

In Between Breaths: Memories, Stories, and Otherwise Design Histories

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Abstract

Decolonial approaches foreground the necessity for design historians to rethink their methodologies and terms of debate to recognize the impact of colonial legacies. Only then is it possible to make changes toward social and cognitive justice. This piece explores new models for working collectively with history and memory across oral registers to include the colloquial and moments of pause, of taking breath.

In mid-2020, four design historians teamed up to develop experimental, multimedia methods of working to explore new critical design histories. By using “otherwise” methods to look, listen, and read closely, this piece foregrounds the making of space for new interpretations of thinking and writing. The tensions between memories, stories, and histories are interpreted and challenged using concepts such as breath, voice, palimpsest, circle and rhythm. Exploring translation, opacity, embodiment, positionality, and nonlinearity emerged as crucial to questioning the terms under which design history can be transformed.

Keywords: art—decoloniality—design history—memory—methodology—materiality

“I don’t think we want to go in knowing what the outcome is going to be”

00:55

I think there are parallels between the spirit of our previous workshops and activities

00:55

And the spontaneity of a conversation

00:56

In that both of them are hugely relational, right? Everyone is feeding off everyone else and creating an ecosystem of ideas, live as it were.

00:56

So, thinking about form in that way is useful given that we started off thinking about, well, how do we work with memories, stories and otherwise design histories? And...because we’ve got all these visual aids...it would be really interesting to see how we would speak to them as well and give them agency within the piece in some way.

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...if you're able to try and extract the words into documents, that'd be fantastic. And then..., um, if we look at these documents, then we can see something that makes us go, Oh I'll take this central theme. That might just generate a bit of writing, and it might just generate entire content...spawned, you know, [in a] new way.

00:57

I don't think we want to go in knowing what the outcome is going to be...

Dear reader,

Is it possible to produce and publish scholarly work that harnesses the energies emerging from decolonial practices to expose the social inequalities within epistemological structures, without falling into complicity with these structures? How might we imagine new ways of working that sustain their resistance to the status quo, and remain open to new possibilities and futures?

We have been engaging with these questions over the last few years, individually and through our collective, OPEN.¹ OPEN is a research initiative formed in 2018 by four scholars, the authors of this piece, originally working at the Royal College of Art in London. We had been developing decolonial methods to explore how we locate ourselves in our research, how our positions frame our processes, how our worldviews translate, and how these methods can be transformational for our practice, our disciplines and our ecologies of work. We have devised workshops, hosted talks and events, and curated an online exhibition and publication to tend to and care for ideas of relationality and inclusivity in terms of diversity and difference of experience. Our aim is to develop OPEN art, design, and humanities practices that honor emotional work, self-care, respect, and positionality as individually and collectively generative. OPEN asks whether questions need to lead to answers, or if can they remain open as a conduit to new forms of thinking?

Working at the intersections of gender and critical race studies, postcolonialism, decoloniality, and cultural studies as they are presented through material and visual culture, literature, and poetry, we were engaged with a range of separate yet related questions. How to write against the grain in this moment of time? How to locate and work with marginalized histories within the colonial archive and give voice and agency to other histories? How to study the disjunctures and cleavages between our imagined and lived realities and find the machinations of coloniality in action? How to understand notions of the subjective, the emotional as relationally tethered to or rubbing against affective—and complex—discriminatory and liberatory structures of feeling? How to locate ourselves in ongoing, global decolonial work that extends far beyond “The Academy”?

As part of our response to these imperatives, and as part of considering how we work with relations and relationality, we have been producing work in collaboration as an overarching methodology. Collective practices produce a plurality of layers, positions and voices that are unattainable in a single-authored work. This does not sit comfortably within academic systems of publishing in the Humanities and may require alternative ways of writing and reading in order to give space to those multiplicities rather than closing them down. Our aim of disrupting the academic conventions of citation where they tend to create and uphold a canon, for example, may mean that it is harder for a reader to quickly locate, unpick or harvest a reading list from this piece. If working

decolonially means researching and writing in different and unaccustomed ways, it may also mean reading and thinking in different and unaccustomed ways—in ways that feel strange at first and might take more time because they intend to provoke change.

Could this reading experience induce a degree of discomfort since we offer you a different model? As the above excerpt from a transcript of our dialogue suggests, we have used experimental methodologies to form a collective “eco-system of ideas.” In this, references are embedded as prompts or revealed through discussions on how we think about and draw on writers, theorists, makers. In a sense, this whole work is about citation. Citations are employed as strategies of incorporation that seek to resist any tendency to produce a shortcut rollcall of names. Our end notes include inviting readers into our exchanges, rather than providing a shortcut to intellectual genealogies and positions.

Another essential strategy was to experiment with no set outcome in mind. We also wondered what would happen if we exposed the making, constructing, the stitching of collective thinking in the final piece. In August 2020, connected through our laptop webcams and microphones, we four authors took part in a collaborative thinking exercise that generated and recorded spontaneous and cumulative responses to various themes. In advance, we each uploaded images, text, and audio materials into a multi-page online shared whiteboard. These materials became a first set of “prompts” from where plural conversations could begin. As collective thinking developed, as memories were elicited, and as dialogue unfolded, further responses were recorded on the same online shared whiteboards. These took the form of coloured notes, scribbles, additional images, or writing. Responses were added in no particular order and by anyone impelled to do so as we worked “alongside” each other in hours-long video calls, so that we were able to see and react to each other’s thinking and impulses in real time.

As part of this piece, you will find reproductions from the resulting pages of co-created visual content generated by this process. The collages printed here are the final stage of the layered process that produced them. As you navigate through this piece, you will notice that we have also drawn from transcriptions of our discussions, which we have divided into sections. Next to sections in the text you will find the corresponding collage, the layered collection of prompts and responses created during the unfolding discussion. We used further video calls to unpick our responses as seen in the transcripts and to meditate on how co-creation might offer transformative methodological frameworks. This technique was also used to consider peer review feedback to this piece, which is both citation and extension of these discussions. We invite you—journal readers, editors, peer-reviewers—to participate by reading, reflecting on and responding to our work.²

The “otherwise” methods we have used to look, listen, and read closely require making space for new modes of thinking and writing. We hope that however you come to this piece, our focus on concepts such as breath, voice, palimpsest, circle and rhythm, and related issues of translation, opacity, embodiment, positionality, and nonlinearity, provide a useful critical exploration into the terms under which design history can be transformed.

Weaving to me suggests a deliberateness. But what happens when memory isn’t deliberate?³

I actually wanted to chat about this idea of weaving of personal stories (**Figure 1**). The idea of “personal stories” has become so hackneyed...has it lost its potency?

