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Editorial

The illogic of exclusion and exception is seductive. Perhaps we will all know ourselves better when we advertise our own place in the world by taking sides with regimes that masquerade as fixed identities and project illusory strength while actually being irreparably fragmented from within, just like we all are. The oppressed, on the other hand, know that a much larger struggle can only be sustained by distinguishing faithful from false witnesses among their own ranks as well as the enemy's. True identity is forged by how we choose to bear witness, by what endures and grows in meaning as it is transmitted.

Last month, the image of paragliders escaping the world's largest open-air prison soon turned to horror when news spread of Hamas's massacre and their kidnapping of hostages. Within days, in Gaza, entire families spanning generations were being wiped from the civil registry by Israel's military, to a point where no next of kin remain to identify the dead, let alone mourn them—a fate deemed merciful by some survivors, whose own grief is drowned out by the unrelenting scale of carnage. Meanwhile, everywhere, something else is being drowned out. That is the ability to discern that the story of two peoples or two identities at war serves to mask the desperate projections of power needed to captivate and unify fragmented populations, as a distraction from that power's own layers of internal ruin.

The government in Israel today is well-known to be the most right-wing in its history, openly advancing a modern ethno-state. The regime is so divisive that a record number of Israelis have emigrated abroad, all too aware that their increasingly identitarian citizenship requires significant military force to renew legitimacy through constant war. Feeding off this symbiotically are opportunistic paramilitaries laying claim to the Palestinian struggle for liberation, and governments of various spineless states who court proxies in an all-too-effective strategy to render liberation, let alone existence, impossible.

Indeed, the only inclusive prospect of identitarian warfare seems to be a war that envelops everyone, of all against all. There will be no heroes in this, but we can at least protect ourselves and whomever else we can from the monstrous lies of identity that our rage and grief would lead us to seek comfort in. The weaponization and provincialization of something as complex and uncontrollable as identity is heretical to our very formation as historical beings, to the contradictions that constitute our inherited and lived identities, and which only become empty, feral, racist, and self-annihilating when purified.

In the 140th issue of *e-flux journal*, Thotti writes that the eternal recurrence of language, myth, and image traps human experience in a cycle of sameness and alienation. The essay begins with chalk on a blackboard. A chasm between the chalk's elemental origins and the

(Portuguese) grammar it writes reveals how language can erase agency from action and make the subject disappear. A rhythmic refrain, "Who pierced the eyes of Assum Preto?," asks who blinded the blackbird from Brazilian folklore to make it sing a more moving song. History and myth intertwine in a perpetual dance, but Thotti shows a way out. Seeing time and existence through the eyes of a "*bicho*," or "beast," could transcend the limits of language. Such vision is of mortal necessity. To be a *bicho* is to be "open to time as prescribed by spatial coexistence with the whole of the cosmos."

Joan Kee's conversation with Serubiri Moses illuminates the global relevance of reading the history of Afro Asia from a geometric perspective. Indeed, the twentieth century witnessed significant African and Asian fellowship in art and postcolonial politics. Today, close readings of concrete artworks can offer a perspective that transcends boundaries and regional classifications in global art history. Kee and Moses discuss the lack of recognition and sustained analysis of Maoism's immense influence on shaping that history. They also explore the concept of friendship as a key element in understanding Afro Asia and its potential to challenge prevailing notions of power and opposition, especially in the realm of art.

Rizvana Bradley's "The Critique of Form" examines the entangled relationship between black critical theory, black artistic practice, and traditional formalism—in particular the skepticism and extractive intent with which formalism has approached black intellectual and artistic forms. Bradley argues that formalism, while useful, should also be a tool for its own deconstruction. Blackness, inherently dissimulative and without ontology, poses an inescapable challenge to form, disrupting and questioning the order of forms. Bradley's approach does not promise redemption or emancipation but lingers with the enduring questions that arise from the entanglement of aesthetics and violence, ultimately demonstrating how blackness is the condition of (im)possibility for form.

Katherine C. M. Adams considers the concept of "mulatoness" in film and visual culture, offering a counterpoint to Frantz Fanon's ideas about the impact of cinematic representation on Black subjectivity. Adams examines Kathleen Collins's 1982 film *Losing Ground*, showing how it takes the trope of the "tragic mulatto"and turns over in ways that challenge racial and social expectations—both within the film's narrative and in its reception. In Adams's analysis, the tragic mulatto figure serves as a structuring formula that exposes the limitations of discourse on racial "hybridity." She suggests that the trope could point toward new modes of understanding Blackness beyond essentialist or ontological categories.

Julia Eilers Smith discusses the life and work of Hija de Perra (HdP), a performer, activist, and writer prominent in the alternative nightlife scene of early-2000s Santiago. In her lifetime, HdP championed LGTBQ+ rights in a Chile transitioning out of dictatorship, and at the same time argued time and again for nuance within queer discourse. HdP's performances and academic engagements alike were transgressive and eccentric, embracing a multi-sexual identity while resisting assimilation into mainstream culture and liberal politics.

Hija de Perra's influential work "Filthy Interpretations" is published here in both English and the original Spanish. In the lecture-turned-essay, HdP critiques the one-size-fits-all approach of queer theory in Latin America and argues for the recognition of culturally specific conceptions of nonnormative identities. Her vision lays out paths for queer theory to fulfill its utopian promise of supporting a complex and multitudinous ecosystem for queer life. Reading HdP today underscores her lasting impact in the Southern Cone and beyond, preserving her uncompromising politics of dissidence.

David Morris charts the history and impact of Artists for Democracy (AFD), formed in London in 1974 by artists and cultural workers from multiple countries to support global decolonization movements. In the first of a two-part essay, Morris details the challenges AFD faced in a declining imperial Britain, highlighting the group's opposition to the nation's racialized policies and the broader context of London as an imperial center. Morris underscores the group's fluid definition of "artist" and artistic activity. The AFD story calls for art and culture to be viewed as collective endeavors, emphasizing the vital importance of group work and interconnectedness.

McKenzie Wark's "Critical (Auto) Theory" is a masterclass in the intersections of labor and capital in the world of book publishing. How can a bad Marxist manage to express herself, sell work, and survive at the same time? Wark calls for a down-to-earth, flesh-and-blood Marxism that engages with the contradictions of living within the commodity form. She also gives a living history of autotextual tactics, highlighting how the intertwining of the author's self and the work can create space for those excluded or marginalized from literary norms.

X

Thotti

Who Pierced the Eyes of Assum Preto?

My eyes (I said then to defend me)
If this beauty I will see kills me,
Rather, eyes, go blind, than I lose myself.

—Gregório de Matos (1636–96)

When chalk writes on the blackboard, no one can see the years of mineral calcite that accumulated in the depths of the sea to make the chalk. There is nothing of the countless plankton that took decades to become the mineral on the ocean floor. When the chalk gives up all of its sedimented time, all the work of its natural demiurges, miners and buyers sculpt their signs and letters in the chalkboard's black rectangle, and nothing of its previous life is tangible. Of all the appalling concepts I saw this chalk carve into the vast and impenetrable blackboard, whether the names of sexual diseases from biology lessons or the acrobatic negative algorithms of algebra, none is as enduring in its ontological aching, its metaphysical wound, than that of Portuguese grammar. For middle school students, amid their slumber of tutelage and childhood panopticons, when it is revealed that language can engender action without any subject, without any agency—that things can be done, undone, changed, and put forward without any engine, merely by flexing the verb to the plural—the world of parents suddenly collapses into a sneak preview of the death of God as an exercise in form.

Make no mistake, Portuguese is far from the only language providing this magic trick of making the subject disappear into the indeterminate (in English, a mere pronoun runs the scam); nonetheless, the manner by which it does so matters. Taken from the mystifying canon of traditional Brazilian songs and Luiz Gonzaga's accordion, the chalk rashly and hastily writes to turn silence into actuality: "They pierced the eyes of Assum Preto." The hands holding the chalk will rush to silence the buzz of voices: *Assum Preto, who? Assum Preto, why? Assum Preto, where?* A bittersweet satisfaction sets in for having piqued interest from the dictatorship of kids, only to incite more havoc with the details of the horror: a blackbird of the Brazilian northeast is captured and then blinded to sing better.

Is it only a song, teacher? Is it true?

The teacher will answer all the questions, even if it causes nightmares and complaints to the school principal the next day for her morbid choice of example. But the question remains: Who is the criminal? Who pierced the eyes of the bird Assum Preto? This, in its howling violence, remains as invisible as the depth of the sea and its plankton, which shall become chalk and question, without background or figure, regardless of what is written on the blackboard.

Mario Cravo Neto, Man with Bird Tears, 1982.

Who pierced the eyes of Assum Preto? How can such violence remain without image and perpetrator? The childhood mystery of this riddle was recently reawakened as an obsession when I saw the image of two climate-change activists from the group Futuro Vegetal pouring Coke over the clear showcase displaying mummies in the Egyptian Museum of Barcelona last year. In that dark liquid consuming the fragile transparency of glass, in the closing aperture between the living and the dead, I could sense the chalk rewriting on the walls of time: Who pierced the eyes of Assum Preto? There were bodies this time, far closer to the opening of darkness and the foundation of blindness than the teacher's hands and her examples. Far closer to the crime scene than her explanation about the miserable men in Brazil's distant northeast who blind the bird to make it sing better before

they sell it. Did they pierce the eyes of Assum Preto as they now pierced the showcase with soda? Would the pharaoh's mummy now rise and sing, blind to how he looked to museum visitors, sending the price of museum tickets skyrocketing with his concert? The protest and its performers, the vandalized mummies' showcase, and all the security in the museum spoke as much about the crime bosses and their intentions as that line on the blackboard or the teacher's stories. No one there had pierced Assum Preto's eyes; no one there had extinguished the window between the living and the dead—calcite was already chalk when the Coke bottle opened, and nothing remained of the original plankton in the soda dripping over the pharaoh who would not sing a single word, but merely whisper: too late. All the images consumed have this mystifying delay.

lateness, I climbed to the third floor of the Grande Galerie de l'Evolution in the Jardin des Plantes in Paris, hoping to find, in a dimly lit room with reconstructions of many extinct animals, the lost vision of Assum Preto. The vision that hides the enigma of being constantly forsaken. But even though there are dioramas with lions, turtles, and marsupials already condemned centuries ago—bones so old that they seem to be made from the stardust of the first Big Bang—the curators and workers of the Galerie de l'Evolution have not yet started exhibiting the extinct sight of abused Third World animals.

The only non-static thing in that room of impossible statues not condemned to the insufficient and superficial mimesis of broken hourglasses is Marie Antoinette's immense horologe. Measuring in its astonishing dimensions all the time in the world, it simultaneously

Calcite Quarry, Michigan. Image: NASA, 2005. License: Public Domain.

The bubbles of soda dissolved in thin air like blinking eyes, and I remembered the maxim from old pulp detective novels that it is necessary to reconstruct the crime from its beginning. One must imagine the crime scene untouched to retrace the wrongdoers' arrival and their footsteps into violence. To find this original scene that can redeem

reminds one that even the accumulation of time has its price in blood and matter. Since the eighteenth century, the chimes of the horologe have marked time—all the trains that left from Paris to Versailles without carrying the woman who gave it name and purpose, all the trains back

that she and history could never take. Now with all the extinct animals, it does not even whimper a lament. Its chimes do not advance with the winds of progress that never enter a room like that—a room without windows. Marie Antoniette's horloge has found, like the replicas of extinct animals glowing in the few lights of their dioramas, a careless standstill, and its measurement of time has become an autonomous aesthetic. Like my childhood question concerning Assum Preto's blindness, the clock merely borrows time from spaces indeterminately. A loan made knowing that soon there may be no words left to ask for anything, as darkness increasingly becomes the glow of disappearance. Chalk fading over a blackboard.

Amid the Galerie de l'Evolution's doomed times, dim lights, and taxidermied animals, the clock can only repeat its chimes. Language has not yet been invented. It is merely a time of stammering. It is often forgotten that along with the changeable and unstable relationship between signified and signifier, Ferdinand de Saussure established the linear nature of language:

> In contrast to visual signifiers (nautical signals, etc.), which can offer simultaneous groupings in several dimensions, auditory signifiers have at their command only the dimension of time. Their elements are presented in succession; they form a chain. This feature becomes readily apparent when they are represented in writing, and the spatial line of graphic marks is substituted for succession in time.[1]

Without time, without a chain of meaning and succession that links one to the outside of the room, to history and language, what remains are mute animal figures, artificial furs, and bones dancing peacefully in a weak form of eternity in a circular space of oblivion.

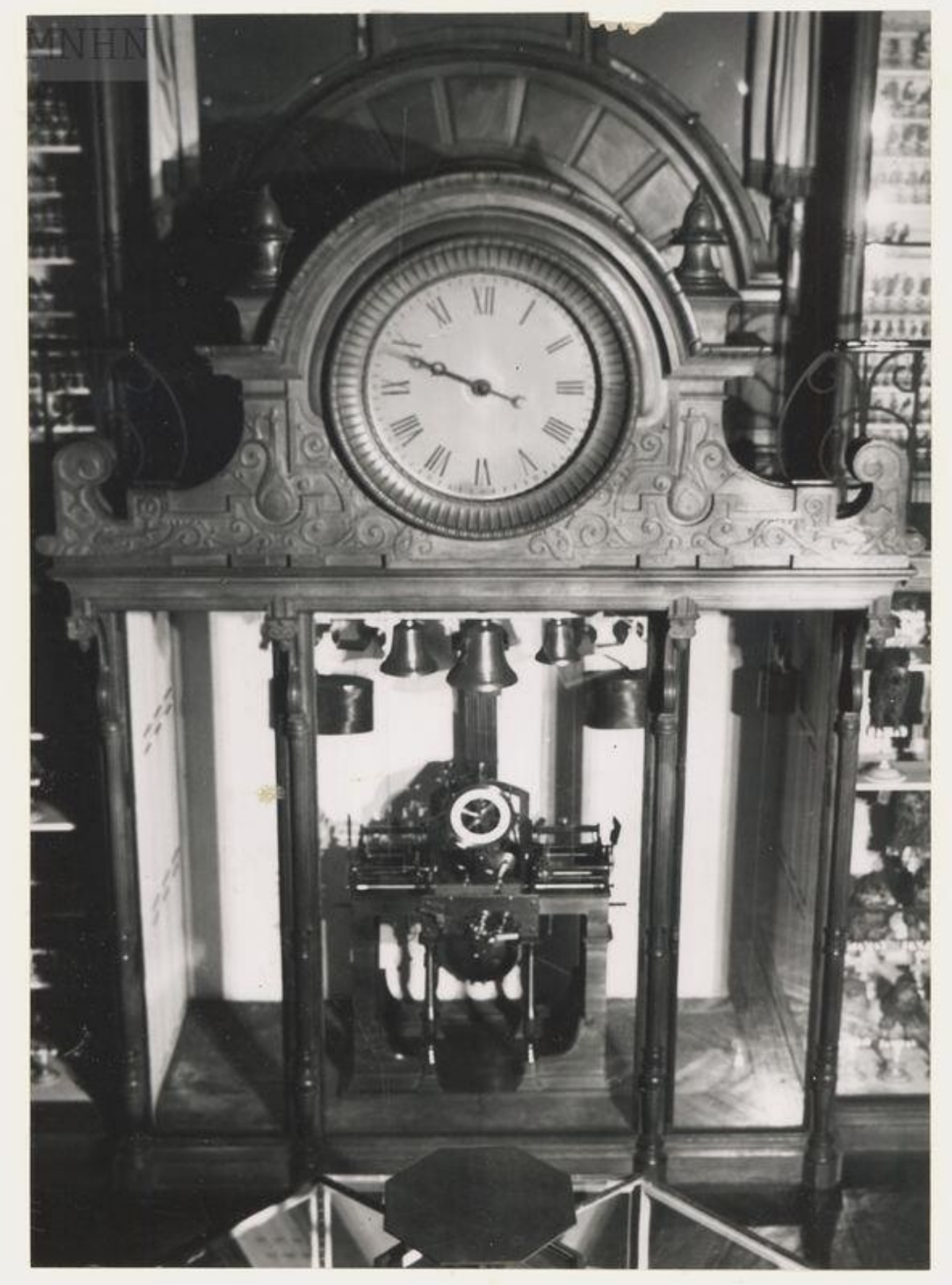
For Alexander Kojève, the end of history is oblivion. He affirmed in a footnote to his *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel* that at the end of history, humans would return to mere animals: "Man remains alive as animal in *harmony* with Nature or given Being. What disappears is Man properly so-called—that is, Action negating the given, and Error, or in general, the Subject *opposed* to the Object."[2] When the dialectics of master and slave reaches its conclusion, when history as a process of self-consciousness reaches its end in revolution, all that remains will be the integration of subject and object amidst a return to the animal in harmonic copulation with the womb of nature. But Kojève stresses that this comes at a price:

> "The *definitive annihilation* of Man *properly so-called*" also means the definitive disappearance of human Discourse (*Logos*) in the strict sense. Animals of the species *Homo sapiens* would react by conditioned reflexes to vocal signals or sign "language," and thus their so-called "discourses" would be like what is supposed to be the "language" of bees. What would disappear, then, is not only Philosophy or the search for discursive Wisdom, but also that Wisdom itself. For in these post-historical animals, there would no longer be any "[discursive] *understanding* of the World and of self."[3]

Looking around the room of artificial animals with its dim lights, its static images jammed together under the breath of annihilation, I wonder if this is the nest that men would build as birds. Like the language of bees that can only articulate the production and consumption of honey in an autophagy of any further flight, this speechless Noah's ark harmonizes with the mercilessness of fading into the radical simultaneity of timeless images without chain or history. In that room, merely a tender solidarity with the passing that foresees no horizon mingles in the waves of carpe diem in every death icon made to live a kidnapped afterlife. It is important to note that the room dedicated to extinct animals is far more abundant in animals close to extinction than those already vanished. In its circularity of extinction as consumed destiny, it cannot propose any different space or time—no negation or heterotopy—but merely a stuttering, as the clock chimes, between the present as myth and the myth as presence.

Using and subverting Saussure's semiology structure, Roland Barthes systematized the myth as that which "makes contingency appear eternal."[4] Contrary to forms of language by which signifier and signified have an arbitrary relation, myth signification is "motivated," according to Barthes: "The signifier is already formed by the signs of the language."[5] If, in Saussure's model, the signifier and signified "existed before forming this third object, which is the sign," in the case of myth, the sign is already presumed beforehand, its context and arbitrary relationship trapped in a compulsory understanding.[6] The myth works by using ready-made signs as signifiers, emptying them of their meanings and treating them as natural and necessary forms to build larger concepts. As Barthes explains, referring to a Latin grammar book and a magazine with the image of an African-French on the cover:

> In a simple system like the language, the signified cannot distort anything at all because the signifier, being empty, arbitrary, offers no resistance to it. But here, everything is different: the signifier has, so to speak, two aspects: one full, which is the meaning (the history of the lion, of the Negro soldier), and one empty, which is the form (*for my name is lion; Negro-French-soldier-saluting-the-tricolour*). What the concept distorts is, of course, what is full, the



Photograph of Marie Antoinette's horloge, 1956. National Museum of Natural History, Paris, France.

> meaning: the lion and the Negro are deprived of their history, changed into gestures. What Latin exemplarity distorts is the naming of the lion, in all its contingency, and what French imperiality obscures is also a primary language, a factual discourse that was telling me about the salute of a Negro in uniform. But this distortion is not an obliteration: the lion and the Negro remain here; the concept needs them; they are half-amputated; they are deprived of memory, not of existence: they are at once stubborn, silently rooted there, and garrulous, a speech wholly at the service of the concept. The concept, literally, deforms but does not abolish the meaning; a word can perfectly render this contradiction: it alienates it.[7]

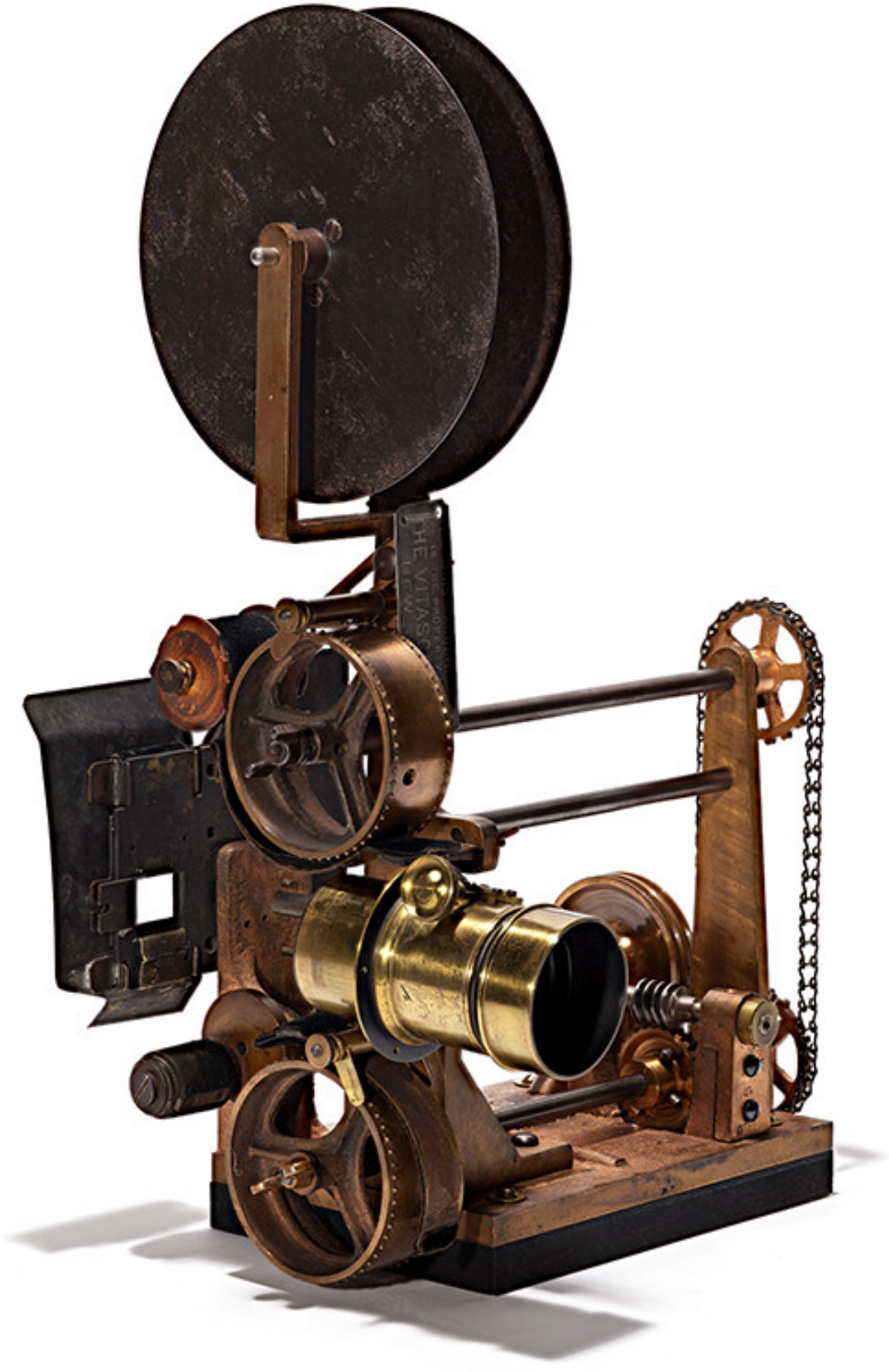
What is central in Barthes's analysis is that the myth ossifies and alienates the relationship between signifier and signified. It turns it into a necessary and nonarbitrary connection that needs to repeat itself exhaustively to prove its truth in a tautological form. This circularity and repetition, this alienation from the beginning of language, is the essence of the totalitarian regime of the image, of the gaze as the source of culture and control, of correspondence crystalized and taken to its final consequence in the contemporary technological image that consolidates signs in a compulsory appearance and context—a mumbling carved into every pupil. Even if images today are flexible and manipulated, and even if passive spectacle is over and we have all become producers of images, we are always reacting against already established image-myths, and suspicion, revolts, and fragmentations only actualize their exhausted bones. But rather than attempt a media theory, here I still write to merely answer the question: Who pierced the eyes of Assum Preto? The myth matters because, as Barthes puts it, the myth is a perpetual alibi:

> The ubiquity of the signifier in myth exactly reproduces the physique of the *alibi* (which is, as one realizes, a spatial term): in the alibi too, there is a place which is full and one which is empty, linked by a relation of negative identity ("I am not where you think I am; I am where you think I am not"). But the ordinary alibi (for the police, for instance) has an end; reality stops the turnstile revolving at a certain point. Myth is a *value*; truth is no guarantee for it; nothing prevents it from being a perpetual alibi: it is enough that its signifier has two sides for it always to have an "elsewhere" at its disposal. The meaning is always there to *present* the form; the form is always there to *outdistance* the meaning. And there never is any contradiction, conflict, or split between the meaning and the form: they are never at the same place.[8]

This ubiquity of form and meaning, where the content and concept drip secretly, eternalizing their contingency as the eyes open and close in the impotence of their circles, brings things to a standstill. It is the end of history, when eternity is delivered not as the end of the march of humanity—its blood, waiting, turmoil, and revolutions, its infinite theological and political eschatology—but in the repetition of the same where humans make their nest. Where one tastes the bittersweet honey of sharing and producing the destiny of extinct artificial animals by reproducing their stasis. Through this same dream of stasis, men in the northeast of Brazil pierce the bird's eyes so it cannot distinguish day and night, so it can sing all the time, since the buyers consume all the time. And all the time becomes very little time as the environmental activist shatters ties with past and future ages to dwell in the little time remaining. There is so little time left in the heart of every myth and its images in which all simultaneity is that of the same, but one cannot yet conclude the investigation; one cannot confirm that it was, in fact, this little or no time left that pierced the eyes of the bird, as its vision holds many layers of ghosts.

