

# Decolonising Archives

Listening Back to the Archives...  
by Mohammad Namazi

**Decolonising Archives** is a programme developed by UAL Decolonising Arts Institute in partnership with UAL Library, Archives and Special Collections. It sets out to explore institutional histories, memories and what it means to decolonise the university from within. We welcomed our first 4 researchers in residence in January 2020: **Dr Elisa Adami, Dr Khairani Barokka, Dr Mohammad Namazi and Dr Ana González Rueda.**

They shared their research projects in an online symposium on 2 December 2020. Each of the researchers focus on a specific collection, aspect of a collection, or particular materials within the UAL Archives and Special Collections Centre and London College of Communication library; the Central Saint Martins Museum and Study Collection and the Special Collections at Chelsea College of Arts library.

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# Introduction

Based within the Decolonising the Archives: Research Residency Programme 2021, at the Decolonising Arts Institute at University of the Arts London (UAL), I began a fellowship in January 2020. My entry into the project was shaped through an enquiry that explored Michel Foucault's engagement with notions of archives in "The Archaeology of Knowledge", 1972, where the *relationality* of objects is described as the basis for the construction of knowledge; and Frantz Fanon's articulations of the principal of decolonisation in "A Dying Colonialism", 1965. Through these channels, I became immersed in various UAL archives, observing multiple collections; surveying an abundance of material in the hope of uncovering traces of the unknown/unheard.

Being British-Iranian, I approach these subjects from a dual ethnocultural lived experience, analysing the archive and its hospitality towards the embodiment of a collective cultural representation. This was an attempt to uncover and map networks of ethnic-minority cultural practitioners.

One specific strand, important to this paper, relates to the creative practice of minorities and the affiliated references and documents that are produced through their artworks, writings, music and filmmaking. The British Artists' Film and Video Study Collection at Central Saint Martins, UAL, brought together by Malcolm Le Grice and David Curtis in 2000, comprises significant examples of experimental moving-image and related publications in the UK from the mid-1960s to the late 1990s.<sup>1</sup> Spending months viewing this collection reveals, perhaps unsurprisingly, a lack of diversity, with minimal representation of black and Asian practitioners. Nevertheless, examples such as "Death Valley Days", 1984, by Gorilla Tapes, "Handsworth Songs", 1986, by Black Audio Film Collective, and "I'm British But...", 1989, by Gurinder Chadha, establish rich counterpoints. These videos facilitate a revisiting of 1980s social and political unrest, providing analysis for the early cultural integration of black and Asian communities in the UK.

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Additionally, these examples provide a framework for re-examining sociopolitical discriminations and prejudices of the recent past against antagonisms witnessed today, such as those of the Windrush generation.

Throughout the research, one particular aim was to establish a connection between field research in the archives, interviews, theoretical investigations and the eventual creative output (this process is discussed more in detail in the methodology section).

From this perspective, the research process within both the writing and creative outcome utilises archival materials to highlight the stratifications of colonialism and the ways in which to challenge such realities.

By utilising research findings, this paper will also aim to bridge events in the past with the social and political injustices of today.

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Figure 1. Image on the left: Tempo 2 newspaper, London College of Printing, UAL Archives and Special Collections Centre. Image on the right: LCC News, weekly newspaper, 2004, UAL Archives and Special Collections Centre.

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# Research methodology

The research methodology takes into account the concept of the “reflective practitioner” and “reflective practice” derived from Donald Schön in 1983. I aim to combine research and historical work, concepts and results into a context for an examination. This research prioritises the particular apprehension that lies in the realm of the writer as the practitioner.<sup>2</sup> Through reflecting on archival research, interviews, historical events and critical studies in the subjects of decoloniality, the creative-outcome aspect of this research aims to respond to its theoretical context by producing an artists’ book, a series of prints and web-based experiments to engage the subject with contemporary events and experiences.

Although the theoretical framework is derived from a Foucauldian approach, it is, however, mainly engaged with an exploration of Jacques Derrida’s analysis of the notion of *stranger* within a dominant community, in addition to analysis of Homi K. Bhabha in relation to the construction of cultural diversities. Furthermore, by exploring Paulo Freire’s pedagogical and anti-colonial writings, the research aims to emphasise the educational aspect of archives and their agency in providing a liberal cultural representation. Moreover, this research makes use of content derived through interviews with artists, curators and thinkers, as a method to link theories and historical events with contemporary experiences. This methodology enables connections between theoretical references and selected items from the archives (see: Introduction) to establish a context for reflection and decolonial strategies through artistic practice.

