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Special Issue Reprint

New Articulations of Identity in Contemporary Aesthetics

Edited by
Derek Conrad Murray and Stacy Schwartz

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Guest Editors

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Cover image courtesy of Derek Conrad Murray

Contents

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Editorial

Introduction: Visuality and Academia's Identity Problem

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The complexities of identity have always been a point of contention and divisiveness in visually based research, its discourses, and pedagogy, which is consistent with academia across the board. Despite the mounting cultural and ideological perception of its progressiveness—its encouragement of intellectual freedom and radical ideas, its activism, and its support of anti-imperialist scholarship—the profession has consistently been in conflict with the acceptance and support of a range of historically marginalized and often threatened constituencies.

Critical debates that destabilize fixed notions of identity have engendered new perspectives, particularly in work critiquing issues of essentialism, heterosexism, monolithic affiliation, and other culturally imposed limitations. Over the last several decades, vibrant intellectual conversations across the academy have inaugurated fluid and intersectional conceptions of the self and community, impacting both theory and practice, and radically shifting contemporary aesthetics. This collection seeks to magnify the questions of belongingness raised in contemporary art and generate an inclusive and interdisciplinary discussion that foregrounds visual practice as a crucial site of social and institutional commentary.

Since the last presidential election in 2024, the administration's systematic attempts to dismantle Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) policies and curb liberalism in universities have engendered a great deal of anger, fear and anxiety in the broader academic community. In our current American political moment, a battle is being waged by the political Right on many fronts, one of which is a conflict over education at all levels. The dismantling of equity programs is mounting, while the federal government seeks to reverse strides to make American education more accessible.

Yet, within higher education, contradictions and complexities subtend this misleading conversation. Institutions of higher education tend to regard themselves as bastions of tolerance and as safe spaces for a range of vulnerable groups, treating bigotry as a threat that exists purely beyond the walls of the institution. This, of course, is a glaringly false rationalization and disavowal of the more complex challenges facing universities. As much as universities hesitate to acknowledge it, in higher education in the U.S., animus directed towards queer communities and ethnic and racialized minorities, including African American, Hispanic, Asian, Jewish, and Muslim people, is not simply a social problem that exists exclusively beyond the institution. That is because sentiment—in the form of promotional pamphlets, solidarity stickers, DEI workshops, and all the impassioned speeches professing commitments to protecting the vulnerable—tends to be a pacifier and not a guarantee of altruism. These gestures do not always act on behalf of others; they do not inherently provide a shield from the biases of people or from institutional inaction that fails to protect the unsupported and those under attack. We also must acknowledge that antagonism between the vulnerable groups mentioned above, or even tensions existing within a particular community, impedes the ability of these constituencies to support each other or collectively address institutional inequity. Before we can make substantive

progress against the external political threats we currently face, we will need a self-critical praxis that interrogates the institutions we labor in and the injuries we inflict on those around us.

This contradiction is evident in the ways academic institutions acknowledge the reality of their demographic disparities, while denying that bigotry and bias are capable of existing within those spaces. *Inside Higher Ed* referenced a 2024 study conducted by CUPA-HR that tracked representation, pay, and equity in higher education. The results found continued disparities for women and people of color in tenure-track faculty ranks. There are similar disparities in student admission and staff employment:

Despite the overall increases in representation for women and faculty of color over time, representation varies by faculty rank. Statistically, as rank increases from assistant to associate to full professor, the proportions of faculty of color and women decrease. In 2022–2023, 35% of assistant professors were faculty of color, and 53% were women. At the next rank of associate professor, which is generally the first promotion faculty receive along with tenure, the representation of faculty of color reduces to 26%, and the representation of women reduces to 47%. At the highest rank of full professor, people of color represent only 22% and women represent only 36% of faculty. This finding of diminished representation with each increase in faculty rank has been observed in each of the past seven years (Schneider and Bichsel 2024).

The disparities articulated in these findings are well known within the academy, and similar data can be found across a range of sources, yet these results clearly illustrate "that faculty of color and women continue to be better represented in the lowest-ranking and lowest-paying positions and are underrepresented at the highest-ranking and highest-paying positions" (Schneider and Bichsel 2024).

Despite the absurdity of the cultural debate, ethnic, racial, sexual, and gendered oppression is a persistent problem in the U.S. that is virulently present both within so-called liberal or Leftist institutional culture, as well as among conservatives and on the political and cultural Right. Each side castigates the other as the locus of discrimination and inequity, while the minoritized are jostled between them in a fight for survival. Put another way, conservatives persistently attempt to take away equity-based programs from the Left, which the minoritized rarely benefit from in the first place. Such is the partisan culture game perpetuated in this country, and this competition to determine the lived realities of the minoritized plays out continuously on university campuses across the United States.

The enduring struggles for reciprocity and acceptance experienced by underrecognized groups have spawned cynicism about academia in general and its stated ethical commitments. For some, the more loudly a university broadcasts its commitments to DEI, the more structurally inequitable that institution actually is (Ahmed 2012). This is not to suggest—which would be wildly inaccurate—that all academic institutions' commitments to equity are inauthentic. But there is still an abiding sense that academia's words are not in step with its actions, even despite the lingering hopefulness that transformation is always a possibility. Yet, under the surface lies a more pernicious set of concerns that make one skeptical of all the performative allyship and virtue signaling that pervades the current landscape of academic culture. Needless to say, there are many universities and educators who are deeply committed to an educational praxis grounded in equity and fairness. Without their presence, institutions of higher learning would be significantly less democratic, critically open, and broadly accessible. Despite the presence of such ethical earnestness, equity efforts that use identity to determine institutional access "continue to be the *bête noire* of the political Right", even though their characterization of the liberal academy as a purveyor of unearned handouts is more myth than reality (Brest and Levine 2024).

Over the past five years, however, institutions of higher education have been derided for their participation in protests and activism against the extrajudicial murders of Black citizens, and, more recently, in response to Zionism and the Israeli–Palestinian war. Higher education's commitments to rallying against a range of historical and present-day abuses—threats to democracy, colonialism, Western imperialism, slavery, settler colonialism, capitalist rapacity, neoliberalism, genocide and ethnic cleansing, racism, gender oppression, and anti-queerness, among other societal ills—has served to fuel the perception that academe has become dominated by an extremist brand of liberalism grounded in lowered standards and anti-American sentiment (among a menu of other ills). But these characterizations belie the historical and present-day reality that academic institutions have never truly been bastions of inclusion and equal opportunity, especially for racialized groups. The forms of moral outrage and activism in American universities that have engendered the ire of the political Right have not necessarily benefited the marginalized groups laboring within those institutions. Disciplines like African American studies, Africana studies, and Black studies have only been in existence since the late 1960s and, since their inception, have had to fight for institutional security and permanence. The conditions have been similar for women's studies, gender studies, Asian-American, Native American (and now Indigenous studies), and Chicanx and Latinx studies. Even under liberalism, these disciplines and fields have consistently been on unstable ground. Out of these arenas, new critical discourses surfaced that were concerned with the relationship between identity and visuality.

During multiculturalism and the identity debates of the 1980s and 1990s, the emergence of identity-based art began to transform the visual arts by foregrounding a range of themes, from race and ethnicity to gender and sexuality. At this time, and despite institutional indignation, the concerns of identity found a place in visually based research across disciplines and fields in the academy. Moreover, visual representation, in general, became a fault line as mass media forms like cinema and television became viewed as the most effective means for the dissemination of not just consumerist influence but also propagandistic information and social engineering. The identity-oriented art practices of this period tended to challenge stereotypes, caricatures, and the reductive ideological framings of certain bodies across the spectrum of visual culture forms. Visuality, what Nicholas Mirzoeff characterized as "the intersection of power with visual representation", therefore, became a contested arena of intense debate and esthetic intervention, particularly as it pertained to the hyper-visuality of everyday life, but arguably more importantly, the excessive representation of identity and difference (Mirzoeff 2002, p. 4). Feminist, queer, and ethnic minority artists and scholars were very much concerned with the conjunction between identity and visuality as they endeavored to resist the representational and critical regimes that relegated and reduced their identities to fixed and narrow categories.

Ultimately, visually based research, both within and outside the academy, has appeared to embrace culturally narrow framings of identity. In academia today—despite valiant efforts by the historically marginalized to construct an oppositional cultural production that denaturalizes popular constructions of identity—there is a clear shift towards the codifying of identity groups into prescribed roles, clichéd esthetic and conceptual categories, and often narrow critical framings, with their own separate histories and critical discourses. Even among these identity-based fields, there are antagonisms, hierarchies (which often mirror the racialized and gendered hierarchies in society), and efforts to position particular conversations as tangential and subservient to others.

Over the past five years, I have frequently written about the academy's tendency to silo identity-specific discourses into their own discreet subfields, which separates them from the critical and historical master narratives of the established, institutionally dominant disciplines:

> Art History suffers from a deeply problematic form of racial categorization that segregates creative histories and restricts scholars of color from engaging in research areas extending beyond those related (or at least perceived to relate) to their respective identities. Simply put, we are limited in the conversations we can engage in and the fields we discuss; therefore, there is a perception that our role in the academy is to teach in fields for which there is little institutional investment. For Black scholars in the arts, their institutional presence and purpose, not to mention the perception of their breadth of knowledge and expertise, are limited to a damaging set of ideological reductions (Murray 2022, p. 149).

This problematic tendency encourages intellectual and methodological (and identity-specific) essentialisms and gatekeeping, which are incommensurate with the values of intellectual and creative freedom that academic and arts institutions tout with regularity. The danger is that this tendency, particularly in education and scholarly pursuits, perpetuates an intellectual and identity-based form of isolationism that is non-antagonistic and operates quietly as standard scholarly and institutional practice. Its restrictions and reductions persist without much interrogation or disruption, since everyone feels more or less supported, in what art historian Eddie Chambers characterized as a "stay in your lane*ness*" (Chambers 2020, p. 1.):

> As someone who came into academia fairly late in my working life, I was struck by the fiendish entanglements and constraints that race played within university art history departments. . .
>
> Looking around at the art history departments across the United States with which I had varying degrees of familiarity, I perceived that African American faculty were frequently, somewhat predictably, there to teach African American art. It was similarly apparent that African faculty were there to teach African art; Chinese academics taught Chinese art; and so on (Chambers 2020, p. 1).

The danger of these fixities of identity is that they can encourage performativity around a very crude and one-dimensional set of identity-based scripts. Within academia and the arts, this compartmentalization may unwittingly thrust the marginalized into a process of culturalization and consumptive spectacle. It also has the effect of discouraging the work of scholars who are committed to exploring the hybrid and intersectional nature of identity formation. Progressive institutions (and their related discourses) may ultimately function in a regulatory and disciplinary manner should they position identity-based groups into prescribed positionalities that are locked into cultural politics of exclusion, victimhood, and poetics of woundedness (Brown 1995).

The contributions to this volume address a range of subjects that challenge one-dimensional understandings of identity. Volume co-editor Stacy Schwartz examines the performance-based art of Danielle Abrams, which critically engages with debates on race, queerness, and identity. Schwartz argues that Abrams directly challenged monolithic and heteronormative structures of identity, unpacking how the artist explored the invisibility of Jewish people of color while taking on a range of intersecting themes from the state of Black/Jewish relations in the U.S., the complexities of her own Black and Jewish familial heritage, as well as her identity as a lesbian. Brett Ashley Kaplan similarly upsets fixed notions of identity in her exploration of the African American and Jewish singer/musician Anthony Mordechai Tzvi Russell's creative production that rejects reductive racial and ethnic terminologies like "Black" and "Jew" to create a hybrid *Blewish* esthetic. Kaplan argues that Russell's video works to disrupt problematic assumptions about identity, specifically related to race, gender, sexual orientation, and ethnoreligious affiliation.

Kerri Steinberg focuses on embodied understandings of Jewish belongingness, history, and identity by considering two seemingly incompatible cultural examples: the Yad Vashem Holocaust History Museum in Israel and Bill Wurtzel's Funny Food Art. Steinberg's unconventional analysis shows how each, in its own way, makes us attentive to space, the haptic, and collective memory in relation to Jewish post-war identity. Lisa Bloom critically examines the relationship between Jewish identity and feminist art by surveying artworks by Judit Hersko and Susan Hiller. Engaging with Marianne Hirsch's concept of "postmemory", Bloom interrogates the scholarly hesitance in the visual arts to give critical attention to the complexities of Jewish identity.

Volume Editor Derek Conrad Murray interviews the Oakland, California-based multimedia artist Adia Millett, who is among a growing contingent of Black artists who have embraced abstraction in their creative production. The growing interest in form by contemporary African American artists is notable, considering their omission from the history of late-modernist American abstraction. While acknowledging how both societal and art world racism contributed to their exclusion, the interview also explores how the intracultural mandate that Black artists prioritize racial injustice as opposed to more esoteric and formalist aesthetics has often limited the creative imaginations of Black artists. In the interview, Millett addresses this legacy while discussing the influences that have shaped her creative journey. Amelia Jones unpacks how Enlightenment conceptions of individual autonomy and sovereign subjectivity constructed a notion of identity rooted in a European white male hegemony in the Euro-American context. The constructed centrality of the straight white male artist has, as Jones attests, been the focus of critique by a range of minoritized subjects. Jones foregrounds the work of a diverse group of contemporary artists who interrogate the falsity and continued centrality of this enduring archetype (and its capitalist and neoliberal investments) as the ideological ideal of creative authorship.

Visual studies scholar Soraya Murray considers how video games are theorized and discussed, as well as conventional pedagogical strategies, with an emphasis on strategies for interrupting identity-mapped notions of expertise. Pointing out the ways that belongingness may collapse into prescribed roles, Murray emphasizes the importance of constantly striving to open up methodologies and pedagogies. By interrupting the social imaginary around representation in video games specifically and computational culture more generally, educators and designers can intervene in the overdetermined masculinist culture of technology and innovation. Similarly, considering how positionality inflects notions of expertise, Lauren A. McQuistion disrupts the myth of the tragic artist surrounding Eva Hesse by reframing her life and work as a process-oriented painter engaged with ongoing formal considerations like those of her male peers Sol LeWitt and Mel Bochner. Reinterpreting her work by engaging deeply with her own prolific and detailed writing, McQuistion reveals the ways that her artistic and intellectual pursuits have been overshadowed by a tendency to psychologize her, rather than observe her commitment to material investigations of form. In his innovative interpretive approach to analyzing works by the artists Annette Cords, G Farrell Kellum, and Njideka Akunyili Crosby, Gregory Blair investigates how identity formation in these artists' works explores how the collective is manifested in their singular identities. For Blair, the contemporary moment unsettles legibility and therefore denies the fixities that are so often prescribed to identity. The often-chaotic interaction between the singular and the collective in their artworks highlights how the implicit instability of identity is expressed formally as a visual palimpsest.

Finally, scholars Alpesh Kantilal Patel and Ace Lehner both make significant interventions into the evolving discourse concerning trans identities. Patel takes on the absence of critical engagement with pedagogy within the history of art. While considering the interrelation between a scholar's pedagogy and their research, Patel reflects on a course

he taught in the fall of 2022 called "Transgender Studies meets Art History". Utilizing the personal as a critical strategy, Patel's vital investigation considers how transgender studies can open up new ways of approaching pedagogy, visual art, and curation while also considering how "trans", as an identity and a concept, impacted both his teaching and research. Lehner argues that there is a need for trans-visual culture to be understood outside of conventional Western conceptions of identity and visuality, that trans deploys a new understanding of bodies, identity, representation, and visual culture. Utilizing the work of trans masculine artist and photographer Wynne Neilly as a key exemplar, Lehner explores how their work engages in a transformative praxis that brings needed complexity to the dominant understanding of identity and representation while unseating the import of White masculinity as the center of Western art and visual culture in an increasingly anti-trans political climate.

This volume represents a significant departure from the ways identity is positioned in the discourse of art and visual culture, reframing it towards a collectivity and mutuality rooted in a liberal humanist ethos. The aim is also to contemplate the troubled relationship between politics, culture, academia, identity, and visuality. The institutionally dominant discourses concerned with art and visuality, in general, tend to mirror the dynamics of universities, as well as academe's often segregated approach to the production of knowledge and creative expression. It resists the enclosures that encourage scholars and artists to rigidly embrace the limits of collective identity and, therefore, their engagements with identity are often restricted and positioned in relative intellectual, critical, and creative isolation. This tendency highlights the failures of academia to support not just the institutional stability and intellectual freedom of various groups but also their humanity, dignity, and complexity as members of what is actually a diverse community of cultural producers. Unexpected connections are to be found among many of these essays, and unlikely intellectual affinities and insights. This project implicitly acknowledges the challenges faced by the underrecognized while rejecting the conceit that the intolerances they face are so distinct that they must be separated and codified as irrevocably in contradistinction to each other. In short, we must begin to think about identity differently and embrace our connectedness in struggle.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

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Article

(Dis)embodiment: Danielle Abrams's *Quadroon* and the Destabilization of Visual Identities

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Abstract: Danielle Abrams's performance art critically engages with late twentieth-century debates on race, queerness, and identity, positioning her as a vital figure in challenging monolithic and heteronormative structures of identity. Her early work *Quadroon* (1998), a live performance and four-channel video installation blending music, costume, gesture, and speech, compounds impassioned debates within the art world and beyond around the impact of multiculturalism on identity-based art, the invisibility of Jews of color and other marginalized members of the Jewish community, and the state of Black/Jewish relations in the United States following the Crown Heights riots of 1991. Abrams's pieces frequently negotiate the tensions and intersections between her Black and Jewish familial heritage and her lesbian identity through the embodiment of semi-fictional personae grounded in family lore, self-perceptions, and cultural stereotypes. This paper explores how Abrams destabilizes the readability of "authentic" identities on the surface of the body in *Quadroon* via her adoption of personifications of her Black grandmother, her Jewish great grandmother, her identification as a butch lesbian, and her (unsuccessful) teenage attempt at passing for Greek. Pairing video recordings of each character with interludes from an unpublished performance script, I consider the anxieties of passing expressed in the personas of Dew Drop and Janie Bell, and through the lens of Abrams's diaries, pose Butch in the Kitchen's potential as an indefinite body to queer socially imposed constructions of monolithic and essentialist identity.

Keywords: contemporary art; Jewish art; queer theory; performance; race; identity

1. Introduction

I know myself through my oppressor. I resolve my race hybridity thru my gender hybridity.—Danielle Abrams, undated diary entry (personal journal entry, Danielle Abrams Papers, Box 6, undated)

Forging identity and belongingness, especially for the recognition of oneself *as* American, Jewish, lesbian, Black, or any group label, is an ongoing tug-of-war between understanding oneself relative to others and the socially invoked essentialisms—often by the loudest or most influential voices—adopted to distinguish one group from another. Within marginalized social groups, the "regulating" of authenticity and perceived adherence to shared attributes, while often intended to protect, preserve, and advocate for the community, also serves to ostracize currently excluded members who identify as multiply marginalized, such as Jews of color or queer orientation. Tensions around the gatekeeping of contemporary identities—indeed, of the structure of identities in themselves—manifested in the 1990s and early aughts in academia and visual production through discourses such as postidentity and postethnicity. Selfhood as envisioned through the postidentity was reconfigured not as static, monolithic, and heteronormative but as innately hybrid, inconstant, and habitually boundary-crossing.

Defining and asserting the parameters of particular identities has been an especially enduring challenge for the Jewish people, for whom recognizing their diverse and intersectional nature signals existential crises around what binds them all together. Artistic representations of the diversity of Jewishness—the literal "face" of Jewishness as held

alongside and in tension with other facets of identity—testify to both the rich cultural complexity of our community and the limited attention given to the experiences of multiply marginalized Jewish American artists. In this piece, I examine the work of self-identified queer multiracial performance artist Danielle Abrams, particularly how her 1998 performance and video installation *Quadroon* navigates the entanglements of Jewish, Black,[1] and lesbian belongingness through the embodiment of four personas. These characters are grounded in Abrams's Jewish (great)[2] grandmother, identified as Dew Drop Lady; her Black grandmother Janie Bell; her lesbian alter-ego Butch in the Kitchen (or BIK); and Dee, her teenage attempt to pass for Greek. Narrative interludes throughout the performance allude to the turmoil of synchronously conforming to and inhabiting expectations of several pieces of oneself. Pairing video recordings of each character with interludes from an unpublished performance script, I explore how Abrams destabilizes the corporeal readability of "authentic" identities by exploiting visual codes of music, costume, gesture, and speech. I consider the anxieties of passing expressed in the personas of Dew Drop and Janie Bell, and through the lens of Abrams's above epigraph, pose the potential of Butch in the Kitchen as an indefinite body to queer socially imposed constructions of monolithic and essentialist identity.

2. Methodologies/Approaches

Abrams's teaching career and artistic practice spanned several universities and projects, including Tufts University in Boston, Massachusetts, her last post as a professor of practice and performance at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts from 2014 to 2022. Despite her academic and artistic accomplishments, public information about her projects, exhibition history, and engagement in academic scholarship is limited. Existing scholarship on *Quadroon*, one of Abrams's best-known early works, is scarce save for Lisa E. Bloom's feature in *Jewish Identities in American Feminist Art: Ghosts of Ethnicity* and a handful of brief write-ups in exhibition catalogs and press releases. A dedicated analysis of the personal and cultural symbolism of Abrams's personae in this piece and the use of her body as a canvas for the exploration, destabilization, and representation of hybridized identities is overdue.

The Tufts University Archival Research Center in Medford, Massachusetts began compiling Abrams's papers, journals, drawings, photographs, and video recordings in the months following her unexpected death in April 2022, some of which have recently become available for academic research. As expected in any archive, information gaps hinder a complete contextualization of *Quadroon* within Abrams's life and work; no recordings of a live performance of the piece were found, though both a complete script and what appears to be a full taping of the video pieces for each persona were accessible. Fortunately, the scripts for each character read very similarly in the jump from live show to recording, aside from the use of music at the beginning and conclusion of film segments and their replacement with interludes in the performance piece. Utilizing several of the above resources, this chapter is a starting point for parsing the symbolism of her cast of characters and how we might relate to them as spectators rather than a definitive statement of the work's intended meaning.

In addition to Abrams's journals, scripts, and recordings, I read *Quadroon* within discourses of social identity construction. I will examine how Abrams's personas embody the tensions between race and cultural identity, employing W.E.B. Du Bois's notion of double consciousness concerning the Black experience of White culture and the extension of this theory into Jewish assimilation as "off-whiteness" as described by scholars like Karen Brodkin and David Schraub. Homi Bhabha's conception of liminal identity and Jose Esteban Muñoz's treatise on disidentification frame my reading of Abrams's usage of humorously overblown stereotype and bodily adornment to disarm viewers and visually dismantle Black, Jewish, and queer identities as compartmentalized, hierarchized, or mutually exclusive categorizations. Ending where I began, I take Abrams's intriguing quote about her racial and cultural hybridity as a starting point for exploring the gender

fluidity of butchness and how Butch in the Kitchen poses possibilities for the material and intellectual existence of intersectional identities.

3. Who Was Danielle Abrams?

Danielle Abrams was born to Stephanie Belkin and Eddie Abrams in North Hempstead, Long Island, on 30 March 1968 (Figure 1). Her father, Eddie, was Black, and her mother was Jewish. Abrams was raised in nearby Flushing, a subdivision of Queens considered a haven for vibrant and varied immigrant communities from Asia and Europe.

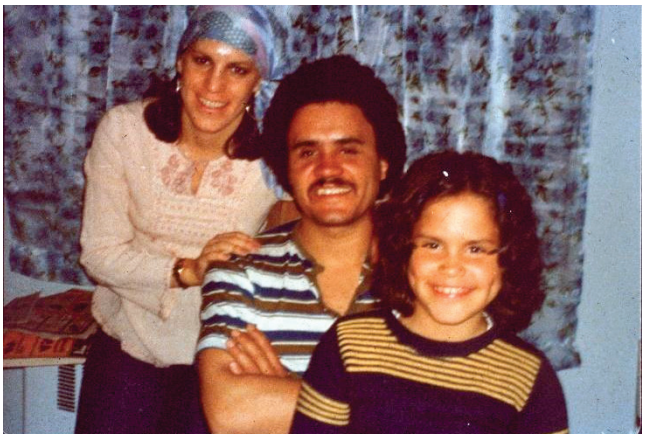

Figure 1. Danielle Abrams and her parents, undated photograph. Image courtesy of Danielle Abrams Papers, Box 11, Tufts University, Tufts Archival Research Center, Medford, MA.

Amidst this cultural diversity Abrams developed a keen awareness of the thorniness of cultural hybridity within the context of the so-called American "melting pot" that would become central to her art. Childhood trips to nearby Coney Island, for example, arise repeatedly in her work as a raw critique of mid-century American idealism and a visualization of a gathering place for social "misfits". Coney Island's social conglomeration of identities seemingly reflected the self-perceptions Abrams would grapple with throughout her oeuvre, including using the amusement park as the backdrop for Dew Drop Lady's video narrative.

After attending Queens College at CUNY, she relocated to California for her MFA at UC Irvine, where she first developed the characters that would congregate in *Quadroon* and punctuate her work as a whole. She wrote of her experience at Irvine in a statement for the Artists in Residence Program at the Studio Museum, Harlem, NY:

> Suffice it to say that my perception of my identity which was once limited to that of a queer butch woman, who was by the way black, expanded into a much more complex configuration of identity where I began to examine not just my Blackness, but my light-skinned Blackness, in relation to my Jewishness, my queerness, my gender, and my position as an artist coming from a working-class family. (Danielle Abrams Papers, Box 1, 21 May 2001: 2)

Abrams conducted several solo and group performance projects within the radical queer community of San Francisco in the 1990s, including the first appearance in 1995 of the character Butch in the Kitchen, who manipulated food stamps as a means to operate a meal plan service for her local queer community.

Quadroon interrogates the tensions between aspects of her identity—particularly Blackness and Ashkenazi Jewishness—that manifest complex issues of appropriation, racial conflict, and the problematics of multiracial identity through tapping into sensory stereotypes in the personae of her family members. Her rapid adjustment from character to character explicitly refuses the fixity of interpellation, materializing the intangible social and cultural barriers that force difficult choices around the projection of orderly, easily recognizable identities and the conundrum of resolving inherited (whether considered

learned or biological) and self-selected affiliations. In her 2002 speech for "Is Anything Alright? Three Generations of Jewish Women Artists in Postwar America: The 2nd Annual Mildred and George Weissman Lecture", at The Jewish Museum, New York, Abrams describing the work as both a family and self-portrait. She further stressed that *Quadroon* accomplished its expression of this enduring conflict and multiplicity through, contrarily, the momentary isolation of its major contributors, both their factual existence and their recognition as fictional types:

> Engendering a collage in motion. . .. The pieces of my identity are teased out and lay singular—the black grandmother, the Jewish grandmother, etc. This strategy speaks back to the idea that perhaps the multiplicated identity, specifically the Black Jew, might privilege the most socially desirable parts of her identity and silently conceal, or pass over, those parts that produce anxiety. . .This operation is what rethreads their singular selves into a newfound whole. . .*Schmatas* and fried chicken, disco purses and geri curl weaves become as impossible as ethnic signifiers as the language which one sought to measure one's race based upon her drops of black blood. . .(Danielle Abrams Papers, 6 November 2002).

The title *Quadroon* invokes oppressive, rigid categorical systems linking skin color and character to physiology to perpetuate racist power structures since the 19th century, a reference rebuked both in the historical reality of Abrams's blended family lineage and the equal cohabitation of the four personae (and the chameleon-like shifting of bodily features among the characters) within her one body. Within the work, Abrams's body becomes a conduit for defying and confusing the borders of language and static classification. The unruly, interwoven personalities of *Quadroon* transcend orderly classifications of race, gender, ethnicity, and affiliation in their refusal to adhere to social categories; to "vocalize the barely audible hiss of family secrets as they seek, in an often-earnest manner, to vigorously and muscularly tackle institutionalized societal orders" (Artist Statement, Danielle Abrams Papers, undated). *Quadroon* seems to taunt the echoes of political oppression in blood quantum and miscegenation laws that both exoticize and preclude the precariousness of Abrams's multidimensional existence.

The work itself has taken several forms, including a four-channel closed-system video installation and a live performance directed by Moira Cutler. Transitions from one character to another depend upon the format of the work: while the recorded videos float like islands amidst the isolation of blank gallery walls, the performance is punctuated by transitional vignettes featuring childhood memories and historical/cultural references to concepts of passing, conformity to expectations of Black performativity, and the social alienation of multiracial identities. In one exhibition (Figures 2 and 3), a dimly lit gallery spotlights four televisions framed by roughly two-foot steel "cages", one on each wall.

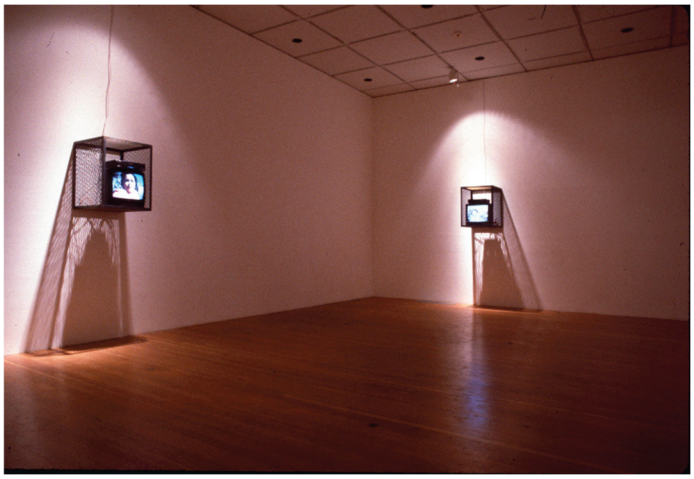

Figure 2. Danielle Abrams, installation detail of *Quadroon*, 1998. Steel cages of 26 × 23 × 23 inches, four video monitors, decks. Image courtesy of Danielle Abrams Papers, Box 11, Tufts University, Tufts Archival Research Center, Medford, MA.

Figure 3. Danielle Abrams, Janie Bell, installation detail of *Quadroon*, 1998. Steel cages of 26 × 23 × 23 inches, four video monitors, decks. Image courtesy of Danielle Abrams Papers, Box 11, Tufts University, Tufts Archival Research Center, Medford, MA.

The cages are open in the front to allow viewing, casting spectral shadows below each monitor. Each character speaks individually, but they also talk over and amongst each other. Abrams's collective embodiment of these characters forms a powerful sensory experience of the complex communications between Self and Other, exposing the sensitive conflicts of individual assertion versus social interpellation in forming multiply marginalized identities.

4. *Quadroon* and the (Im)possibilities of Queer Jewish Multiraciality

Situating *Quadroon* within broader contexts of late twentieth-century Black/Jewish American relations and trends in identity based art, particularly events happening in Abrams's familial backyard, clarifies the pressure Abrams expressed around choosing between her "selves". Despite relative solidarity during the Civil Rights Movement in the 1950s–1960s, relations between American Jews and Blacks broke down in the late 20th century, peaking with the Crown Heights riots against Orthodox Jews in Brooklyn, NY, in August 1991, just seven years before *Quadroon* debuted (Dollinger 2018).[3] Distrust, widespread suspicions of racism and anti-Semitism, and lack of communication between the two communities intensified after accusations of Jewish favoritism among first responders on the scene of an accidental car crash between Chabad Lubavitch member Yosef Lifsh and Gavin and Angela Cato, two Guyanese American children (where Gavin ultimately died), and the burgeoning national popularity of controversial figures like Louis Farrakhan.

Furthermore, merely recognizing the existence of Jews of color has been an ongoing exercise in self-critique within Jewish communal institutions and cultural production. As Marc Dollinger relates in his epilogue to *Black Power, Jewish Politics* (2018), even scholars of Black/Jewish relations have until recently primarily characterized this intercommunal relationship as one of crossing a "racial divide" that "'others' communities of color as objects, or at best beneficiaries, of (white) Jewish benevolence" (Dollinger 2018, p. 189).[4] Commenting on the racist and often reductive American attitudes around the biological qualifications for Blackness and Jewishness (which dictate one Black ancestor and a Jewish mother, respectively), Naomi Zack states that for Jews of color, predicating Jewishness on perceived Whiteness negates the possibility of both:

> Most contemporary American Jews and Gentiles designate Jews as racially white. So is the person who is black and Jewish with a Jewish mother white? No, she is black, and in terms of official racial designation, her whiteness is obliterated. If Jewishness necessarily entails whiteness, then that means that her Jewishness is also obliterated. (Zack 1996, p. 142)

Dismantling the standards and stereotypes of the heterosexual Euro-Ashkenazi Jew within the realm of the visual, a task I claim *Quadroon* attempts, is thus indicative of a more holistic retooling of the parameters of contemporary Jewishness itself.

While not exclusively geared toward multiracialism, the American Jewish art world in the late 20th to early 21st centuries also challenged the "authenticity" and exclusivity of traditional representations of Jewishness as static, heteronormative, and caucasian. Exhibitions such as the Jewish Museum New York's *Too Jewish? Challenging Traditional Identities*[5] (1996–1997) and *The Jewish Identity Project: New American Photography* (2005–2006), The Spertus Museum in Chicago's *The New Authentics: Artists of the Post-Jewish Generation* (2007–2008), as well as several of the Contemporary Jewish Museum San Francisco's communally engaged projects in this period aimed to not only expand what Jewishness looks like, but also to explore the intersectionality of Jewishness with an intricate and often shifting web of identifications. As *The New Authentics* curator Staci Boris writes in the introduction to the exhibition's catalog:

> Authenticity describes a person's connection to his or her true internal spirit or character vis-a-vis the external world. It is about maintaining individual consciousness without falling prey to imposed dictates, self-centeredness, or, more perilously, to insistence on 'purity'. It is non-dictatorial. . .. An authentic identity is therefore neither nowhere, or, just as easily, everywhere (Boris et al. 2007, p. 23).[6]

Such exhibitions openly engaged with broader academic and political discourses, from David Hollinger's conception of postethnicity (Hollinger 1995) to Touré's post-blackness (Touré 2011). Touré pivoted from multiculturalist structures of identity as homogenous, inherited, and particularistic, which for those affiliated with minority group often meant aligning oneself monolithically in solidarity with a marginalized community. Unpacking and embracing the self as constructed of innately multiple, permeable, and coexistent identities marked an acute repositioning of identity-based art as representational and political objects for the authentication and advocacy of identity groups. Exhibitions like *The New Authentics*, indebted to the antiessentialism of Blackness and critiques of group protectivism and heteropatriarchy in the infamous *Freestyle* exhibition at The Studio Museum, Harlem (2001), visually critiqued and defied confining and often unrelatable categorizations of Jewish artistic and social "belongingness". Abrams's questioning of her authenticity, and authenticity in general, via the multiplicity of identity categories commanding attention in *Quadroon* offers an alternative to the siloed organization of identity, art, and art history.

Despite interpersonal tensions between the Black and Jewish American communities and the distinct historical and cultural loci around which they coalesce, then, they clearly share frustrations with the limitations placed upon their belongingness by both mainstream society and their circles of origin. *Quadroon* expresses and expands this conundrum by compounding the problem of double consciousness beyond the color line and across multiple identity group affiliations simultaneously. W.E.B. Du Bois conceived of double consciousness in White patriarchal society as the naturalization of a Lacanian ideological system of racialization (Gordon 2008, p. 88) that engenders an ongoing, irreconcilable, competing sense of self between an individual's self-conception and that ascribed to them by dominant culture (Du Bois 2005, pp. 20–21). Offering slightly different language, Lewis Gordon expounded Du Boisean double consciousness as the impossibility of dual "citizenship", or the social recognition of belongingness to both the American nation, where "American" equals Whiteness, and the "Negro Nation" (as Du Bois called Black citizens in the 1930s) (Du Bois 1935), forged necessarily through the socioeconomic ramifications of slavery and racial exclusion (Gordon 2008, p. 77). Du Bois and Fanon spoke directly to the sociopolitical Othering of Black Americans through the lens of *national* citizenship, but we can also frame Du Bois's conception of double consciousness more broadly as a status of membership within dual or multiple specific communities.

Quadroon's characters act as visual coordinates through which Abrams embodies overlapping and competing cultural consciousnesses, resisting the fixity of sociopolitical

interpellation forced upon the "split" sense of self and wrestling with the optics of social citizenship. Within the classic definition double consciousness, *Quadroon* is steeped in the dichotomy between Blackness and Witeness, from literal references to anti-miscegenation in the interludes of the performance to the more understated, sinister circumstances of Butch in the Kitchen's hospitalization (if we read Jewishness as an assimilation into Whiteness, which I complicate below). Beyond the specifics of the color line, the societal refusal of mutual citizenship is thematic both within the individual personas in *Quadroon* and across characters: Dew Drop's reminder of her outsider status as a Jewish American immigrant, for example, and Dee's struggles to find her sense of self as she straddles the line between acceptance and rejection within several social circles.

Scholars in feminism, queer theory, and Jewish Studies have also compellingly adapted and expanded double consciousness to articulate other, often mutually dependent structures of oppression and barriers to belongingness based upon constructed categories of race, ethnicity, gender, class, ability, and sexuality. This includes the predisposition of citizenship toward assimilation into hetero-patriarchal "Whiteness". Works like Kimberlé Crenshaw's writings on intersectionality add dimension to double consciousness's awareness of self-identification and strategies for political advocacy through multilaterally focusing on race and gender and external and self-perceptions of Black womanhood (Cho et al. 2013, p. 787). More than a consideration of individual identity categories alongside one another, intersectionality as envisioned by Crenshaw et al. as "[conceived] of categories not as distinct but as always permeated by other categories, fluid and changing, always in the process of creating and being created by power dynamics".

Several scholars engaged here, including Homi Bhabha, Jose Esteban Muñoz, and Jack Halberstam, have similarly explored the politics of multiple "citizenships" across the boundaries of identity categories as dictated by majority culture. There are fascinating parallels—but importantly, not equivalencies—between the racial triangulation of Blacks and that of American Jews. Karen Brodkin's *How Jews Became White Folk and What That Says About Race in America* frames (arguably light-skinned, Euro-American Ashkenazi) Jewishness as "off-whiteness", a fluctuating designation somewhere between Whiteness and Blackness under which Jews are subject to a kind of double-vision or "racial middleness": "an experience of marginality vis-à-vis whiteness, and an experience of whiteness and belonging vis-à-vis blackness" (Brodkin 2000).[7] Retooling Brodkin's concept to that of "conditional whiteness" through the lens of intersectionality, David Schraub has further complicated the collapse of Jewishness into Whiteness by the dominant culture perpetuates conceptual stereotypes of Jews as a cadre of powerful "super-whites" taking advantage of the privileges of Whiteness, stratifying or negating both the existence of non-White Jews and the differentiated experiences and concerns of (White *and* non-White) Jews both within and outside of the Jewish community (Schraub 2019, pp. 380–82).

With Schraub in mind, consider Abrams's Black, queer Jewishness (indeed, all conglomerations of identity categories) as "more than the sum of its parts" (Schraub 384)—not simply an additive process of teasing out the attributes of individual identity descriptors but acknowledging the ever-shifting relations between them and what their mutual attachments *do* to each other. How do we interpret each through the others, and in what ways does visual culture reinforce or subvert our interpretations?

In Abrams's case, we might consider the interrelation of powerful constructions of Black and Jewish femininity and expectations of queer gender identity in both dominant culture and within these respective groups. How, for example, might common media conceptions of Jewishness favor Euro-Ashkenazi heterosexuality? In what ways have Black lesbians been denied representation within queer circles? How might identifying as a Black butch female uphold or trouble stereotypes of Black female masculinity? How might issues of class, race, and sexuality undermine Abrams's visibility and mobility within and through all of the personal affiliations to which she asserts membership? Who, ultimately, has the authority to determine citizenship?

Abrams's use of character "types" such as the Jewish mother and the Greek "hair girl" in *Quadroon* thus speaks to her adoption of easily recognizable traits that function as touchstones for her assimilation within specific groups; "Vision is far from neutral", states Elahe Magdalena Yekani, "and the question of recognition often a matter of survival" (Yekani 2022, p. 92). Yet accepting one identity potentially comes at the expense of others. Dew Drop Lady, the personification of Abrams's European Jewish immigrant grandmother, and the character of her Black grandmother, Janie Bell, represent mutually exclusive concepts of national and cultural citizenship. Dew Drop's interpellation "as Jew" at Coney Island alludes to early 20th-century narratives of Jewishness as racial non-Whiteness and thus "un-Americanness". However, it also raises the specter of Jewish paths to social citizenship in this period via popular visual media and the donning of blackface. Janie's narrative evokes parallel social excision through the hardships of class and race that hindered survival in New York, symbolized by her physical separation from society on Welfare Island after developing tuberculosis, a disease more prominent in communities of color due to health and environmental disparities (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2024).

The mutually constitutive racialization of Blacks and Jews in the United States by the majority culture[8] and the fraught relationship between the Black and Jewish communities continues to pit minority identities against each other to deflect from White culture's grasp on the strings of social and political control. While we might conclude that overcoming *political* oppression through the lens of intersectionality is not the central concern of *Quadroon*, the work demands viewers consider the *social* oppression of multiple-times marginalized individuals as impacted by the entangled systems and visual codes of identity politics. Within the title of the work, the concept of a *quadroon*—an ascribed identity label that both affixes Blackness and denies whole association with either Blackness or Whiteness—positions Abrams's body in the borderlands of several proscribed identities. This space outside The Real also makes possible their simultaneous existence.

5. Dee and the Problems of Passing

We first encounter Dee (Figure 4), Abrams's self-portrait as a teenager attempting to pass as a boisterous, boy-crazy Greek young woman. Dee's rapid-fire stories about her social group gradually unfurl her and Abrams's deep-seated frustrations with her inability to physically and socially shed her Black and Jewish familial origins. As the scene materializes, the camera pans over an ostentatious white car with navy leather interior parked aside a residential street in Astoria, the "little Greece" of New York, zooming in on Dee sitting in the front passenger seat. The commanding presence of her sparkly attire and the boldness of her makeup project the self-confidence of youthful femininity and sex appeal. She wears a black sequin dress and striped tights; her teased dark curls graze large, sparkly disc-shaped silver earrings. She is heavily made up with rouge, thick eyeliner, and long red fingernails. Dee reveals that her true identity is obscured not only by the trappings of her dress, but by the inscrutable origins of her brown skin tone and her assumed, culturally ambiguous name, which she says led her friends to believe she is Greek.

Dee's narrative and shifting camera angles expose the subtle discrepancies between Dee's self-presentation—how she *wants* to be seen—and the anxieties of being "discovered" as an impostor. The camera flashes from Dee to her reflection in the side mirror as she gabs casually out of the open passenger window about her string of Greek American boyfriends, perhaps hinting at a prophetic self-awareness of the slippage of her façade. As she waits for Nikos, her latest flame, to emerge from his house, Dee points animatedly to pictures pulled from her purse of her "Dudesses", her circle of Greek female friends. Her excited gossiping around the girls' romantic exploits, from setups to double dates and plans for early marriage, indicate divergences between American Greek communal values and her own as she admits she prefers to wait until she finds the right man.

Figure 4. Danielle Abrams, detail of Dee, *Quadroon*, 1998. Image courtesy of Danielle Abrams Papers, Tufts University, Tufts Archival Research Center, Medford, MA.

However, the diversion Dee's idle chatter offered from her inner turmoil halts abruptly as the conversation circles back to her relegated social position in the car. Here, Dee's mood darkens, and agitation is clear in her inflection and perplexed facial expressions. Her anecdote, concerning a dramatic and disturbing moment just a few moments ago when she tried to wave hello to Nikos's mother through the front window of the house, confirms Dee's failure to adequately "pass" as Greek and realizes Dee's inner fear of rejection amongst her friends and their families:

I don't know, but that lady in the window, one thing Nikos did tell me is something that she said about me, and I'm not even sure what she meant. I mean the lady never even met me, and what, she hates me? What Nikos told me that she said about me was that I was a Mavro, and in Greek, that means Black, and then she said I was a Christ Killer. Black Christ Killer? (*Quadroon* performance script, Danielle Abrams Papers, Box 1, undated: 3).

Despite Dee's best efforts to assert herself within Greek American social circles, Nikos' mother interpellates and divulges Dee's "true" selves, and then dismisses her—literally, through the snap-closure of curtains, negating any semblance of acceptance. Dee's encounter with Nikos's mother highlights the intersectional challenges of passing, underscoring how racial and religious identities complicate her quest for acceptance.

Abrams's presentation of Dee's character deftly articulates the conscious self-awareness of the tender teenage years, procured through uneasy attempts at adopting Greek language, gestures, attire, and even cultural values around love, marriage, and gender roles. Her attempt to present visual signifiers of Blackness: dark curly hair, brown skin—as Greek; her adoption of the language, style, and cultural milestones of Greek immigrant life; her attempt to cover the fraught familial history of her multiraciality with sequins and heavy makeup; her conspicuous performance of heterosexuality, femininity, and cultural identity emphasize the artist's desire yet inability to pass. Dee's story also mirrors Abrams's struggle to reconcile her parents' insistence on the beauty and potential restorative power of her multiraciality with the realities, rejections, and impositions of dominant society as expressed through the delicate dance of teenage identity experimentation (artist statement for *Quadroon*, Danielle Abrams Papers, Box 1, undated: 1).

Dee's desire to pass is undermined by the simultaneous il/legibility of her physical difference and the harmful stereotypes of the Black and Jewish communities of her birth that automatically classify her as "Other". Of the four personae, Dee is the most outwardly concerned with performing a well-received identity, the futility of which is only further emphasized by the character's allusion to the racial ideologies and personal pathologies associated with the myth of the tragic mulatta (echoed in the live performance interlude between Dew Drop Lady and Butch in the Kitchen, discussed later in this piece). Yet, while

Dee is unable to transform her body and transcend ethnoracial stereotypes, Blackness and Jewishness are allowed to coexist in their transgressiveness.

6. Kvelling and Kvetching: Dew Drop Lady and the American Jewish Mother

While Dee attempts to pass as non-Jewish, Dew Drop Lady (Figure 5) embodies the quintessential immigrant Jewish mother, using this stereotype to confront the pressures of assimilation and the desire for acceptance. As we will see, both Dew Drop Lady (DDL) and Janie Bell also mutually evoke existential anxieties around familial heritage and (non)assimilation into their Jewish and Black worlds, respectively, which, for Abrams, often manifested in the racial ambiguities of her hair texture, skin color, conventionally masculine style, and husky voice. The interlude between the characters of Dee, who opens *Quadroon*'s performance, and Dew Drop sets the stage for this dichotomy: donning Dew Drop's head scarf and housecoat, she enacts a ritual symbolizing blood quantum law, in which she drops liquid into a chalice and announces her classification as quadroon. Following this "judgment", Abrams-as-Dew Drop recounts feeling isolated from her cousins as she watched them cornrow her father Eddie's hair at her aunt's home, a skill her own father pointed out she did not possess. The story evokes a sense of guilt and confusion about her belongingness amongst her family members, a sense of detachment from specific cultural histories and practices that also permeates Abrams's stylized portrayal of Dew Drop.

Figure 5. Danielle Abrams, detail of Dew Drop Lady, *Quadroon*, 1998. Image courtesy of Danielle Abrams Papers, Tufts University, Tufts Archival Research Center, Medford, MA.

We meet DDL on a beach just outside Coney Island, once home to the Dew Drop parachute jump ride. In the video recording, Dew Drop's reel opens with a black screen, the quintessential *Fiddler on the Roof* song "Tradition" becoming gradually audible. A female voice sings along with the character Golde, father Tevye's wife, and the ensemble as they extol the Jewish "Mamas"' womanly duties of running home and family; the blackness dissipates into panning shots of the sandy beach and a glimpse of a tall white Ferris wheel. The camera settles upon Dew Drop reading a Danielle Steele novel in her floral house dress, pink fuzzy slippers, and garish makeup, her hair in pink plastic curlers beneath a yellow *schmata*. Noticing us watching, she immediately strikes up a conversation.

Underlying Dew Drop's exuberant prattling about her hair stylist, successful children, and her childhood as a Polish immigrant is the shadow of the Holocaust and the twinned promise and angst of being Jewish in a new home. As if gabbing with a new friend, she chirps at the camera in a thick New York Jewish accent about the origin of her namesake, sprinkling her story with Yiddish exclamations of "*oy*" and "*mazel tov*!" and "*nachas*" and punctuating her speech with exaggerated hand gestures. She describes the train rides her family would take as a young girl after immigrating to Brooklyn, a new version of the "old

country", a journey through dark tunnels and flashing lights until the train broke daylight in Coney Island's sweet smells, sounds, and laughter. Remembering the proverbial light at the end of this tunnel, she explains:

. . .I would think to myself. . .THIS IS AMERICA! It was such a dream come true. So we'd get off the train and so much would be going on. All sorts of families with their children, young couples in love, clowns, tall men, fat ladies, men with two heads, girls that swallowed swords, everything you wanted. We'd get off that train and not one person cared who we were under all those lights. (*Quadroon* performance script, Danielle Abrams Papers, Box 1, undated: 2).

Coney Island functions symbolically here as a third space for both Dew Drop and Abrams that alludes to the immigrant experience and her search for open arms as a perceived outsider in multiple social groups. Abrams wrote in an undated artist statement that:

At the dilapidated amusement park, I am able to locate the artifacts that call upon my restoration. From beneath the inoperable Parachute Jump, I am reminded of my grandmother's exuberance as she once described descending from the top. Peeking through a crack in the garage door of the carousel invites rewriting my father's marriage proposal to my mother in the form of a brass ring. . .Coney Island is the America of my dreams, and it is through the diversity of it's [sic] population that I am born. (Artist statement, Danielle Abrams Papers, Box 1, undated: 1).

It is on Coney Island that Abrams figuratively and literally locates her family and connects with their histories, traversing time by harboring the specter of Dew Drop within her own body. However, DDL evokes both acknowledgment and a sense of detachment from the collective trauma of the Holocaust that anchors her grandmother's personal immigrant experience and much of modern Jewish identity. She recounts an unsettling interaction with a ride operator who points out a "star" is missing from her ticket; Dew Drop, insinuating the man reminded her of soldiers from the old country and directly countering her celebration of Coney Island, proclaims, "I didn't think I was in America anymore" (Danielle Abrams Papers).

Abrams's theatrical, stereotypical portrayal of the elderly New York Jewish immigrant defuses the seriousness of Dew Drop's brush with the danger of identification and her inability to "pass" as a non-Jew in the United States. Her readability depends on popular, gendered representations of the doting, hard-working *Yiddishe Mama*—protective, hopeful, assimilated-yet-unassimilable Jewish Mother, a symbol of the vanishing world of the Jewish past amidst American assimilation. Joyce Antler writes of the early 20th-century stereotype that "because they associated the Jewish mother with home, family, tradition and religion—the bodily representation of all that was familiar, loved, and therefore missed—Jewish artists and writers invested their 'Yiddishe Mamas' with extraordinary energy and sympathy, but often with an obsessive and confining control seen as necessary to the immigrant struggle for survival" (Antler 2007, p. 17). Where Dee seems to bodily reject the visible vestments of Blackness and Jewishness in an attempt at social acceptance, Dew Drop Lady's brazenness, her childlike perception of antisemitism, and her Coney Island surroundings emphasize a sense of external social rejection. Abrams oscillates within these gaps between embodiment and ownership of identity, somewhere amidst performance and possession.

Read retrospectively through Abrams's later work, the character of Dew Drop nods subtly to the contentious relationship between Black and Jewish Americans and their mutual status as outsiders, not simply within dominant society but intracommunally. In Dew Drop's world, this manifests as the unmasking of latent racism and social distancing within the Jewish community through the banalities of everyday interactions. Abrams again dons her *schmata* as Dew Drop in her recorded public performance *Early Bird* (2004), letting her loose in the streets of Brighton Beach to blend amongst the local population of Jewish senior citizens on a bench outside a supermarket. Sporting a light blue dress and red cardigan, compression stockings, and oversized sunglasses, DDL clutches a large, embroidered handbag to her chest as she chats with her fellow *bubbes* and *zaydes*. She

reads corny Jewish jokes off index cards to her compatriots, including one about a *moyel* carrying a "*bris*-ket". The cringeworthy comedy is somewhat offset by the mundanity of their topics of conversation: marriage, family origins, pumpernickel brands—until a series of exchanges in which Abrams, merging herself with the character of her grandmother, reveals her Black and Jewish heritage. She asks Irving, a man on her left, "You don't think Black and Jewish are the same?" "No", responds Irving. When asked why not, Irving states, "You're Jewish, you're Jewish, you're Black, you're Black. I'm not a racist". Abrams responds, "My mother is Jewish, but my Dad is Black. I'm Black and Jewish. . .My mother is Jewish, Jewish, it's my religion. But my race I'm black".

Juxtaposed with Irving is Abrams's conversation with Sylvia, an elderly woman to Abrams's right. Discussing her job as a young woman, Sylvia similarly avers her lack of prejudice as she describes the Blacks she used to work with as lazy. Leaning in, Abrams reveals that her mother is Jewish and her father is Black; later, Sylvia counsels Abrams/Dew Drop not to wait to meet someone, as her "features are beautiful". "So were my father's!" Abrams exclaims (Danielle Abrams Papers, Box 12). Both senior citizens fall quiet, appearing stymied by the duality of Abrams's identification. Cobbled together, these bits and pieces of conversation belie a disconnect between the mutually exclusive, biometrically based systems of racialization (of Blackness and Jewishness) that have shaped American Black/Jewish interactions and their subsequent disorientation through Abrams's physical presence. Implied in this slightly shifted manifestation of Dew Drop is the requirement to shed her Blackness in order to be seen as Jewish, a Jewishness that is loudly performative through the character of Dew Drop herself.

7. Janie Bell and the "Masking" of Identity

Janie Bell (Figure 6), a version of Abrams's Southern Black grandmother who died of tuberculosis when she was six, is perhaps the most enigmatic of the four characters. Janie's performance most directly engages with the circumstances of Abrams's struggle with the dichotomy between her physiological appearance, relatively comfortable upbringing, and familial heritage. Perceived situationally as potentially "too Black" or "not Black enough", Abrams's personal files and journals often express anxieties over the authenticity of her identification with Blackness. In one journal entry, Abrams expresses a bevy of reasons she "is not Black", from the possible privileges of her light skin and advanced degree to the necessities of her performance "as Black" amongst members of the Black community; in another, she recounts a conversation between herself and a dark-skinned man in a multiracial social support group she created, where she feared being viewed as performing Blackness like a "snake oil salesman" (Danielle Abrams Papers, Box 6, undated). She similarly described her experience teaching art to predominantly students of Black, Caribbean, and Latin descent at Erasmus Hall Education Campus in Flatbush, Brooklyn, for a project proposal to the Studio Museum in Harlem's Artists in Residence program in 2001, particularly the dichotomy of her students' interpellation of her as "White" and her instant "non-White" status amongst White social circles ("Notes for Abrams Letter", Danielle Abrams Papers, Box 1, 21 May 2001: 3).

While Janie's story does not outwardly suggest Abrams's struggles with self-perception, her character serves as a mirror for Abrams's internal struggles with Black identity, exposing the complexities of claiming an authentic connection to a history marked by trauma and resilience. She stated of her undertaking of Janie:

Until making *Quadroon*, I was under the assumption that I could not set up shop in the body of a black character, because of my not-so-visibly black skin. I feared that my own performance of blackness would read as disingenuous and float adrift, lacking the anchor of skin color, hair texture, and social codifiers that have come to be associated with black identity. To perform in a black face, to provide visual evidence deeming my work, as well as my identity, genuine. This impossibility was [inaudible]; not just in the embodiment of my genetic grandmother, but more importantly, through the realization that Janie's identity in *Quadroon* was interdependent upon the identities of Dee, Butch in the Kitchen,

and Dew Drop Lady. Janie's blackness moves in tandem with Jewishness, queerness, and my experience of gender and class. . .(artist speech for "Is Anything All Right?", Danielle Abrams Papers, 2002).

Figure 6. Danielle Abrams, detail of Janie Bell, *Quadroon*, 1998. Image courtesy of Danielle Abrams Papers, Tufts University, Tufts Archival Research Center, Medford, MA.

The kinship Abrams suggests between the four personas points to the boundaries of their identities as mutually constituted via the intersection of experiences of marginalization, but also nods to the fear of a merely performative belongingness across all aspects of her identity that effectively renders acceptance inaccessible. As the representation of Abrams's "claim" to Blackness, Janie's character is central to interpreting *Quadroon* through the underlying, binary racial politics of the work's title. In the live performance of *Quadroon*, for example, the interlude between BITK and Janie underlines Abrams's internalized interpellation as not truly Black but "other than" even through the eyes of structuralized White racism. A performer recites what appear to be Louisiana's legal definitions of various delineations of blood quantum—mulatto, quadroon, octoroon, griff—the quoted passage asserting that belongingness to each category is both physiologically impassable and formulaically and visually distinguishable. The passage contradicts Abrams's own experiences with epidermal identification and reinforces a spectrum of rigid boundaries between Blackness and Whiteness, effectively excluding her from claiming either.

Janie's narrative delicately intimates the suppressions of race, class, and gender in her exchange of midcentury Southern Black female experience for the culture shock that is the hustle and bustle of New York City. We meet Janie seated on a park bench near a lake in a public park, the sounds of rustling trees and children playing tinkling in the background. Her bright salmon pink dress with scalloped hems glows like neon in the sunshine, her dark red lips shaping her lilting Southern drawl and her hair in glossy, tight curls. Her reserved gestures and demeanor mask the bittersweet tenor of her experiences in the Big Apple. Janie begins with the family trauma of her mother's murder by her alcoholic husband via house fire in Ashland, Virginia, and her move to Harlem, New York to be near her seven brothers and sisters. The import of the fiber of the family bond is apparent throughout her tale. She fondly remembers family get-togethers in Flushing with her sister Margaret's grandmother, "Mama", with their mixture of "complexions from high yellow to coconut to almond joy" (*Quadroon* performance script, Danielle Abrams Papers, Box 1, undated: 11) and her placement of her youngest and eldest children with her siblings as a working woman in Harlem while keeping Abrams's father, Eddie, in her care. When she is diagnosed with tuberculosis, Janie is moved to the infamous hospital complex on Welfare Island adjacent to New York. Janie fondly recalls how little Eddie's visits and rides on the playground structures outside breathed life into her ailing body; back-shadowing her present conversation with viewers on the park bench, Janie details her last visit with

Eddie at a park in Harlem—and thus past, present, and future converge on the bench as listeners now visit with Janie's specter.

The recurrence of the word "spot" throughout Janie's segment refers outwardly to her sickness, but also alludes to the traumatic and intergenerational memories Abrams inherits. Janie introduces the "spot" as a shifting signifier that connects generations early on in her narrative, sandwiched between the fire at her Ashland home and her move to New York before we learn of Janie's diagnosis:

A spot

A spot on your lung

A spot that holds you in your babies' minds (*Quadroon* performance script, Danielle Abrams Papers, Box 1, undated: 11).

This "spot" thus surfaces first as a possible reference to ash and smoke inhalation and to the less tangible pain of family destruction and separation from life and each other, which become embodied through Janie's illness later in the story. The last few sentences of the performance layer the poignancy of future remembrance atop the pain of past loss and present suffering, tying the meaning of this "spot" as both a literal and figural black mark on the body to the continuance of Janie's memory by Abrams's father, Eddie:

And me and my Eddie, we said goodbye to each other

And I knew

I knew I'd always hold a spot in my babies' minds (*Quadroon* performance script, Danielle Abrams Papers, Box 1, undated: 15).

Considering the spot as a "black/Black mark" also activates its symbolism of Blackness, and membership in the Black community, as a biological inheritance that connects its bearer to the sweeping American history of structural racist oppression. In performing Janie, Abrams becomes a medium for "meeting" her grandmother and connecting with the Black side of her family from which she often felt estranged. Engaging with Janie's contribution to her family history and molding her appearance to elicit the image of her grandmother, Abrams taps into persistent, if essentialist, notions of Blackness; as Cherise Smith states in *Enacting Others*:

Knowledge and correct usage of the narratives and signs of blackness function as a passkey that admits or excludes individuals. Authentic blackness, for example, has been aligned variously with nostalgic notions of Southern plantation culture in the late nineteenth century; with Southern rural, poor folk culture in the first decades of the twentieth century; and, in the final decades of that century, with urban blight and poverty. Despite its shifting lines of definition, blackness continues to be associated with emotionality, the body, urban culture, the primitive, overt sexuality, poverty, and heterosexist masculinity (Smith 2011, p. 11).

At the end of the performance Abrams and Janie merge, uniting the distinctive cultural experiences of Blackness and Jewishness exemplified in Janie and Dew Drop as they perform a powerful and notably Jewish memorial ritual. Janie grabs a CD player and starts the music (in the recording, the song is Bill Withers' *Ain't No Sunshine When She's Gone*), sets the player on the chair where she has been sitting, places a rock from a nearby table on the chair, and exits through the audience at the back of the theater. The spot as a symbol, and indeed Janie as a whole, seems to externalize a multifaceted sense of distance between Abrams and a personal relationship with her grandmother, but also the more abstract gulf between her life as a light-skinned Jewish girl and the subtle conveyance of the adversity of Black American life in her grandmother's story.

Janie's role as the conclusion of the performance piece complicates the possibility of closure, particularly in Abrams's later work where the "spot" as a biological marker of Blackness collides with her fear of her own Blackness as a masquerade. While Janie functions as a bridge to Abrams's Black heritage, she is also a precursor to Abrams's recurring representation of perceived discord between her self-image and her mirror image, her body a compression of tensions over the ability to assimilate, survive, and thrive. Abrams seemed particularly interested in the historical use of blackface by Jewish

performers in the United States and the grotesque appropriation of Black stereotypes in early 20th-century vaudeville and Hollywood as a means of asserting Jewish American citizenship and proximity to Whiteness by, essentially, ostracizing Blackness.[9] For example, Abrams's *Routine* (2008) directly invokes and intertwines the politics of minstrelsy and racial passing/crossing as especially thorny for multiple minority identities and bodies like hers. Donning a tuxedo and impersonating a brassy Borscht Belt Jewish comedian, *Routine* invokes the specters of performers like Sophie Tucker and Al Jolson, for whom fame rested at least partly upon their adoption of blackface. Present throughout the set is a tub of borscht, into which Abrams periodically shocks the audience by dunking her face, and eventually her whole body, into the soup. The comedian's sexist and homophobic jokes clash with Abrams's own identity, underscoring the farcical nature of the piece and referencing Abrams's multiple, contentious layers of masking both in character and out. She once stated of *Routine*'s comedic act:

I asked myself if the image of a Jew in blackface was a bizarre parody of my own self-portrait? [emphasis mine]. . . The penetrating stain of the beet-based soup could be understood in many ways—as the embarrassment of this Jewish legacy or as a kind of bloodletting or cleansing—a *mikvah*. My intention was to review and resignify the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century blackface mask—one that paradoxically functioned as a Jewish portal to assimilation and whiteness (Coon 2018).

Compared to *Routine*, Abrams's interrogation of her performance of Janie Bell as a form of blackface feels downright subtle. However, her comment about Janie's authentic Blackness as reliant upon her juxtaposition with the other three personae similarly conveys a "parodic self-portrait" of oppositional, yet coexistent race and gender relations through which Abrams as a queer, multiracial American Jew must learn to situate themselves. As half-real/half-fiction, we might see the characters in *Quadroon* as cultural "masks" grounded in the familial and the fantastical rendered legible through exaggeration and stereotype and, as they chatter over one another in the video, permitting Abrams to cross between and even inhabit multiple personae simultaneously. Janie's "authentic" Blackness thus becomes so in relation to her *difference* from the other personae and from Abrams's emphasis on specific physical and performative traits: the natural curl of her dark and textured hair, the juxtaposition of her bright pink dress and brown skin, the deep, slow Southern drawl, and the elements of Janie's story.

8. Butch in the Kitchen

Like Dew Drop and Janie, Butch in the Kitchen's (Figure 7) narrative conveys a melancholic longing for emotional connection to her Black and Jewish heritages and the frustration caused by perceptions of irreconcilable binarism, a communal and societal pressure to conform to one group or the other. However, juxtaposing BIK's gender ambiguity with three strongly typified heterosexual female characters—Janie and Dew Drop's easily identifiable Black and Jewish womanhood, and Dee's purely performative adoption of Greek femininity—emphasizes the possibilities of butchness as a template for transcending the limitations of socially imposed identity categories. Through Butch in the Kitchen, Abrams not only performs but interrogates the performative nature of gender, blending elements of masculinity and femininity in a way that disrupts conventional binaries and calls into question the siloing of identities within the social order.

