

Ashanti Harris - Transcript

A kettle boils and clicks off.

Footsteps.

Birds chirping.

The sound of a gate opening and closing.

More footsteps.

I'm taking you on a little walk with me.

I'm walking down Pier Road, I just left the house. It's a really, really beautiful sunny day. There's a little bit of a breeze. But that's quite nice because it's keeping the midgies away. I might move away from the breeze. *[the sound of wind hitting the mic]* Whoo! *[footsteps]* So that you can have a better sound experience. *[bird song]*

The sound changes. Distant voices.

Okay, I think this might be slightly better. I found a seat. Oh, look there's a butterfly. So, I thought that I would use the format... imagine that I'm making a voice note. This is a slightly more technical voice note, because I'm using a Zoom recorder. But I use voice notes quite a lot. I use them with collaborators that I'm working with, also with friends and family, and I really like... I guess this sort of simulated conversation: that you can feel like you have this personal message that feels more intimate *[car horn]* because it's the voice of someone. But also, how you can trick yourself into thinking you're having an actual conversation with a person, rather than listening to a recording or speaking to a recorder. So many times, when I listen to voice notes, I'm talking back to them like somebody can hear me.

Birds chirping.

I wonder if that in some way is maybe the first way that I work with sound.

I was writing about sound recently, about sound and hauntology and thinking about sounds - it's the same with movement as well - but sounds, songs, in particular, how you carry them with you, they don't take up space, you don't have to put them in a bag; they're inside your body, they're inside your memory, you can forget them and then you might hear them and they might come back. They travel across time, they travel over distance with bodies. They're passed from person to person.

And they can be... I mean a song can be a connection to a life... a time that you didn't even exist. You could be singing a song that you know was sung 500 years ago. And I think that's really interesting and maybe that's a nice place to start actually.

So I thought it would be good to talk about a work I made recently, which is called *History Haunts the Body*, and another work I've made called *OCHE*.

So *History Haunts the Body* was made for The Common Guild and their In The Open programme that they made, inviting artists to create sound works to be listened to while walking. And *OCHE* was a commission that I made for Radiophrenia festival. And I am... so to introduce myself, that's probably a good place to start, my name is Ashanti Harris and I'm a multi-disciplinary visual artist. I work quite often with performance and movement, but also writing and video, research and much more recently, a lot more with sound.

And so *History Haunts the Body* and *OCHE* both stemmed from this body of research I've been doing since 2018 that I've been calling to myself 'The Forgotten Diaspora Project'. And it takes that title from the research of a historian named David Alston, whose research specifically looks at the historical relationship between Scotland and Guyana, which is the country that I'm from. But also documents Guyanese women who were in Scotland, or had a relationship to Scotland, in the 18th and 19th centuries.

And so, in 2018, when I started this research project, I went to go and meet David, who shared the work that he'd been doing and I took different trips to different

locations that had a relationship to Guyana – whether they were locations that these women, that I was looking into, had been or that their children had been, that their partners had been - and also places that maybe had a reference to Guyana: places that had the names Berbice, Essequibo, Demerara, which are regions of Guyana, literally kind of engraved into the stones, into the landscape.

And one of the things I was trying to do was firstly speculating on these women's lives. There's very limited information in many of the instances of these women about them: there's maybe names, dates, addresses on censuses; maybe someone might have a grave, someone might have a record of where they would have worked; other people it's the tiniest, tiniest of mention that's never mentioned again. So, the way that I wanted to start was by physically going to these places and working for my personal experience as a Guyanese woman in Scotland now and thinking how I could use that as a direction to take. I wanted it to be personal, I wasn't trying to take any kind of objective stance. And one of the things that I did was I took journeys: I'd walk from a place someone was recorded to have worked to the place that they were recorded to have lived; or I'd just go to a location and I'd allow my desires to lead to me. And I would take sound recordings in different places - just of the soundscapes, just what these places were saying - to think about how I could start to work with all of these resources, to speculate on these women's lives and to think about it in relation to my own in the present moment. And another thing that I did was I would sing songs: there are a few Guyanese songs that I know that I was taught by my dad, who was in turn taught by his mum; some Amerindian songs that are in a language called Wapishana, that I don't speak but I know these songs. And then, there's other songs that I learnt when I was in Ghana - and sort of a reason, a desire, to go to Ghana was because of my family's interest their own history and heritage and tracing their lineage back to Ghana, and I'd also really wanted to go there, and when I was there I also learned songs.

And in some of these places, there are some churches, there were caves, or sometimes just walking on the sea, I would sing these songs in these places. And I really enjoyed that... voice. Those songs kind of existed in these soundscapes as a way to continue to dig into this history.

