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Memory and the Morphologies of Difference

I'm very happy to speak about the politics of memory because, in many ways, everything that I have done touches upon the subject. And it touches upon it via the complex routes of the aesthetic, the ethical, the ideological, and – of course – the political. Now, precisely because of these manifold detours and tangents, the idea of a politics of memory has a number of implications for how my work is conceived and proceeds. So, I want to try to unpick some of the reasons why the double inscription implied by the title remains central to its reception.

Today, I would like to broadly approach the question of ghosting, or what Jacques Derrida calls the hauntology or spectropoetics, in terms of memory. However, in order to do so, I will need to take you on a brief detour. Firstly, some qualifications, starting with an old ghost that haunts and stalks my work: a lot of the commentary on what I do tends to place it in a mysterious category called 'Identity politics'. I have never recognised the term and when I do it is always to highlight its descriptive inaccuracy.

The reasons for that will become apparent later, but let me first say this: it seems to me that the concept of identity politics as a descriptive category makes what I would call both *a priori* as well as *a posteriori* assumptions about the location of identities that my work absolutely refutes and negates. Generally, I would say it makes assumptions about where people are, where they start out, and where they might be going that I find erroneous. And this 'misreading' or 'misattribution' of a given 'identity trajectory' in the work ends up ascribing it to a 'teleology', which, in fact, the work is always attempting to deconstruct.

For that reason alone, I always rather provocatively say that the work I do is anti-identity politics. And why? Because it's always about the journey towards something and never a confirmation of that 'thing'. In fact, this journey towards identity is always an attempt at an opening, always an attempt to avoid the perils and pitfalls of closure, to sidestep the 'teleological arc' implied by the category.

Secondly, I want to say something that might seem paradoxical given my first point, namely that my work to date has always been infused with a politics of identity, by a desire to investigate what one could call 'the etiologies of identity'. Now, whilst that might appear to be the same thing, it comes from a radically different premise. To say that a work is inscribed in a politics of identity is to say that it is built around trying to highlight and pinpoint the implications of identity; it is to say that the work is almost always 'mired' in an attempt to foreground the theoretical, cultural, and psychoanalytic implications that any invocation of the term identity implies. And it is also to say that it is precisely this attempt at 'foregrounding' that always presupposes a question mark at the end of the term 'Identity'. It is this linguistic excess, this questioning, that brings with it notions of 'Ghosting', the 'Uncanny', the 'Trace', and the 'Phantom'. In other words, this more precise and more nuanced invocation of identity, this attempt to separate out the meanings of identity as fact and identity as a process is what leads me to the politics of memory.

Between 1982 and 1997, I worked as part of an art collective in London: the Black Audio Film Collective. Most of the work we did in that period was as preoccupied with generating new material as it was with combining that material (usually 16mm and analogue video tape) with a range of existing things: old home movies; moving image archives from cinema and television; photographs from the nineteenth and early twentieth century; textual fragments from a range of literary, ethnographic and historical writings; and so on. Most of the work was therefore characterised by an obsession with pairings; with ghosts; and with the complex ways in which the phantom haunts narrative, haunts theory, and haunts aesthetic production. The work was also always Janus-faced. We were concerned with saying something new but, because of our interest in the old, it had a necessarily 'historical' reach and feel to it. And to that extent, the work was much more of a hybrid project: not drama or documentary, film or artwork, story or essay – neither fact nor fiction. It was a practice always located somewhere between history and a series of counter-myths. It was a work that wore its hybrid motivations very proudly on its sleeve. And the reasons for that hybridity, the reasons why such a hybrid project was a necessity, is also something I would like to discuss with you today. So, how do we start?

The 'becoming' of anything is unusually difficult to track. And the 'arrival' of categories is even more so. Still, I want to attempt to do so by talking to you about what I call the 'coming of the hyphen'.

