

THE CONCH #21

with

OLAMIJU FAJEMISIN

SAMRA MAYANJA

CAMARA TAYLOR

Curated by Tendai Mutambu and Lily Tonge
South London Gallery / 10 March 2021

These texts were created in response to a live online event, The Conch, hosted by the South London Gallery on 10 March 2021. The participants discussed the ways moving image work is created, particularly in relation to editing

I saw all the mirrors on earth and none of them reflected me

is a line taken from Argentinian writer Jorge Luis Borges' 1949 short story, *The Aleph* [*El aleph*].¹

The story, which alleges there is a point in space in which all other spaces are concurrently contained, relies on a logic of multitudes caused by negation. The absurdity of the notion that one could look into every mirror on earth and not be greeted by a true reflection implies the existence of something(s) or some place(s) beyond infinity. Perhaps the absence of a reflected image implies the existence of a refracted or distorted one, we are left to speculate.

Borges' methodology of causing conjecture among his readers long anticipated scholar Saidiya Hartman's conception of the phrase 'critical fabulation.' The term was first used by Hartman in 2008 to signify her 'intuitive' production of a 'storied articulation of ideas,' despite the undermining of the documentary and archival remains of trans-Atlantic slavery by their incompleteness.²

Working in the aftermath of Hartman's primary consolidation of so-called incompleteness as a premeditated act of colonial violence, artists Camara Taylor and Samra Mayanja demonstrate new potential for omission, deconstruction, and partiality as regenerative, critical tools. The artists' mutual refusal to submit to conventional narrative building—all the while exploring digital methods of archival praxis and preservation—creates a framework within which new surmisations of contemporary Black experience(s) may be toyed with.

There is an abject humour to Taylor's work. In a preliminary draft of *After Us/pining* (2021), overlapping lines of speech give way to belching noises which soon turn to the sounds of crashing waves and rapidly boiling water. A white flag reads simply 'BLACK,' and hangs from the bay window of a Glasgow apartment. The transparent image of a disembodied, hairy mound is laid over a fair-skinned, fleshy crease; perhaps the crook of an arm or knee. The background fades, and we come to recognise that this mound is a Black person's crotch. They are lying on their back, opening and closing their thighs. And then we see incumbent Health Secretary Matt Hancock. Relegated to a shrunken frame, he chews a cookie at which he gazes lovingly between bites, blissfully unaware that his image is already/still being broadcast live and recorded. The semantic distance between this composition—underscored by the ticklish sound of a stream of piss hitting the bottom of a toilet bowl (or maybe just water splashing into a sink)—and those of the Black person nude, protesters in George Square, Glasgow the night after the 2014 Scottish independence referendum, and an insert of anti-BLM "In-ger-lund, In-ger-lund"-chanting protesters in London confuse and provoke the viewer.

In lieu of allowing their audio-visual montage to convey a clear-cut, lucid agenda, Taylor uses their editorial autonomy to pry open the hollows between sensuality and provocation, patriotism and xenophobia, individualism and collectivism. Like Mayanja, Taylor is concerned with investigating the contradictory ways in which people may be moved. But whereas Taylor's work provokes simultaneous feelings of discomfort and humour, Mayanja's video work, *A BLUEPRINT FOR "THE DEEP"* (2020/2021) encourages our curiosity. The twelve-minute collage of muted ambient sounds and patches of silence accompanies a slow-moving montage of affirmations, abstract images projected onto a swatch of lacy fabric, and digital colourscales.

Midway through the film, we see a video game sequence of a retro silver car rushing carelessly along a cliffside meadow before tumbling through trees and over the edge. Before the moment of impact, the film quickly cuts to a tight shot of Ugandan teen climate activist, Vanessa Nakate. Between sobs, Nakate tells of the emotional impact of the incident in which she was unceremoniously cropped out of a group photo featuring four other prominent (white) teen environmental campaigners in Davos last year. Cut back to the pathos-delivering car crash.

