

fORUM: Serubiri Moses

In this talk, Serubiri Moses will consider the phenomenon of sound within the context of the exhibition Paul Maheke: *In spite of my own desire to see you disappear*, and address the idea of listening in an epistemological context. Here, his case study will be the character of Echo who emerges in Greek mythology, and studies of this character by Gayatri Spivak. Moses will consider the collaboration between Maheke and the musician Ndobó-emma in the making of the sound work currently on view at Mercer Union, while also drawing conclusions on the character of listening in context of dissonance, trauma, and discontinuity. The talk will aim to position Paul Maheke's work in dialogue with a black or Global South feminist framework.

fORUM: Serubiri Moses was hosted on Zoom on Wednesday, 20 November 2024, 7 PM EST.

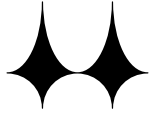
Learn more about the event on Mercer Union's website:

<https://www.mercerunion.org/programs/serubiri-moses>

Theresa Wang: Hello, welcome. My name is Theresa Wang and I'm the Director and Curator of Mercer Union, a Center for Contemporary Art. Thank you for joining us today for our fORUM event with Serubiri Moses. Live captioning for this event is available and can be enabled at the bottom of your screens. I'm joining you today from Toronto, a place that I've come to as an uninvited guest on the traditional territories of the Anishinaabe, the Haudenosaunee, and the Mississaugas of the Credit First Nations. Toronto is a city that is today also home to many indigenous peoples from across Turtle Island. As we're fortunate to come together online from different places across cultures and entangled histories, I ask you to take a moment to acknowledge the rightful stewards of the land in which you are situated. Today's event is part of fORUM, which is Mercer Union's ongoing series of talks, lectures, interviews, screenings, and performances that extends our commitment to free public programming both online and in the gallery.

Today's fORUM features a lecture by curator and author Serubiri Moses who will be considering the phenomenon of sound within the context of the exhibition Paul Maheke *In spite of my own desire to see you disappear*. Following the lecture Serubiri and I will unpack the ideas that he brings up and then we will open the conversation to the rest of the audience for Q&A. Before I introduce our guest speaker today, I'd like to introduce the artist whose work and practice brought us together today.

Paul Maheke is an multidisciplinary artist who lives and works in Montpellier. Spanning drawing, video, sound, and dance, Paul's practice embodies the interplay between the self and the collective in the complex shaping of our identities. His exhibition at Mercer Union continues this study and features a sound installation made in collaboration with musician Ndobó-emma and the resulting collaboration attempts to render this experience of being



affected, recognized, and understood. Paul's exhibition was commissioned by Mercer Union and Southern Alberta Art Gallery Maansiksikaitsitapiitsinikssin in Lethbridge.

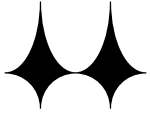
I want to offer my sincere thanks to the supporters of the exhibition, the Consulate General of France in Toronto and Trampoline and Association in support of the French art scene in Paris. Paul's exhibition is on view at Mercer Union until the end of November, closing next Saturday.

Now to get us underway with our event I'd like to introduce our guest speaker. Serubiri Moses is an Ugandan curator and author based in New York City. His writing is primarily concerned with aporia and violence as well as exhibition histories. His exhibitions are rooted in methods of collective teaching and listening as an epistemology. He serves as part-time faculty in art history at Hunter College, CUNY and visiting faculty at the Center for Curatorial Studies at Bard College. He has previously held teaching positions at numerous esteemed institutions including New York University and the New Center for Research and Practice and has delivered lectures at Yale University, University of Pittsburgh, The New School and basis voor aktuelle kunst, the Netherlands amongst many others. As a curator he has organized exhibitions at museums including MoMA PS1, the Hessel Museum at Bard College, KW Institute for Contemporary Art, Berlin and he has previously held a research fellowship at the University of Bayreuth, received his Masters in curatorial studies at Bard and is an alumni of the Àsikò International Art Programme. He is also contributing editor of e-flux Journal and his forthcoming book, *Judith Namala: A Novella* is published by CARA. Welcome Serubiri, we're so delighted to have you join us. I'll pass it on to you now for your presentation.

Serubiri Moses: Thank you, thank you Theresa.

