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Voicing the Museum Artefact

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Everywhere you look or indeed listen these days, museums from the local to the national are calling on various communities to engage with their collections through the spoken word. This paper reflects on the efficacy and capacity of the human voice in translating, transforming and transposing the museum artefact and considers the voice as its own mode of translation of material culture. It focuses on two very different case studies whereby conversations in and around museum objects were generated – the *Melanesia Project* at the British Museum and the *Sense of Place project* in Wapping, East London. Drawing off Dell Hymes' S-P-E-A-K-I-N-G model, I consider both the significance of these vocal engagement and intellectual challenges they set in motion for the museum.

Introduction

The museum is not a place one associates with the human voice. By and large the etiquette of museum visitation requires one to clam up, place finger to lip or at the very least speak in hushed tones when walking within its walls. Despite the technological developments that have seen an increase in the quantity of oral history and first person narratives being installed in the museum, it remains a largely silent, ocular space where meaning and materiality is mediated through a textual narrative. The month-long seminar series, *Voices in and around the Museum*, co-organised by Antony Hudek and the author for the Mellon Programme at UCL in May 2011 set out to address both the broad and specific issues governing the relationship between the human voice and the museum. Each seminar focused on a different site of translation. The first session explored the role of voice in translating the museum artefact; the second was concerned with how voices are positioned within exhibitions; the third focused on voices captured outside of the museum and how these impact back on the museum itself; and the fourth session explored what happens when the voice becomes an object in its own right – its transformation in the archive. The following paper was presented during the first session, *Voicing the Museum Artefact*, and addressed one of its key themes – how the collision between orality and materiality creates an innate epistemological tension capable of translating the meaning of museum objects. This paper reflects on the efficacy and capacity of the human voice in translating, transforming and transposing the museum artefact and considers the voice as its own mode of translation of material culture. It focuses on two very different case studies whereby conversations in and around museum objects were generated – the *Melanesia Project* at the British Museum and the *Sense of Place* project in Wapping, East London.

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The Status of the Voice

Despite being the main instrument of human and social interaction, the status of the human voice has waxed and waned throughout the history of Western culture. The invention of the printing press and spread of literacy from the late 15th century had a cataclysmic effect on the status of the spoken word within Western society. Despite gaining some ground in the 19th century as the result of technological inventions such as the phonograph cylinder and the radio, the power of the human voice to mediate and translate institutionally sanctioned knowledge has been relentlessly undermined. It is not surprising that the voice was peripheral within the highly ambitious educational echelons of the museum from its birth in the 18th century. Johnson (2007: 115) frames the history of the voice as a series of 'confrontations between literate and sonic information circuits' effectively representing 'a politicisation of noise'. Given the political motivation and civilising mission driving the birth of the museum and it subsequent legacy, it is no surprise that what Kimbrough (2011: 19) has defined as the 'cognitive conditioning of print' continues to be the dominant mode of translation of material objects housed by museums – it is what drives its authority. The nuance between voice and text has been the subject of rigorous academic attention in both modernist and postmodernist theory in subjects ranging from literary criticism, anthropology, philosophy, art and theatre studies. Whilst many of these theoretical ideas have been translated into practice (a good example of this being the way in which the human voice has been explored, extrapolated and exposed by generations of sound artists), attention to the nuances of voice and its interplay with text and materiality is more notably lacking within a museum context.

It is important here to emphasise what I mean when I refer to the 'voice'. As Kimbrough (2011: 5) points out "the word voice descends from the Latin vox and vocare, which mean 'to call', and the modern English term not only refers to the sound produced by the larynx, but it also acts as a metaphor for any distinctive form of expression, as exemplified in the phrases 'give voice to', 'they spoke with one voice', and 'the author's voice'". When I discuss

the 'voice' I am not referring to the metaphorical idea of voice but rather to the actual voice itself, the vocalisation and utterance of words by individuals and more specifically to the articulation of voices and conversations that occur in and around museum objects.

A Return to the Voice?

Whilst the voice via oral testimonies has been used as a powerful and integral mechanism for advocating a history from 'below' since the Second World War (Perks and Thomson 1998), the impact on the museum is not as direct or as dramatic as might have been expected. Whilst many exhibitions do include voices, their inclusion is largely the exception rather than the norm. In many ways Raphael Samuel's (1976: 205) fear that oral history be fetishised as a project in its own right has largely been realised. Indeed, an analysis of the content of the Oral History Society journals from their inception in 1971 to today uncovers but a handful of museum-related papers (cf. Davies and Paine 2004; Day 2004). Dialogue and debate on orality does not, as of yet, seem to have found a firm footing in the museum. In many ways, this is a two-way stream whereby museum curators are not that interested in orality and oral historians are not that interested in materiality.