I remember very early on, during my school years in England in the seventies, that one would commonly hear the phrase: 'the British way of doing things', or, in the answer to an enquiry, someone might say: 'this is not our way of doing things, the British way is this' and so on. Now, this mode of address became routine enough for it to move beyond the merely coincidental and into the realm of a compulsion, an obsessive trait. It very quickly dawned on me – almost before I understood the full implications of it – I was being taught and alerted of a certain narrative of belonging. I was being inducted into what Foucault once called a regime of truth about national identity. This regime had very clear prescriptions about 'them' and 'us'. And as I became routinely exposed to it, I realised that I was also being initiated into an awareness of an 'inside' and, crucially, an 'outside' of national belonging. The older I grew, the more I understood that this regime of normalisation had certain qualities, certain default settings by which it invoked and offered to you an 'essence' of a national character. I also started to learn that this 'essence' being 'gifted' to me as 'national characteristics' was not historical or theological, and also not always biological. Of course, it could also be one or even a combination of all three. However, in its being offered to me as pedagogy, as a manual on being civilised, I felt and understood its presence principally as a set of narratives.

Initially, I also understood the injunctions of these narratives in almost wholly existential terms, as catechisms meant exclusively for me, for John Akomfrah. I understood them as 'stories' about how I am or can become something better, something more. And I also understood that, rather like a communion with God, this was a one-way street in which all fault lay with the devotee. This was one's own private dialogue with a Greater Being in which only displays of faith and subservience were the acceptable responses. All failure was entirely one's own. Yet, as one grew up, gaps began to appear, there were fractures within the tissue of the narrative that suggested that all was not well. There were always these loose ends, these untidy bits that seemed interminable and unresolvable within the bounds of that communion, of the narrative. Questions then began to emerge in a space one sensed was 'outside' of that private dialogue. With these questions came the eerie feeling of living in a place populated by 'unseen guests'. I started to wonder: Why was there this sense of ghosting in one's daily existence? Why this sense of a phantom, a doppelganger called John Akomfrah occupying the 'outside' to my 'inside' of these national narratives? Why, for instance, despite the manifold efforts on my part to belong, does the spectre of difference stalk my every move? Why, despite all the mounting evidence to the contrary, was I endlessly told,

'don't be so sensitive; we're all the same. There's nothing wrong'. And then why, on my part, was there this sense that there was 'something wrong?' At some point, you realise that they are not just random or outlaw musings on your part. And the sense of a 'larger narrative' in which this game of denial and confirmation is being played out, the sense that you are implicated in something beyond you, becomes clearer as you begin to talk to other post-migrant children: children whose parents – like yours – are from an 'elsewhere', but who, again, like you, are wholly formed in the 'here'.

These conversations became my first encounter with the Uncanny. I quickly began to realise that all of these new friends had been going through the same rites of passage: they too have had the same encounters with the doppelganger; they too have been held in awe by the same injunctions, stalked by the same phantom. And they too have had those premonitions that told them they were in the throes of something more than a mere 'accidental obsession'. This is what I call 'the moment of the hyphen': the moment a group comes to self-realisation; when it senses that its concept of self is emerging as a result of strategies of exclusion and differentiation that it had initially understood as 'normative injunctions'; that these regulatory mechanisms that it sensed were 'framing' and giving shape to that life, were in fact the same mechanisms conferring an identity upon it; that its identity was emerging out of something far too generalised to be 'personal' – out of something far too amorphous and yet so regular in its appearance and outline that it could only be understood as a 'morphology of difference'.

In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Frantz Fanon wrote, 'Each generation must, out of relative obscurity, discover its mission, fulfil it, or betray it'. My encounter with the 'generation' was in the late seventies when I met some of the people who would go on to form Black Audio Film Collective with me in the early eighties. It was primarily within that art collective that I would come to understand the tasks we were facing.

It was in that group that the complexity of the 'hyphen' became clearer. And with that clarity came a sense of purpose, a desire to investigate the possibility of counter-narratives. Together we would teach ourselves a very important lesson, namely that to be a hyphenated identity, one first had to come to terms with the nature and force of the hyphen. We learnt that when you are a product of a post-migrant milieu, there are elements you comprise that are not wholly or completely 'narrated' by the prevailing legitimatising narratives. We became aware that the reasons for that had to do with what W.E.B. Du Bois called the 'double consciousness' in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903).