Walter Benjamin, while writing and archiving nineteenth-century Paris, understood how the iron clusters of the arcades, a world mediated by its showcases and mythical images, could at its core only hope to produce phantasmagorias—a word born from the shadows and figures found in the spectacles of Etienne-Gaspard Robert in the eighteenth century. The phantasmagoria is a magic lantern on wheels, the Phantoscope's layers of moveable images in candlelit rooms, the gathering of ghosts in all the images of the present. The fantastical form of a relation between commodity-fetishist things is manufactured over tissues of history and tissues of people divested of their matter, yet still encoded in the promise of presence as tongue-tied, torn-apart apparitions. When the machine projects and produces specters, it forgets that it is itself produced by the same reproduced world that remains alive in its dream of transcendence. Phantasmagoria is the reminder that the present, in its enforced myth, in all its sold goods, is also produced.

To Benjamin, the most drastic of all these phantasmagorias, these curses and hauntings, is that of history itself as formulated by the nineteenth-century revolutionary Louis Auguste Blanqui in his 1872 *L'éternité par les astres* (Eternity Through the Stars). Blanqui, held in a cell at Château du Taureau, dared to propose that the universe is made of astral systems and that nature has finite resources to produce the bodies of these astral systems, which leads to their infinite repetition in composing the universe. In the words of Blanqui, "Every human being is thus eternal at every second of his or her existence."[9] The universe infinitely redoubles patterns in the same astral systems that it keeps fabricating indefinitely, shattering any possibility of progress:



Phantoscope/Vitoscope no. 1 35mm Projector. Photo: The Smithsonian National Museum of American History.

> What we call "progress" is confined to each particular world, and vanishes with it. Always and everywhere in the terrestrial arena, the same drama, the same setting, on the same narrow stage—a noisy humanity infatuated with its own grandeur, believing itself to be the universe and living in its prison as though in some immense realm, only to founder at an early date along with its globe, which has borne with deepest disdain the burden of human arrogance. The same monotony, the same immobility, on other heavenly bodies. The universe repeats itself endlessly and paws the ground in place. In infinity, eternity performs—imperturbably—the same routines.[10]

Eternity as repetition formulated by Blanqui is, as Benjamin acknowledges, an anticipation of Nietzsche's eternal recurrence of the same, of Camus's happy Sisyphus, and even of Adolfo Bioy Casares's 1940 novel *The Invention of Morel*, where the dead survive on a desert island in weeklong loops as sentient three-dimensional photographs. Eternity as repetition is the last consequence of progress, where famine and misery become the consolation of a permanent phantasmagoria of duplication. However, in *The Invention of Morel*, the whole repetition apparatus on the island is powered by the energy of the sea. When it stops, the photographs fade away, leaving the island deserted. Sisyphus cannot be happy when the stone he moves each day melts under the intensity of the sun. Zarathustra's flock of sheep are dead, and there may be no snake to bite its own tail. The incapacity to imagine the island-world deserted means repetitively piercing Assum Preto's eyes so its singing can become everlasting. In the grief of imagining the island without oneself, the mummies are splashed with Coke so one cannot see that they might come back, that life could be different without death in the forgotten promises of yesterday. Even dinosaur fossils are unremittingly marshaled as reminders that the myth of the present is fragile and already cursed by meteors. It is under peaceful skies that the frightened animals-turned-men have pierced the stars enclosing them in the repetition of a life that is nothing but a repetition of death, reinvested with earned interest in the future of sameness.

The famous 1963 documentary *Dead Birds* opens with the Dugum Dani myth of the origins of death in the dispute between snakes and birds. Humans can either be immortal like snakes changing their skins, or they can die like birds. Puzzlingly, the latter choice triumphed, and death has since been the final destiny of every human. The rivalry between immortal snakes and mortal birds is not uncommon in mythology, and we might understand human essence siding with the fertility of birds' wings and the possibility of invention and danger evoked by flight. It is not a coincidence that creativity is the primary obsession of this time of repetitive eternity, as it could extend mortal flight, opening the wings a little more in their same serial movement. Nonetheless, it is not always necessary to separate the scales of immortality and the feathers of finite flying. We can imagine Quetzalcóatl, feathered serpent god of the Aztecs and Mayans, which descends into the underworld to craft humans by mixing the bones of the first creatures with its own divine blood. Quetzalcóatl is divine because its flight is towards immortality, the actualization and ecstasy of the entire cosmos through creation. The only repetition is resurrection and not just a resurrection of the same poverty of the world. Through this, Quetzalcóatl's feathers can become like snakeskin. In multiple layers of coexistence between eternities, such a god is no animal; it doesn't speak the language of bees; its nest is the openness of the entire universe; it is a *bicho*.

Bicho is a delightful word shared throughout Latin America. Impossibly translated as "beast," *bicho* defines an animality not enclosed by time, instinct, or language. To be a *bicho* is to be open to time as prescribed by spatial coexistence with the whole of the cosmos. "Each Bicho is an organic entity that fully reveals itself within its inner time of expression."[11] This inner time of expression, as defined by Lygia Clark's famous metal plate sculptures, is a "body to body between two living entities. In fact, a dialogue happens in which the Bicho's answers are properly defined by the beholder's stimulus."[12] The *bicho* 's sight is that of permanent actualization and confluence between all times, encoded and in ruins on the edge of spatial possibilities.

It is necessary to imagine Assum Preto with its eyes pierced as a *bicho* that blindly sings the topos of a different sight, one that could embrace all times from the perspective of these shattered pupils. It is necessary to imagine the museum—showcases splattered with Coke and paintings vandalized—as a *bicho* that, in the failing of heterotopias ("outside of all places," as Foucault defined them),[13] can propose not only a place for all times, but also something like an open wound. Through this wound a different form of eternity—based neither on process nor its counter-image of repetition, neither on the stations of the cross nor consumption—can bleed as the trance of a reencounter between the outside and inside. As a planetarium without distance between cosmic bodies—planets, stars, galaxies, and beings—such a *bicho* would not be a Nietzschean night or bourgeois deterritorialization, but the continuous actualization and production of ecstasy beyond myth and alienation. The blind cry of Assum Preto is a form of post-language, a culture after and before any culture, a communion with extinguished, resurrected, and to-be-invented skies. In "To the Planetarium," the final chapter of Benjamin's *One-Way Street*, he writes that

A page from The Codex Borgia (sixteenth century) depicts Mictlantecuhtli and Quetzalcóatl back to back. License: Public Domain.

nothing distinguishes the ancient from the modem man so much as the former's absorption in a cosmic experience scarcely known to later periods. Its waning is marked by the flowering of astronomy at the beginning of the modern age. Kepler, Copernicus, and Tycho Brahe were certainly not driven by scientific impulses alone. All the same, the exclusive emphasis on an optical connection to the universe, to which astronomy very quickly led, contained a portent of what was to come. The ancients' intercourse with the cosmos had been different: the ecstatic trance. For it is in this experience alone that we gain certain knowledge of what is nearest to us and what is remotest to us, and never of one without the other.[14]

Benjamin's words outline the necessity for a different optics, an augmented conception of the senses and the body, replacing distance with an ecstatic trance capable of bringing forth all that is both present and lost in an eternal movement of absorption and becoming. Our understanding of optics belongs to René Descartes, who announced it to be "imitating the astronomers."[15] The first and most important image in Descartes's treatise on optics is of a the blind man walking with a stick. To Descartes, "One might almost say that they see with their hands, or that their stick is the organ of some sixth sense given to them in place of sight." He uses this comparison to illustrate what light is and how light operates in sight, asking that we "consider the light in bodies we call 'luminous' to be nothing other than a certain movement, or very rapid and lively action, which passes to our eyes through the medium of the air and other transparent bodies, just as the movement or resistance of the bodies encountered by a blind man passes to his hand by means of his stick."[16]

Descartes's comparison is valuable for daring one to see with shut eyes. The Enlightenment conception of light carries this remainder or ruin of the blind man walking with and seeing through his hand and stick, a different prosthesis in the relationship between an *I* and the world. It gives one hope that amid all our poor images, all the death and repetitive blindness of despair in the skies, it may be possible to transform the cry of Assum Preto into a prosthesis of its shattered vision, a trance through which the energy of all space that is always necessarily the accumulation of the fiction of different times may be reflected as surface of coexistence with what is gone. Within this trance, blind birds are plumed serpents. Within this trance, the question and investigation of who pierced the eyes of Assum Preto is the same as confronting and confounding the end and the beginning of a creature, a *bicho*. In all its sleeplessness and horror, in the depths of its quiet alienation and mythic extinction, such a *bicho* can still turn the chalk back not only into plankton or calcite but also into the brightness of dead stars and their lost sight in the blackboard's ever-expanding cosmos.

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Thotti is an artist from Rio de Janeiro, currently based in New York and producing independent films.

1
Ferdinand De Saussure et al., *Course in General Linguistics* (Open Court, 2008), 70.

2
Alexandre Kojève and Raymond Queneau, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel* (Cornell University Press, 1980), 158. All emphasis in original.

3
Kojève and Queneau, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel* , 160.

4
Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (Hill and Wang, 2022), 142.

5
Barthes, *Mythologies*, 115.

6
Barthes, *Mythologies*, 112.

7
Barthes, *Mythologies*, 121. All emphasis in original.

8
Barthes, *Mythologies*, 122.

9
Louis Auguste Blanqui quoted in Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* , trans. Howard Eiland (Belknap Press, 2003). 114.

10
Blanqui quoted in Benjamin, *Arcades Project* , 114.

11
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Joan Kee in conversation with Serubiri Moses

Afro Asia and the Ethics of Friendship

Serubiri Moses: In your latest book, *The Geometries of Afro Asia: Art Beyond Solidarity* (2023), you discuss a 1961 painting by Chinese artists Wu Biduan and Jin Shangyi titled *Chairman Mao Standing with the People of Asia, Africa, and Latin America*. I'm quite interested in your reading of Mao Zedong in such paintings. For example, you point to the aftermath of the Sino-Soviet split when you write that, through Wu and Jin's artwork, "Mao inhabits the center of a new world of nonwhite bodies."[1]

This brings up many questions, starting with one about the realms in which that very world remains unseen. Why, in your view, hasn't there been a sustained reading of Mao Zedong's iconography within the United States, or even in Latin America? Do you think that a study such as yours, which looks predominantly at this 1960s period, is somewhat belated given that you also note the "shadow-like" Asian presence in American art writ large?

Joan Kee: Your question directly points out one of the huge gaps in so-called global histories of art, namely: Why have many iterations of "we" not yet grappled sufficiently with the enormous import of Maoism on an international scale? It is telling, for example, that a stand-alone volume discussing Maoism and twentieth-century art appeared only four years ago.[2] Maoism is an incredibly complex subject, made all the more so by the multitude of contradictions that Mao himself embodied and that Maoist heritages cannot escape. What might be considered as reasonable metrics for quality of life, such as literacy or life expectancy, grew enormously in China during Mao's lifetime. But more people died because of Mao's policies and orders than under Hitler and Stalin combined.

From time to time, Maoism is discussed in art histories of the sixties and in histories of Chinese art. But I think there's an underestimation of Maoist influence, which is one of the reasons why I began my book with a discussion of Wu and Jin's work. It can appear that Maoism vis-à-vis modern and contemporary art registers most strongly through its distortion, namely the *Mao* silk-screen series Andy Warhol produced a decade before his visit to the People's Republic in 1982. But all reproductions of Mao—whether by Warhol or those commissioned by the People's Republic—underline just how distant any viewer was from Mao the person. That said, the magnitude and variety of reproduction also evinces how Maoism is successful in the visual languages it created, and in the power of circulation whose force, once unleashed, cannot be contained. In this way, Maoism is one possibility for charting an art history of the global majority, which for me turns very much on the tension between vulnerability and resilience. There's a case to be made for a global history of art that takes as its flashpoints the popularity of the so-called "peasant" painters of Huxian in Great Britain and France in the mid-1970s, or the pictorial intelligence of Emory Douglas, whose work co-opted elements of Pop

Wu Biduan and Jin Shangyi, Chairman Mao Standing with the People of Asia, Africa, and Latin America, 1961, oil on canvas, 144 × 155 cm. Image courtesy: National Art Museum of China.

while also marshaling the Maoist belief in a world in constant revolution within which violent insurrection was necessary. This is also a story that can be traced through the works of artists like Erró (whose paintings collaged Mao onto a fictional world tour throughout the seventies), or the 1972 pavilion for Documenta 5, realized by Filipino artist/activist David Medalla and Artists' Liberation Front cofounder John Dugger (who visited China that year, the first American artist to do so since 1949).[3]

Some of why Maoism doesn't get talked about is because of what it implies for a liberal democracy. Conventional wisdom in such a political framework treats Maoism as anathema and insists that it denudes individuals of their agency save for their capacity to parrot regime rhetoric. But as Wu and Jin and many other artists directly subject to Mao's rule demonstrate, that is hardly the case. More was at issue than representation. I think of Wu and Jin's work as a quest to find footing, especially as one of its most prominent aspects is the close attention they pay to feet and ground.

I take your point about the sixties. I started the book with the Wu and Jin work as a rejoinder to the Third World model appearing in 1952, and to the Bandung paradigm

Erró, Mao in Piccadilly Circus, 1980, canvas, 100 × 80 cm.

through which the idea of Afro Asia is best known. The latter emerged from the first Asian-African Conference, held in 1955 in Bandung, Indonesia, which brought together three hundred representatives of newly autonomous African and Asian states. Thanks to scholars from Arif Dirlik to Julia Lovell, we know that the worldly scope of Maoism was seeded back in the 1930s.[4] That is, its influence spread with the popularity of books like US journalist Edgar Snow's 1937 *Red Star Over China*, the first account of Mao and his followers published before the establishment of the People's Republic. Read widely in East and Southeast Asian countries seeking to escape Japanese colonial oppression, as well as in Europe and Latin America, Snow's book is perhaps best known for its inclusion of Mao's autobiography, although personally I am most taken with the photographs of intensive listening, including one of Snow attending to what Mao's followers have to say. But the early sixties period has special resonance given how the appeal of Maoism rose in lockstep with decolonization. With specific regard to art, Maoism offers one platform for scaffolding what sovereignty might mean. Here, sovereignty is distinct from the autonomy of art, particularly from modernist conceptions of autonomy deeply entwined with the question of public property—that is, creation founded on the principle that the creator could exclude others from benefiting from his/her/their creation without having to supply a justification.

Maoism offers an intriguing pretext for recalibrating terms to describe art globally.[5] So much of what passes for a global contemporary art reads to me as an offshoot of concession logic. By this I mean how only an extremely circumscribed elite have claimed the right to speak within global contemporary art as they see fit for an entire realm, not unlike how concessions were granted to the US and some European powers via unequal treaties with the Qing Empire signed in the mid-nineteenth century. Mostly established in key trade ports—or other locations across China deemed useful for stabilizing foreign military interests—concessions permitted citizens of a foreign power to live, trade, and evangelize freely within a given area. Concession-specific cultures emerged, intentionally distinct from those outside concession boundaries. The analogy isn't perfect, but I see it in how, for example, only a very limited number of artworks are admitted within the enclaves designated for global contemporary art, while entire bodies of work (media really), such as calligraphy and ink painting, are completely excluded, with limited exceptions. One of my hopes for the book *Geometries of Afro Asia* is that it catalyzes other historicizations. Once invoked, Afro Asia cannot be uninvoked: it has an uncanny power to reshuffle recognized assemblies of events, things, and people and compel serious consideration of assemblies that have always existed but are not properly legitimated.

SM: The second question emerges from your political analysis—and what I tend to guess are your Marxist leanings as an art historian. You choose to view the subjects in the 1961 painting *Chairman Mao Standing with the People of Asia, Africa, and Latin America* as contemporary articulations of real-world economic and political realities. While you discuss Mao's looming presence in the work, implying his (and China's) political and economic influence in the nonwhite world, I wonder if you can also speak to the aspect of diplomacy such a painting represents, which signals towards Bandung?

JK: Diplomacy is an interesting lens through which to think about art and politics. Mao himself did not attend the Asian-African Conference of 1955 but he did send premier Zhou Enlai. Zhou emerged as the big "victor" of the conference, in part because of his ability to telegraph moderate rationality to other delegates, especially to US-aligned delegates like Charles Malik of Lebanon. Indeed, Malik—once a mentor to Edward Said—claimed that the most important political outcome of Bandung was the dramatically improved stature of China.[6] A pressing question then, as now, is what coexistence entails. How does one exist alongside those you regard as opposites, antagonists, or enemies? Or is such coexistence fated to result in violence? And speaking of coexistence, I think there's a lot of possibility in revisiting key terms of the Bandung moment such as sovereignty, self-determination, coexistence, the "unregarded," and cooperation.

SM: I am thinking here, too, of your interest in an artwork by Ed Bereal called *America: A Mercy Killing*. It's a searing multimedia indictment of the ills of a US society afflicted by racist and capitalist violence, masquerading as a model stage for a theater piece, which Bereal assembled between 1966 and 1974.[7] You discuss the artist's inclusion of an image of Mao Zedong in that work. You also make an engaging comparison between Bereal—an African American activist and artist working in Watts, Los Angeles since before the 1965 uprising there—and contemporaries such as Huey Newton. Why has it been so easy to overlook the significant presence of Mao Zedong in this work and others like it?

JK: I think a lot of the discussion of Mao in art history has been so overshadowed by the celebrity of Andy Warhol and his silk-screen series on Mao, and the extent to which the figure of Mao has been lampooned. As a counterexample, I've been thinking quite a bit about the performance conceived by Chinese American artist May Sun, *The Great Wall (or, How Red Is My China)* (1986). During the performance, Sun includes some of the actual footage of Paul Robeson singing "March of the Volunteers" at the World Congress of Partisans for peace in Prague in 1949. Robeson's performance marked the first time this song, composed by Nie Er in 1934 as a rallying cry against Japanese imperialism, was provisionally used as the national anthem of the People's Republic. Mao appears as a talisman in Ed Bereal's work, a miniature poster present among a staggered model photo

Ed Bereal, America: A Mercy Killing, 1966–74, mixed media: wood, plastic, metal, ceramic and paper, 27 1/4 × 55 1/2 × 45 in (69.2 × 140.9 × 114.3 cm), Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum purchase, 1974.29, © 1968 Ed Bereal.

gallery of other epochal figures considered suspect by the US state—from Elijah Muhammad to Daniel Ellsberg to Muhammad Ali. None of these images ward off the evils Bereal illustrates so viscerally elsewhere in his assemblage, but the small portraits left standing and intact confer upon the tableau the vision of a world outside the slaughterhouse of America. If Sun's non-US-centric authority functions as a reset key for tracing a different cultural history that takes Mao seriously, then Ed Bereal's brutal, unsparing, and marvelous tableau signals an end to the America-first rhetoric that makes Sun's counter-American origin story possible. Both works recover transversals buried by the fatally relentless insistence on a very circumscribed and narrow reading of modern and contemporary art that remains unable, or unwilling, to admit the wealth of convergences between Asian and Black thinkers.

One question I think the works of Sun and Bereal ask implicitly is whether Maoism can be repurposed now. Is it like socialism, which has changed enormously from what it was a half-century or a century ago? Does Maoism still have something to teach us, and perhaps more importantly, do we accept that it does? Or is the very notion of an "improved" Maoism unthinkable because of the extent to which capitalism is so deeply flawed?

SM: As I read some of your writing, I began to ask myself whether your analysis in the introduction to *Geometries of Afro Asia* leaned more towards economic rather than cultural Marxism. But then in your essay on the "corroboration-in-arms" between African American artist Melvin Edwards and Japanese American artist Ron Miyashiro, you use the term "fellowship," following economic historian Max Mark.[8] You proceed to tease out the term, even referencing circumstantially unexpected figures like Michel Foucault to address definitions of "friendship" in an art context. Could you clarify what friendship might mean to either an economic or cultural Marxist analysis of an art history of Afro Asia?

JK: As illustrated through countless posters produced from the 1930s to the 1970s idealizing Chinese-African connections, Maoist China instrumentalized "friendship." But we could also reflect on friendship as a mode of permission to choose our kinsfolk. It's not so much about what you were born into but with whom you end up choosing to be reborn. Friendship thus entails obligation,

May Sun, The Great Wall (or, How Red Is My China), performed in 1988 at New Langton Arts, San Francisco, California. Photo by Martin Cox.

especially the duty to consider how your actions affect others. It might even be the basis for a new theory of coexistence, one that allows for disagreement that doesn't necessarily have to result in isolation on the one hand or mutually assured destruction on the other. To wit, friendship creates spaces for disagreements that don't necessarily end in a break or in violence. "The differences between friends cannot but reinforce their friendship" is a quote often attributed to Mao.[9] Friendship entails learning to be liberal with each other without lapsing into libertarianism.

At the same time, I think of the word for "friend" in Korean (*chingu*), where the ideograph for " *chin*" is also used to designate bias and suspect collaboration—as in " *chinilp'a* ," denoting Koreans who collaborated with Japanese colonizers from 1910 to 1945. Refracted through this history, friendship cannot wholly escape becoming imbricated with matters of power and opposition.

SM: Mao Zedong also appears in your references to Robin D. G. Kelley, in particular his essay with Betty Esch, "Black Like Mao."[10] What was the interest in Mao Zedong for the Black Power movement?

JK: This is itself a vast topic deserving of many volumes, but one thing I can say is that the ways in which artists like Emory Douglas engaged Maoist visual culture offer new means of bridging what often appears as a stark divide between histories of art in communist versus capitalist regimes. His cover for an October 1969 issue of *The Black Panther* newspaper, featuring the likeness of North Korean leader Kim Il-Sung, makes the case for contiguity between what reads as Warholian repetition and Maoist replication.

On a somewhat related note, thinking of Afro Asia in connection with the language of Black Power has me thinking more intently about what we can draw from the

Emory Douglas, cover of October 25, 1969 issue of The Black Panther newspaper. Source: marxist.org.

distinctions between sovereignty, self-determination, and another core Black Power term, self-defense. It has us consider sovereignty as quite distinct from autonomy; sovereignty itself is a refusal to surrender one's humanity or claims to that which enable that humanity.

SM: In the essay on Miyashiro and Edwards, you describe a "productive agonism" that is built out of defense or self-defense. Could you explain further how this idea functions in your theoretical development around the "geometries of Afro Asia"?

JK: Initially I thought of titling my book "Afro Asian Bodies." But then I came across a wonderful book chapter lead-authored by the Belizean American mathematician Arlie Petters, which begins with a quote from fellow mathematician David Henderson: "Geometry is to open my mind so that I may see what has always been behind the illusions that time and space construct."[11] I was struck by that line, in part because I had been struggling with the two models of center-versus-periphery and multiple modernities. We can't just think of resistance without qualification but must also ask what various agents—human and nonhuman—cut across, circle, are shaped by and against. These are all operations central to the study of geometry.

Moreover, such operations are indicative of a host of frictions and conflicts. Petters is renowned for his work on gravitational lensing, which refers to when a very large celestial body curves space-time for light so that it appears to bend. It's an apt means through which to think about how our imaginations and worldviews are distorted because of unseen forces we might mistakenly consider as foundational as gravity. Agonism is one way to counteract that distortion. Sometimes it can seem that we (used very broadly here) have lost both the will and ability to disagree in ways that try to at least understand the viewpoints of those very different from ourselves.

I'm reminded of your first question about the relative omission of Maoism from histories of art. Refracted through gravitational lensing, it also sounds like you're asking why Maoism is treated like a self-contained phenomenon when in fact it disrupts the ground on which we calibrate events and agents. The influence of Maoism foregrounds a hyperbolic geometry that brings entities which might initially seem distant, unlikely, or disconnected very close together or even coincident with one another.

SM: I also notice that in your work, Afro Asia is positioned not in abstract terms but rather in concrete artworks and concrete examples. What makes such a reading of the term "Afro Asia" more productive than the larger abstract readings and projections of "worlds" of oppressed peoples and nonaligned economic solidarity?

JK: Maybe the best answer is to paraphrase the legendary playwright Ed Bullins, who says that what is politically expedient is not necessarily coincident with artistic integrity. The reason for emphasizing concrete artworks is that each one demands a close, intense, and durational encounter as well as a commitment to anti-solutionism. To focus on specific works is to detach from the illusion of ready answers. It also emphasizes that the overarching paradigm is not power and oppression, but something rather more complicated, where the viewer is not a dominant or subordinate but someone who is put in the position of constantly having to negotiate the identities of kin, neighbor, and stranger in relation to a given work. In this regard, I also learn from Russian formalism, which flourished before Stalin denounced it as heresy in the 1950s.

The focus on close reading is a degrowth maneuver. While some readers impatient for "content" or "meaning" might want to dismiss this kind of close reading as being too inward looking, it actually refuses the pressures to expand constantly. When we stay with the work, sound it out, and see what it sees, we strike a blow against the indifference that impoverishes thinking.

SM: How does the move away from solidarity reorient our understanding of the term "community"?

JK: One of the reasons I'm drawn to Afro Asia is the potential it has for birthing an infrastructure that can allow us to probe what might be otherwise simply registered and dismissed as mere similitude—one of the crimes for which global-majority artworks are punished by a highly myopic, circumscribed view of modernism. Instead of ending with likeness, why not consider it instead as a clue to an entire galaxy of thinking? Or even collections of galaxies?

By thinking about Afro Asia through its lines, voids, curves, and volumes—its geometries—the idea of Afro Asia becomes very useful for keeping two things separate: virtue on the one hand, and obedience expressed through rule-following on the other. By "rule-following," I mean a programmatic adherence to certain ideological positions and even an appeal to a very select number of citations. I don't mean to claim Afro Asia as being on some intrinsically higher moral plane. Yet its geometries challenge how unquestioning obedience is treated as a virtue, especially in many of the countries it encompasses, particularly the two-thirds of the world that became subject to some form of nondemocratic rule by 1972. Afro Asia asks us to take the question of virtue seriously: to ask what is not only ethical, but what qualifies as morally desirable behavior. For instance, how do we encourage and cultivate a multi-vector humility that has various directions and magnitudes?

SM: Max Mark's economic analysis suggested that the "political loyalty" of African and Latin American countries—for example either to the UK/US or to the Soviet bloc—didn't rest on economic terms alone. Mark

said: "If it is true that economic success or failure is a private matter, then there is no basis for making political loyalty dependent upon economic considerations."[12] This further shows that so-called economic solidarity within the nonalignment bloc may not have produced such political loyalty after all. Your productive use of "Afro Asia" steers us towards "fellowship" and "friendship" rather than economic ties and/or political loyalty.

