



The maid's spirit, played by Laura Strott. Film still from the *Who is ID8470?* video.
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The Maid

Tal Adler, Clara Dröll, Ricarda Rivoir, and Laura Strott

*I always pray to God.
I want to be good in this life and go to heaven when I die.
I also pray for the Madam; she is so good to me.
Another Madam would have kicked me out for getting pregnant
unmarried.
I've been saving money for my burial – half of my salary every year.
I hope they will forgive me and bury me there.
'Unmarried mothers don't get a Christian burial'; they said.
But they also said God forgives us if we repent and pray.
I need to believe this!*

The following text, which explores *the maid's* spirit narrative and our engagement with it, was collaboratively written by Tal Adler, Clara Dröll, Ricarda Rivoir, and Laura Strott. We developed the text as an interview, or rather as a conversation – a format that is fitting with our long-term collaboration. While discussing and co-writing this text, we attempted to involve the spirit of *the maid* in its co-production by directing a few questions to and sharing our dilemmas with her. Although we did not receive direct answers, our intentions and deliberations may have symbolically brought her position forth.

Laura:

Tal, we first met you in November 2019, when the three of us were studying in the master's programme at the Institute of European Ethnology at Humboldt Universität zu Berlin. Silvy Chakkalakal, the professor leading our research seminar, 'On Rehearsal Stages and Experimental Laboratories – Ethnographic Explorations in the Humboldt Lab' invited you to present *Who is ID8470?* – the project you were developing for the Humboldt Lab at that time. During the following year, in 2020, we conducted several interviews with you as part of our ethnographic research on the Humboldt Lab.⁶³

Tal:

These were very interesting encounters that helped me share and think about the processes of research and production. During one of these meetings, at the end of 2020, I told you about the complex challenges facing the project in the few months left before the opening of the Humboldt Lab. You were very kind in offering your help. After considering your generous offer, I invited you to listen with me to the spirit of *the maid*.



Screenshot of a Zoom meeting with the authors of 'The Maid,' January 2023.

Clara:

Why did you decide to share the process of listening to *the maid's* spirit with us? And how did you first come across her story?

Tal:

I first encountered *the maid's* story in a brief passage from *Der zerstückte Körper* (The dismembered body), a book about anatomical dissection in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in Europe.⁶⁴

[63] The Humboldt Lab is an exhibition space of the Humboldt Universität zu Berlin that was being built inside the Humboldt Forum at the time of our exchange. To read more about the process of developing the *Who is ID8470?* project for the Humboldt Lab, see the chapter 'Who is ID8470?' in this volume. To read about the ethnographic research conducted by Clara, Ricarda, and Laura on the Humboldt Lab and the *Who is ID8470?* project, see Silvy Chakkalakal, Dominik Biewer, and Laura Strott, eds., 'Kuratieren als Relation. Ethnographische Erkundungen im Humboldt Labor', *Berliner Blätter* 90 (2025): 3–18; 37–52; 97–109.

[64] I am grateful to Vanessa Zallot, another student at the Department of European Ethnology at the Humboldt Universität, who was the *Who is ID8470?* project's student-assistant for a few months in 2020 and found this reference. See Karin Stukenbrock, *Der zerstückte Körper: Zur Sozialgeschichte der anatomischen Sektionen in der frühen Neuzeit (1650–1800)* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 2001), 110.

In a discussion about the legal aspects and connections between anatomical dissections and burial, there is mention of an unmarried maid (Dienstmagd) from Helmstedt, who died shortly after the birth of her child.⁶⁵ Although the woman had saved enough money for her burial, which took place on April 2, 1762, her body was exhumed five days later and transferred to the anatomy department. The book's author explains that for many individuals at the time, having their bodies handed over for dissection was perceived as a terrible fate, often regarded, and indeed used, as a form of punishment. This woman's story struck me as particularly tragic, since she likely sacrificed much to save for her burial from the presumably very small income of a maid.