Mayanja's keen editing skills, her ability to unite both extreme calm and tension through a considered arrangement of her found and created materials calls on the viewer to investigate why they are experiencing such complicated emotional reactions to the work. Toward the end of the film, the image of an eternally-drowned underwater statue of an alabaster white Virgin Mary is presented along with a sound bite of Nakate detailing the inequity of the global climate crisis. "You're erasing our stories," she says bleakly, before the credits roll.

Both of the artists' works speak to the anxiety of speculation; the never-ending deliberations as to whether memory lacunae are in fact deliberate, or intentional. The almost photogrammetric assembly of audio-visual material creates a new kind of subjective auto-ethnography, allowing the artists to share with us their interpretations of the poetics of racist nuance.

Olamiju Fajemisin is a writer, curator, and student at the Courtauld Institute of Art, London, UK. Her work has been published by frieze, Contemporary&, Brand-New-Life, Burlington Contemporary, Kunsthall Bergen, and the Salzburg International Summer Academy of Fine Arts, among others. She is the digital editor of PROVENCE. Her performative practice constitutes an ongoing exploration of the possibilities of spoken text.

¹ I previously cited this quote in a text published by Zurich-based music journal *From Here Till Now*. The untitled work discussed the themes presented in 'Orlando', the title single from Centre for Research Architecture graduate and experimental pop musician Nelson Beer's forthcoming album. <http://www.fromheretillnow.com/orlando>, January 20 2021.

² Thora Siemsen, "On working with archives: An interview with writer Saidiya Hartman." *The Creative Independent*, February 3 2021. <https://thecreativeindependent.com/people/saidiya-hartman-on-working-with-archives/>

A conversation between Olamiju Fajemisin, Samra Mayanja, Tendai Mutambu and Camara Taylor

NOTE 1

Elizabeth Hardwick, *Its only defense: intelligence and sparkle*, New York Times, Sep 14 1986, <https://www.nytimes.com/1986/09/14/books/its-only-defense-intelligence-and-sparkle.html>

NOTE 2

Elvania Namukwaya Zirimu, *Family Spear*, 1971.

NOTE 3

The African Writers Series is a series of books published by Heinemann since 1962.

NOTE 4

George Hallett (1942-2020), South African photographer.

NOTE 5

Lake Victoria borders Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda. In 2020 the lake hit a new record high level of 13.42 meters.

Tendai Mutambu: So with this conversation we want to focus on the process of how moving image work is created, with a particular interest in how various source material is edited and brought together. I was initially drawn to this idea by novelist, essayist and critic Elizabeth Hardwick's statement that the essay form is 'nothing less than a reflection of ... thought itself in orbit'.

Central to this project is the way in which Samra's and Camara's work embraces the capaciousness of their chosen form. We are bringing into orbit, around their central interests and concerns, a host of interlocutors, including me, Lily, Olamiju, and several artists, thinkers, writers.

Samra Mayanja: In my film-sketch for the project, provisionally titled *THE DEEP*, I wanted to bring together various voices and see how they would sound together. Sound meaning how their colours play into each other, how their voices could be recontextualised to form new threads through time and still link back to the source or sources. With this work, I started by drawing the shape of the film, which acts, and has acted, as a malleable instruction or score for myself throughout the process. This work being somehow an investigation into my process of making images, which is processing and re-processing images through multiple digital devices, as well as mediating images through other objects, and the process of editing images that's dictated by the marrying of a feeling and a quality that I experience.

I started with the play *Family Spear* by Ugandan playwright Elvania Namukwaya Zirimu written in 1971. A lot of Ugandan film that I see, or have researched, borrows from theatrical methods, be it in the staging of the film, the mode of image making, or the perspective of the camera. Secondly, I wanted to collect several of the African Writers Series books, in which this play *Family Spear* is included because of the photographer, George Hallett, who, in my mind, is kind of like an art uncle--someone whom I've never met but feel a kinship to based solely on the quality of his images and work.