Ghosts made sense because our very existence was organised around this doubling. Ghosts were the only indication we had that we inhabited both the deep interior as well as the farthest marginalia of the available national narratives. So, part of our project became one of articulating this 'cognitive dissonance', this unusual perceptual positioning that allowed you to be both 'foreigner' and 'citizen' at the same time.

Ultimately, this became a project of enunciation, which in part involved formulating what one could call an 'index of alterity'. A starting point to this included recognising the complicated ways in which our hyphenated identities – these products of 'bricolage' – were both constituted by and responses to what Du Bois also called the veil, the demarcating psychic line of 'double consciousness'. Then the key question became: how does the hyphen – e.g., black-British or Asian-British – come about? What is the 'process of subjectification' that makes the hyphen possible?

There were a number of theorists and thinkers – too numerous to mention – who proved indispensable in the beginnings of this project. For a time, Michel Foucault's *The Archaeology of Knowledge* was practically our bible, especially the short section entitled 'The Formation of Enunciative Modalities'. If medicine, biology, and political economy could be understood first and foremost as discursive regimes – as Foucault suggested – then so could race, we concluded. And if race was a discourse, it had to have an historicity – something opposed to a biology or a genetics – and then the rules that governed its 'enunciative modalities' could also be grasped.

Orlando Patterson is also a figure worth pointing out, especially in reference to the title of his second novel *An Absence Of Ruins* (1967), which was about colonial Jamaica. This absence of ruins became entirely central to how we began to work. It suggested that all diasporas can be seen as being marked by this absence, especially if we understand 'the ruin' as the incomplete fragment and the marker of civilisation. It suggested that if we think geopolitically of the ruin as the 'civilisational trace', as the evidential confirmation of an 'unbroken line' of European civilisation, it could be commandeered to speak about the African and Asian diasporas in Europe. Now, when you put it that way, the concept of 'the ruin' sounds quite complicated, but the essential implications of the phrase – its 'use value' – slowly became very clear to us. I would like to give you an idea of what it could mean.

When one walks around most advanced industrial cities, there are certain monuments that attest to the passing of former, glorious lives: commemorative effigies in city centres, for instance, to mark the beginning of the

First World War, or one on the edge of the city to mark the passing of some insignificant ruling monarch. Most landscapes in the post-industrial world are pockmarked by these spectral embodiments and they are an indication, if you will, of how cultures that are settled and fixed symbolically function. As memorial incarnations, these monuments say that there are connections between the city's current subjects and the past, and that this connection is a mediated one – mediated by these ghosts.

Public monuments as an exemplar of the ruin articulate this relation: they mediate the demarcation between past and present by serving both as the marker of a 'past-ness', as well as the confirmation or evidence of a continuity beyond the demarcation. Among us, we began to think of the ruin as a vestige of what Robert Young called 'white mythologies' in his book *White Mythologies. Writing History and the West* (1990): the tangible but spectral embodiment of that blurred demarcation, the denouement of an architectural rhetoric which sees an argument and a metaphor about lineage and descent in the unbroken line that these monuments celebrate. The ruin announces the space for ghosts in the everyday because they speak for civility's great undead.

Until very recently, very few of these monuments were about Asian or African lives and when they were, their primary purpose was to throw the scope and grandeur of European achievement into even sharper relief. However, you could almost always sense their presence *in absentia,* since, of course, much of the achievement many of these effigies celebrate is based on encounters with this absent 'other'. Thus, we also began to understand that diasporic existences are, in contrast, presences hailed into being by this 'structuring absence', the absence of the ruin. In the absence of the monument, in the absence of tangible fragments, diasporic artists face a monumental task: they are forced to connect with the question of memory, with the question of the ghost, with the question of the intangible – it is through these that the artist discovers the monumental, discovers the ways in which they are located in their culture and in their present.