Yet, counter to this observation, shifting research agendas, the increased need for public accountability and changing funding structures over the last decade have resulted in an escalation of public and community heritage initiatives – many of which position the voice more centrally as a mode of translation and engagement. These projects are happening both on a local and international stage. UNESCO's *Convention for Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage* (2003)[1] was commissioned to showcase and emphasise the immaterial and intangible and in doing so highlights the unique and global importance of the human voice in terms of encoding and embedding aspects of human experience and history that cannot be expressed through tangible heritage or text alone. Equally, the funding of many local heritage initiatives, such as the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) in the UK, also demonstrate a clear preference for oral history projects, as a way of generating conversations that bring people together so that history can effectively be 'retold'. Indeed, oral history as a methodology is increasingly visible in research applications across the humanities and social sciences, as a method for capturing not only alternative, more personal histories but also institutional ones (see for instance in this volume Hawkins 2012 and Sandino 2012).

Voice and the Museum Artefact

Everywhere you look or indeed listen these days, museums from the local to the national are calling on various communities to engage with their collections through the spoken word. Curators everywhere are asking a series of questions to local, diaspora or source communities: What do you know, see, think and, indeed, What should the museum should do next?[2] Consequently, museum curators are no longer just curators of objects; they are increasingly becoming curators of voices. Whereas most museum curators are adept at managing the interplay between various textual sources and objects, translating the nuances between voice and material has been the subject of less attention. Listening and recording these voices is therefore becoming part of a new curatorial toolkit, one posing practical considerations in terms of whether these voices should be transcribed and how they should be stored.

The vocal engagements set up by curators to draw in new communities are more often than not object-focused. Artefacts brought out of stores or looked at in displays act as an anchor – a translation point between the museum, curator and the orator. Increasingly those both researching and working with museum collections are emphasising the inherent potential of objects not only to reveal narratives and networks about the past but to actively create new ones in the present (cf. Peers and Brown 2003; Byrne *et al.* 2011). Consequently, these processes of recording conversations in and around museum objects not only draw attention to the status of the voice but equally to the status of the object within the museum. Despite the fact that the material turn in social theory over the last fifteen years has revolutionised the status of the object and positioned it as an active agent in social relations (cf. Latour 2005; Tilley *et al.* 2006; Miller 2008), there remains a critique that the museum has turned its back on its objects. The ever-expanding role museums are expected to play in economic, political and community development has made some fearful that 'collections are only secondary to their institutional mission' (Conn 2010: 56). I still subscribe to the old adage that a museum is what it houses, and it is undoubtedly true that many museums are struggling to adequately carry out research on their collections. Therefore, the uncertain status of both the voice and the object in museums makes focusing on the interplay between them an even more fascinating pursuit.

Voices generated by and directed to objects can be difficult to translate and mediate within a museum setting. One reason for this is the inherent paradox at the heart of these encounters in terms of representation. Actively encouraging a vocalisation of objects within collections is often motivated by a need to address issues of multivocality or community concerns but conversely results in the very opposite, the articulations generated often being individual and personal. Crucially, these engagements raise a whole set of intellectual challenges for the museum in terms of how these voices are fed into the dissemination of knowledge and institutional politics. Whilst considerable attention has been paid to *why* this cacophony of voices should be encouraged and facilitated, there has been less deliberation and attention to what actually happens within these vocal engagements – these fleeting and intimate moments when objects are encountered, handled, inspected and when voices articulate, circulate, animate, intersect and collide providing a different understanding of an object.

From working with communities in museum stores – where objects lack the embellishment of exhibition-

ary narrative and where they are, arguably, at their rawest state – I have become fascinated by the processes of unpacking, uncovering and presenting objects with the intention that they will be spoken to and at. What is it about the voice that can translate meaning about objects that text cannot? I want to suggest here that these momentary, impromptu, unrehearsed oral encounters between voice and object reveal something fundamental about materiality that should be of real concern to museums. If museums want to continue to encourage multivocality and actual vocal engagements with objects, then perhaps it is not only the content of these encounters that should be of concern to the museum but also the flow and movement of these voices within them. Consideration is needed of how the vocal register subverts the museum register and transforms and translates museum objects. Regardless of whether the facilitation of vocal encounters with museum objects are designed as a form of community outreach and engagement, or as a knowledge transfer exercise or collaborative research exercise, and regardless of whether these engagements feed into an exhibition or archive, there is little doubt that developing new ways of listening to the voices encountered would be beneficial to the museum and its staff. I suggest here that the perspectives within a sub-field of sociolinguistics, known as the ethnography of speaking, act as an interesting analytical framework by which the efficacy of the voice in a museum setting can be considered in a new light.

