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EMILY HANSELL CLARK

VOICES AND BODIES IN THE ARCHIVE

THE CASE OF COLONIAL AUDIOVISUAL MEDIA HERITAGE

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ABSTRACT

Discussions about colonial heritage in European institutions have largely centered on physical objects in museum collections and written texts in paper archives. Audiovisual media, such as photographs, sound recordings, and film, bring both new challenges and new perspectives to these conversations. This essay asks: What can current debates on "decolonizing" colonial heritage bring to audiovisual media collections of colonial origins; and, conversely, what new perspectives can audiovisual media heritage bring to existing object- and document-focused debates? I use Dan Hicks's "theory of taking," developed in the context of debates in Europe around the Benin Bronzes, to propose understanding colonial audiovisual media as *taken* rather than collected or created; and as capturing human *bodies* and *voices* in colonial relationships that endure across time and power, rather than transparently or objectively capturing historical moments or events. I then use this framework to analyze two recent films that conduct critical artistic reinterpretations of materials from the media archive of Dutch colonialism in the Indonesian archipelago. The essay ends with some concluding thoughts about the concept of "decolonization" in relation to colonial media heritage.

KEYWORDS

audiovisual media; documentary film; colonial heritage; decolonization; artistic reinterpretation; Dutch colonialism; Indonesia; West Papua

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Audiovisual media, such as photographs, sound recordings, and film, bring both new challenges and new perspectives to current conversations about the decolonization of cultural heritage in European institutions.[1] Discussions on this theme have thus far largely focused on physical objects in museum collections and written documents in archives. In the Netherlands, where this article is focused, recent examples include the Pressing Matter project, which investigates the past and future of artifacts and human remains in institutional collections; the Amsterdam Museum's in-person and online exhibit featuring the Dutch royal golden coach and its colonial past; and the digitization of paper collections at the Dutch National Archive related to colonial history in Suriname and Indonesia.[2]

While objects and documents have been the focus of these projects in the Netherlands and of wider conversations on these themes in Europe and elsewhere, it is important to note that the colonial project of collecting and knowledge-making also produced audiovisual media. Sounds and images from colonial history are documented in photographs, sound recordings, and film; these are now found in museums, archives, and private collections. Each with its own set of technological histories, practical challenges, and epistemological questions, different audiovisual media formats are increasingly becoming subjects of critical investigation. In this essay, I ask: What can current debates on "decolonizing" colonial heritage bring to audiovisual media collections of colonial origins; and, conversely, what new perspectives can audiovisual media heritage bring to existing object- and document-focused debates? I propose that the inclusion of audiovisual media in such discussions can help to critically explore notions of creation, curation, use, and restitution in relation to European collections from (formerly) colonized places.

In what follows, I place various audiovisual media in a lineage of colonial encounter, sensory knowledge, documentation, and collection. I then outline my theoretical framing drawing from Dan Hicks's "theory of taking," which he developed in the context of debates in Europe around the Benin Bronzes.[3] Using this framework, I propose understanding colonial audiovisual media as *taken* rather than collected or created; and as capturing human *bodies* and *voices* in colonial relationships that endure across time and power, rather than transparently or objectively capturing historical moments or events. I then use this framing as a point from which to critically explore discussions around digitization and repatriation of colonial audiovisual media. Finally, I examine two specific case studies of artistic reinterpretation of materials from the media archive of Dutch colonialism in Indonesia. These case studies present challenging questions about voices, bodies, difference, and power in the reuse of colonial media. The essay ends with some concluding thoughts about the concept of "decolonization" in relation to colonial media heritage.

COLONIAL KNOWLEDGE, MEDIA, AND THE SENSES

Sensory encounter – looking and listening, and in some cases smelling, touching, and tasting – has long been a component of European knowledge-making about colonial "Others." Elements of nature and culture in other parts of the world have been documented by European travelers for centuries and conveyed to scientific and popular audiences through written words, sketched or painted images, and appropriated objects. Beginning in the mid-nineteenth century, the phenomena of world's fairs and human zoos brought direct sensory encounters with imagined Others to publics in Europe, not only through artifacts but through living human performers transported to colonial metropoles. Staged "native villages" appeared at international colonial exhibitions in London, 1851, and Paris, 1878, and were a regular attraction at the Jardin Zoologique d'Acclimatation in Paris starting in 1877. In 1883, at the International Colonial and Export Exhibition in Amsterdam, an immersive display of human performers from Indonesia (then a colony of the Netherlands) presented food, music, dance, and crafts from the archipelago; the performers lived and slept in homes they built from imported materials in regional Indonesian styles for six months, attracting 1.5 million visitors.[4]

The multisensory stagings of colonial otherness found in such displays in European metropoles were where some of the earliest anthropological photographs and moving images were made, with equipment too large and heavy to be lugged across the world. The French anthropologist Roland Bonaparte, for example, produced empirical and anthropometric "evidence" of human difference by taking photographs and measurements of Surinamese people at the exhibition in Amsterdam and of African and Indigenous people at the Jardin Zoologique d'Acclimatation.[5] At the 1895 Ethnographic Exposition in Paris, Félix-Louis Regnault, a French doctor, created what are now considered the first ethnographic "films." His chronophotographs – several series of still images that conveyed movement when viewed in quick succession – documented West African performers walking, running, and climbing a tree.[6] Bonaparte and Regnault were both driven by now-disproven essentialist notions of cultural and racial difference and aimed to use (moving) images as supposedly objective visual evidence to prove their existence. While such racist paradigms of the human sciences belong to the past, audiovisual recordings have been used throughout the twentieth century and into the present as forms of anthropological evidence, documenting various shifting paradigms that have been used to make sense of human difference.

