

## ***The Trading Faces Online Exhibition and Its Strategies of Public Engagement***

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*Trading Faces is the first online resource in the UK devoted to exploring the legacy of the transatlantic slave trade in British performing arts. By referencing the practice and critical thinking encapsulated in the term orature, this essay will analyse the online platform and discuss its model of action in relation to the creation of a novel interpretation of intertextuality and orality in the field of critical heritage and digital humanities.*

Trading Faces is the first online resource in the UK devoted to exploring the legacy of the transatlantic slave trade in British performing arts. It was launched in January 2009 as part of the wider project Trading Faces: Recollecting Slavery delivered by a consortium of partners including Future Histories, Talawa Theatre Company, and the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A), with the support of the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) and The National Archives (TNA). The success of this online resource, which was part of the commemoration activities marking 200 years since the abolition of the trade in Britain, is an example of the creative, dynamic relationship, which can take place between digital humanities and artistic practice with regards to digital content creation and strategies of public dissemination of performing arts archives. To better elucidate this point, the essay will explore the methodology used in the creation of the platform and its contribution to current thinking on co-creation and co-design within the digital sphere. In particular, it will consider the way

in which African orature, a term coined by the Ugandan linguist, scholar and literary theorist Pio Zirimu, played a crucial role in establishing methods of public engagement, both in relation to the project's participants and its audiences, and how orality was used in the process of selecting and digitising archival material related to the history of the African diaspora. African oral traditions and techniques of storytelling were referenced during the process of designing and constructing this online resource to creatively engage with the performative nature of the material selected for digitisation, which had been produced by people of the African diaspora over a period of 200 years of British theatre and dance history. At the same time, by referencing the practice and critical thinking encapsulated in the term orature (also known through the oxymoron of 'oral literature'), the online resource aimed to establish a model of action that could offer a novel interpretation of intertextuality and orality in the field of digital humanities.

### **Culture as Process, Archiving as Activist Practice**

My work as curator and creative director of Trading Faces represented the culmination of fifteen years of research and professional involvement in the black British performing arts sector in the role of co-founder and Creative Director of Future Histories,<sup>1</sup> a not-for-profit arts and heritage organisation and first independent archive repository in Britain exclusively dedicated to African, Asian and Caribbean performing arts. For this project I was in charge of designing the online exhibition for Future Histories, the organisation responsible for its delivery, using archival resources from the other partners as well as external repositories. The key for me was to critically engage with Paul Gilroy's statement that "culture is now analysed as property rather than process" (Gilroy 1999, 17) and find a strategy that would counteract this problematic trend by focusing on an inclusive methodology of creation, both in terms of co-design and co-production. Working within the context of independent community archives offers specific challenges, which certainly

contributed to the shaping of the final outcome. However, by working alongside my fellow board members, I learned how to effectively facilitate the contributions of black artists, intellectuals and activists and create work able to reflect a community of different voices, as in the case of the Trading Faces online exhibition. Referencing the radical propositions of performance art of the 1960s and 1970s, the idea at the core of the exhibition was to transpose the concept of work of art as a body in space (Phelan 2004) to work of art as archived body in the virtual space. The resemblance of the performative act, which had originally produced the archive documents digitised for the exhibition, reflected an artistic vision aimed at exploring and exhibiting the relationship between the self (the archive user) and the 'other' (the performing artist), represented in the archive documents. These fragments testifying of a much wider and deeper narrative, retained within themselves evidence of an original continuum between performance and documentation, expressed through a variety of mediums selected for the exhibition and mirrored in the open dialogue established through the consultation that supported the curatorial process.<sup>2</sup> The aim was to re-evaluate subjectivity and identity in relation to archival reconstructions and digital reproductions.

