Corporeal Resurfacings: Faustin Linyekula, Nick Cave and Thornton Dial

by
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Program in Literature
Duke University

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Kenneth Surin

A dissertation to be submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Program in Literature in the Graduate School of Duke University

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“Corporeal Resurfacings: Faustin Linyekula, Nick Cave and Thornton Dial,” examines art and performance works by three contemporary black artists. My dissertation is opened by the analytic of black female flesh provided by Hortense Spillers in her monumental essay, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book.” Drawing on Spillers, I argue that it is not the black female body but the material persistence and force of that body, expressed through the specificity of black female flesh, that needs to be theorized and resituated directly with respect to current discourses that take up black ontology, black subjectivity and black aesthetics. I expand Spillers’ conclusions to an analysis of how the materiality of this flesh continues to structure, organize and inflect contemporary aesthetic interventions and performances of blackness in the present. The five chapters that comprise the dissertation map a specific set of problems that emerge from a tangled web of gender, race and performance. I argue that black female flesh, forged through desire and violence, objection and subjectivity, becomes the ground for and the space through which black masculinity is fashioned and articulated as open, variable, and contested within diverse artistic practices.

Examining the work of these artists, I identify the ways in which they channel this neglected flesh as a site of aesthetic reclamation and recovery. Focusing on the art of assemblage and its techniques of cutting, pasting, quoting and tearing I demonstrate how black identity is always assembled identity. Moreover, I demonstrate how artistic assemblage makes visible the dense and immeasurable compressions of race, gender and
sexuality that have accumulated over time. These practices offer us unique opportunities to inhabit this flesh.

The dissertation expands upon connections between visibility, solidarity, materiality and femininity, bringing them to light for a critical discussion of the unique expressions and co-productions of blackness and sexuality in the fields of visual art and performance. The project aligns itself with current scholarly work that treats not simply black subjectivity but blackness itself as central to understanding a history of devaluation that subtends the historical construction of modern subjectivity. I demonstrate how the degraded materiality of blackness, linked to the violent rupturing of black flesh, indexes a deeper history of devaluation that becomes the very condition for and means of qualifying and substantiating our definitions of subjectivity and personhood. I conclude by tracing an aesthetic community or aesthetic sociality grounded in the recovered, lost materiality of Spillers’ ungendered black female flesh, a community that I argue, may be glimpsed through particular instantiations of the flesh in art and performance.
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INTRODUCTION

This project is opened by the analytic of black female flesh provided by Hortense Spillers in her monumental essay, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book.” Drawing from Spillers, I mark the specific moment at which the ungendered complexity of black female flesh emerges as both a problem for thought and a problem for materiality. I argue that it is not the black female body but the material persistence and force of that body, expressed through the flesh, that needs to be theorized and resituated directly with respect to current discourses that take up black ontology, black subjectivity and black aesthetics. I expand Spillers’ conclusions to an analysis of how the materiality of this flesh continues to structure, organize and inflect performances of blackness in the present.

“Corporeal Resurfacings: Faustin Linyekula, Nick Cave, and Thornton Dial,” examines art and performance works by three contemporary black artists. The five chapters that comprise the dissertation map a specific set of problems that emerge from a tangled web of gender, race and performance. I argue that black female flesh, forged through desire and violence, objection and subjectivity, becomes the ground for and the space through which black masculinity is fashioned and articulated as open, variable, and contested. I demonstrate how the artistic preparations and performances of black artists are actively constructed and conditioned by the neglected and unforeseeable substance of black femininity.

Because my claim is that these performances and artworks express a formidable tangle and arrangement of sexual energies and forces, the project does not explicitly take up black feminism as a direct object of inquiry, though the reproductive agency and line of the black feminine is unmistakably its theme and unarguably guides not only this project but the irreducible quality, form, and materiality of the artistic productions I explore.

Examining the work of black feminist theorists including Saidiya Hartman, Angela Davis, June Jordan, Elizabeth Alexander, Sylvia Wynter, and others, I argue that the problems of collectivity, solidarity and visibility these theorists raise are framed by concerns over the material and affective status of blackness. I also draw from a black literary tradition that includes writers such as Toni Morrison, Zora Neale Hurston, Nella Larsen, and Harryette Mullen, in order to fully grasp the representational stakes of these problems that figure as central to the social and political formation of black life. I maintain that in these black feminist literary and theoretical traditions, these concerns do not go unaddressed, but the connections between visibility and materiality, solidarity and affectivity are made explicit in their work from the outset. My project explores the critical linkages and continuities between these concepts in order to think at once about the interdiction and the disclosure of black subjectivity, as movements of identity that may take place and occur in excess of social constructions of race and racial difference. This project expands upon the connections made by these black feminist theorists and writers between visibility, solidarity, materiality and femininity, bringing them to light for a critical discussion of the unique expressions and co-productions of blackness and sexuality in the fields of visual art and performance.
The fabricated and fashioned assembled works and performances I discuss, convey how the historical realities and fictions of contemporary social life have been made possible by a long history of disposing of certain peoples and their materials. Artists concerned with the reframing of black aesthetic subjectivity in the present largely set out to answer the question set up by Saidiya Hartman: “How does one recuperate lives entangled with and impossible to differentiate from the terrible utterances that condemned them to death, the account books that identified them as units of value, the invoices that claimed them as property, and the banal chronicles that stripped them of human features?”2 The history of subjection outlined by Hartman and other black feminists is largely a history of the inscription of black subjects into economies that have sustained themselves at the expense of the de-propertization and devaluation of blackness and black life. This project is invested in the artistic “recuperation” of those entangled lives. My investment is in an experimental figure that, through practice and performance, continues to construct and reconstruct alternatives to the representational vocabularies currently available for defining black bodily subjectivity.

This study identifies specific moments in art and performance when the vestiges of the history Hartman elaborates, materialize as scraps or lost objects. I am interested in the moment in art and performance practices that this history is transformed into a kind of backdrop - a figurative setting or background for the scene, event, or situation of modern subjection, where the various subjects, objects and desires lost to the violence of that history are cloaked and concealed, folded or displaced.

This project examines two terms, the black subject and the black body, and holds them in suspension. I think of these two as complexes, that is, as the exploited sites for

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the sedimentation of a certain set of knowledges, or rather assumptions, about blackness. Rather than take these terms for granted, I figure them as open questions, as sites to be interrogated and reevaluated. The experimental artistic practices I am interested in are invested in a material interrogation of these terms. These artistic interrogations are complex, and may move by way of the deconstruction or augmentation of subject and body, or enact both a cutting and augmenting (as Fred Moten phrases it), of those terms simultaneously. I have selected these three artists primarily because their work reflects this double movement in an attempt to re-imagine black subjectivity and the black body as akin to a mangled and manipulated assemblage.

The project is in indebted to Hortense Spillers’ historical and theoretical accounting for black female flesh in her essay “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe,” because it is there that Spillers provides the analytical tools, conceptualities and resources to begin to rename the black body and rethink black subjectivity, precisely by way of the material history of black female flesh. Spillers’ distinction between the body and the flesh is critical because that distinction bespeaks the ways in which bodies come to constitute the social and political fields through which subjection works. This distinction further opens up an entire aesthetic regime and repertoire of the flesh that has not necessarily gone untapped. My project largely asserts that this flesh has gone unnamed, but that artists who have been working and continue to work within an Afro-diasporic tradition have been informed and directed by this feminine flesh, whose durational powers and capacities stand in contrast to the incrementalization of the body. My sincere hope is that that by demonstrating how the legacy of black female flesh endures within the
imagination of contemporary artistic practice, my work is able to seize upon and become a commentary inside of Spillers’ own crucial elaboration of the flesh.

Looking closely at works by Dial, Linyekula and Cave, I demonstrate how these assembled works foreground the fleshy materiality of black femininity, and how these artists identify and labor through that flesh as the site of intense fabrication. Their engaged practices, whether painted or assembled, performed or danced, sounded or sung, signal the occurrence and dissemination of the black feminine across the field of black diasporic cultural formations. I maintain that it is the materiality of this flesh whose substance informs and structures the ongoing re-imagination and re-fabrication of historically desecrated and devalued black skin. In collage or assemblage, the pull of this black female flesh, its force and power is discernibly felt, as it converges around and diffuses diverse material sites.

The fragmented surfaces of the assemblage continue to stage the historical and material tensions that not only structure our larger cultural desires and identities. The assembled surfaces of both Nick Cave and Thornton Dial’s work to disclose the complex devaluations that have been performed on black skin. The physical demands that have been exacted on black bodies, can be located in the gestures, tucks and folds of fabricated surfaces, whose significance and meaning remains elusive, but whose ephemerality speaks to the contingent formation of black diasporic life and identity in the present.

Each chapter of the dissertation focuses on the work of an artist: The first chapter, “Faustin Linyekula: Fleshly Performance and the Limits of Bodily Finitude,” focuses on the Congolese choreographer Faustin Linyekula, whose performances incorporate
elements from theater, African and Western music traditions, video and poetry, to create an assembled choreographic practice for the stage. I argue that Linyekula’s choreography stages a male dream-wish for reproduction, and that inhabiting the fleshy costumes he assembles for the stage, marks a material hijacking of the womb in an effort to make it a part of the machinery of masculine production. Femininity may be the force this masculinity resists or intends to advance itself beyond, or from which it intends to establish its difference. His performances present masculinity as the performance of an impossible untanglement with female flesh. I discuss what the embrace and enactment of the flesh has to do with the political future towards which Linyekula and his dancers aspire.

The second chapter, “Nick Cave: The Art of Mattering,” focuses on the Chicago-based artist Nick Cave, specifically his soundsuits, or experimental garments. Built with everything from sticks, buttons, horns, beads, sequins, hot pants, socks, rags, rope, condoms, and human hair, I argue that Cave is invested in figurations of feminine flesh in order to create a unique assemblage that interdicts normative corporeality. While Cave’s soundsuits introduce a queer black masculine aesthetic that appears to be another variation of masculinity, I argue that his practice builds up to a black-queer-feminine aesthetic, indebted to the historically specific enactment of black female fleshliness. By way of Spillers, I demonstrate how the co-articulation of blackness and queerness in Cave’s work navigates through the ungendered specificity of black female flesh, whose immensely neglected, incredibly differentiated substance serves as the material support for performative iterations of black aesthetic subjectivity. Throughout the dissertation, I
suggest that we read black cultural production as a series of artistic attempts to multiply the relays between the material, the maternal, the feminine and the queer.

The third chapter, “The Art of Thornton Dial and the Fleshy Vernacular,” introduces Dial as a self-taught artists from Alabama. Dial, who has been labeled an outsider artist by critics, constructs large-scale assemblages from discarded objects, cast-off fabrics and other materials that address issues of war, homelessness and racism. I am interested in how Dial’s assemblages, constructed from broken dolls, nails and other tools, as well as household goods, fabric, and clothing, offer us another artistic rendition of black female flesh, explicitly tied to the social reproduction of a black vernacular culture.

In this introduction I outline the theoretical stakes of the project, as well as the terms and concepts that structure it. Close readings of passages from Toni Morrison’s novel *Sula*, and an essay by Zora Neale Hurston, open this project to an idea of performances in the flesh. I regard these texts as literary experiments that attempt to render what it feels like to inhabit or be *in the flesh*.

* * * *

Rather than offering itself as a disembodied art from, the assembled artistry of Faustin Linyekula, Nick Cave and Thornton Dial, trace both an aesthetic blackness that expresses itself through a difficult materiality, indebted to and inflected by the fleshy expressions of a black female imagination. The art of assemblage proceeds by way of a double movement that highlights the irreducible alien-ness of blackness, at the same time that it fleshes out the singular aesthetic qualities that remain inalienable to blackness. I elaborate three critical tropes that expose these qualities: First, I extend Hortense Spillers’
discussion of the black female body in “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe,” opened by what Spillers’ identifies as its ungendering reduction to the status of mere flesh. The assemblages of Linyekula, Cave and Dial develop what I call an experimental poetics predicated on the re-fabrication, surrogation and performance of that flesh. Furthermore, I contend that the material and fleshy renderings of these artworks are predicated on an implied definition of flesh as open-ended form.

Second, I draw on Frantz Fanon’s discussion of the racist practice of “epidermalization” in Black Skin, White Masks. Epidermalization expresses the alien sameness or uniformity of black skin, which functions metaphorically for Fanon as a kind of garment. His metaphor points to the distinct convergence of fabric and skin as a unique theoretical resource and aesthetic opportunity. I want to clarify that although skin and flesh are not collapsible, the skin remains central to this fleshy economy. Eve Sedgwick tells us that the skin is that which is entered into, and trembles with recollections. Sedgwick enables me to think about black skin and “its fit, its integrity, its concealment, its breachableness, the surface it offers or doesn’t offer for vicarious relations.” This metaphorical convergence of black skin and fabric that Fanon enables, opens up a different hermeneutic, allowing me to understand how enriched, collaged surfaces speak to the accumulated histories of devaluation that subtend black corporeality.

Third, I signal the movement of what Fred Moten refers to as the sexual cut, as the point “where eros meets ontology.” The sexual cut is a motif that allows me to grasp the maternal thrust of black ontology, and the sexual and material augmentation that

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4 Fred Moten, In the Break: The Aesthetic of the Black Radical Tradition, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003, 244.
constantly supports and animates a series of differentiations internal to blackness. I read this sexual cut as the interminable site for an improvisation of authenticity and totality, origination and rupture. The cut opens these large-scale, fabricated assemblages as uncontained sites for the invocation of an ensemble of black bodily surrogations, figured around convergences of race, sex, memory and history. The material and performative artistic deployment of blackness through the motif of the cut, expands the potential range of conversations about the insurgency of blackness given as black performance.

I begin with Hortense Spillers whose theory of black female flesh becomes the condition of possibility for the violent dissemination of the black feminine across the field of American culture. Spillers contends that black femininity remains marked by the ungendered particularity of black female flesh. She also explains that the black male body was always already given in the body of the black female. This fact makes it impossible for “black men to appropriate the gender prerogatives of white men because they have a different kind of history.” According to Spillers, acknowledging the history of the severing of African and African-American motherhood, black femininity becomes the (non)agent in a dispersed history of handing down, a process that continues to stagger and frame black cultural life.

Spillers explains that the analytic of the flesh is opened by the body of the African female slave, whose body was transformed into an open site for the enactment of unprecedented and inhumane forms of violence. In “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe,” Spillers makes the critical distinction between the body and the flesh: the flesh is distinct

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from the body and prior to the body. Moreover, according to Spillers, the body can be written, the flesh cannot. She writes: “Before the body there is flesh, that zero degree of social conceptualization that does not escape concealment under the brush of discourse.” The flesh resists discourse. The body can signify; the grammar of the body is gendered. The flesh however, precedes any gendered economy.

In the essay, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe,” Hortense Spillers introduces her analytic of black female flesh by way of the body of the African female slave, which she explains, was transformed into an open site for the enactment of unprecedented and inhumane forms of violence. Spillers marks the specific moment in which this flesh surfaces, as both a problem for thought and a problem for materiality. Where Spillers argument concerns the violent conditions that led to the historical rupturing and erasure of the flesh, I am specifically interested in the complex ungendered status of that flesh and how it resurfaces within contemporary performance.

Spillers proceeds from a clear distinction between body and flesh, writing: “I would make a distinction in this case between body and flesh and impose that distinction as the central one between captive and liberated and subject positions.” The captive body is marked by its “absence from a subject position.” It is a completely abject, and powerless body. The flesh however, is distinct from and prior to the body. According to Spillers, the body can be written, the flesh cannot: She writes: “Before the body there is flesh, that zero degree of social conceptualization that does not escape concealment under

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7 Ibid., 67.
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“Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe,” subjects the body to scrutiny, abandoning the black body as a measure for the erasure of the deeply experienced violation of the female slave, and Spillers distances herself from discussions of black bodily representation, which she believes belong to “a class of modern paradigms that…confirm the human body as a metonymic figure for an entire repertoire of human and social arrangements.”

Rather than returning to the body as a historicized, racialized, and gendered site of difference, Spillers resists the black body as an analytic, precisely in order to avoid the inscription of black female flesh into the body’s non-specific, universal and degraded economy. Spillers is describing the historical violence that made it possible for a people to constantly subject themselves to their own bodily regulation, a violence that enabled the contemporary disciplining politics that operate against the backdrop of this violent history of racialized subjectivization. She explains how this violent dispersal of the black feminine has resulted in a series of Oedipal reversals – in the “missing agency” of the Father and the “naming and misnaming,” of the “territory of the Mother and the Daughter,” as “the Name and Law of the Father.” It is by way of the presumption that black people emerge from within this distinct social matrix, and their lives structured by its attendant “cultural fictions,” that they become relegated to a single, absent and dysfunctional body and body politic, always invoked as the condition and evidence for de-spiritualized, de-intellectualized black subjectivity.

Opting to underscore black female flesh, Spillers demonstrates how the flesh crucially marks a violent erasure of black subjecthood, and how racialization moves by

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8 Ibid., 67.
way of the trajectory of devalued subjecthood, repeatedly mapped through bodily
subjection. Describing narratives of female bodies “strung from a tree limb, or bleeding
from the breast on any given day of field work because the ‘overseer’ standing the length
of the whip, has popped her flesh open…” Spillers demonstrates how, the very
narratives that generate the “grammar” through which black bodies become flesh, also
generate a fleshy rupturing that signals the undoing of the black body. Black flesh
interdicts the biopolitical inscription and targeting of black life through the black body–
for biopolitics targets the body and its seemingly loose behaviors, but black flesh indexes
the body’s libidinal energies and an erotic potential that remains unseen. It is in the midst
of what Saidiya Hartman calls scenes of subjection, that the black body is disturbed,
disrupted, and formally unhinged from the legible structures that contour something like
a black imago.

Spillers’ concept of the flesh is useful both for thinking about three things: firstly,
how this flesh is opened up as the site for an unprecedented ungendered reduction of the
black body to its flesh; secondly, how the unimaginable violence enacted upon the black
body becomes the means through which this ungendered flesh becomes animated; and
thirdly, how gender difference, a distinction crucial for the process of modern
subjectivation, is excised at the scene of black subjection. Spillers provides the
conditions for and theorizes the implications of this flesh as follows:

Under these conditions we lose at least gender difference in the outcome, and the
female body and the male body become a territory of cultural and political
maneuver, not at all gender-related, gender-specific. But this body, at least from
the point of view of the captive community, focuses a private and particular
space, at which point of convergence biological, sexual, social cultural,
linguistic, ritualistic and psychological fortunes join. This profound intimacy of
interlocking detail is disrupted, however, by externally imposed meanings and

9 Ibid.
uses: 1) the captive body becomes the source of an irresistible, destructive sensuality; 2) at the same time – in stunning contradiction – the captive body reduces to a thing, become being for the captor; 3) in this absence from a subject position, the captured sexualities provide a physical and biological expression of “otherness”; 4) as a category of “otherness,” the captive body translates into a potential for pornotroping and embodies sheer physical powerlessness that slides into a more general “powerlessness,” resonating through various centers of human and social meaning.  

This profitable “atomizing” of the captive body provides another angle on the divided flesh: we lose any hint or suggestion of a dimension of ethics, of relatedness between human personality and its anatomical features, between one human personality and another, between human personality and cultural institutions. To that extent, the procedures adopted for the captive flesh demarcate a total objectification, as the entire captive community becomes a living laboratory.  

Here, Spillers makes clear that the captive body must be distinguished by its “absence from a subject position.” This body becomes completely abject, and powerless. Collectively, these narratives generate the “grammar” through which black bodies become flesh, and are narrated into abjection.  

The enslavement of black women opened up to a different economy, what Spillers calls “the marketplace of the flesh” that speaks to the commodification not of the body per se, but more specifically of its raw materiality, the flesh, survived by these “lacerations, woundings, fissures, tears, scars, ruptures, lesions, rendings.” Elsewhere she writes that “the predicament of Black women” is that “their enslavement relegated them to the marketplace of the flesh, an act of commodification so thoroughgoing that the daughters labor even now under the outcome.”  

Black women, consigned to this “marketplace of the flesh” become subject to the racist reproduction of their bodies within an economy unwilling to recognize them as subjects. Black female flesh becomes

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10 Ibid.  
11 Ibid., 68.  
for Spillers the thing traded and traded upon, whose truck with the commodity inscribes the black female body into a reproductive narrative that ensures not simply biology, but also the reproduction of that very abjection.

Yet, this act of commodification that conditions black female flesh, also allows that flesh to become visible and make itself present. For Spillers the agency of the flesh has to do with its generativity, its capacity to persist as a site for staging a retrieval, a recovery and a reclamation of a certain worth and dignity that has been lost. This reclamation of the flesh brings us closer to the care or love for the flesh that Baby Suggs personifies in Toni Morrison’s novel, *Beloved*. Baby’s plea for “flesh that needs to be loved,” suggests flesh that weeps, that laughs, flesh that is capable of dancing.  

The historical violence Spillers narrates, concerns itself with the opening of the body and allows us to explore the implications of that opening for something like animated flesh. So at the same time that abjection becomes the condition for the absolute abasement of blackness, abjection animates black flesh as a special site of material recovery.

The historical presence of black flesh reveals how the valuation and devaluation of the human supplied the abstract conditions for modern subjectivity. The degraded materiality of blackness given as black flesh can be located at the center of this history of value. Furthermore, the flesh is made possible by a history of devaluing racialized and feminized bodies. The resurfacing of that flesh in the art of assemblage and found object art, requires me to think about black female flesh as the condition and ground for blackness, which as Fred Moten has argued, figures as the originally repressed and devalued essence of the commodity form.

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Fred Moten’s incisive opening chapter of *In the Break* reconsiders Marx’s discussion of value, and brings together a discussion of the commodity, the subject, and consciousness in order to think precisely about the simultaneous occlusion and devaluation of blackness in Marx through the commodity form. Moten demonstrates how a dematerialization of the object is advanced by Marx’s critique of commodification, showing precisely how this gesture is repeated and extended by theoretical traditions in which a critique of commodification, or commodity fetishism, goes hand in hand with the devaluation of the link between materiality and identity, subjectivity and personhood. Marx’s expression of value and his description of the commodity betray an essential secret that is also the crucial fact of the object’s materiality. If for Marx, the material comes to shape the phenomenal world, it does so only by way of negating the materiality of the commodity, so that there is a peculiar emptying out of the commodity’s content that announces itself everywhere but goes unheard. This emptying out is subsumed by the discourse on the commodity form.

Moten proceeds by way of an analysis of the slave, the figure through which the co-production of personhood and commodity becomes a necessary though inconvenient reality for capitalist relations of exchange, and is occluded from Marx’s discourse on value. For the sound of the slave is the sound of what Moten terms *objection*. It is this sound that complicates and distorts Marx’s discourse on the commodity. Subsequently the formal definitions of exchange-value and use-value are severely disrupted by blackness, sounded out by the violent shriek of black bodies always already cut, figured and refigured as commodities. This irreducible sound which Moten proffers as the

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14 Fred Moten, *In the Break*, 1-25.
performative essence of blackness, always precedes and erupts from the commodity form:

These material degradations--fissures or invaginations of a foreclosed universality, a heroic but bounded eroticism--are black performances. There occurs in such performances a revaluation or reconstruction of value, one disruptive of the oppositions of speech and writing, and spirit and matter. It moves by way of the (phono-photo-porno)graphic disruption the shriek carries out. This movement cuts and augments the primal. If we return again and again to a certain passion, a passionate response to passionate utterance, horn-voice-horn over percussion, a protest, an objection, it is because it is more than another violent scene of subjection too terrible to pass on; it is the ongoing performance, the prefigurative scene of a (re)appropriation – the deconstruction and reconstruction, the improvisational recording and revaluation – of value, of the theory of value, of the theories of value.\footnote{Ibid., 14.}

The distinct personification of the commodity Moten identifies, occurs by way of the imbrication of personhood and commodity through the figure of the slave. The commodity’s capacity to sound out, to protest the terms of its subjection, becomes a source of resistance. This ultimately leads Moten to claim that “commodities can and do resist.” Moten credits and correlates this resistance to the condition of what he terms objection.

Paradoxically, the violent conditions of subjection Hortense Spillers describes, de-link blackness from those constraints of personhood that have sought to restrain and normalize black subjectivity. Spillers’ “marketplace of the flesh,” is a metaphor that illuminates the link between abjection and the unique experience of objecthood forged early in the body of the black female subject transformed into commodity. The history of slavery and subjection Spillers outlines, illuminates precisely how blackness, the human and freedom are explicitly differentiated, diffused and extended through the linkages and discontinuities between reproduction, femininity, and maternity. The relations between these concepts must be re-imagined, rethought and re-theorized with respect to the
intertwined problems of reproduction, femininity and maternal affiliation, which are not neutral but come out of the explicitly racialized contexts of modernity.

The feminist theorist Alys Weinbaum has identified the binding together of race and biological reproduction as a problem that operated centrally to the discourse of modernity that generated our shared concepts of freedom, the human and the imagination. As Weinbaum argues: “race and reproduction are bound together within transatlantic modernity’s central intellectual and political formations,” leading to a kind of “maternal racial nationalism” where “maternal affiliation is the criterion for inclusion within the nation.” I would argue that this complex continues to figure as a problem for thinking about blackness, particularly when reproduction is limited to a biological context.

I contend that the history of black female flesh, its devaluation, and the complicated forms of subjectivation and de-subjectivation that subtends its history, must be regarded as central to the formation of modernity, and to the proliferation of its aesthetic and material forms and hierarchies. I argue that far from reducing this flesh to the moment of its subjection, the movement and animation of black female flesh in the present, offers new entanglements and alternative trajectories for thinking about contemporary black life and aesthetic making. I critically reflect on these raced and gendered entanglements with respect to newly emerging experimental economies of black masculinity. I maintain that the artistic and performative negotiations of black masculinity are by no means reducible to allegedly pure expressions of agency and prowess. Instead, such negotiations take place under the radically displaced but forever overlapping productive, reproductive and nonproductive registers of sexual difference.

trace the ways in which the space of the black masculine is radically opened up through
the practice of assemblage, demonstrating how the assembled practices employed by
black artists present entanglements not simply of race and gender, but also of materiality
and maternity, production, reproduction and non-production.

Black female flesh serves as the site for a unique and unprecedented bodily
opening. The body Hortense Spillers identifies, the racialized, maternal body,
compressed and violated in scenes of subjection, is embedded in these assembled works,
where cast off bits of fabric, scraps, shredded materials and partial objects, produce the
texture of “worn” and “worked” bodies, and build up to collaged surfaces that appear
“overworked.” I am interested in how the practice of assemblage addresses the material
specificity of this poetic flesh and how its form stages complex entanglements through a
series of fleshy encounters.

Assemblage allows me to think about the circulation of an alternative black figure
in relation to the concepts of maternity, production, reproduction and non-production, via
a series of complex material figurations, juxtapositions, and overlaps. I pursue these
tangled formations, asking what is being untangled and performed, or what
entanglements are being performed. I am particularly interested in why collage, which
valorizes the displaced or partial object and expresses the displacement of the black body
via the object, has been taken up by many contemporary black artists.

Elizabeth Alexander maintains that the displaced or partial object in collage
“could be thought of as the African body.” In this context, assemblage encompasses “the
African-American in migration, and collage as the process through which that ‘body’
makes sense of itself in a hostile and unfamiliar environment.”\textsuperscript{17} The practice of assemblage we might say becomes an exploratory procedure of sorts that, as Alexander argues, fractures the “two-ness trope” of African American intellectual consciousness. Black identity is always collaged identity she suggests: “if the African-American intellectual consciousness is split, it is split multiply rather than doubly, and that that so-called fragmentation, arisen from the fundamental fragmentation of the Middle Passage, has become a source of our creative power.”\textsuperscript{18} Assemblage valorizes the creative/constructive process, which includes cutting, pasting, quoting and also tearing, “as a crucial and aesthetic component of the path to artistic coherence, and indeed an avenue to understanding how coherence itself is evaluated.”\textsuperscript{19}

I want to suggest that the form of assemblage illuminates that textured surface as a visual metaphor not only for the movement and displacement of black identity as Alexander suggests, but for the singularity and specificity of blackness, visualized and identified through the facticity of what Fanon referred to as the “epidermal schema.” Acknowledging these methods of cutting, pasting and quoting, the practice of assemblage I argue, constructs an alternative epidermal schema for blackness, one that resists the very idea that black skin takes on a certain coherence. Moreover, the fleshy inhabitation of these assemblages, offers itself as a means of challenging the racist practice of what Frantz Fanon famously refers to as “epidermalization.” In \textit{Black Skin, White Masks}, Fanon writes: “the black man has to \textit{wear} the livery the white man has \textit{fabricated} for

\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 35.
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., 36.
him.” He suggests black skin has the capacity of a garment, that it can be worn. While epidermalization, its practice and its institution reduces the black man to skin, if black skin is a kind of garment, it can then function as more than the support for what Fanon refers to elsewhere as “livery” – the colonial metaphor Fanon uses to signal the imposition of social uniformity upon black subjecthood. At stake in this formulation, is not only the suturing or stitching together of black skin as livery, but also the potential unraveling or unstitching of black skin as a kind of uniform. At the same time that Fanon condemns the black skin that is worn, he implies that this same skin might also be cast off, discarded, re-fabricated, and re-possessed. Fanon provokes a series of questions about what black skin is, whether blackness is a kind of skin, and how it might be possible for blackness to escape this livery, to avoid this suturing into servitude.

The art of assemblage pushes beyond epidermalization as the source of a radically impressed inferiority upon blackness, and lends itself to the re-fabrication and repossessed of a black body whose fate has so long been tied to and untied from the impossible and shifting, (or impossibly shifty) meanings of black skin. I maintain that assemblage, which involves the manipulation, transfiguration and innovative juxtaposition of different materials, fabrics, and discarded objects, produces unique assemblages of black skin, through the disassembling and reassembling of what has been referred to for some time as the composite black body. Elizabeth Alexander foregrounds collage as a singular artistic form that offers itself as a means of aesthetic and material resistance to certain forms of representation that locate or contain this composite black body. Operations of displacement at the heart of collage and its practice, re-fabricate and re-craft that body, enabling a material dissemination that places that body into movement.

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And it is in the context of this radical material dissemination that blackness emerges both as a problem of as well as a unique aesthetic possibility for what we call the subject.

Where Alexander qualifies the black body as displaced, I would argue that it has been disseminated. And I am interested in the conditions of possibility for that dissemination. Insofar as assemblage marks a spatial diffusion of the body, what we confront in the work is not so much a black body that in her words, *dwell*, but an aesthetic blackness that circulates through material spaces. This aesthetic blackness illuminates the material tensions that animate an art form whose imaginative conditions, its objects and materials, bring into focus and interrogate hierarchies of knowledge, value and labor that are explicitly gendered and racialized.

As Alexander suggests, assemblage has been cultivated as a vital black artistic practice that interrogates these hierarchies. The expendability of blackness is central to the organization of the fields of knowledge, labor, and value, as well as to the exclusion, classification and regulation of the intellectual and the material, and the critical development of the concepts of production, nonproduction and reproduction. Furthermore, the legibility or illegibility, viability or un-viability of these terms depend that certain figurations and devalued representations of blackness and femininity remain linked and intact.

I am interested in what I will call *fleshy assemblages*, artworks and performances that threaten these representations of blackness, femininity and queerness, by underscoring the way black subjectivity and personhood have always been subtended and indeed are actively constructed by a long history of material negotiations that qualified personhood by way of the degraded status of the object. I am interested in the way
contemporary black artistic practices, instead of disavowing the object and its history, have now returned to the object as a means of identifying the imbrication of blackness and objecthood, as a resource for an alternative aesthetic imagination. Identifying this history, these artists turn it inside out: the devalued object becomes a means of interrogating a history in which the limits and limitations of subjecthood were imposed upon blackness, at the same time that blackness was consistently barred from the privileges of subjectivity and citizenship.

I want to underscore the playful negotiations the object engages in, and the ways in which objects often inscribe an excessive imagination that involves magic, enchantment, punctuation, sound – a hyper-materiality attributed to both the black subject and the black body, whose hyper-visibility is consistently marked at the same time that it is placed under erasure. I have selected artists who play with and move through these paradoxes in order to inhabit blackness, differently. I argue that these artists engage in performances of objection, and that such inhabitation plays at the boundaries of objectification by way of practices of turning oneself into, inhabiting the space of, or being an object.

I turn here to an essay by Zora Neale Hurston, who presents herself as a type of fleshy assemblage. I argue that her excursus is an exercise and performance of objection that expresses the unique convergence of blackness and femininity through objected female flesh. Hurston’s meditation on being colored, presents that devaluation against the backdrop of her own fleshliness.

The superfluousness and expendability of the black female body is the subject of Zora Neale Hurston’s meditation on the condition of “being colored” in her essay “How
It Feels to Be Colored Me.” Hurston compares her body to a sagging, brown sac, ready to be emptied and filled. I want to offer that Hurston engages in a difficult bodily negotiation, betraying a physicality that moves in excess of the racial spectacularity that it seems to effect, and to which it seems irredeemably and inextricably tied. Barbara Johnson’s alternative reading of this same essay aims to shed light on the critical triangulation between “identity, difference and race representation.”

Pointing out that this essay was first published in 1928 in a white literary journal sympathetic to Harlem Renaissance writers, Johnson suggests that Hurston pandered to her readership in order to distinguish herself from the rest of her race as “not 100% colored.” This distinction is made by Hurston in light of those “stories of Indian blood” a narrative trope employed by Negroes, one that Johnson tells us, represents “a common extenuation, dilution and hence effacement of the crime of coloredness.”

According to Johnson, Hurston’s essay is an attempt to vitiate the metaphoric power and authority of that trope, but she ultimately recuperates and succumbs to it. Johnson declares that Hurston’s statement, “I remember the very day I became colored” actively implies that “if one can become colored, one is not born colored.” She concludes that “feeling’ here instead of being a category of which ‘colored’ is one example, becomes the property of the category ‘colored,’” and that Hurston “dramatizes the image of the exotic primitive,” invoking herself as a representational figure of a racial primitivism that places the black female subject at the farthest remove from the field of social agency.

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22 Ibid., 174.
23 Ibid., 176.
Diverging from Johnson’s work and phrasing however, I am interested in the way “How It Feels to Be Colored Me,” illustrates the condition of being “colored” as a singular aesthetic experience, one that illuminates a certain convergence of blackness, and Hurston’s irreducible “feeling” as a necessary condition for a different kind of visual performance enacted at the profoundly invisible, though imminent site of black femininity. In the following passage, Hurston likens her body, her physicality to a sac, sagging, filled, stuffed and over-flowing with random objects materials. She tells us that the objects that comprise these body-sacs are both “priceless and worthless”:

But in the main, I feel like a brown bag of miscellany propped against a wall. Against a wall in company with other bags, white, red and yellow. Pour out the contents, and there is discovered a jumble of small things priceless and worthless. A first-water diamond, an empty spool, bits of broken glass, lengths of string, a key to a door long since crumbled away, a rusty knifeblade, old shoes saved for a road that never was and never will be, a nail bent under the weight of things too heavy for any nail, a dried flower or two, still a little fragrant. In your hand is the brown bag. On the ground before you is the jumble it held--so much like the jumble in the bags, could they be emptied, that all might be dumped in a single heap and the bags refilled without altering the content of any greatly. A bit of colored glass more or less would not matter. Perhaps that is how the Great Stuffer of Bags filled them in the first place -- who knows?  

Feeling like “a brown bag of miscellany propped against a wall” Hurston calls attention to the specificity of the black female body, which serves as an index for a material imagination that precedes and exceeds the discursive and linguistic construction of the racially gendered subject. At the same time, this material imagination no doubt links up with those forms of subjectivity, for which it serves as a unique and anoriginal support.

Hurston’s sac physically resembles the womb in that it holds, carries and sustains what it births. Her body sac becomes the unprecedented site for the production and reproduction of a performance of expendability, of blackness. But it is also a

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performance of that ‘emptying out’ of the commodity as it becomes de-linked from its own materiality. As a consequence, the link between materiality and subjectivity is constantly disavowed. Hurston’s is a performance that anticipates and cuts across this disavowal.

Joseph Roach has written that “performances so often carry within them the memory of otherwise forgotten substitutions – those that were rejected and, even more invisibly, those that have succeeded.” Hurston’s excursus reveals the performative and material constitution of a body conditioned by a set of material and psychic substitutions, a body whose “success” or affective well-being may be measured by its capacity to body forth or make visible those substitutions. The substance of Hurston’s sac and what it allows for has not been fully interrogated. This project accepts and outlines the material messiness of this body and the physicality Hurston describes as an index for a performative and aesthetic blackness that revolves around this inhabited experience of black female fleshliness.

I am invested in the configurations of the body Hurston outlines and the forms of desire that its material trajectories map. Hurston assures us that this body is constantly on the move – that it performs, acts out, dissents, disintegrates, and even diffuses itself. Collage or assemblage signals the radical convergence of these performative energies in one messy, material body. The dissolution and reconstitution of Hurston’s body sac becomes the imaginative condition of possibility for the irreducibly affective spaces opened up by the assembled works of Linyekula, Cave and Dial. I maintain that this

materiality is not neutral and that the desires it gives rise to are explicitly gendered and highly textured and fabricated.

Joseph Roach developed the term “surrogation,” to describe acts of aesthetic making or performances central and essential to the creation and/or reconstitution of identity. Surrogation remains an inherent part of what Roach identifies as a “kinesthetic imagination,” enacted at the occasion of loss, death or departure:

In the life of a community, the process of surrogation does not begin or end, but continues as actual or perceived vacancies occur in the network of relations that constitute the social fabric…Because collective memory occurs selectively, imaginatively and often perversely, surrogation rarely if ever succeeds…The intended substitute either cannot fulfill expectations, creating a deficit, or actually exceeds them, creating a surplus.\textsuperscript{26}

Drawing from Roach’s definition, bodily surrogation then might be the physical capacity of the body to link up with rituals or acts of navigating through the contingent possibilities that desire, pain, and loss provide, in order to simultaneously remember and reinvent the body and to find new positions, acts, and extensions for it in the midst of such un-nameable and incalculable substitutions. But the imminent failure of surrogation that Roach describes is precisely what Johnson’s reading does not allow for. Her discussion of Hurston’s body as a racial fetish, as a sign for both racial and sexual primitivism forecloses on the invisible “deficit” or “surplus” that would give rise to a genuinely black female desire enacted at the site of performance, racial dissimulation and sexual dissemination.

