

# Black Orpheus Dispatch: On Re-visiting History

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March 21, 2025



## On re-visiting history 68-sh, 50-sh years later

I

Last month, when I said you would hear from me soon, I didn't know it would be this difficult to keep to the commitment. I knew I would be doing lots of travels, but I didn't know 'lots of travels' would mean stops in about 10 cities in under two weeks. At my worst, I almost gave up on this whole essay thing, and began to question whatever made me believe I could do this for six months. At my best, I was going to write an essay that would begin, *"Last month when I said you would hear from me soon, I didn't know it was going to be impossible."* I almost gave up on the idea that the reading I have been doing - in transit, in low-lit restaurants, hanging listlessly at the motor park, and while waiting my turn for a sit-down with my resource persons - was enough data for something meaningful. I was this tiny step away from giving up. Then I arrived at Ibadan, my penultimate point of call before travelling back to my base in Jos. I checked into my hotel at about 10 p.m. Thursday, 27 February. after an arduous road journey from Warri, Delta State. Time now is 6:29 a.m. Friday, and I am up to see how many more rounds of revision I can do on this piece before I hand it over to you, the reader.

## II

Filling the application for the *Black Orpheus* fellowship in 2024, I never knew I would be this interested in history, let alone embark on an extensive historical research that would take me around the country. In secondary school, I had taken two social studies subjects - Government and History - which gave me headaches, largely because of the many dates, acronyms and figures one had to wade through. I was that regular guy who would walk into either class, sit fidgeting for one of the worst 40 (or 80) minutes of my life, then walk out, and straight into my favourite class: Literature. No one tried to get me more inclined towards Government or History (they would have failed, anyway). Even the teachers, as it happened, were not interested in the subjects they taught. Because, well, I would later get to know that my Government teacher studied an equivalent of present-day Public Administration, while my History teacher studied Mass Communication. So, you see: it was a tough life not just for me, but also for them. Just as it was a tough life for my Literature teacher, who studied Law.

Anyway, last year, when I got accepted into the this fellowship, I thought I had it all figured out. I would get up, travel to five, maybe six states, interview key people as identified, do an analysis, edit, and submit to **Archivi.ng** and **Olongo Africa** to file away in their vaults; then back to Jos and the lovely chill weather. I didn't see myself reading any background texts or doing any additional study. In simple terms: I never imagined myself being interested in any history beyond the work I was accepted to do. And, you know, the interesting thing is, no one would have batted an eyelid. What I did or didn't do, would be entirely at my own volition. Or so I thought. I had ready explanation for Fu'ad and Kólá, if they so much as asked why I shouldn't/wouldn't/couldn't read certain essays, books, or research products: because they are not relevant to Black Orpheus.

But somehow, curiosity got the better of me. And here we are.

## III

Last month, I stopped at a cliffhanger - *There is a fundamental tension about archiving: no matter how rigorous an approach, no matter how much care the archivist invests in every aspect of their project, there will always be something that escapes. Not all stories can be told, and not all artefacts will be available, so, can we call something "complete" when we know that much of the context is missing?* Let's see how far we can go from there.

The impulse to archive is overpoweringly human, tied as it is to a longing for permanence in a world where time erodes everything. Yet, the paradox is clear. As I stated last month: Archiving is simultaneously an attempt at preservation and an admission of inevitable loss. To document is to choose, and to choose is to exclude. It is a process of selection and valuation that makes the idea of 'completeness' a seductive but unattainable ideal. The archive, therefore, does not just act as a repository of information; it is a hypothesis that is shaped by the fragile subjectivity of those who decide what goes where. This lends a somewhat problematic tinge to archives, because to engage with any (national/historical record, museum collection, etc.) is to engage presence and absence. The gaps are as instructive as the contents, and to ignore either is to misunderstand the very nature of historical knowledge itself. What is left out of an archive is often as important as what is included, and this leads us to raise a number of critical questions, some of which I touched on last month: Who decides what is preserved? What stories are systematically erased? And, can we ever claim to know the past when the materials we rely on for that knowledge are always partial and incomplete?

