

Archival Bodies in Ayana V. Jackson's *Demons Devotees I-IV*

Corpos de arquivo em Demônios Devotos I-IV de Ayana V. Jackson

JULIA STACHURA

Adam Mickiewicz University, Poland

stachurajulia@gmail.com

Abstract

The article focuses on the notion of archival bodies in Ayana V. Jackson's *Demons Devotees I-IV* (2013) photographic series. The artist's work refers to Alice Seeley-Harris' self-portrait with Congolese children from 1905, in the context of King Leopold II's brutal regime. Seeley-Harris' photographs, seen from the perspective of postcolonial and decolonial studies, raise an important question about the power of images from Africa and their existence in the collective memory of the West. In that context, I propose to read the notion of archival bodies as liminal bodies, where the power dynamic and historical burden of representation lies. Jackson's artistic practice is an example of bridging the two to deconstruct the colonial gaze toward decolonial change and the possibility of challenging West-centered and white-centred narratives. Jackson creates a visual story on empowerment, womanhood, and blackness by mimicking (or "mimicry-ing") the visual culture of pain and helplessness. The act of remembrance in Jackson's practice is translated into several issues regarding the colonial matrix of power, collective memory, herstory, and, most importantly, the notion of the body.

Keywords

archival bodies | colonial Congo | studio photography | colonial gaze | decolonial change

Resumo

O artigo parte da noção de corpos de arquivo para abordar a série fotográfica *Demons Devotees I-IV* (2013) de Ayaana V. Jackson. A obra da artista refere-se ao autorretrato de Alice Seeley-Harris com um grupo de crianças congolesas, tirada em 1905, no contexto do regime brutal do rei Leopoldo II. As fotografias de Seeley-Harris, vistas a partir da perspectiva dos estudos pós-coloniais e decoloniais, levantam uma importante questão sobre o poder das imagens de África e a sua existência na memória coletiva do Ocidente. Nesse contexto, proponho ler o conceito de corpos arquivísticos como corpos liminares, onde reside a dinâmica de poder e a carga histórica da representação. A prática artística de Jackson é um exemplo de ponte entre os dois registos, para desconstruir o olhar colonial em direção à mudança decolonial e à possibilidade de desafiar as narrativas centradas no ocidente e centradas na branquitude. Jackson cria uma história visual sobre empoderamento, feminilidade e negritude, imitando (ou “imitando/chorando”)* a cultura visual da dor e do desamparo. O ato de rememoração na prática de Jackson é traduzido em várias questões sobre a matriz colonial de poder, de memória coletiva, sobre a sua história e, mais importante, a noção de corpo.

Palavras-chave

corpos de arquivo | Congo colonial | fotografia de estúdio | olhar colonial | mudança decolonial

* NT. O duplo sentido com o jogo de palavras em inglês não resulta na tradução para português.

In 1876 The Brussels Geographic Conference was held at the request of King Leopold II of Belgium and resulted in actions that would affect the people of Central Africa in the darkest way possible. The scientific conference resulted in forming the International African Association under cover of humanitarian care. Still, in reality, the conference served only as an excuse for securing the colonial expansion of Belgium (Sliwinski 2006, 336). The following Berlin Conference, held in 1884 and 1885, established the Congo Free State and made King Leopold II the trustee for one million square miles of African land and a “protector” of the people inhabiting this terrain (Sliwinski 2006, 336). Shortly it became clear that the king’s interests were far from humane, and he soon started to focus on extracting rubber and making a profit.

The Antislavery Usable Past¹ holds one of the most extensive digitalised archives of images of the colonial Congo. The archive’s first and most important figure is Alice Seeley-Harris (1870-1970), a British photographer. Along with her husband — John Hobbs Harris (1874-1940), they were missionaries documenting Congolese people during King Leopold II’s brutal regime in the early 1900s. The photos later served for the *Congo Atrocity Lantern Slide Lecture*. They came with a narrative text describing the country’s natural wealth, a critique of Leopold II, the cannibal village, and notions of an executioner and a warrior. Mark Sealy (2019) reconfigured the original structure of the lantern slide show with a critical approach in the book *Decolonising the Camera*. He states that the show consisted of sixty slides divided into four categories: 1. “Philanthropy in the Making” (with political context, geographical characteristics of the Congo Free State and its resources), 2. “Philanthropy in Operation” (with a critique of King Leopold’s II regime and framing him as a “pirate”), 3. “Philanthropy Exposed” (focused on revenue received by King Leopold II from Congo), 4. “Philanthropy That May Be” (description of armed intervention from the British government). Seeley-Harris’ work is one of the first humanitarian photographic documents made by a female photographer and a pioneering campaign supporting human rights, well known around Europe and the United States.

Seeley-Harris’ photographs, seen from the perspective of postcolonial and decolonial studies, raise an important question about the power of images from Africa and their existence in the collective memory of the West. Her work is bridged between the agency of the white missionaries representing the voice of the oppressed and the helplessness of the represented voiceless actors of the project. At the exchange’s core lies the notion of archival bodies², which I will interpret as liminal bodies, where the power

¹ Congo has its own section on the website: <http://antislavery.nottingham.ac.uk/congo>. There is also a tab dedicated to the photography and the Congolese diaspora and collection documenting decolonial work of collaboration between the Antislavery Usable Past project and Yole!Africa in Goma and Lubumbashi. The project is an AHRC-funded, led by the University of Nottingham, in partnership with the Universities of Hull and Queen’s Belfast.