For Hurston, who is explicitly concerned with surrogation, the capacity to imagine having another kind of body, coincides with the capacity to possess it: “In your hand is the brown bag. On the ground before you is the jumble it held--so much like the

\textsuperscript{26} Ibid., 2.
jumble in the bags...” Hurston’s surrogation is dependent upon the irreducible exteriority of her body. We may go so far as to say that black bodily surrogation necessarily involves exteriorization because blackness speaks to the devaluation of material life, always constructed as external to subjectivity. Hurston revels in the link between black female bodily substance – irregularly composed of unworthy, unseemly and even unmentionable things - and the precious quality of her own body. The paradoxical force of Hurston’s physicality depends upon an understanding of how the immeasurable value of this body is contingent upon that neglected and degraded materiality.

Hurston’s bodily affectations are sensed here through a unique disposal: *being colored* feels like *being emptied out*, of bodily content. Hurston’s excursus is a meditation on the state of black corporeality as necessarily a performance of emptying out, of un-inhabiting the body, of laying bare or risking the worthlessness that haunts black corporeality. At the same time, it is a performance that reveals an excessive bodily materiality that pushes against the subjective construction of that body, precisely as valueless.

The movement of what Derrida refers to as the parergon possibilizes this bodily exteriorization. “Neither simply outside nor inside,” the parergon is “like an accessory that one is obliged to welcome on the border…the supplement outside the work.”

The frame jeopardizes the sacred interiority of the work, demonstrating that a seemingly external materiality is always already the condition and support for the work’s existence. Derrida writes:

A parergon comes against, beside, and in addition to the ergon, the work done [fait], the fact [le fait], the work, but it does not fall to one side, it touches and

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cooperates within the operation, from a certain outside. Neither simply outside, nor simply inside. Like an accessory that one is obliged to welcome on the border, on board [au bord, a bord]. It is first of all on (the) bo(a)rd(er [il est d’abord l’a-bord]).

Derrida tells us that there is in fact no separation between the externality beyond the frame, and the content of the work. The playfulness of the frame is at once the frame at play. The parergon plays at and around the border, as it borders. This movement animates the materiality of the work, which is forced into an encounter with its own material conditions. The parergon for Derrida “comes against, beside and in addition to” the work; it is that which moves, slides, or glides; it cannot be located as such. The parergon is a performative deviation and aberration at work in the work, an aberration that points to the work’s unpredictable material eccentricity. It is also what Fred Moten refers to as the extraesthetic, “that can impinge upon a certain privatized interiority…”

For Hurston, black female bodily surrogation is animated by the accessory, the remnant, the frame, all of which serve as eclectic supports for her own body.

I am interested in the performances and techniques of assemblage that announce objection, specifically objected flesh, as its object and its limit. The staging or bodying forth of an objected self, or the turning of oneself into an object of performance, marks a certain conflation regarding “the assumed equivalence of personhood and subjectivity,” as a question worthy of serious interrogation. As Fred Moten has asserted, the question to be asked is, what is that “force of resistance or objection that is always already in excess of the limits of subjection/subjectivity?” And, extending that question further,

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28 Ibid.
29 Fred Moten, In the Break, 247.
30 Ibid., 242.
what might a racialized, feminized, queer performance that aspires to the terms of this objection, look like?

A passage from Toni Morrison’s novel *Sula*, illustrates precisely how “the force of this resistance,” is animated by a certain gendered relation. *Sula* presents a black female imagination that becomes the condition for a mode of affectivity that exceeds the metaphorical limits Morrison sets for her feminine type. In the following passage we are presented with Jude describing the woman he is about to marry, a kind, diligent and obedient young girl named Nel who he will eventually betray and leave for Sula, Nel’s best friend. The passage captures Jude’s reveries as he walks home from a long day of work:

The more he thought about marriage, the more attractive it became. Whatever his fortune, whatever the cut of his garment, there would always be the hem – the tuck and the fold that hid his raveling edges; a someone sweet, industrious and loyal to shore him up. And in return he would shelter her, love her, grow old with her. Without that someone he was a waiter hanging around a kitchen like a woman. With her he was head of a household pinned to an unsatisfactory job out of necessity. The two of them together would make one Jude.31

At work here is a double fabrication: Morrison’s description of black femininity is embedded in a speculative sense of how that femininity might be experienced, felt, and animated by a man. Jude dreams of having a job, being put to use, being productive, which would serve as confirmations of his masculinity. Morrison writes: “It was while he was full of such dreams, his body already feeling the rough work clothes, his hands already curved to pick the handle that he spoke to Nel about getting married.” Jude pursues Nel as an object, a possession, and a material good. Morrison contrasts the

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privileges of masculinity, the right to work, protect and shelter, with a judicious feminine economy of care. Jude is the worker, Nel the obedient caretaker.

Likened to cloth, Nel functions as a soft receptacle for Jude and his laboring body. Jude will always have “sweet, industrious” Nel to mend him, to bring him into her fold, should he ever become disheveled or undone, no matter the “cut of his garment.”

Thinking in the metaphorical terms Morrison supplies, “the cut” of a man’s garment is typically distinguished by its tailoring, or “fit.” But Morrison asks us to reconsider the exactness and precision of that cut, suggesting the possibility and possible work of its supplement, a supplement that goes unseen, but is part of the work of the garment.

Jude wants to cut into the world, to make his mark upon it, to leave an indelible masculine presence. For him, Nel will always be the supplemental hem, the tuck, the thing that secures and hides him, the fold that re-incorporates and revitalizes him. The way Jude looks at her operates against the backdrop of epidermalization, and we are confronted with a different kind of uniformity, the invariability of sexual normativity, with which blackness becomes intertwined in this instance. Nel functions as a kind of supplement for Jude: becoming the supplemental extension of his masculine conformity, Nel’s femininity functions as a type of second skin for him, something into which he can easily slip in and out of without compromising his integrity or “fit” within and with the world.

But Morrison’s apparent and easy transcription of normative sexual difference gradually comes undone. The very metaphor she uses to construct this gendered binary, undermines that binary and un-works itself. Her cloth analogy, which mobilizes a certain desire to care and be cared for through a figuration of the feminine fold, complicates and
augments the gendered surface of her own text. Here, Jude is also likened to a torn cloth, a rag even that needs to be shorn up. Morrison puts into his mouth a metaphor that is always threatening to unravel. And it is Morrison’s specific use of the word “raveling” that indexes something singular. ‘Raveling’ is a word that coincides with its opposite: to ravel means at once to unravel. The internal workings of cloth, the raveling and unraveling of fabric, its contrapuntal movement, gestures toward and links up with the irreducible movement of sexual differentiation at work within the text. The softness and suppleness Morrison traces through Nel, surfaces and resurfaces with/in a masculine body whose ragged and torn surface, lingers as a perpetually threatened and threatening edge, as an affront to the “fit” and autonomy of masculinity.

I am suggesting that the materiality of cloth becomes the conditional support for an irreducible sexual economy that distinguishes and inflects black femininity. Morrison presents us with a sexual economy marked by internal differentiation, excess, and mobility, one that is shared and extended between herself and Nel. So, if we are seduced into this sexual and material economy and enticed by the texture, movement and internal contradictions of this metaphorical cloth, it is because Morrison’s text itself assumes and takes on the quality of a textile, Nel’s textile, whose woven coherence is intermittently cut and disrupted by this masculine (un)raveling.

Here too, Morrison asks us to think about a body reflexive enough to feel the roughness of the work clothes it is wearing. She presents us with a body sensitive to the small energies secreted by the skin, a body opened up by that skin and able to sense its own (in)habitation. Morrison textilic text negotiates an immeasurably small space between clothing and skin, an intimate economy between body and flesh, where what
ravels and unravels are certain assurances of masculine autonomy and privilege. If Nel does eventually marry Jude she will end up being his “hem,” but she will always be something more and other than that hem. For the hem is provisional, and Morrison highlights the contingency of the hem as a zone of alteration where supplementation and augmentation takes place. But Morrison is also describing a mutual alteration, signaled both by movement and by interruption. Nel works on Jude, at the same time that he tries to perform work on her.

The excesses of this feminine fold open up an intimate space where masculine and feminine desires expand and converge. The motif of the fold is offered by way of a certain giving and withholding of the feminine, as Jude contemplates his life “with her/without her.” In the mutuality of this shared encounter between Nel and Jude, we are able to glimpse the condition for something like a worked encounter given in the overworked surface.

This giving and withholding of the feminine within the masculine, depends upon a mutual sexual encounter. Freud, whose account of femininity begins to possibilize the mutual exchange and circulation of female and male flesh, may have theorized the conditions for this encounter. But just as Freud seems to make possible a reading of feminine fleshliness as predicated upon both materiality and lack, he forecloses upon the substance of the feminine.

In The Ethics of Psychoanalysis in the chapter on the moral law, Lacan present us with the story of Emma, Freud’s patient who had a phobia of going into stores by herself, afraid people would make fun of her on account of her clothes.\(^{32}\) Lacan presents the

following summary of the case, followed by his own brief interpretation:

Everything is related to an early memory. At the age of twelve she went into a store and the shop assistants apparently laughed at her clothes. One of them attracted her and even stirred her in some strange way in her emerging puberty. Behind that we find a causal memory, that of an act of aggression she suffered in the shop at the hands of a Greis. The French translation, modeled on the English, which was itself particularly careless, says “shopkeeper” - but an old fogy is involved, an elderly man who pinched her somewhere under her dress in a very direct manner. This memory thus echoes the idea of a sexual attraction experienced in the other.

All that remains is the symptom attached to clothes, the mockery of her clothes. But the path of truth is suggested in masked form, in the deceiving Vorstellung of her clothes. In an opaque way, there is an illusion to something that did not happen on the occasion of the first memory, but on the second. Something that wasn’t apprehended in the beginning is apprehended retroactively, by means of a deceitful transformation – proton psuedos. Thus in that way we have the confirmation of the fact that the relationship of the subject to das Ding is marked as bad – but the subject can only formulate this fact through the symptom.33

What we have here, is the case of an adolescent girl who experienced an early sexual attraction, but who covered up the shame of this early memory, with another, what Lacan calls “a causal memory.” This second memory, in which the young adolescent girl is essentially molested in the shop by an old man, covers up the first memory, which Lacan tells us is “transformed” into an “illusion.” However, the second memory becomes the source for the young girl’s attachment to an idea of sexual attraction in the other.

The point is that the evidence of the “deceitful transformation” of what Lacan would call the real memory is hidden in the clothes. Only the clothes can index “the path of truth.” And yet Lacan tells us that even the clothes, the symptom attached to this memory, mock her. Interestingly, Lacan condemns “the deceiving Vorstellung of her clothes.” The clothes, the imagination inherent in them, is what easily seduces, and requires the subject to substitute das Ding for the symptom. The clothing mediates between these two memories. That is, there is no possibility that the young girl could

33 Ibid., 74.
have been aroused through her clothing. In Lacan’s interpretation, the shame and the symptom are inextricable. Clothing is relegated to the status of the symptom; it is not a resource for desire, but the means for achieving some kind of sublimation.

But where Lacan sees the symptom – the girl’s clothing - as a problem, I see it as an opportunity for a certain opening, a reading that would afford that explicitly feminine materiality its excessive quality - that would allow it to speak outside of the limits of its ethical situatedness in Lacan’s narrative. The mysterious circulation of feminine desire that Lacan attempts to trace through the material metaphor of clothing, was explicitly taken up earlier by Freud. In reading both Lacan but especially Freud, we see that the quality of the feminine cannot be thought, but is approached and can only be posed by Freud as a riddle.

In his lecture on “Femininity,” Freud exclaims: “Throughout history people have knocked their heads against the riddle of the nature of femininity.” Many feminists such as Luce Irigaray, Hélène Cixous and Julia Kristeva have noted that for Freud, woman’s sexuality is a dark continent, and have been critical of his pathologization of femininity, as well as his attempts to impose upon it a representation. These feminists argue that the feminine is unrepresentable; it is that which falls outside of discourse. And yet, while Freud has consistently presented woman as a singular site of inadequacy, difference and lack, in this lecture, he proposes that we read femininity as an unanswered question. Freud proffers, that what psychology might offer science is a more thorough investigation of why it is that feminine characteristics appear in men. He argues that it is insufficient to conclude for example, that the female sex is passive and the male sex

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aggressive because each of these characteristics are present and circulate within the sex of the other.

The feminist theorist Teresa Brennan has insisted that recent feminists have misinterpreted Freud’s initial speculations on the nature of femininity. Brennan explains that Freud recognized feminine tendencies at work in masculinity. And while Freud concludes that women tend towards being envious, narcissistic and insincere, Brennan writes that “despite his denigratory digressions, Freud’s riddle of femininity did consist of specific questions about a psychical state that restricts and inhibits both women and men.”

In the lecture on femininity, Freud intimates that woman is an irreducible operation at the heart of sexuality itself, a suggestion that perhaps takes us further away from the logic of psychoanalysis in which woman functions as a ruse for extending a discourse that can only comprehend sexual difference as lack.

In an essay on film and the masquerade, Mary Ann Doane interprets this same lecture on femininity. Focusing on the circulation of the image of hieroglyphs in Freud’s reading of a poem by Heine, Doane argues that Heine’s poem does a certain work for Freud - it “strengthens the association between women and the enigmatic, the undecipherable, that which is ‘other.’” Doane seems to be critical of Freud in the much the same manner as the French feminists. But pointing to Freud’s transposition of the particular question that closes Heine’s poem, Doane suggests that the question of woman surfaces with a different inflection in Freud. Where Heine asks, “What signifies Man?” Freud asks “What is Woman?:” Doane speculates on this transposition as follows:

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The question in Freud’s text is thus a disguise and a displacement of that other question, which in the pretext is both humanistic and theological. The claim to investigate an otherness is a pretense haunted by the mirror-effect by means of which the question of woman reflects only the man’s own ontological doubts. Doane tells us that the question “what is woman” is a disguise for “man’s own ontological doubts.” Interestingly, Freud displaces this ontological doubt onto the feminine. Extrapolating on Doane’s reading further, Freud’s question carries within itself another question - namely what is the ontology of the feminine? That is, Freud’s question is poised to ask whether “woman” is permitted to resurface or reappear as/in another form. In other words, can woman materialize wholly outside the field of representation and the psychoanalytic frame? Can woman be something other than the condition for an original lack, or the mysterious and romanticized dark enigma, an image that as some might argue, even French feminist readers of psychoanalysis have tended to recuperate.

Insofar as “what is woman?” provokes and revolves around questions of propriety, female manners and behaviors, as well as questions of sexual activity and passivity, Freud’s question remains compelling because it demands that we think about the critical development of what Judith Butler has identified as, an “ontology of gender.” Butler explains that gender ontologies establish the cultural legibility of sexual practices and constitute the normative context for the socialization of gender differences. In *Gender Trouble*, she adamantly refuses such an ontology of gender, writing:

“There is no ontology of gender on which we might construct a politics, for gender ontologies always operate within established political contexts as normative injunctions, determining what qualifies as intelligible sex, invoking and consolidating the productive constraints on sexuality, setting the prescriptive

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37 Ibid., 177.
requirements whereby sexed and gendered bodies come into cultural intelligibility.”

Freud’s initial sense of the feminine as an anoriginal source of difference at work in the masculine, fundamentally complicates the bifurcated ground of sexuality that would serve as the basis for such a gendered ontology. The implication of femininity in masculinity would interrogate precisely “what qualifies as intelligible sex.” At the same time however, Freud reduces the question of femininity once again to a normative framework that actively genders the feminine.

The discourse on femininity that Freud elaborates, both sustains and disrupts a gendered ontology that works as Butler stipulates, by “invoking and consolidating the productive constraints on sexuality.” If there is a potentially disruptive femininity that might be located within a normative ontology of gender, Freud’s discourse on femininity, though it proposes the mutual implication of the sexes, ultimately forecloses upon this possibility by insisting that psychology subsume femininity under the Oedipal rubric that translates feminine difference as lack. Interestingly this collapse happens in spite of the way in which Freud insists upon the unpredictable materiality of the sexes, which comes to figure as centrally important to his discussion of sexual difference at the outset: “…in both sexes, the other organs, the bodily shapes and tissues, show the influence of the individual’s sex, but this is inconstant and its amount variable; these are what are known as secondary sexual characteristics.”

I want to suggest that these “secondary sexual characteristics” are the stuff of the supplement. What Freud refers to as “organs, bodily shapes and tissues” are the

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39 Freud., 141.
extraesthetic, they are parergon. Apropos Derrida, these unclassifiable sexual characteristics operate as the conditional support, as the frame for the gendered body. Freud effectively tells us that these organic components of the body are essentially sexless, that they circulate within both the male and the female. Furthermore, Freud tells us that it is not possible to quantify or calculate the stuff of the body, as it is “inconstant and its amount variable.” Freud’s statement enables us to glimpse the material opening for something like an unqualified fleshy encounter between bodies. The spontaneous eruptions of the organs and tissues evince the internal mechanisms of resistance of a body constrained by a violent normativity.

I am invested in these fleshy eruptions, which I contend serve as the condition of possibility for the animation of black flesh as well as for the ungendered reduction of the black body to the status of mere flesh. I want to offer that what Butler calls “the ontology of gender,” sustained by normative functions of sexuality, is and has always been augmented and cut by the historical movement of black flesh. For according to Hortense Spillers, black flesh cannot cede to the sign of gender, and the ungendering violence that generates black flesh betrays the ontological foundation for normative sexuality as the contour for human subjectivity. And blackness realized through black flesh, is restricted from the sphere of normative humanity. The coercive force of this gendered ontology does not entirely hold in the context of racialized subjectivity. I am after a certain convergence of blackness, gender and sexuality, as well as a different configuration of the black feminine with respect to what I recognize as the neglected, overworked history of the flesh. I am interested in how the artistic expressions of a black diasporic tradition
provisionally begin and end with the unraveling and undoing of the ontology for these normative sexual economies.

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Tracing the way the feminine circulates in these critical and fictional texts, what we confront is not the problem of the feminine itself, but how to think the feminine. In other words, these texts draw us closer to the feminine as a problem for thought, so that the task for both fiction and philosophy becomes how to ascertain the quality of the feminine, and understand the form of sense that it makes. But if the problem of the feminine as such remains a stealth issue on the horizon of Western philosophical thought, the question of the black feminine remains even more elusive. My argument is that the black feminine is a purloined secret of sorts, it hides in plain sight, and this black feminine fleshy economy steals itself away from us. I am interested in its aesthetic flight, and how in catching a hold of it, if not only intermittently, the artistic practices of Faustin Linyekula, Nick Cave and Thornton Dial are differentially inflected.

My hope is that by marking and distinguishing the black feminine and the complex passage of its maternal and reproductive relays, will we able to consider the intellectual and artistic labor the feminine affords and has always afforded the collective project of black aesthetics. The work of the artists I identify here labor with and think through this neglected feminine materiality, which constantly shows up in the work of these artists as an excessive remainder. These remnants show up for us merely as surplus or residue. But, I argue that their artistic projects would not be possible without the reproductive tension of the weave, the stitch, and the seam.
My project wants to argue for the shared fugitivity of femininity and blackness, and point to their irreducible sharing, as both take on the degraded form and assume the qualities of the neglected ornament, the remainder, and the remnant. The intimate spaces of the irreducibly shared fugitive lives of blackness and femininity, are brought to the fore by the art of assemblage, a practice whose insistent call for realizing an alternative sociality rooted in the material, is expressed through the reclamation of a fleshy ecology, one that has been lost to the remains of history, but has shaped and continues to frame the particular ecology of black social life.

My project concludes with a meditation on the shared history of black female flesh, read and recovered by Hortense Spillers. The final gesture of this project, redirects us toward this flesh as the material ground for Afro-diasporic life. This resurrected flesh becomes the condition of possibility for the divergent aesthetic practices of the artists I will have discussed. Finally, I argue that those of us who continue to think, live and work within this extended Afro-diasporic tradition, are collectively indebted to black feminine flesh. Furthermore, what we live is life in the flesh. Such a life, indexes a radical openness, a community of the flesh, where we can experience what is common to us.

The final task then in part involves recasting arguably the most significant black feminist intervention by one of the most important feminist thinkers of our contemporary moment. I propose to think of Hortense Spillers as a major philosopher of the flesh and of community. In the end, I attempt to read Hortense Spillers and the French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy side by side; for together their critical labor sheds light on what I would like to call a community of the flesh, a fleshy community. I am interested in how Spillers’ account of the flesh, and her resuscitation of its history, might contribute
towards current debates about community in contemporary continental philosophy. In the final analysis I argue that the artistic renderings of Linyekula, Cave and Dial, bring the fleshy contours of radically enfolded, diasporic communal life to the fore.

Briefly, Nancy’s argument is that we are living in the midst of the disappearance of sense, specifically of the sense of community. Nancy’s philosophical investigation into community is animated by the question, ‘who are we?’ I would argue that the question of who are we, is transposed in an Afro-diasporic context where the question becomes differentially inflected. Specifically, the Heideggerian echo in the radical passivity of Nancy’s question, shifts in the Afro-diasporic context. The persistence of this resurfaced flesh that continues to ground diasporic sociality, requires that we reformulate the question as a declarative. Afro-diasporic communal life is about being collectively present – so that the question is transposed into a meditation on who we are. And the artworks I discuss are made possible by way of the grammar and logic of the ‘we’ afforded by black female flesh.

I want to maintain that each event of performance or aesthetic work inaugurates this community of the flesh. If we accept that the ground for Afro-diasporic existence is the resurfacing of that submerged history of the flesh, then Hortense Spillers affords us a critical opportunity to recover that flesh for a generative sociality that makes these artistic fleshy assemblages possible. That flesh is our form of what Nancy calls sense; it is that feminine substance, whose movement and mutation, allow us to constantly be in touch.

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FAUSTIN LINYEKULA
Fleshly Performance and the Limits of Bodily Finitude

I. The Limits of Gendered Performance

Faustin Linyekula is a choreographer from the Democratic republic of Congo whose work titled *more more more...future*, garnered much critical attention within the art community in 2011. Linyekula and the rest of his company completed a U.S. tour in 2012. *More more more...future* was performed at the REDCAT theater in Los Angeles, the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago, and the Kitchen in New York City. Linyekula returned to the U.S. in late 2012 to perform two newer works, the first titled, *Le Cargo*, and the second titled, *What is Black Music Anyway?.../Self-Portraits*. *Le Cargo* is his only solo piece, a meditative work in which Linyekula invites us to return with him to a village called Obilo. *What is Black Music Anyway?.../Self-Portraits*, is the only one of Linyekula’s works that was commissioned by the Museum of Modern Art in New York as part of its “Some Sweet Day” series, which was curated by the American choreographer Ralph Lemon. *More more more...future* is the only piece in which Linyekula performs with an entirely male cast, and it differs from the other two not simply because of its exclusively gendered composition. In *more more more...future*, Linyekula essentially forces the audience to encounter the collective force of black masculinity. In this performances he puts a range of feelings, most notably, aggression and rage, but also masculine vulnerability, on display.

In interviews, Faustin Linyekula briefly reflects on the political tensions in his homeland, while acknowledging that the violent history of the Congo is the backdrop for
Linyekula began his practice “at the time when the country had just been
renamed Zaire, reflecting the consolidation of the murderous and treacherous Mobutu
regime, that came to power in the early sixties, after the assassination of Patrice
Lamumba. Mobutu was installed by the colonialists who saw their interests threatened by
Lamumba and what he stood for.”¹ Faustin Linyekula was in exile for eight years, and
his work is framed by his own story of exile and return. He honed his craft in Europe,
before returning to the Democratic Republic of Congo to start his own company, Studios
Kabako. This personal story of exile and return gets mapped onto his productions in
interesting ways. Each of his performances experiment with, and exhibit a palimpsestic
tracing, retracing and writing over of the Congo’s volatile history. The fractured and
layered narratives he presents onstage encompass the deaths of relatives and loved ones,
as well as memories of communal celebration. Indeed, his repertoire reflects the need to
cultivate a difficult improvisational technique, one that expresses the profound
remembrance of those lost to the turmoil, corruption and the exploitation of the state, at
the same time that it acknowledges life as a practice, sustained in the midst of social
persecution.

I chose to write on Faustin Linyekula because of the complex, contradictory, and
even inconsistent ways in which gender, particularly black masculinity, gets complicated
by a feminine screen that overlays the masculine construction of the stage. I am
interested in the way femininity shows up but also sometimes hides or steals itself away
in these performances. While the form and execution of the individual performances
would seem to directly depend upon the gendered construction of the stage, I would

¹ Faustin Linyekula, quoted in Toba Singer, “An interview with Studio Kabako's Faustin Linyekula,”
Ballet Dance Magazine Online. October 2005. Available Online at:
http://www.ballet-dance.com/200510/articles/Linyekula20050900.html (accessed 12/14/12)
argue that Linyekula’s current repertoire is in fact held together, if not entirely shot through, with feminine desire – a desire for reproduction that is reflected in the fashioning and fabrication of an experimental mise-en-scène, and that staging this gendered entanglement is itself part of the performance. My argument is that Linyekula, and his accompanying dancers and performers, consistently stage and restage a reproductive desire that is reflected through the work of what I have called *gendered ungendering*, (after Hortense Spillers). Moreover, I want to insist that the labor of this ungendering becomes a subject of performance. Specifically, the work of this ungendering gives rise to the unraveling and undoing of structures of masculinity on stage, and this becomes the source for a fundamental tension in Linyekula’s choreography.

I frame the feminine here as a capacious desire, that circulates at the same time that it conceals itself within the space of performance. The feminine is shrouded by Linyekula’s experimental mise-en-scenes. On stage, the performances sometimes take up the feminine in direct ways, through the use of costume as a kind of proxy or extension of a feminine figure. But feminine desire is also invoked in less obvious ways, for example, through the surrogation of a feminine voice and its irreducible vibration in *What is Black Music Anyway?.../Self-Portraits*, which I would argue is the actual object of performance - or through the figure of the return in *Le Cargo*, in which femininity resurfaces through Linyekula’s appeal to the motherland, figured as an impossible imaginary, a recoverable place of unprecedented fulfillment, shelter, and rest. The potentiality of this feminine desire exceeds the disciplinary technique that so often gets fetishized in performance, as a sort of foundation for masculine rigor and what Peggy Phelan has called *phallocentric*
practice. I am interested in how such feminine figurations which rupture, cut and augment the movements of masculine bodies onstage, are inevitable in the context of an Afro-diasporic tradition, which is made possible by a re-inauguration of the fleshy materiality Hortense Spillers announced in “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe,” which she insisted was opened by the body of the black female slave, and occasioned by subjected femininity. I am interested in how the boundaries of performance are always traversed by this flesh, and how performance itself is cut and ruptured by this cloaked, surreptitious movement of the black feminine.

Faustin Linyekula’s work might be placed within a larger tradition of experimental black performance whose practices put pressure on our conceptual limits of performance, and our understanding of its directionality and its modes of articulation. Peggy Phelan for example has insisted that performance is oriented toward invisibility and disappearance. This argument is most clearly and emphatically articulated in her text, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*, where she writes that the staging of disappearance becomes the quintessential expression of performances committed to subverting a system of phallocentric representation. Phelan argues that that the overturning of a capitalist regime of reproducibility, is made possible by performance’s capacity “to resist the reproductive ideology of visual representation.” And according to Phelan, race, gender and sexuality are inevitably slotted into the reproductive mechanisms of capital. Performance, in her view, must be understood as “representation without reproduction,” in order for it, (performance), “to be seen as a model for another
representational economy, one in which the reproduction of the Other as the Same is not assured.  

My argument however, is that Afro-diasporic performance assures, if not demands the reproduction of the feminine within/as the masculine. The historicity of black performance might be traced back to one among many scenes - but one in particular, the cut moment of the sounded display of Aunt Hester’s scream. That moment illustrates precisely the reproductive force and reach of the scream as itself a performance, one that reconfigures historical and imagined, mangled bodies, by way of its resounding and insistive presence. As Fred Moten has insisted in his opening chapter of In the Break, refusing reproduction as a technique of desire in performance, prevents us from understand or approaching the object of black performance as itself made up of a series of relays, replays, repetitions, disseminations and variations of and on that scream. 

Extrapolating from Moten, I am interested in both this scream and its extension, as one among many possible paradigmatic instances of feminine figuration. The interwoven, re-sketched, re-figured lines of flight that map themselves through dance, trace the line of ungendered flesh delineated by Spillers. I am interested in thinking about the representational breaks that occur within dance, if we follow this fleshy line, and how we might be able to differentially approach the masculine figure in performance that the black feminine both opens and escapes.

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II. Decolonizing the Gendered Body

I am partly interested in how the “the improvisational capacities of dance offer critical recourse to another language, for surveilling alternate realities of black masculine life,” as Maurice Wallace has proposed. Black masculinity both coheres and splinters in Linyekula’s performances, and dance becomes the occasion for what Wallace calls a “kinesic decolonization of the fetishized black male body,” and the “subversion of this phantasmatic obsession” with black male physicality.¹ I would argue that this fetishized black male body, stands in as the universal body of blackness, itself graphed as composite body and forged through a set of descriptives. Taken together, these descriptives mark and remark a black body sutured to both violence and hyper-masculinity. This hyper-visible, hyper-physical, materially excessive black body has generally been understood and widely imagined or lived as captive. Dance places this body into movement. The body in dance becomes differentially opened across a set of relations in space and time.

Linyekula’s choreography labors through the dual gestures of withholding and extension. His performances reveal the dynamic power of the gesture to produce affect within dance. The affective force of the gesture possibilizes something like spirit. The gesture generates a “flash of the spirit,” a bodily event endemic to an Afro-diasporic expressive tradition. And it is in the mediation between body and gesture, in the perspiring glow of the after-image, that Linyekula figures something else, something other than a body. His choreographic interventions interpose artistic figurations of blackness between a totalizing knowledge of the body and constructions of black physicality. Instead of the black body, Linyekula’s performances offer bodily figurations

that lend themselves to re-workings of the very narratives of history and agency ascribed to black subjectivity. In the process, his dancing breaks and expands the codes of physicality and sexuality and the modes of affectivity, attributed to blackness.

In the three works, *Le Cargo*, *more more more...future*, and *What is Black Music Anyway?.../Self-Portraits*, Linyekula his dancers, musicians, and vocalists, move to open up a series of questions about blackness, violence, sexuality, masculinity, nationality, maternity and materiality, demonstrating how these are interrelated in the figurative and fugitive artistic corpus that is the black diaspora. Through an intricate choreography of utterances and gestures, screams and prayers, these performances explore the presumably unbridgeable, epistemological gaps between critiques of violence and violence, the black body and blackness, representation and the unrepresentable.

In light of these deconstructions, I am particularly interested in how the feminine is invoked on stage through figurations of sound, through song, and through a fabricated and eclectic mise-en-scène. These feminine figurations underwrite the physicality of masculine economies of performance, its material investments, and its urgent temporality, so that the physical expressions of masculinity change, and the expenditure of energy and the labor of sweat, take on different valences as they become bound up with this other bodily or figurative desire. So that at the end of each performance, what is undone is the masculine body articulated under the fetishized sign of the black body.

My argument is that this gendered subversion of which Wallace speaks occurs by way of the singular disruption of the feminine, through the work of what Spillers calls ungendering. So what dance or performance facilitates, is not only a gendered subversion; this subversion is bound up with the thorough decolonization of the gendered
body in performance, and what we see in Linyekula’s choreography is not just a performed deconstruction of masculinity. The complex scenes of gendered-ungendered figuration in Linyekula’s choreography often happen by surprise; they occur as happy accidents, or through unsuspected reversals and offer the general practice of performance another mode or measure of vitality. Dancing uttered under the sign of blackness exposes the deep continuations and relays between movement and sound, movement and materiality, spirituality and sexuality, as vital conjunctions that the diasporic figure in dance, constantly (re)traces.

III. Living With Music, Living Through Noise

_In those days, it was either live with music or die with noise, and we chose rather desperately to live._

_Ralph Ellison, Shadow and Act_

Faustin Linyekula performing _What is Black Music Anyway?.../Self-Portraits at MoMa_ (Hlengiwe Lushaba in background)
Linyekula’s most recent work titled, *What is Black Music Anyway?.../Self-Portraits*, betrays this surreptitious movement of the feminine within the space of performance, primarily through the workings of the voice. The structure of the movement of the work is contrapuntal; the tension, the improvisational push-pull between Faustin Linyekula and the prodigious South African singer, Hlengiwe Lushaba is continuously exhausted on stage. The thirty-minute performance opens with Linyekula’s own private-public meditation. He begins, laying on his side, as he gradually unwinds himself before us, slowly contracting a leg, building up the energy of one limb, with the hesitation of someone who realizes and experiences their own radical displacement.

Linyekula originally conceived this piece in the Congo, and has now transposed the work into the white-walled setting of the gallery, specifically the atrium of the Museum of Modern Art. His movements reflect the technical and physical aspects of a laborious translation. Weighted down with a special heaviness, Linyekula takes on the responsibility of being both the author and translator of his own movements. Translating his performance from the cultural setting of the Congo, the place of its conception, and now, making it available to us in the gallery space, Linyekula is tasked with the full weight of translation, which as Walter Benjamin insisted, must successfully produce an “echo of the original,” which is to say, an echo of that original life.\(^5\)

Apropos Benjamin, we might say that Linyekula’s task is not to directly translate an authentic image of life as it is in the Congo, (which is typically how critics have responded to his work). Instead, Linyekula breaks with the *perpetual present* of his homeland, by extending what Benjamin calls, the “afterlife” of Congolese experience,

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through performance. Faustin Linyekula’s dancing practice is directly concerned with the discovery of a rich and deep ancestral genealogy, whose archive is resuscitated on stage through figurations of rhythm, space and sense. When Linyekula invokes the figure of his grandmother, or the people in the neighboring village of Obilo with whom he danced, or his childhood friends with whom he has lost touch, he is invested in a another difficult kind of translation – the bodily transposition of them into the present.

Linyekula’s movements reflect a deep realization of inhabiting the “cramped, capacious” space of the museum, to draw from Nathaniel Mackey’s poetic formulation. The museum is at once a space of impossibility, for it forecloses upon a sense of authentic return, and the rediscovery of the historical circumstances that produced the work. At the same time, inhabiting and translating the piece within this white space becomes the occasion for resuscitating certain memories of the Congolese experience, which is to say, his own experience, of being in his grandmother’s room or playing in his family garden. Linyekula’s task is to somehow leave these impressions with us. His movements leave behind after-images that imprint these memories on the gallery floor and the audience is left to contemplate them.

For Linyekula the challenge becomes one of comportment: how to occupy and fill the museum atrium. Looking at MoMa’s white atrium, its space prompts me to think about what it means for black figures to occupy space, and to think about the color currency of space and how such spaces are designed precisely as an absence to be filled. So that when Linyekula and his accompanying performers fill the space, their presence becomes a confrontation even a threat to the hollowed out, white space of the museum.

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atrium. His practice involves an interrogation of the compressed space-time of the museum, and his techniques of improvisation become the condition for a performance of possibility that opens the contemporary space-time of the MoMa to the conflicted historical realities Linyekula and his performers carry within themselves, historical realities they always inhabit, which get played and worked out through the performance.

This piece opens with Linyekula laying horizontally. As his body gradually opens up, we can feel the acute tension in the disciplining of each distinct muscle in the leg, the torso, the arm, the cautiously extended fingers, the convulsive sway that moves him. Each limb begins to speak to the other. Then standing, he begins to work his way across the stage floor, as if embarking upon a line of physical questioning. The lighting in the atrium is such that the Linyekula’s shadow is projected onto one of the back walls, so that the audience experiences both the liveness of Linyekula’s performance and its ephemeral reproduction simultaneously.

It becomes apparent that Linyekula is pacing himself against his own shadow - competing with its quasi-presence, Linyekula amplifies his footwork in order to keep up with it. The shadow in turn, presses into Linyekula’s figure, pushing and competing for his liveness. This shadow that breathes is Nathaniel Mackey’s “Gnostic stranger,” whose difficult, reflexive “embrace” Linyekula wants to share with us. That difficult and im/possible embrace becomes the subject of the performance: (“Gnostic stranger, I embraced as though it were me I embraced...”

Hlengiwe Lushaba opens with the first line of Bob Marley’s song, “War”: “Until the philosophy which hold one race superior and another inferior...” That song which is

7 ibid.
itself a plea for peace in Africa in the midst of al-encompassing war, is differentially inflected in this setting.

Lushaba’s voice is, in Mackey’s words, a “voice borne up by what ails it.” I am interested in the work done by the ellipses, what is held in the phrasing - how Lushaba’s re-voicing of Marley, carries Linyekula’s elliptical performance through to some other horizon of experience. The audience is swept up in the improvisational arc of Marley’s song which here has no distinct end. The emotionalism of Lushaba’s voice works on and over Linyekula. Her voice animates the incessant movement of his back and forth, pushing him further into a deep interiority that stretches from his name, to his grandmother, to her room, to his ancestors. And then there is that moment when Linyekula’s inaudible recitation, his own chanting, catches hold of Lushaba’s voice, and links up with her song. In this experimental moment of the break, what is broken is the self-possessive movement of Linyekula’s own solo; what is opened is the fullness of the space between Linyekula’s figure and Lushaba’s voice, which is fleshed out by their interwoven performance, and the movement and materiality of their co-presence. This space is a space of irreducible sharing, that is, a space of history, memory, and flesh that they both share in and partake of.

I am interested in the feminine spacing of this voice, and the quality of this feminine voice. Ralph Ellison in *Living With Music,* 8 throws into relief some of the aesthetic fleshing out of voice that happens in *What is Black Music Anyway?* Both Ellison and Linyekula traverse and approach the object of the feminine voice and its performative enactment. In his essay, Ellison writes that music or noise is essentially a

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choice between life or death. He confesses to the reader of the noisy female neighbor who practices her singing above his apartment, who is a disturbance to him and his writing.