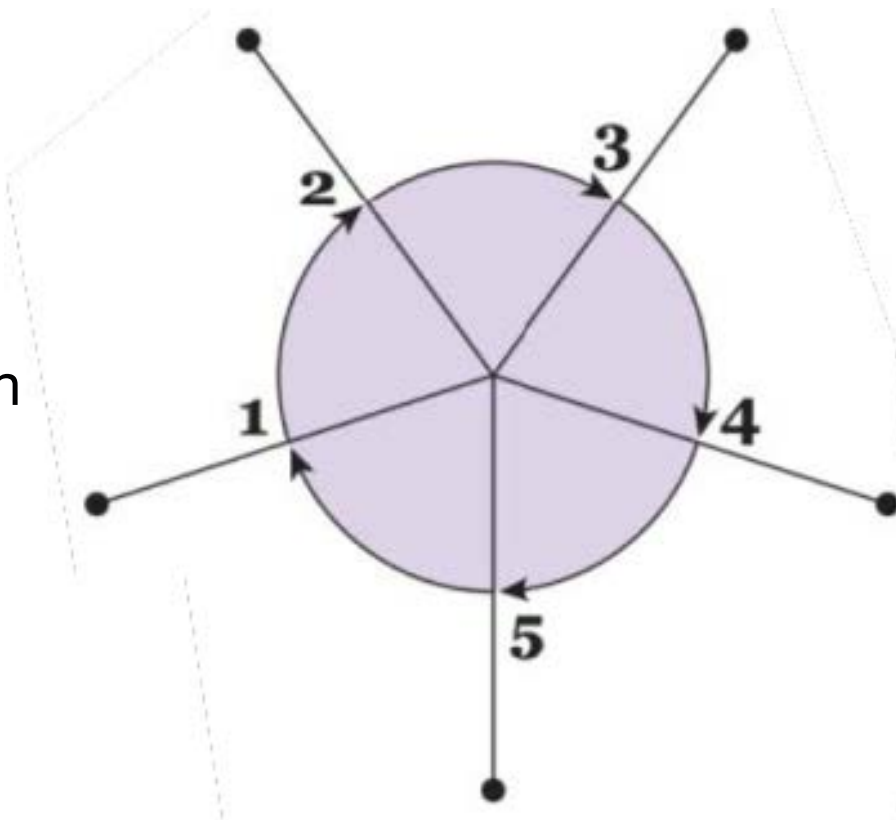
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**Ethnic minority:** through the social groups of Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic (BAME) this research establishes the process of decolonising the archives by working with and responding to some selected archival material that highlights BAME social and cultural representation in the archive.

**Relationality:** the relation between materials in the archive can provide new possibilities for this research - this is to say, by juxtaposing a selection of archival materials (objects, texts, audio, etc.), a process of re-establishing new connections and directions will be investigated. In a Foucauldian context, this refers to the hidden relations between material objects, stories, figures, collaborations and events that are documented within the archives.

**Decolonisation:** is seen as a process for deploying an all-encompassing approach to representation. By challenging the current mainly Euro-centric voice within the archive, this project aims to introduce a method for future forms of representation that can be inclusive, and at the same time applicable to the limitation of the institution such as budget and space.



**Field research:** establishing conversations with senior lecturers, artists and researchers in the fine art, moving-image and design departments within the UAL - who have been working actively with UAL students during the past few decades.

**Artist's intervention:** to make an artist's book that can reflect the research process such as conversations, investigations, documentations and collaborations with other individuals within the subject of archives and decolonisation. In addition, a web-based version of the book will be produced which can act as an online-archive of this research project.

Figure 2. Early phase research method visualisation. Photo credit: Mohammad Namazi.



The reflective practice approach employed in this investigation provided the capacity for me to evaluate the procedure of the research in both its experimental stage and the theoretical development in relation to the decolonisation of the archives. Through a critical approach and evaluation in my exploration (seeking suggestions, views and observation of other practitioners, academics and peers), I created an inter-subjective approach.<sup>3</sup> The timetable of this one-year, part-time research included: (1) analysis of decolonial discourse in visual culture, (2) collection and archival research, (3) historical review, (4) analysis of the colonial stratification in 1980s Britain (5) investigation of the capacity of online-specific events and the dissemination of creative output through the web, (6) writing and journal publications and (7) production of an artists' book.



Figure 3. A selection of documents at the Museum & Study Collection at Central Saint Martins. Photo credit: Mohammad Namazi.

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# Listening back to the archives

Often the words that speak to us today are the resonance of past events in the present moment. This continuous and heterogeneous reflection has, at times, been recounted by means of writing, documenting, archiving—to narrate the stories of the past for future generations.

When walking within the aisles of an archive, aspects of the past feel much closer to us. Contrary to the experience of reading history through the textbook, archives and collections invoke knowledge through actual objects, items and artefacts; ready to be touched, seen and felt. Archives present themselves as the living embodiment of the past, with the capacity to be re-introduced into contemporary contexts. But what if aspects of the past are absent, suppressed and unrecognised in the archives—creating a void in cultural representation?

Or to clarify: how does the archival apparatus produce these oversights? Furthermore, which voids persist in cultural representation, under what circumstances, and how might we reimagine the nature of collective recollection?

The discourse between *cultural memory* and *coloniality*, underpins the position and the line of enquiry in this paper. The interwoven correlations between the two, in addition to my duo ethno-cultural lived experience, set out the objectives and interests for an archival investigation—with the aim of testing the role of archives as the embodiments of a *collective* cultural representation.

The necessity for this approach is located in my presence as a *stranger* to the collections, and the need to establish a connection—a procedure that included a felt duration, exploration and discovery, but, more importantly, the need to

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earn the right of *hospitality*. It is this necessity that Jacques Derrida refers to as the main concern of the *stranger*, which can only transpire when the “question of hospitality is articulated with the question of being”.<sup>4</sup> In this context the duo ethnocultural aspect of my being, as a minority member of society, shaped my reading of the archives—providing a space to enquire into the right of interpretation, intervention and hospitality. Being preoccupied by such thoughts, I carried out research to unearth items that were conscious of the colonial stratifications of their time, to then, re-examine their events in the past, with the events in my present.

