What Lies Unspoken

Temi Odumosu

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What Lies Unspoken

A Remedy for Colonial Silence(s) in Denmark

Temi Odumosu

Introduction

In this article I will try to describe and reflect on a project I initiated in Copenhagen last year called What Lies Unspoken: Sounding the Colonial Archive. I write ‘try’ because the more I think about it retrospectively, the more it expands and loses structure. In truth, the project was a thought experiment on different modes of colonial representation, approached with particular sensitivity around affect. But the project’s enquiries consequentially revealed the challenges of intervening in institutions, and of critiquing their ways of knowing and doing. The idea was developed as part of my artistic research practice in the Living Archives Research Project at Malmö University, where I had been debating and experimenting with colleagues on archiving processes assisted by mobile media, open data, storytelling and performance. Towards the end of 2015 I was invited by curators at the Statens Museum for Kunst (SMK), and Royal Library of Denmark, to discuss how to help facilitate a wider public conversation about colonialism and its imagery. They were preparing for the 2017 commemorative programme, a year of events and initiatives marking the centennial of Denmark’s sale and transfer of its former Caribbean islands to the United States in 1917.

I had worked with a number of institutions during the UK’s bicentenary of abolition in 2007, and experienced a sense of déjà vu when witnessing the concern, anxiety and diminished confidence that was displayed at a moment of potential discourse transformation. Taking all this on board, I decided to work countervisually (to use Nicholas Mirzeoff’s term) with sound, developing a participatory and geographically situated project concept with the aim of calling different voices into the museum.
Research Council’s digitalised society initiative (Vetenskapsrådet). Further information about its productions and activities are on the project’s legacy website: http://livingarchives.mah.se/.


and library exhibition spaces. Initial exploratory questions asked: In Danish exhibitions on colonial history, who usually speaks and why? What might people actually have to say about colonial artworks, if given the space and time to respond? Could the affective resonance of sound nurture the breaks and silences of history?

In the summer of 2016 we made a successful collaborative application to the Nordea Fund as part of its ‘Historier on Denmark’ initiative supported by The Castle and Cultural Agency (Slots- og Kulturstyrelsen). At the beginning of 2017, with the technical support of sound designers, we all embarked on a three-month process in which we hosted discursive half-day workshops at both institutions, during which we recorded live responses in front of colonial artworks: paintings, photographs, maps, and the 1493 illustrated version of Christopher Columbus’s letter to the king of Spain. Hours of conversation were edited into short compositions, which served as interpretive interventions. One set of compositions was played through headset consoles in the Royal Library exhibition ‘Blinde Vinkler/Blind Spots: Images of the Danish West Indies Colony’ (19 May 2017 – 3 February 2018), and a longer piece could be heard through speakers installed above artworks, in a one-room immersive sound installation Ufortalte Historier/What Lies Unspoken (6 May – 30 December 2017) at the SMK. That is the condensed overview, with many gaps in between.

It is important to note upfront that I write about this project with an air of caution. This is, after all, a first-person testimony that cannot speak on behalf of my collaborators. Also, the process still feels incomplete. The project was a bold move for this cultural context, as a co-institutional project of an activist nature, made within a shifting political landscape in Denmark. The whole experience of collaboration, and of hosting dialogue, took energy and time and was emotive, particularly when set against a public conversation that sometimes lacked sophistication. I’m writing this article in the middle of 2018, and we (the Nordic arts community) have still not had a proper collective debrief about exactly what happened last year, and what comes next. This article will therefore take a less formulaic approach to the project description, providing instead notes on the process, as seen through three of my predominant modes of engagement as the creative lead: witnessing, listening, and intervening.