JK: Perhaps the way to answer this is to think of a key instance of friendship gone wrong: crony capitalism along the lines outlined by the brilliant Filipino scholar, activist, and archivist Ricardo Manapat in his seminal 1979 pamphlet "Some Are Smarter Than Others." Here assembly devolves into collusion at the expense of many, and friendship further reinforces a regime of acute capital accumulation. It's important to remember that Manapat's devastating critique of corruption in the era of Ferdinand Marcos was only made possible because of Manapat's own friendships with farmers and city dwellers, who bore the brunt of crony capitalism's friendship-as-violence. Friendship has its own political import and staying power.

SM: Lastly, reading your work on Edwards and Miyashiro makes me think of the field of Asian American studies, which, as many have pointed out, shares affinities with both African and African American studies. Could you clarify your book's relation to those fields?

JK: I am joyfully indebted to all three fields. As a case in point, I have found it incredibly useful to read works that are most likely to be classified as "Asian" or "Asian American" through the lens of Black African philosophy, such as the work of Paulin Hountondji, who boldly claimed that universalism could not be simply dismissed as a Euro-American phenomenon.[13] Through his writings I also wonder about the potential of a global-majority time overwriting the time of globalization. The latter demands the integration of subsistence economies into the world capitalist market, which then results in what Hountondji calls "underdevelopment." Global-majority time is not measured by the identification of alterity determined by the magnitude of contrast with Euro-American standards, or by nation- or region-specific measures. It is a time that in many respects has always been present and has also not yet started; it predates historical time but also denotes the time that has yet to end, as indexed by the degree of unresolved suffering endured by the majority of the world's people.

Another key thinker for me is the South African anthropologist Archie Mafeje, who rejected the idea that knowledge could be produced through the acquiescence of subjugated peoples. Likewise, the writings of Taiwanese critical theorist Kuan-Hsing Chen have been useful in thinking about the engagement with Asian artistic forms by artists like Faith Ringgold and David Hammons. Chen's celebrated rereading of Takeuchi Yoshimi's 1960 lecture "Asia as Method" provides compelling grounds for thinking about such engagement as an operation of transfer;[14] what Hammons does in his artwork *Afro Asian Eclipse* is to fashion a topology where the energy he gains from having encountered hanging scrolls is transferred into another form.

After *Geometries of Afro Asia*, I'm teaching a seminar on Asian American art shaped by the writings of Mogobe Ramose, one of the world's foremost thinkers on Ubuntu philosophy. The term "ubuntu" has different meanings in the many Bantu languages spoken by a third of the African continent, but its use in philosophy stresses humanity-in-common. Ubuntu philosophy in general has been incredibly helpful in thinking with paintings of the internment of Japanese Americans in World War II alongside photographs of Apartheid's human toll in South Africa. Borrowing from Ramose, the guiding hypothesis of the class is: "I doubt, therefore, Asian American is." Part of this doubt is sustained by what might be called the statelessness of Asian America. I'm thinking again here of Ramose, who critiques "bounded reasoning"; reasoning that considers boundaries as necessary leads to the creation of a state. Afro Asia also throws into relief the cosmopolitanism of Asian America, taking into account both the minoritarian status of Asians within the Americas (about 7 percent of the US population, albeit the fastest-growing demographic) and the fact that Asians constitute about 60 percent of the world's population. Afro Asia continues to be an endlessly generative provocation and wellspring.

X

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Serubiri Moses is a curator and author based in New York City. He currently serves as adjunct faculty in art history at Hunter College, and is a member of the editorial team of *e-flux journal*. He is the author of a poetry book *THE MOON IS READING US A BOOK*(Pântano Books, 2023) and the lead curator of an upcoming mid-career retrospective of Taryn Simon.

1
Joan Kee, *The Geometries of Afro Asia: Art Beyond Solidarity* (University of California Press, 2023), 3.

2
Art, Global Maoism and the Chinese Revolution , ed. Jacobo Galimberti, Noemi de Haro García, and Victoria H. F. Scott (Manchester University Press, 2019).

3
Patrick Flores cited in Saloni Mathur, "Why Exhibition Histories?" *British Art Studies*, no. 13 (September 2019) https://www.britishartstudies.ac.uk/issues/issue-index/issue-13/why-exhibition-histories .

4
Arif Dirlik, "Mao Zedong Thought and the Third World/Global South," *Interventions* 16, no. 2 (2014); Julia Lovell, *Maoism: A Global History* (Knopf, 2019).

5
On the study of "American" art, we add the proviso that using "America" to refer only to the art of the United States replicates US imperialist attitudes stemming from, at least, the Spanish-American War of 1898.

6
Charles Malik, "Call to Action in the Near East," *Foreign Affairs* 34, no. 4 (July 1956) https://charlesmalikinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/Call-to-Action-in-the-NE-yellow.pdf .

7
See Joan Kee, "Collaborators in Arms: The Early Works of Melvin Edwards and Ron Miyashiro," *Oxford Art Journal* 43, no. 1 (2020).

8
Kee, "Collaborators in Arms."

9
Christopher Phillips, *Socrates in Love: Philosophy for a Perfect Heart* (Norton, 2011), 186.

10
Robin D. G. Kelley and Betsy Esch, "Black Like Mao: Red China and Black Revolution," *Souls: Critical Journal of Black Politics & Culture* 1, no. 4 (1999).

11
Arlie O. Petters et al., *Singularity Theory and Gravitational Lensing* (Birkhäuser, 2012), 502.

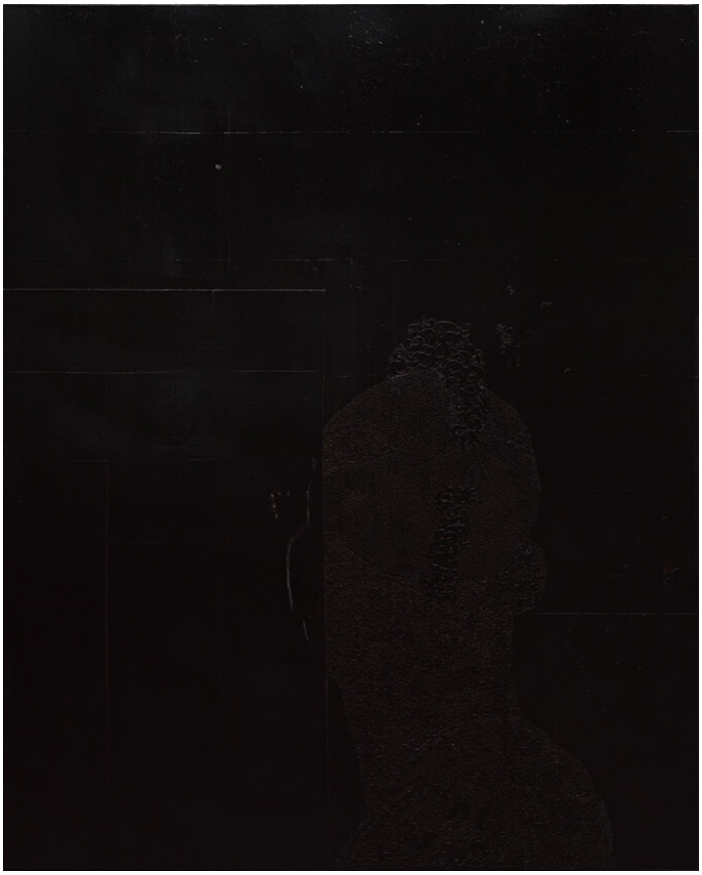
12
Max Mark, "Economic Determinants of the Character of Afro-Asian Nationalism," *American Journal of Economics and Sociology* 20, no. 4 (July 1961).

13
Paulin Hountondji discusses in several places the universal aims and universal value of an African philosophy. See, for example, P. Hountondji, *African Philosophy: Myth or Reality?* (Indiana University Press, 1996).

14
Kuan-Hsing Chen, *Asia as Method: Toward Deimperialization* (Duke University Press, 2010).

Rizvana Bradley

The Critique of Form (excerpted from Anteaesthetics)



Ellen Gallagher, Untitled, 1999. Enamel, rubber, and paper on canvas. Courtesy: Art Institute Chicago. License: CC0.

The unwieldy, internally variegated, and contested traditions that one might nevertheless nominate as black critical theory and black artistic practice, respectively, have had difficult relationships with various traditions of scholarly and aesthetic formalism (though these are, of course, hardly discrete designations). To begin with, the intellectual and artistic forms associated with blackness have typically been regarded by established traditions of formalism with, at best, skepticism. Where the myriad forms associated with blackness have been valorized by preponderant formalisms, it has generally been with extractive intent and far too often at the expense of sustained or nuanced attention to the manner in which these forms prove to be either vestibular to or irreconcilable with the presuppositions of the formalism that imposes itself as hermeneutic authority. For example, Huey Copeland draws our attention to the manner in which Clement Greenberg's claim that "in Africa today we find that the culture of slave-owning tribes is generally much superior to that of the tribes that possess no slaves" rhetorically advances his defense of the true work of art and the social hierarchies upon which he believes it to have been historically predicated, over and against a romance of "folk art."[1] For Copeland, Greenberg's rhetorical maneuver discloses the constitutive relation between the aesthetic formalism that subtends art-historical modernism and the raciality this formalism

both mobilizes and erases. In Copeland's words, Greenberg's passing lines reveal that "racialized barbarity and aesthetic discrimination go together, underlining how dark figures have been mobilized as linchpins of a modern metaphysics that not only demarcate the limits of culture and humanity within Western discourse, but that also trouble the visual, epistemological, and historical categories that structure so-called white civilization."[2] Although Greenberg's statement may now, more than eight decades later, appear a particularly egregious example of the racial fabrication of aesthetic formalisms—or what *Anteaesthetics* would theorize as the anteriority of blackness to the aesthetic and formalization as such—it is, substantively, hardly unique. Little wonder, then, that not a few black artists and critical theorists have regarded various aesthetic formalisms as orders of enclosure.

Where black artists and critics have endeavored to pay deference to reigning traditions of intellectual and aesthetic formalism, even going so far as to offer themselves as the most enthusiastic champions of the very formalisms that hold them at a remove, it has often been at the expense of the development or interpretation of their own intellectual and artistic practices. This pitfall may be regarded as a predictable consequence of a more general tendency on the part of art critics to "confer upon the [black art] work a form that it forcefully disavows … [thereby] attract[ing] considerable attention to the rhetorical work they oblige" black art to do, as Darby English observes.[3] Be that as it may, this is not to suggest that all formalisms can or should be simply dispensed with. As Hortense Spillers avers, formalism can be "preeminently useful" even, or perhaps especially, when it is deployed as an instrument of its own self-destruction.[4] Indeed, Spillers's careful attention to the filigree, concealments, and excrescences of form—not least with respect to her conceptualization of the "hieroglyphics of the flesh" to which I repeatedly return—offers an exemplary model for the kind of ante-formal heuristic *Anteaesthetics* endeavors to develop and extend.[5]

Various hallmarks of modernity—among them, commodity fetishism, the vicissitudinous coupling of deterritorialization and reterritorialization (wherein "all that is solid melts into air"),[6] and the will to epistemic mastery that is one face of the self-possessive subject—have all but ensured the incessant fixation on the problem of form within modern thought. Indeed, Fredric Jameson suggests the conjoined problematic "of content and form… in the long run come[s] to haunt all the corners and closets of the social itself."[7] But what exactly is *form*, and what distinguishes the modes of making and interpretation that lay claim to the title of *formalism*? In *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network*, Caroline Levine gives a capacious definition of form, one which aims to refuse the partitioning of the aesthetic from the social: "'Form' always indicates *an arrangement of elements—an ordering, patterning, or shaping* … Form, for our purposes, will mean all shapes and configurations, all ordering principles, all patterns of repetition and difference."[8] Levine's study is written, at least in part, against the antiformalist tendency that has ostensibly swept literary and cultural studies in recent decades, wherein scholars have become "so concerned with breaking forms apart that we have neglected to analyze the major work that forms do in our world."[9] Levine's concern is echoed across a wide array of fields and, indeed, across political milieus that would appear, at first glance, to operate at a remove from the specialized interests of the academy or the art world. Anna Kornbluh, who affirmatively cites Levine's definition of form in *The Order of Forms: Realism, Formalism, and Social Space*, argues that the "pervasive political lament of form's order," which is equally in evidence in philosophy and art criticism, has become manifest as a naive and reprehensible "anarcho-vitalism," which equates constitution with violence and reflexively "favors fragmentation, unmaking, decomposition."[10] In fact, in Peter Osborne's view, the reaction against formalism is constitutive of contemporary art as an historical designation:

> Contemporary art is a field of generically artistic practices that developed via its Euro–North American heartlands in reaction against both (i) the formal critical norms of medium-specific modernisms and their transformative reproduction and extension of the old, Renaissance "system of the arts," and (ii) the residual cultural authority of all other received aesthetic forms and universals—residual, that is, from the standpoint of the thesis of the tendentially increasing nominalism or individuality of works of art in liberal (now neoliberal) capitalist societies.[11]

Needless to say, both the variegated resistances to form and formalism and the countervailing condemnations of antiformalism across art, scholarship, and politics must be situated in relation to the transgeographic anti-colonial, feminist, queer, and many other rebellions in the latter half of the twentieth century, as well as the various iterations of revanchism that have become ascendant in their wake. A historical genealogy or political diagnosis of these contrapuntal tendencies is beyond the scope of this study. What concerns me is the matter of form—more specifically, the relationships between the gendered reproductions of blackness, the racial regime of aesthetics, and the (im)material extractions, transfers, consumptions, and displacements of form, including that genre of form through which form itself is thought to emerge—the form that is *medium*. Pace Kornbluh, I am not so much concerned with aesthetic forms as "privileged vehicle[s] of mediation" as I am with the manner in which all forms are constituted by the aesthetic, as that which endeavors to suture the metaphysical lacunas and aporias of "iterative discourse and conceptual

logic."[12]

I contend that the relationship of blackness to form poses singular problems for formalism, most immediately because the phenomenological appearance of blackness within the antiblack world is necessarily dissimulative, while the enfleshed existence of blackness is without ontology, relegated by the world to the status of nonbeing. The figure of blackness is therefore not only far from self-evident but, apropos Marriott, always already disfigured and disfiguring. Every form blackness is assigned is thus intrinsically aporetic. However, we will see that the converse is also true: blackness is, or bears, the aporia within and before every form.

My attention to the aporias of form and the forms of aporia within the racial regime of aesthetics finds at least some resonance with Theodor Adorno's interest in "the unresolved antagonisms of reality [that] return in artworks as immanent problems of form."[13] "Pure form is the consequence of perfect death, black death."[14]

At the same time, blackness poses irresolvable problems for form, which no amount of formalist interpretation can fully reconcile. Denise Ferreira da Silva elucidates the problem blackness poses for form by suggesting that, within the modern world, blackness bears the mantle of an ostensibly antiquated, Aristotelian definition of matter as "substance without form," which ultimately disrupts modernity's braiding of formalization and "the Equation of Value."[15] Making recourse to a series of deconstructive (anti-)mathematical operations (which I will not reproduce in detail here), da Silva suggests that blackness is functional to both "the ordered universe of determinacy and the violence and violations it authorizes" and the "*materia prima*—that which has no value because it exists (as ∞) without form"—which decomposes form and poses the thought of an "unbounded sociality … without time and out of space, in the plenum."[16] Warren, however, advocates a "mathematical nihilism," or an embrace of a catastrophe that would dispense even with the critical recuperation of raw materiality, as "both matter and form are caught in antiblack imaginations."[17] For Warren, "the obsolescence of both matter and form," which he calls the catastrophe, "opens a horizon of the unthinkable, where life, death, value, and nonvalue are displaced."[18]

My own approach to a black critique of form could be said to move appositionally with da Silva's and Warren's. I share their interest in the inescapable blackness of what Georges Bataille called "*l'informe*" (the formless),[19] or what Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind E. Krauss articulate as an operation of "declassification, in the double sense of lowering and of taxonomic disorder."[20] However, my principal interest is in the anteriority of blackness to (aesthetic) forms—wherein blackness is vestibular to the emergence, maintenance, modulation, and transformation of the very (antiblack) forms to which it is violently subject—as well as in the racially gendered reproduction of this anteriority. As I elaborate over the course of this book, the bearings of black femininity are doubly bound to the (re)production of the order of forms, as well as to black social and artistic refusals of this order. My thesis of black feminine anteriority has considerable implications for theories of the genesis and development of the modern order of forms, as well as the "quest(ion)" of this order's dissolution.[21]

Anteaesthetics's traversal of ante-formalism promises neither redemption nor emancipation. As Moten reminds us, violence cannot be excised from the materiality of the terrible gift of the hold, which is none other than black art: "Black art neither sutures nor is sutured to trauma. There's no remembering, no healing. There is, rather, a perpetual cutting, a constancy of expansive and enfolding rupture and wound, a rewind that tends to exhaust the metaphysics upon which the idea of redress is grounded."[22] Thinking with and against the force of that rewind, *Anteaesthetics* lingers with the inarticulable yet enduring questions that emerge from the formal entanglements of aesthetics and violence—questions that are unavoidable for those given to blackness.

While the making and unmaking of artistic form is thematized most explicitly in the third chapter of *Anteaesthetics*, all the anteaesthetic practices analyzed throughout the book variously deconstruct the modern order of forms, whether the latter's impetus to formalization is expressed as the body (chapter two), the medium (chapter four), or the world itself (chapter five). That is, the world itself is an aesthetic form, a paradigm defined by the chiasmatic world-making of form and form-making of world. I would also accent this book's interrogation of formal technics, not least with respect to time-based media, that "position … certain bodies and things within, outside, or across the threshold of form in order to maximize the functionality and reach of the system it constitutes."[23] In thinking with the anteaesthetic practices explored over the course of these chapters, a central concern will be the ways in which the gendered reproduction of black anteriority to the order of forms, within which blackness is an existence without ontology, instills an aporia or exorbitance within every form. Not even the onto-phenomenologically truncated form assumed by matter can escape this exorbitance, which can never be fully subsumed, displaced, elided, or eradicated by the order of forms. As we shall see, in every instance, blackness is the condition of (im)possibility for form.

X

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1
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2
Copeland, *Bound to Appear*, 10–11.

3
Darby English, *How to See a Work of Art in Total Darkness* (MIT Press, 2007), 5.

4
Hortense Spillers, *Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture* (University of Chicago, 2003), 85.

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Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The Communist Manifesto: A Modern Edition* (1848; Verso, 1998), 38.

7
Fredric Jameson, *The Modernist Papers* (Verso, 2007), xix.

8
Caroline Levine, *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* (Princeton University Press, 2015), 3. Emphasis in original.

9
Levine, *Forms*, 9.

10
Anna Kornbluh, *The Order of Forms: Realism, Formalism, and Social Space* (University of Chicago Press, 2019), 2, 3.

11
Peter Osborne, "Notes on Form," in *Thinking Art: Materialisms, Labours, Forms* , ed. Peter Osborne (CRMEP Books, 2020), 160.

12
Kornbluh, *Order of Forms*, 168n13, 14.

13
Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* , trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (1970; Continuum Books, 1997), 6. While my method is not dialectical materialist per se, I share the Marxian interest in the material relations that are expressed (and obscured) in (the fetishism of) aesthetic forms. However, my method finds a deeper philosophical intimacy with black critiques of form and formalism, which have witnessed a flowering in the academy in recent years but which are also part and parcel of a diverse intellectual tradition that is coterminous with the history of the diaspora and that is as much in evidence in vernacular traditions as it is in scholarship. Within the contemporary scholarly iterations of the black critique of form, theorists such as Calvin Warren stress that the modern world must be understood as formalization, and that antiblack violence both subtends and is effectuated through the order of forms. C. Warren, "The Catastrophe: Black Feminist Poethics, (Anti)form, and Mathematical Nihilism," *qui parle* 28, no. 2 (December 2019).

14
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15
Denise Ferreira da Silva, "1 (life) ÷ 0 (blackness) = ∞ – ∞ or ∞ / ∞: On Matter Beyond the Equation of Value," *e-flux journal*, no. 79 (February 2017) https://www.e-flux.com/journal/79/94686/1-life-0-blackness-or-on-matter-beyond-the-equation-of-value/ .

16
Da Silva, "1 (life)."

17
Warren, "The Catastrophe," 368.

18
Warren, "The Catastrophe," 368.

19
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20
Yve-Alain Bois, "Introduction: The Use Value of the 'Formless,'" in Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind E. Krauss, *Formless: A User's Guide* (Zone Books, 1997), 18.

21
Cf. Denise Ferreira da Silva, "Toward a Black Feminist Poethics: The Quest(ion) of Blackness Toward the End of the World," *Black Scholar* 44, no. 2 (2014).

22
Fred Moten, *Black and Blur* (Duke University Press, 2017), ix.

23
Seb Franklin, *The Digitally Disposed: Racial Capitalism and the Informatics of Value* (University of Minnesota Press, 2021), 5.

"Negative Anthropology" is a new series of essays, translations, and historical texts that center on disability, sexual dissidence, technics, race, and anti-colonialism. Although the materials in the series do not pursue a single shared argument, what joins them is a focus on the gap between forms of insurgent or resistant activity and the models of political representation and visibility that deny the force and legitimacy of such forms. Set within the profound shifts in technical, social, and ecological relations that mark the mutations of capital over the past two centuries, the series borrows its title from a term used by Günther Anders and Ulrich Sonnemann. In their accounts, "negative anthropology" names a reckoning with the human through what it is not *: through the distance from the ideals historically posed for and imposed on it, and through the limits and failures of prospects for meaningful social transformation. Departing from that often philosophical work towards questions embedded in social and cultural history, the texts in this series consider the ways that even seemingly radical political frameworks—including those that rely on notions of of community and pride—have often been unable to account either for subjectivities that are not legible within their parameters or for the potent kinds of collectivity and action that start not from any presumed commonality but in the negative space around what gets understood as human in the first place.*

—Evan Calder Williams, Contributing Editor

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Katherine C. M. Adams

From Tragic Mulatto to Cinematic Blackout

> Those who grant our conclusions … may ask what we have to say about the woman of color. I know nothing about her.
> —Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*[1]
>
> Let's face it. I am a marked woman, but not everybody knows my name.
> —Hortense Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe"[2]

The "tragic mulatto" has always been a troubling character. A familiar stock figure in twentieth-century cinema and literature, films such as Douglas Sirk's 1959 *The Imitation of Life* cemented her typology: she's a mixed-race Black woman, typically light-skinned or white-passing, who falls victim to the promise of living freely in white society until the revelation of her Black heritage casts her fatally back into social oppression. John Cassavetes's 1959 *Shadows* played on the stereotype, and it was the subject of the 2021 Rebecca Hall film *Passing*, modeled after a novel by Nella Larson. As she has been rendered in culture and particularly in film, the tragic mulatto appears to embody a sort of manic defense against the grief of racialized dispossession. Attempting to

Still from Losing Ground by Kathleen Collins, 1982.

circumvent the dehumanization that her (still Black) ethnicity would expose her to, she aims to surpass or suppress her own racialization, only to be punted back across the color line in the end.[3]

There is selfishness, self-hatred, and small-mindedness in this stock character, but also desperation. The tragic mulatto gives the paradoxical impression that she would be better off if only she were less eager to survive the hostile world around her. Crucially, the tragic mulatto's overt or implied sexuality is often key to her character development, and her desire to be accepted or even to "pass" within white culture is rendered primarily through her potential relationships with white men (as transpires in *The Imitation of Life*). Because it sits on the fault line of a very long-standing topology of America's racial and sociopolitical territory, the trope as it has persisted within visual culture is to some extent designed to escape theorization. At a basic level, the tragic mulatto occupies the space of the "color line" itself—of what W. E. B. DuBois alluded to as the "Veil"[4]—and in her contemporary form she personifies the apparent political futility of trying to trouble this color line, both through the voluntaristic assertion of a "post-racial" world and through the facile desire for a ready ethic of "color blindness." Seen as an allegory not only of self-mischaracterization but of minoritarian political subjectification more broadly, she consolidates the slippery dynamic between contrasting accounts of racialization—between social ontology, on the one hand, and social construction, on the other. As I explore below, the critical impotence that her trope dramatizes and warns of stems, crucially, from her gender position.

Rather than see her as a historical figure, contemporary archetype, or even a "mixed-race" person, in this essay—in part through a reading of Kathleen Collins's 1982 film *Losing Ground*—I follow the afterlife of the tragic mulatto as it has continued to influence film and, perhaps more broadly, contemporary culture. In this reading of the trope,

Still from Imitation of Life by Douglas Sirk, 1959.

the tragic mulatto is not a literal character. She is a cultural encoding that consolidates, in allegorical form, the threat of a specific and acute failure of experimentation in the realm of subjectivity. The tragic mulatto is, in its most essential stereotype, a frivolous and deeply reactionary character, seeking blithely to achieve the same dominant position that will ultimately oppress and disable her. Yet the core of the stereotype operates via a conditioned fear that risks saturating personal encounters with repressive powers of the state and body politic—the idea that knowledge of one's Blackness will register suddenly with the wrong person at a critical moment, after which "everything will be taken away."[5]

"Mulatoness" in film and visual culture—an idea that is seldom analyzed in contemporary visual culture at large—offers, I argue, an important counterpoint to Frantz Fanon's famous account of cinematic representation. Fanon describes his expectation of the degrading representation of the Black man in the cinema: "I wait for me."[6] Fanon's Black male filmgoer is caught up in a larger cycle of anticipation and reenactment, which this fraught viewing experience typifies. After a certain point, Fanon argues, in his daily life this spectator self-racializes to such a degree that he in fact conforms fully to the expectations of a colonialist white culture. This is, in Fanon's understanding, the fatal effect of colonization on Black subjectivity. Fanon's Black viewer defeatedly performs the racist expectations which he is perceived to essentially embody. As Kara Keeling has articulated this temporal dynamic, Fanon's account of anticipatory attention to the screen implies a proto-cinematic (or pre-visual) "interval" of time that precedes this encounter with racist cliché through film.[7] Keeling builds on Fanon's interpretation of the defeatist attitudes he observed among Black communities in Algeria under colonialism. Fanon's diagnosis is that anti-colonial revolution remains impossible until there is a collective recovery of the isolated "spatiotemporal coordinate" of colonialism's historical origins.[8] Historicizing the imposition of colonial domination, such that cooperating with its forces becomes a contingent possibility rather than a necessity, was for Fanon a crucial step within anti-colonial activity. Keeling's reading of the cinematic Fanon suggests that this "coordinate" could perhaps be dissolved or reoriented toward another sort of temporality.

