

Liberation in Four Movements Exhibition Reader



LIBERATION IN FOUR MOVEMENTS

MAY 1 - JULY 27, 2024

ART MUSEUM, UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO ART CENTRE

CURATED BY INGRID JONES WITH WORKS BY ERIKA DE-

FREITAS, JA'TOVIA GARY, AMIR GEORGE, ONYEKA IGWE,

DONNA JAMES, ELSA JAMES AND MICHAËLLE SERGILE

For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change.

Audre Lorde -



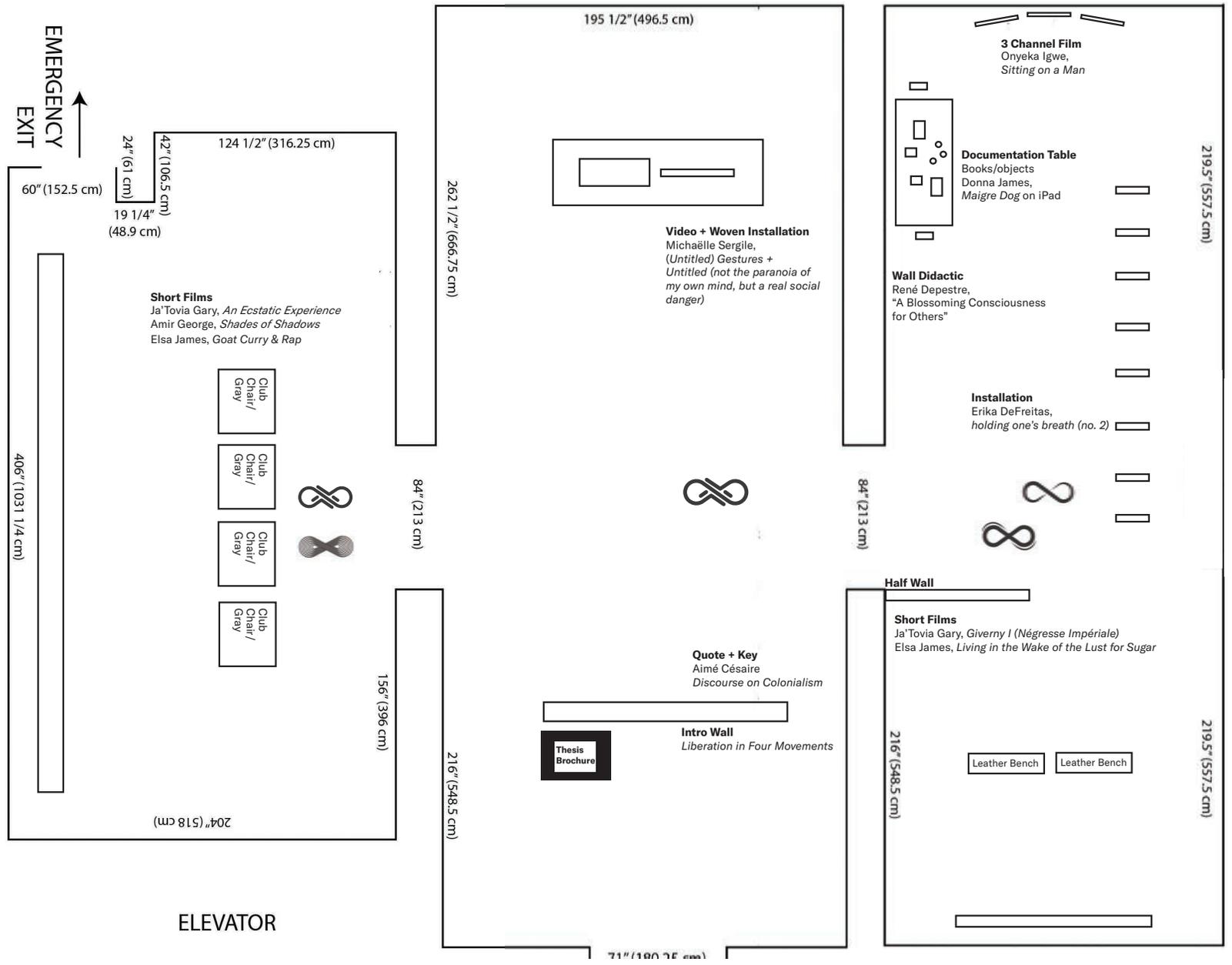
LIBERATION IN FOUR MOVEMENTS

MAY 1 - JULY 27, 2024

UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO ART CENTRE, ART MUSEUM

**CURATED BY INGRID JONES WITH WORKS BY ERIKA DE-
FREITAS, JA'TOVIA GARY, AMIR GEORGE, ONYEKA IGWE,
DONNA JAMES, ELSA JAMES AND MICHAËLLE SERGILE**

THE MAP





Death in the Hold and Beyond

Death in the Hold and Beyond assumes the events surrounding the transatlantic slave trade remain as we know them to be. A devastating collision of colonial hubris, leading to the erasure of African pre-histories and the ensuing revisionist imperial histories disavowing chattel slavery's relationship to the capitalist greed and torture that built the economic foundations of Europe and the Americas.



The Collective Sociality of Refusal

The Collective Sociality of Refusal postulates a kinship in the hold that may enact refusal. Grounding this phase of our voyage, it begs the question of what it means to resist. Is it correct to assume that resistance on the part of the dehumanized is always violence, or is it a stance more complex?



The Surrealistic Throes of Ecstasy

In The Surrealistic Throes of Ecstasy, we explore the transcendental nature of a willful Blackness. This space acknowledges that though there continue to be many dehumanizing attempts to thwart Black progression, it persists. Just as grief and mourning in the wake can be transmitted from generation to generation, so too can an undefinable Black determination, power and joy.



Embodiment

Embodiment explores a Black interiority that traces its lineage to a time before the hold, extending its canons through and beyond it. Here we return to the affectual as a means of describing states of the sensual that encompass this lineage. This movement advocates for the disruption of what it means to be human.

“...colonization, I repeat, dehumanizes even the most civilized man; that colonial activity, colonial enterprise, colonial conquest, which is based on contempt for the native and justified by that contempt, inevitably tends to change him who undertakes it; that the colonizer, who in order to ease his conscience gets into the habit of seeing the other man as an animal, accustoms himself to treating him like an animal, and tends objectively to transform himself into an animal.”

Aimé Césaire - Discourse on Colonialism¹

¹ Aimé, Césaire, et al. *Discourse on Colonialism*, Monthly Review Press, 2000.

What does it mean to be human? Is it the Oxford definition stating that “a human being, especially a person,” is one who is “distinguished from an animal or (in science fiction) an alien”?² If this is the case, then what can we make of the dehumanization of a people? What can be said when some of us are characterized as subhuman, *Others* or animals? For generations, Black people have faced these categorizations, and the manifestation of our dehumanization has taken many insidious forms. From the ravages of the transatlantic slave trade to the terror of Jim Crow and the persistent weathering of systemic discrimination, Black people have experienced all manner of devastation in the white supremacist quest for imperialist and capitalist domination.³

As Walter Dignolo notes of Sylvia Wynter’s writings on the Human, the notion of what it means to be Human is a colonial and overrepresentative narrative set by those who deem themselves to be the exemplar for humanity. As such, anyone falling outside of that exemplar and classified as *Other* or different must assimilate to this dominant prescriptive or remain outside. The fact that the dominant narrative fails to consider the varied histories of those who are *Othered* and becomes ingrained in our collective psyche as truth, particularly within academic settings, is what Wynter flags as problematic and actively moves against through epistemic disobedience.⁴

² Dictionaries, Oxford. “Human Meaning.” Google Search, Google, 2023.

³ Referencing the phrase coined by scholar bell hooks, “white supremacist capitalist patriarchy,” describing interlocking systems of domination that privilege whiteness and the resulting impact on those they oppress, including their oppression of each other through internalized hate and ensuing caste systems. See bell hooks, and Jhally Sut. “bell hooks—Cultural Criticism & Transformation.” Media Education Foundation, 1997.

⁴ Sylvia Wynter highlights that the pre-history of *Other-ed* peoples is interrupted by the history of overrepresented “Man and its human *Others* - that is Indians, Negroes, Natives.” This history is of the West’s expansion from the fifteenth century onwards that is expressed through “its own cultural conception of its own origins.” This history that is ethnoculturally coded is then taught in global academia as the “history for the human itself.” See David, Scott, and Sylvia Wynter. “The Re-Enchantment of Humanism: An Interview with Sylvia Wynter.” *Small Axe*, vol. 8, Sept. 2000, p. 198.

Further, in this colonial narrativization, the dominant create what Mignolo terms “enunciations of what it means to be human,” which are masterfully “concocted and circulated” as the “right” or “noble” or “moral” traits of humanity crafted in their own image.⁵ The enunciations of humanity can also be applied to dehumanization and, in turn, states of oppression, as these narratives emphasize a web of castes whose humanity is determined by their proximity to the dominant. As time and sociopolitical conventions shift, the line of who is Human and who is *Other*; and therefore dehumanized, may also shift or be redrawn, but it always remains an extension of oppression to varying degrees.