Witnessing

What Lies Unspoken emerged in response to a series of internal and external provocations. Firstly, there were the strange aftertastes from time spent living in Denmark, and working in Danish arts and cultural heritage contexts that both lacked diversity and shared worldwide problems of access, inclusion and accountability. Then there were the residual hauntings from my many years entrenched in slavery’s visual archive, researching European artworks that subjected people of African descent to an invasive and distorting gaze. And finally, one can add the sensory impressions left from travel to sites of memory and conscience around the former Atlantic world, where colonial residues profoundly impact contemporary issues of voice, presence/absence, and of who
matters and why. I think we need to start here, with the disturbances, for things to make proper sense, because cultural production under conditions of coloniality – separation, bias, asymmetrical power relations – is often work that unsettles the nervous system; work gasping for reprieve from that ‘force exercised on muscles and mind’, which Ann Stoler has so usefully described as ‘imperial duress’. What emerges under duress?

Since 2012, when I first came to live in Copenhagen, I witnessed things in public and private spaces that highlighted how sensitive the notion of representation could be in a Danish context. There were, for example, complex emotions that emerged from seeing a black child actively avoid or even hide from my own black presence when walking down the street with their adoptive Danish parents. Scholars of transnational adoption attest that such encounters are common, and that we have to honour (and take care of) the discomfort a child might feel in ‘proximity’ to ethnic likeness, which can sometimes ‘unsettle the picture’ of a delicate and emergent sense of self. In Denmark, this would be a sense of self developed in a society that has weaponised its reputation for tolerance, insisting on seamless and quiet (no complaints) integration, while concurrently pointing to, even laughing at, the colour of your skin. The unfolding media debate on the ‘N-word’ (among other pejoratives) has also been particularly brutal, primarily because it reveals entrenched views about the use of this language as an inheritance, and a Danish right to freedom of speech. Added to this linguistic hostility is the daily confrontation with stereotypical images of African, Chinese and Middle Eastern figures, which decorate products in the supermarket and on the high street; ‘retro racism’ that has legitimised the demeaning of non-white bodies as pleasurable commodities.

The Nordic countries are predisposed to exceptionalism, seeing themselves as separate from or untouched by the afterlife of colonialism. That said, there is something distinct about Denmark’s remembrance of its history as benign that has been difficult not to notice or respond to. A few facts: Denmark was involved inATLANTIC ENSLAVEMENTTRADE. It established its first fort on the Gold Coast (Ghana) in 1658 and by 1733 had purchased three islands for sugar production – St Croix, St Thomas and St John. Danes have tended to celebrate that they were the first in Europe to abolish the trade in 1792, even though the edict did not take proper effect until 1803. After emancipation in 1848, which came by way of rebellion, possibilities for selling the islands were already being explored. In the interim, local authorities immediately instituted a Labour Act to serve planter interests, with annual contracts binding the formerly enslaved and their families to plantations. Afro-Caribbean workers struggled for an improvement in living and working conditions. Growing unrest eventually led to a labour dispute in 1878, known locally as the ‘Fireburn’, where workers burnt plantations and destroyed property in protest. One of the leaders of this revolt, Mary Thomas, known as Queen Mary, has become an important historical icon on the islands. Following a public debate and a referendum held in 1916, Denmark finalised its treaty of sale on 31 March 1917 by transferring the people, land and public property of the three Caribbean colonies to the United States for 25 million
dollars in gold. Since then the islands have been known as the US Virgin Islands.

In Denmark, this moment of separation has, until very recently, been held in a strange kind of psychological aspic, preserving a view of the islands as a lost paradise, Denmark’s role as more benevolent than that of other European colonisers, and the colonial project overall as one of past glory. Karen Fog Olwig has conceptualised the gradual shrinking of Denmark’s territory (which over time also included parts of what is now known as Norway, Iceland, Greenland, the Faroe Islands and Tranquebar [a town in the Indian state of Tamil Nadu]), as one of ‘deglobalisation’, and something that has had a profound effect on culture. Nostalgia for what once was has naturally been coupled with the melancholia of loss, perhaps best articulated by a contemporaneous transfer cartoon, from 1917, showing Mother Denmark weeping as America takes away her Caribbean babies, while father Denmark stashes the sale money in the national house. Without a critical mass of US Virgin


11 For a recently revised historical overview by the head archivist in charge of colonial documents at the Danish National Archives, see Erik Gøbel, The Danish Slave Trade and Its Abolition, Brill, Leiden, dollars in gold. Since then the islands have been known as the US Virgin Islands.