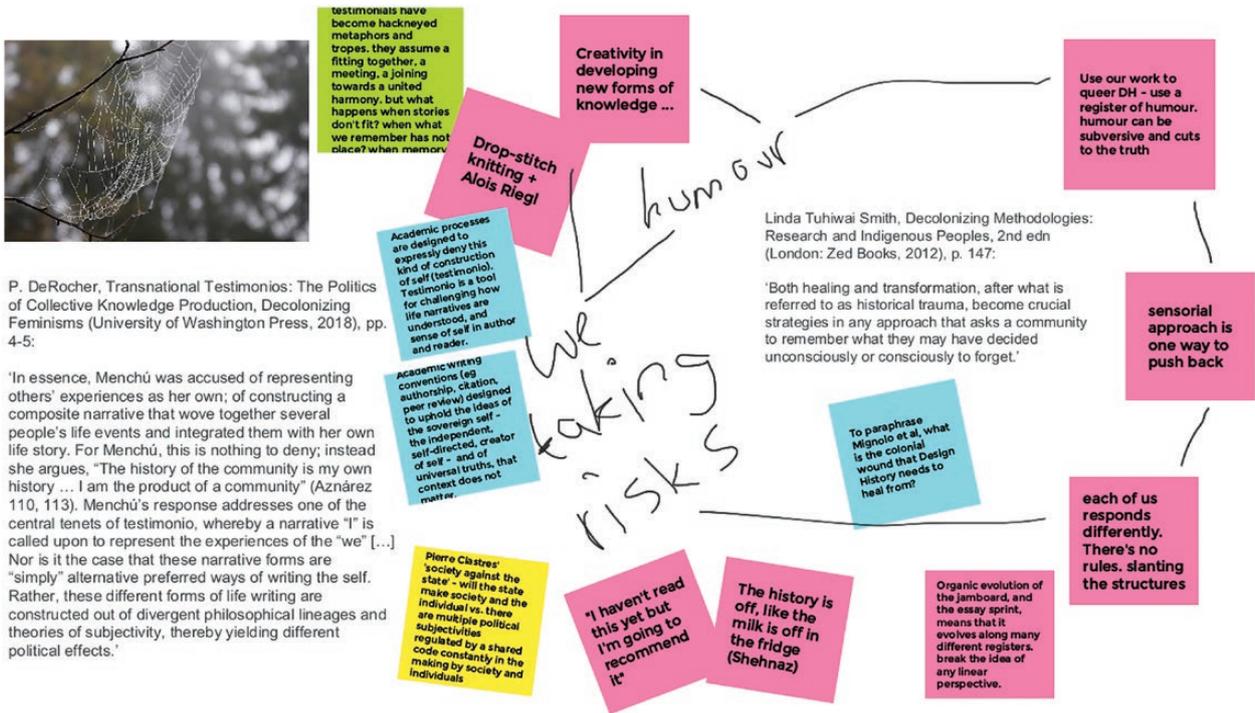


Fig 1. Weaving to me suggests a deliberateness. But what happens when memory isn't deliberate? Collage by OPEN, 2020. Collage 1 image credits: "Cobweb" by randihausken (CC BY-SA 2.0) sourced from <https://wordpress.org/openverse/image/840aa451-6987-488d-a75d-345751a1ac6f/>.

I wanted to bring up the question of what happens when things don't fit into a pattern. What does it mean for histories when the stories don't align? We tend to make this assumption that *weaving* is a good metaphor for the bringing together of experiences...but it still alludes to a *unity* of that coming together. I think what we're learning from personal experience, and stories of trauma and memory, is that so much of our stories and shared histories are about *rupture*, as much as they are about connectivity.

Mmm.

Like, if we use the idea of "weaving," how then do we account for absence? For gaps? Divergence? The role of the historian is not about *creating* patterns. So yeah. I am uneasy with the idea of collectivity if it is just a vehicle for simplicity. I want to "name" this sense of discomfort.

I like the idea of letting memories roam.

Perhaps a better metaphor would be dropped stitches in the weaving? Although this still implies linearity, from which rupture is the exception...

I'm adding a picture of a spider's web—is that any closer to what we're trying to say? Maybe not. There's still order here.

Yeah. I don't know why I'm always looking for the intersect rather than the—what's the opposite of that? But I think for Patricia DeRocher, the idea of testimonio is very

much about reconciling lived experience with social knowledge, rather than finding pattern for the sake of pattern. The form of life-writing that DeRocher is thinking about is deliberately a collective of people with different positionalities of course, but with a shared experience; their stories are told from the singular as a political act to highlight both the uniqueness of the individual, and the commonality of a shared experience. Perhaps we can find rupture here, through these two sides of the same coin?

Testimonio, for me then, is really crucial. I love this book. It really thinks through what life writing is: what it is to *write* about the self and others, and what it is to *read* about life experience. Does the breath of the author begin and end with the testimonio? With the listening to the story?⁴

“Something’s off!” Reassessing the vernacular

Where healing and transformation are “crucial strategies in any approach that asks a community to remember what they may have decided unconsciously or consciously to forget,” can humor also be helpful? The potency of humor is a classic method of dismantling power.⁵

Yes...but what register of humor would this be?

Humor as healing might be about working through really difficult things that you can’t otherwise talk about. There’s an expression isn’t there...is it: *if you don’t laugh, you’d cry*? This idea that you are forced to recognize and reconcile this tension within yourself.

Perhaps this is actually all about tone?

Yeah.

Yes!

Absolutely.

Livia, I was thinking as you were talking about your presentation at the conference, how you go into this archive full of insects and cleaning products and random crap, and it’s this idea that history is gone a bit off, you know? I loved how you were just like looking at the super quotidian, bringing the work back into that very close looking. Because history is off, right—like the milk’s off in the fridge. I quite like that play into the vernacular, again taking the power away from the idea of “grand thinking,” the idea of “decentering.” Perhaps there is something there that we can draw on in writing this piece?

I totally agree. It’s a lot about the use and reassessment of terms. Because if you’re really assessing your positionality—as we are trying to do—then you are also reassessing the terms that you use, the forms of communication, you know...the vernacular. I mean, I’m much more likely to say “something’s off” in my daily life than I am to say, “oh that has been *decentered*.” Yeah, might be nice to play with those registers actually.

...Maybe we just make the *JDH* submission into a TikTok?

Of breath, of stolen breath, of stolen voices⁶

So, I was thinking here about the use—the appropriation?—of space, rendered vacant through the Covid crisis, to highlight social injustices and pervasive, systemic racism

(Figure 2). This poster outside Camden Tube station obviously refers to the killing of George Floyd, and it got me thinking about how this piece was installed through billboard vacancies that were the result of the pandemic, and also the narrative around lockdown being heralded as a “breathing space” from the rat race and all that stuff... When actually for many people, because of childcare responsibilities or issues around the safety of your home environment, lockdown hasn’t created a “breathing space” or more time for yourself.

Just as there are questions around scale here—from the relatively small billboard in Camden to the huge artworks installed on Capitol Hill, LA and Baltimore—I think this points to issues of accountability and personal response to moments of crisis (of racism, coronavirus...). For instance, Brighton and Hove Council declared itself an anti-racist city, in the wake of George Floyd’s death, but it has since been called to account through a petition organized by mainly women of color to act on this.

Yeah, in terms of our own responses to moments of crisis I had a really deep sense of frustration during the Black Lives Matter movement, because of these performative acts on, like, Instagram of people posting black squares. Did you know about this? Yeah. It drove me absolutely mad, primarily because it was being done by people who would never do the work and don’t think critically about their own place in an overarching racist society. But there was also this additional layer of frustration that hash tagging #blacklivesmatter on these squares was actually blocking out critical up-to-date information for protesters on police, enforcement, and organized responses—silencing information on how to stay safe.

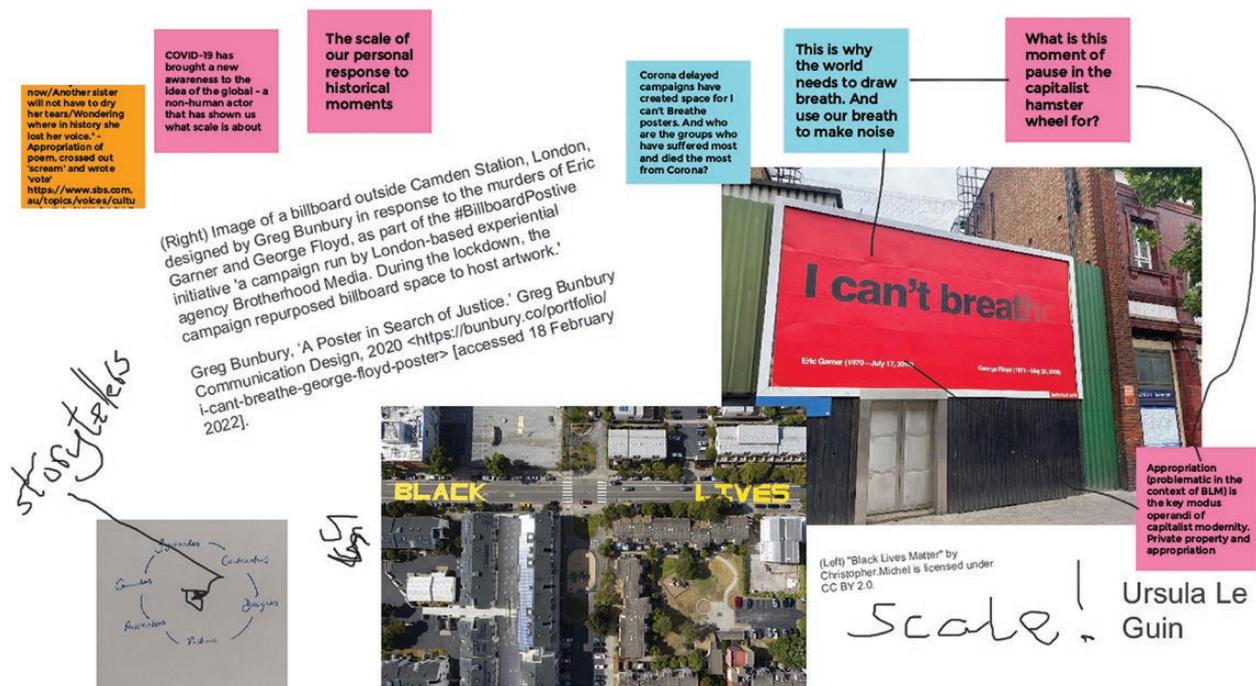


Fig 2. Of breath, of stolen breath, of stolen voices. Collage by OPEN, 2020. Collage 2 image credits: “Black Lives Matter” by Christopher.Michel (CC BY 2.0) sourced from: <https://wordpress.org/openverse/image/1889e5d7-3f18-4cc0-ab6f-94354a908278/>; “I Can’t Breathe” George Floyd Poster, located outside Camden Station, London, as displayed on Greg Bunbury’s online portfolio and used with Bunbury’s permission.

