

Lecture by Dr. Sonja Boon
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I want to start with an anecdote:

“Newfoundland?” one of my aunts apparently crowed upon hearing that I’d been offered a position at Memorial University. “That’s where the batjauw comes from!”

My uncle tells me his sister was wrong and that it was actually Halifax, but both of them, my aunt – a Surinamese born woman now living in the Netherlands, who has never in her life visited Atlantic Canada and my uncle, back in Suriname after a decade away - were right in stating that there’s a long history of salt fish traveling from Newfoundland to the plantations in the Caribbean.

Salt fish is big in my mother’s side of the family. Alliances have been made through salt fish: when my Faroese husband’s parents brought Faroe Islands’ salt air-dried fish to our wedding, my Surinamese relatives congregated around it, snacking the night away. It wasn’t exactly batjauw, but it was certainly close, and they made the most of it. And so it came to be that the palates of widely disparate worlds—Newfoundland, Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Massachusetts, the Faroe Islands, and Suriname—were united through a single export product.

My aunt has never been to Newfoundland; she’s only been to Canada once. And yet, just as salt cod is integral to Newfoundland identity, so too is it central to my mother’s family’s Caribbean identity.

(My book) “What the Oceans Remember” is my attempt to grapple with my mother’s family history, a complicated story that spans five continents and that includes histories of slavery and indenture, and to consider my own implication within, and responsibility for, those histories.

It’s also a story about what stories archives can tell and can’t tell, and in some ways it’s a love letter to archives and archival research.

In both of these ways, my work relates to the themes of “What Carries Us.” Last week, during Bushra’s curatorial talk and later, on Friday, during an extended conversation I had with her, facilitated by Kate Lahey, we focused on belonging: what does it mean to live in a place that has been defined as a white Settler space?

Specifically, what does this mean for those of us who do not occupy that identity and what of the stories that don’t fit that mythology?

1. What does it mean to belong, when dominant understandings don’t include people who look like you?

2. What does home mean, when people constantly ask you where you're from?
3. In a world shaped by migrations, both forced and voluntary, how do we navigate our differences in socially and historically complex ways?
4. How do we make sense of troubling histories, complicated mixtures?

Further, how might we reimagine this place if we situate Newfoundland not as an isolated outpost in the North Atlantic, but as deeply woven into the currents of global commodity exchange? Salt. Sugar. Fish. Rum. Ships. Slaves. Sailors. Merchants. Ballasts.

I want to cede the floor briefly to performance artist Camille Turner, whose "Afronautic Research Lab" seeks to uncover hidden histories of colonial Canadian complicity in the transatlantic slave trade. Interviewed by CBC Radio last year when she was here for the Bonavista Biennale, she made this point:

"We didn't create this history. None of us did. We weren't here, but it is what shaped us," she said. "By not dealing with it, we can never move on from here. We can't really move into a future where things are equitable. So I think it's really important to acknowledge these stories.

Turner articulates very well the conundrum in which we find ourselves. We are, all of us implicated in and inheritors of terrible histories. Brutal histories. Violent histories. Histories of dehumanization. Histories of genocide. Somehow, we need to make sense of them. If we want to live well together, we need to think through these histories. We need to think through the afterlives of colonialism, of slavery, of indenture....

We need to understand their legacies in the present day. And so we might adjust the questions I posed earlier, slightly:

1. What does it mean to belong in the afterlives of slavery, indenture, and more? In a world only slowly coming to terms with the fact that the enslavement of Africans was the foundation for modern capitalism?
2. What does home mean in the context of these histories? How will we construct our identities differently, if we take these histories into consideration – can we imagine NL identity as more than a pseudo Irish identity? And what happens if we do?
3. In a world shaped by migrations, both forced and voluntary, how do we navigate our differences in socially and historically complex ways?
4. How do we make sense of troubling histories, complicated mixtures?

How do we live "in the wake" as Christina Sharpe has put it, of these histories? These are big questions. They're hard questions. And they're prickly. The truths they might reveal are uncomfortable. How do we live with them? They are central, as I see it, to "What Carries

Us” (and also to John Akomfrah’s “Vertigo Sea”). These are the questions that underpinned my own work in “What the Oceans Remember” as well.

As someone who has worked with archival materials, I know, as do Camille Turner and Christina Sharpe, that our pasts determine our presents. They shape who we are and how we are.

