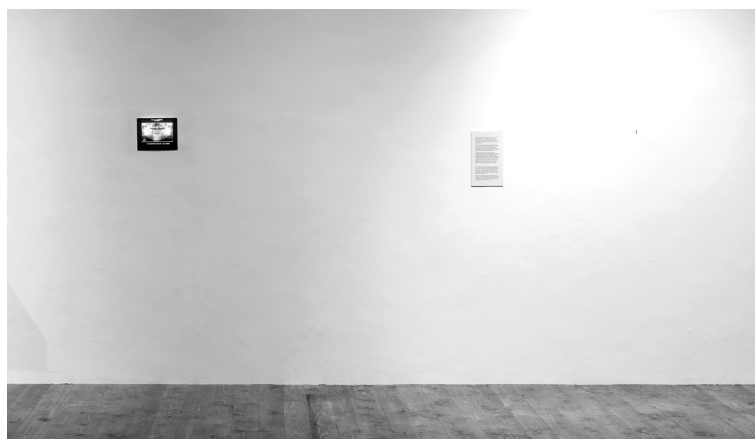


RETRACING THE COLONIAL PAST:  
MIGRATION AND MULTI-DIRECTIONAL MEMORY IN LYDIA  
OURAHMANE'S *IN THE ABSENCE OF OUR MOTHERS*

Kiko Aebi

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 permanently implanted into the mouth of the artist; the other is installed on a gallery wall at the exact same height as its twin in the installation *In the Absence of our Mothers* (2018) (fig. 1).<sup>1</sup> In this work, by British Algerian artist Lydia Ourahmane, the circulation and transformation of memory-laden objects address the uneven distribution of mobility in our contemporary moment. While goods and money move with little-to-no restriction, people do not.<sup>2</sup> Walls, fences, and separations by other means have proliferated, enforcing a kind of global apartheid, which, since the summer of 2015, has been brought into sharp focus with the rising numbers of refugees and migrants into the European Union.<sup>3</sup> This influx has led to a media-termed 'migrant crisis' for which most European states are ill prepared, if not unable, to manage. Sensationalised accounts of border crossings by allegedly dangerous 'illegal' migrants have culminated in the escalation of nationalist rhetoric and race-based violence.<sup>4</sup> Yet, this 'crisis' narrative is critically short-sighted, failing to account for the colonial legacies that fundamentally underpin migration. This is the connection that *In the Absence of our Mothers* makes explicit.



↑fig. 1 Lydia Ourahmane, *In the Absence of our Mothers*, 2015-18, x-ray, text, two 4.5g 19kt gold teeth, dimensions variable. Courtesy Chisenhale Gallery, London, photo: Andy Keate.

Attending to a need for new concepts of space, time, perspective, and modes of engagement to describe migration, this work employs an innovative approach to represent what in many cases is unrepresentable. Rather than emulating the media's graphic, incendiary depiction of migration, Ourahmane's approach denies direct visualization, instead underscoring migration's embodied dimensions through a performative intervention structured around memory. Looking beyond the temporal present, this project unravels migration's complex foundations and reverberating aftereffects to reveal the parallels and intersections between contemporary migration and North Africa's colonial past. This procedure challenges established migration narratives, opening up experiential and conceptual possibilities that foreground its enduring intimacy and direct relevance to postcolonial discourse. By reconsidering migration through this lens, *In the Absence of our Mothers* exposes the long trauma and intergenerational implications that migration has across time and space on family, allegiance, and identity.

Born in 1992, Ourahmane spent the first ten years of her life in Algeria, before immigrating to London, an experience she has described as "physically violent," and which led her, from a young age, to contemplate the dynamics of "how [her] body exists in space."<sup>5</sup> Thus, on one level, *In the Absence of our Mothers* responds to the psychological consequences of her own migration. This personal story is encapsulated by the two teeth that form the crux of this work, which are supplemented by an x-ray scan of Ourahmane's mouth, providing forensic proof of her dental intervention (fig. 2, 3 & 4). Despite the physical smallness of the teeth — a fact emphasised by the display of the one tooth, which is secured directly to the wall without pedestal or vitrine and is only visible in close proximity — they embody a deeply felt trauma that is further suggested by the memory event of Ourahmane's irreversible implantation procedure that is attached to them.<sup>6</sup> Yet while these teeth and x-ray scan are physically indexical of Ourahmane alone, these visual referents signify a story that is far more than simply hers. These objects carry complex ties to a past beyond her lifetime, which are briefly described in a wall text that constitutes the final component of this installation (fig. 5).

