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Ledgers and Legibility: A Conversation on the Significance of Noise within Digital Colonial Archives

Katrine Dirckinck-Holmfeld and Pepita Hesselberth

Abstract

This conversation takes Katrine Dirckinck-Holmfeld's installation and performative presentation *The Christmas Report & Other Fragments* (2017) as a starting point to discuss legibility in relation to the mass digitization of the colonial archives in Denmark. To gain access to the archive, Dirckinck-Holmfeld draws on the figure of the Data Thief, inspired by The Black Audio Film Collective, in an attempt to unearth and excel the vulnerabilities and ethical dilemmas at the heart of today's data desire. The Data Thief, Dirckinck-Holmfeld claims in conversation with Pepita Hesselberth, teaches us to attune to the noise, to the sonorous, affective and textural dimensions of the archive. It compels us to create assemblages of enunciation that cut across semiotic and machinic flows, and invites us to nourish a relationship to time where the past keeps enfolding on itself in the present. This way, she concludes, it demands us to stay in and with the discomfort, and to stay in the cybernetic fold of radical, creative, decolonial and technological reimagination.

Pepita Hesselberth: First of all, I would like to thank you for agreeing to do this interview with us. Your art project *The Christmas Report & Other Fragments* (2017-ongoing), on the digitization of the Danish colonial archives of the West Indies, caught our attention as it raises many interesting questions with regard to the legibility of the (colonial) archive and our colonial past in what is often deemed a post-colonial and, above all, digital era (Figure 15.1). The work was developed as a performative presentation as part of the Uncertain Archives Research Group at the University of Copenhagen and later sequenced into a video installation. Over the last years, you have used your work, both as an artist and a researcher, to explore the affects, materiality and time of digital images in relation to different archival contexts, practices and situations. For starters, could you tell us a little bit more about the project itself, the archives



FIGURE 15.1 Still from *The Christmas Report...* (K. Dirckinck-Holmfeld 2017). Map of St. Croix with the plantations by I. E. Beck (1768) superimposed with the database of digitized photographs from the Royal Danish Library's Map & Photo Collection 2017.

that you are working with in *The Christmas Report*, your approach to it, the video installation your project has been turned into and perhaps also about the performative presentation you did in the run-up to these later installments?

Katrine Dirckinck-Holmfeld: Thank you for the invitation and opportunity to discuss the *The Christmas Report & Other Fragments*, of which you saw the work-in-progress, the performative presentation *Vertigo of Archive*, which I presented at the Uncertain Archives conference on Vulnerabilities in April 2017.¹ It is a great opportunity to think through some of the aspects of the project that I haven't been able to ruminate on while being in the process of making the work.

So, to give a bit of background for the project: 2017 marks the centennial of Denmark's sale to the United States of the colony formerly known as "The Danish West Indies," which was then renamed the US Virgin Islands. For this occasion, The Danish National Archive, The Royal Danish Library's Photo and Map Collection, as well as other archives and collections, are undertaking a mass digitization of their archival records from St. Croix, St. Thomas, St. John,

1 For more information and a recording of that presentation, see: <http://artsandculturalstudies.ku.dk/research/focus/uncertainarchives/vulnerability-workshop/>.

Ghana and the transatlantic enslavement trade. The National Archive alone has scanned more than 1.2 kilometers of shelf space, adding up to more than five million digital scans. The records are said to be among the best preserved from the transatlantic enslavement trade and many are included in UNESCO's world heritage list. The reason why Denmark has access to all this material and is able to digitize it is because after selling the islands in 1917, Danish officials went back and took all of the archives, leaving the inhabitants of the islands without access to 250 years of their history.