Ellison’s obsessive pursuit for a space of pure sound, is sketched against the backdrop of the incessant woman’s voicing. What Ellison initially does not like, is her vibration and the frequency that contributes to her volume, both of which disturb his writing and study. He tells us that her notes sift, ricochet, whistle, buzz, wheeze, trumpet, and squeak, through her floor and into his ceiling. What she creates is merely noise, in contrast to the classical recordings Ellison’s ear is used to. He tells us that this invisible feminine figure encroaches on him day and night, interrupts his thoughts, deters him from writing. He resents her because she cannot achieve the perfected pitch, because she cannot rise to the occasion of the octave. He struggles to make room for her, but he is “doomed to live within a shrieking chaos.” In fact, he defends himself against it, desperately trying to drown out her noise. Ultimately, his only relief comes in drowning her out by his record player, and a “reduction of her volume.”

This female figure that is never given a name in Ellison’s story, is, as Mary Ann Doane has argued, a representation of “the female body constituted as noise, an undifferentiated presence.” But we might recognize what Ellison disregards as noise — the sifting, ricocheting, whistling, buzzing, wheezing, trumpeting, and squeaking, - as variation, as the very stuff, or the phonic substance of improvisation. What Ellison describes as “undifferentiated” noise, I think of as playful deviations — a stretching out of the pure sound Ellison so desires.

Returning to the museum’s atrium, it is the weight of Lushaba’s voice, or more precisely, the resurfacing of Marley in and through Lushaba’s voice, the way that her raspy, texturized expressions, the screams, cries, even the quiet recitations we cannot hear, lend a new urgency to Marley’s phrasing, all of which gives us pause, and makes us ask why it is that the voice that shows up for us in *What is Black Music Anyway?*, is an extension of the discarded voice that does not and could not show up for Ellison. Indeed, this voice and its noise not only surfaces, but makes a radical clearing for Linyekula’s performance. Lushaba’s full figured fleshliness stands in stark contrast to Linyekula’s wiry frame and, her presence soaks up the gallery, the floor, the ceiling, the walls, making the air heavy. And I would insist upon her fullness as the site of desire. The promiscuous circulation of the Lushaba’s voice that both inhabits and transports Marley to us, is not only permitted here, but extends through the atrium in a different kind of way; the fleshy density of Lushaba’s vibrations and intonations give definition and meaning not only to this performance. This sensuous overlap of voice and movement, linked by a shared improvisation, does the work of answering the question of what black music is.

And so we are again returned to the work of *undgendering* and Hortense Spillers. Linyekula’s movements respond to the call of Lushaba’s voice. As he weaves in and out of her voice, and in their call and response, the assuredness of his footing is undone. Lushaba’s voice, its very capacity to *unman*, opens up the space-time of performance here, but the differentiation of her voice, also demands a rereading of Ellison. *What is Black Music Anyway?*, becomes the occasion for an unorthodox, reverse conjuration: the unmanning of men by women. Lushaba’s voice re-presents Marley at the same time that
it fleshes out Linyekula’s performance. The capacious production and reproduction of the feminine and its recasting of the black masculine here is, I argue, the labor that conditions and directs black experimental performance.

IV. Dancing the Diaspora

*Working in new forms, stepping outside tradition is like taking a solo...* The artist breathes in a heap of air, the chords, tones, and even the structure of his or her world and...And then in one concentrated moment moves and breathes out...The sound becomes a shape, a dance, a configuration of what we know that we have not seen or heard that way...The black artist makes this happen out of the most rigid traditions, in a society where our crafts are often not honored...but still with that sensibility that taught the world how to solo – solitary, yet communal, disciplined and free.

-Thulani Davis, Poem Untitled, 1982

The dancers are starting to fall. New pains, damaged feet and exhaustion. I will now need to be more careful as I plow ahead. My anatomy seems impenetrable. We continue to work in scraps of movements and ideas. There does not seem to be any other choice as I search for what I don’t understand.\(^\text{10}\)

- Ralph Lemon, Geography, Art, Race, Exile

Faustin Linyekula’s repertoire can be placed within the context of an Afro-diasporic tradition that works through problems of history and memory and its dispersed contexts of cultural displacement. In Linyekula’s three performances, dancing expresses itself as a moving towards the movement of diasporic life. I am interested in the way his choreographic practice embodies and is bodied forth by the kinesic force of the diaspora. Thulani Davis’s displaced black artist who maps the world in tandem with the aesthetic production and reproduction of her physical being, becomes the pre-condition, a blueprint of sorts for the dancer, whose musical and motional artistry depends upon such interminable breathing – the dancer inhales “the structure of his or her world,” and

exhales other “shapes, chords, tones” that become the condition for an alternative existence, a life lived in motion. And here the explicit connection between the movement of the dancer who moves and works in and through a dispersed Afro-diasporic context, and the movement of the diasporic imagination, is, I would argue, more than merely incidental, but cognate.

The imagination of Diaspora is shared by the figure in motion. Diaspora is marked by “configurations” and reconfigurations of, in Davis’ words, “what we know that we have not seen or heard.” Dancing makes the familiar anatomy of the body strange because movement disperses the body, through time and space, across broken rhythms, and irreducible beats. “Searching for what s/he doesn’t understand,” the dancer works through the uncanniness of feeling temporarily dislocated, disjointed, in touch with a physical sense of being both located and displaced within the home of the self. The instantiation of the uncanny in dance renders the anatomy of the body impenetrable and in Freud’s words, slightly “terrifying.” As Ralph Lemon tells us, new pains are felt. The dancer confronts the home of the body as uncanny precisely because, as Freud tells us it is “something long known to us and once very familiar” that is now felt strangely, when placed into motion.11

The imagination of diasporic life is itself explicitly corporeal. Brent Hayes Edwards alludes to this corporeality in his use of the term décalage, which denotes the particular disjointedness, the temporal or spatial “lag,” felt, heard and experienced in the aesthetic practice of Diaspora. Thinking about “deferred, aborted, or declined” black transnational projects, Edwards employs décalage as a term to underscore the

“unevenness or differentiation…in the very weave of the culture.” “Décalage,” he writes, “is proper to the structure of diasporic ‘racial’ formation, and its return in the form of disarticulation – the points of misunderstanding, bad faith, unhappy translation – must be considered a necessary haunting.”\textsuperscript{12} If we think about these disarticulations, dislocations and displacements as “a necessary haunting” of a diasporic aesthetic, we understand why it is that Linyekula’s figuration of memory, history and ancestry, occurs by way of a disarticulated and disjointed corporeality.

Building on Stuart Hall’s concept of articulation, Edwards extends the term décalage to encompass physical and motional workings of the joint, “the two-ness of the joint,” “that curious place [that] is both the point of separation (the forearm from the upper arm for example) and the point of linkage.” I want to claim that décalage denotes a critical gap, whose larger spatialization becomes the condition for diasporic experience. As Edwards explains, “it is exactly such a haunting gap or discrepancy that allows the African diaspora to ‘step’ and to ‘move’ in various articulations.”\textsuperscript{13} In light of Edwards’ description, with respect to dance then, the disjointed quality of Afro-diasporic practice is not merely an effect of artistic expression; these disarticulations are repeatedly taken up as the foundations for a shared praxis.

I want to suggest that dancing cultivates the shared emergence of what the philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy has called, a sense of the world. Nancy is invested in a philosophical project that concerns the recovery of lost sense, which for him depends upon the understanding that, “there is not subject and object, but, rather, there are sites

\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., 15.
and places, distances: a possible world that is already a world.”

I am interested in the way dance possiblizes a form of diasporic sense that takes dispersed “sites, places and distances” as the condition of possibility for Afro-diasporic being. Moreover, I want to think about an Afro-diasporic tradition as it both pre-figures and animates a collectively shared sense of the world. I would argue that the concept of diaspora itself is shaped and contoured by the disarticulated and displaced expressions of sites, places and distances, and that these in turn, have always figured as the conditions of possibility for the inauguration of what we call the subject. Furthermore if making or recovering lost sense involves re-worlding via disarticulation, I would claim that the black diaspora has always already and continuously been involved in the imagination of “a possible world that is already a world.”

We might then think of dancing as the occasion for such diasporic worlding, and consider the form of sense that specifically emerges from such alternative worlding. To world dance is to trace an epistemic lineage, to translate into performance those global experiences that create alternative spaces through which we might re-imagine forms of sociality beyond the nation and the state. Afro-diasporic being might be understood not as a subject of a particular world consciousness, but as a name and a theoretical object for thought, one that illuminates an ethical demand, an ethic of sharing, or what Jean-Luc Nancy elsewhere calls an ethic of partage, whose subject I take up towards the end of the chapter.

V. Dancing as Anti-Colonial Praxis

Faustin Linyekula’s choreographic practice may be placed in the context of dance as a form of diasporic worlding, conceived of as an extended social practice that

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necessarily moves to address current formations of state power, violence, nationalism, and other social oppressions. His dancing breaks from the totalizing political narratives he encounters, and he imagines a choreographic practice capable of erecting alternative forms of sociality in the midst of cultural struggle. Distinguishing between dance and dancing, Randy Martin has perhaps most succinctly explained the importance of dancing as a means of negotiating political life. For Martin, dancing is mobilization; it is a mediating concept between dance and politics. Martin employs dancing as a critical concept, which reflects and refers to social practices that are articulations of political life, but in excess of politics. Dancing as a critical concept, allows us to expand upon our understand of choreographic invention; dancing offers itself as “a theory of mobilization” enabling us to approach what Martin calls, “the unworkable divide between agency and history.”

The line of inquiry Martin pursues, necessarily traces or follows from another philosophical problem, which is the one that Andre Lepecki has outlined for us in thinking about the ontology of movement and moving subjects as central to the narrative structure of modernity. Pointing to what he calls modernity’s “kinesthetic politics,” Lepecki, drawing on the work of Peter Sloterdijk, argues that the politics of movement espoused by modernism signaled “the militarization of subjectivity,” a mode of subject formation inextricably bound up with “widespread kinetic performances of tayloristic efficacy, efficiency and effectiveness.” My question is whether black dance and performance is necessarily informed by other ontological limits. I want to suggest that

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dancing in the context of an Afro-diasporic tradition, necessarily bypasses what Andre Lepecki calls modernity’s “kinesthetic politics.” Moreover, the improvisational strategies of black performance complicate Lepecki’s understanding of a “being-towards-movement” that would affirm the political ontology of modernity.  

If Africa and blackness have largely been constructed as outside the space-time of modernity and outside of politics – indeed, if there can be no such thing as an African body politic, then we might say that blackness is strategically immune to the political efficacy of modernity. It follows then that black figures in movement are therefore not bound by the laws of movement immanent to that modernity, laws of motion that serve as the ontological foundation for a modernity obsessed with the control of movement and over mobility, as Lepecki has argued.

Specifically Faustin Linyekula and his community of dancers and performers, are embedded in the history of that colonial modernity and its violent curtailing of black bodies. The sovereign colonial state, not only delimited what aesthetic practice could be, but the regulation of black bodies by the political state, compels me to think about what it means to impose power on a body, and moreover, how the constant and total subjection of the body to politics, inevitably gives rise to alternative forms of movement. Dancing under conditions of constraint becomes an expression of creative flight. And the very capacity to form community under these political conditions itself becomes a subject of performance.

Faustin Linyekula’s choreography stages a collective resistance to bodily capture, specifically through series of possession sequences, in which the presupposed, conscious subject, is carried off from the body s/he presumably possesses. These possession

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17 ibid., 7.
sequences culminate in a release or total exhaustion of the body, with the dancer inhabiting something other than a body. By foregrounding possessive rituals such as these, Linyekula makes an appeal to the spiritual and/or supernatural world. This supernatural, spiritual appeal removes the dancer from the situated place or environment of the stage, and transports them to another mental and physical state. Importantly, this spirited transportation also facilitates the deconstruction of those structures of personality and the constraints of personhood imposed upon the colonized, as the conditions for black subjection.

We see these possession sequences in all three of Faustin Linyekula’s performances. In both *Le Cargo* and *What is Black Music Anyway?*, Linyekula’s quiet recitations, his talking or chanting to himself, is a means of achieving physical and psychic release. As he chants, runs and circles the stage, amplifying his movements, we understand that in this self-induced, hyper-affective, stream-of-consciousness state, the body is thinking.

But it is in *more more more...future*, that a collective performance of possession takes on a different and urgent expression. These most conspicuous of these possession sequences, takes place in the constitution of a dance circle. In the intimacy of this circle, bodies close in on one another, and, in the context of the performance, the collective appeal to a shared ancestral lineage is expressed as an open secret. Interestingly it is Frantz Fanon who identifies the dance circle as “a permissive circle,” that “protects and empowers” the colonized. In the same breadth he at once invokes dance as one of the most malignant forms of cultural primitivism, whose expression leads inevitably to the
failure of the anti-colonial praxis. Yet despite this disavowal, Fanon’s description betrays a peculiar investment in the body of the colonized as he writes:

Another aspect of the colonized’s affectivity can be seen when it is drained of energy by the ecstasy of dance. Any study of the colonial world must include an understanding of the phenomena of dance and possession. The colonized’s way of relaxing is precisely the muscular orgy during which the most brutal aggressiveness and impulsive violence are channeled, transformed and spirited away. The dance circle is a permissive circle. It protects and empowers. At a fixed time and a fixed date, men and women assemble in a given place, and under the solemn gaze of the tribe launch themselves into a seemingly disarticulated, but in fact extremely ritualized pantomime, where the exorcism, liberation and expression of a community are grandiosely and spontaneously played out through shaking of the head, and back and forward thrusts of the body. Everything is permitted in the dance circle.  

In Fanon’s view, dancing contributes to the cultural degradation and the inherent political failure of colonized subjectivity. But at the same time that he provides this description, Fanon also underscores the erotic potential of the dance circle. Remaining almost obsessively attentive to the micro-movements of the body, Fanon’s description details the way this space is excited by a collective expression of the muscles. Despite his denigrating tone, Fanon gestures toward performance and possibility evidenced by a body at once sensitive to the constraints that attempt to hold it in place, and to its potential capacities. Fanon reading of so-called primitive dance, uncovers the body of the colonized as an archive for something else.

In Fanon’s description dancing is tied to possession, understood as a performance that yearns for bodily transcendence. I want to claim that in surpassing the limits of the conscious physical self, the one possessed performs a kind of deconstruction on the body, so that what transpires through possession, is the figurative exhaustion of the body itself. The figure that emerges from such a performance, falls outside the bounds of normative

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of subjectivity. Inducing this spirited away-ness, becomes a strategy of the colonized, that reflects the unbounded desire to break free from the requirements of normative humanity, imposed on the colonized, but from which s/he is also barred. Robert Farris Thompson has identified the ecstatic instance of breaking the beat as the specific moment that marks the break into the world of the ancestors and into the possession state.¹⁹ I want to suggest that this interruption of the normative self, and the induction of that self into a state of possession, designates a radical epistemological break from normative being. This break allows the colonized to assume an alternative form of consciousness. The performances of possession provide glimpses into the interiority of those presumed not to possess an interior.

My argument is that inhabiting this alternative possessive state bypasses the aspiration toward universal humanity. Sylvia Wynter has claimed, apropos Fanon, that this universal concept of the human, “in its Western-bourgeois or ethno-class conception” cannot hold or be maintained for the Black, his cultural practices, or his mode of consciousness. What Wynter calls the sociogenic principle (derived from Fanon’s sociogeny), is refracted through Fanon’s phenomenology. Wynter is invested in the philosophical inability to think the human – to think about what it means to be human and to know oneself as human - outside the frame of the Western bourgeois subject. Wynter explains further how the imposition of universal selfhood is part of an ontogenetic project that constitutes itself as a kind of imperialism:

what Fanon enables us to see by analysis, is not only the way in which the culturally imposed symbolic belief system of the French bourgeois sense of self, also structures the sense of self of the colonized French Caribbean middle class Negro. But also, that it is a sense of self for which, it is the notion of “acting like

a nigger," and thereby of lapsing into non-being that...serves as the internalized sanction system which motivates his/her behaviors, thereby functioning in the same way as a “garrison controls a conquered system.”

Wynter’s explication is an extension of Fanon’s critical interdiction of the human: if the “lapse into non-being,” or the “zone of non-being” that Fanon presents in Black Skin, White Masks, is a movement antithetical to subjectivity, then it is not the bourgeois self, but the alternative organization and constitution of the self, that gets colonized.

The practices of the Vodunist elaborated by Sylvia Wynter, allow us to understand precisely what occurs in the possession sequences in more more more...future. Linyekula performs a ritual of soul snatching, that, in the practice of the Vodun looms as a particular threat, a lapse into a kind of abyss, a “zone of non-being.” Wynter likens the threat of the loss of selfhood, what Fanon theorizes as a perilous fall into non-being, to the threat of zombification for the Vodunist:

…the imperative of refraining from what were proscribed as anti-social behaviors was sanctioned by the fear on the part of its subjects, of being transformed into a zombie as punishment by the secret society of Bizango whose members were and are entrusted with the role of punishing such behaviors. For if "normal" being, or identity, was/ is for the Vodunist, to be anchored in one's ti bon ange (i.e., "that component of the Vodun soul that creates character, will-power, personality") to be made into a zombie was/ is made to become, by means of the administration of a powerful toxin tetrodoxin which induces a physical state enabling the victim to be misdiagnosed as dead, cataleptic, as a state believed to be caused by the loss of one's "ti bon ange", of one's soul. While, because for the Vodunist, once robbed of one's soul, the body is but an empty vessel, subject to the commands of an alien force, who would now maintain "control of the ti bon ange," the threat of experiencing zombification is the threat of a death more real than physical death itself.

The Vodunist labors under the threat of being evacuated of personality, of becoming a zombie – a thing whose outer form displays human qualities but possesses no human interior, no soul, no anchor for personality. The practice of the Vodun offers itself as a

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21 ibid.
challenge to the way that the body, animated more particularly by the soul, provides the structure around which personality is organized. In these rituals of possession and repossession that Faustin Linyekula stages for us, the assumed link between the suffering soul as a condition or measure for the depth and richness of human experience and the conditions of black subjecthood is dramatically thrown into question.

I have been arguing that the work of ritual and the performance of possession, is essential and crucial for Linyekula’s choreographic invention, and that the state of being possessed is itself a transgression of the boundaries of acceptable humanity. To be clear, in these instances, a spirit is not overtaking a body, but to echo Fanon, what we witness is a being “spirited away.” In other words, it is not that the body is taken over or subsumed by a force external to it, but that the figure in dance becomes sensitized to the spiritual capacities the normative body has been forced to suppress.

More more more…future offers us a glimpse of what Fanon means by “the ecstasy of dance.” Fanon theorizes what it means for the colonial subject, not to be tired, but more precisely, to be exhausted. When Fanon writes, “Another aspect of the colonized’s affectivity can be seen when it is drained of energy by the ecstasy of dance,” he is referring to the form of physical exhaustion of all those who participate in the dance circle. Exhaustion is collectively felt. Dancing mobilizes a collective striving toward ecstasy, which involves the eventual exorcism and liberation of the imposed effects of colonialism upon the body.

Linyekula’s dancers convey a different quality of bodily exhaustion, thoroughly inflected by the language of possibility, not finality, as Fred Moten has recently theorized. Moten reads Deleuze, essay “On Exhaustion” on Samuel Beckett, extending
the formulation that being exhausted is not reducible to being tired. Moten explains that Deleuze turns our attention to the relationship between exhaustion and possibility. Extrapolating from Moten, we might say dancing becomes a means of achieving an alternative point of exhaustion. The body’s capacity to act and perform is not an autonomous or sovereign achievement, but is bound up with the impossibility to perform. The dancing body realizes through movement that it cannot attain or experience the whole of the possible – it exhausts itself. The figure in motion, is for Linyekula, not a depleted or useless figure, but one capable of making more energy, more noise - it is a productive machine. To exert all of one’s energy is to make oneself exhausted; it is to give up on the possible as a strategy for politics. As Moten has explained: “If politics is the art of the possible, and if the possible denotes rational forms of acting, communicating and existing in the world, then revolution occurs when a people can no longer possibilize. So that anti-colonial or anti-imperial struggle happens on the other side of possible – on the side of exhaustion.” As Deleuze writes, “…you are not passive: you press on, but towards nothing.” To be spent in this context then, is not to be totally worn out, but to be “spirited away” in Fanon’s words, from the very complex we call the body. For Linyekula, Dancing forges a path to an alternative sociality. “It is the colonized’s way of relaxing.”

**VI. Biopolitical Inversion**

Faustin Linyekula’s choreographic invention struggles to construct an alternative narrative to the biopolitical narrative that has been imposed upon blackness. This

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23 Gilles Deleuze., 4.
biopolitical narrative, which has its roots in Belgian colonialism, has a deeply complex and extended history particularly in the Congo. I will ultimately argue that Linyekula’s artistry, indeed the movement and direction of his entire repertoire, marks an intervention into and an overturning of the very conditions for biopoliticality and the philosophy of sovereignty upon which the biopolitical rests. This is because, as I will show, Linyekula’s theatrical display and invention of an aesthetic blackness that defies the ontology of universal humanity imposed upon from without, both marks and ruptures the impossible point at which subjectivity is foisted on the subaltern black subject by a sovereign order that demands that subject’s dual inclusion and exclusion. As Denise Ferreira Da Silva has argued, “the sociohistorical logic of exclusion (re)produces the post-Enlightenment version of the subject.”

My argument is that Linyekula’s artistry imagines and aspires to something other than universal humanity, or what Da Silva calls the “the transparent ‘I,’” defined in her terms as, “Man, the subject, the ontological figure in post-Enlightenment European thought.”

However, I find it necessary to first sketch this narrative, which identifies and targets the black body as a site of political violence and violation, as it develops a body logics that is inextricably bound up with colonial and neo-colonial practices of biopolitical racism. Ironically, the biopolitical state constructs a black body as a targeted site of control, at the same time that it erases blackness, because the state recognizes the potentiality of blackness as an ongoing project of collective creation beyond immediate conditions of oppression. The dilemma faced by the political state, is that the

25 Ibid., xvi.
exploitation of blackness as pure physiognomic difference, is central to biopoliticality, but also a potential threat to the state’s structures of power.

In the context of this biopolitical hold over life, the black body becomes an available form of representation. Sylvia Wynter has explained how the organizing principle of the modern era was “the mode of the subject,” put into place by the mechanism of representation. The subjective representation of the black body was central to a larger economy of representation in which African physiognomy signaled the absence of humanity. And this physiognomic reduction enabled universal processes of socialization. Wynter writes:

…the African physiognomy, culture, way of life, and traditional modes of rationality have come to signify, as they have been discursively instituted to do, the outermost limits and nec plus ultra sign of barely human being. The central mechanism at work here, therefore, was and is that of representation. Its role in the processes of socialization and therefore, in the regulation both at the individual and at the collective levels of the ensemble of behaviors – affective, actional, and perceptual-cognitive – is central. For its is by means of the strategies of representation alone that each human order and its culture can be brought into being as such a “form of life” and third level of human, and therefore languaging existence.26

From Wynter we come to understand how it was that the reduction of the African to “the barely human being” justified a sovereign regime of power that brought together complex configurations of state power and racist colonial practices. These practices facilitated the political regulation and restriction of life that continues in Africa today on a global scale. The regulation over black life can be traced to the exercise of colonial power in the context of modern sovereignty.

For Faustin Linyekula, the stage itself is the metaphoric extension of the sovereign political state. I want to think about dancing as a means of political

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mobilization that exceed the state’s expression of politics, which is only ever politics as violence. I am interested in the way dancing interdicts a long history of sovereign political representation and violent social consolidation. For Linyekula the very mechanisms of theatrical display link up with forms of state control. Dancing must necessarily be an intervention into the forms of political imagining, and Linyekula’s intervention into the production of a visual knowledge of looking at the other, signals a distinctly anti-colonial praxis.

Attuned to the long-lasting effects of European colonialism in Africa, Linyekula understands that the eradication of the historical conditions of colonial oppression is an unworkable but necessary desire. In an interview with the dance scholar Brenda Dixon Gottschild, he remarked: “Congo and many African countries are still colonial states. Because a colonial state is one where legitimacy comes from outside, and political legitimacy in the Congo depends on who your ‘godfathers’ are, outside—in Washington, Paris, or Brussels… ‘The moment you take into account the history of perception, you start realizing that even the image we have of ourselves is shaped by the outside.’”

His productions expose a deeply colonial history of perception by transforming the stage into an experimental zone in which old and new forms of imperial power are exposed as configurations of space.

The stage is not a politically neutral space in which one can assume to tell a story. The telling of a story has to constantly be contested, negotiated and re-negotiated, and it is through dance that Linyekula allows us to think about the political construction of the proscenium stage, as a colonial apparatus replicated by President Mobutu and his dictatorial regime. In the same interview he emphasizes: “It’s not just a stage [the

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concert stage] where any story can unfold. Depending on where you come from, your story cannot be told in the same way. That [stage] space is not mutual. It’s charged with someone’s history that became your history because, *for me, the proscenium theater was part of Congo’s culture when I was born.”* Mobutu was the main patron of the Zairian National Theater.”

Linyekula asks that we think of the proscenium setting and its spatialization not as a neutral construction, but as an apparatus central to visual, representational and political regimes of power and knowledge. The proscenium stage is conventionally understood as the space in front of the curtain, the frame or arch separating the stage from the auditorium, through which the action of a performance is viewed. It provides a sense of spectacle and illusion for the audience whose enjoyment is always predicated on a relationship of pure transparency in relation to the stage. Linyekula explains that the stage has been constructed from a Western European vantage point; it is the locus for the consolidation of both vision and power:

The proscenium theater is a clear extension of Europe—a colonial stage. You have the space for the monarch and you create the perspective from that angle. You define everything according to this person’s eye. The world is organized from his perspective. The moment you take these [African traditional] dances and put them on that stage, and you’re saying you’re celebrating your national identity, and you don’t take into account the question of whose point of view are you constructing it from, then something’s wrong from the onset.

The stage is then not merely derivative of the epistemological organization of the modern world, but becomes the very condition of possibility for the production of a thoroughly scientific knowledge of the other. The viewer is the transcendental subject permitted to see, to know, to carefully observe the other, to catalogue his expressive capacities. The proscenium functions as the live extension of the range of Western aesthetic experiences, dominated by an anthropological gaze at the “other” as Martin Jay,
Johannes Fabian and Stephen Tyler have suggested. In all of his works, Linyekula’s staging provokes “the tunnel vision of colonial scrutiny,” a mode of vision that is both epistemologically grounded in violence, and for which violence becomes salient to a colonial gaze.28

Faustin Linyekula introduces us to an experimental poetics that works to shift our modes of perception. Linyekula builds an alternative archive for the body that re-examines its normative corporeality. This alternative archive tells different stories about the black body and opens up other possibilities for it. The stage becomes a generative space, an experimental apparatus that signals a shift from technologies of vision to the erotics of movement, a space open to new desires. Linyekula’s technique becomes an intervention into the architectural structures of performance. Linyekula demonstrates that the decolonization of the complex called the black body depends upon dismantling the historical, epistemological and political archives of colonial modernity that cast that body as useless at the same time that it recognizes and exploits it as a singular source of surplus. Understanding the depth and historical complexity of that colonial history in which the black body gets constructed as both valued and valueless surplus, as well as the philosophical logics that would enable the black body’s physiological reduction, are both central and crucial, if we are to understand the significance of Linyekula’s aesthetic interrogation of these extended structures of colonial power.

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The presence of Belgian power in Africa established itself as a precedent for the thoroughgoing exploitation of black populations for their material and imaginative resources. In *King Leopold’s Ghost*, Adam Hochschild describes the reign of King Leopold II, and the Belgian imperial regime in the Congo, as a specific colonial moment that witnessed the projection of European sovereignty onto the world stage. Hochschild’s analysis suggests that the contemporary political problems that appear to be internal to the Congo, and presumed to be the result of intra-state conflict, are in fact the residual effects of modern European sovereignty, and recoup many of its same epistemic and structural problems. European and Western imperiousness is interlinked with a series of contemporary situations, from the wars in Rwanda, humanitarian efforts to assist refugees at state borders, to the current civil wars in the Congo. All of these have effectively led to the economic, military and political suppression of African life.

King Leopold II’s reign was an expression of the consolidation of modern political sovereignty, and the sovereignty of the Belgian colonial state served as the hallmark of European “modernity.” But Hochschild writes that King Leopold, “…never set foot in the Congo. There is something very modern about that too, as there is about the bomber pilot in the stratosphere, above the clouds, who never hears screams or sees shattered homes or torn flesh.”

From Hochschild we learn that it is King Leopold II’s figurative omnipresence supplies colonial sovereignty its political efficacy. Modern sovereignty is the exercise of authority at a distance, at a total remove from the atrocities carried out in the colony, from the specificity of the violence done to black life, black flesh. This effected distance culminates in the imperiousness of modern sovereignty.

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Importantly, this colonial moment marks the enclosure of sovereign state authority, and an increase in the biopolitical management over black life. The colonial state insulates itself from the colony, which it penetrates and isolates in order to control it politically, economically and socially. The geographical, spatial and figural distance the colonial state effects is what makes it modern, and justifies its consistent practice of subjugation as a mark of political world progress. It is this form of sovereignty that contours a political modernity immune to black suffering precisely because, echoing Wynter, it regards “African physiognomy, culture, and ways of life” as “barely human being,” and relegated that life outside modernity and therefore outside the intellectual and temporal scope of politics per se.

Sovereignty is a regime of power that condones state sanctioned racism, which we understand as no longer simply a form of neo-colonialist subjective belief, but a part of the sovereign exercise of what Michel Foucault calls biopower, who marks racism as a real enabling power. Biopolitical racism facilitates the elimination of millions of Africans, whose death must be understood within the context of this biopolitical economy. Jasbir Puar has written that death in the biopolitical order is “something permanent, something that slips into life, perpetually gnaws at it, diminishes it and weakens it,” and that “In biopower, propagating death is no longer the central concern of the state, staving off death is... Death is never a primary focus; it is a negative translation of the imperative to live, occurring only through the transit of fostering life. Death becomes a form of collateral damage in the pursuit of life.”

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Foucault tells us that the sovereign power of the state to kill effectively rescues biopolitics for sovereignty since the state needs not only a justification, but a technology to carry out its mass killings. According to Foucault, state racism has two functions:

…the first function of racism: to fragment, to create caesuras within the biological continuum addressed by biopower. Racism also has a second function. Its role is, if you like, to allow the establishment of a positive relation of this type: The more you kill the more deaths you will cause” or “The very fact that you let more die will allow you to live more.” …On the one hand, racism makes it possible to establish a relationship between my life and the death of the other that is not a military or warlike relationship of confrontation, but a biological-type relationship. The fact that the other dies, does not mean simply that I live in the sense that his death guarantees my safety; the death of the other, the death of the bad race, of the inferior race (or the degenerate, or the abnormal) is something that will make life in general healthier; healthier and purer.\(^\text{31}\)

Giorgio Agamben’s claim is that what Foucault says about ‘life’ lacks a sufficient grasp of the dynamic between biopolitics and life. In Agamben’s view, Foucault’s misses that politics, the biopolitical, belongs to the very life it eventually seeks to annihilate. As Andrew Norris has put it: “…in Agamben’s analysis, biopolitics fulfills the potential of its origin in turning against that origin. Hence Agamben argues against Foucault that life in some sense always has been the definitive object of politics.”\(^\text{32}\)

The essential schism between Agamben and Foucault over the question of life and death shadows another problem, namely, the inability to think or ask about the quality of that life that existed prior to this biopolitical order. I would argue that philosophical investigations into the relationship between life, death, politics and the biopolitical, need to be thought alongside another problem, specifically, the devaluation, and eventual excision of black life from the historical consciousness of the West. I would argue that the genre of the historical narrative presents black life precisely as an object of


extermination, as a being-towards-death. My argument is that the systematic regulation 
of death in the biopolitical order is broken by the extra-political vitality, creativity and 
inventiveness of black diasporic existence.

Agamben theorizes that the state of emergency is the “the space of exception,” the 
place within the normative political order where the law is temporarily suspended - the 
place in which bare life becomes sacred. But the modern biopolitical order Agamben 
describes, is wedged by something irreducibly exterior to it, the provisional logic of the 
social that frames and disrupts this order from without. Specifically, the problem of 
black sociality is the state of emergency that suspends the order of the biopolitical. The 
dialectical logic of power and resistance that sustains the biopolitical order, is fractured 
by the very thing it aims to regulate.

In order to even think about something as seemingly non-essential as dancing, as 
a regime of sociality that exceeds politics, we must turn to Foucault, for whom life exists 
prior to politics. Biopolitics is in his view precisely that which “brought life and its 
mechanisms into the realm of explicit calculations and made knowledge-power an agent 
of transformation of human life.”33 Biopolitics marks a particular threshold of political 
modernity that places life at the center of political order. In the History of Sexuality, 
Foucault identifies a life-administering power dedicated to reinforcing, monitoring and 
optimizing the forces of control over life. While it is biopolitics and the biological that 
come to matter more with respect to the management of life, this is only because the

concept of life exceeds the bio-political limitations of the law as the purest expression of state power.\textsuperscript{34}

Agamben explains how it is precisely the law that is the animating force for violence. He demonstrates this by drawing on Walter Benjamin’s notion of sovereign violence, founded upon the dialectic between lawmaking violence and law preserving violence. In Benjamin’s formulation, a non-specified ‘third figure’ would need to break this dialectic.\textsuperscript{35} Agamben attempts to make sense of Benjamin, telling us that the law can only be understood by virtue of a (divine) absence, or what Agamben will refer to as a “zone of indistinction” between outside and inside, between law and nature, or, law and violence.\textsuperscript{36} Here is Agamben:

\begin{quote}
    The root of divine violence is perhaps to be sought precisely in this absence. The violence exercised in the state of exception clearly neither preserves nor simply posits law, but rather conserves it in suspending it, and posits it in excepting itself from it. In this sense, sovereign violence, like divine violence, cannot be wholly reduced to either one of these forms of violence whose dialectic the essay undertook to define.\textsuperscript{37}
\end{quote}

My argument is that Agamben’s logic of the exception is in fact the logic of the sovereign exception. In other words, the fundamental error Agamben commits, is to “rehearse a sociohistorical logic of exclusion…[that] (re)produces a black subject as a pathological (affectable) I, a self-consciousness hopelessly haunted by its own impossible desire for transparency.”\textsuperscript{38} For Linyekula, the black figure in performance becomes the source for an alternative means of organizing Afro-diasporic existence, precisely outside

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{36} ibid., 64.
\textsuperscript{37} ibid.
\textsuperscript{38} Denise Ferreira Da Silva, Toward a Global Idea of Race, 8.
\end{flushleft}
of the parameters of what Da Silva refers to as the “transparent subject.” Faustin Linyekula turns Agamben’s narrative on its head, so that it is life, specifically black life that presents itself as a limit and a challenge to bio-politicality. Black life is at the root of divine violence, not sovereign power. Black life both is and is not legible as Agamben’s “zone of indistinction” – it figures as a threshold, but it is also that which cuts the violence of exception that gives rise to the law.

When Linyekula bodies forth black life as the thing that potentially uproots sovereign power, he does this in a language available to him, through a difficult grammar of figuration linked to a performative violence that remains, and to a certain degree, must remain unthought. And when Linyekula asks us to consider this grammar as the foundation for an anti-colonial praxis, he does so, paradoxically by drawing on the trope of black violence.

Yet the creative conditions that enable the expression of this performative counter violence continue to elude us. Frank Wilderson claims that performative violence is a mere epiphenomenon of the real, structural violence that underwrites black existence. Black existence is shot through with what he calls “objective vertigo,” a symptom of disorientation that accompanies living a life thoroughly conditioned by structural violence. Here he distinguishes between subjective and objective vertigo:

Subjective vertigo, no doubt: a dizzying sense that one is moving or spinning in an otherwise stationary world, a vertigo brought on by a clash of grossly asymmetrical forces...Subjective vertigo is vertigo of the event. But the sensation that one is not simply spinning in an otherwise stable environment, that one’s environment is perpetually unhinged stems from a relationship to violence that cannot be analogized. This is called objective vertigo, a life constituted by disorientation rather than a life interrupted by disorientation. This is structural as opposed to performative violence. Black subjectivity is a crossroads where vertigoes meet, the intersection of performative and structural violence.

Wilderson’s concept of vertigo is useful for a discussion of Linyekula’s practice, which channels this “dizzying” feeling of vertigo through physical, corporeal dispersal. But for Wilderson, there is no escape from this sweeping disorientation. He goes on:

> Black peoples’ subsumption by violence is a paradigmatic necessity, not just a performative contingency. To be constituted by and disciplined by violence, to be gripped simultaneously by subjective and objective vertigo, is indicative of a political ontology which is radically different from the political ontology of a sentient being who is constituted by discourse and disciplined by violence when s/he breaks with the ruling discursive codes.\(^4\)

But Wilderson’s distinction between subjective and objective vertigo is premised on an understanding of black life as always already experienced as disrupted rather than disruptive, an assertion I would want to resist here because it enables Wilderson to extend an idea of the black subject subsumed by violence as the basis for a political ontology that forecloses the possibility of desire and surplus, or surplus desire that exists in excess of the black subject.

And it is desire as surplus that becomes the subject of Faustin Linyekula’s choreographic invention. This expressive surplus is intimately connected to the co-articulation of celebration and dissent within a black diasporic tradition. The simultaneous enactment of celebration and dissent, foregrounds the fundamental difficulty of thinking about resistance within dance as itself a form of effortless resistance. The problem is the assumption of these as mutually exclusive forms of expression, as Thomas DeFrantz explains:

> the black community” is assumed to be a coherent group of participants in dance performances which hold a largely unmodulated connotation of celebration. Performances viewed by cultural outsiders are likely born of duress and discomfort; ironically, they also provide a largely unmodulated measure of pleasure for an immobile audience. The transcript of protest in social dance remains “private,” read and understood only by dancers initiated into black social

\(^4\)Ibid., 4.
dance styles. According to these writers, it is only during the 20th century, amidst burgeoning civil rights activism, that the dancing black body is allowed a self-conscious ability to celebrate and protest simultaneously. Only at this historical juncture can an immobile [white] audience adequately comprehend the transcript of protest inscribed within black social dance movement.\(^{41}\)

Apropos DeFrantz’s assertion I want to argue that this dual emphasis on celebration and dissent is the expressive ground for black aesthetic life. It is, as DeFrantz says, the black beat made visible. In this context, Linyekula’s performances are not about making gratuitous violence, but about the insistence that accompanies a performance of hope.