The text begins by stating that Algeria came under French colonial rule in 1830 and goes on to describe the involuntary military service of Ourahmane's Algerian grandfather, Tayeb Ourahmane, who was forcibly conscripted into the colonial army in 1932. In 1945, with his deployment to the European front imminent, Tayeb, in an extreme act of resistance, extracted all of his teeth with a pair of pliers. His self-mutilation rendered him physically unfit, and he was dismissed. Tayeb later went on to participate in the resistance during the Algerian War of Independence (1954-62). Fighting against French occupation, Tayeb smuggled thousands of arms into Algeria, using his family home as an ammunition cache and hideout for

<sup>1</sup> This work was commissioned by Chisenhale Gallery London, which presented Ourahmane's first solo exhibition *The you in us* (January 26—March 25, 2018). Ourahmane is an interdisciplinary artist, who received her BA from Goldsmiths College, University of London in 2014. She has exhibited at Kunsthalle Basel, Switzerland (2020), Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, Denmark (2019), Manifesta 12 (2018), the New Museum Triennial, New York (2018), and the 15th Istanbul Biennial (2017).

<sup>2</sup> In the last few years, the imposition of tariffs and trade sanctions has somewhat mitigated the free flow of goods and capital inaugurated by Neoliberalism. However, the fact remains that the movement of commerce remains far less regulated than that of people.

<sup>3</sup> Roberto Beneduce, "Undocumented bodies, burned identities: refugees, sans papiers, harraga—when things fall apart," *Social Science Information* 47, no. 4 (2008), 520; Steffen Köhn, *Mediating Mobility: Visual Anthropology in the Age of Migration* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 4.

<sup>4</sup> The recent rise of vehemently anti-immigrant and Islamophobic right-wing extremist groups in Europe has been accompanied by an alarming increase in acts of terrorism targeted at ethnic minorities. To point to just one of the most recent and deadly incidents, on February 20, 2020, a German right-wing terrorist attacked three hookah bars located in predominantly Turkish neighborhoods in Berlin, slaying nine people, before killing his mother and himself. His racist intent was clear, outlined in a 24-page manifesto that called for, amongst other things, the annihilation of Turkey, India, and Israel. Erik Kirschbaum, "Racially motivated terror attack that kills nine leaves Germany deeply unsettled," *Los Angeles Times*, February 20, 2020, <https://www.latimes.com/world-nation/story/2020-02-20/racially-motivated-terror-attack-that-kills-nine-leaves-germany-deeply-unsettled>.

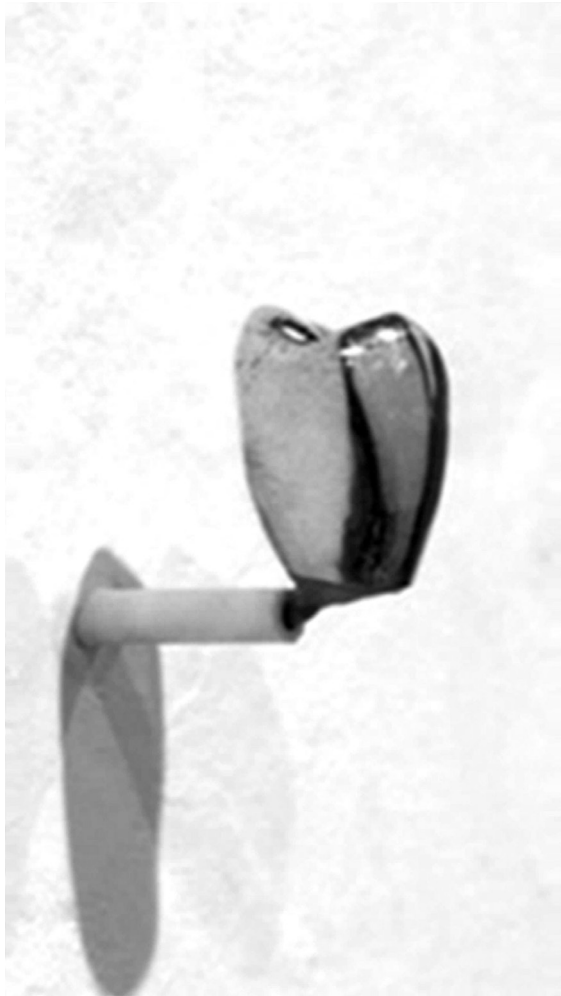
<sup>5</sup> Lydia Ourahmane, "Lydia Ourahmane on why she made a work about her grandfather pulling all his teeth out," interview by Ben Luke, *The Art Newspaper*, February 1, 2018, <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/preview/lydia-ourahmane-sound-system>.

