

## **The (re)Making of Memory**

April 26, 2019 | 12:00-1:30PM

A panel facilitated by Martina Dodd with presentations by Monique Muse Dodd, Tiona Nekkia, and Tsedaye Makonnen

Four artists and curators consider the politics and poetics of memory in light of the many silences and omissions of “the archive,” particularly around black, queer, female bodies and their lived experience. Each panelist addresses the question of remembrance through examples of their own research-based projects, which combine personal and family histories with Afro-Diasporic spiritual traditions.

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**Martina Dodd [Founding Editor of [DIRT](#) and Museum Education Curator at the [Atlanta University Center Robert W. Woodruff Library](#) and the [Clark Atlanta University Art Museum](#)]:**

I want to focus on a three-part exhibit that I curated, which is currently at Clark Atlanta Art Museum and at Atlanta University’s Archive Research Center as well as online. Entitled, *Black Interiors: Envisioning a Place of Our Own*, the exhibition explores the Black aesthetic by drawing attention to interior spaces as sites of liberation and creative expression.

I’d like to begin with a quote by Jill Lepore from her recently-published book *These Truths: A history of the United States*. She writes: “But most of what historians study survives because it was purposely kept—placed in a box and carried up to an attic, shelved in a library, stored in a museum, photographed or recorded, downloaded to a server—carefully preserved and even catalogued. All of it, together, the accidental and intentional, this archive of the past—remains, relics, a repository of knowledge, the evidence of what came before, this inheritance—is called the historical record, and it is maddeningly uneven, asymmetrical, and unfair.”

The accounts, materials, and experiences of disenfranchised groups have been maddeningly, asymmetrically and disproportionately left out of the collections of major institutions. Those not considered part of the dominant social narrative are often times silenced in the archives as well as in real life. Just as museums have never been neutral, neither are archives. Decisions about what should or should not be collected as well as about what is made accessible and widely available to the public are all made by humans who are inherently biased and at times flawed. It is important to redress this silence, both actively remembering and retelling our own stories over and over, and by acknowledging the existence of spaces that validate and prioritize our past, present, and future.

As the largest consortium of Historically Black Colleges and Universities, the AU Center is one of those spaces. Home to Clark Atlanta University's Art Museum, which holds one of the largest and most historically significant collection of African American art in the country, Spelman College Museum of Fine Art, the only college in the nation emphasizing art by women of the Black diasporic, and the AUC Archives Research Center, which contains over 150 collections reflecting the diverse contributions of the African Diaspora. In 2017, the GLAM Center for Collaborative Teaching and Learning at the Robert W. Woodruff Library, was founded with help from the Andrew Mellon Foundation, to promote object-based pedagogy and virtual access to the AUC's holdings through their digital portal.

While I want to spend the remainder of my time focusing on the exhibit's digital form, I did want to show a few images of the physical installation at the AUC Archives Research Center, which was solely pulled from the collection. So we have correspondence between loved ones, writing as they travelled around the country alongside photographs and a newspaper clipping entitled "The Two Atlantas." So I'm really thinking about what it means to designate and hold space of your own, whether it's in your own home, community or city. The physical exhibit at Clark Atlanta Art Museum is pulled from their collection of African American Artists who created work that include interior shots of the home. So there were images of living rooms, of the kitchen space. So thinking about moments of joy sitting with family, but also moments of rest between labor. We're thinking about who is keeping and maintaining the home.

With *Black Interiors: Envisioning a Place of Our Own*, I am also thinking about Black interiors as a metaphysical space that can be created. You may not be able to dominate the physical space that you have but this metaphysical space which can also be translated to online platforms, which is what I want to focus on now. Online/in the context of a digital exhibition, there is a greater opportunity to mold and cultivate space. In her book Elizabeth Alexander *Black Interior/s* describes a place "beyond the black public everyday toward power and wild imagination that black people ourselves know we possess...". This is a place where we can envision ourselves as "complex black selves, real and enactable black power, rampant and unfetishized black beauty." So I really wanted to think about what that means and look at the collection, to see how that's represented, to think about Black interiority cultivated away from the scrutiny of the dominant culture. Pulling inspiration from this text, the exhibit taps into the Black imaginary, using artwork and archival documents that document Black people in the United States and abroad making space an community of their own. The interior of the home, as well as all who dwell within, is sacred to African Americans who have consistently wrestled with the impermanence of place perpetuated by the Transatlantic Slave Trade, chattel slavery, Jim Crow, and gentrification. Really what I wanted to get at was not just how I used the archive but that this archive was available to me and that it was set up intentionally. This wasn't an afterthought. We have our own voices as African Americans, but we also need to make sure that people are keeping track of things.

