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STAGING YOUR CASES: ONE ARTIST'S ARGUMENT FOR MORE CREATIVE WRITING AND PERFOMANCE IN MUSEUMS

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Sometime in 2006, I took a week off my work as an architect to go on a week-long residential playwriting course. I did this because I had happened on the story of Paul Robeson, the African American actor, singer and activist, when I borrowed his biography from Liverpool Central Library. As I read it, I became convinced that this one man's life could teach us a tremendous amount about modern history and politics, and in the process help promote improved understanding between peoples of all races and political persuasions. His story seemed to demand to be told as a stage play, so I eventually enrolled on this short course, in the middle of which we were tasked with writing a fifteen-minute play in three acts, on any subject. I went on a walk in the woods, in the hope that somehow, some inspiration might come. True enough, from somewhere in the depths of my imagination (or some other, unfathomable place), a story of a conflict between a divorcing couple formed in my mind. The wife would be a Brit of dual heritage—part African, part European. The husband would be the last in the line of an aristocratic English family, and they are negotiating—in fact, arguing—about dividing the family assets. One of those assets would be a 3000-year-old Nubian death mask which had been acquired through colonial looting. The play was written over the next day or so. Since its writing, it has been performed a few times, most recently at the Unity Theatre in Liverpool. At that performance, a friend of mine, who happens to be an ethnographer who works at the Liverpool World Museum was in the audience, and it was through him that I was eventually invited to deliver a paper at the 2020 Museum Ethnographers Group (MEG)conference. Since Covid-19 prevented the conference from going ahead, the presenters were invited to submit written papers, which is how I find myself in the pages of the *Journal of Museum Ethnography*, a publication I must confess to not having heard of before. Still, as my transformation from architect to touring storyteller has taken me to some pretty unexpected places including, for example, the town of Inuvik above the arctic circle in the North West Territories of Canada, I should be able to take my appearance in these pages in my stride, and do what I do more regularly, which is tell stories.

The fifteen-minute play I wrote, *Half Moon,* is set in the library of a stately home somewhere in the UK (Figure 1). It opens with the divorcing couple

considering bids received for the various artefacts they owned, and the first act ends with the husband storming off during heated negotiations. This sets the scene for Act Two, which I reproduce here in full:

ACT 2. Fifteen minutes later. ESTHER on her own, examining the artefacts. She starts with the bible, which she handles with white gloves. She then goes to look at the mask which is enclosed in a glass case on the wall through which EDWARD has exited. Enter an African woman from a door on the opposite wall. She is Princess Fatima. She speaks from behind ESTHER, making her jump.

FATIMA That is not in its rightful resting place.

ESTHER Good God! Never mind its rightful place, who the hell are you?

FATIMA The young lady would do well to show respect. She is speaking to one who is over three thousand years older than herself.

ESTHER Who let you in? The estate staff should –

FATIMA Princess Fatima does not require permission to be here. She goes wherever her mask goes.

ESTHER The mask is nothing to do with you. It belongs –

FATIMA The mask belongs to the princess. Nobody else.

ESTHER It has been in my husband's family for over three hundred years. Given to them by some English monarch.

FATIMA And it was made for Princess Fatimah's family when her soul and her body were parted.

ESTHER What nonsense.

FATIMA Does the young lady know how the white family came by this treasure?

ESTHER Oh, I don't know. Some military campaign in Africa somewhere.

FATIMA Nubia it was. Kept in the Emperor's temple where the princess's body had lain since her parting. The resting place was destroyed by the white soldiers, and everything stolen.

ESTHER Well, that happens in war, I guess, along with the killing, raping and everything else.

FATIMA The princess's spirit was recalled to accompany the mask on its journey, and to protect it until it finds a suitable resting place.

ESTHER Well, you better start packing your bags again lady, and get ready for Silicon Valley.

FATIMA Where is this place?

ESTHER The states*(Pause. ESTHER soon realises that FATIMA does not know)* America ... Apache country .... The Sioux, the –

FATIMA Sioux....Apache.... Sioux. *(Beat)*... Yes! Our travellers brought reports of such people. From distant lands. They are wise people. They understand the heavens and the stars like we do.