² This term is used in the recent research on the studies of archives, concerning the critical and cultural theory as well as focusing on the body and embodiment. See: Jamie A. Lee, *Producing the Archival Body*, Routledge, London 2021.

dynamic and historical burden of representation lies. In this case, the archival body can also be interpreted as a body of work or a body of the medium — a photograph — a material thing with its heaviness, smell, color, purpose, and history.

When thinking of archival bodies in the context of colonial photography, we might think of the very detailed imagery depicting the terror, the acts of dehumanisation, and people's passivity and hopelessness. The archival bodies of colonialism are usually captured in a specific manner, which makes us wonder more about the projected narratives around the body produced by the coloniser than about the power dynamics present in and outside the frame concerning the actual body of the colonised. As Elleke Boehmer (1993, 129) writes:

“In colonial representation, exclusion, suppression, and relegation can often be seen as embodied. From the point of view of the coloniser specifically, fears and curiosities, sublimated fascinations with the strange or ‘the primitive’, are expressed in concrete physical and anatomical images. The seductive and repulsive qualities of the wild or other, as well as its punishment and expulsion from the community, are figured on the body, and as the (fleshly, corporeal, often speechless) body.”

The archival body is entangled in a social, cultural, political, and, most importantly, in this case, colonial matrix of power (Quijano 2000; Mignolo 2007), both from the perspective of history and the present. The archive is not only a place where archival bodies can be preserved in one way or another. It is a knowledge system, mostly structured and governed by institutions, archivists, and researchers (Foucault 2002). Most of the time, the knowledge of the archival bodies of colonialism is entirely swallowed by the past, sometimes resurfacing as archival categories of *portraits of natives* or *curiosities*. Okwui Enwezor (2008) emphasises the dark side of the archive concept, referring to the photographic records used as instruments for many quasi-scientific projects in the 19th and early 20th centuries³.

On the other hand, for Achille Mbembe (2013, 16) archives are made of fractures and narrow gateways; they create a rift through time, allowing us to peek into history, retracing steps and paths anchored in the past. Another essential theoretician of the concept is Allan Sekula (1986) and his social history of the archives, which can accommodate an entire social terrain while positioning people in the categories of heroes, leaders, celebrities, poor, non-white, females, criminals, diseased, curiosities, etc. In this context, I see archival bodies as retroactive images that live in our memory and figures we associate through history with specific power dynamics. In terms of the Barthesian theory of

³ For example the practice of Louis Agassiz (1807 — 1873), a Swiss-born American biologist and geologist and a member of the Scientific Lazzaroni, who believed in the hierarchy of races and polygenism, contributing to the white suprematism evident in social and biological para-sciences of the 19th century.

photography, archival bodies can be seen as ever-lasting, still „present”, and still „here” (Barthes 1981). They can remind us of preservation and stillness, both in time and space, as well as of movement and mobility of circulating images in the memory, and within the institutions, through artists, researchers, and scholars.

Many photographic practices from the beginning of the 21st century could be described by the term *archive fever* (Derrida 1995; Enwezor 2008), referring to the particular interest in the past, collecting, and remembrance. One of the most intriguing and ambiguous projects in terms of contemporary interpretation of the agency of colonial photography came from Ayana V. Jackson, an African-American artist of Ghanaian descent. Jackson seems to pay special attention to the imaginative aspect of her work by recalling the well-known tropes of picturing people of colour inhabiting the collective memory of the West. Her *Archival Impulse* series from 2012-2013 refers to the idea of Hal Foster (2004), which describes the production of new knowledge systems when confronted with an archive. Sources of inspiration for the artist’s project come from the Duggan Cronin collection from South Africa, photos of “native performers» from human zoos, images from the Vietnam War, or those taken for the World Press Photo competition.

My article focuses on four photographs titled *Demons Devotees I-IV*, where Jackson re-stages Seeley-Harris’ self-portrait with Congolese children. Jackson is a visual artist specialising in studio photography, born in 1977, living and working in Brooklyn, New York, Paris, and Johannesburg. In her work, she refers to the aesthetics of 19th and early 20th-century photography, the history of European art, and the African diaspora. At the turn of the 20th century, the artist’s interest was linked to the problematic relationship between the photographed subject (often resembling the object), the photographer, and the observer. This triad is completed by the particular double role played by the artist — the model and the image creator. Her photographic work is mainly focused on self-portraits, where Jackson explores the ways of depicting the Black female body. In her artistic statement, she describes her credo as *fighting photography with photography* (Estrin 2016), which means deconstructing the colonial gaze and art canon toward the possibility of creating counter-narratives about empowerment, womanhood, and blackness, placing her body in the centre of her artistic practice.