In this exhibition, we are thinking about adornment, both of the body and of the home, as a form of archiving. Let's think about the objects we choose to collect and display on our walls and how

they speak to our existence and lived experience. Alexander questions the ability of the visual to make possible or imaginable that which is not the present reality. I argue that through the conscious act of collecting and displaying objects in Black people's homes, the self is made visible.

**[Monique Muse Dodd](#) [New York based photo, video and installation artist]:**

Martina, thank you for putting together so many dope artists, and thanks for including me. I would like to begin by acknowledging the role that the Lenape Indians played in stewarding the land on which we stand. As someone who works a lot with concepts of ancestry, and as a descendent of the Transatlantic Slave Trade, my connection to the land has been consecrated in blood, so I feel very connected to this land, as well.

This first image is of a tapestry from my solo show called *(Re)mnants*. It was created by an artist named Cayla Lockwood, and includes the names of family members of mine who are now deceased. Since that time, I have lost other family members whose names I would like to lift up now: Bernadette Baudoin, Marie Johnson, Frank Marshall Sr., John Gibson II, Thomas Caldwell, and Wiley Williams (Ed. note: in addition to others, not all names spoken are captured here). Too often we learn more about family members in death than in life, and I made this work made in part to address the problem.

For this work I took the opportunity to talk to my grandmother and to my aunts. My aunts love to talk, but when I bring around my camera they get really shy. Especially now, dealing with death they have been more open to talking about these things, which has inspired my work as well. My grandmother lives in Jamaica Queens, and her way of telling stories is so captivating. I'll be on my way out the door, and she'll call me in the room and 30 minutes later I will have totally forgotten what I was leaving for.

On my mother's side I'm from Louisiana, seven generations; on my father's side I'm from North Carolina and I can trace that back seven generations. Beyond that we don't know. My father always just said we're from Africa. I got my dad and my uncle to take the ancestry DNA test, and I got the results back and was underwhelmed because it was just percentages. I know that my ancestral heritage is more than percentages.

My film, *(Re)mnants* takes on the question of how we remember and how we choose to forget—using traces of remembrance and refashioning family history to create a portal between this world and the next. Though we hold our ancestor's trauma, we also hold their resilience and dreams. Kwame Nkrumah famously said, "I am not African because I was born in Africa but because Africa was born in me," and this work allowed me to think about what connects me to the larger diaspora while placing value on the here. For this project I started doing research on Ancestry.com and building out stories for my ancestors. So when you talk about how archives being intentionally kept—Arthur Jafa says that Black people figure out how to make culture in freefall. And when my grandma tells me something I believe it. In this way, *(Re)mnants* allowed me to push back against the misperception of Black people as being without history.

This is work I began during my senior year at Howard University. At Howard, everything, from theater to math is viewed through the lens of Black history and culture. I was particularly inspired by the Haile Gerima film *Sankofa* (translation: go back and fetch it). I completed *(Re)mnants* in 2018 for my first solo show, at Flux Factory, and it was my first time creating an installation. For that show, I created a screening room and projected the film in it. I wanted to figure out how to add more value to the film while grounding it in the physical, and the installation became a grounding for me. I created a box of momentos and a sacred space as well. In a lot of my work I create altars so there was an element of that here. And for this quilt project [shows image of a tapestry, held in a long hallway, bearing the text: "Lest we forget, their names should be on our lips..."] I asked people to write things on scraps of fabric that signify home and legacy. On the subject of reimagining history, I used the space to imagine what my living room would look like if I were living in the 1970s. I had to have that Black Power chair in there. Every detail in that space was very intentional, down to the fabric that was used. I was also thinking about my dad who died when he was 25 and also went to Howard University, so there was a connection there.