Thank you everyone. I'll just sort of give an overview, an introduction, to this talk. I was invited by Theresa of Mercer Union, Curator and Director. Thank you Theresa for inviting me, specifically to talk about Paul's work—Paul Maheke—and I'm here in that capacity. I'm also working towards a survey exhibition with the Smithsonian in DC that is in relation also to Paul's work, that's another connection perhaps that we have. I essentially, I started thinking about this idea of Echo a couple of years ago and specifically I was asked to curate an exhibition of contemporary African art and I was really interested in the idea of thinking about sound as a kind of alternative epistemology, specifically what I mean is that, just a different way of knowing, of learning. I was really interested in thinking about withdrawal, wandering, disengagement. And these kind of methodologies, I think of prevalent or evident in Paul's work as as you will you'll see as we move forward.

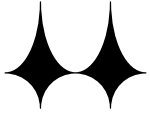
I was also really interested in the idea of the person or the person in African philosophy that's not centered in a kind of Cartesian or rational being or the individual but rather the person's relationship with other beings as well as with their environment, the world in which they live. So this was the context in which I encountered or I was starting to engage with Echo specifically and I bring up this quote by Denise Ferreira da Silva because I think one of the important sort of interventions I think that Denise Ferreira da Silva makes is that when she's talking about this myth of Narcissus and Echo, she's really interested in being skeptical about the fact that Narcissus ever saw himself, which is the kind of the point of that story. I mean in a sense the story of Narcissus and Echo is one in which ultimately Narcissus discovers his own



reflection in a pond and so, similarly, I was really interested in thinking about Echo guided by the work of Gayatri Spivak, specifically, but I was also really interested in the Greek myth of Narcissus and Echo because of the ideas around speech, ideas around self-definition, ideas around self-articulation. Now why do I talk about those? It's because in that myth specifically, Echo is without a voice, she has been punished by the gods—as Gayatri Spivak tells us—she as a result cannot speak so when she meets Narcissus for the first time she cannot speak in her own voice but can only repeat what he says out loud and therefore the name Echo which has come to refer to the echoing of sound or the reverberation of sound on different surfaces moving temporarily.

I've also been really interested in thinking about not only the question of personhood but also the kind of history of African art specifically and in here I was really interested in thinking about how specific African artists were really interested in affect, in moods, also in things like expressing complex feelings and emotions like horror or terror or figures of death or ghosts. So this is a work by Colette Omogbai, a Nigerian artist based in the US. The moment it was made in the 1960s and some of this work is really responding to the kind of crisis that is created in the aftermath of colonialism. This is also an artist based in Uganda, Theresa Musoke, who produced this work called *Cat Ghosts* and when I was researching this specific work I was really moved by the attention to mythology, similar to Colette Omogbai, the attention to the use of vernacular and proverbs but myth at the same time. So this idea of sort of death, ghosts, and myth comes back particularly as it relates to the character of Echo but also this whole notion of self-definition and personhood. I just wanted to repeat that.

This idea of the relationship between ghosts and myth, specifically, I view as related to this project of self-definition and self-articulation which for me, is embodied in this character of Echo. So moving forward I think Paul Maheke also talks about how ghosts are part of his work. He's talked about "in my work there are different ghosts following me." This is in a talk from 2022 from the Hochschule in Basel, Switzerland, and I'm really interested in thinking about how the ghost sort of operates also as a form of absence but also as a form of the invisible. I'm really also interested in the epistemological aspect of that. So for example if we are interested in ghosts is there any kind of particular way that that can become a space to learn about either ourselves or others or the context in which we live as, opposed to the kind of like individualistic idea of Narcissus finding his own reflection and the sort of presence of oneself how can we, even when we are withdrawing—not entirely from society—from perhaps our institutions or our day-to-day routines, how do we encounter knowledge? Right? Assuming that knowledge is first and foremost the knowledge of the self which is that of yourself looking in the mirror. So these were some of the ideas I was really interested in. I know that Freud is also really interested in Narcissus' discovery of his own reflection. I'm also aware that the phenomenon of being narcissistic or narcissism has been kind of used in contemporary political thought and political commentary and people talk about narcissism in very contemporary ways relating to popular figures and politicians and so I think partly I cannot fully escape the idea of Narcissus but why am I interested in Echo? I'm interested in Echo not only because she cannot speak, I'm interested in Echo because I think that where there is an inability to speak there is also Echo who is wandering alone in the forest. There is Echo who is experiencing who is in the course of her punishment, who is in the situation of, shall I say, moral exclusion, meaning that in according to Greek morality she has been punished. There is

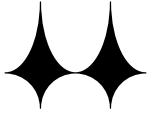


also the Echo who is able to listen and able to encounter her surroundings. Loss of speech is sort of part of the story.