<sup>6</sup> Ourahmane has explicitly described the process of implanting the gold tooth as "violent," Lydia Ourahmane, "Working with this personal history is something I have to deal with now, as a way of moving forward," interview with Veronica Simpson, *Studio International*, February 26, 2018, <https://www.studiointernational.com/index.php/lydia-ourahmane-interview-chisenhale-gallery-london>.

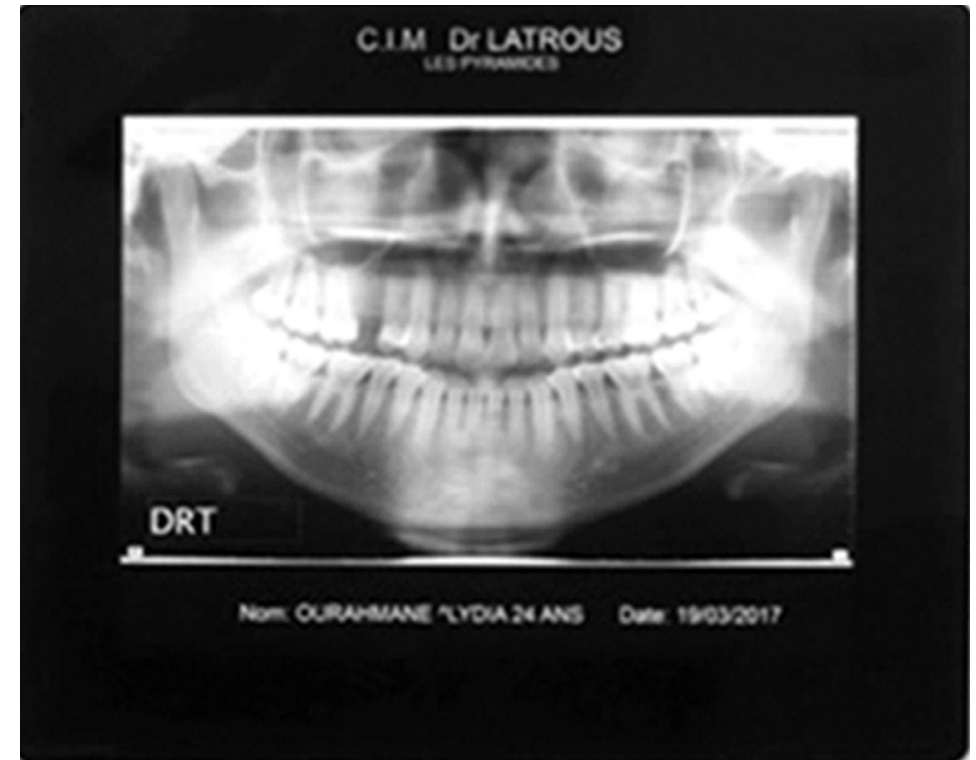
→ fig. 2 Detail of *In the Absence of our Mothers*. Commissioned and produced by Chisenhale Gallery, London, photo: Andy Keate.



← fig. 3 Detail of *In the Absence of our Mothers*. Commissioned and produced by Chisenhale Gallery, London, photo: Andy Keate.



→ fig. 4 Detail of *In the Absence of our Mothers*. Commissioned and produced by Chisenhale Gallery, London, photo: Andy Keate.



→ fig. 5 Detail of *In the Absence of our Mothers*. Commissioned and produced by 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.

wounded fighters. Yet, following his service and Algeria's independence, he refused formal recognition for his involvement, passing away in 1979 with little record of his exploits.