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Islanders making the consequences of history visible and corporeally present on Danish soil, forgetfulness has abounded. By this I do not mean a denial of history in general, rather a turning away from (a blockage of) the human specifics that hurt, the kind of wilful inducement of amnesia that Stuart Hall described as ‘decisive mental repression’, which is ‘one effect of the traumatic adjustment to the very process of bringing Empire to an end’. This attitude becomes most interesting when viewed through the prism of material heritage – the ‘silver plates’, ‘pictures’, furniture, and other movable items in official residences that were taken back to Denmark as part of the conditions for the 1916 treaty of sale. Denmark left the US Virgin Islands with things, and negotiated custody of a significant bulk of colonial documents, the rest of which were transferred to the United States. Jeannette Bastian has rightly acknowledged how the removal of this archive represents a profound and structural memory loss for the US Virgin Islands. In Denmark, however, it is this evidence of intimacies and entanglements, administrative oversight and obsession, with bodies and images of bodies, that foils any attempt to sequester an unruly and unfinished history.

Listening

In the autumn of 2015 I was approached by four curators asking critical questions: Mette Kia Krabbe Meyer, Mathias Danbolt and Sarah Giersing, who were developing a new exhibition together for 2017 at the Royal Library of Denmark; and Henrik Holm from the SMK, who also looked after the Royal Cast Collection. We all already knew each other through our small arts community, attending similar conferences, networking seminars and events. We were also members of a stakeholder network, Nordic Connections, convened by scholar and filmmaker Helle Stenum in 2015. This group brought together researchers and museum practitioners, and international guests, to discuss practical case studies exploring how colonial history has and could be represented in a Nordic context. It is useful to know here that 2015–2016 was a particularly sensitive time in Denmark. A new centre-right government had taken office and introduced a programme of swift spending cuts that impacted the cultural sector as well as universities. This precarity weakened morale, and the anxiety about spending curbed institutional energy when it came to prioritising the 2017 commemoration, with several stakeholders having to change or cancel their proposed plans. Against this particular backdrop, I first met with the Royal Library team – one of the few institutions who maintained their original decision to participate – to discuss their exhibition ideas. They were exploring alternative methods that could be used to move past the traditional mode of colonial storytelling as a singular narrative to instead include contemporary and Afro-descendant viewpoints. For example, they wanted to work with the Danish–Trinidadian artist Jeannette Ehlers, whose video and performance-based work directly deals with Denmark’s colonial history. Another artist, La Vaughn Belle, had also been working on this history in St Croix, and had used photographs from the library’s collection in a photomontage series with the titles Upward Mobility; Learning To Be; Preacher Man Belle, Obeah Man Brown; and St Croix Pickney


18 People on the US Virgin Islands are, however, part of the discourse on reparations. For context see Astrid Nonbo Andersen, ‘The Reparations Movement in the United States Virgin Islands’, The Journal of African American History, vol 103, no 1–2, 2018, pp 104–132.

19 In Stoler, Duress, 2016, see chapter 4, ‘Colonial Aphasia: Disabled Histories and Race in France’, pp 122–170


21 Article 3.2 of The sales treaty of 4th August 1916, 1 quote from the original handwritten version (in English and Danish) at the Danish National Archives, Rigsarkivet, The Ministry of Foreign Affairs, E4 Traktater, VII 120 USA 1916 § 4.