It is for the occasion of the centennial and as part of the Uncertain Archives Research Project at the University of Copenhagen that I produced the performative presentation *Vertigo of Archive*, which was later sequenced into the video installation *The Christmas Report & Other Fragments* and shown at the Ringsted Gallery in Denmark. The work interweaves my interests in the meta-discussion of the interfaces and (infra)structures underpinning these digital colonial archives with my attempt to unravel my own family's involvement in the Danish Colonial System. One day, while roaming through the archives, I came across a report issued in 1902 by the House of Representatives called "The Purchase of Danish Islands" (United States Congress House and Select committee on purchase of Danish West Indies). The report mentions the "Christmas report" – a statement given by the Danish citizen Walter Christmas, who sometimes also appears as Dirckinck-Holmfeld, a namesake and distant relative of mine. The report abridges an American investigation of Walter Christmas concerning his possible involvement in a scandal in which he tried to bribe US Congressmen to vote for the purchase of the islands in 1900. Christmas was an officer in the Danish Navy and traveled extensively to the Danish colonies. According to the document, he tried to sell "The Danish West Indies" to the US in 1900, but it remains unclear whether he operated on his own initiative or whether he was unofficially sent by the Danish Government to oversee this task. It is said that he spent the money he thought he would get in commission for the sales (10% of five million USD) to bribe and corrupt US Congressmen in favor of the sale. After his mission failed, he returned to Denmark, where he settled as a writer of children's books and theater plays, of which the most known is the Peder Most adventure series. Written in a racist language, the books tell the story of a young sailor from Svendborg, Peder Most, who travels the world, thus conveying a colonial worldview to young audiences. Today, the books are little known, but the town of Svendborg has an orchestra named after Peder Most, without acknowledging the colonial legacy of that figure.

Intercutting scraps of information that I gathered about Walter Christmas with my own experiences of trying to make sense of the immense collections of

financial accounts, or ledgers, in both the digital online database and the analog archives, my project is an attempt to explore how the digitization process participates in the redistribution of the past's colonial and racial hierarchies today. My aim is to figure out the extent to which, and exactly how, the logic that structures the digitization of the archives mirrors, or bears witness to, and perhaps even builds on the technologies of the institution of chattel slavery that created the archival records in the first place. For, as social theorist Stevphen Shukaitis has aptly suggested in a post on Facebook, after visiting the exhibition *Blind Spots* at the Danish National Library, which showed excerpts from their collection of maps of "The Danish West Indies" as well as 1,500 photographs: "anyone wanting to study management or business, accounting, or finance should be likewise required to engage with its colonial underpinnings."² To this, I would add: anyone who wants to study digital archival processes, big data and the production of subjectivity in late-Capitalism should be interested in its colonial underpinnings and strong ligaments to the enslavement trade and industry.

What became apparent from looking at the ledgers, which are mainly financial accounts from the ship logs and plantation registers, is how lives were turned into commodities, (ac)countable, first and foremost, in – and to – the data registers of which we can now observe the mass digitization. What I am interested in with this project, then, is to explore what new sites of forgetfulness and unspeakability are created by the desire for mass digitization and big data aggregates. How to account for the viscosity inherent to the archives: the touch, smell and materiality of the analog records, and the pain, suffering and violence that the archive is constituted upon? How do these historical cartographies mix with personal stories, adding up to a multidimensional space, a multifarious "stereoscope" of deferred perception and memories, and, indeed, un/shared histories? Confronted with the archive, I had to ask myself how to position myself in relation to it, or perhaps rather, how the archive orients and positions me. This project thus taps into a set of both micro- and macro-problematics that serves as a generator for developing this work and indeed opens up a plethora of questions pertaining more specifically to the legibility of the digital archive and our colonial past.

PH: Could you briefly reflect on these questions that your project opened up, even if it is perhaps in more general terms? In other words, in what way does the digitization of these colonial archives problematize notions of the legibility of the archive, of our collective colonial histories and of the private histories

² <https://www.facebook.com/stevphen.shukaitis> (7 Oct. 2017).

related to our colonial past, both written and unwritten, in your view? In formulating this question, I realize how inapt a phrase like “to excavate the archive” has become now that we have the possibility “to navigate” it in ways that may appear unprecedented and in ways that are at once as non-hierarchical and historically flat as the web itself (while neither, we know, is necessarily so).

KDH: That is a very interesting question. Of course, navigating the archive digitally implies a completely different interface than roaming the analog archive does. In the performative presentation, for which I eventually chose to use the presentation tool Prezi, I was really preoccupied with the *spatiality* of the archive and how one has to navigate between different platforms, places, objects, temporalities and topographies, constantly moving back and forth between the close-up and the wide-angle, zooming in and out, so to speak. Yet, just because the material has become digital I do not necessarily think it has become less hierarchical or more flat. Quite to the contrary. While the digital interface may appear accessible and therefore more legible, it also obscures things, much like the analog archive, even if the obscurification here has taken on a different form. I speak of a *Vertigo of the Archive* because browsing through an archive that contains over five million scans creates a sense of digital nausea or vertigo, provoked by the vast amount of data available in its variable resolutions.