S-P-E-A-K-I-N-G at the Museum

A seminal essay by Dell Hymes in 1962 highlighted the importance of analysing 'speaking' in its own right, whereby a 'special opportunity, and responsibility, of anthropology' is the 'comparative study of the patterning and functions of speech'. This subfield, known as the 'Ethnography of Speaking', quickly broadened and was subsumed as an 'Ethnography of Communication' (Hymes and Gumperz 1964). The central emphasis within this field was on the analysis of the particularities and diversity of human speech as it is encountered and emerges in particular social contexts. The central notion of a speech community was defined not only by a shared language but by a shared social situation. The emphasis on speech rather than language was deliberate; Hymes was of the view that linguistic anthropologists treated speech as a 'second-class citizen external to language' (Hymes 1974: 445). One of the motivations behind the establishment of this sub-discipline was therefore to 'merge ethnographic and linguistic approaches as fully as possible and to describe language in its social setting' (Keating 2001: 286). Hymes (1972) defined a number of core concepts which ethnographers should take into account when studying speech; these included 'speech situations', 'speech events', and 'speech acts'. Between the 1970s and 1990s, these ideas were very popular and were applied in a variety of case studies (cf. Bauman and Sherzer 1974), so much so that by 1986 Gerry Philipsen and Donal Carbaugh had compiled a bibliography outlining over 200 studies within the field. Although the principals of ethnography of communication still retain a footing within linguistic anthropology today, the field has been subject to more scrutiny over the past 20 years and has largely waned in popularity. Critics have highlighted how notoriously difficult it is to generalise on patterns within speech communities given the vast variation in language use (cf. Hanks 1996); they have also been critical of the lack of solid theoretical underpinnings across the field. James Gee (2005) has pointed out how despite the fact that concepts such as speech community has been displaced to some degree by other concepts, for instance community of practice theory (Lave and Wenger 1991; Wenger 1998), he still acknowledges the concepts within the ethnography of speaking and communication as useful analytical tools that work well in the appropriate contexts. One central concept within the Ethnography of Speaking is Hymes' SPEAKING model, which refers to:

(S) Setting including the time and place, physical aspects of the situation such as arrangement of furniture in the classroom;

(P) Participant identity including personal characteristics such as age and sex, social status, relationship with each other;

(E) Ends including the purpose of the event itself as well as the individual goals of the participants;

(A) Act, sequence or how speech acts are organized within a speech event and what topic(s) are addressed;

(K) Key or the tone and manner in which something is said or written;

(I) Instrumentalities or the linguistic code i.e. language, dialect, variety and channel i.e. speech or writing;

(N) Norm or the standard socio-cultural rules of interaction and interpretation;

(G) Genre or type of event such as lecture, poem, letter (in Farah 1998: 126)

Each element of the S-P-E-A-K-I-N-G framework maintains its relevance when thinking through the role and implications of voices in the museum. Whilst it is true that each vocal engagement facilitated by the museum (often as a way of involving local, diaspora and source communities) creates a different set of circumstances, raises different issues and generates particular sets of knowledge and tensions, there is merit in considering what aspects compare and contrast across these engagements and what this might tell us about particular, shared and different relationship communities have with the objects in the museum. Fitch and Philipsen (2009: 122) point out how the S-P-E-A-K-I-N-G framework functions 'not so much to provide a checklist of things to describe, as an initial set of questions and descriptive possibilities. It is also intended to provide a format for comparison across communities, a set of categories for the discovery of similarities and differences'.

Considering the different components of the S-P-E-A-K-I-N-G framework encourages a more analytical approach to vocalisations within the museum. Ascertaining whether communities have particular 'speech styles' when engaging with museum objects could go some way in helping museums deal with the complexities of these encounters. For example, deciphering the relationship between the *key* and *instrumentality* of individual vocalisations and whether or not these reflect broader *norms* and/or *genres* can be translated back into the museum so as to influence institutional policy and practice. Conversely, the model also makes more transparent the influence the museum and its staff have over these vocal interactions. Despite their seeming organic and inclusive nature, most of these encounters are in reality constrained and framed by a number of important variables largely determined by the museum itself. The setting – the geography of the store (Byrne forthcoming), the material properties of the actual objects being shown, and the fact that visiting behind the scenes of a museum can be an intimidating experience – naturally influences what is being said and how. And the participants in these vocal encounters are more often than not invited by the museum itself; therefore who is deemed 'appropriate' to speak is often controlled by the museum, which may bias age ranges etc. and therefore influence outputs.

Fig. 1: Thames River Police Museum, established in 1798.