With regards to content, the main focus of the exhibition was to gain a deeper understanding of the slave trade and its abolition in the theatrical context, together with new information and knowledge of the achievements of people of African descent in British theatre and internationally. The key objectives of the exhibition were: to demonstrate key periods in the history of black performance in relation to performance traditions, aesthetics and narratives originated in Africa; to explore the personal narratives of black abolitionists in relation to the stories of new migrants in the UK, setting these testimonies against the backdrop of antislavery campaigns past and present, UK immigration policies, and critical debates; and to offer young people and the general public the possibility of submitting personal responses to the site in the

form of historical and visual documents, video and audio material and other works of art. More generally, the platform was aimed at developing an accessible, digital online research tool that would promote on going study on the subject by including links to external online and offline resources (Fig. 1).

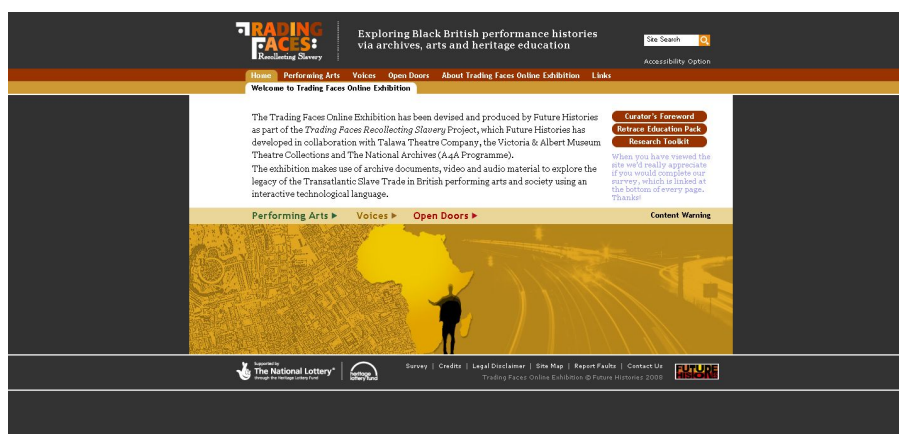


Figure 1. Trading Faces online exhibition, Home Page. Design by Pure Creative. Copyright 2008 by Future Histories.

As the project evaluator Prof. Raminder Kaur put it:

*Knowledge that otherwise would not get any light resting in archives is creatively and artistically exhibited for use by a broader audience. It can be actively rather than passively acquired through the website interface. (Kaur 2009)*

It was important for Future Histories that these objectives would be achieved in a collaborative manner, as stated in the Curator's Foreword to the exhibition. Focus groups and meetings with lecturers, students, artists, community group representatives, academic researchers, anti-slavery activists, journalists and various experts in the field were directly reflected in the design, quality of the archive material included in

the exhibition, selection of theatre and dance productions, language used for titles, and design of the three main sections.<sup>3</sup> From a visual point of view, I had planned to make reference to the circle, as symbolic reference to various African cultural practices. Moreover, the circle has no starting or ending point, and therefore could better represent an art form originated in Africa, developed in the Caribbean and produced in Europe and Britain. Similarly, there could be cases of theatre or dance productions originally devised in Africa, toured to the UK and then imported to the Caribbean through artists returning there. As noticed by dance consultant Funmi Adewole:

*It is also important to note that international Black dance companies such as Les Ballet Africaines and Les Ballet Negres were communicating, looking to each other for new inspirations, methods and exchange of ideas. (Goldson 2008)*

The design aimed at engaging users to access the online exhibition and explore the positive legacy of the transatlantic slave trade in relation to the performing arts, both forwards and backwards in time. To facilitate the process I worked in collaboration with a team of experts of African descent living in the UK to help shifting the focus of the exhibition from the object of the analysis to the discourse that produces it. As a result of this process of consultation the 80 productions, which were initially identified for the exhibition increased to 108, with a total of 257 items relating to these productions and 327 references to further resources, which were researched in other repositories, such as the British Library and the London Metropolitan archives. Of the 257 items, there were approximately 650 images, which had been digitised through the project. As assessed by the project evaluator:

*The selection of secondary material for each production is made in a way that users could compare reviews of a production and contextually assess*

*them for themselves with the added advantage of an overview essay. For instance, three reviews are available of the 1958 production, Moon on a Rainbow Shawl, at the Royal Court enabling the user to assess them in light of Creole speech patterns and issues about race and identity in the 1950s. Also users can manage the material through a variety of geographic pathways. (Kaur 2009, 15)*

The final evaluation also confirmed that:

*The body of material collated for this Project provides a systematic knowledge bank that encourages other performing arts companies to do likewise and can further catalyse research and creative ventures in Black British history and performance. ... Knowledge of Black British performing arts that otherwise would have been lost is preserved for all. (Ibid, 10)*

But possibly, the most interesting aspect to consider is that the increase of digitised material resulted from a consultation process involving a variety of stakeholders and participants. This was meant to open up the curatorial and research practice in digital humanities and move it towards current forms of public engagement, co-creation and democratic participation in knowledge production. It was a political act, in the sense expressed by the poet and academic Micere Mugo in her *African Orature and Human Rights* in which she warns that the study of the old African popular arts should not be simply a way of returning to ‘the source’, but of exploring “where to draw from in our struggle for the assertion of human rights” (Mugo 1995, 39). As remarked by the literary critic Adeleke Adeeko, in the face of ‘dehumanization’ Mugo opposes a model of artistic practice, which is engaged with its own time and actively promotes true human values (Adeeko, 1999). In this respect, the critical question was not only to include voices from outside the heritage sector, but also to re-mould the practice of archiving by resisting the tendency of

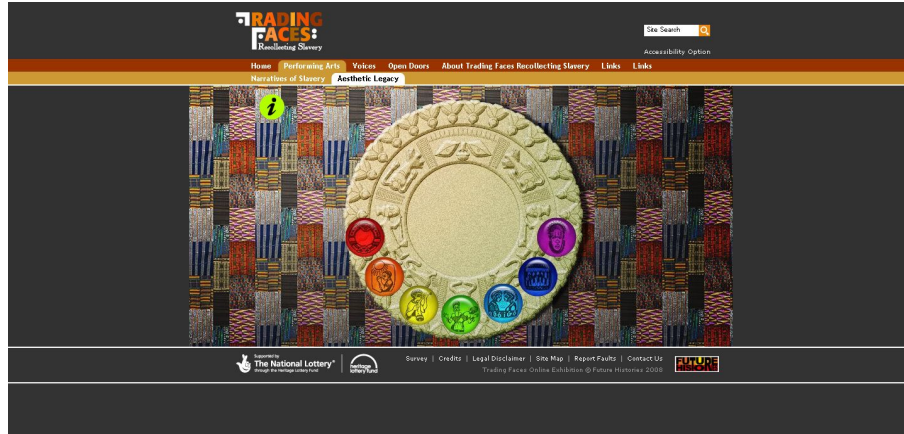
objectifying the past within rigid co-ordinates of time and space. The involvement of black artists and activists in the interpretation and design process was a way of privileging a critical approach to history and memory, which, once again, is indebted to the African practice of orature, implying a circularity of knowledge and a creative exchange between performers and members of the audience. A case in point is the collaboration with the Nigerian singer and composer Juwon Ogunge whose compositions were inspired by old recordings held in the archives. They represented a way of bringing back to life the past in the transient present of the digital exhibition.<sup>4</sup> In this respect the artistic collaboration not only influenced the aesthetic of the site, but also the modalities of its use.