The inherent incompleteness of archives is, no doubt, a logistical problem. But it is more than that. Viewed from another perspective, we discover that it is also a philosophical quandary. If the past as stored in archives is always fragmentary, then the historian's role is not merely to retrieve facts. It

was the historian Jacques Le Goff in his 1988 book, *Histoire et Mémoire (History and Memory)*, as translated by Steven Rendall and Elizabeth Claman; 1992), who famously argued that memory itself is selective and politically determined, rather than an unmediated reflection of the past. As he put it, “Collective memory is not the passive receptacle of historical information but an active process of selection and interpretation serving present history.” In this sense, the archive, instead of merely storing history, constructs it. This is not to say, however, that archival work is futile, but rather that it must be approached with an awareness of its inherent limitations. Thus, the hunt for a totalising, complete record is an epistemological mirage that ignores the contingencies of archival survival. One must then ask: Is completeness a meaningful criterion for evaluating archives at all, or should we instead turn our attention to the ways in which archives, by their very nature, are points of negotiation?



The notion of an “objective” archive that passively reflects history as it happened is a fiction that has been thoroughly dismantled by scholars of archival theory. Michel-Rolph Trouillot, in his seminal work, *Silencing the Past* (1995), reminds us that power enters the archive at every stage: at the time of creation, at the time of preservation, and at the time of interpretation. What we call history, then, is not simply a collection of neutral facts but the result of an ongoing process of selection and erasure. Hence, to study an archive is to confront the mechanisms through which certain pasts have been allowed to survive while others are condemned to obscurity. Therefore, my friend, the archive must be understood not as a static repository but as an always-on-the-move and contested space where memory is constantly being shaped - and reshaped - by those who hold the authority to document it. This absence of completeness, which may look like a flaw at first glance, is in fact constitutive of the archive itself.

If we accept that the archive is inherently incomplete, then we must also interrogate the consequences of this incompleteness. What does it mean, for instance, when ark-size segments of human experience are absent from the historical record? What are the implications when entire demographics (e.g., enslaved peoples, indigenous communities, the poor, and so on) are either underrepresented or entirely erased from these archives? The historian who wants to reconstruct the past must contend with not only what has survived but also what has been excluded, much of which is rarely accidental. The historian working with such materials must be attuned to the ideological underpinnings of the archive itself and recognise that what is absent is often as telling as what is present. This, to my mind, is why many scholars have turned to alternative sources such as oral histories, folklore, and material culture, as a means of countering inherent biases in traditional archival practices. Yet, even these approaches do not entirely escape the problem of incompleteness. Oral traditions, for instance, are susceptible to transformation over time, often because they are shaped by the interpretive frameworks of those who transmit them. Material culture will give us the invaluable insights we are seeking; but without textual or narrative context, its meanings can be ambiguous or contested. The challenge, then, is not just to try and expand the archive but to critically engage with the concept of archiving itself. If archives are always partial and sometimes reliant on external factors, then historians and archivists must develop methodologies that acknowledge and engage this partiality, rather than search for some illusory 'completeness.' We need to recognise and be at peace with the fact that what we call history is, in some sense, a history of forgetting.

If that is the case, then the next question pops up: how do we confront this quagmire? The answer is neither straightforward nor singular (nothing about history is); the silences take multiple forms and operate at various levels, therefore, we need methodological responses to them. Some silences are the result of chance (say, a civil war, like Nigeria in '67). Others are more a display of power acrobatics that determine who gets to speak, who is recorded, who is erased. This means that the historian seeking to reconstruct the lives of the underrepresented must work against the archive (to some extent) and fill the gaps with fragments of what is obtainable. An archival practice that Saidiya Hartman calls "critical fabulation."

It follows, then, that the notion of a singular, authoritative historical record must be abandoned in favour of a more polyphonic one that recognises the legitimacy of multiple forms of evidence. But even this does not fully resolve the issue, because the historian still remains trapped in the paradox of working with incomplete materials while concurrently aiming for historical integrity. The big question is: How does one balance the imperative to reconstruct the past with the ethical obligation to acknowledge its unknowability? If archives are always incomplete, then perhaps the goal should not be to defeat this incompleteness, but to make it central to our understanding of history itself. Instead of treating archival gaps as obstacles to be circumvented, maybe we should, instead, view them as absences that reveal the very processes through which history is constructed.

