

# At Home with Vanley Burke

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## ABSTRACT

In this article, I reflect on the exhibition *At Home with Vanley Burke* (2015, Ikon, Birmingham). Three objects from Burke's archive – a Pitchy-Patchy Jamaican Jonkonnu Carnival costume, an old-fashioned wooden school desk and a photograph of a boy with a Union Jack flag – are used as catalysts to explore the relationship between personal/private/intimate and public/collective cultural histories, remembering, memory and material culture. In so doing, I demonstrate how hidden diasporic histories in Britain can be uncovered via the close reading of everyday objects. Using an autoethnographic approach, I examine how Burke's archive functions as a site of memory and source of individual and collective knowledge.

**Keywords:** Black British material culture; everyday objects; creolisation; archives; memory; rememory; history.

## Introduction

The narratives we create will depend upon how we piece together fragments of the past. The objects we save act as keys to different stories (Curtis 1999:2).

I don't collect the things I like. I collect what represents (Burke 2013).

In this article, I reflect on the exhibition *At Home with Vanley Burke* that was staged at the Ikon, Birmingham, from 22 July to 27 September 2015. For over two months, the entire first floor of the Ikon was given over to *almost* the complete contents of the Black British documentary and vernacular photographer Vanley Burke's flat; everything save his bed, computer and desk. Referred to as the "Godfather of Black British photography" within certain Black British art circles, Burke is also an archivist and collector of everyday objects relating to Black British culture. His home, a small flat in Nechells, northeast of

Birmingham, has been described as a 'cabinet of wonderful curiosities' (Watkins 2015:6). To many in the local African-Caribbean community, Burke is the 'custodian of the history and the cultural memory of Black Birmingham' (Chambers 2012:14).

Burke came to England in 1965 at the age of 14 from St Thomas in Jamaica, where his parents had left him behind when they emigrated to Birmingham to start a new life. "Left-behind/sent-for" children are a common feature of stories of mid-twentieth century migration from the Caribbean. Parents often went ahead and sent for their children once enough money had been saved, or when a suitable house had been bought, the deposit for which was invariably accrued via the "Pardoner", or *Pard'na*, system.<sup>1</sup> Burke's 'archival impulse' (Foster 2004:3) took hold when he started taking photographs of the local community in Handsworth using a Box Brownie camera that had been given to him by his parents in 1961. He began collecting objects in the 1970s, storing them in his parents' home. By the 1990s, the collection had grown to such an extent that more space was needed. In 1991, the majority of the collection was therefore moved to Birmingham Central Library. This allowed Burke to continue collecting. All the new objects that he gathered were housed in his flat in Nechells. In 2013, the Vanley Burke Archive was re-homed again, this time to the stores of the new Library of Birmingham where the objects can be preserved in a fireproof, oxygen-regulated environment (James 2015).

I have a particular connection to Burke and his work. The details of our life experiences are different, but there is common ground. I was born in 1964 to Jamaican parents who had settled in Gloucester after traveling to Britain in the mid-1950s at the height of migration from the Caribbean. Although my parents grew up in neighbouring rural houses in St Ann, they did their courting in England and were married in Gloucester. My parents' first home was purchased via the *Pard'na* system. This house was situated on the same street as the nineteenth-century church in which they were married. It was also the house in which I was born. Hence, Burke and I each have personal knowledge of our subject matter. My work as an artist, writer and curator is characterised by the analysis of everyday objects and the use of textiles as a catalyst not only to uncover hidden diasporic histories, but also to discuss issues such as race, post-coloniality, cultural exchange and creolisation. I have drawn on memories of my childhood home in previous writings (Checinska 2015), and have incorporated objects from that home into exhibitions such as *The Arrivants* (2016, FADA Gallery, Johannesburg).

In what follows, I deploy a similar autoethnographic methodology to narrate my reflection on Burke's exhibition and archival practices. I draw on key moments of my life, triggered by specific objects, to make connections between my personal/private /intimate remembering and wider African diasporic cultural, social and political histories in Britain. Using three objects from Burke's collection – a Pitchy-Patchy Jamaican Jonkonnu

1. The Pardoner system, or "Pard'na hand" to use the Jamaican vernacular, is a method of saving common in the Caribbean. A group of friends each put in an agreed amount of money per week and then take it in turn to draw the "pard'na hand".

carnival costume;<sup>2</sup> an old-fashioned wooden school desk and a photograph taken by Burke of a boy with a Union Jack flag (c.1970) – I explore the relationship between personal and collective cultural histories, re-membering/memory and material culture. Using an inductive approach, I embrace the writings of Walter Benjamin (1999), Toni Morrison (2007) and Stuart Hall (2004) to analyse my responses. I examine how Burke's archive functions as a site of memory and source of individual and collective knowledge. In so doing, I demonstrate how diasporic histories that would otherwise be absent from institutional archives and received cultural and social histories can be uncovered through the close reading of everyday objects.

There have been a number of recent exhibitions in London that either examine the artist as collector or investigate the place of everyday objects and living spaces in the mapping of histories (see for instance, *Magnificent Obsessions*, 2015, Barbican; *Disobedient Objects*, 2014-2015, Victoria & Albert Museum; *Teenage Bedrooms*, 2016, Geffrye Museum). Hence, in this article, I ask: what is the significance of Burke's intervention to the mapping of British cultural and social histories and, by extension, to perceptions of Britishness?