Indeed, since the late nineteenth century, photography, moving images, and audio recordings have played major roles in European exploration, collection, and knowledge production of and about the colonized world. This has produced collections of photographs, sound recordings, and moving images that inscribe fleeting moments of sensory encounter into the enduring historical record. As part of the reexamination of colonial history taking place in the present, what sense can be made of colonial audiovisual media collections today? What knowledge, perspectives, voices, and bodies do they hold? If we understand audio and visual media forms to be not exceptional or peripheral to, but rather central to, a long lineage of colonial knowledge production, these become crucial questions, which scholars are only recently beginning to address.

For example, while the subjectivity of photography and the "colonial gaze" are rather familiar critiques by now, in recent years there has been an increasing interest in reexamining historical sound recordings through a similar critical framework. While sound recordings are often taken as objective documentation of language, music, or events of the past, Miguel García points out that recorded sound – especially the type created or studied for scientific purposes – constitutes a specific type of knowledge emerging from a particular epistemological paradigm. Further, García shows that rather than simply preserving a moment or event in time, sound recordings actually serve to put their creators, subjects, and listeners in a temporal as well as epistemological relationship. Ethnomusicology recordings, for example, were typically created for scholarship that

> **"went hand in hand with colonialism, recording musical expressions before their creators had disappeared, or marching behind colonialism, analysing music once their creators were dead."[7]**

Along similar lines, meLê yamomo and Barbara Titus have conducted important scholarship on the histories and legacies of colonial sound recording collections in the Netherlands, as have Irene Hilden in Germany and Anette Hoffmann in Austria.[8] Drawing from a collection of linguistics recordings created by an Austrian anthropologist in 1908 in Southern Africa, Hoffmann suggests that while colonial sound recordings do not transparently capture and reproduce "voices from the past," they do contain their "mediatized echoes" that could potentially put present-day listeners in touch with subaltern perspectives. This depends, of course, on how we listen.

In what follows, I aim to explore the notion of voices and bodies contained in colonial sound and (moving) image archives and to put this in conversation with debates and theories around taking, giving back, and the colonial past. I first propose Dan Hicks's "theory of taking" as a helpful framework for linking audiovisual media collections to discussions about institutional decolonization – while also exploring the particular affordances of media in relation to time and space, restitution and reappropriation, and voices and bodies in colonial history.

COLONIAL HERITAGE COLLECTIONS: A THEORY OF TAKING

Hicks proposes his "theory of taking" in his 2020 book *The Brutish Museums*, which investigates the history and current status of the Benin Bronzes, thousands of plaques and sculptures looted from Benin in 1897 that now sit in museums and private collections in Europe. The Benin Bronzes have been the topic of discussions about repatriation, restitution, and "decolonization" of museums for decades. Hicks explores the meaning of the Benin Bronzes as objects of looting, museum collecting, display, and debate. From this, he argues against two dominant discourses about museum objects in relation to colonial and contested histories.

First, Hicks argues against the "object biographies" approach, which understands each event within an object's provenance as a step in its life course, generating a positive accumulation of values, social relations, and meanings. The very notion of "provenance" tends to frame these events (which could include looting, destruction, war, even genocide) as neutral histories that give objects in museums their value as symbols and sources of knowledge about humanity. Rather, Hicks argues, in cases of looting and other forms of taking across colonial relations of power, the obtaining of objects for European collections should be understood as a negative act rather than a positive addition to an object's cumulative meaning. In other words, such acts do not primarily add to what we can learn from objects in museum contexts, but violently destruct their meanings and relations with humans in their original contexts of creation and use. "The theft of an object by a European museum is a negative act," Hicks argues – not a creative one.[9]

Second, Hicks takes issue with the "relational entanglement" approach (associated with, for example, Nick Thomas and Alfred Gell), which proposes that the study of art specifically attend to social relations rather than aesthetics. In *Art and Agency*, Gell, for example, suggests art objects be understood as a form of "distributed personhood" or extended agency of their creators.[10] To this, Hicks argues that such "distribution" is not always willingly or agentively undertaken. This approach, he says, attends to objects in European museums from Africa, the Pacific, and the Americas in their cultural contexts, but fails to question the cultural/historical context of colonial expansion through which such objects arrived in European collections. In these cases, "entanglement," Hicks argues, can be understood as a *lack* of politics, agency, and power. Thomas's notion of "the museum as method" is thus a method that "actively omits those moments where a relationship is constituted by separations, not entanglements."[11]

Thus, Hicks argues, the paradigms of "object biographies" and "relational entanglements" that have dominated museum object discourses in recent decades ultimately serve to discourage institutions from considering violence, power, and the possibility of restitution when dealing with collections with colonial pasts. Instead of these two paradigms, Hicks proposes a focus on *taking* as an act that demands attention as violent, destructive, disempowering and anti-agentive, rather than a neutral fact in an object's provenance. Taking objects creates social relations – of a colonial, disempowering nature – and simultaneously destroys the social relations that creators and users have with objects in their original contexts.

