Retracing Colonial Pasts:

Migration, Memory, and the Archive in Heba Y. Amin’s *The Earth is an Imperfect Ellipsoid* (2016) and Lydia Ourahmane’s *In the Absence of Our Mothers* (2018)

Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam
Arts and Culture Masters, Contemporary Art History

Kiko Aebi
Uilenstede 12, Amstelveen 1183AH
+31 618891682
kikoaebi@gmail.com
Student number: 2638013

Supervisor: Sven Lütticken, dr. Modern and Contemporary Art History
Second Reader: Katja Kwastek, dr. Modern and Contemporary Art History

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Declaration of Originality

I hereby declare that this thesis is an original piece of work, written by me alone. Any information and ideas from other sources are acknowledged fully in the text and notes.

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Chapter One

Objects of Memory, Technologies of Mapping: Provoking Colonial Histories in the Present

A gold chain bought from a young man at a market in Algeria is transported to London, where it is melted down into two gold teeth. One tooth is implanted in the mouth of the artist; the other is installed at the exact same height as its twin as part of the installation, *In the Absence of Our Mothers* (2018) [Fig. 1]. Referencing the artist’s own migration story, the teeth also relate to her Algerian grandfather, who, in an extreme act of resistance to colonial rule, extracted each one of his teeth in order to render himself medically unfit to serve in the French colonial army during World War II. He later went on to play an important role in the Algerian resistance during the Algerian War of Independence (1954-1962). Cyclically referring to multiple pasts, these two gold teeth are mementos linking migration from Algeria in the present to colonial resistance and Algerian national identity in the past.

In this work by British Algerian artist Lydia Ourahmane, the circulation and transformation of memory-laden objects addresses the uneven distribution of mobility under globalization in our contemporary moment. While goods and money move with little to no restriction, people do not. Walls, fences, and separations by other means have proliferated, enforcing a kind of globalized, through largely hidden, apartheid. Since the summer of 2015, these obstacles have been brought into sharp focus by rising numbers of refugees and migrants into the European Union, which has led to what the media has termed a “migrant crisis” that most European states are ill-prepared to handle. Mounting political anxieties, compounded by sensationalized accounts of border crossings by supposedly dangerous “illegal” migrants from Africa, have culminated in a rise in populist and nationalist rhetoric. This has led many European states to respond to migrants with extreme hostility. However, this “migrant crisis” narrative fails to account for the colonial legacies that fundamentally underpin contemporary migration. This is the connection that Ourahmane makes explicit in her work.

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1. In addition to the two gold teeth, the multipart installation consists of a wall-text written by the artist, Lydia Ourahmane, and a scan of her mouth that shows the metal screw drilled into her jawbone onto which the gold tooth is attached. The various components of this work will be introduced at length later.
3. In the last few years, the imposition of tariffs, sanctions, and other economic and commercial hurdles have to some degree mitigated the free flow of goods and services. However, the fact remains that the movement of commerce and capital remains far less regulated than that of people.
4. Beneduce 2008, p. 520
5. Köhn 2016, p. 4
A similar preoccupation with the state of migration in the present and its relation to colonial and pre-colonial formations of power in the past structures the multipart project, *The Earth is an Imperfect Ellipsoid* (2016) [Fig. 2], by Egyptian artist Heba Y. Amin. Like Ourahmane, Amin employs objects to both signify and investigate migration in the contemporary moment as well as its historical antecedents. Amin employs multiple historical technologies of mapping. She used an 11th century Islamic manuscript known as the *Kitab al-Masalik wal-Mamalik* (The Book of Roads and Kingdoms), which documents the historical trade routes that traversed the Islamic Empire in North Africa and which migrants continue to use today, to guide her journey. This manuscript has been lauded for its precise descriptions of the geography and people of North Africa in the 11th century; however, today it only exists in fragments. Amin sought to fill these textual omissions with photographs taken through an antique French theodolite that she acquired in Mali, which itself is an instrument integral to and symbolic of European colonialism. Through these technologies, Amin considers North Africa’s layered pasts and how these histories intersect and continue to be manifested in the present. Using the manuscript to trace her own five-month investigative journey from Lagos to Berlin, Amin photographed the landscape through the theodolite, producing images that evoke the colonial past through their black and white, grainy quality, but which capture landscapes and people that are incontestably contemporary.\(^6\)

In both of these artistic interventions, shifting histories and geographies are simultaneously encapsulated and probed by politically redolent objects. Through these objects, the artists scrutinize present day migration against the larger context of North African history, drawing attention to links that have largely remained absent in the visual and media discourse of migration. Specifically emphasizing modern European colonialism (though Amin also refers to the Islamic imperial rule of North Africa through the manuscript), these works consider how imperialism has fundamentally transformed the region, from the bordering of territories and formation of the modern nation state to the conditions predefining citizenship. Offering perspectives that are sensitive to the traces of the past and the movements of the present, Ourahmane and Amin investigate the forces shaping migration

\(^6\) Kherbek 2017. Like Ourahmane’s work, this project also consists of a series of component parts. Beyond the series of photographs, the work includes an iron sculpture, a short video, and text with excerpts from the *Kitab al-Masalik wal-Mamalik*. I will also be discussing the material Amin includes in an associated artist talk held at Künstlerhaus Bethanien in 2017. In this artist talk, Amin speaks at length about how the component parts of the work are related and her specific motivation for undergoing this journey. I consider this artist talk to be integral to any analysis of this work. It is not insignificant that Amin embeds it on the webpage dedicated to this work prior to any actual images of the photographs, video, or sculpture.
and informing the experience of displacement, which has become the everyday habitus for more than 232 million international migrants and 20 million stateless refugees worldwide.⁷

Exposing the parallels and repetitions between the past and the present, these works insert themselves into the larger postcolonial discourse, excavating North Africa’s history through the activation of memory. Both artists engage with these highly political themes and global transformations through works that incorporate their own bodies and subjectivities. As artists whose lives and practices have traversed the Mediterranean, they both are intimately aware of the ongoing and even intergenerational consequences of migration. Their separate investigations present a counter narrative to the media representation of migrants that presently dominates the Global North. Rather than imitating these narratives that displace and obscure the subjectivities of migrants, Ourahmane and Amin privilege their own perspectives. This act of self-inscription is significant, because, as writer Toni Morrison reminds us, the people who belong to any “marginalized category…[have seldom been invited] to participate in the discourse even when [they] were its topic.”⁸

This thesis investigates the strategies employed by Lydia Ourahmane in *In the Absence of Our Mothers* and Heba Y. Amin in *The Earth is an Imperfect Ellipsoid* to explicate the parallels between contemporary migration and North Africa’s colonial past. This discussion considers how such interventions may shift the narrative around migration. Through calibrated visual analyses of these works that will consider artistic intention as well as critical interpretation, this thesis attempts to expose the complex issues delimited by migration. Ourahmane and Amin attend to the need for new concepts of space, time, perspective, and modes of engagement with the embodied dimensions of migration, employing innovative visual and material approaches to represent what in many cases is unrepresentable. In doing so, they bring the spectator into close proximity with the embodied and intimate aspects of migration.

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⁷ Koser 2016, p. 5 and p. 11.
[Fig. 1] Lydia Ourahmane, *In the Absence of Our Mothers*, 2018, x-ray, scan text, two 4.5g 18kt gold teeth, dimensions variable, Chisenhale Gallery, London (photo: Andy Keate).

[Fig. 2] Heba Y. Amin, *The Earth is an Imperfect*, 2016, photography, text, projection, iron sculpture, dimensions variable (photo: David Brandt).
Artist Backgrounds

As research-driven multipart installations that share a conceptual rigor in their investigation of migration in North Africa, the parallels between In the Absence of Our Mothers and The Earth is an Imperfect Ellipsoid are quite rich. Analysis of these works provides insight into postcolonial concerns as well as the affectivity of cultural and artistic modes for exploring contemporary migration. Beyond the aforementioned parallels, both artists also share some biographical similarities. I highlight these parallels not to restrict either artist’s practice to issues of identity politics alone. Rather, by considering their personal backgrounds, I wish to emphasize their individual and shared perspectives on migration in North Africa and their positionality within this discourse. Furthermore, my choice to focus on only two artistic works, which both overtly inscribe complex migrant subjectivities seeks to avoid generalizations about the migration experience. This anti-survey format, which I will elaborate upon further in the Chapter Overview section, allows for a nuanced investigation that avoids totalizing representations of migration.

Lydia Ourahmane was born in 1992 in Saida, Algeria. At the age of 10, Ourahmane and her family immigrated to London, which she has described as a “physically violent process” that led her to explicitly consider “how [her] body exists in space.” She later went on to graduate from Goldsmiths College, University of London, in 2014 with a BA in fine arts. Now living and working in London and Oran, Algeria, Ourahmane’s practice explores her bifurcated identity and is largely geographically focused on Algeria. Typically blending harsh facts, such as the cruelties of colonialism and the inequalities of capitalism, with politically latent materials, including oil drums, tires, concrete, rebar, and crumbing walls, Ourahmane investigates marginal and ephemeral elements of Algerian history. Her multimedia practice includes sculpture, installation, film, photography, and sound. Despite her relative youth, Ourahmane has already participated in a number of significant biennials and exhibitions, including a group exhibition at the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art in Denmark (2019), Manifesta 12 (2018), the New Museum Triennial in New York (2018), and the 15th Istanbul Biennial (2017). In 2018, Chisenhale Gallery in London presented her solo exhibition, The You in Us, for which she was commissioned to make In the Absence of Our Mothers.

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10 Ibid.
11 Ibid.
The same theoretical concerns explored in *In the Absence of Our Mothers* are evident in Ourahmane’s final degree piece at Goldsmiths, *The Third Choir* (2014) [Fig. 3], for which she received critical attention. Consisting of 20 Naftal oil barrels, this work became the first artwork to legally cross outside the borders of Algeria since its independence from France in 1962, when a law was enacted that prohibited the transportation of art in order to protect Algeria’s cultural heritage. The specific brand of oil in these drums came from Algeria’s own wells. However, this brand never leaves the country. Instead, it is sold on to Shell, signifying how Algeria’s wealth seldom benefits its people. Inside each barrel, a mobile phone broadcasts a sound piece that samples recordings made in Algeria by Ourahmane. This work emphasizes the complexities of movement between borders and the global economic structures that continue to disadvantage former colonies to the benefit of the Global North.

Heba Y. Amin’s life and practice similarly moves between Europe and North Africa. Born in Cairo, Egypt, in 1980, Amin was educated in the United States, where she obtained her MA in New Media Art and Interactive Design at the University of Minnesota. She currently divides her time between Berlin, where she is a lecturer at Bard College Berlin and a Doctorate Fellow in Art History at Freie Universitat, and Cairo. Like Ourahmane, Amin’s practice has principally been focused on issues pertaining to North Africa and the Middle East. Investigating the role and representation of landscape and public space, Amin exposes mechanisms of control and oppression, such as border security, CCTV cameras, and mass media, that often go unquestioned. Amin has exhibited at the 15th Istanbul Biennale (2017), the Künstlerhaus Bethanien in Berlin in 2017, for which she presented *The Earth is an Imperfect Ellipsoid*, and most recently at the 10th Berlin Biennale (2018). For her presentation in Berlin, she exhibited her performance installation, *Operation Sunken Sea* (2018-ongoing) [Fig. 3]. In this work, Amin takes on the persona of the leader of a fictional African nation, mimicking the language of fascist dictators throughout history and surrounding herself with dictatorial props and maps. In this guise, she calls for a large-scale infrastructural intervention to drain the Mediterranean Sea in order to merge Africa and Europe into one supercontinent. This project riffs on the early twentieth-century German architect Herman Sörgel’s techno-utopian vision of Atlantropa and promises to end terrorism.

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13 Simpson 2018.
14 Amin 2019.
15 Ibid.
and the migration crisis, mitigate job and housing precarity, and resolve energy demands.\textsuperscript{16} This work mines the colonial past in order to envision an extreme neo-colonial future.

Amin’s artistic interventions have also crossed over into mainstream media. In July 2015, Amin was hired to add Arabic graffiti to the set of the HBO series, \textit{Homeland}. In a prime example of media culture-jamming, Amin inserted subversive graffiti calling out the show for its Orientalizing and at times overtly racist depiction of the Middle East. This intervention was not uncovered until after the show aired, galvanizing a widespread discussion about the ethics of the show’s representation of the Middle East.\textsuperscript{17} Although Amin’s culture-jamming intervention does not explicitly relate to the structure or aesthetics of \textit{The Earth is an Imperfect Ellipsoid}, both interventions share a thematic parallel in their exploration of the role of media in the representation of geography. Amin has specifically stated that a central question that guided her process while working on \textit{The Earth is an Imperfect Ellipsoid} was how to narrativize migration in a way that did not reiterate the media’s narrative, but instead complicated the dynamic of how to tell these stories.\textsuperscript{18} While \textit{The Earth is an Imperfect Ellipsoid} foregrounds a history of media, the \textit{Homeland} incident considers the role of media in the present. Considered together, both projects reveal the ongoing role of media in the misrepresentation of non-Western people and cultures.

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{fig3.jpg}
\caption{Lydia Ourahmane, \textit{The Third Choir}, 2014, sound installation (3m x 5m), twenty Nafta oil barrels imported from Algeria, CZ-5HE radio transmitter, 20 Samsung E2121B phones. Installation view, “Social Calligraphies”, Zachęta National Gallery of Art, Warsaw, Poland (photo:Frederik Gruyere).}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{17} Amin 2016.
\textsuperscript{18} Amin 2017b.
The Contemporary Context of Migration and Postcolonialism

The unprecedented mass movement and displacement of people today has resulted in more people living in locations that are outside their homeland than in any previous point in history. Nonetheless, the movement of people across territories is not a recent development. While today’s frantic mobility makes it tempting to imagine the past as a stable and relatively isolationist period, people have travelled vast distances throughout history. In the context of the African continent, the Arab slave trade, transatlantic slave trade, and intercontinental migration both precede and, in terms of total numbers, vastly outweigh migration from Africa to Europe in the present. Additionally, these previous instantiations are significant to consider—not least because migrants continue to use the same transcontinental routes—because the colonial dynamics embedded in earlier migration cycles are still replicated in contemporary migration. Former imperial powers continue to be linked to their colonies

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20 Ibid., p. 9-10.
through language, economic ties, and *jus sanguinis* rights, incentivizing migration from former colonies to the countries that previously occupied them.\(^\text{21}\)

However, migration in the present is significantly unlike earlier migration cycles due to the present-day fortification of borders. As socially constructed lines, borders artificially prescribe political and cultural constituencies. Passage across these borders are constrained by discrepancies in power and historical links between neighboring countries, as well as the suspected economic value, social status, and language skills of individual migrants.\(^\text{22}\)

Consequently, borders are perhaps the most racialized and militarized places on the political map. The massive efforts expended to target only certain groups of people point to racial and colonial legacies that paradoxically render mobility both a privilege and a stigma depending on who is requesting passage.

The bordering of Europe stands as a particularly alarming instantiation of the contradiction of contemporary migration. As anthropologist Ruben Andersson has noted, “a fundamental absurdity underlies Europe’s response to [migration]” as the so-called “invasion” of migrants “has not materialized.”\(^\text{23}\) Thus, the very reason that the rich world fears migrants is largely grounded in racist myths perpetuated, in part, by the media. Furthermore, this media narrative has superficially erased any suggestion of the historic movement of people between Africa and Europe. Thus, migration’s public perception has been profoundly controlled by mass media.\(^\text{24}\)

The racial hostility underpinning the Global North’s animosity toward the migrant figure is a key issue delineated in the field of postcolonial studies, which emerged beginning in the late 1970s. A brief list of some of the field-defining books includes Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (1978), Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin’s *The Empire Writes Back* (1989), Kwame Anthony Appiah’s *In My Father’s House* (1993), Homi Bhabha’s *The Location of Culture* (1994), and Gayatri Spivak’s *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason* (1999).

These theoretical texts are fundamentally concerned with the lasting impact of colonization and the wide-ranging consequences that it has had with regard to global politics, issues of identity, economic disparity, the nation state, and geography. Migration especially, as a crossing of boundaries leading to both relocation and reorientation, has been a theme of special interest to postcolonial studies.\(^\text{25}\) Lydia Ourahmane and Heba Y. Amin’s artistic

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\(^{21}\) Kherbek 2017.  
\(^{22}\) Papstergiadis 2000, p. 60.  
\(^{23}\) Andersson 2014, p. 31.  
\(^{24}\) Köhn 2016, p. 4 and p. 128.  
\(^{25}\) Rothberg 2013, p. 359; Papstergiadis 2000, p. 10.
interventions directly intercede in this discipline by attempting to further expose the deep connections between migration and colonialism.

**Chapter Overview**

This thesis is divided into two main chapters. Chapter 2 will examine the relation between narrative and memory that structures both works, attending to the dynamic between postcolonial and memory discourses. Chapter 3 will focus on the role of the artists’ own bodies within the works to consider embodied and bodily critiques of the colonial archive. In a brief conclusion, Chapter 4 will examine the exhibition of both works to concretize how the artists simultaneously probe the bodily, spatial, and temporal dimensions of the experience of migration. In the following, I will more thoroughly delineate the theoretical concerns of each chapter.

Chapter 2 centers on the entanglement of narrative and memory that structures both works. Significantly, both Ourahmane and Amin rely on textual components to represent aspects of their accounts of migration. This narrative intervention relates to the postcolonial theorist Edward Said’s invocation that “stories” are critical to the subjectivity of colonized people. As he was written, “stories are at the heart of what explorers and novelists say about strange regions of the world; they also become the method colonized people use to assert their own identity and the existence of their own history.”

Yet, neither artist uses narrative in a strictly linear fashion. Rather, Ourahmane and Amin present migration across time as a cyclically repetitive process. This diachronic representation relates closely to processes of memory, which compress space-time in order to continually reperform the past in the present. To this end, the narrative structures of both works are constructed from and complicated by the invocation of memory. It is through this interrelation of narrative and memory that these works reveal the transnational and transcultural implications of migration as not only an immediate concern of the present, but also a highly political phenomenon of the past. This memory is therefore particularly relevant to the postcolonial discourse. Through this engagement, both works intervene within the intersection between postcolonial studies and memory studies, a junction that has not been deeply theorized to date.