The second section of text picks up decades later, describing a chance encounter in 2015 between Lydia Ourahmane and a 23-year-old man at the Medina Djedida in Oran, Algeria. During their brief meeting, the man offered to sell Ourahmane a gold chain for €300, claiming that it belonged to his mother who wanted him to sell it. At first Ourahmane declined, but later she went back, intrigued that the man was selling the chain for the approximate fee charged by traffickers for a place on a migrant boat to Spain. The text concludes by describing how, after returning to London, Ourahmane kept the chain for three years before having it melted down and cast into two identical gold teeth to replicate her missing upper right maxillary molar, which, as Ourahmane has explained in a subsequent interview, fell out shortly after she graduated from Goldsmiths.<sup>7</sup> She then underwent a complex dental procedure, beginning with surgery to drill a nickel screw directly into her jawbone and then a two-month integration period, during which the screw physically fused with her bone, before the tooth could be implanted in her mouth.<sup>8</sup> Even then, Ourahmane relates that the gold tooth in fact fell out the day after the procedure and has fallen out additional times since, seemingly failing to fully integrate with her body.<sup>9</sup>

Cyclically referring to multiple pasts and geographies, this installation explicates the parallels and contradictions between the lives of Tayeb, the young man, and the artist herself. In doing so, it links migration from Algeria in the present to colonial resistance and expressions of Algerian national identity in the past to draw out colonialism's contemporary legacy. This is a link largely absent in the visual and media discourse on migration. By contrast, this work highlights imperialism's role in the transformation of North Africa, from the bordering of territories and formation of the modern nation state to the conditions predefining citizenship. Sensitive to the traces of the past and the movements of the present, this installation probes the forces shaping migration and informing the experience of displacement, which has become the everyday habitus for the more than 232 million international migrants and 20 million stateless refugees around the world.<sup>10</sup>

#### Fragmentary Migrant Narratives

Through its use of narrative text to suggest a lineage between historical and contemporary events, *In the Absence of our Mothers* aligns with the intellectual precepts of the Algerian sociologist Abdelmalek Sayad and his influential contributions to migration anthropology.<sup>11</sup> Sayad's approach extends beyond the temporal limits of the migrant journey to consider the history, structure, and conflicts that shape not only the receiving

<sup>7</sup> Kaelen Wilson-Goldie, "One Take: Lydia Ourahmane's Two Gold Teeth," *Frieze* (2018), <https://frieze.com/article/one-take-lydia-ourahmanes-two-gold-teeth>.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Khalid Koser, *International Migration: A Very Short Introduction, Second Edition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 5 & 11.

<sup>11</sup> Sayad's study of migration, like Ourahmane, focuses on the relationship between Algeria and France; two countries linked by migration, but also—as a consequence of their shared colonial past—by language, economic ties, and *jus sanguinis* rights. See Abdelmalek Sayad, *L'Immigration ou les paradoxes de l'atérisme* (Brussels: Editions Universitaires-De Boeck, 1991) and *La Double absence: des illusions de l'émigré aux souffrances de l'immigré* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1999).

country as the chosen destination of migration, but also the sending country as the spatial context that defined the migrant's decision to leave. His project stresses the shared colonial past of the sending and receiving countries and the unequal power dynamic exercised between them. Sayad argues that this dynamic has extended into the present, internalized by migrants themselves and traceable in their actions even after their resettlement.<sup>12</sup> Crucially, his project elaborates on the reasons that this historical dimension has been disregarded and migration perennially misrecognized as a transitory event. He argues that all parties, including the sending communities, receiving societies, and the migrants themselves, erroneously conceive migration as a provisional event determined primarily by the economic quest for labour.<sup>13</sup> This "collective dissimulation and social duplicity" results in the disavowal of migration's colonial entanglement.<sup>14</sup>

The correspondence between Sayad's methodology and Ourahmane's narrative is encapsulated by their common effort to reconstitute the "complete trajectory" of migration, beginning with events that precede departure—from colonial conscription to liberation and post-liberation social and political failure—to those that extend beyond resettlement—displacement, loss of cultural patrimony, family separation.<sup>15</sup> By uncovering the full system of factors, both familial and systemic, both contextualize migration and its attendant consequences against a larger geopolitical backdrop. This is in direct contrast to media portrayals of migration, which falsely represent migration as an aberration from a stable and isolationist past. This account fails to recognize that people have travelled vast distances throughout history. In the context of the African continent, intercontinental migration and the Arab and transatlantic slave trades both precede and, in terms of total numbers, vastly outweigh migration to Europe in the present. Additionally, these previous instantiations are significant to consider, not least because migrants continue to use the same transcontinental routes used for centuries, but because the colonial dynamics embedded in earlier migration cycles continue to be replicated today.<sup>16</sup>