## Exhibition overview

I visited Burke in his flat two years prior to the 2015 exhibition, so I was curious to see how his home would be interpreted and re-presented in the Ikon gallery. What follows is an overview of what I found to be a show that gave me not only a unique insight into the photographer/archivist's kaleidoscopic world, but also a glimpse into aspects of the everyday worlds of Britain's African-Caribbean communities.

Entering the gallery space, via a white-walled corridor in which paintings, photographs, posters and black-skinned busts hung, the other visitors and I became part of a living archive that shifted in emphasis depending on who inhabited it. Our reflections in a large mirror at the entrance ensured that we were all included in the show as exhibits, just as Burke himself became the subject of his own enquiry. Moving through the space, my overriding feeling was one of being wrapped in domesticity. This was a particular kind of domesticity that was not only African-Caribbean at its root, invoking memories of my childhood home, but was undoubtedly connected to the basic human need for a sense of at-home-ness and belonging.

<sup>2</sup> Pitchy-Patchy is a central character of the traditional Jamaican Jonkonnu carnival that takes place annually at Christmas-time.

Each room was filled with keepsakes and trinkets, memorials to many moments, reminders of particular events in Burke's life. Objects that I was particularly drawn to



FIGURE **Nº 1**



Vanley Burke, *At Home with Vanley Burke*, 2015. Installation view, Ikon Gallery. Birmingham, UK. Courtesy Ikon Gallery.

included a Pitchy-Patchy Jamaican Jonkunnu carnival costume that filled a corner of the living room; a gilt drinks trolley, a radiogram and a glass-fronted cabinet full of best glasses and *objets d'art* that would not have looked out of place in my parents' 1970's front room. Each of these surfaces was adorned with a crochet doily, some of which were starched to create a sculptural effect. Even the tower of VHS videos adjacent to the Pitchy-Patchy costume was topped with a crochet doily. The window and conservatory of Burke's flat were reworked into an open grid-like structure that looked out from the living room onto a narrow corridor, the walls of which were painted in a vibrant blue colour, which reminded me of the painted wooden houses characteristic of an imaginary Caribbean idyll. This structure constituted a network of struts and shelves that, like a 1970's room divider, drew the disparate objects on display into a more formal composition without over-regulating its eclecticism. Yet it was not only the distinctive décor that placed this space within the African-Caribbean community in Britain. The near constant soul, Blue Beat and reggae music drifting from the stereo, interrupting the BBC Radio 4 received English voices emanating from the kitchen, provided an unmistakably African-Caribbean diaspora pulse.

Walking from Burke's reconstructed office to the front room, to the kitchen and back, I was reminded of Walter Benjamin's (1999) meditation on the packing and unpacking of his library. Benjamin considers the relationship that a book collector has to his books. He suggests that the act of collecting is of equal importance to the collector as the collection itself; the act of acquiring possessions is, according to Benjamin, linked to memory. The 'poles of order and disorder' (Benjamin 1999: 62), that the collector attempts to straddle by creating order out of the chaos of books, in Benjamin's case, parallel African-Caribbean migrants' attempts to hold the tension between trying to settle in a new homeland but longing to return to the old, whilst navigating a Mother Country that did not welcome them as a good mother should. For me, the fastidious tidiness of the piles of VHS videos, towers of newspapers, books, souvenirs, bric-a-brac, golliwogs, shackles and other ironmongery relating to enslavement, together with the many photographs, carvings, collages and paintings produced by Burke himself, seemed to create a precarious sense of order out of such disorderly emotions.

Just as Benjamin's relationship to his numerous volumes is not based on an emphasis on function and utilitarian value, the now unused objects in Burke's front room, for example, metamorphose into signifiers, able to unlock memories – the artist's and my own. Benjamin (1999:69) observes that the personal memories of the archivist stem from the intimate relationship between collector and object. It is as though the objects bear a trace of the owner: 'not that they come alive in him; it is he who lives in them' (Benjamin 1999:69). The things inside Burke's home, through their initial acquisition and handling, bear traces of their life journeys, at once personal history and, in my opinion, an under-represented aspect of British cultural and social history. The relationship between the personal/private/intimate and the public/collective is tightly enmeshed. To draw on the feminist mantra, from my perspective as a young black woman growing up in Britain during the 1970s under a white gaze, there was a growing realisation that the personal was always going to be political. However, in the context of my childhood home and Burke's flat, the notion that "the personal is the political" was not solely tied to the female gender. It was my father who hung the wallpaper, painted the ceilings, skirting boards and doors, whilst my mother dressed the space, crocheting and sewing the soft furnishings. It was my father who knocked down the connecting wall between the front room and the "telly room" to create a fashionable 1970's open-plan look. The presentation of our home became an extension of my parents' presentation of themselves. What was at stake was the issue of personhood.