And the two works I made were very, very different. *History Haunts the Body* compiled stories about four women who were in Scotland, or had a relationship to Scotland, in the 18th and 19th centuries alongside soundscapes that were taken in the places they were recorded to have been, alongside a series of instructions, some body awareness, sensory awareness instructions, for the listener... to kind of guide the listener to think about how these stories are entering that body, and now that they're in their body they know them, they are holding them: so, what do you do with them? And that's going to be different for everyone, that's so personal and unique. These stories will have different significances to different people for multiple reasons, and I wanted to create these texts, these instructional texts, that would support the holder of these stories, the listener who are now holding the stories, to think about how they feel in their bodies and to kind of breathe with them.

The sound changes again. Bird song.

So the other work, *OCHE*, worked with this material as well. I was trying to think about sound sculpturally. I was thinking about this idea of going back and speculating on these women's stories and kind of being in this present moment but going back and what it means to go back and to think back. And I was also thinking about echo so *OCHE* is echo backwards. I was thinking about okay, how do you... How do you reverse an echo and I was thinking about that from a sound perspective.

So echo, the echo kind of breathes back at you like aHa! Like, Hello [*breathily voice*]
Hello! Hello! Hello! Ha! Ha! Ha!

And then I was thinking this kind of Ha! backwards becomes [*sharp inhalation*]
whooooohp!

Like this sort of sucking in [*sharp inhalation*] whooooohp!

And this sucking, sucking in... another way of thinking about that being a holding in your body: to suck, to suck something inside and then it's in the body and it's waiting, it's waiting to be released again but it's going to be released in a different form. And I wanted to play with that sculpturally. I hadn't worked with sound that way before. So, I was playing with reversing sounds, reversing songs, reversing echoes, reversing reverberations and kind of layering them up to create this... I guess I was thinking

about it as a procession, a procession track. I was thinking about carnival processions and this idea that a carnival procession is simultaneously walking forwards and backwards, because it's considering everywhere that it's come from, it's considering its past and history that it's doing that in order to create something new, to create a new identity, to create a new possibility.

And I wanted to create a sound that could do that as well. [*car horn*]

[*car drives past in the distance*]

So I was layering up some of these sounds of... these soundscapes but also the songs that I was singing... I was also working with recordings that I had made, whenever I'd been in Guyana, on family trips in Guyana, and thinking about how I could play with meaning [*wind sounds on the mic*] and play with this [*sharp inhalation*] whooooo! And also the release of the [*breathily*] Haaaa! The echo. Ha! Ha! Ha! Back at you.

More wind.

And so I guess these two works, they come from this same body of research, they're both working with sound, and in really different ways, they have really different forms, but I guess maybe the commonality between them is this thinking about how something's held: How something is held in your body.

And maybe that is a nice way to sort of round this off: what can sound and audio do that other mediums cannot? I think what they do is they sit in your body, they kind of... they occupy this internal space and they can be forgotten or they can be remembered, or they might re-surface, but what I really like about working with sound is thinking about how it physically enters the body of the listener or the audience, through the act of listening. I guess that the performative... or not performative, the active side of that – what happens with that sound afterwards – is it remembered, is it shared, is it passed on, is it hummed, does it become an earworm that comes back to you? I like thinking about that, how sound can continue to exist beyond your lifetime because it has physically entered another person's body.

And maybe I'm trying to think... *[reading]* "How has this work allowed you and your audiences to endure a period where we cannot gather, where physical assembly is restricted and performance as we know it cannot take place?" I guess it kind of goes back to this voice note thing that I was talking about at the beginning *[more wind]*. This idea that you almost can trick yourself into feeling like you're having a *[slight laughter]* conversation with someone. It's like having a voice in your head or, especially when you have headphones on, a voice in your head or someone whispering into your ear or speaking into your ear. It's an intimate act that I guess throughout lockdown we don't have as much of. So, to combine something that *is* personal – and I feel like a lot of the work that I've been making with sound has been really personal – to combine that with the intimate situation of someone speaking into your ear, a voice that's just for you... that's what I love about headphones actually, it's not for the room, it's just for you. I think that intimacy is something that people have been missing and it's digital but without the screen and I think that also feels like a really important connection to have.

Car drives past.

More wind.

Yeah, I've loved working with sound and I think I will definitely continue to work with it. Continue to think about voice and narrative and story and also the way that it... the legacy of sound after it's been given or received by another person.

Pause. Birds chirping.

Well, I'm gonna take you for a walk back inside.

Wind sounds, footsteps, birds chirping.

More wind.

Distant music playing.

Footsteps on gravel.

A gate opening and closing.

Sound fades out.