The conventional view of history as a discipline that is rooted in empirical fact (where the past can be reconstructed through meticulous archival research) begins to look a bit hazy when we confront it from the perspective of archival incompleteness. If historical *truth* is based on the evidence available in archives, and if archives are shaped by both omission and inclusion, then historical truth itself must be understood as contingent and partial. I am neither implying that truth is entirely subjective, nor that all historical claims are equally valid. The point is that the conditions under which truth is established must always be scrutinised.

Michel Foucault's concept of power-knowledge is particularly instructive in this regard. The French historian argues that knowledge is not produced in a vacuum; it is always entangled with power structures that determine what can be known, how it can be known, and who has the authority to declare a thing as knowledge. Safe to say, then, that the archive, in this framework, is an apparatus

of power that regulates access to historical truth. Out comes the reminder again: when historians engage with archives, they (should do so with the awareness of people who) are not just retrieving said 'facts,' but engaging with a system of knowledge production that is structured by power. And so, the process of historical inquiry cannot be reduced to only the accumulation of evidence. Evidence is not enough. There must also be a critical interrogation of how that *evidence* came to exist.

This comes with a consequential implication for how we write history. If the goal is not to reconstruct an unattainable completeness but to acknowledge the absences, then historical writing must admit that complexity and the limitations of its own sources. One response to this challenge has been the rise of counter-archival practices, by way of efforts to create alternative archives that document experiences excluded from traditional repositories. Feminist, postcolonial, and subaltern historians have been doing a great job of that. But, even these efforts must contend with the fundamental problem of archival incompleteness. Oral histories, for example, are shaped by the limitations of memory, the selective ways in which people recall their pasts, and by the interpretive frameworks through which these memories are told. The absence of written records does not simply mean that history is lost. It means that history is constructed differently. Recognising this requires us to have a radical rethink as to what constitutes an archive.

If we move beyond the assumption that archives must be collections of written documents in official institutions (or databases), then we open up new possibilities for historical knowledge. The physical body itself can be an archive (carrying history in the form of scars, genetic memory, or inherited trauma). Landscapes and terrains also preserve histories that may not be recorded in text but are nonetheless rooted in the material world. This shift in perspective does not solve our problem of incompleteness, but it allows us to approach it differently, not as a failure of historical method but as a fundamental condition of historical knowledge. If we accept this view, then history will cease to be a pursuit of absolute truth; it will become an ongoing negotiation with the past where we recognise that what we know is always provisional, haunted by what we do not know.

Foucault's concept of the archive does not refer simply to a collection of documents but to the underlying rules that govern what is recorded and what is not. In other words, the archive is not just an accumulation of historical data but a structure that determines what can be known in a given time and place. Perhaps this is why he shifts our focus from *what* is missing in an archive to *why* it is missing. This framework would, then, force us to ask some difficult questions: Is the role of the historian to reconstruct the past, or to expose the power structures that have shaped what is remembered and what is forgotten? If the archive itself is a product of power, can it then ever serve as a neutral space of historical inquiry? How do we deal with the problem of counter-archives that were created to challenge mainstream narratives? Can they escape the same epistemic structures they seek to critique, or do they inevitably reproduce new exclusions of their own? Perhaps Ralph Waldo Emerson can help us answer those questions.



Emerson's essay, *History* (1841), offered a radical vision of historiography that departs from the empirical and documentarian approach of traditional historians. Rather than treat history as an external, objective record of past events, he saw it as fundamentally a reflection of the individual mind that exists within the consciousness of every person. He therefore insisted that the great

events, discoveries, and transformations of human civilisation are not separate from individual experience; rather, the great events are mirrored within the consciousness of every person who engages with them. This perspective challenges orthodox historiography, which tends to present history as something that happens **to** individuals rather than something that **emanates** from them. To Emerson, the individual is not a passive recipient of historical knowledge but an active participant in its creation. "There is properly no history; only biography," he wrote. Of course, this was not Emerson's first articulation of his transcendentalist philosophy, which saw individuals as microcosms of the universal. Every person contains within themselves the entirety of human experience. In his words, "The student is to read history actively and not passively; to esteem his own life the text, and books the commentary." This leads to his claim that the individual can, through deep contemplation and engagement with history, access the same creative and intellectual power that produced the greatest achievements of the past. "What Plato has thought, he may think; what a saint has felt, he may feel; what at any time has befallen any man, he can understand."