The reconstructed bedroom was home to a 1950's prom dress belonging to Burke's mother, and the dressing table was the resting place for a tablecloth hand-stitched by her mapping different points in her life by capturing the signatures, and therefore

memories, of certain people that she had met (Frances 2013). This further demonstrates Benjamin's thoughts on the act of collecting. There were also the eye-catching porcelain figurines nestling inside brightly-coloured, starched crochet doilies; figurines and doilies that are familiar to me and have become familiar to certain audiences within and beyond the African-Caribbean diasporic communities in Britain through exhibitions such as *The West Indian Front Room*, by artist/curator Michael McMillan (2005-2006, Geffrye Museum, London), and BBC documentaries such as *Back in Time for Brixton* (2016). Over time, these now unused objects increase in perceived value and become 'sacralized' (Kopytoff 1986), as is the case for Burke's objects that are destined to be re-housed in the Library of Birmingham archives. This is precisely the sort of transformation that intrigues Burke (2015a), who states: 'I collect these things but they are not mine ... there is a sense in which the collection has gone beyond me'.

Perhaps the most surprising discovery for me about Burke is the way in which he has brought his creativity to bear across so many artistic genres beyond photography. There were barbed wire sculptures, costumes, large-scale naïve paintings and carvings, all of which were produced by Burke. His home is not about preciousness. It is about the expression of a remarkable creative energy that compels him to collect stories – his own and those of the community's. I was left with the impression that Burke's creative practices are unbounded and unceasing.

In conversation with Burke (2013), it became clear to me that his practice is built around collecting; he sees no separation between the photographs and the objects, including his own artworks. Each continually changing, continually progressing creative output forms a strand of an interlinked archive-in-process that I was allowed to both witness, and become a part of, on my visit to the exhibition. This, to me, speaks to the notion that remembering is not only a conscious and deliberate act, but also a creative process.

Burke's installation provided a catalyst for my own re-membering, by which I mean my own reconstructed memories born out of a creative process. As I engaged with the objects that drew me in, for example the crochet doilies, memories were pieced together like the mismatched multi-coloured scraps of cloth that formed Burke's Pitchy-Patchy costume. Layers of amalgamated memories emerged from fragments of my remembered childhood home, from flashbacks to the homes of relatives and family friends, from imaginings ignited by books read in adult life, such as Andrea Levy's *Small island* (2004) and *Every light in the house burnin'* (1995), both set in the context of African-Caribbean migration and settlement.

On the day of my visit, Burke served me tea in the “kitchen” and challenged me to a game of dominoes. I was transported back to the Formica table that sat in the tiny kitchen of my parents’ first house, my first home. My father played dominoes with his brothers and his friends from “back home” on that table. It is where he taught my sister and I the rules of a game that was so popular back then that it could have been regarded as a Jamaican national sport. I declined Burke’s invitation to put a record onto the turntable. Yet, inwardly, reggae anthems of my youth such as the Naturalites’ *Picture on the Wall* and Steel Pulse’s *Handsworth Revolution* catapulted me back to a mid-1970s moment of Black cultural awakening in Britain. I was too young to have been fully aware of the implications of this moment when we became “Black” instead of “coloured”, but I do “remember” it and know it intimately. It is a “memory”, the meaning of which I have learnt through listening to my sister’s generation. It is a memory that I later understood and absorbed as my own. The invisible borders between the personal/private/intimate and the public/collective collapsed. The unreliability of memory was made apparent as personal and collective cultural memories became enmeshed.

## Rememorying as reconstruction work

Morrison’s concept of ‘rememorying’ introduced in the novel *Beloved* (2007), articulates the piecing together of personal and collective cultural memories through the encounter with Burke’s archive that I discuss. For Morrison, rememory defines the act of remembering a memory, of invoking a past reality, or of calling to mind something once known but forgotten. A rememory is also an object, place or person that triggers the process of individual and collective re-remembering (it is as though a rememory exists in its own right; it is independent of the person remembering; it is there even though it has been temporarily forgotten). Re-remembering signifies a putting back together of reconstructed memories that proceed self-making and self-knowing. Yet, as a particular rememory is called to mind another inevitably slips away.

The maternal protagonist of *Beloved*, Sethe, reconstructs her past through repeated rememory. The novel is set in Cincinnati in 1873, after the American Civil War but through a series of flashbacks, returns to a Mississippi slave plantation named “Sweet Home”. This name is a cruel irony since the past reality that is reconstructed is framed by beating, scarring, escape and infanticide committed in a bid to circumvent the Fugitive Slave Act. Sethe does achieve a form of freedom once she reaches 124 Bluestone Road, but she remains enslaved since she is haunted by Beloved, the child that she killed, and by the resulting guilt. Paul D, the last remaining Sweet Home slave apart from Sethe, arrives at 124 eighteen years later to tell his part of the story of escape and



liberation. This empowers Sethe to share hers. In sum, in *BeLoved*, Morrison tells of a brutal history of enslavement in America and its present trace through the rememored stories of Sethe and Paul D. Their two fragmented stories, rememored by each other, come together to form a multi-layered whole that signifies or stands in for the disremembered/forgotten stories of individual enslavement.