Since mass digitization of archival records opens these records up to a wider circulation and distribution, and enables an easier access to history, it also gives rise to new ethical, political, aesthetic and methodological questions concerning the reuse and dissemination of this highly sensitive material. What does it mean to digitize these archives and make them available, through the internet, to a global public that does not necessarily share the same view on that history? And what meanings are (there to be) produced when the digital interface, created to make the material available, is still based and biased – as I believe it is – by the very archival logic intrinsic to the colonial system of power? To name but one example: I found that if you want to do research into the history of your family, you need to know the “archive creator,” as it is called in the database, i.e. the company in charge of the enslavement trade or the plantation that bought up the enslaved Africans upon their arrival to the islands. In order to use the database to do research, in other words, you cannot but submit to the logic of the enslavement trade and the violence that the archive is founded upon. This is but one of many obscurifications that the digitization process effects and that are not made transparent to the user of the archive or accounted for. The digital archive is oddly haunted by such old hierarchies, structures and logics of our colonial history in ways that are not always transparent to the user. The problem, in my view, is that the designers and developers of these

infrastructures take very little notice of this “hauntology” (Derrida 2006) in the design process and rarely, if ever, seek to create alternative routes and polyvocal narrations in the online databases, or at least point to the biases and pitfalls implicit in their own interface.

Another aspect that has occupied me is the visual complexity of those interfaces. To a certain extent, the digital colonial archival infrastructures can be seen as an extension of what Nicholas Mirzoeff has called the “plantation complex”: an organization of the field of the visual that builds on the ways of classifying, separating and aestheticizing that were developed during and thus derived from the colonial period (2011: 480). The digital collection of maps and photographs of “The Danish West Indies” held by The Danish Royal Library is a case in point of that form of visibility. Many of the photographs were taken by the white Danish colonial administration between 1840 and 1917, and carry on the point of view of the colonial administration, which thus persists and is reproduced within the digital archive as the dominant gaze and voice. My project, then, is an attempt to pay heed to the fact that the whole paradigm governing data-visualization and mass digitization is largely an extension of the colonial project of discretization – the cutting up of people and lands into entities of division, enslavement and control. What is interesting to me, here, are the forms of counter-visibility or *maroon* strategies (Harney and Moten) that can be activated in the digital archives so that they can be opened up, and also used as a site that could tell the other side of the story, that of resistance and dignity for the population of the US Virgin Islands that has been bereft of their archives.

PH: In your project, you introduce the figure, or persona, of The Data Thief | The Data Giver. Can you tell us something about him/her/ze? What is his/her/zir function? Is it merely a rhetorical figure? I have a strong sense that this figure is key to your attempt to open up the archive, to make it legible if you will, without nullifying precisely that which makes the archive so hard, if not downright impossible, to “read” – in other words, its inherent illegibility.

The Data Thief/Data Giver is a time-surfing roughneck, a shapeshifter, part human, part cyborg, a state-less, a beheaded pardoned by a king, a fugitive, a revenant, a digital return, an orphan of a rebel queen ... Transported to 1917/2017 via the internet to roam the archives.³

3 From *The Christmas Report & Other Fragments* – KDH’s alterations from the script of *The Last Angel of History*.

KDH: I borrow the notion of the Data Thief from John Akomfrah and Black Audio Film Collective's seminal 1996 film *The Last Angel of History*. This film develops the concept of Afrofuturism and Black Aesthetics by tracing a genealogy of the deployments of science fiction within black musical traditions and cultural production. The film visually develops the same methods as it sets out to research by introducing the figure of the Data Thief. The Data Thief is sent from the future to roam the archives; he travels across time and space in search of the code – a black secret technology – that holds the key to the future. Invented on the brink of the so-called “digital revolution” and the development of the internet as a popular mass medium in 1995, to me, there is no other figure that captures the vulnerabilities and ethical dilemmas of today's data desire so well. The Data Thief stands for a sensibility that forces us to attune ourselves to the sonorous and affective cuts and reverberations of and within the archive.

