

An extract that has been taken from:

**Invest in Love: Decolonial, Feminist, and Queer Curatorial Approaches in
deep dive (pause) uncoiling memory,**

a dissertation submitted for the Degree of MLitt Museum and Gallery Studies at the University of St Andrews

by **Kate M. Wilcox**

Nestled between the titanic *La Biennale di Venezia* venues of the Giardini and Arsenale but obscured from the well-trodden pathways, a singular wooden bridge stretches over the canal to connect with the miniature island of San Pietro di Castello. This island is home to a picturesque boatyard turned events venue, the Docks Cantieri Cucchini. It is within these two rooms that Scotland + Venice – a 20-year-old organisation supported by the Scottish government and governed by a partnership of three national-level art institutions – hosts their collateral event.

Their commissioned installation for the 59th International Art Exhibition is *deep dive (pause): uncoiling memory*, a multimedia installation produced by artist-curator Alberta Whittle. Within these rich purple walls, Whittle uses her platform to call upon visitors to ‘...slow down, in order that we may collectively consider the historic legacies and contemporary expressions of racism, colonialism and migration, and begin to think outside of these damaging frameworks.’¹ The message is emotive and unwavering, delivered through an anachronistic narrative drawing upon Scotland’s overlooked complicity in the Transatlantic slave trade and demonstrating how anti-blackness lingers in contemporary Scotland through police brutality. The perspective shifts- on the wall hangs a portrait of a sleeping child, painted by Whittle’s mother. The soundscape echoes with the names of those who have been killed in police custody in the UK, Whittle’s own voice laden with grief. Earlier in the same film a black queer couple joyfully speak about their excitement for raising a family together and imagine a future for their unborn child. Across the

¹ Eddie Chambers et al. *deep dive (pause): uncoiling memory*, 5.

space, metal sculptures fitted with rose-tinted diamond paned glass look out onto the water. On the dark green interpretation panels dotted throughout the space, dozens of names of those who helped with the production of the installation are included, with an intimate message from the artist herself that reads: ‘with love and admiration our growing family of loved ones and accomplices- I would not be here without you.’²

How does Whittle’s signature ‘wayward’ curatorial approach use both the themes explored in her installation and the process in which the installation was created to embody decolonial, feminist, and queer theories that resist institutionalised legacies of colonialism? Through an analysis of Whittle’s *deep dive (pause): uncoiling memory*, this research aims to deconstruct how thoughtful curation can become a decolonial process.

Remembrance & Entanglement

‘[D]ecolonial museum practice has to really be informed by the existing decades and decades of black scholarship and the way that black scholars have theorized the legacies of inequality, of racism, of slavery, of all these traumatic histories that centuries of white supremacy have inflicted on black communities.’³

The quotation above comes from my conversation with Dr. Emma Bond (the academic lead for the *Re-Collecting Empire* exhibition), wherein we discussed the precarity of the term ‘decolonial’, and how often it is appropriated by art institutions. Bond speculates this challenge is further heightened for institutions as they are a colonial project, and the process of decolonisation challenges their standard mode of operating. Sceptical of a future wherein any museum could be considered fully ‘decolonised’, Bond echoes the sentiment of theorists such as Christina Sharpe,

² Interpretation Panel “Acknowledgements,” *deep dive (pause): uncoiling memory*.

³ Dr. Emma Bond (academic lead for *Re-Collecting Empire* exhibition), interview conducted on 24 June 2022 by author.

Dionne Brand, bell hooks, and Sylvia Wynter by emphasising decolonisation is a continuous process of institutional self-critique, and should never be conceptualised as a fixed end point. One defining characteristic of decolonial work is its foundation in black scholarship. This foundation of understanding is necessary for reparative work to be done outside of institutionalised boundaries, because as black feminist Audre Lorde articulates: ‘the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house’.⁴ In order to deconstruct the harmful colonial structures embedded within our institutions, we must position ourselves outside Western epistemologies in order to meditate outside the boundaries set forth by imperialism, capitalism, and heteronormativity.