There is a symbiosis between Morrison's concept and what Hall (2002) describes as 'reconstruction work'. On the topic of the suturing of fragmented diasporic histories, Hall (2002:252), himself a migrant from Jamaica, writes

The history of Black settlement in the post-war years is only just beginning to be written. One of the essential preconditions of such an account is the collection, preservation and interpretation of "documents", public and private, formal and informal ... The past cannot speak except through its "archive".

Hall (2002) examines the efficacy of the use of documentary and domestic photographs alongside oral testimony as a means of uncovering and writing diasporic histories. A primary concern in Hall's writing is the impact that the post-World War II, postcolonial African-Caribbean diaspora cultures have had on British national culture. His methodological approach combines personal memories and reflections on everyday materials, such as family photographs, with political and theoretical investigations. The question underpinning Hall's article is whether or not it is possible to represent the lives of post-war Black British migrants without portraying them as "social problems" as they were represented in the media, or solely as victims of racism. Through close readings of documentary photographs from the Hulton-Deutsch Collection and domestic photographs taken by High Street photographers, Hall demonstrates that broader collective cultural and social meanings can be gleaned by examining the details of individual everyday lives. There is a correlation between this piecing together of such details to reconstruct collective histories and the rememoring that I outline in this article.

The photographs discussed by Hall suggest histories of Black people in Britain alternative to the dominant narrative. Not that they bear an essential truth, rather they are open to layered interpretations, contingent and dependent on context, through which multiple histories might be told. He notes that the formal portraits taken by High Street photographers 'signify a certain democratization of representation ... They documented where people were at a certain stage of life, and how they imagined themselves, how they became "persons" to themselves and to others' (Hall 2002:257). These photographs constitute a "counter-archive" that foregrounds the possibility of "counter-narratives". Here, drawing on Okwui Enwezor's (2008:22) definition, the notion of the 'counter-archive' points to



the concept of the archive as an active producer of knowledge, as opposed to the archive as a passive receptacle in which knowledge resides. This notion also suggests a critique of received knowledge and/or history through the cross-examination of the representational politics of the institutional and/or public archive. Hall notes that numerous meanings will already have been inscribed onto each photograph through their appearance in the field of representation via magazines, newspapers and colour supplements and so on. He nevertheless urges readers to look ‘beyond the frame’, to search for the ‘counter-narratives’, to be mindful of the ‘absences’ (Hall 2002:256). Hall (2002:255-257) writes that each photograph is a ‘structure of “presences” (what is represented, in a definite way) and “absences” (what is unsaid, or unsayable, against which what is there “represents”)’). These photographs depicting everyday life are regarded as ‘informal evidence’ vital to the uncovering of ‘the frequently unrecorded, unrecognized, unspoken history of everyday life and practice in the black communities in Britain’ (Hall 2002:258). I suggest in this context that the reading of such documents heralds a democratisation in history-writing. Burke’s installation further demonstrates the way in which such reconstruction work can be achieved through individual and collective memory-work or rememorying. My reading of selected objects from his exhibit – the Pitchy-Patchy costume, the old-fashioned school desk, the picture of the boy with the Union Jack flag – explores this connection between the creative processes of rememorying and reconstruction.

## The Pitchy-Patchy Jamaican Jonkonnu carnival costume

As the central character of the traditional Jamaican Jonkonnu carnival, Pitchy-Patchy’s role is to ensure the good behaviour of the masqueraders and the crowd. He is charged with maintaining order (Lewin 2001). Positioned in the corner of the “living room”, Burke’s Pitchy-Patchy presided over the comings and goings of the exhibitions’ visitors whilst keeping watch over the artefacts housed in this home-cum-archive. I suggest that the “bits-and-piecesness” of his costume could be seen as a metaphor, not only for Burke’s collecting behaviour, but also my process of rememorying set in motion by engaging with his archive. In spite of being randomly stitched together from mismatched strips of leftover cloth, the Pitchy-Patchy costume has a harmonious feeling to its design. This speaks to the stitching together of fragmented diasporic histories to create coherent multi-vocal, multi-layered wider histories of migration and settlement.



FIGURE **Nº 2**



Vanley Burke, *At Home with Vanley Burke*, 2015. Installation view, Ikon Gallery, Birmingham, UK. Courtesy Ikon Gallery.

If Burke's archive is viewed through the prism of rememory, an encounter with it sparks a train of creative memory-work that facilitates self-making and self-knowing. This in turn, potentially encourages African-Caribbean communities to tell their own stories. In my case, when I visited the Ikon, my own diasporic sense of uprootedness and homelessness was temporarily stilled by meditating on objects such as the garland of dried orange peel draped along the kitchen shelf and the scars on the misshapen base of a Dutch pot. The memory that I rememored was set in the kitchen of my childhood home. My nine-year-old self, my older sister and my parents populated it; my mother in her floral "tie-head" and apron, my father in his navy blue paint-splattered overalls. Orange peel garlands were a constant feature in our kitchen and the kitchens of family and friends. I remembered my mother's attempts to teach us how to create these scented garlands that were used in cooking and as a decorative device. We came to learn who we were, from a racial and cultural perspective, through such lessons learnt at the kitchen table. Similarly, the well-worn family Dutch pot, hand-carried from Jamaica, marked us as African-Caribbean. The once mundane everyday objects re-presented in Burke's archive were transformed into a source of re-remembering and self-knowing that connected me to, and made me aware of, wider collective knowledge and histories.