Within the 1980s, a particular move was initiated in Britain to challenge the colonial legacies that were felt in day-to-day life, and were implemented in racial, social and political injustice. Under the political constructions of Margaret Thatcher and her vision of what British culture should be—a vision rooted in the colonial empire—a number of protests, calls and debates took place around Britain, which raised awareness of the oppression of the minority groups and people of colour. For Asian, Black or other minorities of race or belief, this initiative towards demanding social justice led to various responses in the social and political system in Britain at the time.

This is seen in the much discussed but poignant work “Handsworth Songs”, which uncovers stories and images of the Handsworth riots in Birmingham September 9–11, 1985, following the killings of two brothers, Kassamali Moledina, 38, and Amirali Moledina, 44, in their shop. The film also depicts images of the Broadwater Farm Riots in London. This social unrest occurred a month after the Handsworth riots, triggered by the death of black woman Cynthia Jarrett on October 5, culminating in the death of white policeman Keith Blakelock the following day.<sup>5</sup>

The film-essay frames the discontent of the Handsworth community, incorporating interviews with members of the community, snapshots of newspaper headlines and re-filmed archival footage. The sonic and visual crystallisations of the story by John Akomfrah, a member of the Black Audio Film Collective (BAFC), sharply represent the frustration of the Handsworth community, but also the oppression felt by generations of ethnic minorities. Indeed, the evident disconnection from mainstream politics of those in “Handsworth Songs” will be depressingly familiar to anyone who has heard witnesses describe the US police killing of George Floyd in May 2020 and the subsequent Black Lives Matter protests that spread around the globe.

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Figure 4. A composite of stills from “Handsworth Songs”, 1986, Black Audio Film Collective.

Under Covid-19 pandemic protocols, a screening and online discussion of “Handsworth Songs” was organised this summer by Lisson Gallery. Attempting to review the relevance of the film against today’s social unrest, the writer and curator Ekow Eshun raised a question about the effective use of footage of statues for the opening scenes of the film, and the *emotional power* they carried.

In response, Akomfrah as the voice behind the Collective, described this practice as a criticism of political falsification of values, rather than pure historical representation:

‘There are certain commemorative values... which are not merely to do with the historical, mythic or symbolic... It is precisely to do with this business of figuring out a way in which the statue becomes a falsification—a defining semiotic language for describing the best of us, or what we are brilliant at.’<sup>6</sup>

This falsification of cultural values that Akomfrah outlines, embodied in many public statues, was evidently manifested in Bristol, where the public’s demand for a former slave-owner statue to be toppled carried with it a global demand for racial liberation.<sup>7</sup>

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Figure 5. Still from "Handsworth Songs", 1986, depicting the statue of James Watt, Black Audio Film Collective.

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Figure 6. The statue of Edward Colston was dragged through Bristol before being thrown into the harbour, 2020. 2020\_06\_080100 - Fallen Statue by Gwydion M. Williams Attribution 2.0 Generic (CC BY 2.0) Original resized.

The doubling effect of this engagement—from the archive to the present—reinforces the semiotic oppression hidden in such statues, inherent in the stratifications of Western colonial power and often enforced through the utilisation of media, to out-class and eclipse alternative cultural values.

For generations, and again today, the content of news and media has echoed a language of soft racism, that filters into common usage.

