

The Stories Ghosts Tell
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Abstract...

In order to justify continual violence, inequitable distributions of power as well as hierarchical states of being, a carving of bodies has been perpetrated. Bodily constructions and delineations of human, nature, gender, race, sexuality, class and the notion of identity itself have confined 'Beings' as materials and resources to be extracted and destroyed. In the North American context of being marked Black female, I want to understand how I can survive and transcend these forces that operate internally and externally.

The method through which my investigation takes shape borrows from Afrofuturism. Afrofuturism imagines a space where the African Diaspora is a thriving, empowered, regenerating positionality in parallel with other peoples. Within its discourses there are two streams which I take up in my art practice that I believe make this future possible. The first is my graduate thesis installation, which was heavily influenced by hauntology, a concept which recognizes that we are always haunted by the past; and the other, my interim and directed study installations which were informed by biopolitical theory, a body of work which unpacks what it means to be human alongside social constructions of power.

Blending past and contemporary filmic devices and materials to investigate contingencies of identity, my intention is to speak from my own peculiarities to point to larger systems in operation.

Avery Gordon writes that, "... haunting, unlike trauma by contrast, is distinctive for producing a something-to-be-done¹." Through analogue and digital film installations, I trouble notions of 'past'; and through materials and process, I articulate traumas of blackness and gender as well as demonstrate that these constructions are not fixed, but instead fluid and in constant states of forming and reforming in relation to environmental factors such as era, location, power and control. Afrofuturism calls for a joining of critical and utopian discourses embedded in Afrodiasporic experiences. I act to reframe the past and present narratives to imagine utopias, mapped but not inhibited by race and gender. My aim is not to erase difference, simply to dismantle oppressions legitimized through social constructs that systemically award inferiority or superiority.

¹ Gordon, Avery F. "*Some Thoughts on Haunting and Futurity*." *Borderlands* 10:2 2011 (online)

Preface...

July 5, 2016 in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, Alton Sterling was murdered by police officers. Less than twenty-four hours later on July 6, 2016, Philando Castile is shot by police in St. Paul, Minnesota. These incidents have not occurred in isolation. For the past few years, and over my mother's and grandmother's lifetimes, we have been witnessing state-legislated assaults on American men, women and children of African descent in the United States.

Ta-Nehisi Coates opens *Between the World and Me* by stating, "America understands itself as God's handiwork, but the black body is the clearest evidence that America is the work of men." There are several things that can be understood here. First, that the idea of a black body is an invention. Second, that this invention was created and maintained for a specific purpose. During the summer of 2015, visiting instructor John Cussans asked me what my motivation was to make work, and my response was that I was witnessing a war on bodies like my own.

My practice investigates contingencies of identity through bodies and blackness and gender. While I remain conscious of other oppressive constructions, I begin with these particular access points because they are experiences I live through; therefore I am able to speak from my own understanding. Interrogating constructions of blackness call into question constructions of humanism, and humanism mutually calls into question constructions of power.

Each day since I began my MAA at Emily Carr University, I have questioned my presence here. There is a saying that a friend and I recently talked about, that -- has shaped both of us, -- but neither of us knew the name of the woman who said it. She was an activist and community worker, who assisted in the building of communities of impoverished black homes and neighborhoods in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. She said something to the effect of, "if I cannot be the door to change, I can be the hinge that holds it up."

This statement makes me think of my role as an artist who collects and assembles materials to sculpt an opportunity for viewers to interrogate and shift power. I am not a dancer, I simply love to dance and see its power in others and the power it gives me. I am not a filmmaker but I can use film as a tool to construct counter-memories² to destabilize and rebalance Eurocentric metanarratives. I am not a writer, but I can use my 'autohistoria'³ as a conduit to what can be called spectral narratives.

I use the term spectral because it alludes to a state that I have lived, but wasn't able to name. Through my research on blackness and non-humanism, I repeatedly began to come across a reclaiming of figures of monstrosity: ghosts, zombies, shadows, shapeshifters, cyborgs, avatars, etc. When I use the term spectral, it is in an attempt to recognize the in between spaces of living for those that do not have full access to civil rights which have been used by theorists to define what constitutes being human. I live

²Eshun, Kodwo. "Further Considerations on Afrofuturism." CR: The new Centennial Review 3.2 (2003) 287-302.

³ Anzaldúa, Gloria E. as referenced in Hilton, Liam.

in a state of being which is not completely recognized as being fully human, yet I have presence and I have voice. I am using this idea of a spectral narrative to give agency to others on the periphery such as myself.

But I want to say more than this. I want to do more than recount the violence that deposited these traces in the archive. I want to tell a story ... capable of retrieving what remains dormant—the purchase or claim of their lives on the present—without committing further violence in my own act of narration.

(Saidiya Hartman, 3)

In the essay *Venus in Two Acts*, I receive both a warning and a reminder. There are delicate tensions that lie in crafting the narratives of Black female voices. I have a responsibility to shed light on the violence past and present experiences but our experiences can not only be stories of degradation. They must also be stories of power, love, resistance and joy.

Configuring...

There are projections that precede us. Historical narratives and stereotypes that are inscribed onto the subconscious of those who perceive us that act as holograms; distorting, amplifying, or erasing the complexities of who we are.

These projections are informed by many things; the perceiver's own experiences, the bodies we inhabit— the skin tone, composition, (perceived) gender, and the subsequent social narratives that accompany those physical characteristics.

These projections distort our ability to relate with each other. They engender relational dynamics that perpetuate systems of emotional and institutional oppression. Whether we are cognizant of them or not, they often operate in our lives and perceptions of each other- informing our choices. Projections are not always recognizable as ideas, but may instead spring forth from us as feelings that may not be initially seen as linked to social conditioning.

– Yolo Akili (Emotional Justice: The Principle of Projection)

This quote resonates with me because so much of my life has been shaped by external traits: dark skin, kinky hair, female reproductive organs. Akili deftly articulates an outline of social constructs that posit meaning upon difference often through the use of these visible markers. I am relating to these markers as materials in order to remove an association between physicality and capability as well as to illuminate that they are lenses of a colonial gaze.