I propose that this alternative framework for understanding colonial museum objects can be enhanced by thinking with media objects. Hicks considers the medium of photography, in which photographs are "taken" – i.e., created – but which also entail "taking" in the sense of dispossession of their subjects, by entangling them involuntarily with visual representations and perpetuations of colonial ideologies and power relations.[12] He does not consider recordings of sound or moving images, which (in English) are typically referred to as "created" or "collected" by colonial recordists. But Hicks's turn of phrase and his ideological critique both apply to these media as well, I argue. In Dutch, there is also an etymological relationship between recording and taking: sounds and moving images are "taken up" (*opgenomen*) in recordings (*opnamen*), words built on the root verb "to take" (*nemen*). While this meaningful turn of phrase does not transfer exactly to English, we could also say that while "capturing" a moment or event, as we understand photos and recordings to do, the carrier also "captures" the voices and bodies of those who are photographed or recorded – whether they have consented to this or not. This capturing then yields inscribed, persisting social relations of differential power, which we understand as the media object's gaze, perspective, or point of view. In this sense, the "taking" of photographs and recordings operates differently from artifacts, since, when artifacts are taken, they leave behind an absence.[13] Media, on the other hand, capture colonized voices and bodies from the colonizer's perspective into a newly existing physical object, thus recruiting (often involuntarily) the recorded subject into the project of documenting and playing back – sensorily recreating – the world from this colonial point of view.

Through sounds and moving images, this playback of the colonial world takes place in and over time. Hicks points out that there is a dimension of time in the network of social relations constructed by events of looting and taking: what he terms "chronopolitics."[14] Hicks suggests that we could understand "taking photographs as a form of dispossession that operates by making a duration" that contributes, when displayed in museums, to "a persistent regime of visuality and violence."[15] We could reframe photographs, on temporal grounds, "not as frozen moments of time, but ongoing durations"; and thus "not [as] stills, but extensions of colonial violence" that endure through time to the present.[16]

To Hicks's analysis of photographs, I would add sound recordings and moving images. Perhaps even more than photographs, these are still often understood as transparent and objective snapshots of past events. Following Hicks, rather than historical moments frozen in photographs or captured in sound recordings, we can better understand historical media objects from colonial contexts as extensions in time of the purposes and ideologies for and within which they were made: namely, for much of the colonial media archive, as empirical evidence in the interest of establishing incommensurable difference along racial lines. This is true of media created explicitly for scientific and anthropological goals as well as media created for other purposes, such as audience entertainment, or the intimate amateur family films made by Dutch colonials living in the Dutch East Indies that I will discuss below. In the latter, such innocent-seeming documents of family activities also served to portray and construct, through Dutch eyes, the exotic backdrop of nature, culture, and difference that gave shape and meaning to colonial life in the Indies. Media objects serve as carriers of these perspectives from the past into the present, becoming, as Hicks puts it, "devices" or even "weapons" for the creation and perpetuation of such notions of difference.

We can thus see colonial media collections as creating social relations of incommensurability that persist through time, putting into relation the voices and bodies "captured" or "taken" by these technologies of sound and image with recordists in the past as well as viewers and listeners in the present. Today, of course, we have different paradigms and new contextualizing knowledge with which to view these documents. But while this may change some aspects of our readings of them, it does not change the fact of enduring relations with these voices and bodies that were "taken," inscribed in media, and framed by the colonial gaze, the colonial ear. In this sense, we can better understand media to "capture" not a moment but rather the voices and bodies that are involuntarily put into persistent, enduring relations of difference, consumption, knowledge, and power.

If we understand colonial media as "taken" rather than collected or created, does this change how we approach colonial media collections today − as curators, scholars, or other types of viewers and listeners? In the next section, I investigate what it would mean for activities of digitization, restitution, and artistic reappropriation of colonial media to think from Hicks's framework of taking, enduring, and creating networks of social relations across time and power.

DIGITIZATION, RESTITUTION, AND REPAIR: THEORIES OF GIVING BACK

Having considered different notions of what it means to "take" objects, photographs, and sound and image recordings, I now turn to what it means, or could mean, to give back. In other words, how could understanding colonial media heritage as "taken" or "captured" rather than "created" or "collected" contribute to debates around restitution, reinterpretation, and decolonization? Drawing from Hicks's framework, I argue that "giving back" entails more than providing access to, circulating, or even transferring possession of objects or their digital surrogates; rather, it is about doing these activities while also engaging in a dynamic, ongoing conversation about what restitution and repair actually mean in the context of colonial history and the production of knowledge. The inclusion of audiovisual media has much to add to this conversation.

Digitization is a prevalent theme and practice in media archives, presenting potential but also limitations. The digitization of archival materials seems to promise broad and easy access to the world's cultural heritage, giving digital heritage the status of a universal common good and making digitization a "cultural and moral imperative and obligation" for cultural heritage institutions.[17] If we understand the content of a media archive as the immaterial sounds, images, and knowledge contained on media carriers such as tape and film reels, digitized media seems to provide direct access to this, avoiding the challenges presented by outdated and fragile physical carriers. However, digitized media heritage, especially heritage with colonial or contested origins, enters a complicated politics of custodianship, control, access and meaning.

Scholars and archivists have suggested that media, including photographs, sound recordings, and moving images, are simple objects to repatriate because digital copies can easily be made and circulated as equivalents of the original object.[18] Digital copies can be placed online or handed over to communities of origin, while fragile original media carriers remain in archival vaults for safekeeping. However, while this form of “giving back” media objects by providing access to their digital stand-ins avoids some concerns about repatriation, it does not contend sufficiently with the issues of coloniality, ownership, and control. Shubha Chaudhuri, for example, shows that for a collection of sound recordings repatriated from a private collection in the United Kingdom to a postcolonial archival institution in Delhi, accessing and producing knowledge from historical recorded sound still necessitates particular forms of digital literacy and remains connected to existing structures of power and privilege.[19]

Indeed, while digitized media objects may be more widely accessible, they typically remain within existing archival infrastructures of organization and description, access, use, and control. According to longstanding logics of archival institutions and colonial collecting itself, cultural heritage is afforded the status of a public good contributing to knowledge for knowledge’s sake and should thus, it is assumed, be made openly and widely accessible – even if some objects contain sounds and images that are personal, intimate, sacred, or secret. For example, this conflict of values has been demonstrated by Daniela Agostinho and Temi Odumosu regarding the colonial records of the Danish West Indies (now the U.S. Virgin Islands) at the Danish National Archive.[20] Odumosu, considering a photographic image of a crying Black child in the West Indies – a visual inscription of both a body (the child) and a sound (her cry) – proposes developing an “ethics of care” that treats the colonized bodies and voices reproduced in colonial media as ancestral remains rather than anonymous public assets.[21] Odumosu suggests that archives consider caretaking and custodianship as activities that extend beyond the organization and control of archival objects and records within the institution, to involve dialogue with communities, artists, and activists and their varying notions of access, meaning, use, restitution and care.