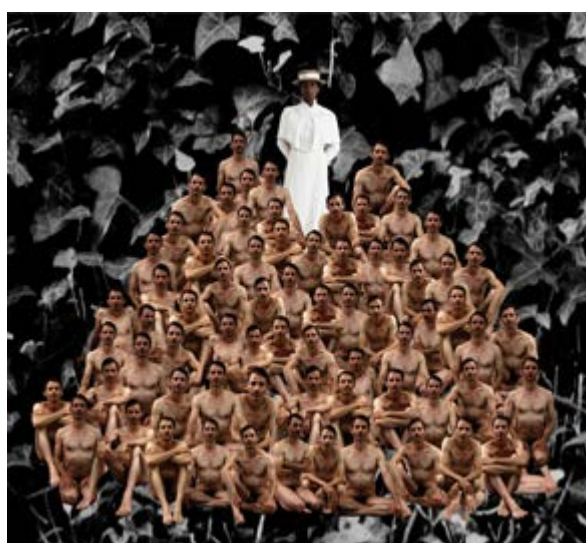
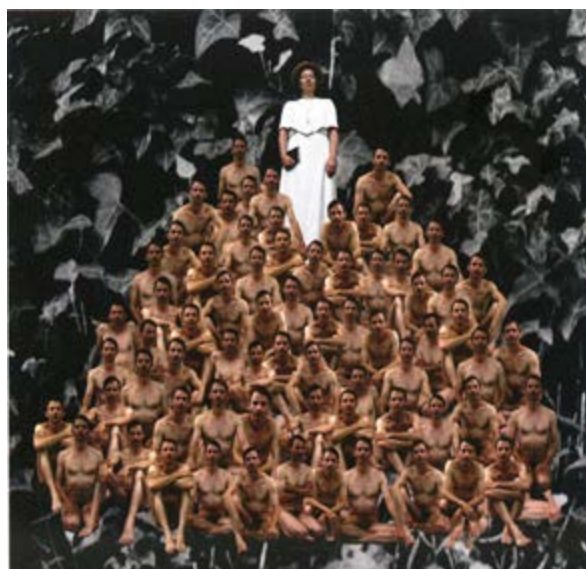


Image 1

Ayana V. Jackson, *Demons Devotees I-IV*, 2013 © Courtesy of the Artist and Mariane Ibrahim.



Image 2

Alice Seeley Harris with Children, Antislavery International, 1905, Congo Atrocity Lantern Lecture, © Antislavery International, The Antislavery Usable Past, http://antislavery.nottingham.ac.uk/solr-search?q=&facet=collection%3A%22Alice+Seeley+Harris+Archive%22+AND+59_s%3A%22Photography%22

Demons Devotees I-IV

Within the *Archival Impulse* project, Jackson created a mini-series of four photographs, *Demons Devotees I-IV* (Image 1), an apparent reference to Alice Seeley Harris' picture with Congolese children from 1905 (Image 2). The title of the polyptych consists of two seemingly opposite words - *demon*, referencing an evil spirit, a person who misbehaves or a skilled and energetic individual, and a *devotee* — someone who intensely admires a particular person/idea or is interested in a specific subject. These two words can be interpreted as alternatives for one another or simply complementary. The inscribed dialectics of the two is a crucial hint for understanding the ambiguity of the referenced colonial photograph.

Sealy states that Seeley-Harris' photographs from Congo shifted the Western viewer's perception of Africa and the black body, which in the spectacle of horror and violence served as a form of consumption. This notion of consumerism, wealth, and profit takes us to Seeley-Harris' self-portrait, which is very specifically and theatrically arranged. The scene takes place on a hill covered in vines. In the background, we can see trees with almost bare branches, creating clear lines on the left. Children surrounding

the hill with Alice on top create a pyramid-like shape. The photographer's outfit is bright-white, catching our eye and focusing our attention on her figure. Most of the children are bare-chested, and only some are wearing short-sleeved dresses in a bright colour as well, but because of their positions in the group and their height, they seem to blend within the crowd much easier than the photographer. The group is looking straight toward the camera, Alice is posing with her hands on the sides, and some children are crossing their arms. The photograph's composition is very peculiar; it resembles Alice's self-portraits with trees from Léopoldville, like the ones with a young Borassus Palm (Image 3) or a mango tree (Image 4). The arranged portrait seems to link the group of children with a notion of nature. The vines even create a shorter pyramid-shaped figure in the lower centre of the photograph. Children are seen here as a part of the ecosystem that can be explored and exploited. This photo is far away from school photos of the teacher with a class, and regarding the cruelty of King Leopold's regime, it almost resembles a mass tomb.

Jackson is reenacting this photo with four versions of the same composition. Her photographs mimic each other. However, the details in each shot are different, like in the movie's scenes. Once you can see Jackson in the position of Seeley-Harris, once in place of Congolese children, the other time she is absent as a model and takes only the role of the image creator when the other woman is posing with the naked male model. In the first self-portrait, she is both Alice and Congolese children, posing nude and in a white gown. Her body is multiplied in a set of individual portraits cropped from the original background to create a pyramid shape, just like in the colonial photograph. In the other three versions of the mini-series, the roles of Jackson and Seeley-Harris' are cast by different people — a white woman and a white man. The female model takes the position of Seeley-Harris when the male model is portrayed as a group of children. His skin complexion is much lighter than Jackson's, so the individual portraits of the mountain of bodies are more visible and recognisable on the dark background. The female model portraying Seeley-Harris is wearing a slightly different gown and hat than Jackson. Her arms are visible, and she is holding a book, referencing a Bible — the book did not appear in the original photo.

