

A Publication
of the 2021
Inward Outward
Symposium

WWS

Out

road

Emotion in
the Archive

Anger & Defiance

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Anger and Defiance and the Archive

The following is excerpted and adapted from presentations and a conversation between Amal Alhaag and Teresa Cisneros as keynote speakers of the *Defiance & Anger* session of the symposium.

Amal Alhaag: This is perhaps more leaning towards defiance than anger, but as a Black woman to whom the notion of anger often brings forward and triggers many different things, I wanted to move more into what I call the dispossessed way of thinking around notions of anger.

I wanted to bring forward a set of propositions. I think often through the lens of science fiction, music, static, and poetry to really consider how we can sit in the space between anger and defiance. To me, both concepts are quite fluid.

When I think about anger, I think about rapper and philosopher Lauryn Hill's song *Black Rage*. In *Black Rage*, released in 2014, she sings the following:

Black rage is founded: who fed us
self-hatred
Lies and abuse, while we waited and waited
Spiritual treason, this grid, and its cages
Black rage is founded on these kind of
things
Black rage is draining and draining
Threatening your freedom to stop your
complaining
Poisoning your water while they say it's
raining
Then call you mad for complaining.

Thinking about this digital thinking space and realm, I thought about Lauryn Hill's song. She released it almost a decade-plus ago after semi-disappearing from the music industry as a beloved rapper-singer in the early 2000s. I thought about what it actually means to be deviant. What it means for a Black woman to be deviant is too often that one cannot function in the public eye. The song Lauryn Hill produced touches on many different things: the precarity of being Black and a woman, the precarity of moving in a particular reality that still means, even when wealthy, one must function within a supremacist system. Dispossession over deviance.

When I think of the archive, I return often to the concept of 'the wake' that scholar Christina Sharpe offered us so kindly. Hanging out with anger as a verb means in the context of the archive, hanging out with silences, gaps, confusions, rambles, and boredom. We often forget about boredom because somehow, it's the least sexy concept that often shapes our days and time hanging out in the archive. And I wonder still if it is even possible to interrogate systems of dispossession and negation and actively listen to colonized, marginalized, and

repressed subjects in the archive everyday. What is defiance in the face of bureaucracy? What possible ways can we listen low-key and bring forward racial thoughts, practices, movements, and riots?

What is holding space, but a momentary shift of attention to how we see anger as noise. I want to move towards the thinking of anger as *sound*.

Here I think of *Cold as Ice* by MOP, a group that was famous in the late '90s. The chorus repeats:

You're cold as ice
You're willing to sacrifice

Thinking about these two words together: ice and sacrifice, I wonder also about anger and what anger means in the Netherlands as a way of being cold as ice, not showing emotions. But what does this actually mean for people who hang out in the archive? My own practice is very much rooted in doing and the undoing. When I say that, it means also having beef with the archive, being in a state of fighting, in a state of negotiation that sometimes might take the shape of disagreement. Disagreement is not yet anger. It might be cold as ice. In relation to this cold as ice notion I ask myself, what am I willing to sacrifice when I hang out in the archive? Especially, if we return to the fact that sometimes the places where objects, documents, remaining stories, gossips, and tales go to die, is the archive.

What does it mean then to listen to the archive? Listening in this context means also listening as a site of racialized technology. Then we have to connect it to the race discourse of listening and sound. It was rooted in the late 19th-century notion of the body and the psyche. Jennifer Lynn Stoeber wrote about how the sonic line has always been politicized, racialized, and classed. She touches on *who* conceptualized this notion of listening: two white men, Frederick Nast, and Hermann von Helmholtz.

I also want to bring forward this idea about the archive as a site of study. Of course, it is, but it's a study as a way of being always in relation with violence. This is especially true in the colonial archive but I feel there's violence in various forms of archives, though I do want to acknowledge the work of people in organizations like the Black Archives, and other places where different types of minor histories are centralized.