Oh, absolutely. I mean, the issue of appropriation, I think is still so unresolved in terms of a proper critical debate.

Grace as power, and palimpsests⁷

Is this your entry, Livia? (Figure 3)

Yes, this is a site-specific work titled *An Equitable Human Assertion Rasanblaj I*, by Gina Athena Ulysse I just experienced at the Sydney Biennale.

The text accompanying it is fantastic. I was particularly struck by the idea of radical vulnerability, and the idea of grace, of grace as power, as opposed to might as power, or strength as power. What would grace as power be? Something that opens us up to ideas of care and repair, which seem quite appropriate at the moment. Is it that grace as power is fueled by radical vulnerability, is it the new matrix in which we start to live? From these ideas I started to think about vulnerability and sensuality as well, bringing it back to the body. And also to think about sensuousness, which made me think within the context of coloniality about an artist called Amrita Sher-Gil, an Indian modernist painter who was working in India and then went to Paris for a while in the 1920s and 1930s. She was schooled in European modernism, but she was born in India to a Sikh father. She was speaking to modernism and coloniality through the idea of sensuality. I thought I'd put that reference in as an interesting take on the idea of where grace can potentially take us: not necessarily

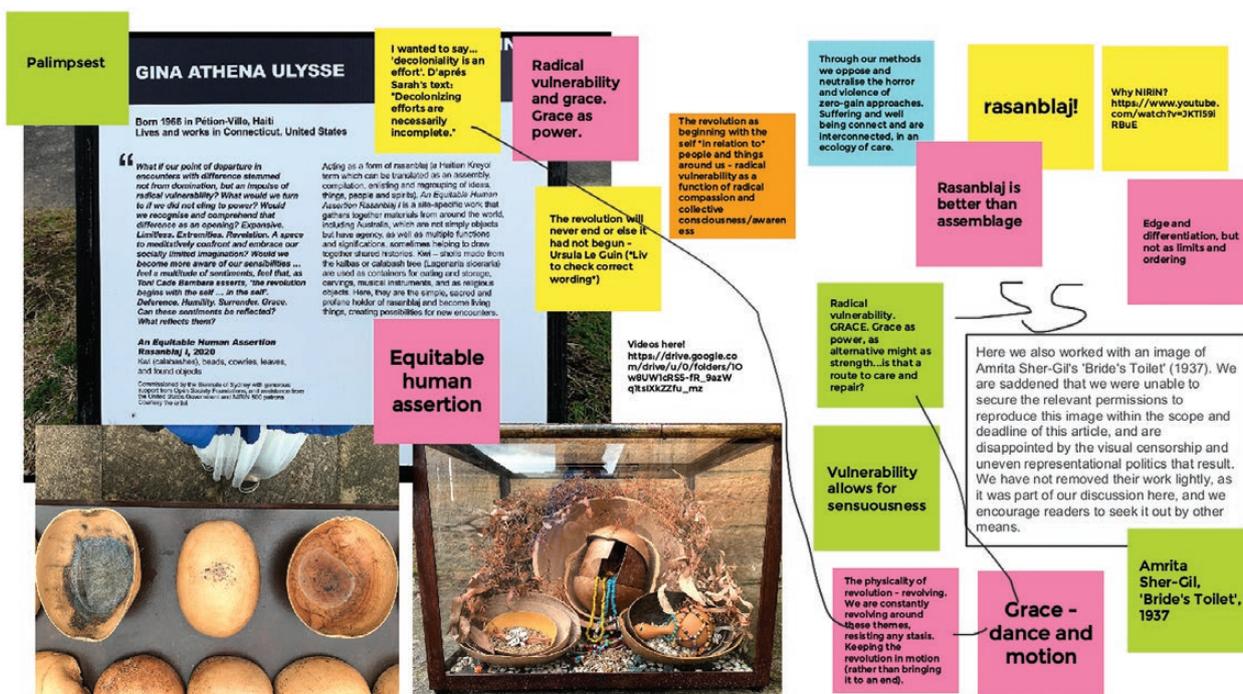


Fig 3. Grace as power, and palimpsests. Collage by OPEN, 2020. Collage 3 image credits: Gina Athena Ulysse, *An Equitable Human Assertion Rasanblaj I*, 2020. Installation view for the 22nd Biennale of Sydney (2020), Cockatoo Island. Commissioned by the Biennale of Sydney with generous support from Open Society Foundations, and assistance from the United States Government and NIRIN 500 patrons. Courtesy of the artist.

as an attribute but rather as a mechanism, as a kind of dynamism and as a form of activism, maybe.

There's a multitude of different experiences going on. An object like the calabash, these massive natural shells, is typical in Africa, the Caribbean and in Brazil, they are part of Afro Brazilian culture and have religious uses as well. They work as musical instruments with beaded meshes attached to them. I thought it was powerful that some of the calabashes were cut in half, exposed to the elements and collecting the water from the rain, so they were full. The way in which they reflected the sky on the water, I mean, there are so many beautiful, layered aspects about this work. The wall text promises a "gathering of ideas, things, people and spirits" and it does that! It is the question of vulnerability and power, power generated in a different form, not violent physical power.

I love the rasanblaj!—it works on some many levels much better than the French assemblage.

That's a riff that we need to put in there!

Sarah, in your call for papers for the *International Journal of Fashion Studies*, I read something powerful and beautiful: that decolonizing efforts are necessarily incomplete. Here you talk about decolonizing as an effort because that's what it is in terms of being painful, in terms of one looking at oneself and one's assumptions and biases. And it's not supposed to be neat. In *The Dispossessed* Ursula Le Guin talks about the meanings of revolution, that "the Revolution is in the individual spirit, or it is nowhere. It is for all, or it is nothing. If it is seen as having any end, it will never truly begin."⁸ That is how I see the decolonial effort, not only personal but also incomplete. Not incomplete in the sense of being unsuccessful or halted but because the decolonial effort, in opposition to the colonial ones, cannot be seen as having a neat end, as a promise. The revolution is in the frequent and careful reassessment of our assumptions.

I just read *Nervous Conditions* by Tsitsi Dangarembga and I'm thinking about how people experience and express being anti-racist, and how that changes through time.⁷ It's never done, it's never something you ever finish.

To comment on that idea of temporality. I'm thinking about the physicality of the idea of revolution, of revolving and thinking about whether there's something in our collages about how we're constantly revolving around these themes as a way to disrupt any stasis. What we're not doing is we're not reinventing the wheel in this revolution. But what we are doing is keeping it in motion. That's really important, I think, because some people may get obsessed with "how do you fix it?," the idea of the solutionist impulse, which is so colonial. Actually, isn't it the motion impulse that's important?

If temporarily we are much more concerned with the motion impulse, then that can be graceful because that is about collecting things along the way. It's about adding to, it is additive. Sarah and I have spoken about this idea of "and, and" as a methodology.¹⁰ It's also not necessarily about leaving things behind because you're in a wheel, so you revisit it. This idea of the colonial progressive history of modernity is basically run over by the idea that you just keep going round and round again. Looking again.

“Where are the holes and the termites”?¹¹

Should we move on?