(2016). The library has an abundance of silent images taken with varying intentions; thousands of photographs in private albums, stereotypes and postcards that show Afro-Caribbean life ways framed by an anonymising Danish perspective. They include images like the affecting photograph of wet nurse Charlotte Eliza Hodge (seated with her young charge Louise Bauditz), for whom there are at least some biographical fragments.24

The SMK, on the other hand, was not preparing for a specific exhibition, but it was interested in thinking about how the permanent art collection (European and canonical) engaged with or expressed colonial histories more generally. It was difficult to sidestep the irony that one part of the SMK collection resided in a separate building constructed specifically to house and administer goods from the transatlantic enslavement trade. The Royal Cast Collection of copies from classical sculptures was rehoused in 1984 to the old West Indian Warehouse (Vestindisk Pakhus) on Copenhagen harbour. This meeting of histories – Western classical aesthetics in white plaster and colonialism – was something that Henrik Holm was bringing to the foreground. Also, in June of 2016, during another media storm about the ‘N-word’, the SMK suddenly decided to change the titles of all artworks containing this word as a descriptive, where the artist had not specifically created the title.25

Overall, it is fair to say that this was a period of high tension in the Danish cultural sector, which was now more publically being held to account, under activist and international pressure, for previous insensitivities. Amid all of our conversations, one particular question that I had been asking myself for some time, rose once more to the surface: Why should we (as curators of the past) assume that looking at colonial imagery is an easy act?

The year 2017 also witnessed the publication of Tina Campt’s important theoretical work Listening to Images. In this text, she called for a different kind of attunement to what/who is held captive in archives and the images hosted there. Listening, she writes, is ‘more than visual scrutiny’, it ‘is an ensemble of seeing, feeling, being affected, contacted, and moved beyond the distance of sight and observer’.26 For me, this was a necessary provocation that could serve to unsettle traditional modes of viewing and spectatorship by paying more attention to the ways artworks and colonial documents ‘speak’ of their sentient lives, which include the traces left by makers, subjects, custodians and viewers. Listening as a research practice also proposed more sensitive negotiations with the varying kinds of silence that cultural institutions seemed to be responsible for: the ‘library conditions’ silence of institutional choreographies; the complicit silencing of voices making exhibitions on colonialism absent of non-European knowledge productions, and also absent of their pain; and, critically, the silenced reactions from visitors to asymmetrical, biased historical sources, standing in as testimonies for ‘what once was’. The listening practice offered a way to recalibrate the terms of encounter and engagement in cultural work, and I wondered how visitors to an exhibition (for example) could be introduced to the complex emotional landscape surrounding images and other records. In particular, I thought about what could be made available by the use of recorded sound, as a means of access to these frequencies, within the visitor experience; and whether this medium could materialise some of the structural tensions
that characterise the colonial archive, while simultaneously attempting to disrupt them.

In total we hosted six four-hour workshops at the Royal Library and SMK with small groups of people (maximum eight) from different walks of life, who were invested in a conversation about this history. Another iteration of this project could include a wider cross-section of the public, but we began by focusing on students, artists, cultural activists, curators and scholars. The workshops began with personal introductions and a clear overview of the recording process that would be embarked upon.27 During the first hour I presented my research and the questions that brought me to the project. I talked about my own affecting encounters with troubling artworks, and described my increasing ambivalence when looking at this material. I then further explored some contemporary remediations of colonial images in popular culture. This set the tone for discussion, debate and the sharing of experiences. Free-form discussion was then followed by practical exercises, concerned with thinking about how we encounter artworks and documents, and also what it is possible for them to ‘say’. For example, at the SMK, we experimented with ways to expand our engagement with a bronze sculpture in the collection by Jørgen Gudmundsen-Holmgreen entitled Neger (1943), depicting an anonymous and naked man, who may have been a life model. The sculpture was brought into the room, and we explored methods such as playing jazz music from the period, and contextualising the sculpture with photos of black people in Denmark in the 1940s. I also encouraged participants to describe the sculpture in careful detail, to highlight how easy it is to miss useful information. Additionally, I asked participants to speculatively imagine a life story for the subject represented. The final part of the workshops served as the main basis for the sound recordings. In each collection setting, participants were presented with my selection of artworks and objects, and were recorded together in discussion facing them. The only request was to simply respond and say whatever was on their minds.