Indeed, we can understand audiovisual media heritage as containing voices and bodies – but these voices cannot “speak for themselves,” revealing their own meanings or perspectives, in the context of colonial museums and archives or even in wide circulation. Instead, interpreting and reinterpreting colonial heritage requires actively engaging with users, communities, and forms of knowledge production that extend outside the bounds of the formal archival institution and contend with the colonial context and power dynamics within which the objects were initially made. To follow Hicks, colonial media objects are captured through negative acts, severing meaningful social relations rather than creating them. Engaging with different kinds of communities and users in the present could potentially build new social relations and new meanings for the voices and bodies captured in colonial media, as well as participating in broader conversations about how colonial collecting, archival stewardship, and restitution all have a hand in shaping and reshaping the world through sounds and images.

What, then, could “giving back” mean? As far as community participation, it could entail active and agentive partnerships with members of communities of origin, driven by community members’ own goals and notions of ownership, use, and meaning. One example is the project Decolonizing Southeast Asian

Sound Archives (DeCoSEAS) in the Netherlands, which includes participation from archivists and scholars in Southeast Asian countries as equal, guiding partners in reexamining sound recording collections from Southeast Asia in European institutions.[22] DeCoSEAS is committed to three agenda points: improving access, including by actively seeking connections between collections that were dispersed according to colonial logics and making the content of European collections known within their communities of origin; transferring agency and ownership of recordings back to stakeholders in communities of origin in more than symbolic transactions; and engaging in and furthering a broader dialogue with diverse participants about how to curate colonial audio heritage.[23] All of these points take discussions about restitution much further than mere digitization and passive circulation of archival objects.

Another approach to colonial media heritage is for institutions to invite and even sponsor artistic reinterpretations of archival materials through contemporary critical perspectives. In the Netherlands, this has become a relatively common practice among heritage institutions in recent years. Such initiatives have included the Unlocking Sounds project at the Tropenmuseum; the Deviant Practice research program at the Van Abbemuseum; the Open Archief collaboration between the Nieuwe Instituut, the Institute for Sound and Vision, and the International Institute of Social History; and funded artist-in-residence positions at the Eye Filmmuseum.[24] These kinds of programs have been both applauded for increasing access and use and criticized for outsourcing the critical, reflexive work that institutions are becoming aware they need to do; indeed, artistic projects do not necessarily result in structural institutional change. But to frame artistic reinterpretation in terms of Hicks's theory of taking, we could understand these activities as having the potential to establish new perspectives on and new forms of social relation with the sounds and images, voices and bodies captured in the colonial archive. Could this be considered a form of restitution? Of decolonization? In the rest of this essay, I explore two works that appropriate and reassemble sounds and images from the Dutch-Indonesian colonial archive and explore their implications for colonial media archives and decolonization.

ARTISTIC REAPPROPRIATIONS OF COLONIAL MEDIA: *THEY CALL ME BABU* AND *EXPEDITION CONTENT*

They Call Me Babu (*Ze Noemen me Baboe*) is a 2019 film by Sandra Beerends, a Dutch filmmaker with Indonesian roots. The archival materials used in this film document the gradual end of formal Dutch colonialism in Indonesia: from Dutch colonial family life in the first decades of the twentieth century, World War II and Japanese occupation, to the Indonesian War of Independence from the Dutch that was fought from 1945 to 1949. Beerends uses film footage from several Dutch media archives, including amateur silent films of Dutch colonial families based in Indonesia, as well as media coverage of historical events, like Sukarno's 1945 Proclamation of Indonesian Independence. This footage, meticulously selected and compiled from 179 different source films, is set to an original score by the Netherlands-based composer Alex Simu and narrated by Dutch actress Denise Aznam.

Speaking in Indonesian, Aznam gives voice to the character of Alima, a "babu," or Indonesian nanny working for a Dutch family. Alima flees her own adverse family conditions and is hired as a full-time, live-in help for the children of a family living in Bandung, West Java, shortly before World War II. Over the course of the film, she travels with the family on a trip to the Netherlands, encounters Indonesian nationalist activists, witnesses the occupation of the Japanese and the removal of "her" family to an internment camp, and eventually experiences her own coming-of-age love story against the hope and the violence of the Indonesian revolution. Alima and her story are fictional, but they are based on Beerends' extensive research into the stories of 90 Indonesian women who served as babus during this period, conducted through interviews with them and their descendants.