Chapter 3 explicitly builds on the previous chapter’s discussion of memory, but centers on the choice of Ourahmane and Amin to incorporate their bodies—as mediums of memory—within their works. In *In the Absence of Our Mothers*, Ourahmane’s body receives

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26 Said 1993, p. xii, quoted in Rothberg 2013, p. 368.
the gold tooth as a form of irreversible bodily modification that references her grandfather’s own bodily modification and resistance to French colonial rule. In *The Earth is an Imperfect Ellipsoid*, Amin herself becomes the agent of migration, subject to the arbitrary and subtle violence of border crossings. Her experience parallels that of the women depicted in the 11th century Islamic manuscript and presently experienced by contemporary migrants. This chapter considers female subjectivity and the body in relation to migration and memory. This intervention is particularly significant because women have been overlooked in the majority of migration studies. The experiences and perspective of women have thus largely gone unrepresented by the media and in academic writing and even artist accounts of migration. This omission is particularly glaring because women are increasingly common on migration routes and are additionally subject to gender-specific violence and discrimination that needs to be openly represented and critiqued. By incorporating their bodies into their works and the contemporary landscape of North Africa, both artists subvert the contemporary phenomenon of representing Africa at a remove and without regard for female subjectivities. Beyond issues of representation, their bodily interventions make migration an experience of intimacy. This experience is internalized by and marks their bodies, suggesting that the consequences of migration extend well beyond the actual journey and are perhaps even inheritable intergenerational traumas. This chapter will conclude by considering these embodied and bodily interventions in relation to the colonial archive. Through their embodied investigations of migration, both artists propose counter hegemonic readings of the canonical archive to expose the limitations of our present view of North Africa’s history.

Chapter 4 ties together this thesis’s theoretical considerations and concludes by analyzing the exhibition of both works. The first exhibition that will be discussed is Lydia Ourahmane’s 2018 show at Chisenhale Gallery in London. The second will be Heba Y. Amin’s 2017 exhibition at Künstlerhaus Bethanien in Berlin. The location of both shows in Europe suggests the urgency of bringing diverse migration accounts to a European audience. Both exhibitions employed affective strategies to bring their audiences into proximity with the migrant experience. In doing so, they sought to highlight the shared experiences between subjects, artists, and audience. By foregrounding proximity and relationality, the exhibitions called into question the perceived separation between Europeans and migrants and provided space to imagine alternate and more inclusive political configurations.

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27 Papstergiadis 2000, p. 52.
Through these chapters, this thesis seeks to heighten awareness for the relationship between postcolonialism, memory, and the body within contemporary discussions of migration. The focused analysis on these two works, which both take temporally expansive approaches to their subject, exposes the historical foundations that have induced migration from Africa to Europe. These works emphasize the conflicting considerations deeply embedded in the decision to leave one’s homeland, which go far beyond economic incentives. Tracing the ways in which the colonial project impacts citizenship, border securitization, and restrictions to movement, both *In the Absence of our Mothers* and *The Earth is an Imperfect Ellipsoid* explore the intimate, explicit, and abstract ways in which colonialism continues to impact migrants in the present.

**A Brief Note on Terminology**

Throughout this thesis, I follow anthropologist Steffen Köhn’s recommendation and dismiss the term “immigration” as reductive and insufficient to describe the spatial and relational complexities of contemporary migration. Migration is not unidirectional, but multidirectional, allowing for the exchange of people, goods, and ideas transnationally and globally in complex patterns that may at a moment’s notice reverse direction. Thus, I will use the term “migration” and “migrant” throughout my thesis. Additionally, when discussed, I will place quotation marks around “migration crisis” and “illegal migrant” to emphasize that these are both media terms and not actual descriptive concepts. While the term “migration crisis” denies migration’s well documented past, “illegal migrant” is pejorative and stigmatizing. It is also frequently used incorrectly because it implies that migrants are criminals when in reality they have usually only committed an administrative infraction by crossing a border without a visa.

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28 Köhn 2016, p. 10.
29 Andersson 2014, p. 54.
Chapter Two

Narrativizing Postcolonial Memory

Through his influential contributions to the anthropology of migration, Algerian sociologist Abdelmalek Sayad outlined three principles from which to structure investigations and research within this field. The first principle proposes that any inquiry must start from the history, structures, and conflicts of the sending communities or countries, rather than from that of the receiving society. Through this injunction, Sayad sought to acknowledge the dual emigrant/immigrant identity that constitutes the migrant figure. Building on this project, the second principle states that migration is the product of a historical relation of inter-national domination that is discernible in both material and symbolic forms at the level of the state and the individual. Tracing back the power relations between North Africa and Europe with specific emphasis on their shared colonial past, Sayad suggested that North African migrants continue to carry this repressed relation of power within themselves and reenact it in their particular experiences and strategies. The final principle of migration considers migration’s processes of group making and unmaking, which results in “collective dissimulation and social duplicity.” Sayad argued that migration is misrecognized for what it is by all parties, including the sending communities, receiving societies, and the migrants themselves. Thus, migration is erroneously conceived as a provisional and transitory event determined primarily by the economic quest for labor. This view inevitably disavows migration’s colonial roots as well as the long term and intergenerational consequences that continue to unfold after the migrant’s relocation.

Collectively, Sayad’s three principles reconstitute the “complete trajectory” of the migrant figure to uncover the full system of determinants—both intimate and systemic—that trigger emigration and continue to be manifest even once the migrant arrives at their destination. These principles outline a methodology for the investigation of migration, but also for the formation of narratives of migration that follows the migrant from before their departure, through their journey, and beyond their resettlement. Yet, the question of what

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31 Sayad 1999, p. 15.  
33 Ibid., p. 176.  
34 Sayad 1999, p. 20.  
36 I use the terms “resettlement” and “destination” quite loosely as few journeys are truly final and many migration experiences are marked by continual transience.
“complete trajectory” precisely suggests still remains. How far back must the story begin, and how far into the future must it continue?37

While Sayad was writing from the fields of sociology and anthropology, his theoretical project provides a rich background upon which to consider the conceptual interventions of Ourahmane and Amin. Joining a larger group of artists participating in what art critic Hal Foster has defined as “the ethnographic turn in contemporary art,” their practices mirror some of the strategies and considerations of ethnographic narrativizations of migration.38 Like Sayad, Ourahmane and Amin’s works attempt to connect present-day migration with the history of colonialism while still foregrounding the individual experience of migration.39 In doing so, they represent migration beyond reductive tropes that sensationalize the movement of people and mischaracterize migration as an aberration of the present.

While structurally similar to Sayad’s ethnographic project, as artistic interventions of a highly personal nature, these works do not strive toward objectivity. They unselfconsciously reveal the intimacies of relocation, presenting migration specifically rather than comprehensively. Thus, they avoid many of the pitfalls associated with ethnography, which is perennially critiqued for fetishizing, abstracting, or intellectualizing the people and communities that are its subjects. Neither passing judgment nor reconstituting the experiences of others, these works do not reproduce conditions of inequality. Instead they give testimony to personal experiences and memories, presenting individualized narratives that consider the concrete social and political circumstances that have shaped migration in their own lives. However, despite their micro-level perspectives, their works still relate to the global interconnections that mark migration.

Lydia Ourahmane’s personal narrative of migration is one of familial intimacy that begins with her Algerian grandfather and his resistance to French colonial rule in the 1940s and 1950s. Ourahmane presents these narratives as written text that she presents alongside the exhibited gold tooth. By contrast, Amin’s personal narrative of migration does not build

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37 I am more interested in how these questions may provoke my reading of Lydia Ourahmane and Heba Y. Amin’s artworks, rather than suggesting that Sayad’s project necessitates them. Sayad sought to expand the socio-political context of migration away from temporal specificity, so it is anathema to suggest that he prescribed rigid temporal demarcations to his studies of migration.

38 Foster 1996, p. 181. Foster dates the emergence of ethnographically informed contemporary art to the mid-1990s. Ethnographic tools utilized by these artists include: interviewing subjects, participant observation, and fieldwork. Notably, both Lydia Ourahmane and Heba Y. Amin conducted fieldwork and interviewed contemporary migrants for the two works under discussion. Other artists working in this vein include: Dan Graham, Martha Rosler, and Allan Sekula.

39 Sayad’s writings are in fact included on a suggested reading list compiled by Ourahmane and distributed by Chisenhale Gallery on the occasion of her solo exhibition, The You in Us (2018).
on the intimate recollections of her family (at least not explicitly), but rather, centers on the documentation of her five-month overland journey across North Africa to Europe. Amin contextualizes this journey within a deep history of migration through her manipulation of artifacts and technologies of cartography—the Kitab al-Masalik wal-Mamlik, the French colonial theodolite, and a camera—which she employs to guide and document her passage across landscapes shaped by centuries of migration. Amin’s journey literally follows the structure of a narrative in and of itself, but her documentation of this narrative-journey is fragmented and full of visual omissions.

Thus, both works are structured around personal narratives, but narratives that do not follow a strictly linear nor complete progression. Shifting histories and events superimpose one another in temporal polyphony. While both works can be read or viewed linearly, diverse connections and parallels exist between the various narrative frames, suggesting recursions and temporal leaps. Additionally, Ourahmane and Amin’s narratives are plagued by gaps in both memory and history. Ourahmane learns her grandfather’s story through the halting recollections of an older uncle, whereas missing pages and inaccurate descriptions beset the Islamic manuscript that guides Amin’s journey, requiring her to reimagine what was once represented and is now lost. These multivalent and circuitous meanderings follow the pattern of memory, suggesting that beyond considering the link between colonialism and contemporary migration, these works consider memory in relation to the postcolonial. How we have failed to connect migration to its colonial roots is, in part, a failure of memory. By visualizing the links between past and present, both works intervene within the realm of remembrance, specifically foregrounding forms of anticolonial memory that diverge from the hegemonic collective memory propagated by imperial power.

This chapter analyzes the structure of In the Absence of Our Mothers and The Earth is an Imperfect Ellipsoid, focusing on the specific forms of personal narrative and memory that both artists use to investigate migration. In considering how these concepts are employed as organizational frames, this chapter reflects on the parallels and intersections between the disciplines of postcolonial studies and memory studies. As noted by the memory scholar Michael Rothberg, memory has seldom been mentioned in the foundational texts of postcolonial studies, and likewise, few memory theorists have considered their subject’s
overlap with postcoloniality.\textsuperscript{40} This juncture, however, is precisely where Ourahmane and Amin stage their interventions.

Beginning with a discussion of migrant narratives from the sociological and anthropological perspectives, this chapter traces how \textit{In the Absence of Our Mothers} and \textit{The Earth is an Imperfect Ellipsoid} integrate both a fragmentary personal narrative structure and memory processes to interrogate migration. The irregular temporalities that these works foreground will be analyzed through the lens of “multidirectional memory,” a term coined by Rothberg to describe “memories [that] emerge in the interplay between different pasts and a heterogeneous present” and “the interference, overlap and mutual constitution of seemingly distinct collective memories.”\textsuperscript{41} This chapter will conclude by examining the specific material objects employed in both works. These objects function as media of memory that constitute and reconstitute collective memory across time. Applying media theorists Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin’s concept of remediation—which describes how various media mediate each other and in the process are changed themselves—to the field of cultural memory, I will analyze how the specific media choices of both artists seek to bring the past into the experiential present.\textsuperscript{42}

This analysis does not negate the differences between these two works. Significantly, both artists approach narrative and memory from considerably different vantages. For one, Ourahmane’s excavation of her family’s history focuses on migration in the past tense. Her family has already migrated from Algeria to various countries in Europe, though the consequences of such movement and displacement are still deeply felt. By contrast, Amin examines migration as an experiential journey in the present tense, becoming the direct subject of migration. However, this journey is integrally informed by the history of migration across centuries, thus her work simultaneously performs a historical excavation of the past.

\textbf{Fragmented Migrant Narratives}

The exhibited material of \textit{In the Absence of Our Mothers} consists of two 4.5g teeth of 18kt gold [Fig. 5 and 6], an x-ray of Ourahmane’s mouth showing the nickel screw drilled into her jawbone to secure the gold tooth [Fig. 7], and a descriptive text in two parts [Fig. 8].

The first section of the text begins by stating that Algeria came under French colonial rule in

\footnotetext[40]{Rothberg 2013. Rothberg specifically cites the texts of postcolonial scholars Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak, and Homi Bhabha; and those of memory scholars Maurice Halbwachs, Pierre Nora, and Jan and Aleida Assmann.}

\footnotetext[41]{Rothberg 2006, p. 162.}

1830 and then describes the military service of Ourahmane’s grandfather, Tayeb Ourahmane, in the French colonial army. After completing his two years of compulsory service in 1934, he was kept on to train other soldiers for a further seven years against his will. In 1942, with his deployment to Europe to fight in World War II imminent, Tayeb took the drastic measure of extracting every one of his own teeth with a pair of pliers and no anesthetic to render himself medically unfit to serve. He was immediately dismissed. The text then describes his subsequent participation in the Algerian War of Independence as a member of the Oujda Group, which fought against French occupation and later became the ruling party after independence. As a member of this group, Tayeb smuggled thousands of arms into Algeria, using his family home as an ammunition cache and hideout for wounded resistance fighters. This section of the text ends with: “Before Ourahmane passed away in 1979, he refused to be formally honored for his involvement in the fight for independence.”

The second section of the text describes a chance encounter in 2015 between Lydia Ourahmane and a 23-year-old man at the Medina Djedida market in Oran, Algeria. The man offered to sell Ourahmane a gold chain for €300, which he claimed belonged to his mother. At first Ourahmane declined, but she later went back and bought it, intrigued by the fact that he was selling it for the approximate fee charged by traffickers for a place on a boat traveling to Europe. A final paragraph describes how upon returning to London, Ourahmane had the gold chain melted down and cast into two matching gold teeth that replicated her missing upper right maxillary molar. She then underwent a complex implant procedure to permanently insert one of the gold teeth into her mouth. Following a preliminary appointment to assess her jawbone, Ourahmane’s gum was cut, her bone drilled into, and a nickel screw inserted into the hole. After the gum was sewn up, a two-month integration period passed, allowing the bone to fuse with the screw. Later the tooth was put into position, and the gum was allowed to heal once more to accommodate the new tooth.

This one page of text tells three stories: that of Tayeb Ourahmane, that of the man at the medina, and that of the artist herself. Yet for all the details provided describing these layered histories, much must still be inferred. The text is punctuated by gaps in time, geography, and memory. How did Tayeb make the decision to pull out his own teeth? Why did he refuse to be formally honored for his participation in the Algerian resistance? Did the

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43 Ourahmane 2018.
44 During World War I, France lost more than 1.4 million soldiers, of whom 97,000 were colonial soldiers, including 26,000 from Algeria. Ourahmane states that when her grandfather was called upon to fight, he believed that if he left he would never return. Blackmore 2018.
45 Ourahmane 2018.
46 Ibid.
young man steal the gold chain or did he have permission to sell it? Did he attempt to migrate to Europe after their transaction, or was it merely a coincidence that the price of the chain coincided with the fee for passage? Why do people take such extreme measures to stay or leave Algeria, and how is agency inscribed in this choice? In addition to these (and more) unanswered questions, this text highlights three fraught conflicts: World War II, the Algerian War of Independence, and the contemporary migrant crisis. These events alternately shape and parallel the internal conflicts experienced by the three subjects, suggesting that while their conflicts are perhaps less visible, they are no less violent.

This fragmentary narrative finds semblance with the forms of narration associated with refugee and clandestine migrants. As anthropologist Roberto Beneduce has noted, these narratives “resist all sociological or historical analyses, or consistent narrative reconstructions.” Describing the specific illogic of these narratives observed during his fieldwork, Beneduce writes:

\[\text{In the stories of these women and men, contradictions and forgetting are frequent, details and events – perhaps too unbearable to be remembered – have been obliterated, or their recollection is inhibited by particular cultural values…there is a lack of coherence, as if for these women and men it is impossible to bridge the time ‘before’ and ‘after’, impossible to bridge different times and experiences, different worlds – a work of bridging which is the specific function of the imagination.}\]

It is particularly this idea of the “time before” and “time after” that links Ourahmane’s work to these narratives. In the Absence of Our Mothers attempts to bridge “before” and “after” in order to fill a “gap” in Ourahmane’s life. In an interview from 2018, Ourahmane described how her right maxillary molar, which had given her trouble for years, fell out soon after she graduated from Goldsmiths. In many ways, this work is about filling this gap, which is both a physical gap and a gap in self-knowledge.

Like Ourahmane, a desire to fill gaps—both historical and visual—underlies the narrative presented by Amin. Rather than relying on video exclusively, a format frequently employed by artists and filmmakers to record the journey of migration, Amin primarily employs landscape photographs and audio recordings exclusively of her passage through border crossings to document her journey. The audio recordings document the intensely

\[\text{47 Beneduce 2008, p. 506.}\]
\[\text{48 Ibid., p. 507; emphasis added.}\]
The intimate act of crossing borders, but are punctuated by the vast silences between them.\footnote{Amin 2017b} While the border crossings are perhaps the most politicized moments of her journey, the majority of her passage occurs in these silences between recordings. These silences signify her movement across countries and vast tracks of land, rather than borders, and find partial visualization in her series of landscape photographs, which in turn refer directly to the lost sections of the *Kitab al-Masalik wal-Mamalik*.