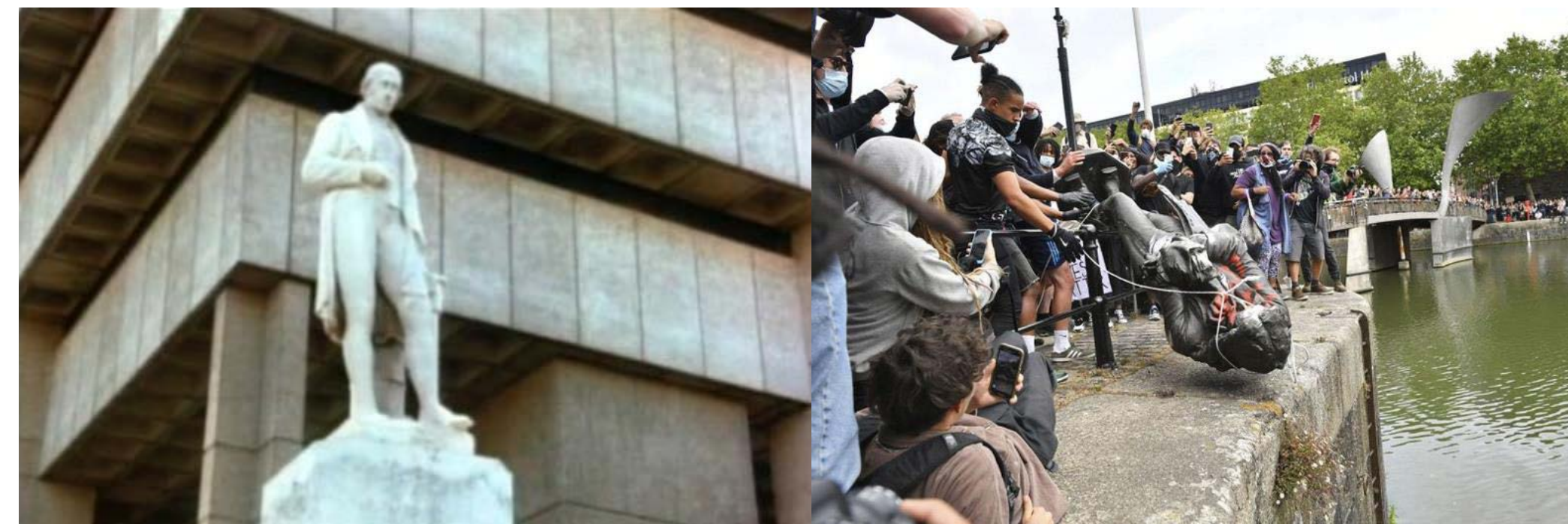


Figure 7. Still from “Handsworth Songs”, 1986, depicting the statue of James Watt, next to the removal of the statue of Edward Colston by the people of Bristol, 2020. Credits as per previous 2 images.

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Media prejudice was frequently the subject of criticism for the Scratch Video artist collective, Gorilla Tapes, whose work intended to raise public awareness. Consisting of Jon Dovey, Gavin Hodge, Jean McClements and Tim Morrison, the group was influential through its ironic, inexpensive, political tapes, mainly made by collaging old movie footage, combined with TV news content. Included by David Curtis in his book “A History of Artists’ Film and Video in Britain”, 2007, the collective described their intention as a strategy to “reveal the true message behind the manufactured mediation of news and politics”.<sup>8</sup>

In the group’s “Death Valley Days”, a satire composed to criticise the 1980s policies of Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan and their so-called ‘special relationship’ – a common term popular in both the Republican and Conservative parties that has again been utilised to refer to the Trump-Johnson relationship.

The work revealed the colonial imperialist manifestos that lay behind liberal appearances and superficial slogans, by juxtaposing images of military equipment and personnel with peaceful speeches from the two politicians.

By utilising audio-imagery collaging techniques, specific frames are repeated to create music and visual effect that fits the seemingly ‘two-faced’ personality and politics of both leaders and the consequence of their decisions around the world through depiction of images of war and weaponry. In particular, this hints at the economic system behind the creation of such empires and colonial power, mainly fed through invasions, colonisation of natural resources and the trade of military equipment.

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Figure 8. A composite of stills from “Death Valley Days”, 1984, by Gorilla Tapes.

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Exploring the stratifications of colonisation when conversing with Hammad Nasar, a curator and writer based in London, Nasar highlighted the layers beneath the economic production of empires, hidden in centuries of colonisation. Referring to the theme and intention of the exhibition “Lines of Control—partition as a productive space”, an exhibition he co-curated, Nasar explains: “There is a claim on Britain, by all these people of [the] south Asia[n] and Caribbean; what Britain has never attempted to do is to [...] acknowledge that claim. I think that’s one of the fundamental issues about this perpetual concern about identity and Britain’s inability to articulate its own identity”.<sup>9</sup>

While Nasar makes use of Benedict Anderson’s analysis of nationalism (“Imagined Communities”, 1983) to refer to the definition of British identity as something closely connected to the recognition of the empirical self,

**the constant development and expansion of cultural diversity and its influences on cities such as London, can sometimes display aspects of anti-colonial cultural formation.**

Some of these features can be traced in the documentary “I’m British But...” made in 1989 by Gurinder Chadha.

As much as “Handsworth Songs” highlights the socio-political concerns rooted in colonial legacies related through a pivotal event in UK history, the documentary, “I’m British But...” presents other socio-cultural aspects of Black and Asian life in the UK, and the manifestation of cultural diversity as understood in the 1980s.

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Figure 9. A composite of stills from “I’m British But...”, 1989, by Gurinder Chadha.

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Chadha’s film utilises recordings from interviews and documentation of quotidian events, to reflect the social dynamics of the late ‘80s in Southall—a suburban district of West London—representing the gradual cultural exchanges between Asian and British communities in the area. Hinting at some positive aspects, Chadha engages us with a narrative that introduces a successful process of inter-cultural exchanges and progressive social integrations—a notion defined by Homi K. Bhabha as cultural diversity. Bhabha analysed this process in his essay “Cultural Diversity and Cultural Differences”, 2006, “as an epistemological object—culture as an object of empirical knowledge”.<sup>10</sup>

To analyse this further through Chadha’s work, among others, one particular section of the documentary gives voice to the then young British Asian musician Haroon Shamsheer, who explains the inspirations, origins and the rationale of composing Bangla music—a fusion between Punjabi Folk and Western pop—as a youth movement initiated in London’s East End. “I see music as being a good mainstream way to put your feelings across, and this is how I do it”, Shamsheer explains. “I’m mixing together Bengali music, folk music and Western music, and making people appreciate and actually forcing them to dance to our music.”<sup>11</sup>

Shamsheer’s strategy in his music practice acts to reconcile audiences from different cultural backgrounds, which, in Derrida’s terms, is seen as an attempt to earn the rights of hospitality in a dominant culture.<sup>12</sup> His methods of mixing Bengali music themes and tempos with pop, hip hop and dance music, enacted an inter-cultural exchange through sonic interventions. Whilst this is a strength in Shamsheer’s work, there is a risk as stated by Bhabha that cultural diversity “gives rise to anodyne liberal notions of multiculturalism, cultural exchange or the culture of humanity”.<sup>13</sup>

Discussing similar social and political themes with Mitra Tabrizian—a British-Iranian artist and filmmaker living in the UK—

Tabrizian indicated that the positive influence she gained from the process of immigration transpired in “observing both (British and Iranian) cultures from an outsider’s point of view”.<sup>14</sup>

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Figure 10. Stills from “I’m British But...”, 1989, by Gurinder Chadha. The Image on the top depicts Haroon Shamsher.