Through the mechanism of the character of Alima and her story, Beerends takes an assemblage of archival footage by Dutch recordists where babus appear as silent figures in the background (if at all) and transforms it into Alima's perspective. We see "her" appear on screen (actually an assemblage of many different babus who make brief incidental appearances in the archival footage) and see historical events through "her" eyes. For European viewers, the effect is a reversal of the familiar and the strange: through Alima's eyes and narration, Indonesia is familiar, and the Dutch and their customs and homeland are exotic. On the foray in Holland, Alima makes sense of the strange foreignness of the Dutch and their culture, including stinky cheese, funny Dutch words, ice skating, and the general manner of Dutch people moving through geographic space "as if the whole world belongs to them." Further, we gain insight into the complexities of life as a babu, a perspective largely undocumented in the historical record. Alima adapts to strictly scheduled Dutch family life; develops a particularly close relationship with the baby, Jantje; is simultaneously essential and dispensable to the family she gives almost all her time to; and ultimately wants to but cannot protect them from internment and eventual deportation back to Holland, which she experiences as a tragic event in her life.

The second work I consider here, *Expedition Content*, is "an augmented sound work for cinema" created in 2020 by Ernst Karel and Veronika Kusumaryati.[25] While *Expedition Content* is designed to be experienced in a theater, it draws primarily from a sound recording archive and makes sparse use of the screen for intermittent information, translations, and a small quantity of visual historical footage. The archive that provides the material is 37 hours of sound recorded by Michael C. Rockefeller on the 1961 Harvard-Peabody Expedition to Netherlands New Guinea (now West Papua). Rockefeller accompanied the expedition as a sound recordist gathering material for Robert Gardner's ethnographic film *Dead Birds* (1963), a classic work of visual anthropology that documents tribal warfare and death rituals among the Hubula people in the Baliem Valley of the Papuan Central Highlands. The expedition was supported by the Peabody Museum of Archeology and Ethnology at Harvard University, as well as the Dutch government and the Rockefeller Foundation (a philanthropic organization founded by John D. Rockefeller, co-founder of the American oil company Standard Oil and Michael's great-grandfather). In addition to Gardner and Rockefeller, the expedition included two anthropologists, a medical student, and a naturalist/novelist, and, aside from *Dead Birds*, produced a novel, two ethnographic monographs, photographic collections, and multiple dissertations.

Karel and Kusumaryati largely forego the other materials produced and focus on the sound recordings by Rockefeller. These recordings include what Rockefeller calls "occupational sounds" (various material to be synchronized with Gardner's film in post-production, such as the sounds of water, birds, gardening, children playing); sonic documentation of the main research events, namely warfare and death rituals; and "expedition content," instances where Rockefeller turned the sound recorder on himself and his fellow expedition members and captured both work and leisure activities. The latter are sometimes recorded clandestinely: "Is it on, Michael? Tell the truth!" we hear one of his compatriots demand, to which Rockefeller's recorded voice responds, "It's not on!" In the context of Karel and Kusumaryati's work, these candid moments end up being the most concretely informative content, telling the listener much more about the ideological backdrop of the expedition and the men who carried it out than the Hubula culture they set out to document. Ultimately, through Karel and Kusumaryati's selection and juxtaposition of sonic materials, *Expedition Content* becomes primarily a documentary about the expedition itself. Rather than documenting Papuan tribal warfare and death rituals, *Expedition Content* documents the strategies, attitudes, and reflexivity – or lack thereof – in the project of observing, representing, and creating scientific knowledge about the colonial Other.

They Call Me Babu and *Expedition Content* have both had limited releases, with *They Call Me Babu* premiering at the International Documentary Film Festival Amsterdam in 2019 and winning a number of awards on the international documentary film festival circuit. It had a short theatrical release in the Netherlands to mostly positive reviews and is currently available to stream for free within the Netherlands via the online Film Player of the Eye Filmmuseum.[26] *Expedition Content* premiered at the 2020 Berlin International Film Festival and has since circulated internationally via film festivals and screenings in niche theaters and academic film series. It has also received praise in the international press, from *The New York Times* to Indonesian media outlets. Neither film has generated much attention in published academic scholarship thus far, although Kusumaryati and Karel have co-authored an article about *Expedition Content* for *MAST Journal of Media Art Study and Theory*,[27] and *They Call Me Babu* has been the subject of one critical article in *Women's History Review*.[28]

My selection and discussion of these two works can be seen as in dialogue with Julia Noordegraaf's 2009 essay "*Facing Forward* with Found Footage: Displacing Colonial Footage in *Mother Dao* and the Work of Fiona Tan." In this essay, Noordegraaf is concerned with the Dutch documentary filmmaker Vincent Monnikedam's film *Mother Dao: The Turtlelike* (1995) and two audiovisual installation artworks by the Indonesian-Australian artist Fiona Tan: *Smoke Screen* (1997) and *Facing Forward* (1999). These works use existing audiovisual material from the archive of Dutch colonialism in Indonesia and reassemble them in compilation films, a genre that Noordegraaf argues serves as a “technology of memory” that employs the technique of montage to create new meaning. For the present-day viewer, Noordegraaf assesses, “the displacement and re-editing of archival material in compilation films can be a tool for remembering the past differently.”[29] Tan’s works use selected archival footage to comment on the relation between historical images, filmmaker, and viewer, ultimately becoming less about specific historical events than about the process of making and viewing the works in the present. Monnikedam’s film conveys the specific – and viscerally affecting and disturbing – conditions of Dutch colonialism in Indonesia by juxtaposing images of Dutch colonials and Indonesian natives, without narration or other forms of contextualizing information. Neither Tan nor Monnikedam provide information about exactly where and when the images are from or in what context they were originally created; the viewing experience becomes more about impressions that cause the viewer to think and feel rather than learn something historically specific about the Dutch colonial past in Indonesia.