Artist-curator Alberta Whittle is well-versed in many critical theories and actively cites them within her practice. However, it is worth noting that Whittle crucially also pulls from another source of inspiration: that of a long tradition of Caribbean hauntology. The ethos of Caribbean hauntology can perhaps be best captured by Jamaican-British cultural theorist Stuart Hall when he wrote: ‘We always knew that the dismantling of the colonial paradigm would release strange demons from the deep, and that these monsters might come trailing all sorts of subterranean material.’⁵ Hauntedness is used as a device to express the psychic trauma caused by slavery. It articulates the way in which collective memories of alienation, displacement, and the loss of kinship cannot be suppressed, especially as we continue to operate within neo-colonial paradigms.⁶ These anxieties have influenced postcolonial writings, and can be tracked through their usage of conventions such as: ‘the undermining of binary oppositions through an engagement of hybridity; the doubling and splitting of schizophrenic subjectivities; the desire for the impossible recovery of lost origins; the re-inscription of hidden, or fragmented histories; the ethics of memory and forgetting; the uncovering of contradictions in the colonising project; the challenge to the

⁴ Audre Lorde, “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House,” in *Sister Outsider* (Berkeley, CA: Crossing Press, 2007), 110.

⁵ Stuart Hall, “When was ‘the post-colonial’?” *Reading the Periphery*, n.d.

⁶ Alison Rudd, “Demons from the Deep,” (PhD diss., The University of Northampton, 2006): 36.

hegemony of western thought; and the foregrounding of the notion that past systems of oppression continue into the present.⁷ While specific authors have championed postcolonial writings, such as Caribbean female writers Jean Rhys, Jamaica Kincaid, and Shani Mootoo, Caribbean Hauntology is rooted within folk and spiritual traditions, thus residing in the collective memory that transcends a specific authorship.⁸ This is distinctly different from metaphysical spaces used to explore aspects of the black experience, such as the ‘Wake’ and ‘The Door of No Return’, which can be traced to an original author. Examples of this include the emergence of supernatural entities of Caribbean diasporic folklore such as *zombie* and *soucouyant*, which are adaptations of West African religiosity reconstituted to personify the grief and anger caused by the Transatlantic Slave Trade.⁹

It should be noted that any enslaved peoples found practising African religion, spirituality, or folklore in the British-Caribbean during the colonial period were heavily persecuted. The term ‘obeah’ was invented by the British as a catch-all negative term for a myriad of diverse African practices and beliefs in the Caribbean. This term was then used to create anti-obeah legislation that suppressed ideologies considered by the British as ‘savage, depraved, or debased.’¹⁰ The artistic reclamation of culture is an act of decolonisation, and has been termed the ‘aesthetics of decolonisation’ by curators of the *Life Between Islands: British-Caribbean Artists 1950s-Now* exhibition at the Tate.¹¹ Director of the Tate Alex Farquharson further defined this decolonising methodology, citing its complex origin through the fusion of African and Caribbean indigenous peoples belief systems: ‘Cultural decolonisation took the form of resurfacing and revalorising the repressed and fragmented African foundations of Caribbean identity which had survived with the folk culture of the Caribbean poor, alongside the evocation of the cosmology of the region’s

⁷ Rudd, “Demons from the Deep,” 4.

⁸ S. A. Franchi, “(Mad)Women in the West Indies,” (Thesis, Wesleyan University, 2015), 2.

⁹ Rudd, “Demons from the Deep,” 56.

¹⁰ Jerome S. Handler & Kenneth M. Bilby, *Enacting Power: The Criminalization of Obeah*, (Kingston: University of the West Indies Press, 2013), 2.

¹¹ Farquharson, “Anew,” 10.

indigenous peoples (the Caribs, Arawaks and Taínos) who had been virtually exterminated under the first colonisers, the Spanish.¹² By integrating this rich history of Afro-Caribbean spirituality throughout *deep dive (pause): uncoiling memory*, Whittle grounds her artistic practice in the reclamation of language and calls upon ancestral knowledge to subvert the imperialistic agenda.

Our relationship to language appears as a recurring theme within Whittle's practice, as seen most prominently in her previous works *How Flexible Can We Make the Mouth* multimedia installation and *A Study in Vocal Intonation* film.¹³ This thematic meditation also appears throughout *deep dive (pause): uncoiling memory*, perhaps appearing most pointedly through the medium of the gallery seating.