In the performance titled, more more more...future, Linyekula, who decrees positivity and power, even “celebration,” in the midst of political and social struggle, imagines a future in which the incorrigible and corrupt operations of states, the violence precipitated by existing state formations, and the eclipsed desires of the Congolese people, are re-coursed by a counter violence – a violence of innovation, that conceives of the common, the space of the people, as a collection of styles, movements, and performances of cultural commemoration. More more more...future, emphasizes how central strategies of improvisation are to the movement of struggle. And Linyekula deploys contact improvisation to develop a choreography that culminates in an alternative mapping of the space of performance.

Violence is staged through pushing, shoving, crashing into the physical space of another, openly raging or screaming. Dancing demands that we examine the improvisational push as a means of questioning, and the scream as a means of authorizing the absurd in the face of rational regimes of consciousness. And Linyekula makes visible the vocalization of something irreducible to anger, the force of the scream, as the

differentiation of the voice in motion. Linyekula thematizes this violence as a general survival tactic. In the interview with Gottschild, he speaks about improvisation as both a social and artistic imperative:

When I asked how much of the work was improvised, how much choreographed, he launched into a politicized, though personal, response, claiming that every Congolese is, by necessity, an improviser. “We don’t know what tomorrow’s made of, not even where the next meal will come from, because you need to improvise to get to that. Improvisation comes as a state of being and the only way to survive. You make plans, but they never go beyond a certain point in time….Death is so much a part of our lives that you can’t project yourself too far in the future. If you want to survive, you need to know how to improvise.”

His technique is culturally specific, inspired by the realities of social life in the Congo, that compel him to work from within a certain set of cultural and social restrictions. Linyekula is trying to develop a new vocabulary for survival that builds on energy, rhythm, and physical presence, as elements of social survival.

Linyekula and his dancers put into practice what Susan Foster describes as the ability to think on one’s feet, to adapt one’s movement and directionality accordingly. Foster describes the structural improvisation in the choreography of Richard Bull in the later 1960s, who rather than treating improvisation as a mere preparation vehicle for the formal process of dance-making, stressed improvisation as itself a performance form that worked by synthesizing known and unknown materials and gestures. Such improvisation “involved the merging of bodies, a strategy that tested dancers through strategies of noncompliance and abrupt shifts of direction.” Contact improvisation prompted dancers to focus on varieties of falling, redirecting their weight in relation to other dancers, or sliding or rolling across and over other dancers. Dancers were asked to “let the dance happen,” and “developed mutual trust support and a quick wittedness to dive into each

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42 Faustin Linyekula quoted in Gottschild, “Outside the Box With Faustin Linyekula, 5.
other’s action and move wherever it took them.\textsuperscript{43} Lifting from these improvisational techniques, Linyekula highlights a fundamental irony, that one must first learn how to improvise in order to successfully be able to know how to move.

Returning to Wilderson, paradoxically, it is by channeling violence \textit{through} the body, that Linyekula reconsiders the way the black body is treated as emblematic of violence, and how such a body is required to perform and reenact violence. His strategy is to foreground the intimacy of the black body \textit{with} real and abstract forms of violence – epistemic, ontological, personal, and historical, in order to break with certain representational codes. Extending Andre Lepecki’s reading, Linyekula demonstrates how the question of ontology, when uttered under the sign of choreography, has the potential to reveal a whole series of reified associations between presence and visibility, absence and invisibility, blackness and noise, blackness and hyper-masculinity, blackness and violence.\textsuperscript{44}

His phenomenal strategy brings the body as approximately close to the orginary scene of violent subjection as possible, only to disavow a total subsumption by violence via a tilt of the head, through a carving out of a rough and jagged line, through layered repetitions of movement that build on a spirited away-ness, ultimately untying the black body from a legible economy of violence. Sliding across stage, crawling and sitting, Linyekula moves counter to the presumed vertical authority of the figure, redrawing the dancer in relation to space. Horizontal figures, hunched over or bent, bear the weight of the implausible regimes of signification that would metaphorize on black skin.

\textsuperscript{43} Susan Leigh Foster, \textit{Dances That Describe Themselves}, Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 2002. 24, 94.
\textsuperscript{44} Andre Lepecki, \textit{Exhausting Dance}, 47.
Rather than disavowal however, Linyekula provokes the discourse of violence, brushing right up against its representations, demonstrating that whatever the colonial constraints, they cannot discipline, contain and immobilize a figure already placed in movement. Here we might remember June Jordan’s analysis of violence in a U.S. context, where she writes: “A nation of violence and private property has every reason to dread the violated and the deprived. Its history drives the violated into violence, and one of these days violence will literally signal the end of violence as a means. We are among those who have been violated into violence.” Jordan allows us to understand that for the violated, what is crucial is not the enactment of a resistance to the very violence to which the violated have been subjected; it becomes a matter instead, of a taking up and crafting strategies of counter-violence that betray that history of violent subjection.

When Linyekula re-inserts a figurative body into the narrative of colonial modernity which culminates in the peculiar co-production of violence, racism, and political sovereignty, it is not his own complicity with the logic of colonial violence which is at stake. Rather, Linyekula demands that we carefully examine his surreptitious performance as a countermanding of this modern narrative of violence and all of its critical terms. The sweep of his choreography cuts across the violence of that racist biopolitical history, replacing it with an alternative, double history of the body and its withholding. In his work, we encounter a doubling of violence and/as performance, in which blackness and black life are both realized through the violence of performance and the performance of violence. Faustin Linyekula’s performances betray the life that always escapes the Euro-centric desire to clothe life in bare life. Later on, I will explain

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how this betrayal happens and perhaps can only happen by taking up the feminine as a means of establishing another kind of social bond.

VII. Maternity/Futurity: Toward a Future Anterior

In his first solo performance titled *Le Cargo*, Linyekula tells the story of his return to the Congo, specifically a village called Obilo, where he spent most of his childhood. Linyekula confronts the audience, armed with a drum and a handful of books. Perched on the drum, he talks directly to the audience posing the artistic and philosophical questions, “what does it mean to dance, really dance? Can you dance outside of geography? What difference does dancing, or art generally, really make, when you are repeatedly confronted with war, crisis, war, crisis, war?” Dropping the books on the ground one by one in frustration, Linyekula tells us that he had searched for the answer to the question of ‘what it means to dance’ in Western philosophical texts and in the history of art, to no avail.
That question, he says, brought him back to Obilo, a village in the Congo. He begins to describe the friends and relatives he knew there, how they used to perform the ritual dances of his upbringing. Linyekula then begins to improvise sequences, meant to evoke the dances of his youth, and we follow him as he chronicles celebrations, births and deaths in the village, his encounters with friends, his visits to the local church.

Linyekula begins to enter a meditative trance-like state. Dancing with his eyes closed, he utters words and phrases, inaudible to us, Linyekula attunes us to what it means to solo. Thulani Davis identifies the solo as the black artist’s poetic interlude, the capacity to convey and carry a singular “solitary, yet communal, disciplined and free” sensibility in the world. In Le Cargo, Linyekula’s soloing shifts from fast to slow, from rapture to marked distress, from ecstasy to disappointment, and we notice an immeasurable depth of feeling held in his phrasing.

Making use of the arranged staged lighting, Linyekula’s body casts shadowy figures against a back wall, so that it appears as if he is not alone, but accompanied by those lost friends and family members. In those brief moments where Linyekula seems to commune with his own shadow, which serves as an index for these others, we sense that he carries them and is constantly moving with them. His dancing is a means of communing with those lost by possessing and repossessing them. The desperation and the weight of his movement is an act of allegiance, to his people, to the Congo, and to Africa, in the face of privation and hardship. Dancing becomes a way of marking the presence of these others, and of his ancestors.

Linyekula immerses himself in these memories and deeper into his own technique. Jerking to the incalculable beat of the drum and the sweet sway of a hummed
melody, he works himself up into a frenzy. The tension builds as the danced solo and muted soliloquy gradually coalesce. His figure bends and unfurls through rhythmic sequences, his sweat flies, and we are left with a partial vision of the memories he has moved through, sharing his catharsis as the physical tension subsides.

In this performance, we are left with a deep sense of the lingering effects of colonialism, that continue to shape the recent history of his country, that compound the everyday grievances of his people. But if Le Cargo feels melancholic, it is not a melancholia that shifts toward collective pathology. It is not the cultural pathology Frantz Fanon consistently struggles to diagnose for example, or the “pathology of cultural community” that Linyekula is invested in, a pathology that, as Paul Gilroy has suggested, is held in the “infrahuman political body” of the migrant, the immigrant, the ex-patriot, as the “unwitting bearers of the colonial and imperial past.”

Linyekula traces a figure of return that echoes the end of his self-exile, a figure of unfulfilled return that, in his performance, mimics a migration pattern that is always to the metropole and back. In the performance of Le Cargo, Linyekula replicates a return that isn’t a return. The Congo becomes a massive projection, and what we glimpse here is not a romanticized return or a yearning for cultural community, which Gilroy regards as a postcolonial pathology. Rather, the imagination along with the imperative undergoes an incisive shift.

Le Cargo asks us to confront a series of questions: what becomes possible as a function of this performative return? What alternative temporality does Linyekula introduce us to and immerse us in, by way of this projection and the movement of this projection? What alternative desire is he after? Is this a desire for retrieval animated by

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loss? What is this feeling of tenderness that envelops us, as we become immersed in Linyekula’s search for the lost time of his community?

Though this piece moves by way of conscious melancholic shifts, Linyekula insists that this work is about renewal in the midst of a sounding of despair. Saidiya Hartman’s eloquent passage from *Lose Your Mother* conveys how the emotionally charged relay between past and present uncovers an anoriginal relation predicated on loss, retrieved and felt everywhere in the present:

Every generation confronts the task of choosing its past. Inheritances are chosen as much as they are passed on. The past depends less on “what happened then” than on the desires and discontents of the present. Strivings and failures shape the stories we tell. What we recall has as much to do with the terrible things we hope to avoid as with the good life for which we yearn. But when does one decide to stop looking to the past and to conceive of a new order? When is it time to dream of another country or to embrace other strangers as allies, or to make an opening, an overture where there is none? When is it clear that the old life is over, a new one has begun and there is no looking back? From the holding cell, was it possible to see beyond the end of the world and to imagine living and breathing again?…The hope is that *return* could solve the old dilemmas, make a victory out of defeat, and engender a new order. And the disappointment is that there is no going back to a former condition. Loss remakes you. Return is as much about the world to which you no longer belong as it is about the one in which you have yet to make a home. *I shall return to my native land*. Those disbelieving in the promise and refusing to make the pledge have no choice but to avow the loss that inaugurates one’s existence. It is to be bound to other promises. It is to lose your mother, always.47

*Le Cargo* reflects a similar patterning of return, loss and remembrance. We watch Linyekula physically select memories that appear as broken reflections of the present, its disenchantments and disappointments.

For Hartman however, remembrance and inheritance give rise to an ethical demand, one that comes in the making possible of something else, something seemingly foreclosed, something we might call futurity. In *Le Cargo* the terms of this demand are

embodied and materialize in dance through Linyekula’s aspirational performance. And dancing is about aspiration; it foregrounds the “strivings and failures” of which Hartman speaks. It tries to “make an opening, an overture where there is none.” But such aspirational energies become tangled in structures of performance, and its allegiance to both excellence and mastery condition and limit creative power. We might say that dancing always conveys that double movement of aspiration – dance establishes its fidelity to the event of performance, at the same time that dance attempts to surpass its limits.

Dancing is about the serious business of life – like life, dance is embedded in relations of power; but it also develops and becomes entangled with forces of resistance. When Linyekula asks what it means to dance?, he is also asking what it means to live, to live with/in/through dance. The question implicitly acknowledges dancing as an expressive form of life, a specific capacity of the life that brings us closer to our own and other lives. Dancing compels us to take loose artistic ownership over ourselves, enabling us to sense the quality of our own lives, to immerse ourselves in practices of self care. Linyekula wants to speak of life as dancing and dancing as life in the same breath.

The work titled more more more...future, takes the possibility of futurity as its subject and its ethic. Linyekula’s orientation toward the future, foregrounds an irreducible desire for sociality in the Congo. It is a piece dedicated to the Congolese people who seek to reclaim a future and wrest social life from the control of the state. For Linyekula, celebration is a resistive strategy, and becomes the object of performance. He exclaims that to be positive is the most subversive,” and “celebrating is a way of
resisting.” Here, an ensemble of dancers, musicians and vocalists collectively imagine the practice of diasporic life as itself a set of experimental performances.

More more more…future, enacts Saidiya Hartman’s ethical demand by way of the temporal disjunction between past and present she identified, which possibilizes an opening and overture to a future. The work Linyekula is trying to do in the piece, differs from the way it has been received by critics and some informed members of the art establishment. Many reviews fail to acknowledge that this performance is about future possibility and explicitly not about the political breakdown of the past. A New York Times review for example, commented that Linyekula’s production makes the audience, “ping-pong back and forth, until [it is] pressed up against the history of a country whose war-ravaged realities, if they make the evening news, merely zip by in dark headlines.” The reviewer concludes by asking: “Is the cost too high to forget? Is it too high to remember? What if you could do both?” The patronizing analysis conflates the Congo with Africa, and reduces the complex story Linyekula is trying to tell to a single narrative of catastrophe. Black dancing bodies in turn are surrogates for the exploited body of Africa, a place where no future is possible. Africa itself is lost, forgotten amidst the “dark headlines” of the evening news. The critic preempts the possibility of the audience entertaining a feeling more complex than pity, and no way of recognizing Linyekula and his dancers as human equals.

Linyekula’s performance is not about “forgetting” but about carrying over. Apropos Hartman, the “new order” he embarks upon, depends upon “inheritance,” not...
paralysis by loss. Hartman invokes the *return* which she writes “is as much about the world to which you no longer belong as it is about the one in which you have yet to make a home.” And loss “remakes you” it “inaugurates one’s existence.” The loss she describes complicates our idea of futurity, so that it is not a pure projection of the future that animates this performance, but a future anterior. This future anterior is, as Jared Sexton has explained, both “structural and historical and seeks to displace the binary structure of both structure and history…in order to pursue that future anteriority, which being both within it and irreducible to it will have unmade it, and that anterior futurity which always already unmakes it.”

Linyekula’s figure conveys the movement of inheritance, expressed as a *carrying over*, staged as another kind of loss. *More more more...future,* is a performance of the im/possibility of this other kind of loss. Maternal loss figures here as both as an impossible possibility and possible impossibility. The performance broaches the difficult conjunction of the maternal past and a masculine future. I am arguing that the masculine future Linyekula desires, can only be glimpsed by way of a maternal past. This lost maternity becomes the condition of possibility for the collective futurity Linyekula imagines, a futurity he wishes to return to, and be inside of or inhabit. I would argue that what ensues onstage is a struggle to embody this lost maternity.

Linyekula’s choreography traces the movement and displacement of that “maternal-material” conjunction Fred Moten describes: “that transference, a carrying or crossing over, that takes place on the bridge of lost matter, lost maternity…that inter-articulates the performance and the reproductivity it always already contains and which

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contains it.”

Through a series of fabricated fleshy unravelings, Linyekula introduces us to this “maternal-material” conjunction, whose material presence impinges upon the figure in dance and complicates an ontology of movement.

VIII. Community, Finitude, Flesh

More, more more...future opens to a low-lit stage and a figure in a spectacular costume, creeping across it. The garment appears like a voluminous presence that floats and transports this figure. For the figure the garment gradually becomes an impossible, insurmountable supplement. The figure, perhaps a consequence of the supplement whose fullness extends it, bears another form with/in itself. In apparent tandem, full with another form, the figure forwards itself constantly thwarted by the force of a weighted weightlessness. A performative tension builds as this curious intimacy and friction shared between figure and fabrication collude and collide; they move and tumble together, opening and closing an epic love story about the flesh.

Faustin Linyekula performing in more more more...future

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50 Fred Moten, In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition, 18.
The puffy, swollen costumes the dancers inhabit operate as feminine surrogates. Lamine Badian Kouyaté’s costumes comprised of various objects and scraps of recycled materials, are pieced together to create voluminous, laminated patchwork effects, and function in the performance as extensions of the devalued materiality of black female flesh. The costumes recuperate the superfluous, nonessential, and disposable, restaging what Fred Moten calls “the bridge of lost matter” of black female flesh, whose deep and irregular secret, whose sweet and erratic music, has been buried.

The inhabitation of these costumes builds on Ralph Lemon’s “impenetrable anatomy”; here it is a matter of inhabiting and making the masculine body strange. Linyekula and his dancers rediscover a fleshliness signaled by a particular figuration of the womb, whose anoriginal substance outlines a material fullness. These costumes cushion and comfort a body constantly willed to move and to exert itself. These womb-like structures become the figures through which movement is differentially opened. The womb undisciplines; it holds and caresses a hard masculine body, reordering its relationship to an “ontology of dance,” where dance, “ontologically imbricates itself with, is isomorphic to, movement.”

Faustin Linyekula presents the movement of dance as the mobilization of flesh that was presumed to be dead, lost to history, sealed by the body. Linyekula’s dancing pushes us to confront skin and flesh as the body’s figurative limits. Rather than exhibit a clear line that extends the body through space, Linyekula’s dancing traces not only fleshy entanglements, but draws us in to the sound of the flesh, the fleshy “phonic substance” (to borrow Fred Moten’s term), the body would resist and sooner disengage. Linyekula

51 Andre Lepecki, Exhausting Dance, 2.
presses towards a corporeal knowledge thoroughly implicated in the imagined failures and fissures of feminine flesh. The imagination of this flesh materializes as a series of im/possible entanglements - of masculinity and maternity, materiality and sexuality, production and reproduction. Linyekula forces the body back into a sensual encounter with the messiness of this flesh, with its formless form. He is after another sensual ensemble that depends upon the essence and contingency of the flesh as the radical contour for something like a body.

By inhabiting the costumes, Linyekula’s male dancers engage in a performance of masculinity that projects masculinity as a fiction of manhood, one that concerns the right to property, labor and other bodies. The costumes enact their own choreography, staging a male dream-wish for reproduction. Inhabiting the costumes might be said to mark a material hijacking of the womb, as Maurice Wallace has suggested, in an effort to make it a part of the masculine machinery of production. The costumes, their voluminous presence, index femininity as the force this masculinity resists or intends to advance itself beyond, or from which it intends to establish its difference. And so more more more... future presents masculinity as the performance of an impossible untanglement.

The costumes fabricate lost female flesh, and the figurative eruptions of this flesh in the performance are possibilized by figures in movement. But if the fabrication of this flesh becomes the metaphorical and material support for a black diasporic imagination, then the sharing of this flesh through fabric, generates a haptic experience, transmitted by the tactility and texture of the garment. Dancing together, sharing rhythm and space, Linyekula presents the sharing of this fabricated flesh as an occasion for Eve Sedgwick’s “haptic” experience that accompanies being folded into an irreducible texture. These
garments outline a space of affects, not of properties, signaling intensive and not extensive space. These costumes gesture toward the haptic, and a measure of vitality that escapes language - that fugitive life that here takes on the undulating tension of the garment, is feminine life, or life in the flesh.

This intensive space delineated by the haptic, is associated with desire as a sensual and social force. I want to point to that sharing as an index for an alternative sociality, that rests upon the opening of a fleshy field of encounter. We might recall that sharing, as what Jean-Luc Nancy calls partage, which denotes the impossible simultaneity of a sharing and a dividing, a synchronous movement that can be traced through dancing. Dancing is the sharing and dividing of figures in motion, the infinitesimally small, invisible spaces and tensions between them, charged by the division of physical energy, and the shared patterns of breathing, respiration, exhalation, and perspiration.

Perhaps the most striking and more dubious aspect of more more more...future, is that its aspirations are grounded in the artistic expressions of a community of men. Its collective performance largely focuses on the visualization and presentation of black men as virile, perfected and fit. Together their muscular and vigorous pursuit of a future both affirms and complicates an idea of nationhood as a gendered imaginary. Nationhood, it could be argued, is here imagined as and coextensive with brotherhood.

At the same time however, more more more...future opens up this explicitly gendered economy of desire to observation and critique. Controversially perhaps, this performance presents the closure of that economy of desire as both a necessary and

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essential ground for aesthetic and social aspiration, at the same time that it renders that economy of desire untenable. I am interested in the im/possible realization of this gendered community, based on fraternal kinship, as always an incomplete project.

I want to offer that Faustin Linyekula’s praxis re-grounds the structure of community through Nancy’s motif of partage, a simultaneous sharing and dividing, activated by a sharing of flesh, its energies and its labor, through dancing. Jean-Luc Nancy’s Inoperative Community offers a revisionist and radical prescription for thinking about the ontology of community. For Nancy, labor is the condition of possibility for the coming together and formation of collectivity. He develops the concept of singularity as a means of thinking community. The formation of community always entails a certain work or labor. More more more...future, is the performance of that labor. It is a performance that enacts the relation of Being in relation to beings. And beings constantly in movement, lend a provisional structure to community.

Apropos Nancy, we understand how the masculine community we encounter in more more more...future, is divested of that “sacredness” that makes it always about “the exclusive passion of one or several.”\footnote{Jean-Luc Nancy, Inoperative Community, Minneapolis, MN : University of Minnesota Press, 1991, 35.} In other words, the future community Linyekula imagines, insofar as it is predicated on the discovery and reclamation of a shared fleshy existence, could never be based on the exclusivity of masculine kinship. Jacques Derrida tells us that kinship is a bond of which we must remain suspicious, and even to assert that something like kinship is at work in this performance is to commit a fatal transgression of something like the community. In the Politics of Friendship, Derrida argues:

“… there has never been anything natural in the brother figure on whose features has so often been drawn the face of the friend, or the enemy, the brother enemy. De-naturalization was at work in the very formation of fraternity… The relation
to the brother engages from the start with the order of the oath, of credit, of belief and of faith. The brother is never a fact.”

Derrida opposes the ‘friend who is to come’ to the ‘friend as brother.’ The problem for Derrida is the brother as the exemplar of the friend. The brother is the figure who established the bonds of ‘fraternity’ or brotherhood. It is the figure of the brother that stands in for the paradigmatic political community. Derrida attempts to deconstruct this fraternal formation. He describes the way in which the ‘naturalness’ of this fraternal bond is co-opted into political discourse. When Derrida quotes Aristotle, “One soul in bodies twain,” he derives from that formulation, a relation of essential equality, between men. The oath of friendship can only be sealed among equals. Friendship, Derrida deduces, expresses an inherently masculine relationship of equality and equity that fundamentally works to exclude: “…friendship was so often defined by that suitability fitting to familiarity, as in a bonding affinity.” Derrida’s suspicion of masculine narcissism masquerading as the bond of friendship, reflects Nancy’s concerns about a community structured around commonality.

And yet, the kinship structure in an Afro-diasporic context demands a reevaluation of the bonds of affinity. I would argue that masculine attachment is predicated on a different kind of structure. The Afro-diasporic figure confronts not just self and world, but constantly brushes up against those lost kin, or ancestors. This triangulation complicates the essential relation between self and world, so that the kinship structure is radically exterior to any singularity. Linyekula is in pursuits of a form of kinship that magnifies “what Nathanial Mackey has called ‘broken claim(s) to connection’ between Africa and African America that seek to suture corollary,

55 Ibid.
asymptomatically divergent ruptures – maternal estrangement and the thwarted romance of the sexes.” Mackey also refers to this as ‘wounded kinship’ established by way of what he calls the ‘sexual cut’.\(^{56}\)

Ananya Chatterjea explains how the coming together of figures in dance reflects an “unremitting search for understanding the self,” and an attempt to think about the problem of relationality through dance:

> [This] unremitting search for understanding the self, is both one and greater than one, unique in its individuality yet realized only in relationship to community…this man and this woman moving to discover the limits of their bodies, and these musicians and vocalists unraveling the depths and dimensions of a sonic universe, articulating a relationship between self and other that is together yet on its own, on multiple levels. In the dance, limbs interweave, intersecting the space enclosed by other limbs, criss-crossing lines of bodies, creating images of an intimacy that leaves us to ask the question: what is it to know another? What knowledge of self is gleaned from this inter-relationship with another? What is this relationship of togetherness when self is so distinct?\(^{57}\)

The ensemble of *more more more...future* is in Chatterjea’s words, a collective of “musicians and vocalists unraveling the depths and dimensions of a sonic universe, articulating a relationship between self and other that is together yet on its own, on multiple levels.” Linyekula’s staging of masculine intimacy through the criss-crossing of figures and the interweaving of limbs, is, as Chatterjea argues, an essentially feminist praxis that intervenes into traditional epistemology, a praxis that potentializes intimacy as another way of knowing the self and knowing another.

Dance movements are not just epiphanies, but accumulations of other vocabularies, so that intimacy is achieved by way of accumulation. Accumulation models itself after a feminine and/or feminist epistemology. At the same time these

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\(^{56}\) Nathaniel Mackey quoted in Fred Moten, *In the Break*, 6.

processes of accumulation in dance become the object of masculine labor, the means of realizing the divided and shared terms of masculine intimacy.

In the middle of *more more more...future*, there is a spectacular sequence in which Linyekula dances out of his garment. He turns his back to the audience who watches him work himself up into a frenzy. Every muscular twitch is visible, the wiry frame of his top half glistens with sweat. With his back turned, we catch the desire to dance out of the garment. As he begins to jerk, the garment loosens and falls to the stage floor. The practice of striptease has also provoked certain questions about whether stripping is a kind of art, or a way of dancing, and also about the presumed relationship between clothing and nakedness, which in turn prompts us to think about blackness as a kind of skin, and the implications of shedding this skin. In this sequence, Linyekula embarks on a series of pelvic thrusts, clenching his backside and then relaxing it, he enacts this continuous forward thrusting. Every muscle is visible and glistening with sweat. He constantly activates the muscles of the torso, so that when the torsos is bare we observe what Ananya Chatterjea has brilliantly described as “those little shifts of energy inside the ribcage...that graceful gliding over between the arriving into the position and the marking of the rhythmic climax.”

Rhythm is achieved upon perfecting this back and forth movement of the torso, the push, the pull, the swaying of the torso side to side is a movement animated in by internal energy shifts. But Linyekula’s stripping is also movement of the crossing, that radically reverses the momentum of Diaspora. He wants not to take us back, but to demonstrate how the desire for return is a fiction, a massive projection of the conflation of origin and origination, and how this conflation is

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58 Ananya Chatterjea, *Butting Out*, 74-5.
differentially embodied by those displaced who may lack a place of origin, but still conceive for themselves a narrative of origination.

Moving toward the final act of *more more more…future*, Faustin and another dancer gradually start to and entwine their figures on the floor, making an inverted arch shape with their figures to form bridges. They then begin to disentangle and then entangle themselves once again in a huddled mass, struggling with one another, as if wrestling. In this mangled assemblage, each one tries to defeat or conquer the other but is never able to; each one tries to struggle to the top of the tangled heap they have made of each other, as they constantly butt heads. The mass of bare torsos and sharp, angular legs, move together like this until the dancers finally exhaust themselves. Surrendering to each other, they sit with their backs facing each other in a circle. Panting and moaning, they find they have totally spent themselves. Suspended in the afterglow of ritualistic exertion, they cool down, captivated by their fleshy figures.

Examining the performative structures of masculine intimacy in *more more more…future*, my argument here is that black kinship cannot conform to the even seamlessness of the social bond Derrida describes. Black brotherhood could never be a model for something like the larger social contract as the requisite for a neutral political community, precisely because of the embedded question of black femininity which inaugurates the radical condition of fleshly sharing as the material ground for such kinship. Black femininity, its reproductive dispersal of the black masculine, precedes and complicates any purely fraternal organization. Hortense Spillers has written that it is impossible for “black men to appropriate the gender prerogatives of white men because
they have a different kind of history.” Kinship among black men always necessarily invokes the black feminine, whose “sexual cut” is irreducibly felt, and whose fleshy vibrations reverberate through any community.

In *What is Black Music Anyway?* Linyekula invested in an alternative sociality that re-imagined the space between himself and Lushaba as full of the substance of this material-feminine, whose performative dispersal was experienced as a radical disruption of the space-time of the museum. In *more more more...future*, we see that this material-feminine dispersal is the condition of possibility for another form of masculine love. Linyekula reaches for a form of masculine love that interdicts the heterosexual ban on male intimacy. This improvised black kinship that Linyekula gestures toward, would retain a certain affiliation with the queer imperative to argue against a certain gendered symmetry, in favor of what Eve Sedgwick calls an “erotic triangulation,” which demonstrates how the relationships between men are always established with respect to relationships with women. Sedgwick’s erotic triangle opens up the question of desire, particularly “the slippery relation...between desire and identification,” which I would argue is always already problematized by the radical ungendering work of blackness figured in motion. 60

Faustin Linyekula’s urgently call, in all three of these performances, including his solo piece *Le Cargo*, is for a resounding kinship in the face of loss, for intimacy in the face of crisis, for love in the midst of war. But his praxis is not about erecting or resurrecting community along the lines of a simple overturning or substitution. Most

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explicitly in *more more more...future*, Linyekula’s male dancers, their continuous coupling and de-coupling, the physical intimacy that is established between black male bodies, the feeling of masculine closeness affected on stage, compels us to ask about something like the relationship between dance and love.

Black masculine intimacy takes on the quality of love, not for a brother, but simply for another. This is the expression of singularity at its limit. Linyekula allows us to glimpse black masculine intimacy with no particular sexual object. And here one has to also ask about the lover, who is only made legible through community. Nancy writes in the voice of someone who anticipates a waning horizon, someone for whom the question of community, the question “who are we” demands an answer. Nancy tells us that the lover disrupts and unworks community. “For the community, the lover is on its limit, they are outside and inside, and at this limit they have no meaning without the community...Reciprocally, it is the community that presents to them, in their very love, their singularities, their births and their deaths.”

Nancy tells us that for the lover, “there is nothing to possess,” and nothing to be possessed by, not the nation or the state.

And it is this movement, of *non-possession*, of dancing with no object but the object of radically being-in-common, of dancing in the name of friendship, or simply dancing in friendship, of establishing community as radical sociality, as another possible world – this non-possessive ethic that inaugurates community, made possible by a re-inhabiting of feminine flesh, eradicates that long biopolitical history that has for so long committed itself to the violence of naming (the black subject, the black body, etc.), or the counting of singularities. Dancing involves the communal tracing of this sensuous flesh; its practice inaugurates a material sharing and dividing that is reflected in the

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experimental inhabitation of flesh on the stage floor. Echoing Nancy, it is the

incompleteness of the work of this sharing and dividing that signals the fullness of black
diasporic life, richly held in common.
NICK CAVE  
The Art of Mattering

I. From Livery to Flesh

The American, Chicago-based artist Nick Cave makes hybrid sculptural works called “soundsuits,” that he fashions and assembles from found materials. Weaving together a veritable potpourri of objects including hooked rugs, toys, figurines, twigs, human hair dyed in outlandish colors, Cave’s soundsuited figures are inseparable from the colors, textures and materials from which they emerge: a dazzling mash-up and display of sticks, buttons, horns, beads, sequins, hot pants, socks (covered in dryer lint), rags, rope, even condoms. Cave spends hours at flea markets and antique stores, scavenging for and rummages through piles of rejected things. Cave’s practice of thrifting and collecting offers itself as a unique resource and opportunity, to construct and provide an alternative genealogy for these objects. Crowning one of his soundsuits with an Easter bunny whose eyes light up, Cave has remarked that he is interested in “how these objects come about.” In other words: how does such vulgar irregularity shows up for us in the world? In a lecture at the UCLA’s Fowler Museum of Art, the artist commented, “I am very interested in [this divide between] low-craft/high art, things that are discarded, devalued, viewed less than…”

Cave has described his adventures at the market and the care with which he makes his selections in great detail. The flea market is the place where people become overly invested, perhaps even obsessed with objects and their materiality, with their histories, where they came from, and who owned them. It is the place where discarded objects that seemingly have no value, once again become objects of value, regarded as unique.
treasures or rare finds. They become objects of fascination, cherished both despite and because of the conditions that led to their devaluation.

These rejected things which migrate into the alternative economies of the flea market, the fair, the bazaar, become a source of curiosity and inventiveness for an artist like Nick Cave. Moreover, these spaces facilitate communal practices of exchange, of sharing and recycling that continue to generate his practice. I want to suggest that the flea market represents a space of possibility for Cave. Its practices of open exchange, offers an ethic of retrieval and recovery, both of the object, and as I will explain further, of objected life. Re-incorporating found objects into his art, Cave foregrounds the degraded histories of commodification, consumption, and manipulation that these objects have passed through - histories of use betrayed by scarred, stained, tarnished surfaces. At the same time however, from the object’s depleted patina, another obscure and shrouded history resurfaces.

My interest in Nick Cave was piqued when I learned that the idea for the soundsuits emerged as an artistic response to the Rodney King beating, a subject I will take up later. To be clear, however, the artistic figures that Cave fashions, are irreducible to what we commonly refer to as the black subject. The first soundsuit was not a representation of Rodney King. I am suggesting more specifically, that the soundsuits explore gendered and racialized subjectivity problematically constituted at the site of the presumably situated black body. I am interested in the way that Cave’s practice moves by way of, at the same time that it troubles the historical, scientific, and linguistic strategies through which racialized, sexed and gendered bodies are constituted as subjects of representation.
Mikko Tuhkanen has explained that “the visibility of race does not merely assign the subject a social category or discipline one’s mobility in society, but may have an ontological status: in certain symbolic configurations, the subject’s emergence, taking place through the visible, may involve “racialization.”¹ Tuhkanen’s in-depth psychoanalytic study of racialization claims that by the mid-nineteenth century, the truth of race had migrated from bodily surface to interiority.² But if the expression of race shifts to an ontological register, migrating from surface to interior, I want to claim that such processes of racialization are enabled precisely because of the specific interdiction not simply of the black body, but of its fleshy materiality. So that in addition to the visible and symbolic orderings of the racial subject, there are material processes at work in these forms of subjective racialization.

With respect to Cave’s soundsuits, I am interested in the liveness of the fleshly assemblage he creates, and how this generative fleshliness activates this critical interplay between bodily surface and interior Tuhkanen identifies. The material imagination behind these soundsuits, reveal Nick Cave’s investment in the distinction between body and flesh as it gets played out over the territory of skin, livery and flesh. It is helpful in this instance to sketch an intellectual relay between Frantz Fanon and Hortense Spillers on this point, for it is in reading their work together, that we might come to understand how livery cannot help but give way to flesh. When Fanon writes, “the black man has to wear the livery the white man has fabricated for him,” he suggests that black skin has the capacity of a garment, that it can be worn.³

² ibid., 10.
Fanon demonstrates how the metaphorical convergence of fabric and skin becomes a singular problem for black subjectivity. This formulation allows us to consider whether black skin can function as more than the support for mere *livery*, and whether the very skin Fanon condemns, might also be mobilized: cast off, discarded, re-fabricated, and re-possessed. Tuhkanen has also written about the problem of livery in Fanon’s text, claiming that it serves a threefold function of epidermalization: “*livrée* becomes a livery, a coat and a uniform. In the first function, livery weaves an unremoveable, encompassing sign of servitude on the colonized subject; in the second, it imposes a mark of subhumanity on the colonized, allowing the colonizer to refer to him in ‘zoological’ terms. Finally, *livrée* marks the epidermalized subjects as indistinguishable from one another and absolutely different from the colonizers.”

Nick Cave, *Soundsuit*, 2011

But Fanon’s critical invocation of livery does not simply mark blackness and its capacity to coalesce as skin. At stake here is not just the suturing or stitching together of

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black skin as livery, but the potential *unraveling* or *unstitching* of black skin from the conditions that confer this livery and supply black subjectivity with its apparent uniformity. If we think about the function of livery as a kind of garment, we can also think about how skin is *fabricated, worn*, and potentially *divested*. In this chapter I want to argue that each of these might be read as *styles* or *techniques* of performance that unsettle the boundaries of the skin. And this capacity to develop styles or techniques of and for alternative ways of being or constituting the self, that is, by way of something other than a body, is precisely what Nick Cave’s art both registers and resources for us.

Returning to Fanon however, in the famous chapter, “The Fact of Blackness,” or “The Lived Experience of the Black,” Fanon laments the loss of his bodily schema and tells us that he is left with an epidermal schema. He writes: “Then assailed at various points the corporeal schema crumbled, it’s place taken by a racial epidermal schema.” For Fanon, it is the loss of the body that troubles him, and he wants the body back for subjectivity, because the loss of the body interdicts subjectivity. But though he objects to the loss of his bodily schema, at the same time, Fanon enables us to think about blackness as no longer reducible to *the body* of the black subject, but as the condition for what he calls, “a triple existence.” I will argue that at stake in this declension, is the retrieval of a lost fleshly materiality, and that what Fanon calls *the body* is already an abstraction from that materiality, which is why he calls it a *schema*. *The body* is a way of organizing matter, the matter beneath the skin that threatens to “hemorrhage” at any moment and “spatter Fanon’s whole body with black blood.”

Hortense Spillers’ analytic of black female flesh, extends Fanon’s metaphorical convergence of *fabric* and *skin*, to the problem of *fabricated skin* and *flesh*. Spillers’

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5 Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 112.
flesh, cuts and augments Fanon’s colonial metaphor, by opening the livery of skin, to the particularity of black female flesh, whose deeply violated contents Nick Cave explores. For Spillers, it is only when the body is lost that we are held within the flesh, and this flesh is that which, I want to argue, mobilizes Fanon’s skin as livery. I am interested in how this skin, always already mobilized by the materiality of the flesh, allows us to grasp how Fanon is held within a triple existence of flesh, epidermis and body or flesh, skin and livery. Nick Cave’s soundsuits actively problematize the relation between black skin and black flesh and negotiates this triple existence, between body, epidermis, and flesh, and the palimpsestic quality of Afro-diasporic fleshly life.