Unlike in *The Last Angel of History*, however, in my project, the figure recurs as both the Data Thief and the Data Giver. It is my attempt to address a double irony: first, that Denmark returned to the islands after the sale to collect the archives and relocate them to Copenhagen, leaving the inhabitants without access; and second, that The Danish National Archive is now “returning” this archive as a “gift” to the US Virgin Islands (as well as to the world) on the occasion of the centennial, offering it as a form of repair without necessarily wanting to call it this (on this topic, see Nonbo Andersen; Bastian). Calling it repair, after all, would require an official apology, which in turn might result in demands for material compensation. As it looks now, therefore, no actual “handing over” of the digital archives is likely to take place, which becomes all the more apparent when one realizes how few resources (if any at all) are being invested in developing an interface that would make the archive – which largely consists of sources written in Danish and in often illegible seventeenth-century gothic handwriting – more accessible to users from the US Virgin Islands, Ghana or elsewhere, who may want to access the online database. As it is now, this effort relies on crowdsourcing and on citizen scientists/historians serving as translators on a voluntary basis.

The figure of The Data Thief | The Data Giver in my work is embodied by a prison photo of Hezekiah Smith, taken in Horsens State Prison, Denmark, in 1909 (Figure 15.2). Hezekiah was the son of Queen Mary, one of the four women who led the Fireburn Uprisings in St. Croix in 1878, a labor rights uprising against the slave-like conditions the workers were still working under 30 years after the abolition of slavery in 1848. After the uprising, Queen Mary served 10 years in a women's prison in Christianshavn in Copenhagen. Hezekiah was around five years old when his mother was sent to jail in the “host” country on a different continent.



FIGURE 15.2 Still from *The Christmas Report...* (K. Dirckinck-Holmfeld 2017). Image based on prison photo of Hezekiah Smith, State Prison in Horsens, *Photographs of Prisoners* (1909: 3), The Danish National Archives.

The records show that, as an adult, Hezekiah was sent to Horsens State Penitentiary in Denmark after being charged with the murder of his girlfriend. Still imprisoned when the islands were sold in 1917, Hezekiah became stateless, since the black population of the islands did not have Danish citizenship, and the US refused to take him back. Upon his release in 1923, he was put on a Polish schooner bound for Trinidad, where it is said he was murdered.

Even today, the specter of Hezekiah continues to haunt me in the archive. When looking at the photograph, I cannot help but think of its relationship to the history of criminal photography and of how that visual archive contributes to the production of a system in which black and brown men are seen as “criminal until proven otherwise.”⁴ The image of Hezekiah can also be seen as a silent testimony to Denmark’s long-standing history of sending prisoners from the colonies to serve sentences in Denmark.⁵

- 4 There are a number of people working on the use of stock images and templates that orient towards race-specific categories and often blatant racism in, for example, facial recognition software, machine-learning algorithms and forensic identification tools. Ramon Amaro’s work on machine learning and racial profiling in data-driven decision making comes to mind, as well as Amade M’charek’s project on RaceFaceID (see <https://race-face-id.eu/>).
- 5 It is worth mentioning that despite Greenland’s *Act of Home Rule* justice affairs, police criminal procedures and the courts of law are still under Danish jurisdiction. As a result, prisoners and psychiatric patients from Greenland are still sent to confinements in Denmark.

Denmark's archival abduction and its digitization made me ponder the way in which it comes to form what we might call, with Fred Moten, a cut to connection. In a highly complex passage, Moten uses Derrida's concept of "invagination" and Mackey's "broken' claim(s) to connection" to define the aesthetics of the black radical tradition. He writes:

In his critical deployment of such music and speech, [Frederick] Douglass discovers a hermeneutic that is simultaneously broken and expanded by an operation akin to what Jacques Derrida refers to as "invagination." This cut and augmented hermeneutic circle is structured by a double movement. The first element is the transference of a radically exterior aurality that disrupts and resists certain formations of identity and interpretation by challenging the reducibility of phonic matter to verbal meaning or conventional musical form. The second is the assertion of what Nathaniel Mackey calls "'broken' claim(s) to connection" between Africa and African America that seeks to suture corollary, asymptotically divergent ruptures – maternal estrangement and the thwarted romance of the sexes – that he refers to as a "wounded kinship" and the [sic] "the sexual 'cut.'" This assertion marks an engagement with a more attenuated, more internally determined, exteriority and a courtship with an always already unavailable and substitutive origin. (Moten 6)