ESTHER If you want stars, there's another place called Hollywood. (Princess looks blank again) They make movies .... films .... entertainment - ... you know, actors? Drama*(Giving up)* ... oh, it doesn't matter.

(FATIMA goes to the window, looks out into the night sky. Pause)

FATIMA The young lady will come. The princess will show her something.*(ESTHER joins her, and she continues)*

You see the goddess Isis showing half her face?

ESHTER What? Oh, the moon! Half-moon. Yes, of course.

FATIMA Go up from the top of her face and you see Malisis. Yes?

ESTHER Wait a minute... Oh yes... there .... blue.

FATIMA Malisis is at the head of a family of four, yes?

ESTHER *(Slowly)* One .... two ... three..... yes, four. I see!

FATIMA Now. That fourth is the goddess Emirisis. She has a twin, Afrisis. Afrisis belongs in that family, but the other gods were warring against each other, and that sent him off his chosen path. Our wise masters have made charts and have understood that he returns to his rightful path every six hundred and forty-six harvests. Now. Look from Emirisis back towards Isis and tell me what you see.

ESTHER From that one to the moon. .... Let's see ....*(Beat)* I don't see anything. In a straight line?

FATIMA Slowly. It is nearer Emirisis than Isis. Look carefull-

ESTHER *(Excitedly)* I see! I see him! Just ... glowing ... throbbing slowly ... a pulse. Now green, now orange, now yellow ... blue ... wow! Is that it? Beautiful!

FATIMA Approaching its long-lost family again. I have watched it for two and a half thousand years, and it won't be long now.

ESTHER How do you know all this?

FATIMA The princess was from the dynasty that studied the heavens. The knowledge was the knowledge of generations before, and generations after, until the white men came and stole it.

ESTHER So, this Afri-whatsit – when it sort of joins up again, is that significant?

FATIMA The time of rich harvests returns. A time of bounty. A time of wealth, ascendancy. When all the people are nourished with food from the soil and their spirits with food from the heavens.
(Pause)
The mask. The princess does not wish to follow it to the land of the Sioux people. They are good people, but not our people. The mask belongs to the Nubian people. When it gets there, the princess's soul may rejoin those of its ancestors and descendants.

ESTHER But ... we've been offered four million by Bill Gates!

FATIMA Tell me. This four million. Will you eat it? Will it nourish your spirit? Is it for you only? What will happen to it when your body and your soul part?

ESTHER Please. Don't start this now. I'm newly divorced. I need to know I can be independent. Start a new life in comfort.

FATIMA Many of the souls of our people have been reborn and are in the children. But they remain lost, until they can reconnect with us. With their past. Reconnect with their future.

(Unseen by ESTHER, the princess retreats and exits via the side door whence she came)

ESTHER You wouldn't understand. My ancestors may have come from Africa, but I'm British, you hear? British. I can't ... Princess? Princess?

(Looks around the room confused. Walks over to the mask, studying it intently. EDWARD re-enters.)

EDWARD Hello
ESTHER Hi
EDWARD Look, this is a bit awkward, but the lawyers have sent one more bid. Some mix up at the office, apparently. Shall we open it?

(ESTHER shrugs absently)

Strictly speaking, we shouldn't, but you never know.

(Pause)

We'll open it, but before we do, I need to know what you've decided.

ESTHER About what?
EDWARD Fifty-fifty or seventy-five/twenty-five?

(Pause)

ESTHER Do you really want one of those things?
EDWARD Surely, you don't think I'd let you take that as well?
ESTHER If I settle for twenty eighty, would you?
EDWARD Twenty eighty?
ESTHER Twenty to me, eighty to you.
EDWARD You sure?
ESTHER Yes, why not?
EDWARD Okay, its a deal. Shake?

(They shake hands)

Now let's open this last one. You do it.

(ESTHER opens it. Reads it, and is stunned by its contents.)

