If these walls could talk, they'd tell you my name
Jasmine Togo-Brisby

A stamped photograph
A stamped letter

Archival concerns drive much of artist Jasmine Togo-Brisby's recent practice. As an Australian South Sea Islander, locating material evidence of her people's existence is an ongoing struggle. In the late 19th century, tens of thousands of Pacific Islanders were abducted from their homes to work as hard labourers, primarily on sugarcane plantations in Australia. This violent rupture was exacerbated by a series of recurring, forced removals and denials. In 1901, mass deportations of Islanders underscored the fragility of acknowledging not just the history of Pacific slavery in Australia, but the very existence of South Sea Islanders. It was only in 1994 that the Commonwealth government recognised South Sea Islanders as a distinct group of people.

Each year in August, state libraries in Australia bring out their South Sea Islander collections and close off the archives to all but South Sea Islander visitors, allowing time for the community to look for their ancestors. However, these "scraps of the archive" - as African American academic Saidiya Hartman describes them - often deny this community's desire to find themselves.[1] The archive remains a place of both loss and longing.

In 2014, Jasmine Togo-Brisby learned of two documents in her family's collection. The first was a photograph of the artist's great-great-grandmother (Granny). The second document was a letter written to Granny by the female head of the Wunderlich household where Granny worked as a house girl. Both documents were stamped, by the photography studio and the Estate respectively. These prosaic marks offered the artist a slim starting point to trace her Granny's journey. Comparing the two insignia with records held by online archive Papers Past, Togo-Brisby could confirm two things: Granny was shipped to Sydney as a child, and she was acquired by the Wunderlich family in 1899.

Public monuments

The Wunderlich family name is synonymous with decorative ceiling tiles. The family company produced ornate, pressed-tin designs found across many buildings across Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand. They are now carefully preserved as heritage materials. Togo-Brisby's discovery of the connection between her Granny and the Wunderlich family coincided with Wellington City Council's plans to earthquake strengthen and restore the Wellington Town Hall. As part of the process, the Council is restoring a key feature of the hall: its Wunderlich ceiling panels.

[1] Saidiya Hartman, 'Venus in Two Acts', *Small Axe*, no. 26 (June 2008): 2, p.4.

Aotearoa New Zealand's ties to the Pacific Slave Trade will surprise many; it may have even surprised Wellington City Council. To know it now means knowing the disparity between preserving a public Wunderlich legacy and the invisibility of their association with the Pacific Slave Trade. It's a timely issue. From the recent Tuia 250 project and protests, the Captain Cook statues or, looking further afield, the removal of Confederate and Rhodes statues in the United States and South Africa, the singular narratives of monuments have come under pressure. Parallel to these discussions are concerns with the heroisation, or even simply appreciation, of great artists accused of or complicit in various abuses. Underpinning both debates is a concern not simply with a binocular view of history and individual heroes, but the absence of counter-narratives in public spaces.

A grandmother
A mother
A daughter

Artist Legacy Russell notes that '[a]s Black people, we've carried so much of our archival experience on our bodies".[2] For *If these walls could talk, they'd tell you my name*, Togo-Brisby juxtaposes images of Wunderlich ceilings from the Wellington Town Hall with silhouettes of the artist, the artist's mother, and the artist's daughter. The tri-generational portraits affirm a matriarchal line that extends both backwards and forwards. When paper records fail and monuments are silent on stolen ancestors, the very existence of South Sea Island descendants offer a bloodline lineage.

Togo-Brisby's lightboxes then merge three forms of material memory; paper documents, civic monuments, and living descendants. This very combination of things speaks to the current disconnect between them. As art historian Hal Foster notes, "why else connect everything so feverishly if things did not appear so frightfully disconnected in the first place?'. [3]

Produced at a larger-than-life scale, the photographs might be read as redressing the imbalance between the grand visibility of public art and the silent legacy of trauma. The three sitters stand in the foreground of the images. Recurring across the lightboxes are Togo-Brisby's established use of crows and ships as South Sea Islander emblems of passage, brought together in Togo-Brisby's recent projects.

And yet the photographs also speak to the ways in which some histories silence others. The Wunderlich ceiling panels appear in Togo-Brisby's photographs as projected studio backdrops. The choice of projected images is both practical (the Town Hall remains a hazardous construction site) and metaphorical. The projection of the panels casts the three sitters into darkness. Similarly, the decorative designs shape the figure's poses and the artist's

[2] Legacy Russell, 'On Death, Loss, And Processing A (Black) Archive', *C&*, 10 September 2019, https://www.contemporaryand.com/magazines/on-death-loss-and-processing-a-black-archive/

[3] Hal Foster, 'An Archive Impulse', *October*, no. 110 (2004), p. 22.

compositional choices. An outstretched arm elegantly doubles the curve of a circular cornice, and a headpiece is carefully haloed by a centre-flower.

While Togo-Brisby’s past works have criticised the accumulation of wealth that resulted from the Slave Trade, the intention here is to focus less on the Wunderlich family, and more on how we value histories. In a few months, Togo-Brisby's photographs will be replaced with the next artistic project. The Wellington Town Hall construction will continue, the Wunderlich panels restored, and with it the enormous disparity between the visibility of concurrent narratives. The questions asked by Togo-Brisby will remain, but without the absolution offered through her work: where might records of South Sea Islanders live? How do we address the trauma hidden in monuments that already exist? And with whom will the responsibility of telling these stories lie?

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