In a subsequent chapter, the author emphasizes the significant disparity between the numbers of male and female bodies delivered to anatomical institutions. The considerably higher number of female bodies compared to that of males reflects broader societal inequities of that time.⁶⁶ Many of these women were unmarried mothers and/or from impoverished backgrounds, making them more susceptible to be sent to dissection compared to men, who usually enjoyed greater social agency. Especially because of this reason, I felt uncomfortable processing her story alone; the idea of her narrative being captured solely by a man, after all she had likely suffered, seemed insensitive. Your offer of support came exactly at the moment in which I was facing this dilemma, and I was relieved that you, a group of three women, agreed to listen to her story and help me process and represent it in the *Who is ID8470?* video.

Ricarda:

It is interesting how you mentioned that our position as young women was important for you in this collaboration. Yes, our position offered a different affective and experience-based access to *the maid's* story. However, when thinking about the details of her experience that were not archivally documented, we realized quickly that there is not one clear narrative to fill the void. It is rather a moment of different possibilities, which need to be carefully examined for what they imply. In fact, in an early draft of *the maid's* narrative that you wrote and shared with us, it read like a story of a woman who was raped by a superior, which is, of course, a very possible scenario. However, it made us feel uneasy telling this story, which is already so full of violence. We asked

[65] At that time, Helmstedt was part of the Duchy of Brunswick-Lüneburg, a principality of the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation.

[66] While the number of female bodies transferred to anatomy exceeded that of males, the number of children's bodies exceeded both. See Stukenbrock, *Der zerstückte Körper*, 127–36.

ourselves if this part about sexual violence was really necessary. Inspired by Saidiya Hartman's concept of 'critical fabulation' – a method that combines historical and archival research with critical theory and fictional narrative – we allowed ourselves to hear the story of a woman who got pregnant through owning her sexuality and then faced the stigmatization of society.⁶⁷

Tal:

That wasn't the only part that was difficult for you in working with *the maid's* story, right? We all struggled with questions about her identity and how much we could, or should, intervene in her story.

Laura:

Well, I wouldn't say it was difficult for us to deal with the sexual violence she might have experienced, but we should rather ask ourselves how, where, and when we tell such stories. Nevertheless, it was not an easy task writing about *the maid* without knowing her (whatever that means). For example, we were worried about reproducing an objectifying gesture by calling her *the maid*. We thought about giving her a name to make our collaboration more personal.

Clara:

The name Lore came up, since it was our Laura (Strott) who eventually read *the maid's* narrative in the *Who is ID8470?* video. At the same time, we asked ourselves whether we had the right to give *the maid* a name and whether this might be an appropriation of her story and individuality.

Ricarda:

I thought that naming her might even be more violent than accepting the archival void. In Saidiya Hartman's book *Venus in Two Acts*, from which we drew inspiration and understanding of critical fabulation, she points out one of the challenges we ourselves experienced when attempting to collaborate across centuries. Did we seek to console ourselves because of the unbearable violence caused by the absence of subjectivity?

[67] See Saidiya Hartman, 'Venus in Two Acts', *Small Axe* 12, no. 2 (2008): 1–14. For a discussion on critical fabulation and other approaches to dealing with archival voids, see the introduction to this volume as well as Ricarda Rivoir, 'Schwieriges Erbe ausstellen – "Programmatische Leerstellen" als kritische Repräsentation im Projekt *Wer ist ID 8470?* und den Archivausstellungen', in Chakkalalal, Biewer, Strott, 'Kuratieren als Relation', 97–109.

Clara:

We tried to fill the archival voids by exploring other sources, aiming to understand the life of an eighteenth-century maid: typical salaries, the implications of pregnancy outside marriage, and burial costs.⁶⁸ Although these scattered fragments did not construct a complete identity, interweaving them through our historical research, editing her narrative, and participating in the filming deeply involved us emotionally in her story.