Filmic representation and its racial clichés connect the historical disorientation of colonialism's origins—which in Fanon's view underlie performative compliance with racist structures—with the "interval" Keeling analyzes as a potential time of resistance to cinema's clichés and their "common sense" racial architectures.[9] I take Fanon's writings (as mediated by Keeling) as a core theoretical bridge between the cinematic and the critical invocations of the tragic mulatto. Through tracing the wider dynamics of which the tragic mulatto is symptomatic, I track the narrative concealment of its dialectical opposite: the forms

of *cinematic blackout* that might enable the novel temporality Keeling alludes to, one which might also open new routes into critical practice that do not, as Darby English writes, amount to an "annexation of private space by rules of social governance."[10] I position cinematic blackout—not only a literal immersion in darkness but an intervention in plot that severs a prior form of sociality—as the possible unraveling of the tragic mulatto and the possibilities latent in what she has come to suppress.

Losing Ground is one particularly illustrative example of how the tragic mulatto trope operates and what else it may withhold. Even on the level of its reception, the 1982 film clearly embodied a crisis in racial categorization. Collins's stated intention is said to have been to represent the predominantly non-white characters "not as mere *race* subjects."[11] The film contains essentially no white characters, featuring an almost exclusively Black and Puerto Rican cast, and as a result is attentive to the racial dynamics that play out between various minority groups within the United States. The film centers around an African-American couple: Sara, a professor of philosophy at a predominantly Black university, and Victor, a painter. The core plot begins when—urged on by Victor's new creative direction—the pair moves out of the university town where Sara teaches and into a more suburban area that is predominantly Puerto Rican and Spanish speaking. As the film progresses, Sara routinely typecasts herself as rigid and overly rational despite verbal praise from her students that she is "lively" and "passionate." Sara's self-characterization is augmented by the perspectives of her husband and mother, both of whom portray her as the stuffy arbiter of order who complements Victor's spontaneity and chaos. At one crucial moment early in the film, Sara and Victor have a conflict about their recent relocation. Sara appears to object to what she sees as the double standard Victor has now set for her. During a disagreement, she implies that Victor maximizes his own freedom to act and move as he likes, while constraining her and minimizing the value of her own work—by, for example, limiting her access to materials she needs for her research. After some back and forth, Victor brings the argument to a close by saying, "Listen, would you … put this mulatto crisis on hold?" However, a typical American viewer of the film would not likely identify Sara as visibly mixed or biracial, such that this and other characters' subsequent positioning of Sara as "mulatto" go against physical type. Rather than identify a literal ethnic makeup, they accuse Sara of a particular subject-position.

One of several passing allusions to "mulatto" subjects in the film, this and other "mulatto" designations in *Losing Ground* intervene at various moments of conflict, always working against the visual expectations we might have as a viewer. "Mulatto" is used to remind one character that another has access to more information (more "standpoints"[12]) than they might have anticipated—but it is also used to downgrade a potential interpersonal conflict to a merely internal one (the "mulatto crisis"). For his part, Victor appears at times preoccupied with the racial origins of the material culture he encounters—foods, aesthetics, and movements are all duly categorized. At one moment valorizing the Latin culture in the couple's new neighborhood, at another point openly "resenting" it, he leverages ready-to-hand social typologies to account for his own and others' behaviors. During an argument between a close male friend and his new Puerto Rican lover (with whom he has his affair), he interjects in defense of the male friend to point out that although the man's father is Spanish, "his mother is a full-blooded, American Black woman." Victor's allusion to Sara's "mulatto crisis" thus emerges against the backdrop of his own race-consciousness and sense of what is or is not "full-blooded" Black. In the context of Victor and Sara's relationship, "mulatto" invokes racial betrayal and, as such, Victor's "mulatto crisis" remark acts as a threat to Sara's moral integrity. The mulatto cliché has a manipulative effect, essentially prompting Sara to remain a structural support for the desires of her husband. Later in the film, Sara agrees to act in the film of one of her students, which—as the student-director indicates—is explicitly built around the theme of the tragic mulatto. As Sara begins to rehearse her part and interact with the other cast members, the film becomes a parallel narrative mirroring her real-life relationship to Victor, whose affair with his Puerto Rican neighbor occurs in spite of his seeming need to limit Sara's own sexuality. The end of the film-within-a-film coincides with the final shots of *Losing Ground*—the inner film's final scene portrays Sara's character shooting her lover, while Victor, having just walked onto the film set, watches her from behind the film's director.

While this "mulatto" designation is seldom explicitly invoked in the narrative and mentioned only offhand by various characters, it bears great significance for the ideas *Losing Ground* puts into play. By the end of the movie, Sara's violent gesture—performed through the proxy character in which Sara is cast—implies a drastic severance from the expectations Victor has placed on her. Yet her dramatic persona also expresses the culmination of a larger search for what Sara deems an "ecstatic" subjectivity. The closing moment of *Losing Ground* is intense: Victor is visibly in shock, having run on set just in time to watch the scene play out. The camera cuts abruptly to black directly following this irruption, a blackout that—because it emerges at the dual juncture of the overarching narrative and its film-within-a-film—is a fecund moment. It feels not so much like a cut or an ending as an insistent expulsion of filmic expectation: the body is gone, but flesh remains. This blackout strikes the viewer as the recoil of Sara's character's fatal performance. At the same time, it is the expression of a decision to embrace a new rift in subjectivity that will put her outside the representational frames within which she has been enclosed.

Although Collins's work has drawn attention in recent

Still from Losing Ground by Kathleen Collins, 1982.

years as an exemplar of Black independent film, there appears to be no literature that has yet explicitly considered what I understand to be the structuring function of mulatto-ness in the film.[13] Prior scholarship has focused on the film's portrayal of sexuality in its intellectual female lead but, even when this literature has referred to the film's mulatto myths and personae, it has not necessarily explicated the film's internal nuances of racialization.[14] Though it may pass over the mulatto dynamics at work throughout the film, most literature on *Losing Ground* acknowledges the film as a form of "black independent media that challenges representational comfort zones"—the sort of project that is challenging for Black viewers to "advocat[e] for."[15] In her essay on the film, L. H. Stallings noted of one of the film's original screenings:

> After the screening, a man asked Kathleen Collins … if she had made the film. When she said yes, he replied, "You're a traitor to the race," and stalked away. And still later … talking to one of our better known filmmakers … the director … told me he did not like *Losing Ground* because it was a negative portrait of a black marriage.[16]

These initial reactions to Collins's work parallel exactly the tragic mulatto cultural code that emerges within the work and indicate that the filmmaker's own work was subject to the same sort of suspicion of her implicit subject position as the tragic mulatto trope itself enacts. Her work is seen as a trial that, in effect, puts kinship at risk: she is a "traitor," supposedly expressing a more general negative sentiment around Black marriage (as opposed to, one might reasonably hazard, marriage itself).

Its narrative importance notwithstanding, the invocation of the tragic mulatto in *Losing Ground* is highly peculiar

given both the trope's implication of white-adjacency and the near-complete absence of white characters in Collins's film. As noted above, Sara herself wouldn't necessarily strike the viewer as bearing the mixed-race background from which the mulatto by definition emerges. Brief scenes featuring her family reveal a bourgeois or artistic background. However, her Black mother's anecdotes don't betray any interracial relationships. Scholarship on Collins's film appears not to have had much to say on this point, referring obliquely to the influence of certain mixed-race actresses on Collin's directorial work.[17] In its recent rediscovery,[18]

Losing Ground has been praised by reviewers for its objectively bold account of the complexity of Black subjectivity—particularly as embodied in its intellectual female lead.[19] Yet even as it is heralded as an exceptional work in the context of the larger politics of representation, the greater significance of the tragic mulatto mythology it brushes up against—an undercurrent that could be easily missed without close attention to particular dialogues and dynamics—still warrants further attention. The subtle invocation of this trope in *Losing Ground* opens onto a larger discourse about how Black women in America are seen to fit (or not) into the critical discourse around family, race, and society.

Why has this mulatto myth been relatively absent from analyses of film beyond the most literal renditions of the stereotype? Why hasn't it made its way into writing about Collins's work? While discourse around the idea of the mulatto does exist—one example being Samira Kawash's *Dislocating the Color Line*—the dialogue often centers around ideas of "hybridity," or creolity. Yet clearly, as in the case of Collins's film, the tragic mulatto archetype is not necessarily dependent on ethnic type or on the performance of proximity to whiteness. Rather, she is a structuring formula. The tragic mulatto imaginary precisely marks a certain practical failure of the discourse of hybridity in an American context, for it in the end reinforces a presupposed, calculable division between essential types. Rather than assign to the tragic mulatto the role of problematizing the "color line," we can instead understand her as the negative expression of an internal differentiation of, and *impasse* within, modern accounts of Blackness. This is a rift that, in our contemporary moment, occurs between, on one hand, Afropessimist, "ontological" accounts of Blackness as social death[20] and, on the other, more psychoanalytically informed accounts such as those that develop out of Fanon, who insists that Blacks have "no ontological resistance in the eyes of the white man."[21] As I suggest below, the tragic mulatto then is an aborted expression of a different kind of "outside" of racialization than that which is accessible through the colorist mixing of Blackness with the attributes of a more socially dominant subject position. It points toward a different kind of epistemological troubling of the body and what Hortense Spillers calls the "flesh" (discussed below). The inverse of this persona opens toward an alternate mode of sociality—one that undoes the units of measure by which *logistical* calculations biopolitically govern the Black body.

The sexual typology of the tragic mulatto maps uncannily neatly onto the vision of the "woman of color" whom Fanon characterizes in *Black Skin, White Masks*, as part of his larger analysis of the impact of colonization on the psychology and self-perception of Black people. In this noted text on the "psychopathology" that emerges as a result of racist encounters with the European colonial context, Fanon remarks that both women of color and men of color are susceptible to the compulsion to use sexuality and intimacy as a means of assimilation into white culture. Yet, crucially, "The Negro is genital," and in the formations that beset his culture, it appears the male is the one in whom Blackness is done and undone, making him "phobogenic" for white culture.[22] The "woman of color," we learn, is not quite visible in this picture. Keeling identifies that, for Fanon,

> except when legible because she is party to an interracial desire or an appendage to the Native or the Black—as his wife, for instance—the "woman of color" is, in Fanon's analyses of colonial discourse and its "anomalies of affect," invisible and unknowable. When she does appear, she does so as, for example, a projection of what might be raped and assaulted in order to harm the Black man or the potential Black nation.[23]

Here, the Black woman is the sexual threshold beyond which Black consciousness is potentially undone.[24]

While there is more to "the story" of the Black than just this bodily aspect, he seems intrinsically male—a masculine-aligned position that Keeling expands on in her account of Black film in *The Witch's Flight* (2007). Keeling's gloss of Fanon implies that his "woman of color" is below the Black man in the sexual hierarchy but morally responsible for securing the Black man's social integrity amid his racialization. She is black beyond Black—lowest on the rung of the social hierarchy yet unadmitted into the protection of Fanonian postcolonial theory; she cannot even await the appearance of her mangled representation on screen.[25] This Black woman is described as responsible for avoiding the miscegenated sexual relation, but the potential violence that induces this same relation is disavowed (what Keeling construes violently here as being "raped and assaulted in order to harm the Black man or the potential Black nation"). Her own vulnerability to brutality is unregistered. She upholds what Keeling would call the "common sense" of racialization from which she is cast in or out at will, in her position as alternately hyper-visible and invisible and subject to intermittent "mulatto" derision. *She* is the critical

problem—downgraded from cultural legitimacy by her potential to be the sexual object of white society, yet racially constitutive of Blackness whenever the latter is in a state of emergency. This is the Black woman cast as the illegitimate bastard child of a Black critical consciousness.

important to note how the tragic mulatto formation has been effectively embedded into this theoretical structure. The tragic mulatto maintains a problematic relationship to Blackness but, most importantly, she encapsulates how the actions of Black women are construed as putting the very coherence of Blackness at risk, as the latter is formed

Adrian Piper, Everything #2.2, 2003. Rights: Collection Adrian Piper Research Archive Foundation Berlin.

Fanon, of course, is writing diagnostically rather than affirmatively. What he points to is a fantasy structure; as such, he implicates the tragic mulatto in her capacity as a cultural encoding, rather than in essentialist terms. Of course, one has to note that the tragic mulatto as a literary figure is a US-American notion, whereas Fanon was writing from an African colonial (and, by extension, European), rather than North American, context. However we are addressing the tragic mulatto here as a structuring figure of racialization rather than a literal demographic. Parallel intellectual histories notwithstanding, it is

through a Black cultural nationalism.[26] Likewise, the tragic mulatto is caught up in Fanon's cinematic dilemma, yet her position involves a different mode of visibility on screen than Fanon originally articulates. She embodies the inarticulable zone of indistinction of the "color line," and this ambiguous paradigm of appearance marks in turn a different temporal quandary as compared to Fanon's Black male "interval." The tragic mulatto embodies *untimeliness*, an out-of-joint position meant to dramatize the political impossibility that haunts attempts to question what

Keeling calls the "common sense" of racial categorization. In this allegory, her insights model a perverse (and false) "freedom" from racist discourses—the authentic contestation of which appears to mandate race consciousness of a type that is adequately "kindred" in its gender position. In turn, the cumulative process of "mulatto production" constructs various no-man's-lands within otherwise emancipatory cinema, film, and visual culture, from which certain kinds of Black female subjectivity must remain absent. While Fanon waits for himself in the cinema, at first blush Fanon's "woman of color" has nowhere to look for her own image. *Losing Ground* is radical in how it breaks with this model.

recognition.[27] In "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," her landmark essay on the complex position into which US-American Black women have historically been thrown, Hortense Spillers reprises the ways in which Black women progressively became the conservative scapegoat for the "problems" attributed to Black communities. In conservative diagnoses, the Black US-American woman is positioned as disproportionately influential through the matrilineal influence she retains in a world in which Black men have historically been key targets of incarceration and deprived of political agency. Yet, at the same time, the matrilineality she represents is rejected as pathological. Spillers explains how the Black US-American woman's construction is also to a certain extent *ungendered*

Still from Losing Ground by Kathleen Collins, 1982.

In *Losing Ground*, the tragic mulatto emerges not, as we've seen, due to an actual inclination toward whiteness but initially as a threat to the coherence of the couple and to the family (as set out by Sara's mother and husband in the film). Additionally, as I argue, the trope personifies a threat to "kinship" in a wider sense. Through the cultural decoding of the tragic mulatto, we recover the problems womanhood and femininity have raised, historically, for Blackness as an object of inquiry—and Black women's historically fraught position in struggles often oriented around urgent struggles of Black men. Such a framework has often shown itself uncertain of where to place women (or "the feminine" more broadly) in this picture other than as a source of fragility that is a hurdle to liberation and

—"feminine" only insofar as she also disturbs prevailing accounts of gender. Building off her analysis of this sort of debasement of the Black mother, Spillers writes:

> This problematizing of gender places her, in my view, *out* of the traditional symbolics of female gender, and it is our task to make a place for this different social subject. In doing so, we are less interested in joining the ranks of gendered femaleness than gaining the *insurgent* ground as a female social subject.[28]

The tragic mulatto trope expresses an anxiety around her potential to secure the "kinship" of which Black woman were historically dispossessed, particularly insofar as their reproductive and care labor was expressed outside of immediate family—either through domestic work predominantly outside the community, or more drastically through the erasure of her maternal link to her children under slavery. This problem of reproductive labor partly shaped the Black feminist update of standpoint theory. Standpoint theory has been a key mode of legitimation for women's—and later specifically also Black women's—position in socioeconomic structures, lending currency to so-called "lived experiences" as proper political epistemology. Yet Spillers's account suggests that such "standpoints"—even where they are sensitively tailored to a socioeconomic position—have never been adequate tools to grasp the power-to-name that Black women in America appear to have inherited. The myth of the tragic mulatto, in essence, is a frustration of the "insurgent" potential that Spillers sees as a counter to "joining the ranks of gendered femaleness." Upon analysis, the tragic mulatto troubles an inherited, impossible responsibility for securing kinship in her attempt to seek out a new kind of subjectivity that would unsettle familial kinship structures. In the original trope, she has necessarily failed to meet this challenge, only reproducing and exacerbating the racial hierarchy to which she is subjected. The potential failure of experimentation with political subjectivity that the tragic mulatto invocation in *Losing Ground* warns of is, cast in other terms, a failure to fulfill a certain kind of standpoint epistemology, leading to the risk of becoming the "tragic" trope without an adequately " *insurgent* ground" to occupy after the abandonment of the standpoint. Reclaimed, this potential of the power to name is also a dissolution of a traditional idea of political community as a *familial* entity.

We can now say that the Black-woman-as-tragic-mulatto as I have defined her here is temporally problematic relative to standpoint theory. Early accounts of standpoint epistemology drew from Marxian theory. In the same manner that the position of the proletariat has been situated in relation to the potential for politically transformative class consciousness, feminist standpoint theory relied on labor models of gender to articulate a more differentiated notion of class consciousness that would render women's subjective experience expressive of meaningful truths about socioeconomic structures.[29] Important examples of standpoint theory include both Nancy Hartsock's early version of the framework organized around (white) women's reproductive labor, and Patricia Hill Collins's updated version of the theory for Black women.[30] Other versions of "Black" standpoint epistemology effectively use slavery-informed formulations of Black woman's labor in order to slot them into a Marxist-Hegelian dialectic of recognition that supposedly undergirds the specific mechanics of Black class (or race or gender) consciousness. In relying on an originally Marxian model of class consciousness and proletarian subjectivity to legitimize "embodied knowledge" of women, early forms of standpoint epistemology like Hartsock's appeared to narrowly circumscribe the sexuality of the women in question; in order to fit into the standpoint framework, women were (heterosexual) maternal subjects, child-bearing reproducers whose care labor was closely linked to exercising their "natural" (straight) sexual function. [31] This clearly didn't wholly account for queer women, but also notably failed to account for the "queer" labor of Black women who, regardless of sexuality, were often in the position of caring for babies who were not theirs—perhaps even serving as surrogate mothers. Although labor is less significant in Collins's account, her corrective to the original standpoint theory presents Black women as "outsiders within" in a manner that refers genealogically back to the labor position of Black women as domestic workers in white homes—"outsiders within" who learn the intimate secrets of the family yet are fundamentally outside it.[32]

The tragic mulatto motif, as it has been used to warn against flippant modes of disidentification in film and in culture at large, belies the degree to which standpoints scaffold registers of governance. To rectify the "tragic" diegesis of the mulatto on the trope's own terms would require restructuring the character's actions through an adequate standpoint form. That is, the very position that is most "survivable" from within "tragic" plots of racialized constraint are those which can only be epistemically justified through a character's *performance of their own knowability*. To be rescued from political suicide in this vein, the tragic mulatto's clichéd persona needs to morph into a ledger of the film's implicit social consciousness. Writing from a different pretext than Spillers, Stefano Harney and Fred Moten also offer their own commentary on "standpoints" in their landmark *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study*. The standpoint's theoretical architecture sets itself against the fluidity of alignment that emerges from within what Moten and Harney write of as "the hold," the uncontrollable dehiscence of kin that emerges from the state of having-been-shipped.[33] "What would it mean to struggle against governance, against that which can produce struggle by germinating interests? When governance is understood as the criminalization of being without interests?"[34] Harney and Moten's imagination of a "new Black studies" goes on to reference an off-gender subject position that exists beyond the enclosures of the political.[35] Their account parallels Spillers's elucidation of the shifting gender status of the Black woman that routes, ultimately, back to the pre-politicized, generative "flesh" to which she has access by virtue of the historical distortions to which she has been subjected. Spillers writes:

> I would make a distinction in this case between "body" and "flesh" and impose that distinction as the central

> one between captive and liberated subject-positions. In that sense, before the "body" there is the "flesh," that zero degree of social conceptualization that does not escape concealment under the brush of discourse, or the reflexes of iconography.[36]

As "mother and mother-dispossessed," the Black woman stands "in the flesh" as harbinger of a potentially different social subject than that which has already been inscribed through the American grammar of racialization and subjectivity. In this vein, Moten and Harney note:

> If commodity labor would come to have a standpoint, the standpoint from which one's own abolition became necessary, then what of those who had already been abolished and remained? ... The standpoint of no standpoint, everywhere and nowhere, of never and to come, of thing and nothing. *What could such flesh do? Logistics somehow knows that it is not true that we do not yet know what flesh can do.* There is a social capacity to instantiate again and again the exhaustion of the standpoint as undercommon ground that logistics knows as unknowable, calculates as an absence that it cannot have but always longs for, that it cannot, but longs, to be or, at least, to be around, to surround.[37]

The power to speak from a subject position, to narrate from a standpoint, is different from what Spillers registers as the power to name. The power to express the deep condition of a structure, and to translate that finding into political terms, is different than finding new language, than moving out of the *camp* and into the *surround*. Moten, Harney, and Spillers might see something else in the strange creature we have been tracking, the cliché of the tragic mulatto: a fleshless body. This is her "white" side—a social existence that is pure body, a "feeling" so logistically refined that her life is wholly determined by others' knowledge or lack of knowledge about her. Her only power comes from what she is able to conceal or suppress in the service of being potentially known as white *enough* —through an epistemically hyperactive white gaze (and in opposition to her color or background). Her life is a secret, and even once she is exposed, the tragedy is that she remains the opposite of Spillers's Black woman ("mother and mother-dispossessed") who stands in the flesh. The "tragic" mulatto has abdicated the place of "mother" in attempting to sever from the community to which she would otherwise be ethnically tied, and yet it is the inevitable and unavoidable *possession* of the mother—her Black heritage—that casts her out of society. Whereas Spillers's Black woman lacks a name because she has a power to *create* it, the tragic mulatto has given away any chance at speaking it.

One analog to the tragic mulatto and her disintegration under the supposed impossibility of a new subjectivity, of a Blackness that exceeds privatized "governance" of the self, is the blackout scene: a cinematic cut marking an indistinct moment that cannot be subsumed into editing. The blackout is not just a refusal or an opacity, but the space that dissolves the ties internal to a film. The blackout's intervention both disorients the plot and disrupts the excessive politicality of the mulatto's appearance—her mythical failure to exist outside of the ties she forges between appearance and social recognition. The ambiguous appearance of the mulatto—her classic cinematic mode of appearance—also allegorizes the epistemic surveillance that politics enacts on the Black female body, attempting to decide whether or not it "passes"—if it is a traitor or an ally, a successful, community-shepherding mother or an unsuccessful corruption of kin. The untimeliness that underwrites the myth of the tragic mulatto might be suspended by an account of what Robert Esposito identifies as the "impolitical," which acknowledges the political effects of the common time in which experimentations of subjectivity take place, but does not reduce these attempts to a political *decision*, or *standpoint.*[38]

The blackout is the obverse side of the standpoint, exploding the tragic mulatto's double bind and turning the anxious prelude of the Fanonian interval of "anticipation" on its head. It brackets the governance that is enacted in and through the name of "kinship," and it suspends the evental time of film that would see "cuts" as unwanted visual abrasions in the larger schema of continuity editing. The blackout outlines an "impolitical" space that is parallel to and conditions the political: not locked within the historical coordinates of established social imaginaries that cultural habit traverses, in the name of survival, with such logistical precision. The blackout exhausts the position of characterological standpoint, exhausts the epidermal episteme of racialized spectatorship. It needn't triumphantly discard identity's strategic utility nor deploy it cynically for survival. Rather, it restructures subjectification by forcing filmic identification to seek its point of suture in the figureless-ness of flesh. The blackout seeks after an abolitionist practice, toward a mode of community that is neither familial nor kindred at its heart. Instead, it stands for a collectivity that forges insurgent genealogies through the names it creates for the unfamiliar.

X

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1
Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* , trans. Charles Lam Markmann (Pluto Press, 1986), 180.

2
Hortense J. Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," *Diacritics* 17, no. 2 (Summer 1987): 80.

3
For a more complete overview of the stereotype, see David Pilgrim, "The Tragic Mulatto Myth," Jim Crow Museum, Ferris State University, November 2000 https://www.ferris.edu/HTMLS/news/jimcrow/mulatto/homepage.htm .

4
W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk: Essays and Sketches* (1903; Johnson Reprint Corp., 1968).

5
This is also the name of an eponymous series by Adrian Piper, perhaps the most visible contemporary artist who has directly engaged with the epistemological and social effects of racial ambiguity as part of her practice.

6
Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 40.

7
See Kara Keeling, "'In the Interval': Frantz Fanon and the Problem of Visual Representation," *Qui Parle* 13, no. 2 (Spring–Summer 2003); and Keeling, *The Witch's Flight: The Cinematic, the Black Femme, and the Image of Common Sense* (Duke University Press, 2007).

8
Keeling, "'In the Interval,'" 103.

9
Kara Keeling discusses "common sense" in a number of texts. In her 2003 "'In the Interval'" she notes that certain racist assumptions "have sedimented into various forms of common sense and now also inform counter-hegemonic projects, including those aimed at dismantling racism" (92).

10
Darby English, *How to See a Work of Art in Total Darkness* (MIT Press, 2010), 43.

11
Emmanuel Sampath Nelson, *The Greenwood Encyclopedia of Multiethnic American Literature: A–C* (Greenwood Publishing Group, 2005), 482. Emphasis in the original.

12
This is a reference to standpoint epistemology, or "standpoint theory," which I discuss in more detail below.

13
The text that comes closest is Geetha Ramanathan's *Kathleen Collins: The Black Essai Film* (Edinburgh University, 2020), which discusses a reference one of the characters makes to Dorothy Dandridge, a Black actress who was often cast in the role of tragic mulatto. However, Ramanathan's text does not read the reference through the form of the film, looking only at the literal influence of Dandridge's work on Collins herself.

14
In a crucial article on the film, L. H. Stallings notes the "Frankie and Johnny" myth that inspires the student film in which *Losing Ground* 's main character will be cast, but doesn't address how the film explicitly codes this story with a tragic mulatto motif in two different scenes of *Losing Ground*. See Stallings, "'Redemptive Softness': Interiority, Intellect, and Black Women's Ecstasy in Kathleen Collins's *Losing Ground* ," in "Beyond Normative: Sexuality and Eroticism in Black Film, Cinema, and Video," special issue, *Black Camera* 2, no. 2 (Spring 2011).