I experienced this artwork by Tania Bruguera who does participatory art, is an activist, she works within communities, for communities, her work has impactful outcomes, to use the academic spiel! It was installed in an archaeological industrial site on Cockatoo Island in Sydney. Visitors found this little table and a tattoo parlor next to this drawer full of index cards. It was really beautifully installed because I felt straight away that the work is about spaces and losses. The first thing that came to mind was “there is something missing here.” Whether the walls, the people or something else—I felt that something was missing. Then, I went through the wall text and found out that the work is an archive of people killed because of environmental activism. I photographed one of the index cards: it says “Saw Johnny was killed in July 2015, shot eight times by an unknown assailant in his house in Myanmar.” This card records in a clinical way who this person was: male, Myanmar, got shot near his daughter who found him still breathing before he passed away.

There’s something quite impactful about the clinical approach to someone’s death. This has a huge resonance with our body count of the COVID disaster. We seem obsessed with the body count and how many have died, which may seem logical at first, necessary even, but does it not backfire in desensitizing us? There is one great quote in *The Dispossessed* in which Le Guin asks “But by damn! I can’t add up figures like that. I don’t know if it’s right to count people like you count numbers?”¹²

In this work, Bruguera is dealing with this idea of the memorialization and the erasure of these people from a really interesting perspective. Linked to this work there was a performance. A local artist tattooed participants using an inkless needle. Like those who have been murdered and recorded in the archive, this invisible tattoo disappeared after a while. So, you experience the artwork, get a bit of a red mark, a scab, some scarring from the act of inkless inscription but afterwards it all goes away. The title of the artwork is *Unnamed* and it proposes: “by marking the name of an individual killed through resource related violence onto the body of another the act of memorialization becomes an intimate person to person act and seeks to personalize the data that records this loss.”¹³

This artwork and proposition are incredibly well made. They are so integral, full of dignity—and that’s how I sensed it honestly. My excitement about the work was because it challenges the idea of the record and the archive. I’m very invested in these questions: who writes the archive and who engages with the archive? Where are the silences, where are the gaps, where are the holes and the termites? It speaks straight to my heart.

I pretty much picked up on that because my post-it note says something like gaps and absences. The idea of rifling through those index cards, it reminded me of the way back in the day when you’d go to a record shop, you’d rifle through, and you’d kind of pick your sound. But obviously, the index cards are just a brilliant visual around taxonomy and all that kind of stuff.

Absolutely, it’s very nineteenth century, it is about “registering what happened.” It’s the “record of history.”

It’s the keeping record of every kind. Through the keeping of records you give becomingness. Right? So, when there are gaps there’s no opportunity for becomingness either. There’s no opportunity for personhood.

Do you know that song by Janelle Monae called "Hell You Talmbout?"¹⁴ She's made an instrumental version of the song so people can add their own names.

Seriously? It's amazing that you can add your own people to it.

Gets back to the point of iteration, I guess, and being able to, you know, these things always work like she's made this piece of artwork that is itself constantly in motion and constantly evolving.

Because you can't add your own to the official archive of index cards. Ordinarily, you can't go into the National Archives and slip your own in, but you can just add and create your own and all multiple records [to this song]. It's this thing about the one true record, isn't it? And the one true database, thinking more in terms of a kind of multiple cycling changing thing of memory and memorialization?

Are names enough? Is naming someone enough of creating a memory of them?

What do I want history to do to me?

I wanted to start with a quote from Édouard Glissant, from *Poetics of Relation*, originally published in 1990 (Figure 4).¹⁵ He writes about opacity, and what I love about his idea is that he uses it to tear apart notions of transparency. Coloniality and modernity have relied on the idea of transparency as some sort of universalizing truth. As ways of

2. Opacity...

Agree not merely to the right to difference but, carrying this further, agree also to the right to opacity that is not enclosure within an impenetrable autarchy but subsistence within an irreducible singularity. Opacities can coexist and converge, weaving fabrics. To understand these truly one must focus on the texture of the weave and not on the nature of its components. For the time being, perhaps, give up this old obsession with discovering what lies at the bottom of natures. There would be something great and noble and initiating such a movement, referring not to Humanity but to the exultant divergence of humanities. Thought of self and thought of other here become obsolete in their duality. Every Other is a citizen and no longer a barbarians. What is here is open, as much as this there. I would be incapable of projecting from one to the other. This-here is the weave, and it weaves no boundaries. The right to opacity would not establish autism; it would be the real foundation of Relation, in freedoms.

Édouard Glissant, 'Poetics of Relation', 1997.

Opacity that is used to oppose the transparency of colonial knowledge forms - framing room for difference through opacity (mess)

I am profoundly moved by this

So what happens when you tell some of the stories of the time and space between the coining of the words "Brexit" and "Covid"?

Time, art, thought, history, language; who gets to speak and who doesn't; people real and fictional and how their stories are and aren't told; division, loss; protest, activism, resistance; generosity, the story of unexpected and extended family. Human coldness, human warmth, human work.

Leaves. Bare branches. Frost. Buds. Leaves again.

(Ali Smith, The Guardian, 1 August 2020, 'Before Brexit, Grenfell, Covid-19...')

Grace

Transcribing and messiness (translating and names) - Are there things that are only knowable to yourself - what are the implications for history?

Cycles of history, cycles of fashion, cycles of the body (Women's history is cyclical, not teleological, says Kristeva).

4. Provocation: What Do We Want History to Do to Us?

Question/title/provocation by Zadie Smith in her essay about Kara Walker's 'Fons Americanus'.



I want history to locate me. But, not in a fountain. Why a fountain?

The pitfalls of reading things that their materiality convey some sort of special truth lingering form the past and therefore more truthful because of the validity of time.

the laws of transparency that govern colonial knowledge

places, brings people together. Benefactors give something to the people. Dressed up in history, with water flowing through it, squirting out of it, collecting in pools. People throw coins in, they paddle, they take photographs.

Evidence - Design history reads the evidence. Creating absurd things, inversions, metaphors, questions the evidence

history changes all the time

Love mess as a method

5. Decolonial aestheSis

Decolonial aestheSis asks why Western aesthetic categories like 'beauty' or 'representation' have come to dominate all discussion of art and its value, and how those categories organise the way we think of ourselves and others: as white or black, high or low, strong or weak, good or evil. And decolonial art (or literature, architecture, and so on) enacts these critiques, using techniques like juxtaposition, parody, or simple disobedience to the rules of art and polite society. To expose the contradictions of coloniality, its goal, then, is not to produce feelings of beauty or sublimity, but ones of sadness, indignation, repentance, hope, and determination to change things in the future. (Social Text, Decolonial AestheSis)

Fig 4. What do I want history to do to me? Collage by OPEN, 2020. Collage 4 image credits: Kara Walker, Fons Americanus, 2019. Nontoxic acrylic and cement composite, recyclable cork, wood, and metal. Main: 73.5 x 50 x 43 feet (22.4 x 15.2 x 13.2 m), Grotto: 10.2 x 10.5 x 10.8 feet (3.1 x 3.2 x 3.3 m) Installation view: Hyundai Commission: Kara Walker—Fons Americanus, Tate Modern, London, UK, 2019. Photograph: Tate (Matt Greenwood). © Kara Walker, courtesy of Sikkema Jenkins & Co., New York; Sprueth Magers, Berlin.

creating linear frames of progress, as ways of shutting down different forms of knowledge and creating ontologies that we know are discriminatory and exclusive.

I use opacity as a way of thinking outside of this: thinking within the mess and untidiness and uncertainty of all of those other ways of being.

The quote reinforces the urgency to create room for difference. Recently Ali Smith, the British author, wrote some reflexions on her new book *Summer*.¹⁶ And she is asking so many of the same fundamental questions as Glissant about ontological truth; about time, art, history, language, about who gets to speak and who doesn't?

I'm always trying to think about how these theories afford an activist position.

Look at *Fons Americanus*, a sculpture by Kara Walker in Tate Modern.¹⁷ It's a riff off the monument in front of Buckingham Palace, a monument of Queen Victoria and of the Empire, its great progressive enlightenment values. Kara Walker uses esoteric references to completely dismantle these ideas. She uses cartoon, subversion, pastiche to reference specifically the Atlantic slave trade.

Zadie Smith then wrote an accompanying essay asking "What do we want history to do to us?" For me, this sort of question triggers the switch from theory to activism.¹⁸

As design historians we think about "making" history. We "do" history in a maker way. If we invert this idea, we can ask: what do I want history to do to me?

These ideas led me to decolonial aestheSis.¹⁹ The personal is about bringing subjectivity to how I look, how I read, how I think and understand.

In response to the provocation, *what do we want history to do to us?* I wrote a very direct reply: it is, I want history to locate me.