***They Call Me Babu* and *Expedition Content*, like the earlier works by Monnikedam and Tan, create new meaning by reassembling and reinterpreting audiovisual materials from the Dutch-Indonesian colonial archive. In contrast to Monnikedam’s and Tan’s works, they are reassembled in ways that give the viewer/listener specific insights into the context and events of this history. The two more recent works each shape a particular critical lens through which to view (and hear) coloniality.**

While *They Call Me Babu* uses archival footage, it takes on the form and structure of a fictional film, so the viewer is not given contextualizing information about the dates of historical events or the specific context of the footage shown in the film. Instead, we see historical events through Alima’s eyes and the combinations of image, sound (the musical score) and voice (Alima’s narration) create meaning and perspective. The archival footage is manipulated for particular narrative effects; for example, in some cases, footage is slowed so that a fleeting moment becomes a scene, a passing figure in the background becomes a character. In the scenes that take place in Indonesia, gamelan music is combined with Western instruments to set the scene and create continuity (this is particularly noticeable when Alima returns from the Netherlands to Indonesia and to the familiarity of Simu’s score). Foley sounds such as seagulls, steamships, parades, marching soldiers, and the mundane sounds of the grocery store and the domestic sphere give sonic realism to the silent film footage. Added sound is also used to form links between the reassembled images. For example, in one series of shots, we see a Dutch child playing at an Indonesian market, and against this we already hear the footsteps of marching soldiers who appear in the following shot. The sonic connection juxtaposes the innocence and vulnerability of childhood with the violence of war and colonial occupation, so far-off historical events are made intimate; we suddenly see the soldiers through a child’s eyes. Throughout the film, reassembling sound and image connects disparate images into narrative sequences, cause/effect relations, and (often implicit) critical perspectives.

Indeed, colonial critique is largely non-explicit in *They Call Me Babu*. Rather, we receive it obliquely through Alima's observations and retellings of other characters' words and perspectives. For example, when Nazi Germany invades the Netherlands, the patriarch of the Dutch family that employs Alima shouts, "Holland has been occupied!" In response, Marlan, the family's gardener (who, unlike the Dutch character, is given a name) responds, "Indonesia has been occupied for 300 years." Likewise, the deepening Indonesian nationalist sentiments are almost never attributed to Alima herself, but to others. "More and more people around me wonder why [the Dutch] are still in charge here," she recounts.

In *Expedition Content*, on the other hand, the audience does receive specifical historical information about the Harvard-Peabody Expedition as well as the context of colonialism in West Papua more broadly. This information is given visually, projected at the beginning and end of the film. The selected, rearranged, and reassembled archival sounds we hear are given meaning in part through the audience's knowledge of this colonial context, which the film points out is ongoing. West Papua remained a colony of the Netherlands after the rest of Indonesia became independent, has been subject to international and particularly U.S. extractivism (including by Standard Oil, the Rockefeller family's company) since World War II, and is currently fighting for independence from Indonesia, which continues to enact colonial policies in the region.

This history of colonialism through the present, then, is the backdrop for the audience to make sense of what they see and hear in *Expedition Content*. The work opens with a conversation between Rockefeller, Gardner, and the photographer Eliot Elisofon. The three discuss color and light and the idea that film can register some phenomena better than the human eye (for example, "the excessive blue light before dawn"), as well as manipulations with filters that can achieve particular effects on the viewer (for example, the fog filters that can be used to create the feeling of almost-dawn). Gardner's stated mission is to create "a film for scientific purposes" that "achieve[s] naturalism" and captures "reality, or a sense of reality," and the three discuss the techniques, corrections, and manipulations that can best accomplish this.

This opening scene (which is only sound with no accompanying visuals) establishes the themes of the work: namely, the politics of representation and knowledge, and the subjectivity of the reality, or truth, that this group of scientists and ethnographers set out to capture. The subjective and constructed nature of this project is emphasized through layers of choices made by Kusumaryati and Karel about what to include from the many hours of archival recordings. For example, in addition to Rockefeller's voice announcing what each recording contains, we also hear catalog numbers of the tape reels spoken by two different archivists at the Indiana University Archives of Traditional Music, where the Peabody Museum deposited the recordings for preservation. At one point, while a chorus of women sing and dance (again, we only hear and cannot see this occurring), Michael resonates a tuning fork to record the pitch of their voices, a gesture towards scientific objectivity that serves more to remove us from the desired “sense of reality” than to establish it. At other points, we hear long moments of silence, a silence filled with the thick sonic textures of recording machines running and tape reels unspooling. Through the choices made in *Expedition Content*, the audience is not immersed in a West Papuan reality, but rather is made distinctly conscious of the great efforts required to construct such a “reality” cinematically, to convey it to an audience. Later, as the work builds up to the longer clips that become the main “events” of *Expedition Content*, the audience is also led to understand these efforts through a critical lens, shaped by the colonial power relations of those filmed and those who do the filming.

For both *They Call Me Babu* and *Expedition Content*, it is useful to understand the historical footage used as “taken” or “capturing” colonized voices and bodies in sound and image, in Hicks’s sense, rather than as being “created” or “collected” by their recordists (namely, Dutch colonial families in Indonesia and American ethnographers, respectively). Whether or not the respective recordists were explicitly aware of their role in a colonial system of power relations, the Indonesian babus and Hubula people whose bodies and voices have been inscribed by Dutch and American recordists are involuntarily drawn into a colonial project invested in representing and perpetuating cultural and racial difference to justify colonial domination and different forms of cultural and natural extractivism. In response to this, *They Call Me Babu* aims to reinterpret historical footage to turn the “captured” figure of the babu from depicted object to narrating subject; in other words, the babus who appear incidentally in the archival footage as background figures become the primary perspective from which we view the events of Indonesia’s colonial past. In *Expedition Content*, we see that Rockefeller’s recordings, which aimed to capture Hubula people and culture to take this knowledge back to American audiences, actually serve to inscribe observations of the members of the expedition as well. The reassemblage of sounds and voices points out the unequal power dynamics of colonial exploration and knowledge production, as well as the ideological grounds and assumptions about human difference on which the expedition was carried out. In both cases, the audience is left with a critical perspective on those who recorded the sounds and images onto tape reels in the first place, and on the historical and ideological contexts in which they did so.