Nick Cave discovers something else in the object’s strange and reduced appearance. He explicitly engages an artistic practice that involves the putting together of different materials, fabrics, and discarded objects to produce assemblages that uncover a deep, fleshly connection between devalued materiality and racialized identity. The soundsuits restore the link between subjectivity and materiality through Cave’s scintillating recovery of aesthetic flesh. His practice of assemblage reveals how the same deep history of devaluation that haunts the commodity, extends an aesthetic genealogy of blackness. In this chapter I am interested first, in how Cave’s resuscitation of the object, amounts to a thorough revaluation of blackness as it has been historically constituted through its explicitly fraught relationship with the commodity. Second, I am interested in the way in which Cave’s soundsuits figure and extend an aesthetic genealogy of black flesh, by way of the slippery mechanics and evasive optics of what Gilles Deleuze called the fold.
II. Redemptive Reification

Like other contemporary artists working with found objects, Nick Cave’s rigorous engagement with the object of “low art,” explicitly reconsiders the fraught relationship between the commodity and the thing, specifically the displacement and supplantation of the thing by the commodity. Found object art inevitably directs us toward that history of reification Marx described, in which the definite social relation between men...assume the fantastic form of a relation between things.”⁶ According to Marx, commodities transform human relationships into relations among the products of men’s labor. Lukacs referred to this same process, the turning of relations into things, as thingification. Lukacs takes his analysis of reification a step further, asserting that reification emanates from the commodity form; it becomes an ideological problem that the working class must overcome if they are to overthrow the exploitative social relations foisted on them by the capitalist system of production.⁷ But found object art in an Afro-diasporic context, does not simply reflect this narrative of reification. It extends the trajectory of that history of the commodity - itself always already an abstracted history of the thing - to the problem of (aesthetic) racialized subjectivity, in a compelling way.

The history of blackness, which, as Fred Moten has insisted, is also the shared history of black performance, calls our attention to the history of the commodity form and the Marxian discourse on value as one that has always accepted and depended upon the fixed distinctions between subjects and objects, persons and things. Moten’s assertion that the object speaks, resists, and performs its radical dissent from the violent

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and brutal subjection that begins and ends with the radically objectified body of the black
slave, serves as a radical rejoinder to Marx’s theory of the commodity form.  

In light of this suppressed history of the commodity, Marx’s discourse on value
remains rife with contradictions when it comes to the figure of the slave. As Moten
demonstrates, the Marxian narrative becomes more complicated once we consider the
failure of that tradition to account for the figure of the slave whose very subjectivity was
defined in terms of being a commodity. My argument is that found object art always
inevitably performs a critical deconstruction of the Marxian narrative of commodity
fetishism, which implies the alienated subject’s rapidly deteriorating intimacy with the
material world. The tradition of found object art demonstrates the equivalent living
presence between people and things. This living presence is avowed by Marx himself,
who famously wrote of the wooden table, (or the dancing commodity):

> It is absolutely clear that, by his activity, man changes the forms of the
materials of nature in such a way as to make them useful to him. The form of
wood, for instance, is altered if a table is made out of it. Nevertheless the
table continues to be wood, an ordinary sensuous thing. But as soon as it
emerges as a commodity, it changes into a thing which transcends
sensuousness. It not only stands with its feet on the ground, but, in relation to
all other commodities, it stands on its head, and evolves out of its wooden
brain grotesque ideas, far more wonderful than if it were to begin dancing of
its own free will.  

Most interesting is the way in which Marx’s animated table is both material and
immaterial, sensory and to use Marx’s own vocabulary, “suprasensory.” Marx is
describing how the physical table simultaneously transcends the sensory physical realm
of matter. Here, the dancing table both highlights and occupies a rather unstable
boundary between animism and fetishism, or drawing from the language in Peter Pels’

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8 Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*, Minneapolis: University of
9 Karl Marx, *Capital*, 163.
The activation and occupation of what Marx refers to as this “ghostly materiality,” is what interests me. For Marx this ghostly materiality allegedly qualifies the abstract, exchange-value of the commodity form. But it does not fully account for the thing’s liveliness in the midst of the activation of what Marx proffers as its quasi-living, quasi-dead character.

I would argue that what Marx’s refers to as the “ghostly materiality” of the object, which for him is the very condition of its fetishism, might be ascribed to its internal animation, a possibility Marx considers and then at once disavows. I want to offer that the recurrent surfacing and resurfacing of the found object in the art of assemblage betrays the fact of its internal animation, and that the movement or circulation of the object reflects, resists and refracts the ghostly materiality of the commodity, whose form has perhaps always depends upon the abstraction of the object or the mere thing. An account of this resurfacing is provided by Marx, who narrates the object’s descent from the world of social relations, or its fall, which he inevitably connects to its reified reappearance into the world of commodities.

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In light of this conflicted history of the object, I am particularly interested in placing Nick Cave within a tradition of contemporary black artists for whom the material trajectory of the deflated object, the thing, the castoff, coincides with the lost (or stolen) genealogy of black life. The trajectory of this history stretches from an artist like Cave whose art understands the fundamental tension of this relation between personhood and objecthood, as the full expression of *lives lived as things*, to the work of an artist like Thornton Dial, concerned with the experience of those currently *living as lost things*. Cave’s extraction of the object from its degraded environment and his inclusion of it into
the work of art, indicates a conscious revaluation of the object in the midst of its critical depreciation.

And yet, in contemporary art, the objective, remains *reification*. As Bill Brown explains in his essay on the artist Theaster Gates, the artist today “does not produce objects so much as reproduce them (retrieving them, reworking them, reframing them)…” He continues: “you could imagine a redemptive reification…that interrupts reification as usual, granting the object the status of a thing, disclosing the thingness of the object, something about the object that is (all at once) material, formal and historical – enabling it to escape the law of obsolescence and decay.” In the art of Nick Cave, familiar objects are stripped bare of their functional properties and presented in pure visual form. His soundsuits are after the personality of things, which obtain a different kind of life, becoming expressive of the degraded materiality that is lent to them. The soundsuits ask us to consider how human subjects are made more thing-like, but even more so, how the trajectory of what we call black subjectivity is bound up with the depreciated ontology of the thing itself.

I want to argue that what Brown refers to as “redemptive reification,” opens three alternative trajectories in art: First this practice of *redemptive reification* possiblizes an interfacing between persons and things, subjects and objects. The philosopher Bruno Latour has provocatively argued that the distinction between subject and object, person and thing is an arbitrary modernist invention. Found object art brings these artificial

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distinctions to the fore, as its practice betrays the uncertain ground upon which these epistemological distinctions rest.

Second, Cave’s persistent retrieval of the object, reveals and explores particular enmeshments of raciality, materiality and sexuality, that confound the essential difference between personhood and objecthood. This collapse between subject and object, has wide-ranging consequences for thinking about the question of value and aesthetic value in particular. In light of Cave’s practice, my argument, is that if the black subject whose very existence was constituted along the same trajectory as the devalued object, has been and is thoroughly circumscribed within that history, then the epistemological status of the black subject or black subjectivity remains an open question. And Cave, whose art traces that same history of blackness, subjection and value, begins with the radically objectified body of the black subject, but ultimately ends with the transfiguration of that history into a kind of radical fiction. That is, his art foregrounds the relationship between fiction and possibility through this obscured history. Cave’s radical move is not to include the black body in art, but to demonstrate the absolute presence of blackness not simply in, but as art. In other words, Cave configures the imagination of blackness as the very structuring condition for the relation between fiction and possibility in art, by way of an epistemological betrayal.

Third, though it is beyond the scope of this project to delve into this more fully, I want to suggest that the practice of retrieval Cave engages in, is subtended by a recuperative gesture that follows and traces the current of reproduction in art. The “disclosure of the thingness of the object” in Brown’s words, that secures the aesthetic redemption of the reified object, also depends upon the abstract figuration of the
reproductive body. In other words, a reproductive imagination animates the work of retrieving, reworking and reframing the object. The abstract figures of reproduction are inextricably bound up with the question of both feminine and queer desire, and are enfolded within Cave’s work. The mechanics of the fold, help me think about his reproductive modes of fabrication. Specifically I am interested in what the fold possibilizes, what encounters, spaces, and desires are explicitly bound up with Cave’s intensive and punctured surfaces – turned and infolded surfaces that reflect a fleshy underneath as the very thing that texturizes the existence we all live.

III. The Art of Mattering

Returning to Marx and the table’s “wooden brain,” what is most disturbing in this passage, is the possibility that the object exhibits the capacity to think, and subsequently, that this capacity to think is inextricably bound up with the object’s bodily or figurative mattering. This notion clearly confounded Marx. But is it possible that this collapse between mind and matter is foundational for an alternative mattering, or coming to be. I am interested in this double capacity of the object. To matter would signify both the object’s radical presence, as well as its ability to point towards its own materialization. This performance of mattering is what Cave’s art exhibits and takes for granted. Moreover, it is the same quality and potentiality attached to blackness, whose sensual breakdown between subjectivity, matter, and form, echoes and revives the essentially feminist interdiction of that metaphysical binary or division between the mind and the body. Feminist theorist Elizabeth Grosz has identified the distinct problem the body poses for theory and philosophy, writing that the body “has been regarded as a source of interference in, and a danger to, the operations of reason.” Grosz has asserted that it is
necessary “to clear the ground of metaphysical oppositions and concepts so that women may be able to devise their own knowledges.”

Nick Cave’s investment in matter and the animated object is central to his figurative practice, which marks the erasure of that very distinction between mind and body. The dazzling display of textures, colors and materials, that draw us to the suits, points toward the distinctly texturized quality Afro-diasporic existence and the *stuff* of its collective experience. I would argue that Afro-diasporic life has always traced a trajectory whose material survival eludes the grammar and consistency of the normalized subject. Discursive accounts of racialized and gendered subjectivity pose provocative questions about forms of power that circulate in the social field, but they often fail to grasp the contingency of political subjectivity, or how political subjectivity depends upon all those social activities and material relations that are not deemed productive in the political field.

Tracing a figure of the racialized subject, the art of Nick Cave, magnifies the discursive procedures through which subjects are necessarily constituted, at the same time that the suits also illustrates the precise means by which certain bodies come to matter and why. In this way the soundsuits are assemblages that open us up to a distinctively feminist concern with *mattering*. Nick Cave’s aesthetic practice is an expression of what I want to call the *art of mattering*. That is, Cave’s art takes up this feminist imperative theorized by Judith Butler, for whom an inquiry into *mattering* has concerned what it means to take up and occupy material space as a sexed subject. Cave practice shares with Butler’s philosophy a concern over how these processes of

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materialization, directly come to bear on the epistemologies that structure our knowledge of gendered, raced and sexed subjects.

Butler outlines her inquiry into mattering by way of three central questions:

“What are the constraints by which bodies are materialized as sexed, and how are we to understand the matter of sex, and of bodies more generally, as the repeated and violent circumscription of cultural intelligibility? Which bodies come to matter and why?”

Feminist theorists seem conflicted when it comes the status and legibility of the body within the context of its discursive construction. It is unclear for example, what the status of the so-called natural body is for Elizabeth Grosz, who argues that we take up a Deleuzian framework that would require feminists to rethink the body as a “discontinuous, nontotalizable series of processes, organs, flows, energies, corporeal substances and incorporeal events, speeds and durations, may be of great value to feminists attempting to reconceive bodies outside the binary oppositions imposed on the body by the mind/body, nature/culture, subject/object and interior/exterior oppositions.”

Grosz exclaims that there is no natural body at the same time that she seems to want to maintain that the body is itself a tabula rasa onto which various inscriptions may be made. Grosz seems conflicted here as to whether or not the body is posited before inscription or not.

My claim is that the physical, bodily, sensorial breakdown and re-organization Grosz describes, has always already been happening in an Afro-diasporic tradition. Indeed, such breakdown was not only the outcome of subjection, but violently imposed upon the black body. My claim here links up with Hortense Spillers who gives us both

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15 Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, 164.
the historical context for and a theory about the material breakdown of that body, which consequently led to the figurative flight from the black body. I want to insist that the various iterations of this bodily disintegration and reconfiguration, are already performances that interrogate the idea of possessing a body at all. Such performances point to an empirical tradition for which the positing of a body is itself an act of inscription. Blackness, however, has historically been barred from such inscription, at the same time that it is required to take up and enact a dual ascription: blackness is required to both take up and assume the body as well as the non-specificity that comes before a body.

My argument is that instead of a body, Nick Cave’s soundsuits posit a figure whose irreducible extension through matter collapses the distinctions between subjectivity and materiality. The artist activates Butler’s *mattering* by asking us to consider the simultaneous giving and withholding of the black body through matter and with/in matter. Undoing the bodily inscriptions that organize and define subjective life according to specific hierarchies and categories, and revealing the imminent breakdown of the determinate boundaries between human and nonhuman, subject and object, matter and meaning, properties and patterns, are all central to Cave’s practice. I am particularly interested in the way Cave problematizes the black body by imagining it as an apparatus central to the processing of “the exclusionary practices of mattering through which intelligibility and materiality are constituted.”16 Drawing from feminist theorist Karen Barad, Cave’s art introduces us to what she calls “intra-actions of matter” that complicate human practices of knowing and perceiving the world, by becoming entangled with them.

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Instead of the black body, Cave offers us figures pleated, enfolded and embedded in a field of material relations, whose deep, texturized existence escapes us by pushing up against and resisting discursive processes of subject formation altogether.

The soundsuits shed light on the physical apparatuses through which “mattering” itself acquires social meaning and form for raced and gendered subjects. In other words, they map the differential materiality through which both race and gender are constituted as epistemological categories that come to matter, and gain significance as situated sites of knowledge. The hyper-materialization of race is interlinked with the inscription of the overly dramatic body. I am interested in this dual mattering and how it is exploited as an art form, how it becomes the material expression of what Sianne Ngai terms the “animatedness” of racial subjectivity and identity. In her book *Ugly Feelings*, Ngai has brilliantly explained the consistent coding of racial subjects as excessive. Ngai’s argument is that the racial body and its "utter subjection to power … its vulnerability to external manipulation and control" necessarily manifests in the hyper-expressiveness, the effusiveness, and I would add, the dissemination of racial bodies.\(^\text{17}\) Furthermore, her claim is that such magnified expression is made possible by way of this utter subjection.

In other words, the racialized body cannot but help to exhibit a kind of surplus. Understanding the interconnectedness of race, animatedness, and the hyper-material construction of the racialized self, is critical for this next section, which attempts to think about the surplus shared between expressive aesthetic forms in an Afro-diasporic tradition, as a condition of possibility for the material imagination behind Cave’s soundsuits. The next section proceeds with brief readings of Zora Neale Hurston, Nella Larsen and the artist Glenn Ligon in order to trace imaginative relays between art and

literature. These relays, I want to argue are animated and shaped by a colorful excess - the sounds, gestures, experiences, and movements that characterize the animatedness of black aesthetic expression. This excess possibilizes the aesthetic figuration that becomes central to Nick Cave’s work, and the production of the soundsuits.

IV. The Art of Figuration

This next section begins with the claim that, what we might call after Butler, *the art of mattering*, has a long and extended genealogy in the Afro-diasporic tradition. It is a form of artistic making or fashioning that becomes particularly pronounced in a black aesthetic tradition for whom questions of lived experience and aesthetic form become virtually indistinguishable. Specifically, I would insist that this artistic practice is central to the ongoing negotiation between life and form that is always getting worked out within this tradition. Indeed, the two are virtually collapsible, so that when we think about black aesthetics, the foremost concern becomes: what alternative forms of life are being articulated? In other words, the black aesthetic tradition necessarily compels us to think along life’s edge, to think about life as form, and subsequently, other life forms.

I want to suggest that this *mattering*, is a mode of placing the question of being in suspension. I want to claim that this mode of inquiry can be, and *is* lived, that furthermore, it is made available by a feminine impulse that crosses over, from literature to art, and back again. It is a contradictory artistic impulse, saturated with a desire to both be in the world, to be counted as a subject. At the same time, this expressive impulse cuts the significance of political subjectivity, bringing it to bear on the material existence that punctures the subject. The double movement of this *mattering*, involves a
critical re-evaluation and revaluation of what it means to count as a subject in the first place.

In order to understand how such mattering marks a profound material and aesthetic negotiation that is structured like a call and response between art and literature, we might start with, Zora Neale Hurston and Nella Larsen, for whom the rendering of the black subject in literature, becomes the occasion for a specific textual rendition for whom the location and prefiguration of subjectivity, happens by way of color, light and shade. In “How It Feels to Be Colored Me,” Hurston famously exclaims, “I feel most colored when I am thrown against a white background.”

Larsen’s *Quicksand*, opens with her casting her protagonist through a distinctive “framing of light and shade.” Indeed, we first learn who Helga is through Larsen’s coloration of her:

A slight girl of twenty-two years, with narrow sloping shoulders and delicate but well-turned arms and legs, she had, none the less, an air of radiant, careless health. In vivid green and gold negligee and glistening brocaded mules, deep sunk in the big high-backed chair whose dark tapestry her sharply cut face, with skin like yellow satin, was distinctly outlined, she was, to use a hackneyed word—attractive.

Helga’s character emerges from “a desert of darkness,” and her coloration on the page extends the depth and texture of Larsen’s text. When Helga finally emerges from the “soft gloom” of her “shadowy” and “shaded” room, she introduces a rich field of color that transports the reader through *Quicksand*. Helga emerges from a shadowy chiaroscuro that shapes her profile, and Larsen’s shading and re-shading directs Helga’s actions until the novel’s end. By coloring Helga so distinctly, Larsen produces an

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affective response in the reader, whose appetite for color is unequivocally stirred from the text’s opening pages.

It is Toni Morrison who specifically introduces us to this “appetite for color.” For Morrison’s characters in *Beloved*, this orientation toward color signals a desire both for a fullness and presence that transcends the dismal reality of their everyday lives. Morrison writes of Baby Suggs:

> Her past had been like her present—intolerable—and since she knew death was anything but forgetfulness, she used the little energy left her for pondering color. "Bring a little lavender in, if you got any. Pink, if you don't." And Sethe would oblige her with anything from fabric to her own tongue. Winter in Ohio was especially rough if you had an appetite for color. Sky provided the only drama, and counting on a Cincinnati horizon for life's principal joy was reckless indeed.  

In Morrison’s text, color, imagining it, possessing it, producing and reproducing it becomes a life activity. Sethe and Baby Suggs gather and collect color and colorful things from the world around them. Selecting pinks and lavenders from their environment, their appetite for color is central, and motivates them to experiment with being in the world differently. Hurston, Larsen and Morrison mine the radical possibilities of color and texture, exhibiting profoundly anti-representational strategies that re-imagine what it means to be a subject of representation. Through their writing, something we might call the black subject surfaces as if it were merely the impression left behind by color, a figure shaded in, whose significance is merely an effect of these shaded gradations.

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Glenn Ligon’s assumption of Hurston’s language from “How It Feels to Be Colored Me,” in a detail of his *Untitled (Four Etchings)*, takes up or assumes Hurston’s blackness. I am interested in the way Hurston’s blackness materializes for Ligon, and how he texturizes her words. Ligon’s etchings insistently repeat Hurston’s phrasing. Cascading down the canvas, their inky descent marks and remarks her blackness, revealing it as nothing more than the effect of this abstract and arbitrary tinting. At the same time her statement is emptied out through Ligon’s repetition, and Ligon finally yields to Hurston. Her words on his canvas are smudged, blurring until they become indistinct. Thrown against his own canvas, Ligon is gradually seduced by Hurston. Feeling the weight of Hurston’s texturized blackness, Ligon is fixed, echoing Frantz Fanon, “in the sense in which a chemical solution is fixed by a dye.”

But this dramatic *fixing* into place, which Fanon describes, is a feeling Hurston experiences ambivalently; it is the same one that Ligon’s canvases echo, and it represents not the pure absence of color, but is an effect of the total absorption color. Ligon’s

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abstract struggle against the white background culminates in the muddy dark scene at the bottom of the canvas, but finds its expressive potential in the two blacker than black, and blue-black aquatints above. It is as if Ligon is suggesting that the undoing of the words, their very unmaking, makes the material blackness of the aquatints possible. While Fanon might consider saturation undesirable, and Hurston is perhaps ambivalent about the status of her blackness, for Larsen and Morrison, this ongoing tension between color and shade is central to the figuration of the blackness of their characters and this tension and ambivalence gets played out across Ligon’s canvas.

The aesthetic process I am trying to describe has to do with a specific form of call and response between the visual and the textual. This aesthetic process is signaled by Ligon, in his sounding out of Hurston, with an urgency that perhaps goes unheard. I want to suggest that the quality of this sound expands the possibilities of what can be sounded out. The particular economy of black sound that Nick Cave’s experimental garments extend, require us to think about how sound, color and movement are interwoven. And their inter-animation gives rise to an aesthetic blackness that, in Jennifer Brody’s words, is “visceral and elusive, enveloping and intangible, material and conceptual.” Cave has said that the suits are named for the sounds that are made when they are worn or performed. But this statement becomes more complicated when we consider how Cave thinks about sound.

V. The Art of Queer Sound

Nick Cave has explained that, “sound doesn’t have to be heard, it can be something that is created through pattern on a surface, how pattern moves across a

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surface, how light reflects across a surface...so sound can also be understood as feeling, color, texture...I want people to imagine what sound these suits could possibly make…”

Thinking about sound, Cave plays with an idea of *aurality*, troubling the presumed correspondence between aurality and the oral. If the oral always connotes the idea of the auditory, a sense that “the ear is always open,” Cave’s statement complicates the putative presence, immediacy, and materiality of sound. The suits open up an inquiry into the materiality *sound*. Cave’s statement in his artist’s talk at the Fowler Museum echoes Salome Voegelin who comments: “to hear the work/the sound is to invent it in listening to the sensory material rather than to recognize its contemporary and historical context. Such listening will *produce* the artistic context of the work/the sound in its innovative perception.”

I want to argue that Cave gestures toward what Amalle Dublon has identified as “the experimental musical tradition of acousmatic sound, or sound absent its sources or context – what Seth Kim-Cohen, drawing on Jacques Derrida’s critique of a Husserlian metaphysics of presence, pointedly calls ‘sound-in-itself.’” Douglas Kahn characterizes this tradition as one of “sounds clipped from their roots, from their embeddedness in the world, leaving only phonic, socially deracinated remains.” These “phonic, socially deracinated remains” are the stuff of the black aesthetic tradition. And these phonic remains become the ground for black performance. Moreover, to speak of blackness expressed as sound in this experimental economy of *sound-in-itself*, is to revisit the

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23 Nick Cave quoted in the artist’s talk given at the UCLA Fowler Museum of Art.
24 Amalle Dublon’s direct engagement with the field of Sound Studies has helped me think about an alternative tradition of sound in relation to Nick Cave’s work. I rely heavily on a paper she gave at the Whitney Museum of Art in May of 2012 titled, “Queer Sound and Subarchitectures.”
question of modernist sound as one isolated mode of sensory experience.

Nick Cave’s figuration of sound, is similarly extended by Ligon. The specific figuration of the sound of Hurston’s voice, ‘clipped from its roots’ possibilizes black sound and its irreducible circulation within art. For Ligon the substance of black sound materializes and diffuses the scene of the canvas. Cave’s soundsuits are most directly invested in imagining those sound effects that could possibly link up with a rich history of improvisation that hinges upon the fleshy, phonic differentiation, which a history of blackness makes possible. We might say that the way blackness is sounded, or the way it enters art’s frame, is as “a radically exterior aurality that disrupts and resists certain forms of identity.”27 This radical disruption, signals the ongoing interruption of form. This formal disintegration itself becomes the condition of possibility for the radical extraction of figure, from ground, of a black figure, from a white background. Nick Cave’s soundsuits proceed by way of this extraction and figuration.

Glenn Ligon, *Installation view of “Untitled (Four Etchings),” 1992 (series of four etchings and aquatints)*

Returning to Beloved, Morrison tells us that Sethe would oblige Baby with everything “from fabric to her own tongue.” This project proceeds from that sensuous overlap between fabric and tongue, between texture and flavor, between texture and speech, opened by Morrison’s cross-generational and queer textual construction. I am interested in the minimal degrees of separation between fabric and tongue, how fabric is imagined or likened to a tongue, how fabric moves, licks or caresses like a tongue. Morrison’s curious poetics, is opened by color and signals the shared materiality between the tissue of fabric, and the fleshliness of the tongue. I want to suggest that this textual, sensual breakdown, animated by Morrison, is traceable through Ligon’s echo of Hurston. This deconstructive impulse, the one that understands the transmutation of fabric and flesh via that irreducibly sensuous tongue, is stolen away and shared in an Afro-diasporic aesthetic tradition. This deconstructive impulse is immanent to performance, and enables material and erotic intimacies between word and flesh, persons and things, subjects and objects, nature, culture and history.

Nick Cave’s art offers itself as the scintillating expression and extension of that black aesthetic tradition and its sensuality. His soundsuits exhibit a distinct desire to be swaddled in fabric and color, a desire that resembles and approaches Larsen’s character, Helga, whose “soft collapse” into the world of things around her, is the affective realization of an intensely material desire. Sharing Morrison’s appetite, and magnifying Larsen’s color tones, Nick Cave signifies blackness through a lush color field. Imagining blackness as a series of variegated, chromatic signs, Cave improvises through color, and his art explores sensuous expressions and experiences that are bound up with a deeper sartorial desire. Cave is interested in new territory: his soundsuits explore the
relationship between skin and garments by way of alternative fleshy inhabitations. Moreover, these experimental garments, posit the body as itself a kind of experiment, by challenging what it means to take ownership of and inhabit a body.

Cave’s soundsuits, which began with the beaten body of Rodney King, were intended as an investigation into the devalued body of the racialized subject. The zones and physical limits of the body are tested by Cave through a series of ornate, bizarre, and sometimes dazzlingly grotesque fabrications. Seeing the suits at the Fabric Workshop and Museum in Philadelphia in 2010, I became preoccupied with the form of the suits. While the suits seem to trace the outline of a body, their material messiness and otherworldly appearance indexes a zone of alternative being, that very one prescribed the racialized subject, who has historically always been figured as more or less than human, as a fictional or imaginary being, a creature, one who exists under the control of another. Experimenting with the figure of Rodney King, for Cave the black body becomes a thing always already fabricated, whose fabrication becomes an invaluable resource and aesthetic opportunity. In Cave’s work, any clear visualization of the black body is distinctly refused. In the absence of a body, Cave rebuilds the over-determined, over-signified surface of the skin, recasting its fleshy materiality, and in the process, transfigures the black body.

Drawing out the figurative potential of the black body whose hyper-materiality has always provoked questions of legibility, visibility and invisibility, Cave lends material specificity to the black body, a specificity that it has been historically denied. In his art the black body is merely a litmus test for the violence of its social breakdown. Instead of a body, the soundsuits are artistic renderings of ensembles of iridescent flesh,
whose rough-hewn surfaces record a broken history of black bodily surfacing and
resurfacing. These performances of resurfacing are themselves part of a deeper history of
resistance. These performances offer an alternative means of arriving at and resisting the
normalizing constraints and discursive structures that confer black bodily legibility and
hold black subjectivity into place.

VI. Re-Figuring the Black Body

Consider the artist’s first soundsuit, assembled from twigs, which Cave intended
as a sort of armor for the black male in response to the Rodney King incident. The first
soundsuit, which he assembled and built from twigs he had found on the ground and
collected and saved, exposes the crucial link between subjectivity and materiality,
specifically black subjectivity and neglected materiality. In an interview, Cave explained
that he started to think about himself as a black man and what it meant to be viewed, in
his words, “as discarded, devalued, viewed as less than”:

I was thinking…what kind of materials provide me with that kind of emotion?
And I was in the park, and I happened to look down, and somehow I found this
twig…we just walk on top of it, we don’t give it much thought, and I sort of
proceeded to collect twigs in the park to build the sculpture. And then when I
built the sculpture and put it on, I didn’t even realize I could wear it, and then I
put it on, and then when I moved, it made sound. And that’s how I arrived at
“soundsuit.”

Disassembling, dismantling and reassembling the composite black body, Cave re-
imagines the aesthetic and conceptual limits of blackness by developing a highly
sensitive material practice that challenges prevailing representations of the black subject.

After reading various news related stories about the King incident, the artist
continued to follow reports about King, many of which according to Cave provided

detailed descriptions of his activities in prison. The artist was particularly struck by reports that detailed King’s exercise routine and his preoccupation with working out at the prison gym. The artist’s first soundsuit reflects his visceral response to the media language that described King, whose preoccupation with his own body and physicality became a public concern and a source for public scrutiny, anxiety and skepticism regarding the veracity of King’s innocence. Cave recalled reading one particular article that asserted that King was “larger than life,” and that during his spare time behind bars, he…”worked out with prison weights.” Cave remarked, “Well that alone is an interesting image. I mean, what is the difference between regular weights and prison weights?”

Cave’s question draws our attention to the way institutional, social and physical forms of discipline have worked to contour the history and construction of what we refer to as the black body, and how these forms of discipline are both imposed upon and taken up by bodies. Interestingly, King’s constant disciplining was broken by his own strategies of self-discipline. And while his body was constantly worked on, he managed to work on himself. The prison weights are an instrument of normalization, but also a form of equipment that enables a kind of performance. Working out with prison weights, the body changes and undergoes a series of bodily modifications and alterations. King induces a mode of bodily adjustment. His body becomes attuned to its reflexive capacity to physically exert itself, to wear the self down to a limit or point of physical exhaustion. Exercising in prison becomes a catalyst for King’s bodily subjectivity, for in this process, King’s body becomes something other than a body.

I am suggesting that King’s exercise regimen is a performative disengagement from these imposed forms of discipline, that the exercise that leads to the development of
his hyperphysical persona, is produced and performed at the limits of his subjection. 

King’s aestheticization of the disciplinary techniques inflicted on him, becomes an anti-disciplinary means of self-defense. King’s racially codified body, demands another understanding of the practiced care of the self. His objectified, body betrays a critical rift between the body’s maintenance and its potentiality. And his prison performance demands a reconsideration of the way “technologies of the self,” Michel Foucault’s term, ensure the efficiency of the human subject through practices of bodily maintenance.

That is to say, King’s body is expressive of a critical paradox – his laboring body both cooperates with and protects or safeguards itself against those disciplining technologies that, as Foucault tells us, permit individuals to perform a series of “operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality.”29 King works through a set of linguistic, visual and symbolic conventions, precisely in order to work himself out of them. His exercise signifies this double movement, and his physical exertion must be read as a form of care produced with/in a certain rupture, or break, between the normalized self and the ongoing, performative enactment of the self outside of these normalizing and disciplining procedures.

*Working out* becomes a way of putting the physical, spiritual, and intellectual self at risk in the interest of caring for it. King’s regulated and restrained body highlights the pleasures and displeasures of disciplining and self-discipline, and reveals how these forms of (dis)pleasure are inextricably bound up with the regulatory demands of

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institutional forms of confinement. King taps into physical exercise as a means of maximizing his own bodily pleasure, which he does by laying claim to his own hyper-physicality, his “larger than life” status, as a stylized form of excessiveness. Cave’s work is a reaction to King’s ability to style himself, or the very capacity to possess style while at the same time being stripped of aesthetic capacities.

The pleasure King derives from his own physical activity, becomes possible at the limit of these very forms of discipline and punishment. The complicated pleasures of physical exertion emerge as forms of counter-discipline that supersede or exceed the formal constraints of incarceration. Cave views King’s physical exercise as the performance for/of a certain kind of achievement: King’s ‘prison exercise’ becomes a means of working on the self in order to repossess a body disciplined, withheld, and subjugated. Paradoxically, it is only by pressing into those conditions of subjection that he is able to approach the limits of his own objection, to borrow Fred Moten’s term. Cave’s initial engagement with the figure of King recasts him, and places him at the center of a history whose trajectory King inherits: a specific trajectory of devaluation, that casts out blackness and its degraded excessive materiality from the domains of political and intellectual legibility. The devaluation of the link between materiality and identity, subjectivity and personhood, manifests a crucial “forging together and breaking of the bonds between objectification-humanization-subjection,”\(^\text{30}\) according to Moten. King’s body offers itself to Cave as an opportunity for the rare staging of such objection.

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The beating incident allowed Cave to understand how the black body comes to be identified and named as such, how it comes to be doubly framed, objectified and reproduced as both the subject and object of incarceration. Indeed his art starts from the critical paradoxes and contradictions of subjection, which require us to imagine how the complex we call the *black body* has been constituted as physically, socially, and psychically withheld. As Gayatri Spivak has maintained, thinking about the conditions of possibility for the black body’s erasure, we must investigate the conditions that efface the presence of the black body *as a thing* and yet remain sensitive to those conditions that keep it legible and indeed *require* its legibility as such.\(^{31}\)

Accepting Spivak’s assertions, we come to understand precisely how and why King’s body as well as the *face* of King, became the required signs that necessarily

constituted and consolidated the prison as an institution of racial discipline in the American imaginary at that specific moment in time. King’s physical performance makes use of the materiality of his own body in order to sound out a refusal not simply of his own experience of incarceration, but of the larger political economy of the prison to which his experience is tied. As Angela Davis famously asserted, it is the political economy of the prison, or the prison industrial complex as capitalist institution, for which “colored bodies constitute the main human raw material in a vast experiment to disappear the major social problems of our time.”

And yet, we must also attend to the physical and psychic release King feels. Might we imagine the residue or trace of King’s sweat as his own affective awareness of and responsiveness to his interconnectedness with the greater circuits of global capital through which his signified body readily circulates? Doing so would require us to think about histories of physical pain, exertion, exhaustion, stamina, and energy that have yet to be critically interrogated. The physical tensions of this life have yet to be mapped. To say that the black body is under erasure is to claim that some recorded material has been removed from that body’s memory. Nick Cave takes up Rodney King’s physical exercise as a starting point for thinking about and expanding upon those corporeal, material sites of memory that would refigure histories of exertion and exhaustion. My claim is that these histories are in excess of the concept of the black body and the signifying regimes that hold it in place.

For Cave, King bodies forth metaphors of value and devalue. As Hortense Spillers has exclaimed, the racialized body and value are “so thoroughly interwoven in their literal and figurative emphases that distinctions between them are virtually

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useless.” In reconstructing the Rodney King narrative, Cave invites us to think about the conceptual tension between the black body and blackness, with respect to the imagination of captivity. King’s narrative activates that historical imagination so crucial to Hortense Spillers delineation of the flesh. Spillers remarks the instance of the black body’s opening to and by the flesh, as indicating a much more profound distinction. She writes, “I would make a distinction in this case between body and flesh and impose that distinction as the central one between captive and liberated subject positions.” The captive body is marked by its “absence from a subject position.” It is a completely abject, and powerless body. The flesh however, is distinct from and prior to the body. According to Spillers, the body can be written, the flesh cannot: “Before the body there is flesh, that zero degree of social conceptualization that does not escape concealment under the brush of discourse.” Spillers is explaining that the body can signify, and that the grammar of the body is gendered. The flesh however, resists discourse and precedes any gendered bodily economy.

Apropos Spillers’ explication, I am able to understand and elaborate how Nick Cave picks up on the interdiction of both King’s racialized body as a deep reflection of the interdiction of the history of black flesh. This interdiction compels King to assume a different corporeality. And it is King’s blackness, more precisely the blackness of King’s flesh, that becomes aestheticized, and resuscitated by Cave, who understands King as a subject divided between the constraints of prison life, and the forms of performative resistance he enacts that exceed the temporality of that life and physicality it demands.

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34 Ibid., 67.
35 Ibid.
For Cave, King’s body yields a figure whose physical brokenness does not so much embody as continually body forth depreciated metaphors of value, productivity and reproduction, which have perhaps always been in circulation and served as the metaphoric constructs for human subjectivity.

The soundsuits link the black body to a history of material denigration and neglect that an aesthetic blackness both lays claim to and reclaims. Cave’s soundsuits, which start with the figure of Rodney King, illuminate precisely how modes of subjectivation are predicated on the systematic, pervasive, and institutional reduction of human subjects to objects, and more precisely to objected flesh. There was something about Rodney King’s resistance to the very reduction of his being to nothing but a body, to which Cave felt he necessarily had to respond. King’s incarceration echoes the history Moten outlines – an aesthetic history of objection, practiced by way of subjection.

Returning once again to Hortense Spillers, who introduces us to the contrapuntal movement of the captive body, whose “being for the captor” I would argue, both resources an irresistible sensuality at the same time that that body is reduced to a thing, whose “absence from a subject position” resounds in the kind of radical “powerlessness” that causes the captive body to lose the differential, anatomical features indicative of human personality. And it is King’s body that registers as a captive body for Cave, a body that necessarily sheds its anatomical features in order to survive such persistent subjection. Nick Cave’s art confronts the central paradox of scripted racialized subjectivity: the racialized body is that thing which is both barred from a subject position, at the same time that it is constantly subjected to a set of bodily codes that stand in for racialized subjectivity. Cave taps into an alternative corporeality that finds a means of
recovering itself from the regimes of bodily subjectivity into which blackness is constantly scripted and re-scripted.

Cave’s meditative devotion to collecting twigs in his backyard highlights this serial practice of collecting, as well as the twig’s seemingly unremarkable reproducibility, its innate capacity to repeatedly show up everywhere, to replicate itself so unassumingly, which reflects the essential quality of the remnant, of things or subjects that hide in plain sight. The twig and the object’s undesirable proliferation, links up with the critical devaluation of the social reproduceability of black life itself, which has for so long been cast as invaluable, less than nothing. Blackness in this context comes to be understood as the degraded imagination behind the valueless labor and reproduction of black people. Cave fixates on the paradoxical beauty of the twig, which circulates by way of a purloined desire, staying in plain sight yet it is so easily cast off and rendered invisible. Hiding in plain sight, the twig becomes the foundational object for his art; it persists as both present and absent, and it is both negligible and essential.