It took me a long time to write that sentence. This is what I always demand from history. I always want it to locate me...but not in a fountain!

We talk so much about positionality. But it's difficult sometimes to understand what that means to me. When I ask, what do I want history to do to me? I find my position within a narrative then, which gives me at least if nothing else, a starting point, one that I hope will be opaque actually, but at least it gives me somewhere to put effort and make an intervention.

In relation to messiness, and the Ali Smith quote, it made me think again about cycles of history and cycles of the body and Julia Kristeva's piece about women's history.²⁰

What are the different ways people have thought about history? What are the implications for history here, and the different ways that history has been done?

I didn't know anything else about Kara Walker's work. So I just thought, *why a fountain?* And then I started thinking about the fountain and what it does, and, and I couldn't get there.

Breathing space

This is a comment on messiness and what's knowable to yourself and what's not knowable, and what's public knowledge and what's private knowledge; and how to approach history from the point of view of opacity (Figure 5). If we are not going to worry about the laws of transparency that govern colonial forms of knowledge, and

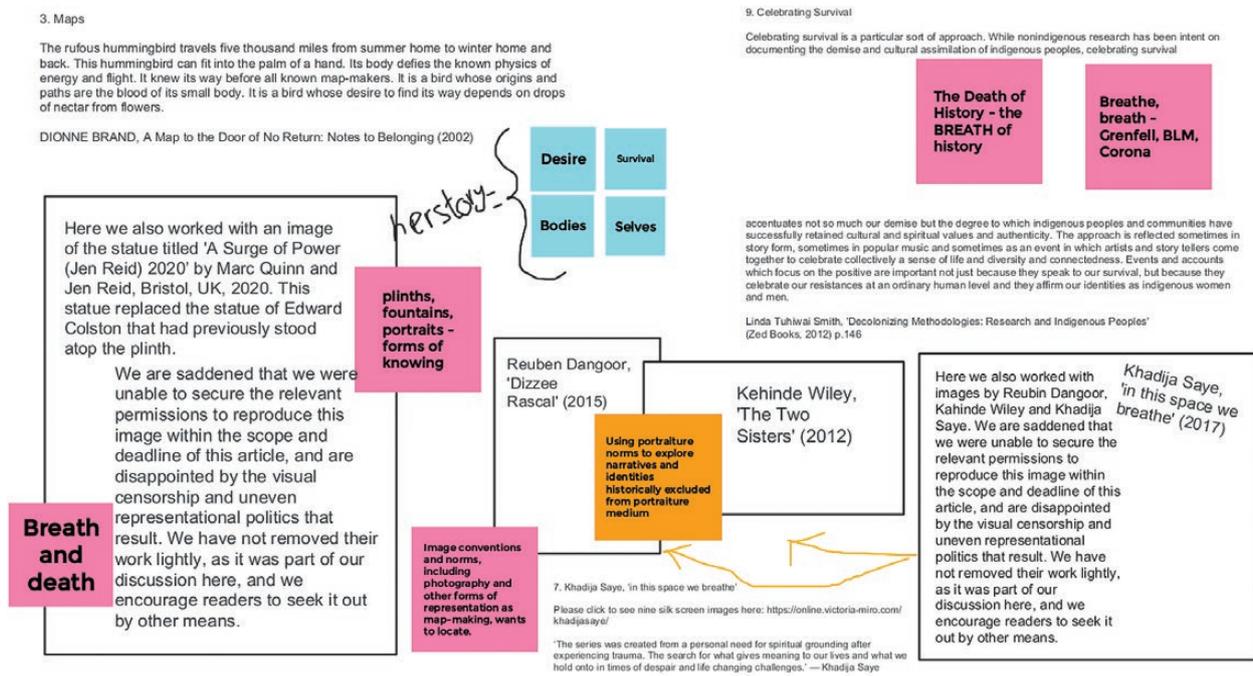


Fig 5. Breathing space. Collage by OPEN, 2020.

we're instead going to embrace the opacity, how do we communicate with one another? And how do we make meaningful work?

Without reducing history.

One of the caveats, one of the pitfalls of design history is perhaps reading objects too closely or too loosely. Walker plays with these ideas creating *other* things: impossible things, absurd things, inversions. This is how she tells us that some things are lies. Because certain objects exist, they are material, and they're sensible, and you can experience them over a long period of time, they become evidence of a certain idea as if it were true.

How can we actually play with things to insert doubt into truthfulness?

Allow for the gaps of memory.

Allow for the creativity of memory.

A quote from Dionne Brand's book, *A Map to the Door of No Return*,²¹ where she's talking about ideas of maps and map makers, but through birds. I found it fascinating and liberating to think about maps in that way.

The hummingbird travels.

And then at the bottom of the Breathing Space collage, the Khadija Saye photographs loop us back to breath. Khadija Saye is the artist who died in the Grenfell fire. This series is called "in this space we breathe."²²

In the context of our conversation it feels amazing to me that we've kind of come here and taken this route out. Of course, Khadija's story is horrific, given she was asphyxiated by burning flames in the fire in Grenfell Tower, London, in 2017.

And what is *An Economy of Grace*?

An Economy of Grace is the portrait of the two women by Kehinde Wiley...

I did a little bit of googling around Khadija Saye's work and there was a section about how she deliberately uses 15th century portraiture norms. Obviously here she's using photography, but the idea was to use portraiture in order to tell stories that she wanted to tell and capture things in her own way.

From this I was reminded of these two other artists, Reuben Dangoor, and Kehinde Wiley who did the presidential portraits. Both of them draw on Western dominant white men in grand suits being painted and then hung in their hallway kind of norms, but the subjects are very different.

I was thinking when you were talking about Walker's fountain about the different analogies that we draw depending on the media that we use?

Actually, it comes back to the book by Dionne Brand. She's talking about the hummingbird, and she says, "It knew its way before all known map-makers. It is a bird whose origins and paths are the blood of its small body. It is a bird whose desire to find its way depends on drops of nectar from flowers."

This to me really speaks to the idea of individual locatedness.

The idea of knowing through our own positionality how we might find our way through history.

It's not always about the directed map, which is sometimes what the orthodoxy presents you with. But I really like the idea of knowing, through other ways—embodied, emotional positions; where we might find our roots and how we might shape our journey.

Khadija Saye also knew that. That was sort of the premise of her work, the idea of excavating personal locatedness within her own history and heritage. It's just that she happened to live in a city and a borough that was completely controlled by the greed of advanced capitalism that cost people their lives.

To put it bluntly, it took her last breath.

The Breathing Space collage (**Figure 5**) brings together for me themes around breathing and breath and holding breath, being able to breathe, having your breath extinguished by racism and capitalism. The pause that we have experienced through lockdown, and the idea of taking breath. The idea that through the awful events of this year, there is this opportunity to remake our world. A lot of the remaking is drawing on anarchist fundamentals of organization, the idea that only the people can save the people.

It can't last, or can it last and how do you make it lasting?

This conversation brings me back to the body: going back to the breath and the drawing of breath and the hiatus—a held breath—that's going to asphyxiate you; or whether it's actually a held breath in order to calm your heartbeat and stop the mania of everything you have to engage in.

I'm writing so much in this pause, a lot of people are and, but we don't want to write in order to service the system and prop it up. We want to do something new and shift the system or move the system; change the system.

So all this thinking about plinths and fountains and portraits as particular forms of representation and knowledge and metaphor and power. If we can connect these to breath, breathing, pausing, to the horror and the violence and the death and the murder of Grenfell and BLM and the corona virus victims.

If we can somehow bring these together to reflect the very particular moment in which we're able to do this work that we're doing right now...

We are doing this work in a very particular moment in history when we're seeing the convergence of all of these horrors.

This goes back to that question: *What do we want history to do to us?*

To see the rings you have to kill the tree²³

I kept coming back to the idea of history and evidence, and other ways to think about memory, history, truth, authenticity, and human experience (Figure 6). How [written] history and time are encoded in words and archival entries, but they go beyond the span of a human lifetime or involve thinking back through generations.