Well? What does it say?

(ESTHER hands it over. EDWARD reads. He chuckles excitedly and reads)

His Excellency, his highness Prince Fankasa Babanla III, Prime Minister for life, Democratic Republic of Tongomanda.
(Aside) That bloody tyrant.... To grace the fourth country palace of his excellency, his highness. Ten Million US dollars. ... Method of transmission, Cash. On delivery.
CASH ON DELIVERY!!! Can you imagine that? Ten million cash! That's two for you, eight for me. Good, huh?

ESTHER *(Unexcited. She's looking out of the window. She speaks nonchalantly)* Yeah. Look Edward, I need to be on my own for a while. I've got some thinking to do. I'm going outside for a while. See you soon.

Exits. EDWARD shakes his head. Looks at the tender, and lights fade. End of Scene.

The third and final act opens with Esther having spent the next hour reconsidering her decision, and pondering the importance of the artefact to the youth of Africa. What she decides in the end (as written by me) interesting though it is, is not quite as important as the fact that at this stage, the audience or the reader is already invested in the story of a single artefact that, as we are reminded in the third act, resurrects the story of how it, like many millions of others in Western museums, were wrested from their natural homes: through violent plunder.In the most recent performance of the play, a member of the cast provided the mask used, and a display case was also found to house it.Looking at the photograph now,it is interesting to notehow the mask used on this occasion or indeed all other productionsof the play have not been death masks but ceremonial or religious masks. Until writing this now, it occurs to me that this was never a problem for me as the writer, nor was it for the director, designer, actors or audience (except maybe for my ethnographer friend!). More important than the accuracy of the artefact used are the issues that the play brings up; not least the fact that many of the objects held in private and public museum collections in the West were acquired as spoils of war and as part of the worldwide colonisation project. Brutality, deception and vandalism would have been associated with that acquisition—in stark contrast to the image of Great Britain and the highly lauded 'British values' that nationalistic people have trumpeted, starting when the sun began to set on the Empire, up to and since the Brexit debate.

Other issues that the play brings out, which are of interest to museums and their visitors include ancient cultures (including death and burial rituals); astronomical study, ancestral worship; historic migrations; reparations, and even corruption. One can imagine this fifteen-minute play being staged in museum spaces, and the visitors/audiences engaging in quite lively conversations afterward, with the artists and themselves. In my experience as a touring stage actor, post-show Q&A sessions are invariably as engaging and enlightening as the drama itself, for they are a chance for people to seek more detail about, and share their reactions to what they have just seen. In such a museum setting, the audience wouldddiscuss with curators the objects featured, and other objects that relate to the play's themes, which they would be able to see then, or on another visit.

The more traditional way of course is for visitors to arrive at the museum, pick up a guide, and take a recommended route through the collection, reading the guide

and the curated descriptions for each, and after an hour or more, leave with a little knowledge about many things, and likely without having spoken to another person about any of the objects on display. As an artist, I argue that the experience is more meaningful when it is enhanced by using drama to bring the objects to life, as suggested in *Half Moon*.The story came from my artistic imagination, inspired by things that are important to me—especially the desire toexamine and share ancient and modern African history (which is inevitably also European and World History) in an engagingway. Of course, the last thing on my mind when I wrote the play was that I might end upaddressing an audience ofmuseum ethnographers about it, but the story about how it has led to me now writing this is nonetheless interesting. It will hopefully reinforce the argument that museums who do not often and regularly work with artists are doing themselves, the public and the previous owners and makers of their artefacts a great disservice.