I'm not necessarily really invested in this idea of the voiceless. I think also Grada Kilomba the German artist talks about—sorry she's Portuguese-Angolan, pardon me—she talks about this phenomenon of the fact that her responding also to Gayatri Spivak saying that she's not so interested in the voiceless—like it's not necessarily necessary to point out who has and who doesn't have a voice. I think similarly I don't think I'm trying to say that Paul doesn't have a voice—it's very clear that he does—I think what I'm saying is that there are these ghosts which kind of are part of his practice and this is an area that could be interesting for us to investigate but also to think about in relation to knowledge. So I think it also changes not only knowledge in terms of knowledge-of-self um also knowledge of the world. If we start from a place what can we learn from nature, what can we learn from sound, what can we learn through this idea of listening, right it really kind of transforms how we relate to to the idea of knowledge and knowing.

So I'm just going to get a bit more into the exhibition here and hopefully we'll unpack more that more with Theresa. As I was thinking also about Paul's installation, here is this basically—what you're looking at is this tunnel that has been constructed in the exhibition. You can hear the sound work and in the sound work you hear these two voices speaking English and French and surrounding these voices are soundscapes. Eventually you hear a kind of musical rhythm that is a coherent song, shall I say, with a song structure as well. And then you also have this idea that you move towards resilience and then resolve and resolution and in that sense there is a sense that there is epiphany in the process of this this sound piece so it takes you through a journey from beginning to end but there are also quite some difficult moments within it. There is a kind of intimation about someone called Robert who kisses the speaker or one of the personas in the poems who is engulfed in romantic embrace. We also have hint or word of something to do both with romance but also with pain, anxiety, perhaps even with heartbreak and the challenges within all of that and I think that at the same time the approach—as Paul describes it in one of the the quotes that I found—is one of addressing a specific speaker. It's an epistolary kind of a purge and at the same time there is this idea of what is hidden, what is revealed, and what is disappeared which is interesting, as well as the fleeting nature of this work. This is the quote I was referring to where Paul talks about that the idea of an artwork with limited spectatorship or the idea of an artwork that has a chosen audience or the work that is always addressed to someone.

I began really in seeking sound and thinking about the ghosts as well as death and asking what can this really tell us. Perhaps not metaphorically, just in the space of Greek myth or literature, I'm not just thinking about Echo and the idea of the the kind of voiceless girl or talkative girl who has been punished by the gods and now therefore she's voiceless. I'm also really interested in what the ghost of the absence of the voice which I think is the echo can tell us about ideas of experience and interiority but also how do we go beyond these kinds of readymade tools for self-identity whether that be citizenship or family or childhood or adulthood or gender. I'm really interested in how perhaps the ghost and also the the absence of the voice can guide us into places that we are not easily going to go to. Here in Paul's work, it's those are spaces of withdrawal where we see the artist withdrawing almost entirely from



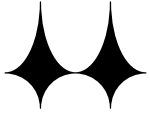
the exhibition, bringing other people into the exhibition, spaces of abstraction moving into inviting speculation rather than concrete imagery and concrete positionality—I'm really interested in that. I'm also interested in what it might mean to move away from a kind of concrete realism and towards other modes of experience and aesthetic production. Not so much because I'm against a particular kind of realism or politically motivated or Marxist social realism, it's because I'm also aware of those painters I think in the in the 50s and 60s in Nigeria and Uganda who are thinking also about the ghost, who are thinking about myth, who are thinking about terror, and horror and how that space of emotion entered and was brought into their their paintings and into their practice. This is, I think, what makes me convinced of varying or alternative modes of thinking, of seeing, and experiencing that are within Paul Maheke's exhibition. Thank you.

This is just another one of the quotes that I have. This is a quote from Paul who he says "that for me the ghost is a cornerstone to articulate a lot of what I'm trying to do here with the exhibition." This is an exhibition from 2016 at Chisenhale Gallery.