Despite the explicit connection between past and present foregrounded by *In the Absence of our Mothers*, this work's layered narrative leaves much to be inferred. The text is punctuated by gaps in time and memory. How did Tayeb come to the decision to pull out his teeth? Why did he refuse to be honoured after liberation? How did the young man acquire the chain, and did he attempt to migrate to Europe, or was it merely coincidence that the price of the gold chain coincided with the fee for passage? What compels people to take such extreme measures to stay or leave their homeland, and how is agency inscribed in these choices? The lack of clarity and resolution in this narrative is more than merely an aesthetic choice; it is a consequence of how

<sup>12</sup> Sayad, *La Double absence*, 15, cited in Pierre Bourdieu and Loïc Wacquant, "The Organic Ethnologist of Algerian Migration," *Ethnography* 1, no. 2 (2000), 174–176.

Furthermore, I would argue that this power imbalance, as a direct consequence of colonialism, is internalised through the collective memories of formerly colonised peoples.

<sup>13</sup> Bourdieu and Wacquant, *Organic Ethnologist*, 176.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 174; Ourahmane explicitly cites Pierre Bourdieu and Loïc Wacquant's text on Sayad's research in a reading list that she compiled, and which was distributed by Chisenhale Gallery.

<sup>16</sup> Nikos Papastergiadis, *The Turbulence of Migration: Globalization, Deterritorialization and Hybridity*, (Cambridge: Polity, 2000), 9–10.



Ourahmane has received each part. She only learned of her grandfather's actions as an adult after asking an older uncle.<sup>17</sup> This mediation, distanced from the actual events, problematizes the reliability of Ourahmane's own retelling.<sup>18</sup> Likewise, despite her eyewitness account, Ourahmane can only speculate on the events that transpired before and after her transaction with the young man. She conjectures that he may have stolen the chain from his mother, but this extrapolation cannot be equated with reality.<sup>19</sup> Ultimately, this work recounts a narrative marked by fragmentation. The questions that plague the work also plague Ourahmane. In an interview, she described this installation as a means to process her past, observing that her work is "a way of understanding what [her] history is...as a way of moving forward."<sup>20</sup>

Fittingly, her fragmentary and speculative 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."<sup>21</sup> Troubled by "contradictions" and "forgetting," Beneduce writes that in these stories it is:

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.*<sup>22</sup>

This sense of the "time before" and "time after" particularly structures Ourahmane's work. *In the Absence of our Mothers* attempts to bridge "before" and "after" migration to fill a gap in her personal history. Filling the physical gap created by her missing tooth becomes a metaphor for filling this gap in self-knowledge. However, even once repaired, the filling is marked by its difference. Beyond the tooth's visual dissimilarity, Ourahmane relates that she is constantly reminded of its presence because it is more sensitive to changes in temperature than her natural teeth.<sup>23</sup> It absorbs and retains heat, becoming a lingering reminder — a memory — of her grandfather, of the young man, and of her connection to them.

Through the absence of narrative wholeness, Ourahmane's intervention follows the imaginative potential of memory. Lacking the commitment to "temporal continuities" and "progressions" that define history proper, Ourahmane's narrative is distinguished by temporal shifts that suggest an "in-between" space of "past-present."<sup>24</sup> This multi-temporal configuration corresponds to media anthropologist Steffen Köhn's description of migration film, which he suggests, "can be viewed as phenomenological descriptions of the function of memory" through their embodiment of "multiple

layers of time."<sup>25</sup> Yet, beyond the work's temporal affinities to memory, it also follows memory's speculative potential. Not knowing fully the motivations or consequences of her grandfather and the young man's actions, Ourahmane allows her imagination to bridge the gap between the known and unknown, which ultimately enables her to suggest a connection between these two actors despite their separation across time. Their connection to one another is signified by the gold tooth in her mouth. Significantly, like memory, the tooth is physically internal, a felt presence not readily visible to Ourahmane or others. Nonetheless, the tooth, as a corporeal marker of memory, is an enduringly activated phenomenon. While the events Ourahmane relates are past, their continuous signification, as memory, is "ever-present" and will continue to persist even beyond her own lifetime.<sup>26</sup>