It is therefore logical that when one group categorically dehumanizes another, their relationship becomes that of oppressor and oppressed.⁶ And, within this dynamic, one could assume that only the oppressed bear the weight of the life-altering transformation from Human to *Other*. But in assessing this relationship, we must also hold up a mirror and reflect back to the dehumanizer how far from humanity they, too, have fallen. Assuming that to dehumanize is a choice, then to make this choice requires an abandoning of reason in favour of willfulness. A willfulness to maintain a cycle of

⁵ Mignolo follows Sylvia Wynter’s differentiation of the term human by the use of capitalization wherein Human represents European/Western Man1 and Man2 and human represents those relegated to the status of *Otherness*. As outlined by Wynter, according to the dominant, the prescriptive by which we should all aspire is “white, cis-heterosexual, able-bodied, middle-class) Man whether Judeo-Christian (Man1) or secular (Man2), both of which are an overrepresentation of the Human whose narrative dominates all others. See Walter D. Mignolo, 2015. “Sylvia Wynter: What Does It Mean to Be Human?”, pp. 106 -123, *Sylvia Wynter: On Being Human as Praxis*, Katherine McKittrick

⁶ This references Paulo Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* in which he outlines the “problem of humanization” wherein both humanization and dehumanization are possibilities for the “uncompleted” human. The oppressor who denies the humanity of the oppressed and the oppressed who struggle to affirm their humanity. Freire believes that the oppressor cannot, within themselves, regain the humanity they have lost through the violent oppression of others and instead looks to the oppressed to liberate themselves and their oppressors. See Freire, Paulo. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. The Continuum International Publishing Group Inc., 2005.

harm.⁷ If liberation is desired for both the oppressor and the oppressed, there are questions of what it means to break this cycle, how to move against this dehumanization and through what modes this may be possible. Herein lies a different type of willfulness, one which desires to be free from the struggle of affirming one's humanity.

Engaging Wynter's epistemic disobedience and centering Black scholarship, artistry, and embodied practices, the exhibition *Liberation in Four Movements* traverses non-linear paths through text and artworks, challenging the confines of traditional museum spaces. It invites spillage and contemplation as we navigate narratives of dehumanization, ultimately arriving at meditations on states of humanity and freedom. This journey flows through the provocative lens of Fred Moten's hypothetical query in "Blackness and Nothingness: Mysticism of the Flesh" of what it would mean for the enslaved to remain in the ship's hold. The author's sprawling dissertation recontextualizes this place of death and displacement wherein millions of Africans toiled in the horrifying darkness of the ship's bowels, pausing at the moment bookended by the end of the journey across the Atlantic for the tortured African subject and the beginning of life as the Black and enslaved on the shore.

As if to stop time, Moten asks us to consider the incredulous, a moment of undefinable immovability that pushes beyond even ideas

⁷ In a 2014 study by Kalina Christoff, two types of dehumanization were identified. The first was animalistic wherein humans are denied qualities that distinguish them from animals and the second was mechanistic wherein humans are likened to objects. Whether dehumanization was subtle or overt, there was a behavioural manifestation required to impose dehumanization onto others such as the decision to exert subtle disrespect, condescension, neglect or social ostracism often evident through looks, gestures and tones of voice. Though many subtle forms of dehumanization are considered to be inconsequential, they exert great harm on the dehumanized leaving victims feeling degraded, invalidated or demoralized. See Kalina, Christoff, "Dehumanization in organizational settings: some scientific and ethical considerations." *Frontiers in human neuroscience* vol. 8 748. 24 Sep. 2014, doi:10.3389/fnhum.2014.00748

of the rational to what he terms as no standpoint, an affective space only described as "the rich materiality of...emptiness"⁸ between internment and flight. Moten's suggestion of a commonality between the Afro-pessimistic view of Blackness as fatalistic and a fantastical optimism⁹ allows for this presentation's range of hypothetical postulations of what this moment of no standpoint might mean.¹⁰ It is within Moten's moment in the hold and the hypothetical that this exhibition offers a mix of shifting outcomes and potentialities yet to be realized, which illuminate how to resist dehumanization through the power of action.

Looking to Moten's hold in the visionary spirit of Black radical thinking, this exhibition asks: if Black people sit, as the author posits, in a space of "refusal to defer to" the idea of sovereignty¹¹ and, as Jayna Brown describes in *Black Utopias*, "untethered from the hope of rights, recognition or redress,"¹² what does a reconsideration of Black freedom and humanity entail? What do we, as Black people, hold, and what can be left behind in this emended canon for others, even those who may dehumanize us?

⁸ Fred Moten, "Blackness and Nothingness (Mysticism in the Flesh)." *South Atlantic Quarterly*, vol. 112, no. 4, 2013, p. 751, doi:10.1215/00382876-2345261.

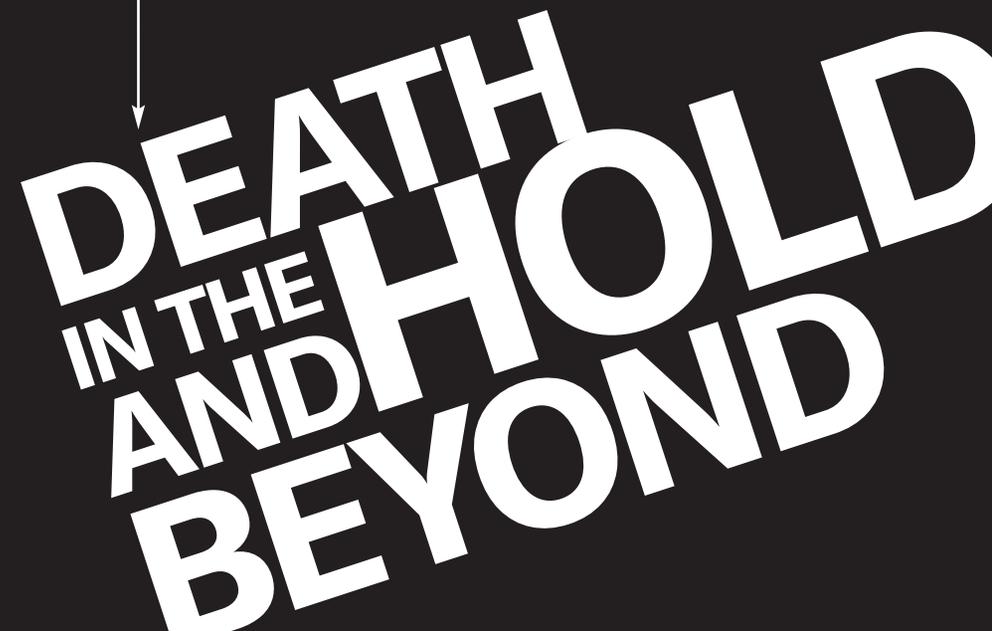
⁹ Speaking to Moten's response to Afro-pessimism as synonymous with Black "social death" as defined by Orlando Patterson, which equates to the condition of people not accepted as fully human in society. Moten asks: "How can we fathom a social life that tends towards death, that enacts a kind of being-toward-death, and which, because of such tendency and enactment, maintains a terribly beautiful vitality?" In other words this "social death" in a "terrible way" is in direct correlation with Black liberation.. See John McMahon, et al, "Episode 26: Afro-Pessimism and Black Optimism." *Always Already: A Critical Theory Podcast*, 18 Jan. 2018.

¹⁰ Moten, 742.

¹¹ Moten, 751.

¹² Referencing Professor and author Jayna Brown's invoking of utopia as a "place in situ, in medias res, in layers, in dimensional frequencies" for Black people facing the "horrific terms of being black in our earthly condition." Utopia is a respite for a Black people "untethered from the hope of rights, recognition or redress," a space of interiority and celebration. See Jayna, Brown, *Black utopias: speculative life and the music of other worlds*, p. 2

In response, *Liberation in Four Movements* offers four speculative outcomes of Moten's moment: 1. Death in the Hold and Beyond, 2. The Collective Sociality of Refusal, 3. The Surrealistic Throes of Ecstasy, and lastly 4. Embodiment, the embracing of interiority and celebration of plurality in the face of a conscripted singularity that concocts a monolithic Blackness. Through this affective range of responses, *Liberation in Four Movements* not only activates Black liberatory practices as expressed through sound, text and film, but also takes up Wynter's call to challenge dominant narratives of what it means to be human to invoke a potential re/humaning inclusive of all.



DEATH
IN THE
AND HOLD
BEYOND



Death in the Hold and Beyond assumes the events surrounding the transatlantic slave trade remain as we know them to be.¹³ A devastating collision of colonial hubris, leading to the erasure of African pre-histories¹⁴ and the ensuing revisionist imperial histories disavowing chattel slavery's relationship to the capitalist greed and torture that built the economic foundations of Europe and the Americas. Death in the Hold is a difficult space of mourning and reflection, which encompasses the Afro-pessimistic view of Blackness, as akin to social death, as its predominant perspective.

In his exploration of the relationship between Blackness and nothingness, Moten points to Orlando Patterson's definition of the enslaved as "socially dead."¹⁵ A state in which the slave, through his enslavement, ceases to belong to any legitimate social order. In this place of nothingness, the link between the enslaved and Africa has been severed as their enslavers have denied them all

¹³ Here I refer the reader to the personal account of Spanish historian and Dominican missionary Bartholomaeus de las Casas who reported extensively on the tyranny of the Spanish in the West Indies in the early 1500s, including their decimation of the Arawak Indians and ensuing enslavement of Africans at the behest of las Casas himself. Las Casas was a willing participant in the conquest of the Caribbean and did, upon witnessing the atrocities committed by the Spanish, return to Spain to plead for the end of Indigenous torture. Las Casas' account is provided as a historical reference. See Bartolomé de Las Casas, *A Brief Account of the Destruction of the Indies*, The Project Gutenberg, 2014.

¹⁴ Professor Ali A. Abdi has written extensively on the oral traditions of the Sub-Sahara, particularly the view of "invading Europeans" that history as documented through oral traditions before colonial intervention was not worth acknowledging as "African oral literatures were not accepted as genuine and valid forms of social, cultural, political, legal, and economic expression." See Ali A. Abdi, (2007). "Oral Societies and Colonial Experiences: Sub-Saharan Africa and the de-facto Power of the Written Word." *International Education*, Vol. 37 Issue (1).