CONCLUSION: DECOLONIZATION?

Can artistic works such as *They Call Me Babu* and *Expedition Content* be understood as a form of “giving back” what has been taken, or in some sense restituting or repairing the legacy of colonial media? And moreover, do such critical artistic reappropriations constitute a “decolonization” of the colonial media archive? I close this essay with some brief remarks about restitution, repair, and decolonization more broadly. Ultimately, I argue that while artistic reappropriation does not necessarily “decolonize” archives of colonial media, it does potentially engage in a critical societal conversation about the colonial politics of representation and knowledge production and how to do these in a less colonial way.

According to Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, decolonization is necessarily "unsettling": it means the reversal of colonizing processes and dynamics, the literal giving back of Indigenous/colonized land and life.[30] For the archive or museum, this would mean returning objects of knowledge and, moreover, the means of knowledge production itself from colonial perspectives and colonial control. Tuck and Yang point out that other pervasive uses of "decolonization" – such as "decolonizing" schools, museums or archives – turn decolonization into a metaphor that means improving these institutions along the lines of contemporary values, thereby evading an actual reckoning with the colonial past and its lasting effects. While making museums and archives more inclusive is a positive and worthy goal, the means of accomplishing this, such as broader collecting or outreach towards more diverse user groups, do not, according to Tuck and Yang's definition, entail actual decolonization.

Along these lines, artistic reinterpretations of colonial media do not necessarily "unsettle" the archival institution and its colonial history and politics. In terms of ownership and control, for both *They Call Me Babu* and *Expedition Content*, the materials are owned by the respective archival institutions, which have granted permission for their reuse. The reinterpretation of these materials from a critical perspective benefits audiences and societal discussions about the colonial past; at the same time, one could argue that it benefits the archive as an institution, accomplishing reflexive critical work that societal institutions with colonial pasts are now tasked with – without relinquishing total control of the means and materials of knowledge production.

In terms of perspective and access to the past through the eyes and ears of the colonized, I argue that colonial archival media cannot shed or escape from its thoroughly colonial perspective. The voices and bodies of colonized people may be captured in colonial media, but this does not mean that merely relistening to the colonial media archive can "give voice" to the colonized, in the sense of affording agency or conveying the past from a subaltern perspective. In ***They Call Me Babu*** **and** ***Expedition Content*****, we see images of babus and hear the voices of Hubula people – but through experiencing both works, the audience becomes aware of how little is actually captured of the perspectives of those depicted, and how much these historical recordings convey instead about the lives and ideologies of Dutch families in the East Indies and American ethnographers in West Papua.**

In this sense, while we may see and hear traces or "echoes" of subaltern perspectives in colonial media archives, we still do not hear the agentive voices or full perspectives of those recorded in the past merely by listening.[31] The two works deal with this in different ways: in *They Call Me Babu*, the perspective of the babu is imagined based on the filmmaker's own research and conveyed by juxtaposing the historical images with new sounds and words. In *Expedition Content*, the lack of Hubula perspective – the impossibility of capturing it on such an expedition – seems to become part of the point of the work, instead focusing on a critique of the expedition members and their futile colonial project. This suggests two broader types of uses of colonial media: we can use it to *imagine* subaltern or colonized perspectives; or we can use it to scrutinize the perspectives, motivations, and ideologies of the colonizer. In other words, media created from a colonial perspective does not necessarily provide us direct access to the bodies, voices, and perspectives captured in it – it is, rather, permanently obscured by power relations in the form of the colonial gaze (or ear).

If colonial media is so thoroughly colonial, is the only productive possibility to destroy it? Hicks's "theory of taking" again provides a valuable perspective here. Hicks argues that the act of colonial looting – or, in the case of media, of colonial recording – creates negative social relations that dispossess colonized people of their agency and involuntarily recruit them into the perpetuation of colonial ideologies and colonial relations. Artistic reinterpretation, then, could potentially create new social relations, putting the bodies historically captured in media into relationship with new viewers in the present. This potentially rearranges the "chronopolitics" of colonial media, or at least adds an additional layer: the social relations that colonized bodies and voices are "captured" into do not necessarily entail only the perpetuation of colonial relations and notions of difference, but also, potentially, a critical reexamination of these.

Thus, while the "decolonization" of colonial media collections and archival institutions more broadly may require more than artistic reinterpretation can accomplish alone, works such as *They Call Me Babu* and *Expedition Content* take a step in the right direction. That is, if we consider restitution and repair of colonial collections and the colonial past to be not just an action or transaction but rather an ongoing conversation about the past and its lingering aftereffects in the present, these works participate actively in such a conversation and invite audiences to do so as well. Through this, as suggested by Hicks, Odumosu, and others, the colonial media archive has the potential to become a space not just of preserving the colonial past and its ideologies and power relations but a space of active anti-racism, dialogue, and repair: a space of collective care for objects, bodies, voices, and living communities and people.

ENDNOTES

1 I began the research for this article as a Postdoctoral Researcher on the project Polyvocal Interpretation of Contested Colonial Heritage (PICCH) and completed it as an Assistant Professor at the Amsterdam School for Heritage, Memory and Material Culture (University of Amsterdam). In particular I thank Alec Badenoch for introducing me to the work of Dan Hicks.