"I see the idea of a ghost as a resilient figure that occupies several dimensions. It has an ability to make itself visible or not. It represents a memory from the past that may or may not manifest in the present, yet lingers in a timeless and unallocated space. It haunts. The ghost also connects different kinds of imaginations, which break with a linear understanding of time and history; it occupies several dimensions. It is both celestial and vernacular. It also seems to respond to an ever-present concern in Paul's work which is related to abstracting bodies and identities. For Paul it is a useful figure to think through identity outside of identity politics—and he feels this need to twist representation and work from representation and be beyond thinking about the body without attaching physicality to it. I'll stop there—thank you.

Theresa: Thank you so much Serubiri. There are so many ideas that you've brought up through this example of Echo within Spivak's study. I think what was really striking to me within her writing was how she talked about this character in Ovid being staged as this instrument of the possibility of a truth that is, as she writes, not dependent upon intention that Echo has no identity proper to itself because of the way in which she doesn't have a voice and is subjected to not speak and repeat. There's this sense of articulation that she has that is without reference to self or maybe so reliant on her surroundings and what is really interesting about how Spivak re-stages this myth, or re-interrogates this myth, is that it brings into mind how one's surroundings and one's relations can then inform one's form of identity. For Paul, he deals with personal narrative so much within his practice and one thing that's quite interesting is how he brings them into a public forum yet is still quite intent on having himself—as an artist or as a person—disappear within the understanding of his work. I'm wondering if you could unpack this in relation to thinking about personal narratives as a form of myth making. I think that when he brings them into an exhibition, he's talked about how he's actually quite comfortable doing so even though it might seem immediately like a vulnerable way of working but he says that he doesn't often feel like that's vulnerable. I wonder if there's a way of thinking about that as a form of myth making and narrative building.

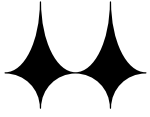
Serubiri: I think one of the things I'm picking up from what you're saying is when you point out a myth making and narrative building. I'll start there and then try to work backwards. I think



that for me this is a necessary thing but also within my studies, especially as as a scholar, I see how um artists of the mid-century in Nigeria and Uganda and other places were doing that. They were working with mythology but I also want to distinguish a little bit between narrative, narrativizing, and then mythology because this idea of agency in creating personal myths as opposed to working with mythology at large because it's I think working with myths also is about engaging what's already there or what has been kind of perceived orally from others or has been down in of oral tradition. I think in this case it's also about this idea of crafting personal myths there's an agency there that I do think is—in a psychoanalytical way—very reminiscent of our Freudian scheme of the ego and talking about experience in that kind of a way. I do think that one of the things I'm aware of is that the personal myth is never just about the person and so when Paul creates his personal myths they're not that their content is just limited specifically to Paul as a person, they're also about people or figures in Paul's life perhaps some of whom are living, some of whom are dead. For example the artist's father appears in one of the artworks as part of this mythical context. Lovers, friends— there's a whole group, a whole array, of characters and figures and then there's spaces. I think this for me is a way of fictionalizing an autobiography but at the same time it's also pushing it to include other people who are not necessarily present directly in Paul's artwork.

One of the other things I'm really interested in is when Spivak is talking about Echo, she's talking about the person who has been excluded from knowledge and she's talking about how women have been made marginal, not only in that story but in the academy, in so many spaces. When she talks about the fact that in Narcissus, it's really that the self becomes the object of knowledge. I think what she's really talking about is in that story the male has been given the privilege of knowing himself but also knowing the world, so I think for her the point is kind of like, okay what can we learn from Echo and what can we learn from her experience in this story? I don't think she's trying to minimize Narcissus' story and as Freud makes clear, I think there are very important things to learn from Narcissus' as well. I think she's pointing us towards Echo to say there's something here.

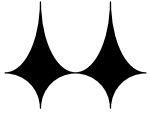
Theresa: I think it's a relationship between the two that she elucidates. When you think about it in relation to how Paul is working in this exhibition there's something quite interesting that surfaces within the context of this exhibition. Paul is working with a journal that he wrote in 2020 and 2021. He has worked with it in a previous body of work before last year that was shown at Mostyn in Wales and at that time he had presented it in that journal format where it was made available for people to read. You're right in how you unpacked the the sound insulation, that it really does take on this narrative of something being conjured through words, a sort of structure that makes clear that there is a romantic relationship involved. I think that in the journal form it's most clearly made known to the reader what type of romantic relationship that is and so when he was making this exhibition he worked with a collaborator named Ndobó-emma who's a musician and asked her to musically, lyrically, interpret his journal into song and also this sonic structure. This idea of passing something on is an effort I think to de-center the self but also he talks about it as a way for him to have reclaimed agency over his own narrative. There's something about relinquishing control over, it passing it on to someone else, that enables him to reclaim agency. I wonder if you could speak to that a bit, that process in which he and Ndobó-emma worked.