Emerson's view of the study of history was that it should not be about the accumulation of facts but about the cultivation of wisdom, hence his criticism of those who approach history as mere antiquarians, concerned only with details and dates. In this sense, history shifts from being a study of what has happened to becoming a guide for what *ought* to happen.

Yet, for all the reverence Emerson had for history as a source of wisdom, he also warned against an overreliance on the past. He cautioned that history, approached incorrectly, can become a prison rather than a source of liberation. He also criticised those who venerate historical figures to the point of self-subjugation, and those who believe that greatness belongs only to the past and not the present. This was a central paradox in Emerson's thought: while history provides the raw material for personal and intellectual growth, it can also stifle originality if one becomes too fixated on past glory.

Just as Emerson argued in another essay, *Self-Reliance* (1841), that individuals must trust their own instincts and intellect rather than defer to established norms, so too does he insist in *History* that one must engage with the past in a way that empowers rather than diminishes the self. The purpose of studying history is not to revere what has been, but to recognise one's own potential to innovate and transform the present. In other words, history is valuable only insofar as it serves as a springboard for future creation.

Now, what is the intellectual distance between Michel Foucault and Ralph Waldo Emerson?

Emerson, a transcendentalist 19th century philosopher, wanted to fuse historical inquiry with self-reliance. Foucault, on the other hand a 20th century poststructuralist and historian of systems of thought, problematised the very notion of the autonomous self that Emerson sought to create. Let us look briefly at both beyond the surface of their methodologies and stylistic tendencies.

Emerson's thesis in *History* is that history is not merely a record of past events but an active, living force that is found in the very fabric of individual consciousness. He suggests that all of history exists within the present, and that the great minds of the past are not separate from us but alive in every individual who dares to think and interpret the world afresh. "There is properly no history; only biography."

While Foucault worked within an entirely different discourse, he also refused to see history as a neutral, empirical domain separate from the present. Unlike Emerson, however, Foucault did not view history as a source of personal transcendence but as a structured discourse that produces and regulates what can be thought and known at any given moment. His concept of the "episteme" (which is the underlying structure that determines what is considered legitimate knowledge in a

given period) could be viewed as a parallel of Emerson's insistence that history is not a distant reality but an active force determining human subjectivity. Despite their methodological divergence, both thinkers rejected the naïve historicism that treated history as an objective, external reality. The middle ground between the two thinkers, therefore, is that history is always engaged in a dialectic with the individual.

The question of individual agency within history is where Emerson and Foucault diverge most sharply. Emerson was an optimist concerning human potential, who believed that the individual possesses an innate, almost divine capacity to shape their own destiny through intellectual and moral self-cultivation. His vision of history is one in which individuals, by recognising their deep connection to the great minds of the past, can overcome the limitations of their immediate context and achieve greatness. Foucault, by contrast, was deeply suspicious of affirmations of individual sovereignty. For him, the concept of the autonomous self is a historical construct, produced through the operations of power and discourse. In *The Order of Things* (1966), he claims that "man" is a relatively recent invention, suggesting that the idea of a stable, self-determining individual is itself a product of historical epistemes. Whereas Emerson saw history as something that exists within the individual, ready to be awakened, Foucault's individual is something that's itself produced by historical forces.

Taken together, Emerson and Foucault offer us a dialectic that is perhaps more productive than either thinker in isolation: **(a)** Emerson's job is to teach us of the importance of historical engagement as a means of self-actualisation, while Foucault's job is to warn us of the dangers of approaching history as a benign or neutral force; **(b)** Emerson teaches us to find history within ourselves, Foucault teaches us to question the structures that make such a claim possible.

If Emerson's philosophy of history is one of empowerment, Foucault's is one of vigilance.