15
Terri Francis, "Whose 'Black Film' Is This? The Pragmatics and Pathos of Black Film Scholarship," *Cinema Journal* 53, No. 4 (Summer 2014): 147.

16
David Nicholson quoted in Stallings, "'Redemptive Softness,'" 52. Original source: David Nicholson, "A Commitment to Writing: A Conversation with Kathleen Collins Prettyman," *Black Film Review* 5, no. 1 (Winter 1988–89): 14.

17
Ramanathan, *Kathleen Collins*.

18
Richard Brody, "Lost and Found," *The New Yorker* , January 30, 2015 https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/02/09/lost-found .

19
See, for instance, Jourdain Searles, "Kathleen Collins's Groundbreaking Portrait of Black Womanhood," *Hyperallergic*, June 28, 2022 https://hyperallergic.com/743670/kathleen-collins-losing-ground/ .

20
"For sociologist Orlando Patterson, social death describes the experience of slavery as it has appeared across time and space—a slave is not merely an exploited person but someone robbed of his or her personhood. For Wilderson, the state of slavery, for Black people, is permanent: every Black person is always a slave and, therefore, a perpetual corpse, buried beneath the world and stinking it up." Vinson Cunningham, "The Argument of 'Afropessimism,'" July 20, 2020, *The New Yorker* https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2020/07/20/the-argument-of-afropessimism .

21
Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 110, as quoted in Keeling, "'In the Interval,'" 95. Whereas both Fanon and Afropessimist thinkers share a sense of the ontological negativity of Blackness, they tell drastically different accounts of it—in one, social death is more or less insuperable, in the other, it is surpassed through anti-colonial resistance.

22
Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 180, 151.

23
Keeling, *Witch's Flight*, 96.

24
See Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* , 179–80: "Those who grant our conclusions on the psychosexuality of the white woman may ask what we have to say about the woman of color. I know nothing about her. What I can offer, at the very least, is that for any women in the Antilles—the type that I shall call the all-but-whites—the aggressor is symbolized by the Senegalese type, or in any event by an inferior (who is so considered). The Negro is the genital."

25
Despite its absence from Fanon's account of Black representations in cinema, the imaging of Black women in film was clearly already a live issue at the time of Fanon's text. Director Ousmane Sembene's *Black Girl* came out in 1966, one year before Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* . (In *Black Girl* , a young Senegalese woman goes to work for a white family in France, only to commit suicide by the end of the film.) As I have suggested above, even if the ultimate, metaphysically crushing defeat in the Hegelian encounter that Fanon traces deranges Black men's possibility of self-reflexive "ontology," it does not mean that the social ontology it institutes for whites leaves the Black woman out of the latter's racist framework. As *Black Girl* explores, the colonized Black woman is exposed to the racism of colonialism—or, in America, slavery's legacy—just like her male counterpart, if in different ways. Even if Fanon's Black man may very well know nothing (or choose to know nothing) about the "woman of color," the white colonial imaginary nevertheless knows her well.

26
Also discussed throughout Keeling, *Witch's Flight*.

27
See, for example, Keeling, "'We'll Just Have to Get Guns and Be Men,' The Cinematic Appearance of Revolutionary Black Women," chap. 4 in *Witch's Flight*.

28
Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," 80. Emphasis in original. Here Spillers also notes: "1) motherhood as a female bloodrite is outraged, is denied, at the very same time that it becomes the founding term of a human and social enactment; 2) a dual fatherhood is set in motion, comprised of the African father's banished name and body and the captor's mocking presence. In this play of paradox, only the female stands in the flesh, both mother and mother-dispossessed."

29
For an array of positions, see *The Feminist Standpoint Theory Reader: Intellectual and Political Controversies* , ed. Sandra Harding (Routledge, 2004).

30
Nancy C. M. Hartsock, "The Feminist Standpoint: Developing the Ground for a Specifically Feminist Historical Materialism," in *Feminist Standpoint Theory Reader* ; Patricia Hill Collins, "Learning from the Outside Within: The Sociological Significance of Black Feminist Thought," *Feminist Standpoint Theory Reader* .

31
Hartsock, “Feminist Standpoint.”

32
Collins, “Learning from the Outside Within.”

33
Fred Moten and Stefano Harney, “Fantasy in the Hold,” chap. 6 in *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study* (Minor Compositions, 2013) http://www.minorcompositions.info/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/undercommons-web.pdf .

34
Moten and Harney, *Undercommons* , 52.

35
Moten and Harney, *Undercommons* , 47.

36
Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe,” 67.

37
Moten and Harney, *Undercommons* , 92–93. Emphasis added. They also write: “In those mutations that are always also a regendering or transgendering … lies blackness, lies the black thing that cuts the regulative, governant force of (the) understanding (and even of those understandings of blackness to which black people are given since fugitvityy escapes even the fugitive)” (50). Emphasis added.

38
Roberto Esposito, *Categories of the Impolitical* , trans. Connal Parsley (Fordham University Press, 2015).

"Negative Anthropology" is a new series of essays, translations, and historical texts that center on disability, sexual dissidence, technics, race, and anti-colonialism. Although the materials in the series do not pursue a single shared argument, what joins them is a focus on the gap between forms of insurgent or resistant activity and the models of political representation and visibility that deny the force and legitimacy of such forms. Set within the profound shifts in technical, social, and ecological relations that mark the mutations of capital over the past two centuries, the series borrows its title from a term used by Günther Anders and Ulrich Sonnemann. In their accounts, "negative anthropology" names a reckoning with the human through what it is not *: through the distance from the ideals historically posed for and imposed on it, and through the limits and failures of prospects for meaningful social transformation. Departing from that often philosophical work towards questions embedded in social and cultural history, the texts in this series consider the ways that even seemingly radical political frameworks—including those that rely on notions of of community and pride—have often been unable to account either for subjectivities that are not legible within their parameters or for the potent kinds of collectivity and action that start not from any presumed commonality but in the negative space around what gets understood as human in the first place.*

—Evan Calder Williams, Contributing Editor

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Julia Eilers Smith

Hija de Perra: Writings from a Poor, Aspirational, Sudaca, Third World Perspective

A drag performer, activist, essayist, and educator, Hija de Perra (HdP) made her debut in the early 2000s as a go-go dancer and singer in Santiago de Chile's alternative nightlife scene. She was deeply immersed in punk, anarchist, and drag circles, making regular appearances at rockabilly shows, *tocatas* (concerts), sex and disco clubs, as well as other underground parties. Her eccentric performances featured props, bold makeup, and elaborate, handmade costumes that often revealed her prosthetic breasts and vagina. In her staged interventions, she loosely integrated elements from both pornographic and horror film genres, infusing her performances with shock and derisive humor. The artist embodied an aesthetic of monstrosity and what she referred to as " *inmundicia*," or "filthiness," repudiating any association with normality, and instead proudly exhibiting an aberrational, multi-sexual identity.

Her profoundly transgressive practice was a response to and reflection of an evolving political landscape in her native Chile as it transitioned from the Pinochet dictatorship to a democratic neoliberal system. During this post-1990 shift, various governments aimed to advance women's rights and LGBTQ+ inclusion through what were considered progressive policies. But for much of this period, these efforts gained limited traction beyond

Portrait of Hija de Perra with a white cat. Courtesy of the artist's personal archive.

decriminalization.[1] While a broader array of civil rights have been made law in recent years, HdP's work preemptively resisted any attempt at assimilation into mainstream culture and liberal politics, tarnishing the image of a clean and sanitized society that relied upon the political discourses of tolerance, inclusion, and diversity.

In an effort to wrestle with the inconvenient subject of "deviant" sexuality in her country (as Chile persisted in punishing LGBTQ+ people via public-indecency and age-of-consent laws), the artist deployed her performance-activism across multiple platforms, never relinquishing its distinctive intensity and extravagance. Apart from her work as a performer and singer, she also navigated Santiago's marginalized and institutional circuits as an actress, recording artist, emcee, and educator. She maintained strong ties to local activism, delivering speeches and actively participating in Pride parades and marches to advocate for sexual diversity as well as human and reproductive rights.

In the years preceding her untimely passing in 2014 at the age of thirty-four, from AIDS-related complications, HdP expanded her reach into the realm of formal academic discourse. Building connections with institutions in both Chile and Argentina, she deepened her engagement with students and intellectual communities. Her active involvement culminated in her participation in university-hosted events, where she gave lectures on safe sex, published theoretical texts, and delivered talks on gender and sexual dissidence.

Theory and Discourse: Lecturing with "Show"

Initially invited to academic conferences to present her performances, HdP began to be approached for more formal speaking engagements and scholarly publication. Student and research groups at the University of Chile in Santiago were committed supporters of her work, providing platforms for the dissemination of her thinking

and writing.[2] Her initial foray into university lecturing came at a 2010 gender-theory conference organized by students from the Faculty of Law at the University of Chile. During a roundtable discussion, she expressed that she had "no intention of being 'queer,'" explaining that the imported term pigeonholed her "unclassifiable" and "already unstable" identity.[3]

discursive positioning of sexually nonnormative practices and local subcultures.

HdP's lectures were as theatrical as they were theoretical. Her flamboyant personality and uninhibited discourse stood in stark contrast to the formalities typically associated with university gatherings. As noted by Chilean writer and activist Juan Pablo Sutherland, "What

Hija de Perra faces the camera in a black-and-white photograph. Courtesy of the artist's personal archive.

HdP delivered a sharp critique both of Chile's dominant sexual culture and of the way academic and cultural discussions of the late 1990s and early 2000s applied queer theory to gender and sexuality in her country. She criticized the lack of attention and credit given to the "lesser forms" of gender- and sexually nonconforming thought, knowledge, and experiences that exist outside of academic orbits. In this way she identified a contextual dissonance stemming from the widespread dissemination of queer theory in South America, where it was (and still remains) in vogue in university circles, influencing the

interest[ed] her, as a whole, [was] to make an irruption in the academic space, but an irruption with *show*, with performance."[4] During her lectures, she would dramatically toss the pages she read from into the air. She incorporated nonacademic, personal, and sexual language and references into her talks, seeking to "break with the rules of the academy."[5] Drawing upon first-person accounts, her writings were rooted in her own sexuality and solidly grounded in her experience as a "new *mestiza latina* from the Southern Cone."[6]

While maintaining her parodic approach, HdP adeptly tailored her discourse to resonate with the already critical academic audience, giving her "filthy" interpretations theoretical underpinnings. Her lectures and writings drew inspiration from postcolonial theory, feminist and queer critique, and the rich intersections of these fields. (It is worth nothing that the majority of authors she quotes in her texts are Chilean.) Through her work, she delved into the enduring colonial violence and oppression perpetuated by the "Western conceptualization of sexuality" in Latin America, as well as the rigid enforcement of gender binaries within its societies.[7]

Filthy Interpretations

One of HdP's most influential works, her 2012 lecture "Filthy Interpretations," powerfully voices her resistance to having her identity framed solely through the lens of queer theory.[8] The piece was subsequently published as a posthumous essay in 2014, in the Chilean academic journal *Revista Punto Género*. In this seminal text, HdP passionately advocates for the validity of the knowledge and practices that circulated among gender- and sexually nonconforming people long before queer theory spread throughout the southern hemisphere. She challenges the way some Latin American theorists applied—and sometimes misapplied—queer theory to the region, and explains how thinkers like her came to perceive this endeavor as a neo-colonization of knowledge.

The opening narrative of "Filthy Interpretations" exposes the profound consequences of the arrival of Western notions of sexuality in Latin America, brought there by the "violent conquistadors." HdP describes this as a "new and deadly thinking" that was brutally enforced through pillaging and other forms of violence—a legacy that persists today under the guise of civilization.[9] Sexual practices that are now deemed debased or immoral in contemporary Latin America were, as HdP contends, celebrated during the pre-Columbian era. She then proceeds to explain how the people of the Southern Cone region continue to grapple with the enduring influence of norms inherited from the era of Spanish conquest.

By referencing Spanish colonization, HdP highlights the presence and importance of precolonial histories. At the same time, she emphasizes the hierarchical systems that were established to maintain Northern dominance over the South. Provocatively, she likens the arrival of the term "queer" in Latin America to the mystical ships of colonization, bringing with them the familiar "Western conceptualization of sexuality." Both, she argues, heralded "new orders of sexual classification and declassification."[10]

These "new understandings of Gender," she asserts, "pile up at our borders and hem us in with new labels to advance and understand the exercises of existence and sexual difference."[11] While not overtly imposing territorial dominance, these new forms of understanding delegitimize and colonize prior forms of knowledge.

HdP's argument provides an intersectional framework that extends beyond sexuality alone. She asserts that our understanding of sexual and gender identities cannot be divorced from the structural realities of "social class, race, education, and geographic location," which "all influence the concept of gender, although some who love heterosexual norms don't want to open their little, conservative eyes and see the reality that's right under their noses."[12] Early in the text, she establishes her specific geographical location as the basis for her perspective: "Today I speak geographically situated in the South, but it often seems that I am validated by speaking, as it were, from the North, as if following the dominator's matrix of thought, which continues to guide us."[13]

Moreover, the author emphasizes that the term "queer" and its theoretical foundations must remain open to reinterpretation and deconstruction in accordance with the particular context(s) in which they are applied. She explains that in Latin America, queer theory has become dominant in discussions of nonnormative gender and sexuality; despite its emphasis on fluid boundaries, it in fact reinforces and normalizes categories, cutting from consideration other experiences and frameworks, such as those from " *maricona* culture."[14]

Her skepticism regarding the ennobled status that the concept of "queer" has attained in the southern hemisphere becomes even more apparent when she poses a pointed question: "Can we enjoy 'queer' shopping in our latitudes?"[15] With this question, HdP highlights how the term and the theory are often treated as a form of currency among those familiar with academic jargon.

Even though HdP calls for the recognition of a culturally specific conception of what was called "queer" in Latin America, throughout her work she always remained sharply critical of nation-building perspectives. Indeed, she offered a framework for a hemispheric approach that maintained vigilance against the uncritical implementation of nation-based forms of theoretical and cultural knowledge.

A World of Fabulous Opportunities

It is crucial to emphasize that HdP did not outright reject queer theory. On the contrary, she recognized that it provides the "possibility of subverting and displacing those notions of gender that have been naturalized and reified in support of cis-masculine hegemony and heterosexual power," and that it "challenges the idea that certain gender expressions are original or true, while others are secondary and false."[16] For HdP, queer theory held a "hopeful message" and presented a "world of fabulous opportunities."[17] Her primary argument was for a more nuanced interpretation of identity and for the recognition of other narratives within and outside of the

Hija de Perra delivers a lecture in this installation view of the exhibition "En Aguante" presented at Liberia, Bogotá, 2019. Photo: Sebastián Bright.

academic sphere.

Towards the end of the text, HdP shares a vision in which queer theory fulfills its utopian promise: "Can I dream that 'the queer' will continue its legacy of resistance and liberty of expression and not be transformed into a fashion or norm?"[18] This dream evokes José Esteban Muñoz's notion of queer futurity, or utopia, which he describes in his book *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (2009). Muñoz's idea of queer futurity refers to a relational and collective "modality of critique" that exists in the present but is imbued with potentiality. "Queerness," Muñoz writes, "if it is to have any political resonance, needs to be more than an identitarian marker and to articulate a forward-dawning futurity."[19] This stance aligns closely with HdP's position, particularly as it pertains to the potential development of queer thought in Latin America.

While we can identify such links to other vital queer thinkers, HdP's texts and lectures perhaps most importantly enacted confrontations not internal to contemporary theory but with social commentaries and discourses imposed on her body and the bodies of others. Her character was firmly anchored in discourse in its broadest sense, and it functioned as a means to reclaim the criticality of a dissenting body. Yet rather than enacting a generic relation to sexual dissidence, this can be seen as a historically specific response to the fetishization of nonconforming sexual and gender identities and their commodification by the market, a process that reduces them from political subjects to products.

A voice and inspiration for numerous nonnormative sexualities in Chile and abroad, HdP made a plea for sexual transformation in her country, advocating for the de-stigmatization of nonreproductive sexualities, the advancement of education free of sexism, homophobia, and transphobia, and the liberation of desires. In an interview, she was once asked if she would ever enter into "the norm." She responded, "I am blessed, and I'll continue my dissident legacy until the end of my days. And I could also be an alien, and my days will never end, and I'll be eternal."[20] Through annual events organized in her memory and the ongoing dissemination and activation of her texts, videos, photos, and music, Hija de Perra's family, friends, longtime fans, and new supporters remain

Hija de Perra at a Pride march in Santiago, Chile, in 2009 paying tribute to the renowned feminist poet, educator, diplomat, and the first Latin American to win a Nobel Prize in literature, Gabriela Mistral. Courtesy of the artist's personal archive.

dedicated to preserving her work and legacy. This commitment has allowed her provocative and uncompromising politics of sexual dissidence to endure far beyond the specific context in which it originally emerged.

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1
Until 2022, same-sex marriage was unrecognized in the country. Same-sex civil unions were not legally recognized until 2015, when socialist president Michelle Bachelet signed the Agreement on Civil Unions (AUC) law. Contributing significantly to this victory was the Movement for Homosexual Integration and Liberation (MOVILH), which had spearheaded a successful public-awareness campaign. Legalized "therapeutic abortion," in which procedures are only permitted in extreme cases where the mother's life is at risk, the fetus is unviable, or the pregnancy resulted from rape, was not legalized until 2017, three years after HdP's death. Abortion rights were a central concern of HdP's work and became a catalyst for a number of her performances and activist interventions.

2
The Center for University Critical Studies was the first to publish one of her texts, which appeared in a collection of essays on gender theory titled *En Reversa* (2010). HdP was prominently featured on the book cover. Additionally, *Revista Punto Género* , a magazine dedicated to gender and sexuality issues at the University of Chile, published two of HdP's essays. The first, "The End of the Retrograde Idealization of Sexuality Is the Magical Spiral of the Eternal Multisexual Apocalypse," was published in 2012, while the second, "Filthy Interpretations: How 'Queer Theory' Colonizes Our Poor, Aspirational, South American, Third World Context, Perturbing People Enamored of Heterosexual Norms with New Gender Constructs," was published posthumously in 2014. The latter appears in this issue of *e-flux journal* , in both the original Spanish and in English translation.

3
Hija de Perra, "Arte en Acción, Temporada 2," interview by Pato Munita, *Arte en Acción Chapter 4*, ArTV, 2013 and 2015. Author's translation.

4
Juan Pablo Sutherland, interview by Julia Eilers Smith, Santiago de Chile, November 28, 2018.

5
"Entrevista Hija De Perra & Wincy," Revista Fill, YouTube video, January 23, 2013 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IkmKJey7ZXI . Author's translation.

6
Hija de Perra, "Interpretaciones inmundas de cómo la Teoría Queer coloniza nuestro contexto sudaca, pobre aspiracional y tercermundista, perturbando con nuevas construcciones genéricas a los humanos encantados con la heteronorma" (Filthy Interpretations: How "Queer Theory" Colonizes Our Poor, Aspirational, South American, Third World Context, Perturbing People Enamored of Heterosexual Norms with New Gender Constructs), *Revista Punto Género* , no. 4 (2014): 11. All translations from this text by Casey Butcher.

7
HdP, "Interpretaciones inmundas , " 9.

8
The lecture was presented in 2012 at the 3rd Queer Art Fair of Mendoza, hosted by the National University of Cuyo in Argentina.

9
HdP, "Interpretaciones inmundas," 9.

10
HdP, "Interpretaciones inmundas," 12.

11
HdP, "Interpretaciones inmundas , " 10.

12
HdP, "Interpretaciones inmundas , " 13.

13
HdP, "Interpretaciones inmundas," 10.

14
HdP, "Interpretaciones inmundas," 10. The term " *mariconas* " derives from its masculine form, " *maricón*," which is akin to "dyke," "fag," or "faggot" in English, conveying the idea of sexual deviance. " *Mari*" s erves as a references both Mother Mary and Marianism, which play an important role in many Latin American societies. Words such as " *maricón*," and " *mariconas* " provoke a displacement, or a *carnivalization*, of the revered and sanctified figure.

15
HdP, "Interpretaciones inmundas , " 14.

16
HdP, "Interpretaciones inmundas," 15.

17
HdP, "Interpretaciones inmundas," 14.

18
HdP, "Interpretaciones inmundas," 16.

19
José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopias: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (NYU Press, 2009), 87.

20
"Entrevista Hija De Perra & Wincy."

"Negative Anthropology" is a new series of essays, translations, and historical texts that center on disability, sexual dissidence, technics, race, and anti-colonialism. Although the materials in the series do not pursue a single shared argument, what joins them is a focus on the gap between forms of insurgent or resistant activity and the models of political representation and visibility that deny the force and legitimacy of such forms. Set within the profound shifts in technical, social, and ecological relations that mark the mutations of capital over the past two centuries, the series borrows its title from a term used by Günther Anders and Ulrich Sonnemann. In their accounts, "negative anthropology" names a reckoning with the human through what it is not *: through the distance from the ideals historically posed for and imposed on it, and through the limits and failures of prospects for meaningful social transformation. Departing from that often philosophical work towards questions embedded in social and cultural history, the texts in this series consider the ways that even seemingly radical political frameworks—including those that rely on notions of of community and pride—have often been unable to account either for subjectivities that are not legible within their parameters or for the potent kinds of collectivity and action that start not from any presumed commonality but in the negative space around what gets understood as human in the first place.*

—Evan Calder Williams, Contributing Editor

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Hija de Perra

Filthy Interpretations: How "Queer Theory" Colonizes Our Poor, Aspirational, South American, Third World Context ...

Piercing the virginal and magically seduced gaze of our Latin American ancestors, the famous Western conceptualization of sexuality—regrettably manipulated by the institution of the Church—arrived on a mystical ship. A new and deadly thinking was discharged across these lands, cemented through bloody insult and pillaging that continue unabated to this day, all with the aim of civilizing—according to chilling and ignorant criteria—the savage beasts that lived in this unknown paradise.[1]

It's astonishing how this new form of thinking and its magical, mystical, religious, forcefully imposed representations spread. Today, shockingly, we still have it inscribed in our neuronal impulses and in each and every cell that makes up our *mestizo* body.

Thus, in a land where twisted Catholic laws didn't exist, alien ideals were progressively imposed, through death and shameless aggression, on every region where this tempestuous scum propagated itself—destroying our rich and original Indigenous culture.

The conquistadors saw Indigenous men as wild, effeminate beings because of their adornments, and considered Indigenous women promiscuous because of their partial nudity.

This photograph of Hija de Perra appeared in the 2009 exhibition "El Glamour de la Basura," Centro Arte Alameda, Santiago, Chile. Photo: Lorena Ormeño.

Our ancestors were dressed up in clothing completely foreign to their own culture, their hair was cut to differentiate men from women, and they were forbidden from maintaining their many intersexual practices that, given their "aberrant" nature, perturbed the moralist Spanish mind.

In our vulnerable and half-sleeping Latin American socioculture today, we are still exposed to norms inherited from these violent conquistadors by way of a social, religious-moralist indictment that has mutated, for better or for worse, shaping these brutish forms of thought.

Do we exist because they discovered us?

It seems that our voice is only valued when the dominant ones encounter us and make us exist. It's as if our history prior to colonization would've never happened … as if everything began with the discovery of America for these people who didn't even know where they were, much less that we had existed—for many years—free of their disgusting miseries.

Where do we speak from today? From a land with history, or from a new territory discovered by others?

Today I speak geographically situated in the South, but it often seems that I am validated by speaking, as it were, from the North, as if following the dominator's matrix of thought, which continues to guide us. I'm referring to how new understandings of Gender pile up at our borders and hem us in with new labels to advance and understand the exercises of existence and sexual difference.

So today, those from the North point us toward a new way of reading, so that we in the South can understand what already existed in our lands …

Yes! *Maricona* culture has always existed within our borders, but it hadn't previously been brought into focus in a way that unified its contents and saw them as fodder for a regimented or movement-based struggle—in the sense that the historical trajectory of new sexual identities and their sociocultural manifestations are often understood.

This Moche pot, circa 150–800 AD, depicts anal sex between two male cadaveric figures. Courtesy of Larco Museum, Lima, Peru.

For example, as the writer Juan Pablo Sutherland narrates in his book *Marica Nation*:

> In the seventies and eighties in Latin America, crimes against homosexuals continued to be a daily reality in Brazil, Argentina, and the rest of the region, … leaving a bloodstain that's difficult to erase. In those years, … a large portion of South America was governed by military dictatorships, and many incipient initiatives arose in the face of brutal repression. In Argentina, the Homosexual Liberation Front was born, led by the poet and anthropologist Néstor Perlongher … In Chile, at the outset of the Popular Unity government, the first public homosexual demonstration was organized in the emblematic Plaza de Armas of Santiago, a protest that was characterized in the left-wing press as degrading and perverted.[2]

Today it seems like everything we'd done in the past is rising up and harmonizing with what Saint Foucault, in his day, described in the *History of Sexuality* and which, combined with years of marvelous feminism, finally arrived at what Saint Butler registered as "queer."

I'm a new *mestiza latina* from the Southern Cone who never intended to be identified taxonomically as "queer" and who now, for gender theorists—according to new understandings, studies, and reflections that originate in the North—fits perfectly in that category, which proposes a botanical name for my extravagant species and defames it as "minority."

When I discerned the tragicomedy of making a radical distinction of difference and refused to go along with the established gender binarism, I had thought that I was just a deformed, inadequate, and very effeminate human with a body biologically recognized as masculine. Logically a sin; excessively approximate to the abnormal, perverted, and deviant; socially cloistered as an immoral subject who didn't deserve to enter the kingdom of heaven—I thought I had to beg for mercy, cry out for help to cure myself of this upsetting and frenetic pathology that made me withdraw from what was politically correct and established as "natural" in my geopolitical context.

I bravely resolved to confront others, and I nourished myself with shocking gluttonies that upended the social constructions typically populating our South American goings-on. I witnessed oppression and hostility firsthand, along with the discriminatory pleasure others experience by feeling upright and superior, meanwhile destroying personal integrity and trashing human dignity.