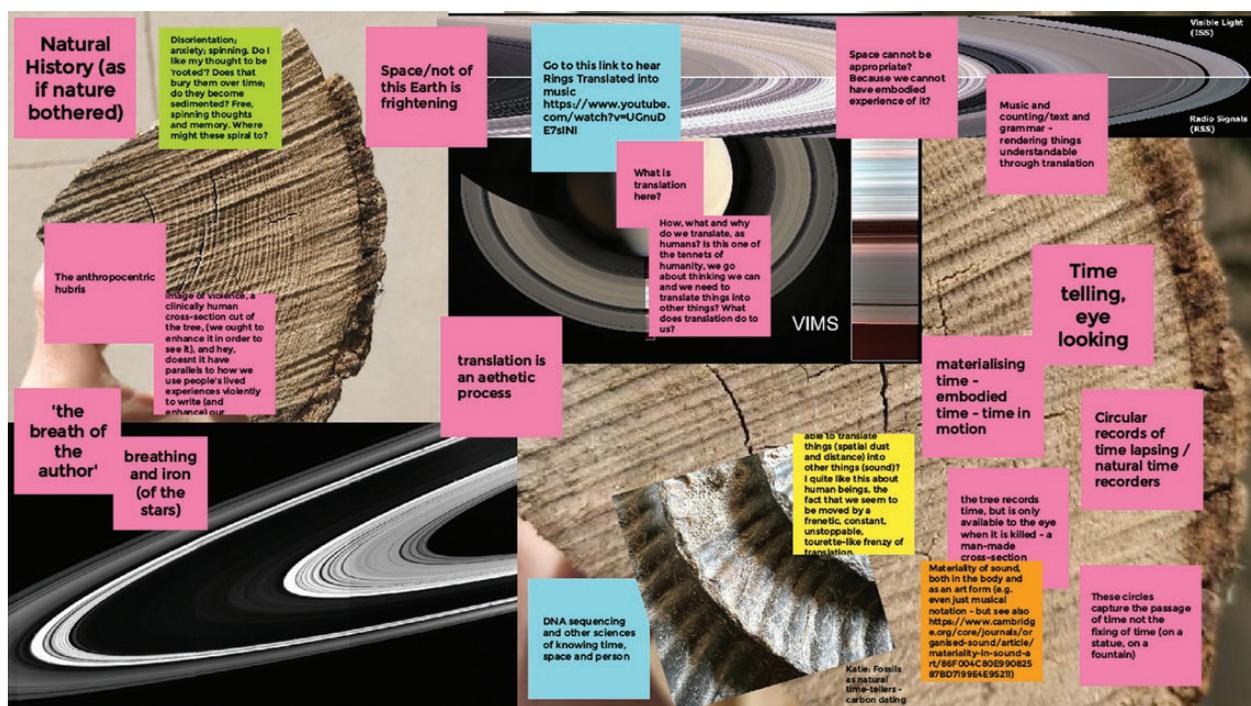


Fig 6. To see the rings... / Translations beyond our grasp. Collage by OPEN, 2020. Collage 6 image credits: "Wood grain" by Katie Irani; Saturn's Rings by Voyager 1, Planetary Photojournal, courtesy of NASA/JPL Caltech.; Saturn Rings IR Map 20190613: Spectral Map, June 13, 2019 by the Cassini mission, courtesy of NASA/JPL/JPL Caltech; Saturn's Rings in visible light and radio, by the Cassini mission, courtesy of NASA/JPL/Space Science Institute, "Fossil ammonite" by Sarah Cheang.

And I read about dendrochronology which is a kind of continuous mapping of tree ring growth across centuries. Using dendrochronology, it's possible to take a piece of [centuries old] timber and look at the patterns in the wood, specifically the gaps between each ring, and then figure out when the tree grew, and roughly date the timber. And, so it's a way of trying to pin things down in time without written records...concentric circles meet a science of linear time.

And when they open icebergs, they can see passages of time [in] atmospheric composition.

We've been thinking about opacity and messiness in questions about translation, intelligibility, and memory. These concentric different coloured tree rings mean different climates or different temperatures that affected the growth rate of the tree and every ring is different because it was responding to the conditions in which it was laid down. These are different models for thinking about time and memory and history.

This is now reminding me of thumbprints as well. So, there's this kind of individuality.

I just put an example of a fossil...natural time and a linear chronology of time that's been imposed by humans.

Objects are seen as being conceived in time and interpreted as the markers of time. [Here] time is very visibly materialized, but it doesn't only trace and stabilize time in one fixed position, it shows the passage of time and comes back to that idea of motion.

The tree is constantly laying down layers of time, recording time through growth in these beautiful yearly cycles. It makes us know we're on this globe, moving in an ellipse around the sun and these rings. But is our only way of seeing—making it into something for the [human] eye—to cut the tree? To see the rings, you have to kill the tree?

Cutting the tree in section, we're seeing a real man-made image of this phenomenon. And that is staggering in itself, because it kind of alludes to so many aspects of our need to translate things.... It's like anthropocentric hubris.

I wanted to make a connection with the violence that's done where we take an individual person's story and try and make it into a history. What happens when we try and enhance it to fit the form that we need, or we cross-section it in various ways, and what's lost. The tree's got its own private, individual way of recording the passage of time, and violence has to happen in order to make that visible, make that into an aesthetic form that we can work with as humans.

And then it is really interesting how wood becomes a metaphor for nature and the natural or it's a sign of the natural and we talk about the natural beauty of the grain. And we have to enhance that in order to see it, do things to it to see it. And in order to enhance and make usable the authentic story of an individual we have to do certain things to it.

It goes back again to decolonial aestheSis. And the different ways that you have to work, and all the structures and assumptions that you have to challenge, in order to actually engage properly with decolonial aestheSis.²⁴ And, to be corny for a second, there's that idea of sanding things down as well. There's something very smooth and polished and finished about these images of woods. But, of course, with the sanding down, you're basically raising; you're molding and shaping and creating ...

Translations beyond our grasp²⁵

I found a recording where music was created from intervals in the movements of the moons of Saturn and the gaps in Saturn's rings. To some extent, this truly is the music of the spheres. Well, of course, it's not because it's another man-made fabrication. It's another way of trying to make something accessible to the sensing human. And it's an aesthetic creation.

...although it's rooted ... in the planets themselves...it's still a human composition. Full of human choices.

I was interested in asking about reading translations, because this [Saturn music] sees itself as a translation. "Moons and Rings: Translated into Music."

Isn't it an interpretation? Are we using the word translation too loosely? What is translation? I've been thinking about translation predominantly around words. But when it comes to sound, can you even use the word translation?

And there's a politics to translation that is always relevant and present in the act of translating.

Oh, because text has the structures of text and linguistics and syntax, and all the other structures of language that we know about means that translation of text also operates within those systems of power.

The translator is there to make something comprehensible to me that without the translator, I would not be able to comprehend or access. And that might just be something as simple as language. But with this music piece, what I felt was a feeling of disorientation, anxiety...I actually found an out of body experience, that was something that was not familiar, that wasn't about giving me that sense of being located somewhere so that I can make sense.

Maybe it would be less disorientating and anxiety inducing if we knew how to comprehend the Saturn music. Things that are not of this earth become frightening because the translation becomes impossible, because it takes us so far away from the anthropocentric possibilities.

And so, what happens when you're trying to translate something that you don't know? How do you make meaning?

There is one word in Portuguese which I know exactly how to use, and I have tried to use it in English, and I can't find the correct translation. The word is *sobrecodificar*... "Sobre" is over and "codificar" is to codify. So anthropologists use this term when they are looking at, say, an ethnologist who goes into the hinterlands of the Amazon and does fieldwork with a community that hadn't really been very much contacted and they have their own ways of knowing, their ways of thinking, their ways of interacting... And...this ethnologist might, putting it simply, want to understand in his or her own terms, or, and that's the word that I'm missing in English, they might *sobrecodificar*—over-codify—that world and try and find analogues in his own or her own world processes. That is the killing of an epistemology, a epistemicide. It's the moment in which you don't allow that world to exist on its own terms. Just super-codify it. You want to translate, but it's the act of translation that kills it. Because we want to find analogues.

The original problem is that we've got such a colonial wordsmith, the Codex. Can we go back to "the death of the author" versus "the breath is the author" here?

One of the things about Saturn and space is that you cannot live in it—it's unliveable—it's something we will not be able to embody.

Yeah, when you're talking about the solar system, it scares the shit out of me as well.

And that's really threatening. The difference between the ethnologist and their readers is precisely the fact that we haven't lived there. We haven't embodied it. We haven't learned a language. We haven't experienced. We haven't found. So translation is this process of mediation. Maybe badly done, it's a violent codification. Perhaps more accurately done, it's more open ended.