Listening was thus embedded in this project’s design, from initial dialogues with colleagues, to workshops, the editing process, and of course in the experience for exhibition visitors. This listening could be qualified, however, in two distinct ways that I would describe as listening in and listening (out) for. Although I believed that it was important for these workshops to be closed (to enable open and frank dialogue), representatives from the museum and our sound designers were always present and listening in; quietly and without the ability to intervene with their voices, except if there was a technical question or logistical issue that needed to be dealt with. Unwittingly this dynamic of museum and library staff listening in on personal testimonies about collections, offered a profound shift in power dynamics. So often staff see themselves, and are called upon, as experts. In this situation the ‘knowing’ and ‘expertise’ was coming from outside the institution, and not within. The choreography of ‘listening in’ also served as a holding space for alternative points of view, where there was respectful awareness and acceptance of polyphony that we hoped could later be shared with visitors.

But what were we listening out for? I had professional support from two sound designers, who technically edited all the workshop recordings, and also shared with me moments in the conversations that they felt were very impactful on a sonic level, and for audience accessibility. Ultimately,
however, the curation (or composition) of the voices rested with me. Returning to hours of recorded conversation provided a secondary opportunity to hear the varying ways in which artworks and objects resonated with workshop participants. During this curatorial process, I listened out for phrases, words, sentences and affective gauges (pauses, breaths, strains of voice) that communicated the levels of complexity involved in image encounters. Gathering these layered vocal tones was required in order to do the experimental work of ‘sounding’ in the project’s title. Sounding is a maritime term that describes instruments and processes used to measure oceanic depth. In echo sounding, sonic pulses are transmitted into water, and the interval between transmission and return of the sound from the sea bed provides a distance measurement. In this project we attempted to sonically explore the resonance and affective depth of collections, by capturing, through recordings of a dialogic process, the textures of emotional complexity that were the result of considered and lengthy encounters with colonial artworks. As each voice spoke into the museum with personal testimony, they asserted their right to speak and be heard, while at the same time registering historical tensions within the collections. On one level, what returned in the process of sounding the museum and library was emotionally poignant: frustration and exasperation with institutional rigidity; pain when faced with absences and misrepresentations; confusion about why museums and archives had not already learned lessons; curiosity to learn more about the unexplored and willingness to set things right. This is an emotional landscape
Astrid Holm, *Rose Laying the Table*, 1914, oil on canvas, 97.7 x 79 cm, Statens Museum for Kunst
usually edited out of interpretive work, since it points to institutional flaws and weaknesses. In this project, we hoped that the recordings could also transmit this complexity to audiences, thereby offering a space of reflection on what it means to be a ‘viewer’ of the colonial past through images.

Intervening

You are standing at the entrance of a large room, facing due west, at the SMK. The walls are a classic off-white colour with wooden floors in a varnished museum-style pine. Not too light, not too dark. A small bronze statuette of a muscular man stands immediately in front of you, inside a clear Perspex display case on top of a simple wooden mount. There are three paintings, one on each wall, and a small drawing towards the back corner of the room. Another wooden cabinet to your left contains two portrait miniatures, but you will not see them until you walk over there. This is all, a sparse collection of seven unusual artworks. You walk to the centre of the room where there are stools and a bench to sit down, and then notice subtle, ball-shaped speakers above each artwork. You stand, you look, you wait. Then come voices leading you to focus your attention on one of the paintings, which depicts a black woman in a pink dress, standing by a table decorated with a large vase of flowers and exotic fruits. It is called Rose Laying the Table (1914) by Danish artist Astrid Holm. The voices talk:

Speaker 1 I don’t have that feeling this is the servant’s dress. This is not the servant’s table. She is laying the table for the one that is going to eat breakfast… It’s not her table. It’s not her story.