As a child I never identified with gender binarism. I felt I fit naturally into another, much more harmonious situation, and I played children's games meant for both sides. I played soccer, and with Barbies; I kissed girls, and I kissed boys. Without a doubt, my childhood was sensational, pluralistic—and no child ever rebuked me in the least. On the contrary, everything emerged naturally from the free flow of life.

In the eighties, when I was five years old, they enrolled me against my will in an all-boys Catholic school. The situation seemed very bizarre to me. Every morning I prayed to the little Virgin so that she would change me into a princess. And when my little boy classmates played Star Wars, I was always Princess Leia. I always took the boys I liked by the hand, and the teacher would shout from a distance, "Boys don't hold each other's hands!" My mind, ignorant of heterosexual norms, never understood those shouts, which sought to restrict my natural, childish liberties.

After having many boyfriends in elementary and middle school, and rewarding boys who scored soccer goals with kisses on the mouth, one of the schoolteachers discovered my doll! Yes! It was my fabulous She-Ra doll—the twin sister of He-Man.

This teacher called my parents into school. She isolated me and sent me to the guidance counselor's office.

After a profuse and traumatizing cry—because I did not understand the strange situation in which I found myself embroiled—I ended up enduring four years of psychological treatment to cure me of my homosexuality.

It is well known that homosexuality-as-pathology was eliminated from psychiatric textbooks only as recently as 1973, but since the dictatorship in my country began that same year … between the bombs and bloody, cannibalistic killings, surely that information never managed to get through to Chile. And so, my case was treated as a sickness, a mental disorder that was possible to cure through therapy. In this way, I could be made to successfully adapt to the patriarchal, cis-male chauvinist, heteronormative order.

As you can see, the results of my therapy were fabulous! I quickly learned to trick my psychologist, exploring my internal masculinity and performing like the most brutish and clever of men!

When the doctor signed my release, my body lit up like a bulb. It filled with freedom, and, in a burst of otherworldly healing, the advice that Gloria Trevi preaches today was then made flesh.

I let down my hair, I dressed like a queen, I wore heels, I put on makeup, and I was beautiful. I walked to the door—I felt you shout after me, but your chains could no longer hold me—and I looked into the night. It was no longer dark; it was sequined!

Mattel's She-Ra versus Shadow Weaver doll set, 2019.

Now, according to our current and much-maligned reality, altered as it is by new orders of sexual classification and declassification, I should enroll myself in and become enamored of one of them so I can get along with this imposed neo-culture, which informs me of the fact that I represent a certain something that binds or unbinds me to the imposed binary gender system.

Following such reasoning while pluralistically oppressed and disorientated—amid so much new erudition that mixes and destabilizes what is coherent for some, and which for others is subject to constant change according to life's sexual metamorphoses—and trying to identify with one of these neat little boxes … it only sends shivers down my spine.

Presently:

Am I a transvestite lesbian sodomite, fiery and citified?

Am I a sinful, effeminate bisexual with counter-sexual features suffering a delirium of transsexual transgression?

Am I an abnormal techno-woman with multi-sexual nymphomaniac carnal whims?

Am I a sexual monster normalized by the academy in the concrete jungle?

Am I a soul that God punished for becoming inverted, twisted, and ambiguous?

Am I a scintillatingly ornate, poor feminine homosexual inclined to capitalist sodomy?

Am I a transvestite penetrator of lubricated orifices ready for passionate episodes?

Am I a body in continuous identitarian flux in search of sexual pleasure?

Given the multiple extant forms of oppression and mechanisms of control, it is no longer clear if you are man, woman, gay, lesbian, transvestite, transgender, androgynous, or bisexual.

Today, social class, race, education, and geographic location all influence the concept of gender, although some who love heterosexual norms don't want to open their little, conservative eyes and see the reality that's right under their noses.

Why can't some people understand this simple premise?

Miguel Cabrera, Casta Painting 1: From Spaniard and Indian, Mestiza, 1763. Museum of Mexican History, Monterrey, Mexico. License: CC BY-SA 4.0.

Sometimes I am weighed down by the dominant paradigm and feel trapped in a narrow model of two sexes.

What's so great about being standardized and looking like a regiment?

Why is this idea politically suited to Latin America?

Just how upsetting is it to be indifferent to understanding which sexual box you fit into?

What is the problem with another individual being sexually ambiguous and difficult to read?

In what sense is it right and good to only understand which sexuality best accommodates your life by appearance and practice?

Why must you make it your business to know if I like to fuck excrement, or if I like old women to puke on me while I masturbate in mall urinals?

This is why it has been necessary to construct other terms that permit us to understand these very real aspects of our sexual lives from another perspective.

The expression "queer" descended on Latin America around the mid-nineties. Keep in mind the term had been coined in the North in the eighties.

Since we're on the periphery of this North American debate, this information arrived belatedly and managed to be interpreted in a most singular fashion. As Sutherland describes it,

> Some have run to inscribe their practices within the "queer" cathedral, as if to sanctify themselves in the most recent neo-vanguard of radical sexual politics. Others have attempted to translate the term from widely divergent lexical approaches: twisted, oblique, post-identitarian, weird, inverted, all of them performing linguistic gymnastics that attempt to evidence a normative malaise, a theoretical revelation, a Promethean flight from identity … They all play, on the political scene, at giving voice to a rejected and stigmatized experience.[3]

In a chapter of the book *Por un feminismo sin mujeres* (Toward a feminism without women), Felipe Rivas narrates:

> " *Teoría queer*" is not the same as "queer theory" owing to the mode by which the Castilian enunciation sheds the political complexities that its role as critical thought might otherwise entail and which are contained in the very gesture enacted by its name. If in the United States, people like David Halperin denounce the rapid institutionalization of a "queer theory" that has been normalized by academic success, in Latin America and Spain this process seems to be unfolding at an accelerated rate due to the absence of tensions provoked by its reception in the local academic spaces, where no question or threat is perceived in its nomenclature, but rather a new, glamorous formulation of knowledge exported from the United States … The market in the peripheral countries of South America usually translates the name of its products into English as an advertising technique designed to increase the symbolic status of the commodity.[4]

We understand that in Latin America it is not the same thing to say " *teoría maricona*" as it is to say " *teoría queer* ," and therefore, this most snobbish of phonetic expressions helps offset suspicion on the part of academic gatekeepers, and avoids producing tensions and repercussions that might otherwise stigmatize this type of knowledge as illegitimate.

Can we enjoy "queer" shopping in our latitudes?[5]

Today, thank God, we have everything we need to take up the "queer" banner in the metropolis: a thousand products to transform ourselves into ambiguous beings, sexually difficult to read, and to go along performing identitarian transgression for life itself. Today it is possible to study this theory in universities and receive reliable information on the theme. Today it is commonplace to buy and sell books that translate this hopeful message and transport it to your nightstand. Today the possibilities offered by multi-sexual meetups, bars, discos, and so on exist and are at our disposal. Today there are bands with "queer" aesthetics whose music you can acquire and enjoy. Today there are stores with counter-sexual devices for our pluralistic, cyber-carnal stimulation. A world of fabulous opportunities to put our discourse into practice and achieve the aesthetic extravagance necessary to feel we are involved in and sanctified by all things "queer."

The economic system easily collects new identities and imbues them with a pseudo-democratic aura. That's what happened with the no-less-problematic concept already absorbed by a taxonomic and identitarian torrent, affirming "queer" subjects and "queer" politics. According to Slavoj Zižek:

> We would have to support "queer" political action to the degree that it analogizes its struggle to the point

> that … it mines the potential of capitalism itself. The problem, however, is that with its continuous transformation toward a tolerant, "post-political," multicultural regime, the capitalist system is capable of neutralizing "queer" causes and integrating them as "lifestyles."[6]

What is the future of this theory that runs the risk of being swallowed up and bought at a cheap price by the capitalist system?

We can note that in the context of academic research related to gender and sexual identity, this "queer" theory that seduces and enchants us has the virtue of offering a novelty that implies an etymological crossing of boundaries without referring to anything in particular, which leaves the question of its detonations open to argument and revision.

Thanks to that ephemeral nature, "queer" identity could apply to any person who ever felt out of place in the face of restrictions imposed by heterosexuality and established gender roles.

It proposes that nothing in our identities is fixed—that gender, like all other aspects of identity, is performed, and that people, therefore, can change.

Its contribution is the possibility of subverting and displacing those notions of gender that have been naturalized and reified in support of cis-masculine hegemony and heterosexual power. It challenges the idea that certain gender expressions are original or true, while others are secondary and false.

Saint Butler proposes the denaturalization of "hetero-reality," in which normative sexual practice transforms into a regime of power that plays a role in every social relation: the economy, legal logic, public discourse, daily life, etc.

The "queer" struggle doesn't aim only for tolerance and equal status, but to challenge these institutions and ways of understanding the world.

"Queer" theory tries to understand different modes of sexual desire and how culture defines them.

Let us understand that we are part of a Latin America where an obvious pluri-sexual and multi-sexual culture exists that many don't want to see or understand, where sex change and implant operations are performed every day, where free human beings, enjoying their experience between various genders and enjoying the natural bounty of sexuality, exist and coexist with people who are undergoing hormone treatments to modify their bodies and become more like who they aspire and feel themselves to be. In parallel, unfortunately, others are full of religious guilt and hide, condemning themselves to dark underworlds, thinking that they are immoral monsters persecuted by that part of society that points a finger at them, seeks to make them feel inferior, and does not recognize their rights.

Finally, we are part of a jungle where an equilibrium between good and evil prevails, a context in which we should elevate our level of consciousness and seek to understand the human who sought to move away from knowledge and base their life instead on fear, deciding to use others and disrespect different kinds of lives.

It would be in our collective best interest to abandon old definitions. In the same way that you discovered the truth about Santa Claus and the Easter Bunny, you now discover that there's been a frame-up—a made-up history, an idealized version of all those things you never wanted to reflect on before and which you adored as if they were gods.

I'm not standing here, in the South of the world, to say who is right. I only wish to throw into disarray prevailing illusions and those idealizations that mystify our problems, and to pop the balloons in which you've come to believe. There's nothing left for me but to suggest that you *think big!*

Can I dream that "the queer" will continue its legacy of resistance and liberty of expression and not be transformed into a fashion or norm?

I hope the utopian idea of my disturbed mind becomes a reality and "queerness" is transmogrified into a constant deconstruction and loving creation, where we can all get along with wisdom and pleasure.

After my nighttime masturbation I will continue dreaming and imploring the universe for education in Latin America to change, and that from the very beginning of human subject-formation we will utilize these kinds of knowledge so that our children, free of generic, imposed impurities, might form themselves free from social stigmas, and that this idea of learning in an environment of gender neutrality—eradicating stereotypes and inequality—spreads as forcefully as the reigning mystical ideologies once did, to reach every corner of the world.

He dicho! Caso cerrado.

X

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Translated by Casey Butcher with editorial assistance from Santiago Silva Daza and Judah Rubin.

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Hija de Perra (1980–2014), a radical figure of countercultural sexuality in Chile and Latin America, was a drag artist, activist, essayist, and educator.

1
This text was originally presented as a lecture at the 3rd Queer Art Fair of Mendoza, hosted by the Center of Information and Communication of the National University of Cuyo in Argentina, November 16, 2012. Thanks to Aberrosexuales, Universidad de Cuyo, Lelya Troncoso, Cristeva Cabello, Jorge Díaz, Javiera Ruiz, Esteban Prieto, and my progenitors Rosita and Orlando.

2
Juan Pablo Sutherland, *Nación Marica, prácticas culturales y crítica activista* (Marica nation: Cultural practice and activist critique) (Ripio Ediciones, 2009), 14.

3
Sutherland, *Nación Marica*, 15.

4
Felipe Rivas, *Por un feminismo sin mujeres, fragmentos del segundo circuito de Disidencia Sexual* (Toward a feminism without women: Fragments from the second circuit of sexual dissidence) (Territorios Sexuales Ediciones, 2011), 68.

5
The English word “shopping” appears here in the original Spanish. The author’s wordplay pokes fun at colloquial use of “shopping” (instead of a Spanish phrase like *ir de compras*) in Latin American Spanish. —Ed.

6
Slavoj Zižek, *En defensa de la intolerancia* (In defense of intolerance) (Ediciones Sequitur, 2005), 69. Translated here from the Spanish.

David Morris

Precarious Solidarities: Artists for Democracy in Historical Perspective, Part 1

> Struggle is hazardous and proceeds in spirals and zig-zags.
> —"THE AIMS OF ARTISTS FOR DEMOCRACY," 1974[1]

In his 1978 "Preliminary Notes for a Black Manifesto," the artist Rasheed Araeen writes:

> What is important now is not WHAT WE WERE IN THE PAST, but WHAT WE ARE TODAY ... Finding ourselves surrounded and dominated by the forces which either demand our return to ethnic traditions or make us accept the hegemony of Western developments, WE HAVE NO CHOICE BUT TO OPPOSE THEM BOTH; AND OUT OF THIS CONFRONTATION WILL EMERGE NEW FORMS THAT TRULY REFLECT OUR PARTICULARITY IN THE WORLD TODAY.[2]

Araeen's "TODAY" can be read historically, in the context of the times and places in which he was working on the text—in Karachi and London during 1975–76. It can also be read indexically—the "TODAY" invoking the present, wherever and whenever that may be for the reader. In what follows I try to explore the long "today" across the points suggested by Araeen's words, to talk historically about the present, about particularity in its world(s), and to do so by way of this 1970s "today."

Of course, another sense of this "today" might be *the contemporary*. Our particularity in the world today is the expression of the spirals and zigzags of history; the globalized present is in particular a reiteration of a world map shaped by colonialism.[3] "Contemporary" is a description of the disjunctive coexistence of multiple temporalities, characteristic of globalization.[4] But if contemporaneity—the condition or quality of being contemporary—is an articulation of the temporal logic of global capitalist modernity, it is not reducible to it—hence the Zapatista call for *un mundo donde quepan muchos mundos* (a world where many worlds fit).[5] In "Preliminary Notes," Araeen asks: "How are Third World people trying to enter into the modern era or/and create their own contemporary history? If their voice is muted or not heard at all, what are the underlying causes? And what are the alternatives open to them?" He goes on to note a handful of examples of organized attempts to find Third World alternatives to those directions imposed by the West. The three examples he gives are FESTAC '77 (the Second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture), which took place in Lagos, Nigeria in 1977; Centro de Arte y Comunicación (Center for Art and Communication, CAyC), formed in Buenos Aires, Argentina in 1968; and Artists for Democracy (AFD).

Artists for Democracy, stickers created by artists including John Dugger, David Medalla, and Cecilia Vicuña, for "Arts Festival for Democracy in Chile," Royal College of Art, London, 1974. Courtesy Cecilia Vicuña Studio and England & Co.

AFD, as any artistic or social movement, is the expression of a very particular time and place. In London in 1974, a small group of artists and cultural workers from Chile, the Philippines, the United States, and Britain agreed to form an internationalist organization to offer material and cultural support to liberation movements worldwide. Their immediate context was a declining imperial power in a state of deep crisis. In the words of one contemporary analysis: "There is no doubt that the old British state is going down."[6] Legislation such as the 1968 Commonwealth Immigrants Act and the 1971 Immigration Act, introduced by respective Labour and Conservative administrations, introduced a racialized two-tier citizenship system—"unashamedly racist," in the words of then-premier of India, Indira Gandhi—that provided the blueprint for Britain's current "hostile environment" for migrants.[7] For many of those arriving in London from elsewhere, this did not appear to be a place with especially favorable conditions for the creation of revolutionary culture.[8]

Artists, writers, and intellectuals from all over the world have long gathered in imperial centers for reasons often antithetical to the project of empire.[9] Just as the economic status of a city such as London is based on the labor of peoples from elsewhere, so too is its cultural capital. A project such as AFD exceeds narratives of "Britishness" or "British art history"; it happened in spite of, rather than because of, the imperial nation-state. As cofounder David Medalla wrote at one point: "We are the expatriates of a future world."[10] (Several AFD members had problems with visas to live and work in Britain; one of them narrowly avoided deportation.[11]) Nadine El-Enany argues that contemporary Britain in toto may be understood as "the spoils of empire," rightfully belonging to those whom Britain has historically dispossessed.[12] The British state itself can therefore be considered an object of restitution alongside its many stolen artefacts; to echo the words of Nii Kwate Owoo in his 1970 film *You Hide Me,* it should "immediately and unconditionally be returned to us!" There is nonetheless a critical tension between the contemporary persistence of London's position within international art circuits—hence its gravitational pull for artists the world over—and its distance from where "the real thing" was actually happening. These tensions would both expand and circumscribe AFD's field of activity.

The group was a precarious formation. The founders began to splinter within the first six months; further splits would occur during its subsequent tenure at 143 Whitfield Street. Overall, it managed to sustain itself for a little over three years. A level of volatility is not uncommon in the context of collective political and artistic endeavors; group initiatives that last into the medium-long term are a comparative rarity. Histories of AFD have thus far been largely told in relation to individual artists' biographies, a fact that tells us more about the individualizing ways of constructing art's histories that remain dominant. In practice, the role of the "artist" was a highly fluid one within their activities. What I attend to here is not just

Cecilia Vicuña with her installation A Journal of Objects for the Chilean Resistance at Art Meeting Place, London, 1974. Courtesy Cecilia Vicuña Studio.

whatever was being produced under the name of "art," but everything happening around it or made possible by it. Paradoxically, the "artist" may appear as a rather incidental character in the present story—a collective fiction, perhaps, and one that helps map a different set of possibilities.

The story of AFD may also serve as a reminder of alternative, pre-identitarian political sensibilities. This can be seen, for instance, in the group's ready expression of common cause with peoples across vast cultural, geographic, and geopolitical differences (and regardless of participation from members of those communities), or in the way their Whitfield Street squat was a "queer" space without ever considering itself as such.[13] Such an approach to organizing a space or collective points to a politics grounded in relationships within and across difference, and an understanding that individualized identities can function as barriers rather than a basis for solidarity.

AFD's story is in no respect a singular one; as one participant observed of their milieu: "[A] feature of this period was the formation of groups. Their history has never been written."[14] As such, this text is a call for a history that recognizes art and culture as a wholly non-individuated activity, grounded in the mess of group work and its exponential interrelations.

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From the perspective of one London-based critic, the 1970s was a decade in art where "everything seemed possible."[15] This was a moment where "young artists emerged with a host of heretical alternatives in mind, including film, video, performance, raw documentation, photography and texts."[16] Naeem Mohaiemen, another keen observer of the 1970s, has remarked that the decade was also "a moment when anything seemed possible *politically*, particularly if you're from the left. And it's a moment of promise because of decolonization. But then it pivots and everything starts going dark, by my estimation … It's the period when things didn't work out."[17] AFD is the outgrowth of these two moods of possibility—political and artistic. Its story is of the contradictions and mixed fortunes of both.

What happens when the transnational networks of anti-imperialism from the not-too-distant past are brought into the "global" context of today? Indeed, fascination with the artistic-solidaristic complexes of the seventies is a distinct contemporary mood.[18] Noting this tendency, the

exhibition project "Southern Constellations: The Poetics of the Non-Aligned" hazarded that "in this time of increasing global inequalities, crises, and the widening chasm between the rich and the poor, artists are seeking new ways and means of expression with which to overcome such divisions and perhaps re-establish different, more just global relations."[19] Yet the critical concern is what relationship the "solidarity" expressed in this earlier moment, with its overlapping horizons of decolonization, liberation, and revolutionary struggle, can have to contemporary manifestations, given the distance between then and now. Are such manifestations predicated on "the absence of a context of political practice that might give such exhibitions an effective extra-artistic political force" (as Peter Osborne has argued in another context)?[20] Or, to turn to AFD more concretely: Is this story of a politicized and particularly worldly group of artists remarkable most of all for its anticipation of art's "global?" Or could there be other reasons to return to it now, other lessons we might learn, other ways we might extend it in the present?

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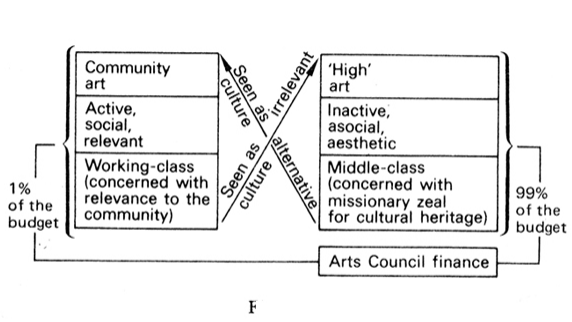
At a conference in 1978 on "The State of British Art," art critic Richard Cork would acknowledge the prevailing attitude in British art at the time: "We are guilty of appalling British imperialist provincialism with regard to the Third World."[21] Araeen's "Preliminary Notes for a Black Manifesto," published in the journals *Black Phoenix* and *Studio International* that same year, offered a trenchant critique of predominant understandings of "internationalism," as something anchored in Europe and North America to the exclusion of the majority of the world. In Araeen's analysis, "international art" may as well be described as "imperialist art," a Western model imposed on the Third World. We may thus think of the prevailing aesthetic model in European and American art contexts at that moment as *international-imperialist* aesthetics. This may be contrasted with what Sanjukta Sunderason terms "partisan aesthetics," to describe artistic practices that were politicized through their adjacency to left-wing activism in Calcutta through the 1940s and '50s.[22] "Partisan" here describes a political position-taking for artists that could support and promote the intersecting political positions of modernity, nationalism, and socialism, through different examples of participation in and disassociation from India's Communist Party. This conjuncture is precisely the shift from a colonial to a postcolonial condition, and the formation of the modern Indian state post-independence; for Sunderason, "partisan aesthetics" refers to those modes of artistic and intellectual practice that articulate the relationships between socialism and modernity in the context of decolonization.

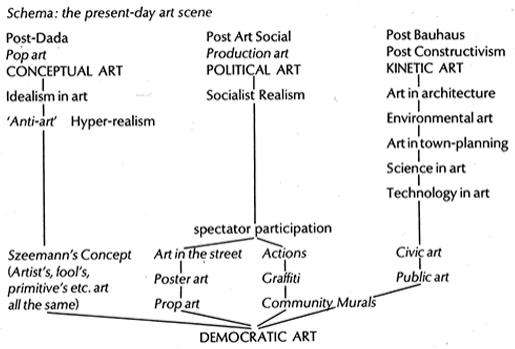
AFD's anti-imperialism was advanced within a still-imperial metropole, and the concept of the partisan offers a point of contrast for understanding how AFD took shape as part of a critical dialogue with internationalist-imperialist aesthetics. As a collective, they were *not* partisan, and deliberately so. They were a self-described "broad front" group of cultural workers operating under the banner of "democracy," and as such they held various political affiliations. (In fact, partisanship towards the Revolutionary Left Movement [MIR] at the close of the Chile Festival, discussed later, was one of the major factors that led to an initial split in the group.) "Democracy" signaled a range of meanings: from specific opposition to the military coup in Chile and commitment to anti-imperialist solidarity with the Third World, to a more general sense of affinity with democratic politics of different types. This extended, in particular, to socialism in its various "really existing" varieties in the mid-1970s, as well as being the expression of a general principle of collective political organization.

The "broad front" strategy extended to AFD's aesthetics, characterized by an experimental spirit realized through a great diversity of artistic approaches. It was unusual in its combination of various and often incompatible tendencies and approaches—many of which can be seen in diagrams drawn up by Su Braden and Frank Popper. Certain features mark AFD out as an outlier within the contemporary art scene at the time: (1) its aesthetic agenda, tending towards performative, literary, and poetic forms; (2) its embrace of "amateur"/DIY/nonart forms;[23] (3) its queer experiment-in-living at Whitfield Street; (4) its demographic makeup; and (5) its internationalism in artistic and political terms. All of this combined in a mercurial admixture of agitprop and avant-garde.

AFD's specific political outlook could only have taken the shape that it did in the years it existed, the mid-to-late 1970s. The years 1973–75 saw the success of several anti-colonial armed struggles. The African Party for the Independence of Guinea and Cape Verde (PAIGC) declared independence in Guinea-Bissau in September 1973, and the following year the Carnation Revolution in Portugal saw the collapse of Estado Novo and the acceleration of the decolonization process in Angola, Mozambique, Cape Verde, and São Tomé and Príncipe. The period saw revolutions in Ethiopia (1974), Laos (1975), Afghanistan (1978), Grenada (1979), and Nicaragua (1979), while the cause of national liberation movements was being advanced at the United Nations, notably in the 1974 New International Economic Order, which highlighted "the interdependence of all members of the world community" and put forward a set of proposals to end the economic colonialism that newly decolonized nations still faced.[24] But above all, the independence of Vietnam, hard won against the forces of United States imperialism, defined the moment. For the Third World and its supporters, much indeed seemed possible.

But the geopolitical outlook was by no means clear. Hopes for a British revolution were raised, while reactionary forces beckoned a Pinochet-style military takeover in





Diagrams from (left) Su Braden, Artists and People (1978); and (right) Frank Popper, Art – Action and Participation (1975).

Britain.[25] AFD was a response to the overthrow of Allende's democratic route to socialism, with support from the US, and the imposition of national debt and structural adjustment programs was already beginning to shape the neocolonial dynamics between the First and Third Worlds (or what would come to be known as the Global North and South). In Southeast Asia, the years following 1975 took increasingly violent turns, defined by the genocide in Cambodia in 1975–79, the Vietnamese-Cambodian war in 1978, and the Vietnamese-Chinese border war in 1979. With anti-imperialism no longer a common cause in the region after 1975, the interference of Cold War geopolitics in Southeast Asia combined with old prejudices and ambitions for regional dominance, with devastating effects. A festival in homage to the victory of the Indochinese peoples, such as that organized by AFD in London in 1975, could only have happened at that moment. As the 1970s drew to a close, the triumphant mood was no longer possible to maintain. And this is also the point at which AFD dissolved.

In a conversation published in a 1979 issue of *Black Phoenix*, Araeen and Medalla discuss the "failure" of AFD's project. In Araeen's analysis, it lay in its inability to deal with cultural imperialism, particularly at the level of artistic practice; for Medalla, it was instead to be found in the disconnect between cultural workers, who had little knowledge of politics but saw it as an opportunity to exhibit, and political radicals, who had little or no interest in art or poetry. These critiques offer some coordinates for thinking about what we might consider "successes" in relation to AFD—namely, how it dealt with cultural imperialism at the level of its practice (or failed to do so), and how it reconciled (or not) the conflicting priorities of its collective.