### Postcolonial Memory

By positioning migration as a project of memory, Ourahmane suggests that the contemporary disconnection between migration and its colonial foundations is fundamentally a failure of memory. This failure is in part due to the very structure of the disciplines of postcolonial and memory studies.<sup>27</sup> Analysis of the foundational postcolonial texts reveals little mention of memory.<sup>28</sup> This is despite the fact that postcolonialism's emphasis on the cultural legacies of the past in the present suggests that memory should be fundamental to its approaches. Likewise, most memory scholarship has centred on canonical forms of cultural memory and the processes that have led to their dominance, rather than considering less stable and marginal forms of cultural memory production related to postcolonial projects.<sup>29</sup>

Memory scholar Michael Rothberg has argued that his discipline's colonial blind spot is the result of the emphasis on "the construction of continuity" and the "coherence of cultural groups," which reproduces imperial frameworks.<sup>30</sup> For example, philosopher Maurice Halbwachs' sociological approach to collective memory, developed prior to World War II, emphasizes relatively stable formations of social groups and group processes.<sup>31</sup> His approach is inadequate for the contemporary context, considering the fluidity and rate with which social groups now form and dissolve into new constituencies. Similarly, historian Pierre Nora too emphasizes stable social groups by centring his investigation on the modern nation-state as the ultimate social framework of memory. Despite engaging specifically with the idea of French collective memory, Nora neglects consideration for France's

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup>

Unlike Ourahmane's body, the gold tooth will not decay and will continue to exist even after she herself is no longer living. This permanence suggests how this family history of resistance, migration, and displacement has become a multi-generational inheritance that will continue to be passed down through Ourahmane's family. In an interview about this work, Ourahmane states, "I have been thinking a lot about these studies about trauma being passed down through peoples' DNA." Lydia Ourahmane, "Chisenale Interviews: Lydia Ourahmane," interview with Ellen, January 19, 2018.

<sup>27</sup>

While the overlap between these two disciplines has not been theorized extensively, Ourahmane's work joins a larger field of contemporary art that intervenes within this nexus, for example, John Akomfrah's *Vertigo Sea* (2015), the photographs of Sammy Baloji, and Kader Attia's *Reflecting Memory* (2016).

<sup>28</sup>

Michael Rothberg, "Remembering Back: Cultural Memory, Colonial Legacies, and Postcolonial Studies," in *The Oxford Handbook of Postcolonial Studies*, ed. Graham Huggan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 359.

Specifically, Rothberg notes that Edward Said focuses his discussion on "narrative" and "stories" rather than memory and remembrance. Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage, 1993). Similarly, Homi Bhabha makes little mention of memory outright, although his concern for the logic of cultural production outlines a space for memory. Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994).

<sup>29</sup>

Rothberg, "Remembering Back," 364.

<sup>30</sup>

Ibid.

<sup>31</sup>

Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, trans. Lewis Cosner (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

colonial projects.<sup>32</sup> Nonetheless, while his overarching argument does not accommodate postcolonial memory, his concept of *lieux de mémoire*, defined as “any significant entity...which by dint of human will or the work of time has become a symbolic element of the memorial heritage of any community,” offers a strategy to identify the physical and conceptual memory markers of colonialism.<sup>33</sup>

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 even form collective consensual memory. 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.<sup>34</sup> Rothberg defines multidirectional memory 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.”<sup>35</sup> This concept suggests that memories emerge in the interplay between different pasts with the present. In the process, they interfere, overlap, and reconstitute each other, even bridging seemingly distinctive collective memories.<sup>36</sup> Unlike the models proposed by Halbwachs and Nora, which might be classified as “competitive memory models,” through their assumption of stable social groups and focus on dominant forms of memory, multidirectional memory denies all forms of stability and closure and therefore is particularly suited to attend to migration memory.<sup>37</sup>