Butch's scene opens in her kitchen with the sensual, dulcet tones of Barry White's *What Am I Gonna Do With You*. Butch sings and sways to the music while shaking a plastic bag full of chicken. She wears a white tank top that reveals her arm tattoos, a heavy chain necklace, and a black hat that obscures her short curls. Noticing us, BIK turns down the radio and turns up the personality. Standing over a popping skillet, through a thick New York accent, Butch describes her father making fried chicken before beckoning the spectator to sit down; the camera pans lower as she, and presumably we, are seated. "Here in my kitchen", she says excitedly, "we'll learn about each other". Ladling chicken soup into a bowl, she animatedly recalls her friends' concern for her self-isolation and their

recommendation of a doctor's visit. BIK visits the doctor, only to be sent to a hospital after she tells the doctor how she likes to cook her chicken: "I like to fry it up. . .or I like to put it in a soup" (*Quadroon* performance script, Danielle Abrams Papers, Box 1, undated: 7).

Figure 7. Danielle Abrams, detail of Butch in the Kitchen, *Quadroon*, 1998. Image courtesy of Danielle Abrams Papers, Tufts University, Tufts Archival Research Center, Medford, MA.

At this point, the undercurrents of conflict between Blackness and Jewishness, concealment and openness, acceptance and rejection surface. While Butch does not specify the type of hospital to which she has been admitted, the undertones of her story indicate that she has been sent to a mental institution to treat her presumably "disordered" identity. She states that the hospital tried to sort her into one social place or another ". . .to put us into one group, or another group, to have a conversation. Hey, well maybe if they sat us down at a dinner table, or to a good poker game we might have talked". Asking a nurse why the doctor committed her, she is told "a 'convergence of stresses' and a 'clinical depression'". "What'd he think?" she muses. "There was only one way to cook a chicken?" (*Quadroon* performance script, Danielle Abrams Papers, Box 1, undated: 7). She explains that her release hinged on shutting herself down and stifling any mention of cooking altogether.

Butch's face brightens as she shifts to her move to San Francisco, where she started her meal plan service for the local queer community with the help of food stamps. She recounts the many questions the social worker asked at her qualification meeting, especially when she again blurted out her preferred cooking methods of frying and soup-making. In this situation, however, the social worker smiles widely and immediately approves her for food stamps. Butch's segment concludes with an outline of the food program and an invitation to return to the table to share stories and a meal.

In the performance script, the interlude between Dew Drop and BIK references two popular culture sources on the mixed-race subject and the concept of passing that prefigure BIK's rejection from society as a multiracial, multicultural subject. After changing out of Dew Drop's housecoat to slacks and a white undershirt, Abrams quotes from the first work of anti-slavery fiction about a mixed-race slave, Richard Hildreth's *The Slave; or Memoirs of Archy Moore* (originally published 1836), specifically a passage where Moore romanticizes his Black mother's beauty despite her connection to an "ignoble and degraded race" (Hildreth 1852, p. 8). Switching gears, BIK recalls a family discussion about Douglas Sirk's *Imitation of Life*, a 1959 American film about a long-term companionship between two single mothers (Lora Meredith, who is White, and Annie Johnson, who is Black) and their daughters, alluding to Annie's light-skinned daughter Sarah Jane's ultimately unsuccessful rejection of her Blackness—and her mother, as its source—as she attempts to pass as White. Quoting her Aunt, Abrams-as-BIK states, "'People used to tell me to try to pass, but I wasn't having it. That's what people used to try to tell you to do in those days, but I

didn't want nothing to do with it. I ain't having it" (*Quadroon* performance script, Danielle Abrams Papers, Box 1, undated: 6). This transition between characters powerfully suggests both the historical fact of passing as a survival strategy and the performance of passing as presented in (White, dominant) culture: as a form of "trespassing" across systemic political boundaries of race and class perpetrated by the multiracial subject via the adoption of the (fabricated) "essential" appearances and behaviors of socially privileged groups (Ginsberg 1996, p. 3).

Dew Drop and Janie's performances evoke the history and practices of *passing for* Black or Jewish through embodying overtly stereotypical and feminine character types within these respective communities. Utilizing Julia Charles' notion of *crossing* as a form of negotiating self-subjectivity sans the racist connotations of passing, I argue BIK seeks not to *pass* but to *cross*—to subvert ethnoracial and gendered boundaries freely and authentically:

> Where [the term passing] ultimately fails or is, at best, inadequate, I offer the term crossing, which is mostly shorthand for the strategy of temporary racial or gender crossing. . . . Passing and crossing each rely on two things: the absence of reliable evidence of difference (i.e., racially indeterminate bodies) and the construction of essentialist identities, which ultimately determine the performer's (in) visibility in particular racialized spaces (i.e., being successfully viewed as White in a White space, Black in a Black space, biracial in a hybrid space, or White in any space). While both passing and crossing require contact between the performer(s) and the audience, there is a distinctive difference in the two terms; the difference lies in deception (Charles 2020, p. 36).

For Charles, the multiracial subject's act of crossing between imposed boundaries of Blackness and Whiteness exposes and exploits the artificial essentiality of race, citizenship, and group identities via the manifestation of a transitional and permeable psychic space called "That Middle World" through the activation of multiple "readable" identities (Charles 2020, pp. 23–24). In That Middle World, performance does not critique an individual's deception of belongingness to sociopolitical categories but the deception of essentialism as natural.

Charles' conception echoes both Homi Bhabha's theory of Third Spaces as collisions of spheres of cultural difference in which hybrid identities are negotiated and José Esteban Muñoz's act of disidentification as a practice of multiply marginalized subjects that overturns constructions of a fixed identity by shuttling back and forth between these spheres. Bhabha characterizes Third Spaces as encounters or collisions of spheres of cultural difference (articulated in *The Location of Culture* primarily through subjects of post-colonial nations) through which hybrid cultural identities are negotiated. More than the "sum of the 'parts' of difference" (Bhabha 1994, p. 2), the work of the Third Space, through the multicultural subject, lies in the resignification of proclaimed characteristics of authentic belongingness/Otherness, a porous *overlapping* of borders in which identity is consistently in a state of becoming. Disidentification, Muñoz argues, is a strategy of identity performance employed by individuals affiliated with multiple marginalized groups, a method of survival and subversion against dominant cultural ideologies that "[punish] the existence of subjects who do not conform to the phantasm of normative citizenship" (Muñoz 1999, p. 24). Neither fully accepting nor rejecting oppressive sociopolitical expectations of specific identity categories (of, for example, gender, sex, race, and religion), Muñoz asserts that multiply marginalized individuals navigate the discord between one's sense of self and socially encoded narratives of identification through "[using] this code as raw material for representing a disempowered politics or positionality" (Muñoz 1999, p. 72), exposing the constructed nature of the tenets of group belongingness and making space for themselves through the redefinition of identity labels. In Muñoz's view, hybridity, exemplified in Abrams's queer multiraciality, destabilizes the normativity of consistent, orderly identities by powerfully refusing to occupy only one space at a time, shuttling back and forth between and ultimately "wear[ing] down the coherency of borders" (Muñoz 1999, p. 74).

Through the lens of Charles, Bhabha, and Muñoz, we can view BIK's kitchen and the racial and gendered ambiguities of BIK's body as spaces of "crossing" in which the limits of

Blackness, Jewishness, and queerness overlap like the cacophony of the characters' voices in the installation, negating the assumption of a static or monolithic identity. By welcoming us into her home, Butch breaches the boundaries of public and private space, with her dining table a site of negotiation between individual self-formation and the communal politics of identities. Furthermore, the kitchen becomes a symbolic hearthstone for both Black and Jewish cultural rituals, celebrations, and family bonding, as well as a potential lab for cross-cultural fusion. For BIK, the act of preparing food connotes the suturing of deeply meaningful, if often adversarial, familial and cultural affiliations, subverting her existence deemed socially pathological. Chicken becomes a proxy for Abrams herself as an easily recognizable but culturally itinerant body and flesh that morphs across culinary borders while maintaining its core integrity as a recognizable form. Butch's meal plan service extends this multiplicity to literally nourish her queer community. Through BIK, Abrams materializes the desire for dialogue and cohesion between her "selves" and acceptance amongst those around her by inviting the spectator into this liminal, utopic space.

9. Unambiguously Butch

With Dew Drop and Janie's narratives in mind, the first portion of Abrams's quote, "I know myself through my oppressor", might be interpreted as a battle for defining subjectivity between individual self-assertion and societal ideologies that essentialize ethno-racial systems and ostracize "race hybridity". How, though, might we consider the "resolution" of the Otherness of multiraciality, at least according to Abrams, through the opacity of gender presented through the character Butch in the Kitchen? The order in which the personae appear in the live performance: first Dee, then Dew Drop, Butch, and finally Janie—does not outwardly stage BIK as a solution to the problems of passing with which the other three characters grapple. However, Butch's unique awareness of these difficulties and her attempts to counteract social limitations on the intersectionality of identities as symbolized by the mental hospital position her character and butchness writ large as a space of multiply "being", if ultimately only fictionally.

We can, of course, ground BIK's performance of butchness within Judith Butler's notion of gender performativity (and, by extension, of masculinity and femininity) as drag: as a retroactive cultural construction of biological gender from which there is no authentic original cluster of characteristics, and which is thus donned, reinforced, and subverted through iterative acts such as speech and behavior (Butler 1991, p. 21). Consistent with the notion of butchness set forth by scholars like Gayle Rubin and Jack Halberstam, BIK's identification as butch (and Abrams's as queer) resists binary conceptions of gender and racial identity via biologically detached masculinity and reclaims illegibility as a *necessary* state for the active formation of a durational subjectivity. Like the terms "masculine" and "feminine", "butch" and "femme" have historically functioned in the lesbian community as sets of behavioral codes that orient members within specific social roles. Butchness has been commonly defined as "a category of lesbian gender that is constituted through the deployment and manipulation of masculine gender codes and symbols" (Rubin 2012, p. 242). Countering the seemingly simple adaptation of a heteronormative binary gender system within the lesbian community, Rubins argues that butchness as an identity category upsets the male/female binary and proves the contingency of masculinity as inflected by the various expectations of race, class, religion, nationality, occupation, and individual preference (Rubin 2012, p. 245). In *Female Masculinity* (2018), Halberstam extends Rubin's discussion of masculinity, noting that the structure of conventional masculinity is decipherable primarily in its repetitions outside of the White, male bourgeois body (Halberstam 2018, p. 2). Furthermore, Halberstam asserts that masculinities are mutually constructed and performed by those with both biologically categorized male and female bodies; masculinity, then, consequently decouples associations between sexual organs and sexual and social roles and activities. Butchness is thus an inconstant state that detaches conventional expectations of gendered behavior from (a biologically) male or female body without rendering that body pathological. BIK's attire and demeanor place her as norma-

tively butch, but the visual cues we read as masculine (if we follow Halberstam) do not lead us to read her as trespassing upon masculinity; alongside these blurred boundaries of gender, we might see Abrams's performance of Blackness and Jewishness in the work as her attempt to locate, make strange, and transcend heavily entrenched and mutually exclusive ideas of authentic Blackness and Jewishness. Relying on stereotyping the other characters in *Quadroon* to "label" their identities according to representational conventions, BIK represents the possibilities of simultaneously inhabiting multiple subject positions.

Furthermore, Butch offers us the potential of extending Butler's constructivist approach to gender, so often tied to physiology, to other cultural categories and to the inconstancy of identities themselves. If rigid notions of essential Jewishness and Blackness are performative then, like the chicken, why cannot her body itself be a canvas for the shifting multitudes of her self-perception? Though a majority of Butler's scholarship is attuned to gender and sexuality, they, like Crenshaw, Schraub, and others, have acknowledged race as a similar but distinct regulatory system reinforced by performativity (Butler 2011). Though analogies between the hardships of marginalized race and gender identities are sticky and potentially reductive, it can be helpful to consider that race, like gender, is also currently understood as a culturally produced cluster of essentializing traits intended to maintain established hierarchies of power and access through the reinforcement of "natural" biological difference. Moreover, constructs of gender, race, and sexuality do not exist solely on parallel planes. Karen Maeda Allman writes that while the separation of gender from sex in progressive politics has freed womanhood from the confines of biology, sexuality, race, and gender, they are nonetheless deeply intertwined as constructs of fixed, natural states. Feminine ideals, for example, are based upon a White, Euro-American complex of virtues, which include expectations of markedly heterosexual female sexual roles in contrast with the hypersexualization of Blacks. Butchness, then, particularly Black butchness, potentially rewrites several symbolic codes of belongingness simultaneously:

> . . .Race, gender, and sexuality exist as a sort of unstable triad; shifts in one create disturbances in the other two. Transgressing racial boundaries, therefore, would not only potentially destabilize notions of racial purity but also threaten exposure of the racialized, historicized character of gender roles. Proscriptions against "race mixing" often coexist with calls for adherence to "traditional" gender roles and an emphasis on heterosexual, procreative sex only within the institution of marriage (Allman 1995, p. 279).

I do not claim to know with certainty what Abrams meant by her quote. Neither am I thoroughly convinced that gender ambiguities—which, as Halberstam writes, tend to both reify the binary system through differentiation *from* and relegate butchness to a type of "thirdness" or deviance (Halberstam, p. 20)—or the black/White color line as social symbolic orders are fully dissoluble. Furthermore, as Samiya A. Bashir notes in "Fear of a Lesbian Planet: Why Black Women Feel More Excluded Now from Lesbian Community Than Ever Before", the image and activism of the lesbian community are typically built around affluent White women to the exclusion of aforementioned issues such as race, class, and religion that compound the social acceptance and perceptions of lesbian identities. "My butch identity is not just about sexuality or even a choice of gender", Abrams asserts in Bashir's piece, "it's about wearing my working-class stripes and wearing my racial stripes" (Bashir 2001, p. 22). However, it is BIK who enables Janie and Dew Drop to "converse", and all four characters are needed to complete both the work and Abrams's autohistory. Butch potentially provides a masculine counterpoint to the three disparate but traditionally feminine personas. Thus, Abrams's ability to embody all four proves the dual possibilities of detachment from, and authentic habitation of, several sets of gendered and cultural traits in a single body. Perhaps we can take Abrams's expression of gender hybridity through Butch's performance as a resolution of the "problem" of racial hybridity, not as an *erasure* of her specific identifications with Blackness or (White) Jewishness but as creating an interstitial dimension wherein, like the many iterations of butchness that confound binaries of masculinity and femininity, she maintains bodily autonomy and authority over her authenticity through the medium of performance. *Quadroon* thus offers

a powerful blueprint for how performance art can be used to navigate and challenge the complexities of intersectional identity, urging us to reconsider the very definitions of authenticity and belonging.

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Notes

1 Per Chicago Manual of Style (CMOS) guidelines, I have capitalized the word "Black" within my text to denote a specific racial or ethnic group; in recognition of the preferences of Abrams and of other scholars, I have left the word capitalized or lowercase as it appeared in their own work. Furthermore, I recognize that terms such as "Black" and "African American" are fraught and usage varies; as not all Black people in the United States are of African descent, this piece utilizes the term "Black". Per CMOS, I also elected to capitalize the word "White" when referring to race; doing so, as we do for other racial designations, disavows the idea of Whiteness as the default and implicates Whiteness as part of embedded structures of racism. However, for accuracy's sake I left the text as-is in direct quotes where the author's original text did *not* capitalize the word.

2 There are discrepancies regarding the true identity of Dew Drop Lady; while some scholarship written based upon interviews with Abrams has described the character as her maternal grandmother, the artist's own statements and correspondence about Dew Drop (as a recurring character in her work overall) and in *Quadroon* refer to her as "*a* Jewish grandmother" or, alternately, as her "great grandmother", as Abrams states in a letter dated 5 November 1997 about the work *Coney Tails*. Pinpointing Dew Drop's familial relationship to Abrams is not of paramount importance, as the character is presented as an archetype in *Quadroon* and is thus at least partially fictionalized, but I would be remiss not to mention this disparity.

3 (Dollinger 2018) is a thorough and focused study of American Black/Jewish relations since the early post-World War II period, through the Civil Rights Movement to the rise of the Black Power Movement, Jewish particularism, and identity politics and beyond.

4 (Haynes 2018) similarly characterizes this dynamic between American Blacks and Jews.

5 Professor Carol Ockman's write-up of the *Too Jewish?* exhibition in *Artforum* cleverly detects undercurrents of drag and the prominence of disidentificatory practices. See (Ockman 1996).

6 *Freestyle*, curated by Thelma Golden, was a defining, if controversial, moment in debates around identity politics and the issues of particularism and solidarity in late 20th-century identity politics through the language of "postidentity", particularly post-Blackness. Similar to my co-editor Derek Conrad Murray's discussion of post-Blackness in (Murray 2016), I assert that post-Blackness is not equivalent to the claims of post-racialism and the death of racism; rather, post-Black, and other "posts" like post-Jewish, are aesthetic discourses that respond specifically to the gatekeeping of group identity as evident in heteropatriarchal, hypermasculine depictions popularized in Black Arts Movement or, closer to "home" intense debates over Holocaust memory and representation (including the events as an anchor for uniting Jews around the world) within the American Jewish community.

7 Writing several decades apart and from differing cultural perspectives, both Du Bois and Brodkin equate national citizenship with whiteness and frame assimilation toward whiteness as a polar choice between the non-citizenship of identification with minority class and culture and participation in the denouncement and upbraiding of said culture in alignment with white sentiment.

8 See Claire Jean Kim's (1999) "The Racial Triangulation of Asian Americans", in which Kim proposes a framework for understanding Asian American not within a fixed binary scale of Blackness to whiteness, nor as isolated from other, singular systemic structures of racism, but as deeply interactive. Such systems, as Kim states, are orchestrated by white culture and pit racialized groups against each other in order to maintain established social hierarchies.

9 See (Rogin 1996) for an in-depth discussion of this topic.

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Article

Abstract Subjects: Adia Millett, Abstraction, and the Black Aesthetic Tradition

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Abstract: The Oakland, California-based artist Adia Millett is among an ever-growing generation of Black artists who have embraced abstraction in their creative production. Her approach is significant, considering that one of the more pernicious dimensions of art history has been its omission of African-American painters from the history of late-modernist American abstraction. In this 2024 interview, scholar Derek Conrad Murray and Millett exchange ideas about the intersection of Blackness and abstraction. Identity and representation have always been a thorny terrain throughout the history of American art, from the nineteenth century to the present—and Black artists' commitment to reflecting on racial injustice dubiously rendered their work incommensurate with the aesthetic dictates of post-war abstraction. Since the 1990s, there has been an increase in corrective efforts dedicated to recuperating Black artists who have fallen through the cracks of history. As a result, the twenty-first century has seen an acknowledgment of many artists who were overlooked—and a blossoming of formalist abstraction among recent generations of contemporary Black artists. As articulated in this interview, Adia Millett, like many of her peers, has resisted the falsehood that abstraction is beyond her purview—and has embraced abstraction while refusing to abandon the complexities of Blackness.

Keywords: African-American art; abstraction; identity; representation; art history

1. Introduction

> Learn to understand existence as being political.
> Avoid art-world strategies.
> Erase all known isms.
> Learn to hate the history of art and, above all, don't trust it.
> Allow the paint as material to take care of the black thing.
> Don't succumb to populist aesthetics.
> Remove the notion of me.
> Eliminate that which qualifies as a narrative.
> Learn to live by the philosophy of jazz.
> Only fools want to be famous (avoid at all cost).
> Remain true to myself.
>
> —Jack Whitten (Whitten and Siegel 2018, p. 251)

For roughly the last two decades, there has been a resurgence of interest in black abstraction. There is a growing list of African-American and African-diasporic artists taking up the genre, including Glenn Ligon, Odili Donald Odita, Julie Mehretu, Mark Bradford, Jennie C. Jones, Rashid Johnson, Shinique Smith, David Huffman, Samuel Levi Jones, and Adia Millett among many others. The greater acceptance and inclusion of black abstraction was preceded by a shift in both scholarly discourses and within the art market. In many ways, this was a recuperative effort and an acknowledgment that the history of

American abstraction was rigidly ethno-European. In the past two decades, there have been efforts to acknowledge many of the artists who were overlooked, many of whom were in their late seventies and eighties at the time they began to receive recognition. However, this shift has opened the door for a younger generation of artists to embrace abstraction and find success despite the continued expectation that *blackness* is a visible and culturally legible presence in their work, which so often necessitates the representation of black bodies. It is, therefore, still an iconoclastic and rebellious gesture for artists of African descent to fully embrace abstraction, especially in the United States. In essence, abstraction means liberation, and especially an individuality that has so often been denied black people, either within the dictates of their own ethnic community—or within a society that can only see black people ideologically as a collective underclass.[1]

2. Context

In what follows, I engage in an extended conversation with Oakland-based artist Adia Millett (b. 1975), whom I interview as exemplary of the current generation of African-American abstract painters. (Figure 1) Originally from Los Angeles, Millett received her BFA from the University of California, Berkeley, in 1997 and her MFA from the California Institute of Arts in 2000. Millett's work is a formally complex and conceptually multivarious exploration of the history of black aesthetic expression (Roth 2023). Within the so-called mainstream art world, black artists who appear to refuse the political concerns of race and embrace abstraction or the intellectually esoteric dictates of conceptualism are perceived as more evolved and transcendent than their activist artist peers. As a multi-disciplinary artist and Afrofuturist, Millett is stridently outspoken in her commitment to exploring African-American history while simultaneously exploring the complexities of identity, collective histories, and the incredible resiliency of black people in the United States. However, she has also suggested that her response to the expectation that black artists embrace identity-based art practices was to locate ways to engage with subjectivity without a representational focus on the body.

Millett was included in curator Thelma Golden's paradigm-shifting 2001 exhibition Freestyle held at the Studio Museum in Harlem. *Freestyle* introduced an emerging generation of black artists whose aesthetic and conceptual choices were often iconoclastic, experimental and endeavored to transform and ultimately expand the parameters of what black art can be. (Golden 2001, p. 14) *Freestyle* has emerged as both prophetic and transformative in its support of an irascible group of artists who rallied against the ideological enclosures and confining scripts that have often relegated black art to the margins. The lack of acknowledgment and support of black abstraction was one of those slippages that emerged after the *Freestyle* exhibition, which, in the years since, has arisen as a major arena of creative production for many black artists.

Millett's creative practice embraces various media and conceptual approaches, including stained glass, collage, sculpture, textiles, quilting, installation, and painting. Her abstract painterly works are in critical dialogue with Abstract Expressionism and the Color Field tradition, depicting beautifully composed and complex geometric shapes, vibrant colors, combined with forms that allude to landscapes, architectural structures, and interior spaces. Millett describes her work, specifically her use of textiles as drawing on African-American domestic and artistic traditions of quilt-making, while "paying homage to the past through the use of repurposed fabrics and historical iconography, its bright atheistic imagery is informed by the future" (Millett 2024).

Figure 1. Studio portrait of Adia Millett (2024) [color photograph].

In his review of the artist's exhibition *Adia Millett, Wisdom Keepers* held at the Institute of Contemporary Art, San Jose (16 September 2023–18 February 2024), critic Dave Roth rightly addressed the historical problematics of a black artist who chooses abstraction, in a moment when racial antagonisms and anti-blackness are pervasive:

> While matters of aesthetics are often thought to be apolitical, the act of a Black artist making non-representational art during times of crisis has historically been viewed as anti-political, as when orthodoxies imposed by the Black Arts Movement during the Civil Rights era ultimately triggered a backlash against the notion that art should serve only political purposes. (Roth 2023)

Roth ultimately suggests "that art-making, in Millett's scheme of things, isn't so much an individual endeavor as it is a timeless, communal, generation-spanning affair" (Roth 2023). However, in contrast to that sentiment, it is clear that the artist's choice of abstraction

and her engagement with black aesthetic histories is engaged in a cultural politics of both race and gender.

Millett's presence as a woman of color committed to non-objective formal considerations is in direct conversation with a history of exclusion and devaluing, as well as an ongoing conversation about what black artists should or should not do. The epigraph above, for example, comprises excerpted entries from the late African-American painter Jack Whitten's studio logs, which were posthumously published in his 2018 book entitled *Jack Whitten: Notes from the Woodshed* (See Figures 2 and 3). The text, originally written in 1998 when Whitten was 58, is part of a list of 32 objectives that shaped his artistic production. Whitten (1939–2018), in his later years, became synonymous with the art world's neglect of black abstractionists, a historical omission that is just now being redressed. The artist's personal notes revealed the frustrations of a gifted black artist negotiating an exclusionary art world, contrasted by intracultural expectations that demanded that black artists construct a distinctly politicized and recognizably "black" visual aesthetic (O'Grady 2021). In some ways, Whitten's creative values are in alignment with the tenets of Abstract Expressionism, while in other respects, it rejects many of its formalist rigidities. *New York Times* writer Megan O'Grady highlights the difficulty faced by Whitten and many of his African-American contemporaries:

> Art allowed Whitten to bridge the country's racial divides with a practice that embodied the possibility of individual freedom and improvisation within larger social identities. His insistence that painting was *about* something ran counter to—or expanded upon—the Minimalist ideals of the time, which privileged form over meaning ("Erase all known isms"). "Abstract painting that addresses subject is what I want," he wrote. "I want something that goes beyond the notion of the 'formal' as subject." (O'Grady 2021)

Art historians have begun redressing the erasures and rigidities as well. In her essay "African American Abstraction", art historian Sarah Lewis brings critical attention to the seminal writings of Anne Gibson, who "properly considered why African American Abstract Expressionist practices had been 'discounted'", and reflected candidly on her own disturbance upon realizing that, at the time, "no people of color were considered 'major' Abstract Expressionists" (Lewis 2019, p. 160). Gibson's exploration into the value systems that subtend the abstract expressionist movement's conceptual and aesthetic criteria was committed to unraveling the genre's rigidities and omissions—while arguing that "the very definition of abstraction as a concept that needed to be dislodged from Greenbergian formalism and influential ideas about "quality" and "presence" that defined it" (Lewis 2019, p. 160). Gibson directly challenged the aesthetic criteria that defined Abstract Expressionism, particularly its mythic universalism and its "denial of politics" (Lewis 2019, p. 160). Lewis points out that Gibson's work on abstraction indicted the art world's delineation of not just what forms of art matter but also whose lives and creative productions have historical worth. Gibson's scholarship had a profound impact and led to a resurgence of interest in black abstraction.

Much of this conversation is rooted in the legacy and intellectual particularities of the late American art critic Clement Greenberg (1909–1994). Greenberg came into prominence as arguably the most influential art critic of his generation and was known for his staunch advocacy of formalism and abstraction in mid-twentieth-century painting. The 1950s was an important time for the intellectual and formal development of art in the United States. The meteoric rise of Abstract Expressionism, spearheaded by Greenberg—along with art critic Harold Rosenberg, art historian Meyer Schapiro, and the art historian and critic Leo Steinberg—brought to the fore new intellectual and aesthetic perspectives that had an indelible impact on post-war American art. Greenberg viewed formalist abstraction as a universal aesthetic that elided socio-political issues, nationalism, and ethnic particularity.[2] He launched several artistic careers, namely those of Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, Barnett Newman, Clyfford Still, and several others. However, Greenberg's rigidity was perceived as elitist and destructive. In many ways, his legacy has been tarnished as a result of his

contentiousness and unwavering advocacy for a very particularized aesthetic criteria—and in the decades since his death, the perception of Greenberg's contributions, have been sutured to a set of annihilative stances, rebukes, and exclusions that not only defined the critics views, but were also perceived as entangled with cultural attitudes of the period. Moreover, the overdetermining of Abstract Expressionism as an exclusively Euro-American (and primarily male) artistic movement, has (for better, or worse) continued to define the critics legacy. Sarah Lewis's recuperation of Anne Gibson's critical reassessment of Greenberg's interventions gives much needed recognition to many of the artists who ultimately (for reasons still being debated) were not recognized.

Figure 2. Anton Corbijn, *Jack Whitten, Self-Assignment*, 24 January 2017. New York, NY—January 24: painter and sculptor Jack Whitten poses for a portrait on 24 January 2017, in New York, NY. (Photo by Anton Corbijn/Contour by Getty Images).

Figure 3. Jack Whitten, *Pink Psyche Queen*. 1973. Acrylic on canvas, 71 × 60 in. (180.3 × 152.4 cm). Gift of Mary and Earle Ludgin by exchange. 2012.14. Photo: Nathan Keay. © Jack Whitten Estate. Courtesy of the Estate and Hauser & Wirth, Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, Chicago, IL.

As a key exemplar, Lewis recalls the groundbreaking 2006 exhibition at the Studio Museum of Harlem entitled *Energy/Experimentation*. The exhibition focused on the creative experimentation of black artists during the Black Arts Movement between the 1960s and 1970s. Many were working abstractly during a time when the emphasis was on representational practices that were reflective of political concerns—and which were in direct

contradistinction to the representational tenets of late-modernist abstraction. The contrast between political engagement and the supposedly liberatory universality of abstraction emerged as a clear (and at times fraught) dividing line between black artists. Many African-American non-objective painters found themselves ignored by the arts established, yet similarly alienated by the black arts community for apparently failing to directly and representationally reflect the revolutionary aesthetics of black pride. It was clear that during the Black Arts Movement, there was an expectation placed on black artists that they must produce art that "speaks directly to the needs and aspirations of Black America" (O'Grady 2021).

The demand to reflect the struggle against structural racism and anti-blackness primarily took the form of figuration and realist depictions of black subjects—often historical figures—and those engaged with activism and resistance. In a limited sense, black abstraction gained some acknowledgment from the mainstream art world—while simultaneously being perceived as adrift from the political dynamism and revolutionary politics of the Black Arts Movement. It was a vexing predicament for many artists, many of whom were resistant to the very notion of a segregated place for black artists.

The abstract painter Norman Lewis struggled to reconcile the intracultural creative demands placed upon his identity while attempting to remain faithful to abstraction (See Figures 4 and 5). Lewis is an important exemplar and antecedent to the current resurgence of interest in abstraction among contemporary black artists and scholars. Lewis was a contemporary of *The Irascibles*, a group of 18 American abstract painters that were associated with the New York School, a group of multi-genre artists during the 1950s and 60s. The artists, many of whom were proteges of Clement Greenberg, would famously appear in a group portrait in *Life* magazine's January 15, 1951 issue—a moment that launched the Abstract Expressionist movement to international notoriety. Lewis often patronized the Cedar Tavern, a bar and restaurant in Greenwich Village in Manhattan, NY, which served as a hub for a diverse range of artists. Lewis was a mainstay among the New York School but found himself alienated from the Abstract Expressionist movement as it came into national and international prominence. He became a casualty of the Greenbergian aesthetic criteria that was so limiting that it excluded a range of artists, primarily ethnic and sexual minorities (Landau 2005, p. 70). A first-generation abstract expressionist, Lewis was a founding member of *Spiral*, a select group of black painters working in New York during the 1960s, which included artists Romare Bearden, Emma Amos, Hale Woodruff, Charles White, and many others. As the only African-American abstract expressionist, it has been widely noted—if not mythologized—that Lewis was actively excluded by the major progenitors of the abstract movement. In his critical reassessment of the artistic movement, David Craven suggests that "Perhaps it is not surprising that the one major Abstract Expressionist who was black would be the one member of the group who has been consistently ignored in accounts of this period in U.S. art" (Craven 2005, p. 515).

The list of black abstractionists is lengthy and comprises a diverse, multigenerational group of gifted yet under-recognized artists with diverse views, including the aforementioned Lewis, Sam Gilliam, Alma Thomas, William T. Williams, Melvin Edwards, Howardena Pindell, Martin Puryear, McArthur Binion, Charles Alston, Beauford Delaney, Al Loving, Barbara Chase-Riboud, Afro-British painter Frank Bowling, and Ed Clark. While it is clear that the cultural racism of the period led to the widespread marginalization of black abstractionists, we cannot afford to overlook how the Civil Rights Movement and the legal fight to end racial segregation necessitated a culture of creative resistance that compelled black artists to commit themselves to the cause. Refusing to do so—or simply resisting any mandate that would control or curtail one's creative freedom—often led to a social and professional death.

In her *New York Times* article, Megan O'Grady underscores the historical and present-day reality that "the license to free expression that white artists have been granted by birthright—especially white male artists, so often perceived as the vanguard in visual arts—hasn't been available to Black artists" (O'Grady 2021).

Figure 4. Arnold Newman, portrait of American artist Norman Lewis (1909–1979) as he poses in his Harlem studio, New York, New York, 5 February 1960. (Photo by Arnold Newman Properties/Getty Images).

> The expectation that black artists would create representational art that reflects the black experience continued to resonate throughout the 1960s, and is vividly addressed in Whitten's writing. The 1963 killing of four girls in a church bombing in Birmingham, his hometown, touched off a long period of rage, anxiety and existential questioning. For Whitten and other black artists of his generation, abstraction was something of a lonely course, one that set them apart from the Black Arts Movement. Early in her career, the painter and video artist Howardena Pindell was famously told by the director of the Studio Museum in Harlem to "go downtown and show with the white boys" when she shared with him her abstract work, which also failed to adhere to the feminist narrative of the time. Pindell was certainly not alone in her frustration with having her work perceived solely through her race or gender. (O'Grady 2021).

Figure 5. Norman Lewis, *City Night*. 1949. Oil on wood, 24 × 18 in. (61 × 45.7 cm). Gift of Marie-Josée and Henry R. Kravis. Digital image © The Museum of Modern Art/licensed by SCALA/Art Resource, NY. Location: The Museum of Modern Art/New York, NY/USA. © Estate of Norman Lewis, Courtesy of Michael Rosenfeld Gallery LLC, New York, NY.

Howardena Pindell being told to "go downtown and show with the white boys", perfectly encapsulates a double bind faced by black abstractionists: a predicament where they find themselves being perceived by their own community as blind or indifferent towards to the struggle against anti-blackness, while, at the same time, they are rejected by the abstractionist community for their artistic commitment to the struggle against structural racism. In more annihilating and judgmental instances, they were often characterized by other black artists as living under the veil of white supremacy—or as too enamored with white cultural aesthetics. On the other hand, any semblance of the political rendered their work incommensurate with the aesthetic and formal criteria that esoterically defined abstraction as a genre, rendering it intentionally exclusive and unreachable for many. All of these challenges were, needless to say, exacerbated by overtly racist and exclusionary attitudes in the U.S. during the 1950s and 1960s.

Scholar Leigh Raiford has taken up this contentious predicament, characterizing it as a type of containment, or an ideological enclosure, that restricts the creative possibilities of black creativity. The stakes are bigger than visual art alone. The very understanding of black humanity hangs in the balance. It is a battle for individuality and personhood; it is about the freedom to exist as an autonomous individual and more than just social symbolism—or merely as an avatar for reductive notions of black victimhood:

> Let me offer two distinct but interrelated ways that I am thinking about abstraction in relation to the representation of Black life: first as a specifically aesthetic problematic and second as a legal and theoretical category—that is, the concept of abstract personhood. The *longue durée* of Black representation has often been cast as one of ongoing and uninterrupted struggle, a now hidden, now open fight between abjected Black subjects, banished to the margins of affirming representational forms (like portraiture) . . .
>
> . . . In this history, Black peoples have invested in the "positive image"—the True, the Good, the Beautiful—as a means of gaining social equity and recognition as well as reprieve from the prison house of representation. In the realm of the visual, all that was required were successful images that defeated a seemingly endless march of images of failed Blackness. Black representation is understood, then, as doing specifically political work, uplift work. And thus, figuration—in the form of portraiture or sculpture, for example—has been central to this sort of representational project. (Raiford 2020, p. 80)

Raiford forcefully takes on a representational problem that has divided black artists and intellectuals for decades. Throughout my scholarly career, I have contemplated how African-American artists become ideologically sutured to a limited set of racialized scripts and reductive cultural and representational tropes that are reflective of victimhood, pathology, violence, and struggle. On the other hand, black artists have historically faced intracultural pressures to produce work that reflects the struggle against anti-blackness which, by extension, placed limitations on the creative expressiveness of certain artists—especially those committed to abstraction. The current generation of black artists working abstractly appears to reject the implication that their work should inherently reflect struggle, which differentiates them from the past. In their work is an unabashed embrace of formalism, albeit without a conflicted relationship to the cultural politics of race. For many of these artists, there is little distinction between art, politics, and identity.

Over the past two decades, Millett has created an intriguing and formally multifarious body of work that operates in deep awareness of the history I have outlined above. Between March and May 2024, I had the pleasure of engaging her in conversation about her creative and philosophical engagement with abstraction.

3. Interview with Adia Millett

Author: Before we begin, I would like to thank you for agreeing to have this conversation with me. I've followed your work for many years, and it's been genuinely enriching to watch it evolve formally and conceptually. For the purpose of introducing readers to the

particulars of your artistic career, I would like to begin with your creative history. How did you get started as an artist? Were you raised in a creative household or exposed to visual art by other means?

Adia Millett: Creativity is definitely in the blood. My grandmother, who died when my mother was a child, was an art teacher. My mother studied art in college but never pursued it. My stepfather studied architecture, and my birth father was an actor who, before he passed, took up painting. I would sneak out of my classes in high school to hang out with my art teachers. When I went to UC Berkeley, I took one art class, and there was no turning back. I think most of the artists I know have always felt alien; even in the community, they were different. Sometimes, our circumstances force us to be creative, for example, being a child of immigrants, of parents who struggle with mental illness or addiction, being a child who faces economic, racial, or gender discrimination, etc. In my case, both of my fathers were black, and my mother white. In the 80s and 90s, "mixed kids" were constantly questioned about their identity. As for most nonwhite people in America, the projections of who and what we are were and still are endless. It wasn't until college that I realized this and began to dissect what that meant for me.

Author: I would like to follow up with you regarding your art school experience. I completed a BFA at Art Center College of Design in the 90s, and I was struck by how little information I was given about black art, in general. At the time, artists like Carrie Mae Weems, Glenn Ligon, Fred Wilson, Lyle Ashton Harris, Lorna Simpson, Kerry James Marshall, Dawoud Bey, and many others were gaining traction in the art world—yet their work was never taught. There was also a vibrant discourse among black scholars who were critically concerned with their artwork. It was an exciting moment, but it also served as an inspiration for me despite the institution's neglect. The lack of any pedagogical or historical interest in African-American art at my institution was ultimately what led me to pursue graduate studies in art history. What was your experience like studying art on the undergraduate level at UC Berkeley and eventually during your graduate study at the California Institute of the Arts? Did you have a similar experience, or was there a more robust engagement with black art and/or a critical interest in identity and representation? Were you able to find a supportive community?

AM: The undergrad art department at UC Berkeley in the mid-90s offered very little in terms of exposing us to black artists. I had more luck taking ethnic studies classes or June Jordan's poetry class in search of African-American creative practices. Cal Arts was better. Carrie Mae Weems and Lyle Ashton Harris came to visit while I was there, offering advice that would help shape myself and the two other black MFA candidates (Figure 6).

Author: As you said, our circumstances often fuel our creativity. Underrecognized people can become sutured to their bodies (and everything that means ideologically in our culture), and by extension—we're often constrained by a limiting set of stereotypes and reductions or find ourselves and our work fetishized. The concern is always that misperceptions about who we are tend to limit our possibilities or at least create a reductive set of understandings about what we can do—or define what our creative and intellectual role is. Can you say more about how your identity became an important area of interest for you during your graduate studies? Were there any experiences you had (creatively, educationally, or personally) that were particularly impactful?

AM: Looking back as young visual artists, writers, and musicians, we were being influenced and exposed to imagery and training that encouraged us to be proud and critical of the cultural tropes that were embedded in our lives. So you saw a lot of young black artists making work about black hair, about the leftover traces of Mammy imagery, and slave ship references, etc. And for black artists working beyond the body, the body and all the layers of who we were had to be a part of our work in order to do anything else. In other words, I was constantly thinking about how my work was both constrained and uplifted by its placement within blackness.

Author: When I first encountered your recent paintings, I was struck by your engagement with abstraction. Historically, the abstract expressionist movement that emerged in

the 1950s was critically framed as an escape from identity and representation in painting. In American art criticism and historiography, there has traditionally been a separation between the formal dimensions of art and the rise of identity-based artistic practices from the 1960s through the 90s. Black artists have always worked abstractly but have not always been acknowledged for doing so. Historically, African-American art has been more figurative—though, in recent years, there has been a distinct leaning toward abstraction among black artists. Why have you made the decision to work abstractly, and how do the broader concerns of identity factor into your conceptual and aesthetic approach?

AM: I'll start by saying that in the 90s, when identity-based work was almost expected from black artists, I began to wonder how I could speak to not just blackness but the larger conversation of the "subject" without including a figure or a literal body. I drank the Kool-Aid of academia and was influenced by Franz Fanon, Edward Said, Hal Foster, Susan Stewart, etc.

While my early work used objects and space to suggest a narrative, I was constantly trying to ride the line between imagery that suggested cultural representation and the removal of that representation. In other words, how could I create an environment that would lead a viewer to their own story, which could be completely different for the next viewer? How could I force the viewer to acknowledge their own projections? I believed that as artists, dismantling how we are defined was our responsibility.

Figure 6. Graduate school image of Millett with artist Lorna Simpson, curator Eungie Joo, and curator and critic Claire Tancons [black and white photograph].

As the years progressed, I noticed that, on an unconscious level, artists reveal who they are through their work, whether they like it or not. Our obsessions, our politics, or trauma inform our work in the most blatant and subtle ways. I could no longer focus on challenging viewers' perceptions of me and definitely not of a whole race of people. So, the work progressively transitioned. I started out focusing on the absence of the body. The domestic space, the home, and the everyday objects were the focal points. Even at this point, I saw the objects and spaces as a collection of collective memories collaged together. Eventually, the "Home" came apart. It seemed like a façade for who a person, a character, or an identity was. I stopped making the miniatures. Only traces of them remained. And everything I made continued to center around the "coming apart." Quilts, structures, photos, and eventually paintings and glass were all made to be deconstructed (Figure 7).

Figure 7. *Your Edges and Mine*, 2018, fabric/textiles—old quilt-repurposed fabric, cotton/poly blend, wool 70 in. × 80 in.

At this point, what I see is that, as viewers, we find meaning in anything. A simple circle becomes a sun, moon, target, portal, mouth, and anus. As a black artist, every shape has the potential to be so much more. When you create clearly representational, figurative black art, the meaning is straightforward. You share a vision that we can all agree on, *or so we think*. With abstraction, nonwhite artists hold up a mirror. In 2024, we are not just humans; we are our past, our ancestorial trauma, and seen through the lens of our oppressors.

The question I asked as I completed the work for my latest exhibition, *Reflections on Black*, was this: "Can a Black woman create a body of work about blackness and it not be about race?"

Author: I am very curious about the motivations that fueled your impulse to remove the figure. It's so true that in the 90s—and still today—centering identity-based concerns (structural racism, trauma, struggle, and deprivation) was demanded of black artists. However, many (if not most) black artists willingly choose to foreground anti-blackness in their artistic production—which so often seems to necessitate foregrounding the black body. It is clearly a choice to engage directly with black cultural politics. Beyond your own creative choices, do you feel that black artists should forgo representation (and experiment with abstraction) as a means to broaden cultural understandings of what blackness is? I do agree with you that it is the responsibility of black cultural producers to challenge racist

misperceptions of who we are. From your perspective, is the abstract gesture a productive means to accomplish that aim, or are there other representational strategies? To that point, do you make any attempt in your abstract works to produce forms that function as visually recognizable signifiers for blackness?

AM: I'll start with the last question. In my process of creating abstract work, I will often start with a series of shapes connected to a story or symbol that is a signifier of blackness *for me*, i.e., a fist, a boat, a spear, but those objects are so open-ended and sometimes you can barely see them. I'm not spelling "my" story out with the assumption that it belongs to everyone. Is it our responsibility to challenge racist misperceptions of who we are? Each artist has a unique life experience; therefore, our responsibilities are not all the same (Figure 8).

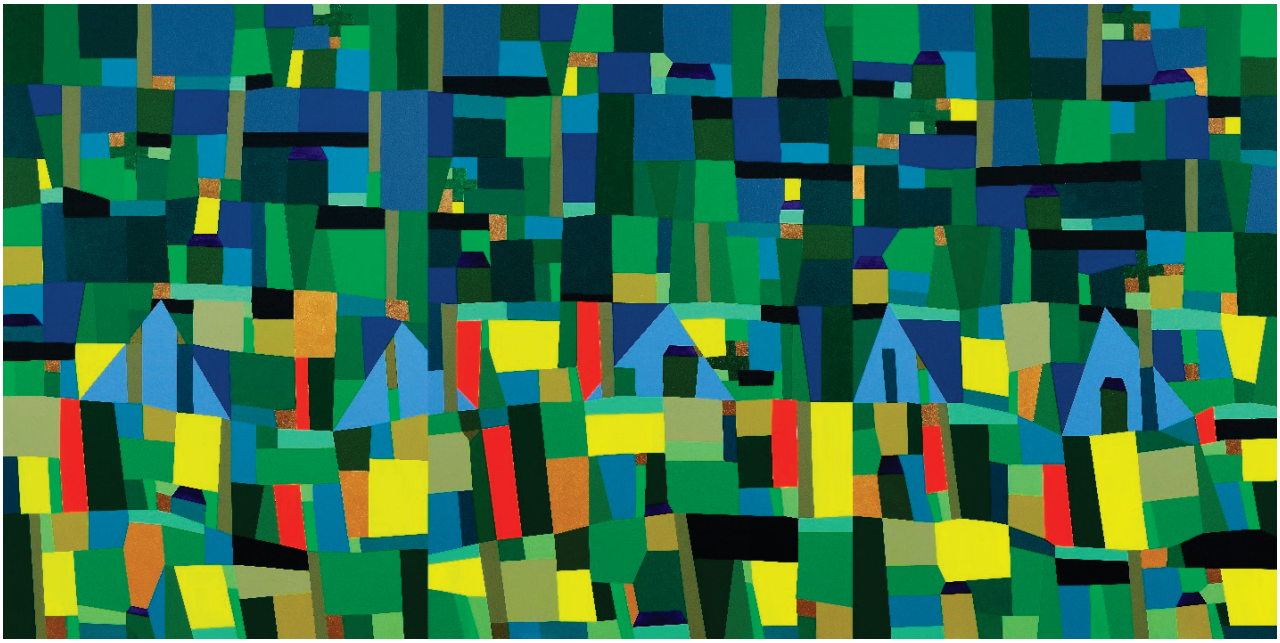

Figure 8. *Visionary*, 2023, acrylic on wood panel(s), 3 wood panels, 59 $\frac{3}{4}$ in. $\times$ 40 in. each (59 $\frac{3}{4}$ in. $\times$ 120 in. total).

When will we get to the point when people are asking black abstractionists the same questions they are asking white abstractionists? Will we ever? The body is an incredible aspect of who we are, but it is not all of who we are. Too often do I see beautiful paintings of black men and women without names, an unnamed figure meant to represent all of us. What I believe that says to the nonblack viewer is, "Continue to see each of us as a general black figure." I think the black body should absolutely remain a part of our visual conversation, but as soon as we see ourselves perpetuating a myth of who we are, we need to ask ourselves how we can expand the limitations of our own identities. For me, abstraction does that; it says I will not be limited by anything or anyone while continuing to be black AF:)

Author: I'm interested in the strategy you are suggesting, which is mobilizing abstraction to combat generalized notions about blackness. In many ways, some of the most core conversations around abstraction have been connected to notions of purity (of form) and universality. So, using abstraction to push against myths of who we are is a really provocative strategy. Can you talk a little more about how you think abstraction can play a useful role in recasting or even breaking tired tropes? And are there artists (past or present) who have been really inspirational to you in terms of cracking through to something new?

AM: Abstract visual art is like Jazz; we're creating languages to extend our voices and foster connections within and beyond our culture. I don't know if I believe anything is truly pure but universal; perhaps everything is. There are certain terms that differ so much from

one person to the next, for example, God or love. I think blackness does the same thing. There are endless ways to understand blackness. Abstraction is one way of extending the way we define anything we want (Figure 9). The advantage and disadvantage of being black is that everything we do and create becomes a representation of who we are. There are lots of artists who, I believe, use abstraction to expand representation in this way. Jack Whitten, Alma Thomas, William T. William, Joe Overstreet, Odili Donald Odita, Shinique Smith, there are so many.

Figure 9. *Three Ladies*, 2024, acrylic and spray paint on wood 40 in. × 40 in.

As far as artists who have been really inspirational, David Hammons and Lorna Simpson. David has always had the ability to create mirrors. His work is visually stunning, simple, and gritty while forcing the viewer to look at themselves. He somehow makes fun of us while educating us. Lorna made me think about the black body and investigate all the assumptions we make. It was her work that challenged me to create spaces without

figures. Even with very little form, we find meaning, and if we can't find it in the art, we will look for it in the identity of the artist.

Author: I would like to pivot to discuss your latest exhibition at the Haines Gallery, *Adia Millett: Reflections on Black*. I'm interested in the relationship between blackness and moonlight. Why is this relationship important to you creatively . . . And how do you see a connection between the lived realities of African Americans, identity, and your personal relationship to blackness?

AM: On a personal level, the moon is a family member and the object in the world that I most identify with. As it connects to blackness, the moon is a reflective surface that gives shadows and blackness a space to be revealed. The moonlight gives us a unique perspective of the world, rich and vivid. And that only touches the surface of what the moon does. It impacts the gravitational field of our planet, our seasons, our agriculture, and our mental and emotional well-being. My personal relationship to blackness is reflected in my art. And the lived realities of African Americans are not something that can be summed up in even a lifetime of words. Like everyone, I have numerous opinions regarding what it means to be black and observations of what the cultural distinctions between us and them are. But I hope that we are all self-aware enough to challenge even the most blatant assumptions; if not, we'll continue to perpetuate a world that lacks empathy and equality (Figure 10).

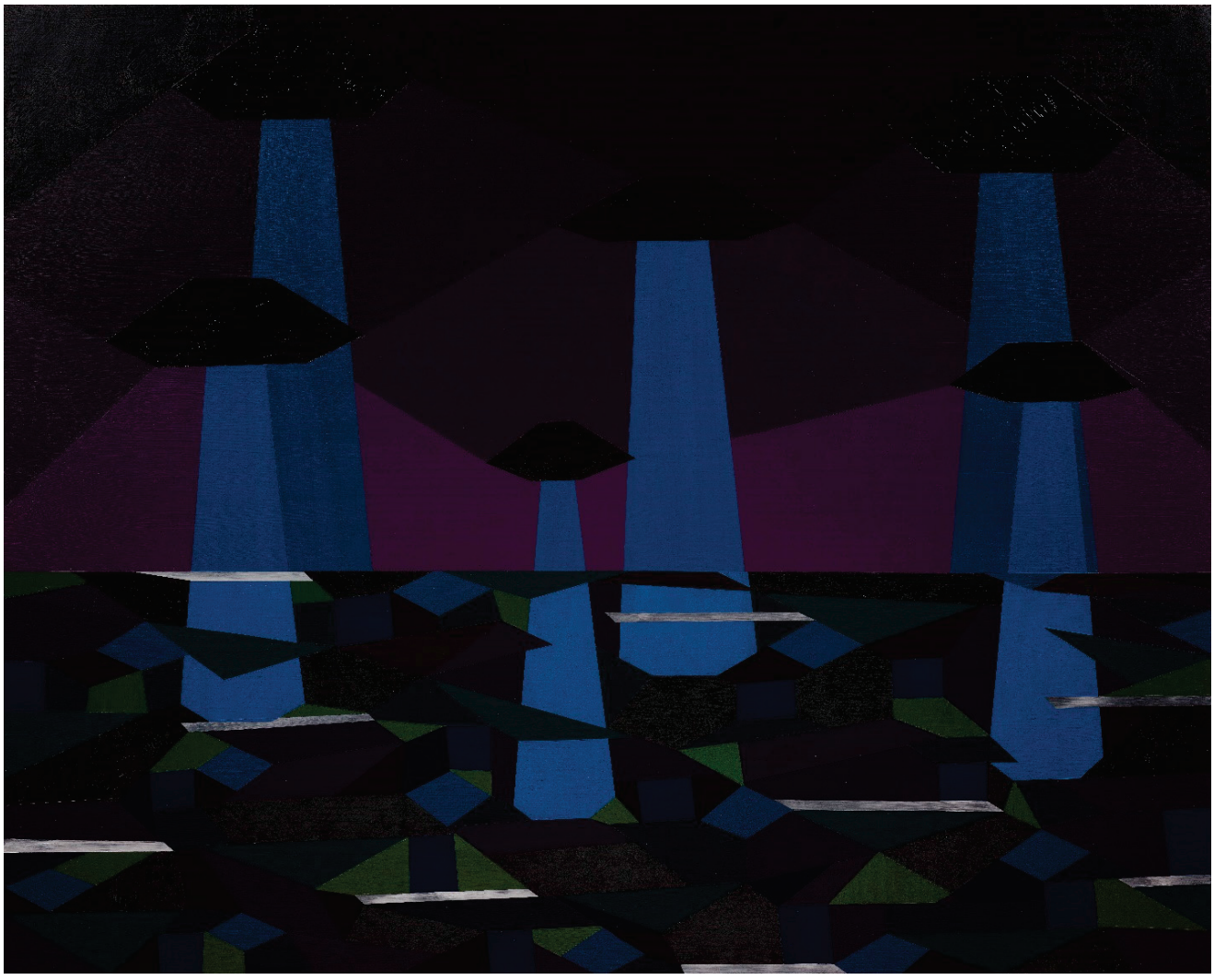

Figure 10. *The Unseen*, 2024, acrylic on wood, 48 in. × 60 in.

Author: You stated that you're interested in creating work that explores blackness without directly engaging with race. I really love that idea, and there is a similar conversation in scholarship around the notion of black liquidity (Raengo 2017, pp. 8–13). The discourse explores the intersection between blackness and aesthetics, contemplating how blackness often exists culturally in a manner that is detached from bodies and legible discussions of race. There is a growing interest in the notion that blackness exists ideologically in form, materiality, aesthetics, and aurally, even as the legible markers of racial identity are not readily visible. Do you see your work as being in conversation with these ideas?

AM: Yes. My hope is that someday, when people identify something as being "Black," it won't be about race; it will be defining something that encapsulates wisdom, innovation, power, comradery, and truth. . . with its roots found in us as a people.

Author: I would love to hear your thoughts on African-American history, especially the black aesthetic tradition. How do you engage with it, and what does it mean to you creatively? Has African-American art history (I'm thinking about the Black Arts Movement) served as an important inspiration? In the 1970s, there was a sentiment among the black arts community that African-American art should be visibly engaged in the struggle against anti-blackness. To not directly do so was to be perceived as taking an apolitical stance. Is this at all a concern for you?

AM: We all have different ways of speaking to a movement, and I believe that black abstractionists were fighting against anti-blackness in the 70s just as much as everyone else. Our power comes from our ability to not be put into a box.

Author: Can you unpack your interest in glass and quilting traditions within African-American culture?

AM: Your question about African-American history, especially the black aesthetic tradition, is directly tied to African-American quilting. The quilts of the 19th and 20th centuries are so rich with the black experience and were not constricted by the restraints and judgment of the art world. Each piece is not only a work of art but a story. The resources, materials, and community that go into this art form are tremendous (See Figures 11 and 12)!

Author: Where do you think the energy is when you look to the future of African-American art? Are there particular challenges that black artists are facing today that need to be addressed?

AM: Technology, social media, and our expanding culture of narcissism seem to be impacting us all. I do think that since George Floyd, black artists are getting recognized significantly more. Hopefully, this is not simply a trend but a marker of a more important shift that we need to move forward as a collective. The consistent concern throughout time continues to be how our history remains relevant. I must admit that at this point in my life, I'm more concerned with the culture of black farming and creating self-sustaining communities for black folks than I am about what we see in museums and galleries.

Figure 11. *Quilted Warrior Air*, 2023, cotton, wool, duck feathers, 74 in. × 52 in.

Figure 12. *Cosmic Code*, 2022, quilted fabric, 78 in. × 104 in.

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Notes

1 There is a robust and ever-growing body of scholarship on black abstraction. For additional reading, please see the following: Gibson (1991); Bowling and Jones (2006); Mercer (2006); Shaw and Powell (2014); Powell (2014, pp. 1–19); English (2007, 2016); Harper (2015); Enwezor (2017); Beckwith (2017); Crawford (2018); Martin (2019); Jenkins (2022).

2 For an in-depth discussion of Clement Greenberg's formalism relative to the politics of identity, see Gibson (1997). Gibson's text explores how the universal abstraction advocated by critics Harold Rosenberg, Donald Judd, Michael Fried, and Greenberg marginalized artists that fell beyond the confines of white, heterosexual masculinity. In other words, it was not the aesthetic of "one gender, one color, and one sexual preference" that it was professed to be. Of the most notable artists believed to have been overlooked was African-American abstractionist Norman Lewis. Gibson explores Lewis' contribution to the legacy of Abstract Expressionism, paying particular attention to the artist's well-documented explication of his chosen aesthetic in relation to his experience as a black American in the forties and fifties.

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Article

Forever Becoming: Teaching "Transgender Studies Meets Art History" and Theorizing Trans Joy

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Abstract: Academics often comment that their teaching affects their research, but how this manifests is often implicit. In this essay, I explicitly explore the artistic, scholarly, and curatorial research instantiated by an undergraduate class titled "Transgender Studies meets Art History," which I taught during the fall of 2022. Alongside personal anecdotes—both personal and connected to the class—and a critical reflection on my pedagogy, I discuss the artwork and public programming connected to a curatorial project, "Forever Becoming: Decolonization, Materiality, and Trans* Subjectivity, I organized at UrbanGlass, New York City in 2023. The first part of the article I examine how "trans" can be applied to thinking about syllabus construction and re-thinking canon formation for a class focused on transgender studies' relationship to art history. In the second half, I theorize trans joy as a felt vibration between/across multiplicity and singularity, belonging and unbelonging, and world-making and world-unmaking. Overall, I consider trans as a lived experience and its utility as a conceptual tool. As a coda, I consider the precarity of teaching this course in the current political climate of the United States.

Keywords: trans joy; pedagogy; worlding; curating; decolonization; auto-theory; opacity; worldmaking; archipelago; belongingness

1. Introduction

This article, in part, reflects on my experience teaching an undergraduate class titled "Transgender Studies meets Art History" during the fall of 2022 at Tyler School of Art and Architecture, Temple University, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.[1] Exploring the artistic, scholarly, and curatorial research put in dialogue with—and often set into motion by—the class is a primary focus of this essay. More specifically, I weave together a critical reflection of my pedagogy, a discussion of artworks related to my curatorial work at UrbanGlass, Brooklyn, where I was a curator-at-large during 2023, and personal anecdotes. This essay examines "trans" as an identity and a concept, as glimpsed through my classroom experiences and research.

Firstly, I want to clarify that my interest in sharing my experiences—in this case, primarily in connection to my teaching—is consistent with my overall scholarship that mobilizes the longer feminist tradition of auto-theory as a self-conscious way of engaging with lived experience alongside theory. However, I do not offer my anecdotes as autobiographically anchored "facts". I am reminded of writer, curator, and artist Lauren Fournier's point that "autotheory. . . is by no means solipsistic". Her following point is particularly resonant in the classroom context and my theorization of trans joy, the focus of the second part of the article: "The singular can be a gateway to the multiple. And in theorizing together we may, after all, hear ourselves"(Fournier 2021).[2]

To illustrate the importance of considering pedagogy alongside my scholarly writing, it is worth noting that this journal rejected an earlier version of this article. When I initially submitted this article, I received the following response from this journal's editorial team: "We will not process this manuscript further as it does not fit into the scope of

Arts. . .[m]aintaining a consistent scope is vital for the success of the journal". When the special issue editors further investigated the matter, they wrote, "It appears your paper was rejected because of its focus on pedagogy". The message is clear: discussions of pedagogy are not considered "significant research" and do not belong in a scholarly journal that "promote[s] critical inquiry, dialogue, and innovative approaches".[3] Meanwhile, the only peer-reviewed journal focused on pedagogy in our field is *Art Pedagogy & Practice*, which began publishing articles in 2016. The dearth of writing on teaching in our discipline is partly because teaching is often not seen as important as publishing, especially within a research-driven university system.

This article counteracts the general scarcity of writing on art historical pedagogy and works more broadly against the de-linking of pedagogy from research. I begin with a meta-reflection of who should teach a transgender-focused art history class and follow this with theorizing the syllabus as trans and a discussion of visual diaries, a pedagogical tool I utilize to build/unbuild what art historian of transnational feminism Marsha Meskimmon, based in England, refers to as transcanons (Meskimmon 2023, pp. 19–62). I then pivot to conceptualizing trans joy as a *felt vibration* between/across multiplicity and singularity, belonging and unbelonging, and world-making and world-unmaking.

2. Meta-Reflection on Who Should Teach a Trans-Focused Art History Course

Before providing more context for the class and the syllabus, I want to take a moment to point out that I began the class by sharing that I identify as a queer person of color and nonbinary. "Queer" can be a catchall term for those identifying as LGBTQI+, the acronym for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and questioning, and intersex. The "+" refers to other identities not necessarily encompassed by the term. "Nonbinary" is one of a constellation of subject positions often connected to "transgender".[4] I was not sure what the expectations of my students might be about my own identity, and I wanted to have a frank discussion not only about my relationship to the term "transgender" but also about *who* they think should be teaching a class focused on transgender studies.

We came to several conclusions as a group. First, it seemed counterintuitive and essentializing to assume that a transgender person or someone transitioning from M to F or vice versa should be the only person who could teach this class. Postcolonial studies scholar Gayatri Chakravarty Spivak has pointed out that the position that "I am not x, so I cannot speak for x" can become an excuse for "not doing your homework", and bell hooks notes that such an approach might reestablish a context where a historically subordinate group must again "serve" their masters, this time as educators (Spivak 1990, p. 62; Hooks 1989, p. 118). In the end, the students and I settled on the idea that the most important thing is that whoever leads the course should be as forthcoming as possible about their intentions and their background. This aligns with the thinking of poststructuralist feminists like Spivak, who has advocated for some form of "strategic essentialism", which recognizes the necessity of occupying a subject position while acknowledging the limitations built into every position (Danius et al. 1993).[5]

Going through this exercise of who should or should not be teaching this class led to another discussion I had not planned. The students began to think critically about their relationships to the subject matter and some of their anxieties. For instance, about half of the students shared that they did not identify as transgender, nonbinary, or intersex and wanted to be respectful to those who did. Meanwhile, those who did identify as any of the latter made it clear that they had no interest in being representatives of the transgender community, and they also were quite vocal that they did not want anyone who was cisgender to feel like they could not speak to the subject matter.

3. Syllabus as Trans

Recently, there have been some overt gestures to think about transgender studies in/with our discipline, such as those by art historians such as David Getsy, Amelia Jones, and Ace Lehner (Getsy 2015; Jones 2016; Lehner 2021b).[6] I was encouraged to teach

"Transgender Studies meets Art History" in the fall of 2022 because earlier in that year, Getsy and Che Gossett had published "A Syllabus on Transgender and Nonbinary Methods for Art and Art History", an open-access essay in *Art Journal Open*, initially published in the print issue of *Art Journal*, an outlier in that it embraces discussion of pedagogy.[7] Their syllabus offered a set of bibliographies organized around broad themes such as abolition, visibilities, materialities, flesh, and form "to prompt new alliances between transgender studies and art history" (Getsy and Gossett 2021). They also presented transgender studies as intersectional with race, class, and ability, among others. They aimed not to present a comprehensive syllabus and "encourage[d] the selective use and remaking of the topics".