¹⁵ Orlando, Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: a Comparative Study*, E-book, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982, p. 8.

claims and connections to their parents, living blood relations, ancestors and descendants. Patterson, the co-founder of the Afro-pessimist movement, believes that through these actions, the slave becomes a "genealogical isolate."¹⁶ Patterson's isolate aligns with Franz Fanon's descriptive of the colonized as "les damnés" or "the wretched," left to live in "native quarters," shanty towns, Medinas and reservations. As decreed by their settler colonial overlords, the wretched are assumed to be disreputable people inhabiting disreputable places, representing those who are born "anywhere" and who will die "anywhere, from anything." Yet, even in the colonized subject né isolate's suffering, Fanon acknowledges their longing for equity and struggle for humanity.¹⁷

What Patterson and Fanon outline is a life lived in the shadow of grief and mourning. If suffering is held in the DNA,¹⁸ then the isolation of the dehumanized by ripping them from any connection to a homeland and family by way of terror continues on traumatically through generations. As author Christina Sharpe notes,

Living in/the wake of slavery is living "the afterlife of property" and living the afterlife of *partus sequitur ventrem* (that which is brought forth follows the womb), in which the Black child inherits the non/status, the non/being of the

¹⁶ Patterson, 21.

¹⁷ Taking reference from Franz Fanon's 1961 book, *The Wretched of the Earth* in which he psychoanalyzes the dehumanizing impact of colonization on society and humanity within the broader context of social, cultural and political implications to make the case for decolonization. See Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*. Grove Press, 2021, p. 31.

¹⁸ This references the ongoing study of epigenetic markers of stress found in African American populations who suffered the trauma of slavery or on prenatal stress transmitted from African American mothers to their offspring. See Élodie Grossi, (2020), "New avenues in epigenetic research about race: Online activism around reparations for slavery in the United States" *Social Science Information*, 59(1), 93-116.

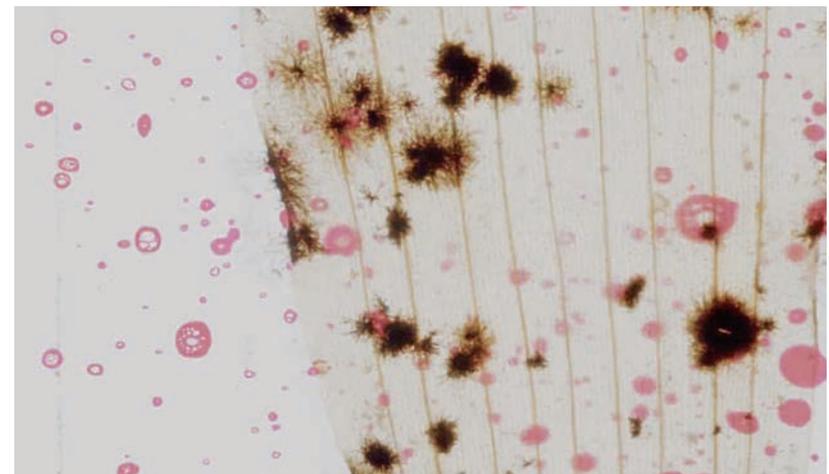
mother. That inheritance of a non/status is everywhere apparent now in the ongoing criminalization of Black women and children. Living in the wake on a global level means living the disastrous time and effects of continued marked migrations, Mediterranean and Caribbean disasters, trans-American and -African migration, structural adjustment imposed by the International Monetary Fund that continues imperialisms/colonialisms, and more.¹⁹

It is here that we contemplate the Black lived experience as one of anguish and lamentation as we reflect on the scholarship of Wynter, who carefully traced the path of our dehumanization in the name of domination. As Wynter outlines, with every step of Black subjugation, there was a reason given. In the minds of the Judeo-Christians, who counted themselves among the angelic, their saving of enslaved populations was required to tame them. For the imperialists, thirsting for sugar, cacao and rum, their beatings and castrations could be categorized as rational in contrast to the irrationality of the native. And for those prone to biologically racist and pseudoscientific theorizations, the enslaved became the missing link, neither human nor animal, but *Other* and, as such, warranting not only brutality but also designation to the outskirts of society and humanity.²⁰

The visualization of this outcome asks that we face the uncomfortable and stark realities of Black death as experienced in the hold and beyond. It is here that we encounter filmmaker Ja'Tovia Gary's *Giverny I (Négresse Impériale)*, 2017. Shot in Claude Monet's garden in Giverny, France, Gary juxtaposes

¹⁹ Christina Elizabeth Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*, Duke University Press, 2016. p. 15.

²⁰ Sylvia Wynter, "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, after Man, Its Overrepresentation--an Argument." CR: *The New Centennial Review*, vol. 3, no. 3, 2003, pp. 293-294.



Ja'Tovia Gary, *Giverny I (NEGRESSE IMPERIALE)* (still), 2017 film, single-channel video, stereo sound, HD and SD video footage, 6 minutes, looped, color/black & white 1920 x 1080, 16:9 aspect ratio dimensions variable © Ja'Tovia Gary. Courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery, New York

Diamond Reynold's prayerful pleas after witnessing the death of her boyfriend, Philando Castile, at the hands of police in Falcon Heights, Minnesota, in 2016, with florals and scenes of herself in the gardens. Much like Wynter's tracing of our dehumanization, Gary's masterful edit foregrounds the significance of that dehumanization by laying bare the ongoing violence contributing to the consistent precarity of



Ja'Tovia Gary, *Giverny I (NEGRESSE IMPERIALE)* (still), 2017
 film, single-channel video, stereo sound, HD and SD video footage, 6 minutes, looped,
 color/black & white 1920 x 1080, 16:9 aspect ratio dimensions variable © Ja'Tovia Gary.
 Courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery, New York

Black life.²¹ Gary denies us the spectacularization of Black death and instead leaves the viewer to imagine these abominable events as represented through sound. This unsettling of the narrative intertwined with soundbites from political activist Fred Hampton demands that we acknowledge the ways in which the placement of Black people at the bottommost point of class position aptly shapes the contours of violence directed toward us.

Continuing through anguish and lamentation is the short film *Living in the Wake of the Lust for Sugar*, 2023 by British artist and activist, Elsa James. Commissioned by Museum of London, James' work responds to institutional narratives of heritage and identity within the museum's London, Sugar & Slavery Gallery that "documents the social, cultural and economic impact" of Britain's sugar trade with the Caribbean. It is in this place that James assumes

²¹ Eyder Peralta, "Philando Castile's Girlfriend Speaks out: 'I Need Justice; I Need Peace.'" NPR, National Public Radio, Inc., 7 July 2016.

the returned spirits of both "I" and "we," those who were enslaved and those who did not survive "the holding, the Middle Passage, the plantation life or the plantation torture."²²

Considering her proximity to the events of the Middle Passage, the artist begins by informing us that James is her last name, "...a reminder of the cruellest, most brutal, and the darkest time in human history." Channelling the "we," James then asks of the institution, "Who was permitted to tell our story in this setting?" "Who signed it off?" and "Who controls the narrative?" while noting that so much is missing and, in turn, deflected.²³ As the artist moves hypnotically through the space, as if to physically invoke ancestral presences, we hear her delivery of the haunting account of Mary Prince, the first enslaved Black woman to publish an autobiography of her experiences under British colonialism.



Elsa James, *Living in the Wake of the Lust for Sugar*, 2023, 4K video with stereo sound, 07.53 minutes, Courtesy Museum of London Docklands

²² Elsa James, and Mary Prince, "Narration for 'Living in the Wake of the Lust for Sugar,'" Museum of London, 1 Sept. 2023.

²³ Ibid.

Who controls the narrative?

Who controls the narrative?

Elsa James, *Living in the Wake of the Lust for Sugar*, 2023, 4K video with stereo sound, 07.53 minutes, Courtesy Museum of London Docklands

Living in the Wake of the Lust for Sugar not only lays a foundation for understanding the necessity of Moten's challenge to a rethinking of the hold in all of its violence and possibility, it also allows for the drawing of geographical and narrative parallels of colonialism and the sugar trade to Canada. Just as Museum of London sits on a dock constructed by merchant, slave trader and ship owner Robert Milligan, our Redpath Sugar Museum sits in pride of place on Queens Quay as constructed by Scottish businessman John Redpath.^{24, 25} Both Milligan and Redpath were instrumental in bolstering their local economies through infrastructure built to enhance the profits of the transatlantic slave trade. And while the institutional narrative of the Redpath Sugar Museum casts John Redpath as "...a man of integrity, with a prodigious work ethic and a keen business sense,"²⁶ it conspicuously omits the fact that even as slavery was abolished in Canada in 1833, Redpath continued to benefit from "the provincial shipping infrastructure that facilitated triangular colonial transoceanic trade for nine years" through his participation in "the exchange of goods for slave workers and slave-produced commodities."²⁷

This first theorization of Moten's moment in the hold could leave one feeling that all is lost and that Blackness as nothingness is all that will remain. But, we are reminded by the author that perhaps there is more than Patterson and Fanon's pessimistic views of Black life. As both Gary and James' works illustrate, even in our deepest grief and vulnerability, there is an unfathomable strength and power.

²⁴ Ibid.