What struck me about *Family Spear*, the play, was this overwhelming use of thunder to indicate or allude to a breaking or rupture that was on its way. It's coming. It's coming. In this context, it's the break between traditional Buganda marriage rights and the Christian rights that were finding their way into Buganda life, and had been for the last ninety years at the point that Namukwaya wrote the play. While reading the play, there was a parallel rupture that was happening or that I was seeing. And this rupture was the pervasive floods in the region surrounding Lake Victoria that were displacing thousands of people, including those in Uganda, as well as in Tanzania, and in Kenya, which is where some of that footage comes from. I think about my mode of editing as iterative, kind of following different threads, always looking back to and away from this malleable shape or form that I drew at the beginning. And with each new voice that's introduced, or that is brought to the choir, the shape shifts, and the film is remade. So this work in progress that you're seeing is maybe the third iteration of this film, and it's still not finished, I don't think.

'With each new voice that's introduced, or that is brought to the choir, the shape shifts, and the film is remade...they are a disparate or diffuse choir that sings together. That moves in the same way without knowing each other, or not knowing the way that each other sounds.'



NOTE 6

Thora Siemsen, *On working with archives: An interview with writer Saidiya Hartman*, The Creative Independent, Feb 3 2021. <https://thecreativeindependent.com/people/saidiya-hartman-on-working-with-archives/>

NOTE 7

Vanessa Nakate is a climate justice activist.

Perhaps, perhaps they are a choir, perhaps that's the new shape. Perhaps this means they will meet, or they are a disparate or diffuse choir that sings together. That moves in the same way without knowing each other, or not knowing the way that each other sounds. There's myself; me, the artist, and at points I felt like a librarian or an archivist, the carer and organiser of information, or perhaps not. One thing that is clear is my voice being the thread, like many of the colours that we see, it is consistent throughout. And I think my role in the choir would somehow be like a composer or a timekeeper. Water is perhaps another voice in the choir; shower, shower water, rain, flood, submerged underwater, rolling through layers, the sight and surface of water, the deep.

Olamiju Fajemisin: I found that someone had written about your work, about Saidiya Hartman's idea of critical fabulation, and that ended up being an idea that I wanted to extend in my exploration of both your and Camara's work.

I think I had perhaps the most intense reaction to the GTA clip going into the self recorded video by Vanessa Nakate, which then went into the crash. I think there was a wonderful contrast between those two clips, not only because of the different aspect ratios, but also the overwhelming pathos that came as a result of the moment of impact. And I was quite interested in that sensation. I didn't necessarily come to a conclusion as to what it might have meant to me. You know, is there something to be found in the fact that this act of terrible racism is being exposed and publicly condemned, but at the same time, it also felt like a sucker punch, or perhaps even a punch line, in the fact that the car is still so mangled and continues to fall, continues to crash? That's quite important to me. And another thing that really stood out to me in the work was the idea of negation as silence, and the interplay between these different moments of extreme quiet or still, unmoving image, like when I was thinking about written editorial processes, and how those could perhaps relate to video editorial processes. By giving us these moments of quiet and moments of silence and stillness, you're creating a space in which viewers are able to kind of consider their emotional reactions as the piece is going on.

SM: I feel like it's such a blessing to make work and then have somebody write about it. Because you're given this very detailed walkthrough of your work, through a different door. Yeah, critical fabulation was the idea that Hartman introduced to us. I think the thing that I'm most drawn to is, knowing that when we step into the archives there will be some degree of violence. I imagine it quite visually, picking things up and observing them, and then putting them back down, and leaving, and leaving them where they were. Leaving them in the corners of drawers, or in the backs of files or in the corner of a hard drive. But that there can be a process of imagining in and around



I want to see...'

Sound: Water trickling begins
to sound more like rain, or a
concentration of rain.

Still Image: 'Sit and let things
fall. Don't cry if some of them hurt
you.'

Several layers of text flash over
each other.