In all of the versions of *Demons Devotees*, the background of scaled-up leaves stays the same. It implies a poison ivy that seems to be swallowing the group. The Congolese nature in Seeley-Harris' photographs was seen as wealth and a potential product that could make a profit. The background told a story on its own with the hill, trees, and branches, creating a specific atmosphere and *mise en scène* for the portrait. On the other hand, the notion of nature appears symbolically in the contemporary version by accentuating only the motif of vine leaves. It is worth noting that Jackson used a greyscale instead of keeping its natural dark green colour. The background gives the impression of stillness, preserved by the analogue photographic medium that turns everything black and white. It contrasts with the rest of the composition in colour, implying the binary

opposition between dead and living. The analogue impression of the grained leaves and colourful, digitally manipulated figures creates a story about the medium itself, changing within the notion of the bodies when the background appears to stay the same. This artistic choice can also be interpreted as Jackson's take on the history of photography.

The other difference between Seeley-Harris' and Jackson's photographs is posing. African-American artist is well composed, looking straight at the viewer with her hands behind her back. Her position is very stable, and the gown gives the impression of the statuesque-ness, almost like a pillar holding the shape of the group together. Jackson is the highest one in the portrait when children surround Seeley-Harris, and the ones standing in the back, on the top of the hill, are visually almost the same height as her. Her disconnection from the mountain of bodies is very sharp because of the intense whiteness of the dress and the editing of the figures in postproduction. The same applies to the rest of the iterations; however, in versions *Demons Devotees II* and *IV*, the central figure of the portrayer of Seeley-Harris is smaller and much more separated from the group of men that seems to be focusing our attention and pushing women to the background. However, the pictured power dynamic still favours the standing and clothed women figures instead of sitting and naked men.

Another intriguing difference between the historical photograph and contemporary versions is Jackson's act of hiding her hands. It is a symbolic gesture related to the hand mutilations of the Congolese people. Severing hands became a trademark of King Leopold's regime and the proof of native deaths commonly required by Belgian officers (Sliwinski 2006, 338). The hidden hands in Jackson's photograph might also be interpreted as a sign of automaticity of the photographic medium or the photographer herself⁴. The disconnection of the act of photographing is apparent in both the historical and contemporary shots. The posing seems more significant and displayed by the almost theatrical effect of the composition. The artist reads the colonial photograph as highly performative, directed by a photographer for whom photography served as a potential propaganda tool. Jackson transforms this theatre of curiosity into a space where new narratives can resonate, and new bodies appear to play the leading role. Hence the "clearing» of the background and the isolation of figures from an almost abstract image of nature.

All the artistic changes made by Jackson are rooted in the notion of the body. Even her approach to the medium itself. Although all of her works are digitally manipulated, the achieved effect of bodies plastered on each other is almost tangible. The created mountain of images evokes discomfort, tightness, and closeness. There is an apparent ambivalence of being together as a group and needing to be made aware of the presence of the people around you. The strategy of photo-montage gives the medium some

⁴ This trope can be also a reference to the automatic writing (psychography), an ability to produce written words without conscious writing or to the Surrealist automatism.

volume and creates the impression that Jackson's photographs are almost *braided* with each other. In this case, Emma Dabiri's (2019) metaphor, inspired by a Ghanaian concept — *Sankofa*, seems fitting: "Braiding operates as a bridge spanning the distance between the past, present, and future. It creates a tangible, material thread, connecting people often separated by thousands of miles and hundreds of years."



Images 3–4

Left: Alice Seeley Harris, *Young Borassus palm at Leopoldville*, 1911-1912

© Alice Seeley Harris Archive, Antislavery International, Bodleian Library, the University of Oxford, 1911-1912, http://antislavery.nottingham.ac.uk/solr-search?q=&facet=collection%3A%22Alice+Seeley+Harris+Archive%22+AND+59_s%3A%22Photography%22

Right: Alice Seeley Harris, *A mango tree with fruit Leopoldville*, 1911-1912, © Alice Seeley Harris Archive, Antislavery International, Bodleian Library, University of Oxford, 1911-1912, http://antislavery.nottingham.ac.uk/solr-search?q=&facet=collection%3A%22Alice+Seeley+Harris+Archive%22+AND+59_s%3A%22Photography%22

Self-portrait and autophagy

As Mbembe (2006; 2018) wrote, the experience of the colonised body is the experience of the colonial *self*, woven from the insecurities of the coloniser projecting them onto the colonised, being reduced to the hours of labour and price, and being excluded and deprived of their past. The notion of the *self* is mainly expressed in the *Demons Devotees I*, where Jackson plays the double role of the photographer and the model. Her concern about the mentioned power dynamic is not only bound to the gender aspect of this relationship but also the economic and race issues. In an interview with Fiona Greenland (2018), she comments:

“It is important to remember, too, that access to photographic equipment was limited, and those on the other side of the lens often could not answer back with their images. There was no first-person perspective to compare the colonial gaze against. So yes, the photographic medium was activated to illustrate problematic and often erroneous stereotypes that long existed in the Western psyche.”