Since this was an undergraduate class, I focused on fewer texts and did not include some articles that might be too challenging for a student with little to no background in art history. About three to four weeks into the class, I announced that the syllabus would be in process, or trans itself, as we went through the semester to reflect on our conversations. While I was certainly queering the syllabus, I am inclined to use trans because it resonates with how we sometimes talk about trans bodies. For instance, I often say that I am "building" or "constructing" a syllabus, and re-assembling something carefully laid out involves metaphorically cutting and re-stitching bodies of knowledge. However, in the American and British contexts, syllabi are generally seen as a "contract" between students and instructors. While instructors can make changes, it is often frowned upon. The syllabus is like an edifice once completed or, in architectural terms, a "frame structure", which refers to a rigid arrangement of parts, or structural components, fastened together.[8]

Since syllabi are often the mode through which canons are reified, a syllabus that responds to conversations in class suggests that canons can never become a stable ground or architectural foundation. More to the point, I discussed how the syllabus was "forever becoming" with my students to avoid the artworks feeling like they were being added to what could be described as a normative white, Western European/American art history canon. Meskimmon has theorized transcanons that I find helpful in thinking more broadly about the relationship between syllabus construction and pedagogy to canon formation (Meskimmon 2023, pp. 19–62). One of the reasons I am particularly interested in this yoking of "trans" to canon is because it emphasizes trans studies' interest in reconstruction/recovery rather than one of deconstruction, where the building often becomes overshadowed by the conceptual unbuilding.

Mesikimmon cites one strand of her complex thinking around this term, emerging from the art historian Nikos Papastergiadis's theorization of the "spherical consciousness from the South" (Papastergiadis 2010, p. 148). She writes that this is his "way of understanding the profound transhemispheric entanglements that colonization set into motion and that continue to ground geopolitics in a 'naturalist discourse of magnetic polarities'" (Meskimmon 2023, p. 38). Emphasizing transcultural rather than bounded regions is a feature of a trans syllabus that disrupts the clarity of a singular canon. In my class, I screened the video work *Ex Nilalang* (2015) by Justin Shoulder and Benji Ra, both based in Australia and of Filipino descent, which speaks to "transhemispheric entanglements" through exploring pre-colonial sexualities (Club Ate 2015). About twenty minutes long, the video is composed of three parts—"Balud", "Dyesebel", and "Lolo ex Machina"—which reimagine Philippine mythological folklore, pop culture, and ancestral spirits, respectively.[9] Depicted in "Balud" is the mythological female known as Manananggal—a beautiful woman by day and a "monster" by night. Spanish colonialists turned this figure into something to be feared, supposedly to combat what they perceived as both the precolonial Filipinos' unabashed sexual liberation of women and their high regard for nonbinary and trans subjects.

Trans syllabi also trouble the chronological, teleological, and linear formation of knowledge in normative canons. To underscore this idea, I presented artworks mirroring this aspect of the syllabus I theorize. For instance, Poland-based artist and film studies professor Wojciech Puś's experiential film *Endless* (2015–)—based on their friendship with a trans woman in Poland— is non-narrative.[10] Puś' has said that doing so was meant to challenge the notion that being trans is a journey with a beginning and ending (Patel 2017).

Body modifications for transgender people have often been understood through medical and psychiatric protocols that reify a language of discovery and destination. As one of my students shared, many procedures are not followed in any order (for various reasons, including fiscal ones), and the surgical building/unbuilding of the corporeal body has no clear endpoint, nor one that will be the same for everyone. I also incorporated the work of Carlos Motta, who is based in New York City and of Colombian descent. I screened his 2015 work *Deseos*/رغبات(Desires) (Figure 1)—discussed in one of the readings on the Getsy and Gossett syllabus–that place queer and gender-variant historical characters within a chronological framework that is fluid and not linear (DeVun and Tortorici 2018).

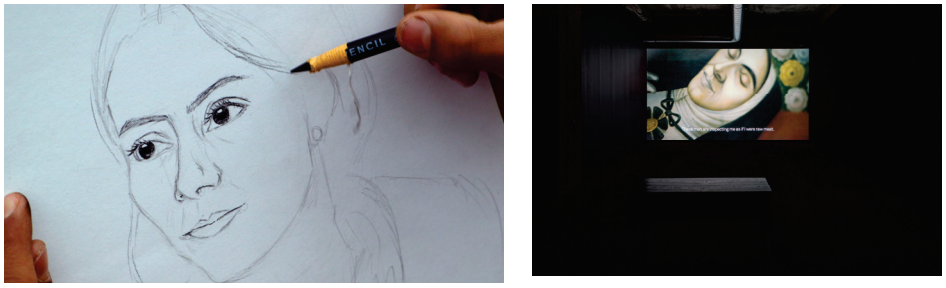

Figure 1. (**Left**) Carlos Motta, *Deseos*/رغبات(Desires), (Motta 2015), still, HD video 16:9, color, sound, 32:37. Courtesy of Galeria Filomena Soares, Lisbon and Mor Charpentier Galerie, Paris; (**right**) Installation view of *Deseos*/رغبات(Desires), 2015, at Gothenburg International Biennial of Contemporary Art in 2015. Courtesy of Galeria Filomena Soares, Lisbon, and Mor Charpentier Galerie, Paris. Photo: Hendrik Zeitler.

One character in Motta's work spoke in Arabic: a student who grew up speaking this language conveyed to me that it was the first time in their life that Arabic had been a part of a discussion of transgender identity. Since I casually knew the artist, I invited him to my class to discuss this work. My student was moved to tears during his visit, and honestly, so was I, as I remembered the first time I heard Gujarati, my first language, being spoken at a queer party.[11] Th works of Puś and Motta point out the irony that contemporary artists, as Getsy and Gossett point out, "have been making work that gives form to the politics and emotions of transgender, nonbinary, and intersex experience in exciting ways", but art history as a discipline has been slow to "engage the robust and decades-old interdisciplinary field of transgender studies" (Getsy and Gossett 2021).

4. Visual Diaries: Teaching Nearby and Walking Alongside

Another way I attempted to keep the syllabus "under construction" was by using "visual diaries", a pedagogical tool that I have found successful within many of my courses because they shift art history to storytelling. Embedded in art history is an element of fiction that underscores its partiality. There can always be another story, another way of looking at seemingly the same set of assumptions (or "facts"). I shared with the class an article I had written, "Visual Diaries: Towards Art History as Storytelling" (Patel 2022). For a visual diary, students are asked to collect ten images connected to the weekly readings. These images did not have to come from the articles. They could include their artworks, personal photographs, and broader visual culture, but they had to connect back to the readings, if even in a provisional way. The visual diary assignments encouraged my students to think through the visuals and leave language aside, or at least until they got to class to discuss the images through spoken word. Ace Lehner has noted that "Transness throws into question the way cultures ideologically descended from the colonial project have sutured 'reality' to the 'privileging of sight'" (Lehner 2021a). The visual diary assignments attempted to challenge the conflation of visuality with the certainty of knowledge by demanding a total rethinking of how the visual connects to spoken and written languages. The "presentations" were meant to be performative, so students were asked to think on

their feet in oral language. Like the "Pecha Kucha" presentation style, each of the ten images they selected would only be up for 20 seconds, for a total presentation time of three minutes and twenty seconds, followed by short two to three-minute discussions per presentation. Students were asked to tread the fine line between knowing enough to discuss the images but not too much so that the presentations would merely convey what they had already figured out. I wanted them to approach knowledge as processual—much like I was approaching the syllabus—and it took some time for them to get the hang of this approach since students are not often asked to share ideas in progress. Several times a semester, students also reflected on their experiences in class in written language.

Students were asked to "introduce themselves" in the second class through this visual diary format. Importantly, though, I told them they would be re-introducing themselves weekly through the presentations but with an eye toward the readings. In other words, the visual diaries were strategic and meant to overlap ideologically with how I articulated trans throughout the class. This was partly to take the pressure of pronouns being stable. The idea was that our identities are constantly in flux. I did not want to marginalize those who had decided to transition from one gender to another. Instead, it was to acknowledge that we should privilege all the moments during, before, and after transitioning.

While I was mindful of the power dynamic between them and me as an instructor, utilizing visual diaries was my way of "just speaking nearby", as articulated by filmmaker and theorist Trinh T. Minh-Ha (Minh-Ha 1992, p. 96). Concerning her film *Reassemblage* (Minh-Ha 1982), she acknowledged the difficulties in speaking either "as" a third-world woman herself, "for" women in Senegal, or even "with" Senegalese women. In a class like this, which attracted students whose personal lives were so closely connected to the subject matter under discussion, it felt important that each student could speak to their specific relationship to transgender subjectivity through their visual diaries or storytelling. As transgender studies scholar Caél Keegan has noted, the field of trans studies "has long been concerned with narratology—with the project of locating narrative structures that will adequately allow for the existence of trans* bodies and becomings" (Keegan 2018, p. 387). At the same time, visual diaries are meant to rupture any sense of linear temporality in that they are consolidated through a mishmash of visual, spoken, and written word storytelling that happens out-of-sync—visuals are organized before class, the spoken word takes place during class alongside the visuals, and writing takes place after both.[12] Moreover, any sense of singular subjectivity becomes impossible because students share them with a group with whom they have a short discussion after their unscripted presentations. In an article in which art historians Ming Tiampo and Birgit Hopfenor recount their teaching practices, they note, "Pluriversal approaches to art history are necessarily collaborative, as collaboration is a central aspect of. . .articulating a critical global art history" (Tiampo and Hopfener 2022, p. 148).[13] Visual diaries as a pedagogical tool of a trans syllabus helped me build/unbuild a collaborative transcanon that, as Meskmmon writes, "tell stories that converse with, and walk alongside, pluriversal worlds"(Meskimmon 2023, p. 22). Thinking of art history as storytelling empowers students to create the histories they deserve and consider them in dialogue with those they may not see in the classroom. In addition, it helped me better walk alongside the pluriversal worlds they share.

5. Towards Theorizing the "Trans" in Trans Joy

One important critique of the class by my students was around readings that discussed statistics of transgender of color death that, of course, are disheartening, as is the rise of states pushing through anti-transgender bills in the United States (Astor 2023; Nakajima and Jin 2022). Understandably, my students wanted to read and think about how to live and thrive in the present. I am so used to "difficult" subject matter that I sometimes forget what it might mean for a student, especially an undergraduate, to be exposed to such writing. My students taught me that scholarship can sometimes commit its own kind of violence by leaning towards an abstraction of lived experiences. So, I encouraged them to highlight "joy" (however they wanted to define this term) in their weekly visual diaries.

Beyond this, though, I did not know enough about this topic to address it further. After the class ended, I began exploring the concept of "trans joy". First, it is essential to note that "trans joy" is indebted to the work of activists of color, such as Kleaver Cruz, who was credited with coining "#Blackjoy".[14] Art historians crystal am nelson and Michelle Yee have recently co-edited a special issue of *Art Journal* (fall 2023) on the "color of joy", underscoring how thinking about the intersections between race, gender, and sexuality cannot be seen as outside of each other.

Women, gender, and sexuality studies scholar J. River Vooris chaired a panel on "trans joy" at the National Women Studies Association (NWSA) annual conference in late 2023. [15] In their call for papers, they note that a "positive affect" can be a kind of productive activism and that trans joy, particularly, "decenters narratives of trans suffering in favor of stories of trans achievement, reclamation, and ecstasy". Through discussing her artworks, Ace Lehner examines trans joy similarly (Lehner 2022). Scholars of transgender studies, such as Hil Malatino, Jules Gill-Peterson, and Cameron Awkward-Rich, have cautioned against this more palliative turn to joy (Malatino 2022; Gill-Peterson 2021; Awkward-Rich 2022). Drawing on Lauren Berlant's book *Cruel Optimism* (2011), Gill-Peterson writes, "Optimism is a stubborn clinging to the scene of transcending the wear and tear of contemporary life that actually ensures its permanent exhaustion" (Gill-Peterson 2021). Malatino argues that "...you can't just flip the joy switch. The influx and efflux of sad passions take their toll. They demand reckoning; there's no easy movement beyond them" (Malatino 2022, p. 12). At the same time, sitting in a room with students having trouble finding joy and whose mental health needs I wanted to pay attention to, I leaned towards a more affirmative understanding of it. It felt unethical to push them too much—although I did as much as possible. None of these scholars are arguing for a wholesale rejection of joy. For instance, Awkward-Rich notes that they do "not set out to contest the critical value of potentially good trans feelings—euphoria, curiosity, hope, earnestness—nor to mire trans studies permanently in the well of loneliness" (Awkward-Rich 2022, p. 16). I would say my position is that trans joy belongs in a messy place that neither promises salvation nor disavows it entirely. More to the point, trans joy in the classroom versus theorizing it are two separate things.

The remainder of this article Is focused on theorizing trans joy through a combination of anecdotes—both personal and from my class—my curatorial work, which took place after the class concluded, and theory. Moreover, I want to clarify that while I was prompted by students' concern about focusing on death and dying in the transgender community, the "trans" in trans joy I am theorizing is not meant to imply that the author-artists of the works I explore all identify as trans nor that the artworks are only concerned with trans issues. They do, though, deal more broadly with LGBTQI+ identities. My horizontal listing here, of course, belies that ever-expanding acronym of identifications.

The prefix "trans" can refer to a movement or crossing. I specifically mobilize trans because it signifies how identity is always in process or "forever becoming", the title I used to describe the exhibitions I organized at UrbanGlass. While queer destabilizes, trans, as I conceptualize it, often refers to a push and pull between or among seemingly fixed, known, and frequently highly politicized constructions. Trans instantiates vibration, which is metaphorical as much as it is embodied. When attached to concepts such as nationality, culture, gender, syllabus, pedagogy, and joy—all of which are of concern in this article—it can unsettle their meanings. I am effectively mobilizing trans in the way Jack Halberstam explains his decision to add an asterisk to trans to "open the term up to unfolding categories of being organized around but not confined to forms of gender variance" (Halberstam 2017, p. xiii and 4). The asterisk mark signifies the conceptual overlaps among the often-overdetermined categories and the slipperiness of transgender.

I focus on Sebastian Duncan-Portuondo's exhibition and related public programming involving the artists Cassils and Erika Diamond. I theorize three kinds of "trans joy" as a felt vibration between/across multiplicity and singularity, or multiple and one, belonging and unbelonging, and world-making and world-unmaking, respectively. As I turn to

curatorial and artistic research, I am moving away from lengthy discussions of pedagogy. Still, I do weave anecdotes connected to my class in each of the forthcoming sections.

6. Trans Joy as Multiple and One

In my class, "visual diaries" allowed every student to take center stage every week. I wanted every student to speak in class and to enable the development of empowered individual voices and perspectives. What I did not anticipate, though, was that this experience also contributed to creating a collective voice. Students often referenced an image or concept other classmates had shown or presented, creating conversation. This also led to group projects that I did not assign. For instance, my students discussed that they wanted to ensure that people knew this course was being taught precisely because there was always the chance it may not be in the future. So, the students produced a zine (Figure 2), a self-published book usually reproduced by a photocopier, as in this case. The zine was placed in front of a monitor, where the students' final assignments were displayed in the hallways of the Tyler School of Art building. For this concluding project, students were asked to produce "visual diaries" in a PowerPoint (PPT) format, exploring the following question: what does trans do rather than what is trans? They decided that each student in the class would choose one image for the zine to answer the same question I posed for the final assignment. The zine can be found online.[16] The students also discussed putting together a book that could be donated to the library.

Figure 2. (**Left**) folded zine, 2023, by my students: kieran becker, Isabella Darlington, Mihael Artemus Ivashchyshyn, Naz Khoury, Yoona Lee, Brian Leung, and Joshua Ulysses Ribera; (**right**) unfolded zine. Photo courtesy of author.

There are fascinating interconnections between the poet and philosopher Édouard Glissant's concept of "multiple and One" concerning what manifested in the classroom: my purposeful method of allowing each student to have an individual voice and a collective one I had not anticipated. Glissant's phrase refers to the multiplicity and singularity embedded in subjecthood. Drawing on the metaphor of an archipelago, a geological formation of a chain or series of islands scattered in a body of water with no clear center, Glissant notes that each island is simultaneously its own entity and always already in relation with the other islands. Each island is "both multiple and One, and inextricable" (Glissant 2005, p. 15). He even wrote that the world is becoming a veritable archipelago (Glissant 1997, pp. 193–94).[17]

The planning for my first UrbanGlass exhibition, a solo show of the works of queer-identified Cuban American artist Sebastian Duncan-Portuondo, was already well underway when I began to teach my class. Still, it was deeply connected to Glissant's idea of "multiple and One", which was further reinforced by what occurred in my classroom (Glissant 2005).[18] In this section, I examine Duncan-Portuondo's ongoing nomadic installation, *Club EXILE*, a response to the 2016 Orlando, Florida, Pulse club shootings, the victims of

which were primarily queer Latinos/as, instantiating a felt vibration between multiplicity and singularity.

A few days before the show opened, the artist Invited the public to assemble mirror tiles to create mosaics that would become part of the altar (Figure 3). The artist, his partner, his mother, and his sister helped teach participants the basics of glass cutting. Food, music, and drinks set the mood for the club-inspired glass mosaic workshop. In this sense, the word "solo" to describe Duncan-Portuondo's show is only partially accurate. I argue that he is likely more interested in bringing people together than feeding into the myth of the singular artist as a genius. The work is not about the final material form but rather the collaborative process of getting there.

Figure 3. Sebastian Duncan-Portuondo and community participants, *Club EXILE Altar*, 2023, $9' \times 10' \times 6'$, mirror mosaic, photo portraits, neon, fabric flowers, diverse sacred material. Photo courtesy of the artist.

The artist refers to his installation as a "disco chapel". Performance studies scholar E. Patrick Johnson has poignantly written about his experiences at black queer southern clubs "where queer nightlife and church" and "sexuality and spirituality" blur (E. Johnson 2021, p. 231). As 2022 Lambda Literary Award finalist Jen Winston succinctly puts it: "In terms of worship, and safety, gay dance floors gave me more than any cathedral ever did" (Dumais 2022). The atmosphere was convivial that evening while we were working together to create the altar, but it was punctuated by more somber moments. For instance, the artist nudged participants to use their phones to get to know the victims whose images were in the frames that we adorned with colored markers, strips of fabric, and glitter—these more self-reflective moments of finding out more about the individuals who had been killed shifted the mood from time to time. When the panels of the altar were put into place, the artist asked everyone to come up one by one to place a flameless candle, an electronic alternative to traditional wicks that would be forever burning, onto the altar. Participants could also place the portraits they had been adorning. This act was more of a collective mourning. The mood, though, that night would shift to a collective joy. In the project's previous iteration in Miami, Duncan-Purtuondo had a night of drag performances. I knew the drag performer Zacrilegious, who lives in New York City, and I asked if they would be willing to organize a night of drag performances from those they knew.[19] As Duncan-Portuondo noted, when Zacriligiuous took over as emcee, those who went to Pulse were there to have fun and celebrate life. Overall, the evening of the workshop, collectively

building/installing the *ClubeEXILE Altar* and drag performance, instantiated trans joy as a felt vibration between collective and individual mourning and celebration that evening.

Returning to the word "exile", written in capital letters in the work's title to emphasize its importance to the artist, Duncan-Portuodos's family emigrated from Cuba, an archipelago in the Caribbean Sea, to Miami—a city shaped into a home by exiles from various parts of the Global South. Indeed, what makes Glissant's thinking on archipelagoes so surprising and, therefore, deeply compelling is that he is acutely aware of the horrors that European colonization has wrought on most of the world—he grew up and lived in Martinique—yet he holds onto the belief that interconnectedness is still something worth striving for. In previous workshops the artist had organized, he asked participants to give him three songs referencing exile and home. I had given him the disco-inflected song "Jimmy Jimmy Jimmy Aaja" from the 1982 Bollywood movie *Disco Dancer*, British rapper M.I.A's 2007 feminist appropriation of it, the up-tempo, pop-electro "Jimmy", as well as the British band Bronski Beat's 1984 synthpop "Smalltown Boy", a bittersweet song about a young gay man who is bullied, shunned by his father, and therefore ends up leaving home. Duncan-Portondo effectively created a sonic atmosphere that would pivot between home and exile, depending on the song playing. Of course, it would not be apparent to every person what any of the sounds/lyrics were meant to signify, and, in this way, what was felt was uncanny. The latter, which translates into "unhomely" in German, is an apt metaphor for the sonic atmosphere orchestrated by Duncan-Portuondo that challenges, extends, and troubles the notion of and is felt as a sonic vibration between the poles of the home/exile binary.

7. Trans Joy as Belonging and Unbelonging

The shootings at Club Q, an LGBTQI+ establishment in Colorado Springs, Colorado, in November 2022 took place while I was teaching the transgender class and planning Duncan-Portuondo's exhibition. Five individuals were killed, and 19 others were injured (Babineau et al. 2023). Unfortunately, my students did not have the opportunity to process it as a group, given that this happened during fall break, and we only had one more class that had to take place on Zoom because I was out of town. I was still processing the horrific event myself, but I offered to meet with them one-on-one. The students, though, did reflect on it in the written parts of their visual diary assignments. As I noted earlier, the visual diaries were not entirely about responding visually and through spoken word to the week's readings. Students were asked to introduce written language at several points during the semester. These assignments were carried out outside of class, allowing them to consider what written language might afford that visual and oral language might not. The reflections suggested that what had happened at Club Q gave them pause to re-assess their previous wholesale rejection of discussions of death. One student (and I am paraphrasing) wrote that joy can only ever be understood if one experiences its opposite, and therefore, it is challenging to consider joy and pain as mutually exclusive. This stuck in my mind, and in February of the following year, it became, in part, the impetus for me to organize a Zoom panel (open to the public) as part of Duncan-Portuondo's exhibition to tease out trans joy further. I invited the trans-identified artist Cassils and the queer-identified artist Erika Diamond, both based in the United States, who had also made artworks in response to the Pulse murders, to be part of the discussion. I examine Cassils' work in this section and Diamond's in the next in tandem with some of the points made during our hour-long conversation.

I begin with a focus on Cassils' work *103 Shots* (2016) (Figure 4), which is about two and a half minutes long and shot in black-and-white, a response to the Pulse shootings (Cassils 2016). Their website notes that Cassils was "struck by the testimony of one of the survivors".[20] They further stated that "a man who said one of the reasons he did not react immediately to the gunshots was that he initially perceived them at first as the celebratory noises of 'fireworks or balloons popping'". This was the starting point for the poignant video, which shows couples bursting balloons between their bodies as they embrace.

Cassils filmed the work in San Francisco Dolores Park with approximately 200 volunteers, and the setup was inspired by Gran Fury's "Kissing Does Not Kill" campaign in the early 1990s. One hundred three shots were fired that night at Pulse, so the work's soundtrack includes recordings of the same number of balloons popping. When I first experienced the work at their retrospective in Texas, I heard the video before I saw it. I immediately thought I heard gunshots but realized this was not the case when I saw the video. It was my knee-jerk reaction: if you watch the video without playing the sound, you feel joy and laughter. Much like Duncan-Portuondo's work, there is a focus on togetherness. However, Cassils' work more acutely registers the precarity of belongingness.

Figure 4. (**Left**) Cassils, *103 Shots, video still No. 1*, 2016. Photo: Cassils with Zen Cohen. Courtesy of the artist; (**right**) Cassils, *103 Shots, video still No. 2*, 2016. Photo: Cassils with Zen Cohen. Courtesy of the artist.

As part of the panel discussion, Cassils mentioned that one hardly hears anyone discuss the attack on the mosque (where the shooter, Omar Mateen, had at least on one occasion prayed) shortly after the shootings (Sutton and Park 2016). I was particularly struck by Cassils' observation about the Islamophobia that was tied to the response of some to the Pulse tragedy. Islamophobia and homophobia are often tied together as they were in the discourse surrounding the speculation behind Mateen's murderous acts. The media initially characterized his actions at the nightclub as partially stemming from his inability to reconcile his queerness with his Muslim identity (Greenwald and Husain 2018).

I was visiting family in central Florida when the Pulse shootings took place, and I felt the tension between my queerness and "brownness", but not in ways I expected. To explain, I share an anecdote before circling back to Cassils' work. Often playing in the background when I visit my parents' home are comedies and soap operas that are part of the Indian television station Zee TV, Hindi-language programming. Consumed by many South Asian diasporic households in the US, these programs are sometimes explicitly homophobic. However, during this visit, I was surprised to find television advertisements that fostered acceptance of queer children of South Asian descent. One involved a Muslim family with a father wearing the customary traditional headdress (NQAPIA 2016a). The bilingual ads, I discovered, were produced as part of NQAPIA's "Family Is Still Family" campaign and meant to air around Pride (NQAPIA 2016b).

So, for me, during the time of the Pulse shootings, my world had turned topsy-turvy. I found a glimmer of queer South Asian belongingness within the traditional South Asian home space where I typically do not feel it. At the same time, the dominant media's splintering of queer subjectivity from Muslim/South Asian identity when discussing Mateen had effectively foreclosed the possibility of finding belongingness where I expected to find it: outside of what my parents' home represented to me. The advertisements did not appear after Pride, so the space of my parents' home swung back to feeling like one of not belonging, but the outside world had not entirely swung back to feeling safe, let alone a space of belonging or joy.

I argue that Cassils' work can be felt as a vibration between belonging and unbelonging. Like Duncan-Portuondo's sonic atmosphere exploring home and exile, the work's sound reverberates in the viewer's body. The sound of the "pop" vibrates between signifying bringing flesh/bodies together and love, as well as ripping it/them apart and indiscriminate hate. Cassils said *103 Shots* was meant to "complicate the discourse at the time about safety, precarity and show a means of finding your joy in the midst of trauma" (Steinbock 2018, p. 120). Cassils' work explores how joy and pain are strange bedfellows and that precarity, which I experienced myself as I described above, is a part of joy rather than being apart from it. If I could turn back the clock, I would have nuanced trans joy in this way for my students during the trauma of the Club Q shooting.

8. Trans Joy as World-Making and World-Unmaking

So many of the visual diaries presented in my class were terrific examples of how my students carved out spaces for themselves as acts of lived trans world-making. One of the ones I remember most clearly is a diary of self-portraits one student made through photography that depicted in their words "black femme/butch trans lives". Tyler is an art school, so many of my students were artists who often shared their artworks in their visual diaries. As the semester went on, the students became more and more comfortable with each other and shared an array of inspirational examples of how they were living joyously. One student noted, "I am so used to feeling scared or on guard that my classmate's visual presentations. . . gave me permission to be happy. I'm leaving this class in a much better place than when I arrived". While I will theorize a more critical take on joy—one that is vibratory between world-making and world-unmaking—this section is not meant to cast a skeptical eye on these visual diaries. Instead, I want to reiterate that theorizing joy, as I have done in the last two sections and will do in this one, is different than thinking about trans joy in the classroom.

While the works of Erika Diamond, the other artist in the panel discussion with Duncan-Portuondo and Cassils, do not have sound, they manifest a felt vibration between world-making and world-unmaking, the final characteristic of trans joy I examine.[21] I focus first on their *Imminent Peril—Queer Collection* series (2018–23) (Figure 5).

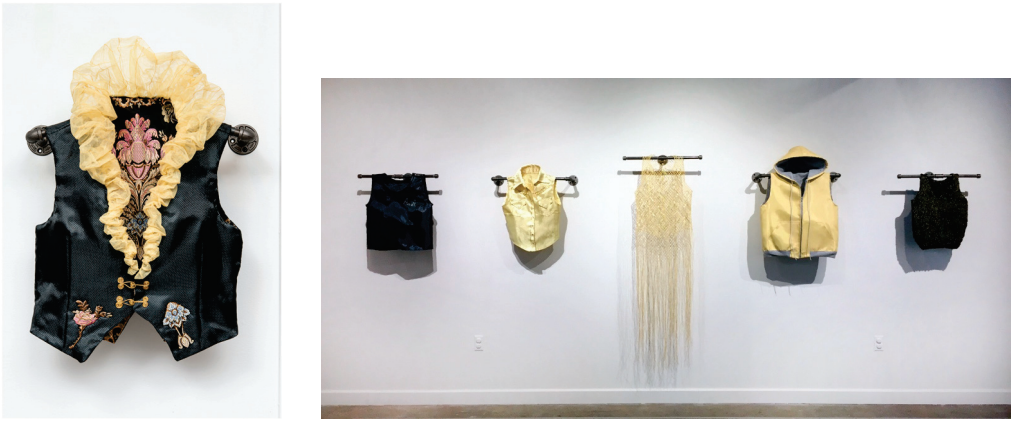

Figure 5. (**Left**) Erika Diamond, *MB Vest* (from *Imminent Peril Queer Collection* series), Kevlar fabric, fabric lining, Kevlar chopped mat collar, embroidery, and applique, 2020. Photo: Terry Brown; (**right**) Erika Diamond, *Imminent Peril Queer Collection* at McColl Center for Visual Art. North Carolina. Photo courtesy of the artist.

Their collection is composed of exquisitely crafted clothing made of the unlikeliest of materials: poly-paraphenylene terephthalamide (PPT or K29), also known by the brand name Kevlar, a component of personal armor such as combat hats, ballistic face masks, and bulletproof vests.[22] Kevlar, not surprisingly, is tough and, therefore, not easy to work with, although you would not know this by looking at Diamond's work. Each work was

made for a specific individual in Diamond's community of queer friends. The short text accompanying the garments includes a few facts about the people for whom they are made and the artist's relationship with them. For instance, here is the text that appears alongside one of the works:

> *MB Vest* is a vest tailor-made to fit and protect Michael-Birch, a true leader within the LGBTQ+ community of Richmond [Virginia]. They are courageous, stylish, a talented textile artist, and super fun! They prefer an aesthetic of gender non-conformity. The reversible vest appears to sparkle from behind the black Kevlar, and the dramatic high collar is constructed with a tulle-like fabric made of chopped Kevlar fiber.[23]

Diamond's work expresses their love and desire to celebrate the lives of non-gender conforming individuals in the present as a foil for the narrative portraits we hear and read about in media only *after* queers are killed or hurt. During the panel, they noted that their work was a "refusal" to focus on narratives of death.

Returning to Diamond's work, there is a palpable tension between the material Diamond uses—bulletproof Kevlar—chosen to reflect the violent world queer and trans subjects live in—and their visual presentation as high-end fashion that obscures that particular reality and glimpses a more convivial future one. The clothes are also displayed in galleries as objects, but not to be touched or one imagines even worn—at least not yet. The works function more as disembodied images in the here and now that can be imagined as protective clothing for bodies in the then and there. If, per José Esteban Muñoz, "Queerness is that thing that lets us feel that this world is not enough, that indeed something is missing," and that it "is essentially about the rejection of a here and now", then perhaps transness in these works is more accurately a felt vibration between here and now and then and there, forever becoming (Muñoz 2009, p. 1).

The vibration of another kind—the one between world-unmaking and world-making that it the chief concern of this section—can be felt in Diamond's 2022 works, *In(Visibility) hoodie* and *#Saygay*, a backpack, (Figure 6), both made in response to the increasing number of bills proposed in American state legislatures, where public schools have become the front line for anti-trans bills. In the last two years, 306 bills targeting trans youth have been introduced, roughly 15% of which have passed (Nakajima and Jin 2022). The title of Diamond's backpack, *#SayGay*, references the movement against a controversial Florida law that opponents have dubbed "Don't Say Gay". The hoodie and backpack play with the heightened visibility of trans youth that such bills have engendered in schools. The hoodie is cleverly lined with what Jo-Ann Fabrics describes as "ombre rainbow pride celebration fabric". The wearer can privately enjoy being protectively wrapped up in the warmth of pride colors. Banned books can be placed in the book bag—even "queer secrets", which Diamond indicates is one of the materials of the work.[24] Both items are made from reflective vinyl fabric. On the one hand, it could be said that it maintains a wearer's right not to be known because as light bounces off its shiny surface, it momentarily occludes the visibility of anyone looking at the person donning the hoodie and backpack. Indeed, Glissant argues that the condition of "globality" (a term he mobilizes to get away from the neoimperialism embedded in the word "globalization") is predicated on citizens having the right to opacity or not to be unknown. This flies in the face of how the West operates. As the wearer moves, the fabric shimmers, further preventing embodied visuality. Nevertheless, the fabric is also highly visible—especially from afar. Therefore, it calls attention to itself, possibly the wrong kind of attention. In this way, the works manifest a tenuous affective vibration between world-making and world-unmaking.

Figure 6. (**Left**) Erika Diamond, *In(Visibility) hoodie*, 2022. Photo: Echard Wheeler; (**right**) Erika Diamond, #*Saygay*, 2022. Photo courtesy of artist.

9. Teaching between Here and Now and Then and There

Diamond's work is in dialogue with the political climate of Florida, and I want to segue into teaching transgender studies meets art history in the here and now—broadly in the political environment of the United States—and what this class might look like in the then and there. For a decade before arriving at Temple in 2021, I taught at Florida International University, the state's only public university in Miami. What I could not have known is that shortly after arriving at Temple, the governor of Florida, Ron DeSantis, began an assault on diversity and equity initiatives that would have made my research and teaching interests in queer and trans theory as well as critical race theory, which the extreme conservative American right has politicized, incredibly problematic.[25] The governor has signed bills such as SB122 that would prevent expenditures for any state university direct-support institutions towards organizations that "[a]dvocate for diversity, equity, and inclusion, or promote or engage in political or social activism, as defined by rules of the State Board of Education and regulations of the Board of Governors" (Florida State Senate 2023). At the same time, schools could now accept funds from organizations discriminating against "gender". In fact, the word "gender" was removed from the list of protected classes and substituted with the word "sex". FIU is the nation's largest Hispanic-serving institution, which makes the governor's attacks particularly troubling. I still have many colleagues, friends, and former students who live in South Florida. A friend emailed that "I dodged a bullet" by having left Florida. While I initially thought of this as a metaphor, the reality is that teachers at all levels *literally* have had, are having, and will have to dodge bullets. I have two nieces—one enrolled in elementary school and another in high school—in central Florida, where I grew up.[26]

All that to say I do not take for granted that I could teach transgender studies meets art history. When I teach this class in the future, I want to take the lessons I learned through my artistic, scholarly, and curatorial research of trans joy and bring them back into the classroom. In particular, I argue that art historical pedagogy and practice can be thought of as enabling trans joy that pivots between multiplicity and one, belonging and unbelonging, world-making and world-unmaking, and other dipoles yet to be articulated. To expand on this point, I turn to the robust and compelling conversations about "worldmaking" by art historians Ming Tiampo and Monica Juneja (Tiampo 2024; Juneja 2018). Martin Heidegger has famously argued that artworks are constitutive of worlds (Heidegger 1964). At the same time, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's postcolonial critique of his worlding suggests—as Tiampo puts it—"is the potential force of conquest, decimating Indigenous

life worlds" (Spivak 1986; Tiampo 2024). Tiampo mobilizes Pheng Cheah's shift from thinking of worlding as less a spatial and more of a temporal category to argue that art history can make worlds through a constant process of deworlding and reworlding (Cheah 2016; Tiampo 2024).[27] Moreover, Juneja writes, "Art history as a form of world-making . . .is dependent on the criticality of a transcultural approach to rethink its epistemic foundations" (Juneja 2018).[28] She further notes that the "trans" in transculturalism brings into relief the notion that "culture" has often been understood through a nationalistic framework and thereby exists "in tension with the unruly and contradictory trends generated by mobility". Tiampo's understanding of an art historical practice that both deworlds and reworlds, along with Juneja's approach that it is both with and beyond the nation, meaningfully intersects with the vibratory quality of trans joy concerned with LGBTQ+ communities that I have theorized. Indeed, bringing together the works of Duncan-Portuondo, Cassils, and Diamond not only helps conceptualize the nuances of trans joy (an investigation prompted by my students) but also exemplifies what an art historical practice that brings into being trans joy might look like.

Besides exploring trans joy and "trans" as a concept more broadly to theorize syllabi connected to a transgender studies class in art history, a primary concern of this essay is that a lot of lip service is paid to the idea that pedagogy and research are connected. However, more reflection is needed on this, especially since academic journals linked to the discipline of art history are largely biased against any theorizing of pedagogy. Finally, rather than offering a syllabus, I wanted to share my experiences teaching this class, which is rare in our discipline. A corollary to this point that is more implicit is that we need to have more frank conversations about pedagogy and identity, especially if we are truly going to expand the demographic of those teaching the discipline and those taking our classes and who participate in art-making and joy.

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Notes

1 I am grateful to the special issue editors for inviting me to participate in this special issue and to the three peer reviewers whose comments have greatly enhanced this essay. I am especially thankful to Derek Conrad Murray, without whose unwavering support this article would surely not have been published, as I describe shortly. Finally, I thank the 2023-24 cohort of Temple University's Center for Humanities (CHAT) fellows who provided crucial feedback on an earlier draft of this essay.

2 The French philosopher Roland Barthes, in his "autobiographical" sketch, *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes* (1977), rigorously refused to revert to an underlying reality or essence by revealing the construction of subjectivity, itself, as a product of language: "This book consists of what I do not know: the unconscious and ideology, things which utter themselves only by the voices of others. I cannot put on stage (in the text), *as such*, the symbolic and the ideological which pass through me, since I am their blind spot". (p. 152. Emphasis in original).

3 The quotes are from the "aims" section of the journal. See https://www.mdpi.com/journal/arts/about (accessed on 5 June 2024).

4 There are many resources for anyone who wants to learn about the nuances of the term "transgender", including the Human Rights Campaign (HRC), https://www.hrc.org/resources/sexual-orientation-and-gender-identity-terminology-and-definitions (accessed on 5 June 2024), and the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation's (GLADD) glossary, https://glaad.org/reference/trans-terms/ (accessed on 5 June 2024). The purpose of this essay is not to define "trans", but to think about what it does alongside and through my pedagogy and research.

5 Being careful not to conflate civil rights in US with trans rights, I want to note that as far back as 1979, writer and Black studies scholar Nick Aaron Ford wrote the following about his thoughts on white instructors teaching courses on black studies in the instruction manual to his anthology, *Black Insights: Significant Literature by Black Americans—1760 to the Present* (1971): "...teachers who are qualified academically, emotionally, and sympathetically (lack of conscious or unconscious race prejudice)... must be encouraged and even urged to accept such assignments" (Emphasis in original; Ford 1974, p. 23).

6 Getsy wrote the first single-authored book in the field of art history concerned with transgender studies' relation to the discipline. Ace Lehner and Amelia Jones edited special journal issues on trans visual culture and trans-ing performance, respectively.

7 The authors have provided a lengthy introduction in which they discuss their syllabus's content, form, and goals in more detail. See (Getsy and Gossett 2021). Full disclosure: I was on the editorial board (2020–24; chair, 2022–24) of *Art Journal*, the flagship journal of the College Art Association, the discipline's main organizational body in the United States. However, the editorial board makes no decisions regarding the journal's content.

8 Jack Halberstam's recent connection of architecture to the trans body concerning his analysis of the work of Gordon Matta Clark (Halberstam 2018) is an inspiration for this line of thinking. Worth noting, too, is that the first sentence of a related article of his that focuses on ruins begins with a nod to the fact that he is teaching a class on "Worlds End", so one imagines his research was probably impacted by conversations in class. (Halberstam 2022).

9 The work's title can be roughly translated from Tagalog as "creature" or "create", with the ex from Latin meaning "out of" and "out from". The title references folkloric beings in the artwork and the provocative notion that the often-maligned creature in most mythological traditions can be a creator rather than a destroyer. I shared the following article where I wrote about their work (Patel 2019).

10 I shared articles I wrote about Puś's work (Patel 2017; Patel 2021a).

11 I shared an essay with the student about my own experience of smelling samosas at a queer of-color dance party in England that triggered memories that I do not typically associate with queer spaces (Patel 2015).

12 Regarding temporality concerning trans, see also (Amin 2014).

13 Along with the Heidelberg University team of Worlding Public Cultures: The Arts and Social Innovation, Tiampo and Hopfener organized a workshop titled "Worlding Art History through Syllabi", 10–11 October 2023, Institute for Cultural Inquiry, Berlin, https://www.ici-berlin.org/events/worlding-art-history-through-syllabi/ (accessed on 5 June 2024)

14 See his website, which he began in 2015: https://kleavercruz.com/the-black-joy-project (accessed on 5 June 2024).

15 Call for papers was found on the University of Pennsylvania's English department website outlining opportunities for students: https://call-for-papers.sas.upenn.edu/cfp/2023/02/25/nwsa-trans-joy (accessed 5 May 2024).

16 The zine can be found on Stella, a virtual satellite gallery of the Stella Elkins Tyler Gallery at the Tyler School of Art and Architecture, Temple University: https://www.stellaonline.art/what-does-trans-do (accessed on 5 June 2024).

17 See also my article (Patel 2021b).

18 Link to images of the exhibition including altar can be found through this link on my website: https://www.alpeshkpatel.com/multiple-and-one-exhibition (accessed on 5 June 2024).

19 I met Zac during the summer of 2019 as a mentor at Chautauqua School of Art. Incidentally, they took a workshop with me, where I utilized the visual diary methodology. We both grew up in Florida: I was part of a South Asian family, and they were part of a white Evangelical family. Somehow, we both survived! For more information on Zac, see: http://www.zacthompsonart.com (accessed on 5 June 2024).

20 Artist website: https://www.cassils.net/cassils-artwork-103-shots (accessed on 5 June 2024). See also performance studies scholar and Cassil's artistic collaborator Julia Steinmetz's excellent essay on this work (Steinmetz 2016).

21 Works can be viewed on the artist's website at https://www.erikadiamond.com/#/imminent-peril-queer-collection (accessed on 5 June 2024).

22 Kevlar is a registered trademark of Dupont: https://www.dupont.com/brands/kevlar.html (accessed on 5 June 2024).

23 Information provided by artist.

24 Three of the most frequent LGBTQ titles to be banned include (Evison 2019; Kobabe 2022; G. Johnson 2020). One Florida school board member went so far as to file a criminal report with the police when he discovered that schools in his district carried Johnson's book, a memoir of the author's experience growing up as a black queer person. He claimed the book violated the state's obscenity laws (Nakajima and Jin 2022).

25 In the previous section, I gestured to this above when I discussed the "Don't Say Gay" bill. In May 2023, the governor expanded on this. See Human Rights Campaign (HRC). 2023. Gov. DeSantis Signs Slate of Extreme Anti-LGBTQ+ Bills, Enacting a Record-Shattering Number of Discriminatory Measures Into Law. Press release, May 17. Available online: https://www.hrc.org/press-releases/gov-desantis-signs-slate-of-extreme-anti-lgbtq-bills-enacting-a-record-shattering-number-of-discriminatory-measures-into-law (accessed on 5 May 2024).

26 As of April 2024, 11 states allow students at colleges and universities to carry arms. Another 21 states, including Pennsylvania and Florida, leave the decision to each university (Rock 2024). Only 16 states do not allow teachers to carry firearms (Orton 2024).

27 See also Tiampo's book series "Worlding Public Cultures", Institute of Cultural Inquiry Berlin Press; and the website of the "Worlding Public Cultures project" (2019–2022), of which Tiampo was a part: https://www.worldingcultures.org (accessed on 5 June 2024).

28 See also (Juneja 2023).

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Article

Jewish "Ghosts": Judit Hersko and Susan Hiller and the Feminist Intersectional Art of Post-Holocaust Memory

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Abstract: This article delves into the underexplored intersection of Jewish identities and feminist art. It critically examines artworks by Judit Hersko and Susan Hiller, aligning with evolving identity constructs in contemporary aesthetics. Concepts like "postmemory" link second-generation Jewish artists to past experiences and unveil the erasure of Jewish women's memory of Jewish genocide. Analyzing Hersko and Hiller's diverse works, from landscape photography and sculpture to performance art, it underscores their shared pursuit: illuminating lingering "ghosts" of the Holocaust in modern landscapes. Susan Hiller's The J Street Project represents an ongoing exploration of loss and trauma beyond the Holocaust in Germany, using archives as a dynamic, evolving phenomenon. Judit Hersko's art calls for bearing witness to a potential climate catastrophe in Antarctica to prompt contemplation of the actions imperative to survival of both humans and non-humans in the future. The article culminates in the exploration of "The Memorial" (2017), an art project by the activist collective Center for Political Beauty that focuses on the resurgence of overt anti-Semitism in Germany. In essence, Hiller and Hersko confront erasures in history and nature, emphasizing justice and repair. Their art, intertwined with a project addressing contemporary anti-Semitism, serves as a testament to the enduring power of feminist art, reflecting, mourning, and transforming a world marked by historical traumas and war.

Keywords: feminist art history; Jewish feminist art; Jewish art and feminism; ecocritical art; art and climate change; environmental humanities and art; gender and memory in art; memory politics and post-Holocaust art; climate crisis art; trauma studies in art; post-Holocaust studies and art

1. Introduction

In the realm of feminist art, the exploration of Jewish identities has often remained obscured, as was central to my earlier work, *Jewish Identities in American Feminist Art: Ghosts of Ethnicity* (Bloom 2006). The book delved into the broader cultural and historical context underlying scholarly hesitance to address Jewish identities in the visual arts. Since then, scholars have reprised this issue in new ways, and the discourse has evolved to question fixed and narrow identity constructs and embrace intersectional viewpoints.[1]

My examination of artworks by Judit Hersko and Susan Hiller aligns with the special issue's theme, exploring how contemporary aesthetics are shaped by new forms of identity. I aim to highlight the underrepresentation of Jewish feminist art in contemporary discourse, seeking to insert it into the complex dimensions of visual cultural studies and contemporary art history. It aligns with what feminist art historian Amelia Jones argues in her book *Self/Image* "that the most important legacy of feminism is its politics of positionality". By this, Jones emphasizes the situatedness of visuality and spectatorship rather than detachment and distance.[2]

In what follows, I explore how the Holocaust continues to cast a long shadow over the artwork of second-generation Jewish artists' work, often termed the "second generation" or the "generation after". Various concepts, such as "absent memory" (Ellen Fine),

"received history" (James Young), "haunting legacy" (Gabrielle Schwab), and "postmemory" (Marianne Hirsch), link these artists to past experiences passed down to those who did not directly witness them.[3]

Marianne Hirsch's concept of "postmemory", detailed in her 2012 book *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust*, provides a particularly helpful theoretical framework for analyzing artworks revealing concealed historical knowledge. It emphasizes memory's emotional and psychological impacts, highlighting shifts in how different generations perceive historical experiences in relation to one another. Hirsch conceptualizes postmemory as a "structure of inter- and transgenerational return of traumatic knowledge and embodied experience". The concept captures the connections of the "generation after" to the "personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before". Mediated by imaginative investment and projection, members of this younger generation "remember" the older generation's experiences, which appear as "memories in their own right".[4] Rooted in postmemory, my feminist approach, as elucidated by Marianne Hirsch, puts emphasis on embodied experience and broadens a historical archive that has previously been neglected by traditional historians and art historians. Such work also contrasts with predominantly male-dominated Holocaust writings and art, emphasizing the importance of addressing the erasure of Jewish women's memory of Jewish genocide.

In this exploration, I delve into the realms of landscape photography, film, conceptual art, and performance art, focusing on how feminist artists Judit Hersko and Susan Hiller illuminate latent Jewish "ghosts" from the Holocaust in two vastly different contemporary landscapes, Antarctica and Germany.

Hersko's artwork From the Pages of the Unknown Explorer (2008–2012), addressing the climate crisis, is inflected by the Holocaust as a touchstone, but extends beyond it to include the trauma of witnessing the destruction of non-human life forms in Antarctica. Her work responds to our contemporary climate emergency, a time when our species' survival hangs in the balance. Her work departs from the distant sublime aesthetics of Romantic art, which is rooted in European Universalism and its pursuit of nature's conquest. She offers a critical feminist perspective in Antarctica and its landscape tradition to reinterpret the absences in the history of women in Antarctic exploration and science, using fictional approaches that create alternative histories. She rewrites themes of gender, science, exploration, and Jewishness in the time of World War II to rethink our understanding of Antarctica and our interconnected dependence on the non-human world in the context of the present climate crisis. Hersko's landscapes and oceanscapes include images from her own family album, pre-war photographs of family members who are Holocaust camp survivors, and objects from those who were victims. Drawing inspiration from Walter Benjamin's allegorical framework from The Arcades Project, her art grapples with the experience of loss and trauma beyond the Holocaust, employing archives, film, sculpture, and photo montage to reimagine history and performance art.

Susan Hiller's artwork *The J Street* Project (2002–2005) opens a space for the exploration of affect, embodiment, and intimacy within historical contexts, reworking the rural and urban landscapes of contemporary Germany. Her work stands apart from that of her peers, bringing haunting experiences to the forefront in a context where gender and other identities often fade into historical obscurity. Her *J Street Project* provides an alternative perspective on the longstanding absence of Jews within the contemporary landscape of Germany. Her work exposes what often remains culturally invisible but is concealed in plain sight. Hiller's lens captures hundreds of altered street signs throughout Germany that once contained the prefix "Juden" (Jew) until they were changed by the Nazis, then restored during post-war denazification efforts. She wields her camera to stage the repetition of similar images of these street signs that stand in for Germany's once large Jewish community. Unlike the first generation that testified to their experiences in the hope of providing a therapeutic clarity that would help put the Holocaust "behind them", Hiller as a member of the next generation looks to ensure that their "postmemory" of events remains an unfinished process, rather than a means toward definitive answers to questions.

Both artists point to erasure within landscapes, requiring viewers to witness without disguising gaps. Their work, labeled as feminist diasporic projects, maps interconnected histories beyond specific events like the Holocaust, creating interconnections and intersections in a global space of remembrance.

Hiller's *The J Street Project* was part of a larger effort by Jewish artists to confront their own traumatic history. Such efforts in Germany were often supported and funded by the nation-state that started to reckon with its own dark past starting in the late 1980s. Germany was doing what most nations have not done; to deal publicly with its own historic crimes. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, the country funded multiple large public memorial projects in Berlin and elsewhere, including the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe, the monument to burned books, the installation of thousands of "stumbling stones" built into sidewalks to commemorate individual Jews, Roma, homosexuals, mentally ill people, and other murdered by the Nazis. However, US art historian James Young, who sat on the board for the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe, early on voiced skepticism concerning the success of these projects that turned out to be prescient. For him, "the problem was that in voiding itself of Jews, Germany had forever voided itself of the capacity for a normal, healthy response to Jews and their ideas. . . It is a terrible, yet unavoidable consequence of the Holocaust itself, this Jewish aphasia, a legacy of mass murder".[5]

In recent years, Germany's memory culture now faces renewed threats from the far right. My argument culminates with an exploration of the art project *The Memorial* (2017), created by the activist art collective Center for Political Beauty, focusing on the resurgence of overt antisemitism in Germany. As genuine antisemitic sentiments intensify globally, especially after 7 October 2023, the date that marked the beginning of the Israel-Hamas War, the artwork of Hersko, Hiller, and the Center for Political Beauty, deeply embedded in histories scarred by antisemitic violence, assumes renewed significance. I conclude by elaborating on how these ongoing threats emanate not only from Germany's far right, but also paradoxically from more recent decisions by Germany's antisemitism bureaucrats to target German and Israeli Jews who are critical of certain Israeli policies. Jewish critics in both countries argue that this points to Germany's public memory efforts going awry.[6]

In summary, this article unravels the multifaceted tapestry of Jewish feminist identities, memory, and contemporary art. Through the lens of postmemory, it sheds light on the interconnectedness of historical experiences, advocating for empathy, connectivity, and the reclamation of marginalized narratives. These artists challenge the traditional boundaries of art, history, and memory culture, urging us to engage with the past to construct a more inclusive and enlightened future.

2. The Melancholic Aesthetics of Judit Hersko's *From the Pages of the Unknown Explorer* (2008–2012)

Judit Hersko's journey into Antarctica began in 2008 when she received the National Science Foundation Antarctic Artists and Writers Grant, allowing her six weeks of collaboration with scientists in Antarctica. As an acclaimed installation artist and chair of the Department of Art, Media, and Design at California State University, San Marcos, Hersko's work bridges the realms of art and science. In 1997, she represented her native Hungary at the Venice Biennale, and her art was featured in the 2007 exhibition "Weather Report: Art and Climate Change", curated by Lucy Lippard at the Boulder Museum of Contemporary Art.

Judit Hersko's artwork *From the Pages of the Unknown Explorer* (2008–2012) constructs an alternative photographic, performative, and cinematic history of exploration and climate science in Antarctica.[7] Her aim is to reshape our sensory and perceptual perspectives on the polar regions and evolving conceptions of nature, all within the context of the Anthropocene. In this work, she confronts both the historical fact that women were physically excluded from Antarctica until the 1960s and 1970s and plays with the visual tropes that perpetuated the notion of Antarctica as an all-male domain. Historically, this continent's human narrative was dominated by heroic polar and oceanic exploration. These narratives, along with Antarctic

expedition photography and art spanning the nineteenth to twentieth centuries, have cast Antarctica as a remote wilderness conquered by (Northern European) explorers.

Instead of the traditional view of polar explorers focused on the overwhelming scale of this wilderness and its conquest, Hersko's work brings the issues associated with it down to a literally graspable and deliberately absurdist small scale as she delves into the intricate and concealed layers of this region's oceanscape and its fragile relation of interdependent beings. This includes her focus on tiny organisms overlooked during the Heroic Age but now vital to understanding climate change in Antarctica. These planktonic organisms, once abundant, are now threatened by ocean acidification, a less sensational but critical aspect of climate breakdown. Her emphasis on small planktonic organisms challenges conventional essentialist views of women-as-nature, aligning more with contemporary feminist concepts rooted in new materialism and matter. Such small planktonic organisms defy the preference for large mammals, like polar bears, as icons of anthropogenic climate change. Hersko's fascination with microscopic life forms aligns with contemporary feminist writing on new materialism and matter. Kathryn Yusoff emphasizes that being earthbound is not an inherent naturalized affinity of women with nature, but a position shaped by material and structural relationships.[8] Stacy Alaimo in her article "Your Shell on Acid: Material Immersion, Anthropocene Dissolves", writes on the importance of scale in terms of such relationships, focusing specifically on pteropods: "To ignore the invisible threats of acidity (to these pteropod shells) . . ..is to imagine that we are less permeable than we are and to take refuge in an epistemological and ontological zone that is somehow outside the time and space of the Anthropocene. This is a call for scale shifting that is intrepidly—even psychedelically—empathetic rather than safely ensconced. It means dwelling in the dissolve. . .an aesthetic incitement to extend and connect with vulnerable creaturely life and with the inhuman, unfathomable expanses of the seas".[9] For Alaimo, to do this "is a political act and a particular feminist mode of ethical and political engagement".[10]

Judit Hersko's artwork, *From the Pages of the Unknown Explorer* (2008–2012), takes the form of a performance piece featuring 120 images that blend fiction with history. This work incorporates photographic and cinematic documentation alongside her sculptural objects as in her silicone portrait of Anna Schwartz, which includes the minute pteropods that she studies [Figure 1]. Hersko introduces us to Anna Schwartz, a fictional Jewish female explorer, photographer, and Antarctic biologist from the 1930s. In her narrative, Anna becomes part of Admiral Byrd's 1939 expedition, disguised as a white man, making her the only woman of that time to work as a biologist and photographer in Antarctica before the 1960s.

The chosen date of 1939 for Schwartz's trip to Antarctica coincides with Hitler's invasion of Poland, underscoring the connection to the atrocities in Eastern Europe, where European Jews like Schwartz were sent to concentration camps and made to disappear. This juxtaposition ties Antarctica in the late 1930s to the apocalyptic devastation of the accelerated climate crisis today.[11]

Hersko draws inspiration from a rich artistic and literary tradition, including Ursula K. Le Guin's short story "Sur". This utopian feminist narrative imagines South American women reaching the South Pole in 1909, two years before the official expeditions of Roald Amundsen and Robert Falcon Scott. Hersko's art is influenced by Le Guin's female characters, who leave no record of their presence at the South Pole, much like Anna Schwartz's activities of creating invisible objects in the story. Moreover, like the vanishing ice sculptures in Le Guin's tale, Hersko's artwork is ephemeral and only preserved as images and narrative. She emphasizes the fleeting and the minute, and in so doing refuses the physical spectacle afforded by the old flag-planting nationalist heroism and imperial entitlements of explorations to "the ends of the earth".

To this end, Hersko employs an aesthetic inspired by Victorian women's surrealist albums *avant la lettre*, later adopted by avant-garde artists including surrealism as pursued by women artists.[12] [Figure 2] This aesthetic style allows her to visually render people in circumstances they would not ordinarily inhabit. The uncanny effect challenges viewers' perceptions, especially when Anna's presence is integrated into iconic images from the

Heroic Age of exploration. For example, Hersko places Anna in a 1912 photograph of Captain Robert Falcon Scott and his companions at the South Pole, originally captured by Henry Robertson Bowers, an image that famously captures in their posture their exhaustion and sense of defeat, and as such creates an unsettling juxtaposition. [Figure 3].

Figure 1. Judit Hersko, *Portrait of Anna Schwartz*, 2008. A silicone portrait of the fictional woman Antarctic explorer, Anna Schwartz, that includes a cast sculptural representation of pelagic snails.

Figure 2. Kate Edith Gough, untitled collage, late 1870s. Proto-surrealist collage by a Victorian woman who invented a method of photo collage later adopted by avant-garde artists. Source: Gough Album.

Figure 3. Judit Hersko, Anna Schwartz: With Scott at the South Pole, 2010. A collage made from Henry Robertson Bowers's photograph of Captain Scott and his companions beside Amundsen's tent at the South Pole. Hersko's fictional explorer, Anna, replaces expedition member Edgar Evans in the foreground. Courtesy of the artist.

Anna's presence in well-known Antarctic expeditions such as the failed British Scott expedition creates a sense of uncanniness due to being linked not only to the death on the ice of all members of the Scott expedition on their return journey, but also unexpectedly to the murders of Eastern European Jews in the concentration camps, including members of the artist's own family. She underscores this parallel by including youthful photographs of her own mother, who survived the Holocaust, and her comment that the icy-white objects in her sculptural installations include the candy jar of her mother 's own aunt, who, Hersko informs us, died in the Holocaust[13] [Figure 4].

What makes this compelling and disturbing for viewers in this narrative of loss is how Hersko uses her fictional story about Anna and her daughter's research on the tiny pteropods, now threatened with extinction, to suggest comparisons between the two genocides. Her art reimagines the articulation of traumatic experience and memory with the sublime awe that Antarctica has inspired since the Heroic Age. However, by switching scale, her images of the pteropods also break with the traditional sublime, emphasizing a different vision of sublimity whose affects were described by Edmund Burke in the 18th century as "the last extreme of littleness is in some measure sublime. . ." He goes on to write "how we become amazed and confounded at the wonders of minuteness".[14]

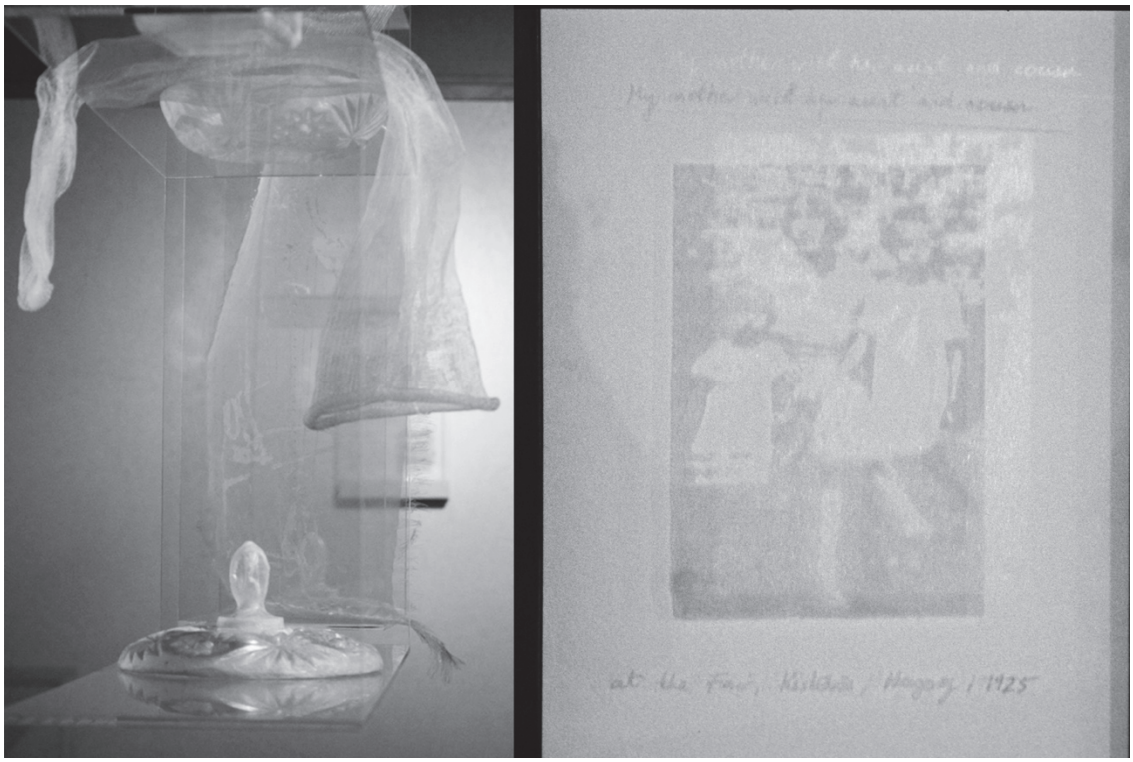

Figure 4. Judit Hersko, Anna's Cabinet (details), sculpture, 2011. The featured objects include the candy jar of Anna's favorite aunt, who died in the Holocaust. Courtesy of the artist.

Through her fascinating representation of the small pteropods, Hersko highlights the snails *Clione antarctica* (sea angel) and *Limacina helicina* (sea butterfly), which are often overlooked but crucial to understanding climate breakdown [Figure 5]. These snails were abundant during Anna's time but are now disappearing in Anna's daughter's time. Hersko's work addresses aspects of global warming that may escape notice because they occur at microscopic levels with gradual transformations. Drawing from Rob Nixon's concept of "slow violence", her aesthetic style highlights the long-term cascading challenge of global warming on place and landscape representations (Nixon 2011). Her art reveals what happens in the shadows, underlining the spreading paralysis that people feel as countries worldwide continue to pump out the emissions that cause climate change, and the world remains far off track to avoid catastrophic unraveling.

Hersko's art explores representations of these microscopic creatures, creating a melancholic aesthetic that engages with photographic materials from the past but assigns them new value. This melancholia reprises Walter Benjamin's conception of surrealist allegory in *The Arcades Project*, where the allegorical figure of the arcade as ruin exemplified the process of integrating the changing meanings of an object as it passes through time and provides a site for melancholic reflection on the transience of human and material existence. Hersko's work invites us to think of these planktonic snails as having ceased to exist by means of presenting a fictional narrative about their documentation by Anna Schwartz in the 1930s. In the story, Anna Schwartz describes looking at pteropods through a microscope in Herbert Ponting's darkroom during Robert Byrd's 1939-1940 expedition. Her archive signifies both moments in time, almost simultaneously. Hersko's narrative and archive invites us to imagine the lost contributions of women to science, polar exploration, and art history. She offers imaginative histories alongside actual ones, including a dreamlike archive that disorients by shifting the focus of polar exploration, altering our perception of the present, and making connections to other histories as well as current realities, extending to the non-human realm.

Figure 5. Judit Hersko, Clione Antarctica—Sea Angel, photograph, 2009. The microscopic gelatinous sea snail in Antarctica is threatened with extinction from climate breakdown. Courtesy of the artist.

3. Jewish Street Signs as "Ghosts" in the Work of Susan Hiller

I now turn to the work by the late Susan Hiller, a US-born British artist who studied and worked as an anthropologist before becoming an artist and settling in London in the early 1970s. Hiller's multifaceted practice encompassed photography, video, sculpture, painting, artist's books, and writing. With a career spanning over four decades, she achieved recognition as a central figure in British art, notably marked by a major retrospective at the Tate Modern in 2011. Hiller was celebrated for her groundbreaking large-scale multimedia installations, often exploring aspects of culture that had been overlooked, marginalized, or disregarded.

Born in the United States during WWII, Susan Hiller (1940–2019), belongs to an earlier generation than Hersko (1959–) but grew up further removed from the war. Hiller's artwork is less autobiographical or familial than Hersko's but embodies a radical definition of Jewish feminist identity in the shadow of the Holocaust. Hiller responded to this profound historical trauma by challenging traditional categories of landscape and history. Her *J Street Project* was a critique or reaction against Conceptualism, what she termed "moving sideways from Conceptualism".[15] She states that for her "there was a need to break through the strict patriarchal language of this art movement" and found a way "to do so with humor, irony, horror, personal details, whatever".[16] This is exemplified in *The J Street Project*, which provides an alternative perspective on the historical absence of Jews in contemporary Germany. At the same time, she is devoted to the seriousness of her conceptual proposition—truth—but brings in moments of irony and grim humor. Through

a collection of photographs and film stills, Hiller documented historical voids within narratives, piecing together fragments left in the wake of the Holocaust. She employed a technological-serial approach over a conventional narrative style, which left her room to express the pervasiveness of collective anxieties. Her approach, akin to Hersko's, carved out space for exploring affect, embodiment, and intimacy as historical concerns in the creation of these new archives, while at the same time shedding light on themes of forgetting, oblivion, erasure, and countering scientific racism, exploitation, and genocide.

