

# Black Orpheus Dispatch: Winding Down

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

I

*"No man ever steps in the same river twice."*

Heraclitus said that, and for the longest time, I thought it was just the sort of thing philosophers say when they are half-convinced that they are poets. The older I get, however, and the deeper I get interested in history and record-keeping, the more I realise that Heraclitus was not being romantic. He was, in fact, trying to issue a warning. We live in a world seemingly obsessed with 'remembering.' There are museums for wars, monuments and databases for genocide, libraries for revolutions, galleries, and so on. We digitise family photos, transcribe oral histories, scan faded letters, and store them all in the cloud, as though permanence depended entirely on format. But what if the real problem is not about fragility but motion? Heraclitus knew—and it would do us well to remember—that the world does not sit still for our labels. The minute you name a thing, it is already becoming something else.

This month, I want to linger on movement for a minute and ask: what becomes of history if we treat it not as a linear sequence of events but as a current that's always self-renewing?

II

Let's sit with Heraclitus for a moment. They nicknamed him "The Obscure," and fair enough, he wrote like he was trying to keep a secret (or maybe he wrote that way because he was indeed The Obscure). He was by most accounts grumpy and solitary, and most probably not your ideal dinner guest. Underneath all that, however, there is a worldview that I find interestingly relevant, or

perhaps it's more accurate to say that I find something old that speaks to me even in the noise of now. When he talks about rivers, he is not just talking about the literal ones; and of course, we know it's metaphorical framing, wherein he offers us a[nother] theory of the world. The more time you spend with him, the clearer it becomes, that everything flows. Everything. There is no stable identity. He is saying that you, reading this now, are not quite the same person who started this paragraph. And I, the one writing this, am already altered, even if ever so slightly. The world, in our Greek philosopher's view, is not fixed, but is in a process of constant becoming, where things emerge only to immediately transform. Now, I know that can sound a bit abstract (like philosophy doing its usual thing), but this has real implications. Think about what it means to live in a world where nothing stays still: ambiguity; contingent identities; uneven, elastic, mood-dependent time, etc. Sounds familiar? Well, because that is the world we are living in. Heraclitus saw it early, and we are just catching up to what he knew all along: that the ground beneath us has never really been solid (okay, not literally). A friend and I recently started this funny thread of describing things via our astrological signs, so let's borrow that for 10 seconds. My sign is Fire; and Fire, unlike my friend who is Earth, does not hold a shape. This, to me, is one of the ways in which Heraclitus becomes genuinely useful, especially for those of us in the business of knowledge. Most of us are trained to think of knowledge as something fixed that we "pin down" or "record." We talk about truth as a thing, and look at memory like a vault where we deposit/retrieve. But Heraclitus disrupts all of that, and kind of asks: what if truth is a process? What if knowledge is ongoing? What if memory is something that moves as we move?

For him, the key to this constant change is opposition. "War is the father of all," he says - that sounds harsh, for a minute, but one hastens to add that it is not necessarily about violence. Heraclitus sees reality as structured through opposites: day/night, life/death, up/down, etc. We understand what something is by knowing what it is not, and when things appear balanced, that balance is never static (AKA, it is the temporary outcome of opposing forces in motion). Harmony, in this sense, is friction held just long enough to form a shape before it shifts again. It should be noted, however, that Heraclitus is not suggesting that the world is random. Far from it. He believes there is a pattern to it all, which he calls *logos*. You neither control nor override *logos*, but you can tune into it and move with it - if you're paying attention. This brings us inevitably to the past. If Heraclitus is right—and I think he is—then the past is not fixed, either. It is not a stable archive of settled facts waiting patiently behind us. The past, too, is in motion. It shifts as we recall it, and is shaped by who remembers, how they remember, and why. In social media analogy, it is a reel that is always being edited, remixed, and re-scored depending on the context and the need. Simply put: if you are in the business of remembering, you are in the business of motion.

When you think of an archive, what probably comes to mind is a quiet room with shelves lined with boxes and folders, and people moving up and down, nodding, and, if allowed, taking photos and touching the materials. Archives give us the comforting feeling that the past is something stable that we can go back to and examine whenever we want. This is misleading. Philosophers like Heraclitus would probably raise an eyebrow at our archives today, and that is largely because they saw the world as constantly moving and always changing. Nothing stays the same, even the water in a river is never the exact same water. So how can history be fixed when everything around us, including our understanding of the past, is always in flux? Like I mentioned in the February dispatch, archival materials are fragile: paper yellows, ink fades, and even digital files can get corrupted or lost when technology does its thing. Much as it is about it keeping history "safe," it is more than about locking it away. Beyond the physical objects, the meaning we assign to those objects changes, too. Take an old colonial report, for instance. When it was first written, it might have been considered an official account ("the truth"), but in 2025, historians would read that same document differently, understanding the biases and power dynamics behind them. The meanings have shifted as new perspectives and contexts come into play.