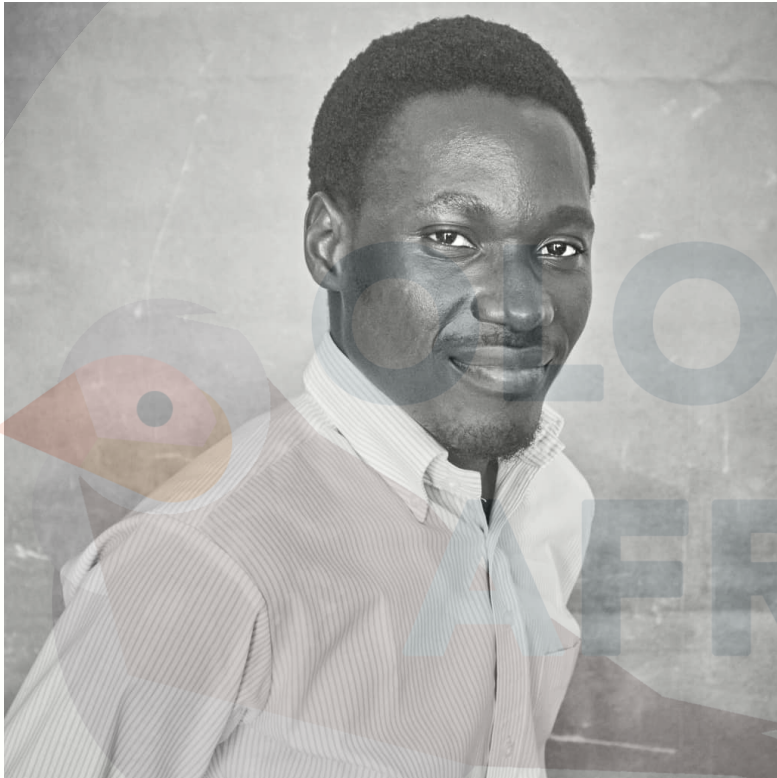
The question of archiving is at the confluence of both Emersonian and Foucaultian thought, albeit through radically different interpretative lenses. Emerson, with his transcendentalist insistence on the individual as the site of historical continuity, would view the archive as a vessel through which the currents of human experience flow. Foucault, on the other hand, would see the archive not as a neutral repository but as a system that actively produces and regulates knowledge. In bringing these two thinkers into dialogue on the question of archiving, the question arises: Is archiving an act of empowerment or control?

Emerson argued that all historical knowledge is, at its core, self-knowledge; that is, to engage with history is to engage with oneself. If we extend this logic to the practice of archiving, we might say that the archive is not simply an external collection of documents and artefacts but a reflection of human consciousness itself. The archive, in this outlook, becomes a space where the great ideas of the past are preserved as forces capable of determining the present and the future. In this sense, he anticipates a more critical approach to archiving, one that resists the ossification of knowledge and insists on the primacy of the individual's intellectual autonomy.

Foucault, by contrast, gives us a far more skeptical view of archiving. For him, the archive is a site where knowledge is produced and regulated. Unlike Emerson (for whom the archive is a manifestation of historical continuity) Foucault sees it as a discontinuous and fragmented terrain. One of Foucault's most significant contributions to the philosophy of the archive is his insistence that what is not archived is just as important as what is. In *Discipline and Punish* (1957), for example, he demonstrates how historical archives of crime and punishment reflect the shifting mechanisms of power in society, via the transition from sovereign power to disciplinary power. If history is always within us according to Emerson, for Foucault, history is something imposed upon

us and conditions our very ability to think. As I wrote last month, every archive is, in this sense, a site of contestation where the struggle over meaning is waged.

Despite their differences, Emerson and Foucault are united in their rejection of historical determinism. Neither saw history (or, by extension, the archive) as a passive, external reality. Emerson insisted that individuals must actively engage with history rather than merely inherit it, while Foucault exposed the ways in which historical knowledge is actively produced through systems of power. If we take Emerson's call for self-reliance seriously, we must approach archives not as static depositories of truth but as living sites of intellectual inquiry. If we take Foucault's critique of power seriously, we must constantly interrogate the structures that govern archival knowledge, asking not only what is preserved but what is omitted, and why.



IV

If archiving is the act that mediates between history and knowledge, then what kind of archive do we need: one that affirms a shared human experience, as Emerson might suggest; or one that's conscious of its own complicity in structures of power, as Foucault would assert? Or is the only true archive one that's always open to revision and reinterpretation?

I can't answer these questions. And maybe that is precisely the point: maybe they have none.

V

Now that we have set a foundation in history and archiving, in my next publication, we'll talk *Black Orpheus*.

I'll see you soon.

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second of his monthly dispatches; you can find the earlier one [here](#). The names of other selected fellows from our application were announced in February. You can read more about the project [here](#).

