

NORTHWESTERN UNIVERSITY

Unmournable Void: Tending-toward the Black Dead and Dying in Contemporary Black
Performance and Visual Art

A DISSERTATION

SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS

for the degree

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Field of Performance Studies

By

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EVANSTON, ILLINOIS

September 2020

ABSTRACT

Unmournable Void:

Tending-toward the Black Dead and Dying in Contemporary Black Performance and Visual Art

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Unmournable Void: Tending-Toward the Dead and Dying in Contemporary Black Performance and Visual Art, explores critical artistic practices that tend to the historical conditions of anti-black violence resulting from transatlantic slavery, colonialism, and apartheid. This triad of regimes produced the Black condition as the *unmournable void* lived in close proximity to death. *Unmournable Void* describes the labor of tending to the condition of Black life by close reading the specific interventions of Black artists who enact something akin to mourning, while recognizing the limited reach of the “mourning and melancholia” framework theorized in Freudian psychoanalysis, for Black death. These artists include Nelisiwe Xaba, Ligia Lewis, Sam Nhlengethwa, and Ezrom Legae. I am interested in the speculative modes they deploy in dance, performance art, and visual art to represent this voided subjectivity, probing the relationship between Black life and matter(ing), specifically the question of what it means to matter. Their work imagines alternative practices to mourning by invoking racial icons (such as Sara “Saartjie” Baartman, Steve Biko, and racial types from the minstrel stage) whose remains cannot be *properly* laid to rest. These iconic images which visualize racial-sexual trauma migrate from one medium to another, across geo-historical contexts, changing form and meaning in the process. Aesthetic practitioners incessantly conjure them up and mobilize them for a number of political and formal aesthetic uses. These uses range from subversion, reparation, evidence, catharsis, empathy, and reconciliation.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am thankful to my dissertation committee for their direction and support. My advisor, Professor Huey Copeland II is the most generous mentor whose support and encouragement were abundant. An attentive and careful reader, he taught and modelled for me a thousand ways of caring about the work. When I came to graduate school, I never imagined I would be working on a project about contemporary art history and visual culture. It was through Dr. Copeland's guidance and mentorship that prepared me to embark on a topic I have come to engage very seriously. His encouragement gave me assurance that I was not an impostor, but a contributor who came to the right place to learn and teach others. He challenged and ushered me into spaces of knowledge I never knew existed. His advice to me to participate in considered and thoughtful analysis is a lesson I will continue to carry with me. Most of all, he allowed me to do my work, which is the greatest gift of all.

Professor Wilderson's "Afro-pessimism" graduate seminar at UC Irvine is where the story of this project begins. Wilderson's care as a teacher and his unflinching attention as a reader and writer changed my thinking in profound ways. It is through Wilderson that I came to understand how we, Black people everywhere, mistook the crumbs of the world for freedom and justice. I am forever thankful to Wilderson for helping me understand the importance of "the power to pose the question," and for reminding me to always be mindful about which questions are mine, and which questions are someone else's. Thank you for being my guide, example, and compass.

Professor E. Patrick Johnson opened the gates for me and other queer Black scholars to pursue our inquiries in academia. Working with Dr. Johnson was a constant reminder that Black performance theory is not merely an add-on or reactionary project, but a rigorous pursuit of the

theoretical, philosophical, and even revolutionary work of Black people. He taught me what it means to genuinely care for those I am writing about and with.

Professor Susan Manning has a wealth of knowledge about modern/contemporary dance history and shares it generously. From her, I learned the importance of paying attention to detail. It was truly a breath of fresh air to have someone to discuss even the most obscure details about dance history with. Professor Manning was excited about my work (what it was, and what it had potential to become) even before I accepted the offer to study at Northwestern.

The artists discussed in this dissertation are invaluable interlocutors who pushed my thinking and reminded me about the different forms critical Black thought and action take shape. I am particularly grateful to Nelisiwe Xaba and Ligia Lewis for being in conversation with me and opening up their archives as well as letting me into their works in process. Their work and their words let me into a world filled with brilliance and an unwavering pursuit of difficult questions about the matter(ing) of blackness. I have high regard and respect for the Melville J. Herskovits Africana Library staff; Esmeralda Kale, Gene, Crystal L. Martin, Gene Kannenberg Jr., and Florence Mugambi. They are more than library professionals, but they deeply care about the livelihood of the students that walk into that library every day. I am thankful to them for always checking in, providing resources, and creating a home away from home.

Completing a PhD often seems like an individual accomplishment. But in the years that I was pursuing my studies, it took friends who encouraged me, fed me, challenged me, housed me, and fought for me. The strongest parts of my work are a result of being in community with Tyrone Palmer, Athi Mongezeleli Joja, and Delali Kumavie. I will never forget their friendship, love, and encouragement. My writing group partners and dear friends Selamawit Terrefe and Axelle Karera also cheered me all the way to the final stage and beyond. Becoming

accountability partners with Mohwanah Fetus is the best decision I made for mutual motivation. Late night conversations and debates with Athinangamso Esther Nkopo and Mandisa Haarhoff made me a better thinker. I have oceans of respect and adoration for my sista and fellow trouble-maker, mayfield brooks, who taught me that it is okay to be a killjoy that asks uncomfortable questions in dance, and that improvisation is more than an aesthetic category, but a way of inhabiting, maneuvering, and organizing against the world of our suffering.

Friends who commented on my work, provided me with nourishment, and checked in with me include Cecilio Cooper, Patrice Douglass, Harrison Graves, Leah Kaplan, Jesús Luzardo, Jordan Mulkey, Jerome Dent, Ali Faraj, Kevin Rigby, Biko Carruthers, Casey Goonan, Sampada Aranke, Ben Jones, Clay Cogswell, Bonnie Etherington, Sinethemba Makanya, Adam McMath, Mbongeni Mtshali, Thomas Love, C.C. McKee, Sara Estrela, Amy Swanson, Maité Marciano, Didier Morelli, and Tarek Benchouia. At Northwestern, I took magnificent classes and workshops that helped shape the direction of my research. It was an honor to learn from Professors Krista Thompson, Evan Mwangi, Penelope Deutscher, and Nasrin Qader.

This work was made possible by the support and resources made available by the Department of Performance Studies as well as the Program of African Studies. Funding support for research came from the Robert Rauschenberg Foundation, the Sexualities Program at Northwestern (SPAN), The Buffett Institute, the Hans E. Panofsky Summer Research Grant, as well as The Graduate School's GRG Research Grant.

For my mother (1964-2011)

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INTRODUCTION

“The Black Body” and the Limits of Performance

Black people are turned away from, not turned toward. We bear the mark of Cain.

— Carrie Mae Weems, “Carrie Mae Weems (Interview)”¹

Now life is written in ones and zeros: every one needs her companion nothingness.

— Hannah Black, “Fractal Freedoms.”²

In November 2016, a viral YouTube video circulated showing two white men in Middelburg, South Africa, forcibly stuffing a Black man, Victor Rethabile Mlotshwa, into a coffin and threatening to put a snake in the coffin and set it alight.³ Mlotswa had used a footpath, which landed him on *their* property. The two white men, Willem Oosthuizen and Theo Jackson spotted him and immediately concluded that he was attempting a robbery. They tortured him before shoving him into a coffin and filming the scene. The humiliation itself was not enough, but it was documented as spectacle, and they went as far as introducing a prop such as a coffin for this death play. This scene was a result of Mlotshwa’s blackness, and not a consequence of a transgression against Jackson and Oosthuizen. He was already woven as a thief in the eyes of his aggressors for simply being Black. This scene is not exceptional, but it is important to think with it since similar scenes often lead to the successful execution of murder. Although the outcome was not murder, the conditions that made the scene possible as well as the props of its execution causes one to pause and think about how death operates even when murder is not involved. Why did the two white men use a coffin as a suitable or “rightful place” for the coherence of their

¹ Carrie Mae Weems and Dawoud Bey, “Carrie Mae Weems.” (2009), 60-67.

² Black, Hannah. “Fractal Freedoms.” (2016), 4-9.

³ “South Africa Coffin Case: White Farmers Receive Jail Terms,” BBC News (BBC, October 27, 2017), <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-41774938>.

dishonor for Mlotshwa? What did they know about Mlotshwa and others like him that made them decide turn to symbolism associated with death to torture him? And what psychic reprieve was granted to them by recording this horror on video for public consumption? Mlotshwa's ordeal is mundane in its spectacularity, similar to the scenes of mediatized Black death and suffering that continue to be a staple. This horror unmakes all Black life irrespective of national citizenship, class background, or presumed sex-gender identification. Mlotshwa's attack is singular to him but it also marks how blackness in general is made to mean. The recording is a warning, an apparatus of humiliation and dishonor, as well as a channel for sadomasochistic pleasure. This violence is not reducible to these spectacles of performance, but it also dwells in unlikely and imperceptible sites. While no murder is involved in this encounter, the coffin symbolizes a space where blackness is disciplined and forced to inhabit prior to physical death. For white corporeal integrity to cohere, the Black is constantly reminded, through violence, that they must live as if they were dead.

In June 2015, poet Claudia Rankine published a *New York Times* article titled "The Condition of Black Life is one of Mourning."⁴ In this article, she meditated on a number of publicized murders of Black people which took place in a spectacular manner. She argued that they were killed not as retribution for their trespasses *per se*, but simply for being Black. The spectacular execution and display associated with these repeated murders raise a number of questions about the entanglement of the gaze, desire, and empathy. In reading Rankine's essay, one also wonders about non-public(ized) anti-black violence which, as a result of anonymity, is

⁴ Claudia Rankine, "The Condition of Black Life Is One of Mourning," *The New York Times* (*The New York Times*, June 22, 2015), <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/22/magazine/the-condition-of-black-life-is-one-of-mourning.html>.

not available for public reflection and grieving. This violence is not quantifiable because even in its ubiquity, it does not materialize in the form of legible performative acts. This is true for Black *life* across time in the Caribbean, Africa, Europe, the Mediterranean Sea, and other parts of the world, where Black livelihood requires the resistance of death in perpetuity, supplemented by strategies of tending to those grieving inevitable loss. Survival itself is part of the continuity, rather than break, from this intimacy with death and suffering.

Mourning is circumscribed in this ongoing catastrophe, practices of grief notwithstanding. As Saidiya Hartman inquires in “The Time of Slavery,” if the catastrophe is ongoing, “How might we understand mourning, when the event has yet to end? When the injuries not only endure, but are inflicted anew? Can one mourn what has yet ceased happening?”⁵ What would it mean to understand Black death not from a place that assumes Black subjectivity, presence, humanity, and corporeal integrity as a given, but a way of writing and moving that pays close attention to the ontological paradoxes of Blackness in full? How has blackness come to signify qualities such as nothingness, lack, objecthood, absence, animality, fragmentation, dishonor, void, and flesh? If, as literary theorist Hortense Spillers has argued, subjecthood is not a given but “must be *earned* for some,” how do we study those ongoing “grammars of capture” and maneuvers which separate blackness from political subjectivity and violently relegate it to the status of objecthood?⁶ Which critico-theoretical and aesthetic tools rise to the occasion and avail themselves to the study of this *position* of objecthood, without remaining in denial of it or pathologizing it?

⁵ Hartman, Saidiya V. "The Time of Slavery." *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 101, no. 4 (2002): 788. 757-77.

⁶ See: Spillers, “Peter’s Pans: Eating in the Diaspora,” in *Black, White, and in Colo.* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

This dissertation, *Unmournable Void*, engages the above questions and provocations through a close analysis of the work done by Black contemporary artists and critical theorists who tend to the Black dead and dying. These Black creators and thinkers approach grief and mourning by embracing questions about the position of blackness in the world, foregrounding characteristics related to objecthood instead of dismissing or transcending them. These artists include choreographers Nelisiwe Xaba, Ligia Lewis, and visual artists Sam Nhlengethwa and Ezrom Legae. Their work attends to the question of mourning by invoking “repeating images” or icons (such as Sara “Saartjie” Baartman, Steve Biko, and the racial archetypes associated with the minstrel stage) whose remains cannot be properly laid to rest and remain in contemporary performance and visual culture. This continuous circulation points to the exhaustive practices that attempt to lay to rest the remains of anti-black violence or activate the remains for political articulation against ceaseless anti-black violence. It is this incessance that makes the unmournable void unmournable. The artistic practices I discuss in this dissertation, as Black queer theorist Sharon Holland would assert, are “flirting with death” to expose anti-black structures that make it impossible to envision life not burdened by death for Black people globally.⁷ Black suffering is not only locatable in archives of hurt and despair. As I will show throughout the dissertation, anti-black violence and enjoyment/pleasure are not binary opposites, but they are enmeshed. Saidiya Hartman’s *Scenes of Subjection* and Christina Sharpe’s *Monstrous Intimacies* are texts that home in on those banal brutalities and grotesqueries of everyday Black life that are “breathed in like air.”⁸ Both thinkers demonstrate how for the Black,

⁷ Holland, Sharon Patricia. *Raising the Dead: Readings of Death and (Black) Subjectivity*. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000.)

⁸ Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 3.; Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-making in Nineteenth century America*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

the neat binary between mundane and spectacular violence does not cohere and that anti-blackness is irreducible to discreet hostile interactions with Black people. In particular, they reveal how for survival, Black political and aesthetic articulation have had to suppress the coexistence of these horrors with pleasure and desire.⁹ I expand the conception of death as not only biological/physical, but also psychic, social (lived), and imbricated in desire, where it is often imperceptible as such.¹⁰

The aesthetic practices discussed in this chapter all centralize the theme of death, employing a variety of visual and dramaturgical strategies that attempt to imagine an alternative to the work of grief/mourning for the unmournable void, whose loss is not recognized as loss and therefore not mournable in conventional ways. If Black contemporary artists suggest in their work that colonial and apartheid suffering have not ended but persist in different forms, then is “mourning” a precise framework for the work they are engaged in? I question whether terms such as “mourning” and “trauma” aptly describe the condition of Black dispossession and suffering by positing that “mourning” and correlate terms are catachrestic, they serve as placeholders for a grammar that does not yet exist for their artistic praxis. Their work enacts something closely related to what cultural theorist Christina Sharpe calls *wake work*, which is a praxis of “caring for, comforting, and defending the dead, the dying, and those living lives

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ My understanding of “social death” is in conversation with a number of black scholars who theorize the concept in relation to Orlando Patterson’s *Slavery and Social Death* (1982) and Abdul R. JanMohamed’s *The Death-bound-Subject* (2005). See: Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study*. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982); Abdul R. JanMohamed, *The Death-bound-Subject: Richard Wright's Archaeology of Death*. (Durham [N.C.]: Duke University Press, 2005). The discussion of the unmournable void in this dissertation indicates the distinction between Black social death and other theoretical frameworks such as “slow death” (Berlant 2007); “precarious life” (Butler 2006) and “bare life” (Agamben 1998). See: Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1998); Lauren Berlant, “Slow Death (Sovereignty, Obesity, Lateral Agency).” *Critical Inquiry* 33, no. 4 (2007): 754-80; Judith Butler, *Precaious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*. (London; New York: Verso, 2006).

consigned to death.”¹¹ This process of *tending-toward blackness*, (as art historian Huey Copeland refers to it) in artistic and political practices is an ethical posture “toward Black forms of being that have been positioned at the margins of thought and perception yet are necessarily co-constitutive of them.”¹² This practice is irreducible to cultural rites associated with burial, but it encompasses aesthetic-theoretical practices that pose the question of what it means to suffer, expanding a political ontology proposed by Frank B. Wilderson, as a text for envisioning the end of anti-blackness, which means the end of the world.¹³

Secondly, these artists, though based in different parts of the world, emerged in the 1990s and 2000s, a period during and after the “culture wars” where there was an increased demand for Black artists around the world to move beyond “identitarian” politics in their work and lean towards formal abstraction. In South Africa, the election of the first Black president, Nelson Mandela, as well as the Truth and Reconciliation Commission fashioned a sense of catharsis, hope, promises of justice, and redress that were never fully achieved. Although this collective hope was understood as opening up new possibilities to move beyond themes of suffering in artistic praxis, Black artists persisted in using themes of struggle and political activism during this period of purported freedom. It is this persistence, and what it reveals about the afterlives of apartheid, colonialism, and slavery, that moves the central questions of this dissertation.

Copeland, in *Bound To Appear* discusses how the emergence and expansion of neoliberalism and

¹¹ Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 6.

¹² I am referring to the praxis of “tending-toward” as discussed by feminist theorist Sara Ahmed in *Queer Phenomenology* (2006) and taken up in implicit and explicit ways by Black cultural critics Christina Sharpe in *In the Wake* (2016) and Huey Copeland II in “Tending-toward-blackness” (2016). See: Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006); Huey Copeland, “Tending-toward-Blackness *.” *October*, no. 156 (2016): 141-2.

¹³ Frank B. Wilderson, *Red, White and Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

multiculturalism in the 1990s also facilitated both an embrace and attack of identity politics in art. Artists such as Bill T. Jones were celebrated as part of a new wave of Black artists that were free to experiment with form since they were presumably free from the “burden” of attaching their work to their Black identity.¹⁴ Although artists discussed in this project acknowledge the victories of anti-apartheid and Civil Rights struggle, I contend (sometimes against the artists’ own assessment of their work) that they invoke regimes of absolute domination not as past phenomena that have been transcended or conquered.

Prominent interventions on death in the field of performance such as Joseph Roach’s *Cities of The Dead* (1996) focus on death in relation to cultural memory and “surrogation.”¹⁵ “Surrogation” as described by Roach is a mechanism of substitution where the living take on the roles of those who have passed. Surrogation is a mode through which American diasporic performances reproduce a collective social memory across Europe, Africa, and the Americas. This dissertation incorporates these interventions, while also probing the reasons why the artists engage official and embodied archives of anti-blackness for purposes that are neither limited to memorialization and repair, nor seeking a return to pre-colonial African wholeness. Their attention to ontological questions about blackness allows them to address corporeal death, as well as the historical and continuous banishment of blackness from the Human category, which includes the relegation of Blacks to the status of (or below) things, animals, non-beings, and

¹⁴ See: Copeland, Huey. *Bound to Appear: Art, Slavery, and the Site of Blackness in Multicultural America*. Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2013.

¹⁵ See: Joseph Roach, *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996).

voids.¹⁶ Formal aspects and content of their work open up a discussion about Black gender, specifically the (un)gender(ing) of blackness as a category.

I am interested in the figural and non-representational strategies used by these artists when choosing to (not) depict Black death. What drives the incessant display of images/gestures associated with histories of racial-sexual terror in aesthetics, and what can it tell us about the psychic afterlives of domination? This project directs attention to what emerges when seemingly unconnected icons such as “the Hottentot Venus,” Steve Biko’s corpse, the Black minstrel performer (and the color black in general) migrate from one medium to another, across geo-historical contexts, changing form and meaning in the process? I consider “movement” more broadly to include commercial/capitalist circulation, theatrical dance, as well as “social choreography.”¹⁷ The reason for engaging this particular set of artists is because they demonstrate how visual figuration and movement/dance performance reckon with the Black bodies’ location outside of certain markers of corporeal integrity based on Western Enlightenment rationalism (e.g., grace, lyricism, physical ability, extension, and binary oppositions). In their respective mediums, they enliven questions of matter/materiality, presence, and absence in relation to blackness and Black people. Their deployment of movement is not necessarily concerned with flight, escape, or moving past/beyond the injury that constitutes Black being. I am primarily concerned with the formal performance and visual art strategies they

¹⁶ See: Zakiyyah Iman Jackson, *Becoming Human: Matter and Meaning in an Anti-Black World*. (NY: NYU Press, 2014.)

¹⁷ See: Andrew Hewitt, *Social Choreography: Ideology as Performance in Dance and Everyday Movement*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005); Ramón H. Rivera-Servera, *Performing Queer Latinidad: Dance, Sexuality, Politics*. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2012).

invent in order to reveal freedom as an “incomplete project”¹⁸ for Black people around the world. Modes of visual and narrative representation that I extrapolate from their work exemplify the capaciousness of Black creativity while also acknowledging that this creativity exists in the midst of (and not in spite of) the persistence of Black subjugation, “the dereliction of black bodily integrity,” and the normalization of Black suffering.¹⁹

This dissertation contributes to the fields of performance/dance studies, art history, visual studies, and Black gender studies in a number of ways. First, by foregrounding theoretical and methodological interventions developed by a cohort of Black performance theorists who think about blackness and ontology, the dissertation theorizes Black performance by revising some assumptive logics about blackness’ presence, political subjectivity, corporeal integrity, readability, affectability, and agential capacity. By thinking of blackness as both a lived experience and a structural position, the project expands the scope of performance studies by paying closer attention to the non-space of the void, what Frantz Fanon in *Black Skin, White Masks* referred to as the “zone of nonbeing.”²⁰ Centralizing this paradox of Black being enables a shift away from recuperative and linear narrative arcs of progress that assume grand historical political shifts (such as Emancipation, post-independence, Civil Rights, and post-apartheid democracy) to be coterminous with freedom.²¹ I am interested in how fields of study that engage

¹⁸ See: Hartman (1997). Also see: Pumla Dineo. *What Is Slavery to Me? Postcolonial/Slave Memory in Post-Apartheid South Africa*. (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2010).

¹⁹ Frank B. Wilderson (2010), 2.

²⁰ Philosopher Lewis Gordon expands Fanon’s concept by describing how Black people’s lived experiences and their knowledge that they are “human” is not taken into account in primal scenes of anti-black racialization, as they are only seen as absence and/or a “cannibals,” their self-perception notwithstanding. See: Lewis R Gordon, *Bad Faith and Antiblack Racism*. (Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press, 1995). The “zone of non-being” is discussed in Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*. Liberation Classics. London: Pluto, 1986 (1952).

²¹ Scholars of Black cultural studies who engage in this critique of linear temporality include Kara Keeling, “LOOKING FOR M—Queer Temporality, Black Political Possibility, and Poetry from the Future.” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 15, no. 4 (2009): 565-582; Calvin L. Warren, *Ontological Terror: Blackness, Nihilism,*

with blackness and Black cultural creation would be strengthened if they resisted the impulse to repair the deform that characterizes blackness and Black aesthetics. What would emerge if Black studies, and by extension, Black performance theory and visual studies, sat with the position of blackness as fragmented instead of giving in to fantasies of flight, wholeness, and liberal humanism? As I show with Xaba's treatment of Baartman, Lewis' treatment of minstrelsy, and the treatment of Biko's corpse by painters Ezrom Legae, Sam Nhlengethwa, and Paul Stopforth, presenting physical features often attributed to the human does not guarantee a universal distribution of that category to all who are figured as such. That is to say, the "black body's" figuration does not necessarily endow the Black any capacity to enter the human category. What do we do with this incommensurability between form and meaning?

Performance and/as Anti-black Violence

The field of performance studies is instrumental in asserting the body as a site of meaning that enlivens embodied repertoires of personal and cultural memory, and these repertoires breach and "disidentify" with dominant gendered and racialized disciplines.²² This assertion of bodily epistememes decentralizes an exclusive reliance on written texts, by positioning the body as a site of what Thomas DeFrantz calls "corporeal orature,"²³ a kind of embodied communication.

and Emancipation. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018); and Michelle Wright, *Physics of Blackness: Beyond the Middle Passage Epistemology*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015).

²² See: Lorne Dwight Conquergood, and E. Patrick Johnson. *Cultural Struggles: Performance, Ethnography, Praxis*. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013); E. Patrick Johnson, *Appropriating Blackness: Performance and the Politics of Authenticity*. (Durham [N.C.]: Duke University Press, 2003); Madison, D. Soyini. *Critical Ethnography: Method, Ethics, and Performance*. (Thousand Oaks CA: Sage Publications, 2005); José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*. (Cultural Studies of the Americas; v. 2. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999); Taylor, Diana. *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003).

²³ See: Thomas DeFrantz, "The Black Beat Made Visible: Hip Hop Dance and Body Power." in *Of the Presence of the Body: Essays on Dance and Performance Theory*, edited by Andre Lepecki. (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 2004), 64-81.

Performance scholars also direct our attention to how knowledge is created through a body-to-body transfer of affects,²⁴ kinesthesia,²⁵ and through the haptic.²⁶ Black performance theory, in particular, is a vital site for inventing multiple grammars that assess the tension between Black objecthood and performative capacity. This is the efficacy of Black performance.

Black performance theorist E. Patrick Johnson suggests that “we must continue to ask, rather than answer, the question, “What is this ‘black’ in Black performance studies?”²⁷ I engage Johnson’s provocation through an enquiry that focuses on both Black lived experience, as well as blackness as an ontological problem that haunts and throws into crisis assumptions about corporeality and matter. The aesthetic interventions I engage in this project probe the relationship between Blackness, form, and matter(ing) by questioning (rather than answering) what it means to matter, and also to speculate what it would mean for black matter to mean something in an anti-black world?²⁸ *Unmournable Void* poses the following questions: What is the relationship between the ontology of performance and Black political ontology? What does it mean to dance with or as the dead? How do those who do not have (or are not guaranteed) life mourn death? These questions might help to unpack the tension that results from overemphasizing

²⁴ See: Ramón H. Rivera-Servera, *Performing Queer Latinidad: Dance, Sexuality, Politics*. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2012).

²⁵ See: Susan L. Foster, *Choreographing Empathy: Kinesthesia in Performance*, (London; N.Y.: Routledge, 2011).

²⁶ See: Erin Manning, *Politics of Touch: Sense, Movement, Sovereignty*. (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota, P, 2007; Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study*. (New York: Minor Compositions, 2013).

²⁷ E. Patrick Johnson. *Appropriating Blackness: Performance and the Politics of Authenticity*. (Durham [N.C.]: Duke University Press, 2003), 461.

²⁸ The Black Lives Matter movement played an important role in enlivening the issue of black matter and meaning in the socio-political realm, following the continued killing of black people of all presumed genders by police and other structural injustices. This dissertation expands on the relationship between “matter” and “meaning” as discussed in detail by Karen Barad in *Meeting the Universe Halfway* (2007) through the lens of quantum physics, philosophy, feminism, and critical race theory. See: Karen Michelle Barad. *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).

performative agency when Black (non-) beings/objects are involved.²⁹ By drawing upon scholars in Afro-pessimism and performance theory, I argue that Afro-pessimism does not have a prescriptive relationship to *performance*, but its intervention of political ontology directs Black performance theory to a question of what it means to suffer. Black performance theory has not exhausted the expanse of what can be theorized about Black performance. Afro-pessimism intervenes on this gap, which is sometimes more than a gap but an oversight. Afro-pessimism opens up a space to engage with Black performance theory not merely as a sub-category of performance theory *proper*, but in many ways an improper and non-incorporable departure with potential to deform the canon of performance theory.³⁰ Afro-pessimism invites Black performance theory to ask brave questions that might be considered taboo.

Unmournable Void pays close attention to the time and care that Black people put into their artistic and theoretical meditations that critique Western modernity. This generative combination of theoretical frameworks allows for a recognition of what David Marriott calls Black people's "commitment to dream themselves differently — in literature, psychoanalysis, photography, and film [and I would add performance] — and in particular how that dream work can start to contest inherited fantasies of black[ness]."³¹ Recognition of this dream work, however, involves paying rigorous attention to how anti-black racism is always at work to bring Black dreaming to a halt.³² Instead of uncritically celebrating Black self-making as has been the

²⁹ For a discussion of how anti-Black racism dispels Blackness into the status of nonbeing and objecthood, see: Denise Ferreira da Silva, *Toward a Global Idea of Race*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007); Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952/1986); Amber Jamilla Musser, *Sensational Flesh: Race, Power, and Masochism*. (NY: NYU Press, 2014).

³⁰ Here I am borrowing language from R.A. Judy. See: Ronald A. Judy *(Dis)forming the American Canon: African-Arabic Slave Narratives and the Vernacular*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993).

³¹ David Marriott, *On Black Men*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), viii.

³² *Ibid.*, xv.

general procedure in Black cultural studies, what emerges if we critique and offer a description of forces that continuously and vigorously unmake Black attempts at dreaming, self-making, and self-possession? Afro-pessimism makes possible a Black performance theory that celebrates Black performance and Black creativity/destruction while moving away from the lure of liberal human recognition.

Unmournable Void critiques a certain contradiction that lies in the endless and compulsory reproduction of the violated and abject Black corpse, even when the purpose is to challenge that very reification. Why is there a widely accepted and generally unquestioned tendency to translate unspeakable violence whose textures cannot be fully grasped with representational tools currently at our disposal, and endow it with quantifiable or visualizable intelligibility? Black suffering, as Zakiyyah Jackson posits, marks “a level of devastation that quite simply cannot be represented.”³³ Every one of these aesthetic recitations of violence by Lewis, Xaba, and the painters of Biko’s corpse is a repression of an already obscured or unintelligible violence. Aesthetic representation cannot, nor does it always claim, to fully account for the totality and breadth of violence. As stated above, aesthetic figuration, often presumed to be the antidote to violence, is sometimes the very mode of enacting anti-black violence. This is what performance theorist Joseph Roach calls a “functional similarity between violence and the aesthetic.”³⁴ The aesthetic is not merely a remedial counterpoint to violence, but it is also a tool deployed for the successful execution of anti-black violence. What still lingers in the horizon and eludes our grasp is a Black performance theory whose task would be to fully hash out the anti-black violence of performance and aesthetics. The political as well as libidinal

³³ Zakiyyah Iman Jackson, “Waking Nightmares.” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 17, no. 2 (2011): 357.

³⁴ Roach (1996), 41.

economies of the brutalization and display of the corpse/remains are performances that must be taken up by performance studies to understand the interwovenness of horror, desire, and capitalist circulation.

Black performance theory has rigorously explained how Black performance resists violence, but my contribution turns our focus to performance *as* violence. Blackness as an “ongoing irruption” or ongoing performance of resistance (to use Fred Moten’s words) is always anticipated by, enabled by, and serves as the property of the structure of violence it resists.³⁵

Roach, drawing from Georges Bataille, tethers violence to performance when he argues,

Violence is the performance of waste... violence is never senseless but always meaningful...[it] serves...to make a point. All violence is excessive, because to be fully demonstrative, to make its point, it must *spend* things—material objects, blood...All violence is performative, for the simple reason that it must have an audience—even if that audience is only the victim, even if that audience is only God.³⁶

This means that although anti-black violence is gratuitous/unprovoked, it requires performance to assert itself. As a performance (of waste) it has a point: expenditure (to *spend* things).

Performance studies is invited to take seriously that “meaningful” and “excessive” performance of waste: violence. If violence for Roach, is always sensical/ “never senseless” then we have to consider the particular gratuity of anti-blackness as senseless and unprovoked (even as it is performative and has meaning).³⁷ Black people suffer social death, a violence which is unprovoked and senseless, and this fact has tension with Roach’s understanding of “all violence” as “senseless.”

³⁵ Fred Moten, *In The Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*. Durham: (Duke University Press, 2003),1.

³⁶ Roach, 41.

³⁷ See: Patterson, Orlando. *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study*) Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982).

Conceptualizing the Unmournable Void

The main object of analysis in this dissertation is the spectacle of the unmournable void (as corpse, corporeal remains, racial icon) in contemporary art, the endeavor to showcase it in its tangible and (non-)material form. The unmournable void is a term I use to distinguish Black personality from universal humanity which is endowed with unbridled life and mournable death. The unmournable void is met with violence at every scale, from the domestic to the public. This means that the organization and coherence of the world is sustained by a requirement for Black life to either be killed with impunity or be allowed to live as if already dead. This death is particular because it is suffered in life, as a form of what sociologist Orlando Patterson calls “social death.”³⁸ Patterson describes social death as the condition of blackness brought about by transatlantic slavery. He explains this condition by providing a triangulated structure consisting of natal alienation (the irretrievable loss of kin), general dishonor, and gratuitous violence (senseless, unprovoked, violence without transgression). Social death, as Jared Sexton has argued in “The Social Life of Social Death” does not mean that Black people are not physical sentient beings with the capacity to interact in the world or participate in daily activities.³⁹ But the structure of anti-blackness makes sentience inequivalent to life. To say that Black people are ontologically dead is not to imply that they are not present in the earth as sentient breathing flesh. It is to acknowledge their presence as a presence without presence.⁴⁰ Death is a predictable condition of *living* that Black people are conscripted into it without consent prior to arriving on

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ See: Jared Sexton, “The Social Life of Social Death” in Agathangelou, Anna M., and Killian, Kyle D. *Time, Temporality and Violence in International Relations: (de)fatalizing the Present, Forging Radical Alternatives*. (Abingdon, Oxon; New York, NY: Routledge, 2016).

⁴⁰ Marriott,

earth.⁴¹ This “fatal way of being alive”, as David Marriott calls it, complicates theorizations of mourning as a process of grieving the loss of life.⁴² In other words, the *unmournable void* is both an explanation and a question for how to mourn a death/loss that does not arrive as a natural step *after* life.⁴³ By *unmournable void*, I am not only referring to a body/corpse whose homeostatic system has ceased functioning, necessitating cultural practices such as autopsy, burial, funeral rituals etc. While the corpse is traditionally understood as a “lifeless body,” I draw from critical Black thinkers such as Steve Biko, Frantz Fanon, Orlando Patterson, Saidiya Hartman, Frank Wilderson III, Denise Ferreira da Silva, and others to suggest a different temporality for Black death as that which cannot be analogized to death as a putative final/transitional phase succeeding life. Life is not presumed for Black people in a structurally anti-black world.⁴⁴ It is something Black people work towards, something they fight for in perpetuity. Practices that obscure this condition turn away from blackness, rather than turn/tend toward, as the Weems epigraph sustains.

The unmournable void is not a condition of inherent lack, but it is a result of machinations of domination imposed from outside attributable to the slavery-colonialism-apartheid triad. The Black’s fractured ontological status is imposed from outside through myth

⁴¹ See: Selamawit D. Terrefe. “Speaking the Hieroglyph.” *Theory & Event* 21, no. 1 (2018): 141.

⁴² Marriott (2000), 15.

⁴³ In Jacques Derrida’s *Aporias*, there is a discussion of death as a *pas*, a step or passage. Death usually signals a linear temporal arrangement beginning with life and ending with death/decomposition. Black people can go through that “life-cycle” in a biologized sense. “Black death” however requires an explanation that goes beyond that biologic. This is an analysis that takes an extra step and does not end at cultural readings of death. Derrida provides a useful critique of approaches to understanding and analyzing death that rely strictly on what he calls “ontical knowledge” (29), arguing that “there can be an anthropology or history of death . . . But there is no culture of death itself or of properly dying. Dying is neither entirely natural (biological) nor cultural”. See: Jacques Derrida, *Aporias*. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), 2.

⁴⁴ See: Wilderson (2010), Fanon (2004/1952), Hartman (1997), Patterson (1982). Patterson attributes social death to three to a triadic structure that includes natal alienation (the loss of genealogical kin), general dishonor (the denial of citizenship and its profits), and gratuitous violence (violence without reason of justification).

and non-Black anxiety, rather than an inherent feature. In other words, the *unmournable void* is produced through *actual* gratuitous violence (wounding, dismemberment, death, medical experimentation), aesthetic figuration, as well as anti-black discourses. The triadic forces of total domination which are yet to leave us cordoned off the province of corporeal integrity for Europeans, producing an abandoned and fragmented “historical racial/epidermal schema” for the Black that is always at pains to reassemble itself.⁴⁵ By historical racial schema I am referring to Fanon’s definition of “crushed objecthood” and “bodily curse” as more apt concepts for a Black *body* which is not a *body* like other bodies because of the historical particularities of how it came to be through degradation.⁴⁶ Fanon writes:

I had created a historical-racial schema, the data I used were provided not by ‘remnants of feelings, and notions of the tactile, vestibular, kinesthetic, or visual nature’ but by the Other, the white man, who had woven me out of a thousand details, anecdotes, and stories. I thought I was being asked to construct a physiological self, to balance space and localize sensations, when all the time they were clamoring for me.⁴⁷

The “I” described by Fanon is a product of false stories and phobic sensations. The “I” is the imbalance whose back the world balances upon, a figure with no capacity for a mutual reaching-toward as a gesture of expanding spacetime. “Distorted” and “sprawled out,” the I’s delusions of wholeness are undermined by the realization of a historical-racial/epidermal schema, whose “crushed ‘other’” status calibrates the delusion of an integrated white corporeal schema.

Fanon’s observations address the unmournable void’s non-relationality. This means the unmournable void addressed a condition of suffering that is without comparison, rendering claims of empathy a ruse. This non-relation is also alluded to in *Discourse on Colonialism* where Martinican poet Aimé Césaire argues that white European subjectivity coheres through

⁴⁵ See: Fanon, (2004/1952).

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 91.

colonial violence. In order for Europeans to feel human and civilized, they have to measure themselves against a fabricated barbaric and inhuman/“savage” other. Césaire describes the colonial context as one where there is “no human contact, but relations of domination, which turn the colonizing man into a classroom monitor, an army sergeant, a prison guard, a slave driver, and the indigenous man into an instrument of production.”⁴⁸ Relation, then, does not and cannot exist outside of domination and thingification. In this slave and thing-producing dissymmetry of relation, there is no reciprocity, only violent paternalism and subjugation. The *unmournable void*, then, is a condition that Jared Sexton and Huey Copeland in “Raw Life” describe as “[living]in the domain of non-existence, inhabit[ing] an impossible time between life and death, when one simply cannot be sure whether one is here or there, alive or dead.”⁴⁹ While both authors focus on the condition of U.S. blackness in this particular essay, this dissertation shows (like they have in other writings) that this is a global condition for Blacks.

Death as a universalizing force is an inadequate term for explaining the captive Black body/corpse that apartheid, colonialism, and African enslavement produced. In *Haunted Life*, David Marriott theorizes what he calls “dead time.”⁵⁰ Marriott describes dead time as the time of blackness, a time of a repressed failure of mourning which manifests as affect and spectacle. He describes dead time as the time which “never arrives and does not stop arriving, as though by arriving it never happened until it happens again, then it never happened.”⁵¹ This is not the time of loss, but a time of “never having had”⁵² Following Marriott, I aim to discuss what emerges

⁴⁸ See: Aimé Césaire, *Notebook of A Return to the Native Land*. (Bilingual ed Wesleyan Poetry. 2013 [1939]), 42.

⁴⁹ Huey Copeland and Jared Sexton, “Raw Life: An Introduction.” *Qui Parle* 13, no. 2(2003): 53.

⁵⁰ David Marriott, *Haunted Life: Visual Culture and Black Modernity*, (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press. 2007.)

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, xxi.

⁵² *Ibid.*

from that inhabitation of dead time, and how it affects Black futurity, since dead time's disorientation helps us to sense "a projected future so dismal that it is impossible to remember why we should long for it to be fulfilled."⁵³ Steve Biko, Sara Baartman, and all the Black people murdered by police are suspended in dead time, unmournable and presented in aesthetic spectacle as an indication of a repressed failure of mourning.

According to political theorist Gregory Maxaulane, Black death is "antesophic."⁵⁴ It anticipates the Black or comes before the Black arrives in the world. It is "a death foretold," where the Black is always already a "corpse with a pulse."⁵⁵ Death as a universal framework for explaining the loss of life, is not sufficient for the Black because as Wilderson in "Doing Time in the Psychic Commons" posits,

Death vouchsafes the subject's relational capacity. Death . . . enables narration... seals the subject's instantiation as a subject because it guarantees the subject's historicity. For the slave, death is more akin to a metaphor, a crushing anvil that further *obliterates* the capacity of the slave to know s/he is alive.⁵⁶

Death, then is what affirms subjectivity for the subject. It provides the subject their corporeal integrity. One is a subject because the narrative progression of their life is one that will certainly end with death. This subject's death is not *a priori* condition that is *lived*, like in the fact of blackness/objecthood. Wilderson poses a crucial challenge to Black performance theory's reliance on narrative, the idea that the unmournable void's life/death can be plotted in a way that provides a return to either past or future equilibrium. The study of the corpse in Chapter 1, for

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Gregory Maxaulane, "On the Poetics of Death and a Theory of Anti-colonialism" (PhD Dissertation, University of the Witwatersrand, 2018).

⁵⁵ Marriott (2007).

⁵⁶ Frank B. Wilderson, "Doing Time in the Psychic Commons: Black Insurgency and the Unconscious," in Agathangelou, Anna M., and Killian, Kyle D. *Time, Temporality and Violence in International Relations: (de)fatalizing the Present, Forging Radical Alternatives*. (Abingdon, Oxon; New York, NY: Routledge, 2016), 96

example, is about bringing attention to the Black body that is considered “alive” as well as the “corpse,” to tease out how the two terms in scare quotes end up being coterminous and interchangeable. Black theorists who gravitate towards and speculate about “life” do so with the knowledge that whatever resembles “life” in its unfettered manifestation has been obliterated for centuries in ways that exceed recourse to evidence. “Life” is something that Black people have to reach out and choose because they have not been not chosen by it. These provocations about what constitutes a corpse or body, its temporality, and mournability, animate contemporary Black aesthetic praxis and critical thought attended to in this dissertation. I ask to what end is “choosing life” or “choosing to be human” when one is chosen by irreversible death? To what extent are figurations of Biko’s corpse or Sarah Baartman’s remains in art and theory clarifying or obscuring the “the loss of loss” that characterizes their being as nothingness?⁵⁷ The answer to this rests on each artist’s understanding of the corpse, its (non)universal mournability.

Consideration of the unmournable void shifts how we think about the object/objecthood in art history and performance theory. Taking seriously the unmournable void’s non-analogizable status, as Wilderson elaborates in *Red, White, and Black*, can allow both fields to tend to violence as each field’s co-constitutive element, as opposed to understanding violence as a disentangled object of study observable from a distance using the fields’ respective methodologies and analytics.⁵⁸ Further, this dissertation demonstrates the kinds of questions that open up when scholars of Black aesthetics consider how apparatuses of representation are called to visualize unrepresentable events, actions, and figures. I concur with performance theorist Sampada Aranke that bringing Black critical thought that gravitate towards Fanon to the canon

⁵⁷ Frank B. Wilderson, *Afropessimism*. (New York: W.W. Norton, 2020), 16.

⁵⁸ Wilderson (2010).

of performance theory “might bring us closer to a kind of Performance Studies that negotiates how blackness (as a structural position) founds the conditions of invisibility, absence, and fixity that foreground any generative investments in performance.”⁵⁹ With this kind of attention to Black aesthetics and theory, terms such as “object,” “corporeality,” “presence,” “disappearance,” “evidence,” “ontology,” and “death” etc. take on completely different meanings and different conclusions, enabling us to revise how we have theorized these terms’ explanatory gravitas before. If the *unmournable void* is not universal, then Afro-pessimist critique and related scholarship allow us to reassess the powers previously ascribed to the Black body’s capacity for appearance or disappearance, and rework previous conclusions about its potential for intersubjective relationality as well as the power of performance to move or affect others.

As I stated, the unmournable void resists representability, but to articulate it, artists turn to different modes of figuration that approximate its characteristics. In this dissertation, that figuration features through iconography, specifically what visual studies scholar Nicole Fleetwood calls “the racial icon.”⁶⁰ Fleetwood describes the racial icon as the image we fixate on because the collective emotional attachment to it promises some form of transformation. As an example, she discusses teenager Trayvon Martin’s hoodie as an object that was used in protests around the U.S. after neighborhood cop George Zimmerman murdered Martin for being Black. Some icons, such as politicians, are aspirational figures or role models who promise to represent the needs of their communities. The icon, according to Fleetwood, is tied to “nation building,” “uplift,” and it sometimes has a “burden to transform the despised into the idolized.”⁶¹ The racial

⁵⁹ Aranke, Sampada. “Fred Hampton’s Murder and the Coming Revolution.” *Trans-Scripts* 3 (2013) 117.

⁶⁰ Fleetwood, Nicole R. *On Racial Icons: Blackness and the Public Imagination*. (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2015).

⁶¹ *Ibid.* 2-3.

icons I am concerned with in this this project are (the corpse of) Steve Biko, (the bodily remains of) Sara Baartman, the blackface minstrel who no longer appears in blackface but ghosts contemporary dance forms, as well as the non-individuated icon whose spectacular execution by law enforcement ignites the fire for the contemporary movement for Black lives (which is non-reducible to Black Lives Matter). I am interested in how contemporary artists invoke these icons to demand racial justice, to instigate conversation about repatriation/reparation, and in Fleetwood's terms, to "subvert the long and voluminous history of degrading racial caricatures."⁶² Below I outline how the figuration of the unmournable void operates in each chapter.

Chapter Outline

This introduction provides a theoretical framework as well as a methodology for researching contemporary performances that respond to Black death. It outlines the ways in which histories of colonialism, slavery, and apartheid discipline bodies in order to categorize some as human while banishing others to the status of nonbeing. I also make a case for the use of performance to highlight histories of dispossession and regimes of domination as a continuation of violence that structure both the spectacular/surface and interior corners of Black life. The three chapters that follow demonstrate, through close analysis, various ways of picturing the corpse and other black(ened) remains in contemporary art and performance. The aim is to show how aesthetic practices are a microcosmic site of a larger societal concern about anti-black icons, libidinal structures, and institutions. The three chapters deal with the methods of visualizing or encouraging dialogue about death and unrepresentable suffering, without resorting to

⁶² Ibid.,4.

problematic representational approaches. These chapters show the political and critical stakes of the material corpse when figured literally as in the depictions of Steve Biko's corpse (Chapter 1); the decomposition of the corpse, particularly Sara Baartman's remains as unreliable archival evidence (Chapter 2); and the material corpse's complete dissolution as a visible particular object, where choreographic form disintegrates, and material darkness becomes a site for putting pressure on representation and politics of visibility in the dance works of Ligia Lewis (Chapter 3). Performance in this dissertation is not reducible to staged theatrical presentations, but I also consider what critical theorist Cecilio Cooper might call "atypical objects" of performance theory such as painting, sculpture, as well as Black revolutionary rhetoric and Black political insurgency.⁶³

The first chapter, "Figuring Biko's Corpse: Allegory, Counter-documentary, and Collage" tends to the aesthetic figuration of South African political philosopher/activist Steve Biko's corpse after he was murdered by the South African apartheid government. I assess the uses of counter-documentary, collage, and allegory as attempts at picturing the corpse. I argue that the depiction of these remains is tied not only to commemoration, but to indicting the apartheid government for killing Biko. In these works, the viewer is invited through aesthetic approaches to either empathize with the corpse or maintain a critical distance that allows them to understand the structure that enabled his death. Firstly, the chapter directs attention to performances of Black insurgency and their suppression or annihilation by the state. Secondly, I question the political promise of figural & non-representational artistic strategies that mobilize the corpse, aspiring either to wholeness/reassembly or fragmentation. This elaborates my

⁶³ Cecilio M. Cooper and Frank B. Wilderson III. "Incommensurabilities: The Limits of Redress, Intramural Indemnity, and Extramural Auditorship," in eds. Hunter et al., "Co-presence with the Camera," *Performance Matters* 6.1 (2020), 83.

argument about how the Black corporeal form does not cohere into relational subject that characterizes liberal humanism. The critique of humanism is most noticeable in Ezrom Legae's drawings from the 1970s responding to Biko's corpse and the murders of other political insurgents. Legae turns to figuration that incorporates the animal as allegory, since the animal was both a site of debasement that the Black was relegated to, as well as a generative symbol in indigenous African thought. Biko's murder was ruled an "accident" and the police officers that murdered him were absolved of the crime. This raised international outrage, and Paul Stopforth produced a series of counter-documentary paintings that attempted to provide an alternative account of Biko's murder. I study this counter-documentary enactment, what it can say that cannot otherwise be said about the conditions for Biko's murder. I specifically concentrate on the Christian religious symbolism around one of his paintings, to examine how an aura of sainthood or martyrdom is deployed to instill an idea of innocence, which has the potential to solicit an empathetic reading from the viewer. Collage artist and jazz painter Sam Nhlengethwa approaches the catastrophe with an awareness of the limits of corporeal wholeness for the Black South African. I read these works with an awareness of Black feminist critiques of iconizing Biko, a cisgender Black man, as a sole "Black Messiah" of the Black Consciousness Movement.

The different formal aesthetic registers discussed in the first chapter such as allegory (Legae), collage (Nhlengethwa), and counter-documentary (Stopforth) attend to an unsuturable corporeal disassembly, how it came to be, and how it affects Black life? Through these works of painting, the viewer observes the negotiation of figuring the *unmournable void* through either incorporation into or critique of the category of the human. I showed how the viewer notices the rendering of the unmournable void in non-/anti-human figuration as part-animal, as well as through the deification of Biko to a super-/supra-human or god-like status. These are modes of

gaining access to alternative ontoepistememes of the human. What remains to be determined, however, is whether humanism of any kind can be effectively repurposed in art, theory, performance, and politics to re-accommodate the blackness it is designed to destroy. Or will blackness and Black art have to destroy humanism altogether, instead of renovating it for purposes of incorporating itself within its refurbished form? The representation of the corpse also appears as an assemblage in Nhlengethwa's practice, a meeting point for seemingly unrelated images which coalesce to dream an invention that forms a new understanding of apartheid. Other representations move away completely from verisimilitude, generating images that do not bear resemblance to either Biko or the site of his demise. This abstraction can be revealing, or it can further obscure, universalize, or depoliticize the murder of Biko.

Since the first chapter is about the tendency that spans at least two decades of painting the corpse for visual consumption, I ask why is it necessary for the world to *see* the image of the corpse (again) in order to reflect on violence, and what modes of recognition and identification are produced? What ideological fantasies drive the ceaseless repetition of a traumatic African past that keeps repeating? Death and spectacle are hardly an unfamiliar pairing. In Western and non-Western societies, viewing ceremonies are held for the corpse, where those who are close to the departed gather together to view the body of the dead. Usually, the dead body is treated with dignity, handled with care, dressed up, embalmed, and make-up is applied. That is a part of how societies care for the dead. The dignified body is viewed. When the corpse is not deemed to be in a dignified state (when it is disfigured, injured, scarred, bloated etc.), that dignity is brought back by displaying a photographic portrait of the departed. Dignity is key. Spectacle is a necessity always, even in the form of a photograph that stands in for the corpse in the case of a closed casket. In Biko's case, aesthetic figurations of the corpse follow the public spectacle of his open

casket funeral. The repetition of his image in art ensures the presentation of alternative *evidence* that indicts the apartheid police, while also preserving the longevity of Black liberation theory and ideology, even after the revolutionary figure has departed.

The chapter discussed above addresses the aestheticization of the material corpse and the political claims/promises accompanying that practice, while the second chapter engages how the unmournable void is represented in its decomposed or fossilized form. In the second chapter, “‘The Venus’ in Two Acts: Nelisiwe Xaba’s *They Look at Me* and *Sakhozi Says ‘Non’ to the Venus*,” I discuss South African choreographer Nelisiwe Xaba’s diptych of performances about the corporeal remains and iconography of Sara Baartman/ “The Venus Hottentot.” The first part of this chapter deals with the relationship between “the black female body,” the colonial gaze, and empathy, specifically how the “Hottentot Venus” as icon still informs how “the Black female” is looked at and apprehended. I argue that Xaba is intervening on the malleability of Baartman’s remains, how they are conjured up by different artists and academics for a variety of purposes such as white rehabilitation, narcissistic identification, and nation-building. The chapter unpacks Xaba’s awareness of the limits of representing Baartman through visual figuration. This creates a paradox where the artist has to repeat certain problematic tropes in order to expose them for critique. The second section of the chapter deals with the global migration and exchange of African material/performance. My discussion of Xaba’s work contributes to conversations about the promises and limitations of repatriating African remains that have been housed in European institutions since colonialism. In my discussion of Xaba’s *Sakhozi Says ‘Non’ to the Venus*, I attend to the repatriation and burial of Saartjie Baartman’s bodily remains that were on display in French museums for two centuries. The aim is to unpack the role of embodied performance in symbolic reparation, especially when archival evidence is unreliable.

There is currently a lively debate in the arts and humanities about the repatriation of African cultural objects back to countries where they were transferred or “plundered” during the colonial period. Drawing from [Black] psycho-analytic theories, I argue that the repatriation of African objects and corporeal remains from European and North American institutions does not completely relinquish relations of power asymmetry, since African (descended) artists are called in to perform in the “West” as *substitutes* for those repatriated objects. This arrangement barter the capitalist ownership of African material objects in exchange for ephemeral embodied African performances such as Xaba’s. In other words, inviting Africans to perform in museums with colonial legacies under the guise of “decolonizing the museum” re-establishes a relationship of ownership with African material, in the form of performance, affect, and energy. Black performance becomes property that replaces repatriated property in the form of art objects and artefacts. It also requires Africans to labor for the rehabilitation of colonial guilt and white psychic redemption. Xaba’s work reveals the contradictions of turning to performance to reverse colonial despotism, to fill in irretrievable gaps within the archive, and the limits of emplotting Baartman into narratives of post-apartheid and post-colonial national citizenship.

Overall, I problematize visuality, reparation, and empathy in my discussion of Nelisiwe Xaba’s “Venus” diptych. Xaba troubles the logic of performance as yet another form of replacing, (while repeating the same logics and functions of) monumentalism. The visual has direct ties to voyeurism, surveillance, and policing. Visual technological apparatuses, in the case of the Black woman or those assigned female at birth, have historically functioned as weapons of an irreversible undoing. That is to say, Xaba’s practice reveals how visuality in the case of Baartman participates in the process of slave-making. Historically, visual figuration of “the Venus Hottentot” executes the successful projection of European desires and anxieties,

fabricating the slave through coerced performance. Nelisiwe Xaba's performance demonstrates that the "Venus Hottentot" is an externally imposed creation rather than an inherent feature of Black womanhood. Her performances battle the repetition of this sign, and the accumulation of degraded meanings that accrued around it over time. The weight of this degradation is gravitational and cannot be easily reversed with a diptych of theatrical performances. What I attempt to show in this dissertation is the challenge of experimenting with visual insurrection while not afforded other options but to reify the signs you intend to obliterate. Xaba creates a messy network of images and gestures that allow for an even messier structure of feeling/sensing/knowing, one that is monstrous because it brings to awareness our own enjoyment of the repeating and reified racial sign. It is this coiled network of signs (not merely solid in form) that exposes the counterfeit and narcissistic nature of empathy. Narcissistic identification occurs when the onlooker experiences the diffractive coil and misrecognizes it as a mirror reflecting their own image. The onlooker cathedralizes the affect associated with this misrecognition, as my discussion of Cohen's *Cradle of Humankind* in the second chapter shows, to analogize a "shared" sense of suffering. The minimalist abstract approach in Xaba is an attempt to eschew form of identification. While abstracted visual tropes associated with Baartman are invoked, unlike in Cohen's performance, these are not brought into the performance for purposes of shocking, scandalizing, or titillating the spectator into consciousness. They are not reflexive of a past, but they are diffractive in nature because they show the present as entangled with the past.⁶⁴

⁶⁴ See: Karen Barad, "In Diffracting Diffraction: Cutting Together Apart," *Parallax*20, no. 3 (2014): 168-87.

The third and final chapter, “Anarrangement and the Anti-choreographic in Ligia Lewis’ *red, white, and blue* Trilogy” examines dance motifs and enactments associated with deformation. The first two chapters focus on artists who chose two iconic figures (Bartman and Biko) as points of departure, but Lewis worked with non-individuated racial icons such as the non-particularized Black subject who gets killed by the police or the enigmatic figure and sign invented in blackface minstrelsy. Lewis’ work attends to how the unmournable void is formed through techniques of violence on and off stage. These works tend to the question of matter and form by dramatizing a destruction of form. Her work enacts a necessary destruction of choreographic technē, demonstrating that representation in canonical dance forms enacts the opposite of the desired practice of tending-toward blackness. I frame this as a practice of anarrangement that moves away from apparatuses of dance technique, asserting a Black anti-choreographic stance that critiques representationalism as a mode of soliciting empathy for the dead. Lewis’ work also shows into highly charged affects that are deemed negative such as rage and animatedness reify historical anti-black stereotypes, but a counterintuitive leaning into them also reveals how they remain in a ghostly manner in contemporary art practice. I argue that Black aesthetics of anarrangement embrace a deform that already constitutes blackness, and not reducible to formlessness as a motif in visual or performance representation only. Lewis approaches the problem historically in *Water Will* by exploring the notion of will as a punishable drive. The trilogy offers a space to meditate on the racial icons from the minstrel stage that still ghost contemporary theater, ambivalent performances that trouble the legibility of will and agency when performed by Black performers.

In her piece titled *minor matter*, she ascertains what black matter means in an anti-black world. This is closely tied to questions raised by the movement for Black lives, particularly

Black Lives Matter. Rather than dramatizing spectacles of Black people brutalized by the police to meditate on mattering, she explores the *nature* of matter more generally to consider whether the question of Black death should be about matter. Instead of repressing or accommodating Black rage, *minor matter* embraces it as a form of tending-toward-blackness. Huey Copeland's concept of tending-toward-blackness is antithetical to both policing and managerial ways of being. It is an always already acknowledgement and *valuing* of the theoretical and critical import of Black rage. This is an understanding that fuels Ligia Lewis' *minor matter* in the third chapter, a comprehension of Black rage as Black study. It is an acknowledgement of Black rage as an unflinching description of the world, a destructive posture that is itself available for plasticized uses where it is both managed and accommodated for the benefit of non-Black others and their liberal Black deputies. The anarrangement and deformation in Lewis' dance practice is an invitation to apply such postures to larger structural conditions. She foregrounds the materiality of darkness and the black box theater to stage provocations about the politics of touch, the (r)uses of empathy, as well as affects such as rage and animatedness. I am interested in what this deformation of canonical technique and gravitation towards minor practices allows for thinking about the problems raised by the trilogy. As I argue in the third chapter, both "anarrangement" and "antichoreography" are not about refurbishing mastery, but they are about the total destruction of mastery and the forms that sustain it. The outcome is a fragmented position and disassembly. The dissertation concludes with a coda that imagines the dissolution of policing as a practice/thought system permeating aesthetic institutionality. I argue that if art and aesthetic practices are to take seriously the question of Black freedom, a serious theorization and relinquishment of policing has to take place.

Methods, Research Sources and Sites

Methodologically, I pursue a Black Performance theoretical inquiry that merges historiography and critical theory. I draw upon an eclectic set of tools of inquiry grounded in art history, performance theory, Black critical thought, gender studies, political theory, and psychoanalysis. This study approaches its primary questions through formal close reading of aesthetic objects and archival materials; discourse analysis; interviews with artists, critics, and scholars; as well as observations assembled from attending art festivals, art biennials, rehearsal/studio visits, and performances. I have been immersing myself in the archives and performances that I assess in this dissertation for eight years since I researched and wrote an MFA thesis at UC Irvine on black queer artists (e.g., Mamela Nyamza and Zanele Muholi) and activists in South Africa. For *Unmournable Void*, I revisited some of these archives where I conducted preliminary research as well as other research sites. My four years of experience as a professional movement practitioner, activist, and teacher in South Africa prior to pursuing graduate studies also offered me an opportunity to revisiting some of those sites for my archival work. My fieldwork included attending dance performances and gallery shows by the artists I am writing about as well as their contemporaries across South Africa and the U.S. Examples of performance and visual art festivals I attended include The National Arts Festival in Grahamstown, Jomba Contemporary Dance Experience, Cape Town Live Art Festival in South Africa; as well as American Realness in the USA. My process involved conducting extensive archival research to find reviews, photographs, and recordings of dance and performance art works of the artists discussed in this dissertation. I visited archives and exhibits at art galleries such as The Goodman Gallery, The Stevenson Gallery, Gallery Momo, and Whatiftheworld Gallery.

CHAPTER ONE

Figuring Biko's Corpse: Allegory, Counter-documentary, and Collage

The Black subject before institutions of law enforcement is already dead.

— Denise Ferreira da Silva, "The Scene of Nature."⁶⁵

You are either alive and proud or you are dead, and when you are dead, you can't care anyway. And your method of death can itself be political. So if you can overcome the personal fear of death, which is a highly irrational thing, you know, then you are on your way.

— Steve Biko, *I Write What I Like*.⁶⁶

What if the cultural traffic in *images* of the black man as phobic object – beaten, disfigured, lynched – is trauma enough?

— David Marriott, *On Black Men*.⁶⁷

In September 12, 1977 the South African government murdered anti-apartheid activist Stephen Bantu Biko (popularly known as Steve Biko) in police custody. As a leader of the Black Consciousness Movement (BCM), Biko agitated the apartheid government in the 1970s. Apartheid (1948-1994) was a white supremacist system of total rule where the white minority controlled the country politically, economically, socially, and legally. The paternalistic regime established townships and Bantustans, enclaves separating Black people from the republic and stripping them of citizenship. Black people required passes to move and work in urban areas and other affluent areas preserved for whites. Apartheid was one regime of anti-black racism preceded by centuries of colonial violence and slavery in South Africa. From the year 1652 when Dutch sailor Jan van Riebeeck landed on the shores of the Cape, Black indigenous people lived as captives in the land of their birth. White domination's totalizing force stretched beyond

⁶⁵ Denise Ferreira Da Silva, "The Scene of Nature" In *Searching for Contemporary Legal Thought* Eds. Justin Desautels-Stein and Christopher Tomlins, (University of California, Berkeley School of Law. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 276.

⁶⁶ Steve, Biko, *I Write What I Like*. (Johannesburg: Picador Africa Press, 2004 [1978]), 173.

⁶⁷ Marriott (2000), 13.

economic exploitation as apartheid was carefully constructed to attack the psyche of Black people and solidify their existential/ontological negation. BCM emerged as a result of these conditions. South African Black feminist Pumla Gqola describes BCM as an “umbrella movement under which could be subsumed all organizations which espoused BC. There is no consensus in South Africa about what should be categorized as the BCM era. Generally, this is understood to mean the height of the ideology (1969 to the early eighties).”⁶⁸ This means that BCM was not a political party but a liberation organization consisting of Black religious, political, and student organizations such as the South African Student Organization (SASO).

Apartheid is also marked by ongoing Black insurgency in various forms: revolutionary, military, and passive resistance. The segregationist government marked anti-apartheid freedom fighters, some associated with BCM, as influencing the Black and non-white populations to unite in liberatory practices that would overthrow white rule. As a result, they banned freedom fighters. These bans were part of a nationwide extra-judicial repression of apartheid resistance, prohibiting banned individuals to come into contact or participate in political activities. Black revolutionary performance through protest, civil disobedience, and other means was circumscribed and punished, as the Riotous Assemblies Act of 1956 had been enforced to weaken all forms of anti-apartheid Black gathering.⁶⁹ Those who were willing to disregard these rules were detained, imprisoned, tortured, and placed under house arrest, sometimes for years. Biko was the 46th person to die in detention after 1963.⁷⁰ Black insurgents were captured by

⁶⁸ See: Pumla Dineo Gqola. “Contradictory Locations: Blackwomen and the Discourse of the Black Consciousness Movement (BCM) in South Africa.” *Meridians* 2, no. 1 (2001): 149.