I am interested in the way Cave’s artistic practice actively problematizes the equivalence between the black subject of representation and blackness, and how his use of found objects becomes a profoundly anti-representational strategy. Cave draws from the emotional life and memory of an Afro-diasporic artistic tradition that appears in the shards and fragments of his broken object-world, disconnected bits and pieces of things whose origins are untraceable. This practice of sculptural assemblage, which remains sensitive to the way black life has been thoroughly objectified in the dual sense of being thoroughly exploited and turned into an object of collective fascination, is an artistic gesture that cuts across that dialectic of experience and representation, which Stuart Hall
has identified as central to black aesthetics. For Hall, this central dialectic organizes black artistic expression and mobilizes a political strategy. He writes:

Moreover, we tend to privilege experience itself, as if black life is lived experience outside of representation. We have only, as it were, to express what we already know we are. Instead, it is only through the way in which we represent and imagine ourselves that we come to know how we are constituted and who we are. There is no escape from the politics of representation, and we cannot wield “how life really is out there” as a kind of test against which the political rightness or wrongness of a particular cultural strategy or text can be measured.  

Cave is sensitive to the fraught history of representation into which the black body has been inserted, and the long resistive history to that representation that inevitably follows it. The soundsuits deliberately interrogate the very notion of a legible, upright body, prepped for or as a canvas, and complicate the very idea that “we work on ourselves as the canvases of representation.”  

I would argue that Cave’s figure is opposed to a subject, whose bodily instantiation in a subjective matrix requires its authentication through language, speech, and visibility. The stakes have shifted, from “using the body as if it was…the only cultural capital we had” or have, to reconstructing that body quite literally from the ground-up, and recognizing the material contingency of all bodies.

Hall seems to be circling the question of cultural authenticity – knowing “how we are constituted and who we are.” In his view, the question of authenticity can only be grasped by way of “the politics of representation” from which he insists there is “no escape.” Representationalism is haunted by notions of correctness, value and legitimacy, all of which become further complicated when we start to consider the positionality of the body in this dialectic, or the defected, blemished, imperfected, improvisational figure.

37 Ibid., 27.
that does not simply mediate between representation and experience, but bypasses the limits of representation, illustrating the irreducibility of experience. The figure in art asserts itself as the experimental and performative locus for the alternative imagination that Hall yearns for. And Nick Cave disassembles and reassembles the body, selecting displaced objects that commune with the scattered experiences of black diasporic life. This irreducible breakdown and material displacement of the body that Cave’s art foregrounds, demands an alternative formulation of bodily experience and subjectivity, alternative formulations provided by experimental narratives and artistic practices that cannot be fully contained within the art establishment, the museum or the gallery space.

It is unclear that when Hall writes, “we cannot wield ‘how life really is out there’ as a kind of test against which the political rightness or wrongness of a particular cultural strategy or text can be measured,” that a distinct line can be drawn between lived experience and representation - that the “out there” he invokes and forsakes is or ever was an imagined, and politically withdrawn reality. Respectfully diverging from Hall’s statement, I want to claim that black life is lived experience outside of representation, it is none other than that rich sociality ventured and risked at the expense of representation. This claim might demand a different kind of thinking about that “out there,” as something other than simply an assertion of a richly experienced sociality. Black life, if it is to include those eccentric, eclectic material practices and bodily performances that provide us with the tools not only to re-imagine ourselves, but to reconstruct, regain and stage a kind of ontological recovery of ourselves, must then include the unpredicatable richness of that life, a life that can only be grasped or imagined as a kind of vanishing presence,
through the impoverished speech of the vernacular, through a radical imagination that exposes the failure of empiricism.

What I am after and what Hall’s statement opens up, is thinking about that “out there” as a border, zoned by an unbridgeable chasm - between reality and an impossible imagination on the one hand, and reality *qua* impossible imagination on the other. To think about that “out there” as nothing other than the “outness” or outer rim of reality, as the *turning out* of reality, is to risk a queer overturning of the reality principle. Such an *outness* would then be what Moten calls an “irreducibly improvisatory exteriority,” an exterior zone in which something like the material figuration of the body of blackness and the blackness of the body, or their extemporary, impossible convergence, is announced.

Nick Cave aligns himself with a tradition of artists who have attempted to map this inexpressible, imaginative convergence. I argue that the soundsuits, which are made possible by way of Cave’s initial figuration of Rodney King, interdict that apparently irreparable rift between reality and imagination. The relationship between King and Cave then might be described as an aporetic relation, structured around an imperceptible, indeed inaudible call and response – an ephemeral relay between the acutely real, lived experience of incarceration, and the aesthetic figuration of what we might call a black body, but can more precisely be grasped as a figure, whose alternative anatomy appears for us as a tangle of elements that provisionally stand in for a body. These provisional figures that appears to us as raw, unfinished, coarse, and unprepared in Cave’s work, are the blueprint of sorts for the alternative figurations and forms that a black aesthetic and literary tradition has constantly traversed.

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38 Fred Moten, *In the Break*, 255.
VII. The Art of Effacement

Looking at the soundsuits Nick Cave made in 2011 as part of his *Speak Louder* series, I am immediately caught off guard by Cave’s refusal of the face as a visual anchor for the body. This strategic disfigurement subverts a bodily hierarchy where the face overcodes effectively stands in for the body. The face fixes the iconography of the subject; it is the point of consolidation for a human personality. As Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari theorized, the face is constituted by the intersection of signification and subjectification; the face is an abstract image reducible to a white wall and a black hole.\(^{39}\) According to Deleuze and Guattari, the face is the fullest expression of these regimes of signification and subjectification. This compression and overdetermination of the face, seals the creative destiny of the subject.

In Nick Cave’s art, what is refused is the possibility of looking into the face of the other. For a philosopher like Emmanuel Levinas, the face is of singular importance because we always encounter others face-to-face. According to Levinas, “The face speaks. The manifestation of the face is already discourse.” Elsewhere he writes, “signification or intelligibility does not arise from the identity of the same which remains in himself, but from the face of the Other, who calls upon the same.”\(^{40}\) It is clear that by *face* Levinas means the human face, and that for him, this face-to-face encounter is the moment when subjectivity is conferred on the other.

Levinas’ emphasis on the human face, confirms Deleuze and Guattari’s philosophical suspicions that the face is a kind of colonial machine. They object to the


“pure formal redundancy” of the face, or what they call the “supreme signifier,” whose expressive regime is *faciality*:

Not only is language always accompanied by facility trait, but the face crystallizes all redundancies, it emits and receives, releases and captures signifying signs. It is a whole body unto itself; it is like the body of the center of significance to which all of the deterritorialized signs fix themselves and it marks the limit of their deterritorialization. The voice emanates from the face; that is why however fundamentally important however fundamentally important the writing machine is in the imperial bureaucracy, what is written contains an oral or nonbook character. The face is the Icon proper to the signifying regime, the reterritorialization internal to the system. The signifier reterritorializes the face. The face is what gives the signifier substance; it is what fuels interpretation, and it is what changes, changes traits, when interpretation reimparts signifier to its substance. Look his expression changed, the signifier is always facialized. Faciality reigns materially over that whole constellation of significances and interpretations…Conversely when the face is effaced, when the faciality traits disappear, we can be sure we have entered another regime, other zones infinitely muter and more imperceptible where subterranean becomings-animal occur, becomings molecular, nocturnal deterritorializations over-spilling the limits of the signifying system.41

For Deleuze and Guattari, faciality is not an *ideology* but a *regime of power* that culminates in the particular configuration and overdetermination of the face. The face becomes an emblem of imperial bureaucracy. The attendant danger here is that anything can become facialized - expression, gesture, affect, imagination. But it is the body that is immediately consolidated under its regime of signification. The body readily comes to stand in for the face. Faciality, they argue, is an “abstract machine” that must be fought against, but one that also enables us to interrogate various assemblages of power.

The blocked out faces of the soundsuits pose a challenge to the structures of subjectivity and the prerequisites of signification and intelligibility, through which the subject must pass, in order to make this ethical encounter with the other possible. This ethical encounter becomes the defining project of humanism. In Cave’s art there is no other, there are only others that refuse or resist recognition.

Cave’s figures challenge Levinas’ investment in the face as the purest indication of the other’s visible presence. With these sheathed figures, individual personality communicated through economy of the face, is erased. Furthermore, that which most resembles a head functions as the mere support for an animated costume.

The *Speak Louder* suits led me to think about the face and its function as a kind of technology of the self. I am thinking in this instance of the face as a marker of personality, and what happens when, for example, the pressures of social life compel you to constantly register or display your personality on the surface of your skin. Cave interrogates this permanent transfer of personality from the soul to the face. The soundsuits also prompt me to think about the art of carnival, or the carnivalesque staging of a kind of tragic-comic transcendence of the face. Cave’s figures ask us to imagine what happens to personality when it is fixed to the skin and exiled to the face, and how
processes of subjectification revolve around the face, and involve the forced expression of personality. However, unlike carnival’s fascination with the art of costume, the soundsuits are not costumes, and Cave has not created a double or supplemental identity. That would involve the condensation or hardening of another face. Instead, these figures are entirely unfixed from the face. This effacement places the rest of the body into movement. By removing the face as an anchor for subjectivity, the decorated and embellished soundsuits are capable of great dissimulation.

The face is produced in concordance with the dominance of language. Where there is the face, no other forms of creative bodily expression flourish. Controversially perhaps, Deleuze and Guattari explain that forms of expression in “primitive societies” are not restricted or consigned to this regime of faciality:

Certain assemblages of power require the production of a face, others do not. If we consider primitive societies we see that there is very little that operates through the face: their semiotic is non-signifying, non-subjective, essentially collective, polyvocal and corporeal, playing on very diverse forms and substances. This polyvocality operates through bodies, their volumes, their internal cavities, their variable exterior connections and coordinates (territorialities).42

They continue: “Primitives have no face and need none, for they have the most beautiful and spiritual heads.” This demarcation of the head as opposed to the face seems to be premised on a purely European ethnographic account of racial otherness. But Deleuze and Guattari are arguing that “primitives” are so distinguished because they engage in aesthetic practices that are already territorialized. The reason Deleuze and Guattari assert that primitives have heads and not faces is not a racialized form of deficiency; this capacity to have a head and not a face, can be attributed to certain

42 ibid., 195.
material and enunciative practices: “Paintings, tattoos and marks on the skin embrace the multidimensionality of bodies. Even masks ensure the head’s belonging to the body rather than making it a face.”

These markings on the skin, tattoos, paintings and other decorations on the body, open up to a fleshy poetics. Such so-called primitive practices offer a flight from bodily intelligibility. In light of Deleuze and Guattari’s assertions, looking at Cave’s soundsuits, it is important to further distinguish between the mask and the face. The philosophers would claim that even the mask avoids such overdetermination. A mask covers the face and though it may mimic facial features, it makes a mockery of the organized economy of the face. The mask parodies at the same time that it conceals, and thus subverts a regime of faciality. Cave’s soundsuits function like full body masks, where there is no distinct separation between head and torso, and the entire body is sheathed.

I am thinking about how the soundsuits trace a primitive figure, understood by Deleuze and Guattari not as an anthropological subject, but as a figure whose defacement is just one example of the continuous deterritorializations that take place across the body. These practices of deterritorialization have everything to do with making oneself imperceptible and unrecognizable. Corporeal effacement becomes just one of many possible forms of bodily modification that challenge the qualitative hierarchy between bodily features: heads, faces, torsos, arms, legs, breasts, hair. The “primitive” is not the transcendental subject who seeks out cultural legibility but is specifically invested in processes of bodily reconfiguration. Drawing on the work of Alphonso Lingis, Elizabeth Grosz has noted that the kinds of permanent tattooing and inscription practiced by those often identified as the “primitive other” appear off-putting because “its superficiality

43 Ibid.
offsends us; its permanence alarms us.” Reading Lingis, Grosz identifies, “welts, scars, cuts, tattoos, perforations, incisions, inlays,” which she argues, “function quite literally to increase the surface space of the body, creating out of what may have been formless flesh a series of zones, locations, ridges, hollows, contours: places of special significance and libidinal intensity.” 44

I would argue that what Grosz refers to as “formless flesh,” actually has a legible material genealogy in the Afro-diasporic tradition, an account of which has been given to us by Hortense Spillers. It is precisely this flesh that Nick Cave’s art channels in the manner of such primitive figuration. Furthermore, this flesh “increases the surface space of the body” as Grosz states, and creates such zones, hollows, and contours, by way of the mechanics of what Gilles Deleuze called the fold. My argument is that for Nick Cave, an engagement with the fold becomes necessary even imperative, given the vital importance of working in and through the tradition of lost black female flesh. For the fold is what hides things away; but, the fold also reveals what histories and forms of life have been stolen away, tucked into the seams of unfurled fabric.

VIII. Nick Cave’s Fold

The technique of the fold that Gilles Deleuze described, helps us understand why the soundsuits are something other than costumes. For Nick Cave, racialized and gendered subjectivity is enfolded within a world of objected flesh and matter. His art reveals generative and infinitesimally small spaces of encounter between for example, the roughness of a chipped button and the matted underside of an oven mitt. These folds of fabric, which mimic ecstatic flesh, are animated by techniques of embellishment. Cave

44 Elizabeth Grosz, Volatile Bodies, 138-9.
incorporates buttons, crocheted pads, toys, and other partial objects into the suits. These dissonant materials are worked, unworked and reworked through elaborate practices of stitching, wrapping, and tucking. Cave’s augmented surfaces are more than just second-skins; these surfaces move in such a way that suggests the deeper movement of the flesh. These fleshy folds generate pockets, hollows, crevices where things can be further stuffed or hidden from view. When Deleuze elaborated his idea of the fold, a structural property of the object in which the interior is nothing more than the fold of the outside, he dissolved the aesthetic hierarchy of meaning over matter. The fold here is animated by a practice of exteriorization in which the folding of the outside in, allows the soundsuits to appear overstuffed or distended, lending them the appearance of being in motion. In this sense, Cave redoubles the aesthetic boundaries of blackness, which is always invoked or imagined as excessive materiality. At the same time, Cave re-animates subjected black flesh, rendering the lost flesh that Spillers theorizes, as tangible form.

Nick Cave, Soundsuit

Examining the soundsuits, fabric and various materials are twisted and patterned so that the figures appear to be folded inside out, as if they have been forcefully wrought to the point of being ripped open. The turns of fabric make these figures almost appear to be bearing contusions, exposing wounds or bruises. Cave echoes and extends Hortense Spillers’ sense of the violent and visceral opening of the body that informs the distinctiveness of the flesh.

Nick Cave’s work is distinguished by a heightened sensitivity to the material specificity of the objects he selects, and is further underscored by his obsessive fascination with surface. Cave is invested in the translucence of a shell button, the fuzziness of dryer lint, the fractured and cracked surfaces of the miniature ceramic birds and antique trinkets he finds, or the nubbiness of an ill-fitting sweater or oven mitt. For example, the artist describes a process of taking his own socks worn through with holes and covering them first with latex paint and then dryer lint in order to create a different kind of textured surface.

The rough and jagged exteriors of the soundsuits, compel us to ask about the idea of surface in Cave’s practice. His constant and obsessive augmentation of surface challenges us to consider whether something like an underneath really exists. The contorted, distorted and warped appearance of the soundsuits, complicate or dissolve any notion of a polished surface. Cave uses bags, sweaters tied in knots, layers of graphic hot pants, to create bulges, pockets and hollows, that efface the distinction between interior and exterior as distinct dimensions. Many of Cave’s surfaces are so overworked that it becomes hard to clearly discern the soundsuits as a costume intended for a figure, or the soundsuit as itself the figure.
Looking at the suits, we perceive one continuous, augmented surface, one deep, fleshy exterior. Any clear shape or line is disrupted by tucks and folds of fabric that loop and create interiors and other dimensions. Cave has manipulated the material so that large bulges of fabric show up for us as an accumulation of sagging flesh. Protrusions of fabric that resemble body parts, appear, while they simultaneously refuse legibility. The soundsuits exhibit or perform this refusal to be read or decoded. I want to point to this as a strategy of material resistance exhibited by the object that is bound up with what Deleuze and Guattari call the *molecularization* of the self. This involves the shrinking down of one’s subjective coordinates to the rough specificity of the object. And this shrinking down of the self, involves turning oneself into something other than a subject. The *becomings molecular*, as Deleuze and Guattari call them, were taken up by a specific artistic tradition in Brazil as a means of artistic resistance. I want to point to the similarities between Nick Cave’s soundsuits and the fleshy originations by these Brazilian artists.

When Nick Cave’s soundsuits are actually performed, these folded spaces are activated though movement. In these performances the soundsuits becomes “environment-structures” in which new experiences might be discovered. Cave’s practice owes much to the work of Brazilian artists like Lygia Pape, Lygia Clarke and Helio Oiticica, for whom the aesthetics of protest and resistance were all bound up with aesthetics of performance and self-display. In particular, Oiticica’s *parangolés* experimented with displaying figures through these elaborate textile creations. Oiticica’s performative capes were fabricated out of gunny sacks, paper, or wicker, their inner layers were embroidered with symbols and characters, or phrases like, “incorporo a
revolta.” The *parangolés* and their multivalent structures, which included brightly colored monotone orange, yellow, red or green capes, were sometimes made of transparent plastic or webs of cloth worn around the shoulders and tied at the neck. When worn, or when danced in, they formed distinct bulges and deep folds creating a shimmering spectacle. These parangolés or spectacularly fabricated capes, facilitated a concrete, tangible, wearable “situation.” Oiticica imagined that the collective performance of the *parangolés* would amount to an interruption of the usual course of things. They were “object-events.”

Nick Cave’s soundsuits are activated by the same transgressive playfulness that characterized Oiticica’s *parangolés*. Both artists are invested in the art of unrestricted play and movement. The inhabitation of the soundsuits and the *parangolés* enable new aesthetic arrangements, and lead to the possible discovery of alternative environments, sounds, and movements, that activate modes of feeling, acting and being in the world differently. For both Oiticica and Cave, this art of sartorial prosthesis concerns itself with improvisations of color and movement, in order to generate figures in movement. This art of sartorial prosthesis extends a figure in flight that outperforms the body, a figure that is never in one place or restricted to a single form of bodily expression.

The collective performances of the *parangolés*, were intended to be art’s response to hegemonic political and cultural struggles; specifically the performances were a creative social response to the totalizing effects of military and political dictatorship in Brazil during the 1960s and 1970s. Oiticica demonstrated that art is a creative tool of the people, and the performances of the *parangolés* offered an artistic rejoinder to the Brazilian state’s disciplinary control over its subjects. My claim is that the line from

Oiticica to Cave is characterized by an artistic response that is essentially disruptive of the political order of things.

To put it one way, I am interested in what Jacques Ranciere might refer to as the *dissensual movement* that the artistry of Oiticica, Pape, Clarke and Cave represent and make possible: a *dissensual movement* of the aesthetic, that starts with the body, but then deconstructs it as a political body or locus of political enunciation. The regimens of artistic practice these artists share, are concerned not necessarily with embodiment, but with alternative, figurative inhabitations - with occupying form. Cave’s extension of this is concerned more directly with what it means to live alternatively *in the flesh*. The fleshy renderings and forms that Oiticica, Pape, and Clarke map out and experiment with, involve fabricating a common experience, what Ranciere calls, “a dissensual re-configuring of the common experience of the sensible.”

This re-configuration of the sensible body is radically extended by Cave through the medium of fabric.

The work of these artists realizes “a field of experience, severed from its traditional reference points…open for new restructurings through the ‘free play’ of aestheticization.” And the art of play, or unstructured playfulness, is expressed as both the condition of possibility for and the essence of performance, in Oiticica and Cave’s work. *Play* mobilizes a material surplus - the billowing shapes of the *parangolés*, or the intricate webbing of Clarke’s fleshy sculptures mobilize something in excess of form, so that the bulges, protrusions and distensions become the privileged space of emergent matter, rather than extraneous or exceptional forms.

Nick Cave can be placed within this tradition of artists whose techniques of

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48 Ibid., 17.
fabrication become interventions into aesthetic form. These artistic interventions in turn “create the fabric of a common experience in which new modes of constructing common objects and new possibilities of subjective enunciation may be developed.” It is in this context then that Nick Cave channels the “common experience” of the Afro-diasporic tradition, which as I have been arguing, has lived and constituted itself by way of such fabrication. Taken together, the artistic practices of Oiticica, Clark, Pape and Cave pre-figure and transfigure what we commonly refer to as the body, through aesthetic practices that re-imagine the body as always already enfolded, into a complex field of material relations.

IX. Ungendering Queerness

I have attempted to describe how new phenomenal relations are possiblized by the irreducible space of what Deleuze called the fold, and how the textured relations the fold enables, can be traced through the dense, layered and unevenly structured object worlds Cave puts on display. Cave starts from the premise that we are always inhabiting objects, and that these objects inhabit us. When Cave invites viewers to experience the soundsuits by wearing them, he is also asking us to acknowledge and accept how such curious even queer occupations, fundamentally re-orient, disrupt and challenge our sense of what it means to be a subject inhabiting the world. Putting on the suits, he is essentially inhabiting refigured flesh.

The soundsuits are figurative sculptures and elaborate symbolizations of black flesh re-imagined as moving ensembles of objects and things. Cave is invested in the suppressed materiality of Fanon’s epidermal schema, with what is underneath the skin.

49 Ibid., 142.
The soundsuits exhibit a tension between skin and flesh, of flesh being opened. The surfaces of the suits become the elaborate territory where bodily borders are negotiated. If for Hortense Spillers the flesh is prior to the body, its agency has to do with its generativity, its persistence as a site for staging a retrieval, for the recovery and a reclamation of a certain worth and dignity that has been lost, we might then say that Cave’s art is concerned with the opening of the body and that he explores the implications of that opening for something like animated flesh. By distinctly refusing something like a body coded by the face, Cave’s characters distinguish themselves through the brilliance of their flesh. Perhaps Cave brings us closer to the care or love for the flesh that Toni Morrison’s Baby Suggs personifies in Beloved who implores, “This is flesh that needs to be loved.” Cave cherishes and animates figures whose specific characteristics develop out of the variances of the flesh.

I have identified Hortense Spillers’ seminal essay, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe” as a text which makes an unprecedented intervention into the subject of the flesh. I am interested in the way Nick Cave extends the potentiality of this flesh to the irreducibly sensual, tangible and physical registers of fabric and the fabricated surface in art. Spillers’ theoretical account of black female flesh is the genealogical condition for Cave’s artistic, fleshy figurations. Specifically, here I want to highlight Spillers’ description of that brutal moment of un-gendering, which the black female slave undergoes, as an instance in which the distinction between the sociogenic and the ontogenic, between gendered being and being itself, is radically cut.

Focusing on what I take to be the most provocative aspect of Spillers’ argument, her claim that this moment of ungendering demands of the black body the violent

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50 Toni Morrison, Beloved, 63.
divestment of all of its subjective attributes, I want to claim that this “ungendering” then becomes the occasion for the critical distinction between body and flesh to be made, and correspondingly, between “captive and liberated subject-positions.” Spillers’ point is explicitly that this brutal moment in which the black female slave is stripped of all subjective attributes, engenders or gives rise to an alternative form of (gendered) being. So that what emerges on the other side of this scene of irreducible violence is something other than a subject – something resembling Cave’s ungendered fleshy figures.

The complex history of ungendering Spillers narrates, however, has been lost to a history of re-gendering, or what Jennifer Morgan calls “the gendering of racial ideology.” According to Morgan, this re-gendering involves the marking of race and gender as two interrelated forms of vulnerability. For Morgan, the gendered racial ideology that we now operate within signifies a gendered racial discourse that constructs stable categories for whiteness and blackness along gendered lines. Morgan’s analysis places this gendered racial ideology at the center of the operation of what Judith Butler identifies as a gendered ontology. The introduction to the dissertation argued that Butler’s identification of a distinctly gendered ontology becomes a precondition for the privileges of legible white subjectivity. As a radical rejoinder to Butler’s disavowal of this gendered ontology, Hortense Spillers asks us to consider the early, violent unmaking of gendered subjectivity as foundational for black being.

Exploiting the critical dissonance between Butler and Spillers, my aim is to think about how Nick Cave’s soundsuits introduce ungendered figures entirely reduced to fleshy form. The gendered racial ideology Morgan identifies, fails to consider how the

aesthetic reconstruction of the racialized subject in and through art, might enable alternative forms of being that do not conform to the categories of sexual difference or even queer difference currently available to us. Cave’s figures betray the close affiliation between gendered ontologies that rely upon binary constructions of gender difference, and queer theoretical interventions that replicate this gendered ontology by explicitly framing queer practices and performances within and through a heterosexual, gendered binary frame.

One explicit example of this heterosexual framing in queer theoretical discourse is offered in the coding of race as always already masculine within performance. Jack Halberstam’s reading of drag kings in *Female Masculinity*, insists upon the distinction between “majority and minority masculinities,” or even more precisely between “masculinities of color and gay masculinities.” Focusing on spectacles of kinging, Halberstam’s reading of one of the black female butch contestants becomes the occasion for this gendered reduction:

The butch who won was a very muscular black woman wearing a baseball shirt and shorts. In here “sports drag” and with her display of flexed muscles the contestant could easily have passed as male, and this made her “convincing.” This contestant won through her display of an authentic or unadorned or unperformed masculinity; he was probably a walk on rather than someone who had prepared elaborately for the contest. Interestingly, the category of butch realness is often occupied by nonwhite drag kings, attesting specifically to the way that masculinity becomes visible as masculinity once it leaves the sphere of normative white maleness.53

Writing that the “muscular black woman” “was probably a walk on,” Halberstam’s claim is that she did not have to go through any preparatory work for her performance. She won because her performance was essentially the performance of that “unperformed masculinity.” Halberstam’s assertions about racialized queer subjects and their

inherently masculine qualities, stand in stark contrast to his discussion of white male masculinities. When Halberstam identifies those performances that take up gay male macho clones, “masculinity tips into feminine performance.”54 Perhaps most disturbing is the last sentence in which Halberstam suggests that the butch realness of queer racialized subjects, in so far as it always aims and reaches for hyper-masculinity, is a performance of failed aspiration.

Thinking about Cave’s soundsuits as an instance of queer racialization in art compels us to confront the limits not only of gendered subjectivity, but of defining queer experience through a heterosexual frame. While I have been primarily concerned with the materiality of the soundsuits, Cave has actually worn and performed in them himself. My claim is that it is through performance, and by way of turning himself into an object, an accessory, and an ornament, that Cave’s inhabitation of the soundsuits effectively queers what it means to be racialized and engendered. Moreover, this performance of objection, (the turning of oneself into an object), expands our sense of what it means to do drag beyond the mere camping up of butch and femme subject positions.

54 Ibid., 235.
More precisely, I am arguing that the queer inhabitation Cave pursues, throws into question the gendered discourse on the subject, which very much depends upon the aesthetic racialization of the other. The soundsuits open up to something further—an explicit confrontation between blackness and queerness, and the materiality of the soundsuits lay the groundwork for this confrontation. *Artforum* described the suits as invoking “everything from Bigfoot, the Ku Klux Klan, the Democratic Party (a donkey mask atop a furry figure wearing a red, white, and blue tie), disco dancers, and space aliens.” The suits are informed and extended by an alternative performance of queerness, expressed through the differential inflection of *quare* instead of *queer*. Monica Miller makes this distinction drawing from E. Patrick Johnson, who explains that *quare* might
be understood as “‘odd and slightly and off kilter. Quares are not necessarily subjects, but “creatures whose quareness is performed with and on their bodies…”” For Johnson quare is queerness with some shade thrown on it, a queerness that attends to the politics and performativity of identity without reifying debilitating notions of identity markers.” I would add that quareness also marks a deeper ontological rupture, a figurative break between normative and alternative being, and that the quare is a “creature,” that constitutes itself within that rupture. The quare is precisely a creature that develops and employs techniques of sartorial prosthesis, in order to enact a different mode of being-in-the-world.

X. Black-Queer-Feminine Assemblages

Nick Cave’s performances in the suits also mark another difference. They recover that gendered ungendering of which Spillers speaks. For Spillers, the fleshliness of the black female body is at once severed from that body, but the feminine remains the constitutive figure that makes that fleshly detachment possible. This alternative gendered economy, this gendered ungendering, becomes the occasion for a radical aesthetic intervention. This gendered ungendering makes it possible for me to read the soundsuits as queer assemblages that mark the place where queerness, blackness and the feminine converge. I want to argue that this fabricated black-queer-feminine desiring assemblage, risks new territory.

The suits leave material traces of what Jose Munoz calls “the sticky interface between the interracial and the queer,” but also with the feminine. The soundsuit is made possible by the distinctly feminine labor Cave engages in, the labor of stitching, sewing.

and braiding. The co-animation of blackness and queerness, through a feminine materiality (more specifically, the art adornment and reproductive practices of weaving, stitching and sewing), is about how blackness and queerness and the feminine, touch across space and time. More than merely an encounter, this complex interface, materializes through the assemblage and “takes the form of an amalgamation of movements…”

Nick Cave, Soundsuit

The soundsuits trace a desire that, as Jennifer Doyle writes, is “improvised, messy and slightly out of control.” Cave builds *black-queer-feminine* assemblages that radiate from the inside out, as if to reflect the intensive overlap of race and sexuality, one that

materializes through this new and ungendered fleshy form. My claim is that the colorful presence of these fleshy assemblages, cut across the recent, persistent queer disavowal of the feminine, as well as a disavowal of both blackness and performance by an aesthetic formalism. Central to the development of this fleshy form is an appetite for both color and texture. Cave’s dense folds animate the haptic suspension and tactile release of the black subject, so that what emerges instead is an extracted, fleshy figure.

Nick Cave’s double punctuation of blackness and of queerness through a textured feminine imagination, radically transfigures all three: Blackness figures as dramatic, theatrical, overly affected; Queerness, defined as “distinctively abjected,” is the realm of “unaccounted for jouissance.”57 And the feminine becomes the domain not only of feeling, but the complex and layered space of affective texture. All three operate via a kind of exceptional excess. Excess is a discursive construct that has been used to frame groups and individuals as morally corrupt or degenerate. Cave’s embrace of excess reconfigures and rethinks the aesthetic possibilities of blackness, queerness and femininity together. The suits dissolve, trouble and queer the differences between blackness and femininity, which have largely been understood to be mutually exclusive according to what Morgan calls that gendered racialized ideology. But Cave’s practice of assemblage insists upon their inter-animation.

I am thinking of queer in the way that Eve Sedgwick deepens the term for us when she insists that queer can encompass other dimensions, “that [it] can’t be subsumed under gender and sexuality at all.” Cave’s pursues a queer logic that confounds heterosexual object-choice, and actively problematizes the assumption that, as Sedgwick

puts it, everyone “has a sexuality,” for instance, and that “that sexuality is implicated with each person’s sense of overall identity in similar ways; that each person’s most characteristic erotic expression will be oriented toward another person and not autoerotic; that if it is alloerotic, it will be oriented toward a single partner or kind of partner at a time; that its orientation will not change over time.”58 Moreover, to defy these conventionally situated logics as Cave’s art does, is to do queer performance.

Apropos Sedgwick, Cave’s attraction to the object queers the boundaries of sexuality. In my reading of Cave, queerness gets mobilized as an aesthetic mode of affiliation here that consists in affirming or occupying the place of a fearful enjoyment. The suits materialize and perform ideas of excess and exceptionality as form, in order not simply to critique them, but to occupy and inhabit them. These folded intimacies index material strategies for “how to live and how to recraft relationality,” as Halberstam has suggested.59

To say that Cave queers these aesthetic relations is to employ queer as a mode of punctuation. As Jennifer Brody has explained, it is to grasp queerness “as a verb more than a noun.” In so doing, we are opened to the way in which “queerness is always already about disrupting the reproduction of a ‘lily white is right’ canon and static notions of the subject.” Brody quotes Sedgwick who views queer as “a continuing moment, movement, motive – recurrent, eddying, troublant…multiply transitive, the open mesh of possibilities, gaps overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of

Queer desire is utterly superfluous - its sexual surplus “seeps across boundaries that are not apparently its own,” as Elizabeth Grosz asserts.

In Brody’s *quotation* of Sedgwick, we glimpse a certain opening that finds itself everywhere repeated. This opening is also the beginning of an affiliation between blackness, queerness and femininity, not simply their shared ground, but an affiliation that points to the radical incorporation of each and their constant extension through one other. I want to maintain that this affiliation is itself a kind of desiring assemblage, a *black-queer-feminine* assemblage that is configured by way of Cave’s deep investments in materiality. I want to think about this preoccupation with material life and its curious excesses as a fundamentally queer desire, whose aesthetic conditions of possibility remain blackness and femininity.

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60 Jennifer Brody, *Punctuation*, 123.
61 Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, viii.
Here, we might say that the queer materiality of blackness, is also the black materiality of queerness, and that such materiality is the constant, present, and animating force through which Cave’s alternative black, queer and feminine figurations transpire. Nick Cave traces Rodney King’s aesthetic blackness through an artistic imagination that both reflects and reconfigures the excessiveness of race, of blackness, in terms of the excesses of capital. And Cave is in pursuit of a material desire that grows out of the sensuous context of lives lived as objects.

I want to identify this form of artistic work – of material regeneration and recovery - as an explicitly queer confrontation with and transcription of the aesthetics of excess. Apropos Elizabeth Freeman, Nick Cave might be described as an artist who reflects an aesthetic queerness that is itself an outgrowth of the very failures of capitalist logics of re-appropriation. We might understand Cave as an artist who works within what looks like a fully bound commodified… world…cherish[ing] not only history’s flotsam and jetsam, but also the excess generated by capital, its castoffs, and the episodes it wishes us to forget. Aware that activist and artistic energies indexed and inspired by this material are also potentially available for recapture, they read and write from the more than the infinite play of meaning, yet also for less than the total transformation of culture. In their own version of trench warfare, they collect and remobilize archaic or futuristic debris as signs that things have been and could be otherwise. That capitalism can always reappropriate this form of time is no reason to end with despair: the point is to identify ‘queerness’ as the site of all the chance element that capital inadvertently produces, as well as the site of capital’s potential recapture and incorporation of chance.62

I am interested in Freeman’s use of the word debris here, and how debris circulates as both the purest and most degraded expression of cultural excess. For the soundsuits are indeed built and assembled out of what some might deem trash, the proliferating debris of culture.

Nick Cave, *Soundsuit* and detail (below)
In their study of *the formless*, art historians Yves-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss discuss the importance of debris to the art of kitsch. They argue that kitsch be understood as a non-dialectical operation of the formless, which they define as an aesthetic operation that *brings things down*. Placing kitsch within the imagination of the formless, Bois and Krauss emphasize that kitsch makes everything turn to “disgust.”

With respect to Cave’s art, I would argue that we are also caught up in the curious feeling of disgust we feel in looking at this corporeal spectacle, created by the artist’s outlandish mash-up of crocheted pads, sticks, buttons, potholders, horns, beads, sequins, hot pants, socks (covered in dryer lint), rags, rope, condoms, toys, and elaborate pelts of dyed human hair. And yet, the artist’s combination and assortment of materials manages to cohere into something terrifyingly pleasurable.

Cave works through an aesthetics of kitsch that both enables and skirts the boundaries of shame, disgust and aversion as complex, forms of queer attachment and desire. But these complex feelings of disgust and shame that are provoked in us by looking at Cave’s art, also betray the ways in which the very productions of capitalist excess, at once construct and map onto expressions of cultural and social excessiveness. Cave’s exploitation of what Bois and Krauss refer to as a non-dialectical, “un-ironic” kitsch, precisely indexes this complex overlap, whose ascriptions of excess have figured as central to the formation of raced and sexed subjectivities.

Freeman points to queerness as the site of this cultural debris or excess that is potentially subject to “reappropriation” or “racapture” by capital. I want to emphasize that such debris, excess, or “chance” that Freeman tells us queerness embodies, is the

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stuff that excessive subjectivity, (and here I would include blackness and femininity), always bodies forth; such debris comes to figure as a point of retreat, or a site of fugitivity for both blackness and femininity. What we encounter in Cave’s art then, is a flipping of the script, so to speak: the very excess that maps onto and attaches itself to stigmatic bodies, manages to mock the excessiveness we all live, all the while marking and remarking the space of excess as the space of desire, where a certain kind of joy and fulfillment can be had and felt.

XI. Desire, Sexuality and Race in Art

I want to conclude with a discussion of the way in which this black-queer-feminine assemblage operates. I am interested in how its vibrations, stimulations, movements and sounds, intensify through fleshy folds of fabric, facilitated by processes of accumulation. Cave’s textured and augmented surfaces reflect his obsessions with finding, collecting, gathering and assembling things. In this context, accumulation becomes a mode of figuration that traces, reflects and refracts the excessive materiality ascribed to blackness. But accumulation also becomes the occasion for thinking about how sexuality operates within his art. In the final instance I want to think about how such decorative strategies of accumulation explicitly index a saturation of desire.

Here I move in the direction of Jennifer Doyle’s work, particularly her discussion about the relationship between art, sex and desire in the work of Yayoi Kusama. Like Kusama, Cave’s congealed and accumulating surfaces exhibit a similar saturation of desire, through the “obsessive repetition” of layering, sewing, stitching and stuffing Doyle describes. Cave’s objects also “literalize the unruliness of sexual desire, its ability to cover everything, to spread.” His embellished buttons and sequins take over his
surfaces, they cover over everything, and allude to the unruly spread of this material desire and its overlap with sexual desire. Both Kusama and Cave exploit an intimate and abundant economy of objects: the odd knick-knacks, the ephemera, and the twisted, broken buttons and bits. Doyle describes Kusama’s work as concerned with the “strange, small excesses of objects.” These practices of extreme embellishment betray the shared energies of sexuality and generativity within art.