After the playwriting course, I went on to write a one-man play titled *Call Mr. Robeson.*I havesince performed it throughout the UK and literally around the world, several hundred times, and it is still in demand. One of the many venues I performed at was Rich Mix in London in 2015. In the audience, unbeknownst to me until four years later, was a woman whopromotes writers of colour, and presents them and their work at live events. In 2019, she was commissioned to assemble a group of writers of colour to respond to artefacts held at the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford. The writers were asked to produce pieces of poetry or prose inspired by the objects, and these written works would then be part of a Museum of Colour.[1]The project was titled People of Letters,[2]inspired by correspondence between Ignatius Sancho, the previously enslaved eighteenth Century Black British composer, actor, writer and abolitionist, and Laurence Sterne, his contemporary, and a popular novelist. The ten writers were sent a link to the online catalogue of the Museum's objects, we made our choices, then visited the Museum weeks later to see the artefacts, before leaving to consider and write our responses. Several months later, in September 2019, the ten writers gathered to give public renditions of their works (Figure 2). They ranged from prose fiction by Bernardine Evaristo who would some months later win the 2019 Booker Prize for Fiction, to a personal family memoir from author, historian and BBC producer Colin Grant, to my poem, in response to a single-stringed musical instrument described as a lute, from the Caribbean.

My background, my interests and my politics had made me decide on a musical instrument, with a view to creating a poem in which I would include some lines of song. On seeing the artefact up close, I noticed something that hadn't been apparent when I viewed itin the online catalogue. The string was nylon, and clearly

not original. This I decided would be an important part of the poem, which I now reproduce here. In performance, the lines in brackets are sung:

Bird song on a new gut string[3]
(Yellow bird, up high in banana tree)
African Bard, Lute maker
Had you not been stolen
Or thrown overboard at sea
Had you not been worked to death
Or hung from a poplar tree
You'd be here
To teach me that song
Learned at your mother's knee
That sings
The names of the birds
That nested in the
Baobab tree
Before flying free
To far off lands
To warble on sycamore branches
Adding their unique voices
To a harmonious world chorus

(But there's sadness in the notes
That come trilling from their throats)
The chord is broken,
African Bard
The gut did not survive
The theft
The middle passage
Of time
Like all the Creator's works
It too has gone to dust
In its place is a man-made string
And as I rub the horse hair across the thin nylon
I know that what I hear
Is not right
Can never be right

But wait…
I see the end of the old gut string
Wound expertly around the ebony peg
The coconut, having fed the ancestors
Yearns, with the goat skin, to amplify the right sounds

Teach me, African Bard
How to work that chord
That I might sing again
the old song

in a strange land

I listen … I learn
And I make a new gut string
It stretches unbroken
across the oceans
And the centuries
And with its vibrations
Come the right words and notes
Carrying with them
That new wisdom
That will make us
Once more free

Free as the avian chorus
Free as the myriad birds
In their many bright colours
Singing in the crown
Of the old Iroko tree

(Awọn agbe nwọn ki n rahun aro – Bẹeni
Aluko nwọn ki n rahun osun – Bẹeni
Lekeleke nwọn ki n rahun ẹfun -
Bẹeni)

Translation:
Awon agbe nwon ki n rahun aro
Beeni
Woodcocks don't want for (lack) violet
That's right

Aluko nwonki n rahun osun
Beeni
Touracos don't want for purple
That's right

Lekeleke nwon ki n rahun efun
Beeni
Cattle egrets don't want for white
That's right

An analysis or explanation of the poem will be helpful, along with the story of what, other than the artefact, inspired its writing and performance (Figure 3).First of all, the first two words of the title: *Bird song*. I have lived in Liverpool since 1989. There has for a very long time been a Nigerian community in the city,