There was a moment when a range of artists and filmmakers in Britain were all obsessed with the question of history. We came from very different backgrounds: children of families from the Asian subcontinent, the Caribbean, and Africa. It was almost as if we all became aware of the need to turn to history as a way of legitimising our present, as a way of legitimising our practice. However, there was a paradox in this turn to history, since planes of historicity were not entirely neutral: we found an ally in history as a deconstructive gesture against white mythologies, as a way of insinuating ourselves

into the present by challenging the essential wholeness of the unbroken line of national genealogy. But, of course, the historical archive and the places of history were no more ours than those of the ruin. For instance, most of the film material shot in colonial Africa or Asia was by European companies or colonial institutions like Colonial Film Unit. So, in a manner of speaking, the turn to history was an agnostic one. One of the things we tried to do – and you see it in the work of most of the artists who came of age in the eighties that I mentioned earlier – was to strongly highlight the presence of ambiguity in the archive of official memory itself, an ambiguity to the way in which the past can exist in the present. It was done in such a way that, even if the BBC had made a television documentary in Lagos in the fifties in which it presented that space in Manichean terms, in terms that suggested that Lagos was on the other side of the civilisational coin and that people from the colonies were somehow simpletons or ignoramuses, our use of that documentary would involve investigating the rules of that assumption. Whatever the authorial intentions, we saw our task as offering a counter memory to the official one. The task was always to embrace that material, to observe it forensically, to work with it in order to be able to use it in different ways. In doing so, our starting point was at the heart of the archive – the ambiguity in ambitions and intentions, in outcome and effect that lies at the heart of what archival memory embodies and emboldens.

What do I mean by this ambiguity? On many occasions, people have said to me: 'Why do you work with archives so much? Wouldn't you rather be making your own stuff?' For me, this question rests on a misunderstanding of the paradox that lies at the heart of one's engagement with the archival, which is essentially as follows: far from taking you away from questions of agency, autonomy, and authorship, the archive returns you to the question of self-representation. With the recognition that your figured past is the archival, is the memorial, comes also the realisation that in that encounter, one is necessarily inscribed into a dialogue of representation. The key question in that dialogue has to do with the issue of self-representation. One begins to understand that embracing the archival is not so much about finding the past or somebody else's past, but instead the beginnings of self or the beginnings of one's own claim on that past – claims on place come via the detour of self-representation, via the detour of memory.

Self-representation always suggests a particular relationship between the ethics of being and the politics of becoming. Self-representation always clearly suggests a narcissistic relation to the body.

Simultaneously, that narcissism is also about the ways in which the body is tied to questions of belonging, existence, and authority. Thus, as you can see, I am very slowly moving away from the ruin, the archival, and the memorial. However, in doing so, I wish to suggest that the memorial and the archival ease the openings, ease the spaces and passages through which we enter into that dialogue with the culture as a way of finding ourselves.

Okay, enough talking. I want to show you a piece that I did two years ago that has quite a surreal history. One of my closest friends in the Black Art Movement was the artist Donald Rodney, who died in 1998. Three years ago, his wife came to me and said: 'I have 30 rolls of Super 8 films that Donald shot about his life in hospital and I want you to see what you can do with them'. It just so happens that she gave them to me on the tenth anniversary of both Donald's and my mother's death. At the time of my mother's death, I was making a film about genetic inheritance with her as the central figure. That film, *The Call Of Mist*, never quite materialised as intended at the time: it was far too short and I never found a way to use enough material on my mother in that film, even though I had an excess of material to work with. So, I made a new plan to use both sets of archival material and have them talk to each other. I wanted the implication of memory that was alluded to by the existence of this twin set of archival material to say something about the two deaths. The film that I made was finally called *The Genome Chronicles* (2008). One noteworthy fact is that Donald died of a hereditary blood disorder called sickle cell anaemia. It is a disease that occurs much more frequently among people whose ancestors lived in tropical, sub-tropical, and sub-Saharan regions where malaria was common. In other words, it's a disease almost wholly specific to Asian and African gene pools. The second noteworthy fact is that a person might not suffer personally from sickle cell anaemia, but can still be a carrier. If they then have a child with someone who carries it, then the child's genetic inheritance will be sickle cell anaemia. Donald was truly extraordinary, a great artist, probably the best of my generation. However, the film was not a biography because what interested me in his archive and his life was how precariously balanced it was on a precipice of memory. On the one hand he was very free, as great artists often are, but on the other, he was the very definition of un-freedom, the prisoner of a debilitating genetic inheritance. In that sense, his life was almost emblematic of memory and the complicated ways in which memory works on all of us. He knew when he was ten that he was going to die and that he could be dead by his forties.

