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Rationale and List of Works

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January 2021

Decolonial Archival Memory

In the 1995 book *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, Jacques Derrida speaks of the "archons," or those who command, in the house of the archive (Derrida 10). The archons govern this house with law, order, and centralized unity in a process of historiographical institutionalization. Similar to the role of Roland Barthes' "operator" in *Camera Lucida*, who in his case is a photographer, these archons present us with a history that is viewed from "the 'little hole' through which he looks, limits, frames, and perspectives" (Barthes 9). It is from the viewpoint of the Spanish colonizers, in their well-preserved and widely accessible dispatches, that we find one of the only first-person accounts from Gracia Real de Santa Teresa de Mose, a place the western archive "rediscovered" in recent decades and began referring to as "the first free black town within the present-day borders of the United States" (PBS). Can all that can be known about the past lives of marginalized groups, in this case African American people who had lived under enslavement, be confined to the perspective of those in power?

In *Archive Fever*, Derrida goes on to describe a death drive, inescapable destruction, by and of what cannot be made to suit the "archival desire" (Derrida 14). The death drive, or death instinct, is at once pitted against and aligned with Freud's pleasure-principle, which "seems directly to subserve the death-instincts; it keeps guard, also over the external stimuli, which are regarded as dangers by both kinds of instincts, but in particular over the inner increases in stimulation which have for their aim the complication of the task of living" (Freud VII-5). What and where are the external stimuli that trigger or reveal the death drive against the fantasy of the

archive? Is there a secret, excessive truth which cannot or will not exist in this idealized, authoritarian picture of history?

In a 1996 article "Ephemera as Evidence: Introductory Notes to Queer Acts," José Esteban Muñoz defines ephemera as "invisible evidence" that is and comes from the performance of queer acts, which is subject to "evaporating at the touch of those who would eliminate queer possibility" (Munoz 6). The archive is rendered imperfect and perhaps false by the very existence of all that must yet could never be archived.

Poems by a Slave in the Island of Cuba, published by a white English scholar in 1840, may also help illustrate some of the fallacies of the archival desire. Packaged with a lengthy preface and even longer body of appendices featuring writings by white abolitionists, the book promises a rare first-person account of a historical perspective always left untold. Still living under enslavement at the time of release, the then anonymous poet Juan Francisco Manzano's involvement seems, as the preface details, to end at the creation of his poems. Translated, organized, and authenticated by white scholars, Manzano's agency in the publication is reduced or completely removed. Can we still call this a first-person account? Does the poetry presented accurately reflect his emotion, inflection, and voice? Can he still be recognized and remembered from what has been presented?

In *The Question of Recovery*, Laura Helton and her co-authors write that "we cannot resolve the tension between recovering archival traces of black life as a means of contesting legacies of racism and exclusion, on the one hand, and reading the archive as a site of irrevocable silence that reproduces the racial hierarchies intrinsic to its construction, on the other" (Helton 2). In continuing to think of this erasure that looms over the publication of Manzano's work, along with many of the works published in the genre of the "slave narrative," Michel-Rolph

Trouillot writes of this sort of loss as "due to uneven power in the production of sources, archives, and narratives" (Trouillot 27), in his thinking of the exclusion of the Haitian revolution from the western canon of history. Is there a life beyond or within the silence? Is it possible for history to exist in a state of loss? Trouillot argues for the need "to make these silences speak for themselves" (Trouillot 27).

In a 1996 film called *The Watermelon Woman*, filmmaker and actor Cheryl Dunye takes on an investigation into the life of a woman whose appearance reveals what Barthes calls a "punctum," or piercing disturbance, in the "studium," or the intentionally and officially meaningful composition (Barthes 26-27), of Hollywood films featuring black actresses in the 1930s and 1940s. Crediting her only by the name "the watermelon woman," Dunye works to locate as much information and evidence of the actress's life as possible. Her journey dealing with the limitations and unwillingness of libraries, archives, and uncooperative collaborators further highlights the tensions between, on the one hand, the archive and western colonial historiography and, on the other hand, the legacies of minority groups, specifically black queer women.

The rich body of photographic material Dunye's character encounters in the film comes from *The Fae Richards Photo Archive*, which is a completely staged series of photographs that fabricate a history of the fictional Fae Richards, who was credited as the watermelon woman. The images serve to remember her life; they elaborately imagine her as a Black queer film actress in the early 20th century United States. The film closes with a quote that reads: "[s]ometimes you have to create your own history. The Watermelon Woman is fiction" (Dunye). In the face of the loss presented by the archive, she has brought forth the "non-beings" in the world by posing them as possibilities (Sartre 7). The film and photographs "turn to 'the archive'

as a subject and not just a source" (Helton 4) to tackle the issue of recovery from structurally formulated loss. Instead of these limitations being the end of the road, Dunye is able to imagine a history beyond them. In reality many of these life narratives are lost to time and end with a brief appearance or nickname.