Case Studies

I now want to discuss two projects I have been involved in whereby conversations in and around museum artefacts were generated. The first was a Heritage Lottery Funded Project, *A Sense of Place: Anchoring Heritage at Hermitage* that took place at Hermitage Community Moorings, a co-operative mooring in Wapping, East London. The aim of this small oral history project was to explore the recent history of those working and living on the tidal Thames. In October 2010, as part of this project, I, along with project volunteers, interviewed John Joslin, the curator of the Thames River Police Museum in Wapping, about a number of significant objects in the collection. The museum houses all kinds of documents, maps, charts and artefacts that relate to the Thames River Police, which was established in 1798, making it one of the earliest police forces in the world.

The second case study I discuss here is the *Melanesia Project*, an AHRC-funded project between Goldsmiths College, the British Museum and Cambridge Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, which was set up to study the largely neglected Melanesian collections at the British Museum and to engage with stakeholders – primarily source communities. The *Melanesia Project* took place over five years, during which time it hosted multiple visits from people from the Melanesia region, from various cultural and professional backgrounds. In April 2007, I worked alongside three media professionals – Walter Nalangu from the Solomon Islands Broadcasting Corporation; Ambong Thompson, film and radio programme organiser at the Vanuatu Cultural Centre; and Peter Solo Kinjap, a newspaper journalist from Papua New Guinea. The delegates were interviewed by Elizabeth Bonshek, Ben Burt, project leader Lissant Bolton and the author over a two-week period, most often in the museum stores whilst inspecting and interacting with collections from their regions. The main aim of the visit was to produce a radio programme about Melanesian material culture and *kastom*[3] that would be broadcast in the delegates' respective countries. The emphasis on radio reflected Bolton's interest in the role of the radio in upholding and promoting a shared notion of *kastom* and cultural identity across diverse communities in Vanuatu (1999).

Although the context of these two case studies is clearly different, both involved people who had strong personal, professional or ancestral connections to the objects they inspected and spoke to. Indeed, the differences between them only draw attention to the fact that when considering the efficacy of the voice in translation of museum artefacts, it is not only community voices that are relevant but also curatorial ones. By overlaying the components of Hyme's S-P-E-A-K-I-N-G model on the discussion of these projects, I explore whether it is a useful framework in helping translate these vocal encounters and highlighting their significance for the museum.

S-P-E-A-K-I-N-G about Police Paraphernalia

The Thames River Police Museum is located at Wapping police station, on a site that has been the headquarters of the River Police since its establishment in 1798 (figure 1). The setting of the museum and its exhibits are located in one large open-plan room – originally a carpenter's workshop that still contains much of the workshop's furniture.

The room is filled with over 30 free-standing glass cases along the walls and in the central aisles of the room. There is no off-site storage and all the historic police paraphernalia is located in this one area and, as a result, is easily accessible to the visitor.

Fig. 2: John Joslin and *Sense of Place* Volunteers inspecting the collections.

Fig. 3: Illustration of the River Police Headquarters from the Strand magazine, 1891.

As a participant, Joslin is much more than just the curator of the museum; he is also its main collector. After being invited to establish the museum in 1963, he invested much of his personal income and time into collecting the objects that now make up the museum collections (figure 2). In addition, he worked as a river policeman from 1960 to 1980, and therefore his own working life is part of history that the museum wants to portray.

Audio clip 1: John's account of joining the police force.

I deliberately left the aim of the interview at the museum open, simply asking Joslin to pick out what he thought were the most significant objects from the collection and to speak about these items on camera.

During the act of presenting the museum objects, Joslin chose three items from the collection, two of which were books. The first book was *The Policing and Commerce of the River Thames,* published in 1800 by Patrick Colquhoun. Colquhoun was the principle magistrate of Queens Square Police Office, Westminster, and was instrumental in establishing the River Police. As McMullan (1998: 149) points out, 'the Thames was the jugular vein of the British Empire' and during the 18th century importers were suffering losses of over half a million pounds annually, the majority of which as cargo on the River Thames. A plan to police the Thames shipping was devised in 1797 by Mr. John Harriott, on Jeremy Bentham's legal advice. It was Colquhoun who convinced the West India Merchants, and the West India Planters Committees to finance the policing of the Thames.[4] Joslin described Colquhoun's treatise 'as the first law book of the river' and displayed clear pride at its legacy and the fact that it had been translated into seven languages.

The second book chosen by him was a bound collection of *Strand* Magazines that included the article *A Night with the Thames Police*, which appeared in its first volume in 1891. *Strand* was a popular monthly magazine that ran from 1891 to 1950 and contained both factual and fictional stories largely centred on London life. *A Night with the Thames Police*, illustrated by a wonderful series of etchings (figure 3), describes a typical night of patrol, providing a detailed insight into the life of River Police officers in late 19th-century London. Joslin's own experiences may have influenced his choice of article. One of its overriding themes relays how police officers were continually confronted by and dealt with death while working on the river, which was an important part of Joslin's own retelling of the challenges of being a river policeman.

