

The Legacies of Memory: A Liberatory Tool

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A woman deeply interested in the practice of archiving, my grandmother born Rochelle Maryland Williams has kept my family's history and legacy tucked away in the basement of her home since the late 80's. As the historian of my family, a title bestowed upon her by me, she has preserved much of my family's history through photos, videos and recipes. Much to my surprise, this has become a role and responsibility that I have taken upon the duty of also exploring and embodying. Such embodiment and practice has shifted my (inner)standing of the purpose of memory, which I continue to explore through continuing this legacy of archiving my family's history through photography and audio recordings, and even more so in implementing in my pedagogical practices as a method of resisting (in real time) the legacies of colonialism. As I have continued to navigate the present and historical space of exploring memory, I have recognized it as not only a tool that can be utilized to preserve oneself and ancestral spirits against colonial forces, but also as something that can be used to truly embody and call upon the spirits of our ancestors and as a tool for liberation.

The question of what it takes for the body to remember is one that I have been sitting with for quite some time now. While my initial interest in exploring the topic of memory and the act of remembering is something that was prompted by the desire to understand the relationship between trauma and memory, I began to also consider the ways in which memory exists as something that lives in the body and could be re-activated. In this process, I have also become deeply curious about the potential ways in which ancestral memories and experiences can also be re-activated, as well as what it can look like to identify and develop tangible ways in which memory, particularly ancestral memory, could be preserved particularly through embodiment. What started as a simple method of documenting, preserving, examining, redefining and reinventing ways of exploring my family's history, evolved into a method in which I began to truly understand what it means to re-activate ancestral memories that continue to live in the body. Exploring the historical archives of my family, namely photography, redefined my relationship to my ancestors in a way that I also hadn't considered to be possible before. It gave breath and shape to their experiences and expanded the space for their stories to allow them to exist as real people and created an inseparable connection between us.

What is the purpose of remembering? This has served as a trajectory through which I have begun to ask myself as I have developed and explored ways in which I could not only archive and honor my family's history in real time, but also as I considered what this meant to be in relation to the people whose history I am exploring through archiving, namely through photography. I come from a family of archivists, primarily through the works of my grandmother, and I have carried out this legacy of continuing to archive my family's history starting with my grandmother as she transitions into her older age. Through photography and audio recording I have created ways in which I continue to hold onto what will eventually become a memory, and potentially a moment to be called upon in a moment of deep, ancestral prayer. Ancestral archiving has deeply shifted my relationship to my ancestors, namely my parents and grandmother, in a way that has made me

recognize that my story is directly connected to theirs. Ancestral archiving has helped me arrive at the point of what it means to choose to actively remember, particularly as migratory people. Archiving in this manner has helped me identify ways in which memory is necessary for both personal and collective liberation and has put into perspective the question of movement forward if the memory of where we have come from is missing.

I have become very curious about the relationship between memory and how it impacts our relationship to our ancestors and this in particular has been what has encouraged me to develop a practice of continuing to archive my family— as a method of preserving memory. As I have expanded my purpose behind archiving, I have identified that the intention behind why I choose to archive is to re-activate and preserve memory. The experience of memory being re-activated when looking at a photo is something that has reinforced and encouraged me to continue archiving as a practice of not only preserving memory but also of reactivating memory. The connection between photography and emotional responses when experiencing a moment captured in a photograph is something that I believe can serve as an avenue and tool for developing and redefining a relationship to our ancestors. The purpose of remembering, I have come to learn, is to assist one not only in the process of identifying who they are, but also can be used as a political and spiritual and liberatory tool to honor where one has come from historically. This has been what my call for remembering has been, not only to develop a more consistent and deeper connection with my ancestors, but also to recognize the ways in which remembering can be used as a tool for both collective and individual liberation.

The practice of remembering is one that has the capacity to ground us in where we are while also providing us with the knowledge and spiritual tools to move forward exploring and expanding new capacities for being. Exploring the topic of memory through photography has given shape to many of my ideas around what it means to acknowledge and honor those whom I am a direct descendant of, and to identify how their stories and experiences have directly impacted where I am, and the direction in which I am headed. “What is the purpose of remembering?” has also become a question of legacy. What does it mean to be the descendant of people who created tangible ways in which they would choose to remember? What does it also mean to be a part of the legacy of actively developing new methods of remembering and re-activating memory? This has become my call and commitment to my community, to continue developing and exploring new ways of maintaining and reactivating memories so that not only might we be able to recall the direction in which we have come from, but also that we might refine and re-envision the direction in which we might be headed.

The process of learning the weight that memory carries has been both heavy and liberating. Throughout the process of exploring the ways in which memory holds the power and capacity to ground students and educators in ways of existing and navigating educational structures outside of the colonial gaze, I have recognized that memory operates as the site of experiencing ourselves outside of the gaze of colonialism. This recognition is what has directly influenced the way in which I exist within the educational system, one that is deeply ridden with oppressive practices, and it has also influenced my methodology of challenging and encouraging my students to also critically examine how structures exist outside of what their ancestral practices may have been. Despite the newness of what it looks like to embody what it means to be a living ancestor while simultaneously exploring and integrating the memory of my ancestors into my daily practices, one thing has become apparent to me: memory is what brings us back to ourselves. It is what connects us to the

spirits of our ancestors in a way that ensures that true liberation, on the inside that is, is never too far out of our reach. Exploring ancestral methods of preserving memory, primarily through photography and recipe keeping, has been what has brought me back not only to myself, but also to my ancestors and ancestral ways of existing in spaces.

Through learning and re-telling their stories I have been provided the knowledge of what it means to continue their legacies through embodiment and it is through this exploration, I have begun to (inner)stand the depth and responsibility that I have in curating the space for my students to also sharpen this tool. While much of their exploration of ancestral memory has been through storytelling, some of my students have also re-imagined what the stories of their ancestors would exist as outside of the gaze and implementation of destructive colonial structures. While this process of re-imagination has not altered the stories of their ancestors, I believe that it is something that has the capacity to influence not only how they preserve the memories and practices of their *antepasados*, but also how they go about the work and responsibility of embodying the legacies of their own ancestral practices and traditions. Despite being a responsibility not chosen by them, it undoubtedly is one that they recognized that they were called and chosen to do.