In *Zong!*, M. NourbeSe Philip uses legal documents from the decision of the Zong case, in which a captain of a ship carrying 470 enslaved persons from the West coast of Africa to Jamaica sends 150 of the enslaved overboard to make an insurance claim over "destroyed cargo," to uncover a poetic telling of "the story that can only be told by not telling, [which] is locked in this text" (Philip 191). Drawing on the archive as a "word store," she breaks down the text into fragmented words and phrases to "murder the text, literally cut it into pieces, castrating verbs, suffocating adjectives, murdering nouns, throwing articles, prepositions, conjunctions overboard, jettisoning adverbs: I separate subject from verb, verb from object—create semantic mayhem," writing that the "manner of working was to remove all extraneous material to allow the figure that was 'locked' in the stone to reveal itself" (Philip 198). She strips away the farce of law, order, and objectivity in the text and searches "to release the story that cannot be told, but which, through not-telling, will tell itself" (Philip 199). What she transforms the body of her feverish source text into is a "memory in service of mourning" which "bears witness to the 'resurfacing of the drowned and the oppressed'" (Philip 202-203). In the destruction of this piece from the archive as it long was and aimed to be, Philip works to resurrect the "[b]lack noise [that] is always already barred from the court," these "yearnings [that] are illegible because they are so wildly utopian and derelict to capitalism" (Hartman 9). Her work, like that of many of the writers I have already discussed, raises the question of whether we can extract an archival lineage belonging to marginalized communities and individuals. Can the memory of folks excluded from the canon

of western history reveal an archive in and of itself? Can there be an organized effort that goes on to maintain our historiographical experience beyond the still standing museums of colonial speculation?

For their initiative titled *Re/Member Black Philly*, project leads Krystal Strong and Jennifer Garcon along with a shifting and growing team of other community members, "utilize digital media and technology to document and celebrate the rich experiences, institutions, spaces, and cultures of Black people in the city" (Strong). Through library workshops, material preservation work, and mapping exercises, the project takes a decentralized yet organized approach to place-based archiving that preserves the memory of an often underrepresented and underserved community with their active involvement. Their website reads "'Black Philadelphia,' as conceived in this work, represents a racial-spatial-imaginative construct that indexes the memories, diverse histories, and lived experiences of the communities that comprise the city's Black, or African diasporic population" (Strong). Their work, and those leading similar efforts, provide a framework for an expansive notion of the archive which can include much of what a Derridean archive would exclude or erase. This contemporary archival practice is diverse, accessible, and self-representative. Can such a framework be organized and applied at a larger, perhaps even global scale? Can pre-existing archival institutions be adapted to support these modern efforts or must this work exist independent of those legacies?

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Columbus goes to Sea to discover the Countreys, Arnoldus Montanus, 1671

On Dreams, Aristotle, 350 B.C.E

An Account, Much Abbreviated, of the Destruction of the Indies, Bartolome De Las Casas, 1560

Poems by a Slave in the Island of Cuba, Juan Francisco Manzano, 1844 [CPC]

Oroonoko, Aphra Behn, 1688

Dispatches of Spanish Officials Bearing on the Free Negro Settlement of Gracia Real de Santa Teresa de Mose, Florida, 1688-1759

Modern Humanities

Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression, Jacques Derrida, 1995 [HIS]

Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History, Michel-Rolph Trouillot, 1995 [CPC]

Camera Lucida, Roland Barthes, 1980

Being and Nothingness ("The Origin of Negation"), Jean-Paul Sartre, 1943

Modern Social and Natural Sciences

The Question of Recovery: An Introduction, Laura Helton, Justin Leroy, Max A. Mishler, Samantha Seeley, and Shauna Sweeney, 2015

Beyond the Pleasure Principle: Section VII, Sigmund Freud, 1922 [HIS]

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Area of Concentration

Ephemera as Evidence: Introductory Notes to Queers Acts, José Esteban Muñoz*, 1996*

The Watermelon Woman, Cheryl Dunye, 1996 [HIS]

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Zong! ("The Origin of Negation"), M. NourbeSe Philip, 2008 [CPC]

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