While Ourahmane’s personal stakes within this work suggests an intervention into the domain of personal memory, she engages deeply with issues of collective memory through her provocation of Algerian national identity, as encapsulated by the actions of her grandfather and the young man. Her grandfather’s choice to irrevocably alter his body to avoid fighting in World War II, only to put his very life at risk to fight for liberation at first seems in total opposition to the young man’s choice to leave Algeria at whatever cost, including selling a family heirloom. However, as Ourahmane suggests, “the two gestures are the same degree.”<sup>38</sup> Both are irreversible actions that fundamentally centre around the notion of Algerian identity and allegiance. While Tayeb is willing to put his very life at risk to stay and defend Algerian sovereignty, Ourahmane suggests that the young man is willing to sacrifice his inheritance and even leave behind his family in order to escape Algeria. In this way, both acts, while opposite, deeply pertain to national identity and collective memory, which is fundamental to the very notion of a shared and collective past.

Collective memory is also invoked by the three fraught *lieux de mémoire* that structure *In the Absence of*

<sup>32</sup> Pierre Nora, *Rethinking France: Les Lieux de mémoire*, English-language edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999-2010): 4 volumes.

<sup>33</sup> Pierre Nora, “From *Lieux de mémoire* to *Realms of Memory*” in *Realms of Memory: Conflicts and divisions*, English-Language edition, ed. Lawrence D. Kritzman, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996): xvii-xviii.

<sup>34</sup> Rothberg, “Remembering Back,” 361.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 372.

<sup>36</sup> Michael Rothberg, “Between Auschwitz and Algeria: Multidirectional Memory and the Counterpublic Witness,” *Critical Inquiry* 33, no. 1 (Autumn 2006): 162.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> Ourahmane, interview with Veronica Simpson.

*our Mothers*: World War II, the Algerian War, and the contemporary ‘migrant crisis.’ These events relate to one another through the conduits of multidirectional memory and — following Sayad’s suggestion — predetermine and shape the internal conflicts experienced by Tayeb, the young man, and Ourahmane. Rothberg has previously designated World War II and the Algerian War as two proximate *lieux de mémoire*, noting that in European collective memory, the former continues to have deep associations with Nazi occupation, genocide, and fascism, which mirrors the latter in the collective memory of Algerians.<sup>39</sup> As one of the most brutal struggles for decolonization, the Algerian War has unmistakable parallels to the Nazi occupation of France, demonstrating a correspondent dynamic of victimization and resistance.<sup>40</sup> Referencing the writings of Charlotte Delbo, a French non-Jewish survivor of the Holocaust and leftist literary figure, Rothberg argues that this correspondence was already identified as the Algerian War was still unfolding. For example, Delbo writes:

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?<sup>41</sup>

This passage links the emergent pattern of violence against Algerians to the memory of the Holocaust.<sup>42</sup> While this is not to suggest that a direct equivalence can be made, what Delbo highlights is the parallel public indifference directed toward the suffering of those deemed outsiders. In the case of the Algerian War, this is particularly alarming considering that the French themselves were victims of Nazi atrocities only a few years prior.

However, to extend Delbo’s inquiry further, this passage also forms a link to migrant experiences in the present. The camps that held Algerian resisters during the Algerian War, while prefigured by the Nazi death camps, have now come to prefigure the ‘detention centres’ used across France and elsewhere to hold ‘illegal’ migrants. Likewise, the same pervasive indifference directed toward Algerian resisters and the victims of the Holocaust, is today directed toward migrants by European nations who have taken a militaristic response to those seeking entry through its borders. Perhaps most sinisterly however, is Europe’s disavowal of all culpability. Having fomented the conditions that now compel

<sup>39</sup> Rothberg, “Between Auschwitz and Algeria,” 165.

<sup>40</sup> Perhaps best encapsulating the mirroring of these *lieux de mémoire* is the Sétif and Guelma massacre, which occurred in Algeria on May 8, 1945, the day World War II ended in Europe. Following Algerian demonstrations for independence, French colonial authorities and Pied-noir settlers brutally and indiscriminately massacred between 6,000 and 20,000 Algerians. Jean-Pierre Peyroulou, “Le cas de Sétif-Kherrata-guelma (Mai 1945),” *SciencesPo* 2008, <https://www.sciencespo.fr/mass-violence-war-massacre-resistance/en/document/setif-and-guelma-may-1945>.

<sup>41</sup> Charlotte Delbo, *Les Belles lettres* (Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 1961): 65-66, cited in Rothberg, “Between Auschwitz and Algeria,” 170.