*(Re)mnants* started with the question: *Where are you really from?* For someone who is a descendant of those Africans who were forcibly brought over the ocean into institutions that not only dehumanized them but erased their history, it's a question that can create feelings of loss and sadness. I wish I had a simple answer and could point to somewhere on the map. There's a quote that's been circulating recently on social media that reads: "To be Black in America is to be African without Memory and American without privilege." African Americans exist in a liminal space between imaginary and misunderstood. We are feared and consumed but never really embraced, never cared for. We helped build this country, and still we fight every day more and more for our rights as they are stripped away. Our humanity is stripped away. I created *(Re)mnants* to honor my ancestors and well as to define myself for myself.

**Tsedaye Makonnen [Current Washington DC Public Library Maker in Residence]:**

I'm going to start from 2016 with a performance at the corner of 7th and U street, where there have been a number of protests around gentrification. Donald from Metro PCS was actually involved in this piece, along with a number of other businesses in the area. There was actually a video that went viral with kids dancing to gogo in front of his shop. We had walked across the street to his shop after doing a performance intervention in front of [The Shay](#) building. The children I was working with for this project were from the [Shaw Community Center](#), and I got these kids to create unfired clay boats, because at that time I was doing a lot of research on the Black Mediterranean and the refugee crisis that's happening now in that area. A lot of the kids I was working with are also experiencing displacement because of gentrification and being pushed out of their neighborhood, into PG (Prince George's) County and other areas, where they have to commute and lie about their residence so that they can stay in their same schools. So in that place we placed 100 or so of those unfired boats in front of The Shay. Even though we expected people to step on them, they didn't, and it caused a commotion because they blocked the tenants and management from getting into the building. A lot of the people moving

into that building have that Christopher Columbus mentality where they think that history began with their arrival. There is an erasure that's happening in DC right now, and this piece was addressing that through the lens of my experience as an Ethiopian-American, having been born in DC and raised in America.

For that performance, I also used and pulled elements of an Ethiopian Coffee ceremony. *It is not a traditional ceremony*; I've had many aunties tell me that it's not traditional, but it's my Ethiopian American interpretation. And I'm using all Black bodies in this piece—friends of mine who are either born in DC or are of Ethiopian descent, artists, and other folks. In traditional Ethiopian coffee ceremonies you pull grass and scatter it on the ground and then you do the coffee ceremony on top. I grew up observing that my whole life and not understanding its significance until one day my mother told me that that comes from a pagan ritual giving thanks to Mother Earth. Ethiopia is a country that is steeped in a very long history of Christianity. Some say that Christianity actually started there. So to dig beyond that and get at what came before that is very hard. I've been digging for that for some time now. I started incorporating not only flowers and grass but ground clove, ground cardamom, ground cinnamon, and ground coffee that I would throw around to activate the space. I would throw it at people, or bless them with a third eye.

Performance is a way to claim space and in this performance in particular, I was evoking the smells that I grew up with my household. The kids also made 100+ ceramic coffee cups during the months leading up to this performance that they passed out to people walking by as they were going into the coffee shop. And the children were confronting them with questions like: "Do you know your neighbor?" "Do you know the history of your neighborhood?" "Would you speak to me if you saw me walking by?" Part of what this was about was the fact that this particular chain of coffee shops is a signifier of gentrification. And like a number of other businesses in that area, it makes it clear energetically that Black people are not welcome and that they do not belong on that block, to the point where the kids and their parents don't even feel comfortable crossing over one block.

The piece was also done in front of an Ethiopian restaurant that had been around since the 90s but closed two weeks later. They are one of the longest-standing Ethiopian restaurants in the area and were one of the first to distribute injera. Even though they are very historically significant and their business was booming, they ended up relocating to Adams Morgan.