Tracing the major trade routes of the Islamic Empire in the 11th century and providing vivid descriptions of the people and landscapes along these routes, this manuscript constitutes one of the first supposedly comprehensive descriptions of Western and Northern Africa under Islamic rule. This text has been noted for its highly lyrical style and accurate description of geography. However, this accuracy belies the fact that its Andalusian author, Abu Abdulla al Bakri, is not believed to have stepped foot in Africa during his life. Rather, Bakri compiled his account from reports provided by merchants, traders, and travellers. Included in their accounts are descriptions of the woman they encountered.\footnote{Kherbek 2017.} These descriptions are highly sexualized and objectifying and in this way parallel the objectification of geography in the manuscript, and by European imperial powers eight centuries later. Today, this manuscript only exists in fragments. Taking this as her starting point, Amin retraced the trade routes and documented the missing geographies from a contemporary perspective. In the process, Amin encountered and photographed migrants, who today use these same trade routes on their journey to Europe.\footnote{Amin 2017b.}

Amin titles each photograph by its geographic coordinates, when known, or with the name of the nearest city and country. The photograph 14° 43’ 19.9 [Fig. 9] captures a group of men working at a construction site. They stand clustered together, surrounded by concrete, rebar, and piles of earth. Two of the men appear to be standing in a ditch, digging a hole. A wall that rises up beyond the image frame dwarfs these men. The photograph is slightly blurry, and a dark shadow occludes the lower right-hand corner. Amin has taken the image from a distance, and the men are unaware of their surveillance. The particular aesthetic quality rendered by Amin’s theodolite, which she photographs through, further suggests this act of surveillance. The circular scope of the theodolite is reproduced in the image’s circular composition. The men are positioned at the circular image’s center. This technological

\footnote{Amin 2017b. These audio recordings are unexhibited, but they strongly shaped the structure and experiential thrust of Amin’s journey and ultimately the exhibited artwork as Amin describes in her artist talk. Samples of these audio recordings are included in her artist talk.}
instrument is a precursor to military weaponry, and consequently, a violent, even militant, quality is embedded in the image. While the actual content of the photograph is quite pedestrian, the circular composition creates the sense that these men are targeted. As targets, they immediately become suspicious. One man, at first glance, appears to have a gun strapped to his back. However, this is more likely merely a shadow. The construction site that they stand in is also suggestive of the crumbling ruins of a shelled building. Thus, this image is evocative of those taken in Beirut during the Lebanese Civil War (1975-1991) and Aleppo during the brutal height of the Syrian Civil War (2011-present). The aesthetic qualities lent by the theodolite politicizes the land, revealing how technologies of representation, far from being objective or neutral, have contributed to a misrepresentation of the people and territory of North Africa.

Each image from Amin’s photographic series presents an isolated landscape that does not obviously link with the other photographs through any type of internal visual logic. Thus, Amin’s documentation of her journey is as fragmentary and insufficient as the personal narratives retold by migrants themselves. Her project functions as a visual mirror to their narratives, demonstrating a competitiveness and antagonism between each narrative frame. Consequently, the narratives presented by her photographs compete with the narrative presented in the Islamic geography text, but also with the perception of North Africa’s geography imagined by Europeans during their colonial endeavors. Like Ourahmane’s work, three layers of representation exist within Amin’s project: the representation of African geography presented in the Islamic manuscript; the representation of the same landscape by colonial powers; and Amin’s own representation of her journey through this fraught land.

The multiple narratives explored by both artists exhibit a tension between the linearity of the unfolding of historical events and the unremembered gaps between these histories. Yet, this insufficiency is a conscious intervention that seeks to compete with the linear coherency of traditional historical narratives. As historian and literary critic Hayden White has pointed out, the linear temporality that we prescribe to narratives of history is highly problematic. The sense of “formal coherency,” wholeness, and orderliness that we ascribe to them is a form of fiction at odds with our reality. White asserts that historical narratives are distinguishable through their moralizing arc, which is an invention of the author rather than a construction of fact. White writes, “the historical narrative…reveals to us a world that is putatively ‘finished,’ done with, over, and yet not dissolved, nor falling apart. In this world,
reality wears the mask of meaning, the completeness and fullness of which we can only imagine, never experience.”

Significantly, both In the Absence of Our Mothers and The Earth is an Imperfect Ellipsoid incorporate a textual element alongside the visual. While both works embed an implicit moralizing arc, neither attempts to construct a cohesive or closed historical narrative. Ourahmane’s wall text reads like a series of facts, with little to no embellishment. Moreover, she does not explicitly connect her grandfather’s story with her interaction with the young man beyond presenting these accounts adjacent to one another. For her project, Amin presents excerpts from the Kitab al-Masalik wal-Mamlik as a scroll text hung on the wall alongside her photographs [Fig. 10]. The excerpts are printed as block texts with no introduction or textual transitions or contextualization between each quotation. This image-text format of both works links to other Late Conceptual artists working to problematize the coherency of historical narratives. Lebanese American artist Walid Raad centers much of his practice on the Lebanese Civil War. Like Ourahmane and Amin, he presents wall-text alongside his images, sculptures, and videos in order to question the factual base that we ascribe to historical narrative.

In I want to be able to welcome my father to my house (1990/2018) [Fig. 11], Raad presents a series of scanned images from his father’s diary from the war years. Switching between English and Arabic, the dairy entries chronicle the collapse of the Lebanese currency, fluctuating prices of construction materials, the time and intensity of bombings, and more personal notes, like the date of his own father’s death and funeral. Raad adds pen ink drawings of various types of explosives to the dairy’s pages, partly obscuring his father’s entries. While these drawings are imposing symbols of war and destruction, what is more striking about this work are Raad’s father’s personal notes about his everyday experiences in the midst of this conflict. These notes adamantly deny war’s visuality, relaying the concerns of the everyday with as much attention as is expended to recount the brutal violence occurring around him. By not attempting to create a hierarchy of events, these diary entries refute the cohesiveness of history proper that White suggests is conventional. Yet, Raad takes his intervention even further by structuring his practice within a largely fictive framework. As with much of his oeuvre, this work is attributed to The Atlas Group, which purportedly oversees an extensive archive dedicated to researching and recording artifacts related to the conflicts in Lebanon. While described as a collaboration between multiple individuals, the

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54 Ibid., p. 24.
group is actually the invention of Raad alone. Moreover, all of the documents that The Atlas Group archives are an uncertain mix of fact and fiction. This added context brings the authenticity of these diary entries and the reality they relate into question. It is possible that these entries are only imaginative representations of Raad’s father’s daily life in war-torn Lebanon, although equally they could be real. This work denies the closure or factual base of conventional historical narratives. Rather, it is inventive and personal, questioning the dynamic between the real and the imaginary in the historicization of the past.

Likewise, Ourahmane and Amin’s interventions deny the closure of historical narratives; they acknowledge their incompleteness and the impossibility of wholly and factually relaying historical narrative. Consequently, their interventions closely follow the imaginative potential and particularities of memory. While their works are partially narrative, they lack the completeness or linearity of history proper. More accurately, their works are narrations of memory. Steffen Köhn has argued in relation to migration film that these “works can be viewed as phenomenological descriptions of the function of memory” through their embodiment of “multiple layers of time.” 55 While not strictly film, the narrative structure of both Ourahmane and Amin’s works contain temporal shifts that suggest an “in-between” space of “past-present” that closely resembles the terrain of memory. 56 This dynamic follows the relation between memory and history outlined by Pierre Nora:

Memory is life, borne by living societies founded in its name. It remains in permanent evolution, open to the dialectic of remembering and forgetting, unconscious of its successive deformations, vulnerable to manipulation and appropriation, susceptible to being long dormant and periodically revived. History, on the other hand, is the reconstruction, always problematic and incomplete, of what is no longer. Memory is a perpetually actual phenomenon, a bond tying us to the eternal present; history is a representation of the past. […] Memory takes root in the concrete, in spaces, gesture, images, and objects; history binds itself strictly to temporal continuities, to progressions and to relations between things. Memory is absolute, while history can only conceive the relative. 57

Nora’s view of history identifies the same problems raised by White. Yet, Nora goes further than White to suggest memory as a possible ameliorative counter to the insufficiencies of history proper. Thus, Ourahmane and Amin’s utilization of memory attempts to fill the gaps and clarify the repetitions of the historical narratives of migration that they interrogate.

55 Khön, p. 115.
56 Ibid., p. 115.
[Fig. 5 and 6] Lydia Ourahmane, details of *In the Absence of Our Mothers*, 2018, x-ray, scan text, two 4.5g 18kt gold teeth, dimensions variable, Chisenhale Gallery, London (photo: Andy Keate).

[Fig. 7] Lydia Ourahmane, detail of *In the Absence of Our Mothers*, 2018, x-ray, scan text, two 4.5g 18kt gold teeth, dimensions variable, Chisenhale Gallery, London (photo: Andy Keate).
Algeria came under French rule in 1830. From 1932 to 1945 Tayeb Ourahmane served compulsory military service in the French-Algerian army. Based in Oujda, which is now part of Morocco, Ourahmane was one of the highest-ranking snipers in the military and worked, against his will, to train Algerian soldiers.

In 1945, he was ordered to join the French military to fight against Germany in World War II. Married with three children and serving his 13th year of service, Ourahmane resisted further military service by extracting all of his teeth. This act of self-mutilation led to his eventual annulment from the military, with officials recognising he was unfit for service.

The Algerian War began in 1954 leading to Algeria’s independence from France in 1962. During this time Ourahmane was part of the Oujda Group, a group of military officers and politicians fighting French colonial control over Algeria. Ourahmane became actively involved in the fight against French occupation. He facilitated the illegal import of arms into Algeria and made his home a base for ammunition storage, as well as a place where wounded soldiers could seek recovery. Before Ourahmane passed away in 1979 he refused to be formally honored for his involvement in the fight for independence.

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In 2015, while researching illegal immigration from Algeria to Spain, Lydia Ourahmane, Tayeb Ourahmane’s granddaughter, met a 23-year-old man in the Medina Djedida market in Oran, Algeria. He was selling an 18k gold chain, that he claimed was his mother’s. Lydia bought the chain from him for £300, the approximate fee charged by traffickers at the time for a place in a boat migrating to Europe.

In January of this year the gold chain was melted down and cast into two gold teeth, replicating Lydia’s missing upper right maxillary molar. Surgery was then performed on Lydia’s mouth to prepare the bone for tooth insertion. One gold tooth was then permanently screwed into her mouth.

[Fig. 8] Lydia Ourahmane, detail of In the Absence of Our Mothers, 2018, x-ray, scan text, two 4.5g 18kt gold teeth, dimensions variable, Chisenhale Gallery, London (photo: Andy Keate).
[Fig. 9] Heba Y. Amin, 14˚ 43’ 19.9, B/W pigment print on Metallic Silver 300 Archival Paper, 20.5 x 20.5 x 8cm, from *The Earth is an Imperfect*, 2016, photography, text, projection, iron sculpture.

[Fig. 10] Heba Y. Amin, detail from *The Earth is an Imperfect*, 2016, photography, text, projection, iron sculpture.
Postcolonial Memory

Because the so-called “refugee crisis” has rendered migration an urgency of the present, it is perceived as having no past, and therefore, has seldom been seen as a topic for memory. Yet, reconfigured as a postcolonial project, migration becomes a prime subject for memory. Before delving into the relationship between migration and memory, however, it is necessary first to consider the relationship between postcoloniality and memory more generally. As stated previously, In the Absence of Our Mothers and The Earth is an Imperfect Ellipsoid intervene within this junction, joining a larger field of contemporary art that considers the connections between these two disciplines. Perhaps best known for his engagement with these themes is French Algerian artist Kader Attia. His documentary film, Reflecting Memory (2016), features interviews with surgeons, neurologists, psychoanalysts, and amputees concerning the phantom limb syndrome. Attia uses this pathology—a medical term used to classify the persistent sensation of the presence of a limb after it has already

58 See for example John Akomfrah’s Vertigo Sea (2015); the photographs of Sammy Baloji; and Emeke Ogboh’s Song of the Germans (Deutschlandlied) (2015).
been amputated—as a metaphor for the workings of postcoloniality. In various scenes throughout the film, amputees are positioned next to mirrors in order to create the visual effect that their missing limbs are still present [Fig. 12]. Contemplating this work in his paper entitled, “The Field of Emotion,” from 2018, Attia remarks that “the traumas resulting from the worst moments in history, such as wars, famines, and genocides, have left lasting material and immaterial scars which, like a phantom limb of an amputated part of the body, are still there.”

Attia likens the phantom limb to the persistence of memory, with memory functioning as an ephemeral shadow of past history. Taking it as the urgent project of the artist to reveal the immaterial character of wounds caused by historical traumas and to attempt to repair them even though they are perhaps beyond repair, Attia has documented the wide-ranging repercussions of Western domination and colonialism on non-Western cultures, a project that both Ourahmane and Amin build upon through their interventions.

Yet, the theorization of the connection between memory and postcoloniality outside contemporary art is surprisingly sparse. Memory is seldom discussed outright in any of the foundational postcolonial texts. Said refers to “narrative” and “stories” rather than to memory or remembrance, while similarly, Homi Bhabha makes little mention of memory outright, though his concern with the logic of cultural production and temporality outlines a space for memory. Despite the absence of discussions of memory, postcolonialism’s analysis of the cultural and political legacies of the past in the present indicates that memory is fundamental to its approaches. Furthermore, postcolonial cultural production is itself a form of counter-memory that seeks to resignify the past in order to unsettle dominant or canonical forms of cultural memory. It is particularly this avenue that would seem relevant to memory scholars. However, most theorization has instead focused on canonical forms of cultural memory and the processes that have led to their dominance. Thus, theorists have seldom attended to less stable or marginal forms of cultural memory production.

The major theorists of memory—Maurice Halbwach, Pierre Nora, and Jan and Aleida Assmann—hardly make mention of the postcolonial in their writings. Michael Rothberg has argued that memory study’s colonial blind spot may be the result of the discipline’s emphasis on “the construction of continuity and the coherence of cultural groups”, which has the side

59 Attia 2018, corrected.
60 Ibid.
61 Rothberg 2013, p. 359. My focus is on the specific field of postcolonial studies, however, it is important to note that the category of memory does figure prominently within the anti-colonial source texts upon which postcolonialism deeply engages. The writings of Franz Fanon and Amilcar Cabral, for example, recognize that the struggle against colonialism is closely related to the struggle over collective memory.
62 Said 1993, p. xii; and Bhabha 1994.
effect of reproducing imperial mentalities. For example, Maurice Halbwach’s sociological approach to collective memory—developed prior to World War II—emphasizes relatively stable formations of social groups and frameworks. This approach is wholly inadequate to the contemporary context in which social groups are much more fluid, easily dissolving and reforming with new constituencies in relatively short time frames.

Pierre Nora too emphasizes relatively stable groups by centering his investigation on the modern nation-state as the ultimate social framework of memory in his three-volume monograph on *lieux de mémoire*, published in 1992. While focusing specifically on the notion of French collective memory, Nora largely neglects mention of any of France’s colonial projects. Despite this orientation, his concept of *lieux de mémoire* is still useful for thinking about postcolonial memory. Nora defines *lieux de mémoire* as “any significant entity, whether material or non-material in nature, which by dint of human will or the work of time has become a symbolic element of the memorial heritage of any community.” Nora further suggests that any place, object, or concept of historical significance within popular collective memory, including monuments, museums, events, and symbols, can function as a *lieu de mémoire*.

More recently, Jan and Aleida Assmann have attempted to systematize the study of collective memory by distinguishing between communicative memory and cultural memory. Communicative memory refers to memory based on everyday communications and has a duration of about three familial generations. By contrast, cultural memory, also known as canonical memory, is based on symbols such as texts, images, rituals, and landmarks, which they suggest have a typical lifespan of 3000 years. Their project emphasizes the continuity and coherence of cultural groups, foregrounding nationalist and imperial representations of power. Yet, their differentiation between “communicative memory” and “cultural memory” is still useful for distinguishing between Ourahmane and Amin’s distinct interventions. Ourahmane delves into a spoken family history and consequently intervenes within communicative memory. By contrast, Amin relies on symbolic texts and technological apparatuses to explore a much longer historical period, and thus can be seen as intervening within cultural memory.

Beyond the failure of current memory models to address the postcolonial, a larger question may be asked as to whether the evermore-fragmentary nature of social groups can

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63 Rothberg 2013, p. 364
64 Nora 1996, pp. xvii-xviii.
65 Ibid., pp. xvii-xviii.
66 Assmann 2010, p 122.
even form collective consensual memory today. Nonetheless, Rothberg has attended to the elision between memory and the postcolonial by attempting to map out their critical intersections. He has proposed “multidirectional memory” as an analytical term to investigate how both fields mutually mediate the past in the present. Rothberg defines this term as “a dynamic in which multiple pasts jostle against each other in a heterogeneous present, and where communities of remembrance disperse and reconvene in new, non-organic forms.” This concept suggests that memories emerge in the interplay between different pasts with the present. In the process, they interfere, overlap, and mutually constitute each other, even bridging seemingly distinctive collective memories. Unlike the models of memory proposed by Halbwach, Nora, and the Assmanns, which might be classified as “competitive memory models,” because they assume stable social groups and investigate what may be termed as dominant forms of memory, multidirectional memory is less static. It enables the simultaneous signification of various lieux de mémoire that fluctuate and evolve across time in relation to other lieux de mémoire. In this way, multidirectional memory seems to conceptually parallel the sociological approach of Sayad’s migrant investigations. Both methodologies are attuned to transnational and transcultural politics as well as to expanded notions of time. Additionally, both seek to subvert traditional models in their respective disciplines that are based around stable social groups and discrete time frames.

Multidirectional memory is thus a useful concept for understanding how memory is activated within In the Absence of Our Mothers and The Earth is an Imperfect Ellipsoid. Both works compress and juxtapose three discrete temporalities through experimental artistic interventions that allow connections and bridges to arise in an organic composition. While their personal stakes within their works suggests an intervention into the domain of personal memory, both artists also engage with issues of collective memory through the invocation of lieux de mémoire and media of memory (the later category will be discussed at the end of this chapter).