Hiller's involvement in feminist politics dates to the 1960s. Her feminist outlook differed markedly from the visual allure and seduction of pre-World War II social realist art. Instead, she embraced an aesthetics of the unfathomable and the uncanny by deploying the stripped-down aesthetics of 1960s Conceptualism and Minimalism, working against the grain. Her artworks, especially those created from 2002 onwards, align her work with other Jewish feminist artists from Israel and the diaspora who incorporated the memory of the Holocaust into their work. Notable among these women artists are Judy Chicago, Bracha Lichtenberg Ettinger, and Nancy Spero, among others.[17]

In *The J. Street Project,* Hiller set herself the monumental task of visiting and documenting all 303 places across contemporary Germany where street names, alleys, and paths contained references to a Jewish absence by bearing the names of their former Jewish residents. Over the course of three years, she meticulously documented every street sign in Germany bearing the prefix "Juden" (Jew) through photography and film. The resulting collection took three distinct forms: a 606-page color photo book filled with sequential photographs, a 67-min slide film, and a monumental installation piece [Figures 6–9,11].[18] All three iterations of Hiller's work constitute an inquiry into the word "Juden" and its absence from street signs during the Nazi period.

Figure 6. Susan Hiller, Detail of *The J Street Project* (Index), 2002–2005. Wall-based installation, 303 archival color inkjet photographs mounted on Kapaline, oak frames. Pigment printed in an almost

painterly fashion on watercolor paper and identically sized and framed. Photographs of ordinary German places including inner-city shopping streets, lanes, anonymous suburbs, and secluded country roads all with street signs such as "Judenstrasse" or "Judenwig". Courtesy of Timothy Tayler Gallery, London.

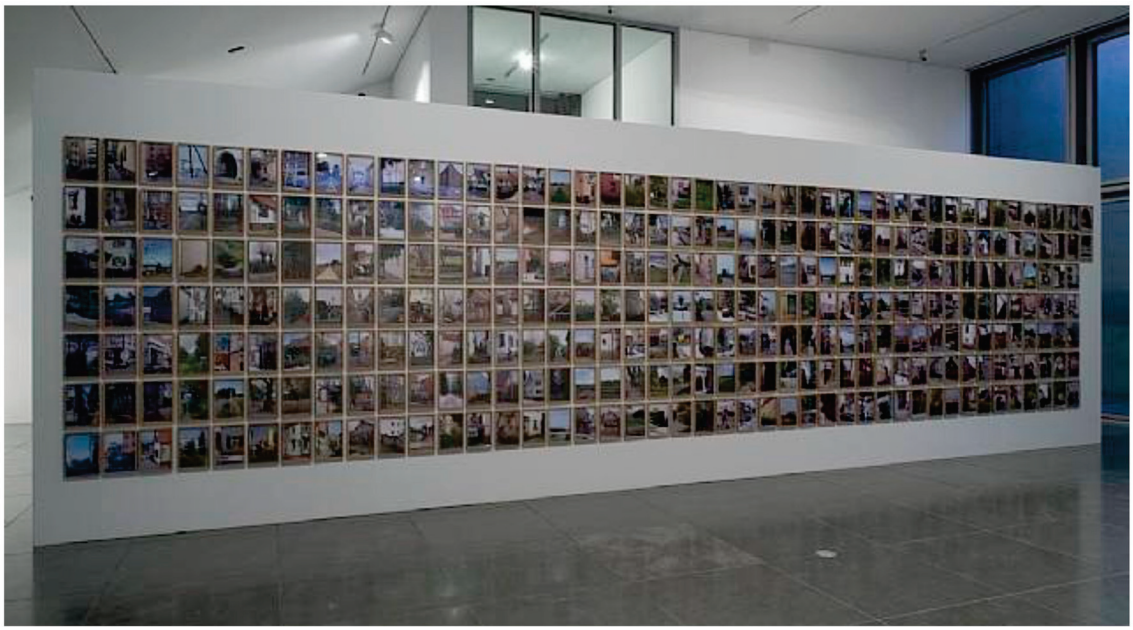

Figure 7. Susan Hiller, *The J Street Project*, 2002–2005. A silent procession of thoroughfares that all have the street signs "Judenstrasse" or "Judenwig" that mark them hung in a seven-foot grid. Monumental wall-based installation with 303 archival color inkjet photographs mounted on Kapaline, oak frames. Pigment printed in an almost painterly fashion on watercolor paper and identically sized and framed. Courtesy of Timothy Tayler Gallery, London.

The film portrays ordinary scenes from the early 2000s that produce a haunting sense of desolation by virtue of the stark facticity of what is in the frame. Hiller incorporates recorded sounds and images into her artwork, exploring the eerie contrast between views of people engaged in daily activities and the ambient sounds of the depicted landscape. [Figure 9] The sounds often include railway crossings and trains, alluding to the deportation of the Jewish population. The film pairs still images with audio featuring innocent sounds like musical box melodies or church bells, reminiscent of childhood experiences. However, these sounds also carry an unsettling, almost perverse undercurrent of impending violence. As viewers watch the film, they are confronted by the sheer number of these signs scattered across various neighborhoods, streets once named after Jews who lived throughout Germany, which later became sites of violence against the Jewish community during World War II, erasing their ancient ethnic identity.

Despite being a straightforward progression of still images, the film offers no commentary or drama. Instead, Hiller employs her camera as a silent witness, commenting on the transformation from presence to absence, and back to a hopefully inadequate presence of the restored signs, compelling viewers to fill in the gaps with their own history and memories. Importantly, Hiller's artwork refrains from inundating the audience with gruesome reminders of the Nazis and the Holocaust. Instead, the focus remains on seemingly mundane details like houses with lace curtains or a girl riding a bicycle. Paradoxically, it is precisely this portrayal of apparently innocent, not quite kitschy, everyday life that renders the mundane more menacing, heightening the awareness of a history marked by segregation, violence, and loss.

Figure 8. Susan Hiller, *The J Street Project*, 2002–2005, a 644-page, cloth-bound book, is part of Hiller's installation project. Featuring each of the 303 color photographs in the series, captioned, as a map, an introduction by the artist, and an essay by Jorg Heiser; the publication was issued in English and German in a limited-edition of 2000 copies by the Compton Verney House Trust, Warwickshire, England, and the Berlin Artists-In Residence Programme of the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD), Berlin, in 2005.

Hiller fittingly refers to these older street signs as "ghosts", emphasizing that they often go unnoticed. In her words from 2008, "The Jews are gone, but the street names remain as ghosts of the past, haunting the present".[19] Hiller considers them "unconscious memorials" that "nobody intended to leave, but they are there".[20] Her work can evoke strong reactions, as seen during a screening of the "J. Street" film in 2011, when some audience members found it profoundly traumatic. In one instance, Hiller recalls in an interview that "a young German woman verbally confronted her vehemently declaring, 'I don't think you should've made this work! It has nothing to do with us!'"[21] For the viewer there is a split between that which has been actively forgotten or repressed and that which is remembered but often idealized, a process that depending on the situation and the person can evoke self-reflection, or as in the case of the angry viewer, denial, or for others, the work of mourning.

In another later interview at the Contemporary Jewish Museum in San Francisco, Hiller discusses the gap between the public representation of the Holocaust and the personal, everyday experiences of Jews. For her, this gap is evident in contemporary Germany, where Jews remain largely abstract to the general population, despite official awareness of the Holocaust and its public memorials. Ruth Ellen Gruber, in her book *Virtually Jewish:*

Reinventing Jewish Culture in Europe, coined the term "virtually Jewish" to describe the resurgence of interest in Jewish life and culture in Europe at a time when Jews in many countries like Germany are scarce or absent.[22] Hiller's work prompts contemplation of this absence—how it has become more common to encounter street signs referencing Jews than actual Jewish individuals. In many ways, it took a disruptive Jewish feminist perspective to name what often remains culturally invisible yet concealed in plain sight.

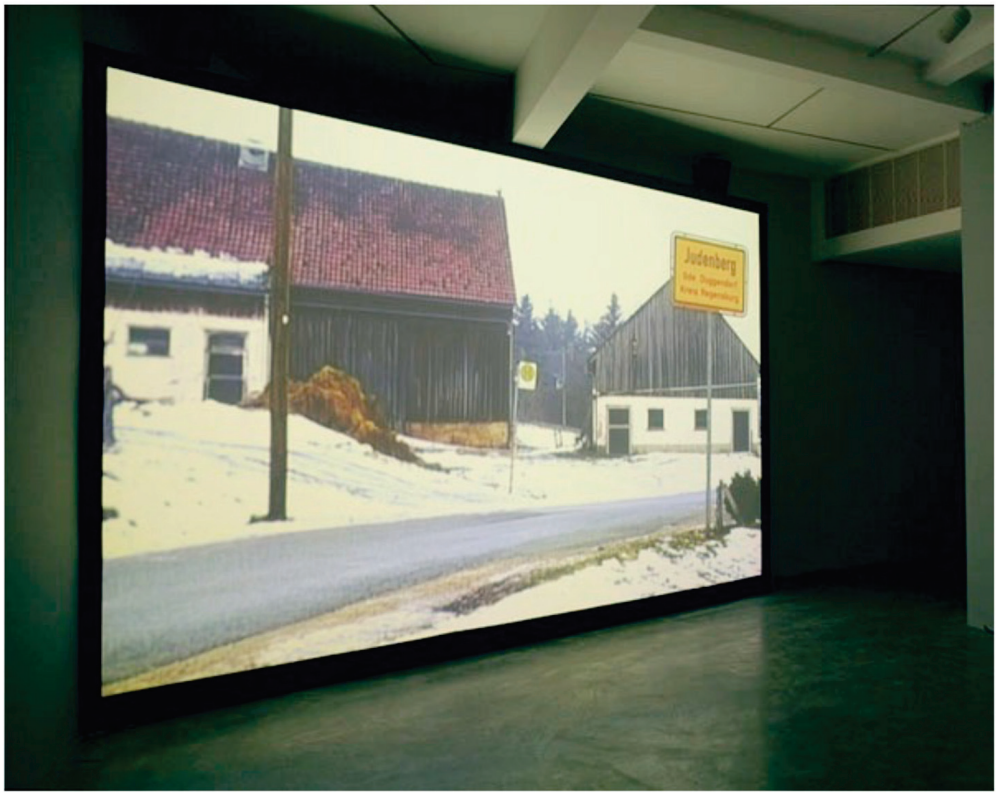

Figure 9. Susan Hiller, *The J Street Project*, 2002–2005. Video installation, color, stereo PAL: single channel projection, 67 min, looped. Courtesy of Timothy Tayler Gallery, London.

4. German Memory Culture and the Center for Political Beauty

Before concluding, I would like to turn to *The Memorial*, a project undertaken by the Center for Political Beauty in Germany (ZPS) in 2017. This activist art collective specializes in raising public awareness through performances, such as coordinating funerals for migrants who perished on the way to Germany and constructing a replica Holocaust memorial outside the residence of a prominent far-right leader [Figure 10].

Their work sheds light on the recent resurgence of racial hatred and violence associated with far-right wing groups and politicians in Germany. Despite Germany's earnest efforts to confront its dark history and transition into a liberal democracy, the unexpected rise of far-right movements, as evidenced by the violent events in Chemnitz that emerged during the summer of 2017, underscores the ongoing necessity of safeguarding democratic values.

Amidst the global surge in violent antisemitism, racism, and anti-immigrant sentiments, my interest was piqued by the miniature version of the Peter Eisenman's original Holocaust Memorial in Bornhagen, a project by the Center for Political Beauty. From February 2017 to 2022, this activist group owned a small property adjacent to the home of far-right politician Björn Höcke in Bornhagen, Germany.[23] They orchestrated a remarkable feat, involving a team of one hundred members who, in just five days, erected a replica of the Holocaust memorial to the murdered Jews of Europe in Berlin. This gesture aimed to serve as a poignant reminder to Höcke of the millions of Jews who were systematically murdered.

Figure 10. The Center for Political Beauty in Germany (ZPS), *The Memorial*, 2017. This is a miniature version of Peter Eisenman's original Holocaust Memorial to the Murdered Jews in Berlin. The replica was put adjacent to the home of far-right politician Björn Höcke in Bornhagen, Germany, for an activist project by the Center for Political Beauty to serve as a daily reminder to him and his supporters that fostering fascist ideologies anywhere in Germany will provoke unwavering opposition.

Höcke, a politician for the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) party, had urged citizens to cease atoning for Nazi crimes and had labeled Berlin's Holocaust memorial as "a monument of shame". His party opposes Germany's "memory culture" and calls for an end to national apologies for the country's dark past.

Placing a miniature version of the Berlin Holocaust memorial near Höcke's residence serves as a daily reminder to him and his supporters that fostering fascist ideologies anywhere in Germany will provoke unwavering opposition. As stated by The Frankfurter Rundschau, a German daily newspaper based in Frankfurt am Main:

> "The Holocaust Memorial is a monument to our shame. We need it so that we don't forget what we are capable of. Every single one of us needs it. The Center for Political Beauty has erected a private monument in the backyard of one of those people who would like to close their eyes to this reality. He should be grateful".[24]

Nevertheless, it is essential to acknowledge that there is a longstanding practice of states and political groups appropriating Holocaust history for their own nationalist agendas. The continued relevance of the Holocaust Memorial in Berlin, originally conceived as a model for countries grappling with the weight of collective memory, has now come into question. This uncertainty paradoxically stems from the establishment of Germany's commissioner system, which was meant to combat antisemitism but now serves a reactionary agenda. It has come under criticism by German and Israeli Jews for being more focused on alleviating Germans' feelings of guilt for the Holocaust than on ensuring the safety of

Jews.[25] Matters took a turn for the worse after October 7, 2023, as Germany and most of its state-funded institutions declared unconditional solidarity with Israel.

Since 2017, Germany has reported a consistent increase in antisemitic incidents, numbering over two thousand in 2019 and exceeding three thousand in 2021. Particularly since the onset of the Israel-Hamas war, within their reporting of antisemitic incidents, German authorities have blurred the lines between violent attacks on Jews on the one hand and what German's term "Israelbezogener Antisemitismus" or "Israel-related antisemitism" on the other. The latter includes criticisms of Israeli government policies and those who "de-singularize the Holocaust".[26] As Israeli architect and author Ewal Weisman writes: "In Germany, Palestinians are often prohibited by German authorities from demonstrating their grief in vigils for the thousands of Palestinians killed in Gaza. Even calling for a ceasefire may be considered antisemitic in Germany".[27] He goes on to refer to official statistics that show that most antisemitic offenses in the country are in fact committed by white neo-Nazis who enjoy the protection of the police when they continue to march in the streets of Germany. Notably, a growing number of Jewish writers, artists, curators, and scholars who have been critical of Israel after 7 October 2023, have been targeted and shamed under these new laws. Regrettably, the well-intentioned efforts by Germans to earnestly confront their past seem to have veered off course since the 1980s. As Emily Dische-Becker, a left-wing Jewish curator and journalist in Berlin, aptly observed in 2023, "German antisemitism efforts are not driven by a concern for Jews". She asserted that it ultimately boils down to a very nationalist "German identity politics".[28]

5. Conclusions

In conclusion, Susan Hiller's *The J Street Project* engages with the Holocaust, yet she does not view her work as confined to the past. Rather, it represents an ongoing exploration of an experience of loss and trauma beyond the Holocaust. She regards the archive she assembled in this project not as a static artifact but as a continually evolving phenomenon of the present. She eloquently states, "*The J Street Project* has allowed me to reflect not only on one unique, incurable, traumatic absence but also on more recent attempts to destroy minority cultures and erase their presence".[29] Importantly, for Hiller, historical context and trauma are not exclusive to Jews alone. She brings feminist art and concerns for justice and repair to bear on even the most heavily contested conflicts.

Motivated by the devastation and desolation of the Holocaust, Hiller embarked on a mission to document and reconstruct every conceivable facet of the lost Jewish world. Her approach aligns with an aesthetic and ethical practice of postmemory, seeking to reclaim historical specificity and context. In this regard, her archive serves as a means of correction and repair. The ongoing nature of name restoration is exemplified in her original exhibition, which traveled to the Jewish Museums in New York City and San Francisco. The Nazis had renamed Spandau's Judenstraße to Kinkelstraße, after a 19th-century racial theorist they admired. In 2002, when Hiller initiated her project, the original name was reinstated, but only after a protracted and heated local debate. Hiller's image poignantly captures both names, with Kinkelstraße crossed out in red and framed by Christmas lights [Figure 11].

By contrast, in Judit Hersko's artwork, the Holocaust connection invites viewers to witness what also must never happen again. We are called upon to bear witness, to a specific future climate catastrophe that has yet to fully unfold. Through her work, Hersko endeavors to prompt contemplation of the actions imperative for the survival of both humans and non-humans in the future. Her art grapples with the challenge of representing phenomena that elude our immediate senses, such as the gradual and imperceptible progression of climate breakdown. Hersko pursues these issues in her earlier installation "Shifting Baselines" (2006) where she confronts ocean acidification directly in "Seven Days of Dissolution" and in a companion piece titled "Winners and Losers" she projects images onto tanks of live jellyfish. She questions the possibility of winners in a cycle of destruction writing: "while jellyfish thrive under current ocean circumstances (they are not affected by

acidification) will they survive down the line? And ultimately, even if some non-human life forms may survive environmental destruction, humans will not."[30]

Figure 11. Susan Hiller, *The J Street Project*, 2002–2005. Video installation: single channel projection, 67 min, looped. Two signs for the project. This single image is about the ongoing nature of name restoration in Germany as exemplified by this rare example where there are two signs that still exist for the same street, including the original sign--Spandau's Judenstraße--and the sign bearing the name Kinkelstraße, after a 19th-century racial theorist the Nazis admired.

Both artists draw attention to an erasure within the landscape that challenges our ability to perceive without a deep sense of displacement and loss. In Hiller's photographic and cinematic images, she portrays idyllic German village scenes or innocent landscapes that obscure uneasy histories, challenging the viewer to think about the absences. The idea and practice of placing objects like street signs, stories, individuals, and organisms into a relationship of proximity is itself an important component of both these projects and an aspect of the counter-memories that they are attempting to activate. I write about them as feminist diasporic projects because of their focus on mapping connective histories beyond discrete historical events like the Holocaust; histories which extend outside of Israel, Germany, or the US. Their work creates interconnections and intersections in a space of remembrance that transcends the national. Such feminist work can expose both the depth of desolation and an abiding concern for justice and acts of repair. At the same time, it avoids the competition over suffering that comparative approaches can sometimes engender.

In essence, Susan Hiller and Judit Hersko engage with memory and loss through their art, confronting the erasures in history and the disappearances of nature that have profound implications for both individuals and societies. They challenge viewers to acknowledge these absences and witness the unsettling intersections of traumatic history and, in the case

of Hersko, to prompt us to not only contemplate but to act. Through Hersko's distinct yet interconnected practices, she extends an invitation to delve into the complexities of post-Holocaust memory and the urgent need to address the emergency of climate breakdown. Both artists remind us that the work of memory and the pursuit of justice require ongoing dedication, creativity, and a commitment to mending the fabric of our collective past, present, and future.

In a world in which historical traumas persist and ecological challenges are multiplying, the contemporary art of post-Holocaust memory crafted by Hiller and Hersko offers a poignant testament to the enduring power of feminist intersectional art as a vehicle for reflection, mourning, transformation, and action.

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Notes

1 Earlier versions of the section on Judit Hersko have been previously published in my 2022 book and other articles, but this version has been significantly revised to be integrated into this article's very different argument on feminist intersectional art of post-Holocaust memory. The article is an expanded version of a paper that I gave in 2019 for the conference "New Perspectives on Jewish Feminist Art in the United States" at the Yale Institute of Sacred Music, organized by David Sperber. My writing on Judit Hersko first appeared in "Antarctica: Feminist Art Practices and Disappearing Polar Landscapes", in Bloom (2017); as Bloom (2020), and in my 2022 book: (Bloom 2022).

2 Amelia Jones (2006), *Self/Image*.

3 See Ellen Fine (1988), "The Absent Memory"; James Young (1997), "Toward a Received History of the Holocaust"; Gabrielle Schwab (1989), *Haunting Legacies*; and Marianne Hirsch (2012), *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust*. The evolving field of Jewish feminist art has been taken up by a wide range of international scholars and includes the following: Matthew Baigell, Samantha Baskind, Paula Birnbaum, Ala Efimova, Tamar Garb, Rachel Garfield, Marianne Hirsch, Norman Kleeblatt, Laura Kruger, Cassandra Langer, Gail Levin, Laura Levitt, Eunice Lipton, Richard Meyer, Margaret Olin, Mor Presiado, Griselda Pollock, Lisa Salzman, Efraim Sicher, Catherine Soussloff, David Sperber, Roni Tzoreff, Edward Von Woolen, Diane Wolfthal, and Tanya Zion- Waldoks, among others.

4 Marianne Hirsch (2012), pp. 5–6.

5 Janes E. Young (2000), p. 196.

6 Susan Neiman (2023), p. 59.

7 See Hersko's website, http://www.judithersko.com/, for images and a full description of her Antarctic art project *From the Pages of the Unknown Explorer.* Hersko's artwork on climate change and planktonic snails is an outgrowth of her collaboration with the biological oceanographer Victoria Fabry. See also Hersko's articles "'Translating' and 'Retranslating' Data", "Pages from the Book", and "Objects" (Hersko 2009). For more on the performance of *From the Pages of the Unknown Woman* (2008–2012) see Hersko (2012, 2018).

8 Kathryn Yusoff (2022), p. 27.

9 Stacy Alaimo (2017), p. 114.

10 See note 9 above.

11 Lüdecke and Summerhayes (2012), Third Reich in Antarctica.

12 See Whitney Chadwick (1991), Women Artists and the Surrealist Movement.

13 Hersko's work also pays homage to her mother, Anna Hersko, one of the first women filmmakers in Hungary, who passed away as Hersko was beginning this work.

14 Edmund Burke (2015), p. 55.

15 Alexandra M. Kokoli (2011), "Moving Sideways and Other 'Sleeping Metaphors': Susan Hiller's Paraconceptualism". pp. 143–154.

16 (Gallagher 2011), Susan Hiller (2011), Yve-Alain Bois and Guy Brett in conversation", p. 26.

17 See Marianne Hirsch (2012), pp. 133–52, 216–24.

18 Susan Hiller (2005), *The J. Street Project*, essay by Jorg Heiser, Berlin: German Academic Exchange service (DAAD), 2005.

19 Susan Hiller's quotes appeared in a short article on the Contemporary Jewish Museum in San Francisco's website at the time of her exhibit there in the summer of 2009: https://www.thecjm.org/exhibitions/58, (accessed on 2 June 2023).

[20] See discussion on Youtube with Susan Hiller and Dan Shiffrin at the Contemporary Jewish Museum in San Francico, June 18, 2009: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=594aCcLjHgs, (accessed on 2 June 2023).

[21] (Gallagher 2011). See note 16 above.

[22] Ruth Ellen Gruber (2002), *Virtually Jewish: Reinventing Jewish Culture in Europe*, p. 7.

[23] For more on how the Holocaust replica shed light on the connections between far-right politicians in Germany and public servants in formerly Communist East German states, see Philip Oltermann, "Holocaust Memorial replica stunt to the murdered Jews of Europe in Berlin shines light on rightwing radicalism in Germany". *The Guardian*, April 7 2019: https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/apr/07/holocaust-memorial-replica-stunt-shines-light-on-rightwing-radicalism-in-germany, (accessed on 2 June 2023).

[24] For the full quote see the website for the Center for Political Beauty: https://politicalbeauty.com/memorial.html, (accessed on 2 June 2023).

[25] George Prochnik, Eyal Weisman and Emily Dische-Becker, "Once Again, Germany Defines Who is a Jew". (Part One and Two) 2023, *Granta*. https://granta.com/once-again-germany-defines-who-is-a-jew-part-i/; https://granta.com/once-again-germany-defines-who-is-a-jew-part-ii/, (accessed on 2 June 2023).

[26] Masha Gessen, "In the Shadow over the Holocaust". *New Yorker*: https://www.newyorker.com/news/the-weekend-essay/in-the-shadow-of-the-holocaust (accessed on 9 December 2023).

[27] George Prochnik, Eyal Weisman and Emily Dische-Becker, "Once Again, Germany Defines Who is a Jew". Part II.

[28] Ibid.

[29] Susan Hiller's quotes appeared at the end of a section titled "About the Exhibit" on the Contemporary Jewish Museum in San Francisco's website from her 2009 exhibit *The J Street Project* J: https://www.thecjm.org/exhibitions/58, (accessed on 2 June 2023).

[30] The quote commenting on her 2006 installation titled "Shifting Baselines" is from a private correspondence dated January 29, 2024. In "Winners and Losers" mentioned in that quote, Hersko projects a clip from Nicolas Rogue's famous 1985 British film drama *Insignificance* onto two tanks of live jellyfish. For more information about this work visit: https://www.judithersko.com/shiftingbaselines-831071.html. (accessed on 2 June 2023).

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Article

Introduction: The New Face of Trans Visual Culture

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Abstract: Transness throws into question how many so-called Western cultures—i.e., those ideologically descended from the colonial project—have sutured "reality" to the "privileging of sight". At the crux of trans-visual culture is a need to be understood outside current modes of visual apprehension. As a methodology rooted in trans-embodied experiences, trans provides a mode for decolonizing the privileging of sight and moving toward a new understanding of bodies, identity, representation, and visual culture. It is imperative to explore such methods in today's political climate, and it is advantageous to apply them to trans-visual culture, as exponential innovations can be discerned. In this article, I will deploy a trans visual studies methodology to the work of contemporary trans masculine artist and photographer Wynne Neilly to explore how his work engages a praxis of transing identity. I will discuss how his work shifts the understanding of identity and representation to one decoupled from optical ontology and how he works to unseat White masculinity as the center of Western art and visual culture.

Keywords: identity; representation; hybridity; trans; transgender; photography; masculinity; LGBTQ; critical race studies; disidentification

1. Introduction

In the spring of 2021, *TIME* magazine featured Elliot Page on its cover in a piece by Katy Steinmetz entitled, "'I'm fully who I am': Actor Elliot Page and the fight for trans equality." The feature on Page reflects a groundbreaking moment—a cultural highlighting of trans masculinity. Elliot Page, with his newly released book *Pageboy: A Memoir* (Page 2023), has cemented his position as one of the newest icons of the trans movement. At the least, as Steinmetz puts it, Page is "now one of the most visible trans people in the world" (Steinmetz 2021). Seven years prior, *TIME* magazine ran the now iconic Laverne Cox cover story wherein Steinmetz dubbed the era the "Trans Tipping Point". I mention this to point out that Steinmetz and *TIME* have been responsible for shaping important cultural discourse around the trans movement and trans representation and to show that even the seemingly recent fight for trans equality has been long and arduous. Even in the recent pop culture arena, the Trans Tipping Point has been less of a critical juncture and more of an ongoing battle that is continuously unfolding. Furthermore, a brief look at the two cover stories highlights that trans masculinity is significantly underrepresented, given that it took seven years after the announcement of the "Trans Tipping Point" for a trans male actor to grace the cover of a major magazine and enter the public spotlight.

The portrait photographs (Steinmetz 2021) accompanying the feature reveal Page looking vulnerably at the camera, posing in T-shirts and long-sleeved thermal undershirts, evocative of the revival of 90s aesthetics donned by many in the early 2020s. The cover image frames the actor within the iconic red border and the prominent title, *TIME*, in grey letters floating behind Page's somewhat forlorn face, as he looks into the camera with bedroom eyes. He leans gently against a light grey wall, sporting a black sweatshirt, jeans, and white sneakers, flanked by a small dog (Figure 1). His poses suggest he is comfortable with the photographer, which translates into a feeling of openness with the reader. The images depict several intimate photographs which cast the actor as eager yet trepidatious about publicly announcing his transness.

The quietly contemplative photographs were taken by trans male artist Wynne Neilly. On 16 March 2021, Neilly posted the above cover image on his Instagram feed accompanied by the hashtags #transrights and #protecttranskids and the following caption:

> I don't even have the words at this moment to describe my immense gratitude for this experience. This is my dream assignment. I have been wanting this and working towards this for so many years. I'm so proud of Elliot. And I am so grateful to the trans elders who risked everything to make this moment happen. I will probably have to add more to this caption later when I have the ability to form more words but for now I am just grateful, honoured and proud to be trans in this moment of time.
>
> Thank you, Elliot.

The enthusiasm, pride, and respect articulated in the sentiment are likely due to the fact that the actor and the photographer are both transmen and reflective of the state of trans rights in Spring 2021 when the issue launched. The weight of the cultural moment must have been palpable to both the actor and the photographer, and it marked a moment when global culture could no longer ignore the relevance of trans people. In the movement for trans rights, trans masculine people have historically been less visible than trans feminine people and largely occluded from cultural recognition. Laverne Cox appeared on the cover of *TIME* magazine in June 2015, and Caitlin Jenner appeared on Vanity Fair's cover later that year. While Cox and Jenner may be the most famous trans people to appear on magazine covers, numerous trans feminine people and trans women have appeared in mainstream TV, cinema, and media over the recent decades, including Alexandra Billings, Candis Cayne, Jamie Clayton, Gia Gunn, Dominique Jackson, Janet Mock, Indya Moore, Peppermint, Jen Richards, Michaela Jae Rodriguez, Hunter Schafer, The Wachowski sisters, and many more. Trans masculine visibility has remained scant, however; thus, Page's high-profile transition in mainstream visual culture wields major cultural significance. In recent decades, the field of trans representations has been growing in all sectors of culture globally. Facilitated by the advent of social media, political progress protecting the rights of trans folks, advances in accessibility for trans medical care, and inroads in media, visual culture, and contemporary reflecting LGTQ+ perspectives, trans representation is becoming a diverse field of study, and in many spaces a divisive and contested issue. The complexities and nuances of trans representations continue to unfold and are increasingly discussed in various sectors of cultural studies, cinema, academia, and beyond.[1]

Figure 1. Screen grab of Neilly's Instagram feed captured by Ace Lehner on 16 March 2021.

The defining trans representations in the decades preceding the Trans Tipping Point included a handful of tragic stereotypes sensationalizing trans femininity and erasing trans masculinity. While some inroads have been made into thinking about how masculinity has been constructed in visual culture, trans masculinity has yet to be substantially visualized, recognized, or theorized. One of the foremost trans masculine activists and culture producers of the last decades (and founder of the highly influential magazine *Original Plumbing: Trans Male Quarterly*), Rocco Kayiatos, has spoken about how, as a young trans man, it took him many years to realize his trans identity, because he saw no examples of trans masculinity in the world around him, save for a chance encounter with Loren Cameron's book, *Body Alchemy*, in his late teens.[2] Cameron's influential 1996 book, which portrays numerous trans masculine experiences in photographic form, was a radical intervention into visual culture and has been a touchstone for many transmasculine people in the ensuing years (Cameron 1996). Neilly's image of Page, is significant in that it is a trans masculine photographer imaging a trans masculine actor featured on the cover of a prevalent pop cultural magazine and it will surely resonate far beyond what we can now imagine.

Cover stories such as Page's are vital in that they make clear that knowledge about trans people for trans and cis people alike is not readily available. Seeing trans people in visual culture is often the only way most folks know anything about trans people. For this reason, trans representations carry significant cultural weight. Sam Feder's 2020 feature film *Disclosure* is an apt example. It takes a nuanced look at the deployment of trans stereotypes in mainstream cinema and visual culture. There is a scene in which Laverne Cox discusses how 80% of Americans do not know any trans people, so everything they know about trans people has been gleaned from media (Feder 2020). Bearing this in mind, representations of trans folks can be extremely damaging when the construction of trans characters in media and the rhetoric attached to trans people are bound up with stereotypes and vitriol. Such representations often reinforce the gender binary while also inspiring hate crimes and anti-LGBTQIA+ legislation. Especially when anti-trans sentiment is coupled with racism.

While writing this article, I have anxiously followed the state of anti-LGBTQ+ legislation and the escalation of hate crimes globally. In the US in July 2023, for example, there have already been 269 anti-LGBTQ bills introduced in nearly all 50 states. The ACLU has a live map tracking the bills on the home page of their website using increasingly saturated tones to correspond to increasingly aggressive numbers of bills introduced in each state. The map's highlighting of anti-LGBTQ+ sentiment across the nation is visually arresting (ACLU 2023). The US is not the only country in the news currently demonstrating increased hostility toward LGBTQ+ people, however. As I write this, Ugandan president Yoweri Museveni is currently considering supporting a bill that will criminalize identifying as gay, lesbian, trans, or queer, with sentences of up to 20 years in prison (Nocholis 2023).

Viewing the ACLU map of the US, one is also viewing the binary, essentializing, and linear ideologies of colonialism applied to land. Such mapping strategies are ever-present in US renderings of this section of North America, a location more aptly known as Turtle Island. Not only does the US outline represent a truncated portion of Turtle Island, but it is also indicative of the racist, colonialist, gender-oppressive history of the genocide of indigenous people, along with which came binary gender paradigms as part and parcel of White supremacy. The essentialized, binarized conception of land into discrete and closed categories (i.e., countries and states) reflects the same colonialist logic that seeks to define and rigidly boundary reductive ideas about gender categories.

Backlash against LGBTQIA+ liberation is often aimed at trans and queer people who visibly disrupt dominant binary, cisgender, and White supremacist paradigms. Trans people who embody aesthetics outside established binary cis-supremacist paradigms are the most frequent targets of violence. Bearing this in mind, it is compelling to consider how drag performance has been a target of much of the recent backlash. Within LGBTQIA+ life and discourse, trans people and drag performances are understood as distinct from one another (albeit often overlapping). To oversimplify, for example, trans is an identity, and

drag is an art. Nevertheless, right-wing attacks on LGBTQIA+ liberation have targeted drag performances and trans identities. From the viewpoints of heteropatriarchy, White supremacy, and cis supremacy, drag performances and trans people are disrupting the dominant world order. Both trans identities and drag performances disrupt the false belief in the essentialized collapsing of binary sex and binary gender and disrupt the pseudo logic that identity is hermetically sealed. Trans identities and drag performances exponentially explode the myriad possible configurations of gender, biological sex, and sexuality and the infinite expressions and configurations thereof. Significantly drag performances and trans identities are often targeted when corporeal presentations visually disrupt dominant aesthetic categories of binary gender.

Visual culture is part of the negotiation of identity formations, and currently, a significant shift is transpiring due to the wave of trans visual culture. While there is an ongoing increase in complex and nuanced trans representations due to growing numbers of trans and queer people across all aspects of culture, media, and art production, the radical transformation is not occurring as one may expect via inroads made by creating positive representations of trans people. Positive representations do not disrupt the problematic and troubling pseudo-logics of White supremacy and heteropatriarchy. Such an approach actually works with the same logic of oppressive schemas, reinforcing the false pretext that visual representation is the key to knowledge or liberation, thus staying invested in binary oppositions and reifying colonialist logic. The methodologic intervention of trans visual culture is a debunking of the pseudo-logic that seeing is indexically related to knowing and that in looking at people, one can know someone's identity. The methodologic break with this outmoded, colonialist pseudo-logic is the transing of identity.

2. Briefly on Identity and Representation

Living in locations where dominant culture seeks to maintain culture as White supremacist, and heteropatriarchal affords Elliot Page what Devon W. Carbado has formulated as "negative identity signification" (Carbado 2005). Carbado has observed that White men live on the "white side of race" and "the male side of gender". "He is, in this sense, the norm: Mankind; the baseline. He is our reference. We are all defined with him in mind." (ibid., pp. 190–212). Yet, as a transmasculine person, Page's relationship to this position of "negative identity signification" and this position of "norm" is not that of a cis man. Page lived decades of his life treated as female, a gender that he was not, while he was wrestling internally with who he was in a world where the examples of trans lives seen in public view demonstrated that to be trans was to live a life unlivable. Arguably one of the most notable public-facing examples of trans masculinity, Page represents a shift in the schema of how White masculine identity is understood. Trans lives and trans methodologies developed from trans lived experiences demonstrate that identity is innate not tied to visual apprehension and malleable not static, thus defying the stoic logic of White supremacy and cis supremacy. As trans visual culture continues to proliferate and trans discourse moves forward, understandings of how visual culture is bound up with the negotiation of identities continue to unfold and shift. Still, the logic of the dominant order persists, positioning Elliot Page as an incorporable example of trans masculinity and affording him a place as "one of the most visible trans people in the word" (Steinmetz 2021).

Via the lens of the pseudo-logic of White supremacist and cis supremacist ideologies, processes of gendering and racializing are part of the dominant order and enmeshed with visual culture. Identities and values are assigned to bodies via visual encounters based on an ideological matrix: a complex system of processes about expectations of how people can look and how identities can acceptably be performed. Cultural representations of identity with regard to who and what are incorporable are proposed via visual culture and the pseudo logic that looking and knowledge are inextricably linked, and stereotypes become part of culturally specific understandings of various groups.

Judith Butler's research investigating regulatory practices that govern gender and culturally intelligible notions of identity is useful here. The intellectual work I am referring

to dates from the 1990s and early 2000s, a time before the so-called Trans Tipping Point, and yet the reductive ideologies Butler observes still hold firm decades later. Butler noted that how people embody norms is often intimately enmeshed with survival. Butler noted that for some, survival is a "burning issue" and how norms are embodied for some folks precisely relates to whether life is livable. Butler describes those who live outside the domain of which she describes as an exclusionary matrix as abject and describes their lives as unlivable (Butler 1993). For the binary gender system to remain intact, those whose identities are viewed as challenging the system must be made examples of as offenders of the system. Butler's observations are clearly demonstrated in visual culture when we see trans subjects who most fully reflect dominant cultural ideologies such as Elliot Page as being (marginally) accepted, while subjects existing too radically outside sanctioned genders are viewed as not only expendable but necessarily eradicable, as exemplified in particular by the countless acts of violence and aggression perpetrated against working class trans femmes of color.[3] Zackary Drucker and Kristen Lovell's 2023 feature film *The Stroll* for example, gives trans perspective and voice to the lives of trans femmes in New York's Meatpacking District, exploring topics such as working to survive, gentrification, discrimination, and the trans rights movement (Drucker and Lovell 2023).

To explore how representation is enmeshed with identity formations, it is critical to consider how the ideological matrix that governs gender is the same as the apparatus of racialization. The two are inextricably linked, with countless intersectional mobile and culturally specific points on intersecting schemas. Writing about the problematic centering of White bodies in art history and visual culture in the West, Devon W. Carbado points out that the situating of the specific identity group as invisible or as lacking signifiers inaccurately positions White subjects as the default. As many scholars have observed, there are no neutral positions—-not in terms of identity, ideas, or visual culture. Everything is uniquely situated, and any suggestion otherwise needs to be challenged and de-centered. Profound discourses on identity and representations that challenge the exclusionary practices of art history perpetrated under the guise of the neutrality veil can be found in Derek Conrad Murray and Soraya Murray's *Uneasy Bedfellows: Canonical Art Theory and the Politics of Identity* (Murray and Murray 2006), and Alpesh Kantilal's *Productive Failure: Writing Queer Transnational South Asian Art Histories* (Patel 2017). The powerful work accomplished by scholars such as these who deploy methods that bring together critical methods of exploring identity, representations, and the exclusionary practices of academia, the art world, art history, and visual culture, is a model for the work that may be conducted via deploying trans visual studies and the study of trans visual culture.

White supremacist, cis supremacist ideologies are rooted in the legacy of the pseudo-logic of colonialism and rely on visual culture to attach systems of beliefs to various groups of people through visible differences. The Black, queer feminist insights of bell hooks reveal that, "From slavery on, White supremacists have recognized that control over images is central to the maintenance of any system of racial domination." (Hooks 1992). This notion is then tied to photography, as photography emerged during a period deeply bound to colonialism and the rationalist belief that seeing was the highest of all the senses. Via visual assessment, colonialist logic emboldens the ascribing of identity and value to others. For Preciado, the emergence of photography marked an essential stage in producing a new sexual subject via "visual truth" (Preciado 2013). Preciado has observed that the discursive framing of photography as indexical and the suturing of beliefs about photography's "technical production" endowed it with "the merit of visual realism" (Preciado 2013, p. 111), which, in turn, has tied photography to a significant stage in the production of gender via the belief in visual truth. Preciado writes, "The truth of sex takes on the nature of visual discourse, a process in which photography participates like an ontological catalyst, making explicit a reality that would not be able to emerge any other way." (Preciado 2013, p. 112).

The cultural conception of photographs, gender, and racialization (in locations ideologically descended from the colonial project) remains linked to the notion that via visual

assessment, the truth about who people are may be ascertained. Although photography scholars have noted that we are beyond the digital turn, making the current state of photography "post-photographic", photographs are often still viewed as a "window into a world".[4] However, no assumption about who someone is based on looking at them can be trusted. Moreover, such a practice can be highly inaccurate, and, more to the point, this schema is deeply problematic, for it upholds a belief that looking is equivalent to knowing and disregards both that looking is ideologically informed and that subjects inherently know who they are more intimately than anyone looking at a given subject.

While photography has often been mobilized as an extension of the colonialist project and in the service of reifying essentialized and reductive identities, photography is also an excellent vehicle for challenging the legacy of oppressive conceptions of visuality, identity, and representation. Transing identity provides a new methodology for understanding representations that move beyond the outmoded colonialist logic that prefers to equate ascertaining information from a surface as inherently linked to interior truth or, in this case, identity. Transing identity prioritizes embodied self-knowledge. Transing identity with regard to visual culture and photographic portraiture provides a pivotal intervention into the understanding of representation.

3. Wynne Neilly

Wynne Neilly is a queer, White trans artist who has created trans and queer representations for over a decade. He earned a BFA in Image Arts from Ryerson University in Toronto in 2012 and has gone on to do commissioned work for publications such as *TIME* and creative work that uses portraiture to explore trans and queer identity. Neilly has had solo and group exhibitions throughout the U.S. and Canada at the International Center of Photography, New York; Joseph Gross Gallery, Tucson, Arizona; and Toronto Image Works Gallery, Toronto. His work has been featured in *Aperture*, *Vision Magazine*, *Unbound*, and *Flash Forward*, among others. The artist's oeuvre can be situated in the legacy of Loren Cameron and in discourse with artists such as Robert Girard, Robert Mapplethorpe, Catherine Opie, Del la Grace Volcano, and Andy Warhol, as well as with younger artists including Chris Berntsen, Cassils, Zackary Drucker, Jess Dugan, Rhys Ernst, Ren Hang, Texas Isaiah, Amos Mac, Tyler Mitchell, Zanele Muholi, Cayote Park, Elle Perez, Lorenzo Triburgo, and others who use portrait photographs to explore the complexities of queer and trans identities.

Nearly a decade before making the cover photo of Page, Neilly was beginning his medical transition and photographing his experience via Polaroid every Friday (the day of his testosterone injection). The ongoing self-portrait work *Female to "Male"* images Neilly's changing corporeality as he undergoes medical transition (Figure 2). In a rich lineage of artists using photography to chronicle transforming their corporeality as durational performance, including Adrian Piper, Eleanor Antin, Tehching Hsieh, Cassils, and others, Neilly's project inserted a popular vernacular process of self-documenting one's medical transition with the use of hormones as a trans person into fine art discourse. The specificity of picturing his medical gender transition lends itself to distinctly different insights than those ascertained from studying any of the above-mentioned similar projects.

(**a**)

(**b**)

Figure 2. *Cont.*

(**c**) (**d**)

Figure 2. (**a**). August 30th, 2013—3rd shot, Polaroid photograph by Wynne Neilly, from Female to "Male"; (**b**). October 18th 2013—10th shot, Polaroid photograph by Wynne Neilly, from Female to "Male"; (**c**). January 24th 2014—24th shot, Polaroid photograph by Wynne Neilly, from Female to "Male"; (**d**). August 8th 2014—52nd shot, Polaroid photograph by Wynne Neilly, from Female to "Male".

Assigning gender to people in locations ideologically entrenched in the logic of colonialism is currently predominantly achieved via assessing and interpreting corporeal aesthetics, and assigning a gender to the subject being viewed. A deceptively benign and often unconscious occurrence, the process of looking is, as scholar Nicole Archer poignantly described, "ideologically saturated" (Archer 2017). Looking at the self-portrait photographs of *Female to "Male"*, the highly ideological process of interpreting the surface aesthetics of the figure vis-a-vis the photograph comes into focus. The conceptual flattening of Wynne Neilly the photograph and Wynne Neilly the person invites us to recognize the phenotypic judgments we are constantly making about people's visual morphology. The repeated aesthetics of the photographs of the subject slows the process of making assumptions about the subject. The numerous images of Neilly invite viewers to reflect on who they think the subject is. With each new picture, the subject appears slightly different in body shape, yet the tonality of their skin tone remains, by and large, the same. Based on subtle shifts in body thickness, muscle tone, body hair, face structure, shoulder breadth, chest definition, facial hair, and posture, one may assign a variety of gender assumptions to each image of the subject. Yet based on processes of racializing, the subject remains white, highlighting the consistent racializing of the subject regardless of gender.

Processes of gendering are always racialized. What comes into view with *Female to "Male"* is that gender is always bound by aesthetics, and when gender is assigned to others, it is conducted via an arbitrary and ideological process of fixing expectations to people based on looking at them. Via Neilly's Polaroids, one is able to see how the color of the subject's skin relates to this process of gendering. In each image, standing in front of a white wall, Neilly brings into relief the color of his skin, highlighting how interpretations of a given physicality are always necessarily bound up with expectations of gender and processes of racialization. For example, in Figure 2 one may identify the figure in the top left image as a soft butch, in the top right image as a little bit butcher, in the bottom left image as a young man, and in the bottom right image as a man. Ascribing gender is contingent on situating a subject within a field of similar-looking bodies and interpretations of them in relation to said field. As such, this process is always culturally and sub-culturally specific. Aesthetic signifiers such as body posture, hairstyle, piercings, jewelry, and tattoos connote specific subcultural affiliations and situate the racialized subject within these locations, suggesting an interpretation of the embodiment of and performance of gender. For example, the bottom right image, where one might assume the figure is male, reflects a specific subset of twenty-something, queer, White masculinity where a subtle mustache coupled with slim upper body musculature connotes masculinity more than the longish hair and slim waist might connote femininity. In differently racialized bodies, the aesthetics of body shape and hair might be interpreted differently, resulting in a variety of disparate assumptions about gender and racialized aesthetics.

Due to the way gender necessarily intersects with corporeality as signifier, as one engages in the process of looking at *Female to "Male"*, the figure's gender embodiment is interpreted within the pre-existing matrix of gendered expectation viewable within visual culture, which, in the "West", is inherently racialized. Repeatedly imaging himself, ostensibly under the guise of making his shifting gender morphology visible, the artist is also bringing his White identity into view. Being careful not to conflate heterosexuality, Whiteness, and cis-normativity, I would like to suggest that *Female to "Male"* as praxis invites a reflection on the unseating of cis-normativity while also working to make Whiteness visible. This intervention is imperative when one recalls the work of queer of color critique, which has compellingly outlined that without attending to racialization and naming Whiteness, one limits and homogenizes queer theory under Whiteness as the default. In addition, continues to center heteropatriarchal White supremacy (Ferguson 2004; Chen 2017; Johnson and Henderson 2005).

4. *Have/Hold* and the Transing of Identity

Wynne Neilly recently showcased an unprecedented body of work, *Have/Hold*, at We Buy Gold, Gallery TPW, Toronto, Canada curated by Michèle Pearson Clarke. A collaboration with fellow artist Kyle Lasky, the project explores the intimate friendship between the two White transmen in photographic form (Figure 3). Playing with the language of marriage vows and bonds of matrimony, the title signals the affection, vulnerability, and love explored in the work. Neilly describes the project as "challenging traditional narratives and stigma around masculine intimacy" (Neilly and Lasky n.d.). Artist friends Neilly and Lasky met in art school at a time when both were beginning to transition and developing a deep friendship. Now that the collaborators are regularly interpreted as male in daily life and find themselves dating women, their relationship with one another strikes the artists as an "anomaly" among representations of male friendship, and they find their closeness is often misinterpreted as that of lovers. Neilly attributes their ability to be so intimate to their friendship being rooted in queerness and not in heteropatriarchal cis masculinity (Neilly and Lasky n.d.). The images in *Have/Hold* transmit these sentiments, intimacies, and complexities, pushing the boundaries of what a masculine friendship can look like, and challenging assumptions viewers may be inclined to make about the work and the artists.

Figure 3. Installation Image of *Have/Hold*, 2021, Work by Wynne Neilly and Kyle Lasky. Courtesy of Stephen Bulger Gallery. Installation image shot by Toni Hafkenscheid.

In a wall-size installation of collaborative, photographic self-portraits, the artists wallpaper the gallery with two floor-to-ceiling, black and white photobooth images of themselves. In the left image, the two faces look out of the picture plane with bright eyes and broad smiles beneath mustaches, their faces exuding glee and their dark t-shirts blending into one amorphous torso before a rumpled backdrop curtain. In the image on the right, the two subjects have turned their buzzed heads toward each other to engage in a tender kiss. The expression of love between the two close friends is palpable. Functioning as a mural behind the other, smaller pictures, the massive photographs ground the installation in feelings of intimacy, humor, and tenderness. Their matching buzz cuts and facial hair, coupled with the kiss, draw references to various queer subcultures and photographs found in the oeuvres of Wolfgang Tillmans and Cathy Opie, where buzzcuts appear donned by queers of various genders in reclamation and queering of an aesthetic oft deployed to signal white supremacist homophobia. The series of images, hung in a loose but thoughtful composition of overlapping and undulating rectangles, shows a story of two friends who enjoy travel, adventures, leisure, and intimacy. The figures inhabit a world where Neilly and Lasky move from camping to hotel rooms to haircuts by windows, from bathing to embracing in a world populated only by them. It is a portrait of the pair and a love letter to friendship. The configuration includes a smaller, more formal, double portrait of the two, each in a plaid shirt and backward baseball cap in what appears to be a studio setting, where Neilly stands in front and Lasky hangs his arm over Neilly's shoulder. Hanging in the installation is the red plaid shirt worn by Lasky in the photograph, bringing the image into the present through tactility and sentimentality. The plaid flannel shirt creates aesthetic allusions to dyke culture of the 1990s, especially in the US and Canada, cultural touchstones that the trans men who once inhabited queer dyke circles make fond and playful reference to by including an image of the collaborators wearing plaid flannel earlier on in their medical transitions where a viewer might want to categorize Neilly and Lasky's gender presentations as masculine presenting women, or as Neilly describes them, "young, butch women" (Neilly and Lasky n.d.). The inclusion of this image and the shirt as sculptural object highlight the origin of their friendship in queer female assumed identities. This visual point rings as pertinent in that it aestheticizes a transing of identity. One cannot assume who the subjects are based on a visual read of a single given image. Identity is far more complex than that which may be viewed in a singular photograph.

In a framed, central photograph, the two appear nude in what looks to be a hot spring in a rugged landscape (Figure 4). Snowcapped mountains rest in the distance, and grassy marshland dapples the midground of the picture. Centered and gazing directly outward through the picture plane, Neilly sits behind and above Lasky on the edge of the pool, with his legs flanking Lasky's sides, one hand placed gently on Lasky's shoulder and the other on Lasky's chest. Their pale, tattooed bodies blend into one another. At first glance, one might not differentiate between Neilly's leg and Lasky's arm; both sport black and grey tattoos, pale skin and body hair. The positioning of their bodies both conceals and reveals signs of transness. Lasky's body blocks places where one might see markings of Neilly's transness, and Lasky's right hand rests in a gentle fist beneath the water, obscuring any view of his genitals. Nevertheless, on Lasky's hairy chest, appear faint red, uneven lines of top surgery scars, soft markings of his transness, faintly echoing the rugged horizon line.

Figure 4. Our Favourite Spot, 2018, Work by Wynne Neilly and Kyle Lasky. Courtesy of Stephen Bulger Gallery.

The picture of the two friends, nude and bathing close together in the wild landscape, recalls images of Greco-Roman baths, gay cruising grounds, spaghetti westerns, and formal portraiture. The soft and gentle gesture of Neilly resting his limbs on Lasky and Lasky resting his left arm in return over Neilly's knee speaks volumes about the beautiful tenderness of friendship and the ability to be vulnerable—things familiar in queer circles but seldom seen in mainstream depictions of White, heterosexual, cis masculinity.

When the figures are interpreted as cis White men, the two central figures, self-possessed and dominating the image, open questions about their relationship to the landscape that recall histories of colonization, stories of conquest, and colonialist ideologies that painted and pictured Turtle Island as an empty wilderness for the taking.[5] When viewed as trans, the tender depiction of masculinity references histories of queer and trans people seeking solace in locations populated only by LGBTQ+ community and practices of image-making by and for LGBTQ+ people in landscapes with the intent of freely being oneself and the photographic work of artists such as Tammy Rae Carland, Ryan McGinley, Sofia Cordova, Torreya Cummings, Laura Aguilar, Elle Perez, Tyler Mitchell, and others, work that considers the complex histories of landscapes in relation to colonization and queer and trans utopia and solace.

Strategically deploying and transforming dominant cultural modes of White masculinity, *Have/Hold* reflects Neilly and Lasky's identities and relationship, playfully and skillfully breaking open nuances of White masculinity. The deployment and transformation of White masculinity one encounters in the images that constitute *Have/Hold* can be understood in conversation with José Esteban Muñoz's concept of disidentification. As José Esteban Muñoz puts it,

> Disidentification is about recycling and rethinking encoded meaning. The process of disidentification scrambles and reconstructs the encoded messages of a cultural text in a fashion that both exposes the encoded message's universalizing and exclusionary machinations and recruits its workings to account for, include, and empower minority identities and identifications. Thus, disidentification is a step

> further than cracking open the code of the majority; it proceeds to use this code as raw material for representing a disempowered politics of positionality that has been rendered unthinkable by the dominant culture. (Muñoz 1999)

Disidentifying with dominant cultural ideas about White masculinity, *Have/Hold* works on and against essentialized notions of heteropatriarchal, cis-supremacist, White-supremacist, binary masculinity. Rather than replicating toxic traits of White masculinity, including machismo, hostility, aggression, homophobia, hyper-independence, emotional repression, and feminist aversion, for example, *Have/Hold* displays images of trans queer White masculine tenderness, vulnerability, intimacy, and platonic love. Neilly's and Lasky's expressions of identity in *Have/Hold* reside not in their overt performance of transness but in their transing of the expectations of White masculinity as ideologically constructed in Anglo-European and North American contemporary culture.

Transing identity in this way can be understood as a methodological intervention and lived maneuver that de-sutures understandings of identity from the surface aesthetics of physical bodies, highlighting the complex and slippery relationship between corporeality and identity. While simultaneously cracking open, disidentifying with, and transforming dominant cultural expectations of identity categories. In other words, the pair's facial hair and flat chests do not equate to any given type of identity. Nevertheless, these aesthetics play with circulating cultural associations about body hair and physiognomy. Flat chests and mustaches are often assumed to signal masculinity or are ascribed masculine gender attributes, and yet this is not necessary or given. Neilly, for example, is more connected with being trans than being male. In Neilly's own words:

> I very strongly identify with being trans. My trans identity is not binary in the ways that society probably expects it to be. When heteronormative or mainstream society imagines a female born body transiting to a body that is perceived as masculine, there is an automatic reading of that person being "female to male" or FTM. This FTM experience might be very relatable and true for many trans people, but it is also completely wrong for others. (Neilly 2015)

Identity for trans people is rooted in who we know ourselves to be and who we tell people we are. In articulating one's transness, one often says, "This is who I am" in the face of a dominant cultural paradigm (and often actual people saying), "I know who you are based on what I see and how I assign categories and values to what I see." The trans person rejects the logic of the colonizing gaze. In this way, trans representations create a crisis of Western conceptions of visibility and visuality. As Micha Cárdenas notes,

> For trans visibility to be a reality, there would have to be an essential trans identity to make visible, but there is not. How could one make visible an identity that begins with the claim: "I am not what I appear to be; I know this because of a feeling that I have; I am my vision of my future self." (Cárdenas 2017)

Transing identity is a radical shift at odds with dominant Western ideologies about identity and visuality. When Wynne Neilly and Kyle Lasky created their collaborative photographic project, they were visually creating a rejection of the pseudo-logic that a viewer can know who they are by looking at them. Moreover, when a viewer accepts the figures as they articulate themselves to be, even if it seems at odds with how they appear, then the viewer is rethinking the colonial ideologies that undergird how people residing in locations ideologically entrenched in colonial pseudo-logics have been trained to look at people and portraits. As trans scholar B. Preciado notes, male and female exist only because they are continuously produced. Gender is dependent on visuality and tied to photography. Emerging during the era of colonization, photography marked a significant stage in the production of sexed and gendered subjects via the notion of "visual truth" Preciado 2013). *Have/Hold* disidentifies with White masculinity, breaking with the conceptualized collapsing of index and indexed or photograph and corporeality. *Have/Hold* highlights precisely how meaning and value are assigned to bodies based primarily on

ideological interpretations of visual information. The work also proposes the unfixing of identity and the de-suturing of Whiteness and masculinity as given and neutral positions.

Part of the colonialist project was the formation and deployment of the concept of the stereotype. The stereotype has since endured as an integral component of various identity-based oppressions in locations ideologically descended from colonial projects. The pseudo-logic of the stereotype is dependent on the ocular-centric cultural belief in valuing looking. According to post-colonial scholar Homi K. Bhabha, a stereotype is "a fixed reality" which is at once an "other" and yet knowable in that it is visible. (Bhabha 2012). Bhabha's observations are invaluable to the discussion at hand. Stereotypes are not factual, but they become endowed with cultural currency when they are anxiously repeated in visual culture to such an extent that the reductive iconic image and the (often damaging) ideas sutured to representations become synonymous with a group of people. Bhabha observes that stereotypes are created about people in an attempt to malign and oppress. Stereotypes produce and cement troubled, problematic, and reductive beliefs about groups of people, essentializing identities and perpetuating ill-treatment of those deemed worthy of mistreatment. However, the deeper issue with stereotypes is that they reinforce and are reinforced by a perpetuated belief in the false equivalence of seeing and knowing. Transing identity makes apparent that this pseudo logic is inaccurate and works on and against such belief systems, mobilizing other ways of engaging visuality and identity.

Have/Hold pushes the limits of White masculinity, making plain that, like all identities, masculinity, in the current colonial schema, is both constructed by and co-constituted by representations. *Have/Hold* reflects what Jack Halberstam has called a "repudiation of the veracity of the visual" (Halberstam 2018, p. 96). The praxis of *transing identity* that Neilly's work engages highlights that the surface of the picture and the aesthetics of a person in an image and a person's corporeality in daily life are not necessarily correlative to any assumption one may make based on looking. The rejection of the problematic belief that one may understand how another person identifies based on looking at them is a challenge to a foundational concept of a particular Western colonialist worldview and opens a new way of rethinking visuality, representation, and identity. This suggests that if one unfixes the idea of reality being sutured to the privileging of sight as articulated by C. Riley Snorton new understandings, methodologies, and frameworks for inquiry become possible (Snorton 2017). Recognizing that identity resides within and is transmitted outward via complex embodied, referential, gestural, and performative aesthetics, trans people and trans methodologies shift the discourse on identity to one that originates in self-articulation and embodied feeling and away from an ocular-centric worldview, calling into question the meanings that are made between the gendered subject and those interpreting gender via nuanced ideologically informed processes rooted in colonialist logics. Specifically, *Have/Hold* suggests that binary, heterosexual, White supremacist, cis-supremacist masculinity is a stereotype, a reduced and essentialized fiction, and that masculinity as gender is, in fact, a concept that is contingent on location, temporality, and culture, and is porous, transformable, intersectional, and ever-evolving.

5. Concluding Thoughts

Trans-self-representations such as those found in Wynne Neilly's oeuvre challenge the dominant cultural logics of White supremacy and cis supremacy, debunking an inaccurate and troubling belief that seeing has an uncomplicated and indexical relationship with the ascertaining of knowledge. Studying trans self-imaging practices such as Neilly's provides a methodology that moves beyond binary structures, de-essentializes how we think about representation and identity, and encourages continually malleable, self-reflexive methods of knowledge formation. Transing identity intervenes in visual culture theory and, in this instance, discourses on photography and the complex relationship between representations and ideas of truth and authenticity, revealing that the indexicality often associated with photographs is similar to the essentialist ways in which one may assume the exteriority of

a subject matches their identification, thus opening up nuanced and often creative modes of engaging these ideological legacies while undoing their presupposition.

Transing identity as a methodology rejects the belief that by looking at someone, one can know their identity. Transing identity shifts the understanding of identity that privileges that which is embodied and experiential. Identity comes from within, not from someone else looking at us and telling us who we are. Transing identity provides a methodological way out of colonialist and White supremacist logic. This logic dictates that the viewer ascribes one's identity via a process beyond reproach and void of agenda or ideology. Transing identity highlights that identity is malleable, fluctuating, intersectional, and collaborative, created in community, and communicated in a field of visual and performed aesthetics, where we all are both interpellated and disidentifying to varying degrees, with numerous aesthetics and gendered and raced frameworks circulating in given temporal, social, and geopolitical locations. Transing identity underscores the humanity of people, the infinitely complex play of visual interpretation, and opens up nuanced possibilities for further investigation into questions of identity, representation, and visuality.

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Notes

1 For further reading on the growing corpus of research on trans representations, and trans visual culture see: (Bey 2022; Chen 2019; Getsy and Gossett 2021; Halberstam 2018; Lehner 2019; Lehner 2021; Lehner 2022; Ochoa 2014; Stanley and Burton 2017; Jones 2021).

2 Original Plumbing. Presented at the Original Plumbing Panel, 10th Anniversary Compilation, a panel of contributors to the lauded magazine that celebrates trans male culture, Strand Bookstore, New York, NY, USA, 24 July 2019.

3 See: https://www.hrc.org/resources/fatal-violence-against-the-transgender-and-nonbinary-community-in-2023 (accessed on 7 July 2023).

4 See the work of Susan Bright, David Campany, and Charlotte Cotton.

5 Colonialist ideology informed images of Turtle Island during the period of colonization deploying aesthetic strategies that perpetuated the colonialist ideology of manifest destiny. See for example, (Berger 2005) and (Monkman and Gordon 2023).

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Article

Who Is an Artist? Identity, Individualism, and the Neoliberalism of the Art Complex

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Abstract: The fantasized artist-as-origin began as the quintessential figure manifesting Enlightenment European concepts of individual autonomy and sovereign subjectivity—and thus of identity and meaning as these come to define and situate human expression as well as securing educated, middle-class, European white male hegemony in the Euro-American context. While we think of this conventional figure of the straight white male artist as old-fashioned, as having been relentlessly critiqued since the mid-twentieth century by artists, often from a feminist, queer, anti-racist, or decolonial perspective, this article asserts that the artistic author still drives much of the discourse as well as underlying the money and status attached to visual art today. Citing key works by a range of contemporary artists who have challenged these value systems—Cassils, rafa esparza, James Luna, Guillermo Gómez-Peña, and Susan Silton—this article foregrounds the critique of whiteness and masculinity and the interrogation of capitalism and neoliberalism necessary to interrogating these structures of value attached to artistic authorship.