With this in mind, we may ask: What was the relationship between the twin senses of artistic and political possibility at this very particular moment of 1974–77? What was AFD's relationship to those to whom it dedicated its activity—"the people", "the masses," "the international working class?"[26] What publics did it in fact gather? What practices and languages were established towards its aim of giving "material and cultural support to liberation movements worldwide" and towards democratic and progressive cultures?

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The "Arts Festival for Democracy in Chile" (Royal College of Art, London, October 14–30, 1974) is a place to start considering some of these questions. As the first and largest event organized under the banner of AFD, the Chile Festival may be the clearest instance of a collective artistic manifestation developing from, and contributing to, progressive political movements. The central role of culture in Salvador Allende's "peaceful route to socialism" provided a model for artists and cultural workers, and the shock of the 1973 coup saw a great wave of solidarity organizing across the world. In Britain, the national Chile Solidarity Campaign, with its basis in a strong trade union movement, quickly took the lead in organizational efforts to campaign for democracy to be restored for the Chilean people, and in support, too, of the several thousand Chileans exiled in the UK. One of those exiles was Cecilia Vicuña, who later wrote that:

> AFD's revolutionary attempt was to dream on the scale of the Americas by reversing the colonial order of the art world, where the metropolis dictates the aesthetic language the colonies must follow. It offered an alternative model of creativity generated from South America and the Third World … where revolutionary politics and experimental art merge with ease.[27]

Vicuña's retrospective account emphasizes the festival's debt to the examples of "new forms of collective participation" provided by 1960s–70s Chile, including Allende's agrarian reforms and Project Cybersyn, the

pioneering experiment in cybernetic governance. From this perspective, the Chile Festival is seen as extending the alternative models of creativity that developed during the Chilean revolutionary process. And this represented a reversal of the prevailing internationalist-imperialist dynamic, where cultural-political developments of the supposedly "peripheral" world could provide models for cultural workers worldwide, and especially in the imperial metropole. In an interview towards the end of the AFD collective's life, Medalla would emphasize the group's purpose as a space to learn from what was happening in the Third World (offering Guinea-Bissau and Vietnam as examples): "New types of culture are being created, you see, and because one is away from these places doesn't mean one should be blind to what is happening there."[28]

Besides Allende's Chile, AFD drew from cultural-artistic models emerging from numerous contexts. European-American avant-garde traditions, still dominant within art schools and the art system at large, operated as genuine inspiration and critical foil; and these were complemented by understandings of avant-garde developments within a wider geographical scope, such as the internationalism championed as part of Signals Gallery in London and its accompanying publication *Signals Newsbulletin*, particularly with respect to Latin America. In the Philippines in the late 1960s, the Ermita district of Manila was a formative context for several core AFD members; "happenings" took place in unexpected venues, from streets, parks, and by the sea wall, as well as cafes, bars, restaurants, churchyards, and cemeteries. These events mingled with marches against the Vietnam War and the activities of the communist youth organization Kabataang Makabayan.[29] We may also speculate about AFD's continuity with what Patrick Flores describes as a wider "installative" tendency in art in Southeast Asia, a "relationality activated by multiple forces" and motivated by the desire "to convene an art world, or a relational or transpersonal world of art, by creating conditions for people to assemble along the various axes of dissent, development, nationalism and solidarity."[30]

Cultural models from elsewhere opened significant space for invention and projection. China was of special interest to the international post-'68 generation, as a powerful locus of inspiration, fantasy, as well as orientalist misunderstanding through which political and artistic questions could be advanced. Jun Terra recalls the Maoist influence on his cultural-political milieu in Manila, and Guy Brett and John Dugger each participated in Society for Anglo Chinese Understanding (SACU) tours of the People's Republic during the 1970s; these experiences furnished a range of new ideas on art, which were elaborated in writing and exhibition-making. This included Brett's championing of non-professional "spare-time artists" and the touring exhibition "Peasant Painting from Huhsien [ ] County";[31] Terra's Maoist readings of the art of his contemporaries;[32] Caroline Tisdall's *Guardian* article based on Dugger's experiences in China and the social and economic position of artists there;[33] and "People Weave a House!," Dugger's 1972 exhibition collaboration with Medalla and others at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, in which visitors were invited to collectively weave architecture using a large loom and transparent plastic tubes. Altogether China appeared to offer an example the British art world should learn from—"the basis for a completely new culture," as one observer put it[34]—constructing an irresistible image of the artist in society, however distant its realities may be: cultural work prioritized over individual careers, artists unalienated in their work and supported by government salaries, and an emphasis "on community, or the sensual contact of bodies, or food, or the earth."[35]

Dugger and Medalla's collaboration first developed through shared interests in Buddhism and interconnected South Asian intellectual traditions, and through their mutual involvement in the Exploding Galaxy (1967–68), a multidisciplinary collective and "dance-drama" group.[36] Their aim was to "break down the invisible barrier between 'creator' and 'spectator' ... Art [should] be a living process in which one, two or several people formulate suggestions that others take up and develop in different directions."[37] Dugger and Medalla would travel together to visit the Kerala Kathakali dance company, a major influence on the collective, spending time in India and Sri Lanka as part of an eighteen-month journey via ship with additional stops in Dakar, Senegal, Durban, South Africa, Mombassa, Kenya, Pakistan, and Manila.[38] The experience was formative: as summarized by Drower, they "left England as Buddhists and came back as Maoists."[39] Dugger and Medalla would draw heavily on Mao's writings in their articulation of their art practices back in London, individually and through the Artists Liberation Front (ALF, a precursor to AFD formed in 1971). Maoist precepts offered a new rationale for their ongoing experiments in participatory artmaking: "the masses have boundless creative power" indicated mass participation as the basis of a revolutionary people's culture; participation art offered "a democratic form of proletarian cultural internationalism."[40] As the banner that hung at the entrance of their People's Participation Pavilion at Documenta 5 (1972) boldly proclaimed: "Socialist Art through Socialist Revolution!"

ALF's (over)identification with certain orthodoxies of "socialist art" is particularly curious because in general the work they produced at the time is barely recognizable in terms of the aesthetic agendas of "really existing socialism." The British art context of the time included a wide spectrum of leftist practices, including the League of Socialist Artists, a group whose rhetorical style bore strong similarities to ALF but whose arguments and practice favored orthodox socialist realist aesthetics. By contrast, ALF's aesthetics continued to develop according to their interest in experimental and participatory artistic forms emergent and popular at the time. It is possible that

This is a photograph taken by the artist Stephen Pusey of a mural he completed in 1977 in Covent Garden, London, UK. License: CC BY-SA 3.0.

"Arts Festival for Democracy in Chile," Royal College of Art, London, October 1974. Lynn MacRitchie (left) stands next to one of the exhibition's "campamento" environments. Photograph courtesy Jun Terra.

some still saw a vanguard role for the ALF group within the "broad front" movement that AFD sought to build; indeed, this might explain certain conflicts that would later emerge in the group. In any case, in Brett's estimation the major difference was that "AFD was open to more people and therefore more ideas," and its "broad front" aesthetics allowed the coexistence of "orthodox" and "experimental" styles.[41] At the entrance to the Chile Festival hung a large-scale painting by AFD cofounder Stephen Pusey—whose practice would develop into civic activism and the community mural movement—which depicted Allende, Pablo Neruda, and the Chilean masses, in grand socialist-realist style.[42]

The Chile Festival's numerous symposia, such as "Cultural Imperialism and Latin American Art and Culture" and "Art and Culture in Asia," reflected the worldwide scope of the group's transnational ambitions. But the group also turned its attention to its immediate colonial context: the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. A 1974 planning document drafted by Medalla includes plans for a travelling exhibition that would "examine the history of working class culture in England, from the beginning of capitalism to the present day."[43] The exhibition, never realized, was to address the legacy of British colonialism within Britain itself.[44] It also set out to explore the potentials of "minority cultures" within the imperial nation.[45]

The program for the Chile Festival's opening night, on October 14, 1974, reveals several significant connections to Black history in Britain. The night began with an invocation on conga drums by Trinidadian artist Roy Caboo, who had been amongst those on trial in 1971 as part of the infamous Mangrove Nine case, a landmark in the struggle against racist policing in Britain. Poems were read by seven-year-old Accabre Huntley, daughter of Eric Huntley and Jessica Huntley, founders of Bogle-L'Ouverture Publications, one of the first independent Black-owned publishers and booksellers in the UK.[46] Barbadian poet and communist Peter Blackman also featured on the opening program, reading from his 1952 poem *My Song is for All Men*.[47] The festival went on to include a symposium, "Art and Culture in Africa and the Black Culture of the Caribbean," chaired by Saint

Vincent–born Lester Lewis, who would found the Hackney Black People's Association, and with contributions from groups including the UHURU Arts Group, who developed theatre, dance, poetry, exhibitions, and participatory "Grounding" events with the Black community in Chapeltown, Leeds.[48]

program at AFD's festival for Vietnam, which involved a durational performance by Limited Dance Company (including Rose English, Sally Potter and Jacky Lansley). Ireland was amongst the concerns that led to another split in the group, with some feeling it was necessary to focus on the struggle "on their doorstep" rather than the more "distant" concerns of Third World liberation—a dynamic

Rasheed Araeen performing Paki Bastard (Portrait of the Artist as a Black Person), 143 Whitfield Street, London, July 31, 1977. Courtesy the artist and Grovesnor Gallery.

Various more "local" issues register in AFD's archive, including campaigns on housing, healthcare services, and abortion; and through performances, such as Araeen's 1977 *Paki Bastard*, which refracted Britain's (post)imperial conjuncture through the racism of British society.[49] AFD overlapped with numerous other left political groupuscules in London at the time, including the ALF; the British Black Panthers, via Araeen and H.O. Nazareth; and trade unionism and British second-wave feminism. Lynn MacRitchie, for instance, was a union representative at the hospital where she worked as a cleaner and a regular at feminist meetings throughout her time with AFD. The conflict in Ireland was a live issue, as a mainstay on the national news and the focus of large-scale campaigns such as Troops Out, and as a reference in the events

reproduced across the British left in the mid-1970s.[50]

The intent behind AFD's unrealized exhibition on the history of the working class in England may be understood with reference to a number of common theoretical sources. One is the work of Amílcar Cabral. AFD participants were familiar with his work following a talk at Westminster Central Hall in 1971, and Cabral would inform Araeen's "Black Manifesto."[51] Cabral's emphasis on culture as integral to anti-colonial liberation movements offered a powerful example for cultural workers worldwide, whatever their proximity to armed struggle.[52] Cabral's strategy of a "return to the source"—the development of popular, "indigenous"

cultural forms as a tool to resist colonial domination—resonates with another reference point common to AFD members: the Maoist principle "from the masses to the masses" (also known as "the mass line"). This recommended a cyclical process: listening to the "scattered and unsystematic" ideas of the people, concentrating them into systematic ideas, taking them back to explain to the people and using them as a guide for action, and then repeat: "And so on, over and over again in an endless spiral, with the ideas becoming more correct, more vital and richer each time. Such is the Marxist theory of knowledge."[53]

In the early 1970s, Dugger and Medalla would position their experiments in participation art as direct expressions of this principle. The 1974 planning document reiterates AFD's commitment to the mass line, but raises the need for determining more precisely how "progressive" art, as they called it, should be defined, including: "(1) a meaningful and qualitative definition of the *new* in art (beyond formal terms); (2) ability to distinguish *progressive* vs *retrograde* examples of experimental art." Noting that "the 'new' and the 'experimental' do not necessarily confer upon an artistic production the quality of being truly progressive," the text surveys historical examples of progressive tendencies (Dadaists, Cubists, Russian Constructivists, Fernand Léger, John Heartfield, Vladimir Tatlin, Bertolt Brecht, Vladimir Mayakovsky) as well as retrograde (some expressionists, symbolists, Futurists, Ezra Pound, F. T. Marinetti), with reference to a fundamental question: "FOR WHOM?"[54] The statement rejects "poster-and-slogan" style art, referencing Lenin's and Mao's remarks ("both of whom vigorously opposed it") and acknowledging that there are also many significant artists who nonetheless fall short in their commitments to scientific socialism. It argues instead for an attitude of "critical assimilation" to art and artists: to "broaden and extend their *formal* artistic discoveries, and *infuse them with proletarian content*"; to "be able to distinguish what Lenin called ' *the democratic and socialist elements in every national culture*,' concentrate them and bring them to a higher stage in our artistic production"; and to "follow in a living way Chairman Mao's teaching: 'Make the past serve the present' (culturally speaking, the *past* here means all valuable artistic heritage of *every* culture in the world, and the *present* refers to the progressive forces of our time)."[55]

In practice, what was AFD's relationship to "the masses?" In the estimation of one Exploding Galaxy member, the 1960s counterculture was heavily skewed towards British elites and white almost without exception.[56] The core members of AFD came from a wider mix of social backgrounds and a significant number were from other parts of the world. Amongst the British were aristocratic, bourgeois, and working-class individuals.[57] Its members from outside the UK came from a comparable range of class backgrounds, but their "foreignness" presented additional barriers for Britain's overwhelmingly white, parochial art establishment.

These dynamics could produce curious alliances between radical and conservative tendencies in the art-institutional landscape. Signals Gallery, for instance, clashed with the narrow nationalist agenda of the Arts Council of Great Britain in the mid-1960s, which would have had no interest in providing support for such a conspicuously internationalist project. Medalla and Signals cofounder Paul Keeler would therefore turn to other sources of support, sustaining the gallery through more old-fashioned, private means. Signals relied on an "enlightened" elite patronage (e.g., Keeler's father, an optical instruments manufacturer, and others brought in by Brett and poet Hugo Williams, both alumni of the boarding school Eton).[58] While the agenda of the Arts Council did change by the 1970s, when AFD received some project- or artist-specific grants, the group was still not able to achieve the necessary support to make their project sustainable long-term.[59]

In such circumstances, what material support was AFD able to offer to liberation movements? The Chile Festival did not receive any state funding, but the initiative was supported by prominent figures in the establishment; the Royal College of Art was secured as a venue (Lord Esher, the rector and vice provost, was Brett's father), and the list of sponsors included British members of parliament, a fellow of the Royal Society, and Nobel Prize–winning scientist, diplomats, ambassadors, and international cultural figures. Material support for Chile was to be raised in an auction of works donated by artists, with proceeds split fifty-fifty, half to the artist and half to the Chilean cause. The auction raised three hundred pound sterling, from thirty artworks sold, which was given to Alvaro Bunster, English representative of the Chile Anti-Fascist Front in Rome, with the recommendation that the full amount be given to MIR as an organization within the front.[60] A further one hundred pounds was raised by a later ICA auction. For a group of unwaged cultural workers operating without a budget, four hundred pounds was not an insignificant amount. But to put it in perspective, a Trade Union Congress campaign for Chile that same year raised £3929 in total, with AFD's total closer to the lower-middle range of donations by individual trade union branches.[61]

Beyond AFD's moderate financial contribution to liberation struggles, how else was its material and cultural support enacted? Much can be said for the simple gesture of a festival in solidarity (as explored in the second part of this text). Another powerful example is provided by Dugger's "Chile Vencerá" banner, as seen in probably the most widely circulated photograph of AFD, of the Chile Solidarity Campaign rally in London's Trafalgar Square in 1974. The scale is extraordinary: this monumental banner proclaiming "Chile Will Prevail" at the head of a ten thousand–strong gathering for the Chilean people. But the image also speaks to the interdependence of artistic practice and social movement, for the scale of the rally is

John Dugger's "Chile Vencerá" banner mounted on Nelson's Column in Trafalgar Square, London, 1974. © John Dugger Archive, England & Co.

what makes the scale of the work possible.

Yet material-cultural support can also ripple out in more subtle ways. The Chile Festival took place at the crest of a wave of energy generated by the optimism of Allende's victory in Chile and the subsequent shock and outrage generated by the coup. By way of contrast, we may consider AFD's homage to Ho Chi Minh and the Indochinese Peoples, which took place the following year at a much-reduced scale compared to the Chile Festival. By 1975, Vietnam was no longer the subject of widespread campaigning in Britain—though it had been just a few years earlier, as seen in major rallies organized by the Vietnam Solidarity Campaign (VSC) in 1967 and '68. In its celebration of Vietnam's victory, the AFD group were more in tune with the mood of the US left—where fifty-thousand joined an end-of-war rally in New York in May 1975—and, more generally, the anti-imperialist mood across the world, in stark contrast to the generally muted response in Britain. Having left the UK for Colombia, Vicuña would produce her own homage to the Vietnamese people through a series of paintings and banners. One such work, *Chile saluda a Vietnam!* (*Chile Salutes Vietnam!*, 1975), depicts a Mapuche woman and a female Vietnamese guerilla, passing on a rifle and revolutionary book. It is a banner cut into strips—echoing "Chile Vencerá"—and was shown in Vicuña's 1977 solo exhibition at the Fundación Gilberto Alzate Avendaño, Bogotà: "Homenaje a Vietnam" (Homage to Vietnam).

To be continued in Part 2, December 2023.

X

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1
"THE AIMS OF ARTISTS FOR DEMOCRACY, and some suggestions for our organisation, with proposals for immediate and long-range tasks," November 26, 1974, Guy Brett collection, Tate Archive.

2
Rasheed Araeen, "Preliminary Notes for a Black Manifesto," *Black Phoenix* , no.1 (Winter 1978): 11.

3
By "our" I mean something gesturing towards the universal, with "particularity" as dialectical counterpoint—following Araeen's own idiosyncratic dialectical thinking/practice. I'm grateful to Kylie Gilchrist for discussion of Araeen's explicit use of dialectics in his work at this time.

4
See Peter Osborne, "Existential Urgency: Contemporaneity, Biennials and Social Form," *Nordic Journal of Aesthetics* 24, no. 49–50 (2016).

5
I am grateful to Migrants in Culture for introducing me to *un mundo donde quepan muchos mundos* http://www.migrantsinculture.com/ .

6
Tom Nairn, *The Break-Up of Britain: Crisis and Neo-Nationalism* (New Left Books, 1977), 13.

7
See Ian Sanjay Patel, *We're Here Because You Were There: Immigration and the End of Empire* (Verso, 2021).

8
AFD cofounder Cecilia Vicuña, for instance, quickly realized that "the real thing" was happening back in Latin America. Vicuña, conversation with Courtney J. Martin at the symposium "Precarious Solidarities: Artists for Democracy (1974–77)," February 2, 2023 https://www.afterall.org/videos/part-1-2-symposium-precarious-solidarities-artists-for-democracy-1974-77-2-february-2023/ .

9
See, for instance, Benedict Anderson, *Under Three Flags: Anarchism and the Anti-Colonial Imagination* (Verso, 2006); or the April 2021 issue of *Chimurenga Chronic* , "imagi-nation nwar—genealogies of the black radical imagination in the francophone world."

10
we are the expatriates of a future world , drawing for David Medalla's performance *Tatlin at the Funeral of Malevitch* , 1976. This is not to suggest that these artists should not be included in national canons but to emphasize the expansive horizons their work demands.

11
Dom Sylvester Houedard, letter to Jun Terra, February 16, 1975; Vicuña, conversation with Martin.

12
Nadine El-Enany, *Bordering Britain: Law, Race and Empire* (Manchester University Press, 2020).

13
Charles Hustwick, conversation with the author, June 22, 2023.

14
Guy Brett, "Internationalism Among Artists in the 1960s and 1970s," in *The Other Story: Afro-Asian Artists in Post-War Britain* , ed. Rasheed Araeen (Hayward Gallery/South Bank Centre, 1989), 112. Exhibition catalog.

15
Richard Cork, *Everything Seemed Possible: Art in the 1970s* (Yale University Press, 2003).

16
Cork, *Everything Seemed Possible* , back cover.

17
Naeem Mohaiemen, "'I wanted to take the documentary form and jar it,'" *The Observer*, September 22, 2018 https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2018/sep/22/naeem-mohaiemen-turner-prize-2018-documentary . Emphasis added.

18
The present text is no exception to this, and it is in good company. Chimurenga's panoramic forays have focused on numerous seventies-era exhibitions and artist groups, including "The International Art Exhibition for Palestine" (1978) in Beirut; post-'68 artists of the Salons de Jeune Peinture in Paris; and the Japan, Asian, African and Latin American Artists' Association (established in 1977), among others. More broadly, the cultural politics of the decolonization era and legacies of the 1955 Bandung Conference have been explored through exhibition projects including "After Year Zero: Geographies of Collaboration" (2013) and "Southern Constellations: The Poetics of the Non-Aligned" (begun in 2019). Other recent exhibitions have centered "solidarity"—for instance "Actions of Art and Solidarity" (2021), curated by Office for Contemporary Art Norway (OCA) and organized in collaboration with Kunstnernes Hus, Oslo; and "Solidarity Spores" (2020), Asia Culture Centre, Gwangju.

19
Southern Constellations: The Poetics of the Non-Aligned , ed. B ojana Piskûr (Moderna Galerija, Ljubljana, 2019), 5. Exhibition catalog.

20
Peter Osborne, "Living with Contradictions: The Resignation of Chris Gilbert," *Afterall*, no. 6 (Autumn–Winter 2007) https://www.afterall.org/articles/living-with-contradictions-the-resignation-of-chris-gilbert/ .

21
Quoted in John A. Walker, *Left Shift: Radical Art in 1970s Britain* (Tauris, 2002), 212.

22
Sanjukta Sunderason, *Partisan Aesthetics: Modern Art and India's Long Decolonization* (Stanford University Press, 2020). I am grateful to May Adadol Ingawanij for her recommendation to look at Sunderason's work.

23
The group included numerous nonartists and hosted a range of "nonart" activities, such as writing, cooking, homeopathy, poetry, education, political meetings, and organizing.

24
United Nations General Assembly, "Declaration on the Establishment of a New International Economic Order," May 1, 1974 https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/218450?ln=en .

25
Tariq Ali, *The Coming British Revolution* (Jonathan Cape, 1972); Patrick Cosgrave, "Could the Army Take Over?," *The Spectator*, December 22, 1973. See also Andy Beckett, *Pinochet in Piccadilly: Britain and Chile's Hidden History* (Faber and Faber, 2002), in particular chapter thirteen on the formation of far-right "civil defence group" Civil Assistance, involving various establishment and ex-military figures.

26
See "THE AIMS OF ARTISTS FOR DEMOCRACY."

27
Cecilia Vicuña, "Organized Dreaming," trans. Christopher Winks, in *Artists for Democracy: El Archivo de Cecilia Vicuña* (Museo de la Memoria y los Derechos Humanos/Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, 2013), unpaginated.

28
David Medalla, interview by Steven Thorn, 1977, Guy Brett collection, Tate Archive.

29
Jun Terra, correspondence with the author, July 19, 2022 and April 28, 2023.

30
Patrick D. Flores, "A Changing World," in *Artist-to-Artist: Independent Art Festivals in Chiang Mai 1992–98* , ed. David Teh and David Morris (Afterall Books, 2018), 269 and 278.

31
In Brett's account, "the paintings convey a great sense of adventure in the large-scale collective undertakings of irrigation systems, terracing climbing the mountains, the density of healthy crops. And at the same time delight in the small scale—the workers' tea cups, a book, a newspaper, shoes left behind to enter the soggy field—material details of real life." G. Brett, "China's Spare-Time Artists," *Studio International* 189, no. 973 (January–February 1975), 14. See also *Peasant Paintings from Hu county, Shensi Province, China* (Arts Council of Great Britain, 1976).

32
J. Terra, "'From the Masses to the Masses': The Art of David Medalla," unpublished manuscript, 1972.

33
Caroline Tisdall, "Chinese Agitscape," *The Guardian,* December 15, 1972.

34
Adrian Rifkin, "The Chinese Exhibition at the Warehouse Gallery," *Artscribe,* no. 5 (February 1977): 17.

35
Tisdall, “Chinese Agitscape.”

36
Jill Drower, *99 Balls Pond Road: The Story of the Exploding Galaxy* (Scrudge Books, 2014).

37
Medalla, “The Exploding Galaxy,” 1968. Guy Brett collection, Tate Archive.

38
Their trip was financed by film producer, director, and underground patron Sylvina Boissonnas, who also supported other members of the Galaxy with travel to India and various other projects. I am grateful to Eva Bentcheva for sharing her research on John Dugger’s experience of this time.

39
Drower, *99 Balls Pond Road*, 339.

40
Medalla, “On the Elements of Democratic and Socialist Culture,” March 3, 1972; John Dugger, “On Participation,” February 22, 1972. Guy Brett collection, Tate Archive.

41
Artists for Democracy: El Archivo de Cecilia Vicuña .

42
Stephen Pusey, correspondence with the author, April 27, 2023.

43
“THE AIMS OF ARTISTS FOR DEMOCRACY.”

44
“THE AIMS OF ARTISTS FOR DEMOCRACY”: “Historically, English imperialism systematically destroyed or denigrated the national cultures of its colonies; how did the English imperialists launch cultural aggression against the culture of the working classes at home in England?”

45
“THE AIMS OF ARTISTS FOR DEMOCRACY”: “Among the non-English people who work in England, what effective roles do their different national cultures play in resisting the cultural penetration of the English bourgeoisie?” The unrealized exhibition also planned to involve cultural-political groups working in Britain such as Cinema Action, Red Ladder Theatre Company, and May First Movement, among others.

46
Accabre Rutlin, communication with the author, July 6, 2023.

47
Blackman does not appear in Lynn MacRitchie’s footage of the opening, although not all parts were captured on film. Lynn MacRitchie, correspondence with the author, July 27, 2023.

48
Chapeltown News , no. 18 (July 1974) https://harehills111.files.wordpress.com/2016/12/july-1974.pdf ; and Imruh Bakari, conversation with the author, June 15, 2023.

49
For a detailed account and documentation of the performance, see Rasheed Araeen, “Paki Bastard,” *Black Phoenix* , no. 2 (Summer 1978).

50
Lynn MacRitchie, conversation with the author, October 7, 2020.

51
Cabral’s lecture was published as *Our People are our Mountains: Amílcar Cabral on the Guinean Revolution* (Committee for Freedom in Mozambique, Angola and Guiné, 1972).

52
See Amílcar Cabral, “National Liberation and Culture,” in *Unity and Struggle: Speeches and Writings* (Monthly Review Press, 1979).