'sit down and let things fall. don't
cry if some of them hurt you.'

'keep your mouth shut'

'Put that spear down'

'I want to see your'

'Put that spear down'

that person. And I suppose the way I connect to that, is by, imagining people as whole people, imagining people that do, and live, and breathe, and were, and can be, and aren't, you know? Like imagining people wholly.

OF: You've kind of answered in that statement one of the open questions that I started out my text with, that was this idea of incompleteness as a result of, you know, cultural colonial violence, whether that was the looting of objects, or the erasure of archives. I mean, to put it quite simply, the rewriting of our art histories, essentially. Your understanding of the different voices in your piece, it completely speaks to the incompleteness that your piece is challenging, and ongoing histories of incompleteness. I think it's very easy to begin to talk about speculative practices when we want to, you know, think about the different ways in which we can combat this incompleteness. But, to tether that to a reality, which is not only relatable, directly comes across because the ways that the different voices were mixed in this piece created a very intricate musical web, and I like how that provides something very tangible to hold on to, rather than just the premise of speculation because I mean, speculation is, it's a very abstract term, which I admit, I do use a lot, but I don't often fill it in with an actual case study or an example.

It's directly reflected in the narratives that both you and Camara built, in that they are nonlinear, they are non-conventional, they don't speak to the typical emotional responses you might expect of the cinematic, or even art film audience. I think that's what was particularly effective about the work: in just a few short minutes, they're able to lay out these concepts, deconstruct them, and reconfigure them in such a way that we can imagine new possibilities for thinking about how to deal with incompleteness. Both of the videos are regenerative and restorative because they identify these, what I like to call 'textual holes'. Perhaps my initial reaction when I was first writing about the videos was that I didn't necessarily have a conclusion. But I guess that was because I was looking for an emotion that I had already experienced. I was, you know, looking for a response that I may have expected to have. And I didn't, so I wasn't expecting to have to entertain feelings that are so, I don't want to say contradictory because that implies that they can never work together, but perhaps incompatible, I guess, would be a better word, to describe it.

SM: Maybe I don't have the language for it, but I'm kind of looking for, in those moments between images, something to shift or jolt, or make you aware of the difference.

Camara Taylor: I'm going to make a film about old world charm and ornate capture. It's going to be funny, hopefully rude, perhaps a little sexy, tongue-in-cheek, in this holiday apartment we can't afford, and are really too queer, poor, black, brown to be in. I'm going to think about deadpan humour and strategies of obliqueness, ornate lusting and the desires, anxieties, pleasures, appetites, revulsions, and phobias that produce nostalgia that's currently structuring our lives, and what's to come. I'm reading out parts of my application, that's making me a little bit embarrassed, but I'm going to

'I thought, I can't let this period of time elapse without something to hold on to.'



NOTE 9

Imani Robinson, *My Blackness / Your Safety, How To Sleep Faster*, issue 9, 2018.

NOTE 10

Black feminist grammar(s), particularly those proposed by Tina Campt and her work on the future tense in *Listening To Images*, 2017, and her other talks/and writing around Black futurity on the future conditional tense - 'that which will have to have happened'.

NOTE 11

Maud Sulter, *A Poem of Love*, c. 1986-1989.

continue. Near distant manifestations and nostalgic impulses will be called upon, as well as those currently bubbling. The tug and pull between those who want to go back to normal and those of us for whom normal was always an unlife, surveilled and under siege. Britain First and their allies who say no to the new, or depictions of an all-white NHS workforce that never was, and the revisionist retelling of the war effort. *Pining* attempts to work against nostalgia and for, 'the feelings that are our facts' [Imani Robinson], of what happened, is happening and will have to have happened for a livable world to be.