For the first eight years of my life I grew up around extended family and in cities with a significant population of other African Americans. Things changed when my mom got a new job at a university in a remote town in the Appalachian mountains of North Carolina where we were the only African American family in town.

There is a large body of discourse around race that offers evidence that there is in fact no physical or biological truth to its existence. But this doesn't mean the systemic and socio-political experiences of racialization do not exist; that notions of race are not so embedded in our psyches, that we continually enact race as real.

There were things that I learned growing up Black, middle-class, and female in the Appalachian mountains. I learned to speak in tongues⁴ and I learned to shapeshift⁵. I

⁴ Speaking in tongues is a double reference: First, it refers to going to my grandmother's church and a state that members of the congregation would reach where spirits took over their bodies and spoke through them in languages that were unintelligible to others. In a sense, you are able to speak in ways that are not from you but can pass through you. Secondly, Zadie Smith's book, *Speaking in Tongues* refers to speaking in tongues as speaking different cultural languages. Being a hybrid of African-Caribbean and European ancestry, recognizing that her social mobility was dependent on an ability to speak the language of the dominant - White, mid to upper class, neo-liberal educated. In doing so there is something that you lose

learned to embody different forms, not smarter than, not more privileged than, or more articulate, so as to be seen as “not like the rest”, “one of the nice ones”, tomboy, girlie girl, non-threatening, “scary black girl”, etc. at different times, based on who I was around and what I needed to survive.

I thought about this when Sandra Bland⁶, an American woman of African descent in Texas, was murdered: hung in a cell by police officers after being pulled over for an alleged minor traffic offense. I was shaken because her execution was committed and upheld by the state. And I was shaken because her killing proved that in my lifetime, I will never move beyond inhabiting a body defined by a state of Blackness.

Last Halloween, a friend sent me an article about the forgotten origins of the zombie. The way that the zombie trope operates now is as an articulation of white, middle-class North American anxieties centered on the ubiquitous ‘Other’. But the story of the zombie originates with Haitian slaves who feared being stuck in the horrors of their enslavement through the matter of their bodies, contained and tortured by a merciless

in terms of the marginalized cultural roots that are also a part of you; and this knowledge becomes more difficult to access as you cease to speak through it.

⁵ Shapeshifting in this context refers to a physical ability to adapt to socio-cultural surroundings. It is important to be able to do this as the site of our bodies because as Aimee Cox’s *Shapeshifters: Black Girls and the Choreography of Citizenship* echoes for many Black girls, this is where discriminatory acts take place. The physicality for me takes place with which accent I speak with, my posture, whether I am self-effacing and quiet or bold and confident. Knowing your audience can be the difference between being assaulted and not being assaulted. And sometimes it doesn’t matter.

⁶ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Death_of_Sandra_Bland

and unrelenting agenda of attaining wealth for a select peoples and never being able to return to 'laguine' as Guinea, Africa, their ideal was called.

I have a different set of fears with roots in the same activities and agendas. My fear is that I will never be able to live and express a multitude of myself without being destroyed spiritually, intellectually, emotionally and physically; that I will be unable to configure and reconfigure beyond socio-political ideologies. That a simple gesture of not doing what I'm told, when I'm told even once, will legitimize my destruction.



figure 1 self-portrait

In the configuring and reconfiguring, there were elements that survived, and ones I have never been able to harness again. In borrowing other tongues and other forms, I have lost a certain potentiality of being. My hope lies that in the construction of Blackness, womanness, and difference, there are slippages in the materials of their

architecture. The inconsistencies and incongruences will create a fissures large enough to insert doubts and alternative narratives.

Reconfiguring...

I strive to locate my work in the art historical contexts of artists Carrie Mae Weems, Kara Walker and Lorna Simpson. Collectively, their work centers Black female subjectivity without perpetuating visual tropes which further their subjugation...exercising a new way of working through visuality which elegantly and politically creates new ways of looking, and arguably as a consequence, new ways of being.

Blending past and contemporary filmic devices with the goal of subverting nostalgia as well as African dystopias, and placing black feminist agency in art historical/contemporary spaces, my body of work at Emily Carr University of Art and Design embodies this process of investigation. I ground my practice in both intimate and societal contexts, while intertwining theory influenced by biopolitics, hauntology, materiality, and Afrofuturism. With the scope of this paper, I couldn't possibly do justice to the breadth of discourses around these concepts; rather, I will speak from my own peculiarities to point to larger theories and systems in operation. I would like to use Samuel Delaney's working definition of science fiction being "a significant distortion of

the present”⁷. Kodwo Eshun connects his understanding with Greg Tate⁸ to state that, “Black existence and science fiction are one and the same.” In other words, I’m not speaking of popular science fiction understood through alienation between humans on Earth with extraterrestrial beings, but alienation marked and experienced through Beings within shared historical and contemporary contexts. I’m looking at horror as trauma that results from these activities.

To summarize, at the center of my work is blackness and gendering. I use these access points as generative locations to move through experiences of biopolitics and Afrofuturism/ hauntology. The connections I am attempting to draw are the following: through biopolitics there is an inquiry into bodies and how they are sifted into human and non-human. This becomes a troubling of identity, exemplified through blackness and gender. Picking up a discussion of blackness, I want to illuminate the ways in which historical and contemporary activities are used to solidify positions of who has access to rights and freedoms; and how these positions which are continually constructed and maintained, operate to traumatize and haunt beings marked as Black. This is relevant to the discussion of art because art offers terrain for ambiguity. Within ambiguity, there is an opportunity to create a space for emergent possibilities, which can serve to disrupt presuppositions and offer new lived experiences to emerge. Ultimately as an artist and as a person, what I am after is an alternative to the distress of my current existence.