particularly because of it being one of the main sea ports linking Great Britain to its Empire, not to talk of its earlier,centralrole in the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade. The Nigerian community is more geographically dispersed than it used to be, but there is one particular street in Liverpool 8 (Toxteth) where one is perhaps more likely to bump into a fellow Nigerian than on any other: Granby Street,which was at the centre of the Liverpool 8 uprisings—the local reference for what is more commonly known as the Toxteth Riots. Grocery shopping there one day, not long after my visit to the Pitt Rivers Museum, I bumped into a man I know mainly from attending meetings of the Merseyside Yoruba Community Association. He, like most other members of the Association is a fluent Yoruba speaker, having grown up in that part of Nigeria, with Yoruba as his first language. We had a brief conversation, and as we were about to part, he spontaneously sang a lyric he remembered from his childhood: Aluko nwọn ki n rahun osun, Bẹeni. He said my surname (Aluko) always reminded him of the song. I was embarrassed to say that I didn't know it. This was not new, because I am often embarrassed in the company of Yoruba speakers, especially when they try to speak to me in Yoruba, because although I understand it, I can only speak it haltingly. This is because I grew up in a family in which it was not spoken to, or by, us as children. My parents who had both grown up in the town of Ilesha, for whom Ijesha, one of many Yoruba dialects, was their first language, andwho were also fluent in the more widely spoken version of Yoruba, decided to raise their children as fluent speakers of English, and send us to schools where speaking one's mother tongue was a punishable offence. Their reasons for bringing us up in this way may have gone with them to their graves, but they are not difficult to rationalize: in the process of colonization, many Nigerians were persuaded to see the English language and ways of life as providing the best prospects for success in a country and a world in transition.

So, here on Granby Street, Liverpool, two middle-aged Nigerians meet, and a simple children's song about birds demonstrates a wide gulf in their upbringings and their personal histories. I had known that our family name was indeed that of a bird—the Touraco—but hadn't heard it referred to in song. I decided to get my friend to teach me the song, and we met a week or two later and spent an interesting hour on it, with me learning much new Yoruba in the process. In coming to write the poem therefore, I had the idea of addressing it from the point of view of a grateful pupil learning his mother tongue, learning a song that connects him with his history, with the ancestry from which he had been disconnected: a chord broken by the processes of slavery and colonization:colonization of the country, of the people, and of the mind.

The catalogue descriptionfor the lute gives the instrument's origin as Middle America, Caribbean; its manufacture from wood and coconut, and the bow of horsehair. The animal skin isn't referred to, nor is the nylon string, the latter probably because it was put onto the instrument after its acquisition, and maybe in the Museum itself. The addition of that nylon string,insignificant as it might have been to the cataloguer, is the central metaphor for the poem, which is in some ways a telling of my personal story, an expression of the loss and disconnection I feel at

having been brought up in a middle-class relatively Eurocentric family, with expectations of material success and respectability in a capitalist world that serves the interests of the West and the elites of those countries and mine. A class in which I more naturally belonged than did my compatriot on Granby Street.The class which produced, like in my own family, the lawyers, the doctors, the engineers and, as in my case, the architects.

My historical, political and sociological education over the last three decades has however led me to believe that the elites in my society and worldwide, are destroyers—of the natural environment, of lives and livelihoods, of culture—and parasites, and that the majority of society, the ordinary people, the common folk, are the more reliable custodians of humanity's future and culture. These people would be embodied by the person who made this lute, probably after having been transported to the Caribbean from Africa, or probably in Africa before the lute made the journey to the Caribbean. Either way, the lute maker, like my Granby Street friend, I chose to see as the person at whose feet I would gladly learn the skills of instrument making, music playing and language speaking that connects me to my history and culture. The nylon string serves as the metaphor that represents the replacement of the original material with a man-made, seemingly indestructible one, but one that would nonetheless not produce the authentic sound. My African bard, my lute maker could teach me our history; teach me to have greater respect for my culture and traditional beliefs than my Christian parents did, and to find wisdom in it, whereas the British and many Nigerians chose to denigrate, downplay or even deny its existence. The wisdom, for example, of building homes using locally available mud, which at the right thickness, with the right amount of, orientation and configuration of openings under the shading of thatched roofing made from the right depth of local straw, alleviates the extreme heat of day and stores that same heat in the walls and warms them with it when the night gets too cool. Such wisdom that has been replaced by the wholesale importation of western materials and methods: concrete blocks, large unshaded windows,and tin roofs, all of which necessitate the employment of air conditioning systems that consume copious amounts of electricity, the unreliable supply of which necessitates the normalisation of expensive, noisy, air-polluting diesel generators, available only to those who can afford them: the elites.