The third item Joslin chose was a ceremonial superintendent's tipstaff from 1827 (figure 4). Tipstaves were carried by police officers of various ranks in the 19th century. They were used to contain important documents such as warrants and were often elaborately carved objects that assumed a ceremonial function, conferring important powers to the owner.

Fig. 4: Superintendent's tip staff from the 19th century.

What is interesting about the objects chosen by Joslin is that two of them – the Colquhoun volume and superintendent's tipstaff – directly reflect and uphold the institutional and official history of the River Police. Whilst the *Strand* article provides a more nuanced account of the life of a river policeman, the fact that it was written over a hundred years ago also means that it is itself now part of the historical cannon relating to the River Police. In addition to this, Joslin's key, and the tone and manner in which he spoke about these objects, were also very formal. It was clear that Joslin had contemplated and prepared his vocalisation of these objects. In many respects his narration – the *instrumentalities* he used – could have easily been translated into a linear and coherent text. I was initially surprised by Joslin's choice of objects, that in a room full of hundreds of eclectic and varied police-related paraphernalia he had chosen two books. Despite his personal connection with the museum, he had therefore placed the most importance on the written word and, as a result, institutional history. That said, Joslin's clear pride regarding the legacy of the Thames River Police and its significant role within the history not only of London but of police forces worldwide, coupled with the fact that he is also the curator of the museum and thus has grown used to relaying such history to various officials and interested media over the years, may have established a set of *norms* by which he performed his knowledge of the museum and its collections.[5]

After these more formal engagements, I walked with Joslin around these collections. As we weaved in and around the objects, Joslin's speech style altered significantly and moved into a different register. Away from the formal narrative, the museum objects began to spark more impromptu conversations. Joslin began describing in detail how a simple wooden tray and copper bowl functioned as a pay-in board (figure 5). He relayed how he and his colleagues would queue up to be paid each Wednesday at 1:15pm, and it was at this time every week that he had direct contact with the Governor and was either praised or got a dressing down depending on his performance the previous week. Joslin highlighted how 'this was all to

Fig. 5: Pay-in board used by Police before advent of cheques.

change with the introduction of cheques'. Another object – a simple wooden slatted seat (figure 6) – became a point of reflection. Joslin first remembered how each officer bought his own seat for half a crown, an important part of his 'kit' and a source of comfort in what were difficult working conditions. Joslin then went on to recount the funeral of the person whose seat it was. It was in these more less edited, less structured and haphazard moments that the power of telling and speaking objects into being – as distinct to writing about objects – assumed a particularly important resonance.

The encounter with Joslin had a profound effect on me, forcing me to contemplate the ways in which museums and individuals inscribe or indeed are expected to inscribe objects with significance and meaning, and how this affects the narration, editing and display of objects within a museum context. It draws attention to the way in which a linear 'official' history is often overlaid on objects, effectively functioning as 'stand-in' facts about a particular place and/or time. In doing so, the historical context becomes prioritised over the object itself. What the intersection between the voice and the object (and the space that opens up between them) alerts us to is the many

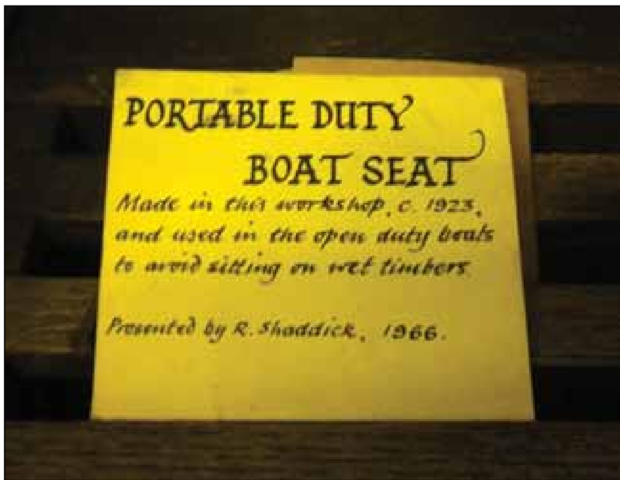

Fig. 6: Wooden duty seat.

trajectories any one object may have had in the past as well as the multiple narratives it can still generate today. Both the pay-in board and wooden seat were exposed to circularities that involved Joslin's own personal experience; the pay-in-board providing insights into past institutional organisation in unexpected ways and the lowly wooden seat embodying a river policeman's work life and the harsh conditions in which he worked. Both objects are relatively mundane, not selected by Joslin for their formal presentation and objects that could easily be overlooked by either the visitor or historian in favour of the more official, more easily recognisable police regalia or documentation. Joslin's narration, this unrehearsed encounter between the voice and the object elevated these otherwise insignificant objects, allowing their historical, social and cultural importance to be fully appreciated.