A good example of this shifting meaning of archival material—especially colonial reports—is in Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o’s *Petals of Blood* (1977). In one section of the novel, the protagonist Godfrey Munira reflects on the District Officer’s records. In colonial times, the records were read as precise bureaucratic documents about what was best for the “natives,” but in the post-independence setting of the novel, these same documents are re-read and criticised by characters like Karega, who sees them as part of the machinery of colonial domination. Karega questions why certain schools were built in particular locations, what subjects were taught, and who benefited from that “education.” The same reports that once seemed like solid truth now become evidence of injustice. Their meaning has changed, not because the ink or paper did, but because the political and ideological context has shifted.

### III

Now that we have wrestled with the idea that archives are spaces that are susceptible to physical and structural change, let us zoom in on the even-trickier dimension of meaning.

Even if an archive looks the same on the outside, what those materials mean is always in motion. The river is never the same, not only because the water is flowing, but because the landscape around it changes. Meaning is like that. Take, for example, the aforementioned District Officer’s records. To the DO who wrote them, they might have constituted a mission to “civilise” the colonised, but to Karega, they mean something entirely different. To a historian reading the record a hundred years later, it might represent an era. To Fu’ad who is uploading it to a global database, it might be a data point in a bigger pattern.

One object, many meanings, all overlapping.



This fluidity of meaning is partly why the work of interpretation is never settled. Historians and archivists are always, to some degree, performing acts of translation by bringing their own contexts and biases into the encounter. What a document means in 1957 is rarely what it means in 2025. What a personal letter means to a family member might be different from what a literary scholar sees in it. Some might say that this makes history unreliable; they argue that if meaning is always

changing, then we cannot trust any version of the past. But I would rather push back a little and suggest that this does not mean that history is a lie, but that history is a conversation, and we must hold it lightly and allow it room to float. A practical outcome of this is the need for archives and historians to be transparent about context and interpretation. Metadata, for example. Who catalogued this? Why? When? Why? What was left out? Why?

If you have ever sat with an elder and listened to them tell stories of their youth, you will know that memory does not follow neat timelines. It meanders and contradicts itself. It forgets, and then, BOOM, suddenly remembers with vivid, cinematic clarity. And most importantly, it tells stories in a way that makes them matter in the now. I think this is what makes memory different from record. Memory is not trying to preserve the past in its original condition. Instead, it is trying to make sense of it in the present and to teach something. This is where the idea of a 'living archive' begins to take shape. A living archive is not a building; it is not even necessarily a database. It is an ongoing act of remembering and re-telling. And it is subjective, which is precisely its value. Yes, I said that. Subjectivity gets a bad rap in traditional archival theory and is seen as a threat to objectivity. Let's be honest: there is no archive without subjectivity. Even the choice to file one document and throw another away is a subjective act. Even the categories we use in our office spaces for example - (we call some "important," and label some as "official," or "classified," and leave others without labels, a.k.a

"nothing consequential") - are determined by human values and ideologies. So why not make that subjectivity visible?

Historians and archivists are not gatekeepers - or at least, they should not be. That old 'gatekeeper' metaphor is outdated and quite frankly, a bit authoritarian. If we are serious about reckoning with history's fluidity, then we need a new image. Not a gate, but a river, hence not a 'gatekeeper, ' but a riverkeeper. Riverkeeping is a real thing, by the way. Riverkeepers are people who watch over rivers and work with communities to keep the water flowing clean and strong. They don't control the river (that would be silly to imagine), but they understand it. They know that a river can give life but also carries danger, and crucially, that a river is a habitat. That is the metaphor we need for archives and history now. This shift in metaphor will also change how we think about authority. A gatekeeper speaks from a place of certainty, but a riverkeeper, on the other hand, speaks from observation.

The gatekeeper says: "This is the correct interpretation; anything else is misreading."

The riverkeeper responds: "This is one way I have come to understand it, shaped by where I have been and what I have seen."

The gatekeeper says: "These are the works that matter; the rest are distractions."

The riverkeeper says: "These are the works that spoke to this moment, though others may rise in different currents."

The gatekeeper says: "That doesn't belong here."

The riverkeeper responds: "That was not here before. Let us understand how it arrived and what it brings."