He also knew that he was going to die from this disorder and that it was part of the genetic inheritance, if you will, that brought him into the world. I cannot think of a life that better represents the point I want make to you about the complex hold of memory than his.

As I said earlier, I belonged to an art collective in the eighties and nineties. One of the things that brought us together was the subject of the film I am going to discuss next. We were part of a generation that really came of age in the seventies and early eighties and I think we became aware (certainly those of us in the black art movement of the late seventies and early eighties) that nothing quite like to us had ever existed in England. There had been people of colour in Britain since the Roman invasions thousands of years ago, but there had never been a generation like us, born between 1955 and 1965, there were thousands of us and we came of age at around roughly the same time in the seventies. We were aware of that.

The moment, the symbolic moment of our becoming, is a date in 1948, I think in September, when three hundred fourty-eight men – only men – came on a boat from the Caribbean. The boat was called the Empire Windrush and it was the beginning of a certain symbolic rupture in British memory. Up until then, Britain had been marked by a particular narrative definition of its identity. The Empire Windrush marked a break in that narrative. Basically, the narrative went something like this: Britain is an empire and all of its subjects are British – if you are African or Asian, you live in the colonies, in the periphery; if you are white, you live in the metropolitan centre. We are all children of the Empire, loved equally by our dear King.

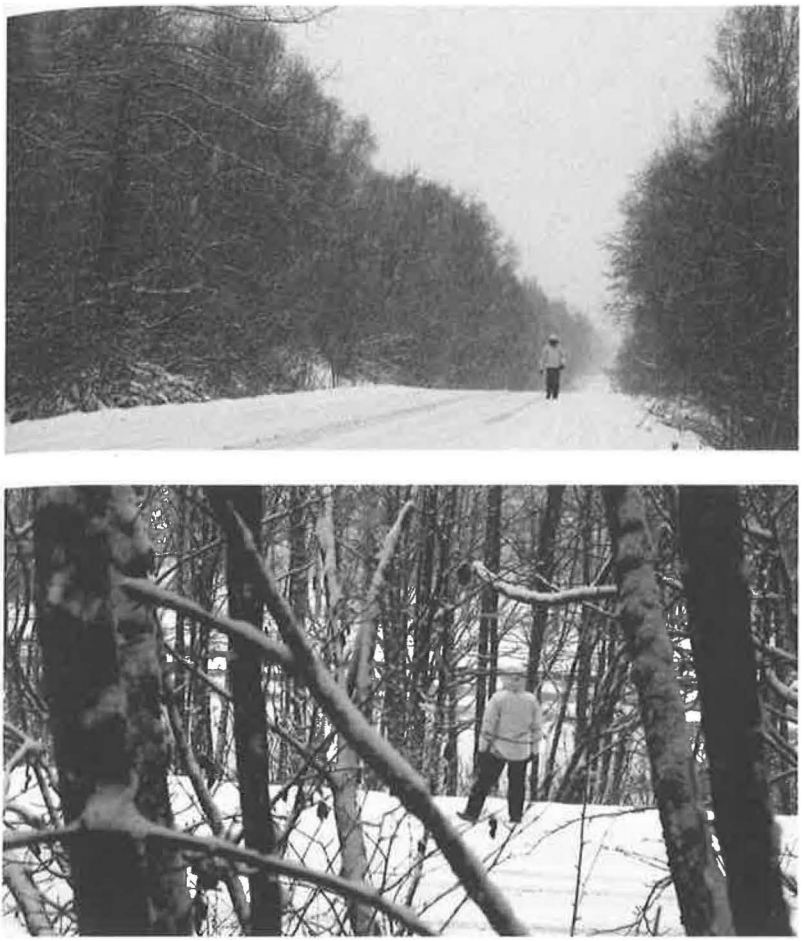
The arrival of that boat broke the connection between the body and the narrative. It shattered the symbolism of that narrative by dislocating body from location, by displacing the connection between space and identity, and in doing so started the process of multiculturalism as a demographic fact. My generation will become the permanent reminder of that rupture; we will be the sign, the trace, the emblem of that profound cultural, political, and psychic transformation of the British tableaux and its increasingly post-colonial *mise en scene*.