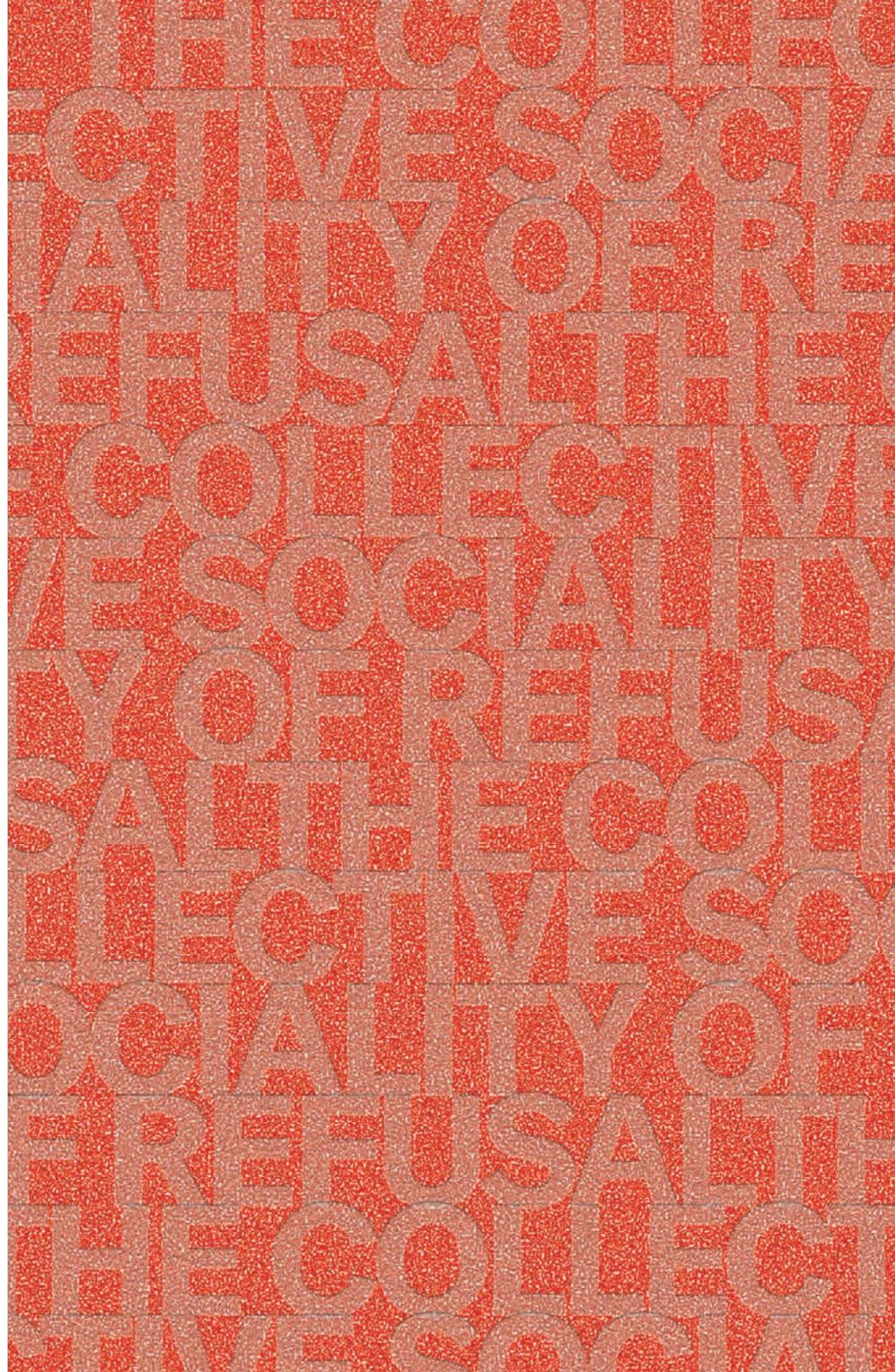
²⁵ A short history. "A Short History of Redpath Sugar." Redpath Sugar, ASR Group, 13 Nov. 2012.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Zhang, Michael, "The Life of John Redpath: A Neglected Legacy and its Rediscovery through Print Materials," pp. 25-35, *Behind the Roddick Gates Repath Museum Research Journal Volume III*, Students' Society of McGill University, 2014.

Though Moten, understandably, struggles with the stark realities of the wake, he asserts “that black life—which is as surely to say life as black thought is to say thought —is irreducibly social...”²⁸ This glimpse of hope foregrounds the next step in our journey toward a collective response not foreseen and with the power to shift Black thought for generations to come.

²⁸ Moten, p. 739.





The postulation of a kinship in the hold that may enact refusal grounds the next phase of our voyage and begs the question of what it means to resist. Is it correct to assume that resistance on the part of the dehumanized is always violence, or is it a stance more complex?²⁹ In Moten's examination of the hold, he contemplates that Fanon's categorization of the Black body as wretched is a positioning shared by the oppressor who dehumanizes and the oppressed, who, over time, internalize this dehumanization.³⁰

Though this positioning is one Moten feels we, as Black people, "cannot have and ought not to want,"³¹ he concedes that this notion is within the logic of the "real world."³² In response, the author offers us what he terms as a "fictive construction"³³ of the hold, this being the enactment of "no standpoint."³⁴

²⁹ Referencing two studies done in 2019 and 2020 which found that non-violent protest or resistance on the part of minority ethnic groups was perceived as more violent than that of dominant/white protestors in the same situations. These findings led authors Devorah Manekin and Tamar Mitts to conclude that due to the prevalent negative stereotypes associating minority ethnic groups with violence, such groups are perceived as more violent even when resisting non-violently. See Devorah Manekin, and Tamar Mitts, "Effective for Whom? Ethnic Identity and Nonviolent Resistance," *American Political Science Review*. 2022;116(1):161-180.

³⁰ Through an experience of overt racism, Fanon struggles to reconcile the version of himself that he knows to be true and that of the white gaze which reduces him to stereotypes of Blackness. Fanon utilizes the writings of Jean-Paul Sartre to make a case for the internalization of this reduction and the ensuing self-loathing stating, "A feeling of inferiority? No, a feeling of not existing. Sin is black as virtue is white. All those white men, fingering their guns, can't be wrong. I am guilty. I don't know what of, but I know I'm a wretch." See Franz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, Vol First Edition, New Edition, Grove Press, 2008.

³¹ Moten, p. 738.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

Here, Moten delves deeply into the designation of Blackness as nothingness by paying the "most painstaking and painful attention to our damnation."³⁵ This includes his consideration of whether Blackness can or should be defined as a pathogen, which the author hopes it is, but only insofar as Blackness "bears or is the potential to end the world."³⁶ Moten's pathogenic attention to Blackness extends to Fanon's desire to perform a "complete lysis" of his own dehumanized and "morbid body"³⁷ and Frank B. Wilderson's assertion of himself and, by extension, a lover as "nothing"³⁸ in reflecting on their respective Blackness. In this exploration of Black nothingness, it is Wilderson's self-imposed subjugation that prompts Moten to state woefully that "one is all but overwhelmed by the need for a kind of affirmative negation."³⁹ Rather than give in to despair, at this moment, the author asks us to think expansively and go beyond ideas of refusal in the hold to a place of neutrality. In this affirming imagining of the hold we find a Black people who sit, unbothered by their presumed wretchedness, and encounter their desire for no standpoint at all.

As those relegated to the space of nothingness, Black people, in this postulation, stand outside of political and capitalist aspirations as well as any desires to capitulate to systems of oppression. If we return to Jayna Brown's description of a people "untethered from the hope of rights, recognition or redress,"⁴⁰ our collective impartiality becomes an irrevocably social form of liberation as

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Moten, p. 739.

³⁷ In Franz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*, he states that two facts are true, the white man considers himself superior to the Black man and the Black man wants to prove his equality to the white man. Fanon sees this wanting as a problem that must be eliminated from the Black body. See Fanon, p.12.

³⁸ Moten, p. 741.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Brown, p. 2.

prompted by Édouard Glissant's call for opacity and Roland Barthes' descriptive of an irreducible neutrality.⁴¹⁻⁴² Therefore, one could reasonably argue that this conjectural place of no standpoint is where resistance may take any form as the dehumanized defiantly deny the dominant the right to forcibly assimilate them.

Historically, as scholar Carol Anderson notes, there has always been a white supremacist narrative of a Black people unable or unwilling to care for themselves. And for this reason, the Black body must be tended to, even if that tending enforces violence. But, as Anderson reminds us, this narrative is a falsity as Black people have always resisted from the moment of their enslavement to the present.⁴³ From the anticolonial movements on the African continent⁴⁴ to the slave rebellions in the West Indies⁴⁵ to the marches,

⁴¹⁻⁴² Here, neutrality is thought of from the perspectives of Glissant's call for the dehumanized to have the right to an opacity which cannot be reduced in response to demands from the dominant for assimilation and transparency as a means of ordering and judging them. Glissant's sentiment is also expressed in Roland's Barthes definition of the Neutral state in which he says: "...the first Neutral, announced subject of the course, is the difference that separates the will-to-live from the will-to-possess: the will-to-live being then recognized as what transcends the will-to-possess...The Neutral is this irreducible No: a No so to speak suspended in front of the hardenings of both faith and certitude and incorruptible by either one." Both readings of neutrality point to not only forms of resistance but the importance of neutrality as a resistive act. See Édouard Glissant, "For Opacity," *Poetics of Relation*, by Glissant Édouard and Betsy Wing, University of Michigan Press, 2021, pp. 189-194. and Roland Barthes, *The Neutral*, Columbia University Press, 22 Feb. 2017.

⁴³ Carol Anderson, *White Rage: The Unspoken Truth of Our Racial Divide*, Bloomsbury Publishing USA, 2017.

⁴⁴ Referencing one of many anticolonial movements, the 1928 Aba Women's War outlined in greater detail in this paper with regard to artist and filmmaker Onyeka Igwe's work with the Colonial Film Unit archive. See Embodiment for citation.