So, I didn't get that bit of funding and the thoughts sat in my computer. Then in summer 2020, I applied for a residency at Market Gallery in Glasgow. I decided to strip back some of the ideas from previous applications and thought, I'm going to make this thing, I have all these feelings and stuff I want to work through. It's gonna be a script, and it's going to be narrated in this legible way, but the person is going to be mad. Then I learned that a residency from home is really difficult, because it's really hard to be like, "No, I'm on residency", when you're in your house and things need to be done. And so what you all just watched is what I made in the last three hours of the last day of the residency, because I had all these materials and ideas. I was thinking, the script, the script! And the script wasn't coming; I'm a terrible writer. I thought, I can't let this period of time elapse without something to hold on to. So I said, 'forget the script, we're just going to go into Premiere and see what happens and then at least, there'll be something that I can carry forward, or at least be like, "look, I did something with this time that you gave me."' It was fun to make, I guess, because I got to let go of the script, let go of any of my intentions for the work and just see what happened.

The file is currently called "pinning first draft first five minutes 11 10 2020". And it's a sketch, I guess. Even watching it just now I remembered that, those last seconds when I'm reading an extract from a Maud Sulter poem, I included that as a reminder to myself that I wanted to somehow include the Maud Sulter poem, not necessarily like that, but sort of thinking, 'don't forget about this thing that you want to do'. And I realise it's maybe in a way a sketch of me trying to figure out how to work through these competing feelings.

As I was watching today, I remembered that there are these textual elements that were meant to overlay images. I don't remember what those were. I guess I'm now at a stage where for the past six months, on and off, I've been trying to figure out where to go with it, where I want to pull it apart, to put it back together. Because it's now the sketch of the framework, or the foundation for a film that will be made for an exhibition at the Newbridge Project in Newcastle.



'You are writing in anticipation of a future self, you have these instances that are placeholders for you to step in to later'

NOTE 12

Jorge Luis Borges (1899-1986) wrote *The Aleph* in 1945. It is a point in space that contains all other points. Anyone who looks into it can see everything in the universe from every angle simultaneously, without distortion, overlapping, or confusion. The story explores the theme of infinity found in several of Borges' other works.

NOTE 13

Frantz Fanon put forward the concept of combat breathing in his book *A Dying Colonialism*, 1959. He proposed the violence of the colonial state positions subjects in the task of 'combat breathing'. Combat breathing becomes the focus of the subject's energy, to continue to live, to breathe and to survive in the exercise of state violence.

OJ: I might as well begin by kind of offering up the quote that I chose to start my piece with. It's, 'I saw all the mirrors on earth, and none of them reflected me,' which is taken from the short story *The Aleph* by Argentinian writer, Jorge Luis Borges. I would really recommend just having a look for it online because I think it has to be out of copyright right now. It's a quote that I've used to kind of kick-off a response or an essay.

I should say that the Aleph is a singular point in space in which all other spaces are concurrently contained. So it kind of relies on this logic of multitudes caused by negations. And then, we can then begin to think about the possibilities for something more or less than infinity. I wanted to be talking about that, within the context of Camara's work because of these ..., again, they're not contradictions, they're not direct negations, I would perhaps call them non-reflecting mirrors, as suggested by this quote, and I guess, they're not mutually exclusive, I believe. And those themes that I identified were sensuality and provocation, patriotism and xenophobia, individualism and collectivism.

These images and the sounds they're not, they're not compatible. And through placing them together and creating these moments of humor, or partial discomfort, or intrigue, you're creating moments in which we need to then think about, Why is it so? Why am I having the reaction that I'm having to this? Which also came up for me in Samra's work.

TM: It's this idea that you are writing in anticipation of a future self, you have these instances that are placeholders for you to step in to later, or you're just making notes for yourself as well, I think I really love that idea. Just thinking from the point of view of writing essays, and the kind of placeholders, I remember maybe a couple of years ago learning a trick whereby I'm just kind of moving other people's words around filling in gaps, and kind of establishing a rhythm or cadence to something in anticipation of other things, my own ideas, that will take their place in future. So I think that's an interesting strategy to use, and to think about.