⁷ As quoted by Eshun. Further Considerations of Afrofuturism. p290

⁸ As quoted by Eshun in Further Considerations of Afrofuturis. P298

Movement Series a

*What does it mean to focus on one of a sum of parts? One fragment of a whole?
What does it mean to move close up and slow the speed all the way down?
What does it mean to show just the hands?
What does it say to show the hands of many?*



Figure 1.2 Photo Credit Ross Kelly

Inspired by Yvonne Rainer⁹ and Rashaad Newsome¹⁰, *movement series a* (later used to construct the interim thesis) is a video installation comprised of nine monitors on plinths, each featuring the image of a different pair of undulating hands. Eighteen

⁹ Hand Movie, 1966.

¹⁰The Conductor, 2014.

hands including my own, some men, some women, filmed close-up with a Super 8 camera, transferred and edited digitally to slow the motion to only a quarter the original speed. The combination of these approaches held space for distinctions within a mass.



figure 1.3 still from Movement Series a

When Rainer filmed hands it was to take pause and deeply examine possibilities enacted without thought and somehow unsettling the nothing special or everydayness to a defamiliarized territory. Newsome builds on this work as he highlights familiarity and rhythm through the gesture of hands to express a rootedness in shared historical and contemporary Afrodiasporic experiences. I wanted to see if some expression of

'when'¹¹ we are could be carved out by that way we move our hands; I wanted to honour the connection between hands and how they shape and are shaped by the lives we lead; I wanted to foreground feminist and Afrofuturist agendas of collectivity. In this desire, Tim Ingold's article, "The world perceived through feet," made me reexamine my emphasis on hands. The hands in this work could be read on different levels. In one way, focusing on collectivity or collaboration (pairs and multiples of hands –rather than a single like in Rainer's work) de-centers individualism and I hope with it, the idea of meritocracy. Ingold talks about intelligence being defined through hands (development of opposable thumb) but erasing intelligence as being shaped through feet (which I hope that I pick up by coupling the hands with the feet of the dancer). Then, looking to Karen Barad's work on performativity and humanism, I want to explore the circularity between the way we move and the connection to how our minds develop/perceive (particular for Beings who are categorized as human/non-human).

Movement Series b

*I break the canvas
Put it on the ground
Dip her feet in paint
I film her movement from above
My voice directs or records her action
She waivers
She looks directly into the camera¹²*

¹¹ Reference to Michelle M Wrights Physics of Blackness where she positions Blackness as related to time and location, a when rather than what.

¹² Inye Wokomo's installation *This is Who We Are*. Frye Museum Seattle July 9-Sep 4, 2016



figure 1.4 Movement Series b

Movement Series b is the second part of the work which I presented in the Concourse Gallery for the Interim Exhibition. It uses the same techniques (slow motion on black and with super 8 film), with the two significant variations 1) rather than a close-up it is a full body shot 2) rather than being silent there is a voiceover.

Through the encouragement of Kathleen Ritter, who was my studio instructor at Emily Carr during the fall of 2015, I was looking for alternatives to the camera for documenting dance. She wanted me to examine methods beyond the conventional means of video documentation to record choreography as process as well as a completed work. Though performing choreography for the interim exhibition was discouraged in its traditional form, she thought I could find an opportunity to mediate dance through an object, or some other evidence of movement having taken place without necessarily showing the dance. Filming the tracings of a dancer allowed me to have various apparatuses: the canvases, the film, her memory and my own to mark the presence of activity. During this time period, I experimented with other ways to

document dance such as audio recordings or journal entries of my street performances.

I was looking for ways to subvert what Laura Mulvey called the male gaze, with regard to the presence of the female body. And insert what bell hooks calls the oppositional gaze,

“Spaces of agency exist for black people, wherein we can both interrogate the gaze of the Other but also look back, and at one another, naming what we see.” (hooks, 115).

Initially, I felt that in terms of my theoretical underpinnings this was my most unresolved work. My reasoning being that artists have often used women’s bodies as tools in making, but not fundamentally transforming visual art. Yves Klein for example used women’s nude bodies as objects which functioned as brushes dipped in ink moving against canvases. How does my work replicate or disrupt female objectification? Furthermore, the bird’s eye angle, where the camera is positioned directly over the subject, introduces a power dynamic in reference to the female body, generally regarded as problematic. However, recently I saw a work from Inye Wokoma¹³ where he films moving portraits of Americans of African descent. Each subject either shifts from complete stillness, looking away from the camera, to slowly turning and looking directly into the lens, or begins by first confronting the camera and then slowly looking away. That single action - the turning of the head or shift of the gaze as it were - shifts the power dynamic in a very subtle, yet immediate and critical way.

¹³ Wokomo, Inye. *This is Who We Are*, Frye Museum of Art, Seattle

I find that moment in *Movement Series b*. I am filming the dancer from above, which would usually place authority in my hands, but she looks up and unsettles the assumptions of authority when she stares back.

While I thought the crux of my work existed in body politics and the ways of looking, what seem to intrigue most viewers was the use of analogue film, its connection to nostalgia and materiality. Visiting interdisciplinary artists Laiwan and Corrine Sworn offered interesting feedback. For Laiwan, the materiality of the film was a figuration for raced and gendered bodies- the scratches, the trauma, the duration and the distress. Corrine Sworn introduced me to the term hauntology. Coined by Derrida¹⁴, hauntology has been appropriated and applied in two ways that bear relevance for my work:

- 1) As a way of looking at the past for ideas about the future
- 2) An acknowledgement that in the present, we are haunted by the past—or as stated by Avery Gordon¹⁵, “the ghost is not simply a dead or missing person, but a figure...and to be haunted is to be tied to historical and social effects.”

I have not been raised in a brutality that exists anywhere close to what was experienced in the Middle Passage¹⁶; but I am a descendent of six generations of people affected by

¹⁴ Derrida, Jacques. *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*

¹⁵ Referenced in Liam Hilton’s *Peripherealities* from Gordon’s book *Ghostly Matters*.

¹⁶ Horrific journey millions of enslaved Africans were forced to make crossing Atlantic Ocean in bottom of ships as cargo where they were packed in lying one on top of the other enduring and dying under unimaginable conditions.

it. Moreover, I am surrounded by and constantly need to navigate the descendants of those who committed and benefit from these atrocities.