At the risk of conflating this passage with my own thinking and project, it made me brood over the ways in which that violent cut to connection that slavery marks is repeated in Denmark's act of steeling back, and now digitizing, the archives. The uprooting of the archive marks a double cut, in which a people that has already been forcefully removed from their country of origin and cut off from their history and environment are then cut off again from access to that little remainder, that name, that list, or that scrap of cloth that might still exist in the ledgers within the archive. Or perhaps it marks a triple cut – a material cut, a rasterization, a discretization – when what is returned are not the actual archival records, but rather the scanned copies in 300 dpi, digital files that have no indexical bond to the always already unavailable originals. How, then, to attune to the breaks, the cuts, the noises in the digital archive as a mode of resistance?

PH: I am interested in your remark about the risk of losing the noise of the archive and in the potential of adding or capturing noise, breaks and cuts as a form of resisting the totalizing logic of the digital archive, in which, indeed,

some of the old structures are still very much in place. I think your work explicitly plays with and into that, the figure of the Data Thief included. On the one hand, the figure forms a red thread, a recurring image, throughout the installation; on the other hand, however, it is a very noisy figure, or even a figure of noise, not in the least because it plays a central part in uncovering the archive as a noisy place. The figure does not seem to serve the purpose of making the telling of the story easier, but rather seems to work against this, as if to disclose the impossibility of the story that nonetheless wants to be told, a story that consists of gaps, breaks and cuts as you say, of illegible ledgers, scraps of paper and almost randomized images, of half stories and, nowadays, also pixels, filters and broken links. In this sense, in your installation, the figure of the Data Thief does not seem to stand on its own. I noticed, for example, that you work a lot with colors and filters, too, with broken links and open endings. The “story” never quite adds up, it seems; it is, indeed, noisy, and in this sense your installation can be said to offer a compelling visual counter-narrative that works to problematize the legibility of these ledgers and the archive as such. Could you comment a little more on this perhaps? The figure of the Data Thief seems crucial here, but I am sure there are other examples, within your own work and that of others, too.

KDH: My project is not an attempt to restore the digital archive to a preexisting whole, nor do I want to lament the digital as a loss of resolution and indexicality. As an artist, for me, it is all about the texture and material properties of a given document. My project, then, is an attempt to show that the material undergoes a radical form of rematerialization in its transfiguration from the analog document to the digital file. In a way, the whole project is an investigation into how the image or document migrates between different contexts, continents, depositories, codecs and compressions, and how this route, or line of flight, is engraved onto the file’s texture and surface (see also Dirckinck Holmfeld 2015). It is in this process that the material enfolds the colonial system that created it into its new form. While the digital file does not have the same textural properties as its analog sibling, it is not void of texture. The violence that produced the file, as well as the many layers of information that were added in the post-production of the archive, are often engrained in the low-resolution scan. What I really want to do is take all these layers apart and look at how they structure the ways in which the file is made available to the public today (Figure 15.3). As such, I think there are two different forms of noise at play here. On the one hand, my project is about attunement to the archival litter, the rasterization of the file, the meta-data, the inscription and layers of marking that the material undergoes, the discarded



FIGURE 15.3 Still from *The Christmas Report...* (K. Dirckinck-Holmfeld 2017). Textile samples that were ordered by the Danish-Guinean Company on the Gold Coast from the Danish colony Tranquebar (today Tharangambadi, India) and traded for enslaved Africans in Accra. *Dansk-Guinesisk Kompagni, Breve fra Direktionen* (1705–1722: 390), The Danish National Archives.

material, the bit-rot, the burned documents, etc. On the other hand, there is also the potential of noise as a form of resistance in and to the archive. To quote Édouard Glissant:

Noise is essential to speech. Din is discourse ... since speech was forbidden, slaves camouflaged the word under the provocative intensity of the scream. No one could translate the meaning of what seemed to be nothing but the call of a wild animal. This is how the dispossessed man organized his speech by weaving that into the apparently meaningless texture of extreme noise. (123–24)

In line with Glissant's quote on noise as resistance, I think Black Audio Film Collective's work is very compelling in that it really attunes us to the sonorous reverberations in the archive. In a similar vein, I am currently working together with performance artist Oceana James to change the voice over of *The Data Thief* | *The Data Giver* into Crusian, the St. Croix version of creole, in an attempt to thief back what has been stolen and at the same time insert other voices into the data. By assembling the data debris and fragments, affects and textures he/she/ze is left with, *The Data Thief* | *Data Giver* is thus able to create new assemblages of enunciation.