Keywords: artist; art world; art market; European Enlightenment; art history; neoliberalism; capitalism

> "... as humans, *we cannot/do not preexist our cosmogonies*, our representations of our origins."
>
> (Wynter and McKittrick 2015, p. 36)

1. Who Is an Artist? And Why Do We Care?

In 2013, the Los Angeles-based artist Susan Silton produced a work entitled *Who's in a Name?* This work, consisting of a performative intervention and an artist's book, was Silton's response to a John Baldessari piece, *Your Name in Lights*, wherein, for the Sydney Festival in 2011, the art star (also LA-based) had an almost 100-foot L.E.D. screen mounted on the Australian Museum in Sydney to project the names of every person who went online and registered to have their "name in lights" for 15 seconds.[1] While *Your Name in Lights* is consistent in tone and critical edge with Baldessari's career-long trolling of the pretensions of the mainstream art world (he is thus not the most typical exemplar of the canonical white male artist), Silton added another level of insight. Baldessari arguably produces a satirical paean to the conflation between the artist and the celebrity in late capitalism (the 15 seconds a name remains visible on the screen spoofs the 15 minutes of the famous comment Warhol supposedly made, "in the future everyone will be world-famous for 15 minutes"),[2] and Silton's intervention was to open up the nexus of fame and artistic authorship even more deeply. Silton compiled a list of lesser-known artists who had committed suicide and then assigned one of these names to each of the 58 mostly LA-based artists and writers she had invited to participate; these people agreed to submit that name on Baldessari's website such that it would then be displayed for a 15 second time slot. As Silton noted, "I wanted to mine the territory primarily of the less recognized", and yet her project also memorializes them, giving them more art-world visibility.[3] Silton herself made a screenshot of each at the appointed time and these images are illustrated in Silton's book, *Who's in a Name?* (Silton 2013), which also includes short biographies of each of the suicided artists, of each of the

58 artists and writers who submitted the names, and (in a telescoping abyss of authorial biographical information) of the writers who contributed the biographies.

If Baldessari could still be introduced by the Sydney Festival seemingly without irony in a video clip made to promote his piece as "one of the most important living artists today. . . [and] a mega-star", Silton's role in her project was low-key. Rather than build up her authority as "a mega-star", she chooses a gentle and thoughtful intervention, but one with sharp political overtones. The heroic white male mega-star artist, whose name supersedes all the names of people choosing to enlist themselves into Baldessari's project (an irony of which he was certainly aware, given his history as a conceptual artist in the late 1960s), is replaced by a network of names dogged by tragic endings, circulating loosely around Silton's author name. Silton herself is an orchestrator rather than a self-asserting genius, a memorializer who is willing to efface herself to make visible the names of those little-known artists who died before their time. Her interruption of Baldessari's fairly straightforward commentary on our desire to be famous, including (in his humorous, self-effacing way) his own, exposes multiple aspects of the powerful hold that the figure of the artist—still (as the presentation of Baldessari makes clear) presumptively white and male—continues to have on the popular but also art-world imaginary. The (white male) artist is still the origin of the work, the phantasmagorically projected figure who gives it value.

This fantasized artist-as-origin began as the quintessential figure manifesting Enlightenment European concepts of individual autonomy and sovereign subjectivity—and thus of identity and meaning as these come to define and situate human expression as well as securing educated, middle class, European white male hegemony in the Euro-American context. And yet, we think of this figure as old-fashioned, as having been relentlessly critiqued by artists, often from a feminist, queer, anti-racist, or decolonial perspective, since the mid-twentieth century. This art world critique parallels larger shifts in Western thought: during a period of social crisis across Europe and North America, feminist and anti-colonial theorists such as Simone de Beauvoir and Frantz Fanon and then subsequent poststructuralist theorists including Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Homi Bhabha, Gayatri Spivak, and Trinh T. Minh-Ha put pressure on this model of the sovereign subject aligned with the artistic author as its perfect manifestation. At the same time, political activists and artists began mobilizing their agency in radically different ways as part of a broad societal challenging of Western hegemony, patriarchal and white dominant models of subjectivity, and structures of power more generally.

And yet, as Silton's piece reminds us, the artistic author still motors much of the discourse, and the vast majority of the money and status, attached to the discourses and institutions of the art world, which I call collectively the "art complex"—comprised of art making, art criticism, curating, art display and marketing (galleries, museums, and auction houses), and academic art history (the academy). In this essay, I seek to challenge the hold that this particular modernist figure of the artist still has on conversations and debates about art. Foregrounding Jamaican theorist Sylvia Wynter's revisionist anti-colonial work, this article engages but also challenges the models of authorship explored in the 1960s in essays such as Michel Foucault's "What Is an Author?" (echoed in my title; Foucault [1969] 1977). I bring this interrogation of Euro-centric ideas of artistic authorship, including the tendency to assume one can know the "identity" and "intention" of the maker of a work of art, to the present by examining queer, feminist, and anti-racist practices that challenge what Foucault called the "author function." This examination takes place within the framework of the neoliberal "global" art complex, from the work of Indigenous American artist James Luna to that of activist artists and collaborators including Mexican–American performance artist Guillermo Gómez-Peña and La Pocha Nostra, as well as rafa esparza (Chicanx and queer activist artist) and Cassils (a white Anglo-Canadian trans-identified feminist artist), the latter two of whom collaborated on a vast project critiquing the U.S. government's immigration policy, *In Plain Sight* in 2020. Effectively, I suggest that we can learn from alternative models of artistic authorship that cut through, abandon, or otherwise challenge

the remaining power of the artist as presumptively a white male origin of a work of art with a singular and fixed value.

2. Challenging "Westernisms" and the Mythoi of the Artist as Origin

In my 2012 book *Seeing Differently: A History and Theory of Identity and the Visual Arts,* I explore the ways in which beliefs about and perceptions of identity haunt our relationship to art as we define it today, understood as a fundamentally European concept forged in the early modern period, not coincidentally at the same moment as the first encounters with colonized others (Jones 2012, 2021a). Art became one of the key means through which Europeans claimed their superiority to those they colonized who, in the framework of European aesthetics, could only make fetishes that could never compare in value to the transcendent qualities of European "art".[4] Exposing this deep historical structure, which is usually hidden from view in Western art institutions and discourses (obviously, to keep white men in power), enables me to insist yet again that art and identity but also art and the power differentials of colonialism (with its attendant structures of industrialism and capitalism) are inextricably connected. By understanding this, we can better come to terms with the continued oppressions and exclusions of the art complex. We can also put pressure on the way in which art institutions today—commonly posing themselves as progressive and in favor of equity and inclusion—are exploiting aspects of identity politics to claim their adherence to Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) standards called for by voices from within social movements such as Black Lives Matter (BLM) and #MeToo. By so doing, I suggest that we need to learn from these examples of artistic practice—collaborative, diverse, non-hierarchical—to come up with strategies to counter the often overly simplistic and cynical use of the language of DEI to mask structures of power that are still iniquitous.

The theories of three major thinkers—Frantz Fanon, a Martiniquan writer, psychoanalyst, and revolutionary activist who lived in Paris and Algeria; Okui Enwezor, a Nigerian poet and curator who was based in Germany and New York; Sylvia Wynter, a Jamaican philosopher and novelist whose teaching career was based in the United States—deeply inform this project. It is surely not a coincidence that these three all came from African and African diaspora origins and were educated in European-style institutions, as well as becoming global culture workers and travelers. They had a perspective that both encompassed European modes of knowledge and belief systems and yet were positioned to think against the grain of them, armed with other understandings and perspectives. (While Wynter is still alive, she is 95 and is no longer actively theorizing).

In his hugely influential catalog for Documenta 11, for which he was Artistic Director, Enwezor coined the term "Westernism" to describe the particular case of Euro-US-centrism in the so-called global art world. Westernism is, he argues, "that sphere of global totality that manifests itself through the political, social, economic, cultural, juridical, and spiritual integration achieved via institutions devised and maintained solely to perpetuate the influence of European and North American modes of being", asserting itself as "the only viable idea of social, political, and cultural legitimacy from which modern subjectivities are seen to emerge" (Enwezor 2002, 46). Wynter, with similar acumen, has argued, "the West *did* change the world, *totally",* and thus (she argues) the West's mechanisms and structures of power (including, I am stressing here, artistic authorship, which epitomizes the Western autonomous "individual") must be interrogated to understand how to move forward (Wynter in Wynter and McKittrick 2015, p. 18).

Many scholars have questioned the institutional structures of art museums and galleries, as well as the parallel neoliberal foundations of the twenty-first-century university (see Shaked 2022; Slaughter and Rhoades 2000). Here, focusing on the art complex, I build on Enwezor's and Wynter's insights and on the Westernism of the idea of the "artist" as author or origin of meaning as one of the ways in which ideas based on "European and North American modes of being", in Enwezor's words, continue to dominate our frameworks, including systems of value we apply to the things or practices we determine to be art. The art world is still in the thrall of an idea of originary authorship that is tied

to European modernity with its concept of the singular, agential *individual*. The artist, I would argue, is the quintessential and extreme example of this individual—and until very recently, only white men could occupy its subject position.

Western culture has long relied on the artist as a kind of ideal individual—this is clear as far back as Giorgio Vasari's 1550 *Lives of the Artist*, wherein he describes each artist as exemplary of a nascently or fully modern form of the individual, but one defined in relation to his access to divine inspiration (Michelangelo, who was Vasari's own mentor and is described as "the most divine", is considered a pinnacle, positioning Vasari as perhaps his natural heir?) (Vasari [1550] 1998, p. 108).[5] And it is well known that in the nineteenth century, European thinkers such as Swiss historian Jacob Burckhardt solidified an idea of the individual and individualism as having been quintessential to the formation of modern Europe (which stood in for modern civilization *tout court*). As Burckhardt famously argues in his 1860 study of the Italian Renaissance,

> In the Middle Ages . . . Man was conscious of himself only as a member of a race, people, party, family, or corporation—only through some general category. In Italy this veil first melted into air; an *objective* treatment and consideration of the State and of all the things of this world became possible. The subjective side at the same time asserted itself with corresponding emphasis; man became a spiritual *individual,* recognized himself as such. . . [A]t the close of the thirteenth century Italy began to swarm with individuality (Burckhardt [1860] 1878, p. 87).[6]

This premium placed on individuality (whether or not it is an accurate description of early modern Europe) of course underlies and is powered by the values of Euro-American capitalism, especially that developing in the United States, with its Protestant ethic of individual hard work and accompanying mirage of individual potential supposedly untainted by race, gender/sex, or other aspects of the person's perceived and experienced identity. The belief that the individual genius is disconnected from any systems of privilege and "deserves" his success is central to this nexus of ideas both within and far beyond the art complex and to the continuing sustenance of the myth of white male superiority (the Elon Musks and Donald Trumps of the world rest their privilege on the idea that it is due entirely to their innate genius, rather than acknowledging the ways in which their class, race, and gender/sex privilege—sometimes even literal lucrative inheritances, but also the less material ways in which patriarchal and white supremacist ideologies function—secured their successes). Similarly, capitalism and its model of competition reciprocally motors ideas of originality and genius in art discourse—the privileged individual (white male) maker is marveled upon as transcending his circumstances to produce great art. He competes with other white men to prove himself the ultimate winner, the most "divine", as Vasari put it so long ago, or the most "famous" as Warhol quipped.

All of these beliefs are connected to actual material structures in the art complex as well as to the more abstract ideas of Western aesthetics; all of these, as I am briefly sketching here, have a history that is simultaneously material and discursive. Art, in the aesthetics of Immanuel Kant from the late eighteenth century, transcends use value; the judgment of art—in discourses that would include art criticism and curating—thus takes place "independent of all interest", because an "interested" judgment would entail or imply the usefulness of the thing being judged (Kant [1790] 1911, p. 65). European aesthetics, in turn, as French philosopher Jacques Derrida pointed out, developed out of Kant's ideas as a theocratic discourse of "divine teleology", an "economimesis", wherein the artwork can only be produced as a static object with inherent value by an originary "genius" who effectively acts as divinely inspired and eventually, by the twentieth century, as a substitute for the Christian god in producing art as a special realm of objects (Derrida 1981, pp. 9, 11). As Derrida asserted, art in this system was invented in the eighteenth century by Europeans to "raise [European] man up,. . . to avoid contamination from 'below,' and to mark an incontrovertible limit of anthropological domesticity" (Derrida 1981, p. 5). Hence art—often by this point designated "fine art"—must exclude the debased, instrumentalized, fetishistic stuff that, from a European ethnographic point of view, the colonized are doomed to make.

The art system structurally refuses agency to those who make useful or spiritual objects or those deemed mutable in value and, of course, to those whose cultures might be oriented around creatively *performing* rituals rather than making objects that can be valued and commodified through the "disinterested" contemplation of aesthetic judgment.

These values are solidified in the material and ideologically powerful construction of the art versus the natural history museums of the global north, which came into being in the late eighteenth century and following—not coincidentally, during the period of most intense consolidation of capitalism, colonialism, and slavery (see Jones 2021a). In this way, the art complex can be seen as a formation designed to justify the subjugation of colonized and enslaved peoples—its institutions and discourses are simply different parts of a machine orchestrated to sideline or eliminate other forms of creative expression, and their makers as subhuman. Art history traditionally reinforced this division between "art" and "artifact" or "art" and "ritual" by constructing elaborate systems of value that deracinated both the objects in question and the discourses themselves. Resting on the façade of disinterestedness, the art historian was trained to perpetuate the hoax of objectivity—which was essential to the maintenance of the institutions but also of the disciplinary logic through which these divisions were set forth. Not coincidentally, this neatly devised system also served to shore up the authority of the art historian himself. The values and energies of the art complex thus epitomize the circular reasoning and tautological value systems of Western culture as a whole, which seemed impenetrable until very recently. (As a scholar originally trained in art history in elite institutions in the 1980s, I can testify to the felt impenetrability; any deviation from the set standards, any questioning of the way the systems worked, was violently rejected, repressed, and pushed to the margins of art discourse, and the person proffering these alternatives was immediately excluded from jobs and opportunities).

By unquestioningly building on this idea of Europe as the locus for individuality to flower, and reciprocally valuing European art as exemplary of individual expression or genius, thinkers such as Burckhardt confirmed the circular logic of European imperialism and colonialism. This is a quintessential example of what Wynter, channeling Fanon, describes as "mythoi" or an origin narrative that points to the necessity of applying "sociogeny"—an attention to the realm of the social, its words, concepts, and ideas—toward an understanding of human existence as viewed through the inescapable lenses of European dominant languages and frameworks (see Wynter in Wynter and McKittrick 2015). For Fanon, trained in Freudian psychoanalysis, the concept of sociogeny allows him to critique the way in which Freud and other major Western thinkers collapse the social into the biological and individual in the social construction of race (thereby implying that racism is the problem or even the fault of individuals of color). While psychoanalysis might be essential for addressing deeper levels of psychic reaction responsible for racism and white supremacy, it must be modified by an attention to the social aspect:

> Reacting against the constitutionalist tendency of the late nineteenth century, Freud insisted that the individual factor be taken into account through psychoanalysis. He substituted for a phylogenetic theory the ontogenetic perspective. It will be seen [here, in contrast,] that the black man's alienation is not an individual question. Beside phylogeny and ontogeny stands sociogeny. In one sense. . . let us say that this is a question of a sociodiagnostic (Fanon [1952] 1967, p. 11).

As Wynter expands on Fanon's idea, attention to sociogeny via a "sociodiagnostic" approach forces us to recognize the "hybridity of humanness—that we are *simultaneously* storytelling *and* biological beings. . . To understand all human societal orders, you must therefore look for the sociogenic principle"; she continues to note that, once you redefine humans in this way, you begin to recognize "the central role that our discursive *formations*, aesthetic fields, and systems of knowledge must play in the performative enactment of all such genres of being hybridly human" (Wynter in Wynter and McKittrick 2015, pp. 29, 31).

What Wynter's Fanonian argument allows, most usefully, is a fully revised understanding of the role of culture in substantiating broad value systems that align with capitalism,

imperialism, and colonialism. In this way, we can easily see that, far from being a frivolous superstructure to the "real" economic systems of colonialism, slavery, and capitalism, culture (including art) in its deepest ideological, discursive, and institutional underpinnings developed as a key part of the apparatus of these oppressive and violent early modern to modern systems of belief. The art complex, as such, was a highly effective system of subordinating the creative productions and performances of the colonized and enslaved to the margins as artifacts, paralleling the relegation of the subjects who make or perform objects to the margins, in the hold of slave ships, or to the hinterlands, stripped of land, language, and resources.

Working to forward a sociodiagnostic theoretical critique attendant to sociogeny, I am arguing that the art complex exemplifies how the origin narrative of the superiority of the European subject-cum-author/artist is instantiated in (but also as a centralizing force for) the matrix of modernity, which is in turn also a European construction later extended by former colonies that follow European models of finance and government such as the United States. This construction of the mythoi of the author/artist, as understood through the hierarchized status of his "product", the work of art, has been key to maintaining the hegemony of people who can align with this European ideal subject (white, middle class (especially educationally), mostly heteronormative, formerly male but, since the "feminizing" of art complex from the 1970s onward, currently often female). I have already pointed out that all the great "global" systems of European advancement (and oppression), including colonialism, slavery, capitalism, and industrialism, are coextensive with the development of aesthetics, including definitions of "art" and ideas about the "artist"; they are all mutually defining of one another. In looking at the question of how art and the artist are equally implicated, it is thus imperative to attend to these larger structures.

Theorists of European aesthetics, largely white men, have made this point in different ways but equally stress the complex matrix of discursive and institutional forces through which Europeans oppressed other peoples, extracted resources, and destroyed other cultures. Luc Ferry, for example, discusses how the "specter of the subject" haunts aesthetics, which is "the field par excellence in which the problems brought about by the subjectivization of the world characteristic of modern times can be observed in the chemically pure state" (Ferry [1990] 1993, p. 3). Aesthetics as a mode of thought-cum-domination was produced by and productive of a perspectival subject who was ideally situated to *colonize* even as he claimed to be spreading the Enlightenment values of freedom and equality: the European "valorization of perspective corresponds to a vision of the world dominated by the modern notion of equality, but a metaphysics of subjectivity where man occupies a point of view upon the world from which the latter appears as a material that is manipulable and controllable at will" (Ferry [1990] 1993, p. 206).

This scenario, of course, corresponds to what Martin Heidegger called the "world picture", a projected holistic view of a world in modernity as defined by supposedly "universal" values (which are nonetheless entirely Euro-centric, as even Kant understood).[7] In this world picture, knowledge is "placed at the disposal of representation", a "picture" that, if viewed from the right perspective by "man" as "the referential center of beings as such", reveals the "truth" (Heidegger [1938] 2002, pp. 65, 67). This arrangement, in turn, produces the human as a subject: "That the world becomes picture [in the modern age] is one and the same process whereby, in the midst of beings, man becomes subject. . . The fundamental event of modernity is the conquest of the world as picture" (Heidegger [1938] 2002, pp. 69, 71). Later philosophers such as Jacques Rancière have built on Heidegger's observation by taking a bird's eye view of the situation (rather than a perspectival one), noting that the struggle for the freedom of the individual subject, "begins when we dismiss the opposition between looking and acting and understand that the distribution of the visible itself is part of the configuration of domination and subjection. It starts when we realize that looking is also an action that confirms or modifies that distribution and that 'interpreting the world' is already a means of transforming it, or reconfiguring it" (Rancière 2007, p. 277).

Rancière echoes the critiques of subjectivism and individualism as models of human experience by other French post-war theorists and poststructuralist philosophers such as Barthes, Foucault, and Derrida. Barthes and Foucault famously hashed out the paradigm of the artistic author in their dual (and dueling) essays of the late 1960s, "What is an Author?" (Barthes [1967] 1978) and "The Author-Function" (Foucault [1969] 1977). Barthes suggested that the idea of the artist as genius is a construction (we seek the "*explanation* of a work in the man or woman who produced it") and represents "the epitome and culmination of capitalist ideology"; he suggests that avant-garde modernist authors such as Stéphane Mallarmé push us to recognize that the author as the origin of the work is a fabrication on the part of the receiver of the work (Barthes [1967] 1978, p. 143). For Barthes, the modern writer "is born simultaneously with the text", allowing the *reader* as an abstract "destination" as the agent who "holds together in a single field all the traces by which the written text is constituted"; he famously argues that in this dynamic, the "birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author" (Barthes [1967] 1978, pp. 145, 148).

Foucault took issue with Barthes' poetic formulation of the concept of the originary author disappearing, focusing instead on the work itself as giving rise to what he calls the "author-function", a means by which readers "construct the rational entity we call an author". As Foucault asserts, the question should be not "who is the real author?", but "What matter who's speaking?" (Foucault [1969] 1977, pp. 127, 138). (As an aside, I would stress that, from a historical vantage point, the two articles seem quite complementary—and Barthes has often been misread as "killing" off the author just as feminists and BIPOC authors rose onto the scene, while he clearly is attempting to identify an *effect* of a mode of avant-garde writing, rather than *producing* it.)

Crucial to my arguments here, however, and echoing Wynter's ideas, is the fact that Heidegger, Barthes, Foucault, and Rancière completely failed to acknowledge *their own perspective,* and de facto the specificity and limitations of their worldview (or "world picture").[8] They all articulate a model of the artistic author or subject/agent that is structurally Eurocentric, linked inextricably to ideas developing out of Cartesianism and monotheism (Christianity in this case and especially Protestantism, with its emphasis on the individual versus the collective as the site of agency) and to massive world shifts in power playing out globally through Europe's role in the burgeoning of colonialism and capitalism, including its late twentieth-century neoliberal and late-capitalist variants. They define a world picture of which they are—as European white men—still, arguably, more or less the center.[9] Through these perspectivally secured aesthetic models of subjectivity, this center is still linked to a limited concept of individualism open only to a chosen group and paradigmatically occupied by the white male artistic genius or his corollary, the white male philosopher/critic/art historian who, until very recently, still retained a tight grip on economic, social, and cultural power and arguably still control most of the wealth in the Western world.

Here is where the post- and decolonial ideas of Fanon and Wynter are invaluable. Interestingly, as Wynter elaborates, the West's definition of humanness, by the nineteenth century (with the explosion of European capitalism and industrialism, built on the blood of the enslaved and colonized), consigned humans to the category of "*homo oeconomicus*"—an individual agent within the structures of capital (Wynter in Wynter and McKittrick 2015, p. 20). In making this point, Wynter suggests an alternative to individualism by drawing again on Fanon, who rearticulated humanness not in terms of the concept of sovereign individuality but as praxis or process. As Wynter stresses in pointing this out, there is one "major implication here: *humanness* is no longer a *noun*. *Being human is a praxis*" (Wynter in Wynter and McKittrick 2015, p. 23).[10] As *praxis*, living as a human could be understood as a kind of ongoing performance, a striving, a relational and ongoing engagement with self and world that honors otherness rather than marginalizing, oppressing, or attempting to destroy it. For Wynter, this clearly extends to how we identify ourselves and others:

> Why not, then, the performative enactment of *all our roles*, of all our *role allocations* as, in our contemporary Western/Westernized case, in terms of, inter alia, gender,

> race, class/underclass, and, across them all, sexual orientation? All as praxes, therefore, rather than *nouns*. . . The idea that with being human *everything is praxis.* For we are not purely biological beings! (Wynter in Wynter and McKittrick 2015, pp. 33–34)[11]

I will return to the problem of the performative self whose identifications and, indeed, social being are praxis as I examine specific artistic practices later in this essay. For now, I want to look more closely at how and why attending to structures through which we identify (artworks, performances, artists, cultures, nations) is necessary in order to make any argument about how art and the artist function in and beyond Euro-American societies.

3. Individualism to Competitive Neoliberalism: The Artist in the Twenty-First Century

Given the massive shifts in communications, travel, and the accelerated flows of capital characterizing life in the late-twentieth and early twenty-first centuries in the Euro-American contexts and beyond, here, it is important to ask: is the art world still reliant on artistic authorship on the Eurocentric model of the individual? Or—given these shifts as well as the very recent incursion of rapidly developing AI (artificial intelligence) interfaces such as DALL-E and ChatGPT and new formulations building on the concept of "originality" in digital structures such as NFTs—is a consideration of artistic authorship now irrelevant?

To the contrary of the implication that we are beyond such concerns, I insist that these new developments make an understanding of the figure of the artist in its historical complexities and current manifestations across discourse and practice even more pressing. The art complex is still based on the Eurocentric model as outlined above. NFTs, for example, are tied to author names; the very value of the "unique" blockchain-based artwork is reliant on its connection to the author name—without it, the NFT is simply a nugget of digital code and has no value whatsoever. In this way, the NFT phenomenon exacerbates rather than mitigates the formation whereby a presumed individual is at the origin of the work of art, the value of which rests on this presumption. And AI, particularly the new variants that scoop up millions of data points from across the internet to make new images, such as DALL-E, makes us all the more aware of what it means to say something is "original". What this will signify in the long term is unclear, but for the moment, these technologies are reinforcing our desire to be able to claim human-generated originality. At best, they might help us examine more honestly what it is we *want* out of the structures of originality and value that still subtend the art complex.

Another major development that has resurged recently is the emphasis on efforts to update institutions to reflect the complexity and diversity of surrounding communities—implicitly or explicitly insisting on an expansion of the categories and positions of artistic and curatorial authority. This emphasis has waxed and waned since the heyday of the rights movements in the 1960s and 1970s and, in 2020, exploded back into view during the COVID lockdowns when massive Black Lives Matter protests hit the streets after a series of murders of Black people by police. Here, we need to ask, however, how "diversity" is being maintained and under what premises, particularly given the structural racism inherent to the art complex I sketched above. We have moved from claims that all adjudications around what art gets exhibited and written about should be "disinterested" in the mid-twentieth century (with modernist formalist critics such as Clement Greenberg positioning themselves in a framework of aesthetic judgment simplified from Kant's arguments) to an assertion that all such adjudications are highly charged and relate to perceptions of the artists' race, class, and other identifications. Black, Latinx, and other ethnic studies as well as feminist and queer theory scholars, curators, and artists have been key in making this latter point in relation to the art complex.

In these cases, it is quite straightforward to point out that the pressure on institutions to diversify specifically demands that we consider identification in relation to whose work is being exhibited, who is being hired, and who is being admitted. Rather than

eliminating the idea of individual authorship, these claims understandably often exacerbate the need for it (after all, eliminating the possibility of authorship just as BIPOC, women, and queers begin to have full access to it does seem counterproductive in some ways). At their worst, these efforts can be instrumentalizing—reducing identity to a logic of tick boxes—literally, labels that one can tick off to claim the values associated with DEI practices have been achieved. This logic then often takes the place of a recognition of the structurally racist foundations of these institutions as well as of complicated and difficult conversations around who is excluded from many of these spaces. But at their messy best, DEI strategies result in institutions, exhibitions, and discourses that are more varied and diverse in all ways (not just the obvious tick-box ways common to a lot of American identity politics discourse)—this is clearly the case in the United States, the epicenter of such diversity efforts.

All this said, we are now, only a couple of years after this surge in calls for DEI work, witnessing a massive backlash, spearheaded by right-wing politicians and supposed parent activists (most of whom are revealed to be Republican party operatives) making claims that DEI work, especially in the educational context, hurts white people's feelings, making their (white) children feel guilty, or taints the supposed purity of children's minds by introducing "sexual themes" (i.e., including works by queer or feminist authors) before they are ready. In the latter case, as of June 2023, the right wing is cheerfully conflating gender/sex identification (LGBTQ-led initiatives to make children comfortable with, for example, the idea of same-sex parents and the joyfulness of drag culture) with sex and eroticism to make this point. The Republican governor of Florida, Ron DeSantis, is at the forefront of these efforts to repeal DEI efforts and demonizing all who fulfill his concept of marginalized subjects, making public statements against what he collectively terms "woke-ism" (James 2023).

The backlash is occurring even as the efforts to change institutions have barely begun, pointing to the depth of the entrenchment of these Westernisms as well as of anxieties among straight and economically advantaged white men in relation to their perceived loss of power and privilege. The mechanisms of exclusion have largely not changed since we hardly have had time to move deeper beyond the superficial DEI approaches. Even as, arguably, the values and systems put in place by Europe in the early modern period have been crumbling around us, the toxic aspects of individualism (the atomization and fragmentation of society through stressing individual rather than structural issues in particular) are arguably even more rigidly foundational to power dynamics in Euro-American societies today, with our increasingly divisive rhetoric of self/other and us/them, and the resurgence of openly racist, homophobic, transphobic, and misogynistic rhetoric and policies (cynically, DeSantis is now attacking trans rights—knowing full well that he can kill many birds with one stone by targeting a group, the members of which are often multiply disenfranchised from mainstream society and power). To this end, I would insist that it is urgently important to put pressure on the structures outlined above of modern individualism and identity in understanding the workings of the art complex—how it functions to give certain objects and, by extension, artists value while excluding or devaluing others from the systems. The institutions of the art complex—like those of the primary, secondary, and higher education institutions the far right is also and primarily attacking—are still structurally racist, homophobic, misogynistic, classist, and exclusionary, based on Eurocentric early modern structures, by which self and other were differentiated to justify the processes of colonialism and slavery.[12]

Within these debates, the art world simmers along—having become an overtly capitalized site where some global billionaires buy art as an investment through intermediaries, stowing it away in warehouses and never even seeing the works they buy. Artists in this picture are not always empowered, any more than, during their lifetimes, the white male geniuses of nineteenth-century French modernism were billionaires or cultural "megastars" as was claimed for Baldessari. In this way, the artist still functions as the epitome of privileged forms of agency but also as a smokescreen for the truly powerful. Just as

in the early modern period artists relied on patrons (aristocrats, royalty, and the pope) to support their workshops and practices today artists who sell work on the marketplace depend on gallerists and wealthy collectors (who may never see the work they purchase). These cultural brokers generally have more power and potentially more agency than the creators, at least within the matrix of the commercial art world.

The labyrinthine plot of the 2022 movie *Glass Onion* narrated a version of this paradoxical abyss of cultural power pivoting around the question of authorship and how it assigns power to the straight white male. The wealth of a sleazy white male tech billionaire, Miles Bron (Edward Norton), was obtained through nefarious means by killing his black female collaborator (Andi Brand, played by the inimitable Janelle Monae) and stealing her ideas by claiming authorship of the secret formula for an alternative fuel called Klear and is ostentatiously signaled by his ownership of a lavish mansion on a Greek island and his possession of Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa* (ostensibly borrowed from the Louvre). Bron is thwarted in his evil plans by a crew of misfits led by a gay white male detective (played by former Bond actor, Daniel Craig) and a kick-ass set of Black feminist twins (Andi and Helen Brand, both played by Monae). Ending in an apocalypse of fire and explosions, the movie makes the hyperbolic and satirical point that the only way to bring down the evil straight white male anti-hero is to blow up the whole lot (including the *Mona Lisa*), and yet one imagines that it is likely that the evil white man will simply be replaced by another, who would be the only kind of person to have the resources to purchase the damaged tropical mansion or to restore the *Mona Lisa*. All of this confirms that, as Wynter puts it, "art experts are, like [scholars]. . ., normally bourgeois and therefore biocentric (and neo-Darwinly chartered) subjects"(Wynter in Wynter and McKittrick 2015, p. 67). The movie's use of the *Mona Lisa* as a signifier of untrammeled wealth and authority, accrued specifically through the improper theft of authorship (from a Black woman, no less, in case the point is unclear), confirms how these circuits work.

Given the persistence of these deep structures of belief—these mythoi, as Fanon and Wynter would put it—how can we better understand how they function so as to imagine how they might be exposed, potentially even modified? Picking up on Wynter's dislocation of the fixed individual as the origin of meaning by redefining what it means to live in the world through the Fanonian idea of humanness as praxis, it becomes clear that we need different modes of making, displaying, and interpreting so as to intervene in and remake the deep structures of the art complex that have been forged from the blood of the oppressed since the beginnings of European colonization. I turn now to several examples of art and performance practice that eschew conventional art world structures of making and dissemination—individualism, artistic genius, the values of the marketplace—by embracing instead community, collaboration, and openness to audience, all of which articulate humanness as praxis and thus structurally challenge traditional ideas of artistic identity and authorship.

4. Self as Praxis vs. Self as Origin

Wynter asks a crucial question: "How can we come to know/think/feel/behave and subjectively experience ourselves—doing so for the first time in our human history *consciously* now—in *quite different terms*? How do we *be*, in Fanonian terms, hybridly human?" (Wynter in Wynter and McKittrick 2015, p. 45). While I have for many years written about the specificity of body and performance art as means to counter certain structures of visual arts discourses, here, by relying on Wynter's channeling of Fanon to proffer a completely different model of subjectivity (or, in her words, hybrid humanness), I present a completely different, yet complementary, way of thinking about the situation (see Jones 1998, 2006, 2021b). I based my earlier scholarship largely on the arguments of (white male) Euro-American theorists of subjectivity such as Barthes, Foucault, and Derrida, as well as phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty, arguing that practices of body and performance art arising in the 1960s and following were dislocating the "centered subject" of modernism—the presumptively white male artistic genius. Wynter and Fanon, however,

move us away from staying within the Eurocentric model of "subjectivity", which relies on Hegelian ideas of self versus other (master versus slave) and ultimately, arguably, does not fully unseat the "individual" as its basis.

Performance itself structurally challenges the conventional structures for determining value in the art complex—by turning the art experience into a *process* rather than defining art as a final object. As well, by making the artist into the work, artists such as Yayoi Kusama, Yoko Ono, and James Luna position themselves—non-white and/or non-male artists—as having the agency to make art and also open the work to the viewer, whose role in determining the meaning of the work is embraced rather than disavowed. Beyond these simple but powerful structural challenges to the art complex and the artist, which open it to artists from groups conventionally excluded and redefine art beyond the commodifying and fixing structures of the modern art market, the formation of artistic performance collectives starting around 1970 radically shifted modernist ideas about the artistic author. Instead of a singular white man whose authority would be directly connected to the value of his work on the marketplace, performance collectives developing out of the feminist, Chicanx, queer, and other rights movements contexts—from Asco and The Waitresses in Los Angeles to Gran Fury and the Guerrilla Girls in New York—redefined the maker as plural, collective, and hard to pin down. Developing hybrid creative practices relating to political activism, theater, pedagogy, and art, these groups further challenged the dovetailing of the construction of the artist as a singular genius with the commodity values of the marketplace in the mainstream art complex.

Tellingly, one never finds collectives comprised of a group of white men, each of whom wishes to be known as the origin of the work. By definition, performance, in general, and collective practices, the latter of which tend in fact to involve performance, are easily available to creators who do not have access to expensive studios and materials, wish to assert their presence in the art complex by alternative means, and (in the case of collectives) believe in connecting creative people through art, reciprocally also opening the work to co-generation by prospective audience members. While it can always be the case that performance can be turned back toward individualistic ends and/or commodified—witness Marina Abramović sitting in the atrium of the Museum of Modern Art for her 2010 retrospective—it offers the possibility of doing otherwise (see Jones 2011). Similarly, while the Nazis and (currently) the fascist Proud Boys have produced culture collectively, and thus collectivity is not inherently progressive, collective art projects can open new potential structures of authorship and meaning that can break down the individualism of Eurocentric models of creativity. In this sense, performance and collective practice are structurally aligned with humanness as praxis and humanness as hybrid (shared among people, co-articulated in the space of live performance as part of the social sphere).

Two examples of earlier developments will suffice before moving into my two more recent examples. In 1987, James Luna, an artist identifying as Payómkawichum and Ipai Indigenous as well as Mexican American, produced *Artifact Piece*, a performance wherein he laid himself in an open vitrine at the so-called Museum of Man in Balboa Park in San Diego, with labels connecting visible aspects of his embodiment to clichés about Indians. For example, one didactic label states: "The burns on the fore and upper arm were substained [sic] during days of excessive drinking. Having passed out on a campground table, trying to walk, he fell into a campfire" (Briz 2023). In this way, as scholars Jane Blocker and Ana Briz have compellingly argued, Luna insists on what are apparently "individual" traits as *socially* determined by setting his own body as a signifier of the larger disenfranchisement of Native Americans as a social issue. Briz asserts, "what are today seemingly recognized as personal issues such as diabetes and alcoholism can be directly linked to the destruction of Indigenous farming systems, diets, and ways of life"; she cites Blocker's earlier argument that, "Luna engages diabetes similarly to the way he [engages] alcoholism. . .he treats it both as an artifact of the dysfunction of Indian culture and as a metaphor for the dangers of white historiography" (Briz 2023, p. 8; Blocker 2001, p. 23). In the terms I sketched above, Luna is exposing the mythoi through which white dominant racist ideologies rely on

individualistic models of agency to fault Native Americans for their difficulties by exposing these as the result of social and political causal forces. This is sociogeny at work.

At the same time, Luna mobilizes the capacity of live performance to insert his living, actual body into a museum that commonly would have been the site where Native American culture went to die—i.e., the natural history museum is commonly the repository for the debased "non-art" objects made by people like Luna, whose bodies and cultures are forever consigned to a dead or dying past in its tableaux and displays. Luna insists on his living presence in a site where there has never been space for thinking, making humanness of the Indigenous person—fundamentally, as Briz points out, challenging the myth of the "Vanishing Indian" (Briz 2023, p. 1).[13]

Luna, who indeed died too young in 2018 at the age of 68 from the long-time damaging effects of the very traumas he narrated in *Artifact Piece,* was supported by a broad network of friends and admirers, including the performance artist, Guillermo Gómez-Peña, who was born in Mexico City just five years after Luna and has been based in California since the 1970s.[14] Gómez-Peña (whose website describes him as "[p]erformance artist, writer, radical pedagogue, Public Citizen & activist against all borders/ Intellectual Coyote (Nanabush). . . fighting colonialism since 1492" and elsewhere, calls himself an "intercultural poltergeist") works across languages and cultural registers to produced solo performances but has also been instrumental in developing and performing with the international collective performance troupe, La Pocha Nostra.[15] Gómez-Peña has always been an infiltrator of the art complex and a purveyor of exaggeratedly hybrid forms of humanness that cast a bright revealing light back onto the white art world, exposing its sexism, homophobia, classism, and racism. Much of the time, this has taken the form of performances of overtly non-normative bodies: in the late 1970s and 1980s, he performed as a "Mexican homeless" man lying on the sidewalk (a 12 hour durational performance); as a terrorist infiltrating various Los Angeles bars and restaurants with his newly formed first performance troupe, Poyesis Genetica (in *MEXIPHOBIA*), which cleared the bars immediately; as a migrant and as a wanderer walking from Tijuana to Los Angeles; and as a "pretentious existentialist dandy" in Mexico City.[16]

Multiplying versions of "mexicanness" as he infiltrates U.S. and Mexican culture, Gómez-Peña, from the beginning, also multiplied sex/gender signifiers, putting the multiple and intersectional identifications of his co-performers and the audience in question. When I first saw him perform live, around 2000 at the Frida Kahlo Center in Los Angeles, for example, he was with his La Pocha Nostra troupe, formed in 1993, enacting a wide range of carnivalesque stereotypical "foreign" identities, each presented in their own isolated set-up—as a perverted living version of natural history museum tableaux. In Gómez-Peña's case, he was dressed in a cacophony of items seemingly purchased at Tijuana souvenir shops or Los Angeles used clothing venues: feminine high heels (or moccasins in other versions), a skirt, with mustache and his luxuriant hair down, and a dog collar around his neck. At one point, as I was lingering in front of his tableau, he handed me a leash, which was attached to the collar, and proceeded to lean away from me. Suddenly his stability and well-being depended entirely on my upper arm strength. I have never experienced a more direct highlighting of the reliance of the artwork on the interpreter or viewer for its meaning and value. The performance clearly activated the hybridity and ongoingness of humanness as we exist relationally in the world. Given this relational interdependence, no singular meaning of a person or artwork or performance can be determined, other than the very broad idea I am proposing here that the work activates the maker/viewer circuits of power to point to the artist as part of the living and ongoing sociogenic system in which all humans situate ourselves.

Casting a continual and hilarious critical light on the conventional Western idea of the artist, Gómez-Peña nonetheless has built a career and a creative life around himself and his collaborators. The "identity" of each performer in the works of La Pocha Nostra is not only rendered ambiguous but also continually defined, redefined, and jokingly parlayed in relation to those who apprehend each performer. In his performances, Gómez-Peña contin-

ually shifts from English to Spanish, with Spanglish in between, from American to Mexican to transnational clothing and gestures, from human to machine: in one performance at the Tate Museum in London in 2003, I witnessed him very effectively mimic a radio interview; shifting from language to language he also impersonated the sounds of radio static and of being muted by the DJ whenever presumably controversial statements were being made. In other works from the late 1990s, he parodies the practice of Greek Australian artist Stelarc, who famously proclaimed the obsolescence of the body, by adopting a fake, clearly plastic prosthesis that echoes Stelarc's experiments with robotic body extensions.

Gómez-Peña's work echoes Luna's in that he deliberately positions himself as embodied artwork while also clearly establishing himself in art contexts as the de facto authorial framework (either singly or, in the collaborative works, with a collective such as La Pocha Nostra). His work provides the perfect means to undermine the pretensions of claims being made across art institutions for "global" coverage. In its current usage in biennials and commercial galleries with a supposedly international focus, "global" art is claimed as a happy embrace of art across borders, from around the world, failing to account for the fact, as I have outlined here, that the concept of art as we know it was constructed out of violence and is Eurocentric; it is a discursive, culturally fabricated idea that came into being out of colonialism, slavery, and Western imperialism in general. Heightening and exaggerating "difference", Gómez-Peña and La Pocha Nostra insist that we develop an awareness of these disjunctive systems.

This strategy is foregrounded in Gómez-Peña's famous 1992 performance series, made in collaboration with Cuban American artist Coco Fusco, *Two Undiscovered Amerindians Visit*. . ., which consisted of the two artists performing as formerly "undiscovered" savages to audiences from Madrid to New York. The display of the two artists in a literal cage is, as with Luna's piece, labeled with didactic texts explaining their origin point in the made-up Pacific-Island "Guatanaui". Their absurd outfits—exaggerated parodies of "exotic" garments seemingly from a mix of the Pacific Islands, Central, and South America, and mixing feminine and masculine codes—are, as noted, above, signature elements of Gómez-Peña's performance practice as a praxis of humanness. The work extended his strategy of activating spectators to make us aware of our complicity in the determination of the meaning, value, and status and, per Wynter's later idea, by exaggeratedly devaluing the bodies we engage in an "art" context, implicitly asking us to rethink the hierarchy structurally embedded into Western aesthetics, reminding us of the very *humanness* of the artists.[17]

If Gómez-Peña continues to remind us of the hybridity of all humans in our intersectional identifications, the artist Cassils also makes use of performance to further exaggerate the attributes of the gendered/sexed and racialized figure of the artist. Cassils's career began with their participation in the three-feminist collective called Toxic Titties in the early 2000s and has been involved recently in two major projects that move us even further away from the reification of individual authorship, either through direct interrogation and critique or via expansive collaborative projects that in effect shift attention away from the artist as a singular (white male) maker. The Toxic Titties (Cassils, then known as Heather Cassils, Clover Leary, and Julia Steinmetz, all three MFA students at California School of the Arts at the time) reveled in parodying social conventions such as heterosexual marriage. In the work *Toxic* Union (2002), produced as they were graduating from CalArts, they found legal loopholes in order to substantiate their three-way and same-sex relationship as if it were a legal marriage (gay marriage would not be legal in the United States until 2015, and polygamy is decidedly illegal to this day) (see Steinmetz c. 2020). The Toxic Titties also deliberately infiltrated the sexist and racist as well as class exploitative work of Vanessa Beecroft—two of them auditioned for and received roles in the Italian artist's 2001 *VB46* project at Gagosian Gallery in Beverly Hills, then the trio co-wrote a savage expose of the artist's problematic exploitation of those who performed in her works (see Steinmetz et al. 2006). A number of the photographs documenting the piece—which Gagosian sells as Vanessa Beecroft works—feature Cassils standing front and center.[18]

Two recent projects by Cassils in collaboration with others extend this anarchic, funny, and incisive approach to making art as a way of addressing deep social and political concerns by interrogating the deep structures through which inequity is perpetuated in American society. The privileges of legal selfhood, based of course on Western individualism (and yet, perversely and infamously, extended to corporations in U.S. law historically and confirmed in the 2010 Citizens United decision), parallel those still largely built into conventional ideas about artistic authorship, which are fair game for Cassils in their more recent work. In 2021, they thus worked secretly to construct an authorial persona named, with deliberate lack of subtlety, "White Male Artist", who was engaged in an art project that was specifically billed as an homage to the Italian artist Piero Manzoni's acerbic satire of the valuing of the artist by selling cans of his own excrement in 1961 (called, equally unsubtly, *Merda d'artista*, or "artist's shit"). Without revealing themselves as the WMA, Cassils produced a public relations blitz around the project in June of 2021 (60 years after Manzoni's project), marketing cans of their supposed excrement with the collective title *$HT Coin*, each of which would be based on their shit collected after ingesting the diet of a famous previous white male artist—including Andy Warhol and Jeff Koons. Each can would then be connected to a unique nonfungible token (NFTs had just dropped into the art world with a huge splash); the website for the project claims unabashedly, "The Greatest and Most Ambitious NFT Performance of All Time" (amusing, given that NFTs had just been developed).[19] The cans and linked NFTs would first, starting on July 1, be released on the Shark.art website for sale (in Cassils' words from an interview in which they remained anonymous, this private sale would be for "insider. . . cryptobros and art fanatics"), and then the remaining cans would be sold through the Phillips auction house at the end of July that same year (Cassils, cited in Damiani 2021).[20]

As did Silton, Cassils picks a worthy white male artist as a touchstone. Manzoni was clearly commenting very presciently on the value given to the artist as a producer (even of shit) and was building on the earlier provocations of avant-garde artists—especially those of Marcel Duchamp. It most certainly did not cross Manzoni's mind (nor Duchamp's for that matter) that such a gesture related to his status, his particular identification as a white European and presumably heterosexual man. Cassils's project, on the contrary, explicitly addresses the specific identifications connected to the lauded figure of the white male artist, whose shit is only worth something because of the white man's larger privilege in the world and, especially, on the art market (it is well known that works by white male artists still sell for vastly more money on average than those by women of any ethnicity—and this continues to be the case with NFT art works (Damiani 2021)).[21] Cassils deliberately refused to reveal themselves until the project was over as a way to expose the fluctuations in value that would occur in relation to the perception of the gender of White Male Artist. The artists they chose to target in their dieting/shitting activity were all successful white male artists—Koons, Warhol, Yves Klein, Gerhard Richter, and others.

As reported in an interview with Cassils by Jesse Damiano in the business magazine, *Forbes*, in July of 2021 as the project was unfolding, the artist asserted *$HT Coin* as a "defecography" exposing the commodification of even the "artist's body as a consumable object" in the machinations of the mainstream art world. They note that in the existing art market, artists commonly make no money at all on the secondary market, and point out the extension of this logic to the NFT marketplace, where Crypto bros profit and other artists tend to be just as disadvantaged as in the "real world" art marketplace (Damiani 2021). They explicitly connect these machinations to the climate catastrophe—mass consumption, whether of actual or digital products (which suck up vast amounts of energy), is directly related to our "ravenous. . . greed". They situate the project as addressing the continual churn that constitutes a capitalist-driven society, with its endless cycles of "accumulation and annihilation of wealth". By mimicking the diets of famous white male artists, this WMA could "parasitically mutate. . . Manzoni's critique onto the blockchain", as a way of literalizing consumption/expulsion through their very flesh. The fact that shit is the commodity produces a level of critique that powerfully parallels Manzoni's in the earlier work.

The WMA project directly attacked the alignment of the "white male" with the privileged position of the "artist" to expose it through parody. Cassils' other major project from that same period during the COVID-19 pandemic (when nothing seemed real), was a massive collaborative work with rafa esparza called *In Plain Sight*, which followed the path of the Toxic Titties' collaborative performative interventions into legal as well as art world structures of cultural value. For *In Plain Sight*, Cassils and esparza enlisted 80 additional creators, from Dread Scott, Zackary Drucker, Harry Gamboa Jr., Alok Vaid-Menon, and Susan Silton to activist artists Emory Douglas (an artist who was Minister of Culture for the Black Panther Party from 1967 until they disbanded in the 1980s) and Patrisse Cullors (co-founder of Black Lives Matter) to generate texts to be scripted in the sky over U.S. migrant detention centers, processing centers, court houses relating to immigration cases, and former internment camps by professional sky writers, all over the weekend of 4 July 2020 (see Solomon 2020; and Cassils and Jones 2019–2020). Each text creatively invites anyone in the area who can see it to think deeply about coercive parts of the U.S. legal system oriented toward containing or deporting migrants, including the prison-like incarceration facilities where migrants were being held at the time, which became even more deadly during the height of the pandemic. Each message—from Douglas's cheery "HEALTH IS WEALTH!", to Gamboa's blunt "NO ICE NO ICE NO ICE", to Drucker's poetic "NOSOSTROS TE VEMOS" ("we see you"), to Cullors' compassionate "CARE NOT CAGES"—ends with the hashtag #XMAP, which guides the user of social media to an interactive map showing the facilities close to where she stands.

Today, *In Plain Sight* exists as a website with extensive documentation but also as a lingering network, a community of progressive thinkers/creators happy to work together for the greater good. The website lists each artist with a photograph documenting their particular text and a short text explaining the significance of it. It activates "artist" in a manner that is the antithesis of the structures of sovereign subjectivity interrogated by theorists such as Foucault and Wynter, and, more importantly, pinpointed as racist, sexist, homo/transphobic in the deepest assumptions these structures perpetuate. *In Plain Sight* both exposes violence and produces or confirms a multiplicitous community of creative people who see such violence as unacceptable.

If the art complex can be seen as echoing, in more passive forms, the effects of the exclusions and violence of detention centers—as I would argue would be accurate, up to a point—then *In Plain Sight* narrates a counter-community that is creative and generous, one that critically provokes (similar to, perhaps, the provocations of white male artists of the avant-garde such as Duchamp, Manzoni, and Warhol) but also produces an alternative way to imagine creative work beyond the structures of individualism and conventional artistic authorship. Simply put, in the latter regime, as interrogated by James Luna, the natural history museum and art museum conspire to produce or at least reinforce an idea of the white artist as "self", and his products as "art", while producing non-white bodies as "other", their creative expression or even their actual bodies as "artifact" or "fetish". Similarly, U.S. law, in general, produces the white, male, heterosexual, educated subject as self, and U.S. policing and immigration policy constructs the migrant, the trans person, and the formerly enslaved as "other". As Zakiyyah Iman Jackson argues, these projections of otherness onto Black or brown bodies are based on the complex rendering of the colonized and enslaved as "plastic", malleable, defined always on a border of human and animal to substantiate Europeans' claims of superiority, of full humanity (Jackson 2020). Given this logic, in the history of the West, it went without saying that the colonized and enslaved must have deserved their subjection, a subjection enforced by Europeans tautologically on the basis of these subordinated peoples' supposed debasement. This logic is fully carried through in the treatment of Black people murdered by police and of migrants coming to this country often from situations of extreme violence and oppression, not to mention those assaulted abroad when the U.S. gets involved in colonial wars. At the very least, *In Plain Sight* calls attention to the terrible treatment of migrants in the United States as they await some kind of return to humanization.

What I hope this article has compellingly shown is that, as creative forces such as Gómez-Peña and Cassils/esparza and projects such as *In Plain Sight* elaborate, something new happens if the "plastic", malleable, othered subject performs—expressing agency in moving and living form. In Cassils and esparza's project in particular, the deepest structures of belief that, in Wynter's terms, substantiate a "bourgeois and therefore biocentric" and individualistic subject, are exposed as mythoi, with an opening toward understanding the "material world", rather, as "at least in part, a *product of consciousness"* (Wynter in Wynter and McKittrick 2015, pp. 67, 71). As a product of consciousness, the world can be changed. Wynter reinforces here that we need to reconnect to the deepest structures wherein the "*co-relatedness* of stories and humans comes into view" (Wynter in Wynter and McKittrick 2015, p. 70).[22] *In Plain Sight* both acknowledges those rendered invisible, or malleable, to the U.S. political regime and brings together a vast and diverse network of artists to play a mutual role in this project. This is *co-relatedness* of a kind that refutes the structure of individual authorship and that points to the power of community; it also exposes the limits of patriarchal (and so inherently racist, homophobic, classist, and transphobic) logics that insist on determinable objects, meanings, and originary subjects to secure its power.

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Notes

1 Silton's project is explained and documented on her website: https://www.susansilton.com/whos-in-a-name-1 (accessed on 7 June 2023). See also (Gaskins 2011).

2 Baldessari comments on this aspect of the work in "Sydney Festival TV", no date; available on YouTube at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RaMAeIESOCU (accessed on 2 November 2023). According to recent research, Warhol probably was not the originator of the phrase; see (Nuwer 2014).

3 Silton is quoted in the excellent article by Liz Kotz in the book made of the project, "A Name of a Name", in Susan Silton, *Who's in a Name?* (privately published, Silton 2013), p. 135.

4 See the work of Claire Farago and Donald Preziosi, both of whom, sometimes separately, and sometimes in jointly, authored works, have deeply theorized and historicized these post-contact structures of power and belief as attached to art and art history. For example, (Preziosi and Farago 2004).

5 As art historian Claire Farago has pointed out many times, these formulations were not invented out of thin air in the Early Modern period but are based on beliefs articulated by Aristotle and other Greek and Roman thinkers taken by Europeans to be the "origins" of European culture. See her edited volume, (Farago 1995). I am deeply indebted to Farago, who is a historian of early modern art and culture, for our ongoing conversations on these historical questions.

6 Claire Farago examines the role this Burckhardt text played in consolidating ideologies of European nation-states in the nineteenth century in her essay, (Farago 2019).

7 In Immanuel Kant's formative articulation of aesthetics in the 1790 *Critique of Judgment*, he clearly acknowledges and exposes this European insistence on universality but also notes how necessary it is to aesthetics to be able to claim universality even when the claimer must acknowledge the *subjective* nature of perception.

8 Derrida might be considered an exception in that he thoroughly deconstructed the idea of the author as origin in works such as "Economimesis", cited above, and (Derrida [1978] 1987).

9 One might argue that Derrida's identification as a Jew and a *pied noir* and Barthes' and Foucault's as gay men puts them somewhat askew of this vantage point (certainly, of mainstream Frenchness). But, as the most compelling and nuanced of thinkers have argued, while every human has elements of privilege and aspects of disempowerment, white men who are not openly gay still have the easiest access to the *pretense* of being fixed, coherent subjects of enunciation—or of seeing. See (de Beauvoir [1949] 2011), where she critiques Hegelian-cum-Existentialist ideas of the transcendent subject as only being a fantasy possible for white men with women, Blacks, Jews, and other "others" consigned to immanence.

10 On human social being as praxis, see also (Arendt [1958] 1998). The work of Ben Nicholson is key in these arguments about Arendt's idea of praxis; see (Nicholson 2023).

11 Citing Judith Butler's work on "performing gender" (Butler 1990), Wynter does not point to the fact that the idea of the performative dates back to the 1950s with the work of analytic philosopher J.L. Austin (Austin 1962).

12 As Denise Ferreira da Silva argues, building specifically on Wynter's arguments outlined here, her strategic "unsettling of Man fissures Foucault's classical order when it unveils how the 'first encounter' shook the basis of medieval thinking and in the process rescued Man from the entrails of the Fallen Flesh. . . while also apprehending the world through a disavowal that

casts alternative/non-European modes of being human (the newly dysselected inhabitants of the Americas) as the Other of the secularized rational mind" (Ferreira da Silva 2015, p. 99).

13 This myth is encapsulated by the photographs of William Curtis from the early twentieth century (especially the 1904 photograph titled The Vanishing Race—Navajo, which literalized the romantic and oppressive idea of Native Americans as a dying race by showing Navajo on horseback walking away from the camera/viewer).

14 See the biographical photo album produced by Guillermo Gómez-Peña and Emma Tramposch, https://interculturalpoltergeist.tumblr.com/page/3 (accessed on 7 June 2023).

15 See the Gómez-Peña website, https://www.guillermogomezpena.com/; and "Intercultural Poltergeist: The Living Art of Gómez-Peña & La Pocha Nostra", https://interculturalpoltergeist.tumblr.com/ (both accessed on 2 June 2023).

16 See Gómez-Peña and Tramposch, https://interculturalpoltergeist.tumblr.com/page/3 (accessed on 2 June 2023).

17 That this reminder was not always understood or taken up is made clear by Fusco in her article commenting on the experience of being objectified in the work, see: (Fusco 1994).

18 See the image on the Gagosian website, https://gagosian.com/exhibitions/2001/vanessa-beecroft-vb46/ (accessed on 7 June 2023).

19 Cassils, "White Male Artist" website, https://whitemaleartist.com/ (accessed on 1 August 2023).

20 See also the Phillips press release here: https://www.phillips.com/press/release/phillips-announces-ht-coin-by-white-male-artist-a-durational-performance-piece-and-nft-series-in-partnership-with-snarkart (accessed on 5 June 2023).

21 Damiani notes that Cryptoart.io, a website that "aggregates and ranks data from NFT art sales", clearly shows that "the vast majority of top-selling artists and individual artworks [sic] are by men, many of whom are white".

22 Wynter is gesturing towards Édouard Glissant's concept of relation with her term co-relatedness; see Glissant ([1990] 1997).

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Article

The Vicissitudes of Representation: Critical Game Studies, Belonging, and Anti-Essentialism

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Abstract: Video games are enjoying a flourishing of critical studies; they are finally taken as consequential forms of visual culture worthy of historical, theoretical, and cultural attention. At one time, their scholarship was largely overdetermined by issues of medium and treated largely as an entertainment product. But with the complexifying of the form, combined with a new generation of dynamic scholars and an expanded understanding of how to write about them, games now constitute a robust area of critical engagement with topics in race, sexuality, gender, ethnicity, ability, and other markers of difference. Those interventions have been key in driving the discourse forward, but game studies now faces a new set of strategic challenges. The gains have likely come at great methodological cost. This essay explores the consequences of identity-focused analyses and the roles of intersectional considerations of self and anti-essentialism as crucial tools in combatting enforced notions of belongingness. The author argues that the frontier of methodology in critical game studies may be to think outside of the prescribed ways in which academia encourages monolithic affiliation (or even false segregation) by validating and codifying identity-driven forms of expertise.

Keywords: representation; video games; videogames; belonging; anti-essentialism; game studies

1. Introduction: Video Games, Identity-Driven Expertise and Its Costs

Video games have come a long way since their humble beginnings in military and scientific contexts. The first games[1], like William Higinbotham's *Tennis for Two* (1958) and *Spacewar!* by Steve Russell and collaborators (1962), originated in labs and were at least in part created to demonstrate what a computer could do—and to connect with non-specialists. As a relatively new field, it was not until 2001 with the establishment of the international scholarly journal *Game Studies* that any organized discourse of video games that one might call "canonical" existed. Prior to that, most of the writing on games originated with reviews and popular journalism, since they were largely treated as entertainment products. With the exception of rare interventions like Brenda Laurel's *Computers as Theatre* (1991), Espen Aarseth's *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature* (1997), and Janet Murray's *Hamlet on the Holodeck* (1997), there was little dedicated focus on video games. But by the mid-2000s, the terrain changed, and books like Geoff King and Tanya Krzywinska's *Tomb Raiders & Space Invaders: Videogame Forms and Contexts* (2006); John Dovey and Helen W. Kennedy's *Game Cultures: Computer Games as New Media* (2006); Alexander Galloway's *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture* (2006); Derek A. Burrill's *Die Tryin': Videogames, Masculinity, Culture* (2008); Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig de Peuter's *Games of Empire: Global Capitalism and Video Games* (2009); and Mary Flanagan's *Critical Play: Radical Game Design* (2009) demonstrated that there was finally traction for a critical cultural approach to games.

Alongside these burgeoning conversations, academic conferences sprung up, like The Digital Games Research Association (DiGRA) in 2003 and Foundations of Digital Games (FDG), originally the Microsoft Academic Days on Game Development in Computer Science Education (GDCSE), in 2006. Scholars from pre-existing disciplines began taking video games seriously as their objects of study, including people such as T.L. Taylor, Anna Everett, Craig Watkins, Steven E. Jones, Justine Cassell, Henry Jenkins, Yasmin B. Kafai et al.,

Lisa Nakamura, Noah Wardrip-Fruin, and Mia Consalvo. But with the complexifying of the form, combined with a new generation of dynamic scholars and an expanded understanding of how to write about them, video games now constitute a robust area of critical engagement with topics in race, sexuality, gender, ethnicity, ability, and other markers of difference. Scholars Patrick Jagoda and Jennifer Malkowski have identified proto-canonical debates in games around medium specificity, as well as proceduralist versus play-centric and, perhaps lesser-known, computational versus representational (Jagoda and Malkowski 2022). Now, there are scholars who have written their doctoral dissertations in game studies, graduated, entered into academia and other related fields, and begun shaping the field in meaningful directions. People like Tara Fickle, Amanda Phillips, Carly Kocurek, TreaAndrea Russworm, Jennifer Malkowski, Amanda Cote, micha cárdenas, Aubrey Anable, Matthew Thomas Payne, Kishonna Gray, Shira Chess, Nina Huntemann, Souvik Mukherjee, Christopher B. Patterson, Aaron Trammell, Vít Šisler, Whit Pow, Bo Ruberg, D. Fox Harrell, Gerald Voorhees, Adrienne Shaw, and Patrick Jagoda—there are now simply too many to list here—are intervening in myriad invaluable ways (Malkowski and Russworm 2017; S. Murray 2018; Ruberg 2019; Payne and Huntemann 2019). I take the trouble to name names because a canonic history is still being negotiated, and some of these formative scholars will become submerged in the process. There are many academic journals dedicated specifically to games (both analog and digital), and it is now common for non-game-specific academic journals to engage scholarship on video games. Today, video games are understood to be consequential media forms worthy of historical, theoretical, critical, and cultural attention.

Those interventions, including addressing representation and intersectionality in games, have been key in driving the discourse forward. But now, game studies faces a new set of strategic challenges. The gains may have come at great methodological cost. This essay explores the consequences of identity-focused analyses and the role of intersectional considerations of self and anti-essentialism as crucial tools in combatting enforced notions of belongingness. While matters of representation are still consequential and certainly should not be taken as passé, I argue that the frontier of methodology in critical game studies may be to think outside of the prescribed ways in which academia encourages monolithic affiliation (or even false segregation) by validating and codifying identity-driven forms of expertise. How does scholarly discourse essentialize identity, and what methodologies can be used to interrupt that tendency? By first grounding the discussion in a critical video-games-oriented history of representational concerns, and then considering the larger stakes of how game representation discussions are advanced in academia, I share anti-essentialist pedagogical strategies and perspectives that have helped me instill an expanded understanding of who can be an expert.

What follows is less a discussion of representation as it pertains to diverse players and whether they may (or may not) feel seen in the player characters[2] they control and more of an anti-essentialist look at how, in critical game studies, identity has become tied to certain forms of knowledge—and the canonical perils that lie therein. But as I will show, these two concerns are not entirely disconnected since they spring from the same origins in Eurocentric value systems. Drawing on my more than a dozen years of personal experience teaching video games within a cultural and visual studies framework, I propose that there is much to be gained from the self-conscious interruption of underlying presumptions, many of which are negotiated on the level of identity and representation but also live in deceptively small pedagogical decisions.

Although my scholarly work has taken various forms of visual culture as objects of study, including art, video games, and, more recently, cinema, beneath those various media lies a concern with sociotechnical imaginaries. This is because it is often through the close reading of visual objects like films, art, and material culture that it is possible to access ideological understandings that inform those imaginaries. I borrow this term from Science and Technology Studies scholars Sheila Jasanoff and Sang-Hyun Kim, who define sociotechnical imaginaries as follows:

> collectively held, institutionally stabilized, and publicly performed visions of desirable futures, animated by shared understandings of forms of social life and social order attainable through, and supportive of, advances in science and technology. . .It goes without saying that imaginations of desirable and desired futures correlate, tacitly or explicitly, with the obverse—shared fears of harms that might be incurred through invention and innovation, or of course the failure to innovate. (Jasanoff 2015, pp. 4–5)

These collective visions are rooted in shared hopes but also fears, both of which drive stories of our technological futures. Jasanoff also writes that when we engage with sociotechnical imaginaries, we can access the connection between how people collectively desire things to be in the future and the nature of the various present-day infrastructures that we have built for ourselves as a society (Jasanoff 2015, p. 22).

The term "sociotechnical imaginary" also signals how science and technology engage with national political cultures and public trajectories to imagine a collective vision of the future, which then serves to shape policy, legitimates particular aims, fuels investments, and contributes to a social order that centralizes innovation. This concept is important because it shows the connection between desired futures and the sorts of stories we tell ourselves as a society about our innovation—and our innovators.

But these notions are also struggled with and reified on the level of the image, and my primary interest in this concept is in how social imaginaries are evidenced, shaped, contested, and galvanized through visual representations such as in video games (Evans et al. 2010). This is because, of course, such narratives involve visions of who belongs in the future and who the drivers of innovation are. Biased visions and exclusionary representations become oppressive and should be actively contested. For the sake of this work, I am also specifically interested in pedagogical interventions that refuse toxic forms of belongingness or academic tribalism and invite more expansive forms of belonging and inclusivity within our sociotechnical imaginaries.