⁴⁵ In 1760, one of the most significant insurgencies on the part of the enslaved took place. Known as Tacky's Rebellion, the battle saw 150 enslaved people attack the fort at Port Maria in the parish of Saint Mary. Though the uprising was unsuccessful, its magnitude shocked white residents who believed Tacky had enlisted obeah men to cast protective spells that immunized fighters from their attackers. Unable to comprehend the spiritual practices of the black population, frightened whites likened them to the European concepts of witchcraft and the Christian doctrines of evil. See Vincent Brown, *Tacky's Revolt: The Story of an Atlantic Slave War*, Cambridge, MA and London, England: Harvard University Press, 2019.

books, poems and songs for Civil Rights⁴⁶ to the building of Black communities and economies⁴⁷ and the ongoing protests in response to police brutality.⁴⁸

Anderson argues that Black people have always found community through their collective refusal to accept only that which has been given. Further, while the distracted focus of Black resistance remains stubbornly on Black rage or the fire we supposedly create, there is little attention to the kindling or the log of systemic discrimination and white supremacy which set our activism in motion. As Anderson observes:

The trigger for white rage, inevitably, is Black advancement. It is not the mere presence of Black people that is the problem; rather, it is Blackness with ambition, with drive, with purpose, with aspirations, and with demands for full

⁴⁶ Drawing attention to Audre Lorde's *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*, in which Lorde, expands on racism, sexism, ageism, classicism and homophobia- highlighting difference as a means of social change. From this collection comes Lorde's wise words, "For the master's tool will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change." See Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*, Trumansburg, 1984.

⁴⁷ Here, I provide the example of Cedric Robinson's *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*, with attention to chapter four in which he outlines that "the objective requirements for Europe's industrial development were met by the physical and mental exploitation of Asian, African and native American peoples." Robinson traces the conditions for this exploitation through the feudal systems of Europe occurring prior to the transatlantic slave trade and their impact on the forced colonisation of *Other-ed* peoples globally, including the categorization of the African as "property" and the willful denial of any prior histories of colonized peoples for economic gain. See Cedric J. Robinson, "The Roots of Black Radicalism," *Black Marxism*, The University of North Carolina Press, 2020.

⁴⁸ Here I reference Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor's, *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation* in which Taylor outlines the sociopolitical circumstances resulting in the ongoing systemic oppression of Black people, including policies of broken window policing, school to prison pipelines and the use of redlining to prevent the accumulation of generational wealth for Black families. See Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation*, Haymarket Books, 2016.

and equal citizenship. It is Blackness that refuses to accept subjugation, to give up.⁴⁹

Considering the possibility of a Black sociality in the hold, we begin our turn away from colonial narratives of the reduced Black subject to reflect on the many forms of resistance undertaken in response to our consistent dehumanization. It is here that we visually set the stage with Michaëlle Sergile’s installation consisting of two pieces. The first, *Untitled (Gestures)*, 2020-2023 is a looped video, played on a striking vintage television, of James Baldwin engaged in a tense 1969 discussion with author and philosopher Paul Weiss on the Dick Cavett Show. By purposefully spotlighting Baldwin’s gesticulations, Sergile compels us to focus on the writer’s defiant responses to dehumanizing attempts to dismiss legitimate and systemic threats to Black life.



Michaëlle Sergile, *Untitled (Gestures)*, 2020-2023. Video, looped. Photo credit Michaëlle Sergile.



Michaëlle Sergile, *Untitled (not the paranoia of my own mind, but a real social danger)*, 2024. Jacquard Weaving, cotton threads, wood, dimensions (54 x 56 x 2). Photo credit Michaëlle Sergile.

The artist’s corresponding piece, *Untitled (not the paranoia of my own mind, but a real social danger)*, 2024 is a combination of photography and single weft jacquard weave on a wooden frame, capturing the repetition of a still image from the video of Baldwin mid-gesture. For Sergile, notions of what it means to be a leader are connected to language as informed by the body and as such, that language becomes much like a fabric of the flesh. What is of note in Sergile’s linking of language to the body is that in so doing, we might also acknowledge the potential for language to cause that body’s harm. By Sergile’s drawing of our attention to Baldwin’s postures, sighs, silences and responses, we not only focus on the

⁴⁹ Anderson, 2017.

author's lived experiences, we bear witness to his ability to resist patronization and dismissal while maintaining composure and grace under repeated verbal attacks.

The work of Elsa James returns in this postulation, expanding on our journey of resistance. In *Goat Curry & Rap*, 2010, James responds to an article written by right-wing provocateur and journalist Rod Liddle in *The Spectator*, a British weekly focused on politics, culture and current affairs. Liddle attributed "the overwhelming majority" of street, gun, knife and sexual violence to young men from London's Afro-Caribbean community and finished off his damning missive by saying, "...in return, we have rap music and goat curry and a far more vibrant and diverse understanding of cultures, which were once alien to us. For which, many thanks."⁵⁰ The journalist's incendiary linking of Black men to violent crime and Blackness to a form of alien-ness is a common tool of mass media which employs stereotyping to dehumanize racialized populations.⁵¹⁻⁵²

James, centering Blackness by turning the camera on herself, decisively humanizes these demeaning tropes that some viewers may share. Sitting calmly at a dining table the artist tucks into a plate of curry goat accompanied only by the soundtrack of grime music, a genre of rap that plays on stereotypes in a satirical

⁵⁰ Liddle was later censured by the Press Complaints Commission due to insufficient evidence to support his claims. See John Plunkett, "Rod Liddle Censured by the PCC." *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media, 29 Mar. 2010.

⁵¹⁻⁵² Here I reference the representation of Black people in media, in particular the use of stereotypical tropes that deem Black people as lazy, violent, overly sexualized and ignorant leading to misrepresentative views of Blackness on a large scale. This misrepresentative view comes partially from media such as William Seller's Colonial Film Unit, which employed tactics of omission and division in the making of films in West Africa. Seller's ethnographic and racist observations of African audiences, which he deemed "primitive" and "illiterate" served a colonial and political agenda of re-education and control under the guise of modernization. See Ingrid Jones, "The Way We See: A Comparison of Gaze in the Work of Colonial Film in West Africa," 2024. and Herman Gray, "Politics of Representation in Network Television." *Watching Race: Television and the Struggle for Blackness*, by Herman Gray, University of Minnesota Press, 2005, pp. 70-90.

manner. James, whose works address misrepresentations of women and the Afro-Caribbean community, delivers this commanding on-camera performance with a direct, unflinching stare.



Elsa James, *Goat Curry & Rap*, 2010
Film performance still. Courtesy of the artist.

THE SURRE- ALISTIC THROES OF ECSTA- SY



As we contemplate legacies of Black defiance, it is only fitting to reflect on the presence of a tenacity to Black resistance that cannot easily be dismissed.⁵³ In *A Willfulness Archive*, author Sara Ahmed describes such willfulness as “the failure to comply with those whose authority is given,”⁵⁴ warning that the price of willfulness is steep as it compromises the capacity of its subject to survive and is often punishable by death. And yet, in a turn to the affective and mystical, willfulness lives on after death, leaving a bodily impression. As Ahmed outlines,

When willfulness is an attribution, a way of finding fault, then willfulness is also the experience of an attribution. Willfulness can be deposited in our bodies. And when willfulness is deposited in our bodies, our bodies become part of a willfulness archive.⁵⁵

In this third postulation of Moten’s hold, *The Surrealistic Throes of Ecstasy*, we explore this tenacity through the transcendental nature of a willful Blackness as we journey toward humanity and liberation. This space acknowledges that though there continue to be many dehumanizing attempts to thwart Black progression, it persists. And, just as grief and mourning in the wake can be transmitted from

⁵³ Referencing Elizabeth Hinton’s work, which corrects the assumption that large-scale Black resistance only began with the 2020 murder of George Floyd at the hands of police by not only tracing forms of resistance in the past, but also the conditions which predicated them. See Elizabeth Kai Hinton, *America on Fire: The Untold History of Police Violence and Black Rebellion since the 1960s*. First edition., Liveright Publishing Corporation, a division of W. W. Norton & Company, 2021.

⁵⁴ See Sara Ahmed, “Introduction: A Willfulness Archive.” p.1, *Willfull Subjects*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014.

⁵⁵ Ahmed, p. 19.

generation to generation, so too can an undefinable Black determination, power and joy. In Moten's hold, he suggests that this is a space of celebration "even in the face of the brutally imposed difficulties of Black life."⁵⁶ But this celebratory mood is far from frivolity as it carries a more profound meaning. As the author outlines,

...the cause for celebration turns out to be the condition of possibility of Black thought, which animates the Black operations that will produce the absolute overturning, the absolute turning of this motherfucker out. Celebration is the essence of Black thought, the animation of Black operations, which are, in the first instance, our undercommon, underground, submarine sociality.⁵⁷

Consequentially, Moten's celebration includes the consideration of Blackness as the disruption of metaphysical time and space. By positioning Blackness as before the "logistic and regulative"⁵⁸ powers that were supposed to have brought the categorization into existence, Moten points us, metaphorically, to a time of African-ness before the hold as he reminds us that Blackness also rests before the study of humanity itself.⁵⁹ Looking further to the mystical, he surmises that in the hold, there is "...the social life of Black things, which passeth (the) understanding."⁶⁰ In this place of "nothingness, that underground, undercommon recess,"⁶¹ Moten tells us, Blackness and imagination consent to being nothing and everything.

In this version of the hold, we collide with the Afro-

⁵⁶ Moten, p. 742.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Moten, p. 739.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Moten, p. 752.

⁶¹ Ibid.

surrealistic philosophies of Black radicalists such as Sun Ra and the Drexciyans. Here, Black liberation turns away from traditional methods of resistance to otherworldly imaginings outside of imposed colonial definitions of the Human to interrogate and revise a traumatic past. For poet and musician Sun Ra, this is an invitation to join the "omniverse" and to become one's "multi-self."⁶² Rather than merely accept the Afro-pessimistic view of Blackness as nothingness, Ra invites us to embrace this designation and enter into the metaphysical realm of "infinite nothingness."⁶³ Ra's use of music, poetry and performance propels his desire for a utopian recalibration of Black radical thinking which conjures a freedom not bound to space and time.