⁶⁹ Riotous Assemblies Act of 1956, *Union Gazette*, Extraordinary (1956) No.17 https://www.gov.za/sites/default/files/gcis_document/201505/act-17-1956_2.pdf

⁷⁰ See: Jesse Walter Bucher, “Arguing Biko: Evidence of the Body in the Politics of History, 1977 to the Present. (PhD Dissertation, University of Minnesota, 2010), 8. Hilda Bernstein also supports this statement, stating, “Since

police, and thereafter mysteriously “found hanged” or died of “natural causes.”⁷¹ Disfigured, bruised, and dismembered corpses, with traces of copper deposits left on the skin by electrodes and traces of other forms of torture were discovered. The police absolved themselves from responsibility, constructing a narrative that murder victims died of “suicides” or “accidents.”⁷²

One of the driving forces for the emergence of BCM was The Sharpeville Massacre (May 4, 1960), which began as a peaceful demonstration against pass laws that forced Black South Africans to carry pass books permitting them to move from place to place. This non-violent protest, organized by Sharpeville citizens and Pan Africanist Congress (PAC) leader Robert Mangaliso Sobukwe, turned into a bloodbath when 300 police officers opened fire on unarmed Black people, killing 69 people and injuring 180 others. According to then senior district surgeon of Johannesburg, Dr. Jack Friedman, most of them were shot in the back.⁷³ These mass murders accelerated and intensified toward the end of the 1970s and 1980s.⁷⁴ At every turn, this violence has been documented and challenged through activism, armed resistance, as well as aesthetic (visual, literary, and performative) means.

Biko was born in King William’s Town, in the Cape Province in 1946, two years before the National Party came to power in 1948 and initiated official apartheid. Black movement was

his death, two more detainees—one only 18 years old—have died in detention. See: Hilda Bernstein, *No. 46 Steve Biko*. (London: International Defense and Aid Fund, 1978), 5.

⁷¹ Bernstein (1978).

⁷² *Ibid.*, 6.

⁷³ See: “Seven out of Ten Shot in the Back at Sharpeville – Archive, 4 May 1960,” *The Guardian* (Guardian News and Media, May 4, 2017), <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/may/04/sharpeville-massacre-judicial-inquiry-south-africa-1960>.

⁷⁴ On March 21, 1960, the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC) and African National Congress (ANC) organized a protest against pass laws outside the Sharpeville police station, the police opened fire and killed 69 Black people, injuring 180 others. Both parties were banned thereafter, leading to more strict surveillance of Black freedom fighters. In the following year, the ANC’s armed wing *Umkhonto Wesizwe* (MK) (translated as Spear of the Nation) was formed. The MK, co-founded by Nelson Mandela, launched attacks in December 1961 and was subsequently banned and classified as a “terrorist organization” by the South African and U.S. governments.

restricted and regulated, and Black intramural/familial bonds were severed to weaken defensive insurgency. Different forms of insurgency, whether peaceful or combative, were always met with state-sanctioned violence. This is the context for which Biko went to study medicine at the University of Natal in 1966. He was eventually expelled from the university for his political activities. He was under constant surveillance and harassment by the security police. In 1972, Biko started working for Black Community Programmes in Durban. Among its projects was *Black Review*, a publication analyzing political trends, which was also banned, and he and other members were banned in 1973. In fact, he was banned several times, confined to King William's Town and not allowed to leave, congregate with two or more people, or communicate with other banned people.⁷⁵ As Hilda Bernstein writes, "if Biko were to be in a room with his wife at a time when a friend walked in, he was liable to be arrested for breaking his bans."⁷⁶ During this period, however, Biko became Secretary-General of the Zimele Trust Fund in 1976, and was elected Honorary President of the Black People's Convention held in Durban, which he could not attend as a banned person. He was arrested in July 1977 on charges of political activities that involved other students. Those charges did not lead to a conviction and he was released back to King William's Town where he was prohibited to leave his hometown. Biko refused this restriction in 1977 by taking a trip to Cape Town with his friend and anti-apartheid activist Peter Jones. Upon his return to King William's Town on 18 August 1977, Biko and Jones were stopped by the police at a roadblock near Port Elizabeth and taken to the Walmer Police Station under Section 6 No. 83 of the Terrorism Act of 1967 which permitted the police station to hold detainees without

⁷⁵ Bernstein, 9.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 10.

charges.⁷⁷ By then, the definition of “terrorism” was irreducible to physical violence, but also expanded to include the expression of thoughts, ideas, and desires for liberation.⁷⁸

While in the police holding cell, he was forced to stand and when he sat down, a policeman, Captain Siebert, was tasked with grabbing him and pulling him back onto his feet. On the 6th of September 1977, Biko was interrogated all day in Room 619, Sanlam Building and that evening he was watched by the “night squad” led by Lieutenant Wilken. They handcuffed him and kept one of his legs chained to a grille.⁷⁹ Biko and Siebert were reportedly involved in a “scuffle” which led to Biko suffering a brain hemorrhage. After the “scuffle,” the guards at Walmer Police Station ignored the signs of this brain trauma such as slurred speech and memory loss. A district surgeon, Dr. Lang, was called in to examine him and he claimed that Biko was “shamming,” suggesting that the rapid deterioration of Biko’s physical health and cognitive functioning was a deceptive act of performance. Despite visible evidence of trauma such as bruises, swelling, and slurred incoherent speech, he was left lying on the floor naked and covered with a blanket.⁸⁰ When the police attempted to interrogate him again in the evening of September 7, Biko was unresponsive. A prison guard found him lying naked on the ground inside the prison cell, manacled but still breathing, with foam coming out of his mouth. A different physician, Dr. Tucker, aware of Biko’s critical condition, co-signed Colonel Goosen’s decision to transport Biko on a twelve-hour drive to a hospital in Pretoria, a 1200 km (approximately 745 miles) journey by road, during which he was kept naked and shackled in the back of a Land Rover. In Pretoria, Biko was left on the floor of a cell and died unattended.⁸¹ In the wake of Biko’s death,

⁷⁷ Bucher, 64. Bernstein, 17.

⁷⁸ Bernstein, 17.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 31.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 32-33.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

the minister of justice and police, Jimmy Kruger, issued a statement that Biko had died from a hunger strike. Contrary to security police's assertions that they were not responsible for his death, a forensic autopsy performed on Biko's corpse indicates that Biko died as a result of repeated blows to the head that led to brain damage and ultimately death. Addressing a National Party Congress, Kruger proclaimed to laughter: "I am not saddened by Biko's death and I am not mad. His death leaves me cold (Dit laat my koud) Any person who dies . . . I shall also be sorry if I die (Laughter)."⁸² What I show in this chapter are manifestations of violence that are particular to (but not reducible to) South Africa, the specific historical machinations of anti-black brutality in that nation state.

This chapter engages aesthetic production directly animated by, and responding to, a published image of Steve Biko's corpse after he was assassinated in detention by the apartheid government in 1977. Biko's corpse, in particular, has been taken up by a number of visual and performance artists attempting to provide alternatives to the apartheid government's official narrative about Biko's death as a "hunger-strike suicide." I focus on different approaches to picturing this iconic corpse by South African painters Paul Stopforth, Sam Nhlengethwa, and Ezrom Legae. Their work spans the period right after Biko's death to the beginning of post-apartheid South Africa. Observing this time span helps us glean what was possible during apartheid and what was censored in terms of aesthetic presentation or political articulation. It also allows us to understand how despotic repression shapes aesthetic styles and forms, and how state repression paradoxically allows for the invention of new forms or the reimagination of

⁸² See: Peffer, John. *Art and the End of Apartheid*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 178. Also see Bernstein, 20.

existing ones. I focus on these three artists because they focus on the figuration of the corpse specifically, and they allow me to contain the study from the height of apartheid to its legal end.

After Biko was killed, there was a proliferation of work that commemorated him by reproducing his images in painting, posters, as well as t-shirts etc. I am interested in why apartheid representations of the Black dead repeat in the present, and the claims to mourning attempted by these interventions. Visual studies scholar Leigh Raiford theorizes the repeating image as having “a ‘surplus symbolic value’ of constructing and reconstructing our collective histories...becom[ing] a guide to appropriate forms of future political action.”⁸³ Drawing from Raiford, I argue that the *repeating image* of Biko’s corpse in artworks by Legae, Stopforth, and Nhlengethwa provides alternative evidence to disprove the evidence provided by the apartheid police. The repeating image of the corpse is reproduced for purposes of commemoration as well as visualizing what the future needs *not* to be. The repeating image of Biko’s corpse asserts certain claims about (the limits of) empathy, archival access, and censorship, while also preserving the longevity of Black liberation theory and ideology, even after revolutionary figures have departed. By invoking the corpse, these images unveil some silences about racial violence in the official document. The aesthetic reproduction of the corpse also calcifies Biko’s death as revolutionary, as a generative force for Black liberation decades after his burial.

This chapter traces how the Black corpse is pictured in apartheid South African art, and how approaches to depicting it reveal the extent to which bodily sentience can be equated with bodily integrity. I question the political promise of figural and non-representational artistic strategies that mobilize the corpse, aspiring either to wholeness/reassembly or fragmentation.

⁸³ Raiford’s use of “surplus symbolic value” is borrowed from Michael Rogin’s *Blackface, White Noise* (1998). See: Leigh Raiford, “Imprisoned in a Luminous Glare Photography and the African American Freedom Struggle,” (The University of North Carolina Press, 2013), 3.

These aesthetic strategies are preceded and partly informed by the public display of images depicting Biko's corpse in the morgue after his death as well as his open casket funeral. These images appeared in the December 1977 issue of *DRUM Magazine*. I ask: Why is it necessary for the world to *see* the image of the corpse (again) in aesthetic practice, in order to reflect on violence, and what modes of recognition and identification are produced? What ideological fantasies drive the ceaseless repetition of a traumatic African past that keeps repeating?⁸⁴ What can we glean from this aesthetic representation of "terrible beauty," as Fred Moten (referencing jazz musician Charles Mingus) calls it, a beauty produced out of cruel conditions?⁸⁵

In *Death's Showcase*, photography scholar Ariella Azoulay questions the critical import of the visual showcase of death in cultural sites such as the media and museums. Azoulay argues that these sites, "all produce the conditions for an unfinished work of mourning."⁸⁶ I question whether this unfinishedness of mourning remains unfinished in these cultural sites when the Black corpse is concerned. The photographic apparatus, after all, (and this extends to proto-photographic apparatuses such as painting) has death as (one of) its ontological features. Raiford refers to the photographic image as "a mode of arrest and incarceration,"⁸⁷ and this is in keeping with Azoulay's claim about (proto)photographic apparatuses as "fatal instruments."⁸⁸ Moten's performance studies method of engaging with the image for its performance and the sound it improvises (what he calls "mo'nin" or the image's "phonic substance") through and away from the Freudian conception of mourning and melancholia distinction is important.⁸⁹ Commenting on

⁸⁴ Marriott (2007).

⁸⁵ Moten (2003), 210.

⁸⁶ Ariella Azoulay, *Death's Showcase: The Power of the Image*, (Cambridge (Mass.): MIT Press. 2001), 4.

⁸⁷ Raiford, 6.

⁸⁸ Azoulay (2001), 7.

⁸⁹ Moten (2003).

Mamie Till's decision to have an open casket funeral for her son Emmett Till after he was killed and brutally defaced by white people for being Black, Moten asks, "Is the display of the picture melancholic? No, but it's certainly no simple release or mourning either. Mo'nin improvises through that difference. You have to keep looking at this so you can listen to it."⁹⁰ This is what Moten understands as the image's simultaneous beauty and terribleness, where the image of the dead is both captivating to the senses while operating as what Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari would call an "apparatus of capture."⁹¹ No matter how captivating or generative the beauty of figuring Biko's corpse is, the task is to consider what Saidiya Hartman describes as "the dangers of looking again," even if that looking is to facilitate a practice of listening for the image's phonic substance.⁹² My inquiries in this chapter echo Hartman's rejoinder to Moten when she asks, "Is the 'terrible beauty' that resides in such a scene something akin to remedy as Fred Moten would seem to suggest?"⁹³ The repetition of the image has political efficacy, but it ultimately requires the unavoidable reproduction of violence. My aim is to think about "surplus symbolic value" vis-à-vis the repetition of Biko's corpse as that which keeps certain strands of Black Consciousness politics going. The images of the corpse provide space to question whether the gains outweigh the violence reproduced as a result of this repetition.

South African photographers and photojournalists such as Ian Berry, Peter Magubane, Ernest Cole, and Sam Nzima pictured the unmournable void at the scene of brutality, capturing scenes that have become iconic and were used for global anti-apartheid organizing. These images became iconic and impactful globally because the international community's witnessing of

⁹⁰ Fred Moten (2003), 210.

⁹¹ See: Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), 198.

⁹² Hartman, Saidiya V. 2008. "Venus in Two Acts." *Small Axe: A Caribbean Journal of Criticism* 26: 4.

⁹³ Ibid.

wounded Black people caused them to be affected and to more readily believe what was happening. The popular saying “seeing is believing” is one of the major operations I wrestle with in this chapter, specifically the desire to *see* the evidence of anti-black violence in order to believe it is happening, or for the image to move people to political action. What can be seen in portrayals of the Black dead, or as Leigh Raiford also asks, images of Black people caught just as their breath leaves their physical bodies?⁹⁴ How do aesthetic portrayals of Biko’s corpse in particular inspire political action, and what approaches to politics and the political inform the portrayals themselves? When an image is believable (because the wound can be seen), does it necessarily provide a full narrative account of what transpired in the scene, or does the image obscure memory by remembering only parts of what occurred? Framing, after all, is mostly a practice of silencing/forgetting the excess that hovers outside the frame. Does this forgetting (which is part of the image’s memory work) facilitate a series of critical questions emanating from those who are looking at the image? Performance theorist Peggy Phelan opens her book *Unmarked* with related questions about the relationship between seeing and believing. She posits, “a believable image is the product of a negotiation with an unverifiable real. As a representation of the real the image is always, partially, phantasmatic.”⁹⁵ Thinking with and alongside the aesthetic figuration of Biko’s corpse, I am interested in the negotiation that has to happen in representing the unrepresentable violence whose consequence is Biko’s remains. To echo the question posed in the epigraph by visual studies scholar David Marriott, if “the cultural traffic in *images* of the black man as phobic object – beaten, disfigured, lynched – is trauma enough,”⁹⁶ then what kinds of formal-political negotiations do Nhlengethwa, Stopforth, and

⁹⁴ Raiford (2003).

⁹⁵ Phelan, 1.

⁹⁶ Marriott (2000), 13.

Legae wrestle with to either reproduce this trauma or bypass the impulse to re-present it? After contextualizing the historico-political conditions for picturing Biko's corpse, I discuss three aesthetic strategies; allegory, counter-documentary, and collage as methods of tending to the corpse and enacting particular political claims. These strategies, depending on who is using them and how, either challenge or reinforce problematic relational modes associated with empathy, humanism, and iconicity.

The task, then, is to attend to the libidinal and political economic consequences of such repetitions of the injured iconic corpse. I am referring to their mass circulation in the media and elsewhere for purposes of nation-building, personal economic gain, and the politicization of the public. Their ability to do so depends on how they touch the emotions of those who look at them and mobilize them to act on issues of justice. These images are what Nicole Fleetwood calls "racial icons."⁹⁷ They are often mobilized for purposes of "nation building, ... uplift, ... transform[ing] the despised into the idolized" and "they make us want to do something [because] they impact us with such emotional force."⁹⁸ They picture already iconic figures as well as previously unknown individuals who become icons after the photographed wide circulation of their experiences with anti-Black violence that sometimes leads to death. It is no surprise that Biko's image of Biko's bruised corpse circulated through international print media in 1977. The media contributed to making Biko a racial icon because they elicited an emotional response which inspired political action as well as a response from artists discussed in this chapter. Post-apartheid national building also rested on the circulation of a different set of images of Biko. However, these were more respectable images of Biko as a *living* activist, not images of the

⁹⁷ Fleetwood (2015).

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 2-4.

corpse, and this shift from the corpse aligns with the desired tenets of post-apartheid bliss and unity. This is why Sam Nhlengethwa's collage painting of the corpse stand out because they insisted on the corpse in the 1990s, a period of rainbow nation post-apartheid ideals whose success relied on the circulation of more "positive" images.

Biko's remains are not described as the unmournable void only after he is murdered, but his suspension between here and there, life and death, prior to being murdered is also characterized as the unmournable void. Aesthetic figuration of the corpse by Stopforth, Nhlengethwa, and Legae are confronted by a challenge to account for this suspension through their respective formal registers. Blackness annuls the neat distinction between *corps* and corpse as a distinction between vitality/life and death. For Black people, drawing breath cannot be equated to human subjectivity. Words, gunshots, legislation, (proto-)photographic apparatuses, medical scientific experiments, and murderous human libidinal drives/affects all collated over time to (de)generate blackness and Black *personhood* into something suspended, a subjectivity in limbo⁹⁹—flailing around, below, and between being and non-being. Apartheid conditions that Black people are born into such as pass laws, the decay in Black townships as a result of deliberate neglect, poverty, disease, poor sanitation, daily police brutality, land dispossession, the punishment of resistant voices are only a few empirical examples of ongoing social death that foreclose the possibility of unfettered life. The overturning of some of these issues has not been powerful enough to change the status of blackness, especially what it stands for in the psychic of non-Blacks. Given this violence, I am interested in the reason why contemporary artists repeat and re-stage scenes of Black racial injury.

⁹⁹ Nathaniel Mackey. *Discrepant Engagement: Dissonance, Cross-culturality, and Experimental Writing*. (Cambridge [England]; New York, NY, USA: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

The unmournable void resists exact visual figuration since it is produced by unquantifiable violence that cannot be fully represented. This unrepresentability invites dynamic processes of figuration that do not intend to fully capture the void, and therefore resort to fragmentation, allegory, abstraction, and counter-documentary approaches. The matter and meaning of the *corps(e)* accrue differently for blackness, such that what appears as a living Black person is *a priori* intimately embraced by death. The task then is to determine the extent to which literal figuration and abstract modalities in art and performance engage anti-black violence. Anti-blackness, as Christina Sharpe argues, is the climate, the very air we breathe.¹⁰⁰ This means that antiblack violence is ordinary and structural, and not limited to spectacular racist acts. It is the malleable composition of Black life globally, where blackness is pulled to different directions between life and death, and this pliability is necessary for the world's and civil society's coherence. I am not posing moral questions about a right or wrong, just or unjust way to represent the unmournable void. Instead, I assess deliberate or (un-)intentional contestations and reifications of violence in art and performance modalities by Stopforth, Nhlengethwa, and Legae. That is to say art/performance can both be used to “tend-toward” the Black dead and it can also accomplish the opposite.¹⁰¹ Violence incubates in places least expected. Art and performance too can be those improbable lethal swords slashing sanguinary “telegraphic codes” on Black flesh, tattooing speech acts that unmake life.¹⁰² To posit that death permeates apartheid visual culture is not an effort to titillate with macabre histrionics or to be a professor of doom. Rather, it is to name, seriously and unambiguously, how death lingers in unexpected sites such as quotidian life and diffuses into resistive joyful practices. The *structure* of anti-blackness hovers like an

¹⁰⁰ Sharpe (2016).

¹⁰¹ Copeland (2013).

¹⁰² Spillers, “Mama’s Baby” (2003).

ominous cumulonimbus cloud above what appears to be the protected lightness, respite, or “otherwise” of quotidian Black performance. If that is the case, my intuition is to move in this chapter in a manner that is apprehensive about dichotomous thinking, that way our starting position can be an acknowledgement of the always-already diffusion of spectacular violence into the quotidian,¹⁰³ the entanglement of the substructure and superstructure in the colony,¹⁰⁴ where the prison cell cannot be distinguished with utmost confidence from the hospital ward, the school, or the servant’s quarters.

Figuring the Nonrepresentable

Practices of figuring the corpse have been generally frowned upon as an unethical aestheticization that capitalizes on Black death. Examples of this aestheticization of Black death include the sale of lynching photographs in 20th century in the United States, as well as late white South African photographer Kevin Carter’s Pulitzer Prize winning photograph taken in 1993 of an emaciated Sudanese toddler named Kong Nyong placed on the ground with a vulture lurking behind him.¹⁰⁵ Scholars such as Harvey Young, David Marriott, and Saidiya Hartman have critiqued the former,¹⁰⁶ and Kimberly Juanita Brown has offered a critical analysis of Carter’s image.¹⁰⁷ Leigh Raiford has argued, in the context of U.S. Civil Rights photography, that “the reproduction of black images always has the potential to reify the black body (in pain or in triumph) as commodity.”¹⁰⁸ I heed critiques of the aesthetic commoditization of Black death,

¹⁰³ Hartman (1997).

¹⁰⁴ Fanon (2004)

¹⁰⁵ Bill Keller, “Kevin Carter, a Pulitzer Winner for Sudan Photo, Is Dead at 33,” *The New York Times* (*The New York Times*, July 29, 1994), <https://www.nytimes.com/1994/07/29/world/kevin-carter-a-pulitzer-winner-for-sudan-photo-is-dead-at-33.html>.

¹⁰⁶ See: Harvey Young, (2010); David Marriott, (2000, 2007); Leigh Raiford (2003).

¹⁰⁷ Kimberly Juanita Brown, “Regarding the Pain of the Other: Photography, Famine, and the Transference of Affect” in Elspeth H. Brown & Thy Phu (eds), *Feeling Photography*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014).

¹⁰⁸ Raiford, 9.

while also gauging the lessons of artists who respond to Black non-being by further distancing themselves from aesthetic re-assembly done for purposes of wholeness. This distancing through aesthetic fragmentation, as Copeland argues in a different context (describing artist Lorna Simpson's practice), has the potential to "undo any sense of corporeal affinity we might feel thereby foreclosing the possibility of identification"¹⁰⁹ This means that aesthetic practices can assert a critique without turning to intercorporeal identification.

The distinction between the figural and non-representational is sometimes fixed, and sometimes these approaches do not have a fixed distinction. I attend to the works of Stopforth, Legae, and Nhlengethwa, with the following questions: Which social conditions permit a figural approach to art and performance that presents things as they appear? What is the critical and political purchase of work that, as Copeland explains, "seems to more directly address the unfolding of black life?"¹¹⁰ What is the critical purchase of turning to the nonrepresentational to explain the horrific nonrepresentability of blackness and Black death? Does a nonrepresentationalist approach alone get to explain this horror or can we also turn to more literal address for these purposes? As Copeland has argued, the question of nonrepresentational art ought to be approached with a more critical sensibility that does not stop at celebration or easy jettisoning of figural form.¹¹¹ In other words, the critical posture of nonrepresentational aesthetics should not be taken as an immanent given. Forms that avoid literal figuration are also embroiled in art market capitalist logics and modes of circulation. Abstract representational practices can also obscure or minimize, rather than reveal the nuances of (anti-)blackness. Further, it is important to think about the relationship between blackness and abstraction as not

¹⁰⁹ Copeland (2013), 65.

¹¹⁰ Wilderson (2010).

¹¹¹ See: Huey Copeland, "One-Dimensional Abstraction." *Art Journal* 78, no. 2 (2019): 116-18.

beginning with aesthetic signification. Blackness itself is inextricably linked to abstraction, meaning that abstraction is not a separate add-on aesthetic device. While blackness has no value, as da Silva argues, it *is* value only as a commodity.¹¹²

At the core of my investigation is the question of whether the libidinal structures harnessed by these portrayals are limited to empathy and a desire for justice as artists often state. What drives the readiness to perform and feel (or make others feel) again the psycho-somatic pain endured by those who were brutalized in the historical past? Critiques of injury in South African aesthetics have been made by scholars such as Albie Sachs and Njabulo Ndebele in the 1980s. Intense and severe brutality against Black people occurred in the 1980s while led to the government declaring a state of emergency and the international community imposing sanctions on South Africa. Sachs and Ndebele responded to a Black aesthetic tradition in the 1970s-90s which focused mostly on a response to spectacular violence. The forms of performance and visual art served a function to bring awareness to the violence or portray the violence often in literal ways. Both authors were curious about what would emerge if South African artists moved away from spectacular portrayals of violence and attend to more mundane details of Black life during apartheid.¹¹³ The hope was that this turn would reveal intricate details about Black interiority and it would “free” the artist to delve into making formal aesthetic interventions that did not (overtly) centralize political struggle. Apartheid, however, blurred easy distinctions between spectacular and mundane violence. Spectacular images of tortured and murdered Black

¹¹² Denise Ferreira Da Silva, “1 (life) ÷ 0 (blackness) = ∞ – ∞ or ∞ / ∞: On Matter beyond the Equation of Value.” *e-flux*, no. 79 (2017).

¹¹³ See: Sachs, Albie. “Preparing Ourselves for Freedom: Culture and the ANC Constitutional Guidelines.” *TDR (Cambridge, Mass.)* 35, no. 1 (1991); Ndebele, Njabulo S. “The Rediscovery of the Ordinary: Some New Writings in South Africa.” *Journal of Southern African Studies* 12, no. 2 (1986): 143-57.

people became a banal visual staple. Domestic and private spaces were sites of unspoken intense violence. While exceptional in nature, these scenes of private and publicly performed brutality became ordinary occurrences.¹¹⁴ I agree with Ndebele's and Sachs' suggestions for an opening up of Black art to more conceptual and abstract registers, as well as paying more attention to forgotten corners of "the ordinary." However, my discussion of representations of the injured Black *body* move away from liberal progressivist models that jettison the study of abjection as passé or limiting. The hope in the air during that time drove Sachs to ask, "are we ready for freedom, or do we prefer to be angry victims?"¹¹⁵ This suggested that there was less to be angry about and that "victimhood" was a thing of the past at the dawn of post-apartheid. I am suggesting that injury can be found in both spectacular and forgotten/ordinary corners of Black existence in apartheid South Africa. Acknowledging this fact allows us to look beyond images of spectacular violence to understand injury. Like Biko, I turn to Black diaspora and Pan-African thought when the optimism of the rainbow is not enough, when hope obscures the ongoing violence that remains unaddressed in post-apartheid.

Legae, Nhlengethwa, and Stopforth identify with apartheid imagery neither for nostalgic reasons nor for strictly documentary or pedagogical purposes. Rather than these artworks serving only as mnemonic devices that document and memorialize, or reflections on past violent events, they are driven by an identification with violated Black figures portrayed in iconic apartheid photographs and paintings. Instead of establishing a structure of identification solely with post-apartheid utopian futuristic desires, they repeat the terror relegated to the past. They identify with past images to draw revelatory connections between the past and the present. What can this

¹¹⁴ See: Sindiwe Magona, "Maids and Madams: African Women Suffer in Unexpected Ways from the Malady at the Heart of Work in South Africa." *New Internationalist*, no. 239 (1993): 14-15.

¹¹⁵ Sachs, 187.

identification with past horrors tell us? This identification can also be false, overdetermined, or narcissistic when past images of the injured Black *body* are transposed into the present without fully fleshing out the specificities of the past. After surveying some approaches to picturing the Black corpse in iconic apartheid imagery, the chapter turns to an expanded discussion of anti-apartheid political activist Steve Biko's corpse in contemporary art. I then closely examine select artworks by Ezrom Legae, Paul Stopforth, and Sam Nhlengethwa that portrayed Biko's corpse. I choose these works because of their emblematic status in representing the corpse. Art historians such as Shannon Hill and John Peffer have conducted comprehensive work on these artists.¹¹⁶ I supplement their more historical analyses with close reading of artworks, and by posing a variety of questions informed by an engagement with unflinching Black studies scholarship. I build on analytical concepts developed by visual studies scholars and art historians such as Huey Copeland, Leigh Raiford, Nicole Fleetwood, Athi Joja, and David Marriott. These questions of the visual spectacle of death are also central to Black performance theory. Theorists of Black performance such as Frank Wilderson, Uri McMillan, Fred Moten, Rizvana Bradley, Harvey Young, Sampada Aranke, and Tavia Nyong'o have expanded the reach of a performance studies analysis by studying non-theatrical Black performances, particularly those pertaining to the visual arts and revolutionary politics. They expand the range of questions that can be asked about the visual, asserting alternative approaches to studying the image. In this chapter, I aim to contribute to that body of scholarship.

¹¹⁶ See: Hill (2007). Also see: Peffer (2009)

The Black Corpse in Apartheid Visual Culture

Colonial era depictions of Africans participate in a logic of othering deployed to make Africans appear as a different species.¹¹⁷ These ways of seeing and picturing the African as frozen in their primitive state are tied to colonial ontoepistememes such as ethnology, botany, travel literature, and eugenics. Colonial visual representation ensured the selective preservation of certain indigenous aesthetics that were beneficial to the colonist, while suppressing those that had a sensibility of dissent. Painting and the development of photography produced race as a “visible fact.”¹¹⁸ Further, as Azoulay argues in *Potential History*, Early Modern racialized and imperial logics necessitated the development of photographic technologies as a way to prove a flawed logic of othering that had been festering in Europe at least since the 1500s.¹¹⁹ Once those technologies of capture got into the hands of colonized subjects, they were no longer used strictly for those reasons. Scholars of photography such as Harvey Young, Tina Campt, and Krista Thompson have demonstrated how Black subjects repurposed the photographic apparatus to challenge notions of primitivism, stillness, the gaze, and surface.

Apartheid visual culture is characterized by depictions of injured Black corpses, captured at the moment of violation or laying lifelessly on the street. The visual field of apartheid is flooded with images of protests, police dogs attacking Black people, Slegs Blankes (Whites

¹¹⁷ In the summer of 2019, I co-curated an exhibition for the Dance Studies Association annual meeting. The exhibition included travel guides, performance programs, and other ephemera portraying the African body. I was struck by travel guides from the 1940s-1990s attracting European and American tourists to African countries such as Lesotho, Zimbabwe, Malawi, Kenya, and others. These books and catalogues showcased animals, flora, fauna, and African people (often naked and dancing or engaged in colorful art and craftwork). What intrigued me was how African people were curated into these travel catalogues, as just another natural attraction that tourists could consume after appreciating a trip to the game reserve.

¹¹⁸ Coco Fusco, “Racial Times, Racial Marks, Racial Metaphors” (New York: Harry N. Abrams 2003) quoted in Leigh Raiford, *Imprisoned in a Luminous Glare* (2013), 12.

¹¹⁹ See: Ariella Aisha Azoulay, *Potential History, Unlearning Imperialism*. (New York: Verso, 2019).

Only) signs in public places, funerals, the Sharpeville massacre, the 1976 Soweto student protests, and protesters being hosed down with water cannons. Other banal images by artists such as Santu Mofokeng, Omar Badsha, and Ernest Cole make their way into the archive, and these portray everyday life of migrant workers in the mines, church gatherings, and social gatherings in Black townships such as Soweto and Sophiatown. The international community came to know of these apartheid brutalities partly through these images. South African photographer Ernest Cole's 1967 silver gelatin photograph titled *During group examination, the nude men are herded through a string of doctors' offices* (fig.1.1) is one example of an image that repeats in work by contemporary artists that include Themba Mbuli's *Dark Cell* (fig.1.2 & fig. 1.3), Sam Nhlengethwa's *Humiliation* (fig.1.4), Hank Willis Thomas' *Raise Up* (fig. 1.5), Tony Miyambo and Phala Ookeditse Phala's *Kafka's Ape* (fig. 1.6), Nandipha Mntambo's *Beginning of Empire* (fig.1. 7), Mohau Modisakeng's *iButho* (fig. 1.8). And Cole's photograph has traveled across time, space, and artistic genres. It is an emblematic example of the ceaseless repetition of iconic imagery associated with apartheid Black suffering. Cole's photograph portrays migrant mineworkers in South Africa in the 1960s that experienced invasive medical examinations. Thirteen adult men stand in a horizontal line, facing a black wall. They are all naked, except one on the left who wears a pair of black trousers. They face a black wall and the camera catches their backs. Their arms are raised in a uniform position, open for surveillance and ready to be examined. On the floor lies sheets of white paper that are placed behind each man's feet.

Achille Mbembe, describes the unlivable conditions and labor practices in colonial and (pre-)apartheid-era Johannesburg portrayed in Cole's photograph as such:

The main site of this inscription was the black body itself. It could be searched every day at the end of the shift in the mines. It could be stripped naked, required to jump over bars.

Hair, nose, mouth, ears, or rectum could be scrutinized with meticulous care. Floggings with a *sjambok* (leather whip) or tent rope, or striking with fists, were the rule.¹²⁰

Mbembe describes apartheid surveillance and racial hierarchies as a rule governing Black *life* rather than targeting only certain Blacks who transgressed the law. Black townships and Bantustans (rural reservations) were death zones where the wasting of black life was perpetrated by the settler population to build the economy and also enhance the integrity of their white subjectivity. Hilda Bernstein, writing during the period of Biko's murder, describes apartheid violence as naked and absolute, arguing that "there is not, nor can there ever be, a 'non-violent' situation in today's South Africa. The laws themselves are violent laws... In their dealing with blacks the police are not bound by Christian ethics but by the precepts of power."¹²¹ The government created conditions where Black men from Bantustans, after being dispossessed of land and livestock, were left with the option to work in the mines to support their families. Women also had to leave their families to work as domestic servants or "kitchen girls" in white suburban households to provide for their families. This was not an easy flow from one place to another due to apartheid's spatial regulations and pass laws. Black people required an official pass called the *doppass* (dumb pass) to gain restricted mobility.¹²²

The artists mentioned above have meditated on the shame and injustice associated with the men photographed by Cole. Their return to and re-imagining of the image attempt to tend to those consigned to domination and unceasing vulnerability. Themba Mbuli's *Dark Cell* (2014) draws inspiration from Ernest Cole's photograph to reveal apartheid policing practices as well as

¹²⁰ Mbembe (2014), 374.

¹²¹ Bernstein, 15.

¹²² Performance studies scholar Catherine Cole discusses the *doppass*' performative acts, how it determined where Blacks could live, work, and travel. Cole asserts that the *doppass* criminalized large portions of the population as "out of order" books meant more opportunities for arrest See: Cole, Catherine. In *Performing South Africa's Truth Commission* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), xi.

mental imprisonment in the present. Mbuli identifies with the men in Cole's photograph by simulating their nudity in performance and this makes him oscillate between time periods without conflating them. Hank Willis Thomas's *Raise Up* simulates certain properties of Cole's photograph. The bronze is soldered to reproduce the top part of Cole's image, showing only the heads and raised arms. Thomas abstracts the image by highlighting the hands. This places Cole's photograph within a Black Diasporic genealogy of art and protest, referencing the message of "hands up, don't shoot." Dramatizing apartheid as such can foreground the suffering of Black men at the expense of the suffering of Black women and children. This is why Nandipha Mntambo references Cole's photography in *Beginning of Empire* (2007) with cowhide sculptures shaped to represent the feminine form.

The didactic social justice impulse and anti-apartheid stance taken by artists discussed in this chapter reveal a relationship between evidence and fabrication. The works of Stopforth, Legae, and Nhlengethwa are aesthetic-political alternatives to the law aimed at proving that Biko's death was not an accident but calculated murder. This posture is what those who fight injustice resort to when evidence has been either omitted or willfully suppressed by the state. The majority of visual representation that utilizes Biko's corpse endeavor to provide evidence intended to discredit the evidence provided by the state claiming that Biko died of a hunger strike. The aesthetic measures in discussed here piece together/fabricate evidence of injury to undermine the law as well as the notion that all evidence of Black suffering can be sufficiently visibilized. The notion of evidence for Black people during apartheid is precarious.

Nhlengethwa, Legae, and Stopforth challenge another form of perverse creative speculation engineered by the apartheid government, which is the invention of "official" documents for purposes of absolving themselves for murdering Biko. Apartheid officials maintained white

power by staging fraudulent evidence to clean up murderous acts. During the inquest to probe the conditions for Biko's murder, the state went as far as staging an event of Biko's death with a black male-bodied actor (who is unnamed) simulating Biko's dead position. This evidence was submitted during the inquest among a collection that depicted the security police's offices in the Sanlam Building.¹²³ The paradox of the apartheid legal system is that it allotted much gravitas to evidence/the alibi as a precondition for arriving at a final verdict, while also discrediting its own legitimacy by accepting the false evidence of their concoction. Apartheid jurisprudence was so pliantly designed that the actors working within and protected by that legal system could transgress and nullify it at their convenience to further their ambitions. Appealing to that jurisprudence, as my discussion of Biko's inquest shows, oftentimes became futile. Consequently, aesthetic speculation that performed deliberate unreliability became the last resort for (Black) artists. They attempted, through aesthetic registers, to retroactively insert justice where it was previously not available.

Black Consciousness and “the limits of consciousness itself”

The first aim of Black Consciousness was to conquer feelings of Black inferiority, to facilitate Black pride.¹²⁴ Some of the main interventions of Black Consciousness include a critique of liberalism, humanism, and ethno-nationalism. Biko insisted, “We are oppressed, not as individuals, not as Zulus, Xhosas, Vendas, Indians. We are oppressed because we are Black. We must unite that very concept to unite ourselves and to respond as a cohesive group”¹²⁵ Biko's

¹²³ Bucher, 71.

¹²⁴ Bernstein, 13.

¹²⁵ Black consciousness, in that sense, is about destabilizing the attachment to nation. “We are oppressed because we are black” ties injury to blackness as a category, not reducible to individual embodied experience, and not reducible to group belonging. Apartheid police did not stop and interview people to find out if they were Xhosa, Yoruba, or Zulu. The attack was on blackness itself.

inclusion of Indians in the fold was strategic for political struggle and the dismantling of apartheid, a common nemesis. Future scholarship would be tasked with unraveling Indian and other South Asian anti-blackness which operates beyond ethno-nationalism. The unity proposed by Biko stretched beyond ethnic-national lines to consider global Black struggle. BCM grasped national consciousness while also working beyond the limits of Nation. The movement took seriously the tactics and philosophies of other liberation struggles in South Africa, African anti-colonial struggles, and the Black Arts/Power movements in the U.S. This transfer of knowledge happened in aesthetics, literature, critical thought, religio-spiritual practice, and revolutionary political organizing. Even as “postcolonial” nations were forming, Blacks without citizenship had to simultaneously dispose of, and rely on, the destruction of the Nation for liberation struggles to emerge.¹²⁶ Black Consciousness drew upon the creative, revolutionary, and theoretical interventions of individuals and social movements such as Aimé Césaire, Leopold Senghor, Angela Davis, Robert Sobukwe, Winnie Madikizela Mandela, Frederick Douglass, Harriet Tubman, Touissant L’Ouverture, W.E.B. Du Bois, Kwame Nkrumah, Frantz Fanon, the Black Liberation Army, Umkhonto weSizwe, George Jackson, Miriam Makeba, Richard Wright,

¹²⁶ Contrary to the international relations metanarrative, there are no failed Black states or nations, only violently repressed and dispossessed ones. Black Nationalism is not hegemonic White Nationalism in black drag. The concepts of Nation and citizen themselves fail Blacks. The failure of Black Nationalism is not reducible to a Black intramural implosion. White hands ventriloquize and orchestrate that failure in concert with *Black skins, white masks*. BCM adherents also read “Charles Hamilton’s *Black Power and the Politics Of Liberation in America* (1967); Elderidge Cleaver’s *Soul on Ice* (1968); George Jackson’s *Soledad Brother* (1970) and *Blood in my Eye* (1971); Malcolm X’s *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (1965); Angela Davis’ *If They Come in the Morning: Voices of Resistance* (1971); James Cone’s *Black Theology and Black Power* (1969), and so on.” Ntwasa announced that UCM was organizing a national seminar on Black Theology, to be held outside Johannesburg in March 1971. The UCM leaders had hoped to invite Cone to participate in the national seminar, but they were realistic, the government was unlikely to give him a visa, and the organization lacked the resources to get him to South Africa in any case. Instead, Ntwasa asked Cone to send a taped speech. Cone agreed, and in early March, a group of church congregants and laypeople gathered in Roodeport to listen to the Black American theologian’s tape and debated its meaning for South Africa. See: Daniel R Magaziner, *The Law and the Prophets: Black Consciousness in South Africa, 1968-1977* (Athens: Johannesburg: Ohio University Press; Jacana, 2010), 102.

Patrice Lumumba, Thomas Sankara, Stokely Carmichael (aka Kwame Ture). The philosophical approach for Black Consciousness was existential phenomenology (Sartre, Hegel, Kierkegaard) combined with Africana philosophy to ask ontological and existential questions.. Barney Pitsoa Motsepe “recalls how he and his black Consciousness comrades benefitted from Hegel’s idea of consciousness.”¹²⁷

Africana existential philosopher Mabogo More’s intervention in *Biko: Philosophy, Identity, and Liberation* highlights the philosophical aspects of BCM, adding to previous scholarship that emphasizes mostly the activist characteristics of BCM. More discusses BCM as a “philosophy that went beyond philosophy itself... a politico-philosophical activism” that did not separate theory and practice.¹²⁸ It operated outside of hierarchical distinctions between “pure” thought and the arts/activism. More also cautions against the narrowing down of the BCM performative “Black is Beautiful” to “a narrow philosophy of aesthetics.”¹²⁹ BCM associated student groups such as SASO occasionally organized cultural events, one of them themed “Into the Heart of Negritude.” He adds that “jazz, poetry and drama were a regular feature presented by a SASO-affiliated group called TECON.”¹³⁰ These events also included readings and discussions on the poetry and works of Negritude authors such as Césaire, Senghor,

¹²⁷ Mabogo Samuel More, *Biko: Philosophy, Identity and Liberation*. (Cape Town: HSRC Press, 2017), 40.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, ix.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 1. Further, the issues of *Drum Magazine* from 1977 that published an image of Biko’s corpse on the cover had many contradictions. I closely studied all the magazines at the Herskovits Library collection from 1977. Most advertisements are about skin bleaching and skin lightening creams. The work of Black Consciousness did not take place at a context where all Black took it up. Skin lightening companies with their subliminal white supremacist messaging were producing revenue through a leading Black magazine of all time in South Africa. The BCM message of “Black is Beautiful” contested with the ubiquity of seemingly innocent advertisements tying civilization and success to lighter skin. See: “Biko: A Special Report in Words and Pictures,” *Drum Magazine*, November 1997, 20-33.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 25.

David Diop and Cheik Anta Diop as well as South Africans such as Oswald Mtshali, Siphosiphiso Sepamla, Mafika Gwala, Lefifi Tladi, Essop Patel, and others.

With Black public gathering restricted by law, the resort to aesthetics as a deterrent to carry out other underground acts is plausible. Even when Biko was president, BCM recognized Black literature, performance, and the visual arts as a space where critical Black thought took place.¹³¹ BCM also had multiple theater groups in townships, where performance gatherings were a form of working out problems of aesthetic form and content as well as a mode of political education. Theater performances served as a way to gather for political organizing. These community theater groups were relatively less surveilled as the government regarded Black theater as a trivial and unthreatening form of entertainment, and this meant that political organizing could take place under the guise of gathering for entertainment. The politically charged anti-apartheid plays were not written down. This meant that the government could not censor them because they did not exist in print. There were no authors to place in detention because there were no scripts which would serve as evidence of anti-government propaganda literature. BCM as a movement and political philosophy of Black liberation, had little luxury to debate vertical hierarchies of value between theory, activism, and aesthetics in the midst of war. Rather than “cathedralizing a [single] tactic,”¹³² they sharpened all these already entangled tools to follow an astute revolutionary trajectory. While their deployment of political theory and (Africana) existential philosophy was more “pragmatic” (as Wilderson has commented) and to a

¹³¹ This was the age when it was widely acceptable to participate in *agit prop*, guerilla art, and “art as a weapon of struggle,” sometimes related to Communist aesthetic theory and practice. See: Barney N. Pityana, *Bounds of Possibility: The Legacy of Steve Biko & Black Consciousness*. (Cape Town: London; Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: D. Philip; Zed, 1991).

¹³² See: Frank, Wilderson, and Jaye Austin Williams. “Staging (Within) Violence: A Conversation with Frank Wilderson and Jaye Austin Williams.” *Rhizomes: Cultural Studies in Emerging Knowledge*, no. 29 (2016): 1.

certain extent programmatic, Black aesthetic interventions were also taken as a form of theorizing that catered to different types of “literacy” during a time when the apartheid government infantilized the Black population with Bantu Education.¹³³

Like most Black liberation movements, BCM is further sharpened by Black feminist contributions and critiques that direct our attention to some of the contradictions around gender within the political philosophy and its practice. Feminist critics such as Pumla Gqola, Desiré Lewis, Kimberley Yates, and Mamphela Ramphela discuss BCM in ways that shift away from heroic male leaders and they expose the unequal treatment of Black women within the movement. These feminist critiques draw attention to how Black men’s “borrowed institutionality” (aspirations of patriarchy) hindered and contradicted some of the powerful claims of the movement about quality.¹³⁴ Women had to play roles related to caretaking and passing on heritage to children. Some women, as BCM founding member of BCM Thenjiwe Mtintso states, were active participants in political discourse and practice. They were considered “honorary men.”¹³⁵ She posits that as a Black woman, “they do want you to be political, to be active, to be everything, but they still need a complement of women who are subservient,”¹³⁶ Ramphela comments on popular BCM slogans such as “Black man you’re on your own!” also unintentionally made the suffering of Black women unimaginable. She notes how the language didn’t have space for women partly because it was a language borrowed from English, and the

¹³³ For a critical discussion of BCM’s limitations which came as a result of its pragmatic utilization of theory, see: Wilderson, Frank B. “Biko and the Problematic of Presence.” In Andile Mngxitama, Amanda Alexander, and Nigel C. Gibson. *Biko Lives!: Contesting the Legacies of Steve Biko*. 1st ed. Contemporary. In “Towards the Armed Struggle”. The problem facing students was the reading material on the national liberation movements was scanty or unavailable because of censorship See: Welile Nhlapo in Pityana et al. (1991), 177.

¹³⁴ See: Wilderson (2010), 103. As he states in the footnote, the term “borrowed institutionality” is derived from a private conversation with Jared Sexton in November 22, 2007.

¹³⁵ Ramphela quoted in Gqola (2001).

¹³⁶ Mtintso interviewed by Wilson quoted in Gqola (2001), 60.

English language reflects English culture's codes and conventions that position women in lesser social and political standing.

I. Suspended Grief

After Biko was murdered, his friend Donald Woods accompanied by Biko's wife Ntsiki Biko, photographed Biko's injuries in the morgue in an attempt to expose and document police abuse. Woods was a white South African freedom fighter who opposed apartheid and was later forced to flee the country after exposing the images of Biko's corpse. According to Hilda Bernstein, "the postmortem had been done almost immediately . . . and preliminary reports began to appear in the press concerning findings of brain damage, a finding supported by the appearance of Biko's head at the funeral parlor, where observers noted an injury to the forehead"¹³⁷ These forms of looking by the public and the media emerged out of necessity and desperation to disprove the state's official statement. Biko's death could have been another statistic, another forgotten number out of 45 detainees such as SASO leader O.R. Abram Tiro that were murdered before him.¹³⁸ The news of his death reached the international community through his white acquaintances such as Woods and the white press. The government at the time pulled all the stops to prevent mourners from attending the funeral. Police carrying FN rifles and machine guns manned roadblocks to prevent thousands of mourners who travelled from different parts of the country to attend the funeral. While this prohibition was instituted primarily to manage Black gathering for fear of a vengeful riot or counterattack, the prohibition also foreclosed a possibility for something akin to collective grieving.

¹³⁷ Bernstein, 26.

¹³⁸ Bernstein, 25.

What does it mean to turn a colonized and dominated people away from mourning the fallen among them, and how does that inability to mourn live on in the Black political unconscious as unresolved loss, when that loss cannot register as loss? Black people have to *live* with the *a priori* loss of the capacity to make claims about their loss as loss, since theirs is a condition of “never having had.”¹³⁹ In Freudian psychoanalysis, if the injury is not sufficiently “abreacted”¹⁴⁰ due to social conditions such as the prohibition to grieve and the interminable status of injury, the result is a melancholic clinging. If sufficient abreaction is the goal, where is Black people’s last resort for something akin to a wake?¹⁴¹ Abreaction, for Freud, is supposed to prevent the affect tethered to the memory of injury from becoming pathogenic. Voluntary and involuntary reflexes which are suppressed and/or repudiated remain in the *body* and form part of the memory which cannot be recollected in usual ways. These reflexes may show up indirectly in speech or the language of aesthetics. For Freud, “if the reaction [to injury] is suppressed the affect remains attached to the memory.”¹⁴² The injury Freud discusses is not analogous to that which constitutes the *unmournable void*. It is about death as an *event* that disrupts the psychic integrity of Freud’s presumably white analysand. Injury is not a constitutive element of Freud’s subject, as in the case of the Black. For Black people, injury is less a disruption of flow than a status of *being*, created by Others for over 500 centuries through violence.

¹³⁹ Marriott (2007), xxi

¹⁴⁰ Sigmund Freud, “On Hysterical Mechanisms,” in *Sigmund Freud: Collected Papers Vol. 1*. trans. Joan Riviere. (New York: Basic Books, 1959), 30. Also see Laplanche, for his explanation of abreaction as an “emotional discharge whereby the subject liberates himself from the affect* attached to the memory of a traumatic event in such a way that this affect is not able to become (or to remain) pathogenic.” Jean Laplanche and J.-B. Pontalis. *The Language of Psycho-analysis*. (The International Psycho-analytical Library, No. 94. London: Hogarth Press, 1973), 14.

¹⁴¹ Sharpe (2016).

¹⁴² Freud (1959), 30.

In *Racial Melancholia*, Anne Cheng discusses the difficulty to articulate racial grief into social claims.¹⁴³ She refers to this as “melancholic suspension” because it bypasses the closure that comes with interment.¹⁴⁴ Rather than understanding the impossibility for mourning and turn to melancholia as pathogen like Freud, Cheng argues that melancholic suspension may be “a more fruitful and perhaps more accurate description for the status of the racial other in this system of consumption and denial.”¹⁴⁵ This means that Cheng is interested in what else is available to the figure whose life is inextricable from ongoing racial violence besides the productive work of mourning that Freud describes. The analytic frame for making sense of this status is “racial melancholia,” defined as the racialized subject’s “internalization of discipline and rejection— *and* the installation of a scripted context of perception.”¹⁴⁶ I turn to the psychoanalytic because as Cheng argues, it opens up questions that attend to the psychic, specifically “the intangible wounds that form the fissures underneath visible phenomena.”¹⁴⁷ Psychoanalysis may allow for an analysis of “intangible wounds” hidden beneath visible wounds whose evidentiary nature makes possible processes of grievance. The analytic of racial melancholia does not have healing and catharsis as its end goals. This analysis takes place “*in addition to*, not in the place of, the work of advocacy.”¹⁴⁸ Advocacy attempts to make social claims or grievances through language based on injury that can be visually evidenced. Understanding Black interminable loss, as Christina Sharpe calls it, would involve tending to

¹⁴³ Anne Anlin Cheng, *The Melancholy of Race*. (Race and American Culture. Oxford [England] New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 1.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 14.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 17.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, x.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

injury that is ongoing, felt, but not visualizable or lends itself neatly into transformation as grievance.¹⁴⁹

The foreclosure of mourning on the day of Biko's (and others') funeral is interminable because it extends to the post-TRC moment in the mid-1990s. Post-apartheid South Africa facilitated closure with the goal of participation in global capitalist economics and liberal democracy, at the cost of redressing Black economic and psychic reparation, or their impossibility. I am not suggesting that Black mourners who attempted attending Biko's funeral would've reached psychic reprieve or a desired final stage of Freudian mourning and melancholia at the funeral. The prohibition to mourn was not similar to Creon denying Polynices the right to proper burial in Sophocles' *Antigone*.¹⁵⁰ Biko's funeral most likely would not have brought forward closure. It would've failed a rational movement trajectory that fulfills the Freudian equation. The point I am making is that by turning Black mourners away, their failure to mourn was not allowed to become evident.

Freud wrote about the role of aesthetics in expediting the work of mourning by "transforming... fantasies into artistic creation instead of symptoms."¹⁵¹ Most of the artwork created in the midst of this ongoing terror demonstrates the struggle to turn impossible mourning into impactful political grievance. These works do not reveal the process or finish line of mourning (even if that is what they intend), but they reveal the impossibility of mourning the

¹⁴⁹ Sharpe (2016)

¹⁵⁰ As I elaborate in chapter 2, the idea of "proper burial" for the Black reaches a cul-de-sac. "Proper burial" was deployed for the burial of Sara Baartman's remains in South Africa, and in more recent years, Black American contemporary artist Carrie Mae Weems adapted *Antigone* operating under the same assumptive logic of "proper burial" as a suitable grammar for explaining how mourning Black death is forbidden or has to take place in universalized ways that repress the prohibition. See: Carrie Mae Weems: "Past Tense: Onassis Festival 2016 Antigone Now," *YouTube*: July 2017.

https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=Carrie+Mae+Weems+adapted+Antigone+

¹⁵¹ Brandon Shaw, "Phantom Limbs and the Weight of Grief in Sasha Waltz's *NoBody*." *Theatre Journal* 67, no. 1 (2015): 21-42, 31.

unmournable void. Artworks generally do not have a direct impact to the kind of structural change needed for addressing apartheid's material dispossession. Artworks quietly indict, scandalize, or embarrass those in power, commemorate and deify, as well as document in indirect ways those ideas which are prohibited when addressed in regular speech or the language of public protest. If Cheng's concept of racial melancholia has explanatory power for the Black, then artworks that have melancholic affects (such as sadness and "the blues") attached to them are not merely cultural expressions revealing the desire or refusal to mourn/move-beyond death by holding on to pathological melancholia. Instead, these artworks signal the impossibility of blackness to be afforded the dilemma of mourning versus melancholia. That is to say, in their attempt to mourn inarticulable loss, blackness' "loss of loss" itself is revealed.¹⁵²

The apartheid government perhaps knew that the funeral would be a site where Black grief is transformed into Black rage, an upheaval that is not premeditated or planned like a parade. In a book titled *Black Rage*, Black psychiatrists William Grier and Price Cobbs venerate Black people's rage as part of the work required to tend to the psychic health of those whose lives are defined by endless grief. They posit, "it is the transformation of this *quantum* grief into aggression of which we now speak... [that] energy will be released in the form of rage- black rage, apocalyptic and final."¹⁵³ They support the articulation of this rage in ways that are not considered rational. This discussion of Black rage might offer a way to understand how the performance most feared by the apartheid government was not the African indigenous and Christian burial rites. Biko's funeral, if the attendees shared a certain sensibility, might have generated a spontaneous and justified performance unimaginable from where we sit: total

¹⁵² Wilderson (2020), 16.

¹⁵³ William H. Grier, and Price M. Cobbs, *Black Rage*. (New York: Basic Books, 1968), 210.

revolutionary upheaval. Below I provide analyses of selected works by Ezrom Legae, Paul Stopforth, and Sam Nhlengethwa to unpack how their formal and political concerns attend to the questions I have posed in the first part of this chapter, and how they consider the tenets of BCM in picturing the unmournable void.

II. Allegory in Ezrom Legae's Biko Drawings

‘The Negro is an animal. The Negro is ugly’
— Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*.¹⁵⁴

Their lack is based on dominant constructions of inferiority that make what whites imagine as their penile surplus a deficiency— bestiality.

— Claudia Tate, “Freud and his ‘Negro.’”¹⁵⁵

The intensification of detentions and murders in the 1970s led to a proliferation of artistic responses that were forced to refrain from literal figuration of the corpse, since any overt criticism of the state led to detention and harassment. The increased turn to abstraction rendered the work ambiguous and not fully intelligible, thus not fully susceptible to immediate regulation. Artists such as Dumile Feni, Sydney Khumalo, and Ezrom Legae turned to animal-related allegory in drawing, painting, and sculpture as an attempt to explain this horror. Allegory, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary (OED)* is “the use of symbols in a story, picture, etc., to convey a hidden or ulterior meaning, typically a moral or political one; symbolic representation.”¹⁵⁶ Allegory in Legae’s work is applied in the form of pictures that conceal meaning by conjuring animal figuration. He presents the image’s political or moral aims in indirect or indeterminate ways. Allegory can be related to folklore, and South African indigenous

¹⁵⁴ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin White Masks* (2008/1952), 11.

¹⁵⁵ Claudia Tate, “Freud and His ‘Negro’: Psychoanalysis as Ally and Enemy of African American Studies” *Journal for the Psychoanalysis of Culture and Society* 1.1, (1996), 60.

¹⁵⁶ “Allegory.” *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2020.

folklore centers around animals portrayed either as themselves or personified to symbolize humans or illustrate human traits. Legae leans into this tradition by incorporating indigenous mythology, particularly its method of revealing through concealment. In the 1970s, he created two drawings directly related to Biko's death which demonstrate what it means for Black people/artists to suffer within a context where articulating that suffering is dangerous, or only possible through an abstract visual language that requires the artist to say as if they are saying something else. The *Chicken Series* (fig.1. 9) was created in 1978, a few months after the state police murdered Biko. *The Death of Steve Biko* (fig. 1.10) was created in 1983. That timeline is not the only feature that distinguishes these artworks, but the formal choices also mark that distinction. This reveals something about what could be said, and how, in the immediate wake of Biko's death.

Ezrom Kgobokanyo Sebata Legae was born in 1938 and grew up in Soweto. He took classes at Jubilee Art Center and received artistic guidance from Sydney Khumalo and Cecil Skotness in 1962. He is known for his drawings and sculptures that not only intervened on modern art but did so with profound attention to how regimes of domination created a Black subject who oscillated between human and animal, life and death, as well as person and object. Legae created drawings and bronze sculptures such as *The Dying Beast* series (1970) [figs 1.11], *Biko Behind Bars* (1979) [fig.1.12], *The Prisoner* (1968), and *Freedom is Dead* (1972). In the late 1970s, his focus was on drawing, and his pencil and conté drawings known as the *Chicken Series* were created around that period.¹⁵⁷ The detentions and acts of torture perpetrated on political insurgents played a role in the creation of these drawings. For example, Legae's

¹⁵⁷ Elizabeth Rankin, "Ezrom Legae" in Burroughs, Elizabeth, and Nel, Karel. *Re/discovery and Memory: The Works of Kumalo, Legae, Nitegeka & Villa*. (Cape Town, South Africa: Norval Foundation, 2018), 174.

Dedicated to Our Friend M. Pheto was created as a result of the security police interrogating and torturing artistic figure Molefe Pheto at John Vorster Square Police Headquarters in 1975. Legae was affected by this murder and he drew *Dedicated to Our Friend M. Pheto* in a manner that portrays a figure lying on his back on a surface with a slightly contorted physique. The *Chicken Series* was created during a period where the political artist was not spared violence if they were believed to be participating in anti-government practice, artistic or otherwise. When the *Chicken Series* showed at The Goodman Gallery, the security branch visited the exhibit. While the drawings were Legae's quiet defiance in the wake of Biko's death, the security branch failed to recognize the components of defiance in the work.¹⁵⁸ The choice of abstract representation proved successful in this instance because of the art object's incomprehensibility to the state. The object got away from state suppression because it was illegible or communicated indirectly.

If some of these representations of the corpse are aimed at soliciting empathy from the viewer, or assume empathetic identification between the artist and the figured corpse, how does human recognition support or go against a revelatory Black Consciousness politic? It is often taken as a moral-ethical given that for Black people who have been denied humanity for so long, that their aesthetic, political, and theoretical endeavors ought to recuperate humanism. Projects that labor toward a "new humanism", an "otherwise humanism", or a "blackened humanism" still hold on to the concept of humanism, albeit re-modelled. Humanism or human recognition should cause those who are African derived to pause. In *Becoming Human*, Zakiyyah Jackson reminds us that "humanization is not an antidote to slavery's violence; rather, slavery is a technology for producing a *kind* of human... Humanism and captivity go hand in hand."¹⁵⁹ If

¹⁵⁸ Karel Nel and Elizabeth Burroughs: "Ezrom Legae: Political Edge" in Burroughs, Elizabeth, and Nel, Karel (2018), 189.

¹⁵⁹ Jackson, (2016).

humanism and captivity are companions or coterminous, a turn to humanization in art, academic discourse, and activism is not necessarily a turn away from captivity. Ezrom Legae's drawings about Biko stage this quagmire, questioning the efforts of relying on human/animal figuration for human recognition. This is why it is necessary to unpack what emerges when Black operation delinks completely from humanism and holds on to flesh—one of the primal sites of Black undoing—as a posture and site of critical inquiry. Flesh is irrecoverable Black banishment rather than a universalizable identity category of discrimination. If we cannot recover or transcend flesh, what set of questions can we glean from leaning towards it, and what knowledge lies in the basement of our exile? Leaning towards and learning from flesh, rather than airbrushed humanism, makes way for Black thought and/as praxis to perform, without reservations, the potential of what Hortense Spillers might call its “cryptic signature.”¹⁶⁰ Sensing through flesh (rather than through flight to universal humanism), as Spillers suggests, “extend[s] the realm of possibility for what might be known,” permitting an unflinching cultural performance that unravels the “nothing we don't know.”¹⁶¹

Zakiyyah Jackson observes *Chicken Series* as a performance that is attendant to indigenous African notions of spirit which “bypass the problem of representationalism and its historical reification of the traumatized black body . . . challenging apartheid state terror [through] opacity.”¹⁶² Drawing partly from Édouard Glissant's work on opacity, she further notes that “*what was opaque to the state was immediately identifiable to South Africans like himself.*”¹⁶³ While Jackson's statement is accurate, aesthetic opacity associated with African

¹⁶⁰ Spillers, “All the Things You Can Be,” (2003), 426.

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

¹⁶² Jackson (2020), 33.