Toni Morrison¹⁷ described the people who experienced the Middle Passage as the first modernists. With this in mind I would like to pick up two streams of thought which informed (my work) *Entire Fragments of Our Future*: 1) the collapse of a space and time continuum marked by past, present and future and 2) fragmentation and its relationship to modernist art.



figure 5 photo credit Kemi Craig

Fragments was a film and video window installation, projected for one hour a night over one week, December 2015, in downtown Victoria, BC. Inspired by images and headlines that I saw of Americans of African ancestry killed by police, I thought about how our lives can be reduced and defined by a single image. And how the nuances of who we are

¹⁷ As referenced in Eshun's *Further Considerations on AfroFuturism*. p288

become lost. *Fragments* represents the idea that in the construction of blackness, there are pieces of narratives, individually and collectively which are erased or manipulated, perpetuating the essentialized ideas that officers have of Black Americans in order to commit the murders without hesitation, remorse or punishment. But rubbing against this, are the ideas of Black worth insisted upon by hash tags of Black Lives Matter movements.

The window itself was divided into two parts, which served as way to frame motion picture images from an analogue Super 8 projector in one window, alongside images from a digital projector in the other window. With the exception of a series of still images and text¹⁸, all motion picture images were originally shot on Super 8 film, and then digitally transferred to video which allowed them to be screened in their original, raw analogue format or digitally with minor editing.

The content of the different projections was: all of the Super 8 films I had shot the previous term for ECUAD, along with a new video comprised of digital still photos and an accompanying new text loop which played in a separate window. The images were photos of myself and my family with a text that questioned what others would know about us, if the only access they had to who we were, was through our images.

On one level, the goal of *Fragments* was to create a dialogue between analogue and digital filmic expressions, teasing out nuances, possibilities and limitations. On another level, a conversation between the images was born out of the juxtaposition of images

¹⁸ One work consisted of a series of still shots and text loop, which was entirely digital in its material composition.

themselves, which were constantly in flux creating a fluidity of meaning or readings of subjects.

In the end, what made the project most interesting for me was the role that viewers played in exploring the process of creating various meanings out of the images. Most viewers saw the work in passing, whether they were driving or walking by. However, those who knew about the installation watched from the outside for a time and then came inside to talk to me. People shared memories of playing sports, of watching their father's home movies, of experiencing meditative moments through the repetitive hand moments, or intimacy with the children's photos.

The connection between fragments and meaning is a critical element to this work.

There is a ubiquitous understanding in filmmaking, that audiences through the sequencing of images can infer meaning. So creating links and then creating meanings and stories between images happens in the minds of the viewer. Credited as being the first popular filmmaker to create new meaning from unrelated material through shooting techniques and editing, Anna Grimshawⁱ in *Ethnographer's Eye* writes about D.W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation*:

Action was broken down into a series of fragments, and movement generated through their manipulation during editing. But just as a single action can now be broken down into parts, so too can the overall narrative itself (Grimshaw, 27).

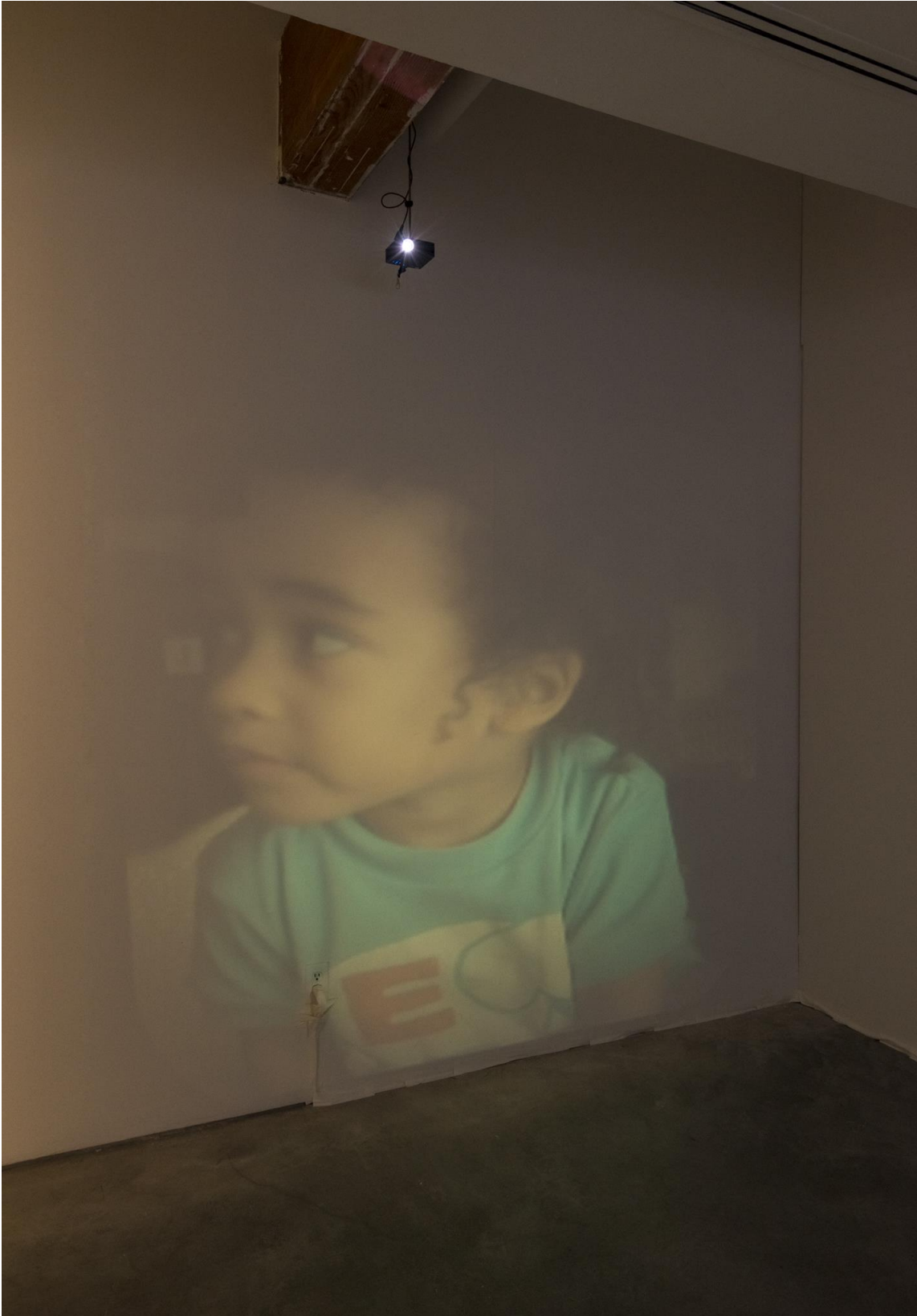
With *Fragments* I wanted to explore what happens when there is no given narrative.