Here, my project is also clearly indebted to Virgin Island-based artist La Vaughn Belle, whose work continues to confront us with the many stories that remain untold and that are not captured by the official narratives of the State Archives. In her series *Ledgers from a Lost Kingdom*, for example, Belle draws on colonial architecture that was built after the Fireburn Uprisings, which burned down large parts of Frederiksted, St. Croix. Cutting and burning its patterns on paper, she creates beautiful, yet violent and painful patterns. She also deploys the tools of resistance – the torch and sugarcane machete were the only tools available to the workers during the uprising – as means for artistic expression, thus calling attention to the fact that, in the absence of archival records in the US Virgin Islands, pottery, building materials and other fragments of material culture have come to function as repositories, constituting a commonplace archival space where the legacies of colonialism continue to resurface in the present. Similar to Black Audio Film Collective's figure of the Data Thief and Moten's quote above, Belle's work forms a double movement, one that is cutting into the wound, but through that cut is able to expand and create new material assemblages. She thus posits a certain materialist formalism that is political in its very work with the materiality of given objects, offering what we might call, with Saidiya Hartman, a "critical (material) fabulation" (11). Belle's *Ledgers* testify to the lacuna in the official state archives, but they also come to form secret technologies, Obeah practices for transmitting the stories, affects and noises that are hidden in the official archives.⁶

In response to the digitization of the archives, we need to ask ourselves how to devise strategies for "disordering and transgressing the protocols of the archive" (Hartman 9). How can we create other interfaces that superimpose rather than overwrite, that are able to transmit the lacuna, the mutters, the oaths and cries, and pay tribute to the black noise? In other words, we must ask ourselves how to use the tools made available by the digital archive "against the grain" (Hartman 9).

PH: You have touched on this before, in response to the opening question, where you identify Walter Christmas as your namesake and distant relative, but there is a moment in the installation where you seem to be grappling with your own positionality, not only in relation to the archive, but also in relation to the colonial past it represents. In this sense, your work also has a clear auto-ethnographic quality to it. Of course, the positionality of the researcher (as well as the one who speaks and/or is silenced) has often been brought up in critical theory and seems to touch directly on the issue of legibility, not

6 In the Virgin Islands and the Caribbean, Obeah refers to the spiritual and religious practices brought by the enslaved Africans and developed among the Afro-Caribbeans. The practices were forbidden by the planters and regarded as sorcery.

only in the need to make such positionality legible as such, but also in the idea that the legibility of whatever and whomever we come across is always and per definition compromised by our own position within and in relation to it/them as well. Could you comment a little on these issues of positionality and legibility in your work, perhaps in relation to this passage from the installation?

KDH: The passage you are referring to, I think, is the following:

THE DATA THIEF/DATA GIVER [DTDG]: How do you as an apparent white Dane position yourself in relation to the archive?

Katrine Dirckinck-Holmfeld [KDH]: The question of position always makes me shiver – maybe because I follow Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick that positions are not stable but always changing and relational. However, when it comes to this archive, and to the situation in Denmark, I do believe that I have to ask myself how I position myself in relation to these images. How does my own family history marry into the Danish colonial system?

DTDG: Do you know Captain Christmas?

KDH: I met him once in a casual way. I live at the Manhattan Hotel, and I met him in a most casual way in the lobby of the hotel.

DTDG: Did you ever have a contract with him of any kind?

KDH: Never, of any kind or character

DTDG: Had you any connection with him in seeking to bring about the sale of the Danish West Indian Islands to the United States?

KDH: None, either directly or otherwise.⁷

⁷ From *The Christmas Report and Other Fragments*, my alterations of the original script from United States Congress House, and Select committee on purchase of Danish West Indies. "Purchase of Danish Islands." Report No 2749.