¹⁶³ Ibid.,32. [italics in original text]

indigenous allegory does not escape plasticized appropriation. The same opacity can be misused for anti-black imperialist purposes that capitalize on and reproduce long-existing colonial ontoepistememes about the African as a primitive mystery. Jackson rightly directs attention to opacity's efficacy for the African, and I am supplementing her conclusions with the observation that African opacity also contributes to the fortification of white subjectivity. Colonial exhibitions capitalized on the fungible status of this opacity, its ability to mean a number of different things that stood in contradistinction to one another. African opacity's elastic value meant that it could be curated for European gain. This opacity is what they failed or refused to understand about the African and resorted to presenting Africans as fascinating figures of alterity or ethnographic mysticism. Whiteness and white supremacy sometimes thrive through an overemphasis of the "other's" opacity, as this buttresses the white subject as a Transparent "I", which Denise Ferreira da Silva describes as "Man, the subject, the ontological figure consolidated in post-Enlightenment European thought."¹⁶⁴ The Transparent "I" is woven as rational and self-determined,¹⁶⁵ while the Black and the Black's knowledge production are dismissed as simultaneous opacity and knowable paganistic simplicity. As philosopher of African aesthetics Nkiru Nzegwu has noted, African aesthetic objects that are purported to contain this opacity are susceptible to misuse because they "'chant,' as they have been orchestrated to sing, that any interpretation is permissible, and accessible because cultural representation is never an objective presentation of facts."¹⁶⁶ Nzegwu is arguing that African

¹⁶⁴ Denise Ferreira Da Silva, *Toward a Global Idea of Race*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), xvi.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, xiii

¹⁶⁶ This is from Nzegwu's review of an exhibition curated by Mary Nooter titled *Secrecy: African Art that Conceals and Reveals* (1993), Nkiru Nzegwu, "Museum Exhibit and Photographic Book Reviews--Secrecy: African Art That Conceals and Reveals." *American Anthropologist* 96, no. 1 (1994): 229.

unknowability and illegibility are also paradoxically revered in white supremacist thought and curatorial practice. African opacity itself can be used for white and non-Black social/cultural capital. The re-production of the African as an unknowable other is marketable, since mystery/mysticism confuses as much as it entices, reinforcing well-established designations of the African and their knowledge as other. The opacity of African indigenous thought/mythology in Legae's drawings is not protected from this type of extraction and accumulation. As Fanon writes in *Wretched of the Earth*, "it is the colonialists who become the defenders of indigenous style."¹⁶⁷ Nhlengethwa's turn to African indigenous knowledges serves its desired purposes while not being shielded from the uses of that knowledge for contrasting intentions.

The Chicken Series made sense of Biko's corpse, as well as the abject Black *body* in general through representation that circumvented the animal/human divide, suggesting a different understanding of Black subjectivity. This distinction between universal humanity and Black captive humanity was Legae's recognition that blackness was placed at the bottom of a vertical hierarchical chain that regarded Black people as a different species. This is the African that, in Mbembe's words is,

At bottom...familiar to us. We can give account of him/her in the same way we can understand *the psychic life of a beast*. We can even through a process of domestication and training, bring the African to where he or she can enjoy a full human life. In this perspective, Africa is essentially, for us, an object of experimentation.¹⁶⁸

I am not as convinced as art historian John Peffer that what we gauge in Legae's and Feni's turn to animality is a Deleuzean performance of *becoming-animal*.¹⁶⁹ While that framework is useful, it does not fully account for the Black's always already positioning as/or below animality or

¹⁶⁷ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*. (New York: Grove Press, 1966), 175.

¹⁶⁸ Achille Mbembe, *On the Postcolony*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 2. (Italics mine).

¹⁶⁹ See: Peffer (2009).

monstrosity. This monstrosity is ontological for the Black, rather than merely an experimental aesthetic device utilized for purposes of divorcing oneself from a post-Enlightenment human status. In *Death of Steve Biko* (fig. 1.10), Legae took a more representationalist approach with a figure that stands for Biko lying on their belly with raised feet. In this image, an indeterminate shadowy figure with human features and a head that resembles a canine's hovers behind the figure on the floor. This is a vulnerable horizontal position. Also towering above the figure lying on the ground is another indeterminate ribcage of an animal, a close reprise of the figured presence in the pencil drawings *Metamorphosis of a Dead Horse* (1982) and *Untitled* (1983). The black and white of the pencil and coal on canvas is broken by a bright yellow round shape, an indexical sign of the sun, with a serpentine blue line meandering to the top of the frame. If the figure drawn stands for Biko (the man and the political philosophy he espoused), Legae bypasses iconography that places the figure in a specific time or setting. That is, the omission of obvious visual aids and a legible domestic mise-en-scène place the figure in a space that cannot be described as a prison cell or the morgue. It is this indeterminacy of place and time that allows the artwork to betray a total leaning toward literal figuration and its presumed transparency of meaning. The title suggests that the figure depicted is Biko, but none of the other visual signifiers make that connection directly.

What changed in the social order or the art world that allowed Legae to move from more abstract portrayal to giving the artwork a title that included Biko's name? What does the linear passing of time enable for the slow contemplation around an idea? I do not mean to suggest that the linear passing of time necessarily signifies social progress, but I am more interested in the artist's processing and contemplation of the difficulties inherent to figuring the corpse, and the variety of experiments required to articulate a non-problematic grammar of tending-toward the

unmournable void. The problem that confronts the artist is how to represent what Copeland calls an “aporetic position,” an object who can never be fully pictured.¹⁷⁰ This subject is aporetic because it straddles the void between person and property, life and death, thing and human,— and I would add human and animal.¹⁷¹ This captive personality cannot be objectively captured in visual/performative representation. Attempts at picturing it or plotting it in visual representation are haunted by the fact that makers of visual cultural objects, as Kaja Silverman has noted, apprehend the world from “a preassigned position” while the aesthetic objects themselves can “intervene where we cannot” since they have “the formal and libidinal properties of highly charged unconscious memories.”¹⁷²

In the *Chicken Series*, the conflation of the image of the referent (Biko’s corpse) with that of the indexical/symbolic sign (the chicken) does not arrive at a fixed meaning but gives way to openness. At once, this collapsing of the referent and the sign can be read as doing the work of metaphor, using one scenario to symbolize another. It could also be understood as personifying the chicken, deploying it as a visual-rhetorical device, anthropomorphizing the (image of the) chicken to get at the real goal, which is to explain *human* suffering. That reading would provide a salient critique of allegory’s or personification’s anthropocentric investments that uncritically reify hierarchies between persons and animals/things. I am interested in the kind of *kinship* being plotted between the chicken and the tortured Black *body* in a way that expands/exceeds symbolism. This *kinship* between blackness and other degraded life forms is akin to what Ishmael Reed (as cited by Copeland) calls “a comrade[ship] of the inanimate.”¹⁷³ This is not to

¹⁷⁰ Copeland (2013).

¹⁷¹ Ibid.

¹⁷² Silverman, Kaja. *The Threshold of the Visible World*. (New York: Routledge, 1996), 3.

¹⁷³ Copeland (2013), 51.

suggest absolute sameness or collapse “interspecial” difference. Instead, the aim is to draw attention to materialdiscursive performances that have reserved *Being* itself for those sitting at the apex of a vertical hierarchy, creating a difference between valuable and disprized life forms. This divide is powerful enough to render certain *beings* killable without justification. Legae’s artwork approaches the viewer with a question of what these bodies have been *made to mean*, and how they became conflatable with degraded animality under the blade of colonial horror. The drawings tend to the Black figure’s simultaneous comradeship with, conflation with, and relegation to the animal.

Animality in South African art and performance has provided a way not only to make sense of the colonial experience but also the project of apartheid and its *current* manifestations. Contemporary South African visual and performance artists such as Swaziland-born Nandipha Mntambo, Athi Patra Ruga, Jane Alexander, and Steven Cohen, are currently rethinking the human/animal divide, embracing what they perceive to be the “fluidity” between the two. The conjuring up of the animal both extends and departs from the 1960s-1980’s tradition of apartheid art and performance (by artists such as Dumile Feni and Ezrom Legae) who employed the animal as a mode of articulating the brutality of white power. White South African artist Jane Alexander’s *The Butcher Boys* which has become a canonical work of art in permanent exhibition at the National Art Gallery in Cape Town is also a noteworthy point of departure for work that conjured up the animal. Alexander’s work was first exhibited at the Market Gallery (Johannesburg) in 1986 during the state of emergency, where apartheid was at its most intense and brutal, as Black people were being gunned down casually in large numbers with impunity. *The Butcher Boys* illustrated the sinister, inhumane, and amoral nature of apartheid society as a whole . . . the grotesque form of the Butcher Boys signified the ‘body of the state’ personified,

depicting the entire society as a monstrosity”¹⁷⁴ Here, monstrosity was equated with the “sinister” and “inhuman.”

Black critical theorists such as Evan Mwangi, Zakiyyah Iman Jackson, and Joshua Bennett are invested in complicating the assumptions of dominant philosophical traditions that critique the “human,” such as animal studies, and new materialism.¹⁷⁵ These framework critique the dichotomy of “us” versus “things,” “vibrant” versus passive,” and “life” versus “matter.”¹⁷⁶ These interventions however, causes those in Black studies to pause and ask: who exactly is the animal of animal studies? What is the absent presence of *blackness* and its intersection with gender in thinking about the animal? This allows a reading of the category of the human as not a category to move beyond (as in *post-human*) since it is a category that has not been an inclusive one to non-white and nonheteronormative subjects.¹⁷⁷ Their interest is in neither moving *beyond* the Human nor incorporating Black positionality-as-“nothingness” into a seemingly “improved” futuristic version of the Human.¹⁷⁸ Zakiyyah Jackson in her essay “Animal,” reveals how Black people, within the discourse and aesthetic tradition of the long-Enlightenment are not only

¹⁷⁴ John Pepper, “Art and the End of Apartheid,” 65.

¹⁷⁵ See: Jackson (2020), Also see: Evan Mwangi, *The Postcolonial Animal: African Literature and Posthuman Ethics*. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2019); Joshua Bennett: *Being Property Once Myself: Blackness and the End of Man*. (Cambridge: Harvard university Press, 2020).

¹⁷⁶ Scholars of new materialism have offered salient critiques of anthropocentrism, troubling the idea of human exceptionalism by “taking seriously the vitality of nonhuman bodies” See: Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter* (2010), 3; Diana H. Coole, and Samantha Frost, (*New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics*. Durham [NC]: Duke University Press, 2010).

¹⁷⁷ Karen Barad enacts a different critical posture that departs from postmodern celebration and/or demonization of the posthuman as living testimonies to the death of the human. She moves away from what she frames as widespread uncritical embrace of the cyborg as ironic liberatory savior. For Barad, posthumanism is about taking issue with human exceptionalism. See: Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 136.

¹⁷⁸ It is also crucial to note that there is a tradition of Black ‘anti-humanist’ critique by scholars such as Zakiyyah Jackson, Evan Mwangi, and Sylvia Wynter who put pressure on common-sense conceptions of “the Human” by elucidating how that concept is a racializing and particularly anti-black colonial technology. Mwangi, Evan. *The Postcolonial Animal: African Literature and Posthuman Ethics*. (University of Michigan. Press). Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2019.

metaphorized as animals, but “they are *positioned beneath them*.”¹⁷⁹ In addition, certain considerations of race in animal studies have often taken place in problematic ways. Alexander Weheliye’s *Habeas Viscus* takes issue with certain animal rights scholars who compare animal cruelty to the enslavement of Black people.¹⁸⁰ In these comparisons, Blackness becomes a conduit, a convenient rhetorical threshold that provides legibility to animal suffering and animal rights discourse. This means that in this scholarship, the severity of animal cruelty can only be legible through an uncritical comparison to the Black condition. This scholarship also assumes that Black demands for freedom automatically ignore animal rights. This is flawed, because Black artistic and theoretical critiques of the Human actually attempt to dismantle *all* of Western hierarchical logics that fabricate boundaries between animals and humans as well as humans and things.

I provide these examples above to show that Legae and his contemporaries such as Dumile Feni, embraced the animal in ways that (even against their aims) did not stop at merely reifying the racialization of the Black as animal. Legae’s *Biko* drawings stage a conversation about blackness’ (un)mournability and intercorporeal (non)relationality. They unpack the ontological, ethical, and epistemological stakes of Black art’s material and metaphoric embrace of animality. The figures appearing in contorted and grotesque positions with textual marks can be read beyond some of Legae’s intentions. For example, he posits that in creating these pieces, he was interested in making people think with their eyes, meaning these drawings invited engaged and thoughtful contemplation.¹⁸¹ He also “hoped [to] shock people to sanity” and

¹⁷⁹ Zakiyyah Jackson, “Animal,” 679 (emphasis mine).

¹⁸⁰ See: Alexander Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics and Black Feminist Theories of the Human*. (Durham: Duke University Press), 2014.

¹⁸¹ Legae in Elizabeth Burroughs & Karel Nel [eds.] (2018), 175-6.

portray “the suffering of all mankind.”¹⁸² These assertions raise questions about who these drawings were inviting to be “shocked to sanity” since Black South Africans experienced this violence as their everyday life. This is either an example of art appealing to the impoverished moral conscience of the apartheid government (and white people as its extension), or a deliberate signifying device using the language of universal humanism to make the underlying aesthetic-political enactment opaque.

III.

Counter-documentary in Paul Stopforth’s *Elegy for Steve Biko*

In 1978, a year following Biko’s death, Paul Stopforth presented an installation of sculptures titled *Deaths in Detention* at the Market Theatre in Johannesburg.¹⁸³ These sculptures meditated on the brutality enacted upon political prisoners by the state which were dismissed as suicides. Stopforth used layered bandages set in plaster of Paris to create figures that were “frighteningly close to reality.”¹⁸⁴ In the installation, a figure falls down the stair, another one appears to be falling from the roof, and others are in torture positions reminiscent of the interrogation room. Although these are static sculptures, some of them give off a sense of flux. The sculptures include the *Tumbling Figure Suspended Figure, Falling Figure, Hooded Figure, and Helicopter* [fig.1.13]. They depict events that transpired in police holding cells (the most notorious being John Vorster Square in Johannesburg) which involved brutal beatings, torture with electric chairs, gagging, and pushing prisoners off high rise buildings and claiming it was suicide.¹⁸⁵

¹⁸² Ibid. 176. He told his art dealer Linda Givon.

¹⁸³ The significance of the Market Theatre is that it was a liberal enclave where multi-racial plays protesting the state were produced, while the Group Areas Act prohibited inter-racial sociality. Protest theater productions by Barney Simon, Percy Mtwa, and Mbongeni Ngema were staged in that space.

¹⁸⁴ Hill, 89.

¹⁸⁵ According to Sassoon (31), “Ahmed Tihmol had been pushed or thrown to his death in 1971 from police headquarters, the police said he jumped” (Sassoon 31) Stopforth was aware of George Segal who “had started

The form and gesture performed by the sculptures communicate these atrocities in a literal manner. This is for impact and sudden recognition by those experiencing the installation, to shock the public into recognizing some of the terrors that the government covered up. Literal figuration of naked violence perpetrated by the apartheid government was a dangerous and even treasonous pursuit that Black artists could not easily get away with. According to art writer Anne Sasson, Stopforth, who is white, “was the only visual artist at the time, white or black, who confronted the issue of torture and detention directly in his work”¹⁸⁶ It is not entirely clear what Sassoon means here by “directly” but if she means a literal representation of brutality, then this was partly because Stopforth *could* enact such “direct” interventions with limited fear of retribution because of his whiteness. The sculptures represented the brutalized, and the brutalizer was not figured in sculptural form as part of the installation. It was in 1979 that Stopforth put a face to the perpetrator, in a mixed media triptych of paintings entitled *The Interrogators* [fig. 1.14] where he portrayed dictators Alfredo Stroessner, John Vorster, and Augusto Pinochet. This shows how in the 1970s, Stopforth was responding to torture and despotism more generally, considering other despotic regimes in Paraguay and Chile.

Corpus Christi

Stopforth figured Biko’s corpse in 1981, in the iconic mixed media painting titled *Elegy for Steve Biko* [fig. 1.15]. Because of the apartheid government’s official dismissal and obscuring of the conditions that led to Biko’s death, Stopforth joined other artists and political activists who

wrapping orthopaedic bandages around the body to make a plaster cast figure and creating theatrical tableaux out of groups of figures” (Sasson 32). This was not the first time Stopforth used bones in his sculptures. Stopforth created assemblages, *Forge* 1971 and *Bill of White Rights* where he assembled bones, animal skulls, a jacket, a gun pouch, some of these instruments appear in Nhlengethwa’s *It Left Him Cold*. See: Stopforth, Paul, and Mason, Judith. *Paul Stopforth*. (Taxi (IFAS (Institute: South Africa); 015. Parkwood, South Africa: David Krut Pub., 2010).

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 28.

intended to provide a counter-narrative. He used counter-documentary in painting as a mode of challenging the government's ideology about political activists as treasonous. Counter-documentaries discredit or undermine official narratives. Media theorist Joanne Richardson defines counter-documentary as an approach to film [and other apparatuses of documentation] that uses some conventions of the documentary genre but "simultaneously negate their fulfillment."¹⁸⁷ It is borne out of a "generalized suspicion of the function of politics, and of the nature of ideological discourse."¹⁸⁸ Stopforth's counter-documentary image jettisons the apartheid government's official narrative by opening up a more heterogeneous interpretation of facts and explanations for Biko's death. Counter-documentary in *Elegy for Steve Biko* functions to assert an alternative account of apartheid's anti-black brutalization divergent from the state's self-exculpatory propaganda. The title included Biko's name, which was a departure from his 1970s work that portrayed a universal tortured body. As an "elegy," the painting was his performance of lamenting the dead in an overt way. Stopforth's figure in *Elegy for Steve Biko*, while painted with a shade of black, bears no obvious resemblance to Biko. This image monumentalizes an individual martyr but also universalizes that martyr, in the sense that the figured martyr is not reducible to Biko. The figure lies on a pathologist's tray, and this image is similar to the one taken by Donald Woods in 1977 when Biko's corpse was still in the morgue [fig. 1.16], the difference being Biko's *body* was covered with a white sheet in Wood's photograph.

Stopforth's approach bears a religious visual poetics, specifically a Christian method of mourning the martyr. This is in line with the general placement of Biko in a position resembling

¹⁸⁷ Joanne Richardson, "Est-Ethics of Counter-Documentary," *ARTMargins*, February 15, 2019, <https://artmargins.com/est-ethics-of-counter-documentary/>

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

a Messiah. Another artist, Colin Richards's mixed media figuration of Biko's death titled *Veils* (1996) invokes the "veil of Veronica," [fig. 1.17] a symbol associated with the suffering of Christ.¹⁸⁹ Ezrom Legae's *Biko Behind Bars* (1979) also invokes the crucifix. Biko's death for some is understood as not in vain, but "a symbol of strength because he was seen to have paid the ultimate sacrifice for a higher purpose."¹⁹⁰ There is an elevation of Biko as a martyr who "sacrificed" his life for the masses. Historian of Black Consciousness Daniel Magaziner explains that there was "the notion that dying to end apartheid was worth it because to do so was to be like Christ."¹⁹¹ Biko himself, in *I Write What I Like* did not distance himself from religion, especially Christianity. He once stated, "Too many people are involved in religion for the blacks to ignore...the only path open for us now is to redefine the message in the bible and to make it relevant to the struggle masses."¹⁹² While Christ is often talked about as a "prince of peace," BCM engaged with James Cone's Black Theology which depicts Jesus as "a fighting God."¹⁹³ In *Biko's Ghost*, Shannen Hill provides a brief survey of artworks that represented Biko's and other Black insurgents' lifeless *bodies* by conjuring iconography related to the crucifixion of Christ. Stopforth's painting has also been compared to Mantegna's Renaissance painting titled *Dead Christ* from the year 1480 [fig. 18]¹⁹⁴ The Mantegna painting is known for showcasing a less

¹⁸⁹ According to art historian and forensic artist Kathryn Smith, " Richards employs a representation of the Biblical "veil of Veronica", a piece of cloth onto which the face of a suffering Christ was reportedly imprinted. As an analogue 'print' made directly from a source, it is considered to be the first photograph. On his recreated veils, Richards instead imprinted facsimiles of images of the cell in which Biko was tortured, and two macroscopic pathology photographs which do not identifiably belong to a specific body (yet they are Biko)" See: Kathryn Smith, "Under the Influence of ... Paul Stopforth's Biko Painting Called 'Elegy'," *The Conversation*, May 21, 2019, <https://theconversation.com/under-the-influence-of-paul-stopforths-biko-painting-called-elegy-64031>.

¹⁹⁰ Hill, 17

¹⁹¹ Magaziner, 13. Magaziner posits that these martyrdom discourse became more commonplace after 16 June, the date of the Soweto Uprisings.

¹⁹² Biko, *I Write What I Like*, 34.

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁴ See: Leora Maltz-Leca in Law-Viljoen, Stopforth and Mason (2010), 66.

ethereal or heavenly Christ, since Mantegna painted instead a body that is weighed down by gravity. This comparison may endow Biko with the reverence and narrative progression traditionally reserved for the corpse of Western theory/society.

This figuration that invokes god-like properties is part of the work of making an icon. As Nicole Fleetwood posits, historically, “the icon is rooted in a desire to represent and thus produce God.”¹⁹⁵ The purpose is usually to “venerate” and “deify” the pictured figure, as well as to find the “godlikeness in human form.”¹⁹⁶ Fleetwood continues to note that “racial iconography hinges on a relationship between veneration and denigration.”¹⁹⁷ While the deification part of Stopforth’s gesture is evident, it is as important to consider the “denigration” element of his iconicization. Denigration means to “blacken” or “degrade.” According to the *OED*, to denigrate [understood as part of iconicization if we follow Fleetwood] is to “blacken, sully, or stain (character or reputation); to defame.”¹⁹⁸ Stopforth “denigrates”/blackens the pious image and reputation of Christ while also deifying Biko through that “denigration.” In presenting Biko as reverent, Stopforth also iconizes Christ through denigration, by blackening/associating him with Biko. This deification achieves its aims of counter-documentation by exposing an open secret about who killed Biko and other political insurgents. This raises the issue of deification as a seeming necessity for mournability. In other words, the deification of Biko to the status of sainthood (and implied proof of innocence and martyrdom) requires the catapulting of the Black to the status of sainthood or innocence in order to be understood as undeserving of death. Black people—those who are considered reverent and those who are not considered heroic—do not

¹⁹⁵ Fleetwood 7.

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 6-7.

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 8.

¹⁹⁸ “Denigrate,” *OED* (2020).

deserve to be murdered. BCM's turn to religious scripture was not about analogizing Black suffering. In fact, their Black theology convictions made them understand that, as Mabogo More posits, "black suffering should not be confused with Christian suffering characterized by masochistic humility and 'give-the-other cheek' resignation of 'dolorism.'"¹⁹⁹ While it could be argued that Biko and Christ were both "persecuted," Biko's executed corpse dwells in the black space between carcass and cadaver, available for scientific/forensic speculation, devoid of *habeas corpus*. His philosophies of liberation persist in contemporary Black struggles without any need for Black people to sit and wait for a second coming.

In the epigraph of this chapter, Biko, rather than posing a question about what it means to inhabit a livable life, shows us what it means to live as you were already dead. He posits, "You are either alive and proud or you are dead, and when you are dead, you can't care anyway. And your method of death can itself be political."²⁰⁰ This statement can be read as demonstrating Biko's martyrdom, a heroic self-offering for a greater moral purpose. However, Biko is directing attention not to martyrdom, but a material and inevitable danger of fighting against apartheid. For Biko, the only way out is enacting something that almost guarantees physical death. For those who are already dead, whose *life* does not register as life, the stakes are lowered and the gates for what Wilderson calls "gratuitous freedom" are opened when they heed this call.²⁰¹ This means that those who are figured as already dead stand to gain some clarity by acquainting themselves with the *dance of death* rather than fear it, for it is already their condition.²⁰² This acknowledgement of deathliness opens up possibility for *living* and dying in gratuitous freedom,

¹⁹⁹ More (citing Sartre 1988; 323). See; More, 13.

²⁰⁰ Biko, (2004), 173.

²⁰¹ Wilderson (2010), 141-142.

²⁰² See: George Jackson, *Blood in My Eye*. (New York: Bantam Books, 1972.) quoted in Wilderson, *Red White and Black*, 138.

rather than the hallucinatory satisfaction that comes with clinging to “life” or recuperating categories such as the “human,” “personhood,” “selfhood,” “aliveness” etc. Black self-consciousness, understood that way, is an awareness of the *self* that is not, the *n'est pas*.²⁰³ Black consciousness is a method of politicizing the deathliness of the self that isn't, rather than embellishing it with phantasmatic wholeness. Biko entertains the idea of politicizing that deform, not having an integrated self, rather than turning to re-assembly, restitution, or incorporation into the forces that are responsible for Black obliteration.

What of Intangible Wounds?

The inquest held to determine the cause of death also offered no closure, as it concluded that no one was responsible for the murder of Biko, despite ample forensic evidence.²⁰⁴ It comes not as a surprise that voicing out grievances to an entity that would not hear them would prove futile. Cultural objects such as literature, performances, and visual art about Biko's death proliferated thereafter, partly as a way to provide a counter-narrative to the government's deceitful masking of their murderous fixations. The aesthetic objects portraying Biko's corpse recognized that in a despotic regime where “there is no *habeas corpus* for the African,” — inquests, court trials, tribunals, or material evidence presented before an unjust legal system would not generate auditors for Black suffering.²⁰⁵ There was no justice for the Black in apartheid South Africa. Biko and other Black South Africans were always already guilty without a cause. When violated or murdered, they had no recourse to the law, since the law mandated the

²⁰³ See: David Marriott. *Whither Fanon?: Studies in the Blackness of Being*. (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2018).

²⁰⁴ An inquest is held when someone dies from other than natural causes. It is not a trial. There are no ‘accused’ and no ‘defense.’ See: Bernstein, 28.

²⁰⁵ I.R. Skine, “Apartheid en Afrique du Sud”, *Les Temps Modernes*, 1950 quoted in Fanon (1986/1952).

murder of Black people in the first place. The visible traces of brutalization marked on Black insurgents' skin/flesh had no integrity to be presented as evidence. The state nullified or fabricated alternative narratives about the meaning and source of these markings. The articulation of Black suffering that appealed to the law often did not travel beyond the void of foreclosure.

Stopforth's movement from the *Biko Series* consisting of *Exhibit A, B, C, D* drawings of 1980 [fig. 1.14] to *Elegy* is progression that moves from homing in on parts of a whole to picturing a presumed whole. Dubious accounts of the cause of Biko's proliferated at inquest where law collided with forensics, performance, and drawing. In the *Biko Series* there is a tethering of fine art and forensic art, a binding of the art institution and the police/legal system. Stopforth's *Biko* series, its closeness to the forensic representation, attempts to portray an "inventory of wounds," zooming in on Biko's open wounds as a way to provide visual evidence for the brutality.²⁰⁶ The *Exhibit A, B, C, D* drawings home in on wounded parts of the body to participate in a struggle of evidence that already took place during the Biko inquest where the prison guards who watched Biko when he died presented their own case for how Biko died. The police suppressed an account of torture during the inquest and this conflicted with the autopsy photographs presented during the inquest. The official explanation for Biko's death was that he had slipped on soap.²⁰⁷ The *Exhibit A, B, C, D* drawings resemble the autopsy photographs that were presented at the inquest. The drawings show bruises on the figure's hands, heels, and arms, and toes. The question that arises is whether this figuration of wounds stops at evidentiary exhibitionism, or also reveal, to invoke Anne Cheng, Bikos'/Blackness' intangible wounds.²⁰⁸

²⁰⁶ Peffer, 64.

²⁰⁷ Judith Mason in Law-Viljoen, Stopforth and Mason (2010), 7.

²⁰⁸ Cheng (2001), x.

How did Stopforth arrive at this visual representational verisimilitude bold enough to be considered alternative evidence, at least at the court of public opinion? At a social event in 1979, Stopforth met Shun Chetty, a lawyer who had worked on behalf of the Biko family during the 1977 inquest.²⁰⁹ Through Chetty, Stopforth gained access to the photographs used in court, both forensic and autopsy. He photographed a number of the images and used them as source material for a series of twenty engravings. As Hill notes, these drawings sourced from Biko's autopsy were intended for questioning a general abuse of all detainees in South African custody. Although they were directly sourced from Biko's autopsy, they were deployed in a way that did not focus on the specificity of Biko's death.²¹⁰ He tempered with them very little to ensure that their evidentiary quality was plausible. In these visual counter-documentary efforts to prove the state's culpability in murdering Biko and other Black insurgents, a question remains about what it means to prove a violation of someone who is not recognized as having the capacity to be violated? As Judith Butler argued in the context of Rodney King's brutal beating by LAPD officers in 1991, "it is possible within [a] racist episteme that no black person can seek recourse to the visible as the sure ground of evidence."²¹¹ The wounded corpse represented by Stopforth is figured through an approach that solicits empathy and an attempt to "educat[e] fellow white South Africans about violence against detainees."²¹² The figuration of Biko's corpse is driven partly by a pedagogical impulse, where the white artist sets himself apart from other white

²⁰⁹ "Through a lawyer representing the Biko family, Stopforth gained access to photographs taken by the pathologists at Biko's autopsy for use at the inquest" (Anne Sassoon 40). Also, Stopforth claims to have been close acquaintances with Biko. Stopforth became involved with the Theatre Council of Natal, overcome and overseen by Strini Moodley and Saths Cooper, leaders who were among the accused in the SASO-BC trial of 1976. Through them, Stopforth met Biko in 1970 and visited him and his colleagues on occasion at the Natal Medical School (Hill 91).

²¹⁰ Hill, 97.

²¹¹ Judith Butler, "Endangered/Endangering: Schematic Racism and White Paranoia" in Robert Gooding-Williams. *Reading Rodney King/reading Urban Uprising*. (New York: Routledge, 1993), 17.

²¹² Hill, 18.

people living in South Africa that need to be educated. All the while, the structure of apartheid benefits and incorporates all white people, those who oppose it and those who affirm it.

Agonizing cries of Black suffering tend to fall on blocked ears. It takes the likes of Stopforth to simulate a sublimated version of that cry, for it to gain something that might resemble some recognition. A painting like *Elegy for Steve Biko*, appears to comprehend (perhaps against Stopforth's conscious will) that Black flesh needs *white masks* for the sound it emits to find empathetic auditors. His elegy is impactful in many ways. However, there is also a possibility that his lament for Biko is a lactified requiem.

III.

Framing the Fractal Condition in Sam Nhlengethwa's Collage Painting

It goes without saying that the death of Biko and all other political insurgents was not experienced as a sad loss to the apartheid government. As stated earlier, minister of justice and police Jimmy Kruger proclaimed "I am not saddened by Biko's death...His death leaves me cold."²¹³ The title of Sam Nhlengethwa's collage painting, *It Left Him Cold* [fig. 1.19] which I discuss below refers to Kruger's statement. This collage figures Biko's corpse by assembling seemingly disparate objects, scenes, and events and collapsing them into a single image. The painting is accompanied a drawing with the same title [fig. 1.20]. Sam Nhlengethwa studied at Rorke's Drift in Kwa-Zulu Natal in 1977 and prior to that he enrolled at Bill Ainslie Studios where he took up collage.²¹⁴ Nhlengethwa's tutors included Dutch teachers Jules and Ida van der

²¹³ Peffer, 178; Bernstein, 20.

²¹⁴ Rorke's Drift was founded by the Swedish Lutheran Mission in 1962 and was formally known as the Ecumenical Lutheran Centre. Situated in scenic Kwa-Zulu Natal, creative ambience inspired a largely interdisciplinary ethos. (Nhlengethwa trained with artists such as David Koloane, Cyril Manganyi, and Bongzi Dhlomo. See: David Koloane in Kathryn Smith, and Sam Nhlengethwa, *Sam Nhlengethwa*. (1st ed. Johannesburg: Goodman Gallery, 2006), 46.

Vyver and former student Eric Mbatha.²¹⁵ After his 2-year diploma, Nhlengethwa returned to Bill Ainslie studios where Ainslie showed Nhlengethwa a book of African American collagist Romare Bearden and he also worked as a set designer for the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC).²¹⁶

Nhlengethwa is known for works that comment of racial tensions in everyday spaces such as *The Fleamarket*, *Johannesburg Building Society* which shows a sign that reads “Europeans Only.” The recurrent features in his interior works include windows or picture frames. The exterior collages contain groups of people at bus stations and train stations, walking in the street and engaged in other performances of everyday life. Some of these urban and township figures perform a posture of waiting. In those quotidian but colorful scenarios, the banality is always interrupted by a subtle symbol that announces the condition of blackness. Death is always ensuing and threatening the banality of the image. For example, in *Platform 4* (1993), a scene of Black people walking, and smiling is disrupted by a small cut out of a newspaper headline saying, “Black Oppression.” Similarly, *Mielies* (1991), presents a scene of smiling figures that is interrupted by a cut out of a yellow police van.

Nhlengethwa also responds to the political situation in the 1990s when official apartheid was undergoing its demise. It may seem odd then that Nhlengethwa would generate a series of drawings and collage paintings portraying dead Black people during a time of much hope and optimism. But as Barney Pityana notes, gruesome acts of violence persisted and intensified during this time of transition, making “the message of Black Consciousness as relevant today as it was in the seventies.”²¹⁷ Revelations were made in July 1991 of the National Party (apartheid)

²¹⁵ Ibid., 48.

²¹⁶ Ibid., 52, 77.

²¹⁷ Pityana et al. 11.

government funding Inkatha Freedom Party to participate in Black intramural violence between ethnic groups. This violence problematically characterized as “Black on Black violence” was in fact orchestrated by the physically disappearing yet still omnipotent apartheid government.

Those who dissented from the rainbow nation program were ostracized or murdered, as in the case of Umkhonto WeSizwe armed struggle soldiers as well as South African Communist Party leader Chris Hani, who was murdered in 1993. Some of those who were in support of the new government ended up gaining positions in parliament. This transition did not mean the transfer or relinquishment of economic power, redistribution of land, or the delivery of life-sustaining resources for Black people. The “post-apartheid” transition allowed for apartheid domineers to continue operating from backstage giving orders to the new ruling party in Black faces. That is to say, apartheid managers after the transition transmogrified into ghosts with capacities to ventriloquize.

Nhlengethwa was one of 15 artists from different regions of South Africa to participate in the 1991 Triangle International Artists’ Workshop in Mashomack, New York. The transitional stage made these exchanges even more of a possibility for Black artists. Other global events such as the fall of the Berlin Wall (1989-1991) and the end of the Cold War (1947-1991) contributed to the increase in cultural exchange. Nhlengethwa travelled to New York City where he visited major galleries, and museums as well as jazz clubs. This is also where he met Dumile Feni and attended a Romare Bearden retrospective exhibition at the Studio Museum in Harlem.²¹⁸ There is a shared formal approach and political sensibility in the collage paintings of Sam Nhlengethwa and Bearden, who is African American. Both artists have an affinity to jazz and they both

²¹⁸ Ibid.

painted “jazz collages.” The painterly gesture in both artists’ work operates like jazz, with elements of improvisation, call-and-response, rhythmic complexity, and atonality. Nhlengethwa states,

My jazz collages, with their distorted patterns, attempt to communicate all of this. As a collagist and painter, fortunately, the technique allows me this freedom of expression. What I am doing is not new though, as there are other artists before me who painted jazz pieces. For example, Gerard Sekoto, Romare Bearden, and Henri Matisse.²¹⁹

I am interested in what is made possible by collage as an aesthetic-political strategy of assembling fragments, piecing them together, for purposes of creating meaning about the Black fractal condition. Nhlengethwa’s collages provide a way of re-thinking linear time and stable space through piecing together a variety of historical events as well as disrupting the dichotomy between interior and exterior space. While gallerists during apartheid were rejecting assemblage art that centralized fragmentation, demanding more realist depictions of township life, in the Black communities “mutilated, broken, or otherwise abused bodies became a common sight after 1976”²²⁰ Steve Biko wrote about a “fragmented Black body politic” with a sectional politics, division, and ethnonationalist logics.²²¹ In Nhlengethwa’s collages, fragmentation in various ways as concept and formal register. A companion piece to *It Left Him Dead* titled *The Brother is Dead* [fig. 1.21 & fig. 1.22] was created after Nhlengethwa got hold of the autobiography of revolutionary Assata Shakur. He would later meet Shakur in the year 2000 when he travelled to Cuba with filmmaker Fred Giggs Mgeyana.²²² At the level aesthetic representation, gallerists were demanding a realist depiction that showed mutilated and broken bodies from the township

²¹⁹ Sean O’Toole, “Archive: Issue No. 74, October 2003,” ARTTHROB_ARTBIO, accessed July 2, 2020, <https://artthrob.co.za/03oct/artbio.html>.

²²⁰ Peffer, 41.

²²¹ Biko, 39.

²²² Smith, 84.

while rejecting township art pieces that enacted that fragmentation through technical and stylistic choices such as collage and assemblage. For Nhlengethwa, collage was not only reducible to an aesthetic style, but it was also a way of making, a material inheritance. By this I mean the materials for his collages were scraps given to him by his father. He narrates,

My father, Bunyane... had given me scrap metals and other objects that he could lay his hands on once he discovered that I was artistic. With hindsight, I suppose I could've used them in a 'Daddy's Found Objects' piece. That gesture touched me dearly.²²³

Touched dearly by the father, by the father's gesture of generosity, Nhlengethwa's understanding of fragmentation and collage can also be attributed to passed down scrap objects. He also pays homage to a different material inheritance, his grandmother's teachings. He dedicates an epigraph to an anthology about his work to his grandmother, "who didn't have material wealth" but taught him valuable lessons that made him a dedicated artist.²²⁴ These found objects for Nhlengethwa were not simply parts that could be arranged together or transformed to make a functional piece of equipment. He realized that they could enact a posture that was political, depending on how the artist interacted with them.

It Left Him Cold was painted in 1990, thirteen years after Biko was murdered.

Nhlengethwa, talking about his Biko painting, posits, "[The painting] reflects my emotions at the time of his death. I was very angry at the apartheid system, its injustices, and human rights abuses."²²⁵ Nhlengethwa used collage to assert a certain intervention about Black corporeal disassembly, to tend-toward Biko's corpse through a studied approach that took into consideration some of BCM's political philosophies? *It Left Him Cold* assembles found objects

²²³ Nhlengethwa, in Smith [ed.] 31.

²²⁴ Nhlengethwa in Smith [ed.], 3

²²⁵ Nhlengethwa in Smith, 70

and Nhlengethwa also engaged with two decades of public opinion. He did not have the privilege of archival access granted to his white counterparts, Colin Richards and Paul Stopforth who both created artworks made possible by access to Biko's autopsy. In the collage painting, a body lies down on the gray and brown cement floor facing upward. An open door brings in a rectangle of light shining on the body's feet. The room is sparse, except for a collection of items such as a chair, a telephone, a police cap, and a pair of eyeglasses on the side of the open door. The open door reveals a stack of flattened out images of a police guard who appears to be checking for *dompass* identity documents, a *Mello-yellow* apartheid police van (used to round up Black people and arrest them), as well as a group of police officers wearing a blue uniform. A framed photograph of a police official hangs on the wall, and beside it is a window that lets in what appears as yellow sunlight. While the yellow sunlight appears to be the only part of the image that does not index a relationship to the state like the other items in view, its yellow color is identical to the yellow of the Mello-yellow police vans. While the yellow can be read through a lens of hope and sunlight as Peffer does in *Art and the End of Apartheid*, this is troubled by the similarity of the yellow coming in through the window and the yellow of state terror (the Mello-yellow vehicles). Biko had contempt for the police till the end. He once stated, "I only understand one form of dealing with police, and that's to be as unhelpful as possible."²²⁶ This statement is a both a rebellious performance of refusal and a profound political-philosophical statement. It guides as much as it warns that performances of refusal are met with even more intensified state violence.

²²⁶ Biko quoted in More 120.

Nhlengethwa troubles the dichotomy of interior and exterior in this image. While the image suggests the prison cell where Biko was held and died, the stoep suggests exterior space. Nhlengethwa's room is both inside and outside. The naked body is inside the privacy of apartheid's prison where it can be tortured, where the evidence of torture can be distorted. It is in this seemingly interior space, the prison cell, where the corpse is vulnerable and open to violence, and always already located outside of the law. Further, if the inside is a prison cell, a space of captivity, Nhlengethwa provides us with an outside that is not a space of freedom from captivity. The scene is filled with symbols of violence both inside and outside. The open door may offer a way out, but it is a way out to more brutality and the perpetual resistance of it. Not only does Nhlengethwa collapse space but he also collapses time. The linear series of events that led to Biko's death suggest that he was kept naked in a police cell in Port Elizabeth, and later transferred to Pretoria where he died. The scene Nhlengethwa creates collapses the place where Biko was kept in Port Elizabeth and the place where he died.

The composition of the corpse is also worth noting in this image. The head, as Hill observes, is "a composite of six photographs taken at Biko's autopsy and reprinted in the popular press. . . Nhlengethwa emphasizes the precise location of the fatal impact—the left side of Biko's forehead— by clipping and pasting its image twice to form a fully realized, though fractured, head"²²⁷ This was possible because images of Biko's corpse, and of the open casket at his burial, were widely circulated in the press. Nhlengethwa emphasizes a distorted relationship of head to body and knees to shins. The proportions are not commensurate with an average human body's proportions. This distortion of anatomical precision through collage suggests what Frantz Fanon

²²⁷ Hill 20.

calls a “sprawled out, crushed objecthood”²²⁸ The figural form coheres to form something that seems whole. The integration of body parts emphasizes the *integrity* of the body as always already “torn, rent, incomplete, and unwhole”²²⁹ The body in pieces is referring to Biko, but its piecing also moves away from that biographical particularity. It seeks to address a general dishonored and dismembered Black body without universalizing its suffering in multiculturalist ways. The figure is situated on a horizontal plane, as an object among other objects that are piled up on the gray floor such as a chair, glasses, and telephone with police figures towering above them. Biko’s corpse is shown to have kinship with other objects and things in the scene, which is a result of apartheid objectification or order(ing) of things. While this creates a sense of a “community of objects”, the objects placed at Biko’s corpse are instruments of torture and anti-Black terror.

Nhlengethwa’s piece is not merely a reflection that seeks healing by recuperating Biko’s dissected and torn body, even if the restoration of wholeness and reconciliation is what the majority of the nation desires in the early 90s. I argue that this care can be extended to the African continent and specifically to Nhlengethwa’s practice. Nhlengethwa’s formal choices to re-arrange these pieces, to re-arrange space and time to a fragmented Black (no-)space-time, provides a cold and indeterminate ground on which a certain Black grammar of suffering can be articulated. This is an aporetic Black grammar of suffering that was present but (had to be) suppressed in Black Consciousness’ philosophies that often emphasized representationalist tactics such as self-assertion and self-knowing that are not available to the *kaffir*.²³⁰ The figure lying on the cement floor is not as reverent (yet) as Paul Storpforth’s figure in *Elegy* which

²²⁸ Fanon, (2008/1952), 9.

²²⁹ Murray and Sullivan in Smith & Nhlengethwa, 6.

²³⁰ Wilderson, “Biko and the Problematic of Presence,” 105.

universalizes the body while also making intertextual references to religious martyrs. Stopforth's figure, while painted with a shade of black, bears no obvious resemblance to Biko at the level of facial features.

V.

Remains and the Marketplace

Biko's autopsy images from 1977 and autopsy report were stolen in the 1990s, then ended up in an auction for the price of R70 000 (approximately US \$5 000).²³¹ The autopsy files were handed over to Wits University in 1995 by Dr Jonathan Gluckman, the pathologist who performed a post-mortem after Biko's death, at the request of the Biko family. It was suspected that there was a break-in at Wits and the files were stolen. This was right before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). It is remarkable how the autopsy files were not only stolen to potentially trump evidence for the TRC, but how they continued to circulate in the market. I am interested in the capitalist circulation of Black ephemera, both as solid materials and as traces of evanescent performances.

These curiosities are fully fleshed out in the next chapter about South African performance-maker Nelisiwe Xaba's performances of *the Hottentot Venus*. In the following chapter, I discuss the transnational circulation of Sara Baartman's corporeal and performance remains. Xaba's practice is also informed by BCM tenets, and in 2006 she collaborated with poet Lesego Rampokoleng in *Bantu Ghost: a stream of black consciousness* which moved away from monumentalizing Biko as a sole struggle hero, instead highlighting how his ideas were entangled

²³¹ Sapa, "Steve Biko's Autopsy Files Stolen in 1990's – Wits Curator," *The Citizen*, accessed July 2, 2020, <https://citizen.co.za/news/south-africa/287794/steve-bikos-autopsy-files-stolen-1990s-wits-curator/>.

with other thinkers who are part of the Black radical tradition. The artworks by Legae, Stopforth, and Nhlengethwa that I analyzed in this chapter address predominantly the abject male *body*. Chapter two will tend to the intricacies of figuring the unmournable void gendered female, through the medium of performance.

CHAPTER TWO

“The Venus” in Two Acts: Nelisiwe Xaba’s *They Look at Me and That’s All they Think* and *Sakhozi Says ‘Non’ to the Venus*

Does the captive’s dance allay grief or articulate the fraught, compromised, and impossible character of agency? Or does it exemplify the use of the body as an instrument against itself?”

— Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*.²³²

The black body, at the vanishing point of their gaze, is reduced to its colonial origin— nothingness.

— Athi Mongezeleli Joja, “Critical Reflections on *Exhibit B*.”²³³

There is a vexed icon whose repetition in contemporary visual culture, theory, and performance eclipses the Black female subject who lies as a shadow buried beneath the sign. We call “her” by another name, and not the one assigned to *her*. The coded pseudonym we ascribe to this sign coheres through infinite distortions, effacements, and mutilations (bodily and otherwise) which unfolded over time, and have been relegated to the past, even though they flourish in the present. “The Hottentot Venus”— an alias of dishonor—bears no resemblance to its referent, Sara Baartman, even as Baartman and all Black women endure the crushing weight of this iconography.²³⁴ To state the matter with minimal opacity, the moniker “Hottentot Venus” *dis-*names South African indigenous woman Sara Baartman (1790-1815). The surface of what we know about her life is that she was transported from the Cape, displayed, and coerced to perform as an ethnographic curiosity in England and France. In death, her body was dissected for science and some of her corporeal remains were exhibited in jars for public consumption at the Muséum

²³² Hartman, (1997), 22.

²³³ Joja, Athi Mongezeleli. “Critical Reflections of *Exhibit B*” *Art South Africa* 13:2 86-87.

²³⁴ See: Jackson, Zakiyyah Iman. ““Theorizing in a Void”: Sublimity, Matter, and Physics in Black Feminist Poetics”. *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 117:3, (2018).

d'Histoire Naturelle d'Angers, the Musée de l'Homme in Paris, and later transferred to The Musée du Quai Branly—Jacques Chirac in Paris in the 1970s. The South African government (led by former President Nelson Mandela) facilitated the repatriation and burial of Baartman's remains in Vergaderingskop, a hill overlooking the Gamtoos Valley in the Eastern Cape, South Africa in 2002. The remains were buried in a gated but relatively unremarkable (which is to say un-/anti-monumental) grave consisting of a modest and flat pile of stones and cement. Dignitaries attended the burial ceremony. Indigenous Griqua rituals were performed to lay the remains to rest, and former resident Thabo Mbeki (who succeeded Mandela) delivered a speech.²³⁵

Despite African indigenous ritual's promise to facilitate closure, Baartman/"the Hottentot Venus" still cannot be properly laid to rest because she is incessantly conjured up in theory and aesthetics, for a number of purposes ranging from evidence, reparation, catharsis, liberal humanist empathy, and reconciliation. "The Hottentot Venus" is also invoked to draw comparisons with contemporary issues faced women. It functions as an "afrotrope" in the work of African and African-descended artists such as Suzan-Lori Parks, Tracey Rose, Lyle Ashton Harris, Renee Cox, Kara Walker, Wangechi Mutu, Mawande ka Zenzile and others.²³⁶ Using

²³⁵ This brief description is paradoxically the kind of perfect summing up this chapter is critiquing. Discreet acts of harm such as dissection and exhibiting constitute, but do not exhaust, the anti-black violence I am describing, which is ultimately unknowable and unrepresentable. However, the re-counting of these details is intended for the reader who is unfamiliar with Baartman. I include the incomplete summing up of Baartman's life to draw attention to how any critique of how Baartman's life is narrated also falls into the trap of relying on narration to critique narrative. This is the impasse of narrative. In this case, narration is critiqued for its unavoidable re-presentation of violence. However, the critique happens by way of re-producing the very pitfalls of narration. Ultimately, the narration of violent acts against Baartman can only scratch the surface and cannot pin down the vast gap of what we cannot know about Baartman's circumstances. For more on the dangers of re-producing the primal scene of violence through narrative, see: Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection* (1997).

²³⁶ Huey Copeland & Krista Thompson, define afrotropes as "those motifs that continue to structure the afterlives of slavery—as a shorthand way of referring to the recurrent visual forms that have emerged within and become central to the formation of African-diasporic culture and identity." See: Copeland, Huey & Thompson, Krista. "Afrotropes: A Conversation with Huey Copeland and Krista Thompson." *October*, no. 162 (2017): 3-18.

figural and non-representational depictions, they put forth a number of critiques related to picturing the voided personality concealed beneath the repeating icon. In addition to “the Venus” icon appearing in popular culture, there exists a body of work in performance and film created by non-Black (particularly white) artists, where the icon serves a number of rhetorical, pedagogical, and reparative functions. When mobilized in this manner, the fragments of the icon generate what psycho-analytic theorist Selamawit Terrefe identifies as the simultaneous “muteness and ideological purchase of the Black female imago.”²³⁷ As African feminist Zine Magubane has shown, “the Hottentot Venus” has been theorized to exhaustion in academic articles, books, anthologies, and lectures.²³⁸ All these avenues revisit (and oftentimes re-perform) the many scenes that en-/un-gendered this particular African *life* to a status of malleable “marked woman,”— a designation that, as Hortense Spillers has observed about the Slave—bears “markers so loaded with mythical prepossession that there is no easy way for the agents buried beneath them to come clean.”²³⁹ If there is no easy way of stripping down the layers of “attenuated meanings” embedded in this coded nomenclature, what can be said that has not already been rehearsed about “the Venus”?²⁴⁰ What observations can be made, and which lessons can be learned from turning to those aesthetic practices which attempt this act of stripping down overdetermined meanings ascribed to the Black woman? Which (un)intended rhetorical and aesthetic devices unflinchingly reveal what cannot and should not be recuperated in Baartman’s and Black people’s status of ontological/existential negation? What are the limits of articulation in art and performance?

²³⁷ Selamawit Terrefe, “Speaking the Hieroglyph” (2018), 127.

²³⁸ Zine Magubane, “Which Bodies Matter? Feminism, Poststructuralism, Race, and the Curious Theoretical Odyssey of the “Hottentot Venus (2001).

²³⁹ See Hortense Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe” (2003), 203.

²⁴⁰ Ibid.

I turn to South African performance artist Nelisiwe Xaba's duo of performances about "the Venus" in this chapter, as an example of attentive Black feminist study, which is an undeniably imperfect but vital attempt at this (al)most untenable act of "stripping down the layers of attenuated meanings."²⁴¹ Xaba's attempt involves the deployment of a stripped down (minimalist) performance language that draws attention to the limits of figural articulation, as well as the critical stakes of (not) representing the *unmournable void*. My attention to Xaba's work aims to situate the practice of *tending-toward blackness* in Black aesthetics, which refers to the care of experimenting with methods of moving, visualizing, or encouraging dialogue about Black captive personality that limit a resort to problematic representational modes that remain in denial of blackness's object status.²⁴² It involves a questioning of how matter matters, as well as how and why the (un-)mattering of blackness is produced. By overturning the tendency of problematic representationalism, Xaba's work enacts more than fashioning a more radicalized visual and deciphering practice on a strictly aesthetic level. Moments in her works of performance seep down the dark bottomless crevices of historical antagonism, to reveal those sedimented structures which buttress the coherence of "an anti-black world" through Black abjection.²⁴³

This chapter focuses on Xaba's "Venus" duology, which consists of *They Look At Me and That's All They Think* (2006), and *Sakhozi Says Non to the Venus* (2019).²⁴⁴ This duo of

²⁴¹ Ibid.

²⁴² See: Huey Copeland, *Bound to Appear* (2013).

²⁴³ Africana philosopher Lewis Gordon's corpus of work provides a detailed explanation of "an anti-black world." I rely mostly on his discussion of the concept in his book titled *Bad Faith*. See: Lewis Gordon, *Bad Faith and Antiracism* (1995).

²⁴⁴ The *Venus* diptych functions as an ur-text that anchors our understanding of her entire artistic corpus, *Plasticization* (2005), *Correspondances* (2008), *Bantu Ghost: a stream of black consciousness* (2007); *The Last Attitude* (2015), *Fremde Tanze* (2017), *Uncles and Angels* (2013), and other works.

interconnected performances engages with two iconic Black feminine figures in performance; Sara or “Saartjie”²⁴⁵ Baartman (1790-1815) and Josephine Baker (1906-1975). I take performance theorist Hershini Bhana Young’s approach as a guide in addressing what she calls “endless repatriations” of Baartman.²⁴⁶ These performances were created following the repatriation and burial of Saartjie Baartman’s bodily remains that were on display in French museums for two centuries. Both pieces encourage an engagement with the sublimity of Baartman as icon, product, and signifying surplus of aesthetic figuration, and the need to theorize sublimity outside of a perverse gesture that uncritically recuperates beauty out of the grotesque.²⁴⁷ I draw attention to how contemporary ideological orientations and desires of scholars and artists are often projected on the surface of “the Hottentot Venus” as icon. For those “ethical” and social justice approaches which rely on providing a counter-narrative to the Black female body’s abject status in discourse, the intention is often to re-write and re-imagine history by embellishing structural dispossession with romances of pleasure. This minimizes the absoluteness of Baartman’s dereliction. Xaba’s *Venus* performances take as their point of departure a critique of these recuperative artistic undertakings. She attempts to expose the silences in traditional archives and narratives of Black subjection, while contending openly with the inevitability of replicating those very grammars of violence in performance.

²⁴⁵ The “-tjie” in “Saartjie” is a diminutive in the Afrikaans language. In the Afrikaans language, that diminutive can sometimes be deployed as a term of endearment for a loved one, or for showing affection to a younger family member. But in the case of Sara Baartman, and in the nineteenth century in general, this diminutive serves a belittling and infantilizing function. It marked one as inferior and a slave. See: Z.S. Strother, “Display of the Body Hottentot” in *Africans of Stage* (1999), 48.

²⁴⁶ Hershini Bhana Young, *Illegible Will: Coercive Spectacles of Labor in South Africa and the Diaspora*. (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2017).

²⁴⁷ I thank Professor Zakiyyah Iman Jackson for this insight, which she articulated during a panel for a Black Critical Thought workshop I co-organized in Spring 2019, called *Rupture and Relation*, at Northwestern University.

Drawing from the interventions of Black performance and aesthetic theorists such as Saidiya Hartman, Frank B. Wilderson III, Fred Moten, and others, I attend to the stakes of “the Black body’s” exchangeability with objects and other matter reduced to nothing.²⁴⁸ Xaba’s aesthetic-philosophical choices are employed against a visual/performative regime that endlessly repeats the sign and image of “the Venus” for purposes of relegating her to her colonial a/object status. This structure fuses anti-black terror and enjoyment.²⁴⁹ Xaba’s “Venus” performances, rather than attempting to monumentalize “Venus” or incorporate *her* as a denied but proper Subject of history, draws attention to the Black female body’s degraded and absented labor as modern culture’s *material* inheritance.²⁵⁰ Our modern and postmodern aesthetic categories, tools of scientific knowledge, theories of aesthetic judgment, and modalities of curating hierarchies of difference are unimaginable without the Black [female] body as the “principal point of passage” whose labor must be accumulated by and disavowed within those categories.²⁵¹

The chapter moves from a discussion of my methods for approaching the above questions, to a socio-historical contextualization of Xaba’s work in (post-) apartheid South Africa, followed by a discussion of the tension caused by Xaba’s embrace of a movement language that encompasses minimalism, abstraction, and conceptualism. This is important because it reveals how African performers are still expected to show up in performance through strictly folkloric African forms. These expectations are not merely about aesthetics, but they bind

²⁴⁸ This status of commutability, as I argue across the dissertation, confounds the logic of mournability. Blackness, I maintain, is the *unmournable void* that confounds representation and figuration, and marks the limits of the knowable (Jackson). How, then, do we begin to mourn a suffering that is not entirely knowable as well as ongoing? Do artistic practices of grief which attend to Black death obfuscate and repress this suffering by making it legible and representable? What are the stakes of conflating Black suffering with the individual subject of Freudian mourning and melancholia whose loss is reckonable?

²⁴⁹ Hartman (1997).

²⁵⁰ See: Moten (2003).

²⁵¹ Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe,” in *Red, White, and in Color* (2003), 155.

the African with still time and tradition. They fix the African within the space of the bodily/affective/energetic juxtaposed against the conceptual and the modern. Before discussing both of Xaba's works at length, I review literature that provocatively broaches the question of "the black woman" in representation, in ways that offer alternative critical models (that foreground an attention to political ontology) for thinking with "the Venus."

The first piece, *They Look at Me*, redirects attention to questions of looking in relation to "the black female body" in general, and the iconography of "the Hottentot Venus" in particular. I offer a close reading of *They Look At Me* in relation to a broad proliferation of images and narratives about Baartman that conjure her up for purposes of symbolic justice and reparation, and in doing so, actually enact further unavoidable violence upon her. I argue that this violence is neither reducible to representationalist performances (whose impetus for literal representation is to provide more "visibility" to Baartman's suffering), nor to those narrative maneuvers drafted to recuperate agency and will for Baartman's and other coerced Black performances. The violence I describe extends (and this is important) even to subversive, "minoritarian," or "counter-hegemonic"²⁵² approaches.

The second part of the chapter is an analysis of *Sakhozi Says "Non"* which homes in on the limits of restitution, and elaborates upon the plasticity of Black corporeal, archival, and performance remains. I draw attention to contemporary tendencies in art institutions where African performers are commissioned to labor for the rehabilitation of Western colonial guilt and white psychic redemption under the guise of "decolonizing the museum." I specifically consider what the dissection and institutional ownership of Sara Baartman's corporeal remains yielded for

²⁵² See: Stuart Hall, Hall, Stuart, Slack, Jennifer Daryl, and Grossberg, Lawrence. *Cultural Studies 1983: A Theoretical History*. (Durham, [NC]: Duke University Press, 2016). Also See: Dwight Conquergood, *Cultural Struggles* (2013).

French culture, Western science and aesthetics, and white collective psychic life. I argue that while European institutions are beginning to consider returning material objects accumulated during colonialism, the new mode of salvaging ownership of African things is inviting African artists to surrogate, or act as substitutes, for those remains/materials that are being repatriated. Staged performances, for the museum, perform the same functions as those repatriated materials. I ask: what do these performative engagements with the colonial archive enact for Africans and African-derived persons? Do they usher in symbolic reparations, “perhaps the only kind we will ever receive?”²⁵³ In performing all the “Venuses” again and again, to what degree are African performers relegated back to their colonial a/object status? I posit that these African performances in the West, no matter how critical or self-aware, are not only received in a manner that buttresses enduring (pre-)Enlightenment racialized modes of looking/feeling/knowing, but they also serve a liberal function of restoring white psychic rehabilitation. *Sakhozi Says Non* approaches these as not problems of the past, by invoking the contemporary Black African domestic servant’s plasticized and cyborg subjectivity.²⁵⁴ In doing so, the performance reveals connections between contemporary capitalist accumulation and Black women’s transnational labor.

This analysis is the result of engaging with Xaba’s live and video performances since I was an undergraduate student with an interest in Black feminist theater in 2007. I have also conducted formal interviews and engaged in informal conversations with Xaba, as well as

²⁵³ Saidiya Hartman, “Venus in Two Acts” (2008).

²⁵⁴ Saidiya Hartman theorizes this as “accumulation and fungibility.” (See: Hartman, Saidiya V. *Scenes of Subjection* (1997). For a discussion of blackness and plasticity, see: Zakiyyah Iman Jackson: “Losing Manhood” (2016). For a discussion of plasticity that focuses on “possibility,” see: Uri McMillan, *Embodied Avatars: Genealogies of Black Feminist Art and Performance*. (New York: New York University Press, 2015).

observed post-performance conversations. Thinking with Xaba in this manner requires a move away from reporting on or breaking down the meaning of her work. Rather, my focus in this essay is to take seriously Xaba's particular Black feminist intervention, enacted alongside and against related aesthetic practices and scholarly discourses that tend to the "Venus Hottentot" icon. I have also attended the performances that I read alongside Xaba's and I have engaged with the visual art materials at galleries and museums. This chapter combines visual, performance, movement analytical, and psychoanalytic methodologies from the Black Diaspora. Xaba's attention to trans-Atlantic and trans-temporal flows of performance calls for such an analytical approach that draws peripatetically from Black Atlantic thought, so as to refrain from fixing her as merely an authentic figure of area studies or reading her work exclusively through socio-/anthropo-logical and biographical pathos.²⁵⁵

In engaging the work of Xaba and related post-apartheid artists, it is crucial to refrain from taking for granted the complicity of politicized artistic work. In that vein, the task here is to follow a methodological orientation that remains perceptive and intuitive to those undertheorized moments where politically overt works of art not only succumb to the trap of critiquing the obvious, but also move by way of hiding their own complicity, ambiguity, ambivalence, and contradiction. This is the case with works that I read alongside Xaba's, by artists such as Steven Cohen and Mary Sibande. Rather than excavating Baartman's resistance, humanity, and interiority; or clinging to a (choreo)politics of restitution in Xaba's work, what might be possible if we also interrogate our own positions from which we theorize? That way we may more clearly comprehend how our own location as scholars sometimes constructs and obstructs our view of

²⁵⁵ For a critique of reading work by Black artists strictly through biographical pathos, see: Spillers, "Peter's Pan's" in *Red, White, and in Color* (2003).

those aspects of Black performance which direct us to a generative but unfamiliar ground, one that is removed from (our) fantasies and our appeals to (refurbished) subjectivity. Put differently, I am interested in what performance theory stands to gain from also sensing those negative aspects of Black performance which are often suppressed or repudiated in pursuit of analyses that favor narratives of becoming, pleasure, resisting, world-making, disidentifying, and agency? The aspiration of this project is to arrive at a sensational methodology whose primary thrust is thickening analysis by engaging in a conversation with the aesthetic-philosophical interventions in Black artists' work, rather than a psycho-(patho)logization of individual artists. To attend to the questions posed above, the performance and visual art works themselves steer us away from strictly cultural readings of death and blackness, inviting us to take seriously what an analysis of political ontology might reveal about performance and anti-black violence.²⁵⁶

Nelisiwe Xaba and the Post-apartheid Condition

Born in Soweto, Johannesburg, Nelisiwe Xaba received her dance training at the Johannesburg Dance Foundation as well as the Rambert School of Ballet and Contemporary Dance in London. She was one of the dancers chosen by former President Nelson Mandela in the mid-1990s to participate in a scholarship program that allowed South African dancers to train at the Rambert School. This initiative was a result of Mandela's deliberations with then retired English ballerina of the Royal Ballet, Anya Sainsbury, who helped set up the Scholarship Fund. The purpose of this initiative was to use the arts "to create nation-building and racial harmony" after the "fall" of apartheid.²⁵⁷ The scholarship was granted to South African dancers of all races,

²⁵⁶ See: Wilderson III, Frank B (2010).