2. Framing the Conversation

What does this all have to do with critical game studies? There have been several important points of friction within critical game studies that have, in my view, acted as proxy debates for something deeper that has to do with canonical formations of a new field and the stakes of game studies itself. While I would point interested readers to more detailed discussions, I want to briefly recount them here as they are critical to understanding the nature of the battleground as it stands (S. Murray 2018, see especially the Introduction). First, early scholarly disagreement around defining a proper dmethodological approach to game studies materialized in a form/content debate commonly referred to in terms of the competing approaches of "ludology" and "narratology." Self-described "ludologists" (who framed this debate) privileged the studies of games from a formal perspective and generally took the position that games are not like other forms of media, and therefore should not be studied through the lenses of pre-existing tools of analysis intended for things like literature, cinema, or theater. They asserted that representation in games should be thought of as incidental to things like rule-based systems (Aarseth 2001; Eskelinen 2001). Janet Murray called the position of ludology "game essentialism", describing it as:

> a field not merely differentiated by its objects of study, but as explicitly disconnected from the kinds of inquiry that have traditionally been applied to other cultural genres. According to this view, games in general and computer games in particular display a unique formalism which defines them as a discreet experience, a different genre from narrative, drama, poetry and also different from other "ergotic" or "configurational" forms. (J. Murray 2013)

In a gesture of academic siloing, ludologists deemed the study of games through pre-existing narrative cultural expressions "narratology"—effectively creating a false binary between the technical and the cultural. So, this label would apply to those who saw the

tools of previous media analyses as useful in understanding games, though it did not necessarily discount their unique formal properties. This would also mean that for so-called "narratologists", considerations of representation would hold value since video games are persuasive ideological forms—though unique for their playability (Bogost 2010). Critiques of such a position would be grounded largely in the idea that narratologists do not center the interactive or rule-based play components of games in favor of simple textual analysis of game story. This false dualism has long been refuted as effectively fabricated for academic territorial reasons or as encoded racialized and gendered bias in early games scholarship. But there certainly are competing schools of thought on how games should properly exist in the academy—looking back at my aforementioned list of key texts and scholars, this friction is very much on the surface of that research.

Notably, as someone trained in art history and visual culture studies, this struggle over method, and particularly the advocating for pure formalism and medium specificity, strongly resembled earlier canonical debates that took place within my own disciplinary training. These were also purportedly about form and content, largely waged in identity politics debates in the 1980s and 1990s. Within these debates, a false dualism was also created: on the one hand was the formalist pursuit of artmaking and the study of such work on its own terms, often tacitly associated with white male genius. On the other hand were minoritized subjectivities whose expressions were deemed 'identity art' and who were characterized as anthropologists or native informants of their own cultures. They were thought of as making something that resembled a 'trauma narrative', perhaps, but not art in its pure sense (Foster 1996). Similarly, revisionist scholars who affirmed the contributions of women, queer subjectivities, and people of color to art history were painted with a similar brush. This effectively theorized their presence as fundamentally outside of proper art history, something more akin to social activism. As my co-author Derek Conrad Murray and I wrote of this pernicious exclusion:

> The troubling misrecognition of these artists is rooted in an inside-outside, or binary-based construction of the relationship between identity-based art (minority, noncanonical) and mainstream (normative, canonical) production. Specifically, this construction can be located in the notion that there exists a "social art" and a "social art history" that operate externally to traditional output, which is indifferent to such concerns. Using the markers "social" or "activist" to describe these intellectual and artistic efforts is misleading, in that they place minority engagements in an inherently peripheral position. Simultaneously, it suggests that the politics of identity is somehow not practiced from within the mainstream [. . .] [T]here is no such thing as one art-historical or critical methodology that is engaged in identity politics and another that is not. There are only those social identities that are seeking recognition, and those that speak from a fictive normative position. The critique of revisionist efforts from the mainstream is essentially an effort to preserve one's identity politics (the histories and power relations they construct) from the political efforts of the Other. (Murray and Murray 2006, pp. 37–39, 'Uneasy Bedfellows')

Key is the last point: the struggle for history characterized above is one of competing forms of identity politics, in which the so-called 'normative' is in fact seeking to retain the dominance of their own identity politics as canon.

I recognize from this earlier debate a similar connection between the policing of game studies' borders through "game essentialism" as also being a kind of identity politics at work. It sought to keep certain kinds of approaches out, thus, by design or as a by-product, keeping certain subjectivities out, and was grounded in *a false presumption that such border-policing contained no identity politics of its own*. In fact, game essentialism demonstrated exactly the opposite. In both cases, we are talking about a conversation that purports to be about one thing but is really about another. In both cases, it is an apparent conversation about disciplinary purity, but underneath it is an essentialism that suggests who does not belong in a canonical history and theory of games. For me, this is a much more critical set

of stakes for games and representation, but one that is not disconnected from the matter of representation in games on the level of player/player-character identification. This is because it pre-emptively categorizes by identity those who are thought of as engaged in mainstream or normative conversations about video games as separate from those engaged with identity politics and representation. This is a false binary and is based on a belief in an imminent set of characteristics rather than understanding identity as experienced differently and fluidly among even those deemed to be of the same grouping.

The stakes of this binary may seem small, but in fact they are large enough to have become part of an ongoing culture war, a struggle for recognition in which a particular kind of toxic ideological white male dominance is shored up. Mounting critiques of the games industry's disproportionately high incidents of workplace chauvinism compared with many other professional spheres (Chang 2018; Neate 2015; Pao 2017; Wakabayashi 2017) and the ugly 2012 harassment campaign against then-emerging feminist media critic Anita Sarkeesian pointed to the stakes of representation in games (Sarkeesian 2015. See also: Sreenivasan 2014; Alexander 2014b; Woolley 2014; Lien 2015; Ryerson 2014). But this was most spectacularly evidenced in the harassment campaign against the presence of female, trans, socially defined minorities, and progressives in games, dubbed "GamerGate", which began in 2014. GamerGaters often targeted indie or alternative "social justice warriors" making work representing their own subjectivities or scholars and journalists supporting those works and speaking out against intolerance in games.[3]

With the widespread reporting of incidents, ranging from trolling and doxxing[4] to other threats, GamerGate became so heated that the conventional construction of the 'gamer' as an identity associated with a particular type of white, male, disengaged, or antisocial player was declared dead by several critics (Alexander 2014a). The negativity and misogyny associated with gamers and increasing connections to the alt-right (which was effectively mobilizing online forums and communities to spread extremism) even led some within the player community to personally reject the title, even if they might solidly fall within the term's definition. In all of this churning debate, the titles characterized as destroying games as 'fun' often centered concerns of identity, including representations of race, sex, gender, nation, class, or other markers of difference. But this is all just a fancy way of saying who does or does not belong, which is incredibly consequential for the sociotechnical imaginary.

3. Vicissitudes of Representation

Many scholars have spoken out about the persisting importance of representation as a battleground within games. For example, media studies and games scholar TreaAndrea Russworm stridently opposes the tendency of mainstream video game representation to uphold dominant values:

> video games matter and will remain relevant because every inflection of the digital can service white supremacy just as the ideology of white supremacy is itself a technology of capitalism. Game culture's proximity to these things is widely apparent when doxxing, trolling, and overt threats of violence are the ready-made tactics of online hate campaigns like #Gamergate and are also techniques that are used by the president and his supporters. Additionally, when online and streaming gameplay is routinely interrupted by a barrage of racial epithets, and when popular game franchises like *Red Dead Redemption*, *Call of Duty*, and *Resident Evil* provide fantasies of destruction that laud settler colonialism, and when *Pokémon Go* limits collectible assets in less affluent neighborhoods, we need not look far to note the overt ways in which gaming culture harnesses the techniques of power that also define the political domain. (Russworm 2018, p. 75)

Russworm's work emblematizes struggles against a 'business as usual' response when it comes to games and representation, and this intervention is necessary for video games

to grow and mature as a medium. Critical interventions by scholars such as Kishonna Gray and David J. Leonard are engaging notions of representation and games as they intersect with social justice, folding in matters of inclusivity and representation across the spectrum of the games industry (Gray and Leonard 2018). This operates against a larger set of interventions taking place in discussions of technology, such as in the work of Lisa Nakamura, Safia Noble, and Ruja Benjamin (Nakamura 2008; Benjamin 2019; Noble 2018). There is much work to be done, and such efforts are incredibly consequential for shifting the terrain away from implicitly white constructions of futurity.

Some unexpected relations to representation have emerged that open-up new possibilities for how we can understand identity and games. Tara Fickle's *The Race Card: From Gaming Technologies to Model Minorities* (2019) moves away from representation in terms of Asian and Asian American identity per se. Instead, it considers games, broadly defined, delving deeper into the Orientalism present in game studies and engaging in a more sweeping genealogy of ideas around the connection between Asian race relations and games as "instruments of 'soft power' to advance political agendas and discipline national subjects" (Fickle 2019, p. 26).

Games scholar Adrienne Shaw, who has conducted extensive research on the connection between minoritized players and their player-characters, also grappled with the notion of representation in relation to games. In her "Diversity without Defense: Reframing Arguments for Diversity in Games", Shaw questions the tacit understanding within media studies that "representation matters" and carefully works through the nuances of what that exactly means—and to whom. Her core provocation is compelling: "How we talk about representation popularly and academically really does matter to the extent that how we make our arguments shapes the type of opposition we see" (Shaw 2017, p. 68). This indicates a keen awareness of how controlling the way a discussion is framed delimits the possible scope of responses. In other words, controlling the framing of the argument is, to a large extent, the means to control its outcome. This is in keeping with my own earlier concern that in advance of even dealing with the art itself on its own terms, many artists engaging identity directly were being theorized out on a canonical and methodological level—the terms of the conversation were already frontloaded with a concern with formal purity.

A key observation Shaw makes within the context of this conversation is that her own research outcomes did not conform neatly to the popularly held idea that people needed to necessarily consume images that directly reflected their own identity (See especially Shaw 2015). Instead, Shaw writes: "what they did need is people like them, in an expansive intersectional sense, to be seen. Representation matters because it makes their identity legible" (Shaw 2017, p. 55). Highlighting the many factors that impact a male-centric understanding of games, Shaw points to things like the overwhelmingly male-dominated industry, the historical narrative of games (despite the consistent presence of all walks of life from the beginning), and the term "gamer" itself as overdetermined by toxic masculine associations. I am interested in how this observation signals a connection between in-game representation, the demographics of identity, canon formation, and game culture.

Shaw suggests it is futile to persist in a struggle between 'good' or 'bad' representations to address deeper elisions. Rather, she embraces what she calls a "diversity without defense argument" that invites us to invest in change and stop trying to legitimate our academic research in relation to its use-value for the industry, its connectedness to accessing new audiences as 'good business sense', or niche marketing. Shaw instead advocates for a rejection of such logics, and an embrace of diversity and inclusion as its own goal, by generating "more kinds of narratives, more kinds of characters, and more kinds of mechanics if they [industry] want to promote innovation" (Shaw 2017, pp. 70–72). This outcome is complicated because although it does not eschew the importance of representation, it does significantly reframe or, arguably, displace its centrality in ways that might alarm those proponents of what Shaw calls the "Representation Matters!" school of thought. This also interrupts the taxonomies of difference that arise in response to the need to 'bean count'

the presence of particular minoritized peoples and for their presence to be considered an extension of a needed quota rather than an authentic asset.

Shaw's conclusions may be thought of as not precisely in lock-step agreement with the vehement "Representation matters!" crowd, one focused on liberal inclusivity, and I suspect it has caused this important research to be somewhat underattended to. But I argue that Shaw's position is extremely useful—not only for thinking about players, but also for who can be thought of as an expert in game studies and game design. In this, I am suggesting that one might consider canons and methodologies as equally important sites of intervention in terms of the mattering of representation.

This conversation is elaborated upon in "Are We There Yet? The Politics and Practices of Intersectional Game Studies", in which Shaw describes the troubling tendency of academic discourses toward taxonomies that artificially mischaracterize intersectional work as rooted in the singular positionality of the person professing their knowledge. So, for example, despite her scholarship being deeply invested in race, as a queer white woman her work is understood to be primarily about female gamers and/or queer gamers. She also complains on behalf of her colleague, Kishonna Gray, that the latter's work is understood to be primarily about race because Gray is African-American—although her scholarship is also deeply invested in gender and sexuality (Shaw 2018, p. 77). This tendency of course conflicts with critical race theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw's very notion of intersectionality, which posits that a more holistic approach to identity is necessary in order to understand how "we can better acknowledge and ground the differences among us and negotiate the means by which these differences will find expression in constructing group politics" (Crenshaw 1991, p. 1299).

I completely agree with this characterization of persisting disciplinary boundary-drawing, even when the scholar themselves may have a complex intersectional engagement with their objects of study. However, I do not think the problem resides in a lack of understanding about intersectionality. There are structures in place that tend to corral people into their predefined identitarian roles, to settle them into forms of expertise circumscribed by those identities, and to reinforce and validate particular kinds of participation through academic disciplinary formations, funding models, and various rewards and benefits that come with the academic legibility of staying in one's lane. This again becomes a matter of representation on a canonical level.

Who may speak, and on what topic? Who is deemed an expert, and what are particular subjectivities allowed to be experts in? What do funding models encourage or discourage in research endeavors, and how is institutional support for particular concerns of representation made measurable and counted by being legible in particular kinds of ways? The result is sometimes a lot of virtue signaling while also creating an enormous amount of intellectual strictures for minoritized academics who are surely experts and pedigreed in something more than their own identities. What I am talking about here is more than a strategy of changing hearts and minds by appealing to an ethics of inclusivity in fellow academics and students. For, as I have explained, this may pursue a noble goal at the cost of locking experts into roles of alterity. Rather, I am advocating that, like Shaw, we need a more complex understanding of what representation actually means. Intersectionality and anti-essentialism are useful tools for interrupting academic scenarios that function to codify alterity and delimit who may be an expert within the sociotechnical imaginary.

4. And What of the Classroom?

In acknowledgment of culturally imposed notions of expertise that are so much a part of academia as to be canon themselves, I am interested in how anti-essentialist strategies can be activated to interrupt this process. I have described this in relation to scholarship, but the classroom is another place where sociotechnical imaginaries are shaped. What representational troubling is possible, and how can the visual culture studies of video games become a crucial site of that interruption for the next generation of game design

students and critical game scholars? Part of this work is in enacting an intersectional approach, and outstripping the limiting presumptions of expertise as tied to identity.

Pedagogy forms one critical frontline of this struggle. To give one practical example, I designed a course called *Video Games as Visual Culture* that was initially intended as a stand-alone visual culture course to satisfy a general education requirement in culture and technology. Soon after, it was adopted as part of the core curriculum for an undergraduate dual-track games program. On one track, one could earn a Bachelor's in Science, with a heavier emphasis on the technical aspects of computer game engineering. On the other track, one could earn a Bachelor's in Art, with a focus on novel game systems, spaces, and configurations toward the artistic pursuit of games within their deeper social and historical contexts. This meant that every single person completing the degree would take the course, and thus it represented an opportunity to invite students into a collective larger conversation, a common language with which to understand why games matter. This also placed me pedagogically in the belly of the beast, in a research university with a wildly popular games degree, located in the immediate vicinity of Silicon Valley, during an ongoing and very ugly public struggle for inclusivity.

The opportunity of a large format lecture course to create a critical framing for how students think about games was apparent, but there were also larger outside factors influencing their perceptions. My critical game studies course swelled over the years to 400 students and brought together emerging engineers and artists. But these students often came dragging their ideological baggage behind them, particularly as it regarded the vision of an expert in video games, what writing constituted a canon for the field (such as it is), and who may wield authority in the conversation. In truth, students could hardly be blamed for this, given that the notion of tech expertise and authority is so strongly ideologically encoded and reinforced by an enormous architecture of media culture against which there is little defense. In addition, one could not ignore the unforeseen consequences of institutional efforts toward inclusivity, which have since the 1990s contributed to a false perception that the presence of diversity comes necessarily at the cost of high standards—or the obverse of this, that one's difference itself constitutes one's worth, rather than one's contribution.

Initially, in 2010, I designed the course rather typically and in accordance with one of the few textbooks on games available at the time. This textbook was conventional in that it presented a history of games and a focus on key themes including game culture, aesthetics, history, ludology vs. narratology, etc. Some of these intersected with identity so that there was a section on race, another on gender (in a binary sense), and, overwhelmingly, experts outside of these limited areas attending to difference were overwhelmingly white, male, and either European or American. Further, as a thirty-something woman of color teaching games, I was often implicitly not understood as an expert given the ideological encoding of technology as masculine (Oldenziel 1999). While many students were receptive, there was a strong contingent of students who initially rejected my presence, protesting in many small ways, mostly refusing to display any recognition of my authority as a professor. There was a false perception projected onto me that by engaging them in the context of serious topics like race, gender, sex, class, nation, and politics, I disliked games or sought to destroy the 'fun' of them. Over many weeks, students would reorient their positions as the course was revealed to actually validate games as significant and worthy of attention, complex, rich, and, in fact, a primary site of visual literacy for their generation.

In the early years of the course, great importance lay in having a conversation about representation, and over time the general sophistication of students grew in keeping with the fact that I was engaging with young people who had increasingly profound relationships to the games they played. But I also began to realize that intersectionality would be key to complexifying such discussions. Further, even more critical than addressing representation in game content—which certainly needed attention—was engaging a diversity of voices in game studies. I was noticing that an unintended consequence of pursuits revolving around particular identities and speaking on those identities exclusively was a kind of segregation of scholars and experts according to their identities. I did not want

to model or reinforce the book's lack of intersectionality and its compartmentalization by example in the classroom. In a radical revision to the course structure, I began disrupting my own presumptions and that of my students.

My students also disrupted my unconscious biases in ways that profoundly changed how I think about what I do. For example, early on I had a dedicated lecture on gender and games, which was in keeping with a section of the textbook. To some extent, one could say that this alone was activist in that it gave feminist approaches a toehold in the games conversation, whereas it might be otherwise ignored. But the primer implicitly took "gender" to mean "female gamers", and among other things did not acknowledge gender as a continuum. One year, because of a lively discussion in class, my gender lecture ran long, and I completed it the following session. Soon after, I received a handwritten, anonymous note from a student who said they were transgender, and that they had intended to skip my gender lecture because it did not acknowledge their trans identity. But when I returned to the topic the next class, they felt unwelcome in the course because of the binary gender presumptions of the textbook.

As someone whose right to belong was questioned throughout my education, I recognized that what they said was true: it was a painful identification of a blind spot. This was a difficult lesson, and I am grateful for the forthrightness of that student in speaking up. In fact, beyond the immediate matter of correcting the implicit binary gender politics in my course, it jarred something in me about my course as a whole and how methodology and pedagogy can impact how students think about games. I immediately changed my lectures, straying a little more each year from the textbook, integrating more essays by a diversity of scholars, selecting key game examples from a wide variety of makers, and ensuring that the whole student body can see themselves in the expertise presented to them. Eventually, I broke with the textbook altogether, engaging a modular thematic approach that can flex with issues in games that arise and the meaningful revisionist efforts to reinstate those who have been drowned out in the historical conversation of video games.

Perhaps most importantly, I am extremely transparent about my politics of citation demonstrated in the syllabus readings. To demonstrate that expertise in game studies can come from any person and often from any area of study, my course is transdisciplinary, intersectional, and anti-essentialist. More than half the syllabus is by women and/or people of color who are respected contributors to the field. Presentations pertaining to essays often contain images of authors to humanize the material and visually demonstrate to students that a wide variety of people operate at the apex of the field. Importantly, I self-consciously do not limit scholars' research agendas to their identities. I do not call upon female-identified scholars only in conversations of gender, or Black scholars only in the capacity of Blackness, or trans scholars only to discuss trans-related topics. Black scholars discuss dystopia or theorizations of play, female-identified scholars teach ethics, Latino scholars may theoretically engage with the haptic in games. White male scholars readily associated with the 'canon' are not ignored, because their contributions have also shaped the field, and self-consciously negating or erasing them would also be a form of negation, erasure, and essentialism. They are present, but in a larger eco-system of ideas. I often create a polemic to force students to engage deeply with these ideas and to decide for themselves what they think. To the best of my ability, I do not create the conditions for students to assume that their identities should cause them to have no place in dominant conversation or that their expertise should be limited to their identity. I model this in my own games research by asserting my authority to speak in ways that are intersectional and anti-essentialist, and which insistently unsettle the expectations set forth by markers of my identity.

5. Conclusions

On the scholarly front of this battle for recognition, a new generation of critical game studies scholars recognizes that representation matters, but they also mine the crucial racial logics that issue from their rule-based systems. For example, Tara Fickle and Christopher B.

Patterson's "Diversity is not a Win-Win Condition" explicitly tackles this problem, teasing out the pitfalls and opportunities of making games "more diverse" through analysis of the various strategies games have attempted—with mixed results— to address this (Fickle and Patterson 2022). By outlining the "procedural logics of racial management", they open-up new possibilities for how we can think about representation and inclusion in game design, industry, and game studies (Fickle and Patterson 2022, p. 211). These, along with those of Shaw, Nakamura, Anna Everett, Kishonna Gray, and Russworm, are all critical interventions. But I am particularly interested in the interconnectedness between the games we play, how and what we teach, core curriculum design, how we research, and the corners we may paint ourselves into as critical game scholars when we allow ourselves to be typecast into identity-based specializations.[5] All of these components feed social imaginaries about ourselves and each other that we should be extremely careful of. Employing anti-essentialist methodologies can be one effective intervention to reshape the nature of the conversation across the spectrum I have identified, slowly but surely.

We need to complexify our vision of what representation means for in-game representations—but also, as I would add, for what counts as canon and expertise in the field. This engagement with the idea of who constitutes a games expert can make legible those in the field who are already present and making critical contributions but are ideologically excised from canonical legitimacy: in other words, curbed in their authority to speak as legitimate experts. This expanded understanding is also, on a basic level, a form of professional competence. The pernicious ideological framing of minoritized scholars as methodologically outside of canon should be fiercely opposed in large and small ways. In addition, minoritized critical game scholars should be brazen about resisting both the external pressures and toxic forms of belongingness that demand the performance of one's identity as the price of admission into academic discourse. All of game studies belongs to us, not just a compartmentalized area corresponding to our identities. In fact, it is to the betterment of the discourse for a rigorous and divergent set of voices to push the field into new areas and model intersectional and anti-essentialist practices by embodying the idea that any person may potentially contribute to any discourse.

Intersectionality and anti-essentialism as pedagogical strategies for greater competence in the medium of games should be *de rigeur* in games programs as an extension of valuing collective belonging in educational systems. In addition to the many potential interventions I have proposed, it is key that games programs include critical game studies as a part of their core curriculum and invest in the stable presence of critical game studies scholars as necessary to cultivate excellence in students and normalize its institutional value. Department leaders might consider that the presence of critical studies in other creative/media forms (music, art, film, television, theater, etc.) is expected and normalized as part of a student's education, whereas in games programs this is often not the case. Even despite the pervasiveness of games and their great impact on sociotechnical imaginaries, within the academy, they are still thought of as primarily technical, not cultural. But it is on a methodological level that there remains a valuable opportunity to expand the possibilities around who is part of the canonical conversation, to model inclusivity around who is thought of as an expert, and of what they may profess their knowledge. I want to be clear here that I am not making an argument rooted in an emotional plea, an invocation for the field (such as it is) to do the right thing. In fact, this is an argument for professorial competence, as persisting in boundary policing is no longer viable. Not to do so is to allow academic liberalism to unwittingly serve the outcomes of disciplinary formalist and purity debates—at great cost to a young and growing field of study. Put another way, the cost of such essentialism would be obsolescence.

Known for her ongoing interventions into the paradigms that order our lives in repressive ways, law professor Trina Grillo argued for intersectionality and anti-essentialism as key to increasing a sense of collective belonging within institutional systems (in her case, she was speaking of legal and educational systems). Grillo wrote, "each of us has a limited view of the world, that we have a better chance of forming a vision of a post-patriarchal,

post-racist society both by trusting in our own experiences and by seeking out voices that are drowned out by essentialism in all its forms" (Grillo 1995, p. 30). These forms take the shape of larger canonical discussions that seek to frame the conversation so that certain entities are theorized out of ever becoming meaningful voices. Small but significant antiessentialist acts within the classroom can subtly nudge students to be better than the previous generation. Within various spheres of influence, critical game scholars, historians, and designers can recuperate and amplify those voices drowned out by essentialism by negotiating the vicissitudes of canonical representation.

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Notes

1 For this discussion, I will sometimes use video games and games as interchangeable terms; but I want to acknowledge a rich body of knowledge in games that are not video games—tabletop, live role-playing, children's games, strategy games, card games, dice games, etc.

2 A player-character is the common term for the character on-screen that a player controls. This is opposed to a non-player character, or a character in the game that the player does not control, or any character that populates the game either as a "background" ambient character or one with which the player character may interact.

3 "Social Justice Warrior" or SJW became a pejorative umbrella term used by Gamergaters to signal progressive activists online.

4 Doxxing is publicly posting sensitive personal information online, such as a social security number, bank account number, address, etc., with the incitement that others should harm the person targeted.

5 Thanks to the anonymous reader for this term "typecast", which is exactly right.

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Article

Converged Aesthetics: Blewishness in the Work of Anthony Mordechai Tzvi Russell

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Abstract: This essay examines the converged aesthetic of Anthony Mordechai Tzvi Russell, focusing on the *Kosmopolitan* video projects. These videos, and Russell's work overall, resist the singular terms "Black" and "Jew," constructing a Blewish converged aesthetic by overlaying images of Josephine Baker or a lonely, lost child walking backward with Russell's rich and full voice singing Yiddish songs. These remarkable videos, and the projects created by Tsvey Brider (Russell and Dimitri Gaskin), disrupt assumptions about race, gender, sexual orientation, and ethnoreligious affiliation in profound and important ways. I argue that this work performs convergence, thus bucking against the very insistence on antagonism that forms the conditions of possibility for racism.

Keywords: Anthony Russell; Josephine Baker; The Quiet One; race; Jewishness; Blackness

1. Introduction

In a body of work under the heading of Tsvey Brider (Two brothers in Yiddish), the visionary performer Anthony Mordechai Tzvi Russell, working with Dimitri Gaskin, creates mesmerizing vocal and visual combinations which offer what I will call here, following Russell's title from another work, a converged aesthetic. Russell and Gaskin's project articulates a new version of identity, resisting the singular terms "Black" and "Jew." Instead, they forge a Blewish converged aesthetic, overlaying images of Josephine Baker with Russell's rich and full voice singing Yiddish songs, or a mournful Yiddish song piped over a lonely, lost child walking backward. These videos and the larger project of which they are part, *Kosmoplitan*, disrupt assumptions about race, gender, sexual orientation, and ethnoreligious affiliation in profound and important ways. This work performs convergence and bucks against the very insistence on antagonism that forms the conditions of possibility for racism.[1] When pressed to define his own performances of convergence, Russell constructs the phrase "Afroamerikanishe-Yidishe muzik" which he mentions in the fascinating context of trying to translate "Black Lives Matter" into Yiddish. Of all the options, "Afroamerikaner Blut iz Nisht Keyn Vaser" (אַפראָאַמעריקאַנער בלוט איז נישט קיין וואַסער) sounds to me the most promising because it preserves the feeling of Yiddish while avoiding the problematic but more literal word for Black in Yiddish ("shvartse"). Russell concludes this short essay by noting, "I've done so much living through the Yiddish language, and now I have words to declare that this living—this life—matters" (Russell 2020b). I will start with a bit about how Russell came to live his life in Yiddish.

2. A Bisele about Anthony Mordechai Tzvi Russell

> "Solidarity with Black people doesn't require a radical act of historical imagination. You are here. We are here. You know what to do. Do it. Now". Anthony Mordechai Tzvi Russell, *Jewish Telegraphic Agency*. (Russell 2020a)

Raised in a Christian, military family in Northern California, Russell trained as a classical opera singer but, through the Coen brother's film *A Serious Man*, found Yiddish music, converted to Judaism, married a (male) Rabbi, and now works on a vibrant and diverse

series of projects that combine African-American with Yiddish music. Keenly aware of his differences from some Jewish communities as a Black Jew but also feeling very comfortable in his role as the Rabbi's husband—he wonderfully queers the Yiddish word "Rebbetzin," typically translated as "Rabbi's wife," by applying it to himself—Russell's life and work are deeply intertwined. He uses his personal narrative to explore musical convergences and to see moments in musical history where Black and Jewish music resonates, overlaps, or clashes and becomes Blewish music. Russell performed his project entitled "Convergence: Spirituals from the Shtetl, Davening from the Delta" at the University of Illinois in 2018. This was the first time I had heard him sing, and it was breathtaking. The performance took place during an ice storm in February and nonetheless filled a rapt auditorium to its quiet as a pin drop gills. Russell operates under the novel assumption that the walls, such as they may have been, between Blackness and Jewishness conceived as opposing identities, have always already been blurred. He embodies their aesthetic convergence. While he was in Illinois on this visit suggested by Sara Feldman that I organized as Jewish Studies Director, I interviewed him, and we discussed at length cross-cultural identifications between Jewish and Black aesthetics. By bringing Black and Ashkenazi music into dialogue, Russell's intersectional music invites us to hear both similarities and differences. Russell's performance and the long interview (which I hope will be included in our co-edited volume of contemporary Black-Jewish experiences) were full of the idea that these two groups have always already converged and have developed aesthetically in relation to one another. I consider Anthony a visionary, and I am grateful to Sara Feldman, again, for using this word to describe him.

Russell (see Figure 1) was obsessed with classical music and opera from a very young age and described watching the film *Amadeus* on repeat as a child. His first operatic role was a choral part in *Madama Butterfly*, and his other roles included playing a preacher in *X: The Life and Times of Malcolm X* and a union soldier in the Philip Glass Opera *Appomattox*. Russell found Yiddish music through the Coen bothers' film *A Serious Man*—some of you will remember that Sidor Belarsky's rich voice offers solace to the main character and figures as a refrain in the film, which concludes with Belarksy's "Dem Milner's Trern" (The Miller's Tears) playing over the credits. Russell converted to Judaism and began an intensive study of Yiddish music and often combined Yiddish with African-American songs to create counterintuitive convergences.

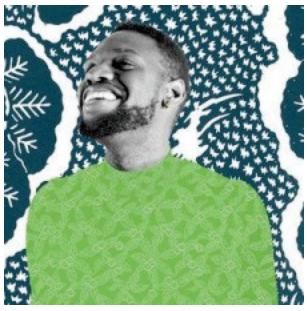

Figure 1. Anthony Russell. Image produced with permission from Anthony Russell.

Of his performance at the Kennedy Center, one review found Russell's voice to be "perhaps the most beautiful I have heard in person" (Hall 2016). Another reviewer describes Russell as a "stunningly authentic, beautifully voiced singer of Yiddish art song" (Serinus 2015). Many other audience members and critics have been similarly wowed and moved by this innovative artist. In a project entitled *Written in Breath*, Russell charts the differences and resonances between Jewish texts such as the Talmud and Yiddish songs. He performs with klezmer musicians Veretski Pass and other august artists who bring together Ashkenazi musical styles with other musical traditions. *Convergence* (which is also a CD) mines diverse cultural sources such as spirituals and Yiddish labor union songs with

musical idioms ranging from jazz, blues, klezmer, and gospel. This groundbreaking work challenges the divisions between identities and musical genres alike.[2]

Another musical convergence Russell worked on was "Yiddish meets Ladino" in conjunction with Sarah Aroeste and combining Ladino and Yiddish lyrics in a singerly tradeoff. In an article in *The Forward* from 2015, Russell notes that sometimes, even when singing Yiddish songs, audience members will ask him to sing 'Ol Man River, thus completely stereotyping him. Throughout the essay, he expresses many wittily offered frustrations about people's expectations but concludes with: "I can joke, because for the most part this has not been my fate. The immense amount of love, understanding and acceptance that I get from my overwhelmingly Jewish audiences is often intensely profound and life affirming. I've found a community in *Yiddishkeit* that lets me establish continuities with its history and my own blackness—on my own terms. The potential for being myself that I've found as a singer of Yiddish is illustrative of the many expectations I have for what performing Jewishness could be" (Russell 2015). This sense of focusing on the positive aspects of the Black-Jewish convergence that he embodies very much characterizes Russell's approach and aesthetics and is evident in a remarkable trio of videos, two of which I turn to in the final third of this essay.

3. A Bisele Context

These convergences appear in the context of the long history of Jewishness and Blackness and their interactions in the U.S. and beyond. "Blewish" is a term that is gaining traction (and detractors) and has been used more often by folx who identify as both Black and Jewish, including Russell. With Sara Feldman, Russell and I have been working on a co-edited book tentatively (emphasis on tentatively) entitled *Blewish: Contemporary Black-Jewish Voices.* The anthology, for the first time, brings together interviews and essays of scholars, artists, performers, filmmakers, journalists, life coaches, and people of many different career paths and orientations to discuss and describe the complex identities they experience as Black and Jewish. Some of the people in the volume converted to Judaism, some have one white-Jewish parent and one Black non-Jewish parent, some are descended from tribes who identify as Black Jews, and others manifest different articulations of new identities. Comedian Tiffany Haddish, writer James McBride, chef and writer Michael Twitty, writer Rebecca Walker, actors Tracee Ellis Ross and Maya Rudolf, musicians Drake, Lenny Kravitz, Daveed Diggs, and filmmaker Ezra Edmond, among others, are well-known figures who have been identified as Black and Jewish.

I want to pause briefly on the example of James McBride because there are so many different pathways at the nexus of Black and Jewish, and his story brings up some of the diversities inherent in the different articulations of these identities. James McBride is the author of the novel *Deacon King Kong* (McBride 2020) and many other works, including a memoir *The Color of Water, A Black Man's Tribute to his White Mother* (McBride 1996). In the memoir and interviews, McBride discloses that his mother, who had grown up as an Orthodox Jew, became a Church-going Christian and did not tell him or his eleven siblings until he was a teenager that she had been Jewish. McBride's maternal grandfather, a Rabbi who ended up running a grocery store in Virginia in a Black neighborhood, was racist even though there might have been a shared sense of oppression between the two shunned communities of Blacks and Jews. McBride mentions in an interview with Terry Gross that "even though their store was in the black side of town, they weren't welcome in town, either, you know, because they were Orthodox Jews. They were—you know, they were very religious Jews". Despite this, McBride's grandfather shunned any attempts to reconcile the communities, and so his mother, when she moved to New York and married McBride's father, who was Black, was turned out of her Jewish world. McBride quotes her in *The Color of Water*: "My parents mourned me when I married your father. They said kaddish and sat shiva. That's how Orthodox Jews mourn their dead" (McBride 1996, p. 2). His mother embraced the Church, and after her first husband died while she was pregnant with James McBride, she remained part of the Black Church community. I read

Deacon King Kong as an avowedly Christian novel with a strong message about adhering to Church communities as an inherent good. McBride, then, offers an interesting biography in that he does not identify as Jewish—and, indeed, given the history of his family, why should he?

As McBride's biography underscores, the long history of intersections between Blacks and Jews has been at times joyous and at other times fraught with deep mistrust and betrayal. The story that is often told as one of convergence (during the shared struggles for Civil Rights) decaying into rupture and mistrust is far more complex, and sensationalized antagonisms such as those perpetrated by Kanye West (see Dellatto and Porterfield 2022 for a summary) do not help to gain a clear picture. Many Jews (approximately 15% by some estimates) identify as multiracial and/or as Jews of Color. The Pew Research Center reports that multiracial Americans are growing by leaps and bounds—in fact, at a far faster demographic rate than the rest of the population. This increase in multiracial identities is reflected in art through myriad channels, from television to opera to painting. However, these stories often fall between the cracks of the discourse around "Blacks and Jews" when "Blacks" are assumed not Jewish, and "Jews" are assumed white.

Many groups who identify as Black and Jewish can be found further back in history than you might think. In *The Black Jews of Harlem*, for example, Howard Brotz describes a vibrant community of Black Jews (see Figure 2) who have been largely overlooked in histories about "Blacks and Jews." Roberta Gold, discussing this same group, argues that Jews had, of course, multiple voices about race, but that "the Yiddish press… reported frequently on anti-black racism and argued that African Americans were, in effect, 'America's Jews.' African Americans, for their part, drew on long theological and nationalist traditions which identified black history with that of the biblical Israelites" (Gold 2003, p. 180). As we saw in McBride's family, this commonality is not a given. Gold goes on to claim that both groups "found in Harlem's Black Jews, the unexpected embodiment of what had traditionally been a metaphoric linkage" (ibid). Merle Lyn Bachman details the "horrified response of the Jewish immigrant community to lynchings and to the general plight of African Americans" (Bachman 1980, p. 3) which not only "filled the Yiddish press" (ibid) but also appeared in Yiddish poetry. There was a group, Hatzad Harishon, which operated from 1964–1972, as Janice Fernheimer details in *Stepping Into Zion*, which was a "multiracial non-profit organization that attempted to ameliorate tensions among Black and white Jews" (Fernheimer 2014, p. 7). The long history of Black Jews—and the not unvexed identifications between white Jews and Black people of other faiths or non-faiths, is treated in a vast array of books and journal articles which I only have space to dip briefly into here. I am taking you on this detour to contextualize the work of Tsvey Brider because, by voicing Yiddish over Black cinema, they now form part of this history.

The title of Michael Lerner and Cornel West's book-length conversation, *Jews and Blacks: Let the Healing Begin* (Lerner and West 1995), implies the rift. West evokes Josephine Baker, whom you will hear about shortly, and who echoes the riots as a disturbing turning point propelling her decision to live in France, when he tells Lerner: "We have to take seriously what Josephine Baker said…that the very idea of America makes me tremble, makes me shake, it gives me nightmares. She is referring to her girlhood in East Saint Louis amidst its riot in 1917. It was an experience that echoed that of large numbers of Black folk between 1877 and 1915, who thought about America the way Russian Jews thought about Ukraine" (Lerner and West, p. 48). The dialogue between West and Lerner is not always easy, and the comparisons are sometimes fraught. For example, at one moment, Lerner laments that more Black people in the U.S. did not advocate on behalf of Jewish refugees fleeing Nazism. To this, West takes umbrage and asks how Lerner can ignore Paul Robeson, W. E. B. DuBois, and other public figures' efforts on behalf of Jewish causes (53). The dialogic nature of the text necessarily leaves many issues unresolved but offers a space to explore the histories of both convergence and divergence, support, neglect, and hope.

Figure 2. Black Jews of Harlem, James Van Der Zee, 1929 © James Van Der Zee Archive, The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Image supplied by the National Gallery of Art.

Other texts also take, as does the Lerner–West discussion, the rift as the starting point. Jonathan Kaufman's (1988), *Broken Alliance: The Turbulent Times Between Blacks and Jews in America* tells many fascinating stories, including that of Paul Parks, a Black soldier who helped to liberate Dachau and then, some twenty years later, marched with King in Chicago as racist whites waved swastikas, hung Nazi banners, and threw a brick at King, hitting him on the head. "Once again", Kaufman reports, "as King listened, he [i.e., Parks], told the story of a young black soldier walking into Dachau" (Kaufman 1988, p. 77). This sentiment, however, of identification between Blacks and white Jews was, by the mid-1960s, according to Kaufman, "increasingly out of date" (Kaufman 1988, p. 78). In his 2005 *Strangers in the Land: Blacks, Jews, Post-Holocaust America*, Eric Sundquist (Sundquist 2005) takes as his starting point the rift between Blacks and Jews, and this registers a turning point; he argues throughout that each relied on the other for their self-conceptions. He takes note of Black Jews and other Jews of Color and thus does not leave these identifications out of the discourse around "Blacks and Jews" when Jews are implied white and Black people are implied non-Jewish. He also asserts that "the black-Jewish question is intrinsic to and inextricable from any understanding of American culture" (Sundquist 2005, p. 12) and that "the importance of blacks for Jews and Jews for blacks in conceiving of themselves as Americans…is a matter of voluminous if often perplexing record" (Sundquist 2005, p. 1).

One perplexing record can be found in the films and life of Spike Lee. An important thread of Jewishness runs throughout Lee's films, from stereotyping of Jewish characters in *Mo' Better Blues* (1990) to mention of Jewish women in *Jungle Fever* (1991); *Get on the Bus* (1996) features a Jewish bus driver who refuses to transport a group of people to hear Louis Farrakhan because he views him as antisemitic. A brief but fascinating critique of Jewish appropriation of Blackness emerges in *Bamboozled* (2000), and then *BlacKkKlansman* (2018) offers multiple layers of influence and interconnection between Jewishness and Blackness (please see my article on *BlacKkKlansman* (Kaplan 2020) for more on this). This thread may have a biographical element: Lee's mother died of liver cancer when he was in college—Morehouse in Atlanta; his father then began dating a Jewish woman, Susan Kaplan-Lee whom he later married—much to Lee's discomfort and disapproval. Lee told the journalist and memoirist Barbara Grizutti Harrison in *Esquire* that he "hate[s] the woman. She's not a nice person. She's a bad person. It's not because she's white and she's Jewish. I just hate her" (Harrison 1992, p. 137). Lee goes on to describe how, unlike the way in which

step-mothers should behave, approaching the new family with humility, she "came like gangbusters. My mother wasn't even cold in her grave" (ibid). Harrison describes Susan Kaplan as "Lithuanian and the descendant of rabbis but considers herself 'spiritually black'" and adds, parenthetically, "(She wears dreadlocks)" (ibid). Biographically, Jews and Jewishness figured in Lee's life from his mother saying things like "I bet you John Silverburg, I bet he got a 95. You gotta be gettin' those same grades the Jewish kids are gettin'" (Harrison 1992, p. 136) through to his father's second marriage and through many other friendships and interactions. By the time Lee made *BlacKkKlansman* (2018), he had situated the proximity and sympathy between Jewishness and Blackness within a fascinating story based on a memoir by Ron Stallworth (although in the memoir, the white cop is not Jewish) of a Black man who infiltrated the KKK and befriended a white Jewish cop in the process.

I am focusing on Blacks and Jews and Blews in America, but the history in Europe, Africa, the Caribbean, and other places is also long and complex. In *Black Jews in Africa and the Americas* (2023), Tudor Parfitt points to the "linkages of different sorts between blacks and Jews in medieval Europe," which were common (Parfitt 2013, p. 3). He continues, "in Europe, for hundreds of years, being black, Jewish, sickly, and ugly became almost coterminous" (Parfitt 2013, p. 7). *BlacKkKlansman* also pointed out the dual hatred borne by the KKK towards Blacks and Jews, although historically, Blacks suffered much more from their racism than did Jews. This amalgamation through negative stereotyping did not negate the later flourishing of many Jews in Africa who felt there was no discord between Blackness and Jewishness. For the co-edited collection we are working on, we interviewed Rabbi Gershom Sizomu, who is a leader of the Abayudaya Jewish community in Uganda. The question of tension between identities of Blackness and Jewishness that so many others we talked to circled around was nonsensical to a Rabbi in a world where everyone is Black, and being Jewish is the anomaly.

In her brilliant study, *Calypso Jews: Jewishness in the Caribbean Literary Imagination* (Casteel 2016), Sarah Phillips Casteel charts the long history of intersections between Jewishness and Blackness in the Caribbean, focusing on "contact and entanglement" (Casteel 2016, p. 2). "Instead," Casteel says, "of treating Black and Jewish experience as discrete terms in an analogy between disparate historical experiences…" her book "foreground[s] areas of overlap between these diasporic histories and the ways in which they converged in the Caribbean (Casteel 2016, p. 12).[3] A longer essay could also delve into really interesting convergences, including the famous story of the Jewish songwriter and poet Abel Meerpol, whose lynching poem, "Strange Fruit," became a chilling and best-selling song when sung by Billie Holliday. There is perhaps an echo of "Strange Fruit" in the Yiddish verse played over Black cinematic images that I discuss below. Other pairings include the Jewish songwriter George Gershwin who created *Porgy and Bess* and insisted that it only be performed by Black singers and actors. From these brief samplings so far, I hope it is clear that there is not one story of "Blacks and Jews" or Black Jews. In so far as any story is told, it almost always points to an arc whereby the apex of white Jewish support for Black liberation came during the Civil Rights movement but was eroded afterward and reached a nadir in 1991, during an infamously awful series of events in Crown Heights.

In *Fires in the Mirror: Crown Heights, Brooklyn, and Other Identities*, the performance artist Anna Deavere Smith probed into the 1991 violence and tensions between Blacks and Haredim in Crown Heights. After a rebbe's motorcade hit and killed a Black child, Gavin Cato, riots erupted, and then, in retribution, a Hasidic teenager, Yankel Rosenbaum, was stabbed to death by an angry mob. Unpacking the events leading up to the violence and the reactions from Black and Jewish leaders afterward, Deavere Smith's performance art is a daring exploration of the problems between Blacks and white Jews in this neighborhood that can be understood as a microcosm of larger tensions and anxieties. When these horrific incidents unfolded, there was a sense that the convergences between Blacks and Jews, fighting shoulder to shoulder as encapsulated in the image of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel (see Figure 3 for a photo from 1968) marching to

Montgomery on 21 March 1965 for Civil Rights, had been erased and what was left was only violence and betrayal.

Figure 3. King and Heschel. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel and Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., anti-Vietnam war demonstration, Arlington National Cemetery, February 1968.

Smith's complex performances probe these questions with sensitivity to the cross-cultural identifications evident in her transformations. In a reading of Smith's performances, Cherise Smith aptly claims that Anna Deveare "Smith not only locates and embodies a liminal space in which identity is neither stable nor fixed, but she also models how to occupy the liminal space" (Smith 2011, p. 163). This liminal articulation of multiple and fluid identities resonates with the converged aesthetics in Russell's work.

Multiple versions of the story of Black-Jewish relations, histories of Blews, configurations of discord, and convergence remain ever-shifting. Advocacy groups such as Be'chol Lashon, the Jewish Multiracial Network, and Jews in All Hues provide important networking forums for Jews of Color, and there is a rise in the number of Jews who identify as Black or as Jews of Color, so the entire landscape of Jewishness is now and has always been in the process of metamorphosizing. By turning now to two short videos by Anthony Mordechai Tzvi Russell, I want to look at how these works begin from a place of convergence and trust that the racialized and gendered oppressions they work through are legible together.

The videos, each under a few minutes, are readily available on the Tsvey Brider website and can be seen here. Please take a few moments to look at "Kinder Yorn" and "In Der Fremd" before reading further; thank you: http://tsveybrider.com/ (accessed on 7 May 2023).

4. Kinder Yorn

"Kinder Yorn" is a song by Mordechai Gebirtig, which Russell sings beautifully to an arrangement made by Tsvey Brider's Dimitri Gaskin. Gaskin, an accomplished musician who studied with Josh Horowitz and Alan Bern, composes, arranges, and plays accordion with Saul Goodman's Klezmer Band and other groups in addition to Tsvey Brider. He teaches at festivals, including KlezKalifornia and others. Mordechai Gebirtig (1877–1942) was dubbed the "poet laureate of Yiddish folklore" and, according to Neil Levin, "Gebirtig's songs, along with those of his poems for which he did not furnish music, spoke to the sensibilities, emotions, and concerns of the common Yiddish-speaking folk of prewar and interwar Poland and Galicia; and they could resonate equally among an educated proletariat or more sophisticated participants in the Yiddish cultural arena" (Levin 1997). In Tsvey Brider's "Kinder Yorn" video, Russell's voice plays over images intercut from two films of the 1940s: *The Quiet One* (1948) and *The Blood of Jesus* (1941). The images of the young child walking backward and alone through city streets are from *The Quiet One*, a film narrated by a white actor playing a white psychologist about a school for mainly Black and Latino boys, Wiltwyck, in Esopus, New York. *The Quiet One* embodies a moment of Black-Jewish convergence and collaboration as it was made by three Jewish filmmakers, Sidney Meyers, Janice Loeb, and Helen Levitt, and a Black musician Ulysses Kay, whose

"Suite from the *Quiet One*" was "performed by the Yaddo Music Group Chamber Orchestra" (Wranovics 2012, p. 218). The actors, both trained and untrained, including Clarence Cooper, a counselor at Wiltwyck who played himself (Wranovics 2012, p. 216), worked with the filmmakers to collaborate on the project.

The combined effect of these films of Black actors accompanied by Yiddish songs can be read as a double act of resistance against genocide. It is often said that Yiddish is a dying language. This is and is not true. On the one hand, many of the millions of people who were murdered in the Nazi genocide were Yiddish speakers. At the same time, assimilation on the other side of the Atlantic was rapidly reducing the vast numbers of Yiddish speakers in New York city—Yiddish daily newspapers declined, and many Yiddish-speaking immigrants actively encouraged their children to speak English, not Yiddish. On the other hand, there has been a creative and vibrant revitalization of Yiddish—and Russell is an exemplar of this spirit. Yiddish programs are growing, and many non-Jews study the Yiddish language, culture, literature, and history. There are large numbers of Yiddish speakers among Haredi communities in New York, Israel, and other places. Jeffrey Shandler argues that in the twenty-first century, the symbolic importance of Yiddish is growing by leaps and bounds even while the number of its speakers may not be growing so fast (Shandler 2008, p. 5). However, the fact of genocide of many of its speakers sometimes lends Yiddish a mournfulness which Russell's work by turns embraces and outpaces, celebrating the vibrancy of Yiddish's reflowering.

Many scholars have looked at *The Quiet One* and connected it with its Italian neorealist counterparts, such as Vittorio de Sica's *The Bicycle Thief* (*Ladri di bicicilette* which came out the same year, 1948) or *Shoeshine* (*Sciuscià*, 1946). Analyses by Michele Wallace (Wallace 1993), Siegfried Kracauer (Kracauer 1997), Paula Massood (Massood 2013), Robert Sklar (Sklar 2012), Vojislava Filipevic Cordes (Cordes 2021), John Wranovics (Wranovics 2012), Dennis Doyle (Doyle 2016), Stephen Charbonneau (Charbonneau 2016), and others often stress *The Quiet One's* connection with the leftist films made by the Workers Film and Photo League and its splinter groups such as Nykino, Film Documents, and others. The film was made, according to James Agee, as "a new form of movie short roughly equivalent to the lyric poem…each image, (like each word in poetry) must have more than common intensity and related tension" (cited by Wranovics 2012, p. 202). This lyric poetic cinematic amalgam of documentary and dramatization was inaugurated by Janice Loeb, whose letter to Wiltwyck John Wranovics found in the MOMA archives. Loeb, in 1946, had visited Wiltwyck and wrote to the school to suggest a film that would "stimulate support for its ideas of child care and treatment" (cited in Wranovics 2012, p. 214).

The film takes a dramatic approach to what is ostensibly a documentary subject. (Kracauer dubs it "a documentary with a found story of high compactness" (Kracauer 1997, p. 252)). It weaves dramatic re-enactments of the life of a traumatized kid with a documentary story about a psychological profile woven from an amalgamation of different stories of children who landed in Wiltwyck. The school in Esopus, New York, enjoyed support from the likes of Eleanor Roosevelt and other prominent figures.[4] The fictional child, Donald Peters, is played by Donald Thompson, an untrained actor whose sole role this film apparently claimed. Ernest Pascucci describes Thompson as "an outgoing and articulate honors student from a supportive and stable two-parent family, whom [the filmmakers] described as the exact opposite of the character he portrayed" (Pascucci 1997, p. 26). It is a documentary, then (or, in Pascussi's term, a "noir docudrama") in a very curious sense because the deeply affecting story we are given as true is both harvested from multiple children's histories and heavily dramatized. The Black child at the center of the story is overwritten by white voices, so there is a bit of a see-saw between the good intentions of the white Jewish filmmakers and a certain vacating of Donald's subjectivity.

Within the film, we see that Donald's mother abandoned him, his father is absent, and he has been deposited with his grandmother, who beats him and only cares for him minimally and due to obligation rather than love. Donald clings to an arresting photograph of the family scene at the beach: little Donald digging in the sand at the bottom of the image:

scroll up, and the head of Donald's father is cut off—his mother and grandmother stand in the scene, ignoring him. If we recall Roland Barthes's (Barthes 1980) theory of photography and remember that he argued for a "punctum" in many photographs: a point that draws the viewer in and offers the key to the emotion of the image, we can say that the punctum of this photograph is the missing head of the father, the absence that haunts Donald. Made with all the best lefty intentions by Nykino sympathizing Film Documents, the film was illuminated by the hope that class transformation could come even to America.[5] Race is not a category, per se, in the film, although the principal actor, a child whose first and only role this was, is Black, lives in Harlem and is a product of a racist society. However, for the idealistic trio of Jewish-American filmmakers, photographers, and cinematographers Sidney Meyers, Helen Levitt, and Janice Loeb, race was not the point: class, poverty, and perhaps more saliently still, hope for neglected children to receive proper psychiatric care and overcome at least some of their traumas, was. Michele Wallace underscores that the child is not allowed "to speak in his own voice (rather the psychiatrist paraphrases his remarks from their psychoanalytic sessions)" (Wallace 1993, p. 268). Wallace also argues that "in *The Quiet One*, the women are nothing more than lifeless shadows" (ibid). Thus, with all good intentions for social transformation, the film, again, it is 1948, fails to fully realize the interiority of the Black characters who populate it—or rather, to let that interiority be told in the voice of the children. When Russell and Gaskin export Donald into the 2000s and offer him a Yiddish song about childhood, they completely transform both our reading of the film and our attachment to the child at its heart.

As viewers of *The Quiet One*, we identify very strongly with this kid. It makes intuitive sense when, in a powerful scene that takes place during a visit to his mother, in response to her cold-fish reception of him, Donald smears cold cream all over the mirror, obliterating his image (see Figure 4). If Lacan's famous mirror scene is a developmental recognition of wholeness, this child's actions symbolize a moment of self-eradication in the face of ever more hurtful rejection. However, the filmmakers are careful to assert that he did not blot himself out completely: he smudged, and there is room to clean up the act, make the image whole and clear and bright. Instead of smashing the mirror, the child smashed another glass, a shop window, and it is this breaking that ultimately will lead to the glimmers of hope for his future. The film avowedly eschews all simple, happy endings.[6] James Agee, who was brought on to lend his poetic stamp, invokes this mirror scene in his closing narration, read by the actor Gary Merrill (who played Bette Davis's husband in *All About Eve*): "Lest the generations of those maimed in childhood, each marking the next in its own image, create upon the darkness, like mirrors locked face to face in an infinite corner of despair. We want only to keep open a place of healing, courage, and hope" (cited in Wranovics 2012, p. 218).[7]

Robert Sklar notes that when *The Quiet One* came out, Agee was understood to be one of the most important film critics in the U.S. (Sklar 2012, p. 74). In 1936, Agee (Agee 2005) traveled with Walker Evans, documenting the extreme poverty he found and producing together the images and text (meant to be read aloud) which constitute *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men.* This now iconic series of images of poverty would have been very much in the zeitgeist at the time of Agee's collaboration on *The Quiet One.* Agee's poetic input into the film sounded a crucial voice at a time when his recognition was paramount. The film enjoyed critical success with accolades from the likes of everyone from Charlie Chaplin to Fritz Lang, Elia Kazan, John Huston, and others—but it was not a smash hit at the box office and even attracted the unwelcome attention of the FBI (Wranovics 2012, pp. 221–22). One early critic, Vinicius de Moraes, in 1950 wondered whether "the message of *The Quiet One* did not transcend the intent of its producers without their being conscious of the fact. The film attacks the racial problem with the most powerful and precise of weapons—poetry" (De Moraes 1950, p. 376).[8]

Figure 4. From The Quiet One, 30.36.

On Valentine's Day 1949, Bosley Crowther enthused in *The New York Times* that *The Quiet One* was a "genuine masterpiece" and continued to note that "the race of the boy is a circumstance. For this is essentially the story of any child who has hungered for love and, in the misery of that hunger, has rebelled in some unsocial way" (Crowther 1949). In claiming, again in 1949, that race is a "circumstance," Crowther implicitly aligns himself with the ethos of Meyers, Loeb, and Levitt, who made the film to encourage support for Wiltwyck and, more broadly, to catalyze hope that troubled youth can overcome trauma through therapeutic practice. Their vision would have been following the communist idea that class trumps race. As Lilya Kaganovsky has shown in the context of the Soviet cinema in which the filmmakers of *The Quiet One* would have been immersed, race, with which the Soviets were obsessed (and for an absence of inequality around which they criticized the U.S.), is nonetheless erased in favor of class and work. In *The Voice of Technology* (Kaganovsky 2018) describes a scene in the *Return of Nathan Bekker* (1932) where Nathan brings home from America to the USSR a bricklayer. Upon meeting him, Nathan's father asks if Jim, who is Black, is a Jew. Nathan's response? "He is a *bricklayer*" (Kaganovsky 2018, pp. 160–61) (see also Senderovich 2022). Indeed, it was Donald's poverty and trauma, not his race, that the filmmakers of *The Quiet One* wanted us to focus on. Of course, we can see now that there is no way to separate these intersectional identities and that racism contributed to Donald's loneliness, poverty, and trauma.

Musing on *The Quiet One* as a film that evokes stark reality through a dream-like quality, the hugely influential film scholar and cultural critic Sigfried Kracauer pondered that "perhaps films look most like dreams when they overwhelm us with the crude and unnegotiated presence of natural objects—as if the camera had just now extricated them from the womb of physical existence and as if the umbilical cord between image and actuality had not yet been severed" (Kracauer 1997, p. 164). Kracauer will have been well aware that his metaphor here is manifest in *The Quiet One* through the endless longing Donald exhibits for

his missing mother. Indeed, it is the word "baby" written on the blackboard at Wiltwyck that inaugurates within the film the very long flashback to his life before the twin idylls of the countryside and the psychiatrist intervened to save him.

It is entirely possible that I missed something, but in all the scholarship on *The Quiet One* that I perused, I did not see one reference to a scene wherein Donald befriends, briefly, two boys slightly older than him. The three enjoy a poignantly short-lived moment of camaraderie on the streets of Harlem, where they try to take in a film in the afternoon. The two new friends, mimicking the movie poster, embrace and kiss (see Figure 5). It is an exuberant moment that passes quickly as the trio dissolves and Donald is once again left alone, wandering, as we see him in "Kinder Yorn." The film, interestingly for 1948, does not recoil at this homoerotic exploration. Indeed, this is one of the only times we see Donald smile as he watches the pair. This queering links the two videos made by Tsvey Brider, "Kinder Yorn," and "In Der Fremd," and, more importantly, allows us to read the hopefulness of the film more fully—expanding it out beyond hope for racial equality and into equality of all kinds.

Figure 5. From The Quiet One, 23.25.

As will also be the case with "In Der Fremd," a remarkable number of resonances between the Yiddish song and video allow us to reflect on these profound convergences. Gebertig's "Kinder Yorn" (see Figure 6) and Donald's experience depicted in the film illuminate the short, powerful video and provide a stellar example of converged aesthetics.

Childhood, sweet childhood.

Your memories will stick with me forever.
Just thinking about it gets me all torn up inside—
It's like I grew old overnight.

And my mother—how much I loved her—
Even if she had to drag me to school.
Every single little pinch from her fingers—
It's the memories that linger, even if the pinches don't.

There it is—the shack where I was born and bred—
And like the crib is there too, in the selfsame place;
Like a dream, all of it is fading…

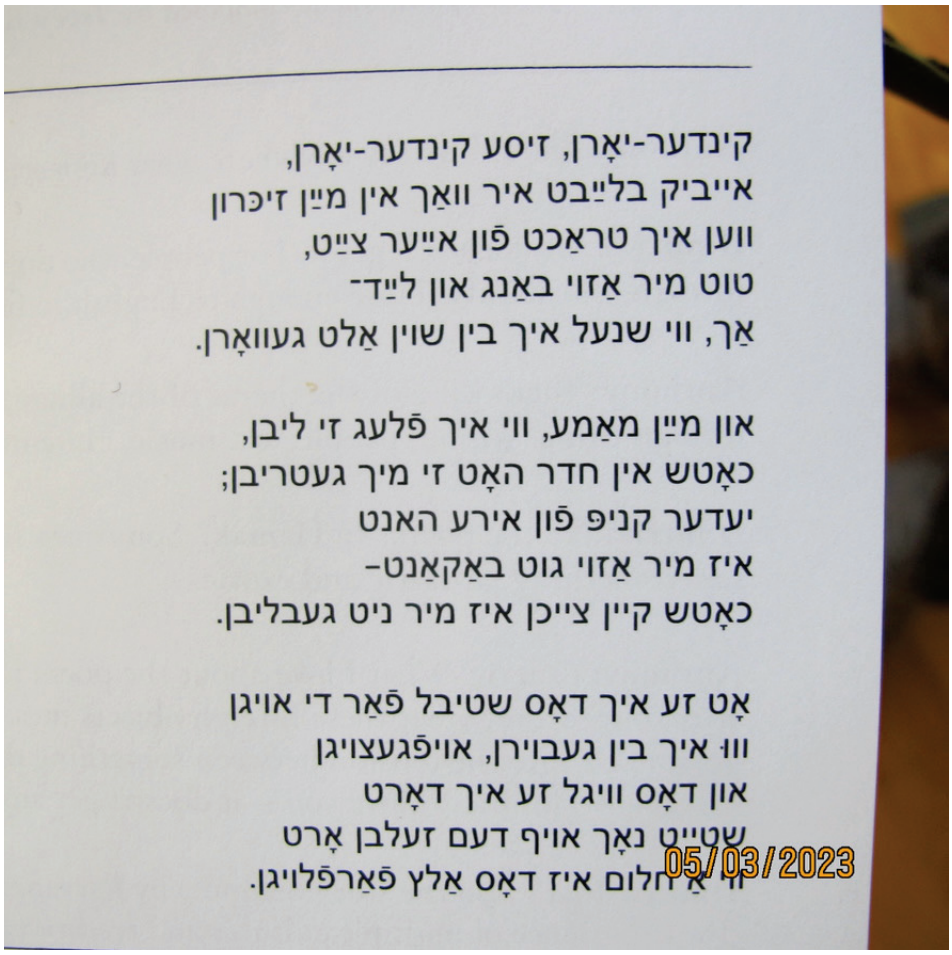

Figure 6. The title song of Russell and Gaskin's video, Mordechai Gebirtig's "Kinder Yorn"'s lyrics in the original Yiddish from the *Kosmopolitan* booklet, above, and in translation, above (15).

Moving through the song line by line, we see that there is nothing "sweet" in Donald's childhood years. However, by singing mournfully over the image of the delicate, lost child alone on the street, Russell grants him some hope for future sweetness. "You'll stay alive…" is, of course, true for trauma survivors, and by marking that here we see the indelibility of that memory even though the valence is transformed from honeyed to angst-laden. The nostalgia that grips the protagonist of Gebirtig's song could be transferred to the nostalgia Donald may feel for the idyll of Wiltwyck. We never know what happens to him, later in life, of course, or how his therapeutic transformation ultimately played out, but we can imagine that perhaps this bracketed time in the countryside could evoke such nostalgia.

The remnants of the "shack" still visible to the narrator of the song again underscore the memory of poverty that Donald will always carry. "Like a dream," we see the resonance immediately between the dream-like qualities Kracauer pointed out in the film and the dream-memory scape of the song. There is the uncanniness, too, of the crib in the song and the crib in *The Quiet One.* In a devastating scene, Donald goes to visit his mother. Not only, as I mentioned above, does she not greet him warmly, but she promptly puts him in charge of the baby who lies in the cradle so she can go out with her man. Donald, naturally, is in no emotional state to care for anyone, and he replicates his mother's abandonment of him by leaving the crying baby alone in the apartment as he wanders the streets yet again, an achingly lonely flaneur. "My faithful mother I've lost as well" (this appears in a different translation of the poem—the translation in *Kosmopolitan* is closer to the original, the other translation is on the website (see Gerbirtig n.d.). Donald never had a faithful mother, but he did have a lost mother, and this near-closing moment of the song leaves us with the impression that, in old age, one is destined to lose one's mother, and thus the premature loss of her in Donald's story is achingly painful and yet resonates with the less-sharp sense of loss experienced by the narrator of the song. Mordechai Gebirtig was shot in the ghetto in Krakow in 1942.

The powerful emotional resonance of Russell's voice as he sings in Yiddish offers what I can only imagine is care for this lost kid, mourning for Gebirtig and other victims of the Holocaust, mourning for victims of racism and poverty. The amalgam of song and image, Yiddishkeit and Blackness, makes this short video an aesthetically converged moment of compassion and identification.