2 https://pressingmatter.nl (2021-25) [19.07.2024]; https://goudenkoets.nl (2021-22) [19.07.2024]; see Michael Karabinos: The Coloniality of Dutch Archives: What Can Be Done and on What Terms?, in: Archivoz, October 21, 2020, URL: https://www.archivozmagazine.org/en/coloniality-in-dutch-archives/ [19.07.2024].

3 Dan Hicks: The Brutish Museums: The Benin Bronzes, Colonial Violence and Cultural Restitution, London 2020.

4 Emily Hansell Clark: ‘So Nicely in Harmony with the Tropical Nature’: Listening to the Cultural and the Natural in Suriname, 1883-2020, in: The World of Music 10:2 (2021), pp. 51-78; Marieke Bloembergen: Colonial Spectacles: The Netherlands and the Dutch East Indies at the World Exhibitions, 1880-1931, Singapore 2006; Blanchard et al. (eds.): Human Zoos: Science and Spectacle in the Age of Colonial Empires, Liverpool 2008.

5 Clark, ‘So Nicely in Harmony’; Paulien Schuurmans: Framing Suriname: De Verbeelding van Surinamers op de Internationale Koloniale en Uitvoerhandel Tentoonstelling in Amsterdam in 1883, in: Tijdschrift voor Geschiedenis 126:1 (2013), pp. 56-75.

6 Fatimah Tobing Rony: The Third Eye: Race, Cinema, and Ethnographic Spectacle, Duke, NC: Duke University Press 1996, 45ff.

7 Miguel García: Sound Archives Under Suspicion, in: Historical Sources of Ethnomusicology in Contemporary Debate, ed. Susanne Ziegler et al., Newcastle upon Tyne 2017, pp. 10-20, here p. 16.

8 meLê yamomo/Barbara Titus: The Persistent Refrain of the Colonial Archival Logic/Colonial Entanglements and Sonic Transgressions, in: The World of Music 10:1 (2021), pp. 39-70; Irene Hilden: Absent Presences in the Colonial Archive: Dealing with the Berlin Sound Archive’s Acoustic Legacies, Leuven 2022; Anette Hoffmann: Listening to Colonial History: Echoes of Coercive Knowledge Production in Historical Sound Recordings from Southern Africa, Basel 2023.

9 Hicks, The Brutish Museums, p. 32.

10 Alfred Gell: Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory, Oxford 1998.

11 Hicks, The Brutish Museums, p. 28.

12 Ivi, p. 13.

13 Although, see Hilden, Absent Presences, on the notions of “present absences” and “absent presences” in the colonial sound recording archive.

14 Hicks, The Brutish Museums, 178ff.

15 Ivi, 14-15.

16 Ivi, 14.

17 Nanna Bonde Thylstrup: The Politics of Mass Digitization, Cambridge 2018, p. 3.

18 Mèhèza Kalibani: The Less Considered Part: Contextualizing Immaterial Heritage from German Colonial Contexts in the Restitution Debate, in: International Journal of Cultural Property 28 (2021), pp. 43-53.

19 Shubha Chaudhuri: Potentials and Challenges of Repatriation: The Case of Archives and Research Centre for Ethnomusicology, India, in: The World of Music 10:1 (2021), pp. 93-104.

20 Daniela Agostinho: Archival Encounters: Rethinking Access and Care in Digital Colonial Archives, in: Archival Science 19 (2019), pp. 141-165; Temi Odumosu: The Crying Child: On Colonial Archives, Digitization, and Ethics of Care in the Cultural Commons, in: Current Anthropology 60, suppl. 22 (October 2020), pp. S289-S302.

21 Odumosu: The Crying Child, p. S298.

22 https://www.decoseas.org (2021-2024) [19.07.2024].

23 https://www.decoseas.org/about [19.07.2024].

24 https://www.materialculture.nl/en/unlocking-sounds (2016-2017) [19.07.2024]; https://www.e-flux.com/announcements/8182/research-programme-deviant-practice/ (2016-present) [19.07.2024]; https://www.openarchief.com (2019-present); https://www.eyefilm.nl/en/academic/artist-and-scholar-in-residence (2017-present) [19.07.2024].

25 http://ek.klingt.org/expeditioncontent.html [19.07.2024].

26 https://player.eyefilm.nl/en/films/they-call-me-babu [19.07.2024].

27 Veronika Kusumaryati/Ernst Karel: ‘Expedition Content’ and the Harvard Peabody Expedition to Netherlands New Guinea, 1961, in: MAST Journal of Media Art Study and Theory 2:2 (2021), pp. 15-25.

28 Ana Dragojlovic/Katharine McGregor: ‘They Call Me Babu’: The Politics of Visibility and Gendered Memories of Dutch Colonialism in Indonesia, in: Women’s History Review 31:6 (2022), pp. 933-952. The article misstates the director’s name and incorrectly recounts some facts about the film, which somewhat reduces the impact of its critical framing of the film as colonial apologism.

29 Julia Noordegraaf: ‘Facing Forward’ with Found Footage: Displacing Colonial Footage in ‘Mother Dao’ and the Work of Fiona Tan, in: Technologies of Memory in the Arts, ed. Liedeke Plate/Anneke Smelik, London 2009, pp. 172-187, here p. 176.

30 Eve Tuck/K. Wayne Yang: Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor, in: Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society 1:1 (2012), pp. 1-40.

31 See also Hoffmann, Listening to Colonial History, on the revealing “echoes” of the past in the colonial sound archive.

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