²⁵⁷ Rodriguez King-Dorset, *Mandela's Dancers: Oral Histories of Program Participants and Organizers*. (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company Inc., 2016), 6.

regardless of their orientation to dispossession during apartheid. The purpose of this initiative was to use the arts “to create nation-building and racial harmony” after the fall of apartheid.²⁵⁸ The scholarship was granted to South African dancers of all races, regardless of their orientation to dispossession during apartheid. In *Mandela’s Dancers: Oral Histories of Program Participants and Organizers*, a book published about the scholarship fund, when asked whether Nelson Mandela was a role model for her, Xaba responds: “I’m sorry to say that my look at politics is much more radical than Mandela’s, so Mandela wasn’t my role model. I think he compromised too much to the detriment of the majority of South Africans”²⁵⁹ The compromise Xaba speaks of is Mandela and the ANC’s decision for transitional coalition with the outgoing apartheid National Party to lead a joint government.²⁶⁰ These odd collaborations also diffused into the politics of culture, particularly Black South African art making, where Black artistic success depended, and continues to depend upon European and American support, cornering artists into a position of circumstantial collaborators, often in projects that consolidate the project of “Nation.”

Xaba emerged as a professional dancer within a framework in which artists were expected to provide coherence for post-1994 nation-building, particularly the “rainbow nation” public relations and marketing project. In 1991, *TDR: The Drama Review* published an essay

²⁵⁸ Ibid.

²⁵⁹ Xaba in Ibid., 94.

²⁶⁰ The justification for this coalition was to make the transition from legal apartheid smooth and save the country from civil war. The implied notion about “saving South Africa from civil war” said more about the fear of an apparently ensuing *swaart gevaar*, or Black danger/threat. The rhetoric of “preventing civil war” was a stand-in for something else that was implied; the anticipation and fear of an encroaching fictive White genocide. The rhetoric of vindictive Black brutes with fantasies of White genocide still reigns supreme in the White collective unconscious — liberal, conservative, and otherwise. Xaba is suggesting that the move between Mandela, his ANC, and National Party collaborators to save South Africa happened at the expense of Black liberation and Black people. For that reason, she gestures toward some undertheorized detriments of democracy which, in certain instances, outweigh the gains (especially for the most vulnerable members of the Black community in South Africa).

titled “Preparing Ourselves for Freedom: Culture and the ANC Constitutional Guidelines” by then activist, lawyer, and member of the African National Congress’s Constitutional Committee, Albie Sachs.²⁶¹ Published in the wake of Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela’s release from 27 years in prison, Sachs acknowledged the extensive tradition of South African artists who turned to protest art and performance as modes of analyzing and responding to apartheid brutality.²⁶² The transition to democracy, for Sachs, instantiated a necessity for addressing the direction of South African cultural creation, particularly an opening up of opportunities previously not available to Black artists. He understood the transition from *de jure* apartheid as a moment for artists to step back from foregrounding themes of spectacular violence and “sloganeering”²⁶³ in their work, and instead to seriously experiment with form, provocatively asking, “are we ready for freedom, or do we prefer to be angry victims?”²⁶⁴

The election of the first Black president, Nelson Mandela, as well as the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in the early 1990s fashioned a sense of catharsis, hope, as well as promises of justice and redress that were never fully achieved. Although this collective hope was understood as opening up new possibilities to move beyond themes of suffering in artistic praxis, a number of Black artists persisted against compulsory hope by foregrounding aspects of struggle and political activism during this period of purported freedom. One such artist is performance artist Nelisiwe Xaba, whose corpus of work insists on showing how the suffering that is often relegated to the historical past is entangled with the historical present. Xaba, in

²⁶¹ Sachs, Albie. “Preparing Ourselves for Freedom: Culture and the ANC Constitutional Guidelines.” (1991), 187.

²⁶² Some prominent figures associated with the protest performance tradition in South Africa include Gibson Kente, Miriam Makeba, Barney Simon, Maishe Maponya, Athol Fugard and the Serpent Players, Mbongeni Ngema, and others.

²⁶³ Sachs, 192.

²⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 187.

interviews, states that she was not aware the scholarship was tied to Nelson Mandela: “I never knew that it was a Mandela/Sainsbury scholarship, all I knew was that it was a Sainsbury scholarship.”²⁶⁵ She expresses her frustration with the conservatoire curriculum at Rambert, which she acknowledges helped her to practice her dance technique, but at the time she found it lacking in critical thinking about the (Black) dancing body.

Xaba and her contemporaries, most of whom trained in classical ballet and modern dance, severed fixed allegiance with those dance forms in the late 1990s and late 2000s to embrace experimental, improvisational, and concept-based modes of performance-making.²⁶⁶ These modes focused predominantly on subject matter related to race, gender, sexuality, class etc., as well as more abstract leitmotifs related to temporality, speed, direction, and object-oriented composition. These formal aesthetic decisions both complied with and exceeded Albie Sachs’ manifesto by responding to global demands for artistic innovation grounded in socio-political issues. Their emergence or increased “visibility” was partly made possible by the “fruits” of a budding democracy, which for Sachs (and by extension the African National Congress), mandated a move away from revolutionary sensibilities and approaches. Sachs’ argument was not merely about promoting new and improved, or more sophisticated ways of engaging “our” apparently shared realities through art and culture. Given the events and investments of the ANC (a party he spoke on behalf of) at that juncture, it is worth underscoring that his utterances cohere with the party’s turn to a mode of “preparing ourselves for freedom,” that involved banning all (perceived) revolutionary formations and acts of practice. Art critic, Athi Mongezeleli Joja describes the ANC’s turn at length below:

²⁶⁵ Ibid., 94.

²⁶⁶ These artists include Boyzie Cekwana, Jay Pather, Ntombi Gasa, Desiré Davids, Hlengiwe Lushaba Madlala, Nelisiwe Rushualang, Musa Hlatshwayo, Mamela Nyamza, Sello Phesa, and others.

What remained a conspicuously untreated, but nevertheless interesting enigma, is how the renunciation of art as a weapon of struggle coevally transpired at the crossroads of growing revolutionary energy and compromise. In fact, Sachs's project must be understood within the broader ANC party line commanding that all revolutionary forces be liquidated. That is, *the disbanding of the armed wing, Umkhonto Wesizwe, and the depoliticization of culture are analogous*. So, the fate of cultural practices — to cease being an ideologically informed critical enterprise, emanates from the liberation movement's own counter-revolutionary position.”²⁶⁷

For Joja, Sachs' call to “abandon culture as a weapon of struggle” happened coevally with the ANC's disbanding of its own armed wing, and this launched the politically taciturn days of our lives. Taciturn in the sense that aesthetics did not abandon the political. Instead, political art was used as a substitute for, or came to stand in for a liquidated revolution. Post-1994 political or counter-hegemonic art and performance ironically took part in the de-radicalization of culture, since aesthetics came to be known as the revolution itself, rather than a mode of instigating revolutionary thought and praxis. The ANC's “counter-revolutionary” position was choreographed in the service of making culture and its creators adhere to the party's “compromise” project, as Xaba calls it above, or a “sellout project,” as even bolder critics often discuss it.²⁶⁸ In other words, Sachs' essay was a treatise drafted to tether the masses to the status quo, a realization of the dream of neoliberal democracy.

Post-1994 neoliberal culture, therefore, is not characterized by the complete repudiation of ideology. On the contrary, cultural/artistic practices, “functions as the unmarked creative double of politics,” as well as a tool for the ruling elite's political ideology.²⁶⁹ Ideology in artistic forms was not completely overthrown after 1994. Rather, some artistic forms adhered to the

²⁶⁷ Athi Mongezeleli Joja, “20 Years After Democracy,” *Contemporary And*, August 2014. Accessed September 11, 2018, <https://www.contemporaryand.com/magazines/culture-in-another-south-africa-20-years-after-democracy/>.

²⁶⁸ The Rhodes Must Fall and Fees Must Fall activist movements have been the most vocal about this, framing their demands against what they call the “sellout project” of Nelson Mandela's post-1994 project.

²⁶⁹ Joja (2014).

mantra of the new ruling elite's multicultural rainbowisms, anti-revolutionary positions, as well as the self-serving "auto-critical" stance which interdicted critique from outside, exemplifying the contradictions of democracy. This is to say that the ruling elite's intentions were, and are still, buttressed and concealed by what is presented to the masses as innocent festivities: festivals, concerts, sport and recreation, as well as high formalist artistic endeavors that proclaim to be art for art's sake. The method of ruling and muting the revolutionary agenda (or at least practices of speaking back to/against the flaws of the current democratic government), happens through co-opting the idea of culture as ideology. It is then used as a kind of opium to lull the Black masses to slumber. Politicized post-1994 Black art, unlike before, came to be supported, fiscally and otherwise, by the new democratic government which had also paradoxically drafted a plan for artists to cease being an ideologically informed critical enterprise, as Joja intimates. This means that post-apartheid artists, even politicized ones, are implicated in the "compromise" project, their overt political stance notwithstanding. Their projects are entangled in the reproduction and endorsement of the ideologically taciturn demands of democracy. Overtly political artistic practices which attempt to challenge Sachs' thesis, also find themselves muting those critical voices which organize against the "compromise" directives of post-apartheid democracy. Often, overtly political works hide more than reveal, obfuscate rather than illuminate, the various machinations of power and domination they profess to critique. Thus, the ethical quagmire confronting contemporary culture and its workers emanates from this culture's "retain[ment] of its many contradictions even when it simulates a critique."²⁷⁰ Nelisiwe Xaba's work is generative for these ruminations, as she insists on undermining Sachs' assumptive logic,

²⁷⁰ Ibid.

while also demonstrating an awareness of how as a Black woman performer, she is also haunted by the quagmire. The “Venus” performances enact a rupture to the dichotomies posited by Sachs between interiority and exteriority, quotidian violence and spectacular violence, as well as apartheid and post-apartheid.

This idea of representing the nation is one that artists are still confronted with in South Africa, whether by doing direct diplomatic international relations work for the government or by participating in festivals and biennales curated with the intention to represent the nation. Xaba’s ongoing resistance to being captured and interpellated into this “nation building and racial harmony” project manifests partly in her blatantly unruly aesthetic and (anti-)narrative approach.²⁷¹ First, her approach to the subject of the “Hottentot Venus” contrasts both the government’s and the memory industry’s mobilizations of the “Hottentot Venus” for the purpose of nation-building. Second, she departs from the deployment of the romantic language of “home” and “restored dignity” in reference to the repatriation and burial of Saartjie Baartman’s remains in 2002.²⁷²

Xaba’s experiences as a trainee and professional Black female dancer inform the framing of her performance works, which focus on the transnational flow of (anti-)Black performance, Black women’s movement, and the relationship between sexuality and the unconscious.

²⁷¹ My use of “unruly” is guided, in part, by some of the insights offered by Nihad Farooq. See: Farooq, Nihad M. *Undisciplined: Science, Ethnography, and Personhood in the Americas, 1830-1940*, (New York: New York University Press, 2016).

²⁷² The website for The South African Heritage Resources Agency (SAHRA), an agency of the Department of Arts and Culture, discusses the “repatriation” of Baartman’s remains. The site states, “After the end of Apartheid her remains were finally returned *home* and she was afforded a dignified burial on a hill overlooking the Gamtoos Valley in the Eastern Cape. With her *dignity restored*, her grave is a reminder to all to strive towards recognizing injustices and work towards the upliftment of human rights, dignity and life” (see: The South African Heritage Resources Agency 2015, italics added for emphasis). I contend that the language of restored dignity and repatriation endows Baartman’s remains with a romance of narrative closure that is highly contested, as demonstrated by Xaba’s methodological approach to that narrative.

Describing her experience as a pre-professional dancer traveling to the United States for the first time with a dance group called Street Beat, Xaba states:

In my first trip, when I actually left South Africa, I was going to America; I was younger, about 21 . . . I left South Africa with a dance group, so we left for America, but soon when we arrived it was clear for me that it was some kind of slave trade, because we were taken as young people who have never been outside Soweto to America without a return ticket. I suppose at that time the embassies were not so strict, but still it's not secure for the dancers. You don't leave without a return ticket because maybe you won't be able to return, and you didn't have a contract or a salary. But before you leave, just like [Sara] Baartman, you're promised that you'll make money and everything's going to be fantastic when you arrive.²⁷³

The above passage connects her experience of being “taken” to the U.S. with Baartman’s experience, both of which inform her “Venus” works. The provocative intersection between the slave trade and her trans-Atlantic movement in the late 20th century is worth noting. Her diagnosis of the transnational flow of Black performance, her attention to time, and her blurring of past, present, and future tenses expose the continuity of atrocities that have been relegated to the past but continue in the present. This involves framing post-1994 freedom as that which still awaits arrival while highlighting the persistence of terror on the Black body in ways either spectacular in their brutality, or disguised in positive grammars of empathy, relation, reconciliation, patriotism, multiracial sisterhood, love, and care. Her performance *oeuvre* offers models for understanding what it means for contemporary South African dancers to be mobilized as symbols of the rainbow nation project, what remains unspoken and unspeakable in assuming that position, and where “body” stands (in) for nation. In engaging with these approaches, spectators are invited to account for what moves and what stands still in the afterlife of apartheid, slavery, and colonialism.

²⁷³ Annalisa Piccirillo, “Speaking with Nelisiwe Xaba: Re-dancing a Body, Re-imagining a continent,” *Anglistica* 15. 1. (2011),” 96.

Since creating these works attuned Xaba to the archives, she confronts the impasses presented by the archive by enacting an approach akin to Saidiya Hartman’s concept and practice of “critical fabulation”— a speculative and critical approach to history and the archive that does not attempt to fill the gaps and voids in the archive.²⁷⁴ Critical fabulation is a “history written with and against the archive [which] tells a story of impossibility and amplifies the impossibility of its telling.”²⁷⁵ Critical fabulation’s indifferent concern for concrete proof and evidence for events distinguishes it from conventional historiographic methodologies, as it troubles the notion of all evidence as tactile/textual. By conceiving of materiality beyond tangibility and intelligibility, critical fabulation accounts for the spectrality, impermanence, and capriciousness of evidence. Such an approach, as it manifests in Xaba’s work as well as other Black artistic approaches, is not intended to salvage or aestheticize the silence. Rather, it is a mode of speculating about what Black knowledge production may look like when not fixated on recuperating archival silences.

The Materialdiscursive Production of “the Venus”/ “The Black [Female] Body”

Before a discussion of Black female iconicity and the politics of the look in Xaba’s *They Look At Me*, I briefly outline how I am understanding “the black female body” throughout this chapter. I specifically outline how discourse and performance act together to produce the *unmournable void*, the Black’s status as non-being. The “Black (female) body” is not taken up using common sense understandings that frame it as an invisible and unvoiced but knowable identity category awaiting its coherent emergence into the visible world or awaiting to speak back against the false meanings entrusted upon it. I also recognize that performances of blackness are not a monolith.

²⁷⁴ Hartman (2008).

²⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 11.

They differ from one geo-temporal order to another, and they are shaped by “the black body’s” relationship to nation state, citizenship, imperialism, liberal capitalism, and other sociopolitical arrangements. The task at hand is to assess how Black critical thought and artistic praxis approach the question of matter, meaning, and the void; or what blackness is made to *mean*, as well as the consequences of that *meaning making*. There are two main tendencies (out of many) in the study of blackness/black performance; one focusing on experience (performance, movement), and the other focusing on ontological questions (position, structure, stasis). Both tendencies conjure up matter/materiality for different as well as interconnected purposes. For this chapter, I am interested in how the two tendencies intertwine and how they detach in their approaches to theorizing “the black (female) body.”

Performance theorist E. Patrick Johnson poses the question, “What is at stake when race and or blackness is theorized discursively, and the material reality of the “black” subject is occluded.”²⁷⁶ He draws attention to the stakes of an exclusively discursive lens in creating knowledge about blackness/black performance. Of concern to him are the limitations of foregrounding a strictly discursive analysis at the expense of experience and fleshy materiality.²⁷⁷ Returning to the question of the “occlusion”²⁷⁸ that transpires when “material reality” is ignored in favor of a discursive analysis, I am interested in the question of “the black female body” and how matter/“reality” and discourse are arranged in the production of “the

²⁷⁶ Johnson, E. Patrick. *Appropriating Blackness: Performance and the Politics of Authenticity* (2003), 2.

²⁷⁷ This call for a focus on materiality can also be gleaned in recent feminist new materialism, a field with a tendency to be oblivious of Johnson’s and other Black feminist/queer theorist calls for a focus on materiality in a way that refrains from re-establishing hierarchies between materiality and discursivity. In chapter three, I discuss how feminist quantum physicist Karen Barad’s argument about the “entanglement” and “intra-action” of the discursive and material, forming a non-hyphenated “materialdiscursive” is haunted by certain black feminist debates, while also offering a set of useful frameworks for black feminist theory. See: Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway* (2007).

²⁷⁸ Johnson, E. Patrick. *Appropriating Blackness*, 2.

black (female) body.” Blackness, for Johnson, is “an elusive signifier.”²⁷⁹ While he recognizes this signifiatory property, the aim of his project is to foreground an analysis attuned to materiality/“material reality”— understood throughout his scholarly corpus as a discredited site of knowledge— in the discourse versus materiality hierarchical struggle. He calls this the “‘living of blackness’ [that] becomes a material way of knowing.”²⁸⁰ For that reason, the question of ontology, or more precisely onto-epistemology, in *Appropriating Blackness* is not as urgent or central as in Zakiyyah Jackson’s “Theorizing in a Void,” an essay that also concerns itself with matter, materiality, discourse, and representation.²⁸¹ While both scholars begin with the question of blackness as a “signifier,” Johnson’s is predominantly a *cultural* reading of the signifier’s legible performances, particularly what I read to be their fungible availability and circulation between sentient beings on and off stage. The ascription of mythical fictions upon black[ened] sentient “bodies,” as well as the subsumption, consumption, and citation of those myths and stereotypes by non-Blacks is what Johnson is calling “appropriating blackness.” While he is interrogating *how* those stereotypes and performances attributed to blackness come to be claimed by different racial groups such that blackness “doesn’t *belong* to black[ened] people,”²⁸² Zakiyyah Jackson’s concern is to probe *why* blackness and Blacks come to belong to non-Blacks as property in the first place, such that they cannot claim ownership neither to *themselves*, nor to the Black cultural performance they produce, as *their* property. Both scholars critique the hierarchical structures that exist as a result of separating the material and the discursive. Johnson’s approach pays more attention to discreet acts of practice and oral historical

²⁷⁹ Ibid., 2.

²⁸⁰ Ibid., 8.

²⁸¹ Jackson, Zakiyyah Iman. “Theorizing in a Void” (2018).

²⁸² Ibid., 2.

utterances, while Jackson takes a step further by probing, “what is at stake when we attempt to invert the representation-matter hierarchy?”²⁸³ She is cautioning against the exaltation of material experience over the discursive, as that risks reinforcing new hierarchies. That question is particularly important for this project whose aim is to understand “the black female body’s” (particularly “the Hottentot Venus”) iconicity through the entanglement of the material and discursive. This is an understanding of blackness that takes seriously black experience, while also theorizing (anti-)blackness as irreducible to what black people say about their experience.²⁸⁴ Rather than jettisoning experience altogether, I question whether there is a way to discuss Black embodied experience without fixing the referent inside legible identity categories? Before we can speak of the “black female’s” experience with utmost confidence, must we first question what it is we speak of when we bring up the “black female body”? Through Zakiyyah Jackson’s theorization, we glean how “the Hottentot Venus,” rather than being an empirical sign, is a material metaphor made to cohere through figuration and projection in aesthetic, literary, and scientific representation.²⁸⁵ As signifier, “the Hottentot Venus,” bears no stable resemblance to the referent, Sara Baartman.²⁸⁶ “The black female body” is neither equivalent to its iconography nor its fleshly representationalist doubles.²⁸⁷ Since the “black female body” is overrepresented as both absence and hypervisibility, the aporia between those polarities has been taken up by Black feminist scholars such as Kimberlé Crenshaw and Hortense Spillers through a deployment of

²⁸³ Jackson, “Theorizing in a Void,” 623.

²⁸⁴ Jackson, “Waking Nightmares,” 358

²⁸⁵ Jackson, “Theorizing in a Void,” 619-20.

²⁸⁶ Jackson, “Theorizing in a Void,” 623.

²⁸⁷ Ibid.,621. Further, Jackson then extrapolates “the black female body” away from the fixity of stable identity categorization and argues instead for *black femininity* or the black *mater(nal)* function.

concepts such as intersection, liminality, vestibularity, and interstice.²⁸⁸ These concepts have provided much-needed clarity about the production of “the black female’s” ontological status, as simultaneously unthought and obscurely visibilized.²⁸⁹ These Black feminist scholars elucidate the banishment of “the black female body” from the category of the Human or correlate Womanhood, and as Jackson acknowledges, they direct attention to a need for an alternative theoretical site to extrapolate “the black female body” from conflation, analogy, and co-optation into the Universal. Jackson, however, expands these Black feminist critical insights by drawing attention to the limits of standpoint. While vestibularity, interstitiality, intersectionality, and liminality are useful frameworks (and by no means retrograde), their implied location “in-between” dyadic nodal points reifies a certain fidelity to standpoint, and Jackson’s task is to move away from standpoint. These concepts assume a “teleological passage”/seriality or in-between-ness, and she argues that anti-blackness demands for blackness to signify as a virtual ontology, rather than an interstitial or liminal ontology.²⁹⁰ The provisional term she puts forward for this virtual ontology is “superposition,” which is a move away from understanding “the black female’s” voided non-/hyper-presence as located in-between dualistic polarities, but rather as entangled in relational hierarchies.²⁹¹ Superposition is a way of understanding the “black female’s” voided personality not through a fidelity to standpoint. When she describes the black *mater*(nal), then, it is not reducible to the figure of the cisgender mother. Rather than being an

²⁸⁸ Here she cites Kimberlé Crenshaw and Hortense Spillers, and I would also add E. Patrick Johnson’s statement that “blackness resides in the liminal space of the psyche where its manifestation is neither solely volitional nor without agency.” See: Johnson (2003), 8.

²⁸⁹ Jackson, “Theorizing in a Void,” 621. For the position of “the unthought,” see: Saidiya V. Hartman and Frank B. Wilderson, “The Position of the Unthought,” *Qui Parle* 13, no. 2 (2003): 183-201.

²⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 637.

²⁹¹ Elsewhere, Jackson refers to blackness’s status as “interposition.” See: Jackson, Zakiyyah Iman. “Losing Manhood: Animality and Plasticity in the (Neo)Slave Narrative.” *Qui Parle* 25, no. 1-2 (2016): 96.

identity figure of standpoint (knowable through sex-gender polarities such as cis vs. trans), the black *mater*(nal) is superpositioned as “indeterminacy, virtuality, and incalculability.”²⁹²

Drawing upon the work of feminist quantum physicist Karen Barad, Jackson further elaborates:

In considering the black *mater*(nal), what this suggests is that there is no preexisting “black female body” with determinate boundaries and properties that precede interaction but only black *mater*(nal) phenomena or material-discursive intra-actions at every scale, processual differentiation of objects-within-phenomena: “cutting together-apart, entangling differentiating (one move).”²⁹³

Given those insights, I aim to approach the question of the “black female body” and particularly “the Hottentot Venus’s” iconicity not as “preexisting” or “with determinate boundaries and properties that precede interaction,” but rather as a signifier that was/is *produced*.²⁹⁴

Jackson’s argument resonates with African feminist scholar Oyèrónké Oyèwùmí’s discussion of precolonial Yorùbá societal arrangements where “there were no *women* [or *men*]—defined in strictly gendered terms in that society” since social roles and hierarchies were not determined through sex-gender, but through other factors such as seniority.²⁹⁵ Such categorizations and hierarchies determined by sex-gender binaries became prevalent as a consequence of colonial invasion. Their hierarchical production, for Oyèwùmí, does not precede colonial interaction. The intention here is to understand how what was produced, from different directions, and through contrasting motives and power maneuvers coalesced into a materialdiscursive metaphor masquerading as empirical. Far from being a resolved theoretical object or “alibic reality” knowable exclusively through what Johnson is calling “material reality,” “the black female figure,” (particularly “the Hottentot Venus” as icon) is a

²⁹² Jackson, “Theorizing in a Void,” 636.

²⁹³ Ibid.

²⁹⁴ Ibid.

²⁹⁵ Oyèrónké Oyèwùmí, *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), xiii.

conglomeration of historical materialdiscursive maneuvers and “socially imposed opacities” thrust upon the referent. These are operationalized to confer coherence to binaristic and hierarchical Western metaphysical logics, and the “Venus” icon is the virtual outside of those binaries.²⁹⁶ Colonial African and trans-Atlantic slavery’s *ungendering*²⁹⁷ of the Black as “female,” is related, but also distinct from the general inferiorization of white and non-Black “females.” As Oyèwùmí posits:

For African women, the tragedy deepened in that the colonial experience threw them to the very bottom of a history that was not theirs. Thus, the unenviable position of European women became theirs by imposition, even as European women were lifted over Africans because their race was privileged.²⁹⁸

In that respect, for Oyèwùmí the “black female” is positioned outside of the “female” that was subjugated within European discourse, even as she is occasionally incorporated into the “feminine race.” In other words, European women’s position within a “privileged race” makes their status incommensurate with Baartman’s status, as well as the status of colonized and enslaved African women. Jackson’s argument about an imposed inscription redirects focus from a consensus about “the black female body” as a knowable secure sign, allowing us to more clearly glean the latent biocentric logics hypostasized even in theoretical undertakings that seek to evade biocentrism.²⁹⁹ Understanding “the black female body” without relying exclusively on representationalism provides a useful mode of assessing the functions, utilities, and pitfalls of identitarian politics, some of which have been [or have had to be] a central grammar of articulation for Black feminism’s engagement with questions of the “black female body’s”

²⁹⁶ Jackson, “Theorizing in a Void,” 619.

²⁹⁷ Spillers, *Mama’s Baby* (2003).

²⁹⁸ See: Oyèwùmí (1997), 153.

²⁹⁹ Oyèwùmí identifies and critiques this “bio-logic” and “somato-centricity” in Western thought’s conceptualization of “woman.” See: *Ibid.*

ontological absence. The struggle between non-representationalism and figuration is central in Nelisiwe Xaba's *They Look at Me*. It also haunts every other artistic/literary rendering of "the Venus Hottentot." Since Xaba deploys formal visual and performance strategies that do not rule out the figural completely, my curiosity lies in the impasse of representation that makes it absolutely unavoidable for the artist to return to problematic aspects of the figural (even if briefly). If non-representationalist aesthetics derives its political efficacy from how much is not said or figured literally, then what does the constant return to charged iconography of the "Hottentot Venus" (especially the enlarged buttocks) in visual representation make possible or obscure? What are the lessons provided by non-representationalist Black feminist theory and aesthetic praxis?

Africa and the When of Post-Modernist Aesthetics

Xaba's search for a fitting vocabulary to represent the "Venus" icon has led her to gravitate towards aspects of minimalism, conceptualism, and abstractions. This raises eyebrows since these characteristics are usually tied to avant-garde practices from the West. While critics can fathom Xaba's technical proficiency in ballet and African folkloric dances, the turn to those elements of performance considered avant-garde is often seen as un-original. This has to do with the African body's relegation to raw passion and imagined outside of conceptualism. Thinking critically about Africa's negation from conceptualizations of spacetime allows for an understanding of the African artist's structural incapacity for incorporation into categories such as "artist." African(-descended) artists' non-generalizable position is due to their association with Africa, a zone of nothingness or *tabula rasa*,³⁰⁰ a source of natural resources, but apparently not a

³⁰⁰ Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (2008/1952).

source of modernization and aesthetic experimentation. The phobias and fantasies inscribed on Africa also never leave Diasporic African personality— “rhizomatic,” “errant,” “afropolitan,” or otherwise.³⁰¹ This is the Africa that is produced and re-produced by “the West”; by festival directors, curators, and scholars alike. As Achille Mbembe asserts:

Africa exists only as an absent object, an absence that those who try to decipher [sic] only accentuate . . . Thus, we must speak of Africa only as a chimera on which we all work blindly, a nightmare we produce and from which we make a living— and which we sometimes enjoy, but which somewhere deeply repels us, to the point that we may evince toward it the kind of disgust we feel on seeing a cadaver.³⁰²

If Africanity is coterminous with absence, the void, the abyss—African performers, even those considered “cutting-edge” such as Nelisiwe Xaba—cannot be incorporated with ease into general categories of contemporary experimental dance. African experimental performers, due to their “cadaver” status, remain absent in contemporary art historiographic accounts of innovators. When Africans create non-traditional/non-folkloric performances, those performances are presumed by critics such as Sharon Friedman as unoriginal, and African artists are perceived to be borrowing and copying Euro-American artistic innovations.³⁰³ This logic emanates from some of “the West’s” self-aggrandizing narratives of periodization, which rehearse white artistic innovation as modernism’s and post-modernism’s originary point. The “West,” here, is not a

³⁰¹ The mark of Africanity cannot leave African Diasporic communities, practices of self-invention notwithstanding. While Édouard Glissant’s discussion of errantry in *Poetics of Relation* suggests a linguistic and cultural waywardness that moves away from cultural roots (which was a critique of Négritude Philosophy), those cultural practices are important and are perhaps the only option that descendants of enslaved Africans have. However, the detachment from African roots does not guarantee that the mark of Africa detaches from them. The mark of Africanity determines the experience and structural position of African-derived people in the Americas and Europe etc.

³⁰² Mbembe, Achille. *On the Postcolony* (2001), 24.

³⁰³ This argument is made by South African dance scholar Sharon Friedman, in her essay “The Impact of the Tourist Gaze on the Voice of South African Contemporary Dance” in *Post-Apartheid Dance* (2012). Friedman argues that African contemporary dancers are mimetic. Friedman is invested in what Joseph Roach critiques as the “relentless search for purity of origins.” This search for origins, according to Roach, “is a voyage not of discovery but of erasure” See: Joseph Roach, *Cities of the Dead* (1996), 6.

specific geographical location. I use “the West” as Martinican poet and literary theorist Édouard Glissant uses it in *Caribbean Discourse*, where he states, “The West is not in the West. It is a project, not a place.”³⁰⁴ Post-modernist performance is often chronicled as a “soliloquy delivered by the West.”³⁰⁵ The idea of the “avant-garde,” as Fred Moten posits, “is embedded in a theory of history. This is to say that a particular geographical ideology, a geographical-racial or racist unconscious, marks and is the problematic out of which or against the backdrop of which the idea of the avant-garde emerges.”³⁰⁶ This suggests a connection between a Western-centric theory of history and what Moten is calling its racist unconscious. This theory of history and aesthetics cannot fathom modernism as emanating from any source other than itself. I am interested in thinking against the grain of solipsistic periodization, to think (post-)modernism and the “avant-garde” away from any geographical-racist originary tale, but through a consideration of relations of domination emerging in the deep time of the Middle Passage and colonialism etc. What is often rehearsed as the history of “post-modern performance” cannot be solely attributed to a Western tale that narrates figures such as Trisha Brown, Yvonne Rainer, Steve Paxton, and other white artists from the Judson Church experiments as sole progenitors. Modernist aesthetics has traces in colonial and Middle Passage racist-capitalist technologies. The Black Atlantic, as a fractal condition instantiated by the trade in Africans as commodities, is the gateway to Modern culture.³⁰⁷ Features and attributes of modern and postmodern culture such as citizenship,

³⁰⁴ See: Édouard Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays*. (1st Pbk. ed. Caraf Books. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1992), 2.

³⁰⁵ Pather, Jay. 2006: "A Response: African Contemporary Dance? Questioning Issues of a Performance Aesthetic for a Developing Continent." *Critical Arts* 20, no. 2 9-15.

³⁰⁶ Fred Moten (2003), 31.

³⁰⁷ For thorough discussion of this argument about the Black Atlantic as the Culture of Modernity in Black cultural critique (particularly in the work of Paul Gilroy and Toni Morrison), see: Thompson, Krista. “A Sidelong Glimpse: The Practice of African Diaspora Art History in the United States.” *Art Journal* 70, no. 3 (2011): 6-31. For blackness as “vestibular to culture,” Also see: Spillers, *Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe* (2003); Coco Fusco, “The Other History of Intercultural Performance” (1994), 134-167.

freedom, democracy, beauty, aesthetic value, breaks from tradition, and dissent from orthodox intellectual thought were instantiated upon, against, and by African enslaved “bodies”—sometimes as the “limit” of those categories.³⁰⁸ The plight of Baartman and the fashioning of “the Venus” icon are examples of this, and Xaba shows how that structure remains, even as the method of execution has transmogrified. Modern modalities of feeling/sensing/knowing, as well as tools of aesthetic judgment cannot be separated from colonial exhibitions, human zoos, ethnological shows and the development of medical scientific specular technologies. These 19th century ethnological attractions in New York, London, Brussels, and other metropolises not only recruited continental Africans and other colonized groups to perform, but they also recruited Black Americans and other Diasporic Africans to “masquerade as African savages, wild men, and pseudo-Zulus...when demand exceeded supply.”³⁰⁹ (Post-)modernist genre categorizations are inextricably linked to modes of knowledge-making emerging from the long Enlightenment, such as natural science, botany, zoology, anthropology, and the philosophy of aesthetics.³¹⁰ Our modern and postmodern aesthetic categories, tools of aesthetic judgment, and modalities of curating hierarchies of difference are entangled with taxonomy, anthropometry, craniometry, and other characteristics of eugenics. *They Look At Me* confronts these questions, demonstrating how the literal dissection and exhibition of Baartman’s genitalia and other body parts for scientific and aesthetic spectacle contributed to modern aesthetic appreciation.

³⁰⁸ Krista Thompson, “A Sidelong Glance: The Practice of African Diaspora Art History in the United States.” *Art Journal* 70, no. 3 (2011): 21.

³⁰⁹ Bernth Lindfors, *Africans on Stage: Studies in Ethnological Show Business*. (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1999.), ix.

³¹⁰ Sylvia Wynter, “On How We Mistook the Map for the Territory and Re-Imprisoned Ourselves in Our Unbearable Wrongness of Being, of *Désêtre*: Black Studies Toward the Human Project.” In *Not Only The Master’s Tools: African-American Studies in Theory and Practice*, edited by Lewis R. Gordon and Jane A. Gordon. (Boulder, CO: Paradigm, 2006, 107-69).

Thus, the avant-garde sensibility in post-modern performance is more than merely a form of Western intra-communal heterodoxy, where the trailblazing “young” dissent from the orthodoxies, laws, and conventions of the generations that precede them. When understood as and through historical relations of domination, the concept of the “avant-garde” also emerges as emanating from a deep craving for the different, strange, or deviant. This waywardness is often celebrated in “postmodern” performance periodization without situating the conditions of emergence for the craving, how and why it came to be, and which “bodies” became conduits for its intelligibility. This is why it is important to remain skeptical of the “West’s” self-preoccupied periodizations of the Modern and the “avant-garde.” This skepticism, rather than constraining us amidst Eurocentric tales of white artistic rebels disgracing the Father/Norm, attunes us instead to modernism’s Black *maternal/material* inheritances.³¹¹ As Richard Iton contends,

We aspire to be modern, as if this were somehow a new position and as if blacks and nonwhites were not already clearly and uncomfortably modern, as if modernity were sustainable without the nigger and the fluid in/convenience that is blackness lying, albeit differently, both inside and outside its borders.³¹²

The “avant-garde” reconfigured this way, owes so much to the enduring ruptures of colonialism, imperialism, and trans-Atlantic slavery. The Black “avant-garde,” in particular, is not merely an add-on to, or mimicry of, already established norms and heresies within Western culture.³¹³ If Blacks are “already clearly and uncomfortably modern,” then modernity/modernism is not a phenomenon that Blacks lack, or which they only aspire to or mimic. Modernism is not a foreign

³¹¹ Fred Moten (2003) offers a rigorous close reading of this *material* trace.

³¹² See: Richard Iton, *In Search of the Black Fantastic: Politics and Popular Culture in the Post-Civil Rights Era*. (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 288.

³¹³ Orlando Patterson in *Slavery and Social Death* (1982) argues that the Slave, as a “genealogical isolate” is deprived of a natal inheritance and does not have a mother in the strict sense. The question that remains open, then, is how does maternal/material inheritance happen when the Slave is alienated from filial ties/motherhood?

garment that the Black has to put on. The Modern and the Black are uncomfortably co-constitutive.³¹⁴

The Ends of Empathetic Identification

“The Hottentot Venus”’ iconicity has engineered a “veritable theoretical industry” in scholarly production.³¹⁵ This also extends to the arts, where there is some capital accrued through the liberal co-optation of the “Venus”’ “signifying excess” in performance/aesthetic practice.³¹⁶

There have been a number of art and performance pieces in mainstream aesthetics that conjure up Sara Baartman/“the Venus” in both cursory and direct ways. Xaba became one of many artists to implicate herself and her personal journey in the fraught drama of re(-)presenting “the Venus.” Like any invocation of “the Venus,” hers had to reckon with a myriad of ways in which “the Venus” has been taken up, subsumed, appropriated, and occluded by artists, activists, and scholars alike.³¹⁷ The “Hottentot Venus” is often embraced as ancestor for all, black and white, which functions similarly to the way another Khoisan woman, Krotoa, is taken up by white

³¹⁴ Subversive white performances that have been immortalized as pioneering the “postmodern category”—do so through a detachment from and/or appropriation of affects and movement characteristics associated with blackness. This is a simultaneous embrace and disavowal of the long Enlightenment’s ideas of beauty, (a)symmetry, and the sublime. The avant-garde sensibility is inseparable from a desire for the occlusionary identification constituted by “becoming minor,” which is to say *becoming Black*, since African personality (and its aesthetic production) is the quintessence of radical dis-aestheticness and dissymmetry in Western discourse. The Western “avant-garde” aesthetic is realized through the simultaneous fetishization of the racialized atavistic, while erasing the historical relations of domination undergirding that atavistic fetish. Primitivism and Exoticism are key examples here. That erasure of historical conditions of emergence allows for the sensibility of the “new” and “cutting edge” [which is a return to previously disavowed “barbaric” thought and action] to be propertied as White or non-Black. What is considered “avant-garde” and categorized as “post-modernist,” especially in dance, moves futuristically toward formally repudiated content and form associated with “irrational” blackness. Black performances concerned with reproducing the (*self* as) strange/deviant, no matter how pleasurable or counterhegemonic, are haunted by lingering anti-black onto-epistemes which produce(d) blackness as deviance *par excellence*, rather than a consequence of deviant performative *acts* by Black[ened] people.

³¹⁵ Magubane, (2001), 817.

³¹⁶ Sharpe (2010), 71.

³¹⁷ Black performance theorist Jaye Austin Williams is an important thinker in unpacking the number of ways in which Black performance (for non-Blacks) is both an object of desire and repulsion that is always subsumed and appropriated. See: Jaye A. Williams, “Radical Black Drama-as-Theory: The Black Feminist Dramatic on the Protracted Event-Horizon”. *Theory & Event*, 21(1), pp.191–214, 2018.

women in South Africa as ancestor, and the way the continent of Africa is generally taken up as land of ancestral origin.³¹⁸ Baartman is also conjured as a symbol of nation-building mobilized by the South African government and as a slate for mapping Black performative redemption and repair.³¹⁹ Some of these representations invoke both Baartman's iconicity and purported corporeal remains to think seriously about KhoiSan history and some reclaim her to endow her with an agency and will that she was never afforded. She is also dredged up to conduct the work of complicating perpetrator/victim relationships in historiography, an act of finding and indicting new historical villains, as well as making new heroic protagonists of lives originally rendered insignificant. Others reclaim her as "the quintessential diasporic figure, her identity resolutely detached from any one place"³²⁰

The general impulse in artistic representation has been to visually approximate Sara Baartman's anatomy by abstractly re-producing "the Venus" as anatomically freakish. In 2015, at the National Arts Festival in Grahamstown (Makhanda), director Sylvaine Strike presented a performance titled *CARGO: Precious* in collaboration with producer Georgina Thompson, choreographer P.J. Sabbagha, musician Concord Nkabinde, and the Forgotten Angle Theatre Collaborative's Nosiphiwo Samente danced the role of Baartman alongside a cast of male characters, most of whom presented as Black [fig. 2.1]. The aim was "to explore the untold part

³¹⁸ Krotoa, who was born around 1643 and died in 1674, was a Khoi woman who worked as a domestic servant in Jan Van Riebeeck's household. She was the first Khoi woman to be married in the Christian custom, with Danish surgeon and slave-hunter Peter Havgard (who the Dutch referred to as Pieter van Meerhoff). The claims to her as ancestor stem from the narrative of her as the first African woman in the Cape to marry a European and bearing him offspring, marking her as a material and symbolic sign of indigenizing Europeans through what Sarah Nuttall calls "blood" entanglement. See: Sarah Nuttall, *Entanglement: Literary and Cultural Reflections on Post-apartheid*. (Johannesburg: Wits University Press), 2009.

³¹⁹ Here I am referring to former President Thabo Mbeki's utterances at the ceremony where Baartman's purported remains were laid to rest. French cultural institutions such as the Musée du Quai Branly have also participated in diplomatic projects conjuring Baartman for purposes of rehabilitating and repairing French colonial history.

³²⁰ Catanese, Brandi Wilkins. "Remembering Saartjie Baartman." *Atlantic Studies* 7, no. 1 (2010): 47-62, 51.

of Saartjie’s extraordinary story, especially the journey between the two continents of Africa and Europe.”³²¹ In an interview, Thompson posits, “so basically the story is a fantasy. It reflects on Saartjie Baartman and what she might have gone through on that trip from South Africa to Europe.”³²² Thompson’s statement about *CARGO: Precious*’ intention to “fantasize” about what “she [Baartman] might have gone through” relies on an underlying assumption about empathy among an “imagined community” of women that recurs in narratives by white feminist artists. A few years prior, choreographer Robyn Orlin, also worked with a cast of black women to produce a piece titled . . . *have you hugged, kissed and respected your brown Venus today?* [fig.2.2]. The intention was to expose the “scandal” of Baartman which, as Orlin wrote in the synopsis, was not known to most Europeans. Robyn Orlin also provocatively used an image from Candice Breitz’s Whiteface Series for publicity, an artwork that deploys a technique of pasting and suppressing image cut-outs of white woman’s faces upon images of black women dressed in traditional Ndebele garb [fig. 2.3]. The suppressed image recalls ethnographic portraiture exemplified by figurations of Africans in “their natural habitat” circulated around the world in the form of postcards. One of the cut-outs is what appears to be a white woman figure originally figured in Italian Early Renaissance painter Sandro Boticelli’s painting titled *The Birth of Venus*. Breitz’s gesture in the collage, and by extension Orlin’s, attempts to collapse all women under the brush of relational universal femininity. While the formal assembly of these fragments and contexts in her collages is remarkable for its dense staging of “the Venus” trope’s multiple signifying functions in art and aesthetics, it also gestures toward an act of eclipsing through cut-and-paste

³²¹ Fortune Cookie Theatre Company. “CARGO: Precious”, 2018.

<https://fortunecookie theatre.com/productions/cargo-precious/>

³²²Africa is a Country “#LivefromGrahamstown CARGO: Precious,” YouTube Video, 2014.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N-XIfYQULqE>

techniques. It arrives at a parasitic substitution and problematic analogizing that repeats in contemporary representations of Baartman. While these pieces were received warmly due to their innovative staging and fine art techniques, many questions linger concerning their intentions in staging “Venus” as a form of galvanizing simultaneous memory and absencing.

No matter how stylized these renderings are, they risk reifying what they critique. Sometimes the choice of mimetic irony in representation is too close to the primal scene, exuding the same fetishistic gratification. Put another way, these processes of exhuming the abject Black dead, no matter how critical, risk relegating them back to their abject status. Such artistic undertakings recruit and co-opt Black actors to participate in performances that are deployed for the purpose of “rehabilitating the master.”³²³ What drives this penchant for recreating the scene of disposable life through fantasy for different artists who conjure up Baartman? Who is rehabilitated by this romance? Saidiya Hartman, addressing enslaved African women in the context of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, provides a language for probing these undertakings. Arriving at the crux of narrative’s deleterious consequences and the limits of intersubjective empathy, Hartman argues:

These modes of bringing back Venus, to imagine what (else) could’ve been are geared towards titillation, recuperation, and cannot bypass the danger of producing again a grammar of violence in describing dead matter and dishonored (non-)life: If it is no longer sufficient to expose the scandal, then how might it be possible to generate a different set of descriptions from this archive?³²⁴

Hartman provides a method for engaging Xaba’s work alongside, and against the grain of, redemptive works by predominantly white artists that re-produce spectacular violence while re-imagining and imposing “joy” and “will,” which Baartman “might have experienced on that

³²³ Athi Mongezeleli. “Critical Reflections of *Exhibit B*” *Art South Africa* 13,2: 86.

³²⁴ Saidiya V. Hartman, “Venus in Two Acts.” *Small Axe: A Caribbean Journal of Criticism* 26 (2008), 4.

trip.” These redemptive works are deleterious, insofar as redemption “demands that atrocities remain unspoken and unspeakable.”³²⁵ The routine spectacularization of both Black suffering and Black joy, no matter how abstract, yields White jouissance and psychic redemption.³²⁶ As Hartman argues elsewhere, the drive for excavating Black interiority in these renderings is less for the assertion of the slave’s humanity or subjectivity, as is often purported. Rather, these “counter-readings” burden “the black body” to rehabilitate the master and revivify the terms of universal humanism.³²⁷ Hartman cautions against contemporary white benevolent gestures committed to scraping for crumbs of subjectivity to retroactively bestow upon disfigured and disregarded black non-lives in the archival tomb. Below, I briefly discuss a performance by Steven Cohen as an example of the idiopathic empathetic impulse to use “the Venus” icon for purposes of white absolution and rehabilitation.

Monstrous Surrogation in Steven Cohen’s *Cradle of Humankind* (2012)

France-based Jewish White queer South African artist Steven Cohen’s controversial *Cradle of Humankind* (2012) exemplifies the assumptive logic permeating some contemporary performance and aesthetic production about “the Venus Hottentot.” It raises the stakes of turning to performance to fill in irretrievable gaps within the archive, as well as the stakes of emplotting Sara Baartman into narratives of post-apartheid and post-colonial national citizenship. *Cradle of Humankind* also demonstrates how performance is implicated in Black transnational labor,

³²⁵ Sharpe (2010), 73.

³²⁶ For a discussion on the inextricable relationship between the libidinal economies of black death and the production of white pleasure, see Copeland (2013).

³²⁷ Hartman is specifically referring to Molly Rogers’s *Delia’s Tears*. She is critical of Rogers’ social justice move of re-imagining or counter-reading J.T. Zealy’s daguerreotypes of enslaved Africans Alfred, Delia, Drana, Fassena, Renty, Jem, and Jack, to salvage humanity and interiority. See: Saidiya Hartman, “Delia’s Tears: Race, Science, and Photography in Nineteenth-Century America (Book Review).” *The Journal of American History* 98, no. 2 (2011): 520-22.

mobility, and therefore, the reinforcement of anti-Black domination. This reinforcement takes place in the reification of colonial scopic regimes, the structures of looking that fix the Black female body in her ontological absence.

Cradle of Humankind is emblematic of the pervasive tendency of conjuring up the vexed iconicity of the “Venus” for liberal social justice purposes that inevitably reify anti-black violence. *Cradle of Humankind* is a multimedia collaborative performance piece with Cohen performing alongside the late Nomsa Dhlamini, a black woman who was 91-years-old when the piece was created.³²⁸ Cohen created the piece after conducting research at the cradle of humankind in Magaliesburg, near Johannesburg, where some of the oldest humanoid remains have been found.³²⁹ This “discovery” of existence and origin of para-human life in South Africa caught the attention of many in the artistic communities, and predominantly white directors (such as Cohen, Craig Higginson, Malcolm Purkey, and Brett Bailey) received commissions to create artistic works about these originary ancestors.³³⁰ The discovery of these fossilized bones instantiated a primitivist fever in artistic production as Black performers were called upon to surrogate, or act as substitutes, for the bones.³³¹ These excavated bones, while supporting claims about Black primitivism, were also paradoxically mobilized as evidence by white artistic

³²⁸ I attended a performance of *Cradle of Humankind* at Rhodes Theatre in Grahamstown; South Africa in July 2012 and I have revisited video recordings of it repeatedly and engaged with critical writings about it to formulate my thoughts.

³²⁹ The piece premiered at the National Arts Festival in Grahamstown, South Africa, where controversial director Brett Bailey was also showing *Exhibit A*. These performances, as well as Craig Higginson’s “Little Foot” (directed by Malcolm Purkey), which also premiered at the festival at the time, were curated to respond to the archeological discovery of the fossilized skeletal remains of *Australopithecus* named Little Foot— a 3.67 million year’s old hominid and oldest to be found at the Cradle of Humankind near Johannesburg. This cradle of humankind fever was not only picked up by South African artists, but French-director Phillipe Pelen Baldini of Théâtre Taliipot (based in Reunion Island) also created a performance titled *!Ai*, inspired by the discovery of Little Foot’s fossilized remains.

³³⁰ See: “‘Little Foot’ Maropeng and Sterkfontein Caves | Official Visitor Centres for the Cradle of Humankind World Heritage Site, accessed July 2, 2020, <http://www.maropeng.co.za/content/page/little-foot>.

³³¹ For a thorough discussion of “surrogation,” see: Roach (1996).

directors from South Africa and beyond to support their claims about Africa as the cradle of *all* humankind, where *all* life began.

In the performance, Cohen sashays around the stage with a taxidermied baboon “tutu” [fig. 2.4] mounted on his front abdomen while Dhlamini (who Cohen often refers to as his “surrogate mother”) is manacled in shackles wearing a loincloth/tutu, being measured, and gazed at through a handheld telescope by Cohen [fig. 2.5 & fig. 2.6]. *Cradle of Humankind* deploys a slow sustained and delicate tempo of movement, partly as a result of Dhlamini’s aging physique, as well as Cohen’s high stiletto heels which propel him to slow down the pace of his movement while sustaining a tall upright position, in contradistinction to Dhlamini’s forward-bending genuflecting posture. However subtle the movement vocabulary, the visuals evade all subtlety. Shocking images of iron manacles, genitalia, a taxidermied ape, a video projection of a rectum (presumably Cohen’s) contracting to the sound of the apartheid national anthem pervade the performance. This juxtaposition of the subtle and the shocking succeeds in making a point about the banality of shock, blurring easy distinction between the ordinary and the spectacular. The piece moves non-linearly from showing slavery iconography, to a futuristic ballet, to apartheid era symbolism, and back to pre-human species imagery. This is despite Cohen’s own intention to make a piece which deals with evolution. To his credit, the piece is aimed at showing how a presumed “we” has not “evolved” from “our” capacity to re-enact brutalities originally enacted in the chronological past. The performance then demonstrates some of these, through representation, with a satirical and critical spin. For legibility, he requires a figure whose embodiment registers immediately as a sign of alterity, since dramatic tension in the theater is often created through staging radical opposition between archetypes. Expectedly, Dhlamini is summoned to give coherence, form, and empiricism to this sign of alterity. Since the piece

attends to the theme of evolution, or the lack thereof within the particular historical context of the stage, another vexed icon, “The Hottentot Venus” is dredged up for immediate spectatorial recognition. Not only is she excavated, but she is conflated with Dhlamini. This surrogation sets up Dhlamini and “the Hottentot Venus” as interchangeable commodities.

Cohen parades a naked and shackled Black woman in her 90s with the intention of revealing to the audience their complicity in desiring to witness such spectacles pertaining to abjection, in a similar fashion that 19th century audiences paid to gawk at Baartman. Armed with a telescope [fig. 2.6], an apparatus that assumes objectivity, Cohen inspects Nomsa’s character from a distance. Karen Barad asks whether an apparatus is “an instrument needed to perform an experiment? Is it a mediating device that allows the object world to give us a sign of its nature? Is it a prosthetic extension of our sensing abilities?”³³² Far from being objective, the telescope is an apparatus that mediates knowledge and filters our own sensibilities and biases. What we observe is also a result of what we pre-emptively want to see, what vindicates what we think should be there and what it should mean. Dhlamini has to “perform” Baartman in a theatrical context and act as a conduit for working out white ethical dilemmas pertaining to looking. She is operationalized as the prototypical material figuration of the missing link in the evolution of humankind. This is a role that precedes Dhlamini and all blacks, a projected meaning they bear prior to any attempts at giving it form on stage. In seeking to redress the deficiencies of Enlightenment praxes of looking, Cohen inevitably duplicates these very praxes, along with their entangled economies of desire and power-driven epistemological obfuscations [fig. 2.5].

Life mimics art and vice versa, since this duplication is not simply Cohen portraying a

³³² Barad (2007), 141.

fictional character from the past holding a telescope, but it is ingrained in his dramaturgical intent which zooms in on historical terror to reinvent “past” grotesqueries in the “post-”. Nomsa Dhlamini was Cohen’s nanny and also worked in domestic servitude for Cohen’s family for four decades. The labor she performs on stage cannot be extricated with ease from the labor she performed for most of her adult life as Cohen’s maid. Somewhere in this operationalization of the language of collaboration and filiation, onto-epistemological violence is prefigured as consent. Perhaps this explains my disorientation at Rhodes Theatre when this performance received a decisive standing ovation by a predominantly white audience. Audience members’ personal or psychological reasons for standing up and applauding are not my main concern here. I comment solely on what was presented in front of the audience and the disorientation/gratification it produced. The standing ovation was partly a response to the piece’s imagery, which has been described as “strikingly beautiful.”³³³ I maintain that this audience applause is closely tied to celebrating “striking beauty,” and less about the piece’s success in dramatically magnifying the *longue durée* of anti-black terror. It is a consequence of reinforcing an opacity and aporia about the violated Black female body, which generates feelings of self-transformation and social transformation for the observer. The social justice impulse (a known working formula in the liberal theater) driving the terms of the work both produces and anticipates the audience’s affective response. It is this economy of white catharsis (manifesting as feelings of transformation) that intensifies and deepens the festering wound of Black suffering. Cohen’s *Cradle of Humankind*’s attempt to zoom in on societal ills instantiates the loss of clarity instead, telescopes and satirical video projections notwithstanding. It exposes “the

³³³ See: Megan Lewis, “Power Plays in the Cradle of Humankind.” *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art* 35, no. 3 (2013): 55-60.

Hottentot Venus” (and Dhlamini as her conflated double) to renewed violence, and we cannot know anything other than the illegibility and ontological absence that already characterized her. The piece exemplifies a redundant impulse which understates “counter-hegemonic” performance’s capacity to reproduce and get away with anti-black terror. Cohen’s “abject performance”³³⁴ rubs salt all over the wound by marshalling in love, empathy, and self-professed indigeneity as its aims. Here is Cohen describing his intentions:

It was supposed to be a work about evolution, instead it turned out to be a work about love . . . We are all from Africa. White people are just mutant black people, and we don’t acknowledge that in the Western world, we feel that we are superior when in fact we’re the same ape in different drag... She [Nomsa Dhlamini] is my Saartjie Baartman and I brought her to France, and I am completely culpable of all that and I take credit for being guilty. I am proud to be guilty of making a 90-year-old woman walk naked for money and take pleasure in it.³³⁵

Using possessive pronouns, “*my Saartjie Baartman*,” Cohen comes close to an analysis of his own master position as irreducible to a character he portrays on stage, but a paradigmatic position of domination he occupies in the world, his queer identification notwithstanding. It is the context of performance that offers him a platform to flirt with this clarity and also step away from it immediately, since relations unfolding on the stage can be conveniently separated from every day “reality.” His statement performs a paradoxical gesture of simultaneous indigenization (identifying with) and distancing from the African continent, referring to himself and all white people, in a step

³³⁴ Most writings on Cohen describe his work through Julia Kristeva’s notion of the abject. He creates a number of pieces based on his Jewish queer identity, and the work often has symbols and features such as the Star of David, human skulls, self-mutilation, the ingesting of bodily fluids, taboo sexual acts etc. For example, see: Bosch, Morwenna. “Limping into the African Renaissance: The Abject Art of Steven Cohen.” 19 (2005): 116-29.

³³⁵ See: Sonja Smit, “The Search for a More Desirable Origin: Steven Cohen’s *The Cradle of Humankind* (2011)” (2015), 4-8.

back to Enlightenment monogenism, as “African ape[s] in drag.”³³⁶ This unfolds while he also incorporates himself into the antithetical “we” of the “Western world.”

This differs significantly from Black feminist performer Nelisiwe Xaba’s “Venus” diptych which anticipates Cohen’s tendency of summoning the Black performer to stand in, give form to, and fill evidentiary gaps for archival corporeal remains. Xaba’s particular Black feminist intervention, is a conceptual contrast to Cohen’s assumptive logic. In a generous posture that both exonerates and venerates Cohen’s utterance, dance scholar Sonja Smit remarks upon Cohen’s choice to exhibit Dhlamini only as part of the conceptual intention of the piece, revealing Cohen’s supposed desire to challenge his audience members, who paid, just like 19th century audiences paid, to see Baartman on stage. Cohen also states, “this [the piece] is about negation, it’s about accentuating my whiteness” and Smit interprets this as “Cohen negat[ing] his own whiteness by exposing it, and becom[ing] minoritarian.”³³⁷ As a presumably unmarked subject of positive value, Cohen has the capacity to *become* minoritarian, in a Deleuzo-Guattarian sense.³³⁸ The baboon and Dhlamini are essential primal opposites for the coherence of his becoming. All this perpetual becoming centralizes Cohen and his plight, effacing Dhlamini/Baartman in the process (already a sign of formlessness and voided personality) for the accentuation of his minoritarian identity markers as a white, Jewish, gay male artist. His performance of self-abnegation intensifies whiteness and obliterates the Black. Cohen’s

³³⁶ Monogenism is the belief that all races have a single genetic origin, Adam and Eve. Its opposite is “polygenism”—a concept which argues that race has different origins. Both concepts were part of Enlightenment debates about race and species (interchangeable terms at the time). See: “Monogenism,” Wikipedia (Wikimedia Foundation, December 13, 2019), <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Monogenism>.

³³⁷ Smit, 7.

³³⁸ For a discussion of white positionality as “unmarked” and possessing positive value through disappearance, see: Phelan, Peggy, *Unmarked* (1993). Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s collaborative work on the concept of the “minor” appears in two of their texts. See: Deleuze, Gilles and Guattari, Félix. “Becoming-Intense, Becoming-Animal, Becoming-Imperceptible” in *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1987). Also see: Deleuze, Gilles and Guattari, Félix. *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* (1986).

monumentalization of his own “guilt” and “culpab[ility]” choreographs occlusionary empathy and affectively binds academics, artists, and audiences in responses that both revere and vindicate such *scenes of subjection*, performed in the name of “love.”³³⁹ Perhaps, even unbeknownst to him, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission as precedent is what re-launches the industry of white guilt confession, and emboldens Cohen’s “proud” confession of guilt, since the 1990s curious precedent likely guarantees his atonement, while the Black body is hung out to dry in shackles, again [fig 2.7]. Love is apparently all it takes to turn the festering wound, the unmournable void, to subjectivity with relational capacity. Frank Wilderson III, in conversation with Jaye Austin Williams, posits that “not only is there an absence of catharsis [in performances such as Cohen’s], but there’s *an intensification of the wound in the very process of performing something that is supposed to be cathartic.*”³⁴⁰ In *Cradle of Humankind*, love is the presumed stitch and bridge apparently needed for catharsis and intersubjective relation. Love presumably aids those who are in chains to graduate into relational capacity. Wilderson, however, provides a sobering reminder that narratives which push the mantra of “love conquers all,” in fact “facilitate our forgetting of a violence that has always already conquered love.”³⁴¹ Love, in Cohen’s piece, is deployed as a pre-Subjective universal vibration sustaining the promise of inter-racial coalition and other tender intimacies. But as Spillers has intimated, “unless relations of power are absolutely equal, love does not and will not matter.”³⁴²

³³⁹ See: Foster (2011).

³⁴⁰ Wilderson, Frank & Williams, Jaye Austin, “Staging Within Violence,” (2016), par 50.

³⁴¹ Wilderson, (2010), 341.

³⁴² The quote reads “without freedom, love and intimacy don’t matter.” See: Spillers, Hortense, “To the Bone: Some Speculations on Touch.” Rizvana Bradley. *YouTube*, June 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AvL4wUKIfpo>

Act I

They Look At Me and That's All They Think

Xaba's *They Look at Me* attends to a number of *disfiguring scopophilic appetites* in performance.³⁴³ As the title suggests, these are destructive practices of looking that solicit both pleasure and repulsion from the disfigured black form. She is confronted by the dilemma of repeating the scene of Baartman's abjection in order to critique its reproduction. Her choice of abstract minimalism, while not beholden to a regime of exhibiting or chronicling the details of spectacular violence endured by Baartman, highlights a history that repeats by having to repeat it. This is because it is unavoidable, and suppressing it amplifies its ongoing presence. Her astute critical posture requires taking extra caution not to re-simulate and reify (unavoidable and inevitable) pornotropic representational and libidinal economies.³⁴⁴ As the performance's program description notes, "*They Look at Me and That's All They Think* is a rumination on *the impossible task of understanding or accessing the thoughts of the dead*, and on the rigidity of the archive which paradoxically opens itself up to the interpretations of the living."³⁴⁵ Xaba recognizes the "rigidity" of the archive, which presents itself as a stable repository of truths but can only provide scraps and silences that lend themselves to interpretations ranging from re-assembly to fragmentation. This results in futile attempts to re-imagine and fantasize about the interiority of the dead, an approach that Xaba avoids.

³⁴³ Marriott (2000), 41.