Nick Cave, *Soundsuit*

But I also want to suggest that in Cave’s art, these “small excesses” which are secreted by Cave’s compressed surfaces, are remainders of a fractured desire that troubles

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the line between sex and art. These experimental soundsuits trace the materiality of
blackness back to the phantasmatic limits of raced and sexed subjects, and Cave’s
practices of excessive embellishment, decoration and adornment, work to reveal the
hyper-sexuality of race. For example, one soundsuit resembles both the head of a
condom and the white sheath of a Klan uniform. The aesthetic ambivalence of this white
body-mask provokes both terror and joy: it ties together a symbol of racial terror with an
object that ensures sexual protection, an object that stands in for the regulation of
sexuality, that also guards against the pleasures and dangers of virility. This white
Gumby-like character skirts the boundaries of race, sexuality and fantasy. The form of
this sheathed figure expresses and uncovers the tension between sexuality and racial
transgression the threat of miscegenation always carries with it, that the racial perpetrator
allegedly embodies. The soundsuited figure here, both embodies and bodies forth the
myth of race as phantasmatic sexuality - a myth that only holds at the limit of sexuality
understood as phantasmatic raciality.
Nick Cave, Soundsuit
“Black folks know what they got to do to live and they will do it, they will work as hard as they know how, as hard as the next man, by the sweat of their own brow. They want to have their own strategy for working, to use their own energy and spirit the way it come to them to do it, not to do something because someone else make you do it. That’s freedom. My art is the evidence of my freedom. When I start any piece of art, I can pick up anything I want to pick up. When I get ready for that, I already got my idea for it. I start with whatever fits my idea, things I will find anywhere. I gather up things from around. I see the piece in my mind before I start, but after you start making it, you see more that got to go in it. It’s just like inventing something. It’s like patterns that you cut out to show you how to make something – a boxcar, or clothes. Everything’s got a pattern for it. The pattern for a piece of art is in your mind; it’s the idea for it. That’s the pattern.”

- Thornton Dial

I. Thornton Dial’s Radical Vernacular

Thornton Dial’s 2004 work titled *Stars of Everything*, features an eagle-like figure, defeated and downtrodden, cloaked in rags, the figure wears over its shoulders the tatters of an old carpet and is partially bound by disintegrating rope. Dial’s large-scale works feature rags, shreds of fabric, cast off bits and pieces of ephemera, that seem to barely be held together by anything at all, but are intricately stitched or woven into massive assemblages. One might say the materials Dial uses are markers for oppression, but I would offer that collectively, Dial’s art performs the work of retrieving the misplaced figures and objects of a black vernacular tradition.

The figure Dial offers us in *Stars of Everything* resembles a buzzard, a creature the artist likens to himself. As art historian Joanne Cubbs explains, Dial is a scavenger or “pickup bird” who finds creative sustenance in material scraps and constructs his art from the detritus of the world. In a larger sense, this bedraggled bird is Dial’s latest embodiment of black struggle, a weary bricoleur, who survives deprivations of all kinds through his sheer resourcefulness and capacity to “make something out of nothing.”

Cubbs continues to describe the work, which features the buzzard as a broken figure, poised among the ruin to rise and strike. This birdlike figure has been hardened sharpened, and prepared for battle. A curious hybrid of a defeated buzzard and dignified eagle, it is a reincarnation of the artist’s idealistic “climbing” tiger image that appeared in

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past works; like the tiger, it claws and fights its way through its alienated surroundings, the exhausted setting that we call the American political landscape.3

*Stars of Everything* sets the stage for a series of themes in Dial’s work. While Dial foregrounds a practice of making something out of nothing, I would argue that at the same time, he actively challenges that phrasing, recalibrating our sense of precisely what it means to have nothing. In other words, Dial’s art becomes a means of reclaiming the imagination of a presumably dispossessed people, by interrogating what it means to be dispossessed. The presumption has largely been that a vernacular tradition possesses nothing, that it holds nothing in common. Apropos Dial, my claim is that the very concept of a “vernacular” is not necessarily that it has a common object, but that it is merely held in common.

The accumulation of certain symbols of domestic work and life, and Dial’s incorporation of the very tools of his own labor, mark an insistence and a desire to texturize black southern existence. Dial means to insist that the vernacular culture he lays claim to and calls his own, is rich with alternative aspirations and desires that go unrecognized precisely because they fall outside of the logic of national culture. His aesthetic investment in the symbols of vernacular culture, cuts across a history of criticism preoccupied with an ideology of success that constantly measured black artistic greatness in terms of how well the Negro artist could mimic a (white) art establishment. Dial debunks this myth of achievement, asking us to evaluate his art on his own terms, and the terms of the tradition he calls his own.

Insisting upon the aesthetic value of this tradition, I would argue that Dial locates what Raymond Williams would call the “structures of feeling,” or the sense of life of this

3Ibid.
vernacular as a community of experience within the fabricated surfaces of his
assemblages. Animated by fleshy folds and turns of fabric, Dial’s assemblages move
and speak to what Williams describes as an unconscious feeling of culture, only drawn
out and made legible with great difficulty by art, which in this instance, reveals to us
those forms of life that have been placed under erasure. Leroi Jones (Amiri Baraka) wrote
in “Myth of the Negro Artist,” that “it was only in music that the Negro did not have to
respect the tradition outside of his own feelings – that is he could play what he felt, and
not make it seem like something alien to his feelings, something outside of his
experience.” In light of Baraka’s assertions, Dial’s profound intervention is to maintain
that the vernacular is in fact capable of having, and furthermore, (re)producing something
like a genuine structure of feeling that it can lay claim to and call its own, without having
to make recourse to an ‘outside,’ a dominant tradition.

In his critical text, The Signifying Monkey, Henry Louis Gates interprets a passage
by Richard Wright in which the author provides a condescending description of the
glaring absences that persist within a vernacular literary culture. Bypassing Wright’s
condescension but relying on his description, Gates exclaims: “‘Nameless,’ ‘formless,’
‘authorless’ traditions can represent no threat to premogeniture.” He argues that “black
authors do not admit to a line of literary descent within their own traditions.” I would
distance myself form Gates here whose understanding of literary or artistic descent is
seemingly governed by an idea of a masculine right of succession. My sense is that,

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within the context of vernacular artistic production and reproduction, this passage of
descent is far more complex. There is something else more profoundly erotic at work in
Dial's assemblages.

My argument is that the visual vernacular tradition Dial traces for us, underscores
material practices of handing down that are shot through with a black feminine history.
Once again, Hortense Spillers narrative concerning the historical severing of
African/African-American motherhood, requires us to recognize black femininity as the
(non)agent in a dispersed vernacular history of handing down.7 Toward the end of this
chapter I will trace these internal feminine relays, the passages and folds that animate
Dial’s assemblages. I will discuss the unique materiality of what I will identify as a
feminine fold, demonstrating how this materiality is bound up with a figure of
reproduction. Dial’s fabricated assemblages re-imagine the linkages between blackness,
femininity and reproduction, as foundational for the constitution and dissemination of
black vernacular culture.

Dial uncovers what I would call a radical vernacular, internally animated by the
disrupted richness of a set of improvisational aesthetics - of using things that are readily
available or at hand, and showcasing them regardless of their value. He stretches the idea
of the vernacular to a radical limit, alerting us to both the relevance and urgency of its
concerns over the organization and implementation of political life.

Grant Farred describes the black vernacular as: “the object that inspires
hegemonic imitation and yet is despised - feared even – because it is the incarnation and
articulation of that which is deemed culturally and economically lesser, the speech of the

working class or the ethnic minority, the discourse of the racial subject. However, even when it is dismissed, the vernacular can, in some if not all instances, stand as the enunciation of a threatening, angry resistance, a determination to speak within and against the dominant group with the hint of Fanonian violence.”

Dial traces black vernacular historical fictions, foregrounding forms of life unique to that tradition, that remain alienated from view. His worn, worked, and broken down surfaces are a visual shorthand not only for the past consequences of racism, but for those resistive efforts of blacks in the South that have been forgotten, covered over by a national culture whose economic ideology aims at erasing black traditions, folklore, and subsequently the social practices that are shaped and informed by them.

The line of lynched crows, or blackened rags, in his piece titled, “Green Pastures: The Birds That Didn’t Learn How to Fly,” is a work that alludes to the literal violence of this erasure through a vile, extrajudicial practice of execution, and Dial’s analogy of the lynched bodies of black Americans to literal rags hung out to dry, is a powerfully disturbing figuration. This figurative technique is a trope we find in many of Dial’s works, and it marks him as an artist who is at once of, and speaks for a black vernacular tradition that troubles the seemingly intact surface of a liberal cultural landscape.

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Thornton Dial’s artistic practice, animated both by a retrieval of the object, and an aesthetics of fabrication and reproduction, shifts a black vernacular Southern experience from the margins of history to the center of a folk tradition that is itself central to the aesthetic of 20th century modernist assemblage. His publicity in the corporate and cosmopolitan settings of the art world, compels us to think about him as “a vernacular intellectual” in Farred’s words: the one who constructs himself as the spokesman for a marginalized or oppressed community, who gives public expression to the experiences of that constituency through the utilization of that group’s linguistic patterns, its cultural rituals, rites and mores, and its unique traditions, because of his unique exposure in the space of the museum.9

At the same time, however, Dial’s self-taught, outsider status, stirs up surprise and disbelief from admirers who have likened his work to important artistic figures like Robert Rauschenberg, Ed Keinholz, Julian Schnabel, Anselm Keifer and others. Dial is a conceptually minded, visually oriented intellectual who was deprived of a formal education. However his practical skills, (Dial is practiced in both carpentry and welding

9 Ibid., 47.
among other things), that allowed him to both imagine and create elaborate objects that don’t fall apart after they have been constructed. His vernacular style draws out aspects of African American life intimately tied to spirituality, hope and survival.

Thornton Dial’s art actively probes and searches the ephemeral material history of rural blacks in the South. His fabricated assemblages shed light on a collective black experience enriched by the memories, impressions, and secrets of creative survival. The artist selects objects that allow him to peer behind the curtain of history and examine the quality of that life that has been little recognized, ignored, and written out of the national consciousness. His art aims to restore and preserve those moments of grace that might be found in the practice of the everyday. For Dial, the neglected object brings this life, alienated from view, once again to the fore.

Many critics have pointed to Dial’s ignorance of the art historical context for these artists and the quality of their works as a justification for effectively positioning him at a remove from the inner workings of the art establishment. Dial’s art inhabits a redemptive project – the effort to redeem built space, the urban fabric, discrete objects and subject/object relations. As the literary critic Bill Brown exclaims: “Might be that a Black man whose genealogy includes lives lived, legally, as things, can grasp things other people never could.”

Born in Emelle, Alabama, Thornton Dial, it is frequently pointed out, is self-taught and illiterate. He is frequently labeled an “outsider artist,” and his ignorance and illiteracy is taken as a sign for his formal illegitimacy. The discourse that often surrounds Dial has certified that his craft lacks definition or form. Moreover, Dial’s naïveté is read

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as a kind of extraesthetic performance, lending itself to claims that his work lacks an art historical precedent. Writing about Dial, Fred Moten has exclaimed that “the ascription of *self taught* or *outsider* are expressions of desire and anxiety that redouble the structures of deprivation and privilege in which they react. The long self imposition of austerity, which conceptualism, minimalism and pop reflect and to which they respond sometimes beautifully as if by accident, and that narrow slice of the intellectual and artistic milieu that delusionally thinks of itself as central, is the perennial inhabitation of a crisis.”¹¹ Dial’s work marks a radical and intended break with the aesthetic formalism of the post World War II avant-garde, whose tendency toward austerity and minimalism eschewed any evidence of its messy genealogy.

Contrary to claims that Dial’s practice lacks a supportable art historical frame or referent, the “crisis of artistic form” Dial’s art uncovers is the undocumented fraternizing between 20th-century modernist assemblage and the folk practices of the regions in which artists started assembling objects. As art critic Jerry Cullum points out, these regions would include Central Europe in the case of the Dadaists, of course, but also rural and urban America, from California (where found-object assemblage flourished before Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg made the practice famous) to the American South, where Rauschenberg grew up looking at African-American yard art, castoffs and discards arranged into provocative displays.¹² Dial’s work sheds light on this vernacular tradition as the very condition for European and American modernism’s success and significance, instead of figuring as that tradition’s neglected and excessive outside.

Thornton Dial’s vernacular imagination grows out of his Southern roots, and Dial refuses “to allow the Jim Crow social restrictions restrain his protean vision of art and life as fluid, spiritual, multidimensional, comic, cryptic.”\textsuperscript{13} In fact, Dial’s assemblages are grounded in the uniqueness and particularity of Southern life and tradition. His vernacular aesthetic flourishes despite the widely felt prejudice against the South espoused by contemporary artists and curators, but also a tradition of black writers. It was not until the mid-twentieth century that many blacks could even think about returning to the South and making a life there a viable option. Farah Jasmine Griffin explains that “for the most part, the South remained the site of racial horror and shame for black writers…For [Richard] Wright migration to Europe is a more viable option than a return to the South. While Ellison seems to suggest the importance of the South, his protagonist retreats to a Dostoyevsky-like underground, and Baldwin’s second novel goes to Europe…Nella Larsen provides us with a protagonist, Helga, whose return to the south signals her metaphoric death…the South is an obligatory site of cultural sojourn, but not a destiny.”\textsuperscript{14} In light of the legacy of Jim Crow, as well as this history of suspicion, which led to creative black flight, Dial’s celebration of a distinctly Southern aesthetic may be one reason why his art has been relegated to the sidelines for so many years.

Dial’s traveling retrospective which opened at the Indianapolis Museum of Art, made a sort of clearing for black artists whose work with found objects anticipated the dramatic turn in modern art towards an aesthetic of assemblage. Cultural critic Greg Tate


has shed light on the political and cultural conditions that ensured the exclusion of artists like Dial from the art world, as well as the total eclipsing of an entire vernacular tradition:

What is somewhat shocking is that Dial’s exclusion has taken place over the last fifteen years, a time when many Black American artists have been awarded unprecedented amounts of fame, critical recognition and money for their art... Thus we have the unsightly spectacle of Dial’s art being treated by art-world gatekeepers of all hues as if he were producing and attempting to exhibit his universal images in the segregated South of the 1930s. At the same time there is a short-list of scholars and critics who have devoted blood, brains, time and treasure to documenting the remarkable tradition of African-American art making and who believe that this current refusal to embrace Dial is only delaying the inevitable: the re-evaluation of everything we thought we knew about the canon of American visual Modernism as it is expanded by and measured against the hidden-away bounty of the Southern black visual arts. 

I am interested in this cultural “bounty,” that richness of a vernacular culture, that Dial reveals by recovering and telling stories with objects that both bespeak the violent historical past of the segregated South, at the same time that they symbolize its unique political metamorphosis, as well as the cultural generativity and innovation that is the Black South’s own. As Dial himself would say, making this art is “just like inventing something.”

The 98-year old artist forces us into an encounter with the inaudible, with stories that are not only handed down orally, but through other forms of exchange, through practices of labor and care unique to the black experience in the South. As the poet and literary critic Harreyette Mullen has explained, African American storytellers are not confined to what she has called the “trope of orality” that would, in Dial’s case, exclude not only “writerly texts” but also the exchange of visual documents or art objects which tell stories of the black Southern experience. Visual texts also do the work of illuminating the specificity of an African-American culture, and have perhaps always been, as Mullen states, “marked by a productive tension between individuality and

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collectivity, and between the sacred and secular, aspects of everyday life that African cultures had worked to integrate seamlessly through communal rituals that forged collective identities and assured human beings of their significance in the universe.”

Dial demonstrates that the object is capable of telling stories. The black vernacular tradition he lays claim to, is invested in the power and agency of the object, as a kind of symbolic artifact. Tracing both the conditions for the object’s circulation and its proliferation within a black Southern heritage, Dial becomes the storyteller Walter Benjamin describes, whose “…living immediacy is by no means a present force,” but “has already become something remote from us and that is getting even more distant.”

The problem Benjamin points to, is the one already indicated by Dial. In this age of mass production, mass circulation and reification, the one who works with objects, who tells stories with them, is the one by whom original philosophical insight is borne. In other words, this is to say that original insight is borne by the one who sees in the artwork’s textured surfaces their contribution to the thinking and the making of black life and existence. We might consider Dial a visual storyteller whose work explores the possibilities for a distinctly hybrid, miscegenated textuality, situated at the intersection of the linguistic, the oral and the visual. This trope has perhaps always been central to the black vernacular.

Like the nineteenth century rag-picker, Charles Baudelaire’s “chiffonnier,” who figures so prominently in Walter Benjamin Arcades Project, Dial taps into the relay between past, present and future. Dial is perhaps like the ragpicker who sifts through the rubbish of the city to assemble something, and proclaims: “I needn’t say anything.

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Merely show. I shall appropriate no ingenious formulations, purloin no valuables. But the rags, the refuse – these I will not describe but put on display.”¹⁸ Dial’s assemblages are bearers of meaning that stretch simultaneously back to the past and forward into the future. These artworks sketch a kind of genealogy – they are works that throw up the controversies of the present, while at the same time they ask be studied historically. But these works also present an aesthetic genealogy that points back to the rich history of African American life and struggle. In this sense, Dial’s works are also ensembles of those real and imagined figures that the linear sweep of the present has left behind.

Dial’s artworks move by way of a historical ensemble - that rich, deep immeasurable collection of affective life and labor that a black Southern tradition holds within itself, constitutes Dial’s unique contribution to the art of assemblage. The ensemble, the very thing that recovers what Moten calls the “freedom drive” which animates both the black artistic tradition and black political life, as Moten explains, is improvisatory and appears as a phenomenon; it is always physically situated and socially embedded.¹⁹ Dial’s assemblages are built by way of these ensembles, whose affective connections generate multiple, overlapping material archives, ephemera and historical testimonies, and in so doing stretch the assemblage as a conceptual apparatus for thinking about those figures displaced from the linearity of historical time. Dial’s work brings these material archives together as testimonies of a shared historical present. This vernacular archive maps a poetics of place, and offers homegrown meditations on the biological, cultural, and political sustainability of black life.

As we move closer to Dial’s work, the density of his fabricated surfaces draws us in; our reality starts to shift, as our certainties of perception and experience start to unfold from an encounter with this fleshy surface and its buried partial objects, the misshapen, broken dolls, wood, twigs, dirt, fabric and cloth that congeal within its open structure. Within the irreducible space of Dial’s open weave, these severed objects evoke a wasteland of uncertain ground. They are the soiled vestiges that evidence the violent social breakdown that has emerged in the second half of the twentieth century, and how that recent history continues to contour American life. These objects are the material surplus of histories and lives that have gone unaccounted for. Dial’s art has everything to do with how the contemporary capitalist realities of American social life have been made possible by a long history of disposing of certain peoples and their materials. In this way, Dial’s massive assemblages expose the material machinations that have produced the very idea of America. But it is within the dense, fleshy mass of the glittering reflections of these assemblages, that something else can be retrieved. The assemblage and its form, becomes tangled in a new kind of visual, vernacular poetics that Dial constructs from his particular encounters with things.

Dial’s piece, *Don’t Matter How Raggly The Flag ,It Still Got To Tie Us Together*, made out of mattress coils, chicken wire, clothing, can lids, found metal, plastic twine and wire, depicts a torn and ravaged United States flag. The jagged edges of Dial’s flag denote the struggle underlying American history and the quest for black freedom, liberty and equality. This work was created just after the start of the Iraq war. Dial has painted the flag in such a way that its bleeding effect alludes to the tragedies of human life, specifically the racial conflict he has been witness to, but also the justifications for
violence under the symbolic banner of nationhood. Here the flag’s marred and melting patriotic red, white and blue surface speaks to the racial and social violence that underlies the national landscape, which is both symbolized and concretized by the American flag.

*Don’t Matter How Raggly The Flag ,It Still Got To Tie Us Together, 2003*

Though the flag serves as an emblem for the collective strivings of nationhood, Dial searches for the contradictions enfolded within its symbolism. On either side of the composition are two nearly invisible figures, one black and the other white that gesture toward the idea of racial difference and human divisiveness. Towards the bottom of the piece two figures lie together on a floating ground made from mattress coils.\(^\text{20}\) Dial extends the notion that American society thoroughly implicates us in the cultivation of violence both domestically and internationally, and we must collectively find a way to

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confront the hard political truths that make patriotism and nationhood both impossible ideals and necessary fictions.

But *Don’t Matter How Raggly The Flag*, is not simply a defacement of the American flag, or a restoration of an idea of humanity redeemed from the antagonistic strivings of the nation. I would argue that Dial’s flag bespeaks a tradition of post-World War II, neo-dadaist artists whose work provoked the critical ambiguity of aesthetically depicting the American flag. We might well compare Dial’s *Don’t Matter* to Jasper Johns’ *Flag* of 1954. First we can acknowledge that Dial’s flag is provocative in the same way that Johns’ flag remains influential. The art historian Fred Orton has pointed out that Jasper Johns’ *Flag* was disruptive for the way in which it’s “aporetic effect…articulated a kind of cynicism that might be understood by certain groups or persons as an interruption of the patriotic message of the American flag.” In the wake of its display, public skepticism turned on the question of whether Johns’ work was an American flag or a *painting of an American flag.*

In contrast, we might grasp the distinct difference between Dial’s longer title and Johns’ more direct one. Orton explains that Johns’ *Flag* is “titled deceptively simple which is to say quite complicated,” that “without the definite or indefinite article, without any adjective, addition or attribute, the title of Stars and Stripes gives us to understand that it is neither something which is definite or indefinite, but both definite and indefinite, that it is only and precisely, *Flag*.” And yet, it is possible that when African Americans looks at the American flag, they not only see but experience the glaring contradictions of history all over again. That is, black folks see not a verifiable, flat surface, but a deeply tarnished surface, even in Cubbs words, “festoons of bloody bandages.” The pointed

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contrast however between these two works hinges on the fact that Dial’s fabricated reworking and undoing, his torn surface, is invested in a deconstruction of the emblematic flag that opens up another material dimension that points to the painfully violent experience of what it means or has meant to be a black American, in the flesh. African Americans in and of the South perhaps have always been alienated from the effects of American national exceptionalism, at the same time that a displaced blackness has always performed a radical deconstruction upon the national consciousness. The shrouded, torn and bleeding deep surface of Dial’s flag, which appears to be coming apart at its fraying seams, suggests that the center cannot hold without those dispersed at the margins.

Thornton Dial’s major retrospective which was titled, “Hard Truths: The Art of the Thornton Dial,” unveils the mechanics of grand political fictions like liberty, equality and freedom. Furthermore, Dial allows us to glimpse the material conditions through which such fictions are assembled. The fabricated assemblages underscore the notion of a hard truth as a truth folded into a lie. Dial uncovers a discourse that surrounds Southern blacks, signifying them as ‘the poor,’ or those who do not possess anything because they cannot in fact have. But the myth of the statelessness of poor black people is structured by half-truths and lies. Dial’s work suggests that the fiction of America, the unfounded dream of American democracy, contains within it hard truths about what it means not only to be black, Southern, illiterate, marginalized, but the creative outcast whose radical resourcefulness is both alienated from view, but extends forms of collective living and practices of sharing that do not take as their condition, qualifications of citizenship or forms of subjective recognition.
II. The Yard Show

Dial’s fascination with refuse continues to serve as the subjects of his major works. Indeed, his exploration into the long genealogy of black creativity finds its inspiration in the symbolic energies of junk. Dial offers us extended aesthetic survey into the quality of junk and its forms of excess, find their dialectical expression in the forms of value and devalue that take on social definition and justify the economic categorization and classification of people in terms of, or, as things. Black people have become caught within this devalued frame, as the victims of techniques of disposability and the practices of social casting they extend. The object becomes an index for the way in which practices of material devaluation shape social hierarchies that extend to racial and sexual subjects. But Dial’s work also highlights the object as that thing which resists capture, and in this way brings us in touch with the remnant, that thing that remains and persists in plain sight, yet is so easily cast off and rendered invisible.

Recasting the remnant as an object of value and beauty, Dial draws our attention to a history of black recycling, practiced in the Southern “yard show,” as the visual discourse that sustains Dial’s painting and sculpture. Art historian Joanne Cubbs has located Dial’s artistic practice in a tradition of African-American yard art, which employs cast-off objects “as a form of encoding visual language.” “Objects are amassed and transformed into sculptural displays that express a range of social, political, spiritual and philosophical themes particular to a black Southern tradition. One might see sculptural works such as these along roads and front yards, and back fields. Many of these assemblages include discarded television sets, fans, auto parts, bottles, appliances, toys, broken furniture and other found items. These objects are often combined with features
of the surrounding landscape – trees, plantings, lined walkways, rock boundaries, swept ground, and fencing.”

The African American yard show remains a missing chapter in mainstream accounts of art history. To the uninitiated, black yard constructions appear to be only piles of junk, a purposeful deception that perhaps prevented their discovery by a brutal white over culture with a long history of suppressing or destroying African American cultural expression. In this context, one might understand why strategies of oppression necessitate strategies of disguise. As Saidiya Hartman has eloquently put it: “the right to obscurity must be respected.” Hartman usefully distinguishes between the significance of opacity with respect to the “dominative imposition of transparency.” I am interested in extending Hartman’s assertions about opacity and transparency to a reading of the assemblage. In Dial’s compositions, discarded things resist systems of taxonomy, ordering, organization. His art shows us how the disposable object resists care. I would offer that this struggle internal to the assemblage outlines possibilities for material resistance that confound human agency and intentionality.

In these yard art traditions, clandestine messages are hidden in the seemingly mundane symbols of everyday labor. But it is within this covert lexicon that a number of repeating themes and symbols that emerge. Examining this history of African-American artistic production, Robert Farris Thompson has argued that items associated with the idea of flight (birds, rockets, airplanes, helicopters) evoke notions of travel, spiritual transport and transcendence. Mirrors, all-seeing eyes, and television sets are icons of watchful protectiveness and cosmic vision. Antennae, transmitters, receivers and other

22 Joanne Cubbs, Hard Truths: The Art of Thornton Dial.
electronic devices represents communication, the power of information and knowledge, as well as contact with the invisible world of the spirit. And emblems of motion (wheels, tires, fans, hubcaps, and pinwheels) signify the cyclical progression of life, death and rebirth, - a reference to eternal renewal that serves as a metaphor for the practice of recycling itself.24

Describing the pervasive influence of the African American yard show on art making in the region, Thompson has dubbed it the “invisible academy” an “alternative classical tradition.” “The Art of Alabama” is an example of the way in which African-American yard art both is excluded from and formally departs from classical traditions of Western art. Dial juxtaposes an example of European classical inheritance as represented by the statue of the Greek character Pandora, here painted bright yellow. We might read Dial as intentionally mounting a challenge to the institutional symbols of “high art,” or

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“fine art,” as the measure against which the works of unschooled, nontraditional artists like himself are dismissed. Ironically however, this juxtaposition illuminates the tradition of yard art as the antecedent to such classical forms of display, as Dial’s strategic placement of the statue in front of the assemblage, ties it to the popular genre of outdoor statuary also known as “yard art.” The placement of the bright yellow statue in front of the assemblage underscores Thompson assertion that yard art was an alternative classical tradition, obscured by the governing aesthetics of Western classicism.

This tradition of African-American yard art brings into relief the special relation between black life and black labor, which becomes crucial to the expression of Southern culture. This relation is magnified and placed on a continuum in the context of Dial’s work. For Dial’s art is explicitly bound up with his labor – considering his artistic repertoire as a whole, we might say that his art is a meditation on the very idea of what it means to work. His art stands in for his labor, and vice versa – in Dial words: “My art is the evidence of my freedom.” Perhaps this is why W.E.B. DuBois underscored the question of labor when he wrote that the institution of slavery brought into focus perhaps the single-most important question: What “if all labor, black as well as white, became free…?” The regulation of labor under slavery became a means of managing black life, assuring that “both property and privilege would be protected.”

Dial’s is a working and overworked imagination that collectively magnifies the history of both black life and labor as intimately connected, and always already an expansion of relations of exchange, and expressions of aesthetic possibility.

I have argued that Dial’s art is at once his labor. This confluence of art and labor is reflected in the creative landscapes of the South. Insofar as its practice features what is

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quotidian and common, this vernacular yard art tradition defies both the notions of privilege and private property, by asking us to consider the radical idea of common property as that which is always made and produced socially. The threat that DuBois’ text foreshadows, would have been a threat to the democratically sanctioned institution of slavery – the threat of the commons, as the open exchange of the social - of both life and labor. This vernacular aesthetic asks us to recognize the common as the field of social life, or in the words of Fred Moten and Stefano Harney, as the place where in fact “we are and what we were all along.”  

III. The Realist Ontology of the South

Dial’s black vernacular displays the unique convergence of the historical and spiritual. Dial conveys how the artistic spirit of the black South is thoroughly permeated by a naturalism that draws on real and imagined ancestral lineages, deeply rooted in nature, the environment and the landscape of the South. The yard art traditions described by Cubbs and Thompson, are a major artistic genre within the South’s cultural topography. But these large-scale sculptures also complicate the topography of the South, because they inspire us to think about alternative, visionary environments modeled on the aesthetic principles of black folklore. This historical-spiritual vernacular tradition offers alternative imaginary landscapes that resist what we might refer to as the “realist ontology” through which an image of the South becomes fixed.

I would like to briefly point to the way Dial’s artistic project intervenes into a tradition of aesthetic modernism that portrays the South as a refuge of obsolescence and decay. While it is beyond the scope of the current project to take up with much specificity

the way in which a host of Southern writers ascribe these characteristics to the South, the
tropes of Southern landscape that we might find in much Southern writing, imagine the
South as a site of historical wreckage. I am interested in how the South functions as a
‘repository’ for a variety of projected cultural anxieties about the failures of American
subjectivity and society as a whole, and furthermore, how an imagination of blackness
surfaces and resurfaces within this picturing of the South, and comes to figure as central
to the region’s political and aesthetic failures. Descriptions of Southern landscape
abound in projected fantasies of the South as being the source of the moral degeneration of
the nation itself.

Thinking about the South and its tropes of historical display, I was led to the work
of literary scholar Lisa Klarr, whose analysis I rely on heavily here. In her in depth
reading of William Faulkner’s Southern realist ontology, Klarr explains that the South
represented a kind of “theatrical scenery,” so that dilapidated barns, rusting tools, and
inefficient workers depicted in so many of Faulkner’s novels are the literary foil for
Northern anxieties about Southern depletion, which coalesced around the non-
functionality of the South and its scenography. For Faulkner, the tropes of a Southern
landscape are fundamentally anti-modern. His spaces are not “humanized,” but are sites
of human labor gradually being reclaimed by nature: the ruined house, the old sheds and
rusty barns, the rampant decay that emerges from everywhere and nowhere. I would
argue that, as Klarr insists, like Faulkner, Dial is able to evoke the unique ‘terror’ and
romanticism of the Southern landscape, and that they both share representations of the
anti-representational space of the South as both an enclosed but at once open world, in

27 Lisa Klarr, “Decaying Spaces: Faulkner’s Gothic and the Construction of the National Real.” Available
which everything, including the body in and of labor is suppressed, and gradually rendered obsolete.

Dial’s assemblages allow us to become tangled or wrapped up in a sensation of feeling caught, just as the landscape of the South was then, and remains caught between a violent and presumably pre-modern past, and the modern, industrial future of the nation. The realist ontology that Klarr describes, establishes and fixes an image of the South, holding it in place as the pre or anti modern exception to the national geography. And yet, I would argue that the decay that emerges from everywhere and nowhere in Faulkner’s imagination, generates another topography, one that is reflected in Dial’s work, and exists in excess of this realist ontology. Amiri Baraka refers to this topos as “the jungle,” suggesting that there perhaps never was a clear or real Southern iconography.

I want to offer that the strange jungle Dial offers us reflects the violent tangle of social life it represents, and complicates an idea of the South as readily available for the work of what Klarr calls, “cultural decoding.” Following Baraka’s reading, the spatial codes and aesthetic decay that have allegedly structured the cartographic landscape of the South, are the very tropes that have been unworked, and according to Klarr, “divested of their structuring power” by artists like Dial who create alternative landscapes that are no longer confined to the flat surface of a canvas. Here is Baraka:

I see an old shed and knock at the door. What about the driveway lined with signs and flags made of coat hangers (what country?) Shit is hanging everywhere. I’m knocked, nobody answers. Jeeezus…Here somebody has…some body – I’m going back to the door – is this the right path? It’s a jungle. But I’m getting a little less spooked. My Mantan Moreland expression is cooling out – I can see not more and more it’s a jungle of art, there’s shit hanging and stacked and dumped and hung everywhere and hundreds and hundreds of
eerily elegant sandstone sculptures, dazzling the eye, perched curiously between what I see now are sculptures created from what they call “found objects.”

Dial’s artistic jungle both assumes this realist ontology that saturates Southern iconography, but unworks it at the same time, through specific techniques of fabrication. His rigorous work with fabric, contributes directly to his re-rendering of Southern landscape, as a reassembled “jungle of art.” Dial produces a torrential landscape, a jungle of art, whose jumbled compositions bear the trace of a fleshy, feminine cut. And this cut, this fleshy trace further exposes that imaginary link between decay and generic reality, between artistic form and the particular objects that populate what we recognize as a degenerate Southern environment.

Klarr has pointed out that the motif of Southern decay functions as a kind of “visual cipher” for how the emancipated and enlightened political strivings of the nation inevitably become tied to the immanent failure of its democratic project of advancement and modernization. The South enforced the slave system, by spatially coding a geography fraught with contradictions, and this led to forms of political and legal disenfranchisement that depended upon certain geographical orderings or rhythms. She writes:

“to say that a ‘culture’ is in decay is to indicate that all of its physical-conceptual aspects: its spatial components (house, farm, plantation), its relational systems (slavery, feudalism, patriarchy), its collective imaginaries (myth, story, narrative) are losing cohesion. They are being divested of their structuring power. As the ‘spatial codes’ of the culture give way to the natural forces of rust and decay, they open up new sites of occupation and trespass. In the complex cartography of Faulkner’s South, these spaces of trespass forcefully destabilize earlier socio-spatial relations. This passage suggests that the ruin produces a tear in the fabric of reality; that physical ‘decay’ of the South likewise results in the ‘decay’ of Southern realist ontology. This is the hidden link between decay and genre, between literary form and the objects it articulates.”

29 Ibid.
Klarr has specifically pointed out how the “Big House” ordered plantation life, setting up a series of inclusions and exclusions, with the obvious inside/outside of the house determining the house/field status of slaves and the coding of black bodies. This extended through to “a front/back technology,” which operated as a site of intense socialization.

Having lived through and witnessed the uneven social effects of desegregation, Thornton Dial picks up on and effectively undermines the logic of this spatial coding, challenging this front/back technology in his piece titled, *Everybody’s Welcome in Peckerwood City*. Dial demonstrates how the geographic coding of the South had far-reaching political consequences. Here Dial has recreated a satirical vision of desegregated America from the 1950s and 1960s. The curators of the *Hard Truths* exhibition explain that the two-sided piece was inspired by the violent resistance to integrated schools and housing launched in Alabama, the home of the notorious segregationist George Wallace and the heart of the region’s xenophobia during the civil rights movement. Here is their analysis of the work:

Painted on the front of the work is an unusually tidy image of a house façade, the highest icon of American dreams. Its front door is money-green, the means of access to America’s promise with an entry mat that offers the sweet message, ‘Welcome.’ But like the opening scene of a horror show, sinister elements soon begin to reveal themselves. A piece of fencing blocs the bottom of the entryway, which has also been dented in, as if the site of a past scuffle. Finally, a puddle of blood oozes ominously out on the ground from behind the whitewashed wall, which when surveyed more closely, is itself constructed of three old doors with locks. On the backside of *Peckerwood City*, Dial’s dreamhouse has turned into a nightmare of decay and decrepitude. Its walls, now rotting, have become picked apart and destroyed by two peckerwoods. “Peckerwood” is black Southern slang for the loud and the troublesome redheaded woodpecker and a derogatory term for white people. Here, the birds are painted the blood red of violence and death. Shaped to resemble hooded clansmen, they are the destructive forces of racism made manifest, dark agents of the most hateful and obscene parts of human nature and the true incarnation of the abject. Surviving their aggressions is the nearby fragment of a rusty bed frame that signifies the tenacious pursuit of a
home – a place however fragile and tenuous to rest one’s head. The tangled grid of mattress wires and other fencing are the economic and social structures that have so often denied black people a sense of home and place. Describing the piece, Dial confessed, “this is the house I tried to build myself.”

Everybody’s Welcome in Peckerwood City, 2005, (paneled front side and weathered wood back side)

In Peckerwood, Dial imagines the American house, the purest symbolic expression of the American dream, as an extension of the “Big House.” In a contemporary context, Peckerwood provocatively suggests that the American promise of

property and privilege to all, conceals the fundamentally real and potentially violent consequences of unequal distribution and access to both. *Peckerwood* is an indictment of the imbalanced reality of the American dream because it is a microcosm of American society, which builds and destroys and continues to construct a metaphorical version of “Peckerwood City” for its black citizens.

The blood that seeps out from under the doorway is an effectively subtle defacement of the front of the house, suggesting the myth of its sanctified interior. In this piece, the back of the house typically constructed as the entryway for slaves and later for disenfranchised blacks, has been picked apart by ominous looking birds. *Peckerwood*, further problematizes the notion of the home and the household as part of the private sphere, because the home was for so long a workplace, in an African-American context. This experience must complicate our shared ideas of public and private. As the historian Thavolia Glymph has argued: “We must remember that the plantation household was also a workplace, not a haven from the economic world, that it was not private or made so by the nature of the labor performed within it, by the sex of its managers…It is not home as idea, but flesh-and-blood practices that make it free or not, and public and private or not.”

