialism and internationalism. The collections include documents from Caribbean Artists Movement, the Black Parents Movement, and the International Book Fair of Radical Black and Third World Books among others. The Institute of Race Relations, which in 1972 was transformed by Sivanandan and other radicals from an establishment concerned with commercial relations between the UK and its former colonies, as well as domestic race relations, into a radical anti-racist and anti-imperialist institute. The collections housed here documented the history of activism and racism in UK and in 2006 were transferred to University of Warwick. However the Institute maintains its own archive and a collection called the Black History Collection. This collects ephemera and publications of black organizations in Britain. The Black Cultural Archives was founded with the goal of challenging the failure of mainstream cultural institutions to portray a black history as marginalized to a white one. Collecting ephemera from events (political and cultural) the collections offer a unique view at black life in Britain.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Flinn, Andrew and Mary Stevens “‘It is noh mistri, wi mekin histri.’ Telling Our Own Story: Independent and Community Archives in the UK, Challenging and Subverting the Mainstream,” eds. Jeanette A. Bastian and Ben Alexander. *Community Archives: The Shaping of Memory*. London: Facet Publishing. p. 3-4

<sup>73</sup> Ibid. 8-16

Flinn and Stevens note that these institutions exist often without support of any kind, except for volunteers or champions of their cause. They found in their survey that independent institutions have two commonalities. The first is that they exist because of a perceived failure of mainstream institutions to collect, preserve, and provide access to their collections in a way that accurately represents the members of a community. The second is that these smaller organizations value autonomous governance. However, this is tied to archival aspirations of the group and between waning interest, and lack of institutional or government support, the long term preservation of their materials is in jeopardy.

It is my opinion that institutions and archivists must become centers for archival production and communication. Community outreach and education, as well as documentation of our own decision-making processes will go a long way in helping communities take ownership of their collections. By opening ourselves up to questioning, to the vigorous challenges to the archival narrative that the work of the film collectives put before us, archives can go from being considered the last bastion of dusty (usually white, male) academics to valued cultural centers. This shift is already happening and my goal is to push these into the mainstream, to activate our community, to turn our collections into something that can be used, not just by those scholars who can afford access to them, but by communities who can use them in a framework of cultural production. Let us arm everyone with splice machines and cement. Dearchivization has begun.



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