Would the audience impose their own narratives across disparate images? Would space allow more room for their associations triggered by images? I wanted to use that space between images and meaning to intervene or disrupt common tropes of what it means

to be man, woman, Black, White, or Other. In other words, I wanted to continually trouble ideas of gender and race through the expanse between images. In his film *Rebirth of a Nation*, DJ Spooky applies the dj technique of mixing to Griffith's film in order to subvert and reinvent the film's narrative through a layering of his own images, demonstrating the historical context and narrative devices used for racializing trajectories.¹⁹

Placing the same footage, analogue projected next to digital, also made invisible processes of manipulation visible. This uncloaking of the image making process is important to me because, as a Black woman, I feel that I am burdened with projections of others and I like to be able to see the source, who is creating and disseminating these stories and what are their devices. If we as individuals are to have agency in our futures, we need to have engagement and the power to intervene with the mechanisms that shape them.

Paul Miller (aka DJ Spooky, 2015)



if not now, when? figure 1.6 photo credit Scott Massey

if not now, when?

In my work I intend to subvert nostalgia in two ways. The first is to bring the past into the present but with unsettling imagery, playing with a sense of horror; and the second is to place black feminine subjectivity at the center of terrain usually reserved for white male experiences of longing. This intention is what shaped *if not now, when?*, a multi-channel film and video installation presented at the Thesis Exhibition entitled 7, in the Charles H. Scott Gallery. The title *if not now when?* questions an experience of time, but also the arrival of time for change/for African diasporic empowerment; for women and girls' voices; for justice.

Constructed within its own room, *if not now, when?* is comprised of three home videos shot with a cell phone and using Super 8. The first (and last) clip which viewers encounter is the cell phone video screened via a monitor in the hallway of the entrance to the room. The next clip features a silent image of a toddler girl projected against one wall, almost floor to ceiling by a projector that was built by fusing an overhead projector with parts of a computer. The final image, featured in opposition to the toddler, is a black and white Super 8 loop of a girl jumping in slow motion. All three clips were of my daughter but shot at different ages and by different means. The video, viewed as one entered the hallway to the gallery was one that my daughter shot of herself when eight years old that I found on my cell phone months later.²⁰. At the time I

²⁰ Aya's selfie for me was an example of being conscious of a cloak cast over her by processes of gendering and her need to have the freedom to configure and reconfigure. "The autobiographical nature of the selfie gives us (women of colour) access to reconfiguring how we are actually seen, also known as subverting

was shocked because I had never witnessed her being so unapologetically mischievous; but also amused and relieved that she did have the space to express it. Filmed from below, she is wearing pajamas in our kitchen, positioned over the screen as she pierces it with her gaze, flashes her middle finger and proceeds to rhythmically whisper a sequence of expletives into the camera. Seconds later, she films herself again saying, “maybe I shouldn’t have made that terrible video” and then laughing. The second video the viewer sees as they enter the gallery space is my daughter when she was a toddler, sitting on a dining room table in our home and talking to the camera. The video is projected in silence, however, the dialogue is that of her beginning to tell a story, but then stopping to ask what I am doing. When I respond that I am recording the story, she asks me to stop, “don’t record the story”, before she continues to speak. When I chose this piece for the installation, it was screened in silence, but during critique her agency became a topic, and I shared the story of her telling me to stop recording, which is why I took out the sound. Instructor Jonathan Middleton noted that this information was critical to the understanding of the installation and that perhaps I could find some way of including those details, for example in a subtitle. In one articulation of the installation, I play it with the sound and the video discontinues as soon as she directs the recording to stop. The final projection, which was on the opposing wall, is a video loop shot with Super 8 black and white, analogue film but transferred and slowed down

dominant assumptions or “truths”This alone may not cause empires to crumble, but it is an act of defiance and a potential space for decolonization...a self-made visibility that proudly proclaims ‘I am here. I am mine. Look at me.’²⁰

digitally. In it, viewers see my daughter at seven years old, jumping up and down. [She frequently saw me shooting dancers with the super 8 camera and asked if I would film her doing a short choreography that she created on the trampoline.]

I made the selections of clips that I did, because as a collective, they voiced Black feminist subjectivities which aren't usually given space for consideration by diverse audiences: expressions of hidden anger, laughter through defiance, staring back and taking control over how and when our stories are revealed.

For example, the 'selfie' video made by my daughter troubles the way that girls are meant to behave, and meant to feel. I heard feedback that some audience members were offended and questioned what was "wrong" with my daughter that she would make that video. Personally, in contrast to that response, I am relieved that she has the ability to use media to release the pressure valve so to speak, to be 'inappropriate,' to explore a spectrum of emotions; and to laugh. In *Making Fun: How Urban Black Girls Craft Identity*, Angela Dino²¹ observes, "it would be a mistake to view the girls' humour as merely a kind of escape from serious or uncomfortable topics. The girls often evoked humour deftly to share and critique their own responses to threats." Because it is positioned in the space where viewers enter and exit, it becomes necessary for them to engage with a rare occurrence of a girl of color being able to act 'out' in anger or aggression, but coupled with lightness and in a protected space. The work creates a gathering of full expression, agency and safety.