Two years ago, I was asked by an initiative set up by the BBC and the Art Council of England to submit a proposal for an archival project. This initiative (named Made in England Initiative) gave me carte blanche to go into the BBC archive to see whether I could create anything. Because of that freedom, it seemed to me that we should use this opportunity to highlight what 1948 has meant for England by taking a look at the Empire Windrush generation – this time, through the prism of Epic poetry.

John Akomfrah, *Mnemosyne*, 2010.

In his book *Postcolonial Melancholia*, Paul Gilroy talks about the melancholia set in motion by the Empire Windrush moment and the ways in which it triggered a set of obsessive-compulsive denials of the epistemic shift that the Windrush rupture entails. In the throes of that melancholia, the Windrush moment will be cast and understood as a moment of defacing what he calls the 'clean edifice of white supremacy'. For me, one of the forms that particular melancholia rests upon is a denial – a denial of the ontology of the Windrush figure, a denial of the resonance, implications, and reality of that figure. My interest in rescuing something had once again become the guiding light of this piece.

So, what was it? Well, it's called *Mnemosyne* (2010). The opening caption (*Mnemosyne then gave birth to the nine Muses*) tells you that this is a project about Mnemosyne, the Greek goddess of memory. It also tells you that it is divided into nine chapters and that each chapter is named after one of the nine daughters of this goddess. *Mnemosyne* was a really interesting project on memory because it tried to operate with four varieties of memory at once: the memory of the televisual archive, a literary archive, a private one, and an imagined manual of affective recollections from the Windrush generation. The idea behind the manual was inescapably bound to the work I had done in the past. Over the years, I had spoken to and had filmed interviews with many members of the Windrush generation. During the course of these encounters, they would always say three things. These became the organising motifs for the film.



John Akomfrah, *Mnemosyne*, 2010.

One was that no matter what time of year they arrived in Britain, they always mentioned the cold; they always felt cold. And that became the first visual trope – hence, our frozen mise en scene.

The second was that most of them had come from tropical climates to Britain when garments and dyes were being rationed, so their clothes were brighter. In turn, they would speak about how colour had separated them.