From Burke's (2015a) point of view, his archive houses records pertaining to a diverse history of African-Caribbean migration and settlement in Britain from the mid-twentieth century to the present day. His collection of everyday objects – the Dutch pot, the doilies, the posters, the pamphlets – document a range of lived experiences. This material is re-presented to a new generation of Black Britons who do not see themselves represented in the current received histories of Britain. He states,

I am informed by my desire to capture people's experience, history is a by-product of lived experience ... History has always been a starting point, but we [the African-Caribbean community] didn't trust the history that was written ... we needed to start documenting and writing our own history so I collected material that reflected us ... newspapers, pamphlets, leaflets ... a lot of street posters advertising dances and events, conferences, meetings (Burke 2015a).

Burke (2015a) explains, 'It's about the process of collecting objects which are full, pregnant with history, history of the people who have used them'. There is a sense in which informal evidence – such as the street posters and pamphlets – have the potential to speak into the gaps found in institutional archives and therefore received histories. Importantly, the use of such informal evidence allows the community to tell its own stories.

The archive has become a recurring feature of contemporary creative practice as artists, curators and critics alike succumb to what Hal Foster (2004:3) identifies as the ‘archival impulse’. Foster (2004) draws on the work of artists such as Thomas Hirschhorn, Sam Durant and Tacita Dean to demonstrate a move by international artists to expose and utilise the inconsistencies and gaps within the institutional archive as a portal through which lost or obscured histories and life experiences might be retrieved. Foster (2004:5) notes that the work of these ‘archival artists’ is as much

preproduction as it is postproduction: concerned less with absolute origins than with obscure traces ... these artists are often drawn to unfulfilled beginnings or incomplete projects – in art and in history alike – that might offer points of departure again.

The installations created by these artists suggest “other kinds of ordering”. ‘Reconstruction work’ and ‘other kinds of ordering’ – Hall’s (2002) and Foster’s (2004) respective phrases – are useful in understanding the function of Burke’s archive as re-presented at the Ikon.

It is important to consider the complex meanings and use of the term “archive” itself. What might the concept of the archive mean currently? How can Burke’s re-presented home-cum-archive be read in this context? Jacques Derrida (1995:9) writes that the archive is a place of origins, the place from which order is given, the place where order and knowledge based on ‘official’ records are to be found. Received history, public memory and memorial are partially generated, regulated and maintained as “objective truths” by the documentary evidence hidden within institutional archives. As Carolyn Steedman (2002:68-69) observes,

The archive is made from selected and consciously chosen documentation from the past and also from the mad fragmentations that no one intended to preserve and that just ended up there ... in [the archives] quiet folders and bundles is the neatest demonstration of how state power has operated.

Similarly, Foster, drawing on Michel Foucault (1976:129 cited by Foster 2002:82), describes the archive as ‘representative of the system that structures the discourse of a particular historical period’. Hierarchies of power and value rooted in such discourse are inextricably bound to the process of archiving. Foster (2002:82) writes, ‘an archive structures the terms of discourse’, but also ‘limits what can and cannot be articulated at a given time and place’. The gathering, demarcating and preserving undertaken by the *archons* (those who come first, or at the head: the leaders) that dictate the guiding principles underpinning this process, naturally involve the obverse – loosing, misnaming and neglecting. Hence there are always inevitable gaps, silenced

subjectivities and overlooked histories. However, like Foster's "archival artists", it is the absences and disconnections, the fragmentary nature of these collections, that seems to inspire Burke to collect.

In his curated exhibition *Archive Fever* (2008, International Centre for Photography, New York), Enwezor presented works by 25 contemporary artists who prise open such cleavages to interrogate questions around identity, history, memory and loss. Enwezor's aim was not to generate a theory of the archive, but to show the way in which Foster's "archival impulse" infuses current work, producing "counter-archives" and therefore "counter-narratives" (Enwezor 2008:22). As stated, the counter-archive is a space that is an active producer of knowledge, rather than a passive receptacle in which knowledge resides. It exists in part to critique received knowledge and/or history by highlighting the representational politics of the public archive. Burkes' archive, whether situated in his flat in Nechells, or in the Library of Birmingham, or re-presented at the Ikon functions in this manner. The relationship between each of these sites has become increasingly fluid as artefacts move freely between public and private spaces (James 2015:26). However by placing the contents of his home-cum-archive inside the Ikon, Burke opens his collection to a potentially more diverse audience, which encourages the possibility of a cross-cultural multi-vocality that might not be achieved when the collection is in his flat in Nechells or the Library of Birmingham.

Such use of the archive is not new. Much has been written on the "archival turn" in contemporary art as in the example of Foster's work cited above. The phrase, when used in conjunction with art and curatorial practice, references 'the increased appearance of historical and archival ... artifacts, and the approximation of archival forms' (Simon 2002:101-102). The archival turn characteristically involves the repositioning of materials that would ordinarily sit outside an art context into a gallery setting by artists and/or curators. Burke's archival practices trouble this definition since, part of his archive ordinarily resides in his home, whilst his collection is not usually housed in a gallery.