There was a line in an earlier version of the poem (which did not survive into the final version partly because of the specified maximum word count) which talked about the nylon string, when discarded, surviving long enough in the ocean to choke marine life. The original gut string would conversely have turned to dust, but close inspection of the instrument revealed a fragment of it still wound around the same peg that secures the nylon string in place. This in itself is a metaphor for knowledge and culture not always dying away completely butremaining in place to give clues as to how to proceed with life, after the damage that humanity has inflicted on itself and on the planet. We just need to have the wisdom to search carefully enoughin the right places, or indeed to recognize where these places are. In this case, it was Granby Street, Liverpool.

The other theme through the poem is that of the freedom of unrestricted flight between continents as dictated by nature, rather than man-made events. Writing this at a time when refugees are in the news, one is struck by the artificiality of the boundaries and borders erected by and between humans, and the lengths to which many are forced to go in order to circumvent these, with many ending up lost at sea, as so many were during the Middle Passage.

And finally, the wood from which the instrument was made. Unidentified by the cataloguer, unidentifiable by me. Birds seasonally leave their tropical trees and fly thousands of miles, taking their song with them todifferent trees in distant lands. However, to borrow some words from the song that Billie Holliday made famous, trees sometimes bear strange fruit (1937/39). Other lines nod to other great artists: the Norman Luboff choir who first sang*Yellow Bird (1957);* andPaul Robeson,who recorded and sang *Just A Wearyin' For You* (1901/38) many times. It is that song thatcontains the line 'but there's sadness in the notes / that come trilling from their throats'. The Melodians' *Rivers of Babylon*(1970) (from a Biblical verse) provided the inspiration for the line 'Teach me, African Bard, how to work that chord / that I may sing again the old song in a strange land'.These influences—musical and literary—are a reminder that as an artist, I find myself following my African Bard in a tradition, thousands of years old, of people whose calling is to spread joy, beauty and knowledge, and to tell stories with or without music. Within that tradition, the production of art for entertainment only is considered an unaffordable luxury, even if, as in my case, that is a realization that one reaches later in life.

Sometimes those travels take the artist to the most unexpected places, such as into the pages of the *Journal of Museum Ethnography.*However, I assume that I am only the latest in a string of artists to write for this journal, for ethnographers' work by its very nature~~,~~ is concerned with culture and cultures, of which art is a fundamental component.

All these ideas, musings, memories, philosophies and feelings, all this history—personal and human—wove their way into *Bird Song on a New Gut String,*as a result of mybeing invited to respond to an object, any object, in a museum in Oxford.As I write these words now, I admit to myself that the rationalization that I have just gone through has brought to the surface things that I was not necessarily conscious of at the time of the writing or the performance of the poem. In other words, the invitation to respond to an object in a museum, and to reflect on it now, a year later, has served an unexpected purpose, which is as a kind of self-analysis, a self-therapy, which thankfully and luckily has turned out to be a positive experience.

As an artist with my unique combination of interests, political outlook, and my personal understanding of history,writing about two artefacts, I now see that the case that I set out to argue is even clearer to me now than when I started to write this paper. The case being that however much individual museums or curators have worked with artists in the past, there will always be room—and indeed a necessity—for theserelationships to be increased.I'd like to imagine a future where it is as normal a pastime for people visiting museums to see what artefacts are being *performed*, rather than, or in addition to what are being *displayed*. Where it is

normal that several times a day, any museum will have 15-minute plays, or readings of poetry or prose about an object of the day, followed by discussions. It could be that the same performance is repeated or that the same object is interpreted by several writers from their different perspectives. The seemingly endless variety of what would thus be on offer would make the idea of repeated visits to a particular museum as attractive for the person who lives a walk or a short bus ride from the museum as it would be for the tourist passing through for a day: let's go and see what objects are being performed in this museum today; will the performance be fact or fiction, or a combination of both? What will we learn from it, and what ideas will it give us? If we go tomorrow, what different conversations will another writer provoke?