The artist states a couple of interesting points. The first mention is access to photographic equipment, a privilege for white, middle-class, and upper-class Americans and Europeans. Seeley-Harris was not an exception; she was a white British woman with financial support from the church for her documentary project. However, from the perspective of *herstory*, she is one of few female photographers present in any media at the beginning of the 20th century and a pioneer of humanitarian photography. What complicates the figure of Seeley-Harris is the position of the narrator, a storyteller, being in charge of representing the *truth*, so much desired by the Western media. The notion of truth and photography share a long story. The image was highly favoured in terms of a search for proof of colonial atrocities. Sealy recalls an essential figure in narration and witnessing, George Washington Williams, an African-American journalist and pastor visiting the Independent State of Congo in 1890. Williams’ open letter to King Leopold II was circulated widely and first appeared in the popular *New York Herald* (Sliwinski 2006). However, it did not attract the wanted attention because of the lack of *photographic evidence* confirming the crimes committed by the coloniser (Sealy 2019, 33). Harrises provided script with pictures, and their whiteness on top of that, was completely believable to the targeted, predominately English spectator. We can only imagine how the audience would react when they saw a Black journalist posing with Congolese children—the question of *what if* is the question that haunts the archival bodies the most. Jackson gives the visual answer by providing one but four different and complex scenarios. Each is charged with notions of gender, race, and nationality concerning the power exchange between man and woman, woman and woman, adults and children, black and white, and photographer and model.

In the context of Jackson’s photographs, Mbembe proposes using the term *autophagy* — in other words, *self-eating* or a fundamental cell survival mechanism (Jackson 2013). It can be interestingly related to Jackson’s self-portrait, where the role of the photographer has historically been considered superior to the portrayed “subject”. In the context of the history of colonial photography and imperialism, the image maker, a.k.a narrator, is identified with the white gaze, active because of the tool — the camera — instead of the passive subject posing for the photograph. Autophagy would function as Jackson’s impersonation of the historical white gaze in the service of imperialism, preying on the suffering of people of colour. Embodying this character might be seen as a self-destructive gesture or even self-harming. However, Jackson’s photographs are not meant to arouse compassion but to show the dangerous border between desire, visual pleasure, and the notion of power.

Travelling Images / Travelling Bodies / Travelling Power

The circulation of colonial images was inevitable. The lantern slide show travelled through the United States and Britain at the beginning of the 20th century and was watched at mass meetings (Sealy 2019, 17). Alice and John Harris profited from the showings under the pretext of spreading awareness of the brutal regime, simultaneously supporting the British colonial politics of white supremacy in their homeland. As Sealy states:

“When we read the Harrises’ lantern slide show now, we can establish that there is a distinctive, ideological two-faced aspect to it: one face scorns the violence of King Leopold II; the other willfully accepts the violence of British imperialism as natural and right. Neither face recognises the human condition of the African as fully equal (Sealy 2019, 27).”

It is worth noting that the targeted audience for the lantern slide show were Christians, already having presumptions about the concept of the *Other* and the mentioned notion of *truth*. Harrises’ work might have fueled the already existing image of Africans in their minds or maybe created a completely new one — in both cases, the depicted people were portrayed as powerless, as opposed to the helping missionaries preaching the word of God.

It is known that the effect on the audience concerned John Harris, husband of Alice. In the letter to The Congo-Balolo Mission, a British Baptist missionary society, he wrote: “The photograph is most telling, and as a slide will rouse any audience to an outburst of rage [...]” (Grant 2001, 27; Sliwinski 2006, 342). Looking again at the position of Seeley-Harris among the children, she resembles the figure of a saviour that the others would follow. The composition’s pyramid or mountain-like shape gives the impression that she has already gained her supporters. However, these are just children; their image was distributed without their conscious decision. There is no doubt that these children had not much to say about picture making, considering this specifically arranged composition. The power dynamic of the creator and subject of the photograph was working only in favour of the photographer.

Jackson’s photographs of *Demons Devotees* also travelled through continents with the Archival Impulse exhibition. Firstly the images were shown under the title *Archival Impulse & Poverty Pornography* in Galerie Baudoin Lebon in Paris, France, with a contribution from an acknowledged Cameroonian historian and political theorist, Achille Mbembe, who wrote an essay for the catalogue. Then the show kept the title *Archival Impulse* and, from 2013-2015, travelled to several locations around the globe: Mariane Ibrahim Gallery in Paris and Seattle, Gallery MOMO in Johannesburg, 33 Orchard Gallery in New York, and Galerie Capazza in Nancy. Although in every city, the context of the exhibited pictures was different — in France, the country with a colonial past, in metropolises in North America with a history of slavery, and in Johannesburg, a megacity in South Africa marked by the apartheid and the discovery of gold — the issue of

power dynamics was somewhat overlooked. The show in Johannesburg has resulted in a few critical reviews concerning colonial mimicry (Cook 2017), “awakening the colonial ghost some choose to forget” (Jason 2013), and manifested nudity.

Adding the three portraits of *Demons Devotees II-IV* to Jackson’s self-portrait raised questions about picture-making conditions. Is the attribution of the models changing or shifting the perspective? How would we react if a white European took the photograph? By bringing the two other models to the studio, Jackson points to another critical aspect of the matrix of colonial power (Quijano 2000) — gender. The relationship between the subjects of the photographs — woman and man — is burdened with a long history of socio-political inequality and misogyny. However, the composition of the photographs never reveals it. It is always the female figure, fully clothed, standing proudly on top of the pyramid. Jackson supports the idea of women’s empowerment by connecting with her story of one of the most influential female photographers at the turn of the 20th century but, most notably, by rooting her practice in corporeal, haptic aesthetics and nakedness.