Although this encounter between Joslin and these objects represents but a single speech event, Hymes emphasises the importance of such events. He writes:

> 'it would seem that the evaluation of the emergent qualities of a single event, and recognition of the appropriateness of a context-specific [speech] style, would both presuppose comparison. The comparison may be implicit, rather than observable in the immediate situation, but it would be discoverable by inquiry outside the situation.' (Hymes 1974: 444).

The point here is that although the context of the vocal engagement described above is closely tied to an individual person and institution, the tensions revealed in the process have significance beyond and outside of the encounter itself. Joslin's switch of vocal register highlights an important point about the mediation of public/private and institutional/personal knowledge. It also emphasises how one person can have different voices in and around museum objects and, most significantly, how experiencing and handling museum objects enacts a particular process of vocalisation, as if the objects demanded not only to be spoken about but also to be spoken at. Museum objects are more than just aides-memoires; their materiality, function, history, presence, and social context can all coalesce to enact a vocal translation that deserves an important place in the museum's archives and displays.

Museum Stores as Setting

Unlike the *Sense of Place* project, which was an oral history initiative external to the museum, the *Melanesian Project* was specifically designed by the museum to engage with stakeholders, by actively inviting people from Melanesia to visit the collections to assess their importance in research, community building and cultural revival. Given the collection's focus of the project and the fact that so little Melanesian material is on display in the British Museum, the *setting* for the majority of these encounters was the museum store. Attempts to engage with new communities and provide greater access to collections mean that the store is increasingly becoming an important site of translation. Indeed, much of the literature on engaging with source communities and on the role of the museum as a meeting place and site of mediation and contestation has been influenced by James Clifford's idea of the contact zone (1997), an idea that emerged in part after listening to Tlingit elders speak in stores of the Portland Museum of Art.

Over the course of its five years, the *Melanesian Project* generated hundreds of hours of audio and video footage. In working with the Melanesian broadcasters alone, five full days were spent at stores engaged in conversation (figure 7). The particular geography of the store and the process by which objects were retrieved from boxes and presented to the delegates framed much of the flow and movement of the conversation (Byrne forthcoming). As a result, the audio data produced from these encounters is not the sustained vocal narrative achieved in a conventional interview, but instead voices rise and fall according to where objects and people are positioned, what knowledge people have, who is authorised to speak about the objects and, of course, what questions are being asked. Discussion is therefore punctuated by long periods of silence and sounds of rustling paper – the sounds of looking and thinking.

Participating in the Process

The manner in which Melanesian participants interacted with and spoke about the collections during the Broadcaster's Programme reflected a variety of cultural, generational and professional differences. Ambong Thompson's long term association with the Vanuatu Cultural Centre meant that he was very comfortable conversing and interacting with museum objects and in particular discussing the complexities between current *kastom* practices and objects housed in museums. Much of Peter Solo Kingap's journalistic work focuses on the relationship between *kastom* knowledge and social, political and economic developments in Papua New Guinea.[6] A lot of Kingap's knowledge was passed on to him by his grandfather and he is very vocal about the role of museum objects in cultural revival. Walter Nalangu's media career with the Solomon Islands Broadcasting Corporation was more focused on current affairs, and as a result he was not as familiar as the other delegates with working on these kinds of col-

Fig. 7: (From right to left) Liz Bonshek, Ambong Thompson, Peter Solo Kingap, Lissant Bolton and Walter Nalangu working at the British Museum stores © Trustees of the British Museum.

lections. This diversity made for some very interesting interactions. Coming from different parts of Melanesia, the community created by the delegates' interaction was a professional rather than cultural one. Instead of coming to see the collections in order to relay information back to their respective local communities, the delegates were engaging on the national and transnational scale by creating a radio programme to be broadcast in their respective countries. The voice is a particularly powerful medium in Melanesian culture, since oral tradition continues to be the backbone of social life in most areas. Mark Busse has highlighted the implications this has for the museum:

> The Papuan New Guineans with whom I worked often stated two principles about a museum as vital: the objects in the museum's collections were powerful in that they could cause people to do things, and the museum should be about people as much as about objects. They often stated that the National Museum should be filled with people's voices, not in the postmodern sense of multivocality (although many of them would have been open to that as well) but in the actual auditory sense of people talking or, where appropriate, of people making music. In our discussions, a saying emerged as a consensus for these views: 'Museums and the things in them should be alive' (2008: 195).