In *The Christmas Report* ... I am (or the narrator is) cut short by The Data Thief | The Data Giver, who in the performative piece takes on the form of the conference moderator, asking me how I position myself in relation to this archive. The question is followed by my own idle attempt to avoid the question, in part by situating myself academically, with Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, so as to avoid stable positioning on the claim that positions are in flux and relational. Nonetheless, and to the point: I find it important to question my own positionality in relation to the archive and the colonial past, a need that is reinvigorated all the more by the current political climate in Denmark, which has become unbearably racist in my view.

The self-questioning is employed as a way to interrogate my own family's involvement in the colonial system and the whole Christmas Report scandal. But again, the form itself becomes whimsical. The interrogation is a direct transcript of "The Christmas Report" and my responses to the questions are confluences of the statements given by the congressmen interrogated in the Report, who all unequivocally denied having any knowledge of or even having met Christmas. The script thus transposes an amnesia similar to Denmark's persistent official denial and remembrance of its wrongdoings as a colonial power. The self-questioning becomes a way of staying with the discomfort that working in the archives entails, a discomfort that is the direct result of the complicity of the Danish families and companies that participated in and/or profited from the colonial system, a denial that is persistent to this very day. The digital archives testify to this. It is certainly a discomfort that I haven't fully managed to resolve in my project yet, and for good reasons; it is a discomfort that cannot and should not simply be resolved.

But, of course, the passage is also employed to question my own position now and the privilege I hold being able to work in and with archives in the first place. This privilege entails having access to the files and the language, but it is also a privilege of having access to genealogy, of being able to look into my ancestry as an uncut line. In *Giving an Account of Oneself*, Judith Butler shows that the very norms that govern how we make ourselves accountable, or are able to give an account of oneself, are always already structured by the norms that constitute the subject, as well as by the stylization of its ontology. In *Signs and Machines*, Maurizio Lazzarato expands that argument to include all the technical and social machines and assemblages that are constitutive of the production of subjectivity under (semio) capitalism (13). This means that, well before I can put myself to the scene of interrogating the Danish colonial archive and my role in it, the lenses through which I look at them are already structured by the very same archive and the technical and social machines it taps into. This might very well trap us in a paranoid hermetic circle, as Sedgwick contends in her essay on reparative and paranoid readings in *Touching Feeling* (123–52). Yet, to me, it is

here that the recourse to narrative and critical fabulations precisely becomes powerful, as it allows for the acknowledgement of that impossibility by enacting it and, by enacting, is able to expand and augment into what I elsewhere have called a method of (para)paranoia.⁸ So, in a way this passage becomes an enactment of my own complicity with the colonial system, while at the same time capturing my failure to fully account for it. In a way, I perform the very same denial that I am accusing the Danish system of performing.

Drawing on Nietzsche, Butler claims that “we become conscious of ourselves only after certain injuries have been inflicted” (2001: 10). A bit further on, she states that “[p]unishment ... is the making of a memory” (Butler 2001: 10). Her notion of a “narrative withheld” is an interesting way to understand Denmark’s inability to deliver an official apology, as well as the silence that the pursuit of repair is generally met with:

Silence ... can be seen as calling into question the legitimacy of the authority invoked by the question and the questioner or attempts to circumscribe a domain of autonomy that cannot or should not be intruded upon by the questioner. The refusal to narrate remains a relation to narrative and to the scene of address. As a narrative withheld, it either refuses the relation that the inquirer presupposes or changes that relation so that the one queried refuses the one who queries. (Butler 2001: 12)

In a similar fashion, we can see the arrogance, and indeed silence, that the call for an official apology and the pursuit for repair is met with by the Danish state. It figures as a form of silencing of those who have been wronged, by not even acknowledging the need to account for the wrong that has been done. That silence, which still continues today, is a mere continuation of the same silencing of those voices that have always been silenced by and in the archive.