²¹ Dino, Angela. *Making Fun: How Urban Black Girls Craft Identity*

The other element to my daughter's transgressive act that I appreciate is that it makes me think of something Kiese Layman recently said in an article regarding Black Lives Matter²², "we knew we were brought here to be subservient, to be hardworking and to die." Seeing a young girl, throughout the installations behave in a manner that is in direct contrast to Afrodiasporic use in the colonial project gives me hope for the future. I want to see more of these images in public discourse and media.

²² Laymon, Kiese. Fader Magazine "*What a Pledge Allegiance To*"
<http://www.thefader.com/2016/09/19/my-mississippi-pledge-kiese-laymon>



if not now, when?, figure 1.7 photo credit Scott Massey

Process...

During an artist talk at Emily Carr this summer with Maggie Groat I became aware of the importance of responding to environment in my work. A self-professed collector of things, Groat described her working practice as arriving at the space where her art will take place, getting a creative understanding informed by the place or situation and then developing her work on-site.

I have a similar process, which I believe is informed by my experiences as a Black North American female. There are correlating patterns that I have begun to notice in my work: an attraction to unrefined materials, fragments, repeatedly discarding and starting over, lack of conclusions or definitions, and slow-motion. I think there is a relationship present between the experiences I have through my body, through my identity, and the process of structuring my work.

It is not my intention to essentialize gendered and raced responses but to reveal the connection between greater systems and how they have informed my manner of thinking. At a conference addressing feminism and racism, Audre Lorde²³ stated, "We are not here as women examining racism in a political and social vacuum. We operate in the teeth of a system for which racism and sexism are primary, established, and necessary props of profit." The way that I think, feel, or operate is an embodied example of how systems of oppression are lived. For example, my process for developing *if not now when?* became the most volatile/contested aspect of the installation, at times overshadowing the work but also, the most fruitful interrogation

²³ Lorde, Audre. *The Uses of Anger: Women Responding to Racism*.
<http://www.blackpast.org/1981-audre-lorde-uses-anger-women-responding-racism#sthash.MA1G4doV.dpuf>

for further research. It is a clear example of how my traumas of race and gender are performed within an installation if curators and viewers allow process to be foreground. When I arrived at the beginning of the summer, I had a different configuration of the work in mind. I had a body of footage, I knew that I wanted to work with the idea of a multiplicity of projections and I knew that I wanted to use analogue materials. Moreover, what was fundamental was that I made work to provoke questions around race and gender, while giving voice to lived experiences. My personal experience is that nothing is assured; I have to engage with whatever my present conditions are.

How does the materiality of the installation reflect materialities of black female identity?

The exposed cords reflect coded resistance to hiding connections between things or making operations invisible. The overhead projector represents an ability to create new useful machines out of joining of devices that are not useful or less desirable on their own. Classroom overheads are defunct and a computer cannot project on its own; but they are both powerful iconography for education, technology and progress. In this installation they appear broken yet their new formation casts a unique, beautiful projection as well as unintended elements for exploration, like the patterns of lights against the wall.

There were projectors without projections as I began with one set up but it wasn't going to work out so I changed projections around until I got what I wanted. I turned off projectors but left them mounted. I wanted the process of creating and of possibly

failing to be visible because I think exposing these vulnerabilities is more powerful, more relatable and more honest.

Work in Progress...

There is a challenge that presents itself when it comes to planning, and communicating future 'end results'. But there is also a strength in that I trust in my ability to create without security. Rather than being flustered and trying to force an installation that will not work, I can improvise with the materials and the conditions that are functioning. And something new and unexpected often comes from giving in to the process and letting the work find you.

There is always a clarity and reasoning that becomes pronounced for each choice, each response that I make. My process feels like an introspective call and response. I make one gesture, then respond to that one with another; and so and so on. There is also a coding present in the work, meanings that are hidden that I want the viewers to see. Can they follow my traces (the cords, the abandoned tools, the clues I have left behind or edited)?

My process is indicative of a need to be responsive, in the moment; and it embodies an instability that I have always lived, and watched my mother and grandmother live. We live in expectation for the other shoe to drop; emotionally braced for the next aggression major or minor, next disappointment, next loss while praying for the best possible outcome. Articulations of Blackness do not show up in my work in a direct manner as they do with Adrian Piper or Howardena Pindell, whose works such as *Cornered and Free*, *White and 21*, boldly confront racialized privilege with unfiltered

monologues and stares directed into lenses. In my work, Blackness shows up as alienation, fragmentation, unpredictability. It also shows up in a simultaneity of feelings - joy, melancholy, anxiety, confidence, beauty, horror, lightness and gravitas entangled and in flux. In *Performativity and Posthumanism* Karen Barad points out, "Bodies are not objects with inherent boundaries and properties; they are material discursive phenomena."

There is a need to acknowledge materiality because the violence of ideology is enacted upon bodies. This violence leaves a legacy of trauma that racialized peoples experience on an ongoing basis.

I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me. Like the bodiless heads you see sometimes in circus sideshows, it is as though I have been surrounded by mirrors of hard, distorting glass. When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination—indeed, everything and anything except me.

Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*

I like this quote because it sutures the surreal with the materiality of Blackness.

Identifying needs of First Nations or indigenous communities in the 1980s, Dr. Maria Yellow Horse Brave Heart identified four necessary stages for healing historical trauma: confronting, understanding, releasing and transcending. This has been applied to the idea of collective trauma, which is defined as... “trauma that happens to large groups of individuals and can be transmitted transgenerationally and across communities. War, genocide, slavery, terrorism, and natural disasters can cause collective trauma, which can be further defined as historical, ancestral, or cultural.”

...There are connections between the distresses of minds and destructions of bodies; and there are ways of healing. One of the methods I have used to participate in processes of healing is collaborating with other Black women; particularly, through narratives found in science fiction. Though I inhabit cis-heteronormative experiences, I have also found intersections with ideologies within queer theories.