Serubiri: I wish my friend Caleb was here, who's a philosopher and he writes about agency. I think that the ideas of agency for me are very rooted in societal norms and structures. In the story of Echo and Narcissus there is also a kind of agency I think but it's like, well, what kind of agency do men have and what kind of agency do women have? Especially in that specific story. I think the way that Ovid narrates this story is that Narcissus—his sense of agency—I think is that he's also wandering in the forest but of course he's searching, pondering, and looking for himself. I want to say that maybe two things here occur to me: it's the idea of what is the agency over our own story and our own narrative which is very important in a psychoanalytic sense it's also a very important sense of agency. I also want to think with Caleb and other people theorizing kind of feminist agency that feeling is also a space of agency. Whether it's anger or whether it's a very deep feeling. Profound feeling is also a space of agency and so that space also can be explored. In Ovid's narrative I think Echo just isn't given too much space for feeling but I do think that um at least in Paul's work I do sense that that particular part of feeling you talked about, vulnerability for example, I think that's one way of talking about it. There is agency also in that feeling of vulnerability but also other complicated feelings that are expressed, like fear and confusion.

Theresa: I think that those modes of feeling and affect are so prominent within the exhibition. One of the striking things about it is how lacking concrete representation is within the exhibition. Much of the exhibition, which is composed of an installation that separates an interior and outer space within the gallery and then, within the inner space of the gallery which is meant to signify Paul's sense of interiority itself, is also composed of these structures. So much of that which Paul has imagined as a way to prioritize an audience's way of moving within the exhibition, moving being very central to how one understands the work. The corridor that you spoke about is one way to not only listen to the sound but also to touch it through the vibrational quality of the sound. He really seems to be working with these not immediately visual ways of representing a representation that we would generally see within an exhibition. I wonder if you could speak to that sort of abstraction and how it allows us to navigate the complexity of forming an identity because I think there's something about it being a blank slate that is surprisingly also accessible for people to place themselves in and relate.

Serubiri: As I was talking about, abstraction for me is not a dominant mode of knowing, of being, of artistic expression outside of "realism" and I don't aim to kind of create a dialectic between realism and abstraction or between what is representable and what is not representable. What I really understand is that by withdrawing away from certain norms like, for example, having the artist body in the gallery or having physical realistic representations of the human figure or legible narratives that people can grab on to, to talk about romance or to talk about the journey and trajectory of a relationship, I think that the withdrawal from those norms makes it more challenging but at the same time within that withdrawal we find other experiences. I talked about the idea of wandering, thinking about Echo wandering in the fields because she's been punished. She's wandering, and that's where she stumbles upon Narcissus. This is something we see in the exhibition as well at Mercer Union, the absolute focus on sound or focusing on sound rather than on other elements, which are actually

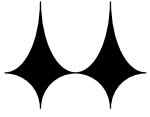


architectural elements. This focus on sound I think is interesting because it's also about collaborating with others. There is a sense of another element into the exhibition which is titled with the artist ('s name) but includes other people. That also pushes against the norm. Then that's another kind of withdrawal—which I associate with abstraction—that also has something to do with that impulse of self-articulation which I was talking about earlier. In my understanding, I think when Spivak is talking about Narcissus and saying within Narcissus, the object the self is the object of knowledge, I think it's about how clearly you can articulate the self and how clearly you can see oneself and describe oneself. That is part of psychoanalytic therapy, that's part of psychoanalytical and Freudian processes that's still very much used. They call it bringing the trauma up into a space where it can be projected onto the therapist like a mirror.