³⁴⁴ (Italics mine). For a discussion of pornotropes see: Spillers, "Mama's Baby" (1987/2003). Also see: Weheliye, Alexander G. "Depravation: Pornotropes" in *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics and Black Feminist Theories of the Durham*. (Duke University Press, 2014). (2014).

³⁴⁵ A copy of the program can be viewed at the Ar(t)chive, a performance archive located at the University of the Witwatersrand, in Johannesburg.

They Look at Me begins in complete darkness. When the lights come on, Xaba stands center stage, facing the audience, swaying her hips from side to side to the beat of Burundian vocalist Khadja Nin's "Sina Mali, Sina Deni." She wears a long white dress and long-sleeved white gloves. A large roll of bubble wrap and a ladder rest on her head [fig 2.8]. The dress is translucent, with Victorian crinoline hoops giving it a floaty and puffed out quality. When she walks, the dress appears as if it is filled with air, like a floating device, and it bounces buoyantly every time she takes a step. The dress serves multiple functions in the piece — as costume, as projection surface, as a chandelier, and as shelter. She spins around, maneuvering the weight of bubble wrap and ladder on her head. When the song ends, she places the ladder and bubble wrap down on the floor and begins to unwrap the bubble wrap.

The dress's ebb and flow and allusions to floating suggest a waterscape. The context of the ocean is further elaborated by a paper-boat that Xaba wears as a hat soon after. These aspects of the piece invoke the Atlantic Ocean as a site for transporting "human cargo." The waterscape alludes to journeys of seasickness, nausea, the dissolution of language, abandonment, and decadence.³⁴⁶ As she places a paper-boat on her head [fig. 2.9], she looks at the audience and smiles with all her teeth showing, before murmuring unintelligible words to herself. This smile is evanescent, it quickly fades and transforms into an expression that seems like either worry or despair. This is the smile of black performance, which inaugurates debates about coercion, will, desire, and ambivalence. It invokes the smile of Josephine Baker on the Paris stage. It also

³⁴⁶ For thorough discussions of such phenomena in the long trans-Atlantic slave trade, see: Glissant, Édouard. *Poetics Of Relation* (1997); Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts" (2008); Hartman, *Lose Your Mother* (2007); Stephanie Smallwood, *Saltwater Slavery Saltwater Slavery: A Middle Passage from Africa to American Diaspora*. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007); Sowande Mustakeem, *Slavery at Sea: Terror, Sex, and Sickness in the Middle Passage*. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2016); Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley, "Black Atlantic, Queer Atlantic" *GLQ*14, no. 2-3 (2008): 191-215.

complicates readability since it is neither reducible to “joy” nor does it open a window to the black performer’s interiority. In fact, it challenges readability and blurs the intransigent distinctions between interiority and exteriority, surface and depth. This is a smile that conceals as much as it reveals. Worn on the surface, the reader of the smile notices its unruly nature, unruly because it is too ephemeral to be captured as “genuine” through language, or in contrast, to be read as a counterfeit outer veil concealing a more genuine interiority. There is not much we are allowed to know about this fleeting smile, beyond general overdetermined and phobic projections on black affect as (in)capable of signifying both intelligibility and opacity.³⁴⁷ On another register, it gestures toward the Black performer’s ambivalent and latent enjoyment of their *own* masquerade because it always elicits applause.³⁴⁸

A melancholic soundtrack accompanies the performer’s descension and ascension, where she appears as if she is attempting to stay afloat, to swim. She crosses her legs and dances around the stage to the sounds of a recorded jazz performance by singer Rachelle Ferrell. This use of Black Diasporic music situates the piece, at least sonically, outside of a particular geo-temporal context. The work is not a chronological account of Baartman’s journey from Cape Town to England and France. Instead, it draws from that narrative to think about Black women’s movement from different parts of the world across spacetime in the context of staged performance, and how performance gave them the impression of mobility and freedom while simultaneously reinforcing their abjection. In an interview with Stefanie Jason, she expands upon exoticizing regimes of looking, positing, “I’ve accepted the fact that I am [seen as] a queen of

³⁴⁷ See: Tyrone Palmer, “‘What Feels More Than Feeling?’: Theorizing the Unthinkability of Black Affect.” *Critical Ethnic Studies* 3, no. 2 (2017): 31.

³⁴⁸ Art critic Athi Mongezeleli Joja encouraged me to think seriously about the Black performer’s latent enjoyment of their *own* masquerade, the Black performer’s collaboration and identification with the fetish since it comes with applause as a reward.

exoticism and the exotic . . . But what I'm interested in is the gaze and its angle. The angle that you view or gaze from is the point that it becomes political.³⁴⁹ Xaba admits that as a Black woman performer, she is construed as a queen of exoticism and the exotic. The fabrication of this image of her as a figure of *radical alterity* and absence precedes and anticipates her arrival at the scene of performance.³⁵⁰ She arrives in Europe and North America to fulfill an anticipated fantasy of her, where she has been assigned “mythical properties” and overdetermined meanings beforehand, fabricated since slavery and colonialism — as void, monster, mammy, freak, seductress, earth mother, etc.³⁵¹ What does she do with this monstrosity? What does movement look like when one occupies this vertiginous *capacity* to stand for both excess and absence? Does she claim this monstrosity, as Hortense Spillers might suggest, to “speak a truer word concerning herself”?³⁵² Is representational monstrosity sufficient in overturning these problematic modes of perception?³⁵³

In conceptualizing her dance pieces, Xaba demonstrates an awareness of the inescapable and prurient appetite for African *bodies*. She then labors to unpack this gaze, its history, as well as its contemporary modes of operation. Rather than concentrating on “good” versus “bad” representation, she focuses her attention on the “structure of vision”³⁵⁴ that fixes Black women as quintessential alterity. This structure of vision imposes a litany of overdetermined properties

³⁴⁹ Xaba, Nelisiwe in Stefanie Jason, “Interview: Nelisiwe Xaba Makes Her Move on the Politics of Exoticism.” *Mail & Guardian*. Accessed: 03 March 2015: <https://mg.co.za/article/2015-03-03-nelisiwe-xaba-makes-her-moves-on-the-politics-of-exoticism>

³⁵⁰ For discussions of “radical alterity,” see: Sylvia Wynter, “Sambo and Minstrels” *Social Text* 1 (1979): 149-156; Mbembe, *On The Postcolony* (2001).

³⁵¹ See: Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe” in *Red, White, and in Color*, 203.

³⁵² *Ibid.*

³⁵³ Frank Wilderson points us to the limitations of representational monstrosity is limited, and he speculates, without prescription, about the efficacy and world-ending potential of representational monstrosity when coupled with “real violence.” See: Frank B. Wilderson III, *Red, White, and Black: The Structure of U.S. Antagonisms*. 66

³⁵⁴ Evelyn Hammonds, “Black (W)holes and the Geometry of Black Female Sexuality” in Winston Napier. *African American Literary Theory: A Reader*. (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 280-289.

upon what it cannot see, or refuses to see, but misnames anyway. Where this structure of looking begins — contrary to the title of the piece — is the opposite and end of thinking.³⁵⁵ Put another way, *They Look at Her* and thinking leaves the room.³⁵⁶

The front-facing staging of the piece, then, orients Xaba in a position where she looks back at the audience in the proscenium arch. However, this looking back cannot be conflated with something as ostentatious as “returning the gaze” because “the gaze” does not emanate from one source.³⁵⁷ It is also implicated in complex structures of power negotiation and distribution that put a strain on bidirectional acts of reciprocity. Arguing that Baartman (and by extension Xaba) “returns the European gaze” assumes a level playing field of reciprocity and power symmetry in the practice of looking/gazing, where Africans possess the same power to project *their* “gaze” back and forth. In that respect, Africans looking back, even with a disapproving eye, cannot reciprocate the objectifying and dehumanizing properties of a system of looking that gets to be called the European gaze. If the title of Xaba’s performance is read through this lens, the conclusion is: *They look at her, she returns the look, but not the gaze.*³⁵⁸

When dance journalist Adrienne Sichel asked Xaba if she is interested in politics of the body, Xaba answered; “Yes, [politics] of the female Black body . . . If your work mainly gets

³⁵⁵ Here, “thinking” means astute awareness and perception. This suggests a body-mind connection in perception. I am not using “thinking” in a way that champions pre-Enlightenment European philosophical rationalism.

³⁵⁶ See: Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (2008/1952). Also See: Wilderson (2010).

³⁵⁷ See: Jacques Lacan. “Of the Gaze” in *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-analysis*. (1st American ed. New York: Norton, 1978).

³⁵⁸ The gaze is also not universal. As theater historian and theorist Matthieu Chapman argues in *The Other “Other,”* the Moors, Africans, Native Americans, and any other darker-skinned races were not read as equally different through the white/right gaze in early Modern England. He concludes that the Black is the “Other ‘Other’” of the English white gaze because this gaze differentiated among the various differences it gazed upon. He contends, “the English recognized and incorporated all non-English Others into human subjectivity in opposition to notions of black abjection, thus arguing for an antagonism of racialized subjectivity that undergirds the network of racialized identities” (12). This particular gaze is a matrix of phobias, fantasies, and projections on blackness constructed prior to encountering black people in the flesh. It anticipates and interpellates them to its hierarchical arrangements. See: Matthieu Chapman, *Anti-black Racism in Early Modern English Drama: The Other “other”*. (New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2017).

seen in Europe, it is important to acknowledge that consciously. Who is consuming what you are doing? You can either play with it or feed the consumer what they want. Oh, yes, I am seen as exotic there.”³⁵⁹ The statement about “play” is not reducible to an amelioratory and revisionist gesture of righting the wrongs of representation, with new, more “positive” representations. An engagement with Xaba’s work demonstrates how “play” is about re-arranging meaning to ensure that it is always unstable, and that instability is ongoing rather than a point of arrival. The (auto-)critical play refrains from giving in to the consumer’s demands and fantasies. At the same time, those fantasies continue to operate with caprice and force, paying no attention to either the black performer’s playful and conscious refusal nor their ignorant surrender. The exoticizing devouring gaze feasts on all black body types and performances; conscious ones, ignorant ones, playful ones, naïve ones, refusing ones, oblivious ones, indifferent ones, subversive ones, ambivalent ones, and fugitive ones.

The main question to be asked to *They Look At Me* is: how does one still become a “queen of the exotic” if they labor with such rigorous dedication to circumvent staging (neo-) primitivist tropes uncritically in their work? The piece’s inclination towards “postmodern dance” characteristics does not shield the performer against a sensorial regime that relegates both primitivist and anti-exoticist black performance to racialized alterity.³⁶⁰ Nor does it shield her from forces of a kinesthetic-affective regime that identifies narcissistically with her, in a waltz between erotogenesis and phobogenesis, where she is an object of attraction and repulsion at the same time. For literary theorist, Anne Cheng, these are “moments of contamination when

³⁵⁹ Adrienne Sichel. “I Dance As I Wish.” *Art Africa*, December 2009. <https://artafricamagazine.org/dec-2009/>

³⁶⁰ Similar to Anne Cheng, I also “[take] as a given that Modernism and Primitivism are intertwined, at times even identical, phenomena.” See: Anne Anlin Cheng, *Second Skin: Josephine Baker and the Modern Surface*. (New York: Oxford UP, 2011), 4.

reification and recognition fuse . . . when the fetishist savors his, or her, [or their] own vertiginous intimacy with the dreamed object, and vice versa.”³⁶¹ The performance advances and retreats from reproducing “the Venus” signifying function as an empirical sign of abject “womanhood” or “black womanhood.” This simultaneous embrace and rejection of “the Venus” iconicity in *They Look at Me* demonstrates the impossibility of completely liberating “the black female body” from our sensorial and deciphering regimes without the risk of reifying further violence in performance production. Xaba redirects our investments in engaging the struggles between positive versus negative representation to question what artistic practices may begin to unpack if they endeavor to frustrate the stability promised by standpoint, moving instead toward an unfamiliar terrain that produces no determinate solutions, but perhaps ellipses.³⁶²

As a light hanging from the ceiling dims, the performer hoists the dress on the ladder, and it transforms to a surface where she projects an animated video on the dress with subtitles that read: “Are you tired of hair-straightening method?” The images shown in the animation are of a woman wearing an afro hairstyle, straightening her hair. The straightening of hair alludes to some of the discussions during the Black Power Movement and the Black Consciousness Movement about what constituted black beauty. As Kobena Mercer has argued, these beauty and style practices (especially the straightening of hair) are irreducible to white aspirations or a simple appeal to white aesthetic sensibilities.³⁶³ It is also important to note that both Movements produced political philosophies that reach beyond aesthetics. Inside the dress, which now

³⁶¹ Ibid., 15.

³⁶² Wilderson introduces speculation about the ellipses when he asserts, “Only when real violence is coupled with representational monstrosity can blacks move from the status of thing to the status of . . . of what, we’ll just have to wait to see.” See: Wilderson (2010), 66.

³⁶³ Kobena Mercer, *Welcome to the Jungle: New Positions in Black Cultural Studies*. (N.Y: Routledge, 1994).

functions as shelter and projector surface, Xaba's silhouette moves slowly and minimally. The figure appears as having expanded breasts, whose appearance we later learn is possible through an inflatable brasserie. She then parts her afro in two with a comb and deflates the brasserie. This particular inflation and deflation of anatomical features enables the audience to ponder upon contemporary cosmetic procedures that some whites and non-blacks undergo to approximate fetishized physiognomic and phenotypical features attached to blackness. At the same time, Xaba draws awareness to European hypocritical obsession with Baartman's anatomical features as freakish, while appropriating those very features for European sartorial and beauty standards [fig. 2.10]. For example, the crinoline skirt's popularity in Victorian England came about as a result of its function to expand the size of European women's posteriors, giving them what they deemed to be a more attractive silhouette that they duplicitously found repulsive in Baartman and other African natives. A more voluminous posterior is one example of many that signaled a subject position outside of the human category for Africans such as Baartman, while its prostheticized appropriation cemented white European women's place within the category of the human. The crinoline skirt as prosthetic was their sign of aesthetic taste, sophistication, and virtue; all characteristics that the Black (female) was defined against.

The performance comes close to closure and horizontal rest, but then Xaba gets up. She lies on the rolled-out bubble wrap downstage center, and then starts rolling upstage, engulfing herself with the bubble wrap, slowly, preciously. Instead of staying there, for what would have been a redemptive posture signaling rest and closure, she gets up, stumbles, using the ladder as leverage. She walks downstage, staring at the audience and gently swaying from side to side. Lights out. This gesture at the end is not a still final image. It is neither grand nor monumental. It echoes the movement language of the piece, with its detailed idiosyncratic gestures and

unremarkable movements. This raises questions about Black women's monumentalization and memory in South Africa. The audience is invited to meditate on what performance as fleeting "mnemonic materiality"³⁶⁴ enacts differently from traditional erect monuments, as well as some of the missteps of traditional monuments it reifies. Those questions concerning the relationship between performance and remains are analyzed more closely in the following section on *Sakhozi Says "Non"*.

Act II:
Sakhozi Says "NoN" to the Venus

Disappearance, that citational practice, that after-the-factness clings to remains—absent flesh does ghost bones.

— Rebecca Schneider, *Performing Remains: Art and War in Times of Theatrical Reenactment*.³⁶⁵

The audience walks in while Nelisiwe Xaba forms a rectangular enclosure on the floor by lining up white paper cut outs shaped like humerus bones [fig. 2.11 & fig. 2.12]. In the beginning, Xaba wears a pair of black heels, a black fishnet body suit, a sleeveless zip-up coat with spikes, and a black pleated skirt. The black pleated skirt resembles isidwaba (a leather pleated skirt traditionally worn by married Zulu women) and she carries a white travel hat box. She walks around within the rectangle with wandering eyes, a seeming sense of wonder, curiosity, and intrigue— like a traveler arriving in an unfamiliar foreign place, uncertain about how she is going to be received. She looks up and down, side to side, places the bag on the floor, and folds out the white inner lining of the skirt she is wearing. Thereafter, she kneels and gnaws one of the life-size paper bones, before lying on one side, resting on the right hip, bone in mouth, while her eyeballs move in an automated staccato pace from side to side. There is a sound of dogs barking,

³⁶⁴ Roach (1996).

³⁶⁵ See: Rebecca Schneider. *Performing Remains: Art and War in Times of Theatrical Reenactment*, (Abingdon, Oxon; New York: Routledge, 2011), 102.

as she crawls across the enclosure in a manner that resembles a canine. At a later stage in the piece, she disrobes and wears a short tassel skirt. She also puts on a maid's outfit—a white apron with images of a passport's visa pages printed on it. As she removes the spikes on her vest in mechanical arm motion, the face remains expressionless. The face's passive affective grammar counteracts the vitality of the rest of the body. This is a break of flow between what the lower part of the body is expressing and the face's indifference to expressivity. She then removes the vest to reveal a black tight-fitting fishnet body suit, while executing spinal undulations, a recognizable movement trope noticeable in African diasporic theatrical dance works by artists such as Vincent Mantsoe, Katherine Dunham, Asadata Dafora, and Germaine Acogny. These movements tropes are attached to African folklore and ritual and have circulated beyond that realm and entered the various venues of black modern and popular culture. Their repetition over time has granted them a reputation where they are expected to appear in African-derived dance.

The soundtrack has switched to a strings composition, which is followed by a gospel song, as she lays out what appears to be white cloth with a visa passport page printed on it. She also pulls out a pillowcase and white powder, which she sprinkles all over the white cloth, before rubbing the powder on her skin, imprinting three vertical lines from her forehead down to her chin, donning these white lines as a kind of white mask. When she sprinkles the white powder, it falls lightly and levitates in front of her face, threatening to overshadow her dark face.³⁶⁶

“Kulomhlaba Siyahilupheka” by Dorothy Masuka, which directly translates to “In this world we are suffering” plays in the background. There is emphasis on referencing other Black women artists who had to travel and work in Paris, such as Sara Baartman, Nina Simone, and Josephine

³⁶⁶ Here, there is a connection with her work *Black and White* which I do not expand upon in this chapter.

Baker. Nina Simone's recording of "I put a Spell on You," is included in the piece, and Xaba re-performs iconic Josephine Baker movements, particularly the wide smile and virtuosic gesture of crossing eyes, which has become one of the prime signifiers for recognizing Baker's *danse sauvage* performances in Paris. This is one of the primary moments where she makes obvious connections to Baker, drawing on familiar iconic gestures and tropes from Baker's performances in France. Xaba's analogizing gesture with antecedent performances by Simone and Baker risks blurring the particularities of their historical conditions of emergence/un-making. The trans-Atlantic slave trade cuts Simone and Baker in particular and enduring ways that foreclose any claims to sovereignty and citizenship in the racist-imperialist U.S.A, forcing them to turn to equally racist-imperialist France because of its meagre promises for Black (American) artists to thrive within that negrophilic economy. Xaba, as a South African black woman cannot lay direct claim to that particular history, even as colonialism, slavery, and apartheid cut black South Africans in entangled and ever-lasting ways. The decision to conflate her condition with that of Baartman's, Baker's, and Simone's is revelatory insofar as it draws attention to the crisis of will and coercion amalgamating such that they become indistinguishable blades for the black's effacement. In other words, the conflation is aware of each performer's geo-historical specificity, while creating awareness about a structure that imagines black female subjectivity as always outside of the Human, irrespective of where they come from.

Sakhozi Says "Non" to the Venus is a 25-minute long performance is a collaboration with directors Toni Morkel and Carlo Gibson, sound designer Mocke van Veuren, and video artist Lukasz Pater. It was originally commissioned by the Musée du Quai Branly—Jacques Chirac, in 2009 in Paris. The museum, which houses 500,000 art objects from Africa, Oceania, the Americas, and Asia accumulated during colonial conquest; approached Nelisiwe Xaba and other

artists to each produce a performance as part of “Body in Motion,” the last program of the museum’s season dedicated to the body.³⁶⁷ It has become customary for European and North American museums that house colonial collections to excavate those collections and exhibit them anew with an intended critical and “self-reflexive” approach.³⁶⁸ These museums and other arts/cultural institutions commission contemporary artists to critically engage with their colonial archival materials and pose questions about a range of topics such as memory, repatriation, repatriation, and reconciliation etc.³⁶⁹ The Musée du Quai Branly—Jacques Chirac’s invitation to Nelisiwe Xaba to create *Sakhozi Says “Non” to the Venus* cannot be separated from those contemporary curatorial practices. The Musée captured Baartman’s purported remains (skeleton and organs) from the 1970s until 2002, and before that the remains were in captivity at the Musée de l’Homme where they were publicly exhibited for decades.³⁷⁰ Originally titled “After all home is not rosy,” the piece’s title changed during the rehearsal process as a result of public utterances by France’s former minister of Interior, Overseas, and Territorial collectivities, Brice Hortefeux, and former French President Nicolas Paul Stéphane Sarközy who, at the time, both announced plans for a “firm but humane” policy to offer migrants €6000 as an incentive for voluntarily leaving France and moving back to their countries of origin.³⁷¹ The title *Sakhozi Says*

³⁶⁷ See: Par Carène Verdon Le 20 juin 2008 à 00h00, “Ã?a Bouge Au Quai Branly,” *leparisien.fr*, June 19, 2008, <http://www.leparisien.fr/yvelines-78/ca-bouge-au-quai-branly-20-06-2008-3298577939.php>.

³⁶⁸ In *Bound to Appear* (2013), Huey Copeland discusses an example of this tendency in his chapter about Fred Wilson. A contemporary and controversial example is white South African director Brett Bailey’s *Exhibit B*, a re-simulation of the human zoo that toured Europe, including the Barbican.

³⁶⁹ See: Huey Copeland, in *Ibid.* on artist Fred Wilson’s “Mining the Museum.” This practice is not limited to museum spaces.

³⁷⁰ As stated in the museum’s website, the Musée du Quai Branly, which opened in 2006, “is one of the richest European public institutions dedicated to the study, preservation, and promotion of non-European arts and civilizations.” See: “History of the Collections,” Musée du Quai Branly - Jacques Chirac - Production - Musée du Quai Branly - Jacques Chirac - History of the Collections, accessed November 11, 2018, <http://www.quaibrantly.fr/en/collections/all-collections/history-of-the-collections/>.

³⁷¹ See: Der Spiegel, “A New Broom in Paris: France to Pay Immigrants to Return Home - DER SPIEGEL - International,” *DER SPIEGEL* (DER SPIEGEL, May 24, 2007), <https://www.spiegel.de/international/europe/a-new-broom-in-paris-france-to-pay-immigrants-to-return-home-a-484716.html>.

“Non” to the Venus is a reference to President Sarközy saying “no” to the (African) immigrant, emblemized by “the Venus,” and Xaba spells his last name in Zulu as “Sakhozi.”

The concept for *Sakhozi Says “Non”* encompasses the journeys of ordinary non-artist African women who are forced to travel to Europe in pursuit of work. Xaba began meditating on the optimism of African and other “migrants” who leave their homes, some who are forced to seek asylum because of war or other socio-political upheaval, who arrive in European countries and suffer as a result of racism and xenophobia. Most of these Africans end up in domestic servitude; cleaning, cooking, and taking care of European children and senior citizens. She considered African migrant laborers’ (and her own) difficulties in attaining visas, as well as their constant subjection to strict border scrutiny at European ports of entry. She also connected Baartman’s experience and the plight of contemporary African cultural workers who are expected to appease the variant modes of exotic voyeurism by European audiences. The piece was also created during the increasing global awareness of the Mediterranean Sea slave trade, the contemporary trade in sub-Saharan Africans, which is often problematically collapsed together with Eastern European and Middle Eastern (forced) movement under the umbrella term “migrant.”

Many machinations of power operate in the encounter between the colonial museum and the African artist. The piece’s focus on contemporary migration and capture reveals to French spectators their ancestral colonial violence which repeats in the contemporary moment. There is currently a lively debate in the arts and humanities about the repatriation of African cultural objects back to countries where they were transferred or “plundered” during the colonial

period.³⁷² African (descended) artists are called in to perform in the “West” as *substitutes* for those repatriated objects. These performance interventions meant to decolonize European institutions and offer Europe an opportunity to confront, reflect, and heal from their enduring colonial practices enact the opposite. Under the guise of redress and re-imagining colonial legacies, contemporary African performance is mobilized to redeem Europe’s collective psyche to a state of re-equilibrium and cathartic resolution.³⁷³ African performers are required to do the work of healing and re-dressing their own dispossession, as if they are accomplices who had a part in it. Europeans reflecting on their historical atrocities requires Africans to stage again that brutality for Western consumption and pedagogy. The linear movement from dispossession to redress in the logic of the museum obfuscates how these performances are a form of, rather than anathema to, African dispossession. From the position of the African, these performances are meant to provide symbolic reparation, to speak back to European domination, and to repatriate irreplaceable dispossession that spans beyond the theft of cultural artifacts.³⁷⁴ As Spillers noted, this void, for (New World) Africans is irreversible due to the incalculable “*theft of the body*—a willful and violent (and unimaginable from this distance) severing of the captive body from its motive will, its active desire.”³⁷⁵ Loss, then, is not a fitting grammar for this irreparable and *unmournable void*, this irrecoverable “severing of the captive body from its motive will.” This is why some artists, theorists, and activists have shifted away from a commitment to redress or

³⁷² Economist Felwine Sarr and art historian Bénédicte Savoy received a commission from French President Emmanuel Macron in 2017 to prepare a 252-page report that called for France to re-evaluate its policy on the repatriating artefacts housed in French museums. The Musée du Quai Branly–Jacques Chirac alone holds 70 000 of the 80 000 African artefacts currently in France. See: Katherine Keener, “Felwine Sarr and Bénédicte Savoy respond to criticism of their repatriation report” in *Art Critique* (31 January 2019) Link: <https://www.art-critique.com/en/2019/01/felwine-sarr-and-benedicte-savoy-respond-to-criticism-of-their-repatriation-report/>.

³⁷³ Wilderson critiques this posture in *Red, White, and Black* (2010).

³⁷⁴ See: Hartman (2008).

³⁷⁵ Spillers, “Mama’s Baby,” 206.

making the void whole again. Instead, their aesthetic-political investments are in revealing those aspects of the severing that cannot be re-sutured. Instead of mending the gaps back together again, they meditate on what the gaps themselves enable for Black thought and action, for ways to devastate the onto-epistemological fulcrum of Western civilization.³⁷⁶

In some cases, the colonial museum is reluctant to relinquish the plundered artefacts from their possession. They either obfuscate or refuse to knowledge colonial theft as theft. For example, when Séverine Le Guével of the Musée du Quai Branly was asked about the museum's position on the repatriation of human remains and other artefacts before 2008, Le Guével remarked;

First, the bodies have never functioned as human remains. Secondly, they were (for the most part) given to the explorers who brought them back, not stolen or taken without permission. Plus, they're not identified. We don't know who they belong to. Thus, they've become art objects; ethnographic objects. That makes a difference. Therefore, they should be preserved like art objects and cannot be destroyed... And it's also important to consider all objects that contain human remains. If we were to honour the claims for everything that contain human remains, it would mean giving away the entire collection of the Musée du *Quai Branly*, anything that contains a bit of bone, anything that contains a skull.³⁷⁷

This paternalistic relationship to African objects (human and non-human) extends to the colonial museum's assumption that because African states are not as economically stable, European institutions are the saving graces stepping in to handle what Africans do not have the financial capacity to protect. However, this is not simply a game of economics. It raises question about the political ontology of things. The "being" of these "artefacts" is malleable, determined by the whims of European museum directors. Masks and severed human bones transmogrify to become

³⁷⁶ See: Joy James, "The Womb of Western Theory: Trauma, Time Theft, and the Captive Maternal" (2016) Accessed: 4 February 2019. http://www.thecarceral.org/cn12/14_Womb_of_Western_Theory.pdf

³⁷⁷ See: Sally Price, *Paris Primitive: Jacques Chirac's Museum on the Quai Branly*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 5.

either art, artefacts, human remains, or ethnographic objects when it is convenient for those “things” to signify as such for the museum. Le Guével’s statement does not demonstrate that any rigorous thought has been put behind the cataloguing of “artefacts” into the different categories she mentions. This demonstrates that the very being and becoming of the European museum is constituted by the perennial possession of African objects (animate or “inanimate”), where the violence of possession is softened by using words such as “preservation.” However, as stated in the preceding paragraph, even if the museum revises their position, repatriation would be the prophylaxis and not the cure. Repatriation cannot repair a certain colonial irreversible *theft*.

When engaging with the Musée du Quai Branly archive during the research phase, Xaba was struck by “the discord between the extensive documentation of her [Sara Baartman’s] body and the physicality of her being, and the absence of any idea of her mental state or thoughts during her lifetime.”³⁷⁸ This discord is unsurprising, as absence and excess is typical of the archive which tells little of black subjects, except “stories that exist [that] are not about them, but rather about the violence, excess, mendacity, and reason that seized hold of their lives, transformed them into commodities and corpses.”³⁷⁹ Xaba’s recognition of the discord provides a crisis where she can either surrender to the fantasy of recovering interiority and narrative closure for “Venus,” or ask different questions about representational form, speculation, and the ends of narrative closure. The Musée du Quai Branly commission throws her in at the deep end, forcing her to confront some of the following questions: What is narrative recuperation for the narratively condemned?³⁸⁰ Are there underlying desires, other than those laid out on the surface, for her invitation to create a performance intervention on one of the most controversial instances

³⁷⁸ Xaba, program note for *Sakhozi Says “Non.”*

³⁷⁹ Hartman, “Venus in Two Acts,” 2.

³⁸⁰ Christina Sharpe discusses the black’s “narratively condemned status.” See: Sharpe, *In the Wake* (2016).

of anti-black terror? Whose rehabilitation is occasioned by this performance? In the bottomless shaft where she has been thrown, she has to account for what the remains can tell us and what they have been structurally conditioned *not* to narrate? If (her) performance *remains*, as performance studies scholars have argued convincingly, then what do the remains of her performance endow to the museum?³⁸¹ If what remains possesses value and potential to participate in capitalist property relations, then performance as remains can also be owned, captured. If performance remains, then, like other remains, it enters the domain of capitalist property relations. This is because contemporary capitalism operates beyond the exchange of material goods (such as fossils, aesthetic objects, and bodily remains), but on “immaterial” value, as well as other affective/libidinal/political economies. To put it differently, if her performance *remains*, that signals that it enters a system of value, of property relations, where aspects of it are open to being owned by the museum, in a similar way that the museum possessed Baartman’s corporeal remains. If the museum understands the performance studies mantra of “performance remains,” then Baartman’s repatriated corporeal remains can be exchanged for a different set of remains— performance remains. Decolonial performance, in this instance, is not the complete way out it promises to be for the Black. In performing the “Venus” in perpetuity, African performers cannot help but be relegated back to their colonial a/object status.

Moving away from a desire for neat representation or attempts at endowing the void of black subjectivity with wholeness, Xaba turns to stripped down or abstract minimalist movement that straddles the space between the figural and the non-representational. Mundane movements

³⁸¹ There is a long-standing and ongoing debate in performance studies about “the ontology of performance.” This debate is between those scholars who argue that performance disappears and refuses capture, and those scholars who argue that performance is always already recording, remaining in the moment that it disappears. See: Moten (2003); Phelan (1993), Roach (1996), Schneider (2011), and Taylor (2003).

such as cleaning, crawling, swinging a suitcase, and blinking her eyes form part of the piece's central movement vocabulary. These movements, sometimes executed with a deadpan facial expression while facing the audience, are sometimes juxtaposed with suspended elongated movements and poses. A video of an eye is projected on the floor, inside the rectangle, at times, and this corresponds with the pieces' investigation of voyeurism. As she kneels and crawls on the floor, she balances a large-sized animal bone between her teeth, blinking and crossing her eyes.³⁸² The soundscape is cacophonous, string instruments superimposed with barking dogs. The general movement vocabulary is comprised of small quotidian movements as well as contrasting extended limbs in a manner that is consistent with ballet and modern/contemporary dance forms.

She also encompasses elements of Zulu dancing, especially *ukusina*: a movement encompassing high kicks typically performed with an articulate spine. By contrast, her execution of the Zulu dance leg extensions is performed with a vertical spine and rigid torso. In addition, she performs these aspects of Zulu dancing without the “exuberance” and “high energy” often associated with these dances. In an artist statement she avers, “In slowing down these movements – in performing them out of context – I also look at the exotic expectation of the

³⁸² Dogs, although treasured in popular culture as “man’s best friend,” invoke a different meaning in the piece. The sound of dogs barking also conjures up memories of terror, in particular, apartheid violence where dogs were trained by police to terrorize black people. As a result, dogs are still understood as an extension of this anti-black prerogative. Attempts at inter-species relationality are difficult in this context, where dogs and other animals are still positioned higher than the black, rather than a “humanimal” companions. This companionship between the dog and the black is only established in racist thought when both are signs of debasement. Xaba’s crawl references this debasement as a meeting point between the black and the dog, where the dog also has capacity to move up the chain and be Man’s companion. Black people’s tense relationship with dogs is not a result of an onto-epistemological order where they see themselves as inherently positioned higher than dogs in a hierarchy of species. The tension, rather, has been produced through racial terror, using dogs as conduits for the policing and brutalization of black people. See: Joshua Bennett, *Being Property Once Myself: Blackness and the End of Man*. (Cambridge: Harvard university Press, 2020).

black body.”³⁸³ She refrains from surrendering to these expectations, but she is aware of the “exotic expectations” which impose those tropes even if they are not present. The slowing down and out-of-context presentation of traditional Zulu dance, for example, is neither a total embrace nor a rejection of European “exotic expectations.” This is a position of neither resistance nor resignation/giving up, but the position often taken by the “indifferent native.”³⁸⁴ In the performance, Xaba’s position is an inevitable one, she “cannot **not** perform” the position of the native (informant).³⁸⁵

In the small rectangular performance space, the interspersions of post-modern/contemporary dance and traditional Zulu dance is less a seamless syncretism characteristic of some “Afro-fusion” dance. Rather than a fusion that flows harmoniously, the interspersions amplify the entanglements and irreconcilable dissonances between the forms. Xaba also demonstrates technical proficiency in ballet. This technical proficiency is not carried out to exalt (her own practice through) classical ballet. Her “eclectic sampling of techniques”³⁸⁶ is not about elevating (herself through) technique. Fred Moten and Stefano Harney recognize this as a common approach in black aesthetics. They argue,

The black aesthetic is not about technique, is not a technique, though a fundamental element of the terror-driven anaesthetic disavowal of “our terribleness” is the eclectic sampling of techniques of black performativity in the interest of the unproblematically dispossessive assertion of an internal difference, complexity or syntax which was always and everywhere so apparent that the assertion is a kind of self-indulgent, self-exculpatory superfluity.³⁸⁷

³⁸³ Sichel (2009).

³⁸⁴ See: Macharia, Keguro. "On Being Area-Studied: A Litany of Complaint." *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 22, no. 2 (2016): 183-90, 188.

³⁸⁵ Ibid.

³⁸⁶ Here I invoke Stefano Harney’s and Fred Moten’s discussion of technique and black aesthetics. See: Harney, Stefano, and Fred Moten. *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study*. (Wivenhoe; New York; Port Watson: Minor Compositions, 2013), 48.

³⁸⁷ Ibid.

In that respect, the appeal to technique, as Harney and Moten have argued, is the appeal to governance.³⁸⁸ Understood this way, technique's appeal to mastery is the antidote to improvisation and anti-colonial gesture, and therefore often antithetical to what the authors understand as blackness' *itinerant drive* towards freedom and the abolishment of bondage. Xaba's anti-colonial stance is enacted through this deliberate detachment from a demonstration of Modern/Ballet technical prowess as the primary intention of the performance. The treatment of these dance forms in *Sakhozi Says "NoN"* is not reducible to a reaction and response to Europe (European funding notwithstanding). The slowing down of the Zulu dance is a process of enacting heresy on Zulu tradition as well, disrupting those elements deemed sacred within it.³⁸⁹ It also pays homage to Zulu dance as a complex knowledge system and practice transmitted from dancing body to dancing body across multi-directional generations. Dissociating the dance from its usual context and familiar affective state opens up a space for an alternative deciphering practice, one that potentializes indeterminacy.³⁹⁰ This disruption is a process of repetition with revision, forgetting, and erasure.

The movement choices in *Sakhozi Says "Non"* confront a problem that haunts Black choreographers in the global contemporary dance scene, which includes the primitivist interpretations of their work, even as they produce highly complex conceptual dance innovations. Xaba's work doesn't escape this reception, as the formal interventions of her work described

³⁸⁸ Ibid., 49.

³⁸⁹ I am using "heresy" in a way that Sylvia Wynter uses it in "Sambo and Minstrels" (1979). In this essay, Wynter argues that those elements of cultural expression deemed "heretic" and outside of the Norm inevitably get co-opted into the Norm. In other words, the Norm absorbs these heresies such that they continue to exist, but their existence is licensed and managed by the custodians of the Norm. In other words, as "licensed heresies," they are repurposed to carry out the work of the Norm. See: Sylvia Wynter, "Sambos and Minstrels," *Social Text* 1 (1979): 149-156

³⁹⁰ Wynter, "Rethinking 'Aesthetics': Notes on a Deciphering Practice" In *Ex-Iles: Essays on Caribbean Cinema*, edited by Mbye Cham, 237-279. (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1992).

above are sometimes ignored. This is also the norm for African and African Diasporic performances in the West, who are often publicized, consumed, and reviewed as “highly energetic,” “pulsey,” “sexy,” etc. eliding their formal interventions in modern/contemporary aesthetics. When there is a refrain from a joyful affective register and exuberant kinetic quality (as is evident in Xaba’s practice), contemporary African performance is often dismissed by scholars and critics as derivative and mimetic of European/North American conceptual dance “originals.” African dancers are often construed as “natural performers,” or “natural entertainers” when they foreground Africanist elements, as if they do not perform the labor of complicating and intervening on those forms deemed “traditional” or “indigenous.”³⁹¹

What would it mean to situate the unfathomability of movement experiments when they are African (Diasporic) beyond notions of inauthenticity? This is not a call for recognition or incorporation, but a call to bear the weight of absences and erasures sanctioned whenever genealogies of experimental performance are recited. I am not arguing that the notion of African experiments is unknown to Europe and North America. The barometer for measuring what is “contemporary” or “experimental,” even in Africa, is deeply embroiled in “Western”-centric critical-discursive and material practices of evaluation. Performance platforms across the European continent such as Festival d’Avignon (Avignon), Tanz im August (Berlin), and Dance Umbrella (London) regularly program African-descended artists, and have played a role in the success and iconicity of certain African (descended) artists.³⁹² My concern, rather, is whether this recognition of African experiments is curated and made legible only through a conceptual framework of nation. Art historian Valerie Kabov, in her article “Whose South Is It Anyway?”

³⁹¹ Susan Leigh Foster (2014), 129.

³⁹² The 2017 *Performa* festival in New York City which featured artist such as Tracey Rose, Zanele Muholi, Mohau Modisakeng, and Kemang wa Lehulere is another example of this acknowledgement.

states “the Global South has materialized as a place of discovery for the fresh, the new, and exciting . . . The new attention for art of the South is, in fact, recognition and validation by the North. To put it another way, it is the North which by-and-large decides when and what sells, is discovered, collected and exhibited.”³⁹³ The validation of African contemporaneity is largely engineered by European and North American academic and cultural institutions.

Some of Xaba’s research for the “Venus” duology took place in Paris, where she meditated on Black American entertainer and icon Josephine Baker who gained fame by performing *danse sauvage* which encompassed primitivist trope that have a major contribution to Modernist aesthetics. While Baker and “The Venus Hottentot” are not entirely collapsible, both provide a noteworthy precedent for those performers who became iconic (and relatively wealthy in some cases) as a result of performing versions of *danse sauvage*. “The Venus [Hottentot],” as Africana feminist Ayo A. Coly posits, had little control and knowledge of the intentions of her captors, or the larger ideological implications and pre-established notions that her “*les sauvages*” *body* signified which preceded her arrival.³⁹⁴ Coly continues, “Unlike Baartman, Baker possessed the foresight into and an astute awareness of the ideological repercussions of her staging of racial difference.”³⁹⁵ However, Baker’s “foresight” neither ceased nor reduced the violence of European structures of fantasy. Baker’s subversion of the stereotype repeated rather than sidestepped the fetish.³⁹⁶

³⁹³ Valerie Kabov. “Whose South Is It Anyway” *ART AFRICA*, (2015), 20

³⁹⁴ Coly, Ayo A. “Housing and Homing the Black Female Body in France: Calixthe Beyala and the Legacy of Sarah Baartman and Josephine Baker”, Thompson et al., *Black Womanhood: Images, Icons, & Ideologies of the African Body* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2008), 259.

³⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁹⁶ Cheng, *Second Skin*, 42.

Xaba, as a performance artists creating work 200 years after Baartman's physical death, also has the foresight to tease out the discontinuities and breaks between Baartman's experience and contemporary experiences.³⁹⁷ Her "Venus" dance works emerge out of the knowledge of and foresight about the experience and position of these Black performance predecessors in relation to capture often constru(ct)ed as "entertainment." It is this foresight, I argue, that raises the stakes even more for both Baker and Xaba. Baker's and Xaba's astute awareness of the ideological repercussions of staging racial difference raise the stakes for what their authorial choices challenge, as well as what they recapitulate. They are both inevitably entangled and complicit by virtue of intentionally citing the primal scene. When they both enter the drama of re(-)presentation, they are haunted by the figure of Baartman and structures of fetishism and fantasy attached to her, their knowing or lack thereof. The knowledge and foresight are not powerful enough to either suspend or stall the haunting. The staging of "self" and primitivism in "their own terms" with this knowledge of the lucrative benefits of *ethnic prancing*³⁹⁸ implicates the artists in a form of self-commoditization that contradicts their foresight-driven "subversive"

³⁹⁷ The figure of the "collaborator" haunts both Baker's and Xaba's performances. What do we make of Baker performing African stereotypes, or Xaba accepting the invitation to perform at the Musée in Paris? The aim of these questions is not to be accusatory, but to examine the concept of collaboration in its myriad and contradictory permutations. Knowingly collaborating with a museum that had liberal but essentially un-transformative politics, or willingly recycling anti-African stereotypes with the self-belief that they are being "subverted" are questions that ought to be brought up alongside celebratory thick description of these artist's excellence. Baker became "Fatou," who in the show went down a tree like a monkey (with the monkey's favorite treat, bananas around her hips). According to Françoise Verges in "BANANAS: Racism, Sex, and Capitalism", Baker was aware of critic Fernand Devoire's praise of her performance, which stated, "In the eyes of Paris, you are the virgin forest. You bring to us a savage rejuvenation." It is worth noting that the savage rejuvenation mentioned by Devoire happened alongside the development of the Negritude Movement in Paris, which called for retentions of (strategically) essentialized notions of African rhythm, modes of philosophizing, and a revival of other visual-artistic accoutrements. Negritude was also rubbing up against the long-existent frenzy of European negrophilia, which Baker was aware of and capitalized upon. Baker's performance at Theatre des Champ-Elysées also drew from the U.S. minstrel tradition. *Sakhozi Says Non*, then, cites Baker to trace a *maternal* heritage of avant-garde performance's ties to racial capitalism, fetishism, aesthetic judgment, and the coeval interplay of desire and disgust. See: Verges, Françoise. "BANANAS: Racism, Sex, and Capitalism", *The Funambulist*, 2016.

³⁹⁸ Rampokoleng in Peter Anders and Matthew Krouse, *Positions: Contemporary Artists in South Africa*. (Auckland Park, South Africa: Jacana Media, 2010).

exercises. It becomes clear that blacks may have no terms of their own, despite their deployment of foresight as an attempt to re-fashion *scenes of subjection* in their “own terms.” The racial stereotype stubbornly sticks to the surface, indistinguishable from the subversive or counter-hegemonic gesture.

In *Sakhozi Says “Non,”* the breaking of line and flow in movement is not merely a fidelity to errant line in a similar fashion championed by Euro-American (post-)modern dance “pioneers.” Instead, it demonstrates the complexities of line itself. It directs attention to “the Black (dancing) body” as the paradigmatically non-linear, slant, and out-of-line antithesis to form, which Whiteness has continuously defined itself against, while paradoxically appropriating.³⁹⁹ The performance encompasses this slant organization of bodily lines, staccato jerks, and contractions etc. For this reason, there is no precolonial state of “purity” prior to entanglement. This impurity is often only read at the level of culture, but it is ontological for the black. Frantz Fanon’s explanation arrives more precisely at this point when he states, “In the *Weltanschauung* [world view] of a colonized people there is an impurity, a flaw that outlaws any ontological explanation...Ontology... does not permit us to understand the being of the black man.”⁴⁰⁰ This means that impurity is not a cultural crisis for the black that can be easily remedied through claims to cultural mixing, or in contrast, through claims to cultural origins. For the black, as Fanon posits, impurity points to the black’s ontological negation, or a condemned status where the black exists as “not.” Xaba traces that through her own dancing “body,” as well as Baartman’s encounter with discourses of science, aesthetics, philosophy, and medicine which produced her as the “Hottentot Venus.” As Zakiyyah Jackson argues, these discourses concocted

³⁹⁹ This is discussed in detail in Brenda Dixon Gottschild, *The Black Dancing Body* (2003)

⁴⁰⁰ Cited in Kara Keeling, “‘In the Interval’: Frantz Fanon and the ‘Problems’ of Visual Representation” *Qui Parle* 13, no. 2 (2003): 91-11795.

the idea of the Black female body as “paradigmatically dis-aesthetic or a monstrous irregularity.”⁴⁰¹ This idea describes an ontological incapacity for elevated sensation. If Joseph Roach defines the 18th century meaning of “aesthetic” as “the vitality and sensuous presence of material forms,”⁴⁰² then to be paradigmatically dis-aesthetic, for the black woman, is to inhabit a *deform* or an ontological impurity. It is to be devoid, *a priori*, of the capacity for vitality and sensuous presence. It marks the black (female) body’s purported incapacity for Enlightenment sublimity. The concept of the sublime and the beautiful is characterized in a variety of ways in Continental philosophy. For the British philosopher Edmund Burke, the sublime is innate to the object and it is not a response to an object, as in Immanuel Kant’s formulation. For Burke, this innate sublimity is not for the black. As Jackson notes, Burke’s formulation of the sublime was “delineated in part by his description of a white boy’s frightful visual encounter with a black female, and his framing of the formlessness of darkness and blackness.”⁴⁰³ This darkness (and the knowledge it carries) is valued as sublime and paradoxically repudiated as antithetical to sublimity, since it is embodied by the dark formless figure.

There is a destruction in Xaba’s work that insinuates itself not as representable disarray, but as a mode of sensing/feeling/knowing that attunes us to that which *must* happen (not in a teleological “future”) but cannot happen in our current order. This destruction can be sensed as a disavowed and absented ground not fully reckonable or permissible, since its full manifestation would blow the lid off all coherence, and indeed the world. This is why in Xaba’s work “the

⁴⁰¹ Jackson, “Theorizing in a Void” 620.

⁴⁰² Roach (1996), xiii.

⁴⁰³ Krista Thompson, “A Sidelong Glance: The Practice of African Diaspora Art History in the United States.” *Art Journal* 70, no. 3 (2011): 21.

black female body” is approached through a somewhat tentative/non-spectacular back-and-forth dance, toward and away from the promises and traps of figuration, legibility, and visibility.

Domestic Servitude and the Ruse of “Care”

Domestic servitude is one of the focal points of *Sakhozi Says Non* that brings attention to the transnational accumulation of black people and their labor. The maid’s costume worn by Xaba combined with gestures reminiscent of domestic and industrial work make this point unambiguous. Xaba sharply punches and dabs the air, picking the spikes of her costume in mechanical motion, moving in staccato motion, resembling an automaton or the machine. The cyborg with mechanical characteristics is evoked to illustrate the historical expectations of laboring black bodies’ hyper-productivity and magical endurance.⁴⁰⁴ This is the plasticized African “body” that France needs for capitalist accumulation, but jettisons after extraction and exhaustion. The quotidian daily house chores she performs while wearing a maid’s outfit also tend to black domestic servitude as a continuation, rather than a departure from plantation and apartheid logics of domestic servitude. The different characters she portrays in the piece illustrate Europe’s incessant appetite for “Venus,” for a desire to perform a range of sadistic aggressivities (real and phantasmatic) upon her, before discarding her. They need her, now, in the 21st century, and *if she wasn’t there, she would have to be invented.*⁴⁰⁵

⁴⁰⁴ Joy James has elaborated on this function of the black *body* as cyborg, showing the direct relation between capitalism, technological advancement, and the laboring black *body*. I think of technology here as not the antithesis or outside of body/flesh. I understand bodies/flesh as technological sites themselves, which means technology is not a separate force that acts on bodies. See: James Joy, “Refusing Blackness as Victimization: Trayvon Martin and the Black Cyborgs” in Yancy, George, and Jones, Janine. *Pursuing Trayvon Martin: Historical Contexts and Contemporary Manifestations of Racial Dynamics*. (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2014).

⁴⁰⁵ To make my point clearer, I rehearse Hortense Spiller’s precise assertion: “I am a marked woman, but not everybody knows my name . . . My country needs me, and if I were not here, I would have to be invented” (2003: 203). And while there’s an expectation for the black body to be hyper-productive, racial capitalism also paradoxically frames the black body as unproductive. The definition of “aggressivity” I am working with is provided by J Laplanche & J.B. Pontails in *The Language of Psycho-Analysis*. Aggressivity is described as “a tendency or

The image of Xaba wearing a maid's apron assembles together a number of objects (with other images pasted on them) which collapse time, place, and a variety of experiences [fig 2.13]. The model of history offered here is one that eschews linear progressivism, focusing instead on stillness as well as historical repetition and cycles. This model refrains from narrating the black into the spatio-temporal coordinates of the rest of the world. In this framing of history as unmoving (particularly for the black), the contemporary stage dancer is shown to have much in common with the domestic servant and the early 19th century Piccadilly Circus performance attraction. The maid character with denied citizenship—visualized as asexual/*de*-sexualized mammy—performs an alternate signifying function to the coquettish “French maid” of sexual role-play fantasy (who, in popular visual culture is often dishonestly *glamorized* as white) [fig 2.14]. The apron worn by Xaba also makes reference to the “Hottentot apron,” another destructive practice of naming and ungendering.⁴⁰⁶ The figure of the black mammy/maid is visualized as asexual while also being physically invaded through sexual violence. As asexual “seductress,” she is denied sexuality while being simultaneously possessed by it as excess. She is sexually violated while that violation is not legible as rape, but a consequence of her “innate” licentiousness. The domestic enclosure is thus a *mise-en-scène* of racial-sexual horrors. It directs our attention to opaque and non-spectacular ways in which black women in particular are

cluster of tendencies finding expression in real or phantasy behavior intended to harm other people, or to destroy, humiliate or constrain them, etc.... [it can either] be symbolic (e.g. irony) or actually carried out. See: J Laplanche & J.B. Pontails in *The Language of Psycho-Analysis*. (1973), 27.

⁴⁰⁶ The “Hottentot's apron” is the hypertrophy of the *labia minora*. Because some Khoi and San women developed this physical attribute and many did not, European colonial voyagers obsessed over its existence for over 250 years (21). As Sander Gilman argues, “Eighteenth century travelers to southern Africa, such as François Le Vaillant and John Barrow, had described the so-called Hottentot apron, a hypertrophy of the labia and nymphaea caused by the manipulation of the genitalia and serving as a sign of beauty among certain tribes, including the Hottentots and Bushmen as well as tribes in Basutoland and Dahomey” See: Sander Gilman, “Black Bodies, White Bodies: Toward an Iconography of Female Sexuality in Late Nineteenth-century Art, Medicine, and Literature,” *Critical Inquiry* 12, no. 1(1985): 213.

brutalized by, and forced to resist, anti-black terror. While certain critics dredge up a kind of (nominal) agency in enclosure, especially by mobilizing the agency of a figure such as Harriet Jacobs in the garret,⁴⁰⁷ I find Hartman's remarks on enclosure more useful in waking us up from a critically comatose posture of reading that recuperates the terror of the domestic. Hartman describes the domestic enclosure as "a refusal of black people's refusal of enclosure."⁴⁰⁸ The enclosure, understood that way, anticipates black refusal, and stubbornly remodels itself to fortify the interminability of its despotism.

The apron attunes the audience to Baartman's domestic servitude in Cape Town, and more generally to black domestic servitude. It alludes to interior and trans-continental migrations, where millions of black women serve in predominantly white domestic enclaves. It is almost impossible to meet a white South African who has not been served or "raised" by a black woman in their lifetime. In apartheid South Africa, the movement of black people was monitored and restricted using the *dompas* (translated from Afrikaans as "dumb pass")—an identity document that licensed black people to leave their Bantustans and labor in white enclosures. As a marker of non-personhood and non-citizenship, the *dompas* was a mandatory requirement for blacks to carry at all times; and failure to do so resulted in stop-and-frisk physical encroachments, brutal beatings by the apartheid police, and sometimes imprisonment. Those public violations were a macrocosm of practices transpiring inside the homes where black

⁴⁰⁷ See: Katherine McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle*. *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006). Similar romances about the "prison cell" as an enclosure of "possibility" and "play" are proliferating in contemporary discourse.

⁴⁰⁸ This appears in Hartman, "Manual for General Housework," *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval*. (New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, 2019), 77. This particular quote comes from Hartman's presentation that I attended at the University of Chicago where she read the first draft of "Manual for General Housework."

women were domestic servants. The apartheid female domestic servant also confounded the logics of anti-miscegenation laws such as the Group Areas Act (1950) and the Immorality Act (amended three times). She labored in the intimate zones inside white homes, while also being cast out, quarantined into the “servants’ quarters” where she slept. As discussed by Achille Mbembe,

The role of architecture and planning was to trace partitions within well-defined spaces with clear protective boundaries so as to avoid the disruptive effects—real or potential—of race mixing. The most obvious figure of this is the domestic worker and, in particular, the “black nannies” of the suburbs, “toiling alone inside white homes, and occasionally meeting on the pavements outside”...“routine duties involved a daily round of cleaning, sweeping, polishing, tidying and dusting,” making beds, and “serving the family at meal times.”. . .“Hence the development of outbuildings — or ‘maid’s rooms’—for black domestic workers, rooms often just big enough for a bed and a toilet.” In this, one can see how a logic of servility or reciprocal dependency interrupts the coded intervals of the apartheid city while opening up a space for combined processes of restratification and involution, proximity and distance.⁴⁰⁹

Post-1994 democracy put an end to the *dompas*, but most of the practices described by Mbembe above remain intact as the norm, rather than the exception, in the white South African domestic sphere. While black domestic servants create conditions of possibility for the white suburban nuclear family’s flourishing, their occupation also leads to further fracturing of their families, as they often cannot participate in raising their children. Family members are separated, and black women raise white women’s children rather than their own. Because the labor is organized according to a gender binary system, millions of black men also labor outside the domestic interior as “garden boys” who maintain the lushness and *luxe*-ness of mostly white residential exterior landscapes. The interiorization of black female labor ensures an opaque “glass-closet”

⁴⁰⁹ Achille Mbembe. “Aesthetics of Superfluity,” *Public Culture* 16, no. 3 (2004): 386-387.

for all the atrocities that repeat.⁴¹⁰ This means that these atrocities are hidden in plain sight, and the “mundane” domestic space is as violent as the outside. Attending to these nuances of the domestic draw attention to how apartheid affected black women specifically, and this is important because it expands the narrative of apartheid which focuses mostly on black male suffering and revolutionary practice.

Even with the above account of the normalization of Black servility, there has been a drive in political and artistic venues towards recuperating the heroic status of domestic servitude. This is in part an attempt to recover, through celebration, the histories of black women during apartheid and its afterlife. This exaltation is often in recognition of domestic servants’ tact and endurance in spaces not meant for their survival,⁴¹¹ as they admirably go through fire to provide for their families. Black woman artist Mary Sibande’s celebrated sculptures of the figure of Sophie come to mind as emblematic of the figure of the domestic servant claiming place in contemporary art. I have engaged with Sibande’s work at different galleries in South Africa.⁴¹² These life-size black sculptures, sometimes in upright positions wearing bright blue and purple maid’s outfits direct attention to the plight of black domestic servants and highlight the gestures of their refusal. Similar to Nelisiwe Xaba’s multi-functional Victorian gown in *They Look At Me*, the maids outfit in Sibande’s sculptures is extended in scale to resemble Victorian gowns in both their grandeur and suffocating stricture. The maid’s outfit is elevated to *haute couture*

⁴¹⁰ See: Riley Snorton, *Nobody’s Supposed to Know* (2014), which discusses “downlow” black sexuality as encased within a glass closet because it is both hidden and not seen. See: Riley Snorton, *Nobody Is Supposed to Know: Black Sexuality on the down Low*. (Minneapolis, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2014).

⁴¹¹ This is an invocation of Audre Lorde, “A Litany for Survival.” *Affilia* 10, no. 1 (1995): 108-09.

⁴¹² I first came across Sibande’s work at the National Arts Festival in Makhanda (Grahamstown), South Africa. I also recall walking around downtown Johannesburg and experiencing her work exhibited publicly around the city in the form of billboards. The large-scale billboards were strategically positioned in areas populated by the black working class, including Bree taxi rank.

proportions, where the royal blue color, besides the image on the apron invoking Superman (who by the way is a cop) adds to the tone of classical regality.⁴¹³

Sibande carves these figures to resemble her own body. They appear as if they are in kinetic motion, involved in some kind of labor, rather than poses capturing still movement. [fig 2.15 & fig. 2.16] When they are not completely upright, they extend their limbs beyond their kinespheric parameters, claiming space, physically transcending the domestic enclosure of their everyday life. They allude to black women on the move, riding horses with arms raised wide open. When they are more composed in their physical comportment, the figures do not show muscle tension on the bodily surface. An example is the figure who knits a blue garment with a Superman logo attached to it [fig 2.15]. While the knitting pose registers a familiar domestic activity, the Superman logo is brought into the sculpture to destabilize a flat reading of the piece which only sees a figure confined in domestic space. Superman suggests a kind of flight and aerofugitivity where, at least in the imagination, the figure can wander and exceed boundaries of the domestic.

The scale of these pieces and their heroic movement gestures raise some concerns about encountering such art works and responding by cathedralizing the form and narrative of the laboring black female body with abrogated rights. When does this exaltation slip into a celebration of the black maid as Super Mammy, a figure of indomitable strength and perpetual endurance? What are the advantages and pitfalls of this fugitivity in black thought and action?

⁴¹³ My colleague, Leah Kaplan who writes about time in Caribbean philosophy, reminded me of this obvious but often suppressed fact during a conversation. Superman's occupation as a cop is often underplayed in narratives that reference him as a metaphor for strength, courage, and heroic action. This detail about Superman as "blue life" matters in this discussion, specifically in understanding the library of symbols animating Sibande's intervention, of mattering and black "life." It reveals a variety of fraught symbols and tropes that Black feminist artists sometimes take up in their narratives of becoming.

David Marriott in “Judging Fanon”⁴¹⁴ has pushed back against this “ceaseless fugitivity” in Black thought and action. Marriott is critical of this perpetual fugitivity because “it can only affirm blackness as affirmation.”⁴¹⁵ In other words, the hegemony of ceaseless fugitivity is “a position in which blackness is only black when it exceeds its racist views. Or the blackness of blackness can only be recognized as black in so far as it escapes the racism of its history: but what allows us to see this escape is not blackness, but its racist disavowal”⁴¹⁶ The aerofugitivity suggested in Sibande’s provides a different way of knowing the Black domestic servant as irreducible to the conditions of her servility. However, the elements of flight in Black thought and aesthetics suggest a transcendence from the boundaries of blackness as enclosure, and one might ask if this bears a hallucinatory understanding of the world as transcendable. In other words, the question that hovers is about whether Black flight and fugitivity are investments in either *transcending* the world, or *ending* the world as we know it.

In Nelisiwe Xaba’s *Sakhozi Says “Non” to the Venus*, the approach to the figure of the domestic servant is rather anti-heroic and un/anti-monumental. Xaba troubles the logic of performance as yet another form of replacing, (while repeating the same logics and functions of) monumentalism. Instead of narrating Baartman as a singular figure whose contribution to history and memory must be erected in a way similar to monuments, she shatters those expectations, and we may very well ask if this enacts a different (dis)order to monumental conventions/ “systems of memory.” The scaling down of props and costumes from *They Look at Me* to an even more minimalist approach in *Sakhozi* illustrates that point. The performance pays homage to domestic servants not by exalting that abject/resilient position, but by an insistence on exposing the

⁴¹⁴ David Marriott, “Judging Fanon” *Rhizome*. Issue 29 (2016).

⁴¹⁵ *Ibid.*, par 6.

⁴¹⁶ *Ibid.*, par 6

conditions which create that position. This leaves the audience with an opportunity to acknowledge that some of those conditions of fungibility are illegible and not fully available to our (re)cognition. Celebrating black figures relegated to domestic servitude and paying homage to their strength is crucial, but we are also called to pay attention to how that celebration reinstitutes Black domestic servants back to a prison instantiated through coercion and force. The result of vouchsafing political and sexual agency for the “mammy” in this manner recapitulates and romanticizes servitude.⁴¹⁷ Xaba moves away from this recapitulation which is present in Steven Cohen’s oeuvre [fig. 2.17]. *Sakhozi* insists on antagonism by exposing the obscenities of domestic servitude as a continuation, rather than a break, from slave-to-master relations.

Performance/Remains

Scholars such as Harvey Young, David Marriott, and Leigh Raiford have expanded upon the economic and libidinal currency of the remains of brutalized Black *bodies*.⁴¹⁸ The currency of these remains is not only predicated upon their “aesthetic value,” but the capacity to possess them, gaze at them, and partake in a haptic engagement with them by whites and non-blacks also cements the idea of European Human subjectivity and reifies slavery’s property relations. The remains as surrogate objects undergo the same violence by circulating as commodities sold in a different marketplace, as well as objects gratifying their owner’s’ libidinal phantasies. Black bodily remains (hair, tissue, cells, bones, limbs, photographs of their final moments, mugshots etc.) circulate between individuals as well as institutions such as museums, medical research centers, galleries, and library collections. This section returns to the claim made in performance

⁴¹⁷ Hartman (2019).