The following year, at NYU in DC I did a piece called *When drowning is the best option*, which deals with the Black refugee crisis in the Black Mediterranean. The work was based in part on the research of Rahawa Haile, a scholar of Eritrean descent who, just like Christina Sharpe does a really beautiful job of connecting the forced movements of the African diaspora across oceans. Currently there are about 5,000 people who leave Eritrea each month trying to get to Europe. This is due, of course, to corruption and the fact that there is a dictatorship, but it is also due to the legacy of Italy's colonization of Eritrea and the continued tampering of European countries on Black land.

I did the piece again under the title *Permanent Impermanence*, which I got from the Dr. Laura Smith, a scholar at Georgetown, who has done a ton of research on the African refugee crisis, while also doing groundwork in Kenya where there is the largest refugee camp of internally displaced people. But really that term, Permanent Impermanence, applies to all Black people.

I recreated the same series in Miami at Art Basel, this time incorporating the text of Haitian American writer Edwidge Danticat on the asymmetrical treatment between Haitian and Cuban migrants crossing the Caribbean (the two texts are *Create Dangerously* and *Brother I'm Dying*). *Brother I'm Dying* talks about her uncle who died in ICE custody because he was not given his medication. This colorist hierarchy also applies in the Mediterranean context, where the lighter you are, the more your life matters. I'm specifically thinking about the slave auctions in Libya that are mostly populated by sub-saharan Africans. Most of the refugees who are drowning are Black because they are the ones who are thrown overboard to lighten the load, and they are also the ones who are not rescued by European rescue boats. For this piece, again, I'm using my spices: cardamom, cloves, cinnamon.

I also did a somewhat tangential but related piece about skin bleaching creams, starting with youtube videos in India and other places in the Global South. I was just in Nigeria this past summer where I produced a series of photographs of bleaching creams in the market, where the skin bleaching vendors are always incredibly well lit, that focused on the packaging and names.

I did a series of performances all over the world with a pelvic bone exploring the idea of crowning—the literal crowning of a baby, but also the crowning of Black women. It was an idea that started when I would crown Black women with flower crown using the text of Toni Morrison's *Sula*. I'm glad that there is more discussion now about what hospitals put Black women through in the birthing process.

I did another performance with the pelvic bone in Ethiopia in a public market, where I wore a traditional royal cape called a *capa*, which monks and members of the monarchy wear. People also wear them when they are getting married. But I decided we're all royalty to a degree.

I followed that with an Installation including the *capas*, pelvic bones, and some of the bleaching creams that I brought back from Nigeria.

In Ghana, we took water from Jamestown Virginia to Jamestown Accra and poured it out there. Again, related to Black migration and the Transatlantic Slave Trade.

Watching my friend's documentary a year ago, I discovered a song in Italian that translates as "little blackface," and I have a whole series that's related to that. The song was created during the colonial period to promote miscegenation, but it is sung to this day, and if you are a Black person travelling in Europe, you may have it sung to you—particularly if they assume you are a

migrant. Using scarves that I collected from my family, I started printing prayers and blessings in Amharic (my version of non-fluent Amharic that's based on my pronunciation). I performed with that song, which exploring the carnal junction between Italian colonists and Ethiopian girls.

Fast-forward to right now, this piece, *You Give Light*, which is dedicated to my aunt who is the matriarch of my family. It is ten light sculptures stacked on top of each other, 9 of which are named after women who have been murdered through state-sanctioned violence in the US and across the Mediterranean. The bottom sculpture is named for Aretha Franklin who died while I was making the piece. I was thinking about patriarchy and conceiving of her as the base and foundation and carrying the rest of these souls. The light sculptures use patterns from Ethiopian crosses (that I got from the library at the African Art Museum at the Smithsonian) and draw connections between Kongo cosmograms and Haitian Bembe symbolism. This is me looking for that pre-Christian info in my own heritage.

[United for Intercultural Action](#) has a list of 30,000+ migrants that I drew research from. One of the sculptures is dedicated to an Eritrean woman who died on April 20th, 2018, from suicide. She strangled her baby and hanged herself out of despair in an asylum center in Germany. Her name means "good luck," "peacemaker," and "gift from above." Her story resonated with me both as a mother and because it reminded me of Margaret Garner, who is from Ohio and who Toni Morrison's *Beloved* is based on.