Okay, let's move on.

Circles, loops, and spinning histories

I looked at the rings of Saturn and I thought about the music, and I thought about vinyl records (Figure 7). In a very, very obvious way! I thought about records and CDs, and all the different circular ways of recording sound, reels and spinning circles. And I went on to Billie Holiday because my dad made me a cassette tape of her music when I left home for the first time.

I thought about memory and history and the way that Carol Tulloch tried to write the history of Billie Holiday, trying not to essentialise, trying not to pin her down, trying to find a sense of the woman.²⁶ And she's using the idea of collage to think about that.

This is about a cyclical process, not only in terms of the place of Billie Holiday's body, as translated through Carol Tulloch, within the histories of both black women histories but also jazz. And so we're coming back to those circles. The concentric circles of the trees or the circles of histories or the circles of the orbiting planets. And there's something incredibly visually and aurally and materially cyclical here.

But then I wanted to think also about the idea of rhythm as being cyclical and loop- ing, and interconnected. And because of jazz, I started to think about improvisation.

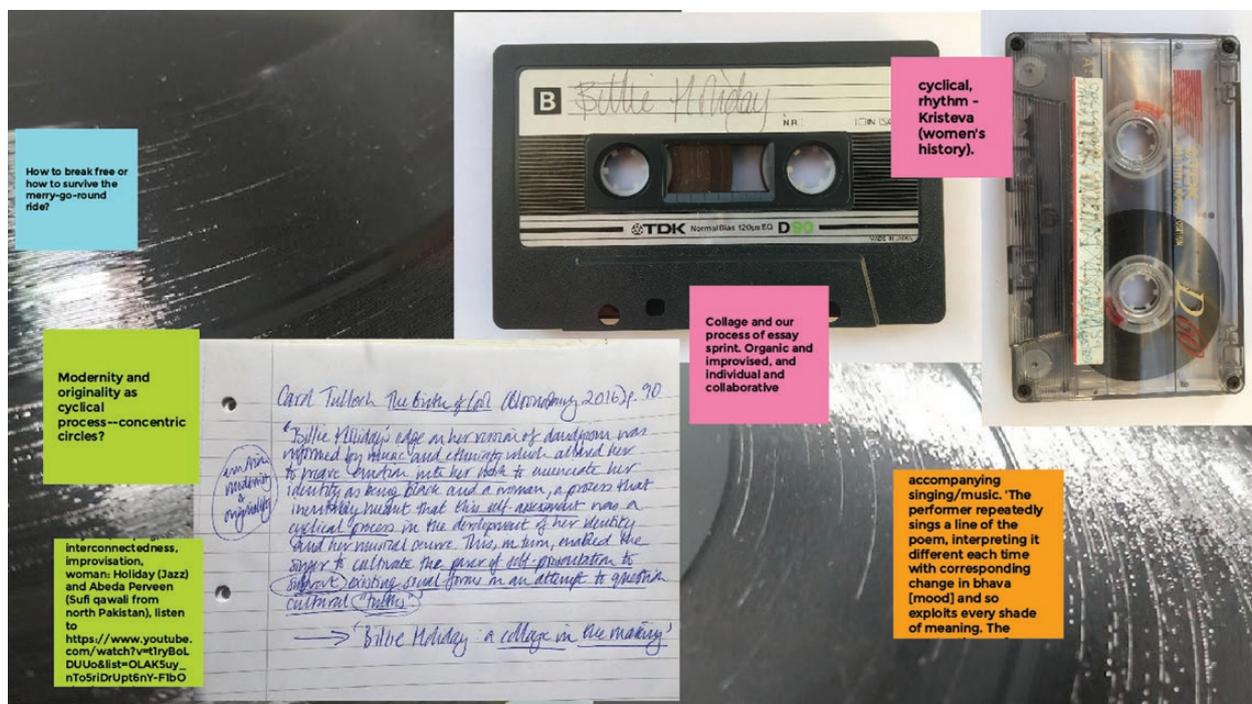


Figure 7. Circles, loops and spinning histories. Collage by OPEN, 2020. Collage 7 image credits: "Vinyl" by Katie Irani; "Billie Holliday" by Sarah Cheang; "Cassette tape" by Sarah Cheang; "Notes" by Sarah Cheang.

And that took me to Sufi music that I know from Pakistan. And Sufism relies on the optic of the swirling dervish that just spins around and around very much like our orbiting planets. And the faster you spin, and the faster that the orbit of your shalwar kameez twirls around you, it's understood that that's how you get into your trance state. So the trance state comes through motion and through spinning and through orbiting. And the music that goes with it is based on improvisation and on a particular rhythmic beat that is very, very close to jazz. But that comes from a very different tradition from Central Asia. But Qawwali is a really interesting parallel when thinking about jazz. It is presenting first and foremost, a vocal and oral tradition that is based on breath and breathing. You sit in a group and together you create music through breath, you create the rhythm through breath, you'll have two instruments, you'll have the tabla which are the drums, then you'll have the harmonium. But other than that, it's all breath. And it's clapping, you know, [claps] you create the rhythm.

I just think it's really nice to juxtapose those two, because of course you're talking about the Global South and the Global North as well there if you want to think along those terms, but the faultlines become interesting.

I just added another example of the accompanying melodies and voice accompaniments in kathak dance. The more improvisations that a performer can produce with their voice over the same line of poetry, over and over again, the better the performer.

And it's the idea of collage because with these oral traditions, and with improvisation, you are constantly sticking on the last thing that just happened. It's collage. It's palimpsest. It's...

...it's also organic.

And it's very bodily as well.

Coda

2:48:33

You wrote: "What is the jazz musician's memory like?" I found that really profound and that's kind of why I suddenly wrote the post-it about my dad having played in a Chinese jazz quartet.

2:49:01

Which is a really interesting kind of revisionist history, if you like, of that bringing forward of so many of the things that we're interested in, in that the body and breath and agency and experience and memory are top of our agenda. But I did also say that I really think that our collaboration is like a jazz improvisation. Or maybe it's jazz meets Qawwali meets... meets a bit of madrigals meets, you know,

2:49:35

a bit of planet trees sonic,

2:49:39

song playing, and

2:49:43

that was also a nice point of connection.

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Notes

- 1 <https://www.rcathisisopen.com>.
- 2 Please visit the OPEN website to respond with your thoughts: <https://thisisopen.squarespace.com>.
- 3 The subject of discussion here is Patricia DeRocher's work, which examines how testimonio form(s) act as an overtly political narrative vehicle that deliberately reflects collective memory. P. DeRocher, *Transnational Testimonios: The Politics of Collective Knowledge Production*, Decolonizing Feminisms (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2018).
- 4 This section emerged out of a discussion of Linda Tuhiwai Smith's work on decolonizing research methodologies which addresses the role of healing and transformation in research methodologies that ask a community to (re) encounter historical traumas that might have been collectively, deliberately "forgotten," and ethical research frameworks that might accompany such work. This section ends with a reference to a paper given by Livia Rezende in the 2020 CAA Annual Conference in Chicago. L. T. Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (2nd ed, London: Zed Books, 2012); L. Rezende, "Deep Encounters with the Design History Archives, from 1968 Brazil to Now," 108th CAA Annual Conference, Chicago, February 12–15, 2020.
- 5 L. T. Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 5.
- 6 The poster referenced in the opening paragraph was featured on a billboard located outside Camden Town TfL underground station (London, UK), and can be seen to the far right of collage *Of breath, of stolen breath, of stolen voices*. The poster was designed by Greg Bunbury, in the wake of the murders of Eric Garner and George Floyd, as part of the #BillboardPositive initiative, "a campaign run by London-based experiential agency Brotherhood Media. During the [Covid-19 2020] lockdown, the campaign repurposed billboard space to host artwork" ("A Poster in Search of Justice," Greg Bunbury Communication Design, 2020 <<https://bunbury.co/portfolio/i-cant-breathe-george-floyd-poster>> (accessed February 18, 2022). Image courtesy of Greg Bunbury.
- 7 When collecting prompts for our collective work, I was impacted by these artworks at the 2020 Biennale of Sydney NIRIN (accessed September 29, 2020). It was July 2020, I was leaving the first COVID lockdown, my senses were numbed. These artworks threw me out of balance, messed up my sense of place in a way that was uncomfortable and welcome. I lost track of time at Ullyse's *An Equitable Human Assertion, Rasanblaj I*. <https://ginaathenaulyse.com/an-equitable-human-assertion-rasanblaj> (accessed August 2, 2021).
- 8 Reading Ursula Le Guin in the context of the 2020 global pandemic significantly impacted on my conceptualization of collectivity and time. Le Guin's take on "revolution" as an individual's attainment and responsibility towards the collective hit a nerve while the killing of George Floyd and the Black Lives Matter protests unfolded. See U. Le Guin, *The Dispossessed* (London: Harper Collins, 1994 [first published May 1974]), 469–70.
- 9 Finding Dangarembga's 1988 book prominently displayed in a UK bookshop in summer 2020, during a time of heightened awareness of the Black Lives Matter movement, underlined how author/publisher/reader tensions are racial tensions. I am struck also by the final words of the author's interview: "I was...tired of feeling stressed as a second- or third-class citizen in Germany. Life is difficult in Zimbabwe at the moment but my soul breathes more freely here." T. Dangarembga, *Nervous Conditions* (Banbury: Ayeibia, 2004), 212.
- 10 As proposed by Bruno Latour in his foreword to V. Despret, *What Would Animals Say If We Asked the Right Questions?* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016).
- 11 Cuban artist Tania Bruguera affected my thinking about archives as there is a visceral connection between the archive