So, I proposed to look at these questions by looking at my own family history. I was, in a sense, my own case study. I asked these questions of myself, and of my own histories. And I asked them as a child whose own history, and whose longer family histories are also embedded in the Black Atlantic (and beyond):

1. Someone who was born in England. Then moved to Venezuela. Then to Ontario. Then to Alberta, Quebec, BC, Newfoundland and Labrador
2. But whose parents came from the Netherlands and Suriname
3. Whose great-grandfather on one side came from India, an indentured labourer.
4. Whose great-great grandmother on another side of the family was enslaved.

What does this history mean, today? How has it shaped who I understand myself to be – and how others have understood me? What are my responsibilities to these pasts? How do I live with them in the present day?

Where did these questions come from?

1. In some respects, they’ve dogged me since childhood: “Where are you from?” has been a constant question for as long as I can remember.
2. Also comes from living in Newfoundland, where place is central to identity. Where everyone, seemingly, seems to know what home is and what it means to belong

My approach to answering this question, as someone who has worked in archives, was to see what stories the archives could reveal to me. Interestingly, that’s where my work intersects most with what I’ve seen in this exhibition.

Archival research is not just about the texts or written words of the past, but about the materiality of the past. It’s about touch, feel, smell; it’s about tracing your fingers over words penned by a ship’s captain in the eighteenth century, about feeling the weight of linen rich paper.

Archival research is about the ballast stones gathered here by Camille Turner (and similar stones which were used to build the colonial fort in Paramaribo Suriname).

To link to the sugary work of Shelley Miller: Archival research is about the stickiness of sugar on the plantations, of the sugar processing vats that the enslaved had to tend, of the way that technology later intervened to create steam-powered equipment.

But it's also, as Miller's work suggests, the way that this sugar enriched the lives of those who lived in The Netherlands:

- the city of Amsterdam, which owned a third of the colony of Suriname, and whose wealth was premised on the enslaved labour on Surinamese plantations,
- the city of Middelburg in the Dutch province of Zeeland, where, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, over 30% of the economy was based on the trade in enslaved Africans in some way (provisioning ships, building ships, etc) and where traces of this history can be seen in the names of grand homes (Demerara, for example) but also in the former pakhuizen, or storehouses for sugar, coffee, cotton, cocoa produced on plantations. Many of these pakhuizen are not trendy apartments.)

Archival research is also about what remains of the past; it is about rainforests reclaiming plantation spaces, mangrove roots so voracious that boat operators travel with chainsaws, erosion that washes stories into oceans, simultaneously revealing new ones: In Suriname, whole plantations have eroded, slipping into the sea. And in the process, so too have new histories been uncovered, as the dress, shoes, and knife of W.H., here in this exhibition, reveal. In the archival collections, it's about mouldering documents whose corners flake off every time you turn a page. About the documents I had to return because the ink had eaten right away to the bottom, making them too fragile to handle. About documents listed in the finding aid that had mysteriously disappeared. Or those with ink blotches right at the moments when you wanted to see something more clearly.

Archival research is also about mixings and minglings; about the stories you didn't expect to find: in the exhibition: it's about the histories of slavery on this island, about a young sailor of African heritage buried along the coast of Labrador. In my book, it's about a man named Jan Houthakker, a formerly enslaved man who was freed and then spent the rest of his life purchasing and then freeing others.

So too, is it about the material artefacts that I own, and how their meaning changes for me over time: The angisa, or head cloth, that I got from my mother, designed and produced in 1963 to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the abolition of slavery in Suriname. When I first found this buried deep in a suitcase even deeper in a basement closet, I took it because I liked the colours and the patterns. I was a young teenager who knew some bits of my family history but who hadn't yet put that history together with my own day-to-day experiences. Only over time has its meaning become that much more central to my understanding of myself.

Archives are about currents and waves – of overwhelming washes of water that carried within them both hope and horror as John Akomfrah's "Vertigo Sea" suggests. The enslaved thrown overboard from the Zong in 1781 for insurance monies (an event referenced in "Vertigo Sea"). The identities lost as enslaved Africans passed through the Door of No Return, their histories forever silenced.

Archives are also about space and place – about reflecting on the past in the spaces where those stories you’re researching happened.

And in my own family history, archives are about the hope and horror of tracing my family tree not through family bibles, but rather, through documents of trade: the accounting records of the royal treasury, designed to ensure the continued wealth of plantation owners.

I’ve worked in archives for years and in that time, I’ve developed ways of working. I have routines and rhythms, notes and notebooks. Everyone who has worked in archives has developed their own routines and rituals (and this leads to some interesting – if nerdy – conversations among archives dwellers!)