This otherworldly imagining is also witnessed in the music of electronic duo Drexciya, who envision a thriving Black civilization in the depths of the Atlantic Ocean. One whose lineage traces back to the children of pregnant women seen as sick or disruptive and cast overboard by enslavers during the transatlantic slave trade. Never needing to breathe air, they survived after swimming from their mother's wombs to form the foundation of a "subaqueous empire."⁶⁴ By summoning the mystical, as is reflected in the work of Afro-surrealists, Moten's imagining of everything and nothing in the hold which passeth understanding, prompts a reconsideration of Black liberation and resistance as beyond our ability to place within the accepted body politic. This space of a Black undercommons pushes against attempts to limit a dreaming of what our fictive moment in the hold could be.

Dreaming of futures not grounded in dominant narratives of the Human as illuminated by the works of Wynter, Sun Ra and the Drexciyans, this exhibition now turns toward a fantastical and mystical

⁶² Brown, p. 178.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ See Helen Scales, "Drexciya: How Afrofuturism Is Inspiring Calls for an Ocean Memorial to Slavery." *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media, 25 Jan. 2021

notion of Blackness in the hold. Weaving in and through themes of ecstasy and Afro-surrealism are Ja'Tovia Gary and Amir George's films, *An Ecstatic Experience*, 2015 and *Shades of Shadows*, 2015 respectively. Both of which point to celebratory states beyond our imagining in the face of inconceivable grief and terror. In *An Ecstatic Experience*, we bear witness to actress Ruby Dee's captivating performance as Fannie Moore, the daughter of an enslaved woman who recounts the reaction of her mother to a brutal beating at the hands of her enslavers. During this moment of colonial savagery, her mother crosses over to an impossible ecstasy as she envisions the glorious end of her captivity. Gary's incorporation of archival sounds and media interspersed with



Ja'Tovia Gary, *An Ecstatic Experience* (still), 2015 single-channel SD video, digitized 16mm film 6 minutes, looped, color/black & white directed, edited, animated by Ja'Tovia Gary dimensions variable © Ja'Tovia Gary. Courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery, New York

animated glitches and scratches in her montages add a depth and nuance to her presentation of a Black interiority often woefully misrepresented. By blending the archival with the contemporary such as Dee's performance and narratives of Black Liberation Army Member, Assata Shakur, Gary challenges us to question these interconnected historical moments as she invokes states of rapture as a path to reclamation.

In *Shades of Shadows*, curator and filmmaker Amir George presents a mesmerizing odyssey in the spirit of Sun Ra and the Drexycians. Commissioned by the Chicago Film Archives as a collaboration between the artist and psychedelic soul band, The O'Mys, *Shades of Shadows* encompasses a vibrant collage of archival footage, animation and sound from the African diaspora. George, whose body of work is informed by a love of Afro-surrealism, experimentation and techniques such as cinema vérité, recognizes the long history of dismissal regarding Black films and artworks on the part of institutions and notes that for many Black artists, a love of science became a surrealist visual language⁶⁵ to address Black alienation in institutional spaces.⁶⁶ For the filmmaker, there is a belief that discomfort should be an essential component of what the Black community shares with the public, as this unease pushes against attempts to assimilate Blackness to acceptable mainstream representations. This tension is evident in his incorporation of scenes of spiritual mysticism and ritual sacrifice as visual guideposts to liberatory states encouraging those who know to embrace the manifestation of their higher selves.

In pondering the engine that drives Black liberation, Moten's nod to the unexplainable is profound. As Brown observes in *Black Utopias*, what is essential to note is that Afro-surrealist practices and the invoking of ecstasy are more than escapism. They are provocative ways of unsettling established methods of liberatory thinking that move us toward "new forms of relationality, communality, collectivity"

⁶⁵ Here I refer to surrealism in the tradition of poet and former President of Senegal, Leopold Senghor who differentiated between European and African surrealism. For Senghor, European surrealism was seen as relating to the unconscious, the arbitrary and the mental which he deemed "empirical," whereas African surrealism acknowledged the existence of cosmic forces, gods and ancestors which for Senghor, engaged the sensual and "mystical."

⁶⁶ Ingrid Jones, and Amir George. "Notes: Studio Visit with Amir George." 14 Nov. 2023.

and “new paradigms of what we mean by freedom.”⁶⁷ Here, to dream of a future that was never intended is to extend one’s focus beyond emancipation to the rejection of any limitations to life and self.



Amir George, *Shades of Shadows*, 2015
Digital, 06:00 minutes, Images courtesy the artist





Liberation in Four Movements advances by exploring a Black interiority that traces its lineage to a time before the hold, extending its canons through and beyond it. Here we return to the affectual as a means of describing states of the sensual that encompass this lineage. In this exhibition, Embodiment references the work of Gregg and Seigworth who describe the affectual as a state that is not only fleeting and momentary with the visceral power to encourage action, but also as a series of intensities that “pass body to body (human, non-human, part-body and otherwise).” Much like Ahmed’s theory of a willfulness that is left on the skin, for the theorists, affect resonates, circulates and “sometimes sticks to bodies and worlds.”⁶⁸ As Jayna Brown notes of the duo’s definition,

The politics of touch reaches under the skin. As Gregg and Seigworth say, touch brings us “both into and out of . . . the intracellular divulgements of sinew, tissue, and gut economies, and the vaporous evanescences of the incorporeal (events, atmospheres, feeling-tones).” I refer here to flesh rather than bodies — fleshliness as well as embodiment — because to surrender to touch, to our sensations, is to loosen the bounds of individualism, to mingle with other flesh and with the elements.⁶⁹

This fourth and final movement roots itself in the food, song, dance, wisdoms and spiritual practices shared through generations and across continents that defy notions of Black humanity as nothingness by their very existence. Here, we sensorially reconnect the

⁶⁸ See Melissa Gregg, and Gregory J. Seigworth, “An Inventory of the Shimmers,” *The Affect Theory Reader*, Duke University Press, 2010, pp. 1–28.

⁶⁹ Brown, p. 11.

invisible link, intended to be forcibly severed between Africa and “the still-unfolding narrative of captivity, dispossession, and domination that engenders the black subject in the Americas.”⁷⁰ The infinity is therefore unbroken and, as such, the before is the past, which is also the present and the future. Pushing beyond the monolithic, Embodiment allows for multiple states of Black being, including the mourning of death, the enacting of sociality and refusal, and the possession of an undefinable joy while envisioning a fantastical tomorrow.

This movement advocates for the collapsing of time and the disruption of what it means to be human.⁷¹ An idea that Moten touches upon as he revisits Fanon’s estimation of Blackness as wretchedness and reveals he was wrong to assert that Fanon believed Blackness to lack sociality. As Moten explains, while Fanon’s concern was the “impossibility of political life,”⁷² his confirmation of a Black conviviality was always there. Of the latter, the author reflects,

It is as if Fanon is there to remind us that the lunatic, the (revolutionary) lover, and the poet are of imagination all compact. They occupy and are preoccupied with a zone of the alternative, the zone of nonbeing...that asks and requires us to consider whether it is possible to differentiate a place in the sun, a promised land, a home—or merely a place and time—in this world, from the position of the settler.⁷³

⁷⁰ James, Johnson, “Being and Becoming Human: Weheliye’s Radical Emancipation Theory and the Flesh and Body of Black Studies,” *Earlham Historical Journal*, 2017, p. 40.

⁷¹ This refers to Alexander Weheliye’s *Habeas Viscus* and the designations attributed to the word “Man” when defining the human, where “Man” denotes “white,” “hetero-masculine,” “propertied men” who are considered “full humans” in relation to the *Other-ed* who are “not-quite-humans” or “non-humans” as summarized by James Johnson in “Being and Becoming Human: Radical Emancipation Theory and the Flesh and Black Studies.” See Johnson, p. 40.

⁷² Moten, p. 777.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

In this last contemplation of Moten’s moment in the hold, we turn from the assimilative matters of state, as suggested by Fanon’s recognition of political impossibility and the scholarship of Alexander Weheliye. Weheliye submits that humanity is split into genres of sociopolitical status, with “Western, property-owning, white man”⁷⁴ as the paradigm among full humans, not-quite humans and non-humans. Black skin, therefore, falling visibly outside of this aspirational prototype engenders the “repeated processes of domination, violence and attempts by the state and other discourses more generally, to eliminate its political voice.”⁷⁵

For Weheliye, the answer lies not in aspiring or attempting to become part of this structure of domination that perpetuates dehumanization based on the designation of some as nonhuman. For this is nothing to aspire to. Instead, he advises us to seek liberation from within while remembering to extend our hand to those of us who are most vulnerable. He bids us to take strength from “sorrow songs,” “minuscule movements,” “scraps of food,” “shards of hope,” and “uninterrupted dreams of freedom” because though the dominant may try, they “can never exhaust the plenitude of our world.”⁷⁶

In this space of interiority we find researcher and moving image artist Onyeka Igwe’s three-channel film *Sitting on a Man*, 2018, which is part of the trilogy *No Dance, No Palaver*, 2017-2018. The artist’s use of footage from William Sellers’ Colonial Film Unit



Onyeka Igwe, *Sitting on a Man*, 2018, 3 channel HD Video, 06:41 minutes
Image courtesy the artist and MoMA PS1. Photo by Steven Paneccasio

⁷⁴ Weheliye’s suggests that “Man” as the ideal full human can only be “abolished” if we consider the damaging impact of racializing assemblages which take “race as a set of sociopolitical processes that discipline humanity into different genres of social status using Western, property-owning white man as the paradigm.” Using these assemblages Weheliye asks that we “understand race not as biological, but as a conglomerate of political relations that designate a changing system of unequal power structures that delimits which humans can lay claim to full human status and which cannot.” See Johnson, p. 41.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ See Johnson, p. 52.

recontextualizes the trauma of the archive's gaze and narrative through critical proximity as a way of transforming how we perceive the people it contains.