⁴¹⁸ See: Harvey Young, *Embodying Black Experience: Stillness, Critical Memory, and the Black Body*. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010); David Marriott, (2000, 2007); Leigh Raiford (2003). Their focus is primarily on Jim Crow lynchings.

theory about performance's ontological status as simultaneously disappearing and remaining/recording. I am interested in the relationship between that ontological status and the ontological status of black corporeal remains which are housed as property in European museums and other cultural historical institutions. What claims are possible once these corporeal remains have been "returned" to where they originate? What emerges when we take a close look at what the language deployed for the repatriation and burying of those remains is mobilized as currency for a different project: nation-building? After the remains purported to be Baartman's were repatriated and buried, the South African government referred to the repatriation and burial as processes that "restored her [Baartman's] dignity."⁴¹⁹ This makes sense when considering the uses of "the Venus" as plastic/fungible icon for two centuries. But how exactly does the soil in South Africa as we know it become a site for the "restoration of dignity"? What qualifies as dignified and proper burial for bones that are an inventory of dishonored severed flesh? What are the limits of symbolic reparation? What if we understand the burial of Baartman's purported remains as perhaps bringing her in close proximity to other restless African ancestors? What if perhaps the "dignity restored" is that the restless dead get to be restless side-by-side, rather than rest with dignity? Instead of completely letting go of the repatriated bones as their former property, the Musée invites Xaba to perform in what ultimately ends up, at least in part, being an invitation for Xaba to perform and surrogate for the bones that the Musée was pressured to return. Whose interests does this surrogation serve? Is there something about Black performance's ontological status that fails to fulfill this rehabilitation fully? Can performance

⁴¹⁹ See: South African Heritage Resources Agency (SAHRA). 2015. "Sarah Baartman Burial Site." 27 March. Accessed 9 June 2018. www.sahra.org.za/sarahbaartmanburialsite/

direct our attention to what bones (the archive) cannot tell us, as well as what performance itself cannot tell us?

Black performance theorist Brandi Wilkins Catanese in “Remembering Saartjie Baartman” demonstrates both the limitations and liberatory promises of reclamation attached to the burial of Baartman’s remains (in the form of bones). Among the liberatory promises, she discusses the Khoi and San nation’s reclamation of Baartman through burial rituals as having “extricated her from her iconic function in France [and] performatively intercepted the rigid pastness of Saartjie Baartman, thereby redefining her into their political present.”⁴²⁰ Catanese understands the burial ceremony; the speech delivered by former President Thabo Mbeki’s; and the Griqua’s “performative interception”, as “rescu[ing]” Baartman “from France’s historicizing acts.”⁴²¹ This, for Catanese, disrupts the dominant narrative about Baartman which focus mostly on capture and coercion. The performative utterances and burial ceremony, for Catanese, augment Baartman’s story of suffering by narrating what she understands to be a more complete and nuanced narrative that encompasses details of black resistance. It remains to be determined, however, how “systems of memory that recognize Baartman’s (and other Black women’s) subjectivity” overwhelm histories of European domination.⁴²²

⁴²⁰ Wilkins (2010), 53.

⁴²¹ Ibid.

⁴²² Ibid. Furthermore, *Sakhozi Say’s “NoN”* complicates Wilkins Catanese’s understanding of Mbeki’s performative utterance as occasioning a “physical re-association with South Africa figuratively [which] helps to sever the colonial relationship of exploitation between Africa and Europe” (Catanese). *Sakhozi Says “NoN”* conjures up Baartman to argue against the notion of a “severed” colonial relationship between Africa and Europe. President Sarközy’s utterance is proof of the resurgence and resilience of that colonial relationship, rather than a severing. Mbeki, as quoted by Wilkins Catanese, states, “The story of Sarah Baartman is the story of the African people [. . .]. It is the story of the *loss* of our ancient freedom [. . .]. It is the story of *our reduction to the state of objects who could be owned, used and discarded by others.*” (53, italics mine). Mbeki’s emphasis on loss, reduction, objecthood, and thingliness resonates with Xaba’s concerns in *Sakhozi Say’s “NoN”* about how European domination remains, and those aspects of loss and abjection in Baartman’s narrative are also “narratives of our age” (Hartman). Neither *Sakhozi Says “NoN”* nor Mbeki’s speech extracted in Catanese gesture toward a re-association or severing of the colonial relationship.

Departing from and supplementing Catanese's analysis, I argue that recognizing or retroactively endowing Baartman with the gift of subjectivity, assumes that subjectivation is antithetical to captivity, when in fact subjectivation itself, for the black, is a form of captivity. It remains unclear why Baartman's "subjectivity" must be "recognized" in the political present as per Catanese's argument. Nelisiwe Xaba's project seems less concerned with restitution or reclamation of subjectivity in this manner. Rather, the piece draws attention to the anti-Black historico-political apparatuses of the "not-yet-past Enlightenment" that calibrate(d) the coherence of subjectivity in the first place.⁴²³ It appears to be less concerned with refurbishing and re-assembling the scraps of a subjectivity long denied to blacks.

What the "Venus" duology enacts, then, is less a process of strict memorialization than an intentional process of layering and substitution. This is the simultaneous enactment of memory and forgetting, which narrates history through performance—a "displaced transmission" which re-members the past in order to both enact and imagine a future praxis.⁴²⁴ Black flesh in motion, which is to say black movement, is simultaneous disappearance and reproduction, simultaneous forgetting and *invention*.⁴²⁵ Rather than "imagining what might have happened" or speculating about "the Venus'" interiority, Xaba charts an alternative ground that foregrounds incoherence, fragmentation, and Ultimate Chaos.⁴²⁶ The atrocities relegated to the past are shown to be

⁴²³ Jackson, "Theorizing in a Void," 621.

⁴²⁴ Roach (1996), 28.

⁴²⁵ See: Ibid.; Moten (2003).

⁴²⁶ Engaging with Zakiyyah Iman Jackson's work (2018) has nuanced my understanding of the *chaotic*. By chaos I am not referring to the common parlance use of the word to refer to a visible pattern of disorder (i.e. a mess) or cacophonous noise. Rather, the chaotic manifests as a "function," a certain condition of Black *being*, rather than merely an "avant-garde" aesthetic tactic deployed by Xaba to mess up or "cause chaos" to a presumably orderly *mise-en-scène* and ontoepisteme. In fact, this Order/Chaos bifurcation, as Jackson attests, has been contested in post-Newtonian theories of chaos which make sense of order and chaos as "interwoven," rather than insinuating chaos as an external threat to order (617). Jackson, however, shows how blackness confounds the stability of that post-Newtonian understanding about the woven-ness of internal and external forces. Even as post-Newtonian theorists move toward an understanding of chaos as entwined with order, black(ened) people are "*recursively* conceived as a

flourishing in the present. The perfect summing up of the lives lost and lives dispossessed is not foregrounded in the work. For Xaba, Baartman and others like her, are not past memory, but they are a past that is not past. Rather than forging a melancholic relationship to the past (that is not past), her practice reveals what Hartman calls “the ongoing state of emergency in which black life remains in peril.”⁴²⁷ In *They Look At Me* and *Sakhozi Says “Non”*, “the Venus” is neither properly returned “home” nor buried, but she hovers as “haint,” always pulled between Europe and the African (Diasporic) world, between back then and right now.⁴²⁸ The project of nation is destabilized through her refusal to mark Baartman’s corporeal remains, and her *own* performance remains, as tokens available for liberal redress. Her work is in conversation with other Black artists who put pressure on the “Venus” icon [fig. 18-22]. The performance space is thus not figured as a site for conventional ideas of catharsis and perfect closure. Instead, the performance space becomes a charged site for elaborating the integration of those who have perished, and those whom death is the structuring condition of (non-)being. That suture of the *dead and dying* in performance proves either revelatory or scandalous to the spectator, depending on their ideological orientation from which they either acknowledge, contest, or deny the *fact of blackness*.

chaotic threat encroaching from, and appropriate to, the margins of a ‘universalist’ system of Order.” (618) Black(ened) people, then, signify “Ultimate Chaos,” as discussed by Sylvia Wynter in her 1984 essay titled “The Ceremony Must Be Found: After Humanism.” Jackson’s term for the Ultimate Chaos is the black *mater*(nal) “primarily because I want to further emphasize not a subjectivity or standpoint but the sublime antiblack and sexuating conditions of discursivity itself” (629) The status and function of this chaos/ black *mater*(nal) as the condition of blackness formed through “active creation” and sustained as such, is invoked in order to give coherence to the dominant models and the Human’s Order of Being.

⁴²⁷ Hartman, “Venus,” 13.

⁴²⁸ *Ibid.*, 5.

CHAPTER THREE

Anarrangement and the Anti-choreographic in Ligia Lewis' *red, white, and blue* Trilogy

Blackness—the extended movement of a specific upheaval, an ongoing irruption that anarranges every line—is a strain that pressures the assumption of the equivalence of personhood and subjectivity.

— Fred Moten, *In the Break*⁴²⁹

Can we think of blackness as incontrovertibly formless?

— Calvin Warren, “The Catastrophe”⁴³⁰

Form is achieved now by dissolution, by the *annulment* of form.

— Hortense Spillers, “Art Talk and the Uses of History”⁴³¹

God, dance is an impossible form.

— Ralph Lemon, *Geography*.⁴³²

The body is everywhere in critical theorizing about performance, particularly dance.

When it appears, it is whole; it is sensational; it is invaginated; it becomes; it is without organs; it is on the line; it affirms presence; it is a repository of memory and experience; and despite strides made to discuss it away from a reduction to biology, it disappears and/or remains as an empirical given. This chapter, informed by and contributing to Afro-pessimist theorizing, questions these conclusions about the body as well as assumptions about universal human subjectivity based on the corporeal form. My concern is performance studies' (and by extension dance studies') assumptions about the body's sentience as evidence for subjectivity. The idea of the presence of the body reifies Western conceptions that underplay how the African “body” in particular, as Hortense Spillers argues, “was made to *mean* via the powerful grammars of capture” such as

⁴²⁹ Moten (2003), 1.

⁴³⁰ Calvin Warren, “The Catastrophe.” *Qui Parle* 28, no. 2 (2019): 357.

⁴³¹ Hortense J. Spillers, “Art Talk and the Uses of History,” *small axe* 19, no. 3 (2015): 184; emphasis in original.

⁴³² Ralph Lemon, *Geography: Art, Race, Exile*. (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press; University Press of New England, 2000), 95.

colonialism as well the Arab and trans-Atlantic slave trades.⁴³³ Instead of theorizing from performance studies' presumption that there *is* a body endowed with (restricted) agency and capacity, what can be gained from taking seriously Spillers' assertion that,

The body is neither *given* as an empirical rupture on the landscape of the human, nor do we actually 'see' it...It is an analytical construct [that] does not exist in person at all. When we invoke it, then, we are often confusing and conflating our own momentousness as address to the world...with an idea on paper, only made vivid because we invest it with living dimensionality, mimicked, in turn, across the play of significations.⁴³⁴

Spillers' work demonstrates the body's irreducibility to its anatomical features and functions, describing it instead as a meeting point of discursive-material maneuvers tied to the accumulation of power. For Spillers, "the flesh" is a more apt concept for understanding Black captive personality and creative speculation, which is distinct from the "the body" as that which demarcates liberated subjectivity. This distinction allows a reassessment of presuppositions about the Black's access to the profits of intersubjective empathy and catharsis. In theatrical performance, it reveals the violence of applause/affirmation. As opposed to studies that take for granted the Black body's wholeness and relational capacity, I am interested in how aesthetic motifs associated with the disintegration of form and disassembly assert certain claims about Black captive personality.

Another concern in this chapter is the problem of narration, how to tell or present incomplete and unknowable stories. Thinking with the anti-choreographies of Dominican Black American dancemaker Ligia Lewis, I examine how dance's ontological resistance to literal figuration aids in asserting a nonrepresentational posture. Nonrepresentation is not discussed as a remedy to the problems of representation, but an opening to and explanation about the limits of

⁴³³ Hortense J. Spillers, "Peter's Pans: Eating in the Diaspora," in *Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003:14.

⁴³⁴ *Ibid.*, 21.

the desire to be legible in performance. Literary scholar Aliyyah Abdur-Rahman tends to the limits of narrative in performance and aesthetics, specifically the limits of realist and figurative gestures that attempt to translate Black suffering for the purpose of transcending it. The concept of “black grotesquerie” is Abdur-Rahman’s way of attending to Frank Wilderson’s call that “we need a new language of abstraction to explain this horror.”⁴³⁵ I aim to show how after Ligia Lewis finds certain approaches of narrating this horror wanting (even those in the Black performance tradition). She opts for a non-didactic movement language that exposes the wounds that hide behind the wound, without offering a balm or even claiming to know if a balm is what is needed. Abdur-Rahman emphasizes the role of Black aesthetic practitioners as critical thinkers whose art confounds representational logics of liberal humanist recognition. Black grotesquerie is an artistic critical posture that acknowledges catastrophe as the context for Black being and considers Black social life as “the practice of living on, in outmoded shapes.”⁴³⁶ This compositional disassembly is also a “recombinant gathering” which does not assume a prior corporeal, narrative, temporal, and topographical integrity for blackness or Black people whose fragmentation or loss is not mournable in conventional ways. Abdur-Rahman writes:

For those whose terms of existence are tethered to structural loss—to forms of civil and social death and to the persistent likelihood of their untimely demise—*narrative fails* in its usual procedure. The appeals, interests, and injuries of these subjects cannot be articulated or recuperated within the ordinary sites and schemas of historical, epistemic, and political rationality⁴³⁷

What must be the procedure when narrative fails? How else must we explain our horror? The failure of narrative to articulate anti-black horror calls for approaches that refrain from mending

⁴³⁵ Abdur-Rahman quotes Wilderson’s call for “a new language of abstraction with explanatory powers emphatic enough to embrace the Black” in *Red, White & Black* (2). See: Aliyyah I. Abdur-Rahman, “Black Grotesquerie.” *American Literary History* 29, no. 4 (2017): 682-703.

⁴³⁶ *Ibid.*, 683.

⁴³⁷ *Ibid.*, 688 (emphasis added).

this silence/impossibility. It remains to be determined whether black grotesquerie's explanatory power can fully account for a certain impasse where even Black artists working in abstraction get entrapped in unavoidable double-binds of reinforcing what they critique. Black grotesquerie does however underscore violence as a ubiquitous force that restricts the chances of unfettered Black articulation or performing oneself to personhood. And as Wilderson states in the chapter of *Red, White, and Black* that Abdur-Rahman responds to, representational monstrosity (what she calls black grotesquerie) alone is only the beginning. For Wilderson, "only when real violence is coupled with representational monstrosity can blacks move from the status of thing to the status of . . . of what, we'll just have to wait to see."⁴³⁸ Nonrepresentational approaches to dance-making such as Lewis' do important work of undermining violent representational apparatuses and destroying the forms that sustain them, but this alone cannot undo paradigm of anti-blackness. Adjusting the world and its terms through aesthetic procedures and ending the world are not two sides of the same coin.

The epigraphs that frame this chapter attend to this question of a subject position whose degraded form is not merely an aesthetic choice, but a condition of (non-)being produced through violence. This chapter raises the question of form and deformation by analyzing choreographer Ligia Lewis' *red, white, and blue* trilogy. I argue that formless Black aesthetics embrace a deform that already constitutes Blackness, and not reducible to formlessness as a motif in visual or performance representation. The condition of "being without form," as critical theorist Calvin Warren calls it, is a result of historical and political maneuvers of violence that rendered corporeal integrity an impossibility for African-derived people.⁴³⁹ This means that

⁴³⁸ See: Frank B. Wilderson III (2010), 66.

⁴³⁹ Warren, Calvin L. *Ontological Terror: Blackness, Nihilism, and Emancipation*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018).

Black corporeal form does not necessarily translate to humanity or personhood. Black political thought and praxis, at least since the Middle Passage and colonialism, has focused on wrestling with this voided personality, whether through suturing the rupture and giving it integrity, or inventing a new African personality that embraces the disintegration of form as a point of departure for the dissolution of the anti-black world. What African-derived thinkers and makers do with this deform matters. As discussed in the previous two chapters, there are political stakes in how this deform is figured in Black aesthetics. Conventional responses to fragmentation that turn to repair and reintegration sometimes fail to do their intended *wake work* since they tend to appeal to the terms of liberal humanist incorporation.⁴⁴⁰ Rather than offering a nuanced reading of the condition of blackness, these approaches assimilate into what I name the industry of care, which foregrounds individual wellness and getting over, while suppressing a Black revolutionary impulse.

In this dissertation, I am focusing primarily on those approaches that do not repair the unmournable void but speculate on the knowledge that can be produced and obtained from staying in the void. By this I am referring to an aesthetic-political posture that is not in denial of Black negation. I am also referring to an aesthetic posture that asserts a negative affective disposition such as rage, as a response to that negation. It is a negative orientation towards the world and investments in “worlding,” a mode that seeks to end the world instead of improving it. Finally, it is a negative orientation that puts pressure on the optimism endowed upon culture and aesthetics. This means that the goal is not to amend the wrongs of representation to form more positive Black representation. Instead, a negative orientation is about stretching those negative

⁴⁴⁰ Sharpe (2016).

icons and scenes, repeating them, and reimagining them to form representations that solicit an ambivalent response because they are dissatisfying and oftentimes problematic. In other words, the efficacy of these negative-oriented representational approaches lies in their reification of unavoidable violent tropes, as an attempt to destroy said tropes. The first two chapters of this dissertation discussed the unmournable void in tangible form (Biko's corpse) as well as the dissolution of form (Baartman's remains), and in this final chapter I am interested in the destruction of form. That is, how to figure Black matter or form by exhausting possibilities and impossibilities with darkness, ghosts, and other apparatus of the theater.

Born in the Dominican Republic, Lewis is based in Berlin (Germany) and she grew up in the United States of America. She received her dance training at Virginia Commonwealth University. Thereafter she moved to Europe to perform in the theater, museums, and film. This chapter considers Lewis' meditations on matter, mourning, and the limits of representation. I offer an expansive reading of two of her pieces from her *red, white, and blue* trilogy. That triptych consists of *Sorrow Swag* (2014), *minor matter* (2016) and *Water Will (In Melody)* which premiered in 2018. The trilogy is framed within the Obama political moment, which promised justice and freedom for Black specifically for Black people in the U.S. This was also a moment where Black representation in the highest office promised social transformation for Black people. As leader of the "free world" for a second term, Barack Obama assumed a representational status that promised to speak on behalf of Black Americans. However, this moment proved the limits of racial representation through racial icons, as the sensibilities and acts associated with slavery and Jim Crow were heightened, dispelling the myth of a post-racial America. The final piece of the trilogy was created after the election of the 45th president of the United States, another icon (an ex-reality television celebrity) who gained the trust of his fanbase

by openly and without respectable pretense authorized white supremacist sensibilities and actions. The racial politics of this time frame Lewis' trilogy, which references moments from the past to make sense of the historical presence. I show in this chapter how instead of grappling with contemporary performative anti-black violence, she examines the structures for this violence and the history that conditions them. That means that the trilogy does not present these problems in a literal way. The "Black Lives Matter" declaration of the time grounds her interests on which forms of life matter, what it means to matter, to (not) be seen, and for Black suffering to (not) have empathetic interlocutors.

In 2015, she created a solo performance for a white dancer called *Melancholy, A White Mellow Drama* which partly adapted Jean Genet's play titled *The Blacks: A Clown Show*. She also created *Sensation I/This Interior* (2019) and has performed in work by other performance-makers, including appearing in the role of Josephine Baker in a German television series titled *Das Adlon. Eine Familiensaga* (2013). In *Water Will* she explores the genre of melodrama in theater and cinema, and how its main feature, highly exaggerated affect, has racialized sexuating properties. Racialized sexuation is a term used by Zakiyyah Jackson to describe how anti-black formulations of gender and sexuality are essential, rather than secondary to the figuration of the Black as matter and object.⁴⁴¹ Highly exaggerated affect is often problematically attributed to the space of the feminine, which the Black is fluidly relegated to and away from through racialized sexuation. In *Water Will*, an antagonism between the white feminine and feminized blackness is staged. Lewis' engagement with racialized affect and racialized iconography related to minstrelsy debunks any presumptions about the universal shared space of the feminine. Using

⁴⁴¹ Jackson (2020), 9.

elaborate isolated gesture and exaggerated facial expressions, the piece reveals how gesture and affect in performance are primary components for generating humiliating racial types. Desire, monstrous pleasure, and fear of blackness as threat solidify in the form of the pliable image as destructive caricature, where the stereotype is calcified into a permanent stable sign.⁴⁴²

Various motifs in Lewis' work stand out in her process of ascertaining what black matter means in an anti-black world. Those motifs are darkness, the destruction of choreographic form, the politics of touch, the (r)uses of empathy, as well as affects such as sadness, rage, and animatedness. I consider Lewis' entire repertoire while focusing primarily on *minor matter* and *Water Will* as those pieces focus more explicitly on the invocation of the (anti-)black sign, as a terrifying aura around a figure that stimulates fear, or as an accumulation of racist tropes in American performance and visuality throughout history. The works comment on death, grief, the limits of narrative, and the horror of things deemed pleasurable. Lewis figures the destruction of form in dance by taking on racialized iconography and approaching it through a negative, non-representational approach. While the *red, white, and blue* trilogy alludes to the colors of the U.S. flag and its triangulated *structure of antagonisms*, the three colors are also connected to three affective states.⁴⁴³ Blue in *Sorrow Swag* is associated with sadness. Red in *minor matter* stands for the affect of rage. The white in *Water Will* explores Enlightenment thought's domestication of darkness and things associated with it such as "the dark continent," and the tradition of blackface minstrelsy which was about painting the face black in order to accentuate one's

⁴⁴² "Monstrous pleasures" is a term used by Christina Sharpe. See: Sharpe (2010), 179.

⁴⁴³ "Structure of antagonisms" is taken from the subtitle to Wilderson's *Red, White, and Black*. See: Wilderson (2010).

whiteness. *Water Will* specifically looks at animatedness, what literary theorist Sianne Ngai describes as “unprestigious affect.”⁴⁴⁴

Darkness haunts all three theatrical pieces, and the materiality of the color black is explicitly worked through in *Sorrow Swag*, *minor matter* and *Water Will*. Working with material darkness in all three pieces, she explores how, similar to the invisible man in Ralph Ellison well-known novel, “without light I am not only invisible, but formless as well; and to be unaware of one’s form is to live a death. I myself, after existing some twenty years, did not become alive until I discovered my invisibility.”⁴⁴⁵ Without light, problems of invisibility arise which are often addressed through a turn to more visibility. For Lewis, there’s a certain entrapment in more visibility, as one’s form is either presumed be known/knowable or the visible form becomes a target for outside projections. Darkness also does not mean invisibility and it too is a site of projections due to its terrifying opacity.

Similar to the artists discussed in the first two chapters, Lewis’ work also deals with the contemporary repetition of Black remains that cannot be laid to rest, prompting debates about the ethics of representation. In *minor matter* those remains manifest in the form of the hyper-mediatized Black corpse murdered by police, and in *Water Will* as the most recognizable but obscure sign of racial phantasmagoria; blackface minstrelsy. Lewis is cautious about conflating the politics enacted by her aesthetic practice to radical politics happening on the ground. While moments of deliberate legibility are present in her pieces, she obscures these such that their meaning is not stable, thus stimulating a response that is both/and, neither/nor, repulsion and appreciation. This is driven by her polemic against representational aesthetics, specifically

⁴⁴⁴ See: Ngai, Sianne. *Ugly Feelings*. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2005).

⁴⁴⁵ Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*. (New York: Vintage International, 1995), 7.

aspects of it that enmesh Black artists in non-transformative identity politics, expecting Black art to make the unspeakable both representable and legible. Lewis' apprehension about representationalism is due to the fact that reproducing scenes of Black unmaking reproduces the violence of the primal scene.⁴⁴⁶ This chapter will also discuss how the affects produced by Black performance generate what Hartman calls a narcissistic identification with the Black body, and that sometimes becomes an end result of liberal politics.⁴⁴⁷

Lewis' dramaturgical process pushes the writer/critic to push beyond the comforts of their disciplinary orientation. The interdisciplinary field of dance studies privileges methodologies associated with historical analysis, ethnographic/formal movement analysis, semiotic analysis (whose hope is to reveal the meanings of signifiers), or a combination of those approaches with identity categories such as race, gender, and sexuality affixed to them. Anxieties about critical theory are slowly fading away in certain corners of dance studies.⁴⁴⁸ This aversion to theory is not only attributable to an anti-intellectual tendency prevalent in the dance community, but it is also a response to Cartesian models that transpose theory to performance objects without allowing the object to participate in a dialog with critical theory. Dance studies gatherings can also be a space where theoretical approaches associated with anticolonialism and feminism etc. are silenced because they are understood to be tarnishing the purity of the form. Because the study of Black dance has often been advanced by historians and ethnographers working with empirical methods, it can be jarring to encounter the study of Black dance that

⁴⁴⁶ Here I am referring to a conversation between Fred Moten and Saidiya Hartman about the effects of reproducing the primal scene. They are specifically referring to the re-presentation of Aunt Hester's scream in Frederick Douglass' narrative. See: Moten (2003). Also see Hartman (1997).

⁴⁴⁷ Hartman (1997).

⁴⁴⁸ This can be observed in the subject matter of papers admitted to major conferences such as Dance Studies Association as well as the subject matter of books being published.

does not foreground the taking apart of dances and rituals to make conclusions about socio-culture. The procedures of critical theory (as limited as they are) offer a way to theorize more than just societal agents, but presumption about what society and agency are. To be involved in a kind of *pas de deux* of knowledge-making with Lewis, the scholar has to also engage with the library of knowledge that informs her practice, that she attempts to disrupt. Her work disorients dance tradition as much as it dismantles the existing traditions of writing about/with dance.

For the reasons stated above, I aim to assert the interanimation that exists between theory and practice, discursivity and materiality, as well as formal analysis and sociopolitical critique. Dance is another way of theorizing. Here, I am specifically conjuring Black feminist Barbara Christian's "Race for Theory" which makes a distinction and relation between Theory and theorizing. The former is linked to mostly academic debates, citational practices, and genealogies of thought associated with academic institutions.⁴⁴⁹ The latter considers vernacular and non-hegemonic forms of knowledge production that are sometimes discredited because they are neither textual nor have scholarly association. The idea that dance is a form of theorizing cannot be presumed to be obvious. As dance scholar Randy Martin notes, "what dance can bring to the scene of theoretical critique needs to be established: [dance] cannot presume to *be* that scene."⁴⁵⁰ Ligia Lewis' trilogy is a moment where theory and practice are inseparable. Her approach to dramaturgy and dance-making is eclectic, with a multifaceted commitment to literature, critical theory, and philosophy. Part of the experience for the critic when thinking with her work requires reading those texts alongside her stage work. My conversations with Lewis since 2017 have

⁴⁴⁹ Barbara Christian, "The Race for Theory" in Napier, Winston. *African American Literary Theory: A Reader*. New York: New York University Press, 2000 (1987), 280-289.

⁴⁵⁰ Randy Martin. *Critical Moves: Dance Studies in Theory and Politics*. (Durham [N.C.]: Duke University Press, 1998), 5.

functioned less as ethnographic interviews because in this chapter I am less interested in foregrounding the artist's self-reflection. I do not intend to silence it either. The aim is less about documenting her intentions or gaining first-hand accounts of the reasoning behind her creative choices. I close read her dance works to gauge how her aesthetic choices are part of larger theoretical conversations. This is why close reading is supplemented with reading around her work, paying attention to socio-economic structures and contexts which make construction of the work possible.

Lewis and I have engaged (sometimes debated) regularly about the writings of scholars who study (anti-)blackness and/or aesthetics, such as Denise Ferreira da Silva, Zakiyyah Iman Jackson, Saidiya Hartman, Fred Moten, Daphne Brooks, and Karen Barad. We have also discussed at length practices of artists working primarily in visual arts such as Kara Walker, Kerry James Marshall, and Adrian Piper. She is also interested in theatrical architecture and reimagining how theatrical design choreographs the event as well as the performer's and spectator's spatial orientation. Theater history references feature in her work in subtle and overt ways. The audience's experience is slightly expanded if they can catch the references to Samuel Beckett, Jean Anouilh, and the literature of Toni Morrison and Jean Genet. These discussions are relevant to the critical analysis of Lewis' work, specifically because they assist in understanding race, gender, sexuality etc. as not merely identity markers but intentional performances and fixed structures as well. These authors and artists challenge her own ideas about representation, the haptic, and form. Her thoughts on these themes are ever evolving. They shift with her orientation

to the texts she is wrestling with. That evolution can be gleaned in the subtle changes and edits she makes in the work.⁴⁵¹

A Note on Anarrangement

Form in Lewis' work can be understood as the destruction of form. This occurs through the breaking down of canonical Western dance techniques as well as avoiding them altogether to foreground Black vernacular dance forms that have always been problematically conceived as incapable of perfect form. These are vernacular forms of dance that do not privilege structure and develop in venues outside the theater. Scholars such as Fred Moten, Rizvana Bradley, Calvin Warren, and Houston Baker have commented on an anti-form or de-form register in Black aesthetics. Ligia Lewis' practice realizes a posture that Moten would call "anarrangement," as it attends to both blackness' relationship to form at the level of ontology, as well as at the level of Black aesthetic operations that shun the mastery of Western technē. Moten comments on blackness itself as a "movement... an ongoing irruption that anarranges every line."⁴⁵² The destruction of form resonates across Black (diaspora) aesthetics. Literary theorist Houston Baker observed this as the *deformation of mastery*, which is different from aspiring to mastery of form.⁴⁵³ In Lewis' oeuvre, there are no attempts at mastering the canon of Western dance. The preservation or refurbishment of form is not only complacent with the position that de-formed aesthetic practices have been relegated, but as Calvin Warren reminds, the need for this destruction of mastery is due to (conceptions of) form contributing to antiblack violence. He then

⁴⁵¹ For example, when I watched a performance of *Water Will* in Chicago it had slight edits from the version that I watched in Los Angeles a few months prior.

⁴⁵² Moten (2003), 1.

⁴⁵³ Houston A. Baker. *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 49.

proposes anti-formalism since “antiblack violence depends on form to reproduce itself.”⁴⁵⁴

Rather than clinging on to the mastery of form, Warren suggests an anti-formalism that is not about re-arrangement of the terms but about total destruction.

The clashes and breaks that take place in *minor matter* attest to an anti-choreographic posture that is a characteristic of this anarrangement. In order to understand the need for the anti-choreographic, we must first unpack the choreographic. Dance theorist André Lepecki, drawing from Deleuze and Guattari, discusses the choreographic as an “apparatus of capture” that operates through modes of documentation such as notation, repertoire, and technique. For Lepecki, the choreographic is “not only a discipline or technology of the body, not only a mode of composition, not only a register, or archive — but an apparatus.”⁴⁵⁵ The choreographic requires the “rational” (post-)Enlightenment mind to plot maps, rigid scores, treatises, and instructional manuals that precede, predict, and arrange movement into codified form. Most classical ballets and military marches exemplify the choreographic. This is in contradistinction to Black improvisation, which is transferred from person to person, from generation to generation, rather than documented through the choreographic. Unlike Nelisiwe Xaba who presents classical ballet by subverting it, Lewis in *Water Will* eschews codified European dance forms but invokes forms from the minstrel stage, vaudeville social dances, as well as the “anachoreographic,” which are movements related to everyday gesture.⁴⁵⁶ What she arrives at through this deformation is what Rizvana Bradley calls the “*anti-choreographic*” or “anti-style.”⁴⁵⁷ For Bradley, anarrangement as a Black aesthetic operation is neither the arrangement or re-

⁴⁵⁴ Warren (2019), 357.

⁴⁵⁵ André Lepecki, “Choreography as Apparatus of Capture.” *The Drama Review* 51, no. 2 (2007): 120.

⁴⁵⁶ See: Moten and Harney (2013), 50.

⁴⁵⁷ Rizvana Bradley, “Black Cinematic Gesture and the Aesthetics of Contagion.” *TDR (Cambridge, Mass.)* 62, no. 1 (2018): 19-21.

arrangement of the choreographic. In other words, an arrangement is not re-arrangement (renewal) or de-arrangement (back) of form and matter, but the prefix *ana-*, as Calvin Warren would posit, translates to “against” the choreographic and its defining mastery of form.⁴⁵⁸ Bradley would describe Lewis’ practice as destroying form to “insist upon dance as the riot that cannot be arranged.”⁴⁵⁹ This resistance of arrangement and capture is what I am discussing as an anti-choreographic/anarrangement feature in Lewis’ dance works.

Experimentation in Black Dance

Lewis’ dances are presented in art museums, black box theaters, as well as proscenium arch theaters. Her dance practice also draws from African diaspora dance genealogies as well as visual art, Western drama, and critical theory. She is part of a cohort of Black artists who share an aesthetic sensibility that entails experimentation with form and concept, and they have less interest in modern and post-modern dance repertory. These movement artists include Okwui Okpokwasili, Keyon Gaskin, nic kay, Will Rawls, Faustin Linyekula, Paul Maheke, Nelisiwe Xaba, Dana Michel, Dorothée Munyaneza, Mamela Nyamza, Jaamil Olawale Kosoko, and others. These movement practitioners work in a variety of interdisciplinary performance practices, and they are connected by their subject matter which explores ontological questions about blackness and mourning. They are interested in the same subject matter and political rhetoric as canonical Black concert dance practitioners such as Pearl Primus, Zora Neale Hurston, Katherine Dunham, Alvin Ailey, Talley Beatty, and Donald McKayle. Their point of departure is their emphasis on concept rather than repertory, abstraction rather than direct articulation of political claims. Their work foregrounds minimal physical effort, lower energy,

⁴⁵⁸ Warren (2019), 369.

⁴⁵⁹ Bradley (2018), 23.

and use of text. It also bypasses classical, modern, and folkloric technique. They perform in both theatrical and non-theatrical spaces.

While Lewis and her cohort of Black choreography contemporaries are able to work in experimental lexicons and present their work in alternative performance spaces different from the concert hall, this has not always been the case. What they are enacting to the language of dance is a deformation of both European classical forms and “Black dance.” This means that they are situated outside of “Black dance” as a historically specific category or style. In fact, “Black dance” as a term refers to a specific and heavily codified set of practices that developed prior to the 1980s. The evolution of dance forms and how we name them in academic discourses is often a result of socio-political events that politicize artistic form and reveal it as always already tied to the political. Black dance is one such form that transmits African and African diasporic movement practices while also experimenting with broader subject matter. The term “Black dance” in the U.S. developed around the 1960s during the Civil Rights, Black Power, and the Black Arts Movements. Thomas DeFrantz, in *Dancing Many Drums* argues that the term “Black dance” did not just emerge out of the self-definition promoted by the Black Power Movement in the 1960s, but it was also obscured by white critics who lumped together and relegated works by Black dancers to the “vernacular” category, even as dancers were mainstream performers in vaudeville and early Hollywood cinema.⁴⁶⁰ This is why Zita Allen in *Freedomways* posed the question, “is ‘Black Dance’ just an empty label devised by white critics to cover that vast, richly diverse and extremely complex area of dance they know nothing about? Does ‘Black Dance’ really exist? And, if in fact it does, just who is qualified to define

⁴⁶⁰ DeFrantz (2002), 16.

it?”⁴⁶¹ Aside from being obscured by white critics, the description of “Black Dance” in the 1960s and 70s was all-encompassing and included the different dances performed by African-descended dancers. In “Reggie Wilson and the Traditions of American Dance,” Susan Manning cites dancer and critic Carole Johnson’s 1970 discussion of the term “Black Dance” as

any form of dance and any style that a black person chooses to work within [...] Since the expression “Black Dance” must be all-inclusive, it includes those dancers that work in (1) the very traditional forms (the more nearly authentic African styles), (2) the social dance forms that are indigenous to this country which include tap and jazz dance, (3) the various contemporary and more abstract forms that are seen on the concert stage, and (4) the ballet (which must not be considered solely European).⁴⁶²

The above description is all-encompassing insofar as those participating in these different dance styles are “black person[s].” That description also opens up a space for further inquiry non-Black choreographers who use the technical steps or the subject matter related to Black people.⁴⁶³

Black dance is both a politicized (kin)aestheticization of how Black people want to present and create knowledge about themselves, and also a set of projections, desires, and fantasies about blackness by white and non-Black choreographers.

Susan Manning’s *Modern Dance, Negro Dance* not only traces Black movement as the suppressed presence in modern dance historiography but she also narrates the chronological shifts in terminology from “Negro dance” to “Black dance” in the 20th century.⁴⁶⁴ While Black

⁴⁶¹ Zita Allen quoted in Susan Manning. “Reggie Wilson and the Traditions of American Dance.” *TDR/The Drama Review* 59, no. 1 (2015): 18.

⁴⁶² DeFrantz (1999) quoted in Susan Manning. “Reggie Wilson and the Traditions of American Dance.” *TDR/The Drama Review* 59, no. 1 (2015): 15.

⁴⁶³ A few of many examples that denote this include the following: the blackface minstrel performance tradition in the U.S. which was also taken up by freed slaves in Cape Town after 1840; White choreographer Helen Tamiris’ performances titled *Negro Spirituals* in the 1920s; Belgian choreographer Anne Teresa de Keersmaeker’s collaboration with composer Steve Reich on an abstract minimalist piece about the Harlem Six called *Come Out* which premiered in 1982 (the Reich soundtrack was composed in 1966).

⁴⁶⁴ “Black dance” refers to dances created by those who are “marked by the culture and history of Africa.” Manning (2004), xv. This is a culture that was violently eviscerated in the African colony as well as the New World. What remains are aesthetic/cultural practices that were licensed by the master/overseer, usually in problematic ways that were about preserving “primitive cultures.” Black dance is also created by non-black choreographers who use the

concert dance from the 1960s incorporated vernacular characteristics, it still placed emphasis on technical mastery. Black dance companies such as Dance Theater of Harlem, Philadanco, and Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater are well-known for their rigor in technical proficiency that requires at least a decade of professional conservatory training to master. The formation of these companies and their emphasis on technical proficiency was partly a response to white modern dance and ballet companies who sidelined Black dancers because of anti-black racism since the 1920s. If not sideline Black dancers, they outright tokenized them. “Black dance” companies became the only haven of high-quality technical training and professional employment for Black dancers. Ligia Lewis’ anti-choreographic turn is a consequence of training partly in “Black dance” techniques and later on turning away from their strict focus on technique and subject matter that was mostly about empowering Black beauty and pride as well as educating the public about pre-colonial and New World Black history.

A break from the tenets of “Black dance” (such as technical proficiency and the dance company model) became more palpable and more pronounced in the 1980s, and it was not received very warmly, even in Black concert dance circles. The 1980s signaled a turn to what was called Black postmodernism in the U.S., with major dance contributors such as Diane McIntyre, Jawole Willa Jo Zollar of Urban Bush Women, Ishmael Houston Jones, Bebe Miller, Ralph Lemon, and Bill T. Jones. These figures foregrounded minimalist movement, they abandoned or limited technical proficiency by emphasizing improvisation, and they incorporated

technical steps, or the subject matter related to Black people, sparking debates about appropriation and cultural exchange. A few of many examples that denote this include the following: the blackface minstrel performance tradition in the U.S. which was also taken up by freed slaves in Cape Town after 1840; White choreographer Helen Tamiris’ performances titled *Negro Spirituals* in the 1920s. See: Susan Manning, *Modern Dance, Negro Dance: Race in Motion*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), 2004.

multimedia elements such as video, spoken word, and even total silence. They privileged experiment over strict codification, and process over product. As experimental as they were, residues of the 1960/70s model of Black dance was present in their work, in both strategic and unconscious. For example, Ralph Lemon directed a dance company in the 1980s which he only disbanded in the 1990s. Socio-political issues of the 1980s such as the Nixon and Reagan administrations also contributed to the highly charged Black postmodernist aesthetic. For example, Bill T. Jones and his dance/intimate partner Arnie Zane created pieces about gay love and intimacy during a period where LGBTQIA+ Americans were demonized for spreading the HIV virus. The dance industry lost a number of its major contributors such as Alvin Ailey, Rudolf Nuyerev, and Robert Joffrey to AIDS. Ralph Lemon, besides directing a multiracial dance company, was creating movement that was not drawing in obvious ways from Africanist aesthetics as defined by dance scholar Brenda Dixon-Gottschild.⁴⁶⁵ Lemon and other Black artists such as novelist Toni Morrison were putting pressure on thinly-veiled meanings of blackness, working with unfamiliar Black aesthetics and archives to emphasize how American culture *in toto* was haunted by Africanist aesthetics. Choreographic themes that centralized queerness and Black feminism became more pronounced during this period, complicating totalizing notions of a unified Black community.

There is a sense that Black experimental dance-makers who emerged in the 1980s and 90s such as Ralph Lemon, Bebe Miller, Reggie Wilson, Diane McIntyre, and Ishmael Houston Jones arrived “too late” in the scene of 1960s avant-garde minimalism to be considered with rigor in the work of dance scholars such as Sally Banes and Ramsey Burt (and others) who

⁴⁶⁵ See: Brenda Dixon Gottschild. *Digging the Africanist Presence in American Performance: Dance and Other Contexts*. (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1996).

focused mainly on Yvonne Rainer, Trisha Brown, Deborah Hay, Steve Paxton, and Simone Forti when considering 1960s experimental dance.⁴⁶⁶ Experimental dance works created by Black choreographers such as Ralph Lemon are not automatically received as “Black dance,” even by other Black choreographers. As an experimental improviser working in art museums and concert halls, Lemon narrates his experience as a choreographer whose work departed from the central characteristics of Black dance. In his book titled *Geography*, Lemon describes an encounter involving major figure of “Black dance,” Talley Beatty:

Once in a small New England college I watched Talley Beatty walk out of a performance of my work. Later I heard that he thought that he was going to see some “black dance.” I was never invited to any of the black dance conferences that meet annually. To this day I have not been to one and don’t know what they do there. I suppose I am not considered a “black dance artist.” This is not painful; mostly it’s hearsay. Much of the conflict part I’ve probably made up, but I do feel slightly insulted.⁴⁶⁷

This split in approach to form by Black dancers solidified in the 1990s as neoliberalism and multiculturalism created conditions where alternative institutions such as museums and galleries became more open to experimental dance practices. Similar to the conditions that allowed for more Black participation in the arts in South Africa in 1994, the cover for October 1994’s issue of *TIME Magazine* showed a picture of Bill T. Jones smiling with a caption that read: “Black Renaissance: African American artists are truly free at last.”⁴⁶⁸ This marked the simultaneous co-optation and repudiation of these Black artists working in alternative practices, a contradiction that is a characteristic of the culture wars. While Jones was praised as the face or emblem of African American artists who were “truly free,” his practice was also facing vitriolic disavowal

⁴⁶⁶ See: Sally Banes, “An Open Field: Yvonne Rainer as Dance Theorist” in Sachs, Sid, Rainer, Yvonne, and Rosenwald-Wolf Gallery. *Yvonne Rainer: Radical Juxtapositions 1961-2002*. (Philadelphia, PA: University of the Arts, 2002). Also see: Ramsay Burt, *Judson Dance Theater: Performative Traces*. (New York: Routledge Press, 2006).

⁴⁶⁷ Ralph Lemon, *Geography: Art, Race, Exile*. (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press of New England, 2000)

⁴⁶⁸ For a thorough discussion of this magazine story, see Copeland, *Bound to Appear* (2013).

from critics such as Arlene Croce. In December 1994, Croce penned a controversial article titled “Discussing the Undiscussable” for *The New Yorker* excoriating Jones’ performance with terminally ill dancers titled *Still/Here* (1994).⁴⁶⁹ Croce’s article asserted her refusal to view and review Jones’ work since Jones and his contemporaries worked with terminally ill or “fat” dancers, as well as dancers with no technical proficiency in Western concert dance forms. She called it “victim art” and criticized the National Endowment of the Arts (NEA) for extending funding support to such non-hegemonic artistic practices. The 1990s also witnessed a change in linguistic usage in the U.S. from “Black” to “African-American,” although “Black” is still widely used. DeFrantz wrote that “African American Dance” was a less problematic term for him during the time that he wrote the introduction for *Dancing Many Drums* in 2002.⁴⁷⁰ Additionally, Nadine George-Graves, in her book about Urban Bush Women, describes the company’s aesthetic as “African American dance theater.”⁴⁷¹

Ligia Lewis and her contemporaries are working at the aftermath of these culture wars, asserting even more those practices which move away from the mastery of Western techniques. Their work is typified by a set of mostly abstract-conceptual aesthetics that play with form by disregarding elements of entertainment, continuity, and virtuosity often found in concert and social dance. They address Black socio-political content in a non-obvious manner. While these challenges of defining a Black dance aesthetic still exist, these Black dance-makers insist on a non-traditional and non-folkloric approach and sensibility, supported by emerging festivals and

⁴⁶⁹ Arlene Croce, “Discussing the Undiscussable” *The New Yorker*, December 26, 1994 P. 54.: <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/1994/12/26/discussing-the-undiscussable>

⁴⁷⁰ DeFrantz (2002), 16.

⁴⁷¹ Nadine George-Graves, *Urban Bush Women: Twenty Years of African American Dance Theater, Community, Engagement, and Working It Out*. (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2010).

biennales around the world. I do not aim to suggest that concert dance choreographers of “Black dance” are retrograde, but I want to give attention to Black cultural work that is somewhat in the margins and does not get written about as much. The current dance curriculum for undergraduates in the U.S. still places more emphasis on training related to “Black dance,” if they even carve out a space for Black artistic practices. More alternative or experimental practices to dancing while Black tend to emerge out of visual art, performance art, and certain MFA dance programs. Although alternative Black dance practices increasingly have platforms of support such as residencies and performance spaces, the approach to dance as a form does not put their work in a position to be revered on a national scale by dance critics and dance historians. In fact, it is mostly contemporary art historians, critical theorists, and scholars of continental philosophy who are more likely to write about their work. These aesthetic interventions by Lewis and related artists are important, and they also have limitations when confronted by the heavy ensemble of questions that blackness brings before the world.

I am equally fascinated by dance historical narrations of experimental dance which do not address Africa, even as African experimental choreographers continue to shape contemporary movement lexicons in cities around the world (i.e. Paris, New York, Berlin, Rio de Janeiro, and Tokyo). This is not a call for the inclusion of African non-traditional performances into meta-narratives of contemporary experimental performance. Rather, it is about marking how in these accounts, Africans exist outside of time as well as subsidize contemporary dance’s temporal and material integrity with their accumulated labor that goes unacknowledged. Black contemporary dance in the post-1990 era is characterized by increased transnational and multicultural collaborations and residences for Black dancers. Lewis’ collaborators for *minor matter* exemplify this statement. This represents the mobility of those who dance fluidly within and

beyond national and disciplinary borders, exploding those borders, but also being racialized in the midst of that mobility. While it is important to celebrate this mobility and the possibilities it promises for the evolution of Black dance, what if critics paused to contemplate how terms such as “transnational collaboration” often obscure the class and racial anti-black power dynamics at play in these transnational collaborative encounters?⁴⁷² The language of transnational collaboration conceals the fact that these collaborations operate under similar (but more sophisticated and suppressed) representational logics of “past” ethnographic attractions. As discussed in the second chapter about Nelisiwe Xaba’s practice, Black performers are invited to rehabilitate European legacies of slavery and colonialism under the guise of “self-reflexive” transnational collaboration. African (Diasporic) intellectual labor in dance is predominantly acknowledged merely as raw affect and energy. Such collaborations sometimes coax Black artists to collude in practices drafted against their advantage. These examples illuminate how the global flow of anti-blackness happens alongside and *through* performance. This means that collaborative transnational performance is also a medium or maneuver through which anti-blackness congeals and proliferates globally. When these collaborations are initiated by Black choreographers from the African continent and Black artists from the Americas and Europe (usually funded by U.S., German, British, French, and Swiss governments “to promote culture”), there is usually an underlying promise and nostalgic expectation that a suturing of what poet and critic Nathaniel Mackey calls “wounded kinship” between Africa and African America will materialize.⁴⁷³

⁴⁷² The language of “collaboration” also obscures the entanglement between these gatherings and presentations of Africans as ethnographic attractions in the early 20th century and before. See: Bernth Lindfors (1999).

⁴⁷³ Mackey is quoted in Moten (2003), 18.

How does the unmournable void relate to dance? The concept of the void, as Nathaniel Mackey shows, is connected to African diaspora dance and ritual. Mackey connects the word *vodun* to the word *void*, where “*limb* is a legitimate pun on *limbo*, *void* on *vodun*.”⁴⁷⁴ The rupture of the Middle Passage produced for the African in the New World an “the emptiness or historylessness left by the collapse of tribal coherency and sanction, the dissolution of ancestral rule.”⁴⁷⁵ This void of history “may never be compensated until an act of imagination opens gateways between civilizations, between technological and spiritual apprehensions, between racial possessions and dispossessions.”⁴⁷⁶ The act of imagination alludes to how the void, is a space of “terrible” beauty,” what Ralph Ellison describes as “a harsh beauty that asserts itself out of the horrible fragmentation.”⁴⁷⁷ This beauty does not undo the fragmentation but it is entangled with terribleness, as my discussion of *Water Will* demonstrates. A memorable dance confrontation of this void created by the Middle Passage is most palpable in choreographer Ralph Lemon’s *Geography Trilogy* where he collaborated with West African, Black Caribbean, as well as African American performers. In a series of books documenting the process, Lemon shows the difficulty of a cultural suture, as the dancers are connected by a rupture that resulted to their shared voided personality. Lemon’s writings foreground a discussion of formlessness, friction, and rupture, and this is different from retentionist approaches prevalent in some 1960s African diasporic cultural production, especially dance. Lemon’s deformed dances, as he refers to them, are beautiful in the sense that they do not subordinate the terrible underside of that

⁴⁷⁴ Mackey, Nathaniel. *Discrepant Engagement: Dissonance, Cross-culturality, and Experimental Writing*. (Cambridge [England]; New York, NY, USA: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 170.

⁴⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷⁷ For “terrible beauty” see: Moten (2003). For Ralph Ellison’s discussion of the harsh beauty of fragmentation See: Ellison (1987), 236.

beauty. Although they are a collaboration with dancers from the African continent, they move away from the romance of precolonial retention, highlighting what Calvin Warren would call “the futility of reunion.”⁴⁷⁸ The dancers fall and crash, and the formal intervention lies in the fragmentation of form. Lemon’s writings move committedly against a cultural suture of wounded kinship in a manner that is as unflinching as Saidiya Hartman’s book *Lose Your Mother* (2008). Lewis’ *minor matter* uses falling and crashing with a similar purpose to examine the limits of intercorporeal relationality.

Dance scholar Joan Frosch’s dance documentary film titled *Movement (R)evolution Africa* (2007) shows Black choreographers from the African continent and the U.S. assemble to teach workshops, perform, and attend to problems concerning the understanding of contemporary Africanity in dance. The documentary presents a collaboration between Black American choreographer Jawole Willa-Jo Zollar’s Urban Bush Women, in a collaboration with Senegalese choreographer Germaine Acogny’s Jant-Bi (before that company disbanded). The choreographers and musicians featured in the film engage with the formal attributes pertaining to the (r)evolution of movement across the Black Diaspora. The choreographers chosen to participate are those who work in a contemporary dance (*danse contemporaine*) lexicon and not those whose dance work falls under what is often termed and categorized as traditional African dance. A moment that stands out in the documentary is when Germaine Acogny and Jant-Bi performers sit on the floor and begin tearing up while watching an Urban Bush women rehearsal which appears to invoke transatlantic slavery. That moment is followed by the Jant-Bi company hugging the Urban Bush dancers. These tears can be sentimentally read as signaling closure and

⁴⁷⁸ Warren (2020), 357.

catharsis between the West African and the African American dance companies. But these tears are also a result of moments in dance performance that reveal an unspeakable realization that cannot be fully articulated with language, so it shows up as affect. By affect I am referring to the capacity to be touched or moved to tears in this particular case. Acogny's tears are more than an outpouring of personal emotion or heart break. On the contrary, they invoke what Trinidadian-Canadian writer Dionne Brand calls "a tear in the world," a rupture of kinship, geography, and temporality caused by transatlantic slavery.⁴⁷⁹ The tear as corporeal liquid emission is more than a window to interiority, but a flood containing what can be transiently felt but can never be fully known or represented. In this documentary, this unintelligibility is given a gift of closure with a final section on contact improvisation, framed as the contemporary African dancer's chosen platform for the pacification of their muscle tension. My discussion of *minor matter* will problematize this treatment of contact improvisation.

Disassembly and The Dissolution of "Relation" in Contemporary Black Dance

Dance is often spoken about as a relational form, an artistic apparatus that makes possible a relational ethico-politics. This is because dance often takes place in group form, in the couple form where the individual is engulfed within and supported by a cipher. This common practice—whether executed in the street corner, the protest, the church, the dance studio, the nightclub, the contact improvisation jam, the military training camp, the wedding, or funeral—often involves differently positioned bodies sharing weight, exchanging sweat, and rubbing frictively against

⁴⁷⁹ See: Joan D Frosch, Alla Kovgan, Faustin Linyekula, Sello Pesa, Kota Yamazaki, Nora Chipaumire, Jawole Willa Jo Zollar, Raiz Di Polon, Urban Bush Women, and University of Florida. Center for World Art. *Movement (r)evolution Africa: A Story of an Art Form in Four Acts*. Gainesville: University of Florida Center for World Arts, 2007. For "a tear in the world" see: Dionne Brand. *A Map to the Door of No Return: Notes to Belonging*. (Toronto]: Doubleday Canada, 2001).

both human and non-human things. Oftentimes, this gives the impression of a certain dissolution of fixed identity. More precisely, difference is sometimes felt as dissipating or immaterial, as dancers gather in occasions made possible by a “common language” constituted by a shared style, technique, virtuosity, rhythm, and spiritual awareness etc. The objective experience of these formal characteristics gives way to a shared sense that the moment of performance, which involves touch and kinesthesia, balances the scales of structural inequality and instantiates an unquestionable inter-subjective relationality. However, this presumed commonality, as a utopian principle of organizing and interpreting, is not as democratic as it professes, and it requires serious analytical scrutiny.

Historical and ongoing capitalist fascisms around the planet have created a certain urgency for the afflicted to “come together” in the quest to combat austerity, labor exploitation, anti-immigrant terrorism, land occupation, genocide, and the contemporary enslavement of Sub-Saharan Africans in North Africa and the Mediterranean etc. These phenomena, collapsed together, revivify a coalitional politics which— at face value, is an effective pragmatic solution for defeating a “common” enemy. In dance, coinciding with and perhaps responding to these frictions, there has been increased support for transnational collaborations than past decades. While the dominant model in past decades was for national ballet companies and modern dance companies to travel, do diplomacy work, and represent the nation.⁴⁸⁰ These collaborations are not outside of diplomatic projects which strengthen “international relations” between countries. They give the impression that borders are porous, and that cross-national exchange is possible, while obfuscating the asymmetrical power relations between “dependent” nations and “First World”

⁴⁸⁰ See: Croft, Clare. *Dancers as Diplomats: American Choreography in Cultural Exchange*. (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2015).

nations that often fund these projects. Immigration documents, as I discuss in Chapter 2, often halt the success of this putative fluid movement, since it is common for dancers from the African continent to be denied visas.

A closer engagement with this coalitional fervor reveals the intricacies of what is taking place as irreducible to a common enemy taunting relational-equals in suffering.⁴⁸¹ In fact, coalitional politics resuscitates a number of (neo-)liberal obfuscations in the name of multi-culturalism, multi-racial politics, solidarity, and the collapsing of every subjugated position as a “minority” creating “minoritarian performance.”⁴⁸² What remains unexamined is the particular production and emergence of “blackness” as a result of the ruptures of the Arab slave trade as well as the trans-Atlantic slave trade—both which abrogated the possibility of subjectivity for Blacks in the African continent as well as the Diaspora. The turn to relational ethics, then, signals both a response and avoidance of the weight of blackness as a sign of stasis and non-relationality in the Western colonial imagination. That is, if non-Blacks know who they are because of what they are *not* (which is Blackness), then the waltz dreamed by relational ethics cannot hold weight. Black being’s radical negativity as produced by Western ontoepistemology ruptures the coherence of relational ethics and “the common(s).”

⁴⁸¹ This is not a statement that champions oppression Olympics. Rather than establishing vertical hierarchies of suffering from “bad” to “worse”—I am interested in the historically specific conditions of emergence, and ramifications in which suffering takes form. These historically specific conditions produce different *positionalities*, even as performativity sometimes obscures difference.

⁴⁸² The concept of “minoritarian performance” is proposed and discussed by scholars mostly working in queer of color critique and performance theory such as see: Tavia Amolo Nyongó. *Afro-fabulations: The Queer Drama of Black Life*. (New York: New York University Press, 2019); José Esteban Muñoz. *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*. (New York: New York University Press, 2009); Joshua Takano Chambers-Letson. *After the Party: A Manifesto for Queer of Color Life*. (New York: New York University Press, 2018); André Lepecki. *Singularities: Dance in the Age of Performance*. (New York: Routledge, 2016). These scholars’ engagement with “the minor” has some resonances with Gilles Deleuze’s and Félix Guattari’s work on the “minor.” See: Deleuze, Gilles, and Guattari, Félix. *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986).

The aim is to assess how contemporary Black dance-makers such as Ligia Lewis complicate relationality and empathetic identification by either moving away from a political-affective grammar of “the commons,” or by illustrating its limitations when it is confronted by Blackness/Black movement. Rather than conceiving of dance only as an occasion to come together, Lewis uses the space of gathering to assert anti-social claims, elaborating how the gathering itself can be an effort to dramatize antagonism, throwing the notion of the possibility of a Black gathering itself into crisis. I contend that the “crisis” these dances enact upon the logic of a shared pre-Subjective commons is a result of a reorientation toward understanding Blackness as a structural position, rather than an identity category fixed to area studies. I borrow the phrase “crisis in the commons” from a chapter titled “A Crisis in the Commons” in Frank Wilderson’s *Red, White, and Black* where Wilderson takes to task critical theory’s assumptive logic about the commons as a space of participation for all. He specifically challenges Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s assessment of the commons as signaling what they call “the liberation of the multitude.”⁴⁸³ He also challenges Marxist/Gramscian and Lacanian film theory’s universalizing presumptions about the status of “the body” and the assumption that “all people contest dramas of value.”⁴⁸⁴ The particular instantiations of police killings of Black people in the U.S. and other parts of the world (UK, Brazil, South Africa etc.), and the political activism of the Movement for Black Lives are part of what made questions of matter and value urgent for Lewis’ creative practice. Performance theory’s assertions about this efficacy of radical performance and performance’s ontological status also rest on this struggle between reproduction, matter(ing), and value. Lewis’ embrace of nonrepresentation and negativity would

⁴⁸³ See. Wilderson (2010), 247-249.

⁴⁸⁴ Ibid.

typically place her in a category of radical performance. Her embrace of negativity differs from what performance theorist Peggy Phelan defines as *performance of negativity*.⁴⁸⁵ Aspects of *minor matter* and *Water Will* discussed in this chapter elaborate that distinction.

I.

Haunting Gathering: On Ligia Lewis' *minor matter*

Minor matter begins in total darkness, while a deep sound bed and a recording of Claudio Monteverdi's *L'Orfeo* (1607) crescendo in coordination with the lights coming up. Three dancers are situated upstairs lying on their backs. They emerge out of this pose and create different shapes with their bodies, before finally advancing forward to begin an hour-long performance. The abyssal buzzing sound bed in the beginning is accompanied by an underlying recorded recital of Nigerian poet Remi Raji's poem titled "Dreamtalk." The poem invokes death, and words from it appear as motifs later on in the piece. This poem's words function as an oblique overture to the whole dance. The volume of the soundbite from the poem rises, and these words can be heard:

I will like to turn you inside out and step into your skin
 To be, that sober shadow in the mirror of indifference...
 And because you shift, you shift, you shift and shift
 I can tell you cringe to see the hypnosis of your own silence
 For I am the last tomb of an invisible age of the dead...
 When you reach the crossroads where nothing means
 Then you will read the road map on my face
 And out of my lips will fall the seductive words of life
 Because death is nothing but impossible silence.⁴⁸⁶

The voice grows until it is abruptly interrupted by Monteverdi's *L'Orfeo*, an early Baroque opera based on the Greek myth Orfeo and Eurydice which is about a failed attempt of bringing the

⁴⁸⁵ Phelan (1993).

⁴⁸⁶ Remi Raji, "Dreamtalk (Remi Raji), accessed July 2, 2020, <https://www.lyrikline.org/en/poems/dreamtalk-6467>.

dead back to the world of the living. If *minor matter* is a sorrow song for the dead and dying, it does not tend to them only in a grand register of an operatic requiem. Instead it is a dirge in a minor key, with chromatic notes and unintelligible tones. While Orpheus is related to the canonical Greek myth, there is another interpretation of the “orphic” which is closer to what I’m attributing to *minor matter* as a sorrow song. That interpretation of the “orphic” is offered by Nathaniel Mackey which he relates to the orphan, described as “anyone denied kinship, sustenance, any, to use Orlando Patterson’s phrase, ‘social death.’”⁴⁸⁷ For Mackey, Black song is both consolation and complaint. As a dance for the dead and a dirge in a minor key, *minor matter* functions similarly to Mackey’s definition of the Black spiritual as “wounded kinship’s last resort.”⁴⁸⁸ It is music that is offered in its harshest, devastating, and most beautiful, without suture, closure, or prescription.

Lewis shares the stage with other Black dancers from the U.S. and South Africa, who move between various countries (the Dominican Republic, Germany, Belgium, France). These dancers include Jonathan Gonzalez, Thami Manekehla, and later Tiran Willemse. The performers create a space for Black (anti-)sociality in dance. While the dancers are not performing their own or other biographical characters, I am interested in their situatedness as generating certain structural expectations about what transnational collaborative performance engenders. Transnational collaborations such as Lewis’ are commonplace in major cities around the world, with European and North American cities serving as epicenters for these opportunities. I first experienced the piece in 2017 at Abrons Center in New York City, and subsequently experienced it at Redcat in Los Angeles as well as Chicago Cultural Center.

⁴⁸⁷ Mackey, 232.

⁴⁸⁸ Ibid.