- of erased lives and my experience in the Brazilian archives. The reference to termites is better explained by a scholar of the Design school in whose walls these creatures co-existed with 3D models and typographic posters. Tania Bruguera, <https://www.biennaleofsydney.art/artists/tania-bruguera> (accessed 29 September 2020); Livia Rezende and Megha Rajguru, "In Conversation: the 2020 Design Writing Prize Winner" [podcast] <https://www.designhistorysociety.org/news/view/megha-rajguru-in-conversation-with-livia-lazzaro-rezende-the-2020-design-writing-prize-winner> (accessed 10 November 2021); Z. Anastassakis, "Remaking Everything: The Clash between Bigfoot, the Termites and Other Strange Miasmatic Emanations in an Old Industrial Design School," *Vibrant: Virtual Brazilian Anthropology*, 16 (2019), <http://dx.doi.org/10.1590/1809-43412019v16a203>.
- 12 Le Guin, op. cit, 460.
 - 13 Tania Bruguera, Unnamed. Installation view for the 22nd Biennale of Sydney (2020), Cockatoo Island. <https://www.biennaleofsydney.art/artists/tania-bruguera> (accessed September 29, 2020).
 - 14 As I prepare this file for submission, in a bout of synchronicity Theo Parrish's Ebonics starts blasting out of my sound system. It echoes our piece by asking "Black dialect is an expressive, vivid, living language. If we reject it, how little have we gained, and how much have we lost?"
 - 15 I was guided to Édouard Glissant's work while exploring writers in decolonial poetics; he and Aimé Césaire caught my attention through the lyricism of their brave visions challenging ontologies. Glissant moves beyond Western epistemologies of transparency, and his articulation of opacity as an open and generative relational possibility has reconfigured my own thinking in limitless ways. For this I'm bound to and grateful for his *Poetics of Relation* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997).
 - 16 Ali Smith is a British novelist, playwright, academic, and journalist whose work offers exciting models for breaking form. Her seasonal quartet, Autumn, Winter, Spring, Summer, are separate but interconnected across temporalities and histories. Her deft journeying through history as narrative, her ability to give texture to time through experience renews thinking about memory and cyclicity. Even in her journalism memory and time and ourselves are placed—and displaced. "Before Brexit, Grenfell, Covid-19...Ali Smith on Writing Four Novels in Four Years," *The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2020/aug/01/before-brexit-grenfell-covid-19-ali-smith-on-writing-four-novels-in-four-years> (accessed August 1, 2020).
 - 17 Kara Walker's *Fons Americanus* was the Hyundai Commission at Tate Modern 2019–20, <https://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-modern/exhibition/hyundai-commission-kara-walker> (accessed August 12, 2020). Walker's practice at large is materially and visually subversive; her focus on race and violence, intersecting with gender and sexuality, offers wry allegorical twists on imperialism and the transatlantic slave trade.
 - 18 Speaking of the *Fons Americanus* sculpture Zadie Smith writes: "Monuments are complacent; they put a seal upon the past, they release us from dread. For Walker dread is an engine: it prompts us to remember and rightly fear the ruins we shouldn't want to return to, and don't wish to re-create—if we're wise. Dread is surely one of the things we want history to cause in us, lest we forget." Z. Smith, "What Do We Want History to Do to Us?" *New York Review of Books*, February 27, 2020, p. 9. <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2020/02/27/kara-walker-what-do-we-want-history-to-do-to-us/>, (accessed August 13, 2020).
 - 19 W. Mignolo and R. Vázquez, "Decolonial AestheSis: Colonial Wounds/Decolonial Healings," *Social Text/Periscope* 11, no. 11 (July 2013). This text has been crucial in helping me to understand how the coloniality of aesthetics can be reframed through exposing the matrices of power within our material and visual arts, through revealing intersectional discriminations. It has offered OPEN ways to expand and develop methods of decolonial aestheSis as healing and therefore transformative.
 - 20 Kristeva's essay ranges across nationhood, subjectivity, gendered power relations and time. In particular she develops the idea of masculine linear time and feminine cyclical time. For me, Kristeva's work is not to be taken too literally, but it provides a place for developing important reflections and insights in relation to feminist approaches to history. J. Kristeva, "Women's Time," (trans. A. Jardine and H. Blake) *Signs* 7, no. 1 (Autumn, 1981):13–35.
 - 21 D. Brand, *A Map to the Door of No Return: Notes to Belonging* (Canada: Vintage Books, 2002). This nonlinear memoir has given me expansive ways to approach thinking and writing about identity. It uses a broad approach that covers cartography, history and ideas of belongingness through travel and displacement narratives. It is poetically and politically rich and exhilarating and a complex reflection on personal stories and positionality.
 - 22 "Khadija Saye: in this space we breathe," <https://www.victoria-miro.com/news/1313> (accessed August 17, 2020). Khadija Saye, known also as Ya-Haddy Sisi Saye, was a Gambian-British artist, activist and carer, who was killed in the Grenfell Tower fire in London on June 14, 2017, aged 24. Saye was the youngest exhibitor in the Diaspora Pavilion at the 2017 Venice Biennale, for which she developed a series of nine tintypes titled, *Dwelling: in this space we breathe*. In the work, Saye photographed herself with various sacred objects and healing instruments. She explored the migration of traditional Gambian spiritual practices and the trauma in embodied black experience.

- 23 The collage in this section was inspired by a paper on how to practice dendrochronology by taking core samples from living trees in order to understand woodland history, in other words to access a history of the wood, or a wood history, in terms of a long-standing community of trees, some of which are still growing. J. R. Pilcher, "Application of Dendrochronological Techniques to the Investigation of Woodland History," *The Irish Naturalists' Journal* 19, no. 11 (July 1979): 377–80.
- 24 In the same way as decolonial aestheSis is not a new art movement, but "is calling for the reconfiguration of art's historical narratives," our discussion across this section turned on a reconfiguration of archival narratives, object-led histories, and anthropocentric and Eurocentric/colonial frames. Rolando Vázquez, *VISTAS OF MODERNITY: Decolonial Aesthetics and the End of the Contemporary*, Mondriaan Fund Essay 014 (Amsterdam: Mondriaan Fund, 2020), 175.
- 25 We listened to "Saturn Sounds: Part 1: Moons and Rings Translated into Music" created by Matt Russ, Dan Tamayo and Andrew Santaguida, 2017, with animations by REBOUND, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UGnuDE7sINI> (accessed August 17, 2020). This tested what happens when the more ontological questions of thing theory and human/object relations are brought into dialogue with our sense of what the experiences and challenges might be of working across boundaries of time and space. For example, what if we read Bill Brown, "Thing Theory," *Critical Inquiry*, 28, no. 1 (Autumn 2001): 1–22, together with Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005)?
- 26 This collage was directly inspired by the way that Carol Tulloch has worked with notions of collage and also insists upon the value for historians of embracing methodologies that enable multiple returns to the same historical records and personal memories. Carol Tulloch, *The Birth of Cool: Style Narratives of the African Diaspora* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016).