CT: It's okay to reuse things, or return to things, in other ways, or through time. You can look at things differently, or find new context, I suppose. I've been stuck on, utterances, and gestures and gestural repertoires for a while now, and particularly in the redevelopment of this work for Newbridge, in May. I think like many people who have a particular interest in a particular sense of politics, I was looking at breath. And then the pandemic happened, and George Floyd was murdered, and everything that I was previously engaged in, or already engaged in, even though I was already committed to these things, everything sort of felt trite or, a bit too, on the nose, or maybe it's just, quite horrific, the enduring relevance of death and objection. But, when I'm thinking about this work for Newbridge, I was looking at Frantz Fanon's concept of combat breathing, but it was also through the pandemic that I realised I was never breathing properly, which I think maybe is a good thing. I'm a smoker anyway, so my lung capacity is so so. I realised the only time I ever took deep breaths

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was when I was having a panic attack, or inhaling on a cigarette. And yeah, the past year I've sort of had to think more consciously about my breath in those sorts of tangible, technical, practical ways. I've also been reading lots of guidance on breathing exercises for when you wear a binder and my friend Meera Shakti Osborne is running these sound tapestry workshops where we always started with a breath exercise. I have an anxiety around the film because the placing of the title scene was towards something of a longer duration, where I could finally get to something that was more explicitly about a collective, or a chorus, or beyond me or the singular.

I guess, before I was unfurloughed--weird, tense, awful, but weirdly blissful period of being furloughed--I had time to fall apart. Which also meant I had time to put myself back together again and get to know my rhythms. I learnt that, it's not that I can't make stuff, it's just that it's horrible to be expected to make stuff regularly. So Premiere, or like coming to this computer, became a nice little retreat. I just got to go in there because I felt like I wanted to check-in to remember something. And then my process is overloading my computer by copying every single image, video, or sound, from wherever it is on my computer, or on my hard drives, into one folder. And then opening all of that in Premiere. And then just having 1,000 projects and sequences, trying to remember what I did, and then letting myself know it's okay if I forgot.

SM: I write to the point of exhaustion. You know, I write reams and reams of paper. Most of which, I forget where they are, or forget, the contents of. But if I remember, that means that there's something special there. Once I feel too tired, if I feel that I don't have anything else to give to that subject or that reflection or that contemplation, then I kind of know that it's done. But I think when it comes to my video work, I'm starting to challenge that notion, because the way of editing the video isn't necessarily 'til exhaustion, but like I was saying earlier, 'til there is a particular quality of image, or a particular surface of the image is achieved, or a kind of collision of colour, that moves me, and then I stop. So it's a kind of anti-exhaustion in a way; it's based on really listening. I suppose exhaustion is a kind of feeling or state but this is something else. So I'm actually excited about that, thinking about those two things together, because it is challenging this work ethic that I was raised with.

The Conch is an open forum for emerging artists and writers that invites critical feedback on work in progress and open discussion in a relaxed atmosphere, outside of an academic institution.

Olamiju Fajemisin is a writer, curator, and student at the Courtauld Institute of Art, London, UK. Her work has been published by frieze, Contemporary&, Brand-New-Life, Burlington Contemporary, Kunsthall Bergen, and the Salzburg International Summer Academy of Fine Arts, among others. She is the digital editor of PROVENCE. Her performative practice constitutes an ongoing exploration of the possibilities of spoken text.

Samra Mayanja is a Leeds based artist and writer whose central concern is what moves us and what it is to be moved. Her work spans writing, performance and film and is an effort to commune disparate voices and to generate around and beyond what's inconceivable, lost or arrives in tatters.

Tendai Mutambu is a writer, editor, and curator based in Bristol where he is Assistant Curator: Commissions and Public Programmes at Spike Island. Tendai is also the inaugural Commissioning Editor for essays at Art Now NZ.

Camara Taylor is amongst other things an artist who lives in Glasgow.

Lily Tonge is the Programme Coordinator at the South London Gallery for exhibitions, displays and public programme.