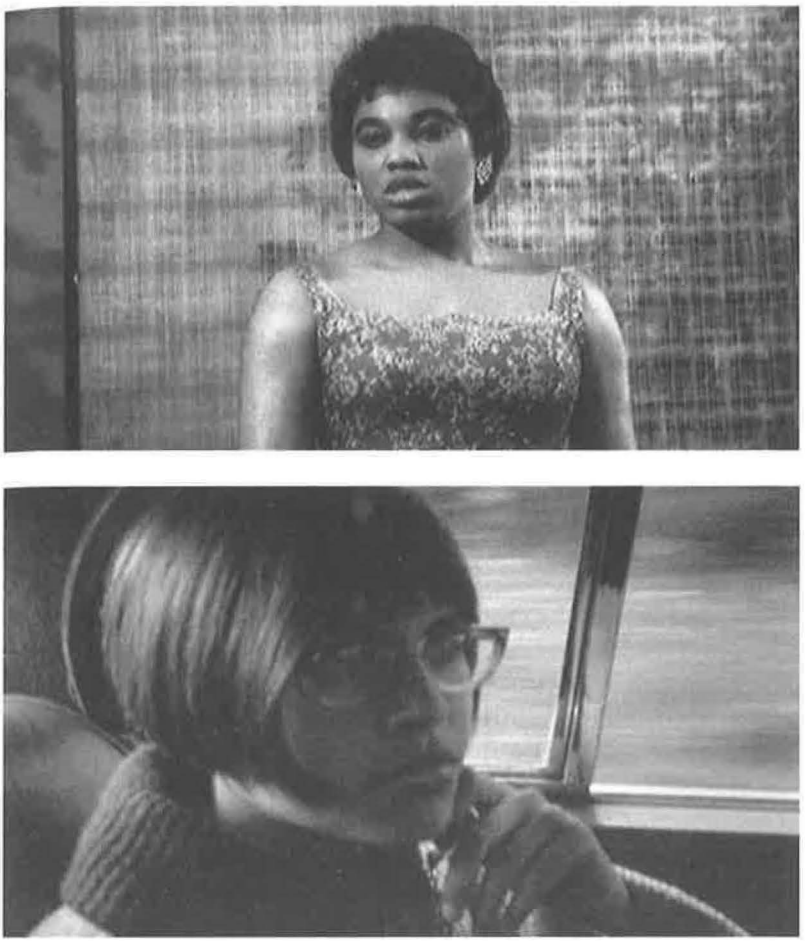
John Akomfrah, *Mnemosyne*, 2010.

Every time you spoke to your mum or grandma, they would always say the same thing: 'Everything was either grey or white and we really stood out; we just felt too colourful'. This became the second aesthetic trope.

The third was: no matter who came with them and how many of them made the journey, they always tended to stress that the arrival was a very solitary one for them; they felt alone. Whether on a ship full of people or on a plane, it didn't matter – they were in that labyrinth of solitude.

All of our interviews contained versions of this primal scene of becoming and the compulsive nature of telling it with their incantatory logic and obsessive repetition. I realised they were not merely sociological accounts of arrival: what I was hearing was a 'truth', but not necessarily one grounded in the 'facts' of migration. I was in the deep interior of the imagination and of perception and therefore I needed to find an appropriate approach to give them room and legitimacy. These three became the unspoken motifs of my piece, its affective markers.

Over the years, I have worked with a variety of approaches to memory and with *Mnemosyne* I called upon some of them. The first is an idea that you find in many writers and thinkers from James Joyce to Antonio Gramsci to the Communist Manifestos. It states that moments of crisis, or moments of emergency are also the same conditions under which new things emerge. Thus, memory is a kind of crossroad, a junction, an intersection where the old and the new meet.



John Akomfrah, *Mnemosyne*, 2010.

The second idea is, again, one that you find in a range of writers. My first understanding of it was from Aimé Césaire one of the founding figures of the Negritude movement, but you also see it in the work of Michel Foucault, for example. It is the notion of memory as counter-cartography: memory as a map by which one re-navigates the present. This idea of memory as counter-cartography is not the same, but can be confused with another similar idea – the idea of memory as counter–hegemony.

It differs greatly from the former and can also be found in the works of a range of writers, such as Frantz Fanon, Gaston Bachelard. It is a way of invoking memory as a means of bypassing the status quo of the present.
The second to last is an idea that you find very commonly in forms of materialist historiography, which is that somehow one can access a forgotten drama via memory as a way of re-legitimising it and bringing it back to life when it is lingering on the outskirts of the present. It is memory as a way of gaining renewed access to that slightly hidden drama.
The last invocation of memory that became central to *Mnemosyne* comes largely from the work of the Italian historian Carlo Ginzburg, with whom I made a film. In his work, memory functions as an appeal. It is part of the way we invoke 'our obligation to the dead'. This notion of memory as incantation, as a way of doing what the Africans refer to as 'pouring libation' to the dead was also central in the making of *Mnemosyne*. Pouring libation is a religious ritual where you pour water on the ground and ask the dead to come and drink it. It is a way of evoking the dead and indicating that you have an open door policy to their existence in your life and that they can come in anytime they want. However, they must wait to be hailed, to be called upon. With that, I can't think of a more fitting way to end my discussion today.