“Science Fiction is a means through which to preprogram the present.”²⁴

²⁴ William Gibson as cited by Kodwo Eshun, 1998

Located at the juncture between science fiction, Afrocentricity and art, Afrofuturism²⁵ provides an opportunity to imagine within a collective with others who visualize a place and time where Afrodiasporic empowerment is the baseline for existence and lived experiences. Individually, we have our own desires and ambitions but we are no longer burdened with the need to circumnavigate racialized oppression. In discussing the role of the Afrofuturist artist, Gaba states the we should act in, "...founding a structure where there isn't one, without losing sight of the limitations of existing models that belong to a certain social and economic order based in the harsher realities of domination²⁶."

There are artists that inhabit the liminal space of critique and/or utopia²⁷ that I consider and have been influenced by when making my work: Lorna Simpson's use of the fragmented image of black women; Carrie Mae Weems' images enacting traumatic historical events from the past with contemporary subjects; and Kara Walker's usage of

²⁵ Afrofuturism is cultural expression at the intersections of science-fiction, Afrocentricism, and art forms such as literature, music, film, etc. Leading figures in this culture include Ottavia Butler, Sun Ra, Parliament, and most recently FKA Twigs and Janelle Monae's Cyborg persona Cindi Mayweather. Although Afrofuture as the term and its use in cultural theory is new (beginning in the 1990's and seeing a resurgence with Monae in the 2000s) its aesthetics began in the 1970s and some are finding earlier representations. I didn't see Sun Ra's film *Space is the Place* until two years ago but his expression of ideas of freedom for Black people in space resonates with me today. His work influenced more recent artists I listen to such as Kamasi Washington and Flying Lotus. Reading Octavia Butler's *Kindred* which used time travel to take an African-American woman from 1970s California to the plantation in the south during slavery influenced me to look for other black science fiction and fantasy writers including Gayl Jones and Nalo Hopkins.

²⁶ Gaba, 2012 as referenced in Eschun, Further Considerations on Afrofuturism

²⁷ Eshun, Kodwo. Further Considerations on Afrofuturism. *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3.2 (2003) 287-302

visual art forms from the past and interplay between the fantastical and brutal historical realities. Where Simpson uses a partial back, I have used hands; where Walker harnesses nostalgia with silhouettes, I use Super 8 film. Weems and I share an objective to place Black female subjectivity at the center; her with photographs with the kitchen table as backdrop, me with aesthetics of home movies.

Hauntology...

Before I continue, there is something else that necessitates acknowledgement in terms of visualizing futures (or gaining "Science Fiction capital"²⁸). What if you are so traumatized, so haunted by your past that you are paralytic...your body, your psyche? What if the weight of what you see everyday, is so overwhelming, that you can imagine nothing else? When I turn on the news and see police officers high fiving each other after murdering a Black teenage boy, joking about their impending desk duty, while destroying someone's possibilities...it affects the way I move or don't move, think or can't think.

I make note of this because as Mark Fisher states, "Afrofuturism and hauntology can now be heard as two versions of the same condition"²⁹. Afrofuturism positions Blackness in Utopian futures, but along side this hauntology is both looking to the past for ideas about possible futures as well as acknowledging that the past remains with us. So yes, we need to be able to envision our futures but an integral part of this is also engaging with our pasts. I make note of this because, even though healing can be found

²⁸ Eshun, Kodwo. Further Considerations on Afrofuturism. *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3.2 (2003) 287-302

²⁹ <https://dj.dancecult.net/index.php/dancecult/article/view/378>

in imaginings and the future, I have to engage in the material of the Black body in its present context.

...racism is a visceral experience, ... it dislodges brains, blocks airways, rips muscle, extracts organs, cracks bones, breaks teeth... You must always remember that the sociology, the history, the economics, the graphs, the charts, the regressions all land, with great violence, upon the body.³⁰

(Coates, 10)

I'm referencing this quote from Ta-Nehisi Coates because it points to relationships between greater society and lived experiences through our individual bodies. He later repeats a question throughout the book, "how do I live free in this black body?". The question resonates because it is one I ask myself. In the greater context, I believe that capitalism and colonization necessitate control over bodies and that the need for this control precipitates violence against particular bodies.

Biopolitics...

This is where biopolitics become a useful tool in building anti-racist landscapes. In the same era that theorist Judith Butler is troubling the physical prudence of gendering, illustrating its true nature as more performance, women like Donna Haraway³¹, begin to challenge the very idea of what it means to be human, forwarding ideas of being posthuman. I remember when I was first exposed to Haraway, I found her work intriguing, but I also had this discomfort in the idea of what it would mean to me

³⁰ Coates, Ta-Nehisi. *Between the World And Me*. 2015. New York, NY Penguin Random House

³¹ Haraway, Donna J. *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*. New York, NY. Routledge, 1991.

to be posthuman before I had had an opportunity to challenge the hierarchal positions of humans. Zakkiyah Iman Jackson echoes this anxiety and puts forth that we cannot exclude an interrogation of blackness in the conversations which project 'beyond' human. After all, Black women, were forerunners in the project of questioning what it is to be human, what it is to be woman. Jackson tells us that rather than moving past these interrogations, we should use them as access points to enter and take apart destructive and divisive naturalized categories of man, nature, machine, animal, white and Other. In an essay from Liam Hilton, a compilation of concepts such as Giorgio Agamben's Homo Sacer (accursed man), Gordon's ghost, and Mbembe's shadow³² figuration for plantation slaves map out the ways that race has been used to deny access to life lived as 'human'³³.

If we are able to work with our malleability, our gaseousness, we have the possibility of transfiguring out of current dystopias and into embodied ideals.

Afrofuturism, hauntology and non-humanism relate to my arts practice in that when I make work, I consider time, gender performativity, what it is to be human/non-human, and Afrodiasporic subjectivity. Blackness/gender/biopolitics are access points for transformation if we examine constructs perpetuated, and question where the cracks are and where they can be taken apart. Understandings are being

³² I selected the footage of her where she is backlit because there was an interesting tension present. Though the movement depicts a joyous moment, the darkness of the film renders the girl an eerie shadow figure which viewers described "creepy".