My discussion of *minor matter* dances back and forth between the concrete world of the stage piece, and the world *outside* whose conditions structure the audience's modes of receiving the piece. This means that I am interested in the dialog between the choreographers' authorial intentions with form and content, as well as the political/libidinal economic paradigms that shape the world in which the piece is possible. The piece takes seriously the materiality of the black box theater as a generative site for working out the gendered and racialized affect of rage—a presumed disposition for Black people in the world. When rage appears in Black form, it is institutionally managed, silenced, and regulated. By asserting Black rage, *minor matter* intentionally forecloses the possibility of presumed relational dialogue, insisting upon a practice of being-with Black rage outside of pathology and moralist judgment.⁴⁸⁹ This involves a visual and movement language considered to be vulgar or taboo by those who follow respectable scripts. Thami Manekehla's memorable tummy dance involves making wavelike movements with his stomach, exposing a body part that is usually tucked in, in dance. During a fast-paced section Jonathan Gonzalez exposes his anus to the audience, a moment of mixed uncomfortability and scopophilic pleasure.

The dancers in *minor matter* perform high impact movements, some associated with contact sport, involving sweat and friction [fig. 3.1]. None of the movements are reminiscent of modern technique and this is sustained for the entire duration. Lewis, Gonzalez, and Willemse all received formal training in ballet, Graham, Cunningham, and Horton techniques. Willemse attended P.A.R.T.S. in Belgium and took classes with Anne Teresa de Keersmaecker. Thami Manekehla's training is less traditional. He played semi-professional cricket in South Africa

⁴⁸⁹ See: Palmer (2017), 31.

before committing to a performance career. *Minor matter* is a careful and selective sampling of these choreographic and anachoreographic techniques and an even more brazen destruction of them. The dancer's physicality is literally pushed to its limits and made to crash and break. These formal dance explorations are as important as the entwined philosophical questions that the piece is exploring. Lewis is interested in how movement can also be a site of investigating how matter matters, how blackness becomes a static category of nothingness, and how that supposed nothingness apparently moves audience members affectively such that they can attest to being transformed. In an interview with Jennifer Piejko, Lewis posits, "I wanted to experiment with an endless unfolding of matter, morphing first from historical connotations and representations to after an hour [of performance] arriving at a kind of nothingness, or bareness of the flesh, both of the theater's and of the body's. The last section is composed with the house lights up, so the literal fact of the *black* box and us are exposed."⁴⁹⁰ The idea of the body operates in two ways in the piece, as the dancer's physicality as well as the black box theater itself. That is, rather than merely housing or hosting performers and audience members, the theater space is challenged to perform and show its embodiment and its parts.

The score for the piece sometimes takes an upbeat turn, with Donna Summer's "I Feel Love" (1977) accompanied by strobe lights and a movement phrase that foregrounds the line of the arms. This is one of a few moments in the piece that straight lines are brought in. The score and movement repertoire transport the audience to a non-chronological time-space that is unfixed, cyclical, and diffractive. The audience is carried to the late Renaissance/early Baroque era; transferred to an evening in 1960 when French-born choreographer Maurice Béjart

⁴⁹⁰ Jennifer Piejko. "Ligia Lewis. Refusing Directions." *Flash Art*, July-August 2019. <https://www.flashartonline.com/article/ligia-lewis/>

premiered his *Boléro*; we are hauled into a Black fraternity through a stepping sequence which shares qualities with a *gumboot dance* (a South African dance form); we are swung back to a contemporary nightclub; then constantly transported back to the immediacy of the time and space of our gathering: the black box (furnished with black curtains, cold floors, theater lights, high fidelity speakers, hard seats, and those elements of the theater which can neither be seen nor touched, but present and felt anyway, such as the echoes and remains of performances that happened before).

What makes *minor matter* minor is its deliberate impropriety and unruly play with physical form. It tends to the dead with dignity while merging the sacred and profane. The dancers work with much effort to create precision with straight lines, and they do not completely reject the straight-line work associated with *major* dance forms such as ballet and modern dance technique (especially Cunningham technique). This practice of thinking/acting alongside the *major* is what Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, in their discussion of *minor literature* describe as “the use of metalanguage that subverts it from within.”⁴⁹¹ In 2017, I spent a day at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago with Lewis and the cast, attending the Merce Cunningham retrospective. Lewis Ligia spoke on the usefulness of Merce Cunningham’s ideas in provisionally helping her think about abstraction and form (away from notions of purity), the precision of gesture, the impossibility of precision. *Minor matter* foregrounds movement qualities associated with disfiguration, disassembly, and exhaustion. A lot of care, mishandling, nonchalance, and re-assembly engenders the frictional entanglements between the three dancers, at times horizontal and conjoined, and at other times weighted, divergent, or combative. The

⁴⁹¹ Deleuze & Guattari (1986).

dancers have to negotiate carefully, and sometimes carelessly, ways of stepping on sentient matter. Lewis approaches a microphone and recites a speech. The output from the speakers emits a technologically distorted low growly sound. She ends the speech with “It’s not a thing. It’s nothing.” This is a precursor and title for the next section in complete darkness, which plays with shadow work and a spotlight that fixates on isolated body parts. This figuration creates an image of floating dismembered limbs, sometimes with illuminated hands that move with the quickness of a hand puppeteer.

When the lights come back on, the dancer’s move in unison to a remix of Maurice Ravel’s classic *Boléro* (1928) which is layered with Carl Craig and Moritz von Oswald’s electronic cover of with Modest Mussorgsky’s *Pictures at an Exhibition* (1928). This section has the most unison choreographically. The dancers flock together, undulating their spines, and stomping heavily, creating an ambiguous togetherness. This ambiguous togetherness simultaneously presents a harmonious relation as well as militarized uniformity. Although the piece references Bejart’s choreography to the *Bolero* overtly (it fits *minor matter*’s red theme because it was originally performed on a red circular platform), there is an unavoidable resemblance to Assadata Dafora’s *Ostrich* dance choreographed in 1932. This reference as well as other Black vernacular social dance steps reveals how a canonical piece of European modernism (Bejart’s) is ghosted by a black shadow, an “Africanist presence.”⁴⁹² European abstraction is taken apart to reveal the primitivism it abstracts and universalizes. The point is not about pointing out appropriation or “cultural exchange,” but it demonstrates how those practices in their difference have something in common, which is to extract Black energy/affect and

⁴⁹² See Morrison (1993); Gottschild (1996).

gesture for its own end. The exposition of these shadows in *minor matter* is similar to the exposition of shadows and material bones in the Musée du Quai Branly as discussed in the second chapter.

When Congolese choreographer Faustin Linyekula was commissioned by the French Ballet de Lorraine in 2012 to re-imagine the 1923 “negro-cubist fantasy” ballet titled *La Création du monde*, Linyekula pointed out these African shadows that lurk in European classical and modern dance.⁴⁹³ Writing about the experience, Linyekula posits, “All the dancers [in European white ballets] are negroes, all writers of the shadows! I therefore demand an invitation to the Ballets Russes, Ballets Suédois and Ballets de l’Opéra de Paris, it’s time that finally I meet all these negroes who have filled the stages and wings down the ages.”⁴⁹⁴ Similar to Lewis’ approach that emphasizes fragmentation, Linyekula asks:

Tell me Cendrars, how do you preserve the integrity of the body when you are just violence and stumps? And you, Senghor, what would have happened if the African national ballets had challenged the national body rather than celebrated it? All of it would have made a negro ballet, I think, a ballet of cruelty, of mutilations, of dishonest compromise, a ballet of shame... And hurray for the losers! A rattling of tambourines with holes in them for the losers!⁴⁹⁵

Both Lewis and Linyekula (as well as Xaba) reference European modernity not for purposes of elevating it. Instead they take it apart to reveal its foundational monstrosity and emphasize the ghostly dark matter that constitutes it. They also highlight how European modernism/modernity is achieved through colonial violence. This illustrates the unavailability of the integrity of the body to the Black dancer, and why experimental Black dance practices eschew aesthetics of

⁴⁹³ “La Création Du Monde 1923-2012,” Numeridanse tv, accessed July 2, 2020, <https://www.numeridanse.tv/en/dance-videotheque/la-creation-du-monde-1923-2012>.

⁴⁹⁴ “La Création Du Monde,” Kunstenfestivaldesarts, accessed July 2, 2020, <https://www.kfda.be/en/program/la-creation-du-monde-2>.

⁴⁹⁵ Ibid.

cultural pride in favor of working out how to figure the voided personality which is accumulated then absented through modern abstract aestheticization. Black dance is fungibly positioned, meaning that it is pliable, and this elasticity allows it *to be moved* in a manner that elicits both approval/applause and disgust. Black dancers are pulled to show evidence of the Negro's "natural" primitive status that is banished from humanity, and in contrast, to assert the Negro's place in human vitality due to the Negro's presumed magical creativity, a gift that keeps on giving. The Black dancer on the concert stage or global festival circuit is also pulled to do identity work, giving performance venues an edge acquired through proximity to those deemed to be identity workers. It is up to the Black artist to decide whether or not to carry out that labor in their work. This is further complicated by the fact that Black artists cannot escape the designation of identity worker, despite attempts to distance themselves from the traps of visibility politics.

Relationality and Contact

Minor matter, as a Black transnational collaboration, is susceptible to expectations to represent transcendental precolonial relationality. Lewis is less interested in that romance as it silences the historical ruptures that established wounded kinship between Africans globally. The vibrant *sociality* enacted on stage is attentive to the *position* of blackness globally as "lived on in outmoded shapes," recognizing the reality of nation while not celebrating its limitations.⁴⁹⁶

Minor matter exhausts the theater's various apparatuses to problematize intercorporeal contact and relationality by foregrounding minor gestures and unprestigious affects.⁴⁹⁷ Form in *minor*

⁴⁹⁶ Abdur-Rahman (2012), 683.

⁴⁹⁷ See: Sianne Ngai. *Ugly Feelings*. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2005). For a discussion of "minor aesthetics," see: Deleuze and Guattari (1986), 16; Erin Manning. *The Minor Gesture: (Thought in the Act)*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016).

matter is achieved/established through “the dissolution and *annulment* of form.”⁴⁹⁸ The dancers wrestle to form multiple “huddles” towards the final section of the piece [fig. 3.2]. In U.S. postmodern dance, “the huddle” is associated with Simone Forti’s dance construction first performed in 1961. I had an opportunity to perform in “the huddle” when Forti visited Northwestern University and directed a performance program titled *Thinking with the Body* in February 2016. Lewis, also participated in a workshop where Forti’s taught “the huddle” in early 2014 at Pieterspace, Los Angeles. Forti’s huddle differs from Lewis’ in the sense that it privileges notions of working together, harmony, and democracy. It is highly participatory and suggests the way that notions of community were being rethought during the 1960s. Each huddle in *minor matter* appears as a tight protective embrace, but it is also slippery and a consequence of uncomfortable collisions. The dancers squeeze, grip, and use each other’s limbs to climb and form knotted *tableaux vivants* that repeatedly crash and fall apart. Through the huddle, does contact signal a “community of experience” endowed with political plentitude and democratic aspirations? Does the huddle direct attention to a more frictive Afro-diasporic formation that choreographer Ralph Lemon once described (referring to his *Geography Trilogy*) as “a limited, contrived community in a context of empirical performance formalism”?⁴⁹⁹ By remaining ambivalent to the “tyranny of positivity” that drives the *major*-ity of contemporary Black performance and its theorization, *minor matter* punctures and punctuates a space for questioning the agential and relational gravitas often bestowed upon contact and/as improvisation.⁵⁰⁰

⁴⁹⁸ Hortense J. Spillers, “Art Talk and the Uses of History.” *Small Axe* 19, no. 3 (2015):185.

⁴⁹⁹ Lemon (2000), 7.

⁵⁰⁰ See Frank Wilderson and Jaye Austin Williams, “Staging (Within) Violence: A Conversation with Frank Wilderson and Jaye Austin Williams,” *Rhizomes: Cultural Studies in Emerging Knowledge*, no. 29 (2016).

The kind of sociality contained in *minor matter*'s embrace of negative affect and negative philosophy can be thought of as *negative kin-aesthesia*. Negative kin-aesthesia alludes to the deliberate anticathartic performance strategies that prevent idiopathic identification between the audience and the performance/performers. Kaja Silverman describes idiopathic identification as "the annihilatory relation to the other," and Max Scheler characterizes it as "the total eclipse and absorption of another self by one's own."⁵⁰¹ Firstly, while the dance's virtuosic elements might allow for "kinesthetic empathy" to happen, for the audience to feel moved by the performance, it is precisely this feeling of being moved that risks establishing false identification with the dancers. Secondly, the dance acknowledges the global position of blackness while troubling the romantic presumption of "kin" in the context of African and African-diaspora aesthetic collaboration. Negative kin-aesthesia is less about regathering precolonial wholeness and more about the praxis and consciousness of using fleshly collisions that tend to Blackness's fractal condition. *Minor matter* is where Black people can gather but the event cannot be a Black gathering. The organized gathering cannot be a refuge or a protected site for Black sociality. Like Black performance in general, the piece is emblematic of Blackness as ongoing resistance subsumed within a framework of institutional coercion, the risk of incorporation into neoliberal identity politics, and civil societal surveillance. These racial-capitalist machinations operate despite Lewis's highly critical, counterhegemonic, and "minoritarian" authorial intentions. This tension reveals where nonrepresentational Black aesthetics arrives at an impasse.

Throughout this dissertation, I examine how artists approach the unrepresentability of the unmournable void through strategies that cling to abstraction and literal figuration. Ligia Lewis'

⁵⁰¹ Kaja Silverman, *The Threshold of the Visible World*. (New York: Routledge, 1996), 23. Also see Hartman's discussion of "narcissistic identification" in *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

non-representational posture is an attempt to trouble ways of depicting the formlessness that constitutes Black embodiment. Art historian Darby English has critiqued an “unfortunate” tendency in art history and criticism where Black art is “almost uniformly generalized, endlessly summoned to prove its representativeness (or defend its lack of same) and contracted to show-and-tell on behalf of an abstract and unchanging “culture of origin.”⁵⁰² English then discusses Ralph Ellison’s discussion of Romare Bearden’s collage art. Ellison points out a tension that exists in the arts between telling and revealing, arguing that figural forms are less successful when they opt for “sociological cliché or raw protest” because in “telling all, they reveal nothing.”⁵⁰³ Ellison proposes a destruction of images of reality in favor of the creation of the “new.”⁵⁰⁴ This new imaging, for Ellison has “little room for lachrymose, for self-pity or raw complaint”⁵⁰⁵ While I recognize the importance of Ellison’s point about not reducing the Black visual repertoire to raw complaint and sociological pathos, and locating other relational or citational formal strategies, I wonder what happens when attention is paid to Black “raw complaint” as doing more nuanced work than meets the eye. What appears as raw complaint is sometimes what, as Leigh Raiford has written about Black Panther Party posters, “highly textured yet accessible pieces in which both meaning and images are layered.”⁵⁰⁶ This question is pivotal to Ligia Lewis *minor matter*, especially the aesthetic choices she has to consider when she exhausts the question of matter through Black Lives Matter. “New images” as fragments of harsh beauty do risk repeating the scene of violence, albeit in abstract ways.

⁵⁰² Darby English. *How to See a Work of Art in Total Darkness*. (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2007), 7.

⁵⁰³ Ellison (1987), 236.

⁵⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 647

⁵⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 676

⁵⁰⁶ Raiford, 203.

Black Lives Matter

Minor matter probes the challenges of Black collectivity and political formation. The movement for Black Lives is most active as a response to state-sanctioned violence against Black people of all class backgrounds and gender identifications. This violence is not reducible to police killings, since policing itself is not reducible to the police in uniform but embodied by those with a close proximity to policing and are protected by the police at every turn. The global traction of Black Lives Matter (BLM) and the movement for Black lives writ large shows that this is not a problem limited to the USA. I spent eight years attending shows and exhibits with this question in mind, paying attention to the sensibility of the movement of Black lives was appearing in cultural production, cultural theory, and activism. The “mattering” of Black life seemed to be a problem that was considered in multiple institutions across the world for various reasons, some reactionary, some for-profit, and others for teasing out the sheer unethicalness of the world. Performance is a space of memory and pedagogy about such sedimented issues, but it is also a speculative modality that keeps the injury and the wound in sight, or close enough to be felt. It is through the work of Black radical and reformist activists that the world came to sit with the (non-)mattering of blackness, the meaning of matter and form, and how seemingly disparate attributes such as darkness make Black people part of an ontological category that is killable. Performance and aesthetics are among many approaches for confronting questions of blackness and mattering, historicizing how black matter was and continues to be made derelict.

Created against the backdrop of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, *minor matter* betrays expectations to aesthetically portray Black death or dramatize scenes of Black people

getting murdered.⁵⁰⁷ This refusal is ingrained in the performance description which states that the piece “resists the tyranny of transparency and representationalism” and the piece limits explanation of the unsayable.⁵⁰⁸ Rather than choreographing a stage version of BLM activism that fully succumbs to contemporary art institutions’ penchant for Black “activist art” to fulfill diversity quotas and other related reasons, Lewis approaches blackness, abstraction, and matter(ing) through formal problems associated with the materiality of the black box, darkness, line, exhaustion, and what Fred Moten calls “phonic substance.”⁵⁰⁹ This is not to discredit “raw protest” but it is to note how Lewis honors that practice in a way that does not directly bring it into the institution for co-optation. *Minor matter*’s embrace of the movement for Black lives eschews a parasitic appropriation of Black activist’s labor and incorporating BLM within the performance’s logic. That is to say, the piece is in conversation with BLM politics and at the same time poses particular questions about representation and sensation within the black box theater, specifically what can be seen and sensed in complete darkness, as well as what a non-visual orientation towards blackness might potentialize. This non-visual orientation towards darkness and blackness opens up space to consider the promises and failures of a haptic engagement with blackness. Moten, discussing Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* states that “invisibility has visibility at its heart. To be invisible is to be seen, instantly and fascinatingly recognized as the unrecognizable.”⁵¹⁰ The blackness of the black box theater, the blacked-out and dimmed lights, and the black dancing *body* are collapsed in *minor matter* as a mode of

⁵⁰⁷ (2018) See: Ligia Lewis, Erin Manning, Rizvana Bradley, “Lewis discusses the connection with BLM in a conversation with scholars Rizvana Bradley and Erin Manning about *minor matter*” *YouTube*, June 2018: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yGr5wkfjr5I>

⁵⁰⁸ For the performance’s program description, see: <https://performancespacenewyork.org/shows/minor-matter/>

⁵⁰⁹ Moten (2003).

⁵¹⁰ *Ibid.*,68.

bringing attention to how black matter is overrepresented as both absence and hypervisibility [fig. 3.3].

Lewis' indifference to visibility (which is not the same as indifference to seeing) is asserted through actual darkness in the theater, where sensation can happen in the absence of light. But how does a politics of disappearance cohere for those who not only lack presence (and a capacity to disappear) but are simultaneously *bound to appear*?⁵¹¹ It is crucial to distinguish Lewis' or other Black artists' negative orientation from tactics described as *performances of negativity* in performance studies. Lewis' performance explores the matter of non-being, darkness, and nothingness as an imposed condition on Blackness rather than aesthetic tactics of becoming. As stated in the introduction, white *performances of negativity* flirt with the dissolution of Being precisely because Being is already secure for white artists.⁵¹² But this negativity is not the structural condition of non-being as in the case of the Black. Blackness' *position of negation* differs significantly from Phelan's *performance of negativity* and its proposed ruptures, possibilities, and promises. One thing worth considering in Phelan's argument that applies to Lewis is the "conscious refusal to take the payoff of visibility."⁵¹³ The Black female figure in visual representation (cinematic, theatrical, fine art) and critical theory is both visible and the invisible, as well as operates as the thought and the unthought.⁵¹⁴

The publicized deaths of Black people have made scholars refuse or reject the racializing violence associated with the ocular. This has reinvigorated a turn to the haptic, where a politics

⁵¹¹ See: Copeland (2013).

⁵¹² On this white capacity and desire for disappearance, see: Sampada Aranke, "Fred Hampton's Murder and the Coming Revolution." (2013): 116-139. Also see: Tiffany Lethabo King. "Humans Involved: Lurking in the Lines of Posthumanist Flight." (2017): 162.

⁵¹³ Phelan (1993).

⁵¹⁴ Kara Keeling (2007).

of touch is expected to reveal other ways of intersubjective relationality beyond the violence of understanding the other through skin color. What new understanding can we get from invoking the “touch of the undercommons” as proposed by Fred Moten and Stefano Harney, described as a “preference” where “though we were refused sentiment, history and home, we feel each other”?⁵¹⁵ Moten and Harney invoke this politics of touch elsewhere as a mode of “surviving genocide.”⁵¹⁶ They name it as a practice of “contact improvisation,” in a quest to meditate on Mike Brown’s death, to salvage his fall as not a fall, but a “refusal to stand ... that is in apposition to rising, anacatastrophic refusal of the case and, therefore, the world”⁵¹⁷ The authors regard Mike Brown’s fall (a result of a murderous gunshot that is part of a larger genocidal regime) as an anacatastrophic refusal of the case and they endow it with an anterior agency, a “refusal to stand,” as opposed to thinking about his would-be refusal as refused *a priori*. Doesn’t Mike Brown’s death confirm, rather than refuse, the case? More would have to be unpacked by Moten and Harney to make a convincing case for how a dead Black person refuses the world by being murdered. Their use of contact improvisation is not limited to the dance practice that emerged in the 1960s-70s. They use it as what Karen Barad calls a “material metaphor,” to assert a politics of contact.⁵¹⁸ Positing that contact improvisation is “how we survive genocide” in relation to Mike Brown hypervaluates the political efficacy of contact.⁵¹⁹ In wrestling with these questions and BLM’s responses to them, what does a politics of touch or a turn to the power of the haptic make possible? The ocular has been criticized for reducing the other through visible skin color. The promise of touch and contact is that it would offer a different understanding of

⁵¹⁵ Ibid., 98.

⁵¹⁶ Stefano Harney & Fred Moten. "Michael Brown." 42, no. 4 (2015): 81-87.

⁵¹⁷ Ibid., 82.

⁵¹⁸ Barad (2008).

⁵¹⁹ Ibid.

the other, revealing a form of intersubjective relationality considered powerful enough to restrain the trigger-happy hand.⁵²⁰ Perhaps this is why touch and contact are not jettisoned, but put under scrutiny in Lewis' project. Artist-critic Hannah Black's observation of *minor matter* is that "in Black collective being, apocalyptic hurt and utopian community are folded together," and this slippery sense of community is presented through dancers' gestures of holding each other up and being dropped carelessly. These are the qualities that Ellison observes as coeval "vitality and powerlessness."⁵²¹

Performance theorist Rizvana Bradley writing about Black (female) movement formations, argues that she aims to insist on Black dance "not as the arrangement of the riot, but [Black] dance as the riot that cannot be arranged."⁵²² Bradley contests Giorgio Agamben's argument about the waning of cinematic gesture, and she reads a film about a Black dance group, set in contemporary Detroit called *The Fits*, to argue that Black gesture is never fully captured by the apparatus of the choreographic. Instead, every attempt and instantiation of capture produces a certain excess. It is this excess that Bradley refers to as a Black "kinaesthetic contagion"⁵²³ where Black gesture in dance moves in excess to the strictures of the choreographic. This survival of excess and fugitive escape creates a (sub)culture of resistance. Resistance is susceptible to assimilation and co-optation. As dance scholar Randy Martin cautions in *Critical Moves*,

These studies of resistance, particularly when applied to colonial imperial subordination, continue to have political and conceptual value... [but] dominance too has too much to lose and prepares itself incessantly to resist this possibility. Ultimately, the state takes on the responsibility to marshal forces that resist the societally creative energies of mobilization. In its myriad concrete forms, mobilization is activity that is already

⁵²⁰ Stephens (2014); Glissant (1997).

⁵²¹ Ellison 237.

⁵²² Bradley (2018), 23.

⁵²³ Ibid., 28.

offensive.⁵²⁴

What Martin identifies here is that the stage is a microcosm of the greater societal context where subversive practice gets subsumed, incorporated, or disciplined. Relations of power asymmetry and antagonism within the theater reveal something about how force and domination assert themselves by crushing dissenting voices/bodies in general. Black movement/gesture, whether captured within the choreographic or in excess of it, is always subject to deadly policing and regulation. The suppression, silencing, and force perpetrated on activists who are part of the Movement for Black Lives is one example of this. Black political theorist, Joy James, also attunes us to these relations. She contends,

When the Black Matrix rends or ruptures captivity, the lofty topple; this is because those aloft have been called out, humiliated, vanquished in some form, whether through large or small rebellion. That rupture is an inescapably bloody, unattractive affair. This is true not just because the balance of the high and low has been disturbed but because the retaliatory violence to punish that disturbance is inevitable.⁵²⁵

Black political formation (on and off the theatrical stage) is always anticipated and made possible by violence and incorporation, as Martin and James attest above. Thus, there remains little to recuperate in the insurrectionary and slippery group formation presented in *minor matter*. That is to say, *minor matter* cautions against the uncritical celebration of its own insurrectionary collectivity, demonstrating that it is anticipated and produced by retaliatory violence. The piece ends with an abrupt blackout cued by Lewis shouting “Black!” after the three dancers balance on each other while climbing a wall (fig. 3. 4). The embrace of rupture, rather than relationality, and the realist representation of the abyss in *minor matter* come close to having explanatory power about the condition of blackness as that which exceeds the frame of a *mournable* subject within

⁵²⁴ Randy Martin (1998), 13.

⁵²⁵ James (2016), 257.

Sigmund Freud's mourning and melancholia formulation. This is not to say that *minor matter* abandons or ignores the unsuturable wound. Rather, the piece tends to the Black dead and dying by declining the seductions of linguistic and dance/choreographic attributes associated with "community"/ "relationality", and against the valorization of the world. The anarrangement through crashes, clashes, knots, and falls in the dance performance serve as a reminder that every Black resistive gesture must always anticipate the inevitable retaliatory violence drafted to punish its very disturbance.

II. ***On Water Will, In Melody***

The audience enters a space filled with fog and a musky smell. There is a sound of frogs and birds, as if we are in a swamp. The downstage curtain is shut and the front part of the stage is dimly lit. Dani Brown walks in from the wings, softly singing "Once upon a time" then recites a German Grimm tale about a willful child who would not do what her mother wished so God made her ill and she died. While in her grave, her arm kept reaching outward. The grave diggers pushed it back into the grave, but the willful child kept pushing the arm out until the mother went to the grave and struck the arm with a rod. Following the mother's act, the willful child never had their arm out again. This prologue opens a conventional dramatic structure that consists of two acts and a *divertissement* in the middle. The narrative of the willful child establishes the context of the piece, particularly its themes such as formlessness, animatedness, the feminine, and will. The placement of the narrative in the beginning of the performance parallels cultural theorist Sara Ahmed's book titled *Willful Subjects* which also opens with this Grimm tale. Like Ahmed's book and another cultural theorist Hershini Bhana Young's *Illegible Will*, the notion of the will is investigated through the feminine (which includes feminized affect as well as

feminized racial positionality). Brown narrates the tale in multiple voices and uses her physicality to establish different characters. She acts as an emcee or a griot who narrates the tale in a distinctly Southern U.S. accent, shifts from a wide stance and deep voice, to a pin-like rag doll characterization with a high-pitched voice. She contorts her limbs, hopping awkwardly with visibly tense muscles, making grotesque facial expressions. The flow of the story is also disturbed by linguistic wanderings when suddenly in the middle of a sentence, Brown, in a high-pitched mechanized tone suddenly yells, “Are you guys ready for the waterfall?” The water falls from the ceiling later on during the second act.

When the curtain opens like in a vaudeville theater, a misty *mise-en-scène* is revealed. This first act is titled ‘Epic Mime.’ Susanne Sachsse, Ligia Lewis, and Titilayo Adebayo make an entrance with their mouths agape. The role performed by Adebayo is sometimes performed by Jolie Ngemi. They perform mechanical movement that stay within a vertical plane, front-facing and two dimensional, resembling a mime show with elements of shadow puppetry. They smile a wide superficial smile, invoking the minstrel performance tradition. Adebayo’s solo is extracted from a specific gospel mime performance (fig. 3.5 & 3.6).⁵²⁶ Gospel mime is a popular form in the Black church where a performer who dons white gloves with face painted white dramatizes the lyrics of a gospel song using exaggerated gesture and facial expressions. Gospel mime inherits and repurposes minstrelsy and classical mime. In fact, some of Adebayo’s movements in the piece are lifted directly from a video recording of a gospel mime artist and modified in *Water Will*. There is a recorded sound of constant stomping. The stomping is sampled from a spiritual titled *Couldn’t Hear Nobody Pray* (2016) sung by the Wiley College Choir, and this is pieced

⁵²⁶ Reverend Paul Jones. “I won’t complain: Ministered by The Chosen One” January 2015. *YouTube*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8ZYisAcrGUo>

together with Renaissance English composer Thomas Tallis' motet titled *Spem in Alium* (1570). There is also original sound composed by sound designer Shades McKenna, who also takes liberty to manipulate Sergei Rachmaninoff's symphonic poem in A minor titled "Isle of the Dead" (1908) for a section of the *Water Will* titled "cadavers." This piecing of disparate genres, styles, and time frames is consistent throughout Lewis' repertoire and she speaks openly about her deliberate use of collage and assemblage. This assemblage allows for the form to consist of fragments, such that each scene refuses stable signs as each image is saturated with shards that seemingly have no relation to one another.

The performers let out operatic sounds, accompanying Tallis' motet. Susanne Sachsse walks to a microphone and recites the tale of the willful child in German in the midst of this cacophony. The senses are overwhelmed by the flickering lights, operatic singing, guttural sounds, and eerie laughs. They perform different tableaux against the back scrim, still images depicting scenes filled with interpersonal tension. The piece's form, structure, and visual language are cinematic, referencing early Hollywood film. The dramatic structure is bisected by an intermission in the form of a balletic *divertissement* – a light and jovial break that briefly takes the audience's concentration away from the world of the piece. The *divertissement* is hilariously camp, with an Enya soundtrack and overly presentational *grande jeté's* that look like scene from *Dance Moms*. The second act is an echo chamber where darkness rules, opening with a lecture by Lewis on darkness. In a dripping wet landscape, a sprinkler from the ceiling unleashes water all over the stage. The stage floor becomes damp and eventually forms a pond. The piece ends in almost complete darkness, with a rectangular light that moves in circular formation like a fan while Adebayo sings a gospel song, "I won't complain" (which is the source of her gospel mime solo) [fig. 3.5]

Water Will is produced by HAU Hebbel am Ufer in Berlin where Lewis is a resident artist, with dramaturgy by Maja Zimmerman, lighting design by Ariel Efraim Ashbel, sound design by S. McKenna, and stage design by Eike Böttcher. The program description of the work is: *Water Will (in Melody)* “is a devised choreographic work for four performers, using melodrama as a point of departure. Wrestling with language and notions of ‘the will,’ this dystopian fantasy becomes a space for negotiating desire, imagination, and feelings of an encroaching end... Lewis initiates this world in which voice, gesture, touch and movement, flow like waves—both gentle and turbulent.”⁵²⁷ I watched *Water Will* at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago as well as Red Cat in downtown Los Angeles. Prior to that, in the summer of 2018, I attended Lewis’ rehearsal for *Water Will (in Melody)* in Manhattan, New York City. This was part of the Spring 2018 Baryshnikov Arts Center residency. The rehearsal and in-progress showing were held in the Merce Cunningham and John Cage studio. It was one of the first assemblies of a team of collaborators and the beginning of a rehearsal process for the third piece of the trilogy. This rehearsal process included Lewis, Berlin-based performer from Botswana Makgosi Kgabi, and composer-performer Colin Self. During the rehearsal process, Lewis was asking questions about what it means for dance to be a site where “thingliness” is worked through, where the oscillation of the (Black) body between thing, nothingness, and something else is bravely worked out as a kind of practice. This rehearsal process culminated into a work-in-progress showing where Lewis introduced the German fable of “the willful child.” She described how these culturally familiar fables inform her process, how she tries to find deviancy within the text themselves and experiments with spoken word to test the borders of

⁵²⁷ Redcat, “Ligia Lewis: *Water Will (in Melody)* Program” *Redcat*, September 13, 2019. <https://www.redcat.org/ligialewis/waterwill>

language. The showing began with performers on the floor, breathing audibly, their movement slow and sustained. The floor was treated as support, but the movers also paid attention to its material characteristics, its texture, color, temperature, and scent. This is a practice that, during rehearsal, Lewis described as experimenting with the senses through “emptying out subjectivity,” and not giving primacy to “the body” as it is traditionally understood in dance.⁵²⁸ This practice staged the risks and possibilities of sitting with *nothingness* while exploring touch in the community of *things*. Unfolding before us was a dance that raised awareness about how material dance bodies relate to things, the ground, and the land. The aim was to establish a horizontal relationship with things without becoming them, and without turning to the opposite extreme, what Zakiyyah Jackson would call an “ever-vigilant form of anti-anthropocentrism.”⁵²⁹

The sound score, then arranged by Colin Self, escalated to reach a cacophonous sonic environment. Kgabi circles the stage, taking purposeful big steps. During the post-showing conversation at Baryshnikov, Lewis articulated that these choices of experimentation with a variety of sonic arrangements occasion the breakdown of language, and open up ways to “other” the theater space itself, exposing its representational logics that often mobilize the senses to titillate, in ways that advance problematic racial fantasies. This embrace of the negative and nothingness, similar to *minor matter*, was a continued meditation on state-sanctioned anti-Black violence which usually results to a what Moten, in *A Poetics of the Undercommons* calls a politics of entrance that attempts to move away from “dehumanization” by opting to prove Black humanity. A politics of entrance is characterized by a preoccupation with “nibbling around the

⁵²⁸ Mlondi Zondi. “Ligia Lewis” *BAC Stories*, June 18, 2018.

<https://bacnyc.org/explore/bac-stories/story/ligia-lewis-bac-story>

⁵²⁹ Jackson, (2020), 15.

edges of the political, like a beaver building a dam.”⁵³⁰ An attachment to the political is an attachment to the world, which means an attachment to the endurance of anti-blackness; since anti-blackness is what buttresses the world.

The dramaturgical intent of *Water Will* shifts away from a desire to incorporate blackness into Enlightenment conceptions of the human. The practice of moving away from the human and making kin with nothingness and objects (where Blackness has often been relegated in Enlightenment thought), also runs the risk of reifying exactly what it challenges. Lewis decided to take up this risk of turning toward objecthood instead of running away from it. Moten cautions against a politics of incorporation into the Human when he states, “You think you have to say ‘No, I am not a thing.’ It’s a horrible experience to find that one is an object among other objects, a thing among other things...but *the maneuver that requires you to claim humanness is horrible as well* precisely because it may well replicate and entrench the disaster.”⁵³¹ In that respect, *Water Will* challenges us to ask: how can what is deemed nothing be with nothing in dance? How does touch operate in that space, and how do we resist reducing touch to a romance of relationality and appeals to liberal human subjectivity? When Lewis’ prompted Kgabi to improvise “emptying out subjectivity” during rehearsal, did that instruction assume that there is subjectivity to empty out in the first place, or was it an invitation to let go of one’s *ego ideal* that deludes one to misrecognize oneself as a proper subject among subjects? At a time in Black theory and practice where the “given” nature of ideas such as “the self,” “being,” “personhood,” and “the body” are under constant questioning and revision, there is much to be gleaned from Lewis’ provocative practice of inhabiting nothingness, the void, and non-representationalism.

⁵³⁰ Fred Moten, *A Poetics of the Undercommons*, (Sputnik & Fizzle, 2016), 36.

⁵³¹ See: Moten, *Ibid.*, (Emphasis mine).

Central to the piece is an attempt to connect 19th century European thought around race, gender, and aesthetics to modernism. The performance style foregrounded in the piece, melodrama, connects to those aesthetic practices linked to vaudeville theater, mime, and early cinema. These are sites where Blackness was spectacularized through minstrelsy and was treated as plastic, plially pulled across all polarities as lazy, affectable, incapable of feeling, and hyperemotional/animated.⁵³² None of these designations were fact, but both the theater and cinema were two of many technologies of weaving these myths and presenting them as fact. This also resulted to a Black performance tradition that committed itself to challenging these myths. In challenging them, they were forced to reproduce the same destructive signifiers, a limited act of “subverting them from within.” This uncomfortable entanglement of reification and subversion can be gleaned in *Water Will*’s reproduction of elements of the cinematic as well as a design concept and gestural repertoire associated with minstrelsy. For that reason, the reproduction in *Water Will* begs the same question I pose about Nelisiwe Xaba’s “Venus” diptych in the second chapter. That is, does Lewis’ subversion of the destructive stereotype repeat rather than sidestepped the fetish.⁵³³ Does the subversive abstraction offered by sampling, piecing together fragments and unstable signs destroy the violence of Enlightenment structures of fantasy?

⁵³² I concur with Zakiyyah Jackson’s argument that “Enlightenment thought [is] not black “exclusion” or “denied humanity” but rather the violent imposition and appropriation—inclusion and recognition—of black(ened) humanity in the interest of plasticizing that very humanity, whereby “the animal” is one but not the only form blackness is thought to encompass. Plasticity is a mode of transmogrification whereby... blackness is experimented with as if it were infinitely malleable lexical and biological matter, such that blackness is produced as sub/super/human at once, a form where form shall not hold: potentially ‘everything and nothing’ at the register of ontology.” See: Jackson (2020), 11.

⁵³³ See: Cheng (2011), 42.

These questions do not appear for the first time in *Water Will*, which is not Lewis' first exploration of melodrama. In *Melancholy: A white mellow* drama, Lewis choreographed a solo performance for a white male performer in white gloves. *Melancholy* threaded together elements borrowed from Jean Genet's play "The Blacks: A Clown Show" as well as W.E.B. Du Bois' often overlooked essay titled "The Souls of White Folk." The first piece of the trilogy, *Sorrow Swag* is also a solo performance for a white male dancer, exploring the color blue and the emotion of sadness. The minstrel tradition also haunts *Sorrow Swag*, as it was originally meant to be performed by Lewis. She decided to maintain distance by having a white dancer perform it. The piece involves a gruesome primal scream, which when she was still performing the piece in rehearsal, she felt it created a feeling of pain that risked soliciting empathy or received as a performance of black female victimhood. The choice to cast a white male dancer was not an aim for the white dancer to become her or take on a Black character. She then adapted elements of Samuel Beckett's *Not I*, a solo play originally performed by Billie Whitelaw in complete darkness with the light only shining on the white performer's mouth. This image had a direct visual affinity to the minstrel tradition that Lewis was aware about. Speaking about this moment, Lewis notes:

Sorrow Swag started with the primal scream (that's how Billie Whitelaw described performing Beckett's *Not I*, and so I built it backwards from there. I began performing in it but then stepped out precisely because of the limits of empathy. I thought my absence from the frame was essential for me and for my work to be understood as coming from a black political/aesthetical positioning that did not have to collapse into my singular body and thus could move into another relation to sight and to be relieved of the epidermal bind of blackness. Messy yes, but for me, necessary.⁵³⁴

⁵³⁴ Ligia Lewis, personal correspondence, February 13, 2020. Also see: Jaime Shearn Coan, "OUT OF THE BLUE Ligia Lewis's *Sorrow Swag* Disrupts Identity Politics-as-Usual," *The Brooklyn Rail*, February 1, 2016, <https://brooklynrail.org/2016/02/dance/out-of-the-blue-ligia-lewis>.

Lewis discusses how she had to step out of the frame in order determine what the work was enacting as well as its limits. What is messy about the primal scream when performed by her is the likelihood of the audience establishing false empathetic identification with her, a type of narcissistic identification that Saidiya Hartman takes to task in *Scenes of Subjection* when she discusses Frederick Douglass' reproduction of Aunt Hester's scream. The other messy part is that Brian Getnick, the solo white performer in *Sorrow Swag* repeats a Beckett moment that bears too close a resemblance to the primal scene of blackface minstrelsy. The guttural scream happens in total darkness with a spotlight shining on his mouth, illuminating his gold-encased teeth, known in hip hop culture as "grills." [fig. 3.7] Below I will discuss how melodrama and its affective registers open up for thought in *Water Will* when tied to questions of femininity and the sexuating properties of anti-blackness.

The mechanic movement language in *Water Will* is similar to the movement style I describe in Nelisiwe Xaba's *Sakhozi Says Non* in the previous chapter. It is distinct from release-based technique and other conventional modern dance forms often shown in U.S. concert dance. What Lewis foregrounds is a movement investigation of Black vernacular forms as well as anti-black phantasmagoric performances that modernized American dance, generating what would be called "modern dance" in the early 1900s. Dance scholars Brenda Dixon Gottschild and Susan Manning, both taking their cue from Toni Morrison's *Playing in the Dark*, write histories of modern dance that begin with the absented and suppressed darkness that haunts it.⁵³⁵ They reveal how Black vernacular and concert dance forms from the late 19th century and early 20th century were discredited and appropriated by white dancers on the stage and everyday life. Degraded

⁵³⁵ See: Susan Manning (2004); Gottschild (1996).

Black performance practices shaped the modern. Manning reveals how modern dance lexicons and pioneers exalted in modern dance historiography are haunted by Black traditions and interventions in dance, dating back to early Hollywood cinema, vaudeville, and the plantation. These dances were considered by 20th century critics and scholars to be as monstrous as their producers and relegated to “low brow” categories such as “vernacular jazz,” “urban/street dance,” or less pretentiously “Negro dance.” The focus on Black dancers’ “natural talent” or “raw energy” erased how Black performance forms involved rigorous training. It also elided that Black dances as a form of intellectual aesthetic practices were American modern dance’s life support. Rather than writing in a way that attended to what gave modern dance its blood transfusion, these critics fixated on white “pioneers” such as Martha Graham, Isadora Duncan, and Ruth St. Denis.

Lewis approaches modern dance by exhausting and taking apart the bare bones that formed it. Adebayo’s opening solo resembles a minstrel mime dance at first value because she wears a pair of white gloves and a long white shirt. However, this solo does not only dwell in that realm as it is a reperformance of gospel mime, with subtle references to forms that became popular after the 1980s such as krumping as well as popping and locking. It is remarkable to see how minstrelsy has survived in Black and non-Black bodies through gospel mime, contemporary Black vernacular and social dance forms, as well as concert dance. Minstrel performance remains in contemporary art. The remains are highlighted to be repeating in contemporary art, given a certain opacity through abstraction. In other words, the intergenerational transfer of minstrel performance has ensured its survival, albeit in subversive and unrecognizable ways. Adebayo’s mime solo then is not krumping in the strict sense. Rather, it is presented for the audience’s recognition of the darkness and joyful terror that haunts that style. In global hip hop,

so many are finding their “inner Black” using these forms, reverting to the tropes of the past that is not past, by wearing exaggerated affect considered as stereotypically Black and exerting high energy (also considered Black) without attending to the historical material bone breaking and flesh tearing that characterizes those forms. *Water Will* does not foreground a modern dance language that is typical on the concert stage. Instead, the piece is a figuration of what ghosts modernity itself. It brings to attention the monstrosity that modern dance whitewash or abstract away.

Water Will invokes the Southern gothic through a direct reference to visual artist Kara Walker’s shadow paintings which are re-performed on stage against the upstage scrim [fig. 3.8]. Another charged icon on the stage is a rope hanging from the ceiling. Dani Brown uses the rope for climbing and swings jovially from right to left. Given all the other references to the Southern gothic (especially in relation to Kara Walker’s paintings) the rope is not too far removed from suggesting a lynching noose, an instrument of terror and murder, which for the white lynch mob is an instrument of jovial white pleasure. The presence of the hanging rope conjures up a memory, a reminder, of lynching, even if it is used only once as a climbing rope. What the rope is used for in the piece may either liberate one from this nauseous feeling brought by what it initially conjures up, or Brown’s laughter and white enjoyment while swinging on it might let the taste of bile in one’s mouth linger for days. Commentary on this fusion of terror and enjoyment, as Hartman names it, runs throughout the piece. The visually striking tableaux upstage referencing Kara Walker’s art depict still pictures of Lewis pulling the hair of the white performers, the other performers squatting as if defecating, and silently screaming. This fusion is

what Kara Walker also talked about in her work as being both “totally demeaning and possibly very beautiful”⁵³⁶ This feeling runs throughout the piece.

The intensity of the first act is contrasted with the calm of the second act which begins with a countdown. The entire second act takes place in a wet stage with a cacophony of recorded whisper [fig. 3.9 & 3.10]. The movement vocabulary in Act II is watery and less exaggerated. This is different from the first Act I’s movement vocabulary which involves isolation and exaggerated muscle tension. The successive and sequential undulations in the second half have no discernible initiation points; they do not end, and they do not begin. However, the literal porousness of the theater and the wavy flow of the choreographic vocabulary are not reducible to mere representations of how water moves. In other words, Lewis is not making the move championed by French ballet master Jean-Georges Noverre in his 18th Century dance treatises of creating sublime movement that mimics/simulates Nature (in this particular case, water).⁵³⁷ Water is a material metaphor. The question of water is fleshed out in a manner that exhausts cultural associations with water (i.e. cleansing/catharsis). She is interested in water’s materiality in performance as it pertains to the water inside the sentient corporeal form, the slippery water that choreographs the body’s orientation in space.⁵³⁸

There is a self-aware overemphasis of Brechtian alienation devices in the piece. Brechtian alienation is about breaking the fourth wall, revealing the theatre’s moving parts to the audience, and breaking the audience’s identification with the world of the performance by

⁵³⁶ Sharpe (2010), 215 (quoted in Juliete Bowles 1997, 9).

⁵³⁷ Jean Georges Noverre. *Lettres Sur La Danse Et Les Arts Imitateurs*. Les Classiques De La Danse, 1. Paris: Éditions Lieutier, 1952 (1782).

⁵³⁸ When the piece was shown at the MCA in Chicago, it was curated to coincide with an exhibition on the ocean. I also performed in that museum with a piece that made references to water, particularly the ocean. This piece was a movement experiment working with and against Aimé Césaire’s *A Tempest*.

commenting on the action. The overemphasis of Brechtian devices in the first act is not only about including these devices in the performance, it is also about bringing awareness to the performer's self-awareness of their own acts of alienation. Susanne Sachsse waves to the audience, addresses them directly to state: "I'm going back. This is shame." Lewis and Brown at different moments repeat the phrase "I'm leaving the frame" and then move across the stage to exit frame of the proscenium arch. Adebayo repeats "lose form" as she melts as if her musculature cannot support the integrity of her form. The Brechtian device of alienation helps the viewer to not merely receive reification of the racial sign, but to also gauge how the actors themselves are exaggerating the racial sign in order to place themselves outside of it and critique it. The melodramatic delivery is pushed to the level of caricature. Overstretching of the racialized affect of animatedness in this manner ensures that the expression eventually plateaus into a banal spectacle. Affect theorist Sianne Ngai describes animatedness as "exaggerated emotional expressiveness."⁵³⁹ For Ngai, the attribution of "animatedness" to the Black is for racist purposes invoked to prove Black people as "bodily," "natural," "lively," "full of vigor and spirit," or full of "zest."⁵⁴⁰ Melodrama is a feminized form that foregrounds feminized affect. Lewis emphasizes the excess of this affect, such that interiority is worn on the surface as plastic and grotesque (in the sense of exaggerated performance). This also rendering the meaning of the sign unstable. It is a self-aware faking of a fake "Black" performance.

Dark Countenance/Continent

Saidiya Hartman described the minstrel stage and melodrama as sites of "coerced festivity" where "the transubstantiation of abjection into contentment" and "the entanglements of terror

⁵³⁹ Ngai, 94.

⁵⁴⁰ Ngai, 94-95.

and enjoyment” solidified.⁵⁴¹ While melodrama and minstrelsy are not exactly the same, Hartman argues that both their “fashioning of blackness aroused pity and fear, desire and revulsion, and terror and pleasure.”⁵⁴² Both presented the Black as perennially and naturally jubilant, predisposed to entertaining, and this obscured the violence that characterized Black life on and off stage. As Joseph Roach posited, “in a world predicated on African slavery, the actor in blackface stands astride the threshold of social death.”⁵⁴³ Black people’s pigmentation is not actually black or even a monotone. A visual mythopoetics that understood black as the absence of color, ascribed “black” to Black people as indicative of their “absence.” It was also indicative of what the color “black” signified in early modern and Renaissance Europe, characteristics such as danger, heresy, Satan, mourning, and misfortune. However, the color black is in fact “dichroic,” which is described by Jackson as “an anamorphic abundance of color”⁵⁴⁴ The mythopoetics of anti-blackness labored to suppress this “abundance, ” willfully misrecognizing it so that a fiction of whiteness as unmarked Humanness par excellence cohered.

Ligia Lewis (much like Xaba’s representation of Baartman) reproduces this coerced festivity in order to expose it. She critiques the *terror of enjoyment* by having to repeat it. The white performers do not perform the mime gestures, or any other gestures associated with the mime tradition. That does not completely absolve them from reification because blackface minstrelsy is not reducible to visible or audible signs. Psychoanalytic theorist Claudia Tate, in “Freud and His Negro” calls this “discursive blackface”— which she describes as an invocation of an imaginary and derisive blackness that calls attention to the [performer’s] ontological

⁵⁴¹ Hartman (1997), 23.

⁵⁴² Ibid., 27.

⁵⁴³ Roach, (1996), 112.

⁵⁴⁴ Jackson (2020), 186.

whiteness by producing and marking ‘the inauthenticity’ of the interpolated Black identity.”⁵⁴⁵

The disassembling of Sambo and other stereotypes in *Water Will*, and the work of imagining new images is key. Black philosopher and literary critic Sylvia Wynter has appraised this creation of new images, calling it a powerful and insurgent “heresy” that is not about remedying stereotypes with more “positive” images⁵⁴⁶ However, she encourages that we push our critique further to consider how this heresy is often co-opted into the Norm to become a kind of “licensed heresy.” Non-realist aesthetic practices by Black artists enact a necessary heresy that is always susceptible to co-optation and absorption into a new counterintuitive hegemony. The question that remains then is about whether there is an opacity that refuses this incorporation, or whether the opacity has to be generated and re-generated frequently since it is always anticipated by incorporation.

Hartman’s emphasis on performance and/as violence differs from performance historian Daphne Brooks’ more recuperative reading of blackface minstrelsy. Brooks is also interested in performances of racial phantasmagoria but her emphasis is on the “slow-burning insurrection of blackface minstrelsy” where Black performers of the minstrel stage repurposed blackface into parody, what she calls “a fugitive assertion of subjectivity through the tools of performance”⁵⁴⁷ She endows performance with alchemic powers to “confront and transform slavery’s putative ‘social death,’ turning that estranged condition into a rhetorical and social device and a means of survival.”⁵⁴⁸ She offers a detailed reading of those acts of confrontation and transformation. However, it is not entirely fleshed out in her text how exactly slavery’s social death is “putative,” or how it has to be that way for subversive performance to achieve its transformational ends.

⁵⁴⁵ Claudia Tate. “Freud and His ‘Negro’: Psychoanalysis as Ally and Enemy of African American Studies” *Journal for the Psychoanalysis of Culture and Society* 1.1, (1996), 55.

⁵⁴⁶ Wynter (1979).

⁵⁴⁷ Brooks, 3.

⁵⁴⁸ Brooks, 3.

Brooks' project is aimed at what she understands as the transfiguration of violence into language and a means of survival. Survival shows up in this text as anathema to capture. This is also striking, since slavery and Black survival are not antithetical but co-dependent. The survival of slavery is possible through Black survival. The slave is kept *alive* (in social death) primarily for the survival of slavery and racial capitalism. In this dissertation, I am not as confident as Brooks about the power of performance to overturn *position* since *position* stubbornly remains or returns. As philosopher Daniel Barber argues, "No matter what performance does with or to a position – performing it subversively or otherwise – it remains the case that 'all performance is positioned,' which is to say that in spite of performance's supposed capacity, position recurs."⁵⁴⁹ If that is the case, then a reading that pays attention to ambivalence (rather than heroism) is what I am aiming at here, as it acknowledges how refusal and reification of the "fact"/"case" of blackness can exist coevally. This is when the actor unconsciously wills their own annihilation using a gesture that is consciously intended as the opposite of annihilation.

Brooks' neologism, "afro-alienation" (derived partly from Brecht's "alienation") defines the process of subverting the racial sign, turning it into a form of self-expression that suits one's aims. In *Water Will*, these afro-alienation acts feature through an "anti-realist" aesthetic posture.⁵⁵⁰ These efforts are sometimes fugitive, running away from the choreographer's stated intentions. In repeating this iconography (even in subversive ways), each gestural enactment, each speech act, facilitates either an occasion to dream the self differently, or as Jared Sexton

⁵⁴⁹ Daniel Colucciello Barber, "Non-relation and Metarelation" in Edia Connoles & Gary J. Shipley, *Serial Killing: A Philosophical Anthology*, (Schism Press), 39-41.

⁵⁵⁰ For Daphne Brooks, "Anti-realist" approaches are a main feature of afro-alienation. See: Brooks, 5.

puts it, “the paradox of willing the disappearance of one’s will”⁵⁵¹ This means that the subversive gesture sometimes wills against its own stated agential intentions. It has not been resolved whether one can fully opt out of reproducing minstrelsy since it ghosts so many aesthetic forms in invisible/invisibilized ways. Lewis acknowledges this:

The black body will remain a problem in a white world, and rather than trying to fix the problem [with my work], I try to continue to make more problems. My position, both political and aesthetic, will remain complicated. And I know the black body can never be fully abstracted — it has no neutral ground.⁵⁵²

The abstract repetition of this “haint” in *Water Will* is (consciously or unconsciously) an acknowledgement of that impossibility, the realization that Black dance forms, even abstract ones, cannot fully liberate the Black performer from fraught meanings projected onto their *bodies* linked to animatedness and affectability.⁵⁵³ A language that is closest to a diagnosis of this horror asks more questions or makes more problems, and rejects the hubris of electing oneself to fix the intricacies of unspeakable horror which we still know little about.

Femininity vs A Gender Apart

In the passages above I established how melodrama in theater and film is mapped onto the Black performer to mark their supposed “natural” and irrational overpouring of emotion. Both melodrama and excessive affect are also projected onto the “female” in Enlightenment thought. This is why Lewis cast four female performers, two white, and two Black (including herself). However, these performers are not “female” in the same way. Femaleness and femininity operate in a particular way for Black people. White patriarchy degrades and protects

⁵⁵¹ Jared Sexton & Daniel Barber. “On Black negativity and the Affirmation of Nothing” *Society and Space Magazine*. September 2017. <https://www.societyandspace.org/articles/on-black-negativity-or-the-affirmation-of-nothing>

⁵⁵² Lewis in Piejko (2019).

⁵⁵³ Hartman (2008).

(in paternalistic ways) white femininity, while it banishes blackness as a whole to its degraded space of femininity. Urban sociologist Robert E. Park once articulated that “The Negro is primarily an artist, loving life for its own sake. His *metier* is expression rather than action. He is, so to speak, the lady among the races.”⁵⁵⁴ In Park’s words, Black (cultural) expression relegates the Negro to a degraded feminine space understood as naturally artistic. Sigmund Freud also compared white femininity to the entire “dark continent” (Africa)— framing it as unknowable and mysterious.⁵⁵⁵

This is more rigorously theorized in Black feminist and queer studies. For example, Sylvia Wynter in “Beyond Miranda’s Meaning” puts pressure on Luce Irigaray’s universalist categorization of “woman” whose silenced ground rises solely from “her” condition as subjected to a “universally applicable patriarchal discourse.”⁵⁵⁶ Race (particularly blackness), is that variable which throws the universalization of feminism/woman into crisis. Irigaray’s universal category of woman does not hold for Wynter, as it is exclusively predicated upon the anatomical sexual difference between European men and women, eliding how race(ism), particularly anti-blackness, binds all Europeans in solidarity under the racial category Man (capable of gender/sexual difference), in contra-distinction to the racial Other who is (un)gendered as native/Black (and the ungendered racial Other of Whiteness). In this equation, the problem contributing to the white women’s *erasure* is white patriarchy, while the problem and cause for the Black woman’s *absenting*, as Europe’s “ontological nigger” is whiteness and white people of

⁵⁵⁴ Robert E. Park, 1924 quoted in Iton (2008), 3.

⁵⁵⁵ Freud, “The Question of Lay Analysis” [212] quoted in Tate, 60.

⁵⁵⁶ Sylvia Wynter. “Beyond Miranda’s Meanings: Un/silencing the ‘Demonic Ground’ of Caliban’s ‘Woman.’” Afterword in *Out of the Kumbla: Caribbean Women and Literature*, edited by Carole Boyce Davies and Elaine Savory Fido, 355–70. (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1990), 355.

all gender identifications.⁵⁵⁷ Patrice Douglass concurs with Wynter's statement, arguing that non-Black women are seen as deviants in the social order while Black women, "are not seen as women at all,"⁵⁵⁸ what Zakiyyah Jackson calls "a gender apart"⁵⁵⁹ For Hortense Spillers, the Black woman is banished from the woman category as she is understood to be a "reversal of the castration complex" in psychoanalytic terms, a domina-trickster usurping the "Name and Law of the Father."⁵⁶⁰ At the level of affect, as Tyrone Palmer argues, "hyperemotionality has historically been written as a characteristic of the feminine, but the Black woman's affective excess goes far beyond this. There is no gendered integrity to [the Black woman's] affectivity; it is cast as brutish, wild, and untamed."⁵⁶¹ All of this is to emphasize that the all-female cast in *Water Will* is not an indication of sisterhood feminism. Instead, it is about marking the irreconcilable boundaries that delineate racial-sexual difference.

Water Will, rather than generalizing about the category of the feminine, stages antagonism between the white feminine and the Black (un)gendered female. The white performers "die" a number of times, either by melodramatically "dropping dead" on stage or being sent off stage and instructed to leave the representational frame. White feminine will is pronounced loudly in the piece while the Black female performers' will remains either absent or illegible. There is a direct overt feminist manifesto about will recited by Susanne Sachsse. She drops to the floor in melodramatic fashion and recites the will monologue lying on the floor with one leg up [fig. 3.11]) With a stern deep voice, she states: "I will generate generations that will walk all over you. I will stand up against your general wall." This manifesto is articulating a will

⁵⁵⁷ Ibid. 364.

⁵⁵⁸ Douglass (2018), 115.

⁵⁵⁹ Jackson (2018), 159.

⁵⁶⁰ Spillers, "Mama's Baby", 204.

⁵⁶¹ Palmer, 45.

that is as persistent and forceful as the Willful Child's arm in the Grimm tale. Sachsse's horizontally delivered manifesto about willing against a wall also lands on European and U.S. audience ears that are familiar with present-day Africans drowning in the Mediterranean Sea while being sold and transported as slaves in North Africa, only to be barred from entering European countries. Audiences are aware of walls mounted by an imperial regime steered by a president whose devotees sport red hats, yelling "Build that Wall!" to keep out Black, Brown, and American Indigenous people from entering through the USA's southern borders.⁵⁶² The manifesto subtly points to these issues.

Black will, in this social order, cannot be pronounced this boldly and loudly without retaliatory violence that seeks to domesticate it, unless it is articulated through a universal grammar. When it is acknowledged, it is acknowledged as "a perverted will" which performance theorist Sarah Jane Cervenak describes as simultaneously "depoliticiz[ing] and dephilosophiz[ing] Black rage and desire."⁵⁶³ An example of this prohibition in the piece is when Sachsse finishes her monologue and there is sudden darkness with a flickering light and a buzzing siren. The screen projects the words "WHITEY MUST DIE." When asked about this moment during a post-show discussion with performance theorists Tina Post and Joshua Chambers Letson in Chicago, Lewis mentioned that she was thinking about how whiteness as a colonizing logic (as opposed to white people) must die. There is an ambiguity lost here through

⁵⁶² Susanne Sachsse is a well-respected actor in Germany, having spent a career acting in film and working for the Berliner Ensemble in East Berlin with activists that willed against the Berlin wall. Lewis' practice as a Berlin-based artist is touched by this wall, its physical/psychic remnants as well as traces of embodied memory. This will against a wall is not exclusively referring to Sachsse's biography, it touches on physical walls around the work as both material structures as well as abstract barricades of domination and control. The piece (and the trilogy writ large) addresses and stages tension between different scales of abstraction, from the domestic, to the regional, to the national, and universal.

⁵⁶³ Cervenak, 27.

the explanation of a moment that was highly charged but irreducible to a single meaning.

“WHITEY MUST DIE” loses its rhetorical and performative force when the Black artist is asked to explain the complex ambiguity of the statement. It is a strong and polemical statement that generates a visceral response from those who presume the Black to always already be threatening and deserving of policing and death. Rather than reserve a kind of opacity, Lewis answers the question stating that she does not mean white people, but she means whiteness as a logic. Black people, especially in the liberal arts establishment, are often forced into this corner to sublimate and subordinate their justified anti-colonial wishes. What prompts Lewis to suspend a poetic or non-representational approach and opt to present these words on the screen in a literal manner? I am not interested in interpreting that statement and rendering it legible. Its opacity requires what Spillers calls an intramural protocol of reading.⁵⁶⁴ The meaning of the statement is perhaps for Blacks to contemplate. Lewis’ answer, even if correct, offers the room respite since it points to whiteness as an abstract structuring logic without indicting its physical actors. When “WHITEY MUST DIE” is made to sound like it refers to a disembodied abstraction rather than actual white racists, one can imagine the mostly white audience’s contracted bellies relaxing. Their proverbial sweat can evaporate, and there can be a safe return to a daily hallucination where Black art is expected to be the bosom that rocks the anxious souls of non-Blacks. In addition to imagining an end to anti-black terror, Black performance is burdened with the task of reversing or subordinating its own unflinching critique in order to make others sleep well at night. I am not arguing that the call for the death of “WHITEY” as actual white people would facilitate the end

⁵⁶⁴ Spillers (2003).

of anti-blackness.⁵⁶⁵ If the declaration “WHITEY MUST DIE” enacts any radical or political work in the piece, that work is possible prior to Lewis’ translation of the declaration.

In one of the most didactic moments, Lewis yells “touch is love, touch is hate. I hate you and I love you” suggesting an ambivalence of two opposing dispositions, “two warring ideals,” existing in one body.⁵⁶⁶ Touch, then is not a celebrated way of knowing that occasions intersubjective relationality as suggested by many scholars who have turned to the haptic when other senses have resisted the work of multicultural recuperation. Lewis’ take on touch is similar to Spillers’ take on touch as an “offense and a site of healing.”⁵⁶⁷ Rizvana Bradley organized a symposium at the HAU Berlin on touch where she presented with Lewis and invited other thinkers such as Hortense Spillers and Erin Manning. Lewis’ idea about touch are very much a part of this conversation that she’s having in public, off stage, with these cultural theorists. Lewis’ negative orientation declines this grandiose task, a realization that a commitment to performance and the issues it suppresses is sometimes a turn away from blackness. Sometimes, a turn towards blackness necessitates an interrogation of performance’s collusions and ambivalences, the spaces where performance fails blackness, or moments where performance theory hyper-valorizes plentitude or offers coherence where there is none.