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67 Rothberg 2013, p. 361.
68 Ibid., p. 372.
69 Rothberg 2006, p. 162.
70 Ibid., p. 162.
Ourahmane’s work is structured around the multidirectional pathways of personal memory. The dominant memory is of her grandfather, which she learns about from her uncle, indicating an additional level of mediation. A secondary memory is of her meeting with the young man who sold her the gold chain. Both memories occupy different temporalities as historical events, and the actions they describe at first seem totally dissimilar: her grandfather’s choice to irrevocably alter his body to avoid fighting in a war, only to later put his very life at risk to resist French colonial domination; by contrast to the young man’s choice to leave Algeria at whatever cost necessary, including selling a family heirloom, which he perhaps stole from his own mother. The actions of her grandfather and the young man are two gestures of the same degree but in total opposition of the other. At stake in both recollections is the notion of Algerian identity and allegiance, issues that both deeply pertain to collective memory since national identity and allegiance are built upon notions of a shared or collective past.

In Ourahmane’s invocation of multidirectional memory, the memory of her grandfather juxtaposes two competing lieux de mémoire—World War II and the Algerian War of Independence—presenting them as two proximate histories of violence. In European collective memory, World War II stands as a lieu de mémoire associated with Nazi
occupation, genocide, and fascism. This intersects with the *lieu de mémoire* of the Algerian War for Independence in the collective memory of Algerians. The Algerian War—one of the most brutal and bloody struggles for decolonization—was fought against the backdrop of World War II, and demonstrates a dynamic between victimization and resistance on the part of Algerians that parallels the French at the hands of the Nazis. The Sétif and Guelma massacre that took place in Algeria on May 8, 1945, the day World War II ended in Europe, perhaps best signifies the mirroring of these *lieux de mémoire*. Following Algerian demonstrations for independence, French colonial authorities and Pied-noir settlers brutally and indiscriminately massacred between 6,000 and 20,000 Algerians.\(^{71}\) This incident foregrounds a dynamic between resistance and oppression that marks and links both *lieux de mémoire*.

Charlotte Delbo, a non-Jewish survivor of the Holocaust and important leftist literary figure from France, in fact noted the connections between these two memory-laden events in her book, *Les belles lettres* (1961), which she published during the conflict in Algeria:

> That the French authorities could open camps in Algeria already shows their scorn for public opinion. But Algeria, that’s far away. That they can open camps in France shows that their scorn was well-founded. Deportees can tell you how heartbreaking the indifference of German civilians was when they passed in front of them in their striped uniforms, walking in rows while going to work outside the camp…There are Algerians in camps in France, camps surrounded by barbed wire, camps surmounted by watchtowers where guards armed with machine guns keep watch…Of course, it’s not Auschwitz. But isn’t it enough that innocents (a priori, people not condemned are innocent) are in camps for our conscience to revolt?\(^{72}\)

This passage indicates how even at the time, the emerging pattern of violence against Algerians perpetrated by French colonial forces was linked to the memory of the violence enacted by the Nazis during World War II. However, this passage also forms a link to the present day experiences of migrants and refugees. The camps in France and Algeria that held Algerian resisters, while prefigured by Auschwitz and other Nazi death camps, now prefigure the “detention centers” used across France and elsewhere in Europe to hold “illegal” migrants. Ourahmane’s presentation of these three temporalities suggests the multidirectionality of memory. All three histories compete, overlap, and resignify one another, suggesting the construction and fragmentation of Algerian identity as two continuous and opposing processes that extend from the colonial past to the present.

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\(^{71}\) Peyroulou 2008.

Associating the Intellectual Regimes of the Past

In contrast to Ourahmane’s investigation of how personal memory flows into collective memory, Amin examines the layered histories that have constructed collective memory. Specifically, *The Earth is an Imperfect Ellipsoid* explores different histories of colonialization and reveals how each marks collective memory in the present. Referencing the Islamic and European periods of colonization through the Islamic manuscript and French theodolite, respectively, Amin traces how the intellectual regime of each period has been imprinted on North African collective memory.

The *Kitab al-Masalik wal-Mamalik* exemplifies the height of geographic knowledge during the Islamic Golden Age, which extended from the 8th to the 14th century. This period was marked by cultural, economic, and scientific developments perhaps best symbolized by the House of Wisdom in Baghdad, which was an intellectual center where scholars from around the world were brought together to translate all classical knowledge into the Arabic language. A comparable impulse to consolidate information about other parts of the world underlies Bakri’s manuscript. Bakri gathered together knowledge from across North Africa from multiple sources without actually substantiating any of their claims by traveling to the various places himself. Despite creating this consequential geographic manuscript, Bakri was literally blind to what the geography of North Africa actually looked like. Amin further alludes to the blindness of the Islamic intellectual regime of this period through the sculpture, *Vision is One of the Senses* (2016) [Fig. 13]. The form of this iron sculpture, which is wall mounted, alludes to a diagram of the human optical system [Fig. 14] as understood by the 11th century writer, Ibn al-Haytham in the *Kitab al-Manazir* (The Book of Optics). This book is notable for its attempt to substantiate the modern intromission theory of vision through the early use of the scientific method and significantly contributed to the development of optics, physics, and mathematics in Europe between the 13th and 17th centuries. Amin’s sculpture replicates the curving lines and symmetry of Al-Haytham’s drawing and yet it is, of course, blind. In this way, it links to Bakri’s ostensibly “scientific” and comparably blind study of geography. By alluding to both of these historically significant texts, Amin seems to question how each of these intellectual pursuits has in some way resulted in a failure to see people. Amin’s allusion to Islamic scientific history

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73 Saliba 1994, pp. 245-257.
74 Al-Khalili 2011, p. 53.
75 Kherbek 2017.
76 Al-Khalili 2009.
simultaneously connects to the scientific history of European colonialism that is embedded in the technology of the theodolite.

The theodolite is an optical instrument traditionally used for land surveying. It consists of a moveable telescope mounted so that it may rotate around horizontal and vertical axes and provides precise angular readouts. The theodolite that Amin employed [Fig. 15] for The Earth is an Imperfect Ellipsoid was acquired in Mali at an engineering school, however the instrument was constructed in France in the 1920s. The dislocation of this instrument from its place of production to its place of operation alludes to the highly political issue of map making. In every city that Amin travelled through, she conducted research at the main center of cartography and discovered that most maps are still produced in France. When speaking to the head of cartography in the mapping division of the lands commission in Ghana, Amin learned that there is no culture of using maps by the public there, which has resulted in a struggle between local mappers and giants like Google Maps to define where power resides. This dislocation is an inheritance of colonialism that additionally relates to the dislocation of knowledge production during the Islamic Golden Age. In both cases, knowledge of the geographic territory of North Africa was produced outside of North Africa, which alludes to the multidirectional pathways that have displaced collective knowledge of North Africa from North African territorial space. Just as then, in our contemporary moment, we extol scientific developments and technological advances in surveillance, but use them to monitor the movements of those seen as “outsiders”. In doing so, we objectify people and represent them from a remove.

Through The Earth is an Imperfect Ellipsoid, Amin parallels the Islamic Golden Age, European imperialism, and the present through objects that represent the peak of each regime’s scientific advancements. Through these parallels, Amin reveals a history of blindness, in which scientific acumen has failed to objectively or neutrally see or represent people. This project denatures notions of landscape, territory, and nationality to reveal their underlying construction. The national borders that divide North Africa continue to retrace those drawn by European colonizers. Relatedly, contemporary migrants travel routes previously recorded in the Islamic manuscript, and undoubtedly also recorded by European colonial forces. By focusing on how these histories parallel each other and overlap, Amin reveals how imperial regimes have flowed across boundaries of space and time through multidirectional memory. These histories and systems of knowledge inform collective

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77 Amin 2017b.
78 Ibid.
memory in the present, and unsurprisingly, this memory replicates many of the same gaps and contradistinctions as their source material.

Both Ourahmane and Amin’s works trace memory that transgress historical and temporal boundaries. Like the empires with which they are entangled, this memory is both disjunctive and combinatorial, disassembling and reassembling in nonlinear and unbounded manners. These works interrogate the fragmented and dislocated afterimage of migration, suggesting, through multidirectional memory, that the “crisis” of the present is neither new nor exceptional. Yet, in order to understand how this memory is constituted, it is necessary to investigate the material media employed by both artists.

[Fig. 13] Heba Y. Amin, *Vision is One of the Senses*, iron, powder coated, 110 x 120 x 6 cm, from *The Earth is an Imperfect Ellipsoid*, 2016, photography, text, projection, iron sculpture.

[Fig. 14] Ibn al Haytham, The structure of the human eye, from *Kitab al-Manazir*, 11th century, MS Fatih 3212, vol. 1, fol. 81b, Suleymaniye Mosque Library, Istanbul.
Remediating the Past

The concern for the confluences between memory and media in Amin’s work suggests how such a pairing may contribute to an understanding of colonial and postcolonial cultures. Both works refer to a host of media forms through which imperial power makes itself felt. In Amin’s project, these media forms include the two Islamic manuscripts, the theodolite, her photographs, and her Egyptian passport.79 Ourahmane’s project also embeds a number of media forms, though this is more obviously seen in the separate but related work, Droit du Sang (Blood Right) (2018) [Fig. 16 and 17], which Ourahmane has exhibited alongside In the Absence of Our Mothers. This work provides additional context for Tayeb Ourahmane’s story. It consists of his conscription card from 1933, military records, French passport issued in 1954, and documents demonstrating his participation in the Algerian resistance. By law, Algerian citizens born prior to independence as well as their descendants are still eligible to obtain a French passport. However, in reality this process is almost

79 Amin includes images of her passport as well as the 14 visas that she had to obtain before she set out on her journey in her artist talk.
unattainable, as Algerian citizens must already be on French soil to petition their claim. Ourahmane herself is now using these materials to apply for French citizenship, with the bureaucratic procedures of the application process forming a component of the exhibited material. To date, the work is still in progress and serves as an urgent model revealing the complex protocols, regulations, and formalities of applying for French citizenship.⁸⁰

Cultural theorists Astrid Erll and Ann Rigney have investigated this role played by media in the production of cultural memory. Cultural memory is premised on the notion that memory can only become collective through a continuous process whereby memories are shared and circulated through symbolic media. This dynamic process is marked by both remembrance and forgetting as individuals and groups continuously reconfigure their relationship to the past and reposition themselves to established and emergent lieux de mémoire. Latent media objects function as the “medial frameworks” of remembering, revealing the “medial processes through which memories become collective.”⁸¹ Identifying media of all sorts, including spoken language, letters, books, photos, and films, Erll and Rigney outline two manners in which media shape memory. Firstly, “as instruments of sense making, they mediate between individuals and the world”, and secondly, “as agents of networking, they mediate between individuals and groups.”⁸² While the gold chain from In the Absence of Our Mothers is representative of the former process, the passports utilized by both artists as well as the two Islamic manuscripts are representative of the latter.

Erll and Rigney specifically analyze how the convergence of medial representations produce lieux de mémoire by expanding on the concept of “remediation” developed by media theorists Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin in their book, Remediation: Understanding New Media (1999). The cultural process of medial networking that Erll and Rigney identify corresponds with that of remediation, which is the “logic by which new media refashion prior media forms.”⁸³ This process operates through the double logic of immediacy and hypermediacy. The logic of immediacy relates to the cultural imperative to “erase all traces of mediation” in order to create the effect of transparency and a perceptual experience that is unmediated.⁸⁴ In direct contrast, the logic of hypermediacy “acknowledges multiple act of representation and makes them visible.”⁸⁵ In describing how these two logics operate together, Bolter and Grusin argue, “Where immediacy suggests a unified visual space, contemporary

³⁸⁰ Ourahmane 2019
³⁸² Ibid., p. 1.
³⁸⁴ Ibid., 5.
³⁸⁵ Ibid., 33–34.
Aebi,

hypermediacy offers a heterogeneous space, in which representation is conceived of not as a window on the world, but rather as ‘windowed’ itself.\textsuperscript{86} While theorized by Bolter and Gusin from the specific vantage of new media, Erll and Rigney translate remediation to the field of memory studies. In their repositioning of remediation, immediacy creates the sense of the past’s presence, while hypermediacy reminds the viewer of the mediation of this sense of past-presence and thereby points to the self-reflexivity of all memorial media.\textsuperscript{87} Through their application, remediation describes how constituted events circulate through a variety of media forms. What is known or remembered about a lieu de mémoire refers not so much to what might be called the “actual event”, but rather to a canon of existent media constructions that continuously resignify this event. Thus, remediation demonstrates how cultural memory is constructed and how its constructedness continues to be reinforced across time, space, and in various cultures.

Through remediation, memorial media borrow from, absorb, critique, incorporate and refashion earlier forms of memorial media. While this, on the one hand, can and does reinforce imperial lieux de mémoire, Ourahmane and Amin’s projects employ remediation to expose colonial meanings and the role of media in constructing history. Both works are highly aware of the historical relationship between mediation and memory, especially in relation to colonialism. Remediation is itself amplified through colonial channels of economic and military power, which both artists highlight in their works.\textsuperscript{88} In revealing the convergences between colonial power and medial representations, both artists demonstrate how certain memory constructs have been formed and reinforced over time, while others have not. This multidirectional project examines both how contemporary collective memory reflects on the past and how historical forms of mediation have constructed collective memory.

Remediation is self-evidently apparent in The Earth is an Imperfect Ellipsoid, in which media very literally relate to and build upon earlier media forms—the Islamic manuscript is mediated through the theodolite, which in turn is mediated by Amin’s photographs. Simultaneously, the photographs visually represent the same landscape represented in written form in the Islamic manuscript. This work explores how different media circumscribe flows of information across time and space, and how this in turn concretizes notions of collective memory. By coopting technical instruments of mapping,

\textsuperscript{86} Ibid., 24.
\textsuperscript{87} Erll and Rigney 2009, p. 4
\textsuperscript{88} Rothberg 2013, p. 372.
Amin traces geography both literally and with a historiographical concern for the scientific construction of geography. Moreover, both the Islamic manuscript and the theodolite were deployed for imperial means. The Kitab al-Masalik wal-Mamalik sought to represent the trade routes of the Islamic empire, testifying to the extent of the empire’s reach. The manuscript’s emphasis on the economic and cultural forces that compelled the travellers on whose accounts of the region Bakri’s text is based are reiterated in contemporary discussions of migration. Similarly, the theodolite was deeply embedded in the European colonial project of visualizing and thereby possessing the African continent. Europe’s mapping project went hand in hand with photography, a media also integral to Amin’s work. Some of the earliest photographic images taken of North Africa were made by European colonial expeditions. These images were employed to validate European domination on the premise that Africa was neither cultivated nor civilized. Through her juxtaposition of these various temporalities and intellectual regimes, Amin unpacks how cartographic technologies, as she states, have been employed as devices to “[control] our historical memories and re-write our narratives.”

Furthermore, by using her Egyptian passport to travel through this region still marked by multiple layers of conquest, Amin invokes an additional symptom of Europe’s colonialization: the a priori concept of citizenship and nationality. Passports replicate global hierarchies by allowing citizens of some countries, but not others, relatively seamless passage from one country to the next. By contrast, most people face prohibitory obstacles to international travel. In all, Amin had to apply for fourteen separate visas to each of the countries she travelled to before she even began her journey. The Islamic manuscript, the theodolite, photography, and the passport are all media that symbolize the Islamic and European colonial pasts through the integral roles they played and continue to play in constituting and replicating colonial dynamics within collective memory. The shifting temporalities embedded in Amin’s project are suggested by the media used to constitute them. In this way, Amin’s work helps to highlight the specific media that transport colonial meaning into the postcolonial present.

In Ourahmane’s project, the remediation of memory takes place in the dialogue between In the Absence of Our Mothers and Droit du Sang. Ourahmane’s memories of her


90 Amin 2016.
grandfather are inextricably tied to the documents that prove the veracity of his actions. Veracity, as French issued documents, is also what makes these identification papers so valuable to Ourahmane, who uses them to claim French citizenship. Thus, these documents have been transformed across time. Their fraught and conflicting signification in the 1930-50s is separate from their function in the present, and additionally separate from their memory function as markers of a family lineage. These documents are representative of the same lingering colonial structures as Amin’s passport, and are also integral to the production of identity in the present. Cycling through various histories and temporalities, these documents evince the recursive structure of history.

[Fig. 16] Lydia Ourahmane, installation view of Droit du Sang (Blood Right), 2018-ongoing, application for French nationality, military conscription card (1933), military records (1933), French passport (1954), proofs of participation in the Algerian War for Independence on the Moroccan frontier (1969), KevinSpace Gallery, Wein, Austria.
Conclusion

This chapter has demonstrated how the specific structure of *In the Absence of Our Mothers* and *The Earth is an Imperfect Ellipsoid* intervenes between narrative and memory. Taking an ethnographically analogous approach that replicates the same fragmentary structure of migrant narratives, Ourahmane and Amin consider the deep historical and political underpinnings that inform contemporary migration. In this way, they reformulate migration as a product of the colonial pasts. Ourahmane and Amin rely on memory and the media of memory to constitute their narratives. By focusing on memory and media of memory, they reveal the multidirectional synapses that interweave temporally expansive and geographically disparate events. Revealing the mechanisms that produce collective memory, they unseat the canonical memory that dominates narratives of North Africa’s history. Their projects propose more self-reflective and subjective perceptions of the past that seek to remedy the cultural amnesia that currently dislocates migration from its historical lineages.

[Fig. 17] Lydia Ourahmane, *Droit du Sang (Blood Right)*, 2018-ongoing, application for French nationality.
Chapter Three

Bodies of Memory: Migratory Subjectivities and the Archive

In the Absence of Our Mothers and The Earth is an Imperfect Ellipsoid mediate between multidirectional memory and personal narrative. This amalgam is constituted by and projected through the subjectivities and corporeal bodies of Lydia Ourahmane and Heba Y. Amin. Their presence, as subjects of experience and inheritors of the memory of migration, is central to the affect of both works. Ourahmane relates an intimate history of family transformation, which she visually and physically signifies through the gold tooth embedded in her jawbone. Concurrently, Amin documents the bureaucratic exchanges between herself and the state to reveal a record of the experience of the migrant body. She deploys herself as a surrogate for the female migrant, authenticating contemporary instances of the objectification of the female body and its counter—instances of agency and subjectification. Thus, both artists’ accounts reimagine the body beyond a Foucauldian notion that would consign the body to the status of object, theme, or symbol only. By contrast, they position themselves as self-possessed actors, foregrounding their intentionality, intersubjectivity, identity, and agency.