The archival bodies in Jackson’s photographs are bounded to the concept of *post-memory* and dialectics between the figures of victim and perpetrator, another travelling motif between history and the present. As António Sousa Ribeiro (2021; 20) writes after Marianne Hirsch:

“The notion of remembrance, of remembering, or recollection in the sense of a simple transmission of experience gives way to notions of investment, negotiation and reconstruction that allow establishing modes of communication overcoming the unbridgeable gap separating the real actor — victim or perpetrator — from those who, not having participated and thus unable to witness *stricto sensu*, have decided to delve into the experience of others, be it at the family level or the broader scale of society at large.”

Jackson’s repetitive copy-paste motif of the same body creates a family resemblance between the perpetrator and the victim and archival and contemporary bodies. That results in a nuanced and highly complex relationship on the visual and socio-political levels. The notion of the perpetrator, both in the archival and contemporary picture, is challenging to resolve. It could be Alice Seeley-Harris, a privileged white woman with a camera, creating the story for the audience in the West, helping to push the missionary agenda, and working for Britain despite its imperialistic politics. It could also be Jackson unleashing the demons from the past and bringing back the images of helpless people of colour to satisfy a predominately western audience attending her exhibitions. *Demons Devotees*, however, might also work as a reminder of the complex and highly problematic past of colonial powers like Belgium and as a warning of the possibility of repeating the colonial image of people of colour inscribed into the collective imaginary.

Mother? Photographer.

Another vibrant motif captured in the photograph from Seeley-Harris and the series from Jackson is the notion of the mother figure. It is pretty literal in Seeley-Harris' case; she is posing with actual children, resembling the school pupils.



Image 5
Zbigniew Libera, *Mieszkańcy*
(Residents), from the series
Pozytywy (Positives), 2002-2003,
© Galeria Raster.

Jackson's iteration of the image could be more precise, especially regarding the version with a self-portrait; the distinction between supposedly younger and older selves is completely blurred. The notion of motherhood might appear in the visual comparison between the historic and contemporary pictures, giving the notion of reproduction a double meaning, both photographic and biological. Multiplied figures of women in Jackson's photograph can be interpreted as mothers of Congolese children, absent in the original shot. The notion of a motherless child or an orphan is another issue that Seeley-Harris emphasises, achieved by the photographic choice of composition, perhaps done to elicit compassion.

Our memory is easily connecting the dots that Jackson is presenting to us — the same poses, similar hairdos, and clothes. However, the one constant thing that seems to be out of order is the body. It is different, it belongs to Jackson, so it also belongs to a different time, another present, to our present. Her artistic practice of mimicking — or, better to say - *mimicrying* is based on familiarity and shifting one body for another. The exchange of bodies can serve as a before for the act of subversion, of changing narration and building a new pattern. The notion of *au-delà* or *fort/da* (Bhabha 1994), from one picture to another, gives us the impression that something is quite not right, out of place, and it is the noticeable shift from the bodies of children to multiple bodies of grown women. Jackson's body functions here almost like a veil, covering and protecting

the images of the children. The veil serves multiple purposes in the context of African-Americans and the colour line (W.E.B. Du Bois 2007 [1903]) and as a metaphor for memory in general. The veil exists in people's minds almost like a filter that can exaggerate remembered stereotypes and stories or completely hide the facts about the confronted person. This raises another question of illusion⁵, created to tell the story — or, in other words, telling the *truth*.

Jackson's new contribution to this colonial image is placing the exposed and vulnerable body in a different timeline and context, in the studio, where she controls the situation as a model and photographer. This environment, however, does not prevent her from the viewer's gaze; her naked body in multiple versions is fully exposed to the audience. The power dynamic seems to shift from the point of the white missionary controlling the group of Congolese children — to the Black woman in charge of the outcome of the picture. Her photographic strategy of *tableau vivant* reminds me of the *Pozytywy* (*Positives*) series by Polish artist Zbigniew Libera. The title of the series refers to the positive, an inversion of the photographic negative, and literal meanings of the two opposite words being something good or bad⁶. For example, the photograph *Mieszkańcy* (*Residents*) from 2002-2003 (Image 5) depicts a group of men of different ages, from older men to young boys, smiling at the camera. They are dressed in coats and thick quilts, bringing the feeling of cosiness and comfort. However, they are standing behind the fence made from white horizontal strings and vines, and the man is dressed in a striped pyjama pack. It is a reenactment of the picture of the residents of the KL Auschwitz-Birkenau, a Nazi concentration camp. The inversion of the negative memory to positive in Libera's project is a way of coping with generational trauma and collective memory of crimes against humanity. In a way, the artist is breaking with martyrological ideology (Domańska 2006), avoiding the rendition of suffering and helplessness and bringing a shifted image of the content and relatively healthy bodies to life. The notion of the archival body here is similar to Jackson's in the artistic strategy of recalling images hidden in the collective underbelly of a complex and painful past. Another reason I am comparing the two narratives from Libera and Jackson is a particular paragraph written by W.E.B. Du Bois (1952), visiting Poland after world war II. He wrote:

“The result of these three visits, particularly of my view of the Warsaw ghetto, was not so much clearer understanding of the Jewish problem in the world as it was a real and more complete understanding of the Negro problem. First, the problem of slavery, emancipation, and caste in the United States was no longer a separate and unique thing as I had so long conceived it.”

⁵ More about the notion of the illusion and veil in Walter Benjamin's *Arcades Project* (1927-40). Interestingly, Benjamin compares the idea of the veil with a crowd, implying the social undertone of the concept.