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Figure 11. "Without Frontiers", from the "Border" series, 2005–06, Mitra Tabrizian, Kodak Type C.

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Figure 12. "Deadly Affair," from the "Border" series, 2005–06, Mitra Tabrizian, Kodak Type C.



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Channelling this observation, Tabrizian described the notion of strangeness and its manifestation in her photographs “Border”—a series that portrays Iranian immigrants in a prolonged state of waiting. After interviewing volunteers for their participation in this series, it appeared to her “they all feel as if they have ‘unfinished business’, and thus, the question of ‘waiting!’”<sup>15</sup>

The fraught subject of ‘home’ is captured by Tabrizian; her subjects are all strangers to the dominant society. In my exchanges with Tabrizian, she described this condition as being similar to the endless sense of unease felt by the characters in Samuel Beckett’s “Waiting for Godot”—described as a state of in-betweenness.

This space of undefined presence—a feeling of in-between and waiting—originates from an unfulfilled sense of belonging or recognition. Nevertheless, it does not remain at an individual level; it expands and applies to the formation of cultural values and the recognition of what is considered as *value* and *knowledge*.

It is this line of enquiry that establishes the central role of archives and collections—including the work of educational institutions—to provide the means of public consciousness for cultural recognition and awareness.

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Figure 13. "Solitude of a Dreamer", from the "Border" series, 2005–06, Mitra Tabrizian, Kodak Type C.

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Figure 14. "The Long Wait", from the "Border" series, 2005–06), Mitra Tabrizian, Kodak Type C.

Exploring these contexts with June Givanni, a UK-based Guyanese-born curator of pan-African and diasporic black cinema, the curator expressed the difficulties she encountered during the '80s and '90s, when she began to introduce black cinema to cultural scenes and institutional bodies in the UK. By engaging with curatorial projects such as the Third Eye Film Festival in London in 1983, her 40 year-long career, working in diasporic pan-African and Asian cinema, Givanni has contributed to many local and international projects, including seminars, conferences, books, periodicals and exhibitions. In particular Givanni collated the very first edition of the “Black and Asian Film & Video List” in 1988, which was realised as part of a commission for the British Film Institute (BFI). Asking her about her long curatorial practice and her experiences, Givanni remarked: “Cinema, whether it’s festivals, genres, whatever, you are always on the outside and being compared to what are regarded as the central tenets [of an institution] ... very often you are challenging some of those central tenets”.<sup>16</sup>

Givanni’s testimony loops us back to the notion of strangeness. Challenging the central principles of dominant cultural values is part of the enduring process of decolonisation.

In any non-inclusive system (including its archives), this process is hidden in the restless and continuing hopeful search to attain the rights of hospitality, which would enable the dissemination and distribution of alternative cultural values. This is precisely reflected, perceived and identified in Givanni’s work—an exercise in making familiar alternative cultural values in order to break through the semiotic oppression operating in institutional hierarchies.

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Figure 15. Composite of images from the website of “June Givanni Pan African Film Archive”.

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Figure 16. One of four poster walls in the June Givanni Pan African Cinema Archive (JGPACA) “Movements” exhibition (co-curated by Professors Sonia Boyce, Paul Goodwin and June Givanni) at Cookhouse Gallery 2014. Photo credit: June Givanni.

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The process of educational and cultural liberation is clearly perceptible in Givanni’s collection, a section from which is currently on show at London’s MayDay Rooms. The June Givanni Pan African Cinema Archive (JGPACA) collection consists of films, posters, publications, audio and other film-related materials, and provides a significant source of information and educational repository for diasporic Pan-African cinema. Currently in search of an organisation to host the collection permanently and, equally importantly, to preserve the anti-colonial ethos of the collection for generations to come, Givanni explains the intention behind working with this medium: “cinema was important to me, because it was a way of coming to a medium and bringing aesthetics, bringing a history, bringing culture, bringing experiences, that add to the very nature of what cinema is... [and] cultures that are not often valued ...”<sup>17</sup>

Givanni’s project demonstrates the importance of working towards creating discursive collections in archives, and their role in pedagogical praxis, with the capacity of portraying contributors collectively—a practice that might have been shaped as a response to the limitations and restrictions Givanni faced during her film-curatorial career.