Speaker 2 Why is it not her story? If she’s a servant in the house, and that’s her job to arrange this… she’s probably done that a hundred times. Why is it not her story? She is… She is making that composition… you don’t think so?

Speaker 1 No.

This exchange, taken from the SMK sound composition, is one of so many poignant moments that I witnessed as it unfolded live in workshops. What you cannot experience through reading is that the dialogue’s atmosphere was filled with a mix of longing, loss and tension; a shared struggle to articulate how an artwork of this kind could be aesthetically beautiful and yet unable to adequately delineate an Afro-Caribbean life under Danish colonial rule. It is an exchange that haunts and has left vibrations; quivering traces in the paint, in the walls, in the artist’s old canvas, in my ears. Later on, in the composition, reflections on this painting continued:

Speaker 3 You’ve got this horrible paradox because why has she been painted by a white person? Is it just, like you are saying, some kind of a product? Or is it a new way of thinking how to do image?

Speaker 4 The civil servants and their families who went home to Denmark, they would bring this image also mentally back with them… this quiet, calm, serene, beautiful, and exotic also… but a moment of good times in their lives...

28 The artworks chosen for the What Lies Unspoken sound installation at the Statens Museum for Kunst were: Conrad Sparre, An African, eighteenth century, KMS635; Andreas Thornborg, Unknown Man called Heinrich Carl Schimmelman, 1780–1845, KMS4641; Karel van III Mander, Head of an African, seventeenth century, KMS4190; David Heschler, African, 1626–1667, KMS5520; Marcus Tuscher, Family Group on a Terrace by a Villa, Possibly the English Businessman George Jackson with his Family, 1737, KMS7116; Georg Achen, A Girl Drinking Coffee, 1882, KS6095; and Astrid Holm, Rose Laying the Table, 1914, KMS8558.
Speaker 5 I wasn’t thinking it was a servant when I looked at this picture. I thought it was sort of the daughter of the family or something, and I’m not sure it’s not. Because why should Rose particularly be a servant just because she’s setting the table? I mean that’s also our expectations of what we think when a Danish painter paints a black person in the Virgin Islands.

Speaker 6 I think it’s a very good point, that, because I think what makes me interpret her as a potential servant is the title of the picture. And of course that says more about me (you know, someone who sets the table it’s the servants)… but of course it could be in your own home. And I think it is a good point not to have these stereotypical ways of interpreting… I mean maybe she was the lover of the painter, we don’t know, maybe they lived together, we don’t know… I also think it’s important to open to these interpretations, which also gives her a much stronger subjectivity.

Hortense Spillers writes of the ‘captive body’ as part of an institutional lexicon forged from flesh, which ‘brings into focus a gathering of social realities as well as a metaphor for value so thoroughly interwoven in their literal and figurative emphases that distinctions between them are virtually useless’. Is it possible to separate the mysterious painted subject, Rose, from her historical entanglements? To see her simply as a woman with presence, possibility and choice? Sharing a conversation about the strangeness of colonial images, their power and their ambiguity, naturally produced frictions that were a healthy antidote to the academic distancing of ‘specialism’, which museums and galleries can sometimes lean on when communicating with their publics. This painting could also have been read art historically as a colour study in which rose/pink is a signifying tone explored by the artist. However, without a biography to place Rose in the embrace of community, linked to kin, these speculative utterances from workshop participants stood in as the missing evidence of her quiet agency. At the same time, they necessarily questioned what conditions brought this painting into being, and thus unveiled its romanticism. When shared with an audience in the process of encountering the same artwork, the intervening gestures of speaking back to the subject and speaking out into the museum also carried with them the potential to expand/deepen who we understand to be the witness in the space of postmemory.