The inscription of both artists’ bodies so centrally and indispensably in their works is itself a significant detour from conventional representations of migration. Through the foregrounding of their first-person perspectives and the emphasis placed on their direct, bodily involvement, both artists actively subvert representations of migration that disregard migrant subjectivities or relate them as abstractions. Their works reveal the intimate, experiential violence of migration. This allows for an understanding of the effects of global processes and collective forgettings from the perspectives of the subjects involved. This is a vital task because, as Steffen Köhn has written:

Taking on this perspective is crucial if one wants to transcend the hierarchical discourses of those who govern migratory movements and obscure the individuality of migrants, their motifs, their stories, and their personalities, by making them invisible.”

Amin has explicitly stressed that this consideration guided her process, stating that the structure of her work developed out of the anxiety she felt about her positionality in relation to migration. This was due to the fact that she has more agency than the typical migrant on

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91 Köhn 2016, p. 53.
account of her education and affiliation with the art world. Her decision to investigate migration through her own movements came about because she felt that she could not explore this topic without putting herself in front of the camera as well. Additionally, her perspective focuses primarily on the visualization of landscape and people within the landscape in order to explicitly emphasize the context of migration.  

Similarly, Ourahmane avoids generalizations about the experiences of others by relating migration specifically as a family history that relates to her personal sense of being. Their individual accounts are all the more imperative considering that female subjectivities have been especially neglected in relation to migration. When female accounts are considered, it is primarily narratives associated with trafficking, domestic work, and (forced) prostitution that are relayed. These accounts of “illegal” migration are not generalizable to the majority of migrant women, including Ourahmane and Amin. Thus, In the Absence of Our Mothers and The Earth is an Imperfect Ellipsoid diversify narratives of female migration, while still speaking to the numerous forms of estrangement generated by global relocation.

Yet, beyond issues of representation, the positioning of both artists’ corporeal bodies within their works serves an additional function. As works that reconcile memory, it is their bodies that function as the central mediums of memory. By consciously positioning themselves as the carriers and subjects of the layered histories and memories of migration, both artists reveal how this act has indelibly marked them and will continue to mark subsequent generations of migrants and their descendants. Consequently, the artists’ temporally and spatially diverse artistic interventions are clarified by the presence of their bodies, which simultaneously function as the subject, object, and primary medium of both works.

This chapter seeks to address the function and effect of the artists’ bodies in these two works. The artists are active subjects of migration and utilize the presentation of their bodies to foreground the intimacy of the migratory experience. Yet, beyond this endeavor, their bodies literally mediate the multidirectional memory of migration. This incorporation may at first appear contradictory, as the multidirectional memory that they embody extends beyond the lived experience of either artist. Nonetheless, this memory is authentic to both artists because it is a personal inheritance that continues to inform their sense of identity. The inscription of the body as a medium of memory fundamentally relies on the performativity of

92 Amin 2017b.
93 Ibid., p. 44.
the body. Ourahmane reenacts and performs a family trauma in order to provide an externalized account of this history, while Amin literally performs a migration journey and exhibits the documentation of this voyage as the final work. Ultimately, it is through the positioning of their bodies as mediators of the past and performative actors that creates an affective experience of embodied history.

Through their performance, selection, and transformation of memory, their practices relate to matters of the archive. Conventionally, the archive constitutes a physical or virtual repository for cultural, social, and political events, which includes museums, edifices, and sites of information. The etymology of “archive,” traced back to its Greek roots, refers to “a public building,” or “a place where records are kept.” Accordingly, archives typically house material items, like documents, maps, letters, archeological remains, and digital media. These materials are relatively stable and resistant to change. It is specifically the archive’s separation of the source of “knowledge,” i.e. material documents, from the knower that traditionally enacts this stability. In this way, archives contain, or “fix”, testimony from the past in the perpetual present. Yet these archived materials, by the very fact of their selection, classification, and presentation are politicized and reformed by the architect of the archive to artificially construct a desired narrative. This is an intrinsically political project.

Ourahmane and Amin respond to the archive through their corporeal bodies in order to contest the traditional structure and reading of the archive. They propose embodied memory as an alternative signifier of the past that is potentially less stable than conventional archive materials. Moreover, their interventions highlight the hegemonic dynamics embedded in the canonical archive to reveal how certain narratives have overwritten others in our representation of the past. The intercession of their bodies and embodied memory facilitates a counter-hegemonic engagement with the archive. Ourahmane literally presents her body as an archive that embodies the fluidity of multidirectional memory. Anthropologist Rob Baum and dance theorist André Lepecki have independently theorized this notion of the body as an archive, and I will draw upon their theorization to analyze Ourahmane’s specific injunction. Alternately, Amin uses her body to construct a counter archive that outwardly acknowledges

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94 Ibid., p. 667.
95 Taylor 2003, p. 18.
97 Ibid., p. 674.
98 Baum 2017 and Lepecki 2010.
its subjectivity and gaps. In both cases, the artists employ their archival interventions to represent revisionary histories that reconcile the fragmentary multidirectional memory of colonial and postcolonial violence.

**Intimacy and Subjectivity**

In the video, *Measures of Distance* (1988), artist Mona Hatoum interweaves the sound of her mother’s voice with visual ephemera that evoke her presence. Audio of a telephone call accompanies images of handwritten letters superimposed onto photographs of her mother bathing. Together these layers create an impressionistic collage lyrically suggestive of the deep longing and sadness of separation from one’s family and one’s home. This video—more than an episodic reflection—actively seeks to bridge the physical and emotional distance between Hatoum, exiled in London, and her family trapped in Beirut by the brutal violence of the Lebanese Civil War. At the time of the video’s making, it was unclear when, if ever, Hatoum would be able to return home to her family.

The beauty and emotive quality of this video is contingent on the relationship it posits between the intimacy and memory of migration and the corporeal body. The photographs of the letters are literally superimposed onto Hatoum’s mother’s body, tattooing her skin with their words [Fig. 18]. At the same time, the intimacy of this family separation is positioned against the political backdrop of civil war, evincing how the personal, cultural, and political are all indivisibly integrated and manifested upon and within the body. With no overt linear narrative, this video is constructed from intermingling temporal layers. Each layer—whether photograph, letter, or audio—intimates a different temporality and temporal flow, evocative of the associative and circular movements of multidirectional memory. It is this relationship between memory and the body that is critical to the present discussion. Significantly, the body does not merely inscribe memory, it is also an active subject of memory that contains and transfers memory as material object.

Hatoum’s video is one of the first emblematic artistic works that relates migration as an intimate project of memory through representations of the body. In *Measures of Distance*, her mother’s body is a feeling, experiencing, and acting subject of memory. An analogous incorporation of the body in relation to the multidirectional memories of migration can be seen in *In the Absence of Our Mothers* and *The Earth is an Imperfect Ellipsoid*, only in these works, it is the artists’ own bodies that function as repositories and subjects of memory. Like with *Measures of Distance*, their artistic interventions foreground the intimacy of migration.
as an amalgamation of the personal, cultural, and political. Yet, they investigate migration from an unambiguously personal perspective. It is the memory of migration embedded within and marked on their bodies that centers their interventions. Yet, their bodies signify more than their own corporeal experiences and memories. They also contain the layered history and multidirectional memory of migration that extends beyond their lives. Ourahamane’s gold tooth is both her own and not. It is a replacement for one that has been lost and reflects on her own uprootedness. This feeling connects her to her grandfather and the young man who sold her the gold chain from which the tooth was made. By embedding this tooth into her jawbone, this shared history and memory marks her. This tooth becomes a constant reminder of the past, including the pasts of others, but always from Ourahmane’s own uniquely intimate and relational perspective.

Similarly, Amin’s reenactment of migration is relayed through her own embodied experience of this journey. Her cross-country passage functions as a commemorative ritual, or even a pilgrimage. This performance transforms relatively neutral territory to the symbolically and politically charged space of migration. Her retracing of the trade and migration routes that have been used across North Africa for centuries specifically draws on the numerous highly sexual descriptions of women compiled by Abu Abdulla al Bakri in the Kitab al-Masalik wal-Mamalik. A representative description taken from his account reads as follows:

Abu Rastam al-Nafusi, who is one of the merchants of Awdaghust, informed me that he saw one of these women reclining on her side (as they do most of the time rather than sit on their buttocks) and her child, an infant, played with her, passing under her waist from side to side without her having to draw away from him at all on account of the ampleness of the lower part of her body and the gracefulness of her waist. While the merchant who relates this story is named, the woman is not. Unlike the man, who is the subject of this story, she is treated as an object of temptation and possession. Amin’s journey ultimately seeks to endow these women—referenced only fleetingly in historical accounts and denied agency— with subjectivity. Amin’s journey becomes a pilgrimage of experience that simultaneously seeks to imagine these women beyond Bakri’s derivative depictions. In this way, she repudiates the legitimacy of Bakri’s crude and one-dimensional depiction of women.

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99 For more on the performativity of space, see Jon P. Mitchell, Performance, pp. 394-399. Mitchell, centering his investigation of the performativity of space on Christian religious parades, argues that performance transforms space in a manner that retains this transformation even post-performance.

100 Levtzion and Hopkins 1981, p. 68.
However, throughout her journey, she also plays the role of voyeur, photographing the landscape and people through the theodolite in a manner that aesthetically emulates the border regime’s surveillance of people and the land. Thus, she formulates herself as an actor of contradiction, who plays a multifaceted and paradoxical role that on the one hand contests the objectification of people in this region and on the other hand participates in the voyeuristic surveillance of contemporary migrants. Amin additionally places herself before the lens of the camera as object by filming her boat journey across the Strait of Gibraltar from Morocco to Spain, which she presents in the short video piece, *The Pupil of the Mosquito’s Eye* (2016) [Fig. 19]. This silent black-and-white video is just over four minutes in length and is filmed through the theodolite. Amin’s head dominates the image space with the theodolite’s crosshairs ominously marking her temple. Gale-force winds whip her hair, and occasionally she slips out of focus, or is obscured by the image of a passing man. Nonetheless, she is uncontestably the focus of the video. She is both trapped and immortalized, akin to her predecessors who have been frozen in place by Bakri’s reductive linguistic portraits.

Amin states that as a woman travelling through a primarily male-dominated territory, it was necessary for her to consider the sexual dynamics of her passage. She specifically connects her work to Jill Magid’s *Evidence Locker* (2004) [Fig. 20]. This video depicts Magid as filmed by CCTV cameras operated by Citywatch police in various locations around Liverpool over a period of 31 days. Over the course of the project, Magid perversely developed a close relationship with the police, whom she would call to provide details about where she was and how she wanted them to film her. On occasion, Magid even had the officer on duty guide her through the city with her eyes closed. In the video documenting this performance, an almost romantic connection forms between the artist and the authorities operating the cameras. The CCTV cameras follow her, zooming in and panning through crowds to identify her walking or posing in her bright red coat. The voyeuristic video implicates the state as a pervert, a perspective that Magid coopted during the process of accessing the footage from the police. For each day that she was filmed, Magid had to submit a “Subject Access Request Form” to request the footage. She chose to fill out each legal document as if she were writing a letter to a lover.

Amin’s work mirrors Magid’s in a number of critical ways. She utilizes technologies of surveillance to capture her images, places herself before the camera, and also constructs a

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101 Amin 2017b.
relationship of intimacy between herself and the state. Amin relates that over the course of her journey, she sought to document instances of “bureaucratic intimacy.” For Amin, bureaucratic intimacy manifested in the process of gaining permission to travel at visa offices and border checkpoints. The transactions that took place were highly intimate and resulted from grossly unbalanced power differentials. Due to this, Amin secretly made audio recordings of her interactions with visa officers and border officials in order to reveal the highly inappropriate and sexual dynamics by which these officials interacted with her. In one instance, the officer requested three photos of Amin even though the documents only stipulated the need for two. When Amin questioned him on this, he openly acknowledged that one of the photos was for his own personal use. Separately, following her appointment at the Nigerian embassy, the visa officer contacted her on Facebook to ask her out on a date. A third instance occurred at the border checkpoint in the Ivory Coast. The officer challenged her on her marital status and, upon learning that she was single, invited her to a marriage seminar. Amin had very little agency in these interactions and was forced to play along in most instances. Amin’s secret recording of these interactions, however, challenges the direction of power. Her clandestine surveillance of the state apparatus is a subversive intervention that usurps the mechanisms of control utilized by the border regime. This action positions Amin as part of a regime of exposure that takes on the perspective of the state in order to critique it.

Thus, through highly divergent interventions—that nonetheless foreground the body as an experiencing subject—both Ourahmane and Amin propose migration as an experience of intimacy. This intimacy is framed by violent exchanges with the state and border regime that extend across time. While both artists experience some of this violence as traumatic experience in the present, much of what they refer to is the memory of past traumas—whether in relation to Ourahmane’s grandfather, or, in Amin’s case, the women in the Islamic manuscript—passed down to them.

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102 Ibid.
103 These are the same audio recordings discussed in the preceding chapters. Although unexhibited aside from being featured in her artist talk, these recordings were critical to Amin’s artistic process.
104 Amin 2017b.
[Fig. 18] Mona Hatoum, still from *Measures of Distance*, 1988, video, projection, color and sound (mono), The Tate Gallery.

[Fig. 19] Heba Y. Amin, still from *The Pupil of the Mosquito’s Eye*, from *The Earth is an Imperfect Ellipsoid*, 2016, photography, text, projection, iron sculpture.
Embodied Memory and Intergenerational Trauma

The memory relayed in both works is still living, or embodied, principally because it resides within the artists’ bodies. This notion of embodied memory aligns with Abdelmalek Sayad’s second principle of migration, introduced in the previous chapter. This principle argues that every migrant carries the repressed relation of power between states within himself or herself. Through this principle, Sayad describes a process of disjunction whereby migrants:

…become irrevocably distanced and dis-located from their originating milieu, losing a place in their native circle of honor without securing one in their new setting; they acquire this false and disjointed ‘double-consciousness’ that is source of both succor and pain; they are consumed by doubt, guilt, and self-accusation, worn down by an ‘unjust and uncertain’ battle with their own children, these ‘sociological bastards’ who personify the horrifying impossibility of the ‘return home’.  

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105 Bourdieu and Wacquant 2000, p. 175.
This notion of “double-consciousness” fundamentally relies upon memory—the memory of one’s former home and the knowledge of what it feels to belong, a feeling that has been lost. In *In the Absence of Our Mothers* and *The Earth is an Imperfect Ellipsoid*, this memory is entangled with the processing of the traumatic past. While Sayad does not mention trauma outright, his description of the disjunctive experience of displacement and dislocation of migration, which extends beyond the actual journey, is one of traumatic memory. This trauma both marks and is embodied by the migrant figure, experienced as “pain”, “doubt”, “guilt”, and “self-accusation.”

Traumatic memory resides within and marks the body. To return to the earlier example of Kader Attia’s *Reflecting Memory*, this video asserts that trauma leaves lasting material and immaterial scars, which “like a phantom limb of an amputated part of the body,” persist even if not visibly present. Thus, while seemingly an invisible wounding, traumatic memory is embodied and manifested by the material body. This elision between memory and trauma has been explored by Aleida Assmann, who argues, “trauma is a form of embodied memory that is precisely cut off from such social ties of conscious and communicative acts of remembrance.” Trauma is a physic wounding. An event becomes traumatic due to the body’s inability to move past it. The body refuses to heal and to locate a single moment of wounding significance. Instead, the traumatic is reperformed continuously in the present. While Ourahmane and Amin are migrants themselves, they have also inherited the traumatic memory of colonization, which they embed within their practices. Discussing her work and the relation between trauma and the postcolonial, Ourahmane has stated:

> French occupation of Algeria, where the French imposed their culture, language, architecture, etc. onto the country, has developed a physical and ideological right to space. I have been thinking a lot about these studies about trauma being passed down through peoples’ DNA, and how this concept relates to post-colonial control – how this right is embedded in one’s body in the same way.

Sayad’s passage seemingly acknowledges this relationship between migrants and their children, albeit without specific regard for the descendant’s experiential processes. This relation between the migrant generation and the first generation in the country of destination

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107 Migration and the memory of migration are not necessarily traumatic in and of themselves. They become traumatic through their intersection with power, for example, in relation to the state, territorial conflict, environmental catastrophe, socio-political breakdown, and a diversity of other possibilities that are outside the control of individual actors. These events lead individuals to migrate out of necessity rather than choice. Thus, I contend that migration from former colonial territories is more often than not an experience of trauma and traumatic memory.

108 Attia 2018.


emphasizes the intergenerational processes at work. The memory of migration is not limited to the migrant generation, but rather is an intergenerational trauma passed down through memory. This is received by the subsequent generation incompletely. Literary scholar Marianne Hirsch has defined this as post-memory, which is “distinguished from memory by generational distance and from history by deep personal connection.” Processes of narration and imagination enable the subsequent generation to integrate post-memory within themselves as a form of authentic personal memory.

Yet, post-memory only partly accounts for the workings of intergenerational traumatic memory, as it does not explain descendants’ embodiment of trauma as alluded to by Ourahmane in the above quotation. As Baum has suggested, descendants of trauma survivors receive memory, or post-memory more precisely, as well as its attendant embodied affects, possibly through their DNA. Descendants literally embody the memory passed down to them, exhibiting psychosomatic effects including nightmares, headaches, and post-traumatic stress disorder. Other intergenerational side effects include obesity, heart conditions, and anxiety disorders. While neither Ourahmane nor Amin references these psychosomatic effects explicitly, their works still highlight the bodily consequences of inherited trauma, and, at the very least, a concern for the somatic effects of traumatic memory.