In this space of all the beautiful words that we can come up with to conceptually relate to these spaces, I often return to the extractive relationship. We often bring up the words of those who are unheard. But who is unheard? Who decides they are heard? In which spaces are people unheard? Why do we need to push people to the foreground? Did we ask? Where is agency in

the reshaping, remodeling, rethinking of these archives? The agency of those who are trapped in the archive but also those to whom we want to bring this archive to light or to whom we want to show it.

These are my constellations of thoughts and sets of questions that I feel I have to wrestle with.

Teresa Cisneros: I am Teresa Cisneros the daughter of Vicente Cisneros and Lucrecia Puente both of Mexican lineage. I am a Chicana or Mexican American. I was born on the Texas-Mexico border. I practice from where I am from, not where I am at.

I grew up knowing that our behavior affects one another and therefore we should always consider the other when we make decisions. A friend said to me, "You are like this because you are a desert person, and desert people cannot survive on their own. They need one another." That is what I carry into all of my practices.

Currently I am the Inclusive Practice Lead at the Wellcome Collection. I'm part of the diversity-inclusion-culture-profession. Historically, I have focused on curating and arts administration, not diversity or inclusion. But I also come from a *curandera* practice, a Mexican healing practice that allows me to work with a different perspective, and work toward healing the colonial wound. The institution as archive is like the scab of a wound that does not heal, but attempts healing.

I was invited to think about anger and the archive.

I am at the Wellcome Collection as an act of retribution or revenge. The institution is the archive. What does it mean to willingly put yourself in the belly of the beast? To accept you are responding from anger and the desire to carry out acts of revenge on the institution? These sentiments are invoked from historical and contemporary colonial encounters, embodied in how the institution behaves, thinks, and acts.

As a paid colonial administrator, who is not white, I center an approach I call healing the colonial wound, which is festering with racism and oppression. The institution is a living breathing thing that embodies and articulates its histories. It is the people, the policies, the outputs, the collecting practices et cetera. Its practices and forms have produced a colonial wound. My practice uses the logic of colonial administration against itself to undo the institution and attempt to heal or reconstruct it.

What does it mean for a body like mine being part of an institution like the Wellcome Collection? You see, the Wellcome Collection didn't ask me to

think about its exclusionary system. They asked me to diversify their audiences. I could not ethically do this without thinking about the institution as an archive to be undone and reinterpreted.

I work through the idea of a wounded hope. I hope there will be change but I know that pain, anger, and revenge will be part of it. Oftentimes I remind myself that I am here because they do not want me here. This makes me want to propel myself forward but also to break the institution open for others.

For instance, I was told, 'We need our front of house team to learn to be more anti-racist.' They expected me to give an afternoon workshop. Instead, we did a series of conversations. When someone there said, 'I've never had to think about race,' because they were white and male, I thought, 'How amazing is that? These are the people who are at the front of our institution, who greet people, welcome people. If we're thinking about the institution as the archive, what does this lack of reflection mean for *us* when we walk in?'

The race conversations started with some of us grappling in a confrontational way. I say confrontational because it was face to face. But they weren't heavy conversations, or they weren't heavy for me. Of course, there were tears. Upset. I remind myself that all those emotions that upset my peers, the anger we feel, it's actually already embedded, embodied within the institution. In the objects we hold.

Historically, Wellcome was a pharmaceutical company. Henry Wellcome collected science and cures from around the world. We hold one of the world's Eugenics archives. The father of Eugenics being Francis Galton¹, who literally, physically lives where I am everyday. We are the belly of the beast of coloniality.

I've been thinking with all my colleagues through the question 'What can we do for people to think differently?' All my life, I have been educated by a white culture, formally educated in a white way. How can I teach the institution – its people -- how to think radically differently and unlearn some bad habits? Especially those related to race and disability?