### **Transnational Aesthetics and Narratives of Resistance**

The design of the Aesthetic Legacy rooms of the performing arts section mimed a physical bodily movement of ancestral African origins (Fig. 2). As specified by Babson Adijade, the visual artist involved in the project:

*The background of this section has been designed as a parchment of several famous traditional fabrics from across West Africa. Mounted in the centre of this parchment is an African divination bowl, which represents the cyclic worldview in which man, nature and spirits cohabit. (Adijade, 2008)*

With regards to the movement of the icon: “when the web-user’s cursor ‘clicks’ on the icon, the icon will make an animated cyclic movement over the top and land in the centre of the divination bowl. In this way, all the icons shall land in the centre (when the web-user clicks on them). The kind of interaction between the web-user, the icons and the entire background is akin to a traditional game of Ayo (its Yoruba name), played by Africans and people of African descent in the Caribbean”.<sup>5</sup>



*Figure 2. Trading Faces online exhibition, Aesthetic Legacy Room Page.  
Design by Pure Creative. Copyright 2008 by Future Histories.*

While the circle was used as a symbolic reference to the political, cultural and aesthetic experience of artists of the African diaspora, the section representing the lines of development of African art in the West had to be symbolised through a fragmented timeline. This visual fragmentation of the historical discourse on the transatlantic slave trade in Britain was conceived as a mechanism to allow space for the ‘excess of readings and possibilities’, which a totalising, closed discourse would prevent. As Creative Director of the exhibition the challenge was to construct “a way of knowing which does not take surveillance of the object, visible or otherwise, as its chief aim” (Phelan 2004, 2). The historical discourse had to be located ‘in between’ the objects populating the time line, in the gaps, the absence of documents, in what was yet to be collected and catalogued. This structure would eventually strive to make overt the limits of the collection policies of national museum, community archives, as well as digital technologies, opening up the platform towards a critical engagement with history and heritage. We were not experimenting with machine learning or text mining, but with a research process based on knowledge exchange and interdisciplinarity, opening up



a dialogue on black performing arts exploring different forms of representation from the mainstream discourse on the so-called ‘other’.

According to Phelan, “converting the Other into the familiar grammar of the linguistic, visual and physical body of the Same is what Freud calls fetishization” (Phelan 2004, 6). The risk of the exhibition was precisely to fetishize the representation of slavery in British performance history. Hence the importance of creating a system in which the ‘relationship’ between the object (which in the online exhibition had lost its materiality through digitisation), the imagined performance, and the reality that the object recreated in the audience’s mind became central. Only the interaction between these three elements of the historical discourse would prevent that risk. This idea of exploring and exhibiting the relationship between the self (the archive user) and the ‘other’, in this case represented by a performance objectified through photographs, flyers, scripts and various other documents, was a way of bringing back to life these fragments in a way that was collective and engaged (Terracciano 2009b, 4–25). It was this crucial relationship that had to be retained and reproduced in the interface by emphasizing the value of the dialogical principle, subjectivity and cultural identity in relation to digital humanities and cultural heritage. Such dialogical approach, in its Bachtinian sense, was reflected in the choice of seven thematic rooms that explored the aesthetic legacy of the transatlantic slave trade in performing arts via digitised archive documents as well as downloadable critical essays produced by contemporary artists who acted as consultants during the project (Fig. 3). The seven themes include: Carnival/Masquerade, Ritual, Music, Dance, Religion, Speech Patterns, and Popular Theatre.



*Figure 3. Trading Faces online exhibition, Aesthetic Legacy Speech Patterns Page. Design by Pure Creative. Copyright 2008 by Future Histories.*

Mirroring this structure, the Voices section of the exhibition, which focused on the legacy of the slave trade and the resistance opposed to it, was similarly organised along seven themes, which included Home, Journey, Arrival, Entrapment, Fear, Resistance, and Escape. Two forms of entry to this section enable an exploration either by way of the characters or by way of themes. The dialogical approach to the design of the exhibition led to the juxtaposition of the experiences of Olaudah Equiano and Mary Prince, two abolitionists of African descent who had been actively involved in the anti slavery movement during the 18th and 19th century, to the testimonies of two present day migrants from China and Russia named as Natasha and Liu to protect their real identities. The critical question was to produce a response to the pernicious continuity of two key aspects of the transatlantic slave trade, economic exploitation and the infringement of human rights. However, the consultation process made apparent that the connection between current forms of human trafficking in the UK and the legacy of the transatlantic slave trade needed to be set in a context that reflected the crucial differences between them, as the African slave trade involved 400 years of consistent