³³ Eshun, Kodwo. Further Considerations on Afrofuturism. *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3.2 (2003) 287-302

created that we are porous or liquid beings. Our boundaries of identities as they shape the contours of our bodies are not fixed, they have no beginning and no end. Our borders are constantly configuring and reconfiguring in response to contexts of other nebulous entities like location and time.

Each of the body's moves, as with all writings, traces the physical fact of movement and also an array of references to conceptual entities and events. Constructed from endless and repeated encounters with other bodies, each body's writing maintains a non-natural relation between its physicality and conceptual, it is also non impermanent. It mutates, transforms, reinstantiates with each new encounter (Foster, 3)³⁴.

Artistic Challenges

"Afraid of assertion. Always trying to get out of "totalizing" language, ie language that rides over specificity; ...My writing is riddled with such tics of uncertainty. I have no excuse or solution, save to allow myself the tremblings, then go back in later and slash them out. In this way I edit myself into a boldness that is neither native nor foreign to me...I am interested in offering up my experiences and performing my particular manner of thinking..."

-Maggie Nelson, *The Argonauts*

There are barriers to trusting myself because when I'm doing things, at the moment, I don't know why I'm doing it...I'm just reacting. I only know when to stop...when the work is ready. But then the doubts come back...some real and embodied by the voices and or looks of others; and some from the tape inside my head.

³⁴ Foster, Susan Leigh Foster. *Choreographing History*. Bloomington and Indianapolis. Indiana University Press, 1995.

During my mock defense this past summer, I (like Groat) also identified myself as a collector of materials- gathering as much as I can without an attachment to how or when I will use it; then I begin to place things into installation and finally distill materials until I am left with the slightest gesture possible that encapsulates my point. But there is a point at which the installation can either be under or overworked and this can lead to a collapse in a kind of confusion for your audience that is productive and provokes questions, or alternatively, puts the work into a state of confusion which denies access to the viewer, with the result that they simply walk away. I need to develop a sense of when uncertainty and ambiguity work and when they fail. I have to set up the expectation for unexpectedness. It is necessary to make the narrative of the work accessible while still leaving room for critical spectatorship and an opening for possibilities generated from audience. My imagery should make the context and the circumstances of socio-political conditions clear while leaving the conclusions for change open. Perhaps, building in visual cues that allude to a constant evolution of the work, or even building my objectives to create with audience and process into didactics.

Like the selfie video that my daughter left on my phone, like the character in Ellison's prologue, my true selves often remain hidden, but I leave traces in plain sight. I used the images of another, but I am a constant presence in that space. I need the audience, because there are things in my head that can only be accessed and extracted by others. I need distance from audience, so that I am not prompted to respond to a need to survive by acquiescence. This goes back to my mention of shapeshifting as a survival

strategy. As a youth in the southern United States, being able to anticipate and be sensitive to what others want of me has been an integral part to navigating the racism of peers, teachers, employers, and police officers: gatekeepers to accessing basics of citizenship. This tendency to put others at ease however, means that at times my voice can get lost in the work that I create. The most recent example is changing my installation in response to our final group critique rather than asking myself deeper questions about why I had made the creative decisions I had made initially. It wasn't safe for me to challenge figures in my past, but it doesn't serve my practice to 'be safe'. This is one of the benefits to presenting in institutions such as galleries. Though it is a contentious space, the institution of the gallery provides a certain safety and sets a stage of expectancy for deep consideration.

Subtle Resistance and Film...

"What can the future hold if our present entertainment is the spectacle of contemporary colonization, dehumanization, and disempowerment where the image serves as a murder weapon. Unless we transform images of blackness, of black people, our ways of looking and our ways of being seen, we cannot make radical interventions that will fundamentally alter our situation."

(bell hooks,7)

Film for me is meditative. It provides a space of contemplation and a place to rest. My films are quiet yet there is a power within the dialogue they contain. The intention with the simplicity of framing the hands, of framing one subject from points of time, space and contexts, is to allow room for interrogation by the viewer. And their questions will lead to thoughts and actions which reshape current states of being. I believe something

else that Ralph Ellison said, "hibernation is a covert preparation for a more overt action."³⁵

Afterword...

An Embodiment of Future

³⁵ Ralph Ellison, p16.



figure 1.8 Situated Choreographies photo credit Katherine Myerscough

The more Blossom spin and dance, the more Suffering back back; the more Suffering back back, the bigger Blossom get, until Blossom was Oya with she warrior knife, advancing. In the cold light of Suffering, with Oya hot and advancing, Suffering slam a door and disappear. Blossom climb into Oya lovely womb of strength and fearlessness. Full of joy when Oya show she the warrior dance where heart and blood burst open. Freeness, Oya call that dance; and the colour of the dance was red and it was a dance to dance high up in the air.

Dionne Brand, Blossom/Sans Souci and other stories

I attended a conference in North Carolina *Dancing the African Diaspora: Embodying the Afrofuture* and one of the workshops I took was a movement based one called *Embodying History Through Dance*. We were led through an exercise of placing ourselves into positions moving throughout Black experience in America; from lying on top and trying not to crush each other on slave ships, dropping to the floor as you were witnessing the brutalization of loved ones on plantations, to lifted chests in the Civil

Rights Movement. For me it resonated because, in the same way that past trauma operates through my body, an Afrofuture exists in my dance. For me dance is resistance and it is also release . Dance is healing. It is language expressed through your physical configuration in a particular time and place and in response to what is inside you. It is the liminal space where the inside becomes the outside. To be a woman, to be Black and to celebrate the living body...there is no greater protest. Dance of the Africandiaspora has been coopted, sullied, diluted, used to essentialize and further entrench imposed narratives. Yet, there is an element that cannot be contained. Like our bodies, it is porous and escapes all entrapment. It is the expressions and interconnection that if you don't have...if you can't have...you hate and seek to destroy. But the movement simply shifts, reconfigures and begins again. When I dance, I carry the stories of my ancestors. I am contemporaneous presence manifested. I embody my Afrofuture.

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