Most of my work to this point had been with what I’d call “juicy archives” – yummy, rich, detailed, gossipy materials like letters and diaries. The routines I’d developed worked really well for these materials.

But it’s different when there are no juicy letters (or, very few), when the materials aren’t so immediately exciting (government documents, lists of names, etc), and, more to the point, when the people you’re looking for exist only in accounting records designed not for their own benefit, but for the enslavers who owned them.

It’s also very different when you’re writing about your own history. Things very quickly got complicated: I couldn’t keep my distance and found it hard to maintain what might be termed archival neutrality. This is not to say that I hadn’t been moved by materials I’d accessed in the course of previous research, because I had. But now, nothing was anonymous. Everything was personal. Not only was everything personal, most of it was horrifying.

This project forced me to work differently, to see differently, to think differently, and to write differently. It asked me to think about who I was not only in relation to the world in which I live, but also in relation to the archival materials, and to my histories. It demanded my whole body, not just my intellectual engagement.

It asked me to attend more closely. To spend more time. To ask more questions. To dwell in speculation.

And that’s what this exhibit demands from me as well. It asks me to think about silence, and also, about silencing. It asks me to think about economic systems, and about what we have justified (and continue to justify), what we have enjoyed (and continue to enjoy), and what we have ignored (and continue to ignore), all in the name of profit.

To return to Shelley Miller’s blue tiles, and the sugar that is disintegrating and crumbling, but that also functions as glue. This sugary glue holds things together but is as invisible enslaved labour makes the tilework possible. And so I wonder... Delft Blue and its knock offs are central to Dutch identity, but what made them possible?

“What Carries Us” asks me to think about restorying, in the face of new knowledge and then to move from restorying, to reworlding and imagining new possible futures. It asks me to think not just about horror or grief, but also about celebration and play. And perhaps, to think of both at the same time.

About the ways that cultures and foodways have been shaped by histories of commodity exchange: Salt fish. Molasses. Rum. About how the flavours that are so central to who we consider ourselves to be are implicated in global commodity exchange, including the exchange of humans as commodities.

But also, thinking about Sonia Boyce’s work, about the ways that history can be saucy, about how the spirits of the past accompany us in our daily wanderings, slide past us, sneak around corners, dance, stride, live with us, play, sparkle brightly even behind the staid furniture of grand plantations and the histories of violence and oppression that made that wealth possible. What might it mean to think of cheeky sprites, celebrations, parades, sparkles, and glitter? To imagine stiltwalkers dancing through overgroomed ornamental gardens?

Can we see W. H. wandering along our cliffs, or the unnamed enslaved woman listed in a colonial will, walking the streets of Placentia? Or perhaps, the “dusky coloured” citizens of empire mentioned in the Newfoundland geography textbook – sailors, travelers, adventurers, merchants, and others – disembarking from ships in St. John’s harbour, drinking in our pubs, meeting, loving, and living with white settlers? Unsettling our assumptions about who belongs in this place and whose stories matter here.

What does home mean?

What does it mean to belong?

If we return to Camille Turner’s words, this history – this Newfoundland in the Black Atlantic – is all of our story. We come to it in different ways, but we need to acknowledge it, to work through it, to take responsibility for it. We weren’t here then, but we need to figure out how to live with it.

“History,” writes the Zimbabwean-born writer, Panashe Chigumadzi, “is like water—it lives between us, and comes to us in waves. At times, still and unobtrusive, and, at other times turbulent and threatening. Even at its most innocuous, water poses hidden dangers, enclosing contested histories, and so we are always living in the tension between water’s tranquillity and its tumult.”

Thank you.

- Sonja Boon is a Professor of Gender Studies at Memorial University and the author of “What the Oceans Remember: Searching for Belonging and Home.”

Citations:

“Artist highlights N.L.'s slave trade connection in Bonavista exhibition”:

[https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/newfoundland-labrador/camilleturner-nl-slave-ships - connection-1.5240589](https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/newfoundland-labrador/camilleturner-nl-slave-ships-connection-1.5240589)

Sonja Boon and Gina Snooks, “Salt Fish and Molasses: Unsettling the Palate in the Spaces Between Two Continents.’ *European Journal of Life Writing*, Vol. 6 (2017)

The Story of Life in a Single Photograph.” LitHub, 2018: <https://lithub.com/the-story-of-a-life-in-a-single-photograph/>