kidnapping of people from the African continent, racialisation of the African slave trade, and legality of its status. Feedback from African historians and activists also revealed that the use of the word slavery within the context of contemporary human trafficking needed to be carefully addressed to avoid any simplistic assimilation between the two experiences. To achieve this the personal stories of contemporary migrants were set in the context of narratives of resistance produced by people of African descent. The aim was to present an African perspective on the fight against any forms of trafficking in the world today and illuminate the powerful legacy of black abolitionists into the 21st century. The views and experiences of the two black abolitionists were brought to the fore with extracts from their writings and existing archive documents from the Anti-slavery Library, audio recordings from the British Library Sound Archive, together with short video clips filmed in London for a re-enactment of extracts from their published biographies. Supported by historical essays and links to further resources, Equiano and Prince's narrative points were eventually set against the stories of Natasha and Liu, whose memories of their degrading treatment in the UK, recorded and filmed in London in April 2008, uncannily resonated with these voices from the past.<sup>6</sup>

By asking the question "has slavery really ended?" the exhibition looked at these two moments in human history in their resemblance, as well as crucial differences. As mentioned before, the history of the transatlantic slave trade was one of human subjugation, but also of racial discrimination, as the de-humanization of people from the African continent was key to their economic exploitation. The condition of people trapped in human trafficking today therefore resembles the past, but is also different: shorter periods of so-called 'enslavement', general absence of a racial bias, different juridical status, and so on. Nonetheless, forms of enslavement of human beings are still taking place in dirty, dangerous and difficult work conditions in Britain, in the running of private homes, the care of the elderly and disabled and in keeping the sex

industry alive, as pointed out by the journalist and human rights activist Rahila Gupta, one of the consultants working on the project. Many vulnerable people are trafficked or smuggled into the UK today. Natasha and Liu are two of them. The attempt of the online exhibition was to bring alive the resilience and resistance of human beings by activating intimate narrative points through different configurations, both visual and audio, which would facilitate the exploration of emotional and political connections between histories and stories from the past and the present. The idea was to challenge the view of slavery as an unfortunate episode for the human race relegated to history books, by placing it in the context of contemporary human trafficking. While academic essays published on the website clearly identified the uniqueness of the experience to which African people had been subjected through the slave trade, links with the present were suggested to stimulate a critical approach to contemporary forms of human trafficking. One Kingston University student involved in focus groups commented that the exhibition material was “extremely emotive, [it] makes you question how far (if at all) we’ve come from slavery” (Terracciano 2008a).

Focus group discussions on this section of the website also stimulated students at Kingston University to think about the theme of physical and cultural displacement and enslavement from a different perspective to the one offered by the media. Without delving too deeply into the feedback received from young people, artists, activists and academics during and after the launch of the exhibition, it might suffice to quote the conclusive remarks of the external evaluator, with regards to the potential impact of the project as a whole:

*This is a landmark project in that it commemorated the 200th anniversary of the parliamentary abolition of the slave trade by exploring the heritage of the transatlantic slave trade in British performing arts and society in a way which could benefit people for years. [...] The Project as a whole is a lasting record on a transient art form – the performing arts –*

*for a momentary period – an anniversary. Whereas on the one hand, the ephemera of performance is preserved, on the other hand, archives have been made more accessible in an innovative and stimulating manner for the general public. (Kaur 2009, 45)*

### **Conclusions**

The original plan was to populate the Open Doors section of the exhibition to offer young people, artists and the general public the possibility of submitting responses to the site in the form of written documents, video and audio material, or other works of art. Since its launch the exhibition has continued to receive a constant stream of visits reaching an average to 10000 hits per month with an average visiting time of about two hours. Yet, no submissions have been received. As the project evaluator commented in the evaluation report:

*Inspiring confidence and trust in the public to submit material to a public site is no mean feat: such work needs to be done through outreach activities such as presentations and discussions; and by encouraging established contacts such as lecturers, teachers, community course directors etc. to integrate the Online Exhibition into their programmes so as to enable more engagement and submissions by the public. (Kaur, 2009)*

The comment offers interesting points of reflection on digitalization and its interplay with critical heritage and digital humanities. It asks to reconsider the space that communities with an invested interest in historical material can have in projects aimed at digitising, cataloguing and interpreting archival resources. In this respect, two questions arise. First, which role can crowdsourcing play in the context of critical heritage and what are the advantages it can bring to researchers in relation to their field of study? Second, which tools could we develop within the digital humanities to capture and analyse the oral history and

tacit heritage of diasporic and migrant communities taking the ethical stance of orature further?

The intrinsic inter-subjectivity of the archive medium and the multiplicity of voices encompassed in the cultural heritage of diasporic communities could open up a series of possibilities for a more democratic approach to knowledge production and historical research in our multicultural societies. This is a challenge particularly relevant today. As the Microsoft Researcher Kate Crawford noticed in her SXSW conference session titled Dark Days: AI and the Rise of Fascism:

*Just as we are reaching a crucial inflection point in the deployment of AI into everyday life, we are seeing the rise of white nationalism and right-wing authoritarianism in Europe, the US and beyond. How do we protect our communities – and particularly already vulnerable and marginalized groups – from the potential uses of these systems for surveillance, harassment, detainment or deportation? (Crawford 2017)*

In addition to this, what role can digital humanities play in this context? What forms of collaboration can be established between independent repositories and higher education institutions to enable the growth and development of culturally specific heritage activities, such as the Trading Faces online exhibition, beyond the scope of the project? As remarked by the evaluator:

*The ‘disappearance’ of valuable creative and research material is not only a loss to British history but also hinders the development of further knowledge. It may indeed compel a ‘reinvention of the wheel’ if it is not accessible to the public in the future, when similar projects are initiated once again. ... Steps should be taken to ensure financial support so that this substantial base of knowledge is not lost and that the general public can continue to access the material in the future if it is to be a point of*

*inspiration for research and knowledge in the area. To these ends, FUTURE HISTORIES should be supported in the maintenance and continuing marketing and publicity of the Online Exhibition. (Kaur 2009, 42–43)*

This is a challenge that Future Histories, like similar organisations, currently faces. It remains to be seen how digital tools can be used to support sustainability and development of these organisations for the benefit of research as well as the wider public.

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## Notes

- 1.
1. [www.futurehistories.org.uk](http://www.futurehistories.org.uk)
2. For a methodology of research on black and Asian performance see The Future Histories Research Toolkit for African and Asian Performing Arts in the UK (Terracciano 2009b: 4-25).  
[http://www.tradingfacesonline.com/toolkit\\_revised.pdf](http://www.tradingfacesonline.com/toolkit_revised.pdf) (Accessed 20 June 2018)
3. The changes for the Voices section aimed at presenting an African perspective on the fight against any forms of trafficking in the world today and illuminate the powerful legacy of black abolitionists into the 21st century. See Terracciano (2008b) 'Progress Report 11 April 2008', Future Histories archive.
4. See Ogungbe's report 'The "Trading Faces" Experience'. E-mail (23 January 2009).
5. The Ayo game is also called Oware in Ghana, Bao in East Africa and Omwiso in Uganda. See Babson Adjibade's email correspondence with the author, "List of Materials for Rooms." E-mail (29 May 2008), Future Histories archive.
6. I personally directed the videos on the experiences of the two contemporary enforced migrants Liu and Natasha, while the two voices from the Transatlantic Slave Trade were directed by Paulette James, a TV/film director of African descent.



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