**Forensic Markers**

Lydia Ourahmane alludes to the somatic effects of migration memory through the paired gold teeth, the one exhibited and the one in her mouth. Literally implanted into her jawbone, this second gold tooth becomes an extension of her body, functioning as a memento mori that corporeally signifies the memory of migration. The tooth is a true, real, and physical memory, yet the majority of the memory it relates is based on something unseen. Ourahmane was not present to witness her grandfather’s military service, his resistance, or even his refusal to be commemorated. Thus, the tooth represents multiple layers of memory, both original to her and transmitted. Though Ourahmane knows some of these memories only in pieces, she now physically and permanently embodies them through the fusing of this tooth into her body. This physical mark will endure for her entire life. Ourahmane relates that she is constantly reminded of the tooth’s presence because it is more sensitive to changes in temperature than her natural teeth. When she eats hot food, this tooth absorbs and retains the

112 Baum 2017, p. 682.
113 Remer 2007, pp. 317-41.
heat even after she has finished her meal, making the memory is signifies consciously
remembered.\textsuperscript{114}

Moreover, this gold tooth physically alters Orahanme’s body in a gesture that
mirrors her grandfather’s extreme act of self-mutilation. Yet their bodily modifications are
separated by more than just time and degree. Her grandfather’s action was performed in
direct response to France’s colonial domination over Algeria and the perversity of its control
over his life. In this way, Tayeb Orahanme’s actions could be read in Foucauldian terms as
hegemonic power literally inscribing itself on and into his body. His body modification is a
literal marker of the insidious and inescapable presence of colonial power. However, on the
other hand, his action can also be read as a performance of self and subjectivity. Interpreted
in this way, his act may be seen as a form of resistance that challenges the French colonial
regime rather than merely visualizing imperial violence.

His action also instantiates a multidirectional pathway that connects the memory of
his bodily modification to an action implemented by contemporary migrants attempting to
cross into Europe, and captured in filmmaker Sylvain George’s experimental documentary,
\textit{Qu’ils reposent en révolte (Des figures de guerre)} (2010). In one scene, George films a group
of migrants sitting around a fire. After a few moments, they pick up an iron screw from the
flames, using a wire to pass it around [Fig. 21]. In turn, each man puts the hot screw against
all of his fingers, burning the surface of the skin. With this act of self-mutilation, they erase
their fingerprints so that the police may no longer identify them if they are caught attempting
to cross the border. These scars become an enduring physical mark that signifies
the memory of their passage. While this violent action indelibly marks them, it also erases their forensic
identifiers. They are no longer easily identifiable—though they are perhaps more suspicious
looking—which enables them to challenge the border regime’s mechanisms of control. The
migrants can now ostensibly attempt their border crossing repeatedly, without allowing the
border regime to record or confirm their attempts. This by effect is an act of subjectification
that actively defies the workings of the European border regime, just as Tayeb’s action defied
the French colonial authorities.\textsuperscript{115} Correspondingly, teeth too are forensic markers used to
identify suspects and victims in criminal investigations. By destroying these forensic markers,
Tayeb challenged the state by making himself unemployable to the military.

\textsuperscript{114} Wilson-Goldie 2018.
\textsuperscript{115} Ibid. This intervention also relates to harragas, North African migrants who burn their passports to make
themselves ostensibly stateless so that—if caught attempting to cross the border—they cannot be sent back to
their countries of birth. Both Orahanme and Amin have studied harragas in relation to their investigation of
migration.
Lydia Ourahmane’s bodily modification, while undoubtedly a reference to these more severe forms of subjectification, operates in a different manner and for a separate purpose. Her bodily modification visualizes a family history that has not been prominently acknowledged. Significantly, Tayeb refused to be commemorated by the Algerian state for his participation in the resistance, which relates to Aleida Assmann’s assertion that traumatic memory is embodied memory that has been “cut off from such social ties of conscious and communicative acts of remembrance.” Ourahmane suggests that this failure to fully acknowledge his participation has hindered the remembrance of this history. By incorporating this tooth into her body as a visible marker, Ourahmane outwardly acknowledges and commemorates this family history. In doing so, she subverts more dominant rememberings of the complex entanglement of the Algerian War of Independence and World War II and the failure of independence to provide true democratic freedom for the people of Algeria. By embracing this history through her body, Ourahmane suggests the lasting psychological impact of this history as an intergenerational wounding. The gold tooth operates as a panacea for a gap in memory and a gap in identity (a lost tooth is a lost piece of forensic identity). Thus, Ourahmane is marked by this history, and the act of visually incorporating it signifies her acknowledgement that it is a crucial piece of her subjectivity. As Assmann has stressed, a traumatic “mark is a hindrance to forgetting; the body itself bears the memory traces imprinted on it; the body is a memory.”

117 Ibid., p. 235.
Ourahmane’s resurrection of her family history is a form of postcolonial cultural production that seeks to resignify the past in order to unsettle dominant or canonical forms of cultural memory. In this way, her intervention relates to matters of the archive. According to Lepecki, who draws on Foucault, archiving is “a system of transforming simultaneously past, present, and future—that is, a system for recreating a whole economy of the temporal.” It is through this process that coherent narratives of the past are constructed and collective memory is reinforced. This has been an especially fraught project as it relates to the postcolonial because it requires a rereading of history that sees through the hegemonic structures that have constricted earlier representations. The two dominant approaches to this project include reading canonical archives against the grain to uncover their gaps, elisions, forgettings, and instances of violence, and alternatively, the production of separate, counter-hegemonic archives. To varying degrees, Ourahmane and Amin utilize both approaches to

“The Archival Impulse”

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118 Foster 2004, p. 3.
120 Astrid Erll has performed a highly engaging re-reading of British Imperial documents and historical news sources to create a counter-narrative of the “Indian Mutiny” that took place in spring 1857. Using the colonial archive, Erll has examined how media have created and disseminated notions about the “Indian Mutiny” as a site of memory shared by British and Indian people over the last one and a half centuries. Her study exemplifies
expose how canonical archives are extensions of imperial power that function as structural mechanisms of exclusions, relegating issues of race, gender, and class to the periphery.\textsuperscript{121} Ourahmane and Amin’s consideration for the role of the archive relates both artists’ practices to a larger trend in contemporary art.\textsuperscript{122} Hal Foster has previously highlighted the archive’s relevance to artistic practices, identifying this interest—which first emerged in the 1990s—as the “archival impulse.”\textsuperscript{123} He argues that this impulse emerges from a desire “to connect what cannot be connected” in order “to probe a misplaced past.”\textsuperscript{124} Foster identifies the archival impulse as directly resulting from a current “failure in cultural memory produced by our ‘society of control.’”\textsuperscript{125} Ourahmane and Amin’s archival intervention aligns with Foster’s presupposition. They quite literally “probe a misplaced past” in order to connect migration to its underlying historic causes. Through their interventions, they reveal how canonical archives are linked to imperial structures of power, which has resulted in a failure to remember the history of those made most vulnerable by imperial dominion.

Both artists have explicitly acknowledged their concern for the archive. Ourahmane’s \textit{Droit du Sang} quite literally is an archive of bureaucratic documents that is continuously updated as the artist undergoes the process of obtaining French citizenship through her “right of blood.” Additionally, her archival concern extends to \textit{The Third Choir Archives Performance} (2014) [Fig. 22], a supporting work for \textit{The Third Choir}. This work presents a selection of the 934 documents involved in the process of exporting the 20 oil barrels from Algeria to the United Kingdom. Analogously, Amin contends that her practice is fundamentally archival, stating, “I work in an archival nature, building databases and drawing from collections of work to reconfigure and make meaning of the subject through different materials.”\textsuperscript{126}

Beyond their consideration for the archive more generally, both artists make explicit reference the canonical archive by employing its material signs. In \textit{Droit du Sang}, Ourahmane presents documents of bureaucratic exchanges between the state and individuals, including passports, visas, her grandfather’s military records, and her own identification

\textsuperscript{121} Assmann 2008, p. 106.
\textsuperscript{122} For example, contemporary artists Zoe Leonard, Taryn Simon, and Walid Raad have each taken the archive as both the framework for their practice and subject of critique in their distinct oeuvres.
\textsuperscript{123} Foster 2004, p. 3.
\textsuperscript{124} Ibid., 21.
\textsuperscript{125} Ibid., 21.
\textsuperscript{126} Ho 2012.
documents. Similarly, in her artist talk, Amin too includes scans of her passport and the numerous visas for which she had to apply before setting off on her journey. She additionally utilizes passages from the Kitab al-Masalik wal-Mamalik. The specific translation she uses was published by Cambridge University Press in Corpus of Early Arabic Sources for West African History (1981), which itself has been lauded as “a treasure which belongs in every college library and which every serious student of the African past should have around.”127 Significantly, all these various materials used by both artists were conceived, developed, and administered by the West. Their selection and inclusion over other possible material references and documents alludes to the inequalities and structural exclusions of the West’s canonical archive.

Yet, Ourahmane and Amin do not merely reproduce these materials. They stage their own bodies in dialogue with these documents, suggesting a fundamental concern for the body and embodiment in relation to the archive. This is indicated in Droit du Sang through the emphasis on blood right, which is a qualification centrally of the body. Likewise, Amin has stated that her work investigates “the rift…between the archive of supposedly enduring materials and the so-called ephemeral repertoire of embodied practice and knowledge.”128 In asserting this, Amin foregrounds the dichotomy between imperially prescribed materials in canonical archives and anti-colonial, embodied forms of knowledge that have hitherto not been contained by the archive. This embodied knowledge includes the multidirectional memory of both artists. This memory is not dependent on an attachment to physical documentation. While still subject to processes of selection, memorization, internalization, and transmission, this memory exceeds the conventional archive’s ability to capture and contain. It is unstable, ephemeral, and as easily associative as it is dissociable. Through the privileging of their bodies and embodied memory, both artists constitute a “counter-hegemonic archive” that subverts the totalizing power structures of the canonical archive.129 However, the specific manner utilized by each artist to compose their embodied counter-hegemonic archive takes highly divergent routes. While Ourahmane seemingly rejects any notion of stable documentation in In the Absence of Our Mothers, instead relying on her corporeality to embody her archive, Amin appropriates the same mechanisms and structures of the canonical archive to present a counter archive.

128 Amin 2017b.
129 Ibid., p. 9.
Ourahmane’s intervention in *In the Absence of Our Mothers* functions as a reenactment of her grandfather’s bodily modification, but with acknowledgment for her separation in time, space, and degree of agency. The reflective intention of this reenactment aligns with André Lepecki’s notion of “will to archive,” which he theorizes in relation to recent performance and dance reenactments. Lepecki argues that performers “re-enact not to fix a work in its singular (originating) possibilization but to unlock, release, and actualize a work’s many (virtual) com- and incompossibilities.”

He elucidates his argument through an analysis of American choreographer Julie Tolentino’s series, *The Sky Remains the Same* (2008-ongoing), which he views as exemplifying this *will to archive*. In this series of performance works, Tolentino proposes her body as a living archive for works by other performance artists, including Ron Athey, Frank B, David Rousséve, and David Dorffman.

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130 Lepecki 2010, p.31. While Lepecki makes this remark specifically in relation to the body as archive, this definition could also apply to the conventional archive, however, since my argumentation follows Lepecki’s original intent, I will not consider this potential further.

131 Tolentino, quoted in Lepecki 2010, p. 32.
In each archival event, Tolentino observes the other artist performing one of their pieces before joining them in a reperformance of the work immediately after. Describing her practice, Tolentino asserts that her intervention is not “aimed at adding a new performance to her repertoire; rather it is explicitly aimed at turning her body into an archive.” She seeks to corporeally archive the other’s performance for her life’s duration.

An analogous impulse underlies Ourahmane’s bodily intervention, or will to archive. Like Tolentino, Ourahmane does not want to re-experience her grandfather’s past through her body, but rather seeks to archive the memory of his experiences for her life’s duration in her body. Moreover, both artists share an emphasis on the performativity of the body in relation to the archive (a feature that may also be extended to Amin’s intervention). However, unlike Tolentino, who limits her archive to performance pieces, Ourahmane archives memory of historical transformation without a direct exchange between herself and her subject. Consequently, the closeness of this memory to her significantly impacts her sense of identity and being and outwardly changes her during the process of formal integration.

By permanently inserting the gold tooth in her mouth, Ourahmane archives an intergenerational trauma. Yet, this tooth is not merely a marker of this trauma, it is an outward sign of the continuous processing of this trauma by and in her body. In this way, she stages her body as an archive, a site of living memory of the self, that functions as a corporeal counter to the architectural notion of the archive. While like the architectural archive in that her body is “a repository for the past but always retrieved in a present that (however much it is secured) cannot be confined by the past,” her archival intervention is distinct due to the fact that her body is unfixed and permeable, encompassing the circularity and associability of multidirectional memory. Thus, it is through the mental pathways of her body that Ourahmane makes the association between her grandfather and the young man, the young man and her self, and her grandfather and her. Ultimately, it is through the tooth in her body that she integrates these connections.

Baum has also theorized the body as archive in relation to Holocaust memory. Examining the embodiment of trauma amongst descendants of Holocaust survivors, Baum argues that transmitted memory becomes the material “object” of intergenerational trauma stored and experienced within the body. Ourahmane’s intervention exemplifies this. Her corporeal integration of trauma and memory belonging to her grandfather constitutes a new

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132 Ibid., p. 34.
133 Baum 2017, p. 687.
134 Ibid., p. 667.
“narrative of transmission.” Significantly, this trauma took place before she was born and is received by her as inheritance. This inherited memory—of her grandfather’s forced conscription into the French colonial forces, his gruesome bodily modification, his participation in the resistance, and his disappointment in the failure of Algerian independence to realize the freedoms that it was intended to bring—are imprinted within her. She archives these experiences as if they were her own, which they become through her reenactment of them and the continual associations she makes between them and contemporary events. Thus, as a living memory, this past remains unfinished and perpetually incomplete. As Baum argues, “The multiply constituted body as archive is not merely the conjunction of memory and post-memory, but incorporates memory and its reembodiment, the reciting of memory and its resiting.”

Relevant to this discussion of the body as archive is the role of spoken language and memorization. Ourahmane initially encountered the story of her grandfather through the recollections of an older uncle. This is a family history that has not been written, photographed, or recorded, but rather has been transferred through oral testimony only to be interned as embodied memory by the receiver. Mette Edvardsen performance piece, *Time has fallen asleep in the afternoon sunshine* (2010), expounds on the body’s ability to archive language, and more significantly, transmit memory. For this piece, performers memorize a book of their choosing in order to collectively compose a library of living books. Visitors may then choose a “book” (performer) to “read” (witness the performance of the memorized book). This intervention alludes to Ray Bradbury’s science fiction novel *Fahrenheit 451* (1953), which describes a dystopian world of the future in which all books have been forbidden and destroyed because they are seen as dangerous. However, an underground community of people preserves books by memorizing them and sharing them with one another. In Edvardsen’s performance piece, the performers learn the books by heart in “a continuous process of remembering and forgetting.” The recursivity of this process is unique to the body. Moreover the intimacy of transferring this archived memory of a book to another is contingent on the direct involvement of multiple closely interacting actors.

The ability of the body to incorporate oral language as memory exemplifies how the body operates as archive. Yet, a final consideration remains. The impermanence of the body, as a vehicle that will inevitably die and decay, seemingly unsettles the notion that the body

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135 Ibid., p. 667.
136 Ibid., p. 671
137 *TIME HAS FALLEN ASLEEP IN THE AFTERNOON SUNSHINE.*
can be an archive. However, Lepecki attends to this contradiction by arguing that the
ephemerality of the body is not merely permissible but ultimately crucial to the
destabilization of the canonical archive. He writes:

In its constitutive precariousness, perceptual blind-spots, linguistic indeterminations,
muscular tremors, memory lapses, bleedings, rages, and passions, the body as archive
re-places and diverts notions of archive away from a documental deposit or a
bureaucratic agency dedicated to the (mis)management of ‘the past.’

The body as archive replicates the “precarity” and “indetermination” of everything that is
past, acknowledging that mutability is perhaps all that may definitively be relayed about it in
the present. In much the same way, Ourahmane’s bodily reconstitution of the past is
precarious and, narratively speaking, fragmentary. She integrates this story as best she can,
but it will always reveal its difference. Symptomatically, the first day after the gold tooth was
inserted into her mouth, it fell out, and it has fallen out a few times since. Perhaps this
inability of the gold tooth to permanently stay in its designated place reflects the deficiencies
and gaps that still mark Ourahmane’s archival impulse with regard to her family’s past.

The Counter-Hegemonic Archive

Amin’s archival interventional similarly foregrounds the importance of memory in
relation to the archive. While she does not follow Ourahmane in proposing her own body as
archive, Amin is still concerned with the archiving of embodied forms of knowledge. She
produces a counter-hegemonic archive that catalogues her own corporeal encounters with
imperial and state power, which is contingent on her direct involvement. Amin also positions
her work more explicitly in dialogue with canonical knowledge production than Ourahmane.
She has stated that an underlying concern in her work is the exposure of the ways that “space”
has been understood “through the canons of technology” in order “to avoid perpetuating and
legitimizing the systems that control it.”

Amin’s rereading of the Kitab al-Masalik wal-Mamalik seeks to critique the text’s
presumed accuracy and place of prominence in the canonical archive. The alternative
material documents that she produces along her journey do not merely fill in the gaps of this
incomplete text, but constitute a new archive that subverts the authorial prejudice of the
manuscript and structural omissions of the canonical archive. Moreover, this new archive is

138 Lepecki p. 34
140 Amin 2017b.
141 Amin 2016, p. 3
composed of materials testifying to Amin’s documentation and surveillance of the state produced by the same mechanisms and technologies traditionally utilized by the state to document people.