These perspectives re-situate the voice not only as a mode of representation but as an object in its own right in the museum.

The Act/Key/Instrumentalities

At the British Museum stores, the Melanesian delegates were presented with many objects they had never seen before. Unlike Joslin in Wapping who had time to prepare a vocalisation of specific objects he knew well, much of the conversation generated at the British Museum stores was prompted through processes of handling and looking at artefacts for the first time. The delegates' key was at times one of authority on the objects they encountered and at others marked by silences. But as in discussions with Joslin, these vocal encounters unravelled the objects and revealed them in a new light, reviving, almost resuscitating them through conversation. It was particularly interesting to monitor the act of speaking, especially when the voices landed and focused on the objects themselves and when they deflected away from the objects.

In a long discussion of a mask from Lawa Village in South Malekula, Vanuatu, Thompson spoke about how masks like this were intended to be destroyed once the ceremonies in which they were used were over. Therefore even the presence of such items in museum collections is potentially problematic. Thompson was particularly concerned about the fact that the mask's fraying edges revealed its construction techniques. Construction knowledge is exclusive to the social group (often men of appropriate rank) that made and used these masks and therefore exposure of this knowledge to outsiders or the uninitiated is potentially dangerous.[7] The structure of Thompson's vocalisation of this object followed an interesting circularity, starting with a discussion of the object itself and moving to broader related issues about rank-taking in Malekula, and then moving back to the object

Fig. 8: Peter Solo Kingap speaking with Liz Bonshek about spears from the Western Highlands, Papua New Guinea. © Trustees of the British Museum.

Audio clip 2: Thompson's discussion of the Lawa mask, in conversation with Liz Bonshek, Peter Solo Kingap and Sarah Byrne.

Audio clip 3: Kingap's account about the dancing spear.

itself and the process of acquiring similar examples for the Vanuatu Cultural Centre today.

The outcome of such vocal engagements varies widely: often they can go on to influence how an object is displayed, stored or researched; they can also set in motion certain partnerships or future projects. The conversation generated in this encounter raises some pertinent issues about the role of museums and practice of conservation.

These kinds of vocal engagements collide and cause friction points on parts of the object itself, etching a new form of understanding into the fabric of the object. Over the centuries museums have developed all kinds of creative ways of etching/inscribing information on to objects, but such information is largely textual in nature. More attention is needed to work out how these vocal collisions on museum artefacts can be attached to the object's biography and museum record. The problem with the content in these vocalisations is that they cannot be easily decoded or reduced to fit existing database categories. Fiona Cameron and Sarah Mengler (2009: 195) have criticised the overly reductive and controlled nature of documentation in museums, arguing that:

> Complexity can no longer be seen as a problem for collections documentation and engagement, and one to be eliminated. Rather, reconceptualizing museum collections as a complex field has the potential to be a creative force in mapping and assembling the social world to which objects resonate, and one to be understood and embraced by the sector.

Vocal encounters with objects manifest a complex field; they are messy and varied and not easily translated back into the structures of the museum: this is part of their power.

Another significant relationship between voice and object revealed during the Broadcaster's Programme, counter to inscription, was the way in which dialogue actively deflected off the objects themselves, more often than not towards the social practices in which they were once used. In discussing two halves of a dancing spear from Koinambe, Western Highlands, Papua New Guinea, Kingap's conversation starts slowly by recounting the movement and use of these types of spears when jumping in a dance called *Waipa* (figure 8). As the conversation progresses, he further elaborates on the social pro-

tocol of the *Waipa* dance, how the position of women in the dance reveals their intention or interest in man with whom they are dancing, and how it ends – with a humorous account of a *Waipa* in which Peter was once involved.

What is important here is that the spear itself is not the most significant element in Peter's account, but rather what the spear embodies about Western Highland social practice and relations between men and women, both in the past and today. One could not have easily predicted that an object both accessioned and stored as a weapon would have ignited insight into gender relations. This demonstrates the power of the vocal register to disrupt the museum register. Christina Kreps (2009: 197) has acknowledged how

> objects stand for significant traditions, ideas, customs, social relations, and it is the stories they tell, the performances they are a part of, and the relationships among people and between people and between people and places that are more important than the objects themselves.

Discussion of related social practices and the desire to set museum objects in motion through recounting related social practices is something I observed time and time again during the many hours of conversation at the British Museum stores (Byrne forthcoming). At other times, conversations moved between a focus on the qualities of object themselves to the social practices in which they were used. For instance, in discussing two objects (98-7-4.7; -98-7-4.8[8]) labelled as canoe paddles from Wala, Vanuatu, Thompson focused on the objects' formal qualities to identify them as in fact paddles used in a men's dance that recreated a canoe voyage as part of its choreography.