It is important for me to say something briefly about intervening as it relates to the more delicate and complex negotiations between professionals within institutions, but this is not easy to do without getting personal on some level. With hindsight, what I can say is that I initially set out to encourage two Danish institutions to rethink their curatorial strategies and also to address how they wielded interpretative power in ways that might be considered colonial. Practically, we developed a counter-action to these processes by augmenting traditional labelling practices with the sound of multiple voices who spoke in support of silenced subjects, but also ‘for the sake of the viewer’. The voices inhabited exhibition spaces, spoke to willing ears, and changed the quality of encounter with artworks and objects. However, intervening as a cultural professional in a project of this kind is multifaceted, and includes everything that is said, not said, and done (all impressions and affects) from the moment you enter an institutional structure. Forgive the metaphor, but intervening is much like the perfume you wear, and how it lingers in a room when you...


have left it. Some people are curious or inspired by the scent, for others it unlocks associations and memories, some just find it too invasive. When the focus is on problem-solving, intervening necessarily requires getting in the way and interrupting habitual patterns. But getting in the way when you are an invited guest in somebody else’s house is counterintuitive under the rubric of hospitality. And, when you are a guest with limited time, working with people in established cultural ‘families’ who will be there long after you are gone, you have to accept that there are places in the house that are closed to you.

Spatial thinking on hospitality and inclusion has provided a useful way to explore what happens when external actors inhabit museums and other cultural ecologies. It has also helped me to process my own experiences of entering the SMK and Royal Library, which are coded institutions framing colonial discourses in Denmark; institutions that professionally have very little ethnic or cultural diversity in general, and none on the level of curation. As an intervention, What Lies Unspoken afforded an opportunity to temporarily address this bias, facilitating diverse voices to take up the knowledge space. However, in its very grappling with the hegemonic Danish canon the project exposed problems of access, exclusivity and blindness that it was simply unable to resolve. Denmark has not created a permanent space to holistically tell the history of slavery and colonialism, and nowhere is the knowledge and experience of enslaved peoples and their living descendants honoured. There has been no truth and reconciliation initiative. Thus, any attempt to inhabit the Danish discourse under these conditions reinforces, in one way or another, these violations. This is perhaps the most profound realisation that the intervening action can bring, that whatever is unprocessed in the culture/discourse/climate, will show up in the project. This is the reason why I reluctantly conclude that the project was not only flawed, but also that it may have come too soon for the context it was inhabiting.

Conclusion

Twenty years ago, this journal published Stuart Hall’s keynote speech from the Whose Heritage conference (1999) held in Manchester, UK, which spoke about ‘selective canonisation’ and ‘operational inertia’, and the inability of professionals in the heritage sector to re-examine ‘their criteria of judgement and their gate-keeping practices’. Since then museums have become familiar with the opportunities that interventions from external actors can bring. They regularly call on curators and artists to help provoke new conversations or, as Fred Wilson says, to facilitate ‘a rupture with our assumptions in order to grow’. Yet these activities can happen without ever changing the core value systems of the institution. How, to paraphrase Sara Ahmed, would the Royal Library, SMK, and its publics be ‘modified’ by our utterances? In this project, the institutions did not speak back, and this is also the challenge being cast here. What Lies Unspoken was an experiment in truth telling; speaking out about, and back to, colonialism’s visual archive. However, as I have already confessed, it was flawed in a number of ways: because it was undertaken reactively to fill gaps in the discourse around the 2017 commemoration, which is why there are no visitor surveys or substantive


feedback information; because the voices of living descendants of Virgin Islanders, represented in Royal Library photographs, were not included this time; and because the desire for accessibility required workshop participants to speak in English, which was not everybody’s usual emotional language. But maybe messy interventions that get in the way, or in between museums and their publics, might be the remedial pill that has to be swallowed by all of us. An action or utterance, in the Danish discourse, is better than silence, which has been the chosen institutional volume. Perhaps the sonic urgency of the speech act is actually the break(age) – a dislocation from inheritance, habit and pride – required for change to enter and take hold. 37

ORCID

Temi Odumosu © http://orcid.org/0000-0002-7693-0883

37 For a transforming meditation on breakages, see Fred Moten, In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, Minnesota, 2003.