<sup>42</sup> Rothberg, “Between Auschwitz and Algeria,” 170.

migrants to flee their homelands, Europe paradoxically fashions itself a victim to an external aggression. This illogic is a pattern discernible in the words and actions of the aggressors in all three of these events. Consequently, each *lieu de mémoire* demonstrates a contradictory memorial impulse that widely diverges depending on who (aggressor or victim) is doing the recall. Thus, by collapsing the temporal continuities of these three events, Ourahmane exposes their intersections. In the process, she reveals how each *lieu de mémoire* competes, overlaps, and resignifies the next, suggesting the construction and fragmentation of migrant identity as two continuous and opposing processes that extend from the colonial past to the present and back again.

This multidirectional resignification is encapsulated by the movement and transformation of the gold chain. As a family heirloom, it passes from mother to son on less than certain terms. Sold to Ourahmane, she brings it to London (we can only conjecture as to whether the young man was able to replicate this journey), where it is transformed into a pair of teeth. The integration of one tooth into Ourahmane's body emblematically reverses the loss of the gold chain by the mother at the hands of her son. Likewise, the act of integration re-enacts and resignifies Ourahmane's grandfather's self-mutilation, forming a new, embodied memory that becomes a form of inheritance in its own right. Thus, time and geography enter into these paired teeth, which, through the irreversible process of implantation, become simultaneously separate and the same: marking separate actions of the same kind, physically the same, but physically and permanently separate in space.

This pairing of oppositions is carried through to the title of *In the Absence of our Mothers*. On the one hand, the title relates to the defiance of acting without permission. Tayeb undertook the extraction of his teeth in defiance of French occupation. Similarly, Ourahmane speculates that the young man's pursuit of escape from Algeria was carried out without the permission of his mother. His actions reflect a larger generational defiance, as Algeria undergoes a mass exodus of its young people to Europe, their choice to leave their 'motherland' seemingly undercutting all that their forbearers fought for during the Algerian War.<sup>43</sup> On the other hand, the title relates to the experiential consequences that follow this exodus. Exiled from Algeria, separated from family, migration has led to the experience of displacement. This trauma is not necessarily physical or visual, but embodied and sustained by the memory of what once was. Ourahmane's project is ultimately the impossible task of representing this psychological wounding — this void — created by the loss of one's family history, one's national identity, and one's sense of place in the world. Her work, however fragmentary and speculative it may be, seeks to comprehend this loss, becoming a permanent evocation of her bonds to a past not truly past.

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<sup>43</sup> Ourahmane, interview with Veronica Simpson.

## THE HEADLESS REAL

Yen Noh

The real is positioned both before and after its representation; and representation becomes a moment of the reproduction and consolidation of the real.

—Judith Butler, *The Force of Fantasy*<sup>1</sup>

Writing re-marks the hole in the signifier, the inability of words to convey meaning exactly. The intimacy of the language of speech and the language of vision extends to their mutual impossibilities.

—Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked*<sup>2</sup>

*The Headless Real* is a performance script. It is based on a script I first performed in 2019 at Dutch Art Institute, which I have revised for this publication. Attending to the possibilities of the speech/writing act, the piece revolves around the performance of language, vision, memory, and representation. The parts of the script were originally enumerated in order for me as a non-English speaker to learn by rote, creating a distance from both the speech and the audience. The Korean text, which helped me memorize and which I never spoke in public, has been left in this version as a trace of the labour of translation. The script includes stage annotations made after the fact.

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Yen Noh is an artist currently living and working in Utrecht, the Netherlands. Her work engages with anti-colonial 'paralanguage' that performs the language's materiality as an enabler to resist linguistic norms and representational violence of colonization. She uses performance to unearth and recreate practices by those who are unthought by the constructive force of history and its white/male dominion of culture. Her research so far has been on the Korean-American poet, filmmaker, and artist Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, the 1920s Japanese art group MAVO, the Korean architect, poet, and artist Yi Sang and his partner Geumhong, who was a sex worker, with whom she explores signification as its bodily practice.

<sup>1</sup> Judith Butler, "The Force of Fantasy: Mapplethorpe, Feminism, and Discursive Excess" *Differences* 2, no. 2 (Summer 1990): 106.

<sup>2</sup> Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (London: Routledge, 1993), 6.