Tal:

Laura, I think it was especially emotional for you, right? We decided together that you would personify *the maid*, since you were particularly drawn to her story because of your family's history. Ricarda performed as one of the anonymous spirits. I remember the setting vividly. We started filming in the afternoon in the makeshift studio that I built into one of the university's seminar rooms, meanwhile outside, a snowstorm was covering the streets with deep snow. It was intense and emotional work for us, which, I think, is evident in the video.

Laura:

I did struggle in the beginning, and I was quite theatrical. But then you, Tal, suggested I should try and tap into the sadness of the story. However, the more I thought about *the maid's* story, the less sad I became. Instead, I became increasingly angry for her but also for the many women that came before and after her. Reflecting on it now, I think I became angry because her story resonated with my experience of being raised by a single mother. The stigmatization that *the maid* faced for being unmarried and pregnant reminded me of the many challenges most single parents face even today (and of course FLINTA⁶⁹ are the majority of single parents). I think that *the maid's* story is still very relevant nowadays, and many can connect to her. This is the strength of critical fabulation and of this format that you developed for this project; it helps us perceive the connection between our current times and the past.⁷⁰

[68] See Jens Flemming, "Herrenloß gesinde . . ." – Existenz am Rande des Minimums', and Susanne Schmidt, "Zu Diensten" – Gesinde und Domestiken in der Residenzstadt Kassel', in *Kassel im 18. Jahrhundert. Residenz und Stadt*, ed. Heide Wunder, Christina Vanja, and Karl-Herrmann Wegner (Kassel: Euregio Verlag, 2000), 296–307, 308–20; Stukenbrock, *Der zerstückte Körper*, 98; Norbert Fischer, 'Vom Gottesacker zum Krematorium – Eine Sozialgeschichte der Friedhöfe in Deutschland seit dem 18. Jahrhundert' (PhD diss., University of Hamburg, 1996), 26–27, 31–35.

[69] FLINTA is the German abbreviation for *Frauen, Lesben, intergeschlechtlich, nichtbinär, trans* and *agender* (women, lesbians, intersex, non-binary, trans, and agender).

[70] On the multitemporality of the *Who is ID8470?* project and relating cultural practices see also Laura Strott, 'Verflochtene Geschichten, verflochtene Erinnerungen. Ethnografische Untersuchungen von (vergangenen) Hoffnungen und ihrem Nachleben', in Chakkalal, Biewer, Strott, 'Kuratieren als Relation', 37–52.

Ricarda:

The three of us really connected with her story. It was interesting to realize that we read our personal stories in hers. So, when your first draft suggested that she might have been pregnant by her landlord, we immediately thought of the asymmetrical power balance constituted by gender and class inequities. To us, this obviously related to the #MeToo debate and patriarchal violence that the three of us experience as women in our everyday lives. In fact, we were worried that she would become a projection of our own experiences in such a way that her own story would be lost – which is just what happened when her skull became part of the anatomical collection of the Charité and was turned into an object for science and display.

Tal:

What do you think she would have thought if she knew her human remains would be turned into exhibition props?

Clara:

I assume it would have been horrible for her. We found out that she must have saved half of her yearly income for many years to be able to afford a burial. It seems like she was thinking a lot about what would happen after her death, and it must have been very important to her to be buried at the graveyard she knew.

Tal:

I also wonder what she would have thought about us, whether she would have liked to ask us something, too.

Clara:

I wonder how she would have felt about us and if she would agree to this whole research and fabulation at all.

Laura:

She might want to know whether the situation of unmarried mothers has improved.

Ricarda:

I think she would ask why she still has not received a proper funeral.

Maid:

We Are Everywhere

*There are many of us here,
parts of us, pieces,
all over the place.
Some of us you display;
others, you hide.
You put us in jars,
mount us on stands,
dry us,
cast us,
stuff us,
and slice.
You keep us behind vitrines
and in dark storages
in universities,
museums,
schools,
archives,
shops,
and private homes.
There is still very much of us here.
Everywhere.*



Main exhibition hall of the Humboldt Lab, July 2021. © Friedrich von Bose