Writing on the archival turn in contemporary art, Cheryl Simon (2002:104) notes a shift towards materiality: 'emphasis is now placed on the forms of institutional discourse and the objects they frame'. Simon's analysis suggests a middle ground; a space between the concern with the critique of the relationship between knowledge and power represented by the public archive, and the fetishisation of the object. Here the archive is viewed as a site of exchange in which artists' interventions, like that of Burke's which reframe the archive and redefine the archival artefact, act as catalysts for dialogue and the re-ordering that results from it. Sven Spieker (2011), discussing contemporary art practice, defines the archive as, '[s]ome kind of relay station on the global trajectory

along which documents travel, where they are exchanged, transmitted, mediated and where new meanings or combinations of the two are tested and in turn exchanged’.

This relates to Hall’s, Foster’s and Enwezor’s notion of the archive as a place of constant creation, where the critical engagement with the archival documents by artist, curator and viewer becomes a form of ongoing knowledge production. This, in my view, underlines the allure of Burke’s home-cum-archive as re-presented at the Ikon.

As a left-behind/sent-for child and as an artist, Burke sits simultaneously within and on the edge of both the Caribbean community and the museum/art/academic world. This in-between positionality manifests itself in an eye or an inner motivational force that is comfortable with the juxtaposition of tabloid newspapers, doctoral theses, religious tomes, golliwogs, prom dresses and a Pitchy-Patchy Jonkonnu carnival costume. His is an inner motivational force that is also comfortable with the blurring of the boundary between home and archive, between personal/private/intimate and the public/collective. By situating what is already a somewhat unorthodox archive into the Ikon, Burke adds another layer of complexity to the stories/histories that might be told through close readings of the objects. Returning to the Pitchy-Patchy Jonkonnu costume, carnival represents a site of dialogue in Jamaica; a public space where the “bits-and-piecesness” of a characteristically creolised culture can be freely expressed; a public space where societies’ hierarchies and power structures rooted in negative readings of racial and cultural difference are temporarily reversed. It is as though Burke’s home-cum-archive constitutes a ‘counter-archive’ that is imbued with a carnival sensibility where open multi-vocal, multi-layered dialogue is actively encouraged by the artist and curator.

## The old-fashioned wooden school desk

One of my lasting memories of visiting Burke’s flat in 2013 is being invited to sit at an old-fashioned wooden school desk situated in his front room. I was instructed to open the lid and look inside. I dutifully did so. Just as my childhood memories of learning to read and write at a similar desk came rushing back, I was shocked to discover a set of iron shackles and chains. There was also a scrapbook in which had been pasted images of other iron instruments of torture. Any sense of cosy at-home-ness came to an abrupt end. In that moment, to reference Frantz Fanon (1986:110), I was ‘battered down by tom toms’; reminded of a history rooted in and through the history of enslavement in the Caribbean, in the buying and selling of human beings; a history characterised by fracturing, learnt in fragments by reading between lines or, to use a textile metaphor, picking up lost stitches. That which was ordinarily hidden was suddenly revealed. Burke left me visibly squirming in my seat.



In the exhibition at the Ikon gallery, the school desk was placed in the “living room”. It stood in the corner diagonally opposite to the Pitchy-Patchy carnival costume. The original contents of the desk were hung from the struts of the reconstructed conservatory area described above. Accessories such as a pair of women’s organza evening gloves dangled from a scold’s bridle. It is unclear whether or not members of the public were given the opportunity to open the school desk in the way that I had been invited to when I had visited Burke’s flat. In my view, some of the impact of Burke’s original statement was lost, since the sensory engagement through touch was not possible as a result of this curatorial choice.

Burke (2015a) explained to me that the shackles, chains and neck irons were made by blacksmiths in the Black Country. During the nineteenth century, the Black Country became the worldwide centre for the manufacturing of such goods essential to the success of the transatlantic slave trade (Burke 2013). The region got its name from the smog generated by the British Industrial Revolution’s (1760-c.1840) coal mines, iron foundries and steel mills that belched black smoke into the air. Sitting at the school desk, handling the irons, leafing through Burke’s scrapbook, I was shown, in a most powerful way, the efficacy of the use of material culture to uncover hidden interconnecting histories. This immersive sensory encounter enabled me to reconnect the other items in the living room, such as the golliwogs, the religious tomes and the porcelain minstrel figurines, to their historical contexts. I was compelled to reread, to re-evaluate his collection at a deeper more complex level that moved beyond a celebratory nostalgia for my own remembered past. I was made to remember an historical past that is all too often obscured, and that I, at times, would prefer to forget; to disremember.

Burke’s front room and the décor of my parent’s house look the way they do because of the interdependent, yet uneven, relationship between Britain and Jamaica that was born out of the Caribbean plantation slavery system. The creolised aesthetic underpinning the style choices present in each space has its genesis in the enslavement of African peoples and their transportation to Jamaica. On opening the desk, I could not escape this realisation.