The gallery seating is fabricated into brightly coloured parentheses, commas, periods, and exclamations to remind visitors of the centrality of language in our ability to express (or repress) concepts outside the establishment. In an interview conducted by *Dazed* magazine, Whittle explains the primacy of language in her installation as being key to a process of 'unlearning':

'The title of this work [the *deep dive (pause): uncoiling memory* installation], it's got that very deliberate pause, and that pause is there to encourage us to settle... to settle into this state where we can really think, what have we forgotten? And so, by looking at memory, and actually almost using memory studies as a way to encourage this process of unlearning, I think we can really start to band together and think about change and encouraging different voices, intervening into what we understand of as history.'¹⁴

¹² Farquharson, "Anew," 11.

¹³ "Installation," *Alberta Whittle*.

¹⁴ Emily Dinsdale, "Why artist Alberta Whittle is imploring us to 'invest in love'," *Dazed Media*, 26 April 2022.

This focus on language and the tension that arises between dialogues once repressed now reemerging grounds Whittle's work as a decolonial curatorial practice. This act of remembrance is what queer theorist Eve Sedgwick articulates as a method in which we might reimagine a new future outside colonial structures, which allows us: 'to open horizons beyond social patterns, rational decisions, and institutionally approved emotion'.¹⁵

Connecting with a lost spirituality in order to commune with ancestors is another theme found throughout the installation's multimedia works. One such example is a wooden African headrest that sits upon the gallery floor, decorated with a carved serpent motif. Seven cowrie shells- like those used as currency within African trade networks- are haphazardly left atop the headrest. This carved piece evokes a history wherein dreams were believed to be journeys to a spiritual plane of existence, and messages from ancestors could be divinely interpreted to reveal hidden truths. Interestingly, this is one element of Whittle's work that has been repeatedly misidentified in press reviews as a prayer kneeler, such as that used in a Christian tradition.¹⁶ The sad irony of this piece being misinterpreted as an ritualistic object of a religion that was forced upon the colonised as part of an imperial ideological conquest is worth consideration.

This theme of forming ancestral connections is perhaps best explored through the tapestry titled *Entanglement is more than blood* (depicted in figure 4). This tapestry is unusual for several reasons, but perhaps most notably for its departure from traditional weaving technique. Whereas a grid of plain 'warp' threads on a loom serve as a canvas for colourful 'weft' threads to interweave a pattern, on this tapestry the 'warp' threads are vibrantly dyed and left exposed in an unfinished manner.¹⁷ Quite literally the background upholding this artwork is revealed, and the unfinished process in which it was created becomes transparent to the viewer. Additional visual cues invite a

¹⁵ Eve K. Sedgwick, *The Coherence of Gothic Conventions*, (New York: Methuen, 1986), 5.

¹⁶ Adam Benmakhlouf, "Invest in Love: Alberta Whittle @ Venice Biennale," *The Skinny*, 9 May 2022.

¹⁷ "What is Tapestry?" *V&A Online*.

decolonial reading of this work. The centre of the tapestry explodes with a brightly-coloured harlequin amorphous hands that end in serpent-like tails, which interlock and reach outward. In dialogue with the other invocations of ancestors throughout the gallery space, these hands could be understood as inviting ancestral connections. Looking closely at the tapestry reveals that it is embedded with cowrie shells, glass beads, and other trinkets of maritime trade. Threads made from deconstructed whaling rope are also intermittently used within the warp background, creating a variety of textures. Perhaps the most obvious message is captured within the tapestry's title: *Entanglement is more than blood.*

The term 'entanglement' is significant in critical theory, as narratives of entanglement are used to conceptualise the relational dynamics that shape our lived reality and sources of knowledge production. In her book *What Comes After Entanglement*, critical theorist Eva Haifa Giraud explains how 'entanglement' as a conceptual framework is necessary to examine our relationality to the natural world and the complexity of systems and epistemologies through which humanity had inflicted harm: 'The purpose of emphasizing these histories of entanglement is to move beyond discourses of human exceptionalism, which can be used to justify practices that are damaging to those deemed nonhuman, other-than-human, or less-than-human.'¹⁸ Through the medium of her artwork Whittle communicates narratives of entanglement which are built through self-critique and contestation.

¹⁸ Eva H. Giraud, *What Comes After Entanglement?*, (Duke University Press, 2019), 7.