The intention here, with Saidiya Hartman, is not to give voice to those voices that have been silenced by and in the archive, or to provide closure, but rather to work towards what Hartman calls a method of “recombinant narrative,” a term she borrows from video artist Stan Douglas. I find this idea very compelling and powerful: a form of storytelling that “‘loops the strands’ of incommensurate accounts” and weaves present, past and future together in narrating the time of

8 Drawing on Sianne Ngai’s work on paranoia in *Ugly Feelings*, I suggest a method of self-reflexive paranoia in which the subject knows that she is always already reactively construed and belated, and yet, I suggest, it is this very complicity that enables the condition of agency to emerge at all (Dirckinck-Holmfeld 2015: 105).

slavery as our present (Hartman 12). Narrative, here, becomes intrinsic to editing. Inspired by Hartman's and Douglas's method, which I read as a proposition for counter-strategies and different ways of working with digital archives, in *The Christmas Report* ... I superimpose and use jump cuts between different archives and collections without necessarily being faithful to the fact, taxonomy and order of the archive, jumping between present and past, archival imagery and restaged footage, and juxtaposing conflicting and incongruent material. Maybe, intuitively, this is an attempt to develop a critical method and work against the grain.

PH: To conclude, perhaps I can ask you to expand on the issue of fact and fiction a little, although I am not happy about using these terms in this context. The reason why I ask about this nonetheless has to do with your remark above and the fact that, at times, I felt your installation was difficult to navigate, or "read" if you will, as it is not always clear what we are looking at, whose voice we hear, what the status is of the image we see, the text we read, and so on (like in the passage above). Yet, at the same time, by working through the material in the way your installation compels us to do, it is clear that it also attempts something else altogether, opens up to a different side of the archive perhaps, one that normally remains hidden from view. Can you reflect on this a little more, perhaps to reiterate the importance of your remark about the risk of continuing the old colonial structures in the present-day endeavor to digitize archives like these?

KDH: As you already suggest, I am not so interested in the division between fact and fiction that seemed to occupy the art world for a period. Nietzsche, Foucault and Butler, they all remind us: genealogy is always a production of fiction. There is nothing in my fable that is untrue or fiction. I guess what I am more interested in are the assemblages, the anecdotes, the fragments and snippets of archival material, and how compiling all that material together produces an assemblage of enunciation capable of capturing the intensities, affects and points of singularities of the archives – without staying true to the archival logic or the archive as an institution.

In the performative presentation, I tried to refrain from using actual archival photographs and records, since I believe, following Hartman, that reusing the material is an act of violence, both physically and symbolically. But it was also a way to make the audience complicit in producing that imagery, mentally, through the narration. In that sense, refraining from showing that material, in my view, can also be seen as a form of violence. Thus, I tried to focus on the infrastructure that governs the process of digitization. My use of the image of Hezekiah as the Data Thief | The Data Giver can be seen as taking Hezekiah hostage and appropriating Black Audio Film Collective's figure of the Data Thief for my own purpose of

trying to make sense of the current mass digitization of the Danish colonial archives. I realize that, by doing so, I risk deploying a similar form of cultural appropriation and colonial theft that I accuse the National Archive of. The Data Thief | The Data Giver is the son of Queen Mary – he carries that legacy by prompting activist strategies in the archive, by taking back what has been stolen, by reclaiming narrative and inserting counter-narratives into the official story. My aim is not to simply change the meta-data and add new information to an insisting structure, but to start a meta-data rebellion against the interfaces and regimes of visibility that govern and reproduce machinic forms of enslavement today.⁹ I risk this appropriation, if you will, to advance the relationship between machinic forms of enslavement today and their origins in the technologies and institutions of slavery that the archives bears witness to. I find in the work of Black Audio Film Collective, as well as that of La Vaughn Belle, Jeannette Ehlers, Oceana James and other artists, sensibilities that can inform new ethical and aesthetic assemblages that help us to confront the current problematic of the mass digitization of these archives: an ability to create, out of these fragments, new forms of practices, which we might call critical or perhaps even decolonial practices of repair. Black Audio Film Collective's Data Thief teaches us to attune ourselves to the sonorous, affective and textural dimensions of the archive. It compels us to create assemblages of enunciation that cut across semiotic and a-semiotic or machinic flows of signs, and to create novel forms of subjectivity. It invites us to nourish a relationship to time where the past keeps enfolding on itself in the present. It demands us to stay in and with the discomfort, and to stay in the cybernetic fold of radical, creative, decolonial and technological reimagination.

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9 Machinic enslavement is a term derived from Lazzarato's self-proclaimed homage to Félix Guattari in *Signs and Machines* (2014).

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