I have to deal with this lifelong process. Every day I ask myself, have I behaved in a racist way or an ableist way? I literally ask myself, because it's

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For some background on Francis Galton see this video from Subhadra Das, a historian of science and museum curator in "Subhadra Das and the many thoughts of Francis Galton": <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NPaalX30k7Y>.

a process, it's an everyday act. I sometimes think about it as something like alcoholics anonymous, where every day I have to face it. Every day, I have to admit that I behave in these ways too and what can I do? I thought, "If I do this, why can't my colleagues learn as well?"

Through these questions, I developed an anti-racism curriculum and lobbied for it to be mandatory. I didn't write it down. I created the conditions where I could bring in activists, professionals, experts in these fields to tell us what we should be learning. Because it's not okay for one person, me, a Brown body, to say how this should be. So it's evolved to be a social justice curriculum. Staff kept thinking it's optional, but I said 'No, it's actually going to be a mandatory piece of work, but it's a lifelong learning piece of work.' I had to keep reminding people, this is the first phase that allows them to learn the foundations of where race and disability have been made. So a place like the Wellcome, we made those conversations years ago.

So while I'm here, I have to act from a place of compassion towards others because they were never taught how not to be racist or how not to be ableist. I always have to remind myself, "These are the people who hold the power of the institution," but also how and what we do with our archives, and the archives being *our* collections, our policies, it's everything we do.

Actually, I'm quite okay with being angry. I really use it as a positive and I'm glad that I feel these things because at least I'm feeling.

Amal: Thank you so much for sharing this. For proposing something about how we could make anger in a particular way, in a productive, imaginative way. I have to think about it because, of course, both of us have the colonial institution as a foundational work space.

I think sometimes it's easier to take a radical stance when the colonial is right in your face. Working at an ethnographic museum, you can't hide from it. It's literally in the building, the spectacularity of it all, I think that's the reality for many of us. But for me, it becomes more complex when you start thinking about it in the everyday, in the mundane. I want to propose that we move away from the spectacular or purely conceptual. I personally always return to bell hooks's idea where she speaks about moving from theory into action.

But sometimes I have to be very real about it and I feel I'm stuck. For some people working at archival institutions is just work. For others, because of our minoritized, racialized, precarious positions, it is for us almost necessary life work. How do we shift that? How do we actually shift that, and who wants to do that labor?

Amal: I want to return also to this idea of extraction in the archive, in relation to people trying to find their own histories in these type of colonial archives. Or via YouTube and social media, how some of these images, these sounds, field recordings, have returned to us through music or through hipster festivals. Or this idea that cool people can work with the archive without being offered the set of conditions of how to actually negotiate space with images, story, sounds.

I'm sometimes more concerned with, not necessarily how things live in the colonial space because I know that that's a very clear confinement, but when they return to enter people's bodies, and brains, and spirits, because there is no altering. When you're looking for yourself, when you're trying to find your own roots or...

Teresa: It's also an idea that we are rooted in one thing. I'm going to go find myself in the archive. I'm going to go find my history. But these histories are colonial histories themselves. They already come with a white colonial gaze. Most of the archives we have... I don't want to say the word dangerous, but there is something about it that feels slippery when imagery is involved.

With imagery, especially in the arts, because we have so many artists that will take images and put them into the artwork, make them to be this thing that they were never meant to be, but they become a new interpretation. Their meanings shift by the gaze. But I always think back to the fact that the majority of these images were collected under a specific gaze and these were not supposed to exist.

Just like photography. We know that's one of the worst ones.

Amal: I completely agree. I think one of the confinements of photography is that

Teresa: I think we are not there yet where we can just release this to the white body to go, ‘You know how to do it now,’ because they’ve never been taught. I remember having a conversation with a colleague, and I said to her, ‘I really feel sorry for white people.’ She looked at me like, ‘What?’ I said, ‘Well because y’all are never taught to be human.’ Her face, she was shocked. I said, ‘The reason I think that is because for so long, white people have been taught how to dehumanize Black and Brown bodies, especially. If logic is right, if they’re not human, then y’all are not human either.’