This counter-hegemonic archive consists of the audio recordings of her interactions with visa officers and border controls, discussed previously, as well as the series of photographs. These photographs take on the perspective of the state, operating as a constitutive practice of surveillance, indicated by Amin’s use of the theodolite. While these photographs at first appear to be benign images of landscape and urban infrastructure, upon closer inspection they reveal a catalogue of the various expressions of state control over the environment. They document border walls and fences, telephone wires, satellite dishes, naval ships, and eroding infrastructure and machinery. These images capture contemporary conflict zones that the historical trade and contemporary migration routes cross through.\(^{142}\) For 35° 44’ 20.53” [Fig. 23], Amin photographed an urban landscape depicting a series of tile-covered roofs upon which over fifteen satellite dishes are attached. The satellite dishes are all pointed in the same upward direction. While most likely domestically owned, the dishes ominously suggest the opaque but all-pervasive presence of state surveillance. Amin has rotated the photograph so that the rooftops form diagonal lines across the image space. This confuses the composition and makes an otherwise conventional urban landscape unsettling and unnatural. While people are not depicted outright, their presence is suggested by the satellite dishes. Ultimately, it is people—not space—that are the subjects of surveillance.

In a separate photograph, 35° 54’ 41.6” N, 5° 23’ 3.95” W Ceuta, Spain [Fig. 24], Amin examines Ceuta, the highly politicized Spanish enclave on the north coast of Morocco. This border town is the final destination for many African migrants before they attempt to cross the Mediterranean to Europe. The movement of people in Ceuta is highly controlled and a number of detention centers are located there. Consequently, numerous artists and filmmakers have documented Ceuta as the site or subject of their visual investigations of migration.\(^{143}\) However, in contrast to these accounts, Amin’s photograph does not overtly reveal itself to be an image of Ceuta. Instead of depicting border securitization or detention centers, the photograph reveals a landscape populated by sharp rocks, which rise up in wavelike forms. Two shirtless young boys are barely visible on the far side of these rocks.

\(^{142}\) Ibid.

\(^{143}\) For example, Randa Maroufi’s video, Bragdia (2019) is also based in Cueta and is centered on a reenactment of border crossing. Maroufi’s concern for the experiential dimension of migration parallels Amin’s project, as does its emphasis on the performativity of the female body in relation to mapping projects. Maroufi has created a series of associated blue prints of maps that were hand drawn by women smugglers demonstrating their clandestine routes through border security.
The majority of the picture space is dominated by grey sky, upon which the clear crosshairs of the theodolite are imprinted. These crosshairs sinisterly scan the landscape, suggesting the two boys as potential targets. The boys are clearly unaware of Amin’s presence or that she has pointed this technological apparatus of surveillance at their vulnerable, fleshy bodies. The theodolite has enabled Amin to take this photograph from a great distance. Thus, she places herself in the uncomfortable position of voyeur, imposing an act of violence on innocent bodies. The black-and-white quality of the photograph evokes the visual aesthetic of the colonial past, which creates the sense that the photograph is a found archival image.

Together Amin’s audio recordings of border control and her photographs of North African landscapes and urban environments constitute an archive of the various levels of hegemonic power inscribed upon the land. These documentary materials are all composed from her point of view and specific subjectivity. The recordings document the sexualization of her body under power, while the photographs reverse this role, allowing her to monitor the state (as well as other bodies) from the vantage of voyeur. Her strategies reveal the policing and objectification of bodies, including her own, at the same time that they perform a counter objectification of the state.

[Fig. 23] Heba Y. Amin, 35° 44’ 20.53”, B/W pigment print on metallic silver 300 archival paper, 20.5 x 20.5 x 3 cm., from The Earth is an Imperfect Ellipsoid, 2016, photography, text, projection, iron sculpture.
The Women of the *Kitab al-Masalik wal-Mamalik*

Beyond filling the gaps of the *Kitab al-Masalik wal-Mamalik*, Amin seeks to parallel her experience as a woman travelling through North Africa with the manuscript’s reductive depiction of women who once lived in the same geographic territory. While self-consciously aware of her positional differences from these women, Amin makes this pairing in order to reveal how the objectification of the female body has been part and parcel of the objectification of territory and land by imperial powers across history.\(^{144}\) Geographers Steve Pile and Michael Keith have identified a persistent “geographic scopophilia”, in which landscapes are equated with women. They argue, “the power of geographers to gaze on the beauty of the world is unquestioned because it is associated with the power of men to stare at women, who are thus objectified.”\(^{145}\) Amin stages her gendered body as a performative subject with the agency to counter these objectifying depictions.

Her positioning starkly contrasts from that of the women in Bakri’s text, who are denied subjectivity in order to be treated as objects for possession. In addition to the passage

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\(^{144}\) Amin 2017b and Cebeci 2017. Amin has explicitly made this comparison in her artist talk.

\(^{145}\) Pile and Keith 2013, p. 221.
excerpted previously, another telling passage explicitly discusses the enslavement and sexualization of the women in a major town along the trade routes:

There are Sudan women, good cooks, one being sold for 100 mithquals or more. They excel at cooking delicious confections such as sugared nuts, honey doughnuts, various other kinds of sweetmeats, and other delicacies. There are also pretty slave girls with white complexions, good figures, firm breasts, slim waist, fat buttocks, wide shoulders and sexual organs so narrow that one of them may be enjoyed as though she were a virgin indefinitely.¹⁴⁶

Like in the previous passage, these women are silenced, objectified, and exposed. Their bodily attributes are listed alongside various sweets and delicacies as if there is no significant difference. The sexual violence that these enslaved women are subjected to is implicit in the passage. They are denied even the suggestion of humanity. By reproducing these passages alongside her own documentations of North Africa, the migrant body, and her own body, Amin exposes how the historical and canonical representation of people, especially women, in North Africa has informed the reception and objectification of people in the present. This is a project that has been supported and reinforced by supposedly scientific and objective technologies of representation. Yet, the sexualization of these women in this manuscript belies the presumed authority and impartiality that we have extended to this early ethno-geographic text.

Beyond revealing this history, Amin’s exposure of these passages seeks to present new possibilities for these women. Literary scholar, Saidiya Hartman has similarly attended to the sexualized and abused depictions of enslaved women in archival records, but of those in the archives of the transatlantic slave trade. In Venus in Two Acts (2008), Hartman considers the ubiquitous presence of the enslaved woman in the archive, and the impossibility of knowing anything about her beyond what has been written by her captors.¹⁴⁷ Likewise, Bakri’s text constitutes the only descriptions of these women available to us, and, to borrow Hartman’s phrasing, exclusively centers on “the violence, excess, mendacity, and reason that seized hold of their lives, transforming them into commodities and corpses.”¹⁴⁸ What the archive shows in both of these cases, as Foucault has stated, is “little more than a register of encounters with power,” which provides “a meager sketch of [their] existence.”¹⁴⁹ Yet, while the women in the Islamic manuscript may seemingly only be grasped through the

¹⁴⁶ Levtzion and Hopkins 1981, p. 68.
¹⁴⁷ Hartman 2008, p. 2
¹⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 2.
¹⁴⁹ Foucault 2003, p. 284.
dehumanizing perspective embraced by Bakri, Hartman proposes a way of reading beyond what is written in archival texts in order to imagine subjectivities for those who have been denied subjecthood. This practice exposes the violence of the archive and requires “writing at the limit of the unspeakable and the unknown.”¹⁵⁰ Hartman suggests that it is not only necessary to describe as fully as possible the conditions that determined the recording of these women, but, drawing on Michel de Certeau, that we must “recruit the past for the sake of the living, establishing who we are in relation to who we have been.”¹⁵¹ In doing so, the production of knowledge about the past may be interrogated and used to inform the present. In creating a direct parallel between these 11th century depictions of women and her contemporary documentation of North Africa, Amin explicitly seeks to “interrogate the past” in order to “inform the present” with specific regard to the representation of female migrants.

Rajkamal Kahlon is a visual artist intervening in the archive in a manner that parallels Hartman’s literary intercession. Working across media, Kahlon explores the visual legacies of colonialism and racism, especially on the intimate level of their effects on the bodies of women. Kahlon grounds much of her practice in processes of amendment, refiguring historical and archival sources to reclaim identities and cultures that have been lost, forgotten, or misplaced. In her series, Do You Know Our Names (2017) [Fig. 25], Kahlon paints over the bodies of photographed women who have been “lost” in the colonial archives. In doing so, she rehabilitates their anonymous and commoditized bodies, transforming these women from passive objects to self-possessed individuals, who wear contemporary garb and proud expressions.¹⁵² Her work emphasizes these women’s unique subjectivities and humanity and critiques the selectivity of institutional memory.

Through a less explicit intervention, Amin too attends to the representations of the women depicted in the Kitab al-Masalik wal-Mamalik. Rather than overtly revising this source material, she problematizes it by staging it in dialogue with her own highly subjective materials and documents that demonstrate her perspective and corporeal being. Thus, she functions as proxy for these women, creating a space to consider how these women would choose to represent themselves, and how they would act as self-possessed and active beings. By placing herself within the same territory and documenting both her objectification and acts of subjectification, Amin attempts to present a more complete and nuanced

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¹⁵⁰ Hartman 2008, p. 2. In applying her intercession to Amin’s work, I suggest that “writing” may be substituted with “imagining,” as both words suggest an opening up of possibility and intentionality.


¹⁵² Exhibition Brochure, What We Forget, 2019.
representation of female subjectivity. Rather than rehabilitating these women outright, it is left to the viewer to engage with these passages and Amin’s counter-hegemonic materials in order to imagine alternate possible representations and subjectivities for these women.

From this injunction of imagination, Amin’s practice may be connected to photographic theorist Ariella Azoulay’s concept of “civil imagination”, which she outlines in *Civil Imagination: A Political Ontology of Photography* (2012). In this book, Azoulay rethinks photography as the site of political engagement that involves actors and contexts beyond what is literally present. Grounding her argument in photographs of the Israeli-Palestinian crisis, a conflict similarly shaped by its colonial entanglement, Azoulay makes the case that photography is borderless, ownerless, public, and constitutes a space in which power and authority do not necessarily reside. Rather than exclusively considering spectators’ encounter with photographs as an act of violence—as essayist and photographic critic Susan Sontag has suggested—Azoulay argues that by imagining beyond the physical photograph, spectators may form new relationships of partnership, solidarity, and sharing between those photographed, the photographer, and other spectators.

By entering into a dialogue with photographs, Azoulay asserts that one can imagine alternative scenarios to which they may also testify. Azoulay imagines the possibility of photographs that attest to the rape of Palestinian women by Jewish soldiers. She bases these imagined photographs on archived texts that relate to the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, and which admit—by omission—the fact of this violence. She writes that these are “not photographs that have been lost, but photographs never captured.” Thus, she considers human mental faculties as an integral component of photography. In this way, Azoulay’s theoretical project finds resonance with Amin’s aims and Hartman’s literary project. In all three instances, the spectator/viewer/reader must look beyond what has been recorded or documented in order to imagine more affective histories and narratives of the past. It is within the void between what is represented and what is stated, that the spectator’s associative potential is foregrounded. Like Azoulay’s engagement with the imagined photographs, the dialogue that Amin foregrounds between the *Kitab al-Masalik wal-Mamalik* and her photographs is imaginary, yet plausible. It is through an injunction of the “civil imagination” that the women in the manuscript may be situated within Amin’s project (and even projected into her photographs). This dynamic problematizes the canonical historical

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154 Sontag 2003, p. 6. Azoulay’s theoretical concerns in fact seem to be a direct challenge to Sontag and her assertion that violence is inherent in any act of looking at photography.
155 Azoulay 2012, p. 231.
narratives of the past by forming (imagined) direct and intimate relationships between Amin, the women, and spectators.

Conclusion:

Both artists present themselves not merely as agents of migration, but as mediators of the past. They testify to the repetitions that link imperial violence to the contemporary violence of the border regime. Ourahmane’s grandfather’s actions closely parallel those of contemporary migrants who go to extreme measures to elude the hegemonic control of the border regime. Similarly, the historical representation of people and the land closely mirrors that of the present, as revealed by Amin. This bridging of the past and present is fundamentally contingent on memory, which is internalized and inherited by both artists as their claim to identity. Through the inscription of their bodies, their works highlight the violent, though often invisible, toll of colonialism on and in the body. Their performances externalize this memory, transforming it into a form of history and storytelling. Thus, Ourahmane and Amin both function as affective sites of history and memory that transmute internalized personal memories into a collective knowledge of North Africa’s colonial past.
Chapter Four

The Space of Migration

North Africa’s colonial past is still present, endurably shaping the course and consequence of contemporary migration as one of its many excesses. This colonial past is inscribed upon the land, demarcating borders and conditioning mechanisms of control, and it is manifest as both violence and intimacy on and in the bodies of migrants. This past prefigures the forms of knowledge and dominant narratives preserved in canonical archives, and directly conditions the sociopolitical, economic, and cultural structures of our present. Through works that probe the embodied memory of migration, both Ourahmane and Amin reveal historical entanglements and transformations that continue to reverberate in the present as a direct inheritance of colonialism.

Identifying a persistent failure to connect contemporary crises with their colonial roots, both Lydia Ourahmane and Heba Y. Amin subvert the conventional view that designates crises as unexpected, unpredictable, and transient calamities of contemporary social and political dysfunction. They disrupt this illusion by meticulously excavating the entanglement between our past and our present within the context of migration in North Africa. Their interventions seek to reveal the banality and omnipresence through which colonialism continues to operate and which has resulted in a societal inability to recognize the links between the “migration crisis” and past structures of inequality, xenophobia, and misogyny. Investigating acts of displacement, the presence of absence, and nonlinear histories, In the Absence of Our Mothers and The Earth is an Imperfect Ellipsoid navigate the possibility of dispersing individual and localized memories of migration into collective experience and knowledge.

Yet, these works do not merely historicize migration and the politicization of the movement of people across time, they suggest how North Africa, as a space of colonial memory and contemporary migration, is fundamentally a site of identity formation and transformation. Their interventions deny the notion that space can be neutral, following sociologist Nikos Papastergiadis’s assertion that space is “neither a flat stage upon which subjects perform their historical tasks, nor a predefined volume through which they pass.”

Rather, space is both a transformative force and a field that is transformed by the interactions that occur within it. Through their acknowledgement of this, both artists assert that a lasting

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156 Papastergiadis 2001, p. 52.
consequence of colonialism is the struggle over the physical and ideological right to space, whether in relation to the individual migrant, the nation state, or the imperial power. Thus, by foregrounding the active role that space has played in the field of identity formation, Ourahmane and Amin contest our spatial amnesia, proposing the critical need to make histories of displacement both embodied and locatable.

The complexity by which the relationship between migration, colonialism, identity, and space coalesce cannot be denied and is mirrored through the complexity of both works. The artists utilize memory as one mechanism of disentanglement, which is as marked by this history as it is provisional and woefully insufficient for the task at hand. Nonetheless, because memory is embodied, trans-temporal, and trans-spatial, it is perhaps the most affective mechanism available to represent and understand the presentness of the past and the transformation of space over the *longue durée*. In the following, I will provide a brief summary of my argumentation over the last three chapters with consideration for the relationship between space and the theoretical preoccupations of the artworks.

Chapter one briefly introduced the two works and considered the careers and biographical similarities between Lydia Ourahmane and Heba Y. Amin. Significantly, both artists focus their artistic investigations in North Africa, which, in addition to being a space of transmigration, is also a site of personal consequence to both artists. This siting seeks to expose how space has been politicized across time and additionally highlights the parallels between pre-colonial and colonial territorial conflicts with those of the present. This chapter also contextualized migration, emphasizing the fallacy of the “crisis” narrative promulgated by the media that is presently fueling nationalist rhetoric, particularly in Europe and the United States. In critiquing this false account of migration, these works may be connected to the concerns of postcolonialism. This reconceptualization of migration offers the potential to ascertain more nuanced historical understandings of our contemporary moment.

Chapter two examined the structure of the two works, linking their fragmentary narrative structures to the processes of multidirectional memory. As demonstrated, both works present several competing narratives of memories that build upon one another to form multidirectional rather than linear compositions. Moreover, these memories are associative and open-ended. This layering of memory corresponds with the nature of North Africa as a space of simultaneity and conflict. As literary critic Patricia Yaeger has noted:

…space resists traditional patterns of narrative. Space is a fragmentary field of action, a jurisdiction scattered and deranged, which appears to be negotiable or continuous, but is actually peppered with chasms of economic and cultural disjunctions…While
temporal narratives (like histories or chronologies) offer a comforting seriality that initiates the queue-like patterns of traditional narrative, space moves out in all directions at once, and it is difficult to imagine a narrative structure capable of capturing this multiplicity.\(^\text{157}\)

Thus, the fragmentation of multidirectional memory becomes a device that mirrors and moves with the impermanence of North African territorial space. In this way, these works associate events through a deep consideration for the politicization of land itself. The material objects employed by the artists also reinforce this project. Utilizing imperial technologies of categorization and vision, Ourahmane and Amin meticulously reveal how colonialism’s control over the body parallels the demarcation of space and the domination of territory.

Colonialism’s encounter with the migrant body is further explored in chapter three, which considers the positioning of the artists’ bodies within their works. Their works’ multidirectional memory is intimate and affective predominantly because it relates experiences and histories that are personal to the artist’s own sense of identity. This memory fundamentally shapes them, continually renegotiating their positions as migrants, women, and individuals complexly related to and distanced from the very soil of North Africa. Moreover, their bodies posit a direct relationship to the territory of North Africa, thus avoiding the mediation of the media and technologies of surveillance and cartography that have—both historically and in the present—abstracted and objectified North African territorial space. By examining their relationship to North Africa, Ourahmane and Amin invoke an archival intervention that reveals the constructed nature of history but also territory. They further propose the need to re-read the archive against the grain and elevate alternate forms of knowledge—like that of memory—to subvert the totalizing and objectivizing nature of canonical knowledge. Their bodies become the mediums by which the memory of migration is clarified and disseminated. Ultimately, through the performance of their bodies, they seek to make this memory collective and to present an affective history of the confrontations between individuals and imperial power in North Africa.

