

On Memory Work And Care

As we converge: curators, artists, essayists, visual storytellers and viewers, we co-constitute a process of memory **work**, when the past is mediated in the present.

Symbols and stories are access points for our inquiry. They are necessary because, according to Sontag (2003), memory does not have an intrinsically collective characteristic, instead interpretations of the past are a political act mediated by images and narratives.

Memory work in post-colonial Africa has often followed the **imperial formula** of remembrance: national days of commemoration, public monuments, museums, exhibitions and even school curricula all fall within the remit of aligning citizens with perceived, agreed-upon values in remembering the past. These forms of transmission create a **state memory** that situates the citizen's identity within its sovereign sense of heritage, as belonging to iconic state symbols and ideas (Nora 1996; Ricoeur 2004). Memory applied from above constitutes what Bell (2003) calls a **governing mythology** whereby the transitional state decides which past is to be remembered, when it can be voiced, and what material constitutes acceptable, valid forms of representation.

Given this perpetuation of the colonial condition, Azoulay (2020) advocates for a process of historical inquiry in which one stops transferring ways of knowing from imperial structures into postcolonial spaces. She describes this **unlearning** as a mechanism to complicate the go-to forms of evidence used to describe experiences or identities as fixed facts or events.

As artists and scholars we provide a framework to understand the impacts of memory work and determine how they interact with strategies for repair (Edkins 2003), reconciliation (Rigney 2012) or transnational solidarity (Rigney 2018).

A Glossary of Words My Mother Never Taught Me engages in memory work as an investigation. It uses film, biography and choral songs to intervene in the archive.

It does not solve the wounds of the past, but soothes it through sound and inquiry. This curatorial essay by Renée Mboya sits in an art historical moment where Kenyan artists use different strategies to unmake the past. Here the colonial story intersects with the critiques of liberation, pointing out the promise and shortfalls of leadership.

The Glossary, at points is difficult, seemingly unbearable. But remember that the triggers are just as subtle as they are obvious. Yet the warning should not make you shun the content, even if choosing not to look is preferable.

To navigate such difficulties Ndebele (1998) urges greater attention to narrative and representational capacities for understanding mass violence so that experiential truths can be valued as much as forensic ones. In *A Glossary of Words My Mother Never Taught Me*, narration and sound carry through the images as textured threads to follow outside the visual vocabulary.

Rather than letting this film sit in silence, we are keeping it in conversation. Part of that dialogue is the texts that are offered as companions. A songbook and the audible interlocution I share with you here.

Interlocution - to interrupt or intervene

And you might wonder why, a White British-American, is here in dialogue with a work on memory and archive in Kenya. So, the most important answer is because Renée asked me.

When dealing with contested pasts, we rely on networks of trust to ensure there is ample space for negotiation. In contrast, development focused memory work identifies the problem from the outside, refusing to keep questioning the condition of freedom - Uhuru.

I am assured it is because we both use our **practice** - that core work you do to ask difficult questions regardless of the marketplace - to address representational wounds. In the process we make ourselves vulnerable, exposing positionalities. Duress is messy when recalled in the former seat of empire. Yet we are connected in our shared commitment to care for difficult pasts.

Care, is about showing up for the uneasy proposition brought on by artistic intervention. It is about ensuring that the work is mediated in such a way that people can ask the critical questions. Care calls *in* not out. In the process we must engage with the evidence presented by the artwork to resist aphasia.

Aphasia the chronic condition of knowing but not being able to speak, often coupled with silence. To hang the work in silence would leave it inadequately cared for.

Thus, inquiry and practice create a methodology for unlearning governing mythologies embedded in state memory. Following McKittrick's warning that 'description is not liberation', this film does memory work as a creative response to colonial conditions. *A Glossary of Words My Mother Never Taught Me* provides a reference and a guide for epistemic sovereignty, should we choose to engage its questions.

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