⁶ More about the series and Libera's artistic strategies of remembrance in: Filip Lipiński (2014).

Jackson seems to be responding to this general idea of facing the problem of violence and abuse of power through her experience of re-imagining and reenacting it through her body. Her position as an African-American artist in the context of colonial imagery is very particular. She often emphasises: “Due to the racially divided history of the country I was born in, the presence of my body in certain spaces is problematised and in some cases not welcome unless it performs in a certain way.” (Shaikh, 2019) Although the Congolese context of colonialism and the contemporary issue of racism in America are two different realities and histories, they share a similar core mechanism of *othering*⁷. On the opposite side of the spectrum situates a sense of *belonging*. Jackson seems to be balancing between the two binaries. On the one hand, her Ghanaian roots seem to link her to the Pan-African idea of a shared past through *blackness*; on the other, her position as an artist living and working in the United States, one of the countries that hold the most power and prospect in the world, is far away from the reality that Congolese have to face.

She faces what Sousa Ribeiro (2021) calls the „dilemma inherent in the representation of violence”⁸. The violence towards Congolese children can be seen at multiple levels — in physical violence and, finally, in the act of capturing their vulnerability in the photograph by Seeley-Harris’. Another aspect of violence seen from a distant perspective of the present is the act of remembrance. This image of Congolese children is probably one of few photographs of this group that influenced and, in a way, “formed a landscape of Western minds” (Bruney 2019) and their knowledge about the Belgian regime. Although we do not see a direct depiction of suffering, the composition of the cramped-up children suggests that their lives are miserable, tragic, and in danger. However, this image associated with Congolese children or children from the Global South in general, rooted in the colonial matrix of power, to this day is very vivid and present. As Sealy argues after Christina Twomey, Seeley-Harris’ slide show easily fit into “existing cultural practices that required the authenticating presence of whiteness” (Sealy 2019, 18; Twomey 2012; 50) and secured the British Protestant missionary presence in Africa (Sealy 2019, 8). The self-portrait with Congolese children helped sustain the white supremacy image on multiple visual levels — from forming the pyramid-like shape composition of human bodies to pose among them to the vivid whiteness of the gown contrasts with the dark complexion of the skin of the children. It is worth noting that another trace of graphic violence visible in the picture is the notion of a clothed European and naked savage (Levine 2008). Although the Congolese children were depicted partially clothed, their chests remained bare. Jackson took that trope to the extreme,

⁷ More about the concept of *othering* and how it affects different minorities in: John A. Powell and Stephen Menéndez, *The Problem of Othering: Towards Inclusiveness and Belonging*, <http://www.otheringandbelonging.org/the-problem-of-othering/>.

⁸ The reflection on the notion of this dilemma is expanded in the writing of Susan Sontag — see: *Regarding Pain of the Other*.

posing completely naked and portraying her male model naked as well. She created another complex shift in the archival image, focusing even more on the body. That seems to be a focal point in the series not only because of the contrast of power dynamics between being clothed and nude but, more importantly, because of the status of the archival colonial body from the contemporary perspective. All the remained clothes from the picture from 1905 are being replaced by the lack them. This gradual undressing of the body can be seen as a metaphor for our memories of archival pictures from the colonial era, being stripped out of context or disintegrating and mixing with the general notion of dehumanisation.

Conclusion

The act of remembrance in Jackson's practice might be translated into several issues regarding the colonial matrix of power, collective memory, herstory, and the notion of the body. Although in her photographs, she is repeating the colonial image in terms of the composition and *mise en scène*, she uses the characteristics of the Seeley-Harris self-portrait to enhance the theatrical and performative aspect of the missionary agenda. Her four contemporary versions of the picture resemble a changing and evolving memory. The decolonising notion in Jackson's photographs is visible through her narrative choices. The artist presents a story about reconstructing the colonial gaze through the eye of the Black female protagonist. She starts the narration with an image of herself playing the double role of the photographer and the model, closing the mini-series with an image of her standing on top of the mountain of portraits of white men. The subverted hierarchy of power is achieved by recalling the presence of the colonial past in the contemporary context, in the photographic studio of an African-American woman. This exchange, however, is not presented as an act of triumph but rather as a journey of difficult artistic choices, of playing both the role of the victim and the perpetrator.