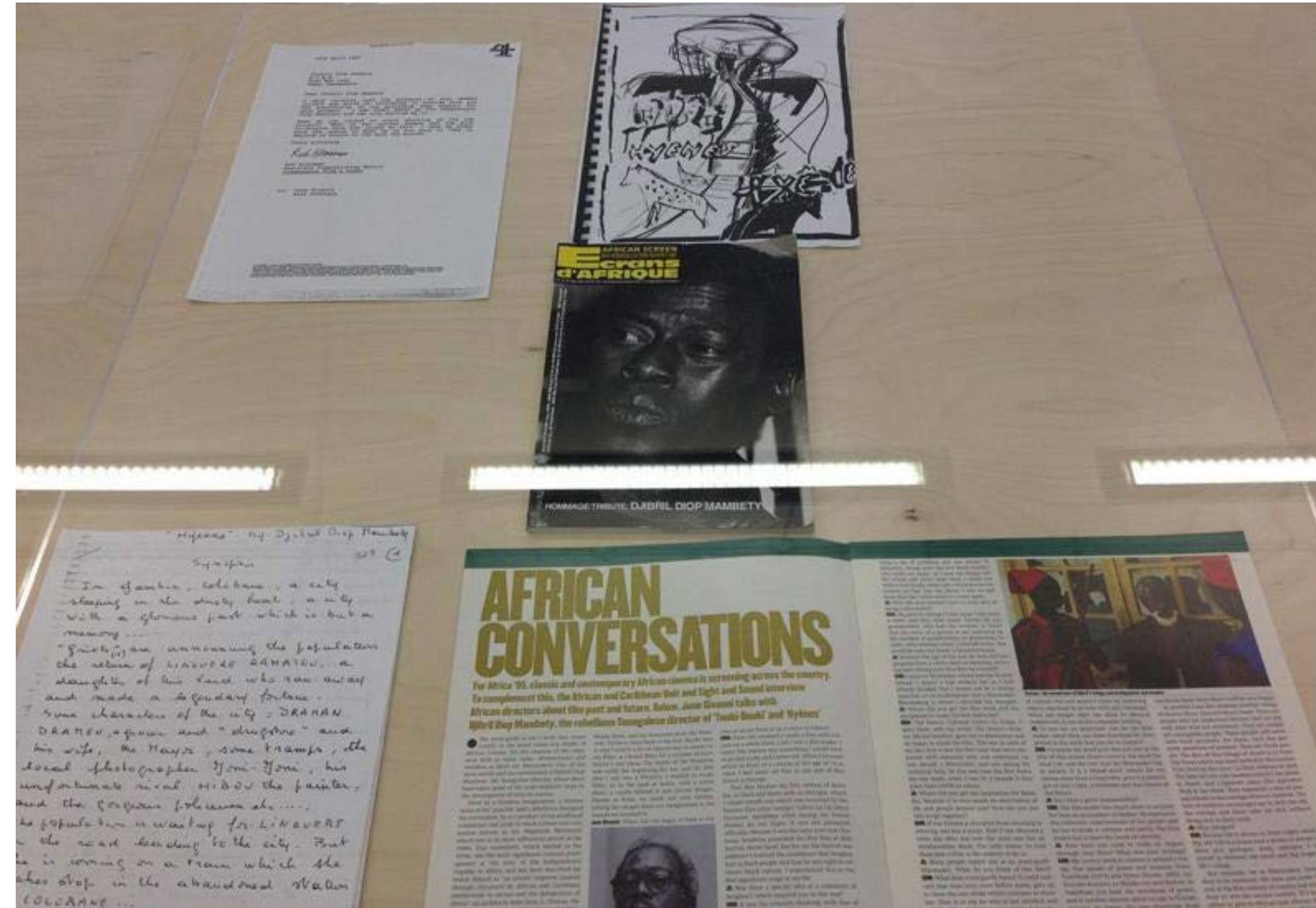


Figure 17. Djibril Diop Mambety—Rebel of African Cinema—vitrine in “Movements” exhibition 2014. Photo credit: June Givanni.

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Figure 18. June Givanni Pan African Cinema Archive (JGPACA) exhibition within “The Place is Here exhibition”, Nottingham Contemporary, 2017. Photo credit: June Givanni.

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Figure 19. Film lounge in the International Market for Cinema and Audiovisuals (MICA) at the 50th anniversary of the Panafrican Film and Television Festival of Ouagadougou (FESPACO), Burkina Faso, 2019. Photo credit: June Givanni.

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When reviewing with Hammad Nasar the various limitations that are imposed by institutions and political powers on minorities, the curator recalled a phrase from his conversation with the late Iranian filmmaker Abas Kiarostami: “if I didn’t have limitations, I wouldn’t know what to do”.<sup>18</sup> Nasar takes an analogy from Kiarostami’s observation to explain that

### limitations are not necessarily negative factors for creativity or cultural reformations:

“to me”, he explained, “[these limitations are] also the archive”, to challenge the idea of a complete archive and an idealist vision of what an archive could be. Referring to Luis Borges’ idea of a library (“The Library of Babel”, 1962), where a library is seen as an endless possibility; for Nasar the archive operates similarly.<sup>19</sup>

‘There maybe facts inside archives, but there are also ghost[s], ... fictions, [and] possibilities, and I think we need to mind those in ways which challenge that kind of completest authority of the archive, and I think that’s when it can become productive. It’s also

about thinking about [an] archive as a possibility of myriad possibilities, rather than as the answer to a specific set of questions’.<sup>20</sup>

Extending this consideration of an archive as an endless possibility is reflective of my approach within this research residency. By creating a network that was driven by researching a selection of materials from inside the film archive, as well as some related materials from outside, I attempted to bridge the documents in the archive with contemporary experiences, ideas and reflections. In response to this, I worked towards translating aspects of my research into an artists’ book, with one particular strategy: the book was to function as a decolonial act. In this context, my direct conversations and exchanges with curators, scholars, artists and archivists, are located next to documentation of items, stills from archival films, screenshots of recent news and events online, to convey a presence, a voice and a decolonial artistic intervention through the book as an artwork.