Sitting on a Man references the 1929 Aba Women's War, a response to colonial presences in Nigeria that dubbed the inclusion of women in governance as "a manifestation of chaos and disorder."⁷⁷ The protests, which took the form of sit-ins, singing and dancing, resulted in the abolition of the imposed colonial system of warrant chiefs and the eventual appointment of women to the Native Court System.⁷⁸ For Igwe, the collective nature of the uprising, with Black women organizing to spearhead an anti-colonial protest, was inspiring, but engaging with the archive was, at times, a struggle. During her research, the filmmaker uncovered documents written by Sellers explicitly outlining his demeaning observations on the ways in which Africans consume media.⁷⁹ It was the uncovering of these documents that spurred her desire to take Sellers' cinematic rules and break them.

Igwe's rhythmic edits and altering of the original sound, evidenced by the dancers' syncopation silencing the sounds of the archive, signal to the viewer that something is amiss in Sellers' visuals. Through amplification and reflection, the artist invokes themes of embodiment. This invocation reminds us that these movements and practices, once implemented as tools of resistance, remain in Black communities to this day.

Looking to lineages of the West Indies is Erika DeFreitas' piece, *holding one's breath (no. 2)*, 2024. DeFreitas' interdisciplinary

⁷⁷ See Marc Matera, et al, (2011). "The Women's War of 1929: Gender and Violence in Colonial Nigeria." Basingstoke, United Kingdom: Palgrave Macmillan. pp. ix-x, 19-21, 45-46.

⁷⁸ Judith Van Allen, "Aba Riots or the Igbo Women's War?-Ideology, Stratification and the Invisibility of Women," *Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies* 6.1 (1975).

⁷⁹ See William Sellers, "Films for Primitive Peoples." University of St. Andrews, 1941.

practice emphasizes gesture, process, the body, documentation and paranormal phenomena while mining concepts of loss, post-memory, legacy and objecthood. The artist's row of unbleached cotton "flour sacks" suspend from the ceiling, each embroidered with a personal message such as, "Please remember me to everyone."⁸⁰ The messages, excerpts of letters sent from Guyana, reveal a mother longing for her daughter in the form of "observations of the local climate, the state of family affairs, and questions of her daughter's wellness" alongside reminders of comfort foods such as casareep and pepper jelly from "back home."⁸¹



Erika DeFreitas, *holding one's breath (no. 2)* (November 8, 1973-August 1, 1975), 2013. Installation at the Houston Museum of African American Culture. Photo courtesy of the artist and Christie Contemporary.

For DeFreitas, the work references the personal history of her family who left their homeland as indentured labourers through

⁸⁰ Erika DeFreitas, "Artist Statement: *holding one's breath (No. 2)*," 2024.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

colonization and migration to the Caribbean with the narrative of fragmentation and separation continuing on through her mother's immigration from Guyana to Canada. This fragmentation can still be found years later in discoloured pieces of repurposed flour sacks tucked in drawers of the artist's home. A reminder that the sacks were once gathered, bleached and sundried by her grandmother and used to teach her mother the skilled art of embroidery. DeFreitas' continued use of this skill is a poignant homage to the women of her family line that showcases the embodied knowledge carried forward across time and space.

Donna James' *Maigre Dog*, 1990 completes our visual exploration of embodiment through her tracing of the significance of embedded histories in vernacular language. The artist foregrounds the role of Jamaican oral traditions, which shaped her identity, by exploring proverbs passed down through generations. James' highlighting of storytelling and memory are key to the politics of representation, especially for those whose representation has been dictated by others. In her short film, we are voyeurs in the background of kitchens and living rooms fortunate to eavesdrop on what appear to be intergenerational conversations. As the proverbs are shared, they are reinterpreted and woven into stories as told in the piece by the women's voices we hear off-screen.

The works of Onyeka Igwe, Erika DeFreitas and Donna James sit in dialogue with texts such as René Depestre's "Une conscience en fleur pour autrui," Amos Tutuola's *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*, Alexander Weheliye's *Habeas Viscus*, Aimé Césaire's *Discourse on Colonialism* and Ntozake Shange's *If I Can Cook/You Know God Can*. All of which provide, through poetry, storytelling, recipes and scholarship, deeper context to the conversation of embodied knowledge and the realm of the affectual.



Donna James, *Maigre Dog*, 1990 HD video, 07:50 minutes.
Courtesy Vtape.

AND SO WE MARCH ON

Much like the neverending loop of infinity, this journey continues on, returning to the questions posed at its outset. Those being: What does a reconsideration of Black freedom, humanity and potential re/humaning entail? What do we, as Black people, hold? And, what can be left behind in this emended canon for others, even those who may dehumanize us? By provocatively daring us to think, as Moten states, “with properly critical, and improperly celebratory, clarity” of the hold, the author provides us with a rich foundation for the contemplation of these questions.⁸²

To reconsider Black humanity and freedom, we travelled visually and affectively through four shifting outcomes and hypothetical postulations. First, by facing death through the harsh supremacist glare, inducing Fanon’s triple consciousness⁸³ and the Afro-pessimistic descriptive of Patterson’s “genealogical isolate,”⁸⁴ struggling tirelessly to regain their humanity in the afterlife of slavery. Then, by heeding Glissant⁸⁵ and Barthes’⁸⁶ calls for liberation through steadfast opacity and neutrality, both of which refuse reduction and persistent attempts at assimilation. Here, we paused to reflect on Moten’s finding that rather than foretelling social death, resistance, in its many forms, is inherently social.

⁸² Moten, p. 738.

⁸³ See Frantz Fanon. *Black Skin, White Masks*, p.48.

⁸⁴ Patterson, p. 21.

⁸⁵ Glissant, pp. 189–194.

⁸⁶ Barthes, pp. 189–194.

From our grapple with death and ascent through refusal, we entered the heady realm of the mystical with Ahmed’s acknowledgement of a tenacious and undefinable willfulness that is carried in the archive of the body.⁸⁷ The evoking of rapturous and ecstatic states that surpass attempts at limitation allowed us to dream with Brown⁸⁸ of futures and utopias not intended before entering the embodied and apolitical world of Black interiority and freedom through the lenses of Weheliye⁸⁹ and Fanon.⁹⁰ With the unfolding of time, we witnessed the rise of a Black subject no longer beholden to dominant narratives of what humanity must be, but instead one who finds strength and sustenance from within.

But what can be said of our re/humaning? The path to our reinvention may be found by returning to the scholarship of Wynter, Mignolo and Freire. Their illumination of our dehumanization, encompassing the cycles of violence it perpetuates and the web of enunciations and castes it fosters, might be interpreted as a cautionary message, applicable not only to the oppressor but also to the oppressed. The ways in which we are urged to respond to this warning are different for each scholar. Whereas Mignolo advocates for our delinking from colonial systems of oppression by engaging in epistemic disobedience,⁹¹ Freire implores the oppressed to not only re/humanize themselves, but also their oppressor through acts of generosity as the oppressor, so deeply riddled with hate, cannot extricate themselves from the cycle within which they are embedded.⁹²

⁸⁷ Ahmed, p. 1.

⁸⁸ Brown, p. 11.

⁸⁹ Johnson, pp. 40–41.

⁹⁰ Moten, p. 777.

⁹¹ See Walter D. Mignolo, “Epistemic Disobedience, Independent Thought and Decolonial Freedom,” *Theory, Culture & Society*, vol. 26, no. 7–8, Dec. 2009, pp. 159–181, doi:10.1177/0263276409349275.

⁹² Freire, p. 44.

But Wynter offers us another take, a “re-enchantment” with our humanity in the spirit of Aimé Césaire. Here, the focus is not on the literal materiality of our humanness but on the “ideological hegemones, race principally among them,” that come to define us and are the boundaries and varying realities within which we live.⁹³ The conquests and ensuing rise of overrepresented European Man have led to the erasure of the pre-histories of the racialized and the rooting of a dominant supremacist history in our academia, our media and, by extension, our minds.⁹⁴ Yet, Wynter does not necessarily advocate for the dismissal of this colonial narrative. Instead, the scholar’s re-enchantment advocates for a recognition that “every mode of being human, every form of life that has ever been ever enacted, is a part of us.”⁹⁵ As such, to make way for an acceptance of others and inclusiveness of all, we must come to terms with all of our pasts, both pre-colonial and colonial, unknown and known and erased and imposed. For Wynter, this is a re/humaning that is, as Césaire describes, “made to the measure of the world.”⁹⁶ One in which our ability to see each other as human takes precedence above all else.

And so, in the emended canon of unimaginable Black life, what can we hold and pass on to even those who may dehumanize us? This neverending journey illuminates that our legacy is much more than knowledge. It is an undefinable faith and consciousness passed down from generation to generation that appears and reappears across oceans and seas and throughout time and space. Though the ships may have separated us, home can be found in the food we eat, the stories we tell, the songs we sing and the whispers of our ancestors on the wind. As much as there is grief and lamentation,

⁹³ See David Scott, and Sylvia Wynter. “The Re-Enchantment of Humanism: An Interview with Sylvia Wynter,” *Small Axe* 8, 2000, p. 121.

⁹⁴ David Scott, and Sylvia Wynter. p. 198.

⁹⁵ David Scott, and Sylvia Wynter. p. 197.