⁵⁶⁵ Since anti-blackness does not just live in non-black human bodies but it is an onto-episteme that sometimes even appears to black people as their own “unconscious that appears to hate them” see: Marriott (2000).

⁵⁶⁶ W. E. B. Du Bois. *The Souls of Black Folk*. (The John Hope Franklin Series in African American History and Culture. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press), 2013. (1903).

⁵⁶⁷ Hortense, Spillers, “To the Bone: Some Speculations on Touch.” Rizvana Bradley. *YouTube*, June 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AvL4wUKIfpo>

CODA

Gratuitous Freedom or The Unbridled Jouissance of Policing?

No more opiates to dull the pain. No more patience... no more reason. Only a welling tide risen out of all these terrible years of grief, now a tidal wave of fury and rage, and all black, black as night.

— William H. Grier, and Price M. Cobbs. *Black Rage*.⁵⁶⁸

When this dissertation was completed, the world was both still and moving too fast due to the covid-19 global pandemic and ongoing protests following the brutal murder of George Floyd,⁵⁶⁹ Ahmaud Arbery,⁵⁷⁰ Tony McDade,⁵⁷¹ Breonna Taylor,⁵⁷² and many other Black people in the U.S. whose murders were not publicized through mass or social media. The response to this violence occurred through protests and other insurgent forms of anarchy and riotous performance. This upheaval was a practice of tending-toward the Black dead and dying, even if strict lockdown rules were put in place to prevent the spread of Covid-19, an airborne virus that affects the respiratory tract. In South Africa, where I was born and raised, the government's covid-19 response involved military deployment, where soldiers responsible for imposing the

⁵⁶⁸ William H. Grier, and Price M. Cobbs. *Black Rage*. New York: Basic Books, 1968, 213.

⁵⁶⁹ Brian Dakss, "Video Shows Minneapolis Cop with Knee on Neck of Motionless, Moaning Man Who Later Died," *CBS News* (CBS Interactive, May 29, 2020), <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/minneapolis-police-george-floyd-fatal-arrest-officer-kneeling-neck/>.

⁵⁷⁰ Richard Fausset, "What We Know About the Shooting Death of Ahmaud Arbery," *The New York Times* (The New York Times, April 28, 2020), <https://www.nytimes.com/article/ahmaud-arbery-shooting-georgia.html>.

⁵⁷¹ Democracy Now!, "Black Transgender Man Tony McDade Shot and Killed by Tallahassee Police," *Democracy Now!*, June 1, 2020, https://www.democracynow.org/2020/6/1/headlines/black_transgender_man_tony_mcdade_shot_and_killed_by_tallahassee_police.

⁵⁷² See: Democracy Now!, "Black Woman in Kentucky Shot to Death in Her Own Home by Police at Wrong Address," *Democracy Now!*, May 13, 2020, https://www.democracynow.org/2020/5/13/headlines/black_woman_in_kentucky_shot_to_death_in_her_own_home_by_police_at_wrong_address?fbclid=IwAR3tzi3RY8jREoC-377nKAXF2Mrenvm2MEv7QOmV4Wuhvjen33CbBJkM3vE.

lockdown murdered Collins Khosa for having a drink in his own house.⁵⁷³ They continued to murder other Black people.⁵⁷⁴ The Democratic Alliance, which governs the Western Cape of South Africa also bulldozed “informal settlements” inhabited by Black people during this time, rendering thousands homeless. In both countries, state-sanctioned police brutality, displacement, and covid-19 deaths disproportionately affected Black people. The overrepresentation of Black people in covid-19 deaths is not a consequence of Black people’s genetic predisposition to the virus, but it results from structural abandonment, health disparities, and lack of health resources which left Black people immuno-compromised.⁵⁷⁵ There were also reports of Black people being denied medical care, as non-Black health workers privileged non-Black patients, authorizing themselves to let Black people die.⁵⁷⁶ These events corroborate the argument I have sustained throughout this dissertation, that Black death is not “natural,” but *produced* and needed as the life-support and blood transfusion for non-Black others.

The responses to the violence described above also involved a turn to spectacular performance, meaning the responses manifested in the framed theatricalization of gestures for an audience. United States congresswoman Nancy Pelosi and her co-workers responded by kneeling while wearing kente cloth around their shoulders. This performance was not only an

⁵⁷³ Mzukisi Makatse, “Apartheid Aggression Lingers on as Police, Army Brutalise Blacks,” *Citypress*, accessed July 2, 2020, <https://www.news24.com/citypress/Voices/apartheid-aggression-lingers-on-as-police-army-brutalise-blacks-20200408>.

⁵⁷⁴ See: Sandisiwe Shoba, “South Africa: ‘She Was Found Hanging in the Police Cell’ – Sex Worker Dies in Police Custody,” *Daily Maverick*, June 4, 2020, <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2020-06-05-she-was-found-hanging-in-the-police-cell-sex-worker-dies-in-police-custody/?fbclid=IwAR12h8sywWtPlzL4JfxK1AAOxMBaZNCMJiMoqDD4HwJHnGl2eqgUKNa1Xd4>.

⁵⁷⁵ See: Ed Pilkington, “Black Americans Dying of Covid-19 at Three Times the Rate of White People,” *The Guardian* (Guardian News and Media, May 20, 2020), https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/may/20/black-americans-death-rate-covid-19-coronavirus?CMP=share_btn_fb.

⁵⁷⁶ See: Chris Riotta, “Black Man Dies after Being Denied Coronavirus Tests at Three Emergency Rooms Because of Racism, Family Alleges,” *The Independent* (Independent Digital News and Media, April 22, 2020), <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/coronavirus-death-michigan-race-gary-fowler-gretchen-whitmer-task-force-a9478966.html>.

“embarrassment,” as some critics described it, but it was another form of cannibalizing Black gesture through a practice ghosted by minstrelsy.⁵⁷⁷ Pelosi and company’s choreography, a full-on production with kente as costume, not only watered down the Pan-Africanist symbolism associated with kente, but they appropriated protest gesture that Black people are usually punished for. This gesture of kneeling was met with retaliatory violence at a national scale when Black football player Colin Kaepernick was ostracized and excommunicated from the National Football League when he took the knee as a sign of protest for Black lives. The choreography of taking the knee was also co-opted by police in cities like New York and Minneapolis during the protests. In addition, police danced with protesters and even hugged them. These are the monstrous intimacies of performance I have tried to describe in *Unmournable Void*, the contradictions that lie in subversion sharing intimate companionship with reification. The choreography of kneeling murdered George Floyd. It is a police officer’s knee on his neck that halted Floyd’s breath. The well-intention for these performances of kneeling may be about dignity and respect, however they also reperform the very homicidal gesture they seek to refrain from. The choreography of kneeling is generally drafted as “peaceful protest” pitted against more riotous upheavals. This serves to discipline “irrational” responses to irrational structural violence. The state murders Black people socially and physically, then dictates to them a script for responding to state violence. What is often proposed as a legitimate response for Black people against anti-black terror is often a ventriloquized struggle, licensed by anti-black homicidal agents.

⁵⁷⁷ Doreen St. Félix, Bryan Washington, and Danez Smith, “The Embarrassment of Democrats Wearing Kente-Cloth Stoles,” *The New Yorker*, accessed July 2, 2020, <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/on-and-off-the-avenue/the-embarrassment-of-democrats-wearing-kente-cloth-stoles>.

I have provided empirical accounts of Black brutalization above only as shards of a violence that exceeds naming or evidence. What can this unnamable and unrepresentable excess(iveness) be called? It is mostly a violence without evidence that the aesthetic practices discussed in this dissertation try to name through figuration. It is a dissolution or incoherence of form that whenever artists come close to articulating, they must do so in ways that unavoidably reproduce the violence. Black people are abandoned and have been turned away from and not turned toward. This ushers in a sobering realization that if this condition is interminable, the world can never gain its coherence without violated Black flesh. What then should the relationship between blackness and the world look like, if the world exists through violated Black flesh? The unmournable void survives only to give coherence to the world. The world's destruction is also an urgent consideration for the unmournable void.

Policing continues because it is pleasurable. The brutalization is a source of pleasure. It is both enjoyable as well as buttresses the humanity of the executioner of anti-black terror. The unbridled *jouissance* of policing is not limited to the police. By *jouissance*, I am referring to a transgressive enjoyment and ecstasy that pushes the subject's limits of what is prohibited. As Frank Wilderson's intervention has shown (and there is ample "empirical evidence" to support this claim), "White people *are* the police. This includes those white people who... at the level of consciousness, do not want this birthright deputation. At a deep unconscious level, they all intuited the fact that the police were not *out there* but *in here*, that policing was woven into the fabric of their subjectivity."⁵⁷⁸ Not all police wear uniform. Wilderson shifts our understanding of whiteness as not simply being protected by the police, but whiteness as the embodiment of

⁵⁷⁸ Wilderson (2020), 208.

policing itself.⁵⁷⁹ As I have shown in this dissertation, policing is buttressed by institutions, individuals, as well as regimes of looking/sensing/feeling/knowing. The efficacy of the artistic practices discussed depends on the intensity of the policing gaze, which forces Black cultural creators to bite their tongues and not say certain things. The chapter on Biko is a good example of this, where even non-representational forms attempt to evade hyper-visibility and legibility of their insurgent posture, since literal figuration as impactful as it is, also makes the Black artist vulnerable to surveillance and policing.

The violence Afro-pessimism names precedes and exceeds the covid-19 statistics. The violence that Afro-pessimism describes is not reducible to visible or quantifiable evidence. Even with the statistical evidence, media reports, and historical archives that corroborate the persistence of this violence, many remain unconvinced about the deathliness of blackness as a position. This is not attributable to hope, as hope actually recognizes the injury and hopes for a way out. Hope is not the denial of the wound, but it is the wish to transcend it. The misrecognition of the unmournable void and the conditions that produce it is at best a kind of hallucinatory satisfaction with the way things are. Hope itself sometimes gives way to propositions for reform. This entails reforming police institutions as well as other institutions of policing such as theaters, museums, and the academy. But as I have argued in the second chapter, reform rehabilitates these institutions instead of dismantling them. Huey Copeland's concept of tending-toward-blackness is antithetical to both policing and managerial ways of being. What would it mean to bring an end to this reformist politics? What would it mean for institutions such as the Musée du Quai Branly—Jacques Chirac to abandon an attachment to an economy of

⁵⁷⁹ Wilderson (2010), 82.

property ownership altogether, instead of requiring performances by the likes of Nelisiwe Xaba to surrogate as their new property? What would it mean for them to take seriously the fact that the colonial dispossession that created them cannot be refurbished through liberal humanist interventions, since those performances are parasitic to the Black? Further, as I argue in the first chapter, the machinations of policing that murdered Biko persist in the post-apartheid moment, where the brutalization of Black people by state law enforcement is normalized.

The corpse in aesthetics sometimes generates a turn to beauty in the midst of very little of it. The turn to (terrible) beauty, depending on the artist, may reveal or obfuscate beauty's embroilment and ambivalent position within and against death. Cultural/political projects of remodeling are still invested in politics or the political. What if political reform is understood not as a revamping of politics, and rather as a dissociation of oneself from the politics of culture, and a turn to a culture of politics that does not seek reform?⁵⁸⁰ This entails dissociating from the political sphere itself, such that a Black attachment to politics itself is vanquished, making way for revolutionized Black political subjectivity to perhaps emerge.⁵⁸¹ By revolutionized Black political subjectivity I mean a Black attunement to "gratuitous freedom" rather than a politics of reform, imaginable as a commitment to ending the world, rather than seeking to re-make the world and its organizing ontoepistememes. Describing gratuitous freedom, Wilderson posits,

The Slave needs freedom not from wage relation, nor sexism, homophobia, and patriarchy, nor freedom in the form of land restoration. The slave needs freedom from the Human race, freedom from the world. *The Slave requires gratuitous freedom*. Only gratuitous freedom can repair the object status of his or her flesh, which itself is the product of accumulation's and fungibility's gratuitous violence. There are no feelings powerful enough to alter the structural relation between the living and the dead. But one can imagine feelings powerful enough to bring the living to death.⁵⁸²

⁵⁸⁰ Wilderson (2010). [Italics mine].

⁵⁸¹ Warren (2018).

⁵⁸² Wilderson (2010), 141-142.

The object then can gain its power, which is to say lose its status of objecthood, by committing itself to gratuitous freedom. This would be different from Black political-aesthetic projects that deploy affect in order to appeal to the empathetic sentiments of “the living.” Wilderson’s proposition of gratuitous freedom is something that is perhaps unthinkable, or like all Black revolutionary thought, thoroughly foreclosed in our current order.

Blackness and policing cannot share space together, unless one is squashed and deformed, or one remains parasitic on the other. Rather than reform these apparatuses of horror, what would it mean to imagine a world where they have been terminated? What would it mean to actively terminate *actual* prisons and policing altogether? If, as I argued in the first chapter, the Black is policed as an ontological criminal (that is, a criminal that does not need to “break the law” to be considered a criminal), abolishing carceral institutions would be the beginning. The question that would linger would be about how to put an end to the regimes of thought that mythologize the Black as what Fanon calls a “phobogenic object”— a stimulus to fear and anxiety that is simultaneously a source of destructive pleasure, what Fanon refers to as “negrophilia.”⁵⁸³ Steve Biko once said that the most helpful way to be around the police (and I would extend this to policing in general) is to not be helpful at all.⁵⁸⁴ I bring up policing instead of an exclusive focus on the police as an attempt to bring the stench closer to “home,” and draw attention to academic and art institutions. They too are confronted by the need to introspect on how policing is a regime that also sustains them and circulates through them. What would it mean for these institutions to heed Biko’s suggestion, to abandon practices of policing and render them useless? What would emerge if Black critical thought/praxis that questions such

⁵⁸³ Fanon, “The Black Man and Psychopathology” in *Black Skin, White Masks* (2008/1952).

⁵⁸⁴ Biko (2008/1978).

structures and practices was not met with vitriolic backlash from those who are protecting liberal humanist tenets of institutionality? Examples of this include the co-optation of Black feminist and queer labor to act as diversity ornaments rather than heed the demands that these modes of thinking and practice call for, which is the destruction of hierarchies and tokenism. Jared Sexton, in “Afro-pessimism: An Unclear Word” has also commented on the attack of revolutionary Black thought, specifically Afro-pessimism, where he posits:

If Afro-Pessimism has captured the imagination of certain black radical formations and suggested a critical idiom, provoking a basic rethinking among more than a few of their non-black counterparts by the way, it has also, and maybe for the same reasons, struck a nerve among others, all along the color line, who fear that open-minded engagement involves forsaking some of the most hard-earned lessons of the last generation... [Afro-Pessimism], the entire undertaking, the *movement* of thought it pursues, is apprehended instead as its lowest common denominator, indicted by proxy, and tried *in absentia* as caricature.⁵⁸⁵

Sexton’s use of “tried in *absentia*” suggests a criminal law system that treats Black thought as if it were a criminal to be tried and indicted before throwing away the key. It is plausible that the “criminality” of such thought is incommensurable with the uplift as well as multiculturalist-identitarian desires and goals of academia/art institutions. In “The Position of the Unthought,” Saidiya Hartman and Wilderson caution against the institutionalization of Black studies which has led not to Black study (as was the goal in the 1960s and 70s), but the management of Black anger.⁵⁸⁶ This goes beyond disciplinary and methodological “turf wars” within the interdisciplinary field. A consideration of what Moten and Harney call “para-institutional Black study” or the anti-institutional is an alternative to the incorporation and domestication of radical and/or revolutionary Black study within the academy or other cultural

⁵⁸⁵ Jared Sexton, “Afropessimism: The Unclear Word,” *Rhizome*. Issue 29 (2016), par 3-5.

⁵⁸⁶ Saidiya V. Hartman and Frank B. Wilderson, “The Position of the Unthought,” *Qui Parle* 13, no. 2 (2003): 183-201.

institutions. The para-institutional is not free of these practices, but it carries so much of what is not yet known about what Black study could be outside the unbridled *jouissance* of policing.

These projects discussed in this dissertation pay attention to the limits of refurbishing the project of humanism and its investments in further policing the unmournable void. Engaging practices by Legae, Nhlengethwa, Lewis, and Xaba demonstrates that blackness needs not move toward wholeness in order to speculate about what is possible as an effective response to the world. Black objecthood, or the unmournable void, in these aesthetic-theoretical practices, is not covered up or overcome. This reminds me of Toni Morrison's *Sula*, where Eva, whose left leg was amputated, "did not wear long dresses that disguised the empty place on her left side."⁵⁸⁷ Why does Morrison present the "empty place" of Eva's left leg as something not to be overcome, hidden, or something to be apologetic for? She does not romanticize it either.⁵⁸⁸ What would it mean for Black studies and aesthetics to address this "empty place," in a manner that does not hide, compensate for, or relegate "the empty place" to metaphor? This is when aesthetics does not cover up the irreparable chasm launched by anti-black violence that ruptures relation. For certain Black aesthetic practitioners, the "empty place" has a message for and against the world.⁵⁸⁹ Refusal to conceal the "empty place" and the pain that persists despite the absence of visible evidence about the severing, is how I have attempted to *tend-toward* the void of Black subjectivity.⁵⁹⁰

⁵⁸⁷ Toni Morrison. *Sula*. ([1st Ed.]. ed. New York: Knopf; [distributed by Random House]), 1974: 31.

⁵⁸⁸ My colleague, Dr. Cecilio Cooper (whose research deals more rigorously with the topic) helped me approach *Sula* with closer attentiveness to Eva's "empty place," particularly the knowledge it carries for Black study.

⁵⁸⁹ This is a riff on W.E.B. du Bois' statement that "Negro blood has a message for the world." See: W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*. (1st Vintage Books/Library of America ed. New York: Vintage Books/Library of America, 1990 [1093]). For a discussion of "the end of the world" in Black feminist aesthetics, see: Denise Ferreira Da Silva. "Toward a Black Feminist Poethics: The Quest(ion) of Blackness Toward the End of the World." *The Black Scholar* 44, no. 2 (2014): 81-97.

⁵⁹⁰ See: Copeland (2016): 141-44.

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<https://bacnyc.org/explore/bac-stories/story/ligia-lewis-bac-story>

ILLUSTRATIONS

Chapter One



Figure 4.1. Ernest Cole, *During group examination, the nude men are herded through a string of doctors' offices*, 1967.



ST GEORGES CATHEDRAL
PARKING
ENTIRELY AT OWNERS RISK
THE CATHEDRAL AGENTS
AND/OR EMPLOYEES
SHALL NOT BE RESPONSIBLE
FOR ANY LOSS OR DAMAGE
HOWSOEVER ARISING.

Figure 1.5. Themba Mbuli, *Dark Cell* (Performance), 2014.



Figure 1.3. Themba Mbuli, *Dark Cell* (Performance), 2014.

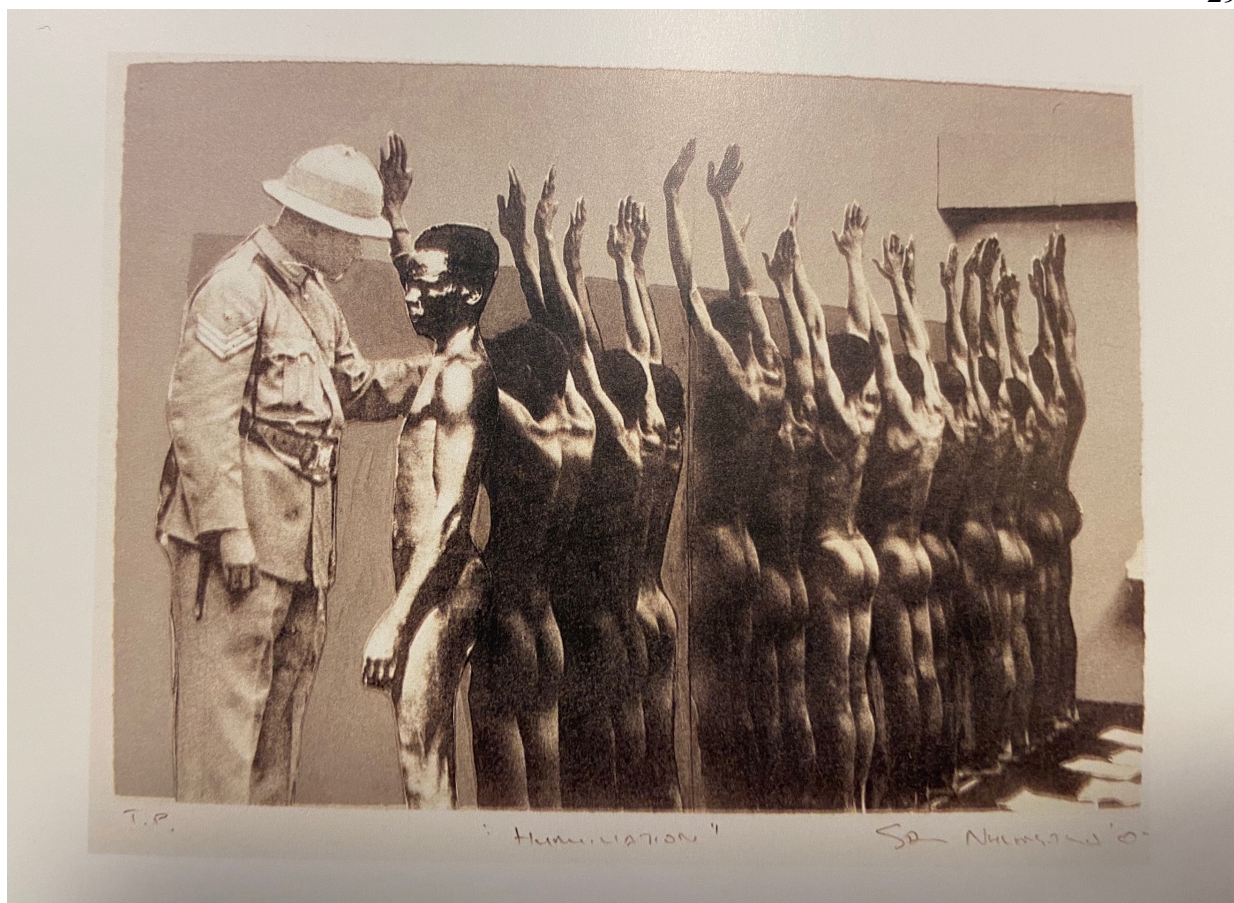


Figure 1.6. Sam Nhlengethwa, *Humiliation*, 2004.



Figure 1.5. Hank Willis Thomas, *Raise Up*, 2014.



Figure 1.6. Tony Miyambo and Phala Ookeditse Phala, *Kafka's Ape* (performance).



Figure 1.7. Nandipha Mntambo, *Beginning of the Empire*, 2007. Cowhide, resin, polyester mesh, waxed cord.



Figure 1.8. Mohau Modisakeng, *iButho*, 2010.

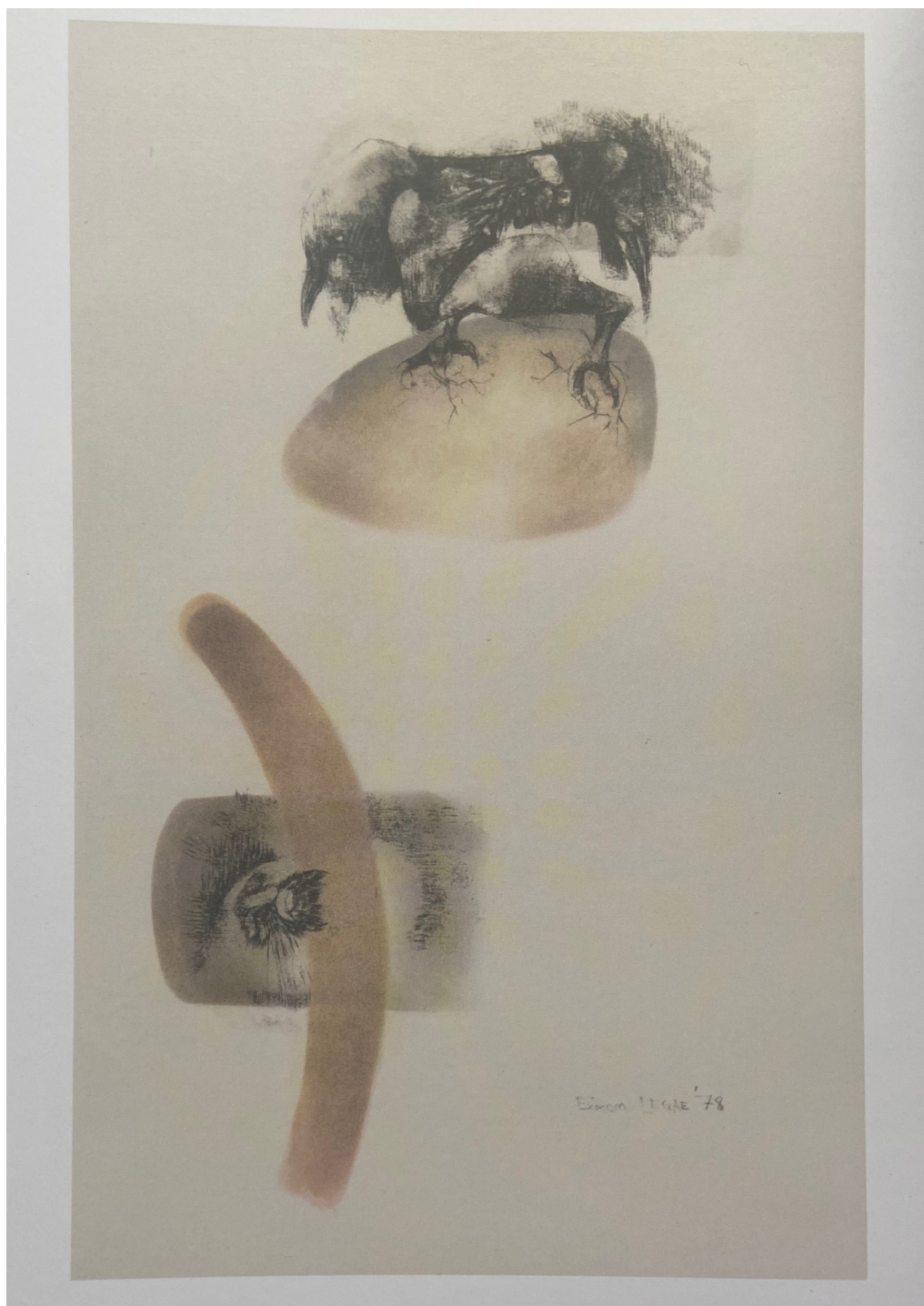


Figure 1.9. Ezrom Legae, *Chicken*, 1978. Mixed Media on Paper.



Figure 1.10. Ezrom Legae, *The Death of Steve Biko*, 1983.

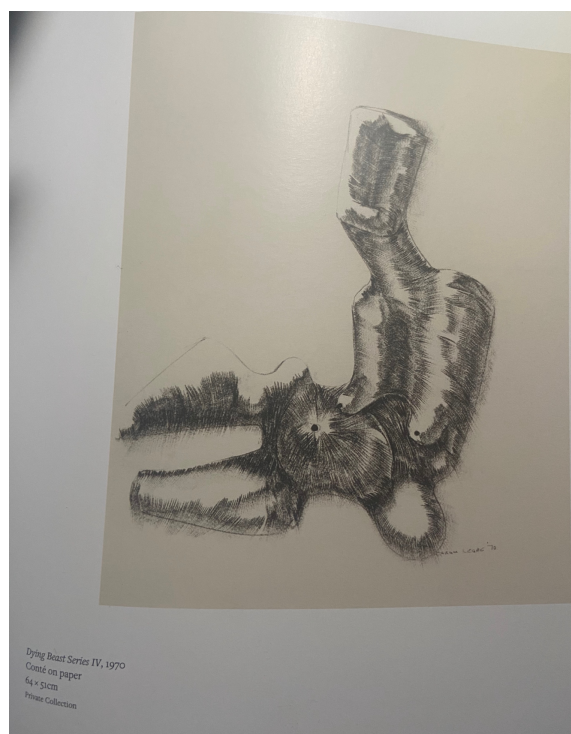
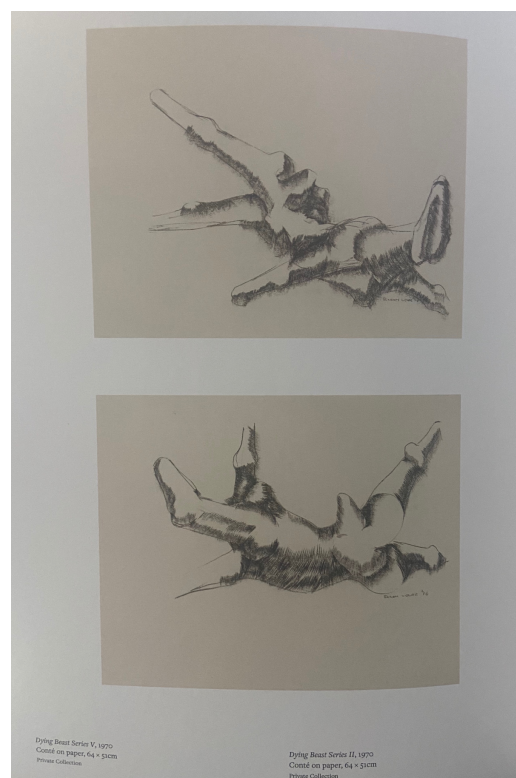
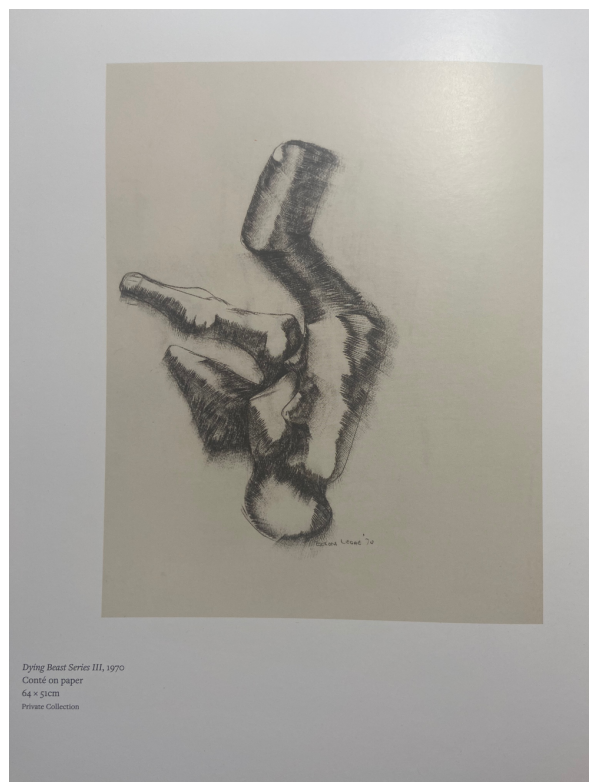


Figure 1.11. Ezrom Legae, *The Dying Beast Series III, IV, V*, 1970.

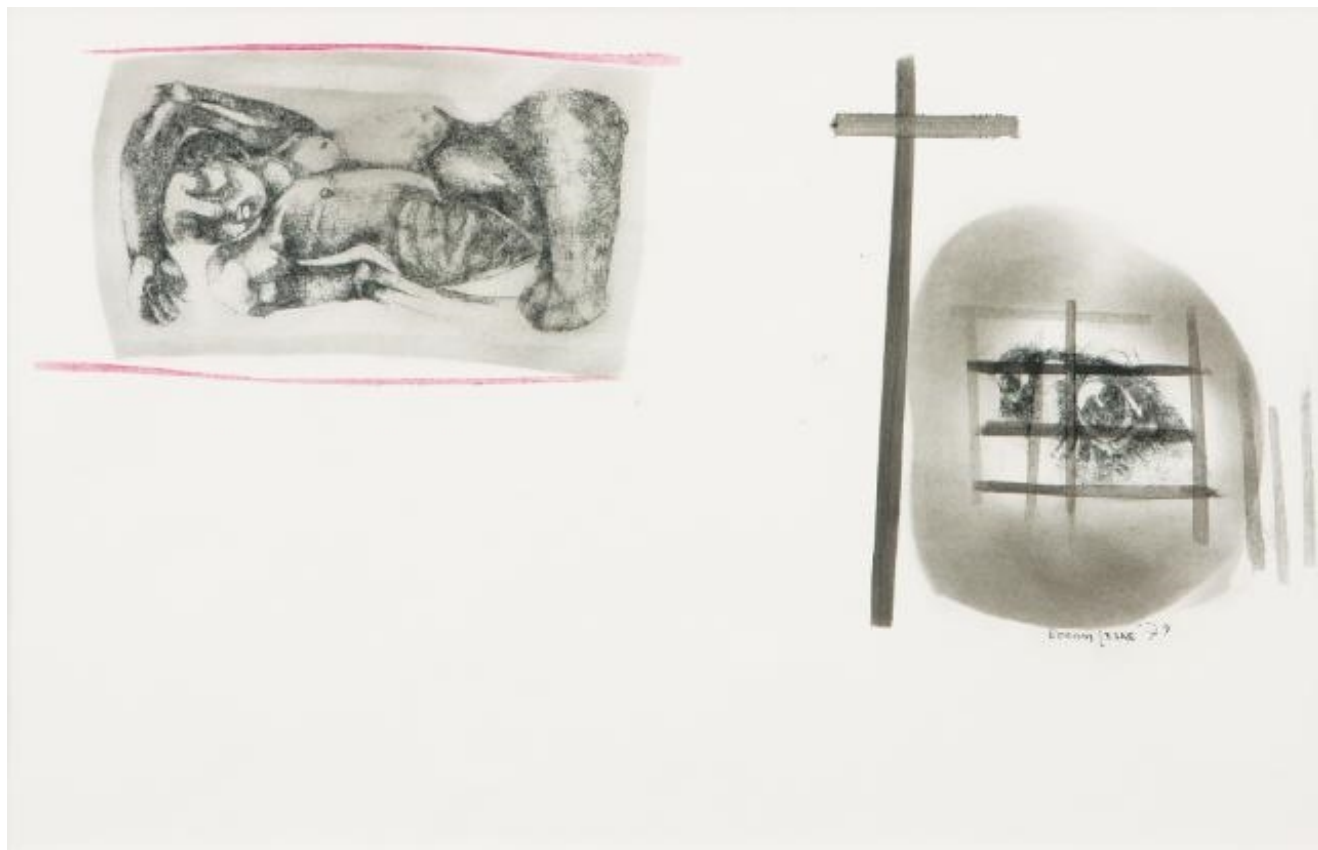


Figure 1.12. Ezrom Legae, *Biko Behind Bars*, 1979.





Figure 1.13. Paul Stopforth, *Deaths in Detention*, Tumbling Figure (top left) Falling Figure (top right), Hooded (bottom) Figure, 1978.

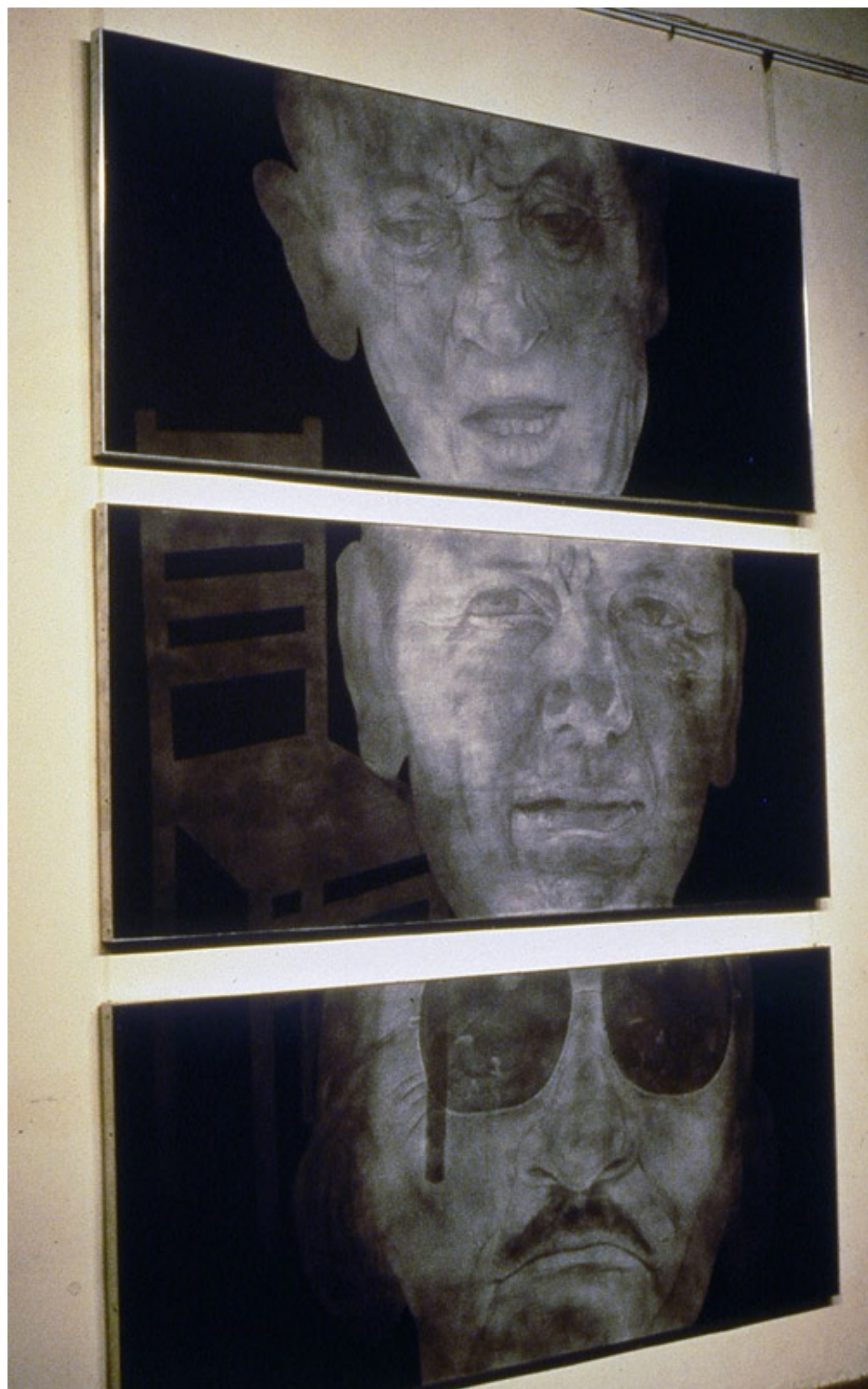


Figure 1.14. Paul Stopforth. *The Interrogators*, 1979.



Figure 1.15. Paul Stopforth, *Elegy for Steve Biko*, 1981.

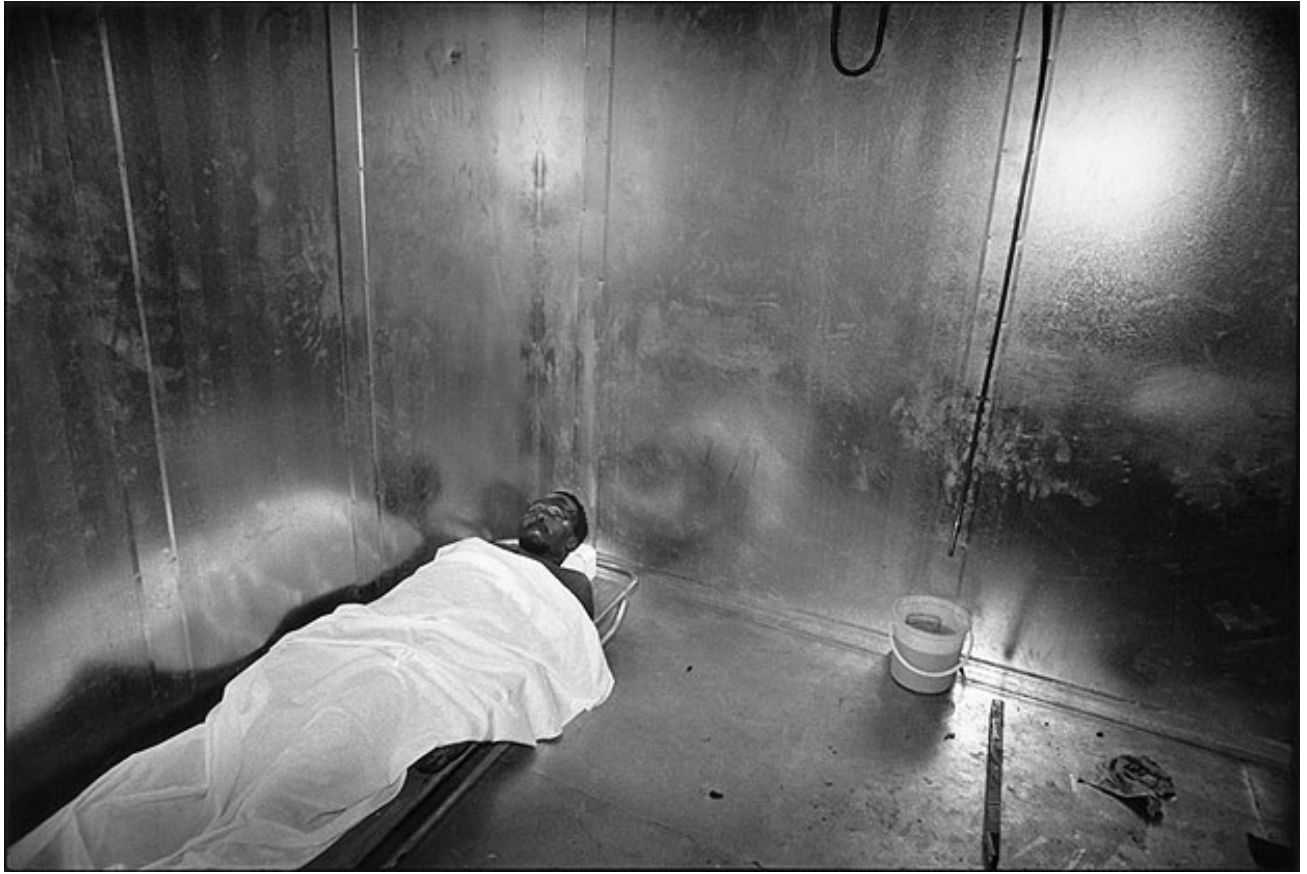


Figure 1.16. Donald Woods, a photograph of Steve Biko's corpse, 1977.



Figure 1.17. Colin Richards, *Veils*, 1996. Mixed media.



Figure 1.18. Mantegna, *Dead Christ*, 1480.

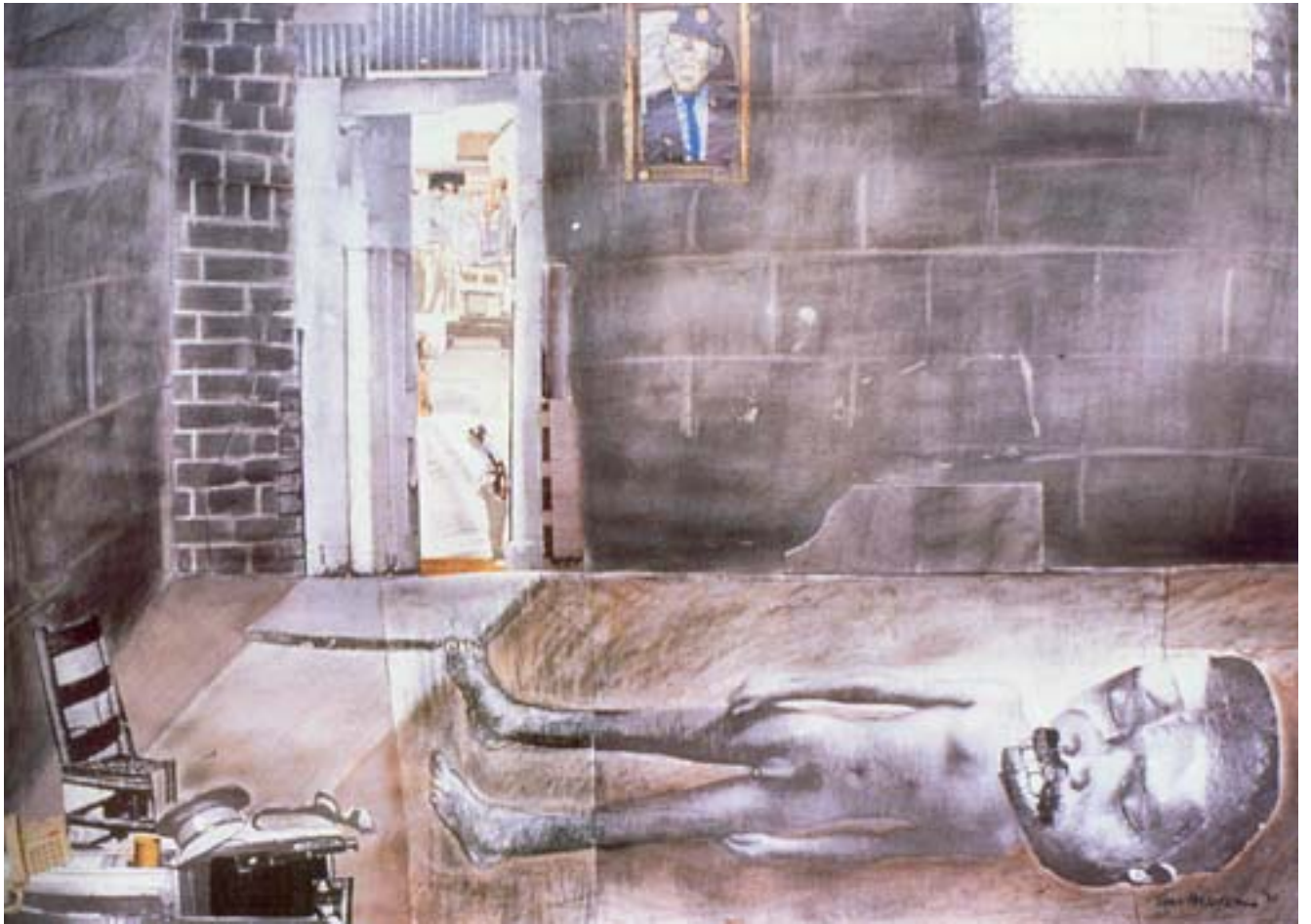


Figure 1.19. Sam Nhlengethwa. *It left him cold - the death of Steve Biko*, 1990.

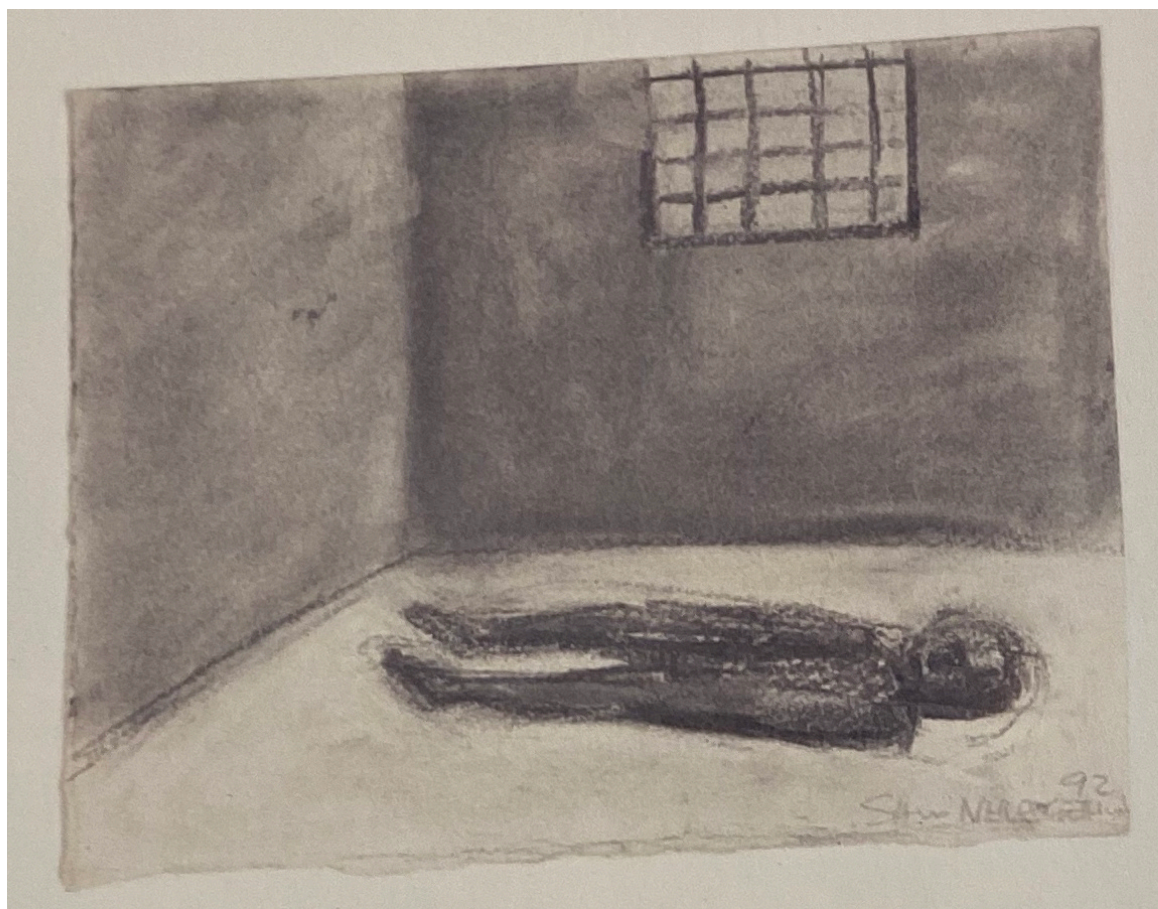


Figure 1.20. Sam Nhlengethwa. *It left him cold - the death of Steve Biko*, 1992, Collage, pencil and charcoal 69 x 93cm.



Figure 1.21. Sam Nhlengethwa, *The Brother is Dead*, 1998.

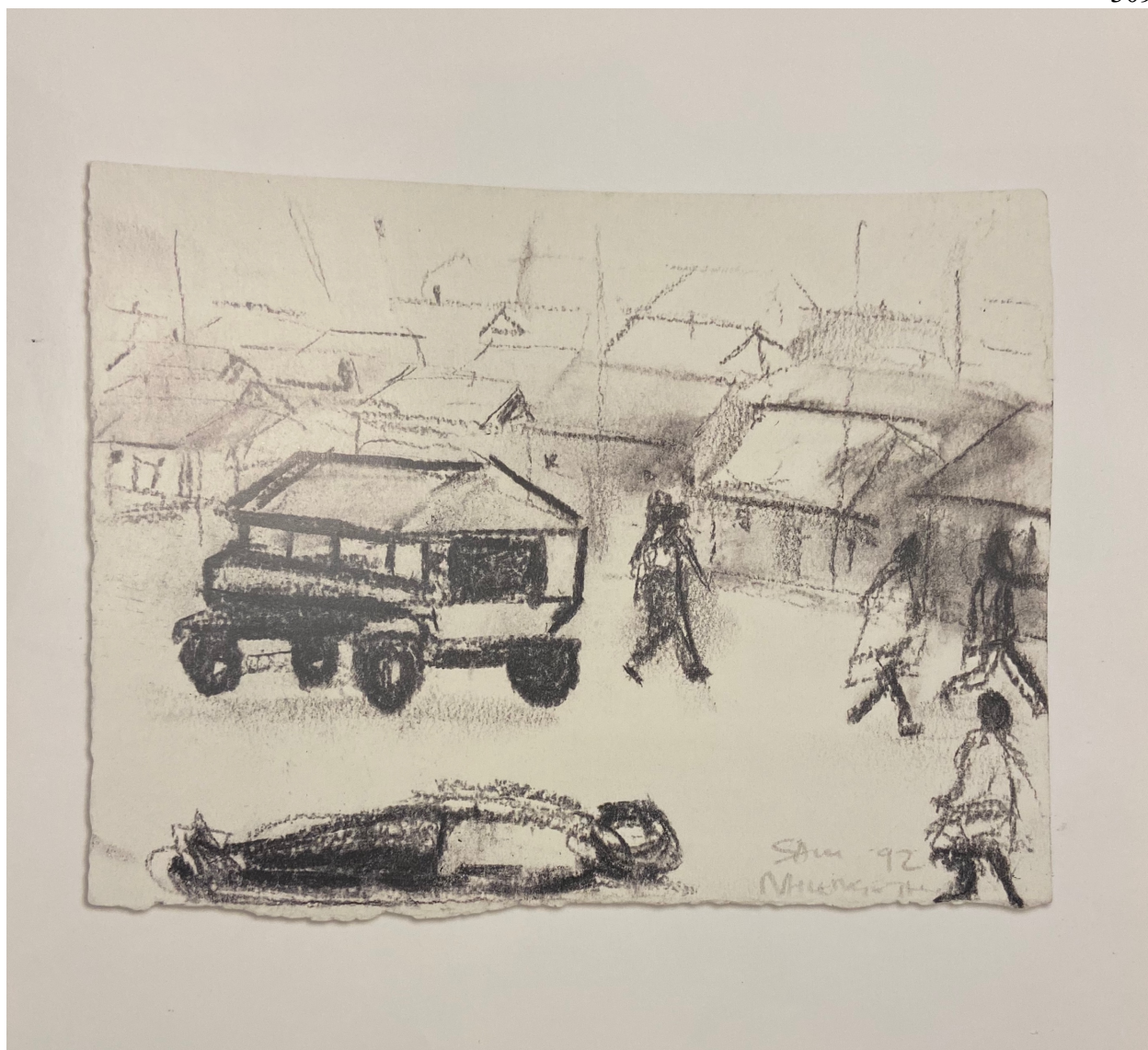


Figure 1.22. Sam Nhlengethwa, *The Brother is Dead*, 1992 (sketch).

Chapter Two



Figure 2.1. Nosiphiwo Samente as Saartjie Baartman in Forgotten Angle Theatre Collaborative *Cargo: Precious* (performance) 2015.



Figure 2.2. Dudu Yende in Robyn Orlin's . . . *have you hugged, kissed and respected your brown Venus today?* (performance), 2011.



Figure 2.3. Candice Breitz, *Whiteface Series* (Robyn Orlin's publicity photo for . . . *have you hugged, kissed and respected your brown Venus today?*), 1996.



Figure 2.4. Steven Cohen. *The Cradle of Humankind - Baboon Tutu*, 2011. Pigment on baryta coated cotton paper. Image 60 x 45cm. Edition of 3 + 2AP.

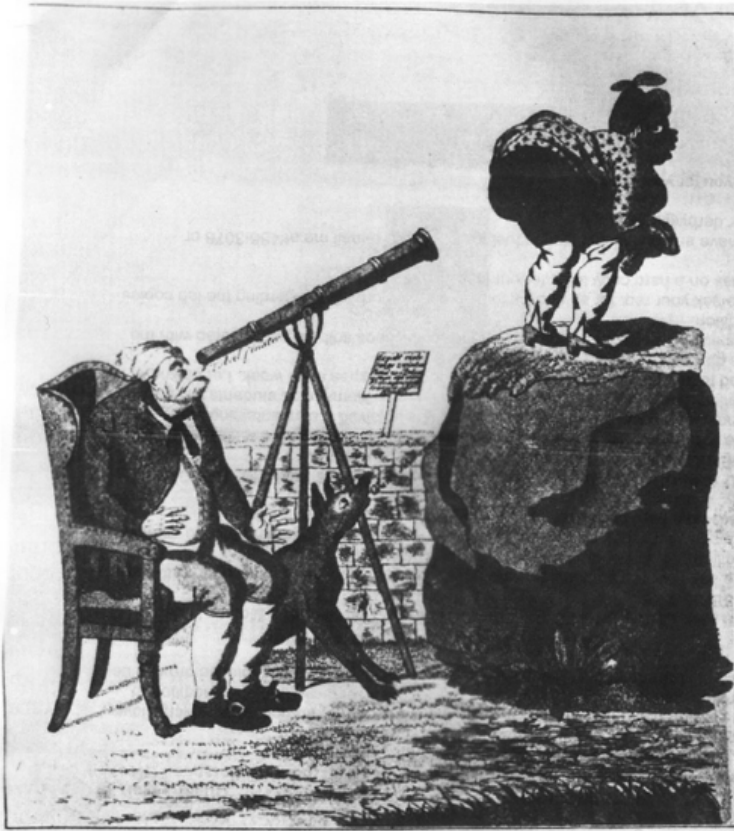


Figure 2.5. *The Hottentot Venus*, popular engraving, ca. 1850.



Figure 2.6. Nomsa Dhlamini and Steven Cohen. *The Cradle of Humankind* (performance), 2011.



Figure 2.7. Nomsa Dhlamini. *Cradle of Humankind*. (performance), 2011. Photo: John Hogg.



Figure 2.8. Nelisiwe Xaba. *They Look At Me* (performance), 2016. Photo: Val Adamson.



Figure 2.9. Nelisiwe Xaba. *They Look At Me* (performance). Photo: Val Adamson, 2006.



Figure 2.10. Nelisiwe Xaba. *They Look At Me* (performance). Photo: Val Adamson, 2016



Figure 2.11. Nelisiwe Xaba, *Sakhozi Says 'Non' to the Venus* (performance), 2010.



Figure 2.12. Nelisiwe Xaba, *Sakhozi Says 'Non' to the Venus*. (performance), 2010.



Figure 2.13 Nelisiwe Xaba, Sakhozi Says 'Non' to the Venus. (performance), 2010.

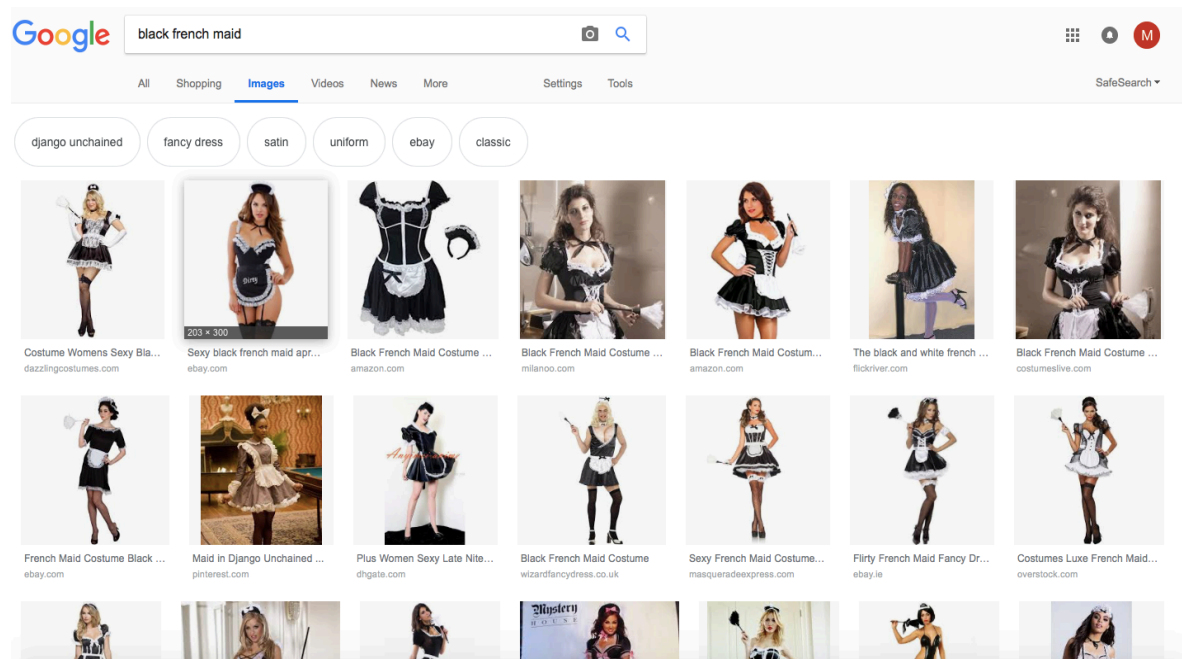


Figure 2.14. “Black French Maid” (Google search results showing mostly white models advertising maid costumes for role play (sexual and otherwise), 19 December 2018.



Figure 2.15. Mary Sibande. *They Don't Make Them Like They Used to*, 2008. Courtesy: The Reign, 2010.



Figure 2.16. Mary Sibande, *I Decline, I Refuse To Recline*, 2010.



Figure 2.17. Nomisa Dhlamini & Steven Cohen, *Maid in South Africa*, 2005, Single-channel digital video, sound, Duration 12 min 35 sec, Edition of 5 + 2AP.



Figure 2.18 Lyle Ashton Harris, *Venus Hottentot 2000* (in collaboration with Renee Cox), 1994.



Figure 2.19. Tracey Rose, *Venus Baartman*, 2001.



Figure 2. 20. Josephine Baker, 1926.



Figure 2. 21. Lyle Ashton Harris, *Josephine #17*, 2002.



Figure 2.22. Mawande ka Zenzile, *Letter for Sarah batman to Josephine Baker*, 2011, earth, cow dung, oil paint on canvas.

Chapter Three



Figure 3.1. Ligia Lewis, *minor matter* (performance).



Figure 3.2. Ligia Lewis, *minor matter* (performance).



Figure 3.3. Thami Manekehla in Ligia Lewis, *minor matter* (performance).



Figure 3.4. Ligia Lewis, *minor matter*, (Performance at Converso, Milan), 2017. Photo: Luca Del Pia.



Figure 3.5. Ligia Lewis, *Water Will* (performance), 2019.



Figure 3.6. The Chosen One, “I won’t complain: Ministered by The Chosen One” January 2015.
YouTube



Figure 3.7. Brian Getnick in Ligia Lewis, *Sorrow Swag* (performance), 2014.



Figure 3.8. Jolie Ngemi, Ligia Lewis, Dani Brown in Ligia Lewis, *Water Will*. Performance View, Performance Space New York, New York, May 25, 2019. Photo: Maria Baranova.



Figure 3.9. Ligia Lewis, *Water Will* (performance), 2019.



Figure 3.10. Ligia Lewis, *Water Will*. *Performance View*, *Performance Space New York*, New York, May 25, 2019. Ligia Lewis. Photo: Maria Baranova



Figure 3.11. Susanne Sachsse in Ligia Lewis, *Water Will* (performance), 2019.