53
Quotations from Chairman Mao Tsetung (Foreign Languages Press, 1976), 129.

54
“THE AIMS OF ARTISTS FOR DEMOCRACY.” Emphasis in original.

55
“THE AIMS OF ARTISTS FOR DEMOCRACY.” Emphasis in original.

56
Drower, *99 Balls Pond Road*, 44–45, which describes the scene around London’s UFO club.

57
The planning document includes a call to AFD members from working-class backgrounds to lead study meetings and seminars with a view to “informing all members on the working class struggle in England.”

58
Paul Overy, “Other Stories,” *Art Hi story* 20, no. 3 (1997): 494.

59
AFD were awarded £250 in 1976 for “The Hand in Life and Art,” and five hundred pounds in 1977 for “Vernacular Art in Camden.” A request of five thousand pounds per annum to rent a new premises following the group’s eviction from Whitfield Street, made directly by Medalla to Peter Bird, assistant art director at the Arts Council, was refused. See Arts Council of Great Britain, “Value for Money: Thirty-Second Annual Report and Accounts 1976/77”; and Peter Bird, letter to Lord Esher, May 27, 1977, Guy Brett collection, Tate Archive.

60
Adjusted for inflation, the total is equivalent to around five thousand pounds in today’s money. The proceeds of the sale were a contentious issue for some time, with Lord Escher and Roland Penrose earlier insisting that the donation be made to Amnesty International. The circumstances around the subsequent decision to divert the funds to MIR was the basis of a bitter split in the founding AFD group.

61
Ann Jones, *No Truck with the Chilean Junta!: Trade Union Internationalism, Australia and Britain, 1973–1980* (ANU Press, 2014), 50.

McKenzie Wark

Critical (Auto) Theory

1.

These feet hurt. It's the weather. An unseasonably warm October. I'm schlepping up Broadway on my way from Village Works bookshop to Rizzoli bookshop, via The Strand bookshop. In each, I will sign copies of my new book, *Love and Money, Sex and Death*, and take some pictures to put on the socials. It's a living.

It's not. I can only afford to write books because I have a day job as a full-time, tenured professor. I don't rely on money from selling books, although it helps. I have dependents to support and New York rent to pay. I could be writing esoteric things for a tiny readership, but for some very mixed motives, I want this book to sell. I'm doing my best to sell it. A delightfully contradictory experience for a Marxist.

Being bad at business is not a critique of capitalism. Something I learned as a music journo back in the eighties: bands who built their own audience had more contractual leverage and "creative freedom" with their record companies when they "sold out." Perhaps it's that, or just my provincial middle-class origins, but I never jibed with that aristocratic aloofness some writers and scholars affect about the book trade. I'll happily do the work of flogging my own book, even if the legwork makes my feet ache. I learn a lot about the book trade this way.

The full title of this book is *Love and Money, Sex and Death: A Memoir.* It's not a memoir. That subtitle was a concession I made to help booksellers sell it, although even without it, classification is going to take place. Markets work through categories; the book market works through BISAC categories—Book Industry Standards and Communications. For *Love and Money, Sex and Death*, those categories and sub-categories are "Biography and Autobiography / LGBTQ+ / Personal Memoirs" and "Social Science / LGBTQ+ Studies—Transgender Studies." In a physical bookstore, that gives a bookseller a few difference places to put it.

BISAC categories help booksellers manage the relation between the product and the potential buyer's expectations and desires. When you enter a bookstore, you enter a space divided between zones of expectation. If a bookseller shelves my book as "Biography and Autobiography," the book can be found among those in which the reader might expect that the writer writes of things in her life that actually happened to her. But here's a question: can "LGBTQ+" lives, specifically this transsexual life, fit within the category of "Biography and Autobiography," or does that category constraint life-writing to a cis template?

I've always had a yen for books that lie askew. That play with genre as form, that tweak a reader's expectations. Books that, when you open them, open also towards uncategorized desires. Similarly with scholarly books: I like the ones that don't squat neatly in a field, that evade the

Shelfie #1. Photo: McKenzie Wark, 2023.

keywords assigned to them, that refuse the private property system of owners and their claims to stake out the knowable. In the case of *Love and Money, Sex and Death*, I wanted it to put some tension through a set of categories like "Social Science / LGBTQ+ Studies—Transgender Studies."

And then, needless to say, I also like books that cross the line between the scholarly and books that, in the trade, we call "trade." This can be hard to do, on a number of levels. We are in what Dan Sinykin, in his very useful study *Big Fiction*, calls the "conglomerate era" of publishing. It can be harder, and more expensive, for booksellers to get books from smaller publishers. Or from academic presses, which offer less of a discount on the retail price, and don't offer the bookseller free shipping.

Writing trade books, particularly for the conglomerates, comes with constraints. They want to sell books like the books that have previously sold well. This comes up early in the process. If you propose a trade book, invariably via an agent, you will be asked to name "comps," which are comparable titles that did well. This can be a curious exercise if your previous experience is with academic publishing. In proposing an academic book, you want to say that your book is not like others; in proposing a trade book, you want to say it is.

I tried pitching *Love and Money, Sex and Death* as a trade book to conglomerate publishers. I only got one nibble. An assistant editor expressed interest in working with me if I could turn it into a more conventional memoir. He is a white cis gay man with Ivy League credentials. I appreciate his interest, but this is where we are with "diversity" in conglomerate publishing. So I came back to Verso Books. My editor there, Leo Hollis, with whom I've worked before, knew what to do with me. He didn't try to make the book more conventional but did gently nudge me toward solutions to some problems. I like the book we made together.

Shelfie #2. Photo: McKenzie Wark, 2023.

Verso books are distributed by Penguin Random House, the biggest conglomerate, on more favorable terms for booksellers than academic presses offer. So, I can have independent-publisher freedom with conglomerate-publisher distribution. Sweet. The one thing we don't have going for us is the kind of publicity machine a conglomerate publisher will throw behind the handful of their own titles they choose to promote each season.

2.

It doesn't help with the sales effort that *Love and Money, Sex and Death* is a bit weird. Late in my writing life, I started writing what I'm not ashamed to call autofiction and/or autotheory. They're not exactly respectable ways of writing, although they have their charms. I think of autofiction as writing in which a character with the same name or attributes as the author appears, but where that character is not attempting to write the truth of the self, in the manner of memoir or autobiography. Selfhood itself is a fiction, and the writing is an account of how the fiction of a self is produced.

I think of autotheory as not too different from autofiction. Both are interested in the *perceptual*. Autofiction is more interested in the *affective* dimensions of what's perceived; autotheory more the *conceptual*. It's more interesting to think of autofiction/autotheory as tactics rather than genres, and as a continuity of tactics. I'll call it the "autotextual": *These* practices made *this* self. *These* institutions, *these* historical circumstances. It chanced these slings and arrows.

The name of the author in the text is an empty sign that forms a node in the perceptual field, around which unfolds the situation of its making. *Love and Money, Sex and Death* won't tell you much about the true and secret inner life of McKenzie Wark. It might tell you instead about an

era of media and culture, about the forms of family, class, and sexuality that went into the production of a legally recognized entity known as McKenzie Wark. I'm not the creator-god of this life, this text. I'm just a made thing, like any other made thing—just one that is curious about its making.

That I started writing like this is a matter of circumstance. Emigration from Sydney to New York left me feeling lonely and disconnected. My job was at Binghamton University, a four-hour drive from Brooklyn. I drove up Monday, back every Thursday. I was freshly married to Christen, and in love, but I'd lost my Sydney friends and community. I'd lost the sense of purpose that came with struggling in and against the culture in which I was raised. And it felt like after my visiting professorship ran out, I might be unemployed.

When back in New York, I wandered around the city in a dissociated fugue state—partly culture shock, mostly gender dysphoria. Christen had given me a personal, handheld GPS device as a gift. This was years before there was GPS tracking in everyone's phone. I'd record my GPS coordinates in a notebook and write about that place and time. Eventually it became a book, *Dispositions* (2002).

It's mostly a book about the tension between the abstraction of GPS and the particulars of scene, setting, mood, and ambience at the coordinates recorded. I felt this world being rendered ever more abstract by vectors of information that could command economic and strategic forces to be deployed around the globe. The book ends in the days after 9/11, with me and Christen drifting around the scene of the disaster. Its last words are: " *This dust*, she says, *t his dust is people*."

After 9/11, New York state was broke, and so was I. My Binghamton job, abolished. Best I could find was teaching composition at SUNY Albany. A little closer to Brooklyn, but a more expensive town, and less money. I was there for a year. Then in 2003, a job opened up at Eugene Lang College, The New School, at $70k per year, $22k more than at Albany. A three-year contract, unranked. I took it. I'd been told at SUNY Albany that I'd have to move there full time and publish another book to be considered for tenure. I already had three books, not counting *Dispositions*, so fuck that.

The rest was dumb luck. I'd landed at Lang College when it was expanding. After a few years, tenure was extended beyond the graduate faculty for the first time. By then I was a good candidate, as I'd chaired the Media and Culture Department a couple of times, and published two more books, both with Harvard University Press, which more than a few academics think of as the gold standard in academic publishing. The books were *A Hacker Manifesto* (2004) and *Gamer Theory* (2007).

I hadn't written *A Hacker Manifesto* as an academic book at all. It came out of my engagement with the digital media avant-garde of the 1990s. We were trying to make the revolution in the media of our times, through politics, art, and theory. I was trying to find a language for an emerging class, those who made information as difference. A different kind of labor to making commodified sameness. Many publishers turned it down. I sent it to Lindsay Waters at Harvard out of desperation. He called my three days later. He made it happen.

Gamer Theory is that book's bleak double. It also voices a persona: "gamer" rather than "hacker." It tries to find a language for what I'd sensed in *Dispositions* was a planet-wide enclosure of all of space and time in a "gamespace" of zero-sum calculation and competition. It articulates what I learned hanging around a different creative subculture, that of independent game designers.

Those books aren't too removed from the autotextual. They're about the making of collective rather than individual subjectivities. They attempt to defamiliarize subjective experience by freshening language. They look for language for what's coming. The autopoetic worldview of the hacker has suffered a series of defeats in the twenty years since it came out; the enclosed world of the gamer has became the prevailing mood.

I felt that Marxism was living in the past—and the wrong one. It became a scholastic simulacrum of itself. Not surprising, given that it was now mostly produced in academia. I tried to give it fresh language, fresh forms. It worked—both books sold well. *A Hacker Manifesto* was translated into a dozen languages. I found myself among interesting readers, often with commitments, projects, and perspectives that were also trying to engage the struggles of the present. I was excommunicated from "Marxism" by certain defenders of its orthodoxies. There's an irony in being a party-trained Marxist denied membership in a "party" that no longer exists by those who acquired mastery of its revered classics in graduate school.

After *Gamer Theory* I wrote some books that try to put into circulation some of the materials that the genteel world of academic Marxism holds at arm's length. *The Beach Beneath the Street* (2011) and *The Spectacle of Disintegratio* n (2013) are before-and-after books about the failed revolution of 1968. *Molecular Red* (2015) is also a book about failed modernity, on a grand scale: that of the Soviet Union and the United States, from the point of view of dissenting Marxist currents.

I was raised intellectually, politically, and even emotionally in the labor movement. The mood, back in the late seventies, was already that we were a defeated people. If one takes praxis seriously, then the defeats in practice of our movement—and those defeats have been horrible in scale—mean that one cannot keep repeating the same old theoretical truisms. One starts over, drawing other resources from the past.

It feels like I have one more book in me in that series. It would be on the British Marxist scientists and their social milieu from the thirties to the fifties. They've been largely erased from the canonic succession of "Western Marxism," and I think that's disabling. The Anthropocene changes the relationship between scientific and humanistic knowledge, as it changes the relationship between geologic and historical time. There's resources there, for our times—compromised ones, to be sure.

Not to be that bitch, but I wrote enough books for two academic careers. As a provincial outsider with a constitutional inability to kiss the ring, my academic career was never going to be a sterling ascent crowned in institutional prestige. (I'm vain enough to think I had enough talent.) I teach undergrad liberal arts and a few master's students. In any case, I'd rather be a writer of the city, of my city, New York. I was never really tempted to leave it just for professional reasons. I'll be here as the waters rise to meet me.

Besides being careless with career management, I tanked whatever credibility I had in media studies by coming out as a transsexual. The dysphoria got to me. I couldn't take it anymore. I became one of those "late transitioners." We who have our cake and eat it too, even if it's gone a little stale.

From the relative comfort and security of a middle-class life, I decided to just write whatever the fuck I wanted. Hence the sequence of autotextual books, picking up from *Dispositions*. The next one was accidental. Kathy Acker's executor wanted to publish our email correspondence, which came out as *I'm Very Into You* (2015). One in which two people who don't know that they are in some sense trans intuit that in each other but don't know what to do with it. After that, *Reverse Cowgirl* (2020) and *Raving* (2023). And now *Love and Money, Sex and Death* (2023).

There are a lot of hot takes about the autotextual as narcissistic, self-absorbed, a symptom of the neoliberal blah blah blah. It's a rhetorical device of the haters to collapse everything into one giant symptom from which they declare themselves magically exempt. That's not my reading experience with the autotextual at all. The most interesting autotextual writing does one of two things, or even better, both: shows how selves are made, and makes room for a kind of self that otherwise barely gets to exist.

Transsexuals, for instance. Sometimes it's an achievement just to declare, on the page, that we exist. So many others claim authority over us, narrate us in the third person, as if we're not in the room. We are the object of pathologizing "expert" discourse. Or we're quirky minor characters in third-person fiction. I was getting into Cormac McCarthy's *The Passenger* until his trans character showed up, a bundle of clichés. The condition of possibility of third-person narration is the mutual ignorance of writer and reader, and the conceit that the other written about is not also able to read and write.

These thoughts are all rattling around in my head as I schlep up Broadway, between bookstores, for signings and selfies. I'm a weird, off-brand Marxist selling herself to sell books. I had professional photographs done. I maintain social media accounts. I do readings, signings, podcasts, and interviews. I learn how contemporary media works, as I always did, by being in it. I feel like going all-in with that is far less hypocritical than pretending to hold the commodity at arm's length. To foreshadow where I'm going with this: rather a critical (auto) theory than hypocritical critical theory.

3.

There are two kinds of Marxists: those who think everything is capital and those who think everything is labor. I'm the second kind. What the commodity form hides from perception is that it is always the product of socially organized labor.

Take *Love and Money, Sex and Death*. It appears as a commodity in the bookshop. If you buy it, the bookstore gets about 40–45 percent, the rest split between the distributor (Penguin Random House), which gets about 20 percent, and the publisher (Verso), which gets about 25 percent, leaving less than 10 percent for me. So many kinds of labor are involved. The booksellers, the shippers, the warehousers, printers. Even Verso Books, my left-wing publisher, needs my book to sell, to pay for the labor that made it. There's the editor, the copy editor, the designer, the production manager, the publicist. (It's a press where, incidentally, the workers are now unionized.) My relation to the labor of bookmaking is a little different. I have a contract which assigns certain rights to Verso in exchange for an advance and percentage of the sales.

You could look at this and critique the way in which the commodity form has saturated the whole process. Writing and bookmaking are subordinated to the extraction of a profit from our collaborative labor. The commodity form turns writing's promise of the possibility of textual difference into the reproduction of sameness. The sameness of categorization, which disciplines difference into repetition.

Commercial publishers are in the business of minimizing risk, but that in turn risks boredom. Every now and then they take a chance on something a little different. If that works, then you see a bunch of things come out a year or two later that used it for comps. After Maggie Nelson had a minor hit with *The Argonauts*, you can be sure a lot of agents and editors were looking for another Maggie Nelson. Which is not the fault of Maggie Nelson.

The autotextual is a writing tactic that's actually been around for a long time, under various names, but if you only get your information about book culture from publicity

Shelfie #3. Photo: McKenzie Wark, 2023.

handouts, it seems that autofiction is a recent trend. A Marxist reading from the point of view of capital might then go: Aha! Autofiction is the logic of the market overdetermining the writing process. Autofiction equals neoliberalism! Autofiction equals reality TV equals selfies equals narcissism equals neoliberal capital!

If your (rather "undialectical") Marxism only perceives from the point of view of capital, then like capital, it finds sameness everywhere. I find this a bit lazy, and ironically, "neoliberal" in its own way. It takes the appearance of things on the market as allegories of capital at work, and capital only. Everything is capital! Which is, of course, neoliberalism's key theory—that we're all just "human capital." Hence: Neoliberal Marxism, in which everything is capital, but that's bad.

How does all this look from the point of view of that Marxism in which everything is labor? Writing is work, of a sort. The writer, like the worker, only has tactics in and against the production of commodities. Sometimes the same tactics, sometimes different ones. Most work under capitalism is the production of sameness. The organization of labor by capital reduces it to repetition, in the name of measurement, efficiency, value extraction.

Writing is work, but work that does something else: it produces difference. A work of writing can only become a commodity if it has a measurable amount of difference from existing works. The contradiction in writing for the trade press is that the book has to be different enough to be a work of saleable "intellectual property," and yet the same enough to be like other works that have been successful. There's a whole industry out there which schools writers in how to do that: how-to books, workshops, MFAs. And agents, whose job is to detail writers for market like you would a used car.

What's a writer to do? One tactic is refusal. Stick to the periphery of the industry, to the small presses, to circuits

of writing and reading that do their best to de-commodify that relation. I'm all for publishing collectives with political agendas, but they tend not to endure long, and struggle to get distribution. There are also nonprofit publishers. Much of that world is supported by grant money from foundations, who have their own agendas. They like to support diversity, but they like to keep the "diverse" in their place.

Another tactic is to write in-and-against the dominant forms in the marketplace by writing through the contradictory experiences of trying to live any kind of creative life in the gamespace of present conditions. When the autotextual is interesting to me, that's what it's doing. It's writing in which the process of its own making is present in both the form and content of the book itself. It's not the only writerly tactic that can do that, but it can be a fun one.

You can conceive of writing as labor, but the problem is that I never really know what part is the work. Sure, my book would never have made it into the front window at Rizzoli bookshop if I had not been sitting at my laptop in cafes for hours. And then sometimes the writing happens while I'm dancing, or fucking, or in the shower. What part of this is labor? How does the form of life shape the form of writing? The autotextual might, among other things, be a tactic for writing in which people who do creative work—the hacker class—communicate to each other about the shared problem of the connections between the practice of life and the practice of art.

4.

Any writer can deploy autotextual tactics, including wife-shooters and wife-knifers (William Burroughs, Norman Mailer). I'm interested in it when it comes from those excluded from the set of those whose right to be a human at all, let alone a creative human, is contested and embattled. My reading of the autotextual started with Jean Genet's *Our Lady of the Flowers.* It's prison writing, homosexual writing, and maybe even trans writing, which calls the writer into existence through the capacity to fabulate the situation in which the writer writes.

Shorn of its stylistic curlicues, this tactic shows up later in French gay writing: in Hervé Guibert and Guillaume Dustan. The latter's direct, minimal prose also comes, in part, from the later autotextual books of Marguerite Duras, like the text *Writing*. Which is about exactly that. Or the now famous work of Annie Erneux. *The Years* contains the entire postwar experience of France as experienced by a provincial woman.

Otherwise, privileged writers of the literary inner circle might resort to autotextual tactics when, being women, their talent is discounted. Two that I learned about from Dan Sinykin's *Big Fiction* are Renata Adler's *Speedboat*, and Elizabeth Hardwick's *Sleepless Nights*. Both were conglomerate publishing insiders, and while both writers had complicated relations to feminism, these books center the practice of writing as a woman, for whom the separation of writing from life affected by their male contemporaries was not an option.

Those books came out with conglomerate publishers and got their share of attention. Sinykin offers a different story with Percival Everett's *Erasure*. Everett's previous book, *Frenzy*, got pigeonholed as "Black writing" when it's anything but that. He followed up with *Erasure*, the story of a Black writer pressured into self-marginalization by an industry in which the power to overfly the totality of experience like Icarus is not one granted to certain kinds of subjects.

Frank Wilderson III's *Incognegro* is an astonishing book, weaving together his parent's middle-class Black lives with his story of going to South Africa and joining the struggle there. It's sometimes overlooked that this founding writer of Afropessimism came by the bleak idea of an ontological anti-Blackness as modernity's original sin through direct experience of the failure of the labor movement in South Africa.

The autotextual as a way of weaving together the personal and the political is a whole subset of tactics—for instance: Gloria Anzaldua's *Borderlands / La Frontera*, Audre Lorde's *Zami*, and Leslie Feinberg's *Stone Butch Blues.* Those are books that deal with the negotiations involved in producing solidarity out of difference. How can one negotiate being both queer and a comrade? All three came out of the small-press world, relatively free from the category constraints of conglomerate publishing.

Perhaps the best way to access the New Narrative writers is via the anthology edited by Dodie Bellamy and Kevin Killian, *The Writers Who Love Too Much*. That book puts the emphasis on the collective production, at one and the same time, of a gay milieu and an overlapping writing milieu. Theory and gossip nestle into each other on the same autotextual page.

Several trans writers have turned to the autotextual, from Juliana Huxtable's *Mucus in My Pineal Gland* to Aurora Mattia's *The Fifth Wound* to T. Fleishmann's *Time I s the Thing a Body Moves Through*. The autotextual is a tactic for trans writers to write to each other, to share the work and play through which we write both our books and our bodies into existence.

The scandal of Chris Kraus's *I Love Dick* was not so much that she wrote about sex but that she wrote about money. Together with Hedi El Kholti, Kraus turned legendary theory publisher Semiotext(e) toward the autotextual. Hedi brought in the French queer authors: Guibert, Dustan, and several others. Chris brought in Kate Zambreno's *Heroines*, a meta-autotext on the fraught living/writing situation of modernist women. *I'm Very Into You* and

Reverse Cowgirl saw print through these same connections.

Semiotext(e) also published my favorite Kathy Acker book, *Hannibal Lector, My Father.* It includes early texts that play with autotextual tactics, together with one of Sylvère Lotringer's brilliant interviews, in which Kathy unfurls an autotext theory and practice. In *Philosophy for Spiders* (2021), I try to show how Kathy worked writing out of its middle zone of respectable public utterances in two directions at once: toward the most intimate and toward the most abstract. She could write about masturbation and post-capitalism in the same sentence.

Paul Preciado's *Testo Junkie* makes a lot of sense if you've read some of the above. It pivots from auto-administering testosterone to a theory of postwar capitalism that centers the production of sex via pharmaceutical and pornographic technics. It's also an explicitly Marxist book, one that takes issue with the Italian and French theorists of "cognitive capitalism" by centering the situation of genderfuck radicals whose experience of commodified life is hardly reducible to "cognitive" labor.

Testo Junkie is the secret source/sauce of my own book *Raving*. Both try to connect particular practices to the forms of real abstraction that dominate the contemporary world. If you start from practices, you can appreciate the differences in how people live and labor. There's no solidarity without mutual appreciation of difference. You can discern how the totality within which we live and labor has particular historical contours, which appear to have mutated. Or, as I put it in another book: *Capital I s Dead: Is This Something Worse?* (2019).

Lastly, you can appreciate how that totality appears differently when perceived from different situations, through different working methods. I like the autotextual best when it extends beyond the particulars. When it reaches for a *particular*-universal, for the totality as perceived from a point of view. This is not the *universal* -universal of third-person narration, that unknowable totality of totalities. Writers are not gods. The autotextual is the creator become secular.

For the practice of writing autotexts there's a corresponding practice of reading, which traces connections between the particular universal as perceived via different working methods, in the name of a comradely production of knowledge. That's what I've tried to do in my books *General Intellects* (2017) and *Sensoria* (2020), both devoted to the work of others who I read as having produced interesting particular-universals from different situations via different methods.

5.

The danger of writing in the third person is the flyover view which erases or suppresses the particulars it can't totalize. The danger of writing in the first person is being confined, by voluntary or involuntary means, to the particular only, foreclosing a sense of totality at all. What of the second person?

The epistolary has always intrigued me. It, too, has been a tactic for certain modern and contemporary writers, from Victor Shklovsky's *Zoo* to Dennis Cooper's *The Sluts*. It's a surprisingly common tactic in recent trans writing, such as Kay Gabriel's *A Queen in Buck's County*, Cecilia Gentili's *Faltas*, and Akwaeke Emezi's *Dear Senthuran.* The second person turns the writerly self away from the self towards the other, and in addressing the other within the text, models modes of interpretation for the book's *other* other—the reader external to it.

That has its uses for trans writing when confronting readers, including even trans readers, used to perceiving trans-ness through the cis gaze which categorizes us as objects to be discounted, distrusted, spoken of or for. And so: *Love and Money, Sex and Death* is a series of letters to mothers, lovers, and others about practices of self-making and self-becoming, within given historical, political, and cultural constraints.

Not critical theory, critical (auto) theory. I've grown disenchanted with those strains of academic Marxism that have turned it into doxa. For Roland Barthes—himself a great exponent of critical (auto) theory—doxa is the overturning of history into nature. Such that we shrug and say: "It's always been so. It just is what it is." Marxist doxa is the belief that not only is everything capital, but that the essence of capital is eternal and never changes. Only its appearances change. The world of appearances, the world of the senses, incidentally also the world of labor and play and practices of all kinds, appears only in the negative, as derivations of an essence that only the sage critical theorist can observe from a stately distance.

I'm not claiming that a critical (auto) theory would be some noble, ethical alternative. On the contrary, I'm touring bookstores to promote my book as an embrace of the contradictions of being in and against the commodity form. My motives are mixed. I think it's good praxis, but I also like attention—and royalty checks.

If there's to be any ongoingness to Marxism I think it needs to get more vulgar, more common, fleshy, and "ill-bred." It needs shelter outside the academy, which shaped Marxism after its own image more than we academic Marxists care to admit. The struggle for liberation is a continual one of defeat and renewal. When theory fails the test of practice, then practice should inform its renewal. As it ever was: what came to be thought of as "mature" Marxism came after the defeats of 1848.

Shelfie #4. Photo: McKenzie Wark, 2023.

These are different times, and we're on the defensive against creeping fascism everywhere. Against which—what is even our image now of the good life? Perhaps it's to be found in fragments of the everyday when we live without dead time. While fucking, while dancing, while wandering without appointment. When we glimpse another city for another life. Let's write that.

X

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