We are therefore talking of the prospect of museums of all kinds providing regular employment and creative outlets for local and indeed national and international writers, actors and poets. We are also looking at the prospect of creating, or increasing the number of, dedicated Arts Officers, as distinct from Education Officers within museums, to promote these strands of activity within their walls. These officers will likely be interested in other forms of art through which stories can be told. Song is an obvious other example, both in the creation of musical stories about the exhibits, and in the singing of existing songs that tell the stories associated with the acquisition of artefacts—for example, forced migration, colonization and slavery, and the repertoire is practically immeasurable: folk songs, work songs, spirituals, story songs etc. Song has the additional benefit and potential of being able to get visitors directly involved in participating, by singing along, and therefore being that much more invested in the story behind the artefact. Song is also perhaps the best way of engaging children with artefacts, more readily perhaps than with the written or spoken word. There will be existing children's songs that can be heard anew when considered in the context of a particular object, or new ones written around a particular exhibit, with children in mind.

I happen to have performed my song-rich play, *Call Mr. Robeson* in a museum before, amidsome exhibits displaying the maritime history of the island of Nanaimo in British Columbia, when I was part of the 2013 Nanaimo Fringe Festival.Covid-19 prevented me from performing extracts from the same play at a new display at the Liverpool Maritime Museum in May 2020. I do look forward however to the time when such opportunities come again. One of the songs in the play is *Steal Away to Jesus*(n.d), which was one of those sung as a signal for the enslaved to prepare to escape the slave states of what is today the United States of America. The route was invariably North, via the Underground Railroad—the network of houses (stations) and people (conductors) who helped escapees make their way to the Northern States, and/or to Canada, where slavery was theoretically illegal. They would have followed the North Star, which they would have been shown how to identify—the knowledge that my imaginary Nubian Princess in *Half Moon* would have been well versed in. Theymight also have been guided by quilts, which were designed to display visual codes to the fugitives that either indicated a place of safety, signified the route to the next station or provided other instructions to ensure their safe onward passage. I picture in my mind's eye, an exhibit of one

such quilt, of the ethnographer pointing out the codes to the visitor/listeners and me, of me telling the story perhaps of Harriet Tubman and one or two other known characters of the Underground Railroad, and me singing *Steal Away to Jesus, Go Down Moses*(n.d)or *Wade In de Water*(n.d).We might discuss how our shared history has brought us to a place where people, for different reasons and in different ways, are fleeing Africa on foot, making the perilous journey across the Sahara and the Mediterranean, in an effort to reach what they perceive to be a place of relative safety. And we might hear the story of one such person who successfully completed that journey, and learn about one object that survived the journey with them, which they may be happy to donate to the museum, so that afuture generation of writers may one day use that twenty-first century object brought from Africa to tell another story of bravery and survival along routes lit by the same stars that have guided us and our ancestors for millennia.

Acknowledgements

This is a revised version of a paper that would have been given at 'Creativity and Museums', the annual conference of the *Museum Ethnographers Group*, held at the World Museum Liverpool, 21–22 May 2020. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic the conference was cancelled.

Notes

1. See https://museumofcolour.org.uk
2. See https://peoplespalaceprojects.org.uk/en/projects/museum-of-colour-people-of-letters-pol/
3. The poem can be listened at: https://soundcloud.com/tayo-aluko/bird-song-on-an-old-gut-string and a filmed performance can be viewed at: https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=3327840647308435&extid=H6wPAoMKVOpaXEwl

About the Author
Tayo Aluko was born in Nigeria. Previously an architect, he is a playwright, actor and singer who has performed several lead roles in musical theatre, opera and oratorio. His two one-man plays, *Call Mr Robeson*and *Just An Ordinary Lawyer,*have taken him as far afield as the North West Territories of Canada and Australia and New Zealand, and to New York's Carnegie Hall. His short play *Half Moon* has been performed several times in the UK. His audio-visual piece on West African History before the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade is part of the permanent exhibit at Liverpool's International Slavery Museum. He has been published in *The Guardian*, *The Morning Star, NERVE Magazine, Modern Ghana* and *Searchlight* Magazine.

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