⁹⁶ Césaire, p. 73.

there is also a coming together to mourn, a willfulness to persist, a desire to dream and a generosity to share what we have learned, and thus our humanity, with others. Perhaps Moten said it best when he stated,

Is it possible to desire something other than transcendental subjectivity that is called nothing? What if blackness is the name that has been given to the social field and social life of an illicit alternative capacity to desire? Basically, that is precisely what I think blackness is. I want it to be my constant study. I listen for it everywhere.⁹⁷

⁹⁷ Moten, p. 778.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- A short history. "A Short History of Redpath Sugar." Redpath Sugar, ASR Group, 13 Nov. 2012, www.redpathsugar.com/our-history. Accessed 05 Feb. 2024.
- Abdi, Ali. A. (2007). "Oral Societies and Colonial Experiences: Sub-Saharan Africa and the de-facto Power of the Written Word." *International Education*, Vol. 37 Issue (1). Retrieved from: <https://trace.tennessee.edu/internationaleducation/vol37/iss1/3>, pp. 42-59
- Ahmed, Sara. "Introduction: A Willfulness Archive." pp.1-21, *Willfull Subjects*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014.
- Anderson, Carol. *White Rage : The Unspoken Truth of Our Racial Divide*, Bloomsbury Publishing USA, 2017. ProQuest Ebook Central, <https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.myaccess.library.utoronto.ca/lib/utoronto/detail.action?docID=5235648>.
- Barthes, Roland. *The Neutral*, Columbia University Press, 22 Feb. 2017, cup.columbia.edu/book/the-neutral/9780231134040.
- Brown, Vincent. *Tacky's Revolt: The Story of an Atlantic Slave War*, Cambridge, MA and London, England: Harvard University Press, 2019.
- Césaire, Aimé, et al. *Discourse on Colonialism*, Monthly Review Press, 2000.
- Christoff, Kalina. "Dehumanization in organizational settings: some scientific and ethical considerations." *Frontiers in human neuroscience* vol. 8 748. 24 Sep. 2014, doi:10.3389/fnhum.2014.00748
- DeFreitas, Erika. "Artist Statement: *holding one's breath (No. 2)*." Erika DeFreitas, 2024.
- Dictionaries, Oxford. "Human Meaning." Google Search, Google, 2023.
- Fanon Frantz. *The Wretched of the Earth*, Grove Press, 2021, p. 31. EBSCOhost, search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=2632904&site=ehost-live.
- Fanon, Franz. "Chapter Five: The Lived Experience of the Black Man," pp.47-59, *Black Skin, White Masks*, Vol First Edition, New Edition. Grove Press, 2008.
- Freire, Paulo. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, The Continuum International Publishing Group Inc., 2005.
- <https://envs.ucsc.edu/internships/internship-readings/freire-pedagogy-of-the-oppressed.pdf>
- Glissant Édouard. "For Opacity." *Poetics of Relation*, by Glissant Édouard and Betsy Wing, University of Michigan Press, 2021, pp. 189–194.
- Gray, Herman. "Politics of Representation in Network Television." *Watching Race: Television and the Struggle for Blackness*, by Herman Gray, University of Minnesota Press, 2005, pp. 70-90
- Gregg, Melissa, and Gregory J. Seigworth. "An Inventory of the Shimmers." *The Affect Theory Reader*, Duke University Press, 2010, pp. 1–28.
- Grossi, É. (2020). New avenues in epigenetic research about race: Online activism around reparations for slavery in the United States. *Social Science Information*, 59(1), 93-116. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0539018419899336>
- Hinton, Elizabeth Kai. *America on Fire : The Untold History of Police Violence and Black Rebellion since the 1960s*. First edition., Liveright Publishing Corporation, a division of W. W. Norton & Company, 2021.
- hooks, bell, and Sut Jhally. "bell hooks—Cultural Criticism & Transformation." Media Education Foundation, 1997. <https://www.mediaed.org/transcripts/Bell-Hooks-Transcript.pdf>, p. 7.
- James, Elsa, and Mary Prince. "Narration for 'Living in the Wake of the Lust for Sugar'." Museum of London, 1 Sept. 2023.
- Johnson, James. "Being and Becoming Human: Weheliye's Radical Emancipation Theory and the Flesh and Body of Black Studies." *Earlham Historical Journal*, 2017, pp. 24-66.
- Jones, Ingrid, and Amir George. "Notes: Studio Visit with Amir George." 14 Nov. 2023.
- Jones, Ingrid. "The Way We See: A Comparison of Gaze in the Work of Colonial Film in West Africa," 2024.
- Las Casas Bartolomé de. *A Brief Account of the Destruction of the Indies*. The Project Gutenberg, 2014.
- Lorde, Audre. *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*, Trumansburg, 1984.
- Manekin D, Mitts T. "Effective for Whom? Ethnic Identity and Nonviolent

- Resistance." *American Political Science Review*. 2022;116(1):161-180. doi:10.1017/S0003055421000940
- Matera, Marc; Bastia, Misty; Kingsley Kent, Susan (2011). *The Women's War of 1929: Gender and Violence in Colonial Nigeria*. Basingstoke, United Kingdom: Palgrave Macmillan. pp. ix-x, 19-21, 45-46.
- McMahon, John, et al. "Episode 26: Afro-Pessimism and Black Optimism." *Always Already: A Critical Theory Podcast*, 18 Jan. 2018.
Digital transcript of podcast episode.
- Michel, Jean-Claude. "Leopold Sedar Senghor and Surrealism." *The Black Surrealists*, Peter Lang Publishing Inc., New York, New York, 2000, pp. 111-116.
- Mignolo, Walter D. 2015. "Sylvia Wynter: What Does It Mean to Be Human?", pp. 106-123 *Sylvia Wynter: On Being Human as Praxis*, Katherine McKittrick.
- Mignolo, Walter D. "Epistemic Disobedience, Independent Thought and Decolonial Freedom." *Theory, Culture & Society*, vol. 26, no. 7-8, Dec. 2009, pp. 159-181, doi:10.1177/0263276409349275.
- Moten, Fred. "Blackness and Nothingness (Mysticism in the Flesh)." *South Atlantic Quarterly*, vol. 112, no. 4, 2013, pp. 737-780, doi:10.1215/00382876-2345261.
- Patterson, Orlando. *Slavery and Social Death: a Comparative Study*. E-book, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982.
- Peralta, Eyder. "Philando Castile's Girlfriend Speaks out: 'I Need Justice; I Need Peace.'" *NPR*, National Public Radio, Inc., 7 July 2016, www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2016/07/07/485141835/philando-castile-girlfriend-speaks-out-i-need-justice-i-need-peace. Accessed 05 Feb. 2024.
- Plunkett, John. "Rod Liddle Censured by the PCC." *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media, 29 Mar. 2010, www.theguardian.com/media/2010/mar/29/rod-liddle-pcc-spectator.
- Robinson, Cedric J. "The Roots of Black Radicalism." pp. 71-100, *Black Marxism*, by Cedric J. Robinson, The University of North Carolina Press, 2020.
- Scales, Helen. "Drexciya: How Afrofuturism Is Inspiring Calls for an Ocean Memorial to Slavery." *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media, 25 Jan. 2021, www.theguardian.com/environment/2021/jan/25/drexciya-how-afrofuturism-inspired-calls-for-an-ocean-memorial-to-slavery.
- Scott, David, and Sylvia Wynter. "The Re-Enchantment of Humanism: An Interview with Sylvia Wynter." *Small Axe*, vol. 8, Sept. 2000, p. 198.
- Sellers, William. "Films for Primitive Peoples." University of St. Andrews, 1941.
- Sharpe, Christina Elizabeth. *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*. Duke University Press, 2016. p. 15
- Taylor, Keeanga-Yamahatta. *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation*, Haymarket Books, 2016.
- Van Allen, Judith. "Aba Riots or the Igbo Women's War?-Ideology, Stratification and the Invisibility of Women." *Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies* 6.1 (1975).
- Van Allen, Judith. "'Sitting on a Man': Colonialism and the Lost Political Institutions of Igbo Women." *Canadian Journal of African Studies / Revue Canadienne Des Études Africaines*, vol. 6, no. 2, 1972, pp. 165-81. JSTOR, https://doi.org/10.2307/484197. Accessed 22 Dec. 2023.
- Wynter, Sylvia. "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation--An Argument." *CR: The New Centennial Review*, vol. 3 no. 3, 2003, p. 257-337. Project MUSE, https://doi.org/10.1353/ncr.2004.0015.
- Zhang, Michael. "The Life of John Redpath: A Neglected Legacy and its Rediscovery through Print Materials", pp. 25-35 *Behind the Roddick Gates Redpath Museum Research Journal* Volume III. Students' Society of McGill University, 2014.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book is dedicated to my ancestors, who are long gone yet always guide me, and to my family, who are still present. Their wisdom, love, and perseverance are a constant source of strength and inspiration. I extend my heartfelt gratitude to Dr. Zachary Blas and Prof. Dr. Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung, whose generous advisory and support on this project were invaluable beyond measure. Thank you both for the time and care you devoted to my work. To Director Gareth Long, Jean-Paul Kelly, Dr. SA Smythe, Sarah Robayo Sheridan and Melanie Gilligan, thank you for your thoughtful advice and feedback throughout this process. To my brilliant MVS cohort, thank you all for your camaraderie. And to Barbara Fischer and the Art Museum team, thank you for your work in bringing this exhibition together. I also thank Mel Gallardo and the team at Moveable Inc. for their support of this print publication.

To Erika DeFreitas, Ja'Tovia Gary, Amir George, Onyeka Igwe, Donna James, Elsa James and Michaëlle Sergile, what an honour it has been to explore, research, and exhibit your work. Thank you all for the insightful conversations and moments shared that gave this exhibition its wings.

LIBERATION IN FOUR MOVEMENTS

is presented with generous support from:

Art
Museum



HartHouse



D
AN
IELS



CINEMA
STUDIES
INSTITUTE

galdsu



SEED9

Essay © 2024 Ingrid Jones
Designed by Ingrid Jones
Printed by Moveable Inc.