#### **IV**

There is something lovely about the word, "riverkeeper." It sounds like someone who watches over things, not someone who is trying to boss the river around, more like a guide than a guard. You hear people say things like "mining" an archive or "excavating" history; and sure, that sounds important,

but I think it also comes off as a bit aggressive (by the way, read this account of how mining is done, and you'll get why I say it is aggressive to use either of those terms when referring to history). Riverkeeping is about paying attention and knowing when to step in and when to chill. Being honest, a lot of what we have been handed (especially around here in Nigeria) is this very stiff, colonial idea of the archive. You know what I am talking about: boxes, files, moist-walled buildings downtown. It is so easy to say, "Well, let us just do the same thing, bigger and better - but online." BOOM: more funding, more shelves, more scanners.





*The writer with Bruce Onobrakpeya in Agbarha-Otor last month.*

Riverkeeping starts with the humility that comes with knowing a simple truth: that we cannot/should not know everything. Some memories are seasonal; they show up when they are ready, and then they drift away when they want. And your job, if you are paying attention, is not to trap them. Your

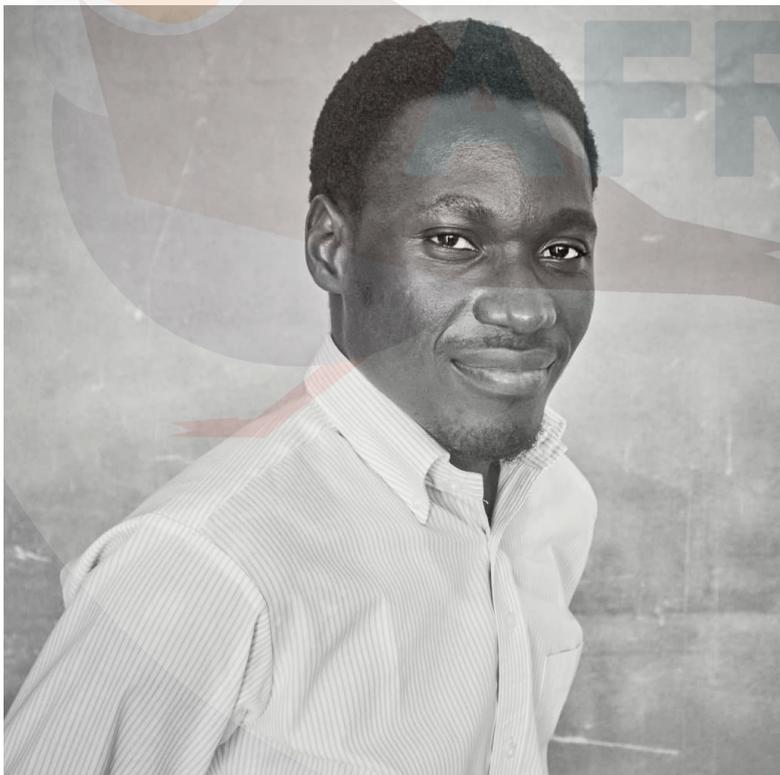
job is to witness and say, “We see you.” That counts as archiving, too. Being a riverkeeper means asking what a community really needs from its collective memory, not just what the state wants, or what some academic framework says is important. It means realising that all history is alive, but not all live in documents. So, next task: rethink what we call “evidence.” Stretch the boundaries a little, my friend. *Reach for your Peak*. And yes, you need to really, really chill out about this whole “permanence” thing. Your work is not to bottle the river. Your work is to sit beside it and to watch what floats by. That is how memory behaves when we stop trying to fix it.

V

In February, I travelled to Agbarha-Otor to speak with Professor Bruce Onobrakpeya, who was a member of the Mbari Club. He asked if I’d seen a copy of the journal whose story I was so passionate about telling. No, I hadn’t. (not the print, of course). Then he did something interesting.

I have spent the past six months working to present a slice of Nigeria’s history. Three of my friends at Archivi.ng have been doing the same (one on migration, another on the civil war, and the third on the lives of everyday Nigerians from the 1800s). The need arose, funding came, research got carried out, and findings will soon be harmonised and ready for presentation. The big question is, What will you, my friend, use these findings for? Of course, I can’t dictate that. Next month, I will tell you what I—as Shalom Kasim, not as the researcher for this project—will do with them.

I’ll see you soon.



**Kasim** is the Managing Editor of *Mud Season Review* and lives in Jos Plateau, Nigeria. He is a fellow in our **Black Orpheus Exploration Project**, chosen in collaboration with Archivi.ng. This is the fifth of his monthly dispatches; you can find the earlier ones here (*February*), here (*March*), here (*April*) and here (*May*). The names of other selected fellows from our application were announced in February. You can read more about the project here.