My way, thinking about my role here, is to think, ‘Do I humanize people to be kinder?’ To learn how to be together, to treat people like people, and not based on this conception of color, of skin tone? I don’t say this is the work everyone should be doing because not everyone is cut out to do this type of work.

But then there’s also the other thing, Amal, where we also become the voice by which a lot of people want to use us to speak to the institution.

Amal: I have to say, luckily, perhaps, I’m not that person!

If I think about the ethnographic museum, or the way research has shown that people see the museum as the place of truth-making more than the university, then I think we also need to start developing tools of accountability. We don’t have a word for accountability in Dutch. Maybe that says a lot. But I often think about how Wayne Modest quotes this famous Shaggy hit, *It Wasn’t Me* to demonstrate the refusal of accountability. I sometimes think about it in relation to this undoing.

Many of us are excited about the work of undoing, until it comes to the actual doing of the undoing. I don’t get angry, I just get irritated where I cannot even hear any more people blah, blah, blahing about things. I just want to hear, how are you *doing* this?

Teresa: Even the word undoing or unlearning. I use it because I want to re-educate people. If I could, I would re-pattern our behavior because we’re not just born this way. We are *made* to be this way.

But it also reminds me of this idea of a radical practice. I don’t have a radical practice, yet I am told that I do. It’s just irritating, as you say. It’s not radical, it’s just another practice. It’s just not white, middle-class, university-educated. There’s not language for it yet, because y’all have never allowed the language in or the practice.

The other word that annoys me in the museum sector currently is ‘disrupter.’ I’m like, ‘I’m not a disrupter, this is my work. I get paid to tell you all

its technology was already so colonial and supremacist that to even undo, one almost needs to re-conceptualize what photography potentially could be and it’s almost unattainable. What I would then recommend, is to just really acknowledge and embed the colonial roots of it. Because it’s almost like living on stolen land. Like how some Canadians or people from the US sometimes acknowledge first that they live on stolen indigenous land. I feel that’s what we almost need to put in as a disclaimer with photographic images.

Teresa: I completely agree with you.

Amal: I think about the technology of today. The algorithm, but also what it means, as a Black person, to even use automated soap dispensers. When people ask me, ‘What do you think it was like to live when it was colonial times?’ and sometimes to be like, ‘Listen, I still live in a colonial era.’ That’s today for me: the aftermath or afterlife is using that soap dispenser that’s not working and having to ask a white person, ‘Can you please put *your* hand underneath because it will recognize it?’ It’s these types of everyday violence or aggression that are within the genealogy and technology of the colonial.

Teresa: I think we’re all complicit. We’re all complicit in upholding systemic oppression every day. From the moment you wake up, and you look at your phone, the alarm on your phone. We contribute to it every day, we exist, I don’t think we’re ever going to move on beyond colonial time.

13 these things. I'm not disrupting. I'm just asking a different set of questions."

I think for me those layers of where I am complicit -- I get paid for this work and I am fortunate that I get to do this work in an institution that is actually trying to make moves. I'm fortunate. I'm not privileged, I'm fortunate that I've been supported and I think you have too. I think this is something we both can recognize that we've had encounters that have also supported us to work through defiance, or through revenge or retribution or to undo. I just have to say that I'm-- gosh, I really do hate the word fortunate because I've worked my ass off and so have you.

Amal: You can be so fortunate and work your ass off and be complicit and maybe.... And maybe let's just end here as a beginning provocation of Inward Outward.

AMAL ALHAAG is an Amsterdam-based independent curator, dj, and researcher who develops ongoing experimental and collaborative research practices, public programmes, and projects on global spatial politics, archives, colonialism, counter-culture, oral histories, and popular culture. Her projects and collaborations with people, initiatives, communities and institutions invite, stage, question, and play with "uncomfortable" issues that riddle, rewrite, remix, share, and compose narratives in impermanent settings.

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Critical Archival Engagements with Sounds and Films of Coloniality