**Martina:** While we're switching over I just wanted to mention that Toni Morrison's *Beloved* is based on events from a news clipping that she found in an archive. So just another example of an artist creating work based either on imagined history or history as it actually occurred.

**[Tiona Nekkia McClodden](#) [Philadelphia-based film-maker and installation artist; past Pew and current Guggenheim Fellow]:**

Hello Philly. I'm excited to be here because I've been living in Philadelphia for about 12 years—North Philly to be specific. I'll be focusing on one particular work, the presentation of which is dedicated to my mother and my cousin Taylor. My name is Tiona Nekkia McClodden. I am a filmmaker. As a filmmaker and video artist rooted within social realism, remembering, and more recently biomythography, my work explores shared values and beliefs within the African Diaspora or what I call "Black mentifact." I am interested in nostalgia and how the past, present and future can interest visually and thematically in time-based work. I'm interested in exploring intersubjectivities in Black communities.

I always read my artist statement because it's constantly under negotiation. Like most artists, you start out one place and slowly end up where you're supposed to be.

I want to share three interrelated aspects of culture that I use to explore my investment in Black mentifact in different ways. Because my work is so heavily archive- and research-based, I am interested in being pulled out of the library, pulled out of the archive, and actually sitting at the feet of someone to hear their memories and experiences, while placing those experience on the

same level as these more “factual” documents. Much of my practice involves looking at the space between truth and fact and trying to produce martial culture from that.

I’m going to start with the film *The Color Purple* to give you a key or a legend for my process. *The Color Purple* is one of my favorite films because it is one of my favorite books. I’m interested in what happens in that translation between media, but more importantly, I collect film press kits. This project is based on the fact that I first entered into a filmmaking practice through the material culture of films. Part of my origin story, growing up in South Carolina with a hyper-religious father for part of the time, was going to rent dollar videos and the wallpaper of that establishment being these movie posters. Even though I wasn’t able to see many of these films, I still felt that I was able to see the films because I saw the materials. I consumed trailers in a similar way.

The project I want to talk to you about today is *Be Alarmed the Black Americana Epic*. I wanted to talk about this because I just received a Guggenheim Fellowship, which I got after applying for five years, with this work. To a certain extent this project preceded my ability to articulate the ideas that it addresses. This project will be a four part, non-linear film comprised of trailers, scenes, and objects that explore my memory and biography, and that take shape across form, time and narrative structure. This project includes a collection of contemporary Black ephemera from my own family history and traced through landscapes of resistance labor and cultural production. I am specifically interested in the Black Southern experience. This work emphasizes the role of rememory, nostalgia, and relationships to ancestors as spiritual technologies of Black survival. I use “rememory” as a nod to Toni Morrison and her notion of remembering a memory. I also use the idea of biomythography as a nod to Audre Lorde which allows a degree of artifice around one's own biography. My particular relationship to my ancestors and my Egungun is that I am a priestess of Ogun within the practice of Santería/Lucumí, and this project does abstract on that. So there are things that I’m not going to explain, but I’d love to talk to other practitioners afterward to hear what you see in it.

Much of my process is about unpacking ancestral data. And I call it data because in its best form, data is something that is compressed and legible across many forms and intellects and backgrounds. These four parts I have been working on since 2009, but today I will focus on *Movement I*, which had to come first. Because I was really struggling with my film practice, I decided to go back to my origin story to determine what it is I really like about film. Each movement of the film has a poster. This poster here is of my mother’s mother, Marvis, the pretty woman in the yellow dress, that’s my mom. The one next to that is my father’s father and then my father at the end. I use fireworks in the posters. They are set in the dimensions of an American film poster, which is 27 X 40, but I don’t use no text. Instead I’m using fireworks as a text because it is an emotional text. These posters are the basis of my color story, and the starting point for my research.