In this case I'm thinking about it less as the curing of a trauma but more as inhabiting difficult emotions and inhabiting difficult feelings. According to Caleb Ward—my friend who has written about these topics—that (difficult feelings) is also a space of agency. The fact that there is a lot of pain but also joy and then all these kind of mixed moods and feelings, I think that is also a space where there is agency. We can say that it is also a space of abstraction. Within that space of withdrawal, Paul is able to fill it with something that might otherwise—like the space of withdrawal—be perceived as a space of lack but he fills it with other ways working through a collaborative strategy with Ndobemma, really de-centering himself and continuing the passing on of his narrative over to not only a collaborator but then to an audience, a space that we're meant to fill in.

Theresa: Thank you Serubiri, this has been such a wonderful conversation. I would like to open up the floor to any questions that might come up. I'm happy to begin with a couple of questions that I had about your curatorial work. I wonder if you could speak to your previous experience that deals with topics related to the body and performance because Paul, he has a history of working with dance and movement in his practice and there have been more recent instances where his body is not explicitly referenced and in the space like the show at Mercer Union. Yet, there still feels to be a choreography of space and an understanding of how people move through the space that informs Paul's work. I'm wondering if you could speak to your work dealing with bodies, performance, and movement, such as your experience working with Raymond Pinto at Participant Inc.

Serubiri: Working with Raymond was really exciting but I think one of the aims and purposes of my curating is to create forms of hospitality but also to create a platform for pedagogy and learning as well. I was talking about collective teaching so part of what we were doing is we went into an archive at the Schomburg Library and we were looking at the archives of poets in the Schomburg and he and I went there for several months maybe like six months or so. We also looked at some dance archives from the New York Public Library Performance Library which is at the Lincoln Center, where we looked at archives of modern dance. I think that the goal wasn't necessarily to—according to Raymond—create a choreography, but it was to create gestures that were evocative of certain poetic forms or poetic experiences. We were thinking a lot about the HIV crisis. I think that whole piece is about these poets who died basically during the HIV crisis so it's kind of like an homage but at the same time I don't think when you watch the piece, that's not the first thing that comes to your mind. He just had so much life in



his body and he's doing all these moves that are actually fun to watch and engaging and it's over the space of an hour. There's a lot of different kind of movements but I think the first thing that comes to your mind is not trauma, I think the first thing that comes to your mind is "oh my God, so much energy, so much, vibrancy." That comes out of the fact that it wasn't specifically about creating one kind of choreography which is in a sense—at least according to Raymond Pinto—a form of colonizing the body. I know those are very stark terms but but I think avoiding choreography and moving into other things like poetry really helped that performance. I tried as best as I could to facilitate this kind of collective research process that we were doing prior to it.

Theresa: Thank you. I also had another question about your work as a curator. You've been part of several curatorial teams for bienniales and you were also co-curator for Greater New York 2021 which was the fifth edition of the MoMA PS1 survey of contemporary art and as you mentioned, you'll be working with Paul in the context of another large survey exhibition at the Smithsonian in 2025. I'm curious to know how you approach curatorial work within these contexts considering that you have such a sensitivity to the politics of representation and an interest in things that are not readily visible. There's a sort of tension and ambiguity to all of that that is really important to make clear, so I'm hoping to glean from you some curatorial strategies you have in that type of work.

Serubiri: You know it's Theresa I have to say it's not so easy [laughs]. I think one of the things that I would say is that a lot of my strategies are strategies of upsetting the expectations of what people think a certain artist is or a certain artwork is or a certain topic is. Often, marginal communities, when they're represented in exhibitions people always have these kinds of stereotypical expectations, so my strategies often come from trying to upset and upturn those expectations. Sometimes they work, sometimes they don't. Sometimes the strategies are far too much but sometimes they work. For example, working with Echo has been a strategy of mine. I think when I'm talking about Echo it's not easy for people to think: "oh is this about gender, is this about sexuality, is this about you know Blackness, is this about Africa?" You don't really know but I am still engaging all of those kind of themes within it. Echo I think is a curatorial strategy for me and I also talked about this idea of listening as a strategy. I think it's more in relation to myth and myth-making and as I was saying, I think there is so much outside of what we already have received that we can draw upon, like in Paul's case, as well.

Theresa: Thank you. If there are no other questions I just want to thank Serubiri for your time and your generosity in unpacking Paul's work by positioning these ideas around his exhibition. I really look forward to seeing and hearing more about the project that you have forthcoming with Paul. Thank you everyone for attending and listening to today's talk.

Serubiri: Thank you Theresa, it's been a pleasure.