5. "In Der Fremd"

In the video entitled "In Der Fremd," Russell's voice sings in Yiddish while Josephine Baker sings something else unknown to viewers of just this artistic reworking. Borrowed from Marc Allégret's 1934 film *Zouzou*, in which Baker plays the eponymous character, the Yiddish words express all the longing so acutely felt by Zouzou. In "In Der Fremd" Russell queers Josephine Baker. She becomes familiar and strange at once. He makes her Jew—ish by inserting Yiddish under her tongue. Baker had been, according to her son, Jean-Claude, who wrote one of the many biographies, bisexual, and she had cross-dressed (see Figure 7). Scholarship on Baker often turns to this queerness. Consider, for example, K. Allison Hammer's reading which argues, "Baker therefore performed in *La danse sauvage* and *la danse des bananes* the queer plasticity and transferability of the phallus" (Hammer 2020, p. 166).

From the very moment of her life-changing appearance in Paris in 1925, Baker had been perceived as man and/or woman, as Black and/or white, as human and/or animal. Here is Pierre de Régnier in the weekly newspaper *Candide* in 1925:

> Joséphine Baker.
>
> Est-ce un homme? Est-ce une femme ? Ses lèvres sont peintes en noir, sa peau est couleur de banane, ses cheveux, déjà courts, sont collés sur sa tête comme si elle était coiffée de caviar, sa voix est suraiguë elle est agitée d'un perpétuel tremblement, son corps se tortille comme celui d'un serpent ou plus exactement, il semble être un saxophone en mouvement et les sons de l'orchestre ont l'air de sortir d'elle-même; elle est grimaçante et contusionnée, elle louche, elle gonfle ses joues, se désarticule, fait le grand écart et finalement part à quatre pattes, avec les jambes raides et le derrière plus haut que la tête, comme une girafe en bas âge. Est-elle horrible, est-elle ravissante, est-elle nègre, est-elle blanche, a-t-elle des cheveux ou a-t-elle le crâne peint en noir, personne ne le sait.
>
> Joséphine Baker. Is it a man? Is it a woman? Her lips are painted black, her skin is the color of a banana, her hair, already short, is glued onto her head as if it were capped in caviar, her voice is supersharp she is agitated by a perpetual trembling, her body squirms like that of a serpent or more exactly, it seems to be a moving

saxophone and the sounds of the orchestra seem to emit from her; she is bruised and grimaces, she crosses her eyes, she puffs out her cheeks, she disarticulates, does a split, and finally exits on all fours, with her legs stiff and her butt higher than her head, like a young giraffe. Is she horrible, is she ravishing, is she black, is she white, does she have hair or does she have a skull painted black, no one knows. (Régnier 1925, p. 6)

Figure 7. Josephine Baker cross-dressing. Image produced with permission from © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

This review was accompanied by sketches by the same reviewer, only signed with his nickname, "Tigre." The sketches exaggerate Baker's lips and fall squarely into racist stereotyping, which belies the myth we like to hold that all of Paris welcomed Baker with open arms in 1925. This review captures how Baker was perpetually perceived as undefinable and as none and all of the binaries: man/woman, black/white, human/animal, horrible/beautiful. While the tone of the review and the troubling sketches indicate a complex mix of responses on the part of this white French reviewer writing 100 years ago, the sense of undefinability in Baker's multiple, complex identities may be one of the reasons Russell was interested in returning to her and making her a Yiddish singer.

In a fascinating essay, Theresa Eisele examines how, just three years later, in 1928, when Baker performed in Vienna, it was the Jewish "impresarios, journalists, and artists" (Eisele 2022, p. 26) who supported her against the stuffy ones who worried about her morals. Eisele "highlights the complex solidarities between Jewish and Black artists in their struggle to belong" (ibid) and continues to note that "Jewish artists forged special connections to their Black fellow artists (Eisele 2022, p. 30) in ways that accord with how Russell's work also highlights these complex solidarities.

Baker fits perfectly, then, with the ideas of complex identities and aesthetic convergence that Russell's projects so thoughtfully work through.

By representing her this way, Russell magnifies some of the queerness already present in Baker's history. Moreover, she was interested in Jewishness—although I am not sure in Yiddishkayt specifically; to complete the multi-ethnic, multi-religious "Rainbow Tribe" of kids Baker adopted and housed at her Château des Milandes, Baker sought out a Jewish child. According to Bennetta Jules-Rosette, "While on tour in the Middle East, she looked for a Jewish son in Israel, but was turned down due to strict Israeli government regulations on international adoptions" (Jules-Rosette 2007, p. 194). When she returned to France, she found and adopted a Jewish baby, Moïse, from an orphanage. Believing that each of the children should know something of their origins, an Israeli tutor was engaged to teach Moïse Hebrew—apparently, he hated it and ran away at every opportunity (Jules-Rosette 2007, pp. 195–96). However, in a remarkable interview with Henry Louis Gates, Jr., who was simultaneously interviewing none other than James Baldwin, Baker, who had left a racist America with violent images in her mind's eye from the East St. Louis race riots, affirms her affinity with Jewishness: "How very often," she says, "I've felt like the wandering Jew with my twelve children on my arms" (Gates 1985, p. 600). When Russell rewrites her in this role as a Yiddish singer, the long memory and influence of Baker—her iconic status as a highly sought after and famous Black icon, yet also deeply indeterminant, American singer and performer in Paris, and perhaps, her "Rainbow Family Project" are all traces that arise as we see her but do not hear her.

The Yiddish words sung by Russell over Baker's image are a poem by Leyb Naydus entitled "In Der Fremd," which was translated as "In an Alien Place" and anthologized in *An Anthology of Modern Yiddish Poetry* edited by Ruth Whitman. The poem (see Figure 8 for the Yiddish original) speaks of longing, and the visuals capture Zouzou's unfulfilled longing for Jean:

> For whole nights—(don't ask how many)
> I was rich with suffering and dreams…
> I longed for you as a sailboat longs
> for the cool swell of the river.
> I longed for you as a dark soft curl
> of woman's hair longs for a flower,
> as the blueness of the sky longs for the rhythmic fables of bells.
> Longed, as an empty cradle longs
> for someone's tremulous sleep,
> as the mirror longs for reflection,
> as the beginning longs for the end (Whitman 1995, p. 159)

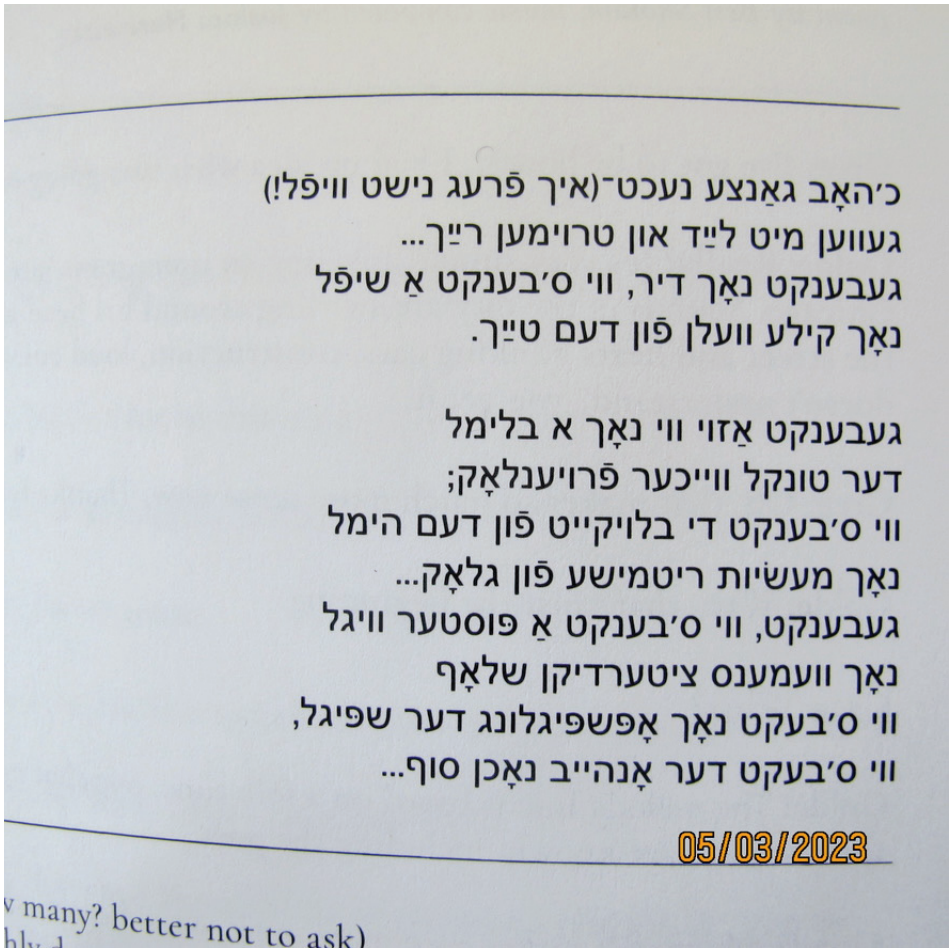

Figure 8. Leyb Naydus, "In Der Fremd" from *Kosmopolitan* booklet (p. 27, translation above).

There are a surprisingly huge number of images in the film, *Zouzou*, that correspond with those in Naydus's poem: Zouzou herself is "rich with suffering," and the object of her desire, Jean, emerges from a sailboat, just as Russell sings of a "dark soft curl" we see Baker's curly hair; we know from Baker's biography that she adopted many children—filling in the "empty cradle," and in an early scene in *Zouzou* Baker, as a child, ponders her reflection at length. The empty cradle returns us to the cradle in Gebirtig's song and *The Quiet One.*

Naydus was a particularly apt poet to pair with Baker, as Russell will have been well aware. Jordan Finkin, whose book *Exile as Home* focuses on Naydus, describes the particular sensibility of this poet as expanding "the possibilities of Yiddish poetry via his rich cosmopolitan works, introducing a wealth of themes and forms seldom seen in that language… His groundbreaking poetry explores classicism, exoticism, eroticism, Orientalism, and Judaism with equal verve.… Naydus's unique body of work not only expanded the repertoire of Yiddish poetry but also cemented its place on the world literary stage, convincing young Yiddish writers that this was a language that could fulfill their artistic aspirations."

It is also keenly appropriate that Russell has Baker's French replaced with Yiddish because Naydus translated Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du mal* into Yiddish and was, according to Finkin, very influenced by Baudelaire, Nerval, and Verlaine. Finkin argues that Naydus saw "the imagined contact situation" between self and other not as a "matter of deformative pathology but of a formative potential" (Finkin 2017, p. 80). Naydus, dubbed on the website Yiddishkayt as the "Poet Rock Star of Grodno," adored French culture (Yiddishkayt n.d.). Benjamin Harshav explains that Naydus's "fine, well-metered poems were filled with French words, pianos, Chopin nocturnes, and nostalgia" (Yiddishkayt n.d.). Thus, the Tsvey Brider project puts Russell's Yiddish over Baker's French using the poetry of a poet whom himself

mixed languages—three polyglots with complex and multivalent identities come together in this one short video. This plurivocality was, as Shandler shows in *Adventures in Yiddishland*, an inherent part of Yiddish itself as the language sponges up the disparate locations in which it is spoken.

The bulk of the visual of (the poem and the video have the same name) "In Der Fremd" is from the very end of *Zouzou*, yet throughout Tsvey Brider's reconstruction, we see glimpses of the young girl who became the glamorous star who sings "C'est Lui" in a gilded gown trimmed in feathers (or is it fur?). In the film, we first see Zouzou as a ten-year-old "Polynesian" circus curiosity—supposedly the twin sister of a white brother, both the offspring of a Chinese woman and an Indian man. The "twins" are presented lovingly and not as a horror—more like a wink-wink genetic impossibility. While they are presented at the circus as "Polynesian," later in the film, Jean tells another sailor that his "sister" is from Martinique. Matthew Pratt Guterl notes of these flexible geographies that "the comedy, or farce, lay in the bright, grotesque, bizarre display of so many unexpectedly aligned features of colonialism in one place and at one time and even on one body, breeching the expository walls that separated Indochina from Martinique from Algeria. To conceive of this technique, Baker needed only to think creatively about the familiar form of the music revue, itself the founding venue for her fame, which relied on the orchestration of variation" (Guterl 2010, p. 27).

The "twins's" kinship structure is fictive, and their actual origins remain fuzzy. As Elizabeth Ezra notes, "Baker's enormous popularity owed much to her cosmopolitan identity: she could evoke Africa, the Caribbean, the United States, and France, by turns or all at once as the occasion required" (Ezra 2000, p. 99). Ezra discusses the biographical Jewishness of the stage manager in the film, Saint-Lévy, but she does not comment on how this "cosmopolitan" fluid identity resonates with Jewishness as a construct. Guterl finds that Baker offered "herself up as the personification of the tropics, positioning herself as the antidote to conventional modern life" (Guterl 2017, p. 341) and that her "repeated gestures to… outside spaces…made her a repeating island…turning her body into something that was always slightly out of sync with modern Paris" (Guterl 2017, pp. 343–44).

Returning to the film, Zouzou is portrayed as a lively and loving character who looks after children, plays the mandolin and sings, and brings home stray puppies to her "father," the appropriately named Papa Mêlé. She takes up a position as a laundress—this works way better in French because the place she works is, in fact, a "blanchisserie"—and she folds and irons along with all the white blonde laundresses. There is no diegetic racism. At the blanchisserie Zouzou befriends Claire, who falls in love with Jean. However, it turns out that Zouzou herself is in love with her "brother," a sailor who is a bit of a womanizer and even has a naked lady tattooed on his arm (see Figure 9).

Near the end of the film Papa Mêlé becomes ill and dies suddenly on the very same night that Jean is falsely accused of murder (he was in the wrong place at the wrong time). Now desperate for funds and without either of the men she lived with, Zouzou returns to the theatre and negotiates a top spot. While she had declared early in the film that she wanted to dance ("J'ai envie de danser!"), there is just one scene in which Zouzou seriously dances before her overnight stardom erupts. She dances with her shadows (see Figure 10), plays with them, transforms them, and embraces the enormity of the silhouette. Hannah Durkin reads this scene as one of resistance: Baker, she argues, "uses bodily gesture to rupture colonialist configurations of Black womanhood and assert her authorship" (Durkin 2019, p. 114). Baker had said in 1949: "You can see why I love—why I adore—the movies. They are the endless play of all shadows, a dream in black and white" (cited in Groo 2011). I am anachronistically seeing Kara Walker here and yet an appropriated Kara Walker where Baker's silhouettes magnify her dancerly shapes rather than broadcast while resisting the degradations of slavery. I also remember what Michele Wallace said about the women in *The Quiet One*, nothing more than shadows.

Figure 9. Jean's tattoo.

Figure 10. Baker dancing with shadows, Zouzou 46: 37.

Zouzou resisted being hired after this stunning dance and then became a tough negotiator for her position instantly when she needed it. We see nothing of her rise to fame—one day, she is a laundress, and the next, a superstar. To a jam-packed audience in a huge house and preceded by many white dancing girls, Zouzou first floats onto the stage in a cage.

The gilded cage had been prefigured earlier in the film when Zouzou reunited with Jean; they run through the town illicitly freeing birds for sale; the cage also appears at the exact moment that Jean is falsely imprisoned. Of course, this is long before the era of huge protests and rightful outrage over the false imprisonment of Black men for crimes they did not commit, but there is an echo, perhaps, to our sensibilities, of Baker's mournful song at the very moment of her brother's imprisonment. Moreover, this is the second time in the film he is caged—he had been in the naval jail for a short spell for a minor infraction and, indeed, had freed the caged birds after sneaking out of the boat and swimming ashore to be reunited with his soi-disant sister. In *Second Skin*, Anne Anlin Cheng (Cheng 2011) asks us to consider what it would mean to see Baker as a "fracture in the representational history of the Black female body" (Cheng 2011, p. 3), and I see Russell's work as contributing to this fracture; this resistance, the shadow play as pressing against rather than re-affirming Baker's subjugation.

Haiti appears in *Zouzou* as another fictive homeland for the yearning character. "C'est toi mon seul paradis, Haiti" (It's my only paradise), Baker sings nostalgically, "je vivais des jours heureux/Mais tout est fini/Seul dans mon exile aujourd'hui/Je chante, le coeur meutri." (I lived happy days/But now all is finished/Alone in my exile today/I sing, my heart dead, see Figure 11). Like the longing for various lost homelands in Naydus's poem, Zouzou's longing for this fictive other place that is neither Polynesia nor Martinique becomes a longing for an impossible space that could embrace her disparate and confusing (to some) identities. We can see the trace of Donald, lost on the streets, endlessly longing for the absent father, the distant mother, and the care that eludes him.

Figure 11. Baker in a cage.

As Leyb Naydus put it in another of his poems, "I am always a wanderer/A wanderer…And I have more homes than spaces, more than the dreams in my soul" (cited in Finkin 2017, p. 20). In Russell's work, singing Yiddish over Baker can be imagined as part of the "borderless nature of Yiddishland"—he describes (Russell 2018) connections through Yiddish as defying borders. Russell "wanted to create an imaginary space where there might have been some kind of historic African American Jewish music because as far as I know it doesn't exist." What would the components of combined African American and Jewish music have been? "I wanted," he says, "to use diaspora as an artistic medium" (Russell 2018). This rich and fascinating desire to draw on what is, in effect, an alternative history to imagine what a convergence of African American and Yiddish music might have looked like, sounded like, felt like, is part of Russell's overall project of asserting an always already thereness to a conjoining of the two musical and therefore cultural idioms. Three multilingual, multiply identifying artists converge in this one short video which demonstrates an intuitive convergence between Blackness and Jewishness, a converged aesthetic that makes us feel the resonances and connections that have always been below or above the surface of things.

Russell and Gaskin's videos surface the granular nuances missed in many of the extant narratives, and this contemporary creative work is in dialogue with the findings of historians and other scholars who have traced the history of the interchange between "Blacks and Jews." In a recent reading of the popular Yiddish writer Sarah Smith, Saul Zaritt (Zaritt 2023) encourages "scholars not to pit a writer's Jewish and Yiddish identity against an American one but rather to read the uncertain conjunction of multiple cultural vocabularies" (Zaritt 2023, p. 3). We can see that in the videos, the multiple cultural vocabularies of Black cinema converge with Yiddish lyrics and poetry to create new spaces that unfold onto other possible identifications. The very diversity of patterns in these texts reflects the multiple layers of influence and the deep interconnection between Jewishness, Blackness, Blewishness, inviting spaces of inquiry and illuminating new aspects of the relationship between these communities that will contribute to the ongoing exploration of difference and often troubled identifications of all kinds. At a historical moment when walls and divisions are being reinforced, we need to celebrate artists such as Russell, whose work and lives confound borders and offer intersectional identities, converged aesthetics, and new modes of creative inquiry. Jewishness and Blackness exert mutually powerful influences on U.S. culture aesthetically, culturally, personally, and in ways that shape new narratives about mixed identities. Russell's work—in the videos I discussed here and his larger musical oeuvre—disrupts ideas about animosity and tension between Blacks and Jews and, more importantly, offers an inspiring template for how art reveals the true beautiful messiness of complex identities through converged aesthetics.

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[2] The *Convergence* record is described thusly on Russell's website: "Vocalist Anthony Russell, in collaboration with acclaimed klezmer consort Veretski Pass (Joshua Horowitz, Cookie Segelstein and Stuart Brotman), set out to create new musical idioms by combining two distinct older ones: African American spirituals and the music of Jewish Eastern Europe. Drawing from a diverse collection of folksongs, anthems, lullabies, art and religious music, *Convergence* mobilizes an array of historic genres to evoke a multi-diasporic sound. Early blues, Hungarian and Bessarabian klezmer, 'old time' fiddle music, synagogue tunes and contemporary classical music combine to create a repertoire of songs authentically inhabiting the sounds and histories of two traditions."

[3] See also Casteel and Kaufman, *Caribbean Jewish Crossings.* (Casteel and Kaufman 2019).

[4] "There are very few places that can boast a roster of supporters that includes first lady Eleanor Roosevelt, prizefighter Floyd Patterson, writers Claude Brown and James Agee, and photographer Helen Levitt. But this one does" (Trodson 2008).

[5] Frédéric Thomas (Thomas 2018) similarly notes the empathy that the filmmakers feel in the context of Levitt's earlier film, *In the Street 1"* Le spectateur y sent l'empathie des réalisateurs, qui semblent s'être fondus dans le brouhaha des rues et de la vie quotidienne". (Thomas 2018, p. 171). ("The spectator feels here the empathy of the filmmakers, blended in with the brouhaha of the daily life of the streets").

[6] See (Wojcik 2016) for a reading of unhappiness in *The Quiet One.*

[7] See (Massood 2013) for more on the narration and also on Levitt's photographs.

[8] For an excellent examination of psychiatric critiques of the absence of race as a category in the film, see (Doyle 2016). "Dr. Mosse argued that The Quiet One's refusal to acknowledge and explain the existence of racial inequality actually squandered a teaching opportunity" (Doyle 2016, p. 97). See also (Charbonneau 2016).

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arts

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Article

Identity as Palimpsest

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Abstract: This article focuses on the formation of identity as a stratified discourse between the singular and the collective, and how that exchange is expressed as a visual palimpsest by the artists Annette Cords, G Farrell Kellum, and Njideka Akunyili Crosby. Through their artworks, each artist explores their own identity formation, but also identity formation of those living amid the Postmodern condition of the Western world in the late stages of capitalism. All three artists explore how the collective is manifested in their singular identities by weaving in the personal, intimate, and everyday vernacular into their artworks while also including remnants of wider cultural influences. In the contemporary moment, the dynamic process of identity formation remains betwixt any sort of settled or concretized state. This unresolved status is also reflected in the conceptualization and construction of the artworks by Cords, Kellum, and Akunyili Crosby. The messy interplay between the singular and collective is presented in their artworks as unexpected juxtapositions of diverse information, images, materials, and mark-making.

Keywords: identity; palimpsest; singular; collective; artwork

1. Introduction

This article explores new articulations of identity in contemporary art practices. Its significance and importance within the research field is due to its demonstration of how various contemporary artists are responding to the evolving nature of identity formation in the contemporary moment which includes the influence of the Postmodern condition, late capitalism, and the Anthropocene. The main goal of the work is to argue for the conception of identity as a palimpsest which is represented in a variety of visual forms. Various theoretical writings are utilized to elucidate the relationship between the singular and collective in identity formation and how this exchange is evident in certain contemporary art practices.

The current state of the field includes important publications such as Stepping Out!: Female Identities in Chinese Contemporary Art, Self-Made: Creating Our Identities from Da Vinci to the Kardashians, The Double: Identity and Difference in Art since 1900, This Is a Portrait If I Say So: Identity in American Art, 1912 to Today, and The Cindy Sherman Effect: Identity and Transformation in Contemporary Art.

2. Results

Individual identities are complex and convoluted; they can also be messy and malleable while remaining continuously in flux. As Laura Miller has described of writer Kimberlé Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality, "every individual resides at the nexus of multiple identities, each affecting and shaping the others" (Miller 2018). A good visualization of all this complexity is the concept of the palimpsest. In the study of texts, the palimpsest is a page of writing which has had text erased or removed so that more text can be applied over top of the original. Through this process, traces of the original text are left slightly visible as ghostly remnants on the page. If we make a correlation of the palimpsest to identity, a palimpsest *as* identity, is then something which is built up through layering while retaining evidence of the earlier layers. In this article, I will be

focusing on the formation of identity as an unresolved discourse between the singular and the collective, and how that exchange is expressed as a visual palimpsest by the artists Annette Cords, G. Farrell Kellum, and Njideka Akunyili Crosby. Through their artworks, each artist explores their own identity formation, but also identity formation of those living amid the Postmodern condition of the Western world in the late stages of capitalism. This condition is also coupled with the 21st century ramifications of the massive changes being made to the planet in the era of the Anthropocene, which adds further complexity and anxiety to identity formation in the contemporary moment.

If we conceive of identity formation under these contemporary conditions as an exchange between the interior and exterior, or singular and collective, then we can also theorize this interaction as an ongoing dialogue. As a form of discourse, these exchanges can also be considered a form of communication. All three of the artists explored here create palimpsests to show how the collective is manifested in their singular identities by weaving in the personal, intimate, and everyday vernacular into their artworks as they are in communication with the remnants of wider cultural influences. In the contemporary moment, the fluctuating process of identity formation remains betwixt any sort of settled or concretized state. This unresolved status is also reflected in the conceptualization and construction of the artworks by Cords, Kellum, and Akunyili Crosby. The messy interplay between the singular and collective is presented in their artworks as unexpected juxtapositions of diverse information, images, materials, and mark-making.

2.1. Singular and Collective

To better elucidate the relationship of the singular to the collective in the cosmopolitanism of the 21st century, I have drawn upon a multitude of theories and writings. The first is by the philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy. Nancy deems the singular/collective relationship as an exchange that is a radical ontological status of being "singular plural"—both at the same time, never one without the other. Nancy posits that being itself depends upon a "being-in-common", an understanding that inextricably locates the singular within the collective. The individual is given through the plural in which "this consciousness—or this communication—is ecstasy: which is to say consciousness is never *mine*, but to the contrary, I only have it in and through community (Nancy's italics)" (Nancy 1991, p. 19).

Hannah Arendt expressed a similar connection between interiority and the exterior in her analysis of the Socratic inner dialogue. Even within the supposed solitude of the Socratic inner dialogue, Arendt emphasizes the presence of community in the turn toward interiority: "this faculty of thought, which is exercised in solitude, extends into the strictly political sphere, where I am always together with others" (Arendt 2005, p. 157). One crucial aspect of Arendt's re-examination of the Socratic inner dialogue is how she circuitously navigates the critical connection between the singular subject and the plural (or the political as Arendt names it). Arendt, like Socrates, advocates for solitude as the situation in which the inner dialogue thought can best be realized. Any contact during the inner dialogue is considered unsettling and detrimental; "if somebody addresses me", Arendt writes, "If somebody addresses me, I must now talk to him, and not to myself, and in talking to him, I change" (Arendt 2005, p. 98). Socratic estrangement, however, is given a clever hermeneutic twist by Arendt when she ponders that "the Socratic 'being-one' is not so unproblematic as it seems; I am not only just for others but for myself, and in the latter case, I clearly am not just one. A difference is inserted into my Oneness" (Arendt 2005, pp. 184–85). The Arendtian difference that is inserted into the subject is revealed as the presence of the polyphonic multiplicity of community. Through this revelation, Arendt emphasizes the interdependence of the singular and collective. She deftly pokes at the unity of the hermetic singular subject—the metaphysical "oneness"—into which Arendt inserts a difference. This same interdependence between subject and world emphasized by Arendt is later shown to be crucial in the analysis of the artworks by Cords, Kellum, and Akunyili Crosby.

To further demonstrate the concept of identity formation as dialogical interplay, I turn to Mikhail Bakhtin's concepts of "polyphony" and "heteroglossia". Just as Bakhtin believed that dialogical literature contained polyphony and heteroglossia, I argue that they are also present in the negotiation between the singular and collective. Polyphony means the existence of many voices, each with its own perspective. The theory of polyphony asserts that even within a single perspective, there are always multiple voices and viewpoints, because "language [and thoughts] are often borrowed from others". (Robinson 2011). Heteroglossia is like polyphony in the sense that it also describes a diversity of voices that may be present within a written or visual work of art. Bakhtin describes this occurrence as the "sideward glance" in which the emergent presence of other voices is considered and accounted for during the inner/outer dialogue. It means thinking of the other when forming a response, or as Bakhtin states, "no word [or gesture] is without its intense sideward glance at someone else's word" (Bakhtin 1984, p. 203). For Bakhtin, the recognition of the other arising from a dialogical exchange can have powerful effects on a subject because entire identities and worldviews are shaped by the experiences brought forth in their encounters. An intersectionality of voices is dynamically present in the heteroglossic network that surrounds each individual. In their own ways, Cords, Kellum, and Akunyili Crosby each create visual manifestations that show us the heteroglossic network in their explorations of identity.

Lastly, to further appreciate the imbroglio of exterior pressures on the interiority of the self, I lean upon the thoughts of Kwame Anthony Appiah. Appiah is also a proponent of thinking about identity as an undetermined discourse between the self and society. He asserts that "our individuality isn't produced in a vacuum; rather, the available social forms and, of course, our interactions with others help shape it" (Appiah 2006). Appiah is also careful to point out that the individual does have a certain degree of agency, and is often able to push back, subvert, or sidestep the characteristics encompassed in established social identities. As he claims, "identities come, first, with labels and ideas about why and to whom they should be applied. Second, your identity shapes your thoughts and how you should behave; and third, if affects the way other people treat you. Finally, all these dimensions of identity are contestable, always up for dispute" (Appiah 2018, p. 12). The dispute that Appiah references is the dialogue between the singular and collective, but more significantly, by framing the exchange as a dispute he emphasizes that these two may often be at odds with one another, the singular may resist the collective, and that their relationship or influence may evolve over time. This is similar to Judith Butler's critique of Foucault's sense of society scribing its influence on the body. In her discussion of subjectification, Butler candidly asks: "how can it be that the subject, taken to be the condition for and instrument of agency, is at the same time the effect of subordination, understood as the deprivation of agency?" (Butler 1997, p. 10). In her text, *Gender Trouble*, Butler criticizes Foucault's presumption of the body as a static *tabula rasa* awaiting cultural inscription. In a similar manner, I want to suggest that the individual negotiates and navigates an ontological space that relinquishes the predominance of any singular constituting force in the formation of identity.

The ability of the individual to negotiate or resist exterior constituting forces is supported by Appiah's assertion that individuals often invent new identities because the existing ones that are presented to them through cultural conduits are deemed insufficient or misaligned. The evolving exchange between the interior/exterior or the singular/collective enables the formation of new permutations of identity. As Appiah states, "Identities are so diverse and extensive because, in the modern world, people need an enormous array of tools in making a life. The range of options sufficient for each of us isn't enough for us all. Indeed, people are making up new identities all the time" (Appiah 2006). Through the process of making and re-making, dissolving, and erasure, individual identities emerge as unfolding interstitial zones of intersectionality. It is worth noting here that my use here of intersectionality goes beyond the original conception by Crenshaw and is closer in usage to "scholars and activists [which] have broadened intersectionality to engage a range of issues,

social identities, power dynamics, legal and political systems, and discursive structures" (Carbado et al. 2013). This broader sense of intersectionality has been utilized so that it mirrors the range of holistic forces acting on the formation of an individual identity, but also the evolving and unresolved nature of identity. This fragmented layering and unfinalized character of identity is perhaps best manifested through visual representation in the form of a palimpsest.

2.2. Identity as Palimpsest

The manifestations of heteroglossia, polyphony, intersectionality, and being singular/plural within identities does take the form of palimpsests in the artworks of Cords, Kellum, and Akunyili Crosby. These artists visualize the different influences on identity and how they are intertwined as woven, sculptural, collaged, and painted palimpsests. Through the processes of layering, concealing, and revealing of images, impressions, and text, each artist creates complex visual metaphors of identity. Not only do they explore the entangled and amorphous nature of identities in their artistic practices, but they also utilize diverse materials and construction methods to form palimpsests that examine the relationship between singular and collective identities. For instance, in G. Kellum's *Lady Boom Bap* (Figure 1), he creates several collaged layers of magazine Pages from *Vibe*, acrylic paint, fabric, and marks made by a paint pen. The magazine pages are sliced and spliced to display fragments of body parts, microphones, and slivers of recognizable figure from hip-hop culture such as the rapper Eminem. These cultural references are overlaid with Kellum's mark-making which serve as a record of his presence but also as an archive of his movements, gestures, and splashes. By building up a complex visual field, Kellum weaves together pieces of cultural influences with his own singularity—personal and intimate touches—which as a whole present a conversation between the singular and collective. The identities entwined in this artwork are multiple and varied, as they form a nexus of Kellum's identity in visual form. The various identities represented here include hip hop, graffiti, fashion, architecture, street art, pop culture, being an urbanite, an artist, an academic, an African American, and a Philadelphian.

Figure 1. G. Kellum, *Lady Boom Bap*, Acrylic, collage, paint pen and fabric on wood.

Cords, Kellum, and Akunyili Crosby present their artworks as interstitial zones of colliding desires, histories, and identities formed through the layering and fracturing of different voices. The overlap of visual information is similar to the eclectic visual field that one can experience while moving through an urban environment. What is seen and what is not seen, or whose voices are present or absent, form a sort of politics of aesthetics because it is through visibility (or lack thereof) that different voices have a presence within identity formation. As Jacques Rancière has written, the significance of the visibility of a

voice should not be underestimated because "it is the delimitation of. . . the visible and the invisible, of speech and noise, that simultaneously determines the place and the stakes of politics as a form of experience" (Rancière 2006, p. 13). By seeing the layering of voices, actions, and histories that comprise identities as palimpsests, we can also realize that there are often alternative or forgotten histories and voices occurring just under the surface, often left behind as barely perceptible traces.

For example, Akunyili Crosby speaks of how everyday objects or people from the domestic vernacular creep into and occupy spaces within her paintings: "I wanted the pictures to fall back a little bit more than they did when I just cut them up and glued them on. I wanted it to exist first as a painting and then for the images to have a slight background effect to them" (Schneider et al. 2020, p. 38). Sometimes the presence of the objects or people are barely perceptible yet remain without disappearing. In her painting titled *Garden Thriving* (Figure 2), we can see a secondary layer of representation beyond the rendering of her Los Angeles based home that includes images of Nigerian food underneath the surface of the counter and images of Nigerian pop stars, models, celebrities, military dictators, as well as Akunyili Crosby's personal snapshots intertwined within the vegetation. By doing so, Akunyili Crosby creates a hybrid of the personal and intimate with the larger cultural collective. She also emphasizes how each of these identities—Nigerian, Igbo, American, Californian, daughter, wife, immigrant, academic, and artist—remain entangled with each other in Akunyili Crosby's existence. She attempts to make visible how our backgrounds and histories stay with us, perhaps as ghostly traces haunting our consciousness, but present nonetheless. The technique and media used (especially the photo-transfers which allow the artist to raise images from newspapers or magazines) also serve to reinforce the notion of the layered and bricolage palimpsest of her globalized and intersectional identity.

Figure 2. Njideka Akunyili Crosby, *Garden Thriving* (diptych), Acrylic, transfers, colored pencil, and collage on paper.

The dynamic process of identity formation, whether it be for people or places, remains perpetually in a state of evolution. This unresolved status is reflected in the conceptualization, construction, and palimpsest nature of the artworks of all three artists. For example, Cords displays some of her weavings so that the backside is visible. In doing so, Cords leaves the viewer to wonder why what is typically concealed has instead been revealed. For Cords, the artwork is not the front of the weaving or the back, but rather the evolving relationship between them which the viewer experiences in real time as they circle around the sculpture. In Akunyili Crosby's collages, she layers the imagery in a way that some of the images are partially concealed, faded, or made semi-translucent. The process also creates layers within the reading and observation of the work which can provide a sense

of movement or oscillation between separate spaces and times—creating a sense of never being resolved.

The other means by which these artists present identity as a palimpsest is by bringing together distinctive references without dissolving them into a unified whole. Each of the voices, actions, and histories remain as identifiable fragments brought together as a bricolage. By creating a pastiche of the dialogue between the singular and collective, Cords, Kellum, and Akunyili Crosby also add another layer to the palimpsest of identity by pointing to the frictions, fissures, and hybrids which emerge from the singular/collective discourse. In Akunyili Crosby's *Tea Time in New Haven, Enugu*, for example, she includes objects and images which reference her life in America, her life in Nigeria, as well as the influence of English culture all brought together to form a hybridized palimpsest. We are shown that they each have a presence, but also given a sense of how they may overlap, recede, or conjoin each other through the dialogue of the singular/plural.

2.3. Cords, Kellum, and Akunyili Crosby

Annette Cords produces Jacquard loom weavings which fittingly "weave" together bits and pieces of visual data that she plucks from the massive visual field that she experiences walking through the urban streets on any given day. As we globally shift to an increasingly screen-based culture, the tsunami of visual stimulus only continues to grow. Cords' weavings represent a sort of visual literacy that attempts to make sense of this visual field and bring together disparate fragments in an intersectional and interstitial object of identity. Cords has referred to this interaction as "being receptive to what presents itself".[1] By doing so, Cords al so brings together a multitude of identities in her work that include artist, educator, German-American, immigrant, urbanite, sculptor, writer, weaver, as well as influences from material culture, pop culture, urban landscapes, writing systems, the vernacular, mark-making, painting, installations, and shifting human perception. Even though these visual fragments are held together through warp and weft, Cords also alludes to the unfinalized and ongoing dialogue between them by displaying some of her weavings so that the backside is visible (Figure 3). In doing so, Cords leaves the viewer to wonder why what is typically concealed has instead been revealed. For Cords, the artwork is not the front of the weaving or the back, but rather the evolving relationship between them which the viewer experiences in real time as they circle around the sculpture. In her recent weavings, Cords even more explicitly utilizes a palimpsest process in the production of these metaphorical identity objects. As Cords has specified, "In these recent tapestries, I take one weaving file, double back, and repeat parts of it. It is a form of erasure and revision during the process of creation. The effect is filmic and glitchy, revealing a search for articulation and form through the playful making of the tapestry itself".[2]

G. Kellum's collages and sculptures display the complex web of polyphony which build upon one another to form the singular/collective matrix of identity. Kellum draws upon sources of hip-hop culture, graffiti tagging, and other ephemera from the urban landscape, woven together with his own distinct drips and gestural marks. Just as palimpsests preserve suggestions of what was once there, Kellum is also attentive to the presence of voices that are unseen or barely perceptible. As Kellum has stated, "I'm very much drawn to tags and hits as opposed to the more colorful and conceptually design forms of graffiti. To me these tags represent lost voices from the distant past as well as the present and voices not heard yet in the future".[3] We can see an example of the incorporation of graffiti tags in his piece *The Dark Sygnus* (Figure 4). Kellum uses fragments or reinterpretations of the graffiti tags that he observes in the urban panorama to show how these tags maintain a latency and represent voices that serve as important exterior influences which are merged with singular identities much in the same manner as Bakhtin's heteroglossia.

Figure 3. Annette Cords, *Call On Me/Say It Softly*, (front)-left (back)-right, Handwoven Jacquard tapestry, cotton and wool.

Figure 4. G. Kellum, *The Dark Sygnus*, Acrylic, paint pen, and collage on wood.

Njideka Akunyili Crosby creates paintings of domestic interiors spaces. Having been born and raised in Nigeria before moving to the United States, Akunyili Crosby depicts spaces chosen from the various places that she has called home. Within some of the objects in her paintings, Akunyili Crosby transfers and collages images of Nigerian cultural figures or particular objects with cultural resonance. Due to the transfer process, these images have a ghostly or shadowy presence. Akunyili Crosby's intent is to create a quilt-like palimpsest of the varied influences upon her own identity. As Andrea Lissoni writes, Akunyili Crosby shows "her own identity as it collides with familial, political, and cultural influences and traditions" (Schneider et al. 2020, p. 10). Even though these paintings are

often highly personal because they reveal intimate moments and reflect Akunyili Crosby's unique intersectionality of "Nigerian politics and Postcolonial history, social struggles, and popular culture", they also prompt the viewer to consider how "cultural entanglements and their feedback effects-intrude into the daily and intimate spheres of every individual with a lasting impact" (Schneider et al. 2020, p. 5).

2.4. Shaping of Identities

These artworks are meant to challenge the viewer to consider both the liberation and erasure that occurs in the shaping of identities. In many ways these artists are continuing the investigations that the pioneering artist-as-activist Howardena Pindell began exploring in the early 1980s about the relationship between individual agency, political discourse, and the aspiration for freedom. There is especially a connection with Pindell's use of artistic expression in the search for answers. Just as Pindell once asked, "If a person is socially constructed as a gendered or raced subject, could that invented subject be deconstructed, reconstructed, or recontextualized as an aestheticized object?" Cords, Kellum, and Akunyili Crosby each question the relationship of the singular and collective and interior to exterior through their artistic practices (Beckwith et al. 2018, p. 98) by presenting incisive and purposefully open-ended questions in their works, which urge the viewer to sort through the implications of formulating any answers. The queries presented through in these art objects are intended to linger in one's consciousness—what is the role of language, cultural signifiers, and mark-making in the articulation of identity? How do voices become material, so they are not lost into the ether? How does the metaphysical become physical? How does the collective communicate with us and how do we respond? The objective of these artworks is not to supply a clear and concise answer—simply, because there isn't one. Instead, these artists have embraced, and brought to view, the complexity of the layering, fragmenting, concealing, and revealing that constitutes the mutability of any given singularity. Through the presentation of their consciously reflective woven and sculptural works, Cords, Kellum, and Akunyili Crosby remind us that identities are like patchworked palimpsests, beautifully muddled and knotty.

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Notes

1 Annette Cords in discussion with the author, November 2021.
2 Annette Cords in discussion with the author, March 2023.
3 G Farrell Kellum, email message to author, November 2021.

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arts

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Essay

Minding the Body: Space, Memory, and Visual Culture in Constructions of Jewish Identity

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Abstract: While it is well established that articulations of identity must always be contextualized within time and place, only when we consider how bodies move through, touch, and are touched by physical, cognitive, and even imaginary spaces do we arrive at dynamic and intersectional expressions of identity. Using two divergent visual culture case studies, this essay first applies Setha Low's theory of embodied spaces to understand the intersection and interconnection between body, space, and culture, and how the concept of belongingness is knotted with material and representational indicators of space at the Yad Vashem Holocaust History Museum in Israel. Marianne Hirsch's ideas about the Holocaust and affiliative postmemory are also considered to further understand how Jewish bodies inherit their identifies and sense of belonging. To test how embodied spaces and affiliative postmemory or collective memory implicitly operate to help shape and articulate expressions of Jewish identities, the focus then shifts to a consideration of the eight-decade career of New York jazz musician and visual artist, Bill Wurtzel. The clever combination of "schtick and sechel" in Wurtzel's artistic practice, activated by his movement through the Jewish spaces of his youth such as the Catskills, and through his interaction with Jewish design great, Lou Dorfsman, underscore how Jewish belonging and identity are forged at the intersection of physical and tactile "embodied spaces," where the internal meets the external and human consciousness and experience converge.

Keywords: Yad Vashem; embodied spaces; postmemory; collective memory; Bill Wurtzel; Borscht Belt; Lou Dorfsman

> *Memory, we may say, is the shell of that which was once a body, a form of disembodied thought or reflection.*
>
> —*Joan Ockman* (Ockman 2006, p. 24)

1. Introduction

The discourse surrounding constructions of identities and belongingness presupposes a thinking, moving, and feeling body—one which has been shaped by any number of markers, including race, gender, class, nationality, religion, language, culture, and (dis)ableism, to name a few. For the past several decades, these bodily markers have been the subject of various scholarly treatments regarding the constructions of Jewish identities. A few such studies include Biale (2002), Brettschneider (1999), and Aviv and Schneer (2006). More recently, articulations of identity have examined the intersection of the above markers to steer away from reductive generalizations about identity formation, but how is a sense of Jewish belongingness inherited by Jewish bodies? What role do space and our movement through spaces—from the physical to the cognitive and imaginary—play in developing a sense of Jewish affiliation? Further, how does our cognitive activity in the form of memories, perspectives, and feelings collide with the experiential to determine the effect of our movement through these spaces?

When it comes to articulations of modern Jewish identities, much has been written about the Holocaust, the possibility of representation in its aftermath, and especially its

impact on contouring Jewish identities from the mid-twentieth century to the present. However, less attention has been paid to the role of space—particularly the convergence of the cognitive and the experiential, or what anthropologist Setha M. Low has termed "embodied spaces"—in the construction of post-Holocaust Jewish identities (see Low 2003). If we accept that not all bodies are fashioned the same, then it follows that the ways in which they "touch space" to experience common events and even common spaces will also differ (see João Durão 2009, p. 401). As bell hooks has claimed, what we see depends entirely upon where we stand and how we occupy the space in which we stand (Hooks 2003). This realization was not lost on architect Moshe Safdie when he received the commission in 1995 to redesign the Yad Vashem Holocaust History Museum, first established in Jerusalem in 1953 on the Mount of Remembrance. Aspiring to hold space for that which cannot be fully represented and to provide a panoramic perspective of the Holocaust, Safdie utilized architecture and multimedia storytelling devices to draw visitors in, make them attentive, and inculcate feelings of belonging, especially for the array of Jewish visitors.

This essay centers Setha Low's theory of embodied spaces, Marianne Hirsch's theory of postmemory, and ideas about collective memory as a conceptual axis to arrive at a more integrative, entwined, and nuanced understanding of Jewish identity construction, one which looks towards indigenous conceptions of interconnectedness as a model to understand our place in the world (see Halbwachs 1992; Hirsch 2001, p. 220. See also Kimmerer 2013). In particular, it questions how Jewish bodies inherit their sense of belonging to a peoplehood, a shared history, and a culture. Low's theory of embodied spaces is first examined in consideration of the Yad Vashem Holocaust History Museum owing to Safdie's self-conscious use of architecture and spatial devices. These spatial tactics, combined with multimodal and multisensory displays, are meant to trigger somatic and visceral reactions from Jewish visitors—regardless of where they stand—to encourage their connection to the collective trauma of the Holocaust, followed by an embrace of the triumph of the establishment of the State of Israel. To test the efficacy of this entangled theoretical model in uncovering how Jewish bodies inherit their sense of belongingness, these same theories are then considered in a context that is antithetical to the Yad Vashem Holocaust History Museum; namely, the more playful spaces in the advertising and artistic career of New York-based artist, Bill Wurtzel. By applying this conceptual axis to two divergent case studies which use visual representation to address identity construction in the wake of rupture—one focused on the legacy of the Holocaust and the other on the legacy of immigration to America in the early 20th century—I hope to demonstrate how Jewish belonging and identity are forged at the intersection of the ecosystems of mind and body, where the internal meets the external and human consciousness and experience converge.

2. Embodied Spaces and Postmemory

> *. . . Without the role of the body, material entities would be unoriented, without the directionality of left and right, up and down, front and back.*
>
> *. . . Body is not separate from the mind and the way the human being perceives space is interdependent on the physical structure of the body that articulates space and is articulated by it dynamically.*
>
> *—Maria João Durão (2009, p. 400)*

As Maria João Durão suggests in the above statements, "between body and place there is so much more than position, there is the data of our experience and expectations." (João Durão 2009, p. 399). Following Durão's logic, position functions both locationally and ideologically and is shaped by how the body moves through and absorbs spatial experiences. Durão's claims build upon anthropologist Setha M. Low's theory of embodied spaces, explained in her article, "Embodied Space(s): Anthropological Theories of Body, Space, and Culture," wherein she posits a connection between the subjective or thinking body with its objective, physical form in order to better comprehend how the body becomes entangled in the world (Low 2003, p. 10). At the heart of Low's theory lies a desire to supersede the customary division between the thinking and moving body by understanding how mobility

and movement draw upon both the physical and metaphysical properties of the body to create space and culture (Low 2014, pp. 19–20). Leaning on the research of anthropologist Thomas Csordas, Low distinguishes between the body as a biological and social entity and *embodiment*, which according to Csordas, is "an indeterminate methodological field defined by perceptual experience and mode of presence and engagement in the world." (Low 2003, p 10)[1] Driving this article is Low's intersectional quest to integrate body, space, and culture in anthropological thinking so as to grasp the metaphorical and material attributes of the body interacting with and touching space.

Low acknowledges a slew of scholars before her who shared an interest in space and culture. They include Pierre Bourdieu and his notion of *habitus*, which aimed to discern how the body, mind, and emotions coalesced to better uncover how social status and class are embedded in everyday life. Edward Hall's theory of *proxemics* asserted the body as a site of spatial orientation and people's use of space as an aspect of culture. (Ibid., p. 13) Of special note, in the context of identity formation, is Miles Richardson, who deemed that body experience and perception could be symbolized in objects and that these same symbols could then be used to shape experiences. Infused with references to others' embodied experiences, these symbols can effectively trigger our own "decisive experiential moments" because of how laden they are with symbolic meaning.[2] Such use of symbolic artifacts serves as an important strategy to tell the story of the Holocaust at Yad Vashem and to encourage a collective sense of postmemory.

First coined in 1992 by Marianne Hirsch, the child of Holocaust survivors and a scholar of Comparative Literature, the term postmemory "describes the relationship of the second generation to powerful, often traumatic, experiences that preceded their births but that were nevertheless transmitted to them so deeply so as to seem to constitute memories in their own right."[3] More specifically, "postmemory describes the relationship that the generation after those who witnessed cultural or collective trauma bears to the experiences of those who came before, experiences that they 'remember' only by means of the stories, images, and behaviors among which they grew up." (Hirsch 2008, pp. 103–28). The postmemories of this second generation stem from imaginative projections, often drawing upon photographic images or material artifacts from the Holocaust rather than from their own legitimate experiences and recollections (Hirsch, p. 107).

For this reason, some have objected to the very concept of inheriting a memory that was never theirs, arguing that memory can only result from the direct experience of an event. In response to this doubt, Hirsch maintains that using "post" as a qualifier to memory acknowledges the differences between directly bearing witness as opposed to forming a memory based upon the "affective force" of images and storytelling (Ibid., p. 109) It is through images and storytelling that a "living connection" is created for the second generation (Ibid.) This supports the work of memory theorists such as Steven Schrag, who argues that memory is not simply the stored past but rather "an active process of retrieval, rearrangement, and revival." Similar to Hirsch's theory of postmemory, Schrag contends that theories of socially mediated trauma, wherein collective identities confront violent histories, "underscore the fact that the mnemonic is also memetic," which is to say that memory has the capacity for replication via imitation" (Schrag 2016, p. 208). Indeed, as we shall see, the photographs and material artifacts abundantly displayed at Yad Vashem or the illustrations and advertisements created by Bill Wurtzel serve both a mnemonic and memetic role, perpetuating memories from the past forward. Still, as theorist Joan Ockman reminds us in the opening quote of this essay, as a form of disembodied reflection, memory functions as a specter of the past. Only by traversing physical and symbolic spaces does our memory become animated in the present; herein lies the work of storytelling and representation.

For the second generation of Holocaust survivors, representation in its various forms becomes a mechanism through which to process the burden and pain that they have inherited. However, as a postmemory, this representation will always be mediated by extant representational forms. The question then arises as to how far the transmission of postmem-

ory can be extended. While we have already established that this notion of postmemory exists within the purview of the once-removed second generation, can postmemory also be experienced by the larger post-generation? Here, Hirsch differentiates between *familial* postmemory, or a direct vertical transmission from parent to child, as opposed to *affiliative* postmemory, or a horizontal identification that becomes more broadly available:

> *Affiliative postmemory would thus be the result of contemporaneity and generational connection with the literal second generation combined with structures of mediation that would be broadly appropriable, available, and indeed, compelling enough to encompass a larger collective in an organic web of transmission. (Hirsch 2008, pp. 114–15)*

Whether the postmemory is familial or affiliative, certain forms of representation, like testimonials, material artifacts, and especially photography, function as the conduit to memory work because representation has the capacity to touch and trigger embodied feelings of empathy and connection. (Ibid., p. 117) Likewise, architecture, through its work of shaping space, also has the ability to effectuate a somatic response that heightens receptors to trigger feelings of alienation or identification and belonging. The redesigned Yad Vashem Holocaust History Museum makes apparent how embodied spaces animate a collective or affiliative postmemory.

3. The Yad Vashem Holocaust History Museum

> *. . . We dreamed of building a home for the Jewish people in the Land of Israel and of raising a new Jewish generation, changing the world, and healing the fractured, shattered lives of post-Holocaust Jews.*
>
> *—Avner Shalev (Shalev 2006, p. 50)*

Established by the Israeli Knesset in 1953 and opened to the public as the Holocaust Martyrs' and Heroes' Remembrance Authority in 1957, Yad Vashem exists to memorialize each one of the six million Jews exterminated in the Holocaust, recognize the righteous non-Jews who found the courage to aid and abet Jews despite tremendous peril to themselves and their families, and to perpetuate the lessons of the Holocaust so as to educate and prevent such grotesque anti-Semitism in the future. Space and place matter at Yad Vashem. Its placement on a hilltop on the western slope of Mount Herzl, also known as the "Mount of Remembrance"—the burial place of preeminent Israeli prime ministers, presidents, and other prominent Jewish leaders—imbues this hilltop with historical and symbolic significance regarding the State of Israel. Here the repugnant past meets the propitious present in an attempt to process humankind's propensity for evil, to preserve the memory of those who perished, and ultimately, to position Israel as synonymous with the promise for the future of Jewish life.

As the first of its kind with a mandate to never forget and to honor the lives of every single victim of the Holocaust, Yad Vashem faced the profound complexity of representation in the wake of that which cannot be easily or aptly represented.[4] In its original iteration, the museum presented a collection of monuments, sculptures, paintings, artifacts, and a heavy dose of photography, including images from the Warsaw Ghetto, photographs of concentration camp inmates, and images of piles of gassed corpses, which have since become painfully iconic. While there was nothing especially noteworthy about the architecture of the original museum, perhaps what was most remarkable was the visceral impact of the above-mentioned photographs and material artifacts, including heaps of shoes removed from the inmates upon their arrival to the camps and yellow fabric stars (Figure 1):

> *. . . Amid the sea of multimedia shows in Yad Vashem's historical museum stands an unpretentious glass case containing a small number of yellow stars, actual remnants and paradigms of Nazi stigmatizing. Having been infused with the Holocaust so completely . . . The effect of these scraps of cloth is like that of the ruins of the concentration camps. It is metonymic in the most direct sense, with no fanfare or explanation necessary. (Jusidman 2001, p. 26)*

Figure 1. Yad Vashem Holocaust History Museum, Jerusalem, Israel. Photo by Kerri Steinberg, 30 August 2022.

Artist Yishai Yusidman's words above drive at the emotive and somatic power triggered by remnants that were worn by victims, connected to their bodies, and which, therefore, have come to be infused with the weight of lives lived and lives lost. It is as if these artifacts, which have outlived their users, appeal to visitors and implore them to identify and consider what if it had been them, reifying Miles Richardson's theory that the experiential can be triggered through the use of symbolic objects.

This capacity for contemplation and connection reached its zenith in the Children's Memorial. Commissioned by the Yad Vashem Directorate in 1976 to create a space dedicated to the 1.5 million children who perished in the Holocaust, the Children's Memorial was completed by Israeli-Canadian architect Moshe Safdie in 1987. Compared to the approach taken in the curation of the original museum, Safdie states he began to "appreciate the nuance of information versus contemplation, confrontation versus meditation. I realized that the visitor emerging from the history museum would already be saturated with information. The Children's Holocaust Memorial must therefore be about reflection." (Safdie 2006, p. 92). With this awareness, Safdie utilized the power of space by moving visitors through an underground chamber wherein a "single candle would be made to reflect into space—millions of floating flames—through which we would move, surrounded. Then we would emerge through the mountain to the north, to light, to the view of the Jerusalem hills." (Ibid., p. 93) As the viewer meanders through the memorial, a dispassionate voice names children who were lost, one by one. This convergence of the underground cavern—akin to a burial site—with floating lights simulating 1.5 million stars or angels in heaven set the stage for an embodied approach combining both the cognitive and experiential, symbolically moving from dark to light, which Safdie would further develop in his redesign of the entire Yad Vashem complex beginning in 1995.

According to Safdie, the story of the Holocaust was "too terrible, uniquely cruel and shameless in the annals of civilization, to be told in normal 'galleries,' traditional architectural constructions with doors, window frames, hardware, and other detailing." (Ibid., pp. 94–95) Instead, as Avner Shalev, Chief Curator of the museum from 1993–2021 explained, the remodel of Yad Vashem would proactively transform the Mount of Remembrance from a more disembodied, commemorative site into a full-fledged campus dedicated to Holocaust education and the dissemination of knowledge with more than 17,000 square meters of new space, and a museum that would be almost four times larger (Shalev 2006, p. 50). The new master plan included the establishment of the Yad Vashem International School for Holocaust Studies, the online digitization of information that Yad Vashem had amassed, the construction of a new building for the archives and library, and the expansion of the research and publication divisions (Shalev 2006, p. 52). Committed to a more fully embodied experience to drive home the lessons of the Holocaust and to promote affiliation to a people and country, Safdie made the decision to cut through the mountain from the south and to situate the museum underground with only a narrow skylight coming up

for light, "a reflective knife edge across the landscape that would disclose the museum's presence." (Safdie 2006, p. 94).

Anthropomorphic metaphors and references to life and death abound in the museum's redesign. For example, Safdie regarded the main thrust of the museum as a spine, straddled by chambers, "with shafts rising from each one, like periscopes through earth and vegetation, for light." (Ibid.). Like the linear spine, these chambers, too, were excavated from the mount, then cast in concrete against the bedrock, analogous to giant burial caves in the Mount of Remembrance, according to Safdie. (Ibid., p. 95) At the heart of the entire Yad Vashem complex sits the Hall of Remembrance, a vacuous space carried over from the original museum site, wherein an eternal flame burns in perpetuity to commemorate the six million Jewish lives lost. The austerity of the space matches the gravity of the overwhelming feelings of helplessness and loss visitors experience as they emerge from the museum.

Approaching the campus, the visitor first encounters what Safdie calls an *aqueduct*—essentially an open concrete structure with twelve archways meant to separate the sacred space through which the visitor will shortly enter from the more profane space of the city left behind. An inscription above the archway from the prophecy of Ezekiel reading, "I will put my breath into you, and you shall live again, and I will set you upon your soul," shifts visitors into a contemplative state as they cross this threshold and brace themselves for an immersive experience that will walk them through this valley of life and death. Even the *Mevoah*—the visitor center which guests next approach to purchase tickets and audio guides—continues this quiet, reflective state through the use of a trellis over a glass rooftop as an architectural flourish that dissolves the sun into changing patterns of light and dark, evoking for some, the stripes of the clothing worn by concentration camp inmates (Ibid., p. 96) (Figure 2). The last architectural feature encountered by the visitor before entering the tunneled space of the museum proper is a steel bridge with wooden planked floors. This passage functions as the final transition from the quotidian present into a vanished past.

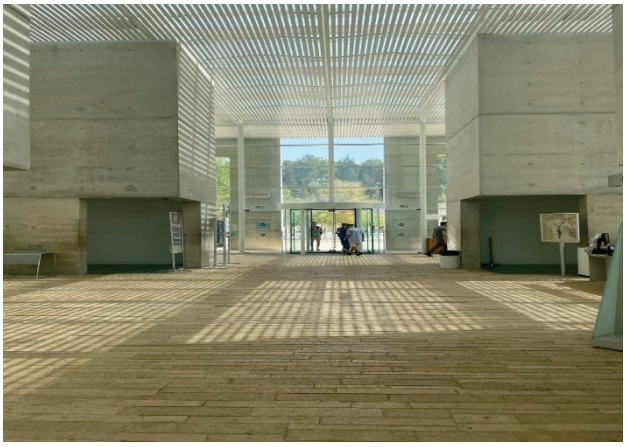


Figure 2. Mevoah. Yad Vashem Holocaust Museum. Image taken Kerri Steinberg, 30 August 2022.

Into the museum, the visitor immediately experiences the effects of architectural manipulation through the vast use of concrete to establish a stark triangular prismatic structure (the linear spine), which creates a sense of foreboding (Figure 3).

Safdie's intentional use of concrete, as opposed to the more conventional Jerusalem limestone, according to architectural historian and theorist Joan Ockman, deliberately calls into question the idea of context and represents an overt effort to create a temporary sense of displacement to heighten the visitor's embodied sense of self (see Ockman 2006, p. 23). A ten-minute film montage, "The World that Was," created by Michal Rovner, uses archival footage to illustrate Jewish life before Hitler's rise to power and is projected onto what becomes the back wall of the approximately 1000-foot linear stretch of the museum prism (Figure 4). This footage depicting such mundane activities like couples promenading and

school children from a world that the visitor understands is destined for doom triggers a gut-wrenching sensation, echoed by the massive concrete void.

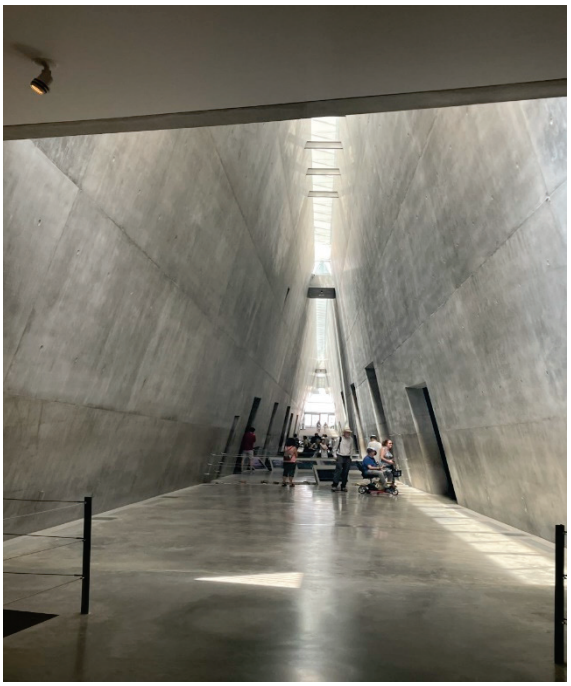


Figure 3. Interior of Yad Vashem Holocaust Museum. Image taken by Kerri Steinberg, 30 August 2022.

Figure 4. Still photograph of the film "The World That Was" by Michael Rovner, Yad Vashem Holocaust Museum. Image taken by Kerri Steinberg, 30 August 2022.

This is consistent with Joan Ockman's assertion that there are two modes of representation in place at Yad Vashem: (1) the historical, documentary, and narrative, meant to activate and to pass on the (post)memory and (2) the spatial and aesthetic, meant to engender an embodied response. Whereas the documentary work offers information to help provide context for the past, the function of the architecture aims at creating an "unmediated apprehension of something ineffable." (Ibid., p. 24) This perception is additionally shaped by a five-degree subtle slope downward as the visitor descends into the prism. A subtle narrowing of the central spine further compresses space, reaching its narrowest dimension before visitors enter the side chamber where they will confront the annihilation of over 1.1 million Jews at Auschwitz-Birkenau. This architectural manipulation positions and opens the sensibilities of the visitor to an uncomfortable absorption of the events and evidence that lie ahead. Neither the footage nor the architecture alone gives form to our affiliative postmemory of the Holocaust; in Safdie's words, the exhibits and architecture needed to reinforce each other (Safdie 2006, p. 96). As such, it is precisely the fusion of the documentary and the spatial that produces an embodied experience and fosters our sense of connection to the atrocities that unfold.

We might say that the interaction between the architecture and exhibition design at Yad Vashem equates to a dialogue between embodied spaces and postmemory, where the cognitive, internal meets the somatic, external. For the most part, the central spine of the museum comprises an uneasy spatial void, save ruptures created by floor installations, likened by Safdie to an earthquake that rips the spine apart. (Ibid., p. 97) These strategically placed floor channels move guests in zig-zag fashion through impenetrable barriers across the spine to adjoining side chamber galleries—four on one side, five on the other—where visitors, through an overwhelming number of testimonials and material artifacts, including letters and other memorabilia—some 46,000 audio, video, and written testimonies in all, experience the story of the Nazi rise to power, its occupation of European countries, and its establishment of ghettos and concentration camps (Lu 2017, p. 445) (Figures 5 and 6).

Figure 5. Side gallery depicting Nazi rise to power, Yad Vashem Holocaust Museum. Image by Kerri Steinberg, 30 August 2022.

Figure 6. Striped uniforms worn by concentration camp victims. Yad Vashem Holocaust Museum. Image by Kerri Steinberg, 30 August 2022.

The floor rupture exhibits range from video footage to installations, including material artifacts like books, shoes, and burned railway tracks (Figure 7).

Figure 7. Discarded shoes. Yad Vashem Holocaust Museum. Image by Kerri Steinberg, 30 August 2022.