Because this project is very dense I’d like to focus on poster one, *Dear Papa*, which is for my grandfather. What my grandfather is holding, which is very rare in the Black community, is a

family crest. Because he had already done a certain amount of research to find that seal, I felt I needed to extend his research. He has traced the transfiguration of our family name, which is McClodden from the Irish/Scottish Mclachlan family clan. He is holding their family seal as well as the tartan). This project is also constructed of scenes and trailers, and again I'm using "scenes" loosely, as a series of images that are set before or after each other. I'm interested in trailers and scenes as being these abstracted forms of a larger narrative. And with scenes, I'm thinking about the fact that most of the films I watch I don't actually like the entire film. I just watch them to get to specific scenes. So instead of that durational process of waiting for scenes I'm just dropping in a those moments.

All of the films are projected separately or on separate monitors, because I don't like the forced perspective of the traditional film-viewing experience. Instead of sitting in the dark with everyone looking one direction, I'm interested in what it means to make something where people can walk around a film. I also created a press kit for this project which includes lobby cards, which is an old form of film promotion where images were sent ahead to movie theaters and would be in the lobby. In this case though, the images featured do not appear in the film. These are actually my family photos, including a photo of my mother's childhood home, which no longer exists, and a photo of the van we lived in when we were homeless for a while. Similarly my film stills are comprised of images that do not actually appear in the film.

The objects in the project are I see as portraits of the ancestors that I no-longer have names for. Also I'm thinking about the labor histories from both sides of my family. My father's family has a military background. My mother's family sews, and so I'm thinking about how to create a reverse heirloom, which is to force a narrative into an object when you don't receive objects. (Specific objects include: parts of a shotgun, parts of a sewing machine that my mother and her mother sewed on, castings of my teeth as well as of my lead actress' teeth). Everything has a double meaning, both a biographical reading and a spiritual reading (referencing my Orisha).

I found out that the Mclachlan clan was known for making chainmail, so I decided to learn how to make chainmail. I call this piece, which is a piece of chainmail, *Etymology of a Surname*. I'm interested in chainmail both as a militaristic tool and also as a method of sewing, as a way to collapse my two lineages.

I am also making work (entitled *The Deities*) inspired by Negro spirituals like *Made in the Water* and *Follow the Drinking Gourd*, which attempt to think about these spirituals as a kind of technology used to convey messages.

I also exhibit my lead actress's clothing which references both military garb that I grew up seeing on base as an army kid and a Yoruba garment that's used to cover people when they are about to enter possession to hold their Ase in.

This piece, called *Protection from All Things*, references a really strong blue house paint color used primarily in the Gullah community to protect against haints or bad spirits (surrounding

windows). This color, which references the color of water is believed to be effective because those spirits are believed not to be able to cross water. This practice, which is extraordinarily African, I see as an example of cultural retention that traverses religious practice.

This summer, I will be filming Movement III, *Triple Deities*, which will be taking formal cues from my mother's poster. *The Triple Deities* is a multimedia performance that explores Black female identity within the context of American society. It draws from Langston Hughes's poem "Song to the Dark Virgin," which in 1941 became an art song composed by Florence B. Price, the first African American woman to have a composition performed by a major American symphonic orchestra. In collaboration with pianist and composer Courtney Bryant, I will create a score that will include Price's original composition along with other music from various genres of the African American tradition. This is in part about me making the case that my own family's narrative is just as important as the narratives surrounding these celebrated and historical figures.

As someone who started college at Clark Atlanta University and then moved over to Spelman, where I had a mentorship for about two years and learned to do a certain kind of intersubjective research, I credit much of my approach to unpacking Black culture to my time at the AU Center.

**Martina:** What is the relationship between truth and myth in the act of remembrance?

**Monique:** My remembrance work attempts to highlight the subjectivity of truth.

**Tsedaye:** For me the truth is the truth.

**Tiona:** Truth is belief and fact is historicized fiction. My work comes from an understanding that most of what you think you see is completely made up and a product of your brain's attempt to keep balance. I'm trying to get away from forced perspective, from thinking more how a horse with blinders would think, conceptually. To me the periphery is a biological superpower that shows a certain kind of intellect that everyone has—if you are able to see in a certain way.