Bibliography

- Barthes, Roland. 1981. *Camera Lucida*. New York: Hill and Wang.
- Boehmer, Elleke. 1993. "Transfiguring: Colonial Body into Postcolonial Narrative." *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction* 26(3): 268-77. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1345836>.
- Bruneau, Gabrielle. 2019. "This Artist Brings Myths of the Black Diaspora to Life through Self-Portrait". Artsy. September 9, 2019. <https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-artist-brings-myths-black-diaspora-life-self-portraits>.
- Cullinan Cook, Shashi. 2017. "Confounded subjectivities and 'fundamental ambiguities': Ayana V. Jackson's performance of colonial-era photographic subjects in the Archival Impulse exhibition." In *Critical addresses: the archive-in-process. The Visual Identities in Art and Design Research Centre (VIAD)*, edited by Leora Farber and Claire Jorgensen, 85-97. Johannesburg: Faculty of Art, Design and Architecture, University of Johannesburg.
- Dabiri, Emma. 2019. *Don't Touch My Hair*. London: Penguin Books.
- Derrida, Jaques, and Eric Prenowitz. 1995. "Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression." *Diacritics* 25(2): 9-63. <https://doi.org/10.2307/465144>.
- Du Bois, William Edward Burghardt. 1952. "The Negro and the Warsaw Ghetto." *Jewish Life* 6(7): 14-15. <https://perspectives.usmm.org/item/w-e-b-du-bois-the-negro-and-the-warsaw-ghetto>.
- Du Bois, William Edward Burghardt. 2007. *The Souls of Black Folk*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Enwezor, Okwui. 2008. *Archive Fever. Uses of the Document in Contemporary Art*. New York: International Center of Photography.
- Domańska, Ewa. 2006. *Historie niekonwencjonalne. Refleksja o przeszłości w nowej humanistyce*. Poznań: Wydawnictwo Poznańskie.
- Estrin, James. 2016. "Honoring the Legacy of African-American Women." *The New York Times*, May 26, 2016. <https://archive.nytimes.com/lens.blogs.nytimes.com/2016/05/26/honoring-the-legacy-of-african-american-women/>.
- Foster, Hal. 2004. "An Archival Impulse." *October* 110: 3-22. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3397555>.
- Foucault, Michel. 2002. *The Order of Things. Archaeology of the human sciences*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Grant, Kevin. 2001. "Christian critics of empire: Missionaries, lantern lectures, and the Congo reform campaign in Britain." *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 29(2): 27-58. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03086530108583118>.
- Greenland, Fiona R. 2018. "Broadening the Landscape of Blackness." *Contexts* 17(3): 8-9. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1536504218792518>.
- Jackson, Ayana V. 2013. "Archival Impulse." In *Archival Impulse. Poverty Pornography*, edited by Ayana V. Jackson, and Joseph-Achille Mbembe, 2-3. Paris: Baudoin Lebon.
- Jason, Stefanie. 2013. "Ayana V Jackson, Sarah Baartman and the gaze on black bodies." Mail & Guardian September 5, 2013. <http://mg.co.za/article/2013-09-05-critical-reappraisal-of-the-colonisers-one-sided-gaze>.
- Levine, Philippa. 2008. "States of Undress: Nakedness and the Colonial Imagination." *Victorian Studies* 50 (2): 189-219. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40060320>.
- Lipiński, Filip. 2014. "Figurations of Memory in the Virtual Field of Art (History)." *RIHA Journal*, Special Issue "Contemporary Art and Memory» (Part I). <https://doi.org/10.11588/riha.2014.3.70218>.
- Mbembe, Achille. 2013. "Forbidden Pleasures. Exercises in Autophagia." In *Archival Impulse. Poverty Pornography*, edited by Ayana V. Jackson, and Joseph-Achille Mbembe, 16-21. Paris: Baudoin Lebon.
- Mbembe, Achille. 2006. "Nécropolitique". *Raisons politiques* 1(21): 29-60. <https://doi.org/10.3917/rai.021.0029>.
- Mbembe, Achille. 2018. *Polityka wrogości. Nekropolityka*. Kraków: Wydawnictwo Karakter.
- Mignolo, Walter D. 2007. "Introduction. Coloniality of power and de-colonial thinking." *Cultural Studies* 21 (2-3): 155-167. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09502380601162498>.
- Quijano, Anibal, and Ennis Michael. 2000. "Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America.»

- Nepantla: Views from South* 1 (3): 533-580. <https://www.muse.jhu.edu/article/23906>.
- Shaikh, Ayesha Sohail Shehmir. 2019. "Through The Lens Of Humanity With Photographer Ayana V. Jackson." *Harpers Bazaar Arabia*, September 23, 2019. <https://www.harpersbazaararabia.com/culture/art/artists/through-the-lens-of-humanity-with-photographer-ayana-v-jackson>.
- Sealy, Mark. 2019. *Decolonising the Camera: Photography in Racial Time*. London: Lawrence & Wishart.
- Sliwinski, Sharon. 2006. "The Childhood of Human Rights: The Kodak on the Congo." *Journal of Visual Culture* 5(3): 333-363. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1470412906070514>.
- Sontag, Susan. 2003. *Regarding the Pain of Others*. New York: Picador.
- Sousa Ribeiro, António. 2021. "Postmemory: the Past and Future of a Concept." In *Europa Oxalà. Essays*, edited by António Pinto Ribeiro, 19-26. Marseille-Paris-Lisbon-Tervuren: Centre for Social Studies of the University of Coimbra (CES), Mucem, Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, Royal Museum for Central Africa.

Biographical note

Ph.D. Candidate in Art History at the Art History Institute of Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań (Poland) and archivist at Audiovisual Archive of The Faculty of Art Studies. She is preparing her dissertation on African-American photographic self-portraits. She published for *View Theories and Practices of Visual Culture* and *Artium Quaestiones*. She worked as a researcher on the Grant of National Development Program of Humanities and on Digital Research Infrastructure for Humanities and Arts Sciences DARIAH-PL. Her academic interests: photography, self-portrait, philosophy, decolonial perspective, queer art.

ORCID

[0000-0002-7701-211X](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7701-211X)

Institutional address

Adam Mickiewicz University
Wieniawskiego 1, 61-712 Poznań, Poland.

Received Recebido: 2022-09-29

Accepted Aceite: 2023-02-22

DOI <https://doi.org/10.34619/zrtl-Osrk>