For generations of American blacks that followed, the South was a site of racial intimacy, and of political memory. The South was a contentious, thorny and complicated space for many blacks, it was a place whose vestiges of a violent, brutal and anti-democratic past would tinge the image of the nation. Thornton Dial, who spent his life in the South, was subject to the political abuses that grew out of the racial tensions and

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intimacies there, and his art thematizes this friction. James Weldon Johnson brilliantly wrote of the differences in character of Northern and Southern whites, specifically with regard to their feelings toward “the Negro race”:

…it may be said that the claim of the Southern whites is that they love the Negro better than the Northern whites do is in a manner true. Northern whites love the Negro in a sort of abstract way, as a race, through a sense of justice, charity and philanthropy, they will liberally assist in his elevation…Yet, generally speaking, they have no particular liking for individuals of the race. Southern white people despise the Negro as a race, and will do nothing to aid in his elevation as such; but for certain individuals they have a strong affection, and are helpful to them in many ways.\(^{32}\)

Johnson illuminates a specific problem: in the South, the Negro race was thought to possess a collective personality. According to this logic, blacks were part of a totality, not regarded as genuine individuals but as representatives of their race. For Johnson, the individual is always in the foreground, and “the Negro race” in the background. But Dial reverses this logic. Blackness as the object of totality is less a stigma but a privilege for Dial, who explores questions of individuality by way of the unthought totality of black life - its vernacular, its unique historical forms of expression, are what make the individual possible.

The black artistic tradition from which Dial emerges, has been informed and structured by what many refer to as “the Black South.” But Dial refuses to imagine the South as the impoverished center of agrarian life, as the ‘outside’ of American industrial culture. Instead Southern landscape is given expression and character, it is fully textured and reclaimed as a site of creativity in Dial’s work. Amiri Baraka writes that Dial’s work exposes the South, not only as “the scene of the crime” (of slavery), but also as the place where the largest concentration of African American people made their lives. “It is truly

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the land base of the Afro-American nation in this country.” Baraka tells us that the South has been traversed by black people leaving to go North, because they assume they could live their lives with dignity there. By the end of the 1960s, there were still more black people in the South than anywhere else. The contradictions of cultural belonging animated by black flight have tinged a Southern landscape haunted by a deeply criminal past.

The account of the development of Southern land by W.E.B DuBois for example, stands in contrast to Faulkner’s anti-humanized literary landscape. For DuBois, black life and black labor were intertwined with the perceived decomposition of the South. DuBois demonstrates how black life was entwined with black working life. Black life and labor flourished against the backdrop of a set of imaginative, legal and political attempts to negate it. I want to argue that Dial’s preoccupations with clay, dirt, silt, and soil, reflect his interest in that same history DuBois traces, of the lost vitality of the land, which I want to claim is inextricably bound up with the devaluation of black labor and black life. DuBois uncovers the intimacy of black laboring bodies with Southern soil. This enmeshment of bodies with the Southern landscape is a trope that has remained for the most part unexplored in literary topographical explorations of Southern decay.

IV. Black Life and Labor

Observations about black working bodies may be traced back to the writing of DuBois in particular, whose commitment to depicting the lives of working blacks, revealed the interconnectedness of black people and their labor and the swelling pressures of a presumably undeveloped landscape. DuBois’ text, *Black Reconstruction*, portrays

the South as the scene of both land and labor control. A vicious cycle of profit required
that land constantly be worked or be made ready and available for the presence of slaves.
DuBois writes: “The South was fighting for the protection and expansion of its agrarian
feudalism. For the sheer existence of slavery, there must be a continual supply of fertile
land, cheaper slaves, and such political power as would give the slave status, full legal
recognition and protection, and annihilate the free Negro.”

DuBois’ *Black Reconstruction* traces how legal and political practices of disenfranchise mens, emerged
by way of arbitrary geographical lines, that had everything to do with the exploitation of
Southern black labor and the openness, vulnerability and exposure of overworked land.

In DuBois’ complex analysis, the political fight over Southern land that ensued
before and in the aftermath of the Civil War, generated a set of intertwined political
problems – the continued cultivation of land was always a sign of prosperity, and having
access to free land conferred civil status upon those who otherwise could not obtain it. In
this context, Dial’s work further reveals how the suppression of black labor and the
ecological fate of the land become conjoined. The artist’s overworked and soiled
surfaces recall this suppressed history of politically overworked Southern land and the
exhaustion of the very soil that served as its lifeblood.

For DuBois, the South was a place of political fragmentation, but it was also a
resourceful and open landscape that could be economically exploited. DuBois presents
the historical fight over Southern land as a setting for the unique convergence of black
labor and land. Both resisted such political measures, which demanded more expendable

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35 Although space and time prevent me from doing so, much more could be said about the range
of studies on the life of black slaves in the South, their communities, and their forms of
socialization. W.E.B. DuBois’ *Black Reconstruction* is but one text that has allowed me to think
about this in some depth.
labor for the over-cultivation and abuse of Southern soil. My claim is that DuBois invites us to think about a figurative merging of bodies and landscape, and that this in turn gives way to the aesthetic convergence of soil and flesh.

DuBois examines imbrications of black life and labor within the frame of landscape. At the same time, however, something, some substance ruptures that frame. The sheer sweep and scale of Dial’s assemblages and their earthy texture, allude to an idea of landscape as well as to a history of migration and geographic traversal. And yet, Dial’s collection of unwanted things asks us to think about the South as a kind of overworked body. His fabricated folds allow us to glimpse the passing through of black bodies that labored under oppressive conditions. The assemblages reflect and refract the historical realities of black labor in the South. But more significantly, Dial’s persistent work with the destroyed surfaces of cloth, asks us to consider the overused, threadbare quality of bodies worn down to their flesh.

Jean Toomer’s poem, “Song of the Son,” throws light on this aesthetic fleshy convergence. Toomer’s text stages a different reclamation of black flesh, one that I would argue, transposes the dark negativity that haunts the persistent image of blackness we associate with the South. An aesthetic blackness is mobilized in the dark fleshy, purple economy of Cane, and Toomer invites us to feel how that fleshliness, tied to the movement of black labor, extends itself across an imagined agrarian landscape. Toomer realizes a blackness whose flesh serves as both the sign of and the sound for this profound and uncanny presence. Specifically in “Song of the Son,” it is black flesh that is re-imagined and re-fabricated as the skin of “dark purple ripened plums”:

O Negro slaves, dark purple ripened plums,  
Squeezed, and bursting in the pine-wood air,  
Passing, before they stripped the old tree bare
One plum was saved for me, one seed becomes
An everlasting song, a singing tree,
Caroling softly souls of slavery,
What they were, and what they are to me,
Caroling softly souls of slavery.\textsuperscript{36}

Toomer’s aestheticization of blackness as black flesh, is made available metaphorically, through his extension of the qualities of black flesh to the concentrated color of ripe, purple plums.

I want to offer that black flesh is the unacknowledged surplus that almost always figures as supplemental, ornamental or decorative. And its material surplus is in Toni Morrison’s words, what “ignites and informs an [American] literary imagination” and the construction of its innumerable tropes, which are “in fact responses to a dark, abiding, signing Africanist presence.”\textsuperscript{37}

I am interested not simply in the color and texture, but also the \textit{movement} of that flesh that is aesthetically rendered by Toomer, specifically, how it extends through the Southern landscape he sketches for us. For it is precisely this movement of the flesh that concerns Dial, who highlights it through the workings of fabric or cloth. I would argue that it is the surreptitious movement of the flesh that animates Toomer’s prose. This fleshy blackness rendered through prose, flourishes against the backdrop of an agrarian Southern landscape. But as soon as this flesh makes an appearance, it then disappears from view, into the recesses of song and soft caroling voices.

Here black bodily labor coincides is animated by a movement of black flesh. This unique convergence is enabled both by violence but also by an excessive and unlocateable desire that cuts that violence. In “Song of the Son” this fleshy figuration

enables black bodily labor and pain but also black sociality to come into full relief. In *Cane*, the labor of black flesh is remembered through song, marking a performative substitution, a surrogation of that labor, by way of re-fabricated flesh. This compounded imagination of black skin realized as black, purple flesh bodies forth a joyful, even erotic history of black life and labor that we have yet to fully explore.

V. Thornton Dial’s Fleshy Assemblage

Toomer offers us a poetic assemblage in which the boundaries between skin and flesh, song and text gradually breakdown, so that it becomes possible to read and register the emergence of another phonic substance - the fleshliness of song. I would argue that it is this sensual breakdown that we glimpse in Toomer’s text, which animates the aesthetic imagination of the South, that is the figurative precondition for what Morrison calls a *dark abiding signing Africanist presence*. It is this sensual materiality, that disrupts a literary realist ontology and Faulkner’s aesthetic of obsolescence, which cannot contain the flesh or its movement. This sensual disruption or disfigurement animated by the flesh, is what Fred Moten refers to as a “phono-photo-porno-graphic disruption,” that locates the flesh as “the prefigurative scene of a (re)appropriation – the deconstruction and reconstruction, the improvisational recording and revaluation – of value, of the theory of value, of the theories of value.”

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38 Fred Moten, *In the Break*, 14.
Hortense Spillers’ ungendered black female flesh is re-animated by Toomer, where flesh is presented as the occasion for a sensuous fold, which opens to an ungendered landscape that bodies forth slavery’s violent history, a history whose imminent eruption is sensed by way of the full ripeness of the plums Toomer describes. That imminent violence is in turn attached to black bodies that have been “squeezed,” worked and overworked. In *Cane*, black bodies are, like Toomer’s plums, the sensuous, fleshy surplus, that might either be “squeezed” and exploited, or “saved” and ecologically preserved.

Thornton Dial’s assemblages extrapolate from this central tension outlined by Toomer - between people and things that have been used and exploited or *squeezed*, and that which can and must be saved and preserved. My claim is that by recasting these objects, Dial revalues black life, placing it at the center of an alternative tradition of recycling where castoff objects and detritus index an alternative sociality that places value on the seemingly mundane aspects everyday life. Perhaps more significantly, is the way in which such revaluation, which depends upon *reproduction*, also offers us a
glimpse into another ecology, one in which the saved seed of the plum, the preservation of black fleshy life, becomes the occasion for, in Toomer’s words, the “everlasting song, a singing tree.” Fred Moten has said that Dial’s art presents us with an intimate “ecology of things.” My argument is that this Dial’s art links up with and exposes an alternative, fleshy ecology that also calls upon another temporality. The ecological dimension of Dial’s work draws from other material forms, structures, relations, other modes and activities of exchange, bringing into full relief the moment of the historical present that is so uniquely Southern.

The cracked and gritty appearance of these assemblages, and the scraps of fabrics that appear to have been soiled by nature’s elements allude to the eerie presence of fleshy remains. Dial’s surfaces construct a patina of decay that is so often associated with the intrinsically depreciated quality of the South and Southern life. The assemblages are textured by the dark patina of time; blackened with age, they accumulate temporal detritus, pushing the idea of mortality to the fore. But the distinct patina of the sullied surface that seems to embody the perpetual lag of Southern life is actually an effect of the accretion of dirt. So that if we were to scrape off and peel back those grimy accumulated layers, they would reveal a bright, almost garish concentration of color and texture. Dial creates a palimpsestic surface. Playing around the edges of authenticity and appearance, he takes aim at a surface deception that structures our understanding of aesthetic value: that which we assume is inherently part of a Southern, old-world patina is really an extrinsic and arbitrary fact of the work – a fabrication. At the same time however, this superfluous exterior serves as a protective armor of sorts, shielding a fleshy interior.

The movement and intense play between surface and interior is perhaps what lends the assemblages their dramatic appearance. Dial’s technique of fabrication involves taking hard and soft materials and melding them together. He experiments with hard masculine materials like wood, and works those materials into softer, suppler, traditionally more feminine materials like fiber and cloth; manipulating, twisting and braiding them in some instances he figures the soft eddies upon which they rest. Dial emphasizes spaces for secretion, cracks and crevices that rupture the surface. This melding of hard and soft materials also critiques a physical binary and overturns a material hierarchy. But the structure of the assemblage itself appears to be in movement, in flight as bits and pieces of broken off objects are sheared from the surface to reveal a fragile and complex underneath.

And here we might return to the function of what Lisa Klarr identified as the tear in the fabric of a realist ontology. The function of the tear in Dial’s art denotes a rupture of the surface; the tear is the result of the working up of fabric, or the amplification of what Gilles Deleuze called the fold, whose soft interiors lure us beyond the surface, into the space of Dial’s labor, of tucking and pleating. Dial’s assemblages reveal an autogenous surface, that constantly regenerates itself, so that when we return to the work, we see new objects, relations, and fictions resurface.
The particular objects Dial uses, animate intimate spaces, crevices and openings that alter our perception and experience of his large-scale works. Hortense Spillers’ description of black female flesh allows me to understand the feminine as a field of relation that is both dense and spacious. And I am interested in how the feminine emerges as an abstract object in the assemblage, how it is realized as the capacious and generative center of Dial’s large-scale works, and furthermore, how the feminine is evoked and provoked as a constitutive, spooky fold of sorts. So it becomes possible to see how the symbols and codes of black life Dial moves through are worked over by the mechanics of the fold, which reflect the generative movement of flesh.

Dial maps an alternative fleshy schema, that stuff below what Frantz Fanon called the epidermal schema. Dial reveals for us the teeming quality of the subterranean life below the surface of the skin. In effect, he has created a network of veins and nerves. He uncovers the nervous system of the assemblage, revealing its subcutaneous points of entry. The interiors of Dial’s works look like the innards of a gutted animal suspended
by a mass of vital organs whose remains are left exposed, their vestigial tentacles reaching out into space. Dial asks us to confront the ghosts embedded in the skeins of thread and fibers.

Experiencing these assemblages, one is haunted by the animistic death with which an artist like Rembrandt was obsessed. For Dial that which is rotting is still alive. These fleshy interiors draw on the energy and substance left over in the midst of apparently open death. Dial is invested in what persists in the midst of that messy, tangled, fleshy survival. The survival of the flesh is central to the general ecology of the assemblage, because the flesh gestures toward materiality’s life cycle and its ability to endure. These fleshy entanglements play off of our sense of finitude and depth, of whether that survival can be measured in light of the immeasurable vitality of the flesh.
VI. The Aesthetics of Fabrication and Reproduction

I would like here to draw attention to the labor of fabrication - folding, tucking and pleating - in Dial’s work. The assemblage is modeled on a fundamental contradiction: their large scale is sustained by intimate, invisible configurations that shift and alter our certainties of perception, enabling us to sense movement in an apparently static architecture. I want to argue that fabrication provokes a particular problem of aesthetic form, and that we need to more carefully attend to the rich implication of this problematic of fabrication, and the way such folding, tucking and pleating bring other intimacies into relief for us. Specifically, I want to claim that Dial’s assemblages tap into the rich but undocumented kinship between the vernacular or folk, and a Western, modernist avant-garde tradition. A brief detour through the work of Marcel Duchamp might help us better understand the relationship and the movement between these artistic traditions.

Marcel Duchamp documented his own technique of fabrication in Three Standard Stoppages of 1913-1914, by proposing a kind of theorem: "If a straight horizontal thread one meter long falls from a height of one meter onto a horizontal plane twisting as it pleases [it] creates a new image of the unit of length." Duchamp dropped three threads one meter long from the height of one meter onto three stretched canvases. The threads were then adhered to the canvases to preserve the random curves they assumed upon landing. Duchamp then cut the canvases along the threads' profiles, creating a template

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of their curves creating new units of measure that retain the length of the meter but undermine its rational basis. 41 Duchamp intended this exercise in fabrication to be at once a case study, a technical exercise and a joke.

Duchamp’s text is a seminal intervention into the thinking about figuration, movement and space as the critic Marjorie Perloff has explained.” Duchamp unequivocally rejects Euclid's assumption of the indeformability of figures in movement.” As the art historian Linda Dalrymple Henderson asserted that, "In Duchamp's Stoppages, it is simply the movement of a line (the thread) from one area of space to another, which illustrates that geometrical figures do not necessarily retain their shape when moved about, as Euclid and geometers for two thousand years after him had assumed they would.” 42 In Dial’s work, fabrication at once implies construction, organization and improvisation. The improvisation of the line in Duchamp extends to the play of the surface in Dial, for though they no doubt they come from different artistic traditions they approach the same of the same material and physical problems in art. The visual and verbal play of iconography that so preoccupied Duchamp and animated his ready-mades, is radically built up, and achieves and reaches a specific historical climax in Dial.

Dial has radically extended what Duchamp had initially intended as a humorous joke: we might say that Duchamp’s thread becomes the occasion for the raveling and unraveling edges and surfaces that intensify Dial’s assemblages, but it is perhaps more

provocatively the case that Dial’s raveling, woven, frayed and irregular components become an occasion for rereading the direction of that Duchampian thread and its suspension in space. That thread and its presumed autonomy, is both exploited and negated by Dial’s work with pleats, drapes and folds of fabric.

In other words, Duchamp’s thread, re-inflected by Dial’s weave, might be read as the zero point of fabrication, that generative reproductive point, from which all other fields of relation are disseminated. In Dial’s work, each skein constructs a new relationship with space and surface, building up to a dramatic cascading effect, and we see draping that continuously tumbles down, gathering into semi-hard and soft mounds of fabric. Far from being merely decorative components of the work, these dense trajectories of fabric transport us form surface to interior.
My argument is that it is apropos Dial, that Duchamp’s suspended thread becomes saturated with desire, and a yearning for alterity. Thinking about fabrication in the wake of the line’s deconstruction as Duchamp prompts us to do, moves us into Dial’s territory. Dial extends the question of the relation between fabric and things, or fabricated things, to the historical question of black flesh whose deep surface Dial animates as moving, fleshy ensembles. I have chosen not to read the historical problem of black flesh approached by way of aesthetic form, as a metaphorical conflation on Dial’s part. Instead, I want to think about how Dial’s assemblages fabricate a lineage from blackness and its vernacular history, to texture and space, while imagining the capaciousness of blackness in relation to the movement of feminine flesh.

Most significantly, the open weave of Dial’s assemblages, direct us toward Eve Sedgwick’s haptic space, where the particular surprise of the haptic is located in specific negotiations between skin and surface, flesh and depth. The open weave, is I want to claim, a generative space carved out by the figure of reproduction, whose openness and material fullness prompts me to think about the affective extension of flesh to the seemingly neutral impulse behind what Hannah Arendt once identified as the faculties of ‘making, fabricating and building,’ as the hallmarks of what she called “world-ing.”

I am interested in thinking about the way in which black female flesh carves out the zone of sociality from which Dial’s black vernacular proceeds and within which it flourishes. His work with fabric complements the irreducible possibilities of this flesh. Thornton Dial, perhaps controversially, elevates the domestic sphere of black female labor as itself a kind of art that facilitates the social reproduction of black life itself. Of

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course, much more could be written about this last point, specifically with respect to Dial’s relationship to women, and how stories of the women he has lived with and known, but also stories about love, faith, and friendship between women are woven, stitched and folded into his assemblages. These stories of women, specifically their telling and retelling, give rise to forms of collective life that ground the vernacular aesthetic Dial is after.

The Italian feminist Sylvia Federici has explained that getting together, the act of assembling, is itself a form of social reproduction. Specifically she argues that such forms of gathering are activities rooted in reproduction and general dissemination. Massimo De Angelis writing about Federici’s text, *Revolution at Point Zero: Housework Reproduction and Feminist Struggle*, explains: “Women inhabit this zero point neither by choice nor by nature, but simply because they carry the burden of reproduction in a disproportionate manner.” I would like to further explore Federici’s idea of reproduction as this “zero point of revolution,” specifically within an Afro-diasporic feminist context. I am interested in Federici’s idea that new social relations generate this *zero point*, which cannot have any other location but the sphere of reproduction. Extrapolating from Federici briefly here, I would conclude in much the same frame, that black female flesh is and has always figured as such a *zero point*, as Spillers has claimed, “that zero degree of social conceptualization,” whose reproductive force is felt everywhere within the sphere of black culture and black social relations.

My aim here has been to think not simply about blackness and visuality, but about blackness and its particular texture, its capaciousness, through other affective and sensory

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registers, and the way it crosses artistic genres. I want to think about how blackness and the site of its aesthetic production, necessarily provokes questions of gender. What does it mean, for example that Dial’s fabrications imagine blackness through reconfigurations of texture, air and space? What does it mean that these elements are woven, and that the generative art of the weave always traces the figure of reproduction? How does starting from a different point of entry like the haptic, produce alternative ways of understanding race, sex and materiality, and enable us to remap and relocate both power and agency in something other than subjectivity?
CODA
Flesh Held in Common

“Let's face it. We're undone by each other. And if we're not, we're missing something. If this seems so clearly the case with grief, it is only because it was already the case with desire. One does not always stay intact. It may be that one wants to, or does, but it may also be that despite one’s best efforts, one is undone, in the face of the other, by the touch, by the scent, by the feel, by the prospect of the touch, by the memory of the feel. And so when we speak about my sexuality or my gender, as we do (and as we must), we mean something complicated by it. Neither of these is precisely a possession, but both are to be understood as modes of being dispossessed, ways of being for another, or, indeed, by virtue of another.”

- Judith Butler

“...if my art don’t rub off on somebody, it ain’t art...if this touched anybody, it got to touch them all.”

- Thornton Dial

This dissertation has examined experimental artistic practices that refuse and transgress certain conventions of form, in order to insist upon the co-extension of lived experience and aesthetic praxis within an Afro-diasporic aesthetic tradition. My interest has been to lay claim to this mutual articulation, arguing that the structures of lived experience are deeply inflected by, more precisely they are made, remade and undone by an aesthetic praxis opened and extended by black female flesh and its deep material history. The project has attempted to think about and theorize what it means to inhabit flesh that has been historically interdicted, and examine artists whose work revitalizes and restores the value of that flesh, publicly, on the stage or gallery floor, in the midst of and despite of the presumed enclosure of that flesh.

The project is indebted to the work of Hortense Spillers’ rereading of black female flesh, its historical and material agency. Specifically I have imagined this project

as an exegesis and intervention into the legacy of her seminal essay “Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book” in order to extend Spillers, and reclaim this flesh, to point to its relevance and material bearing on Afro-diasporic artistic practices. To make a claim about the persistence of this feminine flesh is to imply its duration. I believe the material fullness of these artworks, span and traverse the intervals of this historical flesh, which continues to bridge the present.

I have attempted to map the movement of black female flesh through the art of assemblage. Additionally, I have argued that in performance, we can find micro mappings of fleshy relations generated by figures in motion that are otherwise presumed not to be there. The project has been invested in the material presence of the flesh, whose depth and persistence animated new fields of aesthetic relation. More to the point, I have been interested in how the work of folding and unfolding, (which both fabric and the act of fabrication initiate), draws our attention to the specifically and irreducibly haptic space of the black feminine, which I have demonstrated is always already enfolded in the social field and inhabits a collective black aesthetic consciousness.

Faustin Linyekula’s padded, womb-like costumes, Nick Cave’s sequined, decorated, embellished bodies, and Thornton Dial’s stained clothing and broken dolls, reverberate in the full echoes of the feminine, whose substance is reproduced within these assembled artistic practices. I have tried to argue that a fleshy feminine materiality cuts across the deep texture of these artworks, themselves marked and moved by the generative and unceasing materiality of the feminine. Fred Moten has traced the sound, or what he refers to as the phonic substance of blackness, back to the “heart-rending
shrieks” of Aunt Hester.\footnote{Fred Moten, \textit{In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition}. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003, 5-6.} Moten traces the doubling and doubled over sound of the commodity in/as the figure of those who labored as commodities. My argument extends Moten in order to reclaim this feminine phonic substance and its fleshy movement. My claim is that this feminine materiality passes on its material heritage by way of sound, but also by way of fleshy fabrication.

More specifically, I have been invested in the textilic eruptions that occur by way of the fabricated experiments of Linyekula, Cave and Dial. Sounds, cries, and tears are intimated and animated in Linyekula’s performances, in Cave’s experimental soundsuits, and in Dial’s assemblages. Read together, the divergent practices of these artists move by way of this fleshy materiality. The embellished and decorated surfaces these artists create and inhabit, provoke the boundaries of form, so that what we encounter are not sculptures, costumes, or installation works, but dynamic assemblages, whose entanglements uncover the unique imbrications of race, sex, and gender, through the workings of historicized flesh.

I am interested in this excessive artistic corpus, and more specifically, the alternative forms of \textit{being} and \textit{being in relation} this corpus makes possible. To invoke the term \textit{corpus}, is already to suggest that we think about the corporeality of these artworks. I want to explore this corporeality further and the forms of relation they engender. The work of Jean-Luc Nancy opens up the question of the finitude of the body. His philosophy of bodily finitude radically pushes our understanding of both, and places them in question or holds them in suspension. Nancy explains that it is through finitude that a figure of community becomes available to us. While this might seem
contradictory at first, it becomes clearer once we understand how Nancy’s notion of community depends upon his philosophical understanding of finitude, which is connected to his concept of singularity. Singularity is expressed as an originary relation, and its concept is irreducible to the figure of the individual. Nancy writes:

…behind the theme of the individual, but beyond it, lurks the question of singularity. What is a body, a face, a voice, a death, a writing – not indivisible, but singular. What is their singular necessity in the sharing that divides and that puts in communication bodies, voices and writings in general and in totality? In sum this question would be exactly the reverse of the question of the absolute…But singularity never has the structure of individuality. Singularity never takes place at the level of atoms, those identifiable if not identical identities; rather it takes place at the level of the clinamen, which is unidentifiable. It is linked to ecstasy: one could not properly say that the singular being is the subject of ecstasy, for ecstasy has no subject – but one must say that ecstasy (community) happens to the singular being.3

In Corpus, Nancy explains further that he is invested in “the oneness of singularity, provided that the subjectivity of the subject is considered as outside the self.” He wants to propose singularity not as a pure interiority, but as “a being in exteriority in relation to itself.”4

Singularity gestures toward some larger composition, something “unidentifiable” that has the faint outline of a relation – what we might call an anoriginal relation - that already structures being. Here we sense a tension in Nancy, as he wants to lay claim both to identity, and to the self’s expropriation.

Returning to his project in Inoperative Community, Nancy explains that there are two more conditions for singularity that draw out the philosopher’s though about an external relation. The first concerns Nancy’s notion of compearance. Nancy contends that one appears with another being, alongside another. Compearance is always a matter of relation. It is a matter of being toward, of being originary oriented toward another.

In dance or performance, we might recognize the act of compearing, enacted through

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movement, as the relation between figures in motion. The ontology of community is sustained by that anoriginal relation possiblized by compearance. Community is grounded in this “being-with,” or “being-in-relation.” By extension, the very act of being-with or being-in-relation is expressive of community. With respect to this project, I am interested in how the flesh allows radically differentiated things, objects, or figures to compear.

Ecstasy is the second condition for Nancy’s idea of community. The ecstatic gestures to that which is beyond the absolute, to that which is irreducibly exterior to the current structures of forms of being and belonging. According to Nancy, the ecstatic fundamentally throws into question the ground of commonality that presumably constitutes any community of individuals. I am invested in the open-ended traversal of ecstatic flesh, which, in Nancy’s words, “has no subject.”

In one of the most illuminating passages in Inoperative Community, Nancy explains that community is a matter of sharing outward, a movement of internal division, and external collation. Perhaps paradoxically, in community, nothing is common, but merely held in common. The ground for community is a sharing that is: “…neither an entity nor a sacred hypostasis of community – there is an ‘unleashing of passions,’ the sharing of singular beings, and the communication of finitude…Moreover, there is no entity or hypostasis of community because this sharing, this passage cannot be completed… It is not a matter of making, producing or instituting a community; nor is it a matter of venerating or fearing within it a sacred power – it is a matter of incompleting its sharing.”

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5 Nancy, Inoperative Community, 23.
Singularity is always punctured by a figure of surplus, by the work of what Nancy calls partage. Partage is a simultaneous sharing and dividing. My claim is that the labor of partage, becomes the condition for collective invention. For Nancy the task becomes

...thinking the sharing [partage] of community and the sovereignty in the sharing or shared sovereignty, shared between Daseins, between singular existences that are not subjects – and whose relation – the sharing itself is not a communion, nor the appropriation of an object, nor a self-recognition, nor even a communication as this is understood to exist between subjects. But these singular beings are themselves constituted by sharing, they are distributed and placed, or rather spaced, by the sharing that makes them others: other for one another, and other, infinitely other for the subject of their fusion, which is engulfed in the sharing, in the ecstasy of the sharing: “communicating” by not “communing.” These “places of communication” are no longer places of fusion, even though in them one passes from one to the other; they are defined and exposed by their dislocation. Thus the communication of sharing would be this very dis-location.6

The collective invention and innovation of community happens through an ethic of partage that occurs by way of spatial (re)arrangement. The work of such sharing is recognizable in the distribution and placement, or the spacing of beings. But to be clear, Nancy tells us that community is not an absolute fusion; community is communication by way of dislocation. We might say that this communicative sharing by dislocation, is the expressive contents of diasporic existence. Furthermore, communication by way of dislocation, disruption, division, is precisely what is shared in an Afro-diasporic tradition.

I want to go so far as to claim that Nancy’s ethic of partage is rooted in diaspora, and possiblizes diasporic invention and reinvention. I want to underscore that the labor of partage, is initiated by the feminine flesh recovered for us by Hortense Spillers – that this black feminine flesh is precisely what is shared and divided, in Nancy’s words. Here, it may be useful to look at another philosophical argument on the concept of finitude, in order to understand the extent to which Nancy stretches its concept. In contrast to Nancy who expands our definitions of both finitude and singularity, Kaja

6 ibid., 25.
Silverman explains that finitude presents a particular problem that arises from “the demand that humanism makes upon us: the demand to be an individual.” She writes:

Finitude is the most capacious and enabling of the attributes we share with others, because unlike the particular way each of us looks, thinks, walks and speaks, that connects us to few other beings, it connects us to every other being. Since finitude marks the place where we end and others begin, spatially and temporally, it is also what makes room for them, and acknowledging these limits allows us to experience the expansiveness for which we yearn, because it gives us a powerful sense of our emplacement within a larger Whole. Unfortunately though, finitude is the most narcissistically injurious of all the qualities we share with others and therefore the most likely we are to see in them, and deny in ourselves. Our refusal to acknowledge that we are limited beings has devastating and often fatal consequences for others.  

For Silverman, human finitude puts us in deeper touch with our own mortality, and further in touch with the whole of humanity. Nancy’s sharing and dividing would be an impossibility for Silverman because finitude, (which denotes that we are limited beings), and sharing, in her view are irreconcilable. The difference is that for Nancy, the finite self is always engaged in an outward relation. Finitude for Nancy would appear on the threshold of a fleshly divide. But for Silverman, who is concerned with likeness, finitude can only map onto an analogical view of the world.

But the fleshy movement that animates the art and performance works of Faustin Linyekula, Nick Cave and Thornton Dial, compel me to think about finitude differently. Michel Foucault has theorized finitude “not as an end, but as the curve and knot of time in which the end is beginning.” 8 I want to claim that, in the absence of what Kaja Silverman calls finitude, what we have is sharing, an ethic of partage, an apportioning of the self, a fleshy figure always cut or divided. In light of Nancy and Foucault’s formulations, I am invested in a thought about bodily finitude that permits me to think about how the body is animated and opened by the flesh, and how the flesh extends the

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body’s temporal limits. I want to think about the unique expressions of bodily finitude that present themselves in an Afro-diasporic context. In these experimental traditions of art and performance, a fleshy figure is extracted – one that is intent on giving of itself, of sharing itself, a figure that in the words of Edouard Glissant, “consents not to be a single being,” a single subject or citizen.⁹

I would argue that Glissant dissents from the view of the subject that Jean-Luc Nancy puts forth. And this is where I would want to push Nancy, for his conception of singularity and the relational subject, still insists on subjectivity. To the extent that I am in touch with Glissant’s assertion, I am invested in a certain critique of the subject. But I also want to retain that part of Nancy’s formulation that appears in/as a thought about corpus, as a philosophy specifically dedicated to the body and its capacity to touch. That is, I am interested in the subject’s capacity to touch that world which is outside its self. I would want to offer that what emerges on the other side of or after touch, perhaps even in its midst, is something other than a subject. This would be to think about subjectivity as distributed, as open-ended - or perhaps more precisely, subjectivity as an open-ended process of emergence. Art and performance present themselves as the ideal settings for such rich speculation. The art and performances of Linyekula, Cave and Dial, point towards the generative sexual and material transduction of the subject by way of a fleshy fulfillment, and the visual and tactile release of the aesthetic subject from the constraints of representation and signification.

The theme of touch, which runs throughout Nancy’s works, is inextricably tied to his concept of finitude as that which occasions a radically open and divided sharing. Nancy formulates an idea of touch in which the finite end of the body, inevitably links up

with the touch of the outside, so that the body touches the world. From this idea of touch, we might be able to understand that even in the instances of the body’s most extreme confinement, such confinement is always both “cramped and capacious,” always about limit and possibility. The body’s compression becomes the occasion for a radical opening, a kind of distension.

This idea of distension allows us to think about what it means to be in relation across gendered difference, sexual difference. A verse by the poet Evie Shockley, inspired me to think about bodily distension at the level of skin and flesh, under the register of sexual difference. Shockley writes: “Baggage free, at last he gave me some skin. Was it black? I had nowhere to put it, so I gave it back.” Stretching and experimenting with the parameters of a poetic body, Shockley’s prose offers us this mode of corporeal distension not simply as a feminine aesthetic, but as a praxis for engaging with the world. Shockley herself is interested in a philosophy of relation. These verses erase the boundary of skin and flesh that separates the two sexes, marking a curious movement in which the masculine lends or gives its excess skin back to the feminine. I am interested in what this fleshy transfer makes possible. I want to explore the development of this fleshy transfer in an Afro-diasporic context, how it shapes and defines our relationship to others and the world; how a diasporic aesthetic based on such transfer, can help us see sexual difference and gendered relationships differently. What does such transfer say about our desire to live with others, to become others? How does such transfer reflect the irreducible mobility that always presents itself in black aesthetics?

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Returning to the irreducible space of the flesh then, if according to Hortense Spillers, black female flesh becomes the material condition for understanding how black life is collectively practiced and organized, then in the context of Afro-diasporic life, this always already divided flesh is shared – it manifests an experience of being-in-common, of huddling together in the hull of the ship, animated by an experience of lost touch and touching, the non-possessive touching that shared flesh ignites, in which “fellow creatures become our portion,” as NourbeSe Philip imagines in *Zong!*\(^{11}\) It is that form of touch which grants that an object or a being must “be touched as it wishes to be touched,” that the body is folded into the sensible, that just as one touches, one is being touched as Merleau-Ponty insists.\(^{12}\)

In his later text, *Corpus*, Nancy explains that the body loses its form and becomes matter. And it is in this moment that he approaches an idea of the flesh, as a limit point for thought. The flesh is absolute matter, an “impenetrable mass.”\(^{13}\) However, I want to offer that art illuminates that which makes up the space of relation between matter and form. Curiously, this space of the *inter*, remains a critical blindspot for theory. Even Nancy, relying on a reading of Merleau-Ponty, claims the materiality of this impenetrable mass, is un-theorizable. For Nancy, what is un-thinkable is the irreducible way in which the body points toward itself, the way it folds into itself. We might describe these as vortices in the body, which become a problem for thought. Nancy refers to them as black

\(^{11}\) M. NourbeSe Philip, *Zong!*, Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 2008. 16.
\(^{13}\) Nancy, *Corpus*, 75.
holes, “an abyss where the hole absorbs even its own edges.” Here, we are told, there is a total absence of exteriority. All that we perceive is an abject, gaping open-endedness.

I would argue that what Nancy claims is unthinkable, is actually the materiality of relation, marked out by the flesh, which undoes the subjective body, untying it from its coordinates in language and its significations. Thornton Dial’s assemblages, which appear to be shot through with pain, are constituted in and through what Nancy would regard as an abject openness, that characterizes Faustin Linyekula’s open and distended costumes, and the unfolding materiality of Nick Cave’s experimental garments realized as compressions of objected flesh. Yet Merleau-Ponty says, “What we call flesh, this inwardly worked mass, has no name in any philosophy.” Nancy echoes this thought asserting that the flesh is an impossible name where all signification is exhausted.

I want to claim an Afro-diasporic aesthetic that calls upon and announces an anoriginal fleshliness, in order to manifest another kind of community. Afro-diasporic life and the art of its community, is predicated on enriched forms of affective experience made possible by this fleshy sharing. This sharing is highlighted in performance through the radical enactment of touching and feeling, against, beside, and in excess of the body’s immediate limits. The specific performances and practices I have examined open up the possibility of what I call life in the flesh, an assembled life, that is irreducibly feminine, artistic, material, generative, queer. Moreover, this fleshly life generates a practice of being-with others, a community, instantiated through a particular mode of touching already divided beings.

14 Ibid.
15 Ibid.
The raveling and unraveling edge of Toni Morrison’s fabricated imagination, is where this project began and now where it provisionally ends. My hope is to have asserted that the poetic relation enacted by the flesh, the connectedness it initiates is not only affective and erotic but also political and environmental. The material space marked out by the flesh can be felt in and through a textual imagination and enacted through writing. But this aesthetic black feminine flesh and its movement, extension and distension, also works to make this relational ontology visible for us in the world in new ways.
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BIOGRAPHY

Rizvana Bradley was born in Nairobi, Kenya on July 12, 1982. She graduated with honors, with a Bachelor of Arts in English and Political Theory from Williams College in 2004. In 2005, she received a full scholarship to the Duke University Literature Program. During her time as a graduate student at Duke University she served on the editorial board of *Polygraph: An International Journal of Culture and Politics*. Rizvana was a recipient of both the Dissertation Fellowship and the Gender and Race Award from the Department of Women’s Studies at Duke, several travel and research grants from the Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation and the Social Science Research Council. Rizvana participated in the Franklin Humanities Dissertation Working Group. She also participated in the Dartmouth Future of American Studies Institute in the summer of 2012. Additionally she was the Research Director and Web Editor for the Certificate Program in Sexuality Studies at Duke, and the Program Coordinator for the Annual Seminar at Franklin Humanities Institute for three years. Rizvana also worked as an editorial intern at Duke University Press.

Rizvana completed her Ph.D. from Duke University in the Literature Program in 2013, with certificates in both African and African American Studies and Women’s Studies. She is now an Assistant Professor in the Department of Women’s Gender and Sexuality Studies at Emory University, where she teaches course on Black Feminism and Feminist Theories of Race, as well as courses in Performance Studies. She has articles forthcoming and under review in the journals *Qui Parle, Women and Performance, The Drama Review* and *GLQ*. 