Richard DE Burton (1997) defines African-Caribbean identities as ‘creolised’ identities that emerged from the Caribbean plantation system. He uses the term ‘Afro-Creole’ to emphasise his focus on the traces of African cultures within the creolised culture of black-skinned Jamaicans of African heritage. Kamau Brathwaite (1971:212) takes up the same term, but gives it a political impetus by equating Afro-Creole culture with the emerging cultural nationalisms of Jamaica in the 1960s. He sees the process of creolisation itself as the source of Jamaican culture, which is rooted in and through the



“folk” or vernacular culture of the enslaved. Braithwaite (1971) defines creolisation as a cultural process that emerged as people mainly from Britain and West Africa interacted with one another to create a distinctive culture that was neither British nor West African. However, creolisation was not a process of blending. The dynamics of domination and subordination present within Caribbean plantation society were central to it. As Percy Hintzen (2009:93) elaborates, ‘to be Caribbean, then, is to occupy the hierarchical, hybridized ‘Creole’ space between two racial poles that serve as markers for civilization and savagery’. Indeed, Burton (1997:6) defines creolisation as ‘a process of contention’. In as much as the creolisation process was cruel, so it was creative. Considering the mid-twentieth century Britain to which Burke was sent and my parents migrated, the contention experienced on arrival, for example the shock of racism, provided a catalyst for the creolised reconfiguration of popular culture seen in their respective homes. Each object in each home evokes ‘hope as much as fear, feelings of alienation as much as celebration, active resistance and demands for equal opportunity as much as the enjoyment of new opportunities’ (Watkins 2015:6).

## The photograph of the boy with the Union Jack flag

In the Ikon gallery exhibition I came across a framed copy of Burke’s photograph entitled *Boy with Flag* 1970 on the living room floor, leaning against a shelving unit filled with vinyl records and cassette tapes. I first encountered this iconic image in 2007. At the time I was immediately drawn to this black and white image of a half-smiling young black boy, no more than nine or ten years old in my estimation. He strikes a languorous pose with his right hand on his hip and his left hand holding onto his bicycle saddle. He steadies his bicycle with his left knee. He is dressed in two layered skinny t-shirts that hug his pre-teen torso, gently flared jeans cropped to just above the ankle and laced up plimsolls. The Union Jack flag attached to his handlebar flutters in the wind. The setting is a tree-lined lane in Handsworth Park in Birmingham, ‘the community’s front room’ as Burke calls it (2015b). The boy seems at home (Smith 2015: 22).

In my view, *Boy with Flag* speaks to the cultural exchanges that have occurred following large-scale migration from the Caribbean to Britain during the mid-twentieth century; the Empire came home, irreversibly changing the racial complexion and cultural landscape of the country. African-Caribbeans set up home cheek by jowl with white British people. Cultural exchange or ‘colonizin’ in reverse’, to borrow from the Jamaican vernacular poet Louise Bennett (1996), was inevitable. This photograph also marks a coming of age in terms of Black empowerment, not through syncretism or hybridity, but through social action. By the 1970s, Handsworth had come to represent the emergence and



FIGURE **Nº 3**



Vanley Burke, *At Home with Vanley Burke*, 2015. Installation view, Ikon Gallery. Birmingham, UK. Courtesy Ikon Gallery.

presence of Black Britain, alongside areas such as Brixton in London and Moss Side in Manchester that had sizeable populations of African-Caribbean people living there. Whereas many parents educated under a colonial education system in the Caribbean saw England as the Mother Country, when faced with unexpected racism, sought either to conform, or to take up quiet day-to-day resistance through the establishment of their own clubs, churches and community groups, the left-behind/sent-for and “born-here” 1970’s youth mobilised themselves; they refused to remain invisible. They became Black Britons, assuming the same national status as their white-skinned counterparts. In 1970, the dashiki-wearing vocal duo Bob and Marcia released the reggae version of Nina Simone’s song *Young Gifted and Black*. This was the soundtrack of my early years: ‘To be young, gifted and black is where it’s at!’ The radio in our house was always turned up to full volume when this track was aired. We had a new Black identity and that identity carried value. This moment of awakening coincided with Britain’s gradual transformation into a European state following the demise of its empire a decade before.

It would be easy to assume that Burke’s archival practices can only be understood and appreciated by African-Caribbean diasporic audiences. Such reductive thinking

underestimates the significance of the archive. Interestingly, Burke (2015b) refers to ‘the public’ in general below rather than referring specifically to an African-Caribbean audience:

I am using a language that the public can understand, hoping this exhibition will speak their language. It is about time passing. I’m interested in how ... people’s relationship with objects has changed. Stories and memories are attached to objects and I’m collecting them.