The exhibition of both works extends upon this project and contributes to the spatialization of the narratives and memories embedded within the works themselves. Significantly, the exhibition of these works has thus far been displaced from North Africa. Lydia Ourahmane’s \textit{In the Absence of Our Mothers} was commissioned by Chisenhale Gallery in London and exhibited in their gallery spaces in 2018 as part of Ourahmane’s solo exhibition, \textit{The You in Us}. This work will next be exhibited in Washington D.C. in a show

\(^{157}\) Yaeger 1996, p. 4.
that opens in June 2019. Similarly, Heba Amin’s *The Earth is an Imperfect Ellipsoid* has been exhibited in work-specific shows at the Zilberman Gallery in Istanbul, Turkey, 2016, and at the Künstlerhaus Bethanien in Berlin, Germany, 2017. It was during this second exhibition that Amin also presented her artist talk for this work.

While the locations of these exhibitions have been divorced from the sites of memory that the works individually relate, they correspond with the artist’s own dislocation from North Africa. This intercession is quite suggestive because, as Abdelmalek Sayad asserts, it is necessary to extend the migration narrative beyond the originating milieu and journey of the migrant figure to consider their ongoing processes of integration and displacement that persist beyond their arrival. Moreover, this deployment is also a strategic intervention, especially in relation to the works’ siting in European contexts. As the desired destination of most migrants from North Africa and the end destination of both artists, Europe urgently needs to acknowledge its role in fomenting contemporary migration. In this way, the exhibition of these works within a European context participates in the deterritorialization and reterritorialization of “Fortress Europe.” The exhibition sites themselves become politicized spaces that contribute to the formation and transformation of migrant identity and memory. Following Amin’s invocation, they operate as “memory spaces,” which, she argues, “provide an opportunity for continued dialogue within the public realm” that “potentially bring forth the in-between narratives.”

These exhibitions activate the personal memory of the artists into a collective and shared knowledge of the past in relation to the present. In the following, the exhibition of these works within a European context and public sphere will be considered. I will focus on the exhibitions of *In the Absence of Our Mothers* at Chisenhale Gallery and *The Earth is an Imperfect Ellipsoid* at the Künstlerhaus Bethanien to analyze the individual strategies employed by each artist to engage the public.

**The You in Us (2018), Chisenhale Gallery**

Ourahmane’s first solo exhibition after completing her studies at Goldsmiths College was held in London at Chisenhale Gallery. From its very title, *The You in Us* sought to inscribe the spectator as participant and complicit actor. In fact, Ourahmane has stated that she “want[ed] people to feel as part of the work as [she did].” To this end, she sought to

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158 Lydia Ourahmane, e-mail to the author, 16 May 2019.
159 Amin 2017a.
160 Sayad 1999, p. 15.
161 Amin 2014, p. 149.
162 Epps 2018.
viscerally engage her viewers, beginning with *Doors* (2018) [Fig. 26]. This work is composed of two silver doors treated with sulfur so that—at the exhibition’s commencement—a black film covered their surface area. This was the very first work that visitors encountered, and it was necessary to pass through them in order to enter into the main exhibition space. Over the course of the exhibition, as visitors and staff went in and out of the gallery space, the sulfur slowly rubbed off the doors to reveal the silver beneath. Thus, these metal doors were a durational artwork that recorded and bore the mark of every person who passed through the exhibition. Every finger and handprint became a forensic residue, implicating and imprinting each viewer within the transformation of the doors as both a witness and participant. The doors were deliberately very heavy, requiring people to actively push on them to pass through. In participating in this visual and physically demanding way, spectators played an active part in the histories related by the exhibition. With the show’s end, the doors became a temporal record, archiving the passage of the exhibition.

Once viewers went through the doors, they entered into an open and sparsely installed gallery space. One wall exhibited the gold tooth, associated text, and dental scan [Fig. 27] of *In the Absence of Our Mothers*. While the text and scan were conventionally hung, the tiny tooth was placed on a hook inserted directly into the wall. Slightly distanced from the other components, the tooth almost disappeared into the wall due to its minute size. In an adjacent vitrine, the documents comprising *Droit du Sang* were exhibited. The final and largest work of the exhibition was *Paradis* (2018) [Fig. 28]. Composed of twelve transducer speakers and twelve amplifiers embedded underneath a temporary wooden floor, *Paradis* consisted of an hour-long soundscape that combined field recordings that Ourahmane made in Algeria and ambient wave sequences, composed and performed by the artist and others. Transducer speakers are conventionally employed for sound therapy, due to the ability of the vibrations to create a trance-like state of calm. Throughout the exhibition, visitors laid on the exhibition floor, allowing the sound and vibrations to envelop and pass through them. As Ourahmane explained, “Lying down on the hard floor forces you to recognize your body and to become more present.” In this way, *Paradis* extends Ourahmane’s own memory into an experience shared with spectators. The vibrations inhabited their bodies, physically connecting them to Algeria through an embodied experience. Through this intervention, visitors physically experienced a kind of displacement between the site of the sound’s

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163 At this point in time, Ourahmane had yet to begin to petition for French citizenship, so the materials were limited to records related to her grandfather.
164 Epps 2018.
source—Algeria—and the site of the sound’s emanation—the gallery space—that mirrored Ourahmane’s own displacement from Algeria and relocation to London. Thus, this exhibition framed the ethics of witnessing as an experiential embodiment. This is critical, because as sociologists Jack Katz and Thomas Csordas have suggested, embodiment is “the common ground for recognition of the other’s humanity and the immediacy of intersubjectivity.”165 By activating an embodied experience for spectators, Ourahmane sought to create an intimate connection between them, herself, and Algerian migrants.

Spectators’ embodiment is likewise prompted by the exhibition of In the Absence of Our Mothers. The affect of this work is closely linked to the bodily response that most spectators have to the traumatic notion of viscerally ripping out one’s own teeth. While spectators did not actually experience this trauma, the exhibition’s foregrounding of the materiality of the subjective body created the potential for Tayeb Ourahmane’s narrative to inhabit their bodies. Thus, spectators could feel as if their teeth were being pulled out, or, at the very least, became affectingly aware of the presence of their own teeth in their mouths.

The histories and memories that Ourahmane relates are incomplete and half-told, and yet they are still affective in part because of their embodied, experiential qualities. It is through this sense of a shared experience that The You in Us emphasized the relationality of Ourahmane’s past and family history. Spectators too became complicit in the recording, embodiment, and memory of this past and were compelled to accommodate viscerally charged themes and stories within their own bodies. The sacredness of this shared memory was furthered by the sparseness of the exhibition’s visual elements. The gold tooth especially became a precious memento that drew viewers into close proximity. Ultimately, it was through this proximity—as indicated by the handprints on the doors, the vibrations from the floor, and the gold tooth implanted in the artist’s mouth and on the gallery wall—that relayed the gravitas of the histories and memories embedded within Ourahmane’s practice.

165 Katz and Csordas 2003, p. 278.
[Fig. 26] Lydia Ourahmane, *Doors*, 2018, wood, copper, brass, silver, sulfur oxide, steel frame, hinges (photo Andy Keate).

[Fig. 27] Lydia Ourahmane, installation view of *The You in Us* at Chisenhale Gallery, London, pictured *In the Absence of Our Mothers* and *Paradis*, 2018 (photo: Andy Keate).
The Earth is an Imperfect Ellipsoid (2017), Künstlerhaus Bethanien

Amin’s exhibition of The Earth is an Imperfect Ellipsoid at the Künstlerhaus Bethanien presented the various components of the multipart installation in a single room. Twenty-four theodolite images were hung in a continuous horizontal line, traversing the length of a single wall [Fig. 29]. Exhibited in an order that followed the passage of her journey, visitors could retrace Amin’s voyage by following the sequence of photographs from one end to the other. This constituted an abbreviated journey in its own right. However, the exhibition of the work suggested the act of passage through additional means as well.

Seen from afar, the photographs all appeared identical. Each circular photograph was surrounded by a black square frame, which created a compositional arrangement that was evocative of the moon in the night sky. The linear sequence of photographs consequently conjured an image of the twenty-eight day cycle of the moon. Implicit in the notion of the

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[Fig. 28] Lydia Ourahmane, Paradis, 2018, 11cm raised floor with treated floorboards, 12 transducer speakers, 10 amps, 2 super-bass amps, 250m. of speaker cable, 1:03:00min. (looped) (photo: Andy Keate).

166 The exhibition of this work has taken various configurations, both in terms of the number of photographs exhibited and their presentation on the wall. For the Zilberman exhibition, the photographs were hung on two adjoining walls and the wall scroll was distributed through an exhibition brochure. However, the arrangement of the photographs in a horizontal line so that deep shadows are evident below each frame has been consistent.
lunar cycle is the sense of time’s passage and the journey of the moon around the Earth. This sense of journey was complemented by the shadows of varying depths beneath the photographs. While the black frames appeared identical, they were actually of varying depths, which ranged from 3 to 20 centimeters. Consequently, the overhead lights in the exhibition cast rectangular shadows of varying lengths below each image, creating a unique shadow pattern below the line of photographs. The particular sequencing of shadows shifted from shortest to longest and back, forming a gently pyramidal sequence. Thus, the display of photographs created a dual sense of passage across territory—encapsulated by the shifting terrains depicted within the images—and across time—suggested through the sequencing and shadows of the works. Collectively, the photographs presented a hyphenated journey, offering the opportunity for spectators to follow this journey from beginning, middle to end.

The shadows below the photographs also formed a parabolic shape, constituting one half of an ellipsoid. This visual evocation of the work’s title is provoking for a number of reasons. The Earth is an (imperfect) ellipsoid, though it has long been misclassified as a sphere. The association of geography and geometry implicit within the work’s title relates to how the study of geography has utilized processes of mapping, charting, and plotting using principles of geometry to pursue symmetry and order as a means of possessing the land through its panoptic visualization. Yet, this desire for symmetry has resulted in a trend toward generalization that ignores the physical anomalies of the Earth. The Earth is neither spherical, nor truly elliptical; it is really an imperfect ellipsoid as Amin states. The photographs of the series suggest this reality through their content and display. With regard to their content, the photographs themselves are imperfect markers of Amin’s journey, failing to fully chart her passage, or even intelligibly represent the landscapes that their coordinates designate. In parallel, the shadows belied total symmetry, blurring and overlapping with one another at separate and imprecise intervals.

Adjacent to this series of photographs, four video monitors stacked in an asymmetrical configuration simultaneously played *The pupil of the mosquito’s eye* on loop [Fig. 30]. Each monitor presented the video with a slightly different level of saturation, resulting in Amin’s portrait appearing more or less washed out. Played continuously, Amin appeared and disappeared, as if trapped inside the monitors. On the opposite side of the gallery space, the sculpture, *Vision is One of the Senses* (2016), was hung slightly away from the wall [Fig. 31]. Like with the photographs, the downward lights cast a shadow on the wall behind it, which perfectly replicated the delicately shaped lacework of lines and curves of the sculpture. Their layering on top of one another produced a slightly blurry visual effect, as if
the sculpture was out of focus or perhaps its own vision was out of focus. The sculpture’s gaze aligned with the monitors displaying Amin’s visage, holding her in a perpetual but sightless present.

The final work of the exhibition was a scroll of paper that spilled out onto the floor [Fig. 32], featuring sections of Bakri’s descriptions of the women. This work was placed directly across the gallery space from the photographs. This staging created the sense that the sections of text were literally speaking across time and space to the photographs, a dynamic that closed the distance between past and present, there and here, Amin and the historical women of the *Kitab al–Masalik wal-Mamalik*. Both text and photographs exhibit deficiencies in their representation of territory and people, which are highlighted through their opposing staging.

This exhibition generated a space within which spectators could employ Ariella Azoulay’s “civil imagination” to investigate the specific context within which the photographs were taken (and the text written). By presenting a text-based narrative description of the geography of North Africa that emphasizes, however problematically, individual historical people along the trade routes adjacent to photographs and videos of contemporary people, the exhibition appealed to spectators to “move within and beyond the frame” to consider the other elements, visually and textually missing.\(^\text{167}\) Through this imaginative possibilization, spectators were confronted by the presence of those physically absent from Amin’s photographs and from the historical texts and contemporary media narratives more generally. Fomenting a connection between historical and contemporary individuals, the exhibition highlighted the experiential act of passage and the relational connections between variously distanced people. Thus, the exhibition of *The Earth is an Imperfect Ellipsoid* created the possibility, as Azoulay has urged, “of sharing a certain space with other people and objects” that was not dependent on physical proximity or presence in the same place and time.\(^\text{168}\)

\(^{167}\) Azoulay 2012, p. 15.

\(^{168}\) Ibid., p. 68.
[Fig. 29] Heba Y. Amin, *The Earth is an Imperfect*, 2016, photography, text, projection, iron sculpture, dimensions variable, installation view at Künstlerhaus Bethanien, Berlin (photo: David Brandt).

[Fig. 30] Heba Y. Amin, *The pupil of the mosquito’s eye* from *The Earth is an Imperfect*, 2016, photography, text, projection, iron sculpture, installation view at Künstlerhaus Bethanien, Berlin.
[Fig. 31] Heba Y. Amin, Vision is One of the Senses, iron, powder coated, 110 x 120 x 6 cm, from The Earth is an Imperfect Ellipsoid, 2016, photography, text, projection, iron sculpture, installation view at Künstlerhaus Bethanien, Berlin.

“it is said that there are great sands there, known as al-Ja‘alir “the Islands”, which have many palm trees and springs but no habitations nor human beings, and that the whistling of the jinn is heard there all the time. Sometimes Sudan raiders and robbers stay there to waylay Muslims. The dates pile up there for years without anybody coming far enough to come across them until people come foraging for them in years of famine or when they have an urgent need.”

“Among the provinces of Ghana is a region called Jama, the inhabitants of which are known as al-Bakr. From that region to Ghana is four days travelling. The people there go naked, only the women cover their sexual parts with strips of leather which they put on. They leave the hair on the palms and long shaves their heads. Abu Abd Allah al-Makki related that he saw one of these women stop in front of an Arab, who had a long beard, and say something in Arabic. The Arab turned to her and asked her what she wanted. She answered: “My father and my mother have an urgent need of date”.

[Fig. 32] Heba Y. Amin, detail from The Earth is an Imperfect, 2016, photography, text, projection, iron sculpture, installation view at Künstlerhaus Bethanien.
Conclusion

North Africa is haunted by its colonial memory. In a parallel manner, the exhibitions for *In the Absence of Our Mother* and *The Earth is an Imperfect Ellipsoid* are haunted by their displacement from their originating contexts. Seeking to connect the traumatic violence of colonialism with the instability of the present, the two exhibitions discussed above challenge a European public to acknowledge their entanglement with their former colonial territories and with migrants, whose dislocation corresponds with the disjunction of colonialism. By translating and transmitting the complicated intersections between past and present in their multipart artworks, both Ourahmane and Amin act as emissaries of the colonial past. Ourahmane is haunted by the memory of her grandfather and the memory of the young man whom she met at the market. In projecting these haunting memories through her work, she attempts to grasp the meaning of their actions and their lasting consequence on her own sense of identity. Likewise, the women in the *Kitab al-Masalik wal-Mamalik* haunt Amin. She wonders who these women are and searches for them through the theodolite and in the faces of migrants whom she encountered on her journey. Ultimately, at the end, she turns her camera upon her self, allowing us to watch her as she watches the ever-distant horizon.

This thesis presents the first in-depth scholarship on either Lydia Ourahmane or Heba Y. Amin. As emerging contemporary artists who have both received significant international recognition for their work, this thesis fills a critical gap and directs attention to the important work on migration that both artists are individually engaged in. Moreover, this thesis seeks to bring greater attention to female narratives of migration, acknowledging that women represent a significant percentage of contemporary migrants even though their perspectives are seldom documented. This silencing has hitherto operated as an additional form of violence that has been replicated across time as reflected in archival sources. However, beyond filling a gap in scholarship and highlighting underrepresented narratives and perspectives of migration, this thesis critically thinks through the parallels and intersections between the disciplines of postcolonialism and memory studies. While the intersection between these two disciplines may on the front appear self-evident—both are attuned to the relationship between the past in the present—few scholars have previously critically engaged with this intersection. Moreover, the interlinking of these two disciplines proposes the acute need for memory, as an intimate, transformative, and transferable form of knowledge, to supplement and even dislodge the primacy of more stable and potentially more hegemonic forms of material knowledge traditionally upheld by the canonical archive.
While this thesis is intentionally limited to the investigation of two works that are both geographically tied to North Africa, the structure of this intervention could and should be extended to other geographic locations around the world and to other issues that continue to be marked by colonialism. It is vital to understand the workings of the past in the present in all of its many guises. A similar localized investigation that incorporates embodied memory could be applied to conflict zones around the world, for example, the United States-Mexico Border and in Palestine and South Africa. Moreover, while migration is a latent subject for understanding the relation between the past and the present, as well as memory and postcolonialism, other issues, like environmental devastation and land exploitation and the destruction of indigenous cultures, could also provide fertile grounds for investigating the entanglement between the past and the present through embodied forms of knowledge and memory. Research into these other “crises” of the present would provide much needed revisions to more dominant historical narratives that occlude their colonial underpinnings. Additionally, more in depth scholarship is needed to understand the role of spectatorship in activating the memorial impulses of the works discussed in this thesis as well as other migration works. While my limited discussion of the exhibitions of both works serves as an illuminating model, more attention is needed to analyze the creative methods employed by these artists and others to inscribe proximate and embodied relationships between the public and migrants.

Lydia Ourahmane’s *In the Absence of Our Mothers* and Heba Y. Amin’s *The Earth is an Imperfect Ellipsoid* seek to recast the narrative of the present from one of singularity and linearity to one of multiplicity, circularity, and contradiction. They expose the fallacy of the “migration crisis,” which divorces the present-day displacement and relocation of millions of people around the world from the hegemonic and structural inequalities of the past. Their works bring viewers into intimate proximity with the subjects of migration. While their accounts of the migrant experience is embedded in victimization, oppression, and dispersal, their works attest to how these accounts may be employed creatively to explore the ways that people and memory move through history, circulate, fragment, and transform. These works ultimately seek to preserve, sanctify, and disperse narratives and memories of migration, attending to the necessary task of reversing the silencing and abuse of those most precariously situated within our complexly entangled global present.
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