Audio clip 4: Thompson's discussion of the paddles.

These kinds of recordings present challenges in editing and interpretation, particularly in terms of how they should be presented at the museum. It is quite understandable that museums seek linear narratives for their displays, whittling down audio data to segments that form a coherent narrative. Indeed, I have also picked certain 'choice' pieces by which to reflect on the encounters in this paper. But the problem with 'choice' pieces of audio is that they create norms in the museum – norms about particular cultural groups and their relationship with the museum and/or particular objects in the museum. Although this is in many ways unavoidable, the full experience of these vocal encounters (as recorded and experienced) also warrants the attention of museum scholars and practitioners, not only to think through these processes of engagement but also to reflect on the vagaries of voices within them. Much like in the Wapping case study, important vocalisations about objects during the Melanesian Broadcaster's Programme happened at unpredictable junctures when delegates were not being 'formally interviewed'. Indeed, what is particularly interesting about programmes such as these is the fact that the objects not only lead and frame discussions but continually interrupt the process, exerting their own form of agency.

Conclusions

There is little doubt that vocalisations in and around museum objects are becoming their own genre, an increasingly common type of fieldwork and engagement at the museum. Finding new ways of listening and translating how voices fall and flow between objects and people can reveal much about the meaning of these objects for communities with whom the museum seeks to engage, and in turn go some way towards influencing museum practice and policy.

In highlighting two different kinds of projects, this paper used Hymes' S-P-E-A-K-I-N-G model as a frame by which to consider in more detail the processes and particulars surrounding vocal engagement with museum objects. I have reflected on how voices can free objects from their museum context, forcing a consideration of the personal and social relations and practice as well as social structures to which they are connected. Johnson suggests that 'sound is one of the oldest ways of defining, encroaching on and enlarging territorial space, of manifesting power' (2007: 113). In particular, it is the human voice that has an innate potential to claim back territory, to readdress power imbalances in museums, should we choose to let it in. Unlike text, which is altered to fit the museums or exhibitions agenda, I have emphasised how voices can inscribe their own kinds of values and significances into objects, often at unexpected/fleeting moments.

Voice is therefore best thought of as its own distinct mode of translation of museum objects. The paradoxical aspect to these engagements lies of course in the fact that free-flowing and organic conversation and chat is, once recorded, instantaneously converted into a fossilised state. In many ways, likening voices to objects might only improve their transition and inclusion in the museum. Vocal engagements at the museum are not only about generating an archive, another tangible layer to overlay the museums artefacts' history or biography, they are also (and perhaps more importantly) about the space that unfolds in the process of translation – be that the translation between text and object, voice and object, practice and object, community and curator or curator and the public. Pertinent here is Wolfgang Iser's (2000: 5) point that:

> Each interpretation transposes something into something else. We should shift our focus away from the underlying presuppositions [regarding interpretation] to the space that is opened when something is translated into a different register.

By paying more attention to the oral register, many museums will find that indeed a new space has opened up and with it a new dialogue to direct its future.

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Notes

1 For more information see: http://www.unesco.org.uk/intangible_cultural_heritage_%28ich%29 [Accessed 29 January 2012].

2 Projects such as Collective Conversations that recently took place at Manchester Museum epitomise this type of programme. See: http://www.museum.manchester.ac.uk/community/collectiveconversations [Accessed 29 January 2012].

3 Kastom is an all-encompassing term that refers to the knowledge, practice and objects of traditional culture in Melanesia.

4 See http://www.thamespolicemuseum.org.uk/h_police_1.html (consulted 29 January 2012).

5 In reading a draft of this paper in June 2012, Joslin added a further remark about the volume, The Policing and Commerce of the River Thames. He wrote: "... the 'original' Colquhoun treatise which is rarely removed from it's show case nowadays (I suppose I am probably the only person to have read through this particular volume for over a hundred years) has very tactile vibes for me, as well as written connections with our past. Just reading it when starting the museum (it was one of the first items loaned), making notes and checking the relevent points so that I understood our roots and the men who, out of nothing founded a whole new system of crime prevention- it telescoped the years and gave me the grounds, for what is the museum, and how should be presented- the rest is history!"

6 Kingap's blog, The Melanesian Way explicitly deals with the relationship between Melanesian kastom and contemporary concerns http://www.melanesianway.blogspot.com/.

7 In respect to Thompson, I am therefore not going to show an image of the mask in this paper.

8 http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/search_the_collection_database/search_results.aspx (consulted 29 January).

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