**Critical analysis derived from imagining a better world, is one important purpose of art and cultural production.**

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From this perspective, artists and cultural practitioners are the creators of values, experiences and thoughts to form better conditions.

Thinking through the notion of cultural practice and the agency of artists in bringing positive change to various social and political issues, I asked Nasar, who is currently co-curating the next “British Art Show”, for his thoughts on this.<sup>21</sup> After reflection, Nasar described: “what artists are capable of doing, is producing pocket utopias, ... that have the possibility to perhaps intervene in what and how we value things”.<sup>22</sup> The work of cultural practitioners discussed previously in this paper, whether by criticism or raising questions and provocations, depict the dysfunctionality of forming a cohesive society—and present a longing for reform.

Such works contribute to enhance audiences’ consciousness by bringing attention to the notion of equality; whether through culture, race, belief or any other form of differences.

This is precisely how cultural production can be profoundly productive in constructing new imaginations, and therefore, new strategies to challenge colonisation, racial injustices and inhumanities.

# Conclusion

The process of decolonisation can only be effective through a direct dialogical interaction with those excluded from society; it has to be materialised through their values, their ethos and collective knowledge.

The process must give space to alternative voices in an attempt to potentially redirect the process of colonisation into one of liberation. The educational theorist and anti-colonialist thinker Paulo Freire argued that this framework of dialogical interactions was critical for the process of decolonisation. In his 1970 book “Pedagogy of the Oppressed”, he emphasised that the dialogues between the “oppressor and the oppressed” must entail “action”, and that the content of these exchanges “can and should vary in accordance with historical conditions and the level at which the oppressed perceive reality”.<sup>23</sup>

Following Freire’s point, decolonisation in cultural production and institutional realms can only be progressive if differences in the perception of reality and values are understood and integrated as important features for constructing a democratic society where equality can be applied pertinently. For example, JGPACA provides an excellent collection and repository for educational and artistic purposes. If hosted permanently by a cultural institution, it can contribute immensely to the familiarisation of researchers with alternative cinema, as well as providing a balance to cultural representation. In examples such as Death Valley “Days”, “Handsworth Songs”, and “I’m British But...”, the line of enquiry shared in these three films indicates various attempts to raise or reflect on public consciousness around socio-political problems of colonial power, white supremacy, racism and its impacts on the lived experience of a minority. For instance, Haroon Shamshar’s music represents how limitations can lead to a challenge for obtaining the right of hospitality, that can result in forming alternative cultural productions and widening

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the cultural diversity in a society per se. Mitra Tabrizian’s photography series, “Border”, traces the poetic and often nostalgic resonances of the notion of ‘home’ that is faced in challenging isolation, unfulfillment and a sense of in-between.

These selected archival items—located between The British Artists’ Film and Video Study Collection at Central Saint Martins and Iniva—provided a great network of resources for this research to revisit and analyse aspects of colonial power. These aspects resonated in the social life of the minorities in Britain in the 1980s and offer and opportunity to explore the implications of dislocation constructed by migration and the notion of the stranger within this process.

Although the recent drives for decolonisation in many UK institutions—mainly as a response to growing criticism from those directly affected—has seen an engagement with so-called minority groups, there is the possibility that problems can potentially be disguised under new languages of coloniality. This occurs through the false impression that the process of decolonisation can be achieved by entry alone. This will indeed help to tick the racial diversity boxes when the annual forms are due; it will not, however, enable real infrastructural change. In other words, if the dialogical process of engaging with any minority does not entail “common reflection” and “action”, as Freire describes, it will only result in “pseudo-participation, [and not] committed involvement”.<sup>24</sup>

## To avoid this fissure, it is vital to embody reflection and action in the process of dialogue.

It is only through this channel that we can succeed in retracting colonial stratifications, not only in the archives, but also in the wider socio-political dimensions of collective living. Only through this pathway can we critically unveil the reality of suppression and then be able to challenge it.

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<sup>1</sup> D. Curtis, “A History of Artists’ Film and Video in Britain” (London: British Film Institute, 2007).

<sup>2</sup> C. Gray and J. Malins, “Visualizing research: a guide to the research process in art and design” (Hampshire: Ashgate Publishing, 2004).

<sup>3</sup> Gray and Malins, Visualizing research.

<sup>4</sup> Jacques Derrida, “Of Hospitality”, Anne Dufourmantelle invites Jacques Derrida to respond, trans. Rachel Bowlby (California: Stanford Univ. Press, 2000), 9.

<sup>5</sup> ITV News website, The 1985 Handsworth Riots: 30 years on (September 9, 2015), <https://www.itv.com/news/central/2015-09-09/the-1985-handsworth-riots-30-years-on>.