Referencing Merleau Ponty's notion that perception is inextricably connected to movement in his article, "Museum Architecture as Spatial Storytelling of Historical Time: Manifesting a Primary Example of Jewish Space in Yad Vashem Holocaust History Museum," Fangquing Lu equates visitors' understanding of historical time with movement and the experiential:

> *Compared with the symbolic, dominant, and embodied experiences created by architectural spaces, the artifacts in each gallery contribute to illustrating individual stories with entire themes and events and bring out the human dimension . . .*
>
> *. . . Moreover by means of creating eye-level encounters between the 'narrator' or 'witness' within each gallery, visitors are led through a two-tiered exhibit structure: the context, which describes the historical processes, and the artifact, which tells the story at a personal level. (Lu 2017, p. 450)*

In each of the side chambers, guests confront videos of survivors' testimonials and numerous artifacts ranging from books and art to clothing worn by inmates and other memorabilia such as flags, letters, and identification cards. However, as Maria João Durão has suggested in her work on embodied spaces, it is only through bodily movement that these video testimonials and artifacts—symbolically infused with lives and moments from the past—are experienced as a haptic memory, which for post-Holocaust Jewish visitors can ignite a post or collective memory of the Holocaust and its role in their self-understanding. That is, it is the fusion of movement through a particular spatial environment together with the content presented in these spaces that builds an affiliative postmemory for visitors. As Shalev conveys in his essay, "Building a Holocaust Museum in Jerusalem," the main goal of the exhibitions and artifacts is to have visitors—especially Jewish visitors—connect to and empathize with the victims (Shalev 2006, p. 54). Storytelling, according to Fangqing Lu, helps to invoke a physical space conducive to generating experiences (Lu 2017, p. 444). It is for this reason that, in each gallery, Holocaust survivors look visitors straight in the eye and share their video testimonials, as if to convert the affiliative postmemory of the post-Holocaust generation into a more immediate familial postmemory.

Like artifacts, photography plays a crucial role in the transmission of historical events and the creation of postmemory, which according to Marianne Hirsch, functions to extend memory across three to four generations or eighty to one hundred years (Hirsch 2008, p. 110). Nowhere is this more evident than in the Hall of Names—an archive and memorial to the six million who perished in the Holocaust—situated at the north end of the east side of the corridor. Here sit two large cones, one which shoots upward approximately thirty feet, lined with 600 photographs of Holocaust victims, and the other which is excavated about thirty feet below into the Mount of Remembrance and is filled with water, serving as a reflective mirror of the photos featured above, whose subjects' names we may never know (Lu 2017, p. 450) (Figure 8).

Further, we are reminded of Yad Vashem's imperative to memorialize each one of the six million lives lost: "It is not that six million Jews were murdered. Rather there were six million murders, and in each case, one Jew was murdered."[5] This is the shared trauma that forms the foundation of an affiliative, collective postmemory.

Together, the artifacts, video testimonials, and extensive use of photography in Yad Vashem establish a common memory, connecting survivors and the post-Holocaust generation and shoring up shared beliefs that control memories, which then give form to familiar narratives. However, we must ask to what effect? Aside from the post-Holocaust Jewish vow to vigilantly monitor the treatment of Jews to prohibit the spread of such vitriol and raging anti-Semitism in the future, what other purpose or purposes might be served by the absorption and perpetuation of a collective Holocaust postmemory? Hirsch gets at this question by stating that the growth of a memory culture may be symptomatic of "a need for inclusion in a collective membrane forged by a shared inheritance of multiple traumatic histories." (Hirsch 2012, p. 111). In other words, this ongoing narrative of trauma and tragedy animates Jewish life in the present, providing for many a sense of purpose,

urgency, and belongingness. This theory aligns neatly with Vamik Volkan's concept of "chosen trauma." According to Volkan, large groups unconsciously *choose* to adopt a past generation's mental representation of a shared event as part of their own identity as a potential way of connecting to millions of others through a shared mental representation of trauma.[6] Similar to postmemory:

> *. . . [Transgenerational transmission of chosen trauma] is the end result of mostly unconscious psychological processes by which children's core identities are flooded with and therefore influenced by the injured self- and internalized object-images and associated affects that rightfully belong to the original victims, caregivers or parents.*
>
> *. . . [C]hosen traumas are much stronger ethnic or large-group markers than chosen glories—the mental representations of past shared successful events that lift up the large group's self-esteem—because the psychological processes they initiate are much more profound. Whereas chosen glories merely raise the self-esteem of group members, transgenerational transmission of chosen traumas provoke complicated tasks of mourning and/or reversing humiliation; since all are carriers of the unconscious psychological processes of past generations, chosen traumas bind group members together more powerfully. (Stein 2014, pp. 238–39)*

Figure 8. Hall of Names. Yad Vashem Holocaust Museum. Image by Kerri Steinberg, 30 August 2022.

The power of "chosen trauma" and an inheritance of hardship lies in its ability to transcend the present and to link together Jews across time and space in a shared narrative of suffering. This sense of Jewish belongingness is established at Yad Vashem through both the content of the exhibitions, which jogs the affiliative postmemory of Jewish visitors, and the use of space—more specifically, a tension between light and dark, up and down, contraction and expansion—that heightens visitors' awareness and absorption of the content as they traverse space, thereby connecting the somatic and the perceptual. As guests gradually descend into space in an architectural attempt to align the darkness of the tragedy and trauma with what we understand as the Holocaust, so does the width of the prismatic tunnel widen, and the floors and roof planes slant slightly upward as visitors

emerge out of the darkness at the end and into the light of what we are led to equate with modern Israel. In effect, their movement through space symbolically has visitors making "aliyah," which literally means to ascend or rise, but for generations, has signified immigration to Israel. Indeed, as museum guests complete their journey, they step out onto a wide, bright terrace whose form culminates in wing-like projections over the landscape of the Jerusalem hills beyond (Figure 9).

Figure 9. The exit from the Yad Vashem Holocaust Museum opens onto and frames the landscape of Jerusalem. Image by Kerri Steinberg, 30 August 2022.

Listening to a 1930s recording of "Hatikva"—Israel's national anthem—sung by a children's choir from Czechoslovakia, most of whom were murdered at Auschwitz, Israel is proclaimed as the answer to what was lost, resolving the initial sense of displacement that is intentionally fostered at the beginning of the journey. Visitors now experience a strong sense of presence.

The from-tragedy-to-triumph trajectory that is both narratively and spatially staged at the Yad Vashem Holocaust History Museum—or in Howard Stein's words, "chosen trauma" and "chosen glory"—beginning in 1930s Europe and culminating in present-day Israel intends to inculcate in Jewish visitors a strong sense of connection to a people and to a place. I have argued that for Jews, the affiliative post-memory of the Holocaust preconditions them to experience or to touch space in a manner that affirms that this is their story and that they, therefore, belong to the Jewish people. If we acknowledge that your body is identified

as Jewish because of the spaces that you touch and occupy, then it is precisely movement through these spaces that causes the body to inherit its sense of Jewish belonging. Let us put this theory to the test through an entirely different case study, one which examines the career of New York Jewish creative Bill Wurtzel, now eighty-five years old.

4. Jewish Embodied Inspirations in the Artistic Career of Bill Wurtzel

To best understand the meaningfulness of the sometimes subtle, and at other times more overtly Jewish references, and particularly how embodied Jewish spaces and iterations of a collective Jewish memory figure in artist Bill Wurtzel's work, we must first consider his eight-decade career against the rich, yet complicated history of Jewish emigration to, and acculturation in America during the late 19th century and early decades of the 20th century. Unlike his immigrant grandparents, as a third-generation American Jew, Bill was spared the challenging and stressful accommodation process of adjusting to the requirements of life in the new world. However, this is precisely the point: even though Bill himself was not an immigrant, the power of the immigration experience was so palpable in Jewish residential, commercial, and entertainment spaces that it was absorbed as an intergenerational, collective memory for many second and third-generation American Jews. Even though emigration to America—regarded as the land of opportunity—was the desired goal of the massive wave of Jewish emigrants from Eastern Europe beginning in 1881 with the assassination of Russian Czar Alexander II and the subsequent implementation of repressive laws that essentially squeezed Jews out of Russia, the perilous and dire circumstances that culminated in their migration to America, not to mention the poverty, squalor, and anxiety the majority of immigrants faced throughout their journey, left a lasting impression—one that would certainly feed American Jewish life and American Jewish culture for decades to come. One need only consult the Yiddish-language socialist newspaper, the *Forverts*, established by Abraham Cahan in 1897, or any number of other Yiddish daily journals between 1881 through 1920 to appreciate the complexity and deep anxiety that accompanied these immigrants beginning with their travel across oceans under miserably crowded conditions, to their arrival in Ellis Island, where they could only hope to be processed and not sent back to the old country, to their settlement in tenement slums.[7] Even though many immigrants had no choice other than to escape Eastern European anti-Semitism, not only was their journey through the aforementioned spaces distressing but what they experienced was a rupture with a past lifestyle that they had endured for centuries. These are the embodied physical and emotional spaces endured by three million Eastern European Jewish immigrants that shaped the ways in which they became entangled in America. It is their movement through these spaces that defined how they themselves negotiated being in America as Jews and, ultimately, how their memories were absorbed by subsequent generations of American Jews as their own familial or affiliative (post)memories. It is these collective memories, reified years later by passage through either actual or symbolic spaces occupied by Jews, that make an appearance throughout Bill Wurtzel's expansive artistic career.

Bill's journey as a Jewish creative began in the early 1940s, not in the expected spaces occupied by New York Jews such as the Lower East Side, Brooklyn, or the Bronx, but in a more unlikely space for Jews: the backcountry of Forestburgh, Sullivan County. Here Bill's parents, Al and Beatrice Wurtzel, owned and operated Forest Tavern, a bar and grill, which was frequented by local folks, who were sometimes entertained by a guitar-strumming cowboy. At nine years old, this cowboy taught Bill how to play the guitar and his first two guitar chords, G and C. He learned his third guitar chord, D, from a former wrestler, who Bill's dad, Al Wurtzel, hired to train Bill in self-defense so that he could protect himself against anti-Semitic bullying during his five-mile bus ride to school. With these three chords, Bill could now teach himself country music—the music of the backroads. When the radio station WVOS in Liberty, New York invited Al to advertise Forest Tavern, he auditioned Bill to sing and play his guitar, and Pecos Bill, the guitar-playing country western singer was born, along with a fifteen-minute radio show, starring Bill three times a

week. His radio popularity landed him a weekly spot at the Concord Hotel in the Catskills during the summer of 1950, where he performed each Tuesday night in his all-American cowboy attire (Figure 10). Now twelve years old, Bill would play before an audience of 1500, largely first- and second-generation American Jews. Each week for his encore, Bill sang "Joe and Paul," a popular Yiddish song, originally written in 1912 by Yiddish theater composer Shalom Secunda as an advertisement for Paul Kofsky's clothing store in Brooklyn by the same name (JOE 1947. Also see the Yiddish Radio Project 2002). To experience a twelve-year-old "Yiddish cowboy"[8] yodeling about purchasing a "suit, a '*koyt*' (*coat*), and *a gaberdine*" (for a bargain no less), was enough to make this audience of first and second-generation immigrants *kvell* (gush) with delight.

Figure 10. "Pecos Bill" with the Jewish comedian Sam Levenson at the Concord Hotel in the Catskills, 1950. Buddy Hackett also performed that evening. Photo courtesy of Bill Wurtzel.

Popularized by the Jewish comedian Red Buttons as the basis for his spoof of Yiddish radio, which he performed in the Catskills to the enjoyment of thousands of hotel guests, "Joe and Paul" was the epitome of Borscht Belt humor.[9] Buttons's parody tickled Catskills patrons and struck a chord with this first and second-generation Jewish immigrant population, many of whom found their way from peddler pushcarts into the garment business and ready-to-wear shops like Joe and Paul's. Buttons's exaggerated routine consisted of a fictitious radio station with a series of fabricated advertisements for products such as Alka Seltzer and Castor Oil, one commercial sillier than the next:

> *Like much Yiddish-American comedy, "Joe and Paul" is focused on the physical. Divided into four mock commercials, each of the commercials offers relief for a particular ache: a prostitute for sexual repression, an open window for excessively smelly feet, a belch-inducing antacid for indigestion, and an overdose of castor oil for an annoying cough ("If your husband coughs too much from smoking, just give him a bottle of castor oil to drink and he'll be afraid to cough"). The humor is crude; the emphasis is on getting by . . . "Joe and Paul" offers a comic primer on the here-and-now, a how-to manual on how to stay alive. (The Free Library 2000)*

Through a synthesis of Yiddish and English, the rhythmic and comedic spirit of the comedy act brought Catskill audiences to tears, specifically because it paralleled the careful assimilationist choreography rehearsed by many American Jews and because of their shared understanding of having traveled the same geographical and emotional spaces which brought them to the here and now in the Catskills, connecting a common past to the present. In his article, "Collective Memory Anchors: Collective Identity and Continuity in Social Movements," sociologist Timothy Gongaware builds upon Maurice Halbwachs's theory of collective memory, which maintains that human memory can only function within a collective context (Russell 2006, pp. 792–804). Gongaware explains how collective memory lives on through what he terms "collective memory anchoring."

Similar to postmemory, collective memory is established through an anchoring process wherein images and storytelling form the basis of interactive experiences that "bring the past forward" to forge a link of continuity—a collective memory—where the present meets the past to affirm articulations of identity (see Gongaware 2010, p. 215). In other words, collective memory relies upon an interactive process that uses narrative commemorations from the past to contour and to constrain collective identity in the present (see Gongaware 2010, p. 222). According to Gongaware, both collective identity and memory draw upon a wider culture that perpetuates a common stock of world views and vocabularies, along with discrete beliefs, images, feelings, and values (Ibid., p. 215). For Jews, the Catskills provided just the right interactive space where storytelling and humor could be used to assuage the challenges of the acculturation process in America. Here, among kindred spirits, first- and second-generation immigrant Jews could be themselves without fear of reprisal, laughing and crying to their hearts' content, as comedians like Red Buttons used raucous and crude humor as the storytelling vehicle to acknowledge their common ties and tribulations. Often shrill and frenetic, the comic voices that emerged from the Catskills reflected the tensions of their tentative lives:

Like most parodies, it is both a homage to the old and a bridge to the new; it is both reverence and revision.

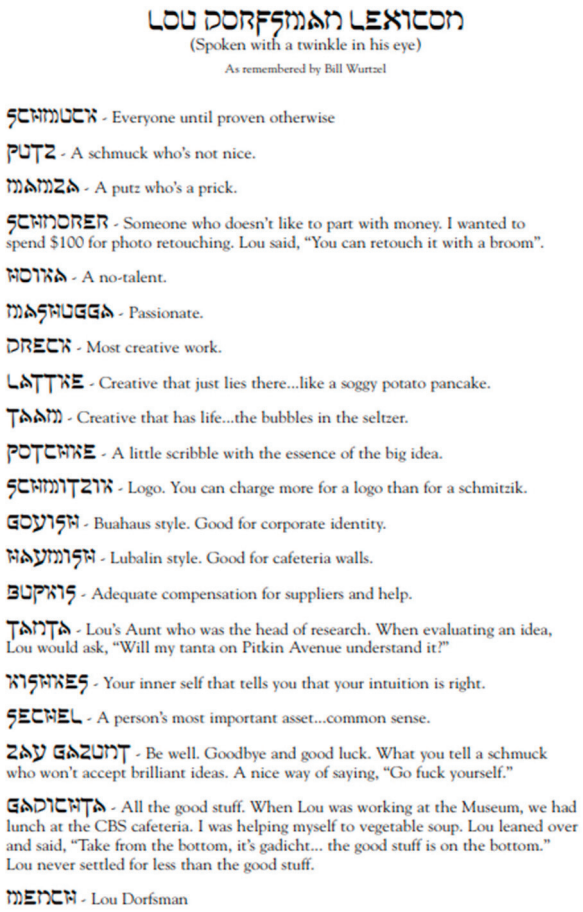
> *. . . Theirs was a comedy of survival–getting by, after all, was a Jewish trademark, a lesson passed on from generation to generation. The mouth was the mechanism, and getting by was the message. Alone in the world, and on a stage, Jewish comics laughed at the world even as they struggled with it. (The Free Library 2000)*

Listening and absorbing the Borscht Belt humor of such comedians like Buddy Hackett, Sam Levenson, and Mel Brookes at the Concord Hotel during the summer of 1950 proved lucrative for our twelve-year-old guitar-strumming, Yiddish-crooning cowboy, Bill, beyond the meager wages he earned. His movement through this distinctly Jewish space where hundreds of Jews convened oriented Bill, entangled him in American Jewish life and culture and primed him for his career as a creative.

The Wurtzel family returned to New York City when Bill was thirteen, where his musical interests took a turn from country to more urban, popular music. On his sixteenth birthday, the family moved to Springfield, Massachusetts, and it was here that Bill first saw himself as an artist. Without formal musical training, music, like art, was something to be felt. In fact, not until his twenties did Bill learn how to read music. In Springfield, Bill honed his art and design skills, working as an illustrator and designer for the public library and as a sign painter for supermarkets. Bill eventually worked his way up to art director for the multipurpose cleaning product, Lestoil, where he could have remained had the pace and opportunities available in NYC not perpetually tugged at him. In New York, he took a liking to advertising and design, and in 1960, Bill was hired at Grey Advertising, a primarily Jewish firm. His first account was for NBC TV, creating promotional ads. But when the firm lost the account, the creatives abandoned ship, including Bill.

In 1962. Lou Dorfsman, then creative director of CBS Television, before being named in 1964 as director of design for the CBS Corporation, hired Bill to work at CBS. Though twenty years his senior, Dorfsman would fulfill the role of mentor to Bill. Despite their age difference, there was plenty of common ground between the two men: both descended from eastern European Jewish immigrant families, both served in the army, and both were outsiders in the distinctly non-Jewish corporate world of CBS. Their relationship was more than friendly; it was familial—in large part due to a collective identity that was based upon a shared Jewish survivalist mentality centered on *sechel*—common sense. Even though their experience as Jewish outsiders certainly informed their creative sensibilities, providing ample opportunities for them to see things differently, this common sense, survivalist mentality dictated that, outwardly, they blend in with CBS corporate America through their language and mannerisms.[10] However, as the "Lou Dorsfman Lexicon," pictured in Figure 11, illustrates, the knowing nods and subtle winks Lou and Bill exchanged affirmed

that they both understood their professional roles based upon having moved through essential spaces that formed the common framework of being Jewish in America.


LOU DORFSMAN LEXICON

(Spoken with a twinkle in his eye)

As remembered by Bill Wurtzel

SCHMUCK - Everyone until proven otherwise

PUTZ - A schmuck who's not nice.

MAMZER - A putz who's a prick.

SCHNORRER - Someone who doesn't like to part with money. I wanted to spend $100 for photo retouching. Lou said, "You can retouch it with a broom".

NOYAR - A no-talent.

MASHUGGA - Passionate.

DRECK - Most creative work.

LATKE - Creative that just lies there...like a soggy potato pancake.

TAAM - Creative that has life...the bubbles in the seltzer.

POTCHKE - A little scribble with the essence of the big idea.

SCHMITZIK - Logo. You can charge more for a logo than for a schmitzik.

GOYISH - Buahaus style. Good for corporate identity.

HAYIMISH - Lubalin style. Good for cafeteria walls.

BUPKIS - Adequate compensation for suppliers and help.

TANTA - Lou's Aunt who was the head of research. When evaluating an idea, Lou would ask, "Will my tanta on Pitkin Avenue understand it?"

INSHKEYS - Your inner self that tells you that your intuition is right.

SECHEL - A person's most important asset...common sense.

ZAY GEZUNT - Be well. Goodbye and good luck. What you tell a schmuck who won't accept brilliant ideas. A nice way of saying, "Go fuck yourself."

GADICHTA - All the good stuff. When Lou was working at the Museum, we had lunch at the CBS cafeteria. I was helping myself to vegetable soup. Lou leaned over and said, "Take from the bottom, it's gadicht... the good stuff is on the bottom." Lou never settled for less than the good stuff.

MENCH - Lou Dorfsman

Figure 11. The "Lou Dorfsman" lexicon, created by Bill as a tribute to Lou upon his passing in 2008, captures the Jewish spirit of their familial rapport and their interaction behind closed doors.

Passed down by Yiddish-speaking immigrants and their offspring, the word *sechel* stems from the Hebrew word for the Enlightenment, *haskalah*, a late 18th- and 19th-century movement which introduced European Jews to secular ideas and society. The Jewish Enlightenment opposed the teachings of traditionalist religious thinkers and many of their accompanying superstitious old ways. As a Jewish enlightenment concept, *sechel* acknowledges the necessity of common sense in navigating the often unwelcome and contested spaces encountered by Jews in the diaspora (Johnson 2013). With its emphasis on common sense and practicality, *sechel* might further be understood as a response to Jewish anxiety prompted by displacement and not fitting in. Because *sechel* required the exercise of self-discipline and a heightened awareness of your surroundings necessary to fit in, we might also consider it as a catalyst for the rather crude and raucous Borscht Belt humor—itself a catharsis for the anxiety of adjusting to a new world. Visually, this Jewish sensibility manifested itself through clever text and image combinations that helped to uncover the things right under your very nose. Lou Dorfsman mentored Bill in seeing the world this way—making visible that which is before your very eyes but often hard to see. Take, for example, Bill's award-winning television commercial for Bellagio Wine, created in 1986 (Figure 12). Isolating the Ls from the wine label animates them and invites viewers to see them more kinetically and symbolically—as legs with feet, ready to squash the round grape-like form in the right-hand corner. At the same time, pulling the Ls down outside of the label creates negative space, splitting the brand name into two words to suggest, "Be 'agio'"—otherwise implying, "get comfortable and cozy" (with Bellagio Wine)! By looking

closer and using a common sense, no-frills, economy of means approach, this playful and witty advertisement pulls out of invisibility that which is present but lies buried, thereby expanding awareness of the Bellagio brand and deepening its value.

Figure 12. Bellagio Wine television commercial, 1986. Courtesy of Bill Wurtzel.

By 1967, Bill had moved from CBS to become Creative Director at the Lampert Agency, where building upon the lessons learned from Dorfsman at CBS, he would go on to earn numerous awards, including an ASIFA award for the best animated television commercial for Hanes Hosiery, a Clio for the best radio commercial of the year in travel and recreation, and a Gold Lion award at the Cannes International Film Festival for his 1967, "Please no dancing in the aisles" television ad for Olympic airlines. Owned by Greek billionaire, Aristotle Onassis, advertising for Olympic Airlines boasted service befitting that of a billionaire in economy class, such as a steak dinner served with gold flatware.

When a passenger, seated in economy, turns on his "vibrant Greek music" on "a stereo channel" (no less!), he simply can't contain his feet, and it becomes a party in the aisles, prompting the male narrator of the commercial to respond, "Please no dancing in the aisles." The written tagline on the print ad likewise advises passengers to "Please fasten your feet belts." (Figure 13). Despite the ad's pristine "Madison Avenue" pedigree, its exaggerated, silly premise has direct ties to the uproarious humor of the Borscht Belt. After all, in Bill's mind, the star of the ad was the classic *shmegege* (silly person), clearly indicating a carryover from his Catskills days.

Music and creative improvisation have remained a constant thread in Bill's eight-decade artistic career. He continues to play jazz guitar throughout the world, and over the years, he has played alongside some of the most acclaimed musicians, including The Count Basie Countsmen, Jimmy McGriff, and Jay Leonhart, to name just a few. Still drawing upon his well-worn practice of bringing out of invisibility that which is easy to look past and Borscht Belt *schtick* (gimmick) humor, about fifteen years ago, Bill's pursuits took a new creative turn. For the past sixty years, each morning, Bill has created and photographed playful breakfast plates for his wife, Claire (Figures 14 and 15).

Having amassed an archive of thousands of food images, Bill, and Claire, an educator by training, realized that these playful images of healthy breakfast foods had inherent educational value for children. Funny Food Art, a Bill and Claire collaboration, was born. Whimsical and improvisational, in typical Bill Wurtzel fashion, there is more to this art than may initially meet the eye (Figure 16).

Looking with intentionality and seeing beyond the obvious is paramount to clever advertising and graphic design. However, for children and their parents, it additionally fosters critical thinking and can raise awareness about the influence and instrumentality of visual media in an image-saturated society. This, according to graphic design legend Milton Glaser, is the purpose of art, which he defined as that which makes us attentive (Glaser 2008). From his days in advertising and design to his Funny Food Art, Bill's artistic nimbleness, combined with *sechel*, pays tribute to Glaser's claim.

Figure 13. This 1967 print ad for Olympic Airlines carries forward the Borscht Belt sensibility of exaggerated humor. Courtesy of Bill Wurtzel.

Figure 14. "Flapjack and Jill" breakfast for Claire, 20 February 2023. Courtesy of Bill Wurtzel.

Figure 15. Bagel girl. Courtesy of Bill Wurtzel.

Figure 16. Poster promoting Funny Food Art at the Becket Arts Center, May 2022.

Bill and Claire's most recent book collaboration, *In Our Teeny Tiny Matzah House*, listed by Bank Street College's Children's Book Committee as one of the Best Children's Books of 2022, brings full circle the importance of narrative and images in the creation of collective memory, as well as Setha Low's theory of embodied spaces and how the external body, moving through space, meets human consciousness to come together in the construction of (Jewish) culture. Unlike their other book publications, including *Funny Food Art* and *Meshuggah Food Faces*, which both present stand-alone breakfast plates created by Bill, *In Our Teeny Tiny Matzah House*, uses images for the purposes of storytelling. The seven family food characters introduced on the first two pages are repeated throughout the story, along with other characters who show up for the Passover seder to crowd the teeny tiny matzah house (Figure 17). Inspired by the classic Yiddish folktale, "It Could Always Be Worse," spatial awareness figures at the center of this narrative. Kitzel the Cat lives with his family in a tiny, noisy, and crowded matzah house. Family and friends are invited from everywhere for Passover, stressing Kitzel's spatial comfort and pushing the house to the brink. Only when the Seder ends and all the guests leave does the house feel ample, causing Kitzel to appreciate the comfort and coziness of home (Figure 18). In other words, self-awareness is spatially driven, and movement through space lies at the heart of identity, memory, and culture. Drawing upon Bill's and Claire's collective memory of the American

Jewish immigrant past, anchored by Claire's firsthand childhood experience of tenement living on the Lower East Side and Bill's interaction with Borscht Belt comedy from his youth, the award-winning *In Our Teeny Tiny Matzah House* children's book brings the past forward to create a link of continuity—a collective memory—where the present meets the past to affirm a sense of Jewish connection for today's kids.

Figure 17. Double page spread from In Our Teeny Tiny Matzah House featuring four food characters at the crowded Seder table to the left and three of the ten plagues to the right, 2022 (Wurtzel and Wurtzel 2022).

Figure 18. *In Our Teeny Tiny Matzah House* recalls the classic Yiddish folktale, "It Could Always Be Worse." Relying exclusively on fruits and vegetables, each character on each page of the children's book is hand created by artist Bill Wurtzel. In addition to being listed by Bank Street College as one of the best children's books of 2022, the book also earned PJ Library's Best Children's Book award for 2023 (Wurtzel and Wurtzel 2022).

5. Conclusions

Using two divergent visual culture case studies, this essay has considered the convergence of memory, representation, and embodied spaces to address how Jewish bodies inherit their identities. To understand how our external bodily movement through space orients us and touches our internal cognitive awareness, we applied Setha Low's theory

of embodied spaces to a walk-through of the Yad Vashem Holocaust History Museum in Israel. Because, from the late twentieth century to the present, the Holocaust has figured so prominently within Jewish life, we next considered Marianne Hirsch's ideas about the Holocaust and postmemory, and especially the role of stories, images, and even chosen trauma in inculcating memories for the generation/s after those who experienced collective trauma firsthand. Of particular interest was Hirsch's spatial claims about the directional movement of postmemory. Whereas familial postmemory is directly passed down in a vertical fashion from survivor to the second generation, affiliative postmemory operates horizontally to form more of a collective memory that lasts between three to four generations. I argued that architect Moshe Safdie's calculated use of space in the redesigned Yad Vashem Museum, combined with the content in the side galleries and floor installations in the center of the museum, intended to trigger a collective, affiliative postmemory to foster a sense of belonging to a people and connection to Israel for Jewish visitors. However, only through movement is this sense of belonging actualized, such that this connection may live on in perpetuity.

Inasmuch as this essay focuses on embodied spaces and memory in articulations of Jewish identity, Yad Vashem offers a convenient and explicit case study because attention to space is a key feature in connecting Jewish visitors to their identities as Jews. Therefore, to explore and test how embodied spaces and post-affiliative memory implicitly operates to help shape and articulate expressions of Jewish identities, our second case study focused on the eight-decade career of New York jazz musician and visual artist Bill Wurtzel. Bill's summer in the Catskills as a twelve-year-old boy, opening for legendary Borscht Belt comedians, engulfed in an audience of first- and second-generation American Jews, situated him in an interactive and connective space that would prove instrumental in locating his Jewish sensibility as a creative. Though just a child, Bill responded to and absorbed the collective catharsis facilitated by the Jewish schtick humor in the space of the Concord Hotel, where guests could be wholly themselves. As Jewish bodies inhabited such spaces, their experience of these shared spaces shaped a collective memory that would live on through American Jewish culture. Further, to a degree, this humor lives on in Bill's Funny Food art, but his art additionally relies upon what Bill regards as the Jewish sensibility of *sechel*—common sense—which has served Jews as an important adaptation strategy here in America. Using an economy of means to see the extraordinary in the ordinary is borne out of *sechel*, and this certainly has been a consistent thread throughout Bill's advertising and design career. His clever combination of "schtick and sechel," emanating from Bill's experience of and movement through space in the Catskills and his days at CBS under the guidance of Lou Dorfsman, situates viewers of Bill's advertising and design work to assume a more interactive role. Moreover, interaction, according to theorists, specifically that which uses narrative commemorations from the past to contour and to constrain identity in the present, sits at the heart of collective memory. This we observed at play in Bill and Claire's most recent book publication, *In Our Teeny Tiny Matzah House*.

While it is well established that articulations of identity must always be contextualized within time and place, only when we consider how bodies move through, touch, and are touched by physical, cognitive, and even imaginary spaces do we arrive at dynamic and intersectional expressions of identity. How might we understand ourselves differently if we were to regularly practice more indigenous conceptions about our interconnectedness to our environments and to every animate object possessed with life and a spirit?[11] Finally, it might be worth asking how an embodied spatial thread might be used to amplify and nuance your own family history[12] and a subsequent understanding of how you became who you are.

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Notes

1 See also Csordas (1994); "Embodiment as a paradigm for anthropology," *Ethos*, 18, 1988.

2 See Cartier Bresson (1952). For Cartier-Bresson, the decisive moment in photography captured the essence of an event in an unplanned, spontaneous manner.

3 Hirsch (2012). Also see Hirsch (1992, pp. 3–29) and Hirsch (2008). According to Hirsch, postmemory is not an *identity* position but, rather, a *generational* structure of memory transmission embedded in forms of mediation (Hirsch 2008, p. 114).

4 In the article "Disfigured Memory: The Reshaping of Holocaust Symbols in Yad Vashem and the Jewish Museum in Berlin," Jennifer Hansen-Glucklich references thinkers such as Mark C. Taylor and Lawrence Langer, both of whom have claimed that *disfiguration* may present the best strategy in preserving both the atrocities and the sanctity of the Holocaust (see Hansen-Glucklich 2011, p. 211).

5 This quote is prominently placed on a plaque that visitors are sure to see before exiting the museum.

6 See Stein (2014, pp. 236–57). In the article, Stein posits a Jewish sense of time as a continuous line of persecution. In fact, he sees the investment in specific, chosen traumas and the "cataclysmic" narrative of Jewish history as perpetuating a sense of continuity.

7 I have examined the acculturation process through a study of the advertising that appeared in Jewish periodicals across America beginning in 1850 (see Steinberg 2015, "A Portrait of American Jewish Life" in *Jewish Mad Men: Advertising and the Design of the American Jewish Experience* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2015).

8 "I'm a Yiddish Cowboy" was popularized by Edward Meeker as a comic Jewish song in 1908. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PiThhh80zsY, accessed on 15 April 2023.

9 Saposnik (2000, pp. 437–48). Called to World War II, Red Buttons left the Joe & Paul skit and the Catskills, where it was picked up and recorded by the Barton Brothers in 1947.

10 For more on how being an outsider on Madison Avenue served as a creative asset, see Steinberg (2015), "You Say You Want a Revolution: The Mainstreaming of Jewish Identity in American Advertising" in *Jewish Mad Men: Advertising and the Design of the American Jewish Experience* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2015).

11 Robin Wall Kimmerer refers to this as a "grammar of animacy." See Kimmerer (2013, pp. 55–56).

12 As I have done here. Bill Wurtzel is my talented, ever-youthful, and playful uncle.

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arts

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Article

Eva Hesse: Emergent Self-Portrait

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Abstract: The artist Eva Hesse (1936–1970) and her work, ranging from traditional painting and drawing to highly inventive bas-relief and sculptural form, are frequently interpreted through the lenses of biography, psychology, and gender, contributing to a prevailing narrative of a troubled and tragic artist figure. This dominant understanding of Hesse's oeuvre has largely emerged from the interpretation of the artist's own words, in the form of diary entries and interviews, and the published interpretations of these texts by scholars, peers, and critics, who frequently dwell on the narrative of Hesse's short and challenging life. However, a closer look at the documentation of the artist's own process of making, one that combined a near-daily writing practice, close annotations of choices made and executed in her work, and her emphasis on material experimentation, reveals an alternative reading of her writing and work. This paper will first explore the origins of the existing scholarship dedicated to Hesse's writing that has contributed to the gendered and tragic mythos surrounding the artist and her work. This paper will then provide a re-reading of Hesse's practice through the example of the work *Repetition Nineteen*, demonstrating her textual and material process as a deeply entangled set of relations between artist, process, and material contributing to a still-emerging portrait of the artist and her contributions.

Keywords: Eva Hesse; identity formation; process-oriented practice; emergence

1. Introduction

In surveying the existing scholarship dedicated to the artist Eva Hesse (1936–1970), her short but highly productive career is often framed within distinct biographical brackets of life-threatening or traumatic events, and the resulting psychologically influenced analysis serves as an explanation for her complex and deeply affecting work. Much of this bodily and identity-focused sentiment can be traced to several texts published shortly after Hesse's untimely death from brain cancer in 1970, setting the tone for the subsequent art historical discourse on the artist. The first section of this paper will trace the lineage of the existing scholarship that has contributed to the prevailing narrative around Eva Hesse which has greatly influenced the interpretation of her work. This historiography will focus on the treatment of the artist's own words in the form of diary entries and interviews, the original catalogue raisonné published six years after the artist's death, and the writings of critics and artist peers produced during and after Hesse's lifetime.

The second half of this paper will offer a counternarrative for the interpretation of Hesse's work in relation to her biography. This approach, relating the artist, her writing, and her artistic work, will be understood through the lens of entanglement, reinterpreting Hesse's words, material processes of making, and artistic production as deeply interrelated and still unfolding. This argument for a new reading of Hesse's oeuvre, and particularly a consideration of her highly iterative process involving both writing and material experimentation, will be discussed through the production of *Repetition Nineteen*. Revisiting this well-documented sculptural work, which marked the starting point of Hesse's use of latex, suggests how the vital materiality that still makes up Hesse's archive of papers, process materials, and completed works has extended the vitality of Hesse herself, contributing

to the ongoing emergence of her identity as a far more complex and nuanced figure of 20th-century art history.

2. Defining the Artist

2.1. Personal Writings

Much has been made of Hesse's diaries, kept as a series of notebooks and datebooks between 1955 and the time of her death in 1970 at age 34. Hesse's journals chronicle her personal musings, obsessive list-making, and ultimately her focus and self-awareness as an artist emerging in the Bowery art scene of New York City in the 1960s. As a first-hand account, these writings not only provide a window into Hesse's practice but also an intimate portrayal of the struggles Hesse faced in her foreshortened life. Escaping Nazi Germany with her Jewish family as a young child, surviving the suicide of her mother as a teenager, struggling to establish herself as an artist, and grappling with her own diagnosis of brain cancer, the drama of Hesse's life was something she often reflected on in her writing as she actively participated in psychotherapy throughout her adult life (Lippard 1976, p. 5).[1] This personal reflection and documentation were and continue to be frequently referenced in understanding Hesse's life as tragic and troubled and formed the basis of the prevailing psychological framework through which her work has been viewed since the 1970s.

In addition to the reflective journaling in her datebooks, writing was deeply entangled with Hesse's artistic practice. She kept copious notes on the development of her art, which frequently blended as simultaneous musings on the artist's perception of herself along with her work. Difficult to extract from one another, many of the papers held in the Eva Hesse Archive at Oberlin College, donated by the artist's family following her death, include the mundane recording of everyday occurrences, ideas for art works, and notes-to-self encouraging and coaching the artist to pursue her craft. An example of a typical collection of Hesse's notes can be found in an undated diary entry from 1966 that was published in *Eva Hesse: Diaries* in 2016. The text included the following:

> Thurs. 4:00 p.m. almost finished piece. beautiful. Crash. fell off the wall. Now midnight again. 'I can't believe it.' For I am drunk on librium and stuck.
>
> I must pull through.
>
> Fri 1:30 a.m. I am tired. scared. It's up but might not be long. I am running bad luck streak-way-all Where it is my own fate, my making it this way—I must learn + change. i.e.,
>
> 1. Tom.
>
> 2. the working falling down.
>
> 3. friends
>
> my handling things wrong. Consistently so.
>
> That I let Sol + Mel help me when neither are technicians is wrong.
>
> That I can only count on friends and fear asking advice outside my circle is wrong. even like not being able to call WBAI for bulletin.
>
> Sat. frame drawing (get staple gun)
>
> 1. balsa wood?
>
> 2. Press
>
> 3. address Elias
>
> 4. dress shortened.
>
> (Hesse 2016, pp. 710–11)

The combination of reported updates on work, personal reflections, practical tasks, a crossed-off to-do list, and self-motivating language are typical throughout the archive of her datebooks, diaries, and loose notes collected from her studio following her death.

Hesse's estate, in conjunction with Oberlin College and Yale University, Hesse's alma mater, published a transcribed and abridged version of Hesse's extensive collection of notebooks (Hesse 2016). The editors' notes provided in the closing pages of the text state that the dates associated with the diaries are difficult to attribute, the artist's handwriting is often difficult to decipher, and "material has only been included when it seemed relevant or compelling" (Hesse 2016, p. 897). This raises questions about the completeness of the text and the editorial liberties taken in their transcription. In addition, it is also stated that all sketches included in the body of the various journal texts have been redacted rather than reproduced (Hesse 2016, p. 897). This disassociation of text from image within the context of the diaries, which are themselves far from complete in terms of dates covered, leaves significant gaps in understanding Hesse's diaries and notebooks as an entangled component of her process-oriented production, leaving the reader to wonder about lost connections in tracing the conceptualization and development of her work.

2.2. Interpretations of Hesse's Words and Works

The reaction to Hesse's death and the scholarship produced shortly thereafter to memorialize and extend her legacy established a prevailing interpretation of her work through the lenses of trauma and gender, largely drawn from the artist's own words recorded in her writings and in interviews.

Feminist art historian Cindy Nemser's 1970 interview with Hesse is a frequently referenced text. The interview, published as "A Conversation with Eva Hesse", was conducted during the last stages of Hesse's illness and rushed to publication in *Artforum* in the weeks leading up to her death (Nemser 1970). The timing and nature of Nemser's questioning have added to the mythos of the tragic artist figure as she opens the interview with questions regarding Hesse's childhood and family dynamics. A tone of personalized tragedy pervades the questioning despite Hesse's own responses, which suggest a positive, even absurdist, acceptance of her life circumstances and the reflection of an artist looking forward to a recovery from her illness and returning to work. Published so close to the time of the artist's death, the interview is practically a conversation from beyond the grave, and Hesse's responses to Nemser's questions have been interpreted and reinterpreted by many scholars for their own ends since 1970, including by Robert Pincus-Witten in the first retrospective exhibition of Hesse's work and Lucy Lippard in the compilation of Hesse's first catalogue raisonné (Lippard 1976; Pincus-Witten 1971).

The timing and tone of Nemser's interview are also revealing of the interviewer's own motivations as an early and vocal advocate for feminist art practices, placing Hesse soundly within the context of the growing women's movement of the early 1970s. Hesse's words and works were being recorded and widely published during a period of increasing feminist discourse on art and culture, an association that has influenced the reading of Hesse's works (Bochner [1992] 2002). Despite Hesse's own statements in her interview with Nemser rejecting the preoccupation of her status as a woman and her clear intentions to recover from her illness and continue working, these associations have persisted as the dominant characteristics defining Hesse as an artist.

The first comprehensive accounting of Eva Hesse's work was published in 1976 by art historian and critic Lucy Lippard. Among the earliest scholars given access to Eva Hesse's diaries by her family, Lippard's catalogue raisonné was informed not only by documentation from Hesse's personal papers supporting the accounting of her work but also by Lippard's personal friendship with the artist. The resulting catalogue is both a complete record of Hesse's works and a biography of the artist supported by the professional and personal insight of Lippard. This text and the authorial influence of Lippard in constructing a personal, though thorough, narrative of the artist's life and work have not escaped scrutiny (Bochner [1992] 2002). The writing accompanying the catalogue entries often combines the personal experiences of the author with an objective presentation of the artist's perceived intent or process, conflating the subjective nature of the author's relationship with Hesse with the scholarly tenor of a catalogue raisonné. The narrative constructed by Lippard,

which references Hesse's personal writing but does not provide traceable citations, straddles a line between personal and critical distance and ultimately established a trajectory for future scholarship on Hesse defined by the themes of psychoanalysis, gender, and biography, which had already begun to emerge during the artist's lifetime.

A passage of note is included early in Lippard's accounting of Hesse's development as an artist. Lippard makes much of Hesse's journal entries regarding the writings of French feminist theorist Simone de Beauvoir. Hesse's notes on de Beauvoir's book *Second Sex*, specifically those passages relating women to objects (as opposed to subjects) and the suggestion that this is a role that women have been made explicitly aware of and embodied through time, have been widely cited in subsequent scholarship focused on the bodily reading of Hesse's work (Lippard 1976, p. 26). The inclusion of this excerpted diary passage in the first major publication dedicated to Hesse opened the door for a later generation of art historians, including Briony Fer, Mignon Nixon, and Anna Chave, to use Hesse's writings as evidence supporting the formal interpretation of her sculptural work as sexualized part-objects (Fer 2007; Fer 1994; Nixon 2007; Chave 2002). Much has been made of this iconographic reading of Hesse's work, producing wide ranging scholarly interpretations of Hesse's engagement with the feminist zeitgeist of the late 1960s and Hesse's softer (and floppier) contribution to the highly rational Minimalism of her male peers. Griselda Pollock has written an extensive historiography of this line of inquiry, recounting how each of these scholars, including Fer, Nixon, and Chave, has taken up their own interpretation of Hesse's gender and perceptions of her own femininity in addressing her body of work (Pollock 2006). These texts, which often toe a fine line between embracing and rejecting the psychoanalytic theories on which they appear to be based, often remain within the veins of inquiry established by early scholarship on Hesse's work and avoid outright questioning the interpretation of Hesse's writing by Lippard or the original intent of the artist's own note-taking.

Hesse's work was also included in gallery shows and widely commented on by critics and peers alike during her lifetime. Although written from the perspective of fellow artists and critics who perceived Hesse as a peer rather than a subject of study, these writings tend to suffer less from an overly personal bent than much of the scholarship published immediately after Hesse's death. Many of the artists Hesse associated with in her Bowery neighborhood were also transitional figures benefitting from the Minimalist movement, exploring new forms of abstraction and representation during the 1960s, and influencing one another's practices. While Hesse was perceived as a private person, she writes extensively in her notebooks about the artistic cohort she belonged to, many members of whom went on to contribute to the scholarly discourse on the artist herself. Despite Hesse's writing on her daily life and practice, retrospective views on the artist often draw on the insights of her peers, such as Sol LeWitt and Mel Bochner, who seem to stand in for Hesse herself. Because she did not live long enough to write with the critical distance of time about her own work, the musings and explications of LeWitt and Bochner are received as a type of composite understanding of Hesse and her work through proxy artist figures, as if to say, "If Eva could write this herself, she would say . . . ." Often, these artists are called upon to contribute to the conversation as major exhibitions on Hesse have been staged in the last thirty years interrogating Hesse's works through their individual lenses and brands of conceptual art making to varying degrees of criticality (Roberts et al. 2014; Sussman 2002).

Correspondence with Sol LeWitt, a close companion of Hesse, has been preserved and published in several venues and demonstrates their personal connection and parallel development of their artistic voices (Swenson 2015, p. 68). Many scholars read into Hesse's turn toward the grid and repetition of similar yet varied forms in series during the mid-1960s as part of the same line of inquiry as LeWitt's works, producing linguistic structures for the creation of similar yet varied drawings and forms. LeWitt, who directly participated in Hesse's work and helped fabricate components for several of her pieces, has contributed to an understanding of Hesse's studio practice from a first-hand perspective

(LeWitt and Kazanjian [1991] 2014, pp. 66–67). Mel Bochner, another of Hesse's artist contemporaries and close companions, respected and commented on Hesse's work both during her lifetime and following her death. Bochner's own compositions, based on ordered structures punctuated by elements of disorder, share characteristics with Hesse's regularized and geometricized armatures that are augmented with disorderly components. In more recent writings on Hesse, Bochner has advocated for a contemporary, critical reading of Hesse's works that elevates the understanding of her practice beyond that of the tragic to that of a significant artistic figure contributing to the evolution of 20th-century sculpture, as he considers her work foundational to what developed into the performative focus of art in the 1970s (Bochner [1992] 2002).

Although the first half of this paper has explored the problematic tropes recurring within the existing scholarship on Hesse, more recently published scholarship has questioned the essentializing nature of much of the standing commentary on Hesse, returning to her diaries and interviews for evidence. Of note are the essays of Ann Wagner and James Meyer, published in 1994 and 2008, respectively (Meyer 2008; Wagner 1994). Each resists the pitfalls of reducing Hesse to her biography of trauma and rejects her journal writing as indicative of her anxiety as a female in a male-dominated field, but even these attempts at questioning the origins and arcs of the biographically driven, psychoanalytically informed, and bodily derived narrative developed around Hesse's life and work fail to completely break out of the mold. Anne Wagner's 1994 essay, "Another Hesse", attempts to trace the origins of the early readings of Hesse's diaries and interviews by critics and scholars closest to Hesse immediately following her death. Challenging the authority of the tragic narratives that have been reinforced throughout both the academic and popular discourse on Hesse, Wagner asserts that the interpretation of Hesse's highly edited journals and the potential for perpetuated errors and omissions not only guided a specific interpretation of Hesse's work but, to a large extent, determined it (Wagner 1994). Wagner provides examples of diary passages that have been taken out of context to play up the reading of Hesse's demeanor as anxious, insecure, and terrorized by her most challenging life experiences, and by extension, her work is understood and read as a product of these same emotions.[2]

James Meyer's assessment of the existing scholarship on Hesse similarly rejects the feminist reading of Hesse's work in favor of contextualizing her practice among Minimalist contemporaries, albeit without fully questioning the parameters of Minimalism in the first place and ignoring Hesse's own rejections of this categorization for her work (Meyer 2008). While these more contemporary re-readings of Hesse's life through her writing and the analysis of her work may fall short of pushing the discourse into new territory, their willingness to question the standing interpretations of this evidence allows space for additional opportunities for reinterpretation of Hesse's practice, presented later in this paper.

3. The Emergent Self-Portrait

3.1. Re-Reading Hesse

Rather than reject the writings of, by, and about Eva Hesse problematized in the first half of this paper, the following interpretation understands Hesse's personal writing and note-taking practice as integral to her processes of making through experimentation, as demonstrated in the context of the work *Repetition Nineteen*. Hesse's own words have taken on an outsized importance in the construction of the personal narrative of the artists, often interpreted as describing Hesse as a tragic female figure, which has, in turn, influenced the interpretation of her work from a gendered perspective. However, by reframing the relationship between Hesse the artist, her words, her practice, and her resulting art works, this evidence can be understood as a deeply entangled set of relations, providing a new understanding of Hesse's practice and her still-emerging identity through her work.

The reciprocal relationship between the artist, her process, and her work speaks directly to the material entanglement theories of Ian Hodder (Hodder 2014). According to

Hodder, entanglement emerges from the relations between humans and things in which "subject and object, mind and matter, human and thing co-constitute each other" (Hodder 2014, p. 19). In the case of Hesse, this complex set of relations plays out between the artist and her work and in the continued emergence of her identity through the process of making.

Beginning with an alternative reading of several of Hesse's diary excerpts particularly concerned with the self-conception of the artist maturing into an adult, there is evidence that her work can inform her biography as much as her biography has informed an understanding of her work to date. Hesse's objects are the result of a highly personal and materially engaged process of making, which came into full fruition with the creation of her *Repetition Nineteen* series between 1967 and 1968. Reflecting the artist's awareness of her self-emergence, her note-taking documents the simultaneous processes of material innovation and personal self-awareness developed in tandem through her work. The objects that Hesse made through close documentation and a rigorous process of material exploration act as a simulacrum of self, not in a bodily sense, but as representative of her own process of becoming that continues in the ongoing material change in the work well after her death.

The nature of Hesse's writings is evidence of many years of psychotherapy, referring to personal growth and her emergence as an "adult" directly in dialogue with the development of her practice and her emergence as an artist. In a journal entry from 1963, Hesse states, "I still want to be a little girl, and yet I resent when then I do not feel I get respect as an adult" (Lippard 1976, p. 23). Later, Hesse follows her commentary on Simone de Beauvoir's musings on the modern woman with the rhetorical question to herself, "What does being adult entail?" (Lippard 1976, p. 26). While building an interpretative argument from these excerpted writings may resemble trading one psychologically informed reading of Hesse's life and work for another, it is the language of self-questioning and exploration captured in these diary entries and many others that lends a new understanding of the artist in relation to her process-oriented practice.

3.2. Processes of Making

Hesse's works are not merely symbolic references to her life trauma or perceptions of a disordered and deteriorating world. Instead, her works are the material result of a self-reflective exercise to fashion herself. As Hesse became dependent on the material engagement of her work as a means of parsing out her own perceptions of self, her work also became dependent on her exploration and inventiveness of method in relation to her emerging concept of self-identity. The suggestion that Hesse's non-representational work serves as a form of self-portraiture, a long-standing artistic tradition, is not a stretch when considered in the larger context of Hesse's oeuvre. Her earliest surviving paintings are self-portraits, rendered in the expressive though very traditional use of oil paint in the style of Abstract Expressionism. Though her methodology of making evolved drastically as she abandoned painting for object making, the resulting process-oriented work can still be read as an extension of a practice of self-representation, with her work reflecting her testing out of various media in conjunction with an evolving perception and fashioning of her own persona. Hesse conscientiously rejected composition, or "formal esthetics", as the root problem considered in her work, as she felt she had already mastered an understanding of them (Lippard 1976, p. 5). She felt that "everything is process" (Nemser [1970] 2002, p. 8). This included spending her time and energy on the exhaustive exploration of materials at her disposal from local hardware stores in her Bowery neighborhood, as well as on her own introspective process of grappling with her suppressed emotional state. While she personally struggled with defining herself as simultaneously carrying the labels of "Woman, beautiful, artist, wife, housekeeper, cook, saleslady, all these things", she explored a material-oriented means of art making as a way of seeking stability in her life, a process reflected in the production of *Repetition Nineteen*.

Similarly to Hesse, Hodder prominently references stability in the discussion of relations between humans and things, acknowledging that stability is a desirable state that also frequently requires an intensive investment of effort by humans or others to be maintained (Hodder 2014, p. 21). The answer to Hesse's call for something stable can be found in her adoption of a process-oriented and material-specific experimentation introduced to her during her time at Yale. Josef Albers was known for his methodical and systematic studies of color, which underscored his belief in the contingent role of color as a mutable material in and of itself, impacting the perception of art and the world (Swenson 2015, pp. 30–32). His pedagogical stance, originating in his experiences at the Bauhaus, structured his teaching and, in turn, structured Hesse's experiences at Yale, stressing "process and experimentation" with all materials in the production of art (Singerman 1999, p. 81). Despite Hesse's diary entries, which suggest she struggled with Albers' aesthetic proclivities and his insistence toward "rule making", Albers' emphasis on "heuristics and problem solving" can be seen as the legacy of his teaching in her resulting development as an artist (Swenson 2015). Lippard provides commentary on Hesse's relationship to materials later in her career, suggesting that "she felt it dishonest to use materials in a way that hadn't been personally arrived at, usually through long and/or difficult processes" (Lippard 1976, p. 110). This can be interpreted as the conflation of the material with the personal self-reflection of the artist.

The artistic process outlined by Albers and imparted on Hesse while at Yale resulted in a rigorous, almost scientific, experimentation with materiality that Hesse later engaged in while creating *Repetition Nineteen.* The title of the work itself, featuring the term "repetition", suggests the emphasis on iterative practice. In her process, Hesse's materials and their inherent characteristics were given agency in the production of the work and resulted in three major iterations of material experimentation with lasting repercussions on Hesse's ongoing practice until her death.

Although Hesse did not maintain a daily diary during this time, she included copious notes-to-self as part of her documentation of her process of developing *Repetition Nineteen* through several rounds of making. The earliest drawings studying this serial piece were made in 1967. Hesse's process included sketching, note-taking, and small mockups of her concepts particularly focused on the material qualities of the resulting work, the structural integrity of the forms she created, and the perception of the spaces these objects made. The ink, gouache, and watercolor study *Repetition Nineteen I* conceptualized the work as a collection of vessels with various postures and effects in relation to light, shade, and shadow, and was annotated with Hesse's impressions and intentions for next steps in fabricating the sculptural form (Hesse 1967c). The first test of fabricating the nineteen forms, though initially planned to be executed in thin sheet metal, was later realized in wire mesh, papier-mâché, and white paint as *Repetition Nineteen* I (Hesse 1967b). In reflecting on this first stage of work, Hesse noted she was "conscious of her use of papier-mâché in *Repetition Nineteen I* as 'kid's stuff' in contrast to the use of 'real' materials which she admired in the work of others" (Lippard 1976, p. 110). Hesse associated negative connotations with the perceived character of papier-mâché, assessing the work as much from the perspective of a formal object as a personified self-reflective vision of self. She strove to be an adult, and so the work called for "adult" materials.

Hesse repeated the process of drawing and note-taking in developing further iterations of *Repetition Nineteen*. Her sketches closely studied the volume and dimensions of the nineteen hollow forms and emphasized her desire for each of the objects to be placed at random in relation to one another, forming a sense of individual elements making up a larger whole (Hesse 1967c). The layer of white paint in conjunction with the papier-mâché used in *Repetition Nineteen I* had also lent the forms a solidity or heaviness that detracted from the lightness and a more subtle interplay of shade and shadow that Hesse felt was important to the overall composition. This led her to experiment with a new material, cast latex, in the second test of the piece. Briony Fer has discussed the material significance of Hesse's choice of latex and the process of building up its mass through layering as a critical turn in Hesse's practice (Fer 2009, p. 97). In addition to achieving a complex and variable

effect of light passing through the surface of the latex vessels she experimented with, the process of material layering was analogous to parsing the multi-layered and complex perception of self that Hesse was grappling with at that moment of her artistic emergence.

Though Hesse noted her positive reaction to the material qualities discovered during this phase of work, *Repetition Nineteen II*, produced in cotton cloth, latex, and rubber tubing, was never fully completed, She felt the vessels seemed *too* solid, detracting from the interaction of the hollow forms in relation to one another (Lippard 1976, p. 110). The first latex experiments lacked the complexity and perceived vitality she hoped the forms would convey as a larger collection of different yet related elements, again a potential link to her own perception of self, made up of a multitude of alter egos, related but different. The process yielded results that Hesse internalized and recorded in sketches as part of her notes as the basis for further "hard work" propelling her practice forward and refining *Repetition Nineteen* by using new-to-her materials (Hesse 1967a). Few tests from this iteration survived, as portions of *Repetition Nineteen II* were incorporated into other studies and finished pieces rather than retained and documented as a completed version, reflecting Hesse's inventive reuse and repurposing of materials within her studio.

The final version, *Repetition Nineteen III*, was the first work that Hesse commissioned to be fabricated outside of her studio. The artist contracted Aegis Plastics of New York City to produce the collection of vessels in fiberglass and polyester resin, materials that Hesse had not worked with before but hoped would capture the quality of lightness she wanted the piece to convey. As seen in "Studies for Repetition" from 1968, Hesse provided dimensional and material specifications for the piece, rendered as nineteen similar yet different vessels (Hesse 1968). This process extended the network of relations involved with her work beyond her individual practice through the process of commissioning fabricators. The first version produced by Aegis was rejected by the artist because the vessels' forms were too refined, a reaction suggesting the artist felt that the personal, physical connection of her hand had been lost in translation during the fabrication by others (Lippard 1976, p. 110). The final version was created and approved by the artist in July of 1968. The completed fiberglass forms were larger than the original papier-mâché version, though their quality of translucency balanced the perception of the objects in space. The composition was prominently featured in the only one-woman show staged during her lifetime, *Eva Hesse: Chain Polymers*, at the Fischbach Gallery in New York City in 1968 (Barger and Sterrett 2002).

3.3. Repetition Nineteen, Entanglement, and Artist Identity

Through the production of *Repetition Nineteen*, Hesse developed a process of art making inextricable from her process of self-making, similar to what Hodder has described as a "double bind" of "depending on things that depend on humans" (Hodder 2014, pp. 19–20). This concept of the double bind is also present in Rosalind Krauss' "Notes on the Index Part I", in which she employs Lacan's linguistic mirror stage to interpret the doubled relation of self-identity of the artist "[as] primarily fused with identification (a felt connection to someone else)" evidenced in the works of artists such as Vito Acconci and Marcel Duchamp (Krauss 1977, p. 197). In the case of Hesse and *Repetition Nineteen*, Krauss' doubled relations are also those of Hodder, enacted between the artist, written documentation, material processes, and the completed work of art. Hesse used the documentation of her writing, material evidence of her experimentation, and creation of her work as a way of creating herself. Hesse's notes on material experimentation were not only "technical instructions" but also a record of her interest in a material's "Intrinsic" characteristics and their "extrinsic connections and interactions" (Fer 2009, p. 106). This interpretation of her notes suggests the importance of the relationality of the base materials and final objects produced throughout Hesse's process. The exhibition of Hesse's work situated her within a larger milieu and community of artist peers that contextualized her practice, i.e., a cultural network of people and things. The systematic and iterative exploration practiced by Hesse was also a tether to her earlier study and work with Josef Albers. The involvement of text

as integral to the realization of the work, in Hesse's case, her notes and instructions for fabrication, not only implicated others in the making of the work but related her practice to the contemporary works of her close friends Sol LeWitt and Mel Bochner.

The nineteen separate vessels that make up the completed *Repetition Nineteen* can be understood as proxy physical representations of the many personas Hesse felt compelled to identify with as a woman and artist establishing her practice, each unique, similar yet different. Hesse placed significance on the distinctly "aimless yet congenial" ordering of the vessels on the floor when arranging and presenting the work (Lippard 1976, p. 108). She struggled to reconcile the existence of her multiple selves, and the multiple vessel forms of *Repetition Nineteen* were a way of externalizing those entities so she could directly grapple with the process of making a whole out of many distinct parts. The arrangement of the objects in the room created a space, an interiority and exteriority, contributing to both the viewer's experiential and visual encounter with the work and, in turn, perhaps also with the artist. The collection of vessels with gaps in between as well as the objects being hollow containers introduce aspects of light vs. shadow, edge vs. field, and inside vs. outside, all potential personal reflections of Hesse's own multiple personas and pluralistic understanding of self within the work as well as the variability of the viewer's individual perception of the piece.

Hesse used a photograph of one of the earlier iterations of the work as the postcard for the gallery announcement for her first solo show, signaling that she recognized the importance of *Repetition Nineteen* as a work that closely aligned with her self-perception and projection as an artist. But this choice was not necessarily made due to the outward aesthetics of the sculpture. Given that she used an image of the papier-mâché iteration of the installation, the image represented the process of *Repetition Nineteen* rather than a final product. As Wagner has also noted in her historiography dedicated to Hesse, Rosalind Krauss attributed Hesse's significance not to her contribution to or creation of a discourse, but to "her engagement with contemporary practice" (Wagner 1994, p. 67). Hesse's practice relied on the integration of writing and making together, suggesting that the evidence of Hesse's working process held significant agency in the artist's systematic experimentation with materials. Hesse's writing, which blends self-talk and notes on the production of *Repetition Nineteen*, ultimately constitutes the body of work and the artist herself.

All materials, including discarded tests from her various iterations of *Repetition Nineteen*, were valid for exploration and reuse, a cyclical process mirroring Hesse's ongoing search for the form she would ultimately take as an artist. In her 2009 essay, Briony Fer raised questions regarding the role of Hesse's material test pieces and their eventual display in a series of glass cases included in the installation in the Fischbach Gallery show where *Repetition Nineteen* was debuted. According to Fer, the juxtaposition of the tests with the final sculptural work contextualized the "radical and experimental nature" of Hesse's practice, elevating the importance of the process by displaying the "residue of the work involved in making" (Fer 2009, p. 86). Despite this assertion of their importance, Fer also uses the word "failure" to refer to the multiple, earlier iterations of *Repetition Nineteen* put on display, but the categorization of these fragments as "failures" associates negative connotations with what can otherwise be understood as productive material outputs of Hesse's process-oriented practice (Fer 2009, p. 102).

The *Repetition Nineteen* series was a breakthrough moment for Hesse in her discovery of liquid latex, its properties, and its resulting aesthetics, marking a transition from what Hesse considered more juvenile, conventional materials to the "adult" medium of plastics. Hesse noted latex's flexibility, malleability, and inherent color properties as particularly appealing to her, and she used these characteristics to her advantage in much of the work she produced between the completion of *Repetition Nineteen* and her death in 1970. The significance of Hesse's association with and affinity for a material built up through layering that could transform into so many different things cannot be understated, as latex came to be seen as her signature material in a period of her artistic production rife with transformation.

4. Continued Emergence

Despite the development of a wide field of scholarship dedicated to Eva Hesse throughout the last 40 years, a re-reading of the artist's writing, along with a closer analysis of the material processes of her works, reveals an understanding of Hesse constituted by her works (rather than an overreliance on interpretation through her biography) that continues to emerge.

The process of preparing instructions, testing, evaluating, dismantling, and repurposing her material experiments is strikingly similar to the process of self-evaluation Hesse recorded in her diaries. As Hesse established and grew her artistic practice, her internalized perception of self became entangled with her process and materials of artistic production. Hesse also understood that her works produced in unstable materials such as latex would continue to morph in form and quality over time, even commenting that she felt bad that patrons would pay so much for pieces that would become brittle and fall apart (Nemser [1970] 2002, p. 18). *Repetition Nineteen III*, now a part of the permanent collection at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, is a composite of its previous iterations as much as Hesse is a composite of the many personas she describes as aspiring to embody in her diaries. The once clear and luminous fiberglass vessels have become cloudy and yellowed, continuing a process of transformation started by the artist. Her awareness of the expected decay of her work can be understood as a material presence extending the vitality of the artist long after her death. Hesse's writing and works have an agency of their own, outlasting the artist as they continue to transform, allowing for new interpretations of her intent and practice. The vitality of the materials that Hesse chose to work with represents the vitality that she wished to capture and harness within her own persona, creating a still-emerging assemblage of the artist and her work through the objects of her creation.

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Notes

1 While Lippard's account of Hesse's biography cited here is the first and most comprehensive version of the artist's personal story to be published following her death, it serves as a stand-in for the extensive list of subsequent scholarly works on Hesse prefaced to some extent by a recounting of the tragic circumstances of the artist's life and death. A complete recounting of Hesse's life is far too long to recreate in this paper. Therefore, for brevity, further discussion of the details of Hesse's life will be forgone in favor of a deeper analysis of the existing scholarship and will only be provided when directly applicable to the discussion at hand.

2 Wagner provides a specific example of textual analysis. A paragraph of journal text, first published by Helen A. Cooper in the catalogue associated with the 1992 exhibition *Eva Hesse: A Retrospective* regarding Hesse's experiences at Yale, is compared to the original text from the artist's journal, unedited. The omission of 24 words from the original to the republished text paints an entirely different picture about Hesse's outlook on life and her work, one in which the artist finds painting uncomfortable and emotionally taxing. The implication is that the edited text presented by Cooper as "the artist's own words" privileges a reading that reinforces the image of emotional distress that much of the narrative around Hesse thrives upon.

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