The language that Burke is referring to is the non-verbal language of everyday objects. His collecting is focused on the African-Caribbean story of migration and settlement. However, there is a level on which objects like the prom dress or the VHS tapes or the crochet doilies speak to audiences outside the African-Caribbean diaporas. There is an accessibility attached to everyday objects that closes the distance between the audience and an artwork that is attached to the gallery wall. Everyday objects, particularly those found in the home, also close the distance that can be created by an encounter with unfamiliar cultures since such objects are central to the composition of what it means to be human; they express and mediate human and social relations. Framing the research driven by and centred on everyday objects within the context of material culture studies, Karen Harvey (2009:3) writes, ‘material culture is not simply objects that people make, use and throw away; it is an integral part of – and indeed shapes – human experience’. Daniel Miller (2010:4-10) rhetorically asks: ‘do things make us as much as we make things?’ He notes that ‘the best way to understand, convey and appreciate our humanity is through attention to our fundamental materiality ... in many respects stuff actually creates us in the first place’ (Miller 2010:4). Drawing on Pierre Bourdieu’s observations, Miller (2010:135) concludes that

Individuals grow up to become ... members of a given society. This happens in most cases not through formal education, but because they are inculcated into the general habits and dispositions of that society through the way they interact in their everyday practices with the order that is already prefigured in the objects they find around them.

Since every object triggers many stories, material culture provides new insight into the past; it allows for layered interpretations and alternative perspectives to emerge for the viewer. The prom dress, the VHS tapes and the crochet doilies evoke different associations for different audiences. For example, a working class narrative of aspiration and consumption can also be told through these objects. Harvey (2009:1) writes, ‘history is impoverished without attention to material culture’; such is the power and importance of language of everyday things. Through the contemplation on and analysis of Burke’s collection of everyday objects alternative, layered, interconnecting histories are potentially invoked or remembered.

## Conclusion

The purchasing of the first home was vitally important to mid-twentieth-century African-Caribbean migrant families like mine. The Black churches, community centres and sound systems in Britain began in these domestic spaces. West Indians, as we were known from the 1940s to 1960s, were not always welcomed by the British establishments, so we created our own, bringing a creolised aesthetic to them. The first and second generation migrant homes represented by Burke's archive are the result of movement. The dressing of the home, though bound up with notions of Englishness, respectability, aspiration and memories of a colonial past, was a creative act of creolised cultural expression, of agency, that was much more than merely imitation or mimicry, or indeed nostalgia for former island dwellings. These spaces were about newness, about being African-Caribbean in Britain. Time, labour and care were invested into the establishment of the home.

Many African-Caribbean migrants, my parents included, came to England with the intention of staying for no more than five years. For many it turned out to be a long five years. My parents could not afford regular trips back to the Caribbean, so my sister and I accumulated various surrogate aunts and uncles. Educated under the British colonial system, my parents were taught to believe that 'all light and leading came from the Motherland', as CLR James (1993:38-39) reminds. Any longings for our Caribbean cultural home were paradoxically suppressed when in the company of British people outside the domestic setting, yet allowed to blossom "back-a-yard" from behind the safety of net-curtained Victorian windows, that allowed us to look out whilst preventing nosy neighbours from looking in. This is a common story of 1950's migration and settlement in Britain. The repercussions of the tensions resulting from inhabiting two worlds connected by a long and interdependent, yet uneven, history is reminiscent of the 'double consciousness' described by WEB Du Bois (1994). But from a creolised African-Caribbean perspective, it is perhaps more accurate to refer to 'doublings of consciousnesses', since tensions are multiplied three, four, fivefold. It is indicative of the diasporic push and pull between cultures that erupts in the creolised aesthetic of Burke's archive and that of my remembered childhood home. For those of us who have lost parents that did not return home to the Caribbean, Burke's archive facilitates our mourning for their past and the future that they never had. It facilitates our lament for the future we never had, but perhaps are still searching for.

Burke's archive constitutes a portal through which lost or obscured histories of migration and settlement might be retrieved, simultaneously revealing wider interconnecting histories in Britain. His carefully curated home in Nechells and at the Ikon gallery are contemporary cabinets of curiosities where such histories are mapped through

strategically placed objects. The proximity of seemingly disparate objects, such as a chiffon-trimmed church hat hung next to a leather whip, sets up a feeling of the uncanny in a psychological sense; the memory that I would rather forget or disremember is remembered; the familiar and the incongruous clash together, suggesting other frameworks against which the objects and/or space might be read.

Burke's "archival impulse" therefore impels him not only to collect but also to commemorate and memorialise the histories of Black people in Britain lest it be forgotten. The act of collecting is thus of equal importance to the collection itself, bearing witness to Benjamin's (1999) observations. For many African-Caribbean migrants the only material trace of their lives in Britain are the orders of funeral services that have been donated to Burke's archive. I am reminded of Benjamin's (1999:63) assertion the collector's 'deepest desire' is 'to renew the old world', to affirm its existence. These processes of collecting, affirming, remembering and reconstruction are tightly interwoven. For me, the allure and significance of Burke's archival practice lies in the alchemic power of his media; the haptic quality of cloth, the sensually evocative pull of the black and white image, the lure of nostalgia, the hypnotic controlled clutter that is his creolised aesthetic. Julia Curtis (1999:2) notes that it is memory that makes people who they are: 'The narratives we create will depend upon how we piece together fragments of the past. The objects we save act as keys to different stories'. Burke's photographic imagery and the everyday objects in his archive 'invite us quietly to contemplate and consider our own textures of memory' (Curtis 1999:2). As we do so might we all begin to see personal/private/intimate and public/collective memories and histories as unfinished, uneven but interwoven tapestries of intersecting stories?

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