BBC News website, “Handsworth Riots—Twenty years on”, (October 28, 20 14), [http://www.bbc.co.uk/birmingham/content/articles/2005/09/05/handsworth\\_riots\\_20years\\_feature.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/birmingham/content/articles/2005/09/05/handsworth_riots_20years_feature.shtml)

<sup>6</sup> Lisson Gallery website, “John Akomfrah in conversation with Tina Campt, Ekow Eshun, Saidiya Hartman”, (June 18, 2020), <https://www.lissongallery.com/studio/john-akomfrah-tina-campt-saidiya-hartman>.

<sup>7</sup> The Guardian website, “The day Bristol dumped its hated slave trader in the docks and a nation began to search its soul”, (June 14, 2020), <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2020/jun/14/the-day-bristol-dumped-its-hated-slave-trader-in-the-docks-and-a-nation-began-to-search-its-soul>.

<sup>8</sup> Curtis, “A History of Artists’ Film”, 116–117.

<sup>9</sup> H. Nasar, “The process of decolonisation and cultural constructions: a conversation with Hammad Nasar, interview with Mohammad Namazi” (December 12, 2020). Cornell University website, “Lines of Control—partition as a productive space, exhibition”, co-curated by Hammad Nasar, (2012), [ual: decolonising  
arts institute](https://museum.cornell.edu/exhibitions/lines-control#:~:text=At At its core, Lines of Control: Partition as a Productive Space investigates the historic upheaval of the 1947 partition of India that spawned the nations of Pakistan and later Bangladesh. The exhibition is part of an ongoing project initiated in 2005 by Green Cardamom, a London-based non-profit arts organization. “More than forty works of video, prints,</a></p></div><div data-bbox=)



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photographs, paintings, sculpture, and installation by international artists delve into the past and explore the present to expose the seductive simplicity of drawing lines as a substitute for learning how to live with each other. Living within and across these lines can be a messy, bloody business but also offers a productive space where new nations, identities, languages, and relationships are forged. [...] The exhibition at the Johnson Museum is co-organized by Green Cardamom and the Museum, and co[-]curated by Hammad Nasar, Iftikhar Dadi, and Ellen Avril, with Nada Raza assisting.”

<sup>10</sup> H. K. Bhabha, “Cultural Diversity and Cultural Differences”, in B. Ashcroft, G. Griffiths, and H. Tiffin, eds., “The Post-Colonial Studies Reader” (New York: Routledge, 2006), 115.

<sup>11</sup> H. Shamsher, in Gurinder Chadha, dir., “I’m British But...” (England: BFI Production in association with Channel Four Television, 1989), <https://player.bfi.org.uk/free/film/watch-im-british-but-1989-online>, 6:30–6:46.

<sup>12</sup> Derrida, “Of Hospitality”

<sup>13</sup> Bhabha, “Cultural Diversity and Cultural Differences”, in The Post-Colonial Studies Reader, 155.

<sup>14</sup> Mitra Tabrizian, “Cultural production, migration, race and identity: a conversation with Mitra Tabrizian, interview with Mohammad Namazi” (October 19, 2020).

<sup>15</sup> Tabrizian, “Cultural production”.

<sup>16</sup> June Givanni, “Curatorial practice as decolonial strategy: a conversation with June Givanni the founder of June Givanni Pan-African Film Archive (JGPACA), interview Mohammad Namazi” (September 25, 2020).

<sup>17</sup> Givanni, “Curatorial practice”.

<sup>18</sup> Abas Kiarostami, in interview with Hammad Nasar.

<sup>19</sup> J. L. Borges, “Jorge Luis Borges Fictions”, Andrew Hurley, trans., (London: Penguin Books, 1999), 65–66. Jorge Luis Borges in his fictional book “The Library of Babel”, 1962, describes: “The universe (which others call the Library) is composed of an indefinite, perhaps infinite number of hexagonal galleries....

From any hexagon one can see the floors above and below—one after another, endlessly. The Library is total and... its shelves contain all the possible combinations... that is, everything which can be expressed, in all languages.”

<sup>20</sup> Nasar, “The process of decolonisation”.

<sup>21</sup> British Art Show 9, <https://homemcr.org/exhibition/british-art-show-9/> “The British Art Show is a touring exhibition that provides a vital overview of the most exciting contemporary art produced in this country.”

<sup>22</sup> Nasar, “The process of decolonisation.”

<sup>23</sup> P. Freire, “Pedagogy of the Oppressed”, Myra Bergman Ramos, trans., (The Continuum Publishing Company, 1970), 39.

<sup>24</sup> Freire, “Pedagogy”, 43.

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# Biography

Mohammad Namazi is an artist, researcher, and educator based in London. In 2019 he completed a PhD in Chelsea College of Arts, with a subject emphasis on digital humanities — the notion of encounter within a networked culture. His inter-disciplinary studio-practice manifests through means of decoloniality, deconstruction, collaboration, process, unlearning and telematics systems within social and cultural realms. Namazi is a member of the Critical Practice research cluster, and a visiting lecturer at UAL. His writing has been published by Intellect Books, and he has previously exhibited at venues such as NEOF Digital Festival, the Